

floundered into the drawing room and violently clapped the doors to. I sat with my book of maps in my father's heavy creaking chair near a stagnant grate and wondered how I could get him out. I thought of carrying the whole rude tale of his licentiousness to my sister – but anything I might say against a person who was plainly my own guest would undoubtedly tell doubly against myself (so wholesome was my father's whim, and so completely had he disliked me), and since all the money had gone to my sister, and only this gigantic curio of a house to me, I had the warmest desire to hold on to it. Room for room I hated the place; it smelled of the wizened scrupulousness of my burdonsome childhood, and my dream was to put it on the market at precisely the right time and make off with a fortune. Luckily I had cosy advice from real-estate friends: the right hour was certainly not yet. But for this house and these hopes I owned nothing, not counting my salary, which was, as my sister liked to affirm, beggar's pay in the light of what she called our "background". Her appearances were now unhappily common. She arrived with five or six of her children, and always without her husband, so that she puffed out the effect of having plucked her offspring out of a cloud. She was a small, exact woman, with large, exact views, made in the exact image of a pious bird, with a cautious jewel of an eye, an excessively arched and fussy breast, and two very tiny and exact nostril-points. She admired Elia and used to ascend to his rooms, trailing progeny, at his bedtime, which is to say at nine o'clock in the morning, when I would be just departing the house for my office; whereas the poetesses, to their credit, did not become visible until romantic dusk. Sometimes she would telephone me and recommend that I move such-and-such a desk – or this ottoman or that highboy – into his attic to supply him with the comforts due his gifts. 'Margaret,' I answered her, 'have you seen his stuff? It's all pointless.' It's all trash.

'He's very young,' she declared – 'you wait and see,' which she reproduced in his idiom so minutely that she nearly sounded like a Glusker herself. At your age he'll be a man of the world, not a house-hugging eunuch.'

I could not protest at this abusive epithet, vibrantly meant for me; to disclaim my celibacy would have been to disclaim my house. Elia, it appeared, was reaching her subtlety as well as ornamental scurrility – 'eunuch' had never before alighted on Margaret's austere tongue. But it was true that since I no longer dared to see poor Regina under our old terms – I was too perilously subject to my guest's surveillance – she had

dropped me in piege, and though I was not yet in love, I had been fonder of Regina than of almost anyone. 'All right,' I cried, 'then let him be what he can.'

'Why that's everything,' said Margaret; 'you don't realize what a find you've got in that young man.'

'He's told you his designs on fame.'

'Dear, he doesn't have to tell me. I can see it. He's unbelievable. He's got in that young man.'

'A cheap little immigrant,' I said. 'Uncultivated. He never reads anything.'

'Well, that's perfectly true, he's not effete. And about being a foreigner, do you know that terrible story, what they did to his whole family over there? When you survive a thing like that it turns you into a man. A fighter. Heroic,' she ended. Then, with the solemnity of a codicil: 'Don't call him little. He's big. He's enormous. His blood hasn't been thinned.'

'He didn't survive it,' I said wearily. 'He wasn't even there when it happened. He was safe in England, he was in Liverpool, for God's sake, living with his aunt.'

'Dear, please don't exaggerate and please don't swear. I see in him what I'm afraid I'll never see in you: because it isn't there. Genuine manliness. You have no tenderness for the children, Edmund, you walk right by them. Your own nieces and nephews. Elia is remarkable with them. That's just a single example.'

I recited, 'Gentleness is the True Soul of Virility.'

'That's in very bad taste, Edmund, that's a very journalistic way to express it,' she said sadly, as though I had shamed her with an indelicacy so I assumed. Elia had not yet educated her to the enunciation of this potent word.

'You don't like it? Neither do I. It's just that it happens to be the title of the main artist's latest ode,' which was a fact. He had imposed it on me only the night before, whereupon I ritually informed him that it was his worst banality yet.

But Margaret was unvanquishable; she had her own point to bring up. 'Look here, Edmund, can't you do something about getting him a better job? What he's doing now doesn't come near to being worthy of him. After all, a police station. And the hours!'

'I take it you don't think the police force an influence suitable to genuine manliness,' I said, and reflected that he had, after all, managed

to prove his virility at the cost of my demonstrating mine. I had lost Regina; but he still had all his poetesses.

Yet he did, as I have already noted, now and then send them away, and these times, when he was alone in his rooms, I would listen most particularly for the unrelenting clack of the typewriter. He was keeping at it, he was engrossed; he was serious. It seemed to me the most paralysing sign of all that this hollow chattering of his machine was so consistent, so daydreamed, meandered, imagined, meditated, stucked, picked, smoked, scratched, or loafed. He simply tapped, forefinger over forefinger, as though these sole active digits of his were the legs of a conscientious and dogged errand boy. His investment in self-belief was absolute. In its ambition, and I nearly pitied him for it. What he struck off the page was spew and offal, and he called it his career. He mailed three dozen poems a week to this and that magazine, and when the known periodicals turned him down he dredged up the unknown ones, shadowy quarterlies and gazettes printed on hand-presses in dubious basements and devoted to matters anatomic, astronomic, gastronomic, political, or atheist. To the publication of the Vegetarian Party he offered a pastoral verse in earthy trochees, and he tried the organ of a ladies' tonic manufacturing firm with fragile dactyls on the subject of corsets. He submitted everywhere, and I suppose there was finally no editor alive who did not clutch his head at the sight of his name. He clattered out barrage after barrage; he was a scourge to every idealist who had ever hoped to promote the dim cause of numbers. And leaf by leaf, travel journals shoulder to shoulder with Marxist tracts, paramilitarists alongside Seventh-Day Adventists, suffragettes hand in hand with nudists — to a man and to a woman they turned him down, they denied him print; they begged him at last to cease and desist, they folded their pamphlets like Arab tents and fled when they saw him brandishing so much as an iamb.

Meanwhile the feet of his fingers ran; he never gave up. My fright for him began almost to match my contempt. I was pitying him now in earnest, though his confidence remained as unmoved and oafish as ever. 'Wait and see,' he said, sounding like a copy of my sister copying him. The two of them put their heads together over me, but I had done all I could for him. He had no prospects. It even horribly developed that I was looked upon by my colleagues as his special protector, because when I

left for the trenches my absence was immediately seized on and he was fixed. This, of course, did not reach me until I returned after a year, missing an earlobe and with a dark and ugly declivity slashed across the back of my neck. My house guest had been excused from the draft by virtue of his bad eyesight, or perhaps more accurately by virtue of the ponderous thickness of his lenses; eight or ten of his poetesses tendered him a party in celebration of both his exemption and his myopia, at which he unflinchingly threw a dart into the bull's-eye of a target-shaped cake.

But I was myself no soldier, and went only as a correspondent to that ancient and so primitive war, naively pretending to encompass the world, but Neanderthal according to our later and more expansive appetites for annihilation. Someone had merely shot a prince (a nobody — I myself cannot recall his name), and then, in illogical consequence, various patches of territory had sprung up to occupy and individualize a former empire. In the same way, I discovered, had Elia sprung up — or, as I must now consistently call him (lest I seem to stand apart from the miraculous change in his history), Edmund Gate. What I mean by this is that he stepped out of his attic and with democratic hugeness took over the house. His great form had by now entirely flattened my father's august chair, and, like a vast male Goldilocks, he was sleeping in my mother's bed — that shrine which my father had long ago consecrated to disuse and avar, a piety my sister and I had soberly perpetuated. I came home and found him in the drawing room, barefoot and in his underwear, his dirty socks strewn over the floor, and my sister in attendance mending the holes he had worn through the heels, invigilated by a knot of her children. It presently emerged that she had all along been providing him with an allowance to suit his tastes, but in that first unwitting moment when he leaped up to embrace me, at the same time dragging on his shirt (because he knew how I disliked to see him undressed), I was stunned to catch the flash of his initials — 'E. G.' — embroidered in scarlet silk on a pair of magnificent cuffs.

'Edmund!' he howled. 'Not one, not two — two dozen! Two dozen in the past two months alone!'

'Two dozen what?' I said, blinking at what had become of him. He was now twenty-one, and taller, larger, and hairier than ever. He wore new glasses (far less formidable than the awful weights his little nose had carried to the draft board), and these, predictably, had matured his expression, especially in the area of the cheekbones: their elderly silver frames very cleverly contradicted that inevitable boyishness which a big

face is wont to radiate when it is committed to surrounding the nose of a cherub. I saw plainly, and saw it for myself, without the mesmerizing influence of his preening (for he was standing before me very simply, diligently buttoning up his shirt), that he had been increased and transformed: his fantastic body had made a simile out of him. The element in him that partook of the heathen colossus had swelled to drive out everything callow — with his blunt and balding skull he looked (I am willing to dare the vulgar godlessness inherent in the term) like a giant lingam: one of those curious phallic monuments one may suddenly encounter, wreathed with bright chains of leaves, on a dusty wayside in India. His broad hands wheeled, his shirttail flicked; it was clear that his scalp was not going to be friends for long with his follicles — stars of dandruff fluttered from him. He had apparently taken up smoking, because his teeth were already a brown ruin. And with all that, he was somehow a ceremonial and touching spectacle. He was massive and dramatic; he had turned majestic.

'Poems, man, poems!' he roared. 'Two dozen poems sold, and to all the best magazines! He would have pulled my ear like a comrade had I had a lobe to pull by, but instead he struck me down into a chair (all the while my sister went on peacefully darning), and I heaped into my arms a jumble of the most important periodicals of the hour.'

'Ah, there's more to it than just that,' my sister said.

'How did you manage all this?' I said. 'My God, here's one in *The Centennial!* You mean Fielding accepted? Fielding actually?'

'The sheaf of horrors man, that's right. He's really a very nice old fellow, you know that, Edmund? I've lunch'd with him three times now. He can't stop apologizing for the way he embarrassed himself — remember, the time he wrote you that terrible letter about me? He's always saying how ashamed he is over it.'

'Fielding?' I said. 'I can't imagine Fielding—'

'Tell the rest,' Margaret said complacently.

'Well, tomorrow we're having lunch again — Fielding and Margaret and me, and he's going to introduce me to this book publisher who's very interested in my things and wants to put them between, how did he say it, Margaret? — between something.'

'Boards. A collection, all the poems of Edmund Gate. You see?' said Margaret.

'I don't see,' I burst out.

'He doesn't know! Edmund — this was to Edmund — "he doesn't know!" You never did. You haven't the vigour. I doubt whether you've ever

really penetrated Edmund.' This confused me, until I understood that she now habitually addressed him by the name he had pinched from me. 'Edmund,' she challenged — which of us was this? from her scowl I took it as a finger at myself — 'you don't realize his level. It's his level, you don't realize.'

'I realize it,' I said darkly, and let go a landslide of magazines; but *The Centennial* I retained. 'I suppose poor Fielding's gone senile by now. Wasn't he at least ten years older than Father even? I suppose he's off his head and they just don't have the heart to ship him out.'

'That won't do,' Margaret said. 'This boy is getting his recognition at last, that's all there is to it.'

'I know what he means, though,' Edmund said. 'I tell them the same thing. I tell them exactly that — all those editors, I tell them they're crazy to carry on the way they do. You ought to hear—'

'Praise,' Margaret intervened with a snap; 'praise and more praise,' as if this would spite me.

'I never thought myself those poems were *that* good,' he said. 'It's funny, they were just an experiment at first, but then I got the hang of it.' 'An experiment?' I asked him. His diffidence was novel, it was even radical; he seemed almost abashed. I had to marvel: he was as bemused over his good luck as I was.

Not so Margaret, who let it appear that she had read the cosmic will. 'Edmund is working in vain,' she explained.

'Hasn't he always worked in vain?' I said, and dived into *The Centennial* to see.

Edmund slapped his shins at this, but 'He who laughs last,' said Margaret, and beat her thimble on the head of the nearest child: 'What a callous man your uncle is. Read!' she commanded me.

'He has a hole in the back of his neck and only a little piece of ear left,' said the child in a voice of astute assent.

'Ssh,' said Margaret. 'We don't speak of deformities.' 'Unless they turn up as poems,' I corrected, and read; and was startled by a dilation of the lungs, like a horse lashed out of the blue and made to race beyond its impulse. Was it his, this clean stupendous stuff? But there was his name, manifest in print: it was his, according to *The Centennial*, and Fielding had not gone senile.

'Well?'

'I don't know,' I said, feeling muddled. 'He doesn't know! Edmund — this was to Edmund — "he doesn't know!"'

'I can't believe it.'

'He can't believe it, Edmund!'

'Well, neither could I at first,' he admitted.

'But my sister jumped up and pointed her needle in my face. "Say it's good."

'Oh, it's good. I can see it's good,' I said. 'He's hit it for once.'

'They're all like that,' she expanded. 'Look for yourself!'

I looked. I looked insatiably. I looked frenetically. I looked incredulously — I went from magazine to magazine, riffling and riffling, looking and looking and shuffling until I had plundered them all of his work. My booty dumbfounded me: there was nothing to discard. I was transfixed; I was exhausted; in the end it was an exorcism of my stupefaction. I was converted, I believed; he had hit it every time. And not with ease — I could trace the wonderful risks he took. It was a new vein; more, it was an artery, it had a pump and a kick; it was a robust, ineluctable fountain. And when his book came out half a year later, my proselytization was sealed. Here were all the poems of the periodicals, already as familiar as solid old columns, uniquely graven; and layered over them like dazzling slabs of dappled marble, immovable because of the perfection of their weight and the inexorability of their balance, was the aftermath of that early work, those more recent productions to which I soon became a reverential witness. Or, if not witness, then auditor: for out of habit he still liked to compose in the attic, and I would hear him type a poem straight out, without so much as stopping to breathe. And right afterwards he came down and presented it to me. It seemed, then, that nothing had changed: only his gift and a single feature of his manner. Unerringly it was a work of — yet who or what was I to declare him genius? — accept instead the modest judgment of merit. It was a work of merit he gave me unerringly, but he gave it to me — this was strangest of all — with a quiescence, a passivity. All his old arrogance had vanished. So had his vanity. A kind of tranquillity kept him taut and still, like a man leashed; and he went up the stairs, on those days when he was seized by the need for a poem, with a languidness unlike anything I had ever noticed in him before; he typed, from start to finish, with no falterings or extimations; then he thumped on the stairs again, loomed like a thug, and handed the glorious sheet over to my exulting grasp. I supposed it was a sort of trance he had to endure — in those dim times we were only just beginning to know Freud, but even then it was clear that, with the bursting forth of the latent thing, he had fallen into a relief as deep and

curative as the sleep of ether. If he lacked — or slipped — what enthusiastic people call the creative exaltation, it was because he had compressed it all, without the exhibitionism of prelude, into that singular moment of power — six minutes, or eight minutes, however long it took him, forefinger over forefinger, to turn vision into alphabet.

He had become, by the way, a notably fast typist.

I asked him once — this was after he had surrendered a new-hatched sheet, not a quarter of an hour from the typewriter — how he could account for what had happened in him.

'You used to be awful,' I reminded him. You used to be unspeakable. My God, you were vile.'

'Oh, I don't know,' he said in that emul, or blandness, that he always displayed after one of his remarkable trips to the attic. 'I don't know if I was *that* bad.'

'Well, even if you weren't,' I said — in view of what I had in my hand I could no longer rely on my idea of what he had been — 'this! This!' and fanned the wondrous page like a triumphant flag. 'How do you explain this, coming after what you were?'

He grinned a row of brown incisors at me and gave me a hearty smack

on the ankle. 'Plagiarism.'

'No, tell me really.'

'The plangent plagiarism,' he said accommodatingly, 'of the plantigrade persona — Admit it, Edmund, you don't like the Ps, you never did and you never will.'

'For instance,' I said, 'you don't do *that* any more.'

'Do what?' He rubbed the end of a cigarette across his teeth and yawned. 'I still do persiflage, don't I? I do it out of my pate, without perwig, pugtee, or peril.'

'That. Cran grotesque words in every line.'

'No, I don't do that any more. A pity, my dictionary's practically all gone.'

'Why?' I persisted.

'I used it up, that's why, I finished it.'

'Be serious. What I'm getting at is why you're different. Your stuff is different. I've never seen such a difference.'

He sat up suddenly and with inspiration, and it came to me that I was observing the revival of passion. 'Margaret's given that a lot of thought, Edmund. She attributes it to maturity.'

'That's not very perspicacious,' I said — for the sake of the Ps, and to show him I no longer minded anything.

But he said shortly, 'She means virility.'

This made me scoff. 'She can't even get herself to say the word.'

'Well, maybe there's a difference in Margaret too,' he said.

'She's the same silly woman she ever was, and her husband's the same silly stockholder, the two of them a pair of fertile prudes — she wouldn't recognize so-called virility if she tripped over it. She hates the whole concept.'

'She likes it,' he said.

'What she likes is euphemisms for it. She can't face it, so she covers it up. Tenderness! Manliness! Maturity! Heroics! She hasn't got a brain in her head,' I said, 'and she's never gotten anything done in the world but those silly babies. I've lost count of how many she's done of *those*—'

The next one's mine,' he said.

That's an imbecile joke.'

Not a joke.'

'Look here, joke about plagiarism, all you want but don't waste your breath on fairy tales.'

'Nursery tales,' he amended. 'I never waste anything, I told you. That's just it, I've gone and plagiarized Margaret. I've purloined her, if you want to stick to the Ps.' — Here he enumerated several other Ps impossible to print, which I am obliged to leave to my reader's experience, though not of the parlour. 'And you're plenty wrong about your sister's brains, Edmund. She's a very capable businesswoman — she's simply never had the opportunity. You know since my book's out I have to admit I'm a bit in demand, and what she's done is she's booked me solid for six months' worth of recitations. And the fees! She's getting me more than Edna St. Vincent Millay, if you want the whole truth,' he said proudly. 'And why not? The only time that dame ever writes a good poem is when she signs her name.'

All at once, and against his laughter and its storm of smoke, I understood who was behind the title of his collected poems. I was confounded. It was Margaret. His book was called *Virility*.

A week after this conversation he left with my sister for Chicago, for the inauguration of his reading series.

I went up to his attic and searched it. I was in a boil of distrust; I was outraged. I had lost Regina to Margaret's principles, and now Margaret had lost her principles, and in both cases Edmund Gate had stood to

profit. He gained from her morality and he gained from her immorality. I began to hate him again. It would have rejoiced me to believe his quip nothing could have made me merrier than to think him a thief of words, if only for the revenge of catching him at it — but he could not even be relied on for something so plausible as plagiarism. The place revealed nothing. There was not so much as an anthology of poetry, say, which might account for his extraordinary burgeoning; there was not a single book of any kind — that sparse and pitiful wreck of his dictionary, thrown into a corner together with a cigar box, hardly signified. For the rest, there were only an old desk with his — no, my — typewriter on it, an ottoman, a chair or two, an empty chest, a hot bare floor (the heat pounded upwards), and his primordial suit slowly revolving in the sluggish air on a hanger suspended from the skylight, moths nesting openly on the lapels. It brought to mind Mohammed and the Koran; Joseph Smith and the golden plates. Some mysterious dictation recurred in these rooms: his gift came to him out of the light and out of the dark. I sat myself down at his desk and piecemeal typed out an agonized letter to Regina. I offered to change the terms of our relationship. I said I hoped we could take up again, not as before (my house was in use). I said I would marry her.

She answered immediately, enclosing a wedding announcement six months old.

On that same day Margaret returned. 'I left him, of course I left him. I had to, not that he can take care of himself under the circumstances, but I sent him on to Detroit anyhow. If I'm going to be his manager, after all, I have to *manage* things. I can't do all that from the provinces, you know — I have to be here. I have to see people . . . ah, you can't imagine it, Edmund, they want him everywhere! I have to set up a regular office, just a little switchboard to start with—'

'It's going well?'

'Going well! What a way to put it! Edmund, he's a phenomenon. It's supernatural. He has *charisma*, in Chicago they had to arrest three girls, they made a human chain and lowered themselves from a chandelier right over the lectern, and the lowest-hanging one reached down for a hair of his head and nearly tore the poor boy's scalp off.'

'What a pity,' I said.

'What do you *mean* what a pity, you don't follow, Edmund, he's a celebrity!'

'But he has so few hairs and he thinks so much of them,' I said, and wondered bitterly whether Regina had married a bald man.

'You have no right to take that tone,' Margaret said. 'You have no idea how modest he is. I suppose that's part of his appeal — he simply has no ego at all. He takes it as innocently as a baby. In Chicago he practically looked over his shoulder to see if they really meant *him*. And they do mean him, you can't imagine the screaming, and the shoving for autographs, and people calling bravo and fainting if they happen to meet his eyes.'

'Fainting?' I said doubtfully.

Fainting. My goodness, Edmund, don't you read the headlines in your own paper? His audiences are three times as big as Caruso's. Oh, you're hard, Edmund, you admit he's good but I say there's a terrible wall in you if you don't see the power in this boy —'

'I see it over you,' I said.

'Over me! Over the world, Edmund, it's the world he's got now — I've already booked him for London and Manchester; and here's this cable from Johannesburg pleading for him — oh, he's through with the backwoods, believe you me. And look here, I've just settled up this fine generous contract for his next book, with the reviews still piling in from the first one!' She cracked open her briefcase, and flung out a mass of files, lists, letterheads, schedules, torn envelopes with exotic stamps on them, fat legal-looking portfolios, documents in tiny type — she danced them all noisily upon her pouting lap.

'His second book? I asked. 'Is it ready?'

'Of course it's ready. He's remarkably productive, you know. Fecund.' 'He pullulates,' I suggested.

'His own word exactly, how did you hit it? He can come up with a poem practically at will. Sometimes right after a reading, when he's exhausted — you know it's his shyness that exhausts him that way — anyhow, there he is all fussed and worried about whether the next performance will be as good, and he'll suddenly get this — well, *fit*, and hide out in the remotest part of the hotel and fumble in his wallet for bits of paper — he's always carrying bits of folded papers with notes or ideas in them I suppose, and shoo everyone away, even me, and type (he's awfully fond of his new typewriter, by the way) — he just types the glory right out of his soul' she crowed. 'It's the energy of genius. He's *authentic*, Edmund, a profoundly energetic man is profoundly energetic in all directions at once. I hope at least you've been following the reviews?'

It was an assault, and I shut myself against it. What will he call the new book?

'Oh, he leaves little things like the titles to me, and I'm all for simplicity. — *Virility II*, she announced in her shocking business-magnate voice. 'And the one after that will be *Virility III*. And the one after that —'

'Ah, fecund,' I said.

'Fecund,' she gleamed. 'A bottomless well!'

She marvelled at this. 'How is it you always hit on Edmund's words exactly?'

'I know how he talks,' I said.

'A bottomless well, he said it himself. Wait and see!' she warned me. She was not mistaken. After *Virility II*, and after that *Virility III*, and after that an infant boy, Margaret named him Edmund — she said it was after me — and her husband the stockbroker, though somewhat puzzled at this human production in the midst of so much literary fertility, was all the same a little cheered. Of late it had seemed to him, now that Margaret's first simple switchboard had expanded to accommodate three secretaries, that he saw her less than ever, or at least that she was noticing him less than ever. This youngest Edmund struck him as proof (though it embarrassed him to think about it even for a minute) that perhaps she had noticed him more than he happened to remember. Margaret, meanwhile, was gay and busy — she slipped the new little Edmund ('Let's call *him III*', she laughed) into her packed nursery and went on about her business, which had grown formidable. Besides the three secretaries, she had two assistants: poets, poetasters, tenors, altos, mystics, rationalists, rightists, leftists, memoirists, fortunetellers, peddlars, everyone with an *it'see free*, and therefore suitable to the lecture circuit clamoured to be bundled into her clientele. Edmund she ran ragged. She ran him to Paris, to Lisbon, to Stockholm, to Moscow; nobody understood him in any of these places, but the title of his books translated impressively into all languages. He developed a sort of growl — it was from always being hoarse; he smoked day and night — and she made him cultivate it. Together with his accent it caused an international shudder among the best of women. She got rid of his initialled cuffs and dressed him like a prizefighter, in high laced black brogans and tight shining T-shirts, out of which his hairiness coiled. A long bladder of smoke was always trailing out of his mouth. In Paris they pursued him into the Place de la Concorde yelling 'Virility! Virility! *Die Manneskraft!*'

they howled in Munich. The reviews were an avalanche, a cataclysm. In the rotogravure sections his picture vied with the beribboned bosoms of duchesses. In New Delhi glossy versions of his torso were hawked like an avatar in the streets. He had long since been catapulted out of the hands of the serious literary critics – but it was the serious critics who had begun it. ‘The Masculine Principle personified, verified, and illuminated.’ ‘The bite of Pope, the sensuality of Keats.’ The quality, in little, of the very greatest novels. Tolstoyan? Seminal and hard. ‘Robust, lusty, male.’ ‘Erotic.’

Margaret was ecstatic, and slipped a new infant into her ‘bursting nursery.’ This time the stockbroker helped her choose its name: they decided on Gate, and hired another nanny to take care of the overflow. After Virility IV came Virility V. The quality of his work had not diminished, yet it was extraordinary that he could continue to produce at all. Occasionally he came to see me between trips, and then he always went upstairs and took a turn around the sighing floors of his old rooms. He descended haggard and slouching; his pockets looked puffy, but it seemed to be only his huge fists he kept there. Somehow his fame had intensified that curious self-effacement. He had divined that I was privately soured by his success, and he tried bashfully to remind me of the days when he had written badly.

‘That only makes it worse,’ I told him. ‘It shows what a poor prophet I was.’

‘No,’ he said, ‘you weren’t such a bad prophet, Edmund.’
‘I said you’d never get anywhere with your stuff.’
‘I haven’t.’

I hated him for that – Margaret had not long before shown me his bank statement. He was one of the richest men in the country; my paper was always printing human-interest stories about him – ‘Prosperous Poet Visits Fabulous Patagonia.’ I said, ‘What do you mean you haven’t gotten anywhere? What more do you want from the world? What else do you think it can give you?’

‘Oh, I don’t know,’ he said. He was gloomy and sullen. ‘I just feel I’m running short on things.’

‘On triumphs? They’re all the time comparing you to Keats. Your pal Fielding wrote in *The Centennial* just the other day that you’re practically as great as the Early Milton.’

‘Fielding’s senile. They should have put him away a long time ago.’
‘And in sales you’re next to the Bible.’

‘I was brought up on the Bible,’ he said suddenly.

‘Aha. It’s a fit of conscience? Then look, Eli, why don’t you take Margaret and get her divorced and get those babies of yours legitimized, if that’s what’s worrying you.’

‘They’re legitimate enough. The old man’s not a bad father. Besides, they’re all mixed up in there, I can’t tell one from the other.’

‘Yours are the ones named after you. You were right about Margaret; she’s an efficient woman.’

‘I don’t worry about that,’ he insisted.

‘Something’s worrying you.’ This satisfied me considerably.

‘As a matter of fact –’ He trundled himself down into my father’s decaying chair. He had just returned from a tour of Italy; he had gone with a wardrobe of thirty-seven satin T-shirts and not one of them had survived intact. His torn-off sleeves sold for twenty lire each. They had stolen his glasses right off his celebrated nose. ‘I like it here, Edmund,’ he said. ‘I like your house, I like the way you’ve never bothered about my old things up there. A man likes to hang on to his past.’

It always bewildered me that the style of his talk had not changed. He was still devoted to the insufferably hackneyed. He still came upon his clichés like Columbus. Yet his poems . . . but how odd, how remiss! I observe that I have not even attempted to describe them. That is because they ought certainly to be *presented* – read aloud, as Edmund was doing all over the world. Short of that, I might of course reproduce them here; but I must not let my narrative falter in order to make room for any of them, even though, it is true, they would not require a great deal of space. They were notably small and spare, in conventional stanza-form.

They rhymed consistently and scanned regularly. They were, besides, amazingly simple. Unlike the productions of Edmund’s early phase, their language was pristine. There were no unusual words. His poems had the ordinary vocabulary of ordinary men. At the same time they were immensely vigorous. It was astonishingly easy to memorize them – they literally could not be forgotten. Some told stories, like ballads, and they were exhilarating yet shocking stories. Others were strangely explicit love lyrics, of a kind that no Western poet had ever yet dared – but the effect was one of health and purity rather than scandal. It was remarked by everyone who read or heard Edmund Gate’s work that only a person who had had great and large experience of the world could have written it. People speculated about his life. If the Borgias, privy to all forms of foulness, had been poets, someone said, they would have written poems