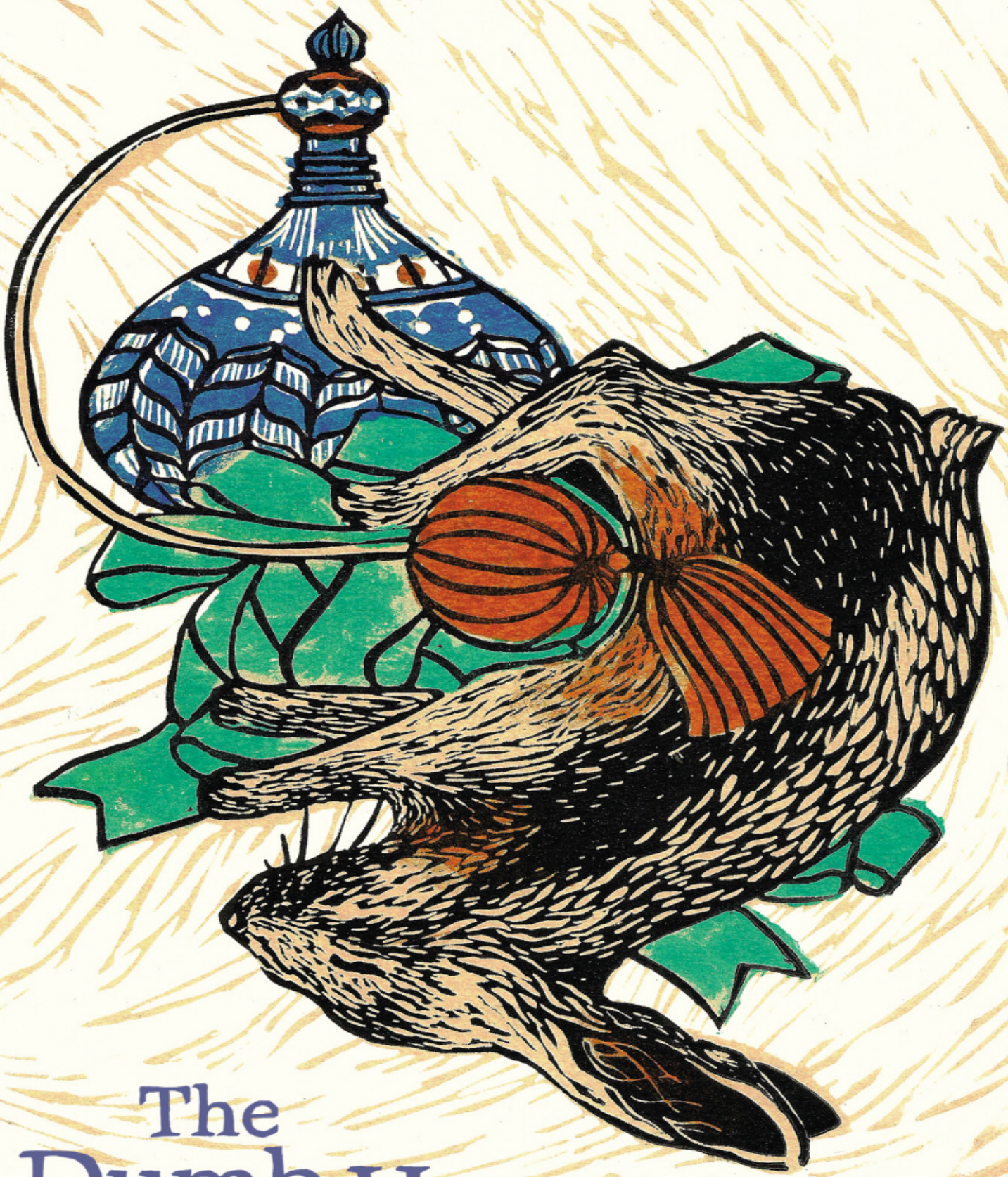
VINTAGE BURNSIDE



The Dumb House

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About the Book

In Persian Myth, it is said that Akbar the Great once built a palace which he filled with newborn children, attended only by mutes, in order to learn whether language is innate or acquired. This palace became known as the Gang Mahal, or Dumb House.

In his first novel, John Burnside explores the possibilities inherent in a modern-day repetition of Akbar's investigations. Following the death of his mother, the unnamed narrator creates a twisted variant of the Dumb House, finally using his own children as subjects in a bizarre experiment. When the children develop a musical language of their own, however, their gaoler is the one who is excluded, and he extracts an appalling revenge.

About the Author

John Burnside was born in 1955 and now lives in Fife. He has published six collections of poetry, the most recent being *A Normal Skin*, and has received a number of awards, including the Geoffrey Faber Memorial Prize. He was selected as one of the twenty New Generation Poets in 1994. *The Dumb House* is his first novel.

BY JOHN BURNSIDE

Fiction

The Dumb House

Poetry

The Hoop
Common Knowledge
Feast Days
The Myth of the Twin
Swimming in the Flood
A Normal Skin

John Burnside

THE DUMB HOUSE

A Chamber Novel

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

I am not yet so lost in lexicography, as to forget that words are the daughters of earth, and that things are the sons of heaven. Language is only the instrument of science, and words are but the signs of ideas: I wish, however, that the instruments might be less apt to decay, and that signs might be permanent, like the things which they denote.

Samuel Johnson

part one

karen

No one could say it was my choice to kill the twins, any more than it was my decision to bring them into the world. Each of these events was an inevitability, one thread in the fabric of what might be called destiny, for want of a better word – a thread that neither I nor anyone else could have removed without corrupting the whole design. I chose to perform the laryngotomies, if only to halt their constant singing – if singing is what you would call it – that ululation that permeated my waking hours, and entered my sleep through every crevice of my dreams. At the time, though, I would have said it was a logical act, another step in the research I had begun almost four years before – the single most important experiment that a human being can perform: to find the locus of the soul, the one gift that sets us apart from the animals; to find it, first by an act of deprivation and then, later, by a logical and necessary destruction. It surprised me how easy it was to operate on those two half-realised beings. They existed in a different world: the world of laboratory rats, or the shifting and functionless space of the truly autistic.

That experiment is over now. It was terminated, only in order that it might begin again, in a different form. If I know anything, I know this is the true pattern of our lives: a constant repetition, with small, yet significant variations, unfolding through the years. The experiment with the twins was just one variation on a lifelong theme. If it had been a conventional piece of work, I would be writing up the results; describing, in abstract language, an initial problem, a series of hypotheses and tests, a final outcome. Everything would be clearly stated, in scientific terms. But this was not a conventional piece of work. There is no way to describe this experiment without describing everything that has happened, from the morning I first learned to talk, thirty years ago, to the moment I locked the door of the basement room, leaving the twins inside, silenced now,

gazing at one another with those expressions of grieved bewilderment that finally made it impossible for the experiment to continue. I switched on the music before I left, but I still had no way of knowing what it had meant to them during their years of isolation. Outside, I put my eye to the observation grille for a last look; they seemed not to have noticed my departure. Quietly, I left them to digest their poisoned meal, went upstairs to check on Karen, then made a pot of coffee and waited.

It seems odd now, this silence. Perhaps it was what I expected all along; perhaps it was what I wanted. This silence is more than the absence of sound. This is something I have earned: now I understand that, without it, I could not have contemplated this account. I had to know what the end was before I started. Now I can begin at the beginning, with Mother in her fine clothes, coming to my room in the evenings to read me stories, Mother in her pearls and beautiful dresses, one of those exquisite parasites which infect and inhabit their host, without ever going so far as to destroy it entirely – and even, in this case, creating the illusion of a natural symbiosis, a mutual nourishment. It is impossible not to admire such elegance.

Not that I would judge her harshly for that. I loved her as much as it is possible to love anyone. Looking back, I can see her faults. I can be detached, even clinical, in my analysis of our life together; yet, even now, I still love her. As a child, I was stunned by the presence of that marvellous being, that woman who had made of herself an object so beautiful that even she would stop sometimes and wonder at her own reflection in a mirror or a darkened pane of glass. As children, we love who we can. My father was shy with me, difficult, wrapped in a cocoon, always afraid that I would enter somehow, and touch him. I think he was more afraid of me than he was of Mother: he was haunted by a possible betrayal, by seeming to be the one

who intruded between us, so he adopted the role Mother had prescribed for him, the role of invisible husband.

At some level, I probably always knew how distant Mother was, even from me. She was always working, like an architect, building a house of stories, treating her life and mine as a piece of fiction. I knew she was engaged in an exercise, an invention in the old sense of the word: everything she did was controlled, every story she told was a ritual. Nothing ever varied, and I admired that. Our relationship resembled that of the priest and the altar boy at Mass: she was the celebrant, I was the witness; our roles and offices were divinely appointed, therefore inevitable. Even now, I suspect she was right: because of her stratagems, our life was ordered. We could avoid intimacy without skulking in our rooms, as my father did; by the use of rituals and stories, she created a neutral ground where we could meet, where everything could be kept under control, and nothing would slip beyond the boundaries we set for ourselves.

When others were present, we were formal, perhaps even cold. It was my father who opened up to guests, telling them stories about his early years in the business, his time in Palestine, his clumsy courtship of my mother, inviting his listeners into a form of collaboration, while she regarded him with a remote, almost contemptuous expression. His favourite story was the one about their first meeting – how, walking a country road, in the summer twilight, he encountered a beautiful young woman with curly brown hair, lugging a parcel along Blackness Lane. He was in uniform at the time. He stopped and offered to help, and that was how they met: a man in uniform, home on leave, visiting a friend from a neighbouring village, and the pretty girl who let him carry her package, then hardly said a word to him all the way home. Mother would listen while he told this story, then interrupt, towards the end.

‘It was nothing like that,’ she would say to the guests. Then she would turn to my father and say, in seeming mock-annoyance, ‘I wish you wouldn’t tell such ridiculous stories.’

Mother insisted on my presence at these gatherings; she wanted a witness to my father’s folly and I fulfilled the office to the best of my ability, which only made my father more awkward with me later, after the guests had left. At the time, I suspected his stories were true – I even understood his bewilderment – but they failed to meet Mother’s standards, not of truth, but of correctness, a standard that might be applied to a piece of fiction, or a portrait. I see now how I resemble her. Sometimes, standing in the kitchen, I look out at the dark, and I see her face, gazing back at me from the shrubbery. It’s my own face, but it only takes a minor trick of the light and I see her in myself: the same eyes, the same mouth. It’s an easy resemblance to find, but it has taken me till now to see that I also resemble my father – how I am just as weak as he was, and how it was that weakness that caused the experiment with the twins to fail. Something in my spirit is irresolute. Everything should be taken seriously, in the spirit of a game; I should have carried out this experiment with the same unwavering attentiveness that is demanded by a puzzle, or a good story. That is the essence of scientific endeavour. My problem was that I failed to play; I was solemn, rather than serious. I didn’t think enough. I failed to translate the intention into the act.

Later, when I went down to the basement, the twins were dead. They lay on the floor near one of the speakers; they were huddled together, embracing one another in a way that reminded me of young monkeys, the way they cling to anything when they are frightened. I waited a long time before I opened the door. I think, even then, that I was afraid of them, afraid they were tricking me in some inexplicable fashion, afraid they were not really dead, but

pretending, hoping to catch me unawares. Yet what harm could they have done me? They were small children, after all. I opened the door and crossed to where they lay: they were dead, of course, and it seemed they had died without too much suffering. Certainly their pain would have been minimal, compared to the agonies Lillian had endured, in those few days after they were born. I was glad of that. It seemed appropriate to bury them next to her, in the iris garden, and that was what I did, working all afternoon to prepare the grave, then carrying them out, one by one, in the evening twilight, and laying them out, side by side, face to face in the wet earth. Now it is midnight. Karen Olerud is upstairs, still asleep in her soft prison. I am, to all intents and purposes, alone. Now, at last, I can begin again.

From the moment I first learned to talk, I felt I was being tricked out of something. I remember it still – the memory is clear and indisputable: I am standing in the garden, and Mother is saying the word *rose* over and over, reciting it like a magic spell and pointing to the blossoms on the trellis, sugar-pink and slightly overblown – and I am listening, watching her lips move, still trying to disconnect the flower from the sound. I was already too old to be learning to talk – maybe two, or getting on for three. For a long time, I refused to speak – or so Mother told me. Though I appeared intelligent in other ways, I had problems with language. She had even gone to the doctor about it, but he had told her such things happened, it was quite normal, I would learn to talk sooner or later, in my own time, and I would quickly make up the ground I had lost. He was right. When I did begin speaking, it was a kind of capitulation, as if a tension in my body had broken, and I spoke my first word that afternoon, the word *rose*, meaning that pink, fleshy thing that suddenly flared out from the indescribable continuum of my world, and became an object.

The trick and the beauty of language is that it seems to order the whole universe, misleading us into believing that we live in sight of a rational space, a possible harmony. But if words distance us from the present, so we never quite seize the reality of things, they make an absolute fiction of the past. Now, when I look back, I remember a different world: what must have seemed random and chaotic at the time appears perfectly logical as I tell it, invested with a clarity that even suggests a purpose, a meaning to life. I remember the country around our house as it was before they built the new estates: a dense, infinite darkness filled with sheltering birds and holly trees steeped in the Fifties. I remember the old village: children going from house to house in white sheets, singing and laughing in the dark, waving to us as our car glided by. I remember those months of being alone here, after Mother died. At night, when the land was quiet and still, I would take off my clothes and go naked from room to room, then out into the cool moonlight, wandering amongst the flower beds like an animal, or a changeling from one of Mother's fairy stories. The garden is walled on all sides; no one could see me, and the house was so far from the village that I would hear nothing but the owls in the woods, and the occasional barking of foxes out on the meadow. Sometimes I wondered if I was real – my body would be different, clothed in its own sticky-sweet smell, a smell like sleep, laced with Chanel No. 19 from Mother's dressing table.

When I was a child, Mother would come into the bedroom and tell me stories. It was a ritual she performed, without variation: I had to go up to bed, and she would follow five minutes later. I would hear the clock strike nine as she climbed the stairs. Sometimes she brought a book, but quite often she told me the stories out of her head. Whether she made them up, or had them by heart, I couldn't say, but she never once hesitated or faltered. I had the impression, then, that she knew every story that had ever been told,

and all she had to do was think of one for a moment, and every detail came flooding into her mind, instantly. It was Mother who told me the story of Akbar: how he built the Dumb House, not for profit, or even to prove a point, but from pure curiosity. Nobody knows how long it stood, or what happened to the children who were locked inside with their mute attendants. Nobody knows because the story of the Dumb House was only ever an episode in another, much longer story, an anecdote that had been folded in, told in passing to illustrate the personality of Akbar the Mughal, the dyslexic emperor whose collection of manuscripts was the richest in the known world. Later I realised that most of the details of the story were embellishments that Mother had added herself, to spin out this single episode that I liked so much. In fact, the original story of the Dumb House was simple and fleeting. In that version, the Mughal's counsellors were debating whether a child is born with the innate, God-given ability to speak; they had agreed this gift is equivalent in some way to the soul, the one characteristic that marks out the human from the animal. But Akbar declared that speech is learned, for the very reason that the soul is innate, and the soul does not correspond to any single faculty, whether it be the ability to speak, or to dream, or to reason. Surely, he argued, if speech came from the soul, then there would be only one language, instead of many. But the counsellors disagreed. While it was true that there were many languages, these were simply the corruptions of the original gift, implanted in the soul by God. They knew of incidents in which children had been left in isolation for years, or raised by animals: in such circumstances they had created a language of their own, that nobody else understood, which they could not have learned from others.

Akbar listened. When the counsellors had finished speaking, he told them he would test their hypothesis. He had his craftsmen build a mansion, far from the city: a

large, well-appointed house, with its own gardens and fountains. Here Akbar established a court of the mute, into which he introduced a number of new-born babies, gathered from the length and breadth of the Empire. The children were well cared for, and were provided with everything they could possibly need, but because their attendants were dumb, they never heard human speech, and they grew up unable to talk, as Akbar had predicted. People would travel from all over the kingdom to visit the house. They would stand for hours outside its walled gardens, listening to the silence, and for years to come the mansion was known as the Gang Mahal, or Dumb House.

Mother would come to the bedroom and tell me this story in the evenings. Naturally, her version was different; she barely touched upon the controversy over the innateness of language, or the nature of the soul. Instead she described the Gang Mahal in sumptuous detail: the orange trees in terracotta pots, the jewelled walls, the unearthly silence. I lay in bed listening, watching her lips move, intoxicated by her perfume. I used to wonder what had happened when those children grew up; how they thought, if thought was possible, if they ever remembered anything from one moment to the next. There are people who say speech is magical; for them, words have the power to create and destroy. Listening to Mother's stories, I became enmeshed in a view of the world: an expectation, a secret fear. Even now, nothing seems more beautiful to me than language when it creates the impression of order: the naming of things after their true nature; the act of classification; the creation of kingdoms and genera, species and sub-species; the designation of animal, vegetable or mineral, of monocotyledonous plants, freshwater fishes, birds of prey, the periodic table. This is why the past seems perfect, a time of proportion and order, because it is immersed in speech. For animals, memory might reside as a sensation, a resonance in the nerves, or in the meat of the spine. But for

humans, the past cannot be described except in words. It is nowhere else. What disturbs me now is the possibility that language might fail: after the experiment ended so inconclusively, I cannot help imagining that the order which seems inherent in things is only a construct, that everything might fall into chaos, somewhere in the long white reaches of forgetting. That is why it is imperative for me to begin again, and that is why Karen was sent here, after all this time, to fulfil her true purpose.

I lived entirely in the presence of my mother. Even when she wasn't there, I was aware of her, somewhere, and I was always conscious of myself, I always behaved as if she were with me, watching and listening. My father, on the other hand, seemed barely present. Most of the time, I disregarded him, just as Mother did. He seemed peripheral to our existence, irrelevant to our enterprise and, at the time, I thought he preferred it that way. Often, he was away on business. When he was at home, he would make an effort to play the game of father and son, but we were always awkward together. He knew I belonged to Mother.

Not that I was ever disrespectful. When he asked me to take a walk with him, I always assented readily, and we would go out, pretending there was some purpose to our excursion. Usually, he would ask me to go fishing. He had no idea of how fishing was done, but he must have thought it was appropriate, the sort of thing fathers do with their sons. We would carry our rods and baskets to the river, then sit on the bank in silence, watching the water flow over the dark weeds. I was certain the place we usually chose was wholly unsuitable. I never saw a fish there, in all our visits.

We would spend a couple of hours like that, then we would gather up our equipment and turn for home. I think my father enjoyed being near the water. It set him at his ease and, on the way back, he would seem more relaxed; he

would make efforts at conversation, asking me questions about school, or what books or music I liked. I would answer as well as I could; I think I wanted to be friendly, but the questions were too simple, too closed. Then, as the conversation petered out, he would fall back on his favourite stand-by, which was to ask if there was anything I wanted, anything I needed. To begin with, I must have thought these questions were nothing more than conversational gambits, and I told him I was fine, there was nothing I could think of. Eventually, when I saw how disappointed he was with this reply, I began naming things, just to keep him happy, and perhaps also to see what would happen. I was surprised to begin with, then later, slightly irritated by the fact that he always remembered what I had asked for. Inevitably, the requested item would arrive: without ceremony, it would appear in the hall, or on the table in the breakfast room. There would be no gift wrap, no tags or ribbons, nothing to say who had sent it. Most often, these gifts were delivered to the house, and usually when my father was away. Mother must have been aware of the parcels, but she made no comment. It was as if they had been delivered to us by accident.

In a spirit of loyalty, I tried to ignore them, too; but I have to admit there were times when I was pleased. My father's interpretation of even my vaguest request would be uncanny. No matter what I asked him for – a bicycle, a new violin, a tennis racquet, a fountain pen – no matter what it was, it would always be the size, the style, the colour I would have chosen. Yet I never felt these objects were gifts as such, because I never felt they were entirely mine. I used them the way I would have used something borrowed, taking care of them the way you might care for something that, sooner or later, would have to be returned. Occasionally I asked for things I didn't really want, to see what he would do. Yet still, no matter what it was, he only chose the best, and I would be embarrassed, as if I had

been caught out in a mean practical joke. Sometimes I even forgot what I had asked for. I would just say the first thing that came to mind, to give him something to think about as we made our way home across the meadow. But he always remembered. Whatever I requested would appear, in its plain packaging, like a bundle of exotic flotsam, washed up on the doorstep. Most of the time, he wasn't there for me to thank him. I think he arranged it that way, to avoid any difficulty. Looking back, in spite of his seeming collaboration with our regime, I see that he was secretly and perversely trying to find some way into the world I shared with Mother, and these gifts were his crude attempts to win my confidence. I feel sorry for him now, in retrospect. He must have been lonely; it must have pained him to know he was little more than a stranger to us, someone we treated with courtesy, but whom we regarded, essentially, as a guest in our house.

Nevertheless, I felt guilty sometimes, when the parcels arrived and I stripped them open to find some expensive object that I couldn't use, glittering in the morning light. Occasionally I would go to the river alone and stay there all day, as if paying a forfeit, or enduring some kind of penance. The river seemed different when I was by myself: it was a mysterious place, whose strangeness I was interrupting. Sometimes I took my rod and pretended to fish, for my father's sake. I wanted to tell him I had been out there while he was away, carrying on where we had left off. Sometimes I even convinced myself that I would catch a fish. It would have been good to have something to show him on his return. Most of the time, though, I just took off my shoes and socks and waded out into the cold, quick water, to feel the long streams of riverweed against my shins. My feet would be chilled to the bone, but I still felt the current on my skin, and I would stand for as long as I could, letting the cold sink in, trying to become another element of the river, as natural, as neutral, as the silt and