**Difference**

All that’s left of the signpost is a mute shaft, but I readily recognized it, this vast crossroads that opened at the edge of the village. One of the roads descended between the houses toward a little low-lying inn: the *Star Café*. I remember. At the time I greatly feared the stars, and very nearly, having barely read the sign beneath the porch lamp, I might have gotten back on the road. But the painted star was still better than her sisters teeming up above, that sharp wolf pack bent on piercing helpless prey, those executioners with lovely names ceaselessly resurrected, insulting Cassiopeia, fists outstretched in her burst of eternal laughter, Orion hunter once again, Hercules, Perseus – the spear, the lance, the hammer, all their bygone arms abandoned for one weapon alone: the whistling of pale, silent arrows straight to the heart.

I remember. At that time I would stammer every night, with this whole body vague and as if curled into itself, and yet stirred by a sort of excessively vivid and certain expectation, a word that is difficult to live with: *difference*. The paths of day are merciful toward these false vagabonds. For a swarm of stones, for women’s laughter at the fountain, they give you a violet naked against your cheek, burst from the dead grass, and behind the hedge where the cold wind of late autumn is endlessly carded, this robin, always alone, who shyly turns toward you its gleaming eye, enclosed like a blackcurrant. But the shadow stripped me of named things. And I had no name. I went forth naked, my inner ear wide open to a bubbling of syllables, while up above, from one end of the sky to the other, the great luminous Creatures targeted their victim, disguising the hunt beneath a thousand fairy glimmers. I had no name. I did not know my name. Yet I sensed some obscure original baptism, a seal whose merciless signs I would one day spell out in the depths of my torn flesh. Laughable voyager! What a monstrous effort to conquer the mere threshold of the *Star*! And this voiceless voice toward the maid-statue leaning against the baluster of the gleaming bottles! I expected a burning upon the lips, the miserable flame that would descend bit by bit from the throat to the heart and here it was, the liquor fallen from these sleepy hands was nothing but a dubious opium perpetrating the worst of absences: Being ousted from itself.

Ten, fifteen, twenty-five years. Twenty-six perhaps, and yet the memory of that quest and that halt rises up so powerfully here that to say it, I involuntarily take up once again the solemn tone of adolescence. But today it’s a man with grey temples who speaks. He knows his name. Against the asphalt, the cold wind of late autumn makes the dry leaves scrape, it chases the hail-bearing clouds, it enlightens my two empty hands. It caresses the riders’ naked hair, lashes the manes’ rough hair. It unleashes in the footsteps of the last runner, above and beyond the obstacles pallid in the daylight as dead as tombstones, the transparent leaping of a thousand frenzied beasts. It rushes under the fringe of eyelashes, as far as the impenetrable, the blue of this gaze that my friend calmly lays upon me.

For I am no longer the only one taking the path down toward the *Star*. Close to me there is the hand, higher than my shoulder, of my friend closed over the reins, and all these young men around us who I greet by name, and their horses numbered at the collar (whose difficult names I also know), all these voices, all this laughter gnawing blond locks, all these calls swept away like a swarm of leaves by the gale, and there all at once (the shadow has come) this lamp of yesteryear lighting up again above the threshold.

Enter! Push aside with both hands these shrubs of drinkers standing in smoke like an alder thicket gnawed by fog! The time is no longer for memories. Present our glasses to the silken girl who balances at the end of her arm the bell of pretty bright wine the color of leaves! How our hands resemble one another! How easy it is to speak to men, how little then do they ask to recognize you! For I am one of you, am I not? Nothing unusual in my gestures—and you understand *everything* I am trying to say to you? To say that once at this same table an adolescent emptied false liquors to the yawning of an impassible maid, ready to become once again the prey of the scintillating Sentinels until the dawn! Difference, o bitter poison of the soul and the blood! How many years traversing the seasons, voice unanswered and hands empty, with this fated companion, and the sole salute, at times, of a winter bird, the caress of a sole snowdrop flower! What an agony till the hour when the seal breaks at last, till resemblance at last attained, the cure! For I am cured, am I not? I resemble. I raise this glass with the expected gesture. I said the sentence rightly. I laughed, and no gaze turned away as it once did. You’re getting up?

It’s true, the ball is beginning. A single call of the brass instruments brought you to your feet before me all at once. You look at me without recognizing me, eyes adrift, mouth closed abruptly on an obscure sleeper’s word. From the depths of your sudden absence you still raise your hand toward mine. But here it is the same as all those hands of long ago that no one ever held out to me. Go. Do not even try to offer it to me, and what taste would it have on your lips, this wine poured by a *stranger*?

Leave me alone. A liquor, maid! and don’t close the shutters yet. Don’t light that lamp right away. It was reflecting itself in the windows, with all that festivity to which no one summoned me. It basely blinded the night. I blew it out. The shadow must see. Do you not know that the night leans at all windows, tireless, to find *its* *own* again, to take back, to call softly back, with a lone star barely murmured, those who claimed to be cured? The night must see me as I once was, hands empty, heart deserted, at this very table where for an hour I tried to escape it. It must forgive me. It must take me in at last forever. I await the sign. I will wait for it until dawn if I must.

Cassiopeia at the heart of the highest window suddenly burns and trembles.