There's always one who falls in love with implacable doom like this boy did, and it's as impossible to explain as any other love. Why would anyone fall in love with the march of doom? Banks of lights startled out one by one, crash by crash in a resounding enclosure, laying strips of perfect darkness on a bare cement floor. The hall of locked doors—the old hall with no doors, and it keeps angling in even segments forever. Is it a comfort to believe you are irrevocably trapped? Is that an invigorating feeling? Maybe it was just Nordic phlegm, inherited from people who often had to be pretty ambitious just to get by. When he was old enough to notice, he thought about it. Death doesn't glide, or pop up out of the ground, it marches. He's sure there's a reason why death marches, but he doesn't know what it is. Somehow he had imbibed the idea that doom never ends but marches, head up, without halting, immortal and dignified beneath its own beautiful, transparent banner, which he pictured lying across the sky like the shadow of a flame.

His divorced older brother, who was twelve years his senior, had tormented a woman for years with a benign affability that was unconsciously and consummately well calculated to drive her crazy, always turning her away with an invitation to come again. Young as he was at the time, he could see in her face, nearly every time she came around, the resolve that comes from having yet another tactic. Nothing she did, though, ever gained her any purchase on his brother's obdurately slippery personality, and it was heart-rending to see her going away, time after time, defeated again. He never wondered why his brother was like that, especially since he never had anything further to do with any woman, and hated his ex-wife. Many years later, when his brother was dead and he had defeats of his own, he realized two things. First, that he understood the persistent, long-suffering way that woman had tasted every last drop of her destiny, and admired her for it. She didn't neglect a single grain of her dream. That struck him as the best way to live. The second thing he realized was that his brother had wanted to say yes to her all along. He knew that because, one time, he was out to lunch with his brother, who had had a stroke and was in a wheelchair by then, and a woman walked by their table, trailing a wake of the same perfume that other woman, the persistent one, always wore. They both smelled it, they both remembered. He saw his brother's face tremble and instantly understood that all those smooth demurrals had been hiding a kind of impalement, that his brother had been a hostage forced to act normal; he had been inwardly smothering himself with a firm hand without ever really knowing why he was doing it, as if he were possessed by his own pride, acting as an external force, a neutralized part of himself looking on helplessly as the active part kept shutting her down.

He'd worked in city planning for a while. He'd mapped out a barren concrete square fronting four huge pokerfaced banks, and helped to select the sinister cubical sculpture that was the black heart of the square, and which looked like it wanted to fall down on you and crush you. Crush you, gradually. He also designed a strip mall that ended up housing a check cashing store, a bail bondsman, a gun store, and the offices of a foreclosure attorney who went next door one day, and then shot himself right there in the windswept center of the intersection. Some colleagues in the planning office had known the attorney socially, and he once overheard two of them discussing the suicide.

"But that's just how it's been, he's just—”one of them twirled a finger in the air, "a downward spiral."

"It's not a spiral," he said, eyes on his work.

"What's that?"

"It's not a spiral, it's straight down," he said, eyes on his work.

He lived in such-and-such a place and did such-and-such things, and now he's lean and bent and old, with knuckly hands and a cigarette, sitting alone in his hard wooden chair in watery sunlight white on his white head and the silent white smoke. Tom Waits wrote a song about him called "What's He Building In There?"

His late older brother had also taken the full measure of whatever it was that systematically pinched out every last wick of his earnestness, and he respected the skill, conscious or not, he used to conceal his anguish. It took years of neglect and old age and a stroke to shake his facial control. By the time that perfume-incident happened, he already never could stand earnestness from people, but he could stand it from machines, which was good since he still needed earnestness, needed it very, very badly. He used to go out looking for it, on silent recon. He wasn't really any different from anyone else, except for that one part of his mind that was always on silent recon, and stored up images and gestures he gathered imperceptibly from the windows of houses, shops, apartments, from street corners and contrasted against bus windows.

He thought to himself, although not in so many words, "All these are the architecture of my doom somehow."

After he retired, he moved into an old clapboard farmhouse. He'd first caught sight of it from the window of the bus, and it was like locking eyes with another person. By chance it was the doomed spot. What first he noticed was the sooty blackness of its air, and the wiry deadness of the wormy trees whose limbs made a sort of hive around and above the roof. That particular obscurity clung to him as he flashed by down the road, and he remembered too the somber vividness of the broad white clapboarding

that seemed to glow at him through an invisible veil draped from the eaves. And one more detail—a real estate sign—made the image complete.

Now he can see the bus jostle by on the road from the window of that old place. It looks like a sort of bathyscape, filled with a homey orange radiance, bustling people home like the merry old village coachman. In his memories, the bus was unimportantly desolate, but from this window it was positively hearthlike. He imagined the contrary perspective; he knew what the house looked like from the bus, but now there was the one lit window to invite speculation.

Once he had the house, he could get to work on the earnestness machines. He knew design, but had no serious knowledge of engineering and had never owned any tools more demanding than a hammer and some screwdrivers. In the absence of clutter and mental noise that moving to this farmhouse had made, he could set aside any technical obstacles and address himself frankly to a bare white formica table. Then to pencils, tracing paper, a compass. An ashtray made of clear glass, a carton of unfiltered cigarettes, and a stately box of safety matches.

He smoked, and blew the smoke straight out ahead of him. With his eyes half open, he would search the coils of smoke for shapes and then sketch them on the paper in front of him without looking at his pencil. The tracing paper sheets he used were big, like butcher's paper. When he felt a shape was complete, he would move the paper evenly in a random direction. Overlapping drawings were no less useful. When he got tired of doing this, and the sheet was full, he would go to a drawer and extract a parts catalog. The company went out of business years ago, but the thick catalog was a virtual dictionary of mechanical parts. Opening it on top of the tracing paper, he would methodically turn the pages looking for parts that corresponded more or less to any of his drawings. When he found one, he would label the drawing with the name of the part. In this way, he knew what to look for.

He ordered parts on the rotary telephone, and soon parcels were arriving nearly every day. Very often the parts were virtual antiques, and he sometimes had to pay rather high prices for them. Pieces of ancient clockwork and from long-obsolete washing machines, jelly molds, ice cream makers, bed warmers, rubber seals, radiator faucets, valves from an old ammonia refrigeration machine, most of the works from a player piano, a gas mantle, part of a telegraph decoder, the action from an old carbine, a steam tractor drive rod, a prosthetic arm made from wood and gutta-percha, gears, belts, and cams. Sometimes he reaches right in and pulls a piece from the tobacco cloud and sets it down on the table in front of him. His smoke never entirely dissipates, and fragments drift through the house like jellyfish. Eventually he sets up an assembly bench in his garage; all his tools hang from the ceiling on rubber bands. When he has enough parts, he goes in there and closes the door. He pulls one tool down after another, uses it and lets it go, and it snaps back up through the smoke. Reach up and pull another one down through the smoke.

Stock the farm with animals. Make them out of memories, machine parts, smoke vestiges, and recyclables; then, add the doom they can't live without. It's the final step. Doom is the spark and the wear. It looks like a black asterisk he pulls out of a shadowy hole in the bench, the way you would pick up a starfish from a tide pool. He pulls one out with long tweezers and lays it limply on the back of his latest creation; the asterisk seethes down into the body, the gears start to tick, the limbs start groping, and the eyes flip open, staring.

At first, the end result of his work was more or less frogs, and what they did was walk up walls, never down, and even when they crossed the ceiling they still were climbing up somehow, with their long sinewy arms corded like a stream of tap water and colorless spatulated hands. Every now and then, a long tongue would snap, flashing like a firecracker. In no time, he was up to full-sized livestock; they didn't need any extra material to make, only a greater concentration of mental effort. The lots in back of the farm house became hideous and inexplicable with half-glimpsed bulks of shadow, rolling masses like low herds, aerial presences like birds made of wind flurries, wallowy patches that seemed to collect senseless despair like a hollow in the ground collects slime. From bus windows at twilight, a passenger might be struck by the dire glamour vibrating off the plain white house, long and flat against the ground, and the word went around that some kind of warlock Calvinist was living there now.

Once he lost a kitten he'd made. It had gotten out of the house, he didn't know how. The second day he went out to look for it, he found a dead coyote pup, very young, and the kitten wedged in among some rocks nearby. A dark opening beneath a wide, flat boulder was the den mouth. The kitten was still moving its paws in little circles, rolling its head, and when he touched it he saw in a burst of mental imagery the mother coyote, the retreat from the farm with the kitten in her mouth, the kitten slipping loose and falling in among the rocks, the mistake of one for another in the dark, the pup's neck broken. When, twenty minutes later, he was back by the roadside and saw the crumpled grey body lying in the margin, where the car had flung her, he blanched, inwardly contracting in a kind of black satisfaction. He pulled the kitten out of his knapsack, made an adjustment with his fibrous, thick index finger, and the kitten seemed to pull itself together with a snicker. It returned home with him under its own power, gambolling innocently along beside him.

"First animals, people next," he thought. "That's always the way it goes."

He began waiting.

It might or might not have been nerves, but, when the old man opened the door to him, Guy thought for an instant that a black plume was tumbling in space just above the white head, like the holy flame that stands on prophets' heads in church windows. So he wasn't at all sure just what he said to the old man, but he only nodded and

waved Guy into the dim, cigaretty interior. Now that he was seated again at his kitchen table, the old man was plainly the central wheel in his farm machine. Outside the walls, Guy could hear the animals methodically nibbling grass, their nearly invisible heads all bowed in a line, unravelling the grass like a sweater, row by row, their teeth and their feet moving to the sharp ticking of the big wall clock above the old man's kitchen table. The clock was like a steel porthole looking out on a snowy field raked with lean, ink-black shadows.

"I'm here for a friend," he tells the old man, who is drawing straight lines on tracing paper using a plastic triangle. The table lamp blazes with colorless light. Colorless twilight blows in from the screen door behind Guy, the spectral windows around him, dimly edging the overstuffed sofa in its glistening plastic slipcover. The old man's movements are perfectly regular.

Guy takes a step closer and freezes. All but invisible living things in constant, automatic motion are hearkening all around him.

"Yes?" the old man says.

Something hops onto Guy's left foot. It looks like a toad, although it has a neck, and out of all those living things, it alone has stopped moving. Guy instantly dismisses the impulse to kick out or shake it off. Now it is climbing his pant leg, reaching up his body with its long arms. He reaches down to shoo it away, but instead he finds himself picking it up and holding it in the palm of his hand. Not warm, not cold, not heavy, not light, but, inside it, something plucks like a thick guitar string in time with the clock. The toad thing grips the sides of his hand with its own long firm fingers. Then, with a sort of anticipatory whir inside, it inflates its throat to reveal a brilliant emergency-yellow pouch with a ragged, black exclamation point in the middle, and it sings out a tone that starts soft and high and ends loud and low, as if it were imitating the roar of a passing train.

Guy hefts the toad at the old man.

"How much?"

"Take it," the old man says and draws a crisp straight line.

"I can have it?" Guy asks, uncertainly.

"You can have that," says the old man.

Guy dropped her off so late she barely made her flight. Now that she's in her seat, the seething numbness that he'd left her with regains her full attention. An hour of sullenly unbroken silence in the car; she couldn't afford a cab. No friends left around

here anymore. But with the divorce settled, the worst is permanently behind her. She won't be coming back.

The descending whine of the engine tugs at her sleeping mind, but it is the wild plummet in her stomach as the plane jolts and instantly drops thirty feet that whips her awake amid shouts of surprise and alarm. The angle of the clouds out the porthole makes her grow cold, and again that engine sound grates almost underneath her. With a ferocious start, her eyes desperate, she suddenly lunges forward, snatches up her carry-on bag, unzips one compartment after another until one of them blooms out an emergency yellow throat with an exclamation point down the middle, and that long descending tone rings out among the screams of the passengers.

Guy is speeding down an empty highway, music blaring, eyes all over the road. It might or might not be nerves, but he swerves once to avoid what he thought was a car abruptly pulling out from a dirt road into the lane ahead of him. Something dark and bulky flashes by on the right, but he can't see anything in the rear view mirror—whatever it was, it was too low for a car, wasn't it, and a truck was passing, horn blaring from high to low as it went by, although come to think of it he hadn't seen and didn't see any truck ...

His breath stops. Braking hard, he pulls onto the shoulder by a stand of trees thinking: “It's not possible...I put it...I put it."

He jumps from the car and fumbles with the trunk catch. The whole car seems to be vibrating with the vestiges of the sound, and he's suddenly as giddy as if he was caught in an earthquake. With a trembling that starts in his gut and shakes him from the inside out, he throws the trunk open so abruptly and violently he tumbles into it and comes face to face with a note addressed to him in her handwriting and topped by an emergency-yellow throat streaked with an exclamation point that bulges up with that same sweep of sound from high to low.

In that moment, he realized the giddiness, the rumbling, actually were coming from the ground. They're not inside him at all, not at their point of origin. He has time to turn around, to see the aircraft fuselage erupt from woods and pivoting tree shadows, combing the air with the soft white light from its portholes. It snaps the guardrail, hurtles past the separated landing gear he had swerved to avoid a moment ago, and bears down on him like a colossal white plow.

The old man gets up from his table at midnight sharp and steps out in front of the farmhouse for a little air, a bit of a breather. The night around him inaudibly booms with conglomerated ticking and catching. Lumbering shades, precisely coordinated, their springs taut, rut in the back lot. Their snorts and ejaculations coincide exactly with the long tearing noise of each passing car on the road there. Cigarette smoke lifts drowsily in the still air in front of the farmhouse. To every passing car, the old man

delivers the same mute warning: never ever lose hold of your fond dream of escaping necessity, as if it weren't as close to you as the vein in your neck, as if it weren't the hammer whose blows shape even that dream pulsing in your neck, as if you were the one rascal in a universe of dire nobility. Doom isn't a spiral, but it isn't an abyss either. It's a staircase as straight as a die and, with the wind in what's left of your hair, every step of your descent is deliberate and firm, on down with everything else to a heat death that is the tapered new cosmos.

A smudged mob of birds leaps up into the bare branches of the dead sycamore tree, wings whirring and beaks snapping. The old man pinches out his cigarette, pockets the butt, and turns to go back inside again, climbing the low steps to the front door, foot, foot, hand, hand, foot, foot, hand, hand.