Everyone knows Ezra Pound's funny name, but no one can quote him. This was also the case with the American poet Walter Van Bellamy, who – like Pound long ago – lived in England. Nearly everyone knew what Bellamy stood for, but I had never met a person who could quote a single line he had written. I wondered sometimes whether the people who bought his books actually read them. Certainly they went to his readings and listened to him reciting his poems. He did so in a whisper, but it was an amazing one. Most people whisper in a monotone; Bellamy could whisper over an octave and a half, a characteristic he shared with the best actors.

His subjects were love, nature, humanity, and war. He also wrote frankly of how he had once lost the balance of his mind. That was the phrase he used. I liked 'lost the balance' very much, as if he had lost the little that remained and had none left. This confession of a recent bout of lunacy made him greatly sought after as a party guest, and it also conferred on him glamour and respectability. His poem 'I Am Naked' was about these very paradoxes.

Inevitably, his war poems concerned politics. His readings had the flavor of political meetings and some had the heat and unanimity of religious get-togethers. That was what the clippings said in his Embassy file, which was all I knew at the beginning. (I had met him once at an Embassy reception and had found him deaf on gin – we got nowhere.) To a large extent, Bellamy's audience could best be described as believers, and they were charmed by his music. He was famous for the sounds in his poems, what he called 'my throbs and gongs.' It was possible that people were so persuaded by him beforehand that there was little need afterward for them to remember anything. Still, it surprised me that no one could quote his poems. His presence was memorable, though: a broad chest, eyes as blue as gas flames, a stern bony Pilgrim Father's face, and enormous hairy hands. He was also very tall – my height, about six-three. He walked with a slight stoop, a cringing posture that had probably evolved out of a fear of banging his head.

His strong, distinctly radical views were well known – his position on South Africa, nuclear disarmament, NATO, and even such rarefied issues as the exploitation of nonunion labor in the wine-growing region of Northern California. He had led peace marches in the 1960s, when he had been regarded as the soul of propriety in his dark gray three-piece suit and hand-knotted bowtie and gold watch chain. You might have taken him for a Tory politician or a banker or an Episcopalian preacher. He had a copper-bottomed look of authority, of solidity and trustworthiness; he had a good old name. The ragged, angry protest movements of the sixties needed his respectability,

and they were probably surprised by how vocal he was on their behalf. He had the appeal of John Kennedy – in fact, the two had been classmates at Harvard. His 'Elegy on the Death of JFK' was celebrated for its intimate and unexpected details of the two men's friendship. Within a very few years of this poem, Bellamy became a public figure, who stumped around the United States reading his poems and giving encouragement to the anti-Vietnam protesters. He was noted for his willingness to share a platform with a folksinger, a jailbird, or whoever. Most people agreed that he was the conscience of his generation. Bellamy seemed to have no fire, but that was not so surprising. A conscience does not shout – it murmurs.

What else? Yes, he looked wonderfully well fed. This alone was an amazing characteristic in a poet, but he was a most unrepresentative figure. The more I found out about him, the more bewildered I was. He had a large following, but he was not only a poet. He was like a spiritual leader, like one of those bearded domineering Indian gurus; but for Bellamy poetry was the medium of instruction. His humility was so conspicuous and challenging it was like arrogance; but his sense of certainty, and the preachiness of his poems – and his physical size – attracted many people to him. He had considerable influence, and I was very glad it was for the good. His followers were a peaceful and romantic bunch on the whole – the college crowd – who perhaps trusted and liked this well-dressed father figure more than the middle-aged men who also wrote poems and carried banners and played to the gallery, and who dressed like chicken farmers and long-distance truckers, and who could be pretty embarrassing in the cold light of day.

Bellamy had the strange privacies also of a spiritual leader. There were no rumors and stories of his excesses, but there were resonant and suggestive silences. To look like a banker and to be known for his nervous breakdown – that was what made him. And his marriages had also given him fame. He had been married three times. But he was no philanderer – he had been victimized and thrown into confusion by these messy affairs. Each of his wives had been extremely rich.

It was some measure of his fame that he was known as a writer to people who did not read him, and a great writer to those who did not read at all. He was all the more celebrated for not living in America. When Walter Van Bellamy came to England from New York in the early seventies he was called an exile. It did not seem the right word to describe a man who was often on television telling lively stories, or else doing something public and political before a crowd. I thought of exiles as gaunt silent men, with red eyes, pacing the rocky foreshores of barren islands; or else unshaven men in hot overcoats who spoke in thick accents and slept on sofas. Bellamy did not fit my stereotype. And were you still an exile if you occasionally flew home first class in a jumbo jet to attend a New York party? I did not think so. Some years he taught at Harvard. He had money. His rich wives had been sympathetic. They were more patronesses than wives. He was lucky. He had always lived well – he was in his way a socialite, a party-goer, if a somewhat reluctant one. He had a house in the depths of

Kent and an apartment in Eaton Square. Perhaps the most unusual thing about him was that, as a poet, he made money. People bought his books, even if they didn't read them. The books were symbols or tokens of belief. Buying them was a political act, an affirmation that you were on his side – whatever side he was boosting at that moment.

I had been introduced to him at Everett Horton's house, when he was drunk and deaf. I was eager to meet him again, because I had read him at school. He too had been to Boston Latin, and his books in the school library and the thought that he had sat under these same windows, this whiff of literary history, fueled my own ambition to write, until I drifted into the State Department. I had wanted to talk to him. It is a natural desire to want to meet a writer and size him up. But I did not see him again until the Poetry Night of the London Arts Festival, where he was reading.

His poems that night were dense and full of his personal history, but his reading was vigorous and gave life to what seemed to be little more than spidery monologues about his domestic affairs – how he had cleaned out a sink and swept a room and ordered a pint of milk and so forth – modern poetry, as a lady behind me said out loud. There is a personal tone in some poetry that is so intimate it gives nothing away – so private it sounds anonymous. Bellamy's was a sort of general confession of practical untidiness with which any youngster might identify. I say 'youngster' because Bellamy seemed to be addressing younger people, implying that he understood them and offering them reassurance. This restrained snuggling was a popular approach. The audience clamored for more, and that was when I noticed how lonely he looked in the spotlight – how solitary and anxious to please.

As an encore that night he read a long poem, called 'Londoners,' about Americans in London, starting with Emerson and Hawthorne and ending with himself. In between, there were references to Mark Twain, Stephen Crane, and Henry James. The personal note was struck in such sentences as 'Tom Eliot told me –' and 'Cal Lowell used to drawl –' Afterward, he said the poem was about language and culture. With a characteristic flourish, he added, 'and schizophrenia.'

What I have written so far will not be news to anyone who has followed the career of Walter Van Bellamy. He was a public man; the facts are well known – but wait: it is the public men who have the darkest secrets. They have the deepest cellars and hottest attics, and they are consoled by blindness and locked doors. It is impossible to guess at what truly animates these people whose surfaces we seem to know so well, and there is nothing in the world harder to know than the private life of a public man.

The London Embassy had tried to cultivate Bellamy. We needed him. He had a powerful eminence among the writers in London – partly for being American and partly because his present wife was a patroness. She was an irascible Englishwoman who, for tax reasons (ah, the resourceful English aristocracy!), held an American passport.

In the previous ten years Bellamy had signed petitions condemning our intervention in Vietnam and our arming small Central American countries; about our decision to build a neutron bomb – and more: public matters. Of course we needed his criticism, but it was unhelpful, not to say humiliating, to get it publicly. I had told Horton that I hoped there was a friendly way of gaining Bellamy's confidence. It occurred to me at the poetry reading that in another age a man like Bellamy might have chosen to be a diplomat. Even today the French, the Spanish, the Portuguese, chose poets as their cultural attachés and the Mexicans had recently sent one of their most distinguished writers to be Ambassador to France. Bellamy could, I thought, teach us a great deal. There were too few men at the London Embassy who were willing to criticize policy decisions – they felt their jobs were at stake. That sort of thing wouldn't bother Bellamy. He had a reputation as a humane poet-philosopher; he also had a private income. I felt that someone like Bellamy might keep us from making stupid mistakes. And it would certainly be a very good thing for our image in Britain if Bellamy chose to associate himself with us, for there was no question but that British intellectuals regarded our London Embassy as a stronghold of corrosive philistines, reactionaries, anti-Communists, and America Firsters – a nest of spies. Bellamy would be a good corrective.

True, he was a little unpredictable. He had been something of a prodigy; he had published while still very young and had attracted the notice of the really eminent – Robert Frost and Eliot and Pound. He had gained laureate status while still in his forties. Now, at sixty-three, and nearly always in the public eye – 'the most visible poet since Yeats' he had been called – he qualified as a bard. He was a complicated man – confused, vain, too many sleeping pills, too much wine – but he wrote like an angel. I was sure of it. I could never understand why no one remembered the lines of his poems – I don't know why I was unable to recall a single line. But, then, who can quote Ezra Pound?

When the reading – this Poetry Night – was over, Bellamy walked off the stage and was mobbed by people asking for autographs. I noticed that few people addressed him directly. They stood shyly, offering him his books, which were open to the flyleaf. He signed them without saying a word. The group around him was reverential. Out of politeness – but it might have been fear – they kept their distance and even averted their eyes as, not speaking, Bellamy scrawled his name in various editions of his books. When he was finished he saw me.

Our height was all the introduction we required. Tall people often find themselves talking to perfect strangers, merely because the stranger is also tall. Tallness is like a special racial attribute.

Bellamy spoke over the heads of his admirers: 'I think we've met before.'

‘At an American Embassy reception,’ I said. ‘Months ago.’

‘Yes,’ he said and came over and shook my hand. ‘I remember you well.’

His eyes were unsteady and his hair had the look of having been combed by someone other than himself. In his wincing, round-shouldered way he seemed wounded or drunk, but he was more likely just very tired after two solid hours on the stage.

‘How is your wife?’ he said.

‘I think you have someone else in mind,’ I said. ‘I’m not married. I’m the man from Boston. Excuse me, that didn’t sound right!’

Bellamy said, ‘Is she still writing poems?’

He had not heard me, and he had mistaken me for Vic Scaduto, whose wife wrote poems – or at least she said she did.

‘Not married,’ I said, shaking my head.

‘So am I,’ he said. ‘I was just leaving – why don’t you come along?’

His tone was neutral, but this was the strangest thing about Bellamy. At a distance he was very friendly, but the closer you got to him the cooler he became. Giving a lecture or a reading, Bellamy had a very warm intimate tone; in public he was relaxed; but face to face, like this, he was deaf and almost completely indifferent. This I am sure will be news to many of his fans.

I followed him outside, not certain that I was really wanted.

He said, ‘Have you eaten?’

‘No.’ But I was not particularly hungry. ‘I don’t want to intrude. We can meet some other time. You must be tired after your reading.’

‘Time to eat,’ he said. He waved a taxi toward us. ‘You haven’t eaten. You may as well come along. After you.’

It was off-hand, as plainly spoken as I have written it, not really an invitation but rather a nod to the inevitable. We rode in silence for a while.

I said, ‘I don’t feel right about this.’

‘It’s dinnertime,’ Bellamy said. ‘Too bad about your wife.’

The wife-business had taken hold of him, but I had no idea what he was imagining. It seemed a ludicrous trip in this taxi, for the fact was that I did not want to go with him, and he probably did not want me along either – and yet here we were on our way to a restaurant. I wasn't even hungry!

It was Wilton's in Bury Street – expensive, English, dark brown, and joyless. Emma, Bellamy's wife – the third – was waiting for him at the table inside the restaurant. With her were the Poulters, man and wife. I recognized the name instantly.

'Like the mustard?' I asked.

Poulter's English Mustard had a green and yellow label, and an unforgettable royal warrant: By Appointment to HM Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother, with her gold crest. I often stared at this label and tried to imagine the Queen Mother painting Poulter's mustard on a royal sausage.

Mr Poulter said, 'I am the mustard.'

It was clear, from the way Poulter had stood up and shown Walter Van Bellamy his chair and called the waiter over for a fresh drinks order, that he was the host. Poulter was paying. I had no business there.

Bellamy said, 'For God's sake, sit down!'

But they were one chair short. They had not expected me.

Poulter was tactful. He urged me to take his chair. This proved embarrassing. I sat and left Mr Poulter, the host, standing. Every other diner in the restaurant was seated. I quickly stood up again and offered him my seat.

Bellamy turned his back on us. He was drinking wine and – his hand shook badly – spilling it.

Mrs Poulter's hair arrangement was bright mahogany and so shiny and stiff it looked shellacked. She became suddenly flustered and said, 'There seems to be something wrong. There are too many people. Norman, there's one too many!'

And Mr Poulter said, 'No, no. Our friend here' – he beckoned a waiter over – 'will get us another chair.'

The table in the cubbyhole was still set for four, and, worse, it was designed for four, so throughout the meal the discomfort reminded me that Bellamy had had no right to bring me there and make me an unwelcome guest.

Bellamy did not explain my presence to the Poulters. For a time he spoke to the waiter, who did nothing but listen and agree (‘That needs saying, sir!’). Emma spoke to Norman Poulter about the treachery of postmen, and I spoke to Mrs Poulter about the weather in Indonesia.

The table jolted – Bellamy was shifting position. He stared at me and said, ‘Learn of the green world what can be thy place.’

‘I suppose that’s good advice,’ I said.

‘Pull down thy vanity,’ he said.

‘Excuse me?’

‘But to have done instead of not doing,’ he said. ‘This is not vanity.’

‘No –’

‘Here, error is all in the not done,’ he said, ‘all in the diffidence that faltered.’

The others, hearing this, had fallen silent and were watching me. Bellamy was smiling broadly.

‘Ezra,’ he said.

He was quoting Pound!

At eleven o’clock Bellamy stood up and took Emma by the arm and said, ‘We have to go. We’re in the country these days and our last train leaves in half an hour.’

I stayed uneasily with the Poulters.

Mrs Poulter said, ‘Bingo’s going through rather a bad patch.’

‘Bingo?’

‘Walter Bellamy, of course.’ She had lipstick flecks on her teeth. ‘Do you mean to say you’re a friend of his and you don’t even know his name?’

That was as far as I had got with Bellamy, which annoyed me, because I still admired him and we still needed him. A month later we had a request from our Binational Center, Amerikahaus in Berlin, asking whether Bellamy would be available to represent the United States in a seminar called ‘Writing East and West.’ Everett

Horton, our number two, told me to take care of it.

I called his house in Kent. A housekeeper answered and said he was in London. I called the Eaton Square number. A tetchy voice said I could not speak to him.

‘It’s very important,’ I said.

‘He is very ill.’ Was this Emma? ‘In any case, he is not here.’

‘May I ask where I can get in touch with him?’

‘I am not obliged to answer your questions!’

The phone was slammed down.

There were two more cables from Berlin, demanding Bellamy. My secretary tried but failed to discover Bellamy’s whereabouts. There was another cable, and then I went to Scaduto. He was the cultural affairs officer, I said; surely it was his job to deal with Bellamy, the literary man, the poet –

‘A binational seminar in West Berlin, with writers from both sides of the Iron Curtain, and you call it literary?’ He laughed at me.

“‘Writing East and West” – that’s what it’s called.’

‘Guys from East Germany,’ he said. ‘You call them writers?’ He tap-danced for a moment, then said, ‘Face it – it’s political. That’s why we need Bellamy to represent us. The Ambassador’s going to be there! Bellamy’s got the right profile – he’s old, experienced, liberal, well known, active in political protest. Did you know he was arrested in ’sixty-five on a peace march in Washington? Do you have any idea what that buys in terms of credibility with these so-called Marxist writers? Plus, he’s well connected, lovely wife, and he wears these terrific suits.’

‘And he’s sick,’ I said.

‘So you say,’ Scaduto said. ‘It might just be a story – famous men often have people around to protect them. “He’s sick” – it might be a euphemism for “Take a hike” or “Don’t bother him.”’

It was then that I remembered the Poulters and that awkward dinner at Wilton’s. I found ‘Poulter’s Mustard Ltd’ in the phone book and called the main office. My telephone technique, to reassure people, was to call very early in the morning and leave the Embassy number and my name. They always called back: a call from the American Embassy always seemed important. Poulter was prompter than most. Yes, he

remembered me.

I said, ‘I know Bingo’s very ill. I wonder whether you can tell me where he is – I have something to give him.’

‘Doesn’t he usually go to the Abbey?’ Mr Poulter said.

‘In London?’

‘Yes,’ he said, ‘that clinic on the other side of the river.’ Other side in London always meant south.

I said, ‘I wasn’t sure, but I can check.’

‘I try to avoid the Abbey,’ Poulter said. ‘I’ve never liked those places. And anyway, Bingo will be out soon. He never stops long.’

By then, it was too late to ask what was wrong with Bellamy.

‘Berlin is still waiting for a reply on that Bellamy request,’ Horton said, just before I went home.

I said, ‘I feel as if I’ve been looking for Bellamy my whole life.’

‘Then it’s about time you found him.’

Back home at my apartment in Overstrand Mansions, I looked up the Abbey in the phone book and discovered that it was not far from me. Its address was Spencer Park, on the 77 bus route in Wandsworth.

I switched off all the lights so that I could think, and sitting in the darkness I reflected on the fact that what I had told Horton was true: I had been aware of Walter Van Bellamy, and seeking him, since my schooldays. Then, to impress us, my English teacher, Mr Bagley, showed us Bellamy’s first book of poems and the jacket flap that said:… attended Boston Latin School. We were very proud of Bellamy and, because of him, were proud of ourselves. It seemed possible that we could do what he had done. For me, he was more than a fellow townsman – he was, in fact, like my alter ego; and here we both were in London, not exactly exiles but with certain likenesses and affinities.

I knew no more about him than what I have written here. Some people regarded him as one of the greatest living writers, but my image of him was indistinct – from hearsay and books, from the reception at Horton’s, the reading, the terrible dinner at Wilton’s. I could not say what he was really like. What was at the heart of my quandary

was the suspicion that Walter Van Bellamy was a little like me.

The best news was that this private hospital – its name, the Abbey, said everything – was nearby. It was three miles at most, a fifteen-minute bus ride. I called and was told that Bellamy was indeed a patient, that he could receive visitors, and that visiting hours were not over until nine o'clock. It was now seven-thirty.

I resolved to visit him that night. On the bus, I was amazed at my audacity: here I was visiting one of the most famous American poets. I wondered if I could bring it off. It was like anticipating a hard interview. Would I measure up, and could I get him to agree to the Berlin request? I did not know much about him, but I knew he was human. At the time, I was naive enough to find that a consolation.

The Abbey was a Victorian house behind a wall, with a tower to one side. Its tall church windows were heavily leaded. A mock Gothic villa, its rear garden was part of a private park – the most inaccessible park in London – and its Frankenstein-movie façade faced Wandsworth Common, many chestnut trees, and a row of bent-over hawthorns. Its sign, in old script, was well lighted, but the building itself was in darkness – the curtains were drawn, and it was impossible to get a glimpse of anything going on inside. When I rang the bell and entered I saw that it was a very deep house. Ahead of me, past the reception desk, was a long corridor.

A nurse took swift squeaky rubber-soled steps toward me, but before I could identify myself I heard a sudden yakking and the rattle of what was almost certainly lunatic laughter.

'Sorry about that,' the nurse said. 'Are you here to see one of the guests?'

'Mr Bellamy,' I said; and I thought: Guests?

'Is he expecting you?'

My first impulse was to lie and say yes. But I shook my head and said that I had not had time to get in touch with Mr Bellamy on the phone.

The nurse said, 'He can't use the phone.'

'Is he that bad?'

'No, no. He'd be on the phone all day, talking nineteen to the dozen, if we let him. But we have instructions from the family. He's not allowed to use the phone.'

'Poor fellow.'

‘They’re afraid of what he’ll do.’ She smiled at me.

‘What will he do?’

‘I mean, say.’ She smiled again. ‘He never gets any visitors.’

‘Is it contagious?’

‘Being manic?’ She nodded with real conviction and said, ‘It may sound silly but I honestly think it is. Crazy families! If you promise not to excite him you can see him. But don’t stay too long. Have you been here before?’

I said no and she told me to follow her. Bellamy’s room was on the top floor. The nurse knocked, there was a grunt from inside the room, and she left me there to go in on my own.

Bellamy lay on the bed. He was fully clothed – over-dressed if anything – wearing a jacket and turtleneck sweater and tweed trousers and thick socks. The room was small and hot and brightly lit and smelled of cough remedies: Bellamy also had a cold. On a chair there were books – three were Bellamy’s own, including his Poems New and Selected. He was reading a small black Bible.

He glanced up. It was a glance I recognized: his nod to the inevitable – not friendly, not hostile. But he was drugged – his lips were puffy and inexpressive, his eyes sleepy-looking.

He said, ‘Read that,’ and handed me the Bible, where a passage was circled in pencil. ‘Read it out loud.’

“‘I have digged and drunk strange waters, and with the soles of my feet have I dried up all the rivers of besieged places.’” I gave the Bible back to him. Its leather cover was unpleasantly warm where he had been holding it.

‘What does it mean?’ he said.

I shrugged, and already I felt as if I had failed the interview.

‘It’s a poem,’ Bellamy said. ‘It’s my poem.’

He tore the Bible page out and opened his mouth to smile. I thought he was going to eat the page. He crushed it into his pocket.

‘How do you feel?’ I asked.

‘I don’t sleep.’

‘Can’t they give you something?’

‘That’s not it,’ he said in a drowsy voice. ‘I haven’t got time to sleep. Too much work to do. Look.’ He picked up a book and said, ‘Are you the tax man?’

On the bus I had thought: Will I measure up? Am I bright enough? The anticipation hurt my nerves. I imagined certain questions. But I had not expected this. I felt sorry for him.

I said, ‘I’m from the Embassy. I have a message for you.’

‘I’ve been getting messages for weeks. Taking them down. I don’t want any more messages.’ He showed me the book again, and again he said, ‘Look.’

It was Poems New and Selected. He flipped the pages. I saw blue ink, a blue scrawl, poems scribbled over and smudged, balloons with words in them, and arrows, and asterisks. You see a person’s bad handwriting and you get frightened or sad. It was the sort of book that students kept, full of underlinings and annotations and crossings-out. Now Bellamy was holding it open to a particular page. I could see that he had crossed out nearly all the lines in that poem and had rewritten them. I couldn’t judge how good the new lines were – they were scarcely legible. The exclamation marks did not make me hopeful.

‘You’re rewriting your poems.’

‘Improving them,’ he said. ‘I’m getting messages.’

‘But these poems have already been printed,’ I said.

‘Full of mistakes.’ His eyes brightened. He looked desperate, as if he had been tricked and trapped and could escape only through this great labor of rewriting. He looked at his hands. There were ink stains on them that brought his wrinkles into relief. He motioned to the other books, opened one – it was Londoners. It was a mass of blue ballpoint. The handwriting was wobbly and childish and actually frightening to look at. It indicated disorder and mania and big blue obsession: ‘And these.’

His head lay to one side, on his shoulder, as if he were trying to read upside-down writing. But when he shut the book his head didn’t move.

He said, ‘The names of racehorses – they aren’t names. They’re numbers. Word-numbers. Meaningless.’

I said, ‘I had never thought of that.’

‘It’s true. A Jew thought it up, the names, to confuse people. You can make a lot of money if you know how to confuse people.’

‘How do you know it was a Jew?’ I said.

‘Because the Jews have all the money,’ he said. ‘What’s wrong with you? Sit down.’

I was standing at the foot of his bed. I said, ‘I can’t stay. I just wanted to make sure you’re all right.’

‘I’m not all right,’ Bellamy said. ‘Didn’t anyone tell you?’

‘You should write some new poems – not rewrite the old ones,’ I said, eager to change the subject.

‘If your car was rusty, would you paint it or sell it?’ he asked.

‘I guess I’d fix it,’ I said.

‘A Jew would sell it,’ he said. ‘But I’m not selling these rusty poems. I’m fixing them.’

I wanted most of all to open a window. It was stuffy in here – and the smell of Vicks and old socks and last week’s apples made it stuffier. I looked out through the window bars and saw a blackness: Spencer Park. I sat down.

Bellamy said, ‘Tell them I’ll have this book fixed pretty soon, and then I’ll leave this place.’

‘Whom shall I tell?’

‘The rest of them,’ he said. ‘Roger, Philippa, all the Howletts.’

Now I was certain that I wanted to leave. He thought I was his publisher. It was a charade – and pathetic. He had no idea who I was. It was unfair and tormenting for him if I stayed longer.

‘Here’s one,’ he said. He took up a piece of paper and cleared his throat. ‘They were naked at last and had no pockets to pick.’ He smiled. He said, ‘The Jews.’

I stood up.

‘They knew they had to be purified, an angel gave them the news.’ He smiled as

before. ‘The Jews.’

I said, ‘I get the point.’

‘Their shoes –’

I could not stop him. He read on. It was a short poem, but it was poisonous, as clumsy as the scribble it was written in. It was demented, it was awful, it was wrong. And the next one he tried to read was an attempt at comedy. Anti-Jewish feeling nearly always tries to pass itself off as humor, because there is a kind of easy freemasonry in anti-Semitism – the nudge, the shared joke. And it is worse because it is completely fearless hatred mimicking sanity as it mocks its victims.

I was glad for the knock on the door as he started poem three: ‘The Jewnighted States.’ The door opened.

‘Hello, Walter,’ the man said. ‘Have you taken your pill?’

Bellamy reached for the pill and put it into his mouth and drank his water. Doing this, he became childish again – the way he pulled a face and had a hard time swallowing, the way he gulped his water and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, the way he drooled and sat forward, working his jaw.

‘May I see you for a minute?’ the man said to me, and led me into the corridor. ‘I’m Doctor Chapman. Are you a friend of Walter’s? Family?’

‘Not really, no,’ I said. ‘Just an interested party.’

‘Pity. He’s doing marvelously well. But he’d do a great deal better if he got more visitors. I’m thinking of releasing him. He needs company.’

‘He says some rather wild things. Racehorses. Jews. And he’s rewriting his poems. I think he’s crazy.’

The doctor smiled at me. ‘That’s not a word we use here.’

‘You use all the others – why not that one?’ I said. ‘And Bellamy’s in there babbling about the beauties of Auschwitz. Why don’t you tell him there are certain words, certain ideas –’

The doctor was still smiling. It was a Bellamy smile, of a kind – impatient, patronizing, humorless. He said, ‘A famous Jewish writer once said, “All men are Jews,” meaning all men are victims. It’s not true, you know. The opposite is closer to the truth. All men are Nazis, really. I mean, if all men are anything, which of course they’re not. What a

depressing subject! But I'm keeping you from Walter. Sorry. I just wanted to find out if you were close to him.'

'I'm from the Embassy,' I said. 'We try to keep an eye on our citizens, even if they are determined to be exiles.'

'He's that, all right. Exile – it's a good word for his condition.'

I did not re-enter Bellamy's room. I did not stay. He had no idea who I was. I took a bus home and drafted a cable to Berlin, which I sent the next day, explaining that Walter Van Bellamy could not attend this seminar, or any other.

And of course, for months afterward, whenever I saw a book of Bellamy's or a newly published poem, I searched it for signs of madness or Jew-baiting or plain stupidity. But there was nothing, nothing, nothing. His poems were serene and unmemorable; they never touched these subjects; and afterward, when I couldn't remember them, they frightened me.