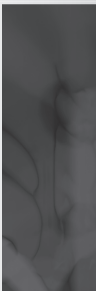
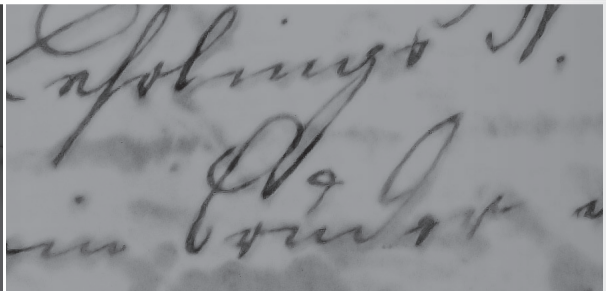
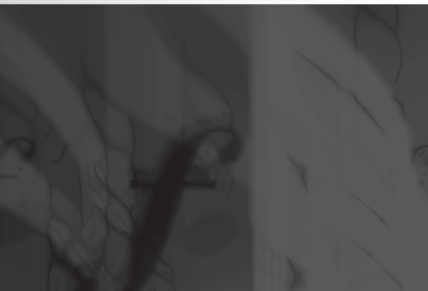


UNIT 1

What We Believe

(The Profession of Faith)



Beliefs Handed Down

Because God made us for himself in his own image, our goal is to know and love him throughout our earthly lives and to live with him for eternity in Heaven. By his very nature, God is totally above human comprehension: He is eternal, almighty, and all-knowing. And while we are mortal and limited in our knowledge and power, through the gift of his Son Jesus Christ, and in the Scriptures, God has revealed to us certain truths about his being and nature and his plan for humankind. Over many centuries, saints and theologians have reflected on God's revelation to his people, and so we have come to a fuller knowledge of who he is and how he loves us.

The handing on of this revelation from generation to generation, coupled with a deepening reflection upon it by the Church over the course of time, is known as the Sacred Tradition of the Church. Occasionally, to clarify matters and to summarize our beliefs about God, the bishops from all over the world gather together in meetings called ecumenical councils to assert fundamental truths of the faith in a clear and systematic way. These truths are expressed in dogmatic statements about our faith are called creeds (beliefs). These creeds reflect the teaching of the Church as revealed to the prophets and apostles and passed on from generation to generation to the entire Church. The most well known of these creeds was formulated in AD 325 by the bishops at the Council of Nicaea. The Nicene Creed was slightly modified in AD 385 at the Council of Constantinople. We recite this creed at each Sunday liturgy to strengthen us in our beliefs and to remind us of our communion with the Christians who have preceded us, as well as those who are still to come.

The Nicene Creed expresses our desire for God, the subject of belief, and the nature of God himself. God has revealed that he is One and that he is a Trinity of Persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God has revealed that he is the Creator of all that is. He has made known that His only Son, Jesus Christ, has come into the world to save us from our sins, and that the Holy Spirit is present to guide and teach us always through the Church.

Introducing the Unit

Each section in Unit 1 focuses on the lived experience of creative persons who, through their work, bring imaginative access to the Christian beliefs detailed by the Nicene Creed. These beliefs are highlighted by the following selections:

Creation and the Nature of God

- Gerard Manley Hopkins’s beautiful poem “God’s Grandeur” lauds God in his role as Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier.
- Oscar Wilde’s story “The Teacher of Wisdom” tells of our need to know and love God.
- “Pigeon Feathers” by John Updike shows how God reveals himself to a teenager in a most unexpected way.
- The poems “The Creation” and “The Burning Babe” by James Weldon Johnson and Robert Southwell, respectively, focus our reflections on the mystery of God’s creation and the precious gift of his Son, who entered the world as a vulnerable infant.
- The unsettling story “Parker’s Back” by Flannery O’Connor shows how Jesus reveals himself in time and space as our brother.
- The philosophical selection taken from St. Bonaventure’s *The Journey of the Mind into God* provides witness to the revelation of God through creation.

God’s Ongoing Revelation

- The transfiguring revelation of God in history is clearly expressed in Madeleine L’Engle’s poem, “The Bethlehem Explosion.” In the life, Passion, Death, and Resurrection of Jesus, God shows us that Jesus truly is the perfect expression of God’s love for his people.
- In his short story “Where Love Is, God Is,” the great Russian writer Leo Tolstoy shows how the manifestation of God’s love is made known to a humble shoemaker.

The Catholic Spirit

- In Dostoyevsky's "A Woman of Little Faith," Father Zosima calls on the 'woman of little faith' to reform her life, to love passionately the individual human persons who are a part of her life, and not to waste her spiritual energy in the pursuit of grandiose dreams of universal love. Only by doing this will she be able to believe.
- Pope Leo XIII said that "truth cannot contradict Truth." The methodology for investigating the apparent conflict between the divinely inspired Scriptures and the discoveries of science is explored in the readings of both the great physicist Galileo Galilei and Pope John Paul II.

The Uniqueness of Mary, the Mother of God

- In the poem "The Blessed Virgin Mary Compared to a Window," Thomas Merton uses the image of a window to highlight Mary's special role in the history of salvation, her union with God as his Bride, her humility, and her concern for her children on Earth.
- By looking toward Mary, we see through her toward the Lord. In the short story "Our Lady's Juggler" by Anatole France, we see how the Blessed Virgin Mary expresses maternal love for her children.

The Communion of Saints

- That the Church is a visible society made up of various persons and groups, each of whom plays a specific and vital role in the life and governance of the Church, is clearly seen in the poem "Marble Floor," by Karol Wojtyla (Pope John Paul II).
- Martyrs and saints are witnesses to the presence of God's Kingdom on Earth. An Account of the Martyrdom of St. Blaudine and Her Companions in AD 177 is a second century account of the steadfast bravery demonstrated by exemplars of the Christian life.

Life Everlasting

- How we should prepare for the Second Coming at the end of time—when God will judge the entire world—is beautifully explained in two letters to a young priest written by St. Thérèse of Lisieux.

Creation and Nature of God

“God’s Grandeur”

Gerard Manley Hopkins

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the lord, the giver of life,
who proceeds from the Father and the Son . . .

—**Nicene Creed**

Author Background

Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844–1889) was a Jesuit priest who never saw a single one of his poems published during his lifetime; his poetry was not published until twenty years after his death. He was an innovator in the use of poetic language, and the originality of his work has made him very influential among modern writers. Hopkins is not an easy poet to read. In his works, he compresses language, eliminates modifiers, and even invents new words in order to better express his meaning. This intensification of language, however, gives his poetry (especially when it is read aloud) an explosive power that can be matched by very few writers. The following selection, “God’s Grandeur,” is Hopkins’s most well-known poem.

Before the Reading

This poem by Hopkins can be called a “creedal” poem, because it contains within it the essential articles of Christian faith: The world has been created by God; the world has fallen into sin through human choice; but it is redeemed through the love of God and the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit. The poem is an example of how the believer is called to look upon all creation with the vision of faith and an attitude of hopeful realism. From that perspective, we are empowered to view the world in all its defects, and yet also see the saving grace of God, who makes all things new.

“God’s Grandeur”

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.

It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;

It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil

Crushed. Why do men then now not reckon his rod?

Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;

And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;

And wears man’s smudge and shares man’s smell: the soil
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

And for all this, nature is never spent;

There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;

And though the last lights off the black West went

Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs—

Because the Holy Ghost over the bent

World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.

Reading for Comprehension

1. What words connote electricity in this poem?
2. What images does Hopkins use to describe humanity’s destruction of nature?
3. Why are feet no longer able to feel?
4. Easter is associated with the dawn, the coming of light. What images in the poem express resurrection?
5. What is the colorful image of the divine that Hopkins uses at the conclusion of the poem?

Reading for Understanding

1. Reflect on moments in your life when you have experienced and been swept away by the sight of natural beauty. In what way do these experiences give you insights about the existence of God, or about his nature?

The Catholic Spirit

2. Reflect on ecological disasters, such as oil spills, the destruction of the rain forests, forest fires, or global warming. What do these occurrences tell us about our role as stewards of God's creation?
3. What is Hopkins's commentary about the modern world that explains our inability to see God in nature?
4. What ideas about the nature of God is Hopkins trying to convey by describing how the Holy Spirit "over the bent world broods with warm breast and ah! bright wings"?

Activity

The following are some of the essential beliefs expressed in the Nicene Creed:

- God has created the world;
- humanity has fallen through sin and has become estranged from God;
- God has not abandoned humankind but has sent his Son for our salvation;
- the Holy Spirit will remain with humankind and protect us until the end of time.

Locate the places in the Nicene Creed where these beliefs are stated and then match them with the images and descriptions found in Hopkins's poem.

Creation and Nature of God

“The Teacher of Wisdom”

Oscar Wilde

“You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee.”

—**St. Augustine**

Author Background

Oscar Wilde (1854–1900) is regarded as one of the greatest British writers of the nineteenth century. His comedy of manners, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, is a masterpiece of the modern theater. Wilde had a lifelong attraction to Catholicism and was received into the Church immediately before his death in France at the age of forty-six. A writer who worked in a variety of genres, his works have never been out of print. His book, *The Happy Prince and Other Tales*, his lengthy dramatic poem, “The Ballad of Reading Gaol,” and his novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, are of special interest to those who would like to read other literary works that reflect his religious sensibilities. However, controversy followed Wilde as well; “The Ballad of Reading Gaol” was based on his imprisonment for “gross indecency.” The following selection, “The Teacher of Wisdom,” is from his collection, *Poems in Prose*. The tale is representative of Wilde’s religious stories; it is classic in structure, filled with lush and evocative imagery, and animated by a profound religious vision.

Before the Reading

God calls us “to seek him, to know him, to love him with all his strength” (CCC, Prologue, 1). In the following reading, Oscar Wilde portrays the yearning for the knowledge and love of God. Through this short story, Wilde explores the psychological reality that our response to God must be a response of love as well as a response of knowledge. The story points out

that no matter how theologically educated a person is, it is only in loving God that one comes to know him.

“The Teacher of Wisdom”

From his childhood he had been as one filled with the perfect knowledge of God, and even while he was yet but a lad many of the saints, as well as certain holy women who dwelt in the free city of his birth, had been stirred to much wonder by the grave wisdom of his answers.

And when his parents had given him the robe and the ring of manhood he kissed them, and left them and went out into the world, that he might speak to the world about God. For there were at that time many in the world who either knew not God at all, or had but an incomplete knowledge of Him, or worshipped the false gods who dwell in groves and have no care of their worshippers.

And he set his face to the sun and journeyed, walking without sandals, as he had seen the saints walk, and carrying at his girdle a leathern wallet and a little water-bottle of burnt clay.

And as he walked along the highway he was full of the joy that comes from the perfect knowledge of God, and he sang praises unto God without ceasing; and after a time he reached a strange land in which there were many cities.

And he passed through eleven cities. And some of these cities were in valleys, and others were by the banks of great rivers, and others were set on hills. And in each city he found a disciple who loved him and followed him, and a great multitude also of people followed him from each city, and the knowledge of God spread in the whole land, and many of the rulers were converted, and the priests of the temples in which there were idols found that half of their gain was gone, and when they beat upon their drums at noon none, or but a few, came with peacocks and with offerings of flesh as had been the custom of the land before his coming.

Yet the more the people followed him, and the greater the number of his disciples, the greater became his sorrow. And he knew not

why his sorrow was so great. For he spake ever about God, and out of the fullness of that perfect knowledge of God which God had Himself given to him.

And one evening he passed out of the eleventh city, which was a city of Armenia, and his disciples and a great crowd of people followed after him; and he went up on to a mountain and sat down on a rock that was on the mountain, and his disciples stood round him, and the multitude knelt in the valley.

And he bowed his head on his hands and wept, and said to his Soul, "Why is it that I am full of sorrow and fear, and that each of my disciples is as an enemy that walks in the noonday?"

And his Soul answered him and said, "God filled thee with the perfect knowledge of Himself, and thou hast given this knowledge away to others. The pearl of great price thou hast divided, and the vesture without seam thou hast parted asunder. He who giveth away wisdom robbeth himself. He is as one who giveth his treasure to a robber. Is not God wiser than thou art? Who art thou to give away the secret that God hath told thee? I was rich once, and thou hast made me poor. Once I saw God, and now thou hast hidden Him from me."

And he wept again, for he knew that his Soul spake truth to him, and that he had given to others the perfect knowledge of God, and that he was as one clinging to the skirts of God, and that his faith was leaving him by reason of the number of those who believed in him.

And he said to himself, I will talk no more about God. He who giveth away wisdom robbeth himself.

And after the space of some hours his disciples came near him and bowed themselves to the ground and said, "Master, talk to us about God, for thou hast the perfect knowledge of God, and no man save thee hath this knowledge."

And he answered them and said, "I will talk to you about all other things that are in heaven and on earth, but about God I will not talk to you. Neither now, nor at any time, will I talk to you about God." And they were wroth with him and said to him, "Thou hast led us

into the desert that we might hearken to thee. Wilt thou send us away hungry, and the great multitude that thou hast made to follow thee?"

And he answered them and said, "I will not talk to you about God."

And the multitude murmured against him and said to him, "Thou hast led us into the desert, and hast given us no food to eat. Talk to us about God and it will suffice us."

But he answered them not a word. For he knew that if he spake to them about God he would give away his treasure.

And his disciples went away sadly, and the multitude of people returned to their own homes. And many died on the way.

And when he was alone he rose up and set his face to the moon, and journeyed for seven moons, speaking to no man nor making any answer. And when the seventh moon had waned he reached that desert which is the desert of the Great River. And having found a cavern in which a Centaur had once dwelt, he took it for his place of dwelling, and made himself a mat of reeds on which to lie, and became a hermit. And every hour the Hermit praised God that He had suffered him to keep some knowledge of Him and of His wonderful greatness.

Now, one evening, as the Hermit was seated before the cavern in which he had made his place of dwelling, he beheld a young man of evil and beautiful face who passed by in mean apparel and with empty hands. Every evening with empty hands the young man passed by, and every morning he returned with his hands full of purple and pearls. For he was a Robber and robbed the caravans of the merchants.

And the Hermit looked at him and pitied him. But he spake not a word. For he knew that he who speaks a word loses his faith.

And one morning, as the young man returned with his hands full of purple and pearls, he stopped and frowned and stamped his foot upon the sand, and said to the Hermit: "Why do you look at me ever in this manner as I pass by? What is it that I see in your eyes? For no

man has looked at me before in this manner. And the thing is a thorn and a trouble to me.”

And the Hermit answered him and said, “What you see in my eyes is pity. Pity is what looks out at you from my eyes.”

And the young man laughed with scorn, and cried to the Hermit in a bitter voice, and said to him, “I have purple and pearls in my hands, and you have but a mat of reeds on which to lie. What pity should you have for me? And for what reason have you this pity?”

“I have pity for you,” said the Hermit, “because you have no knowledge of God.”

“Is this knowledge of God a precious thing?” asked the young man, and he came close to the mouth of the cavern.

“It is more precious than all the purple and the pearls of the world,” answered the Hermit.

“And have you got it?” said the young Robber, and he came closer still.

“Once, indeed,” answered the Hermit, “I possessed the perfect knowledge of God. But in my foolishness I parted with it, and divided it amongst others. Yet even now is such knowledge as remains to me more precious than purple or pearls.”

And when the young Robber heard this he threw away the purple and the pearls that he was bearing in his hands, and drawing a sharp sword of curved steel he said to the Hermit, “Give me, forthwith, this knowledge of God that you possess, or I will surely slay you. Wherefore should I not slay him who has a treasure greater than my treasure?”

And the Hermit spread out his arms and said, “Were it not better for me to go unto the uttermost courts of God and praise Him, than to live in the world and have no knowledge of Him? Slay me if that be your desire. But I will not give away my knowledge of God.”

And the young Robber knelt down and besought him, but the Hermit would not talk to him about God, nor give him his Treasure, and the young Robber rose up and said to the Hermit, “Be it as you will. As for myself, I will go to the City of the Seven Sins, that is but

three days' Journey from this place, and for my purple they will give me pleasure, and for my pearls they will sell me joy." And he took up the purple and the pearls and went swiftly away.

And the Hermit cried out and followed him and besought him. For the space of three days he followed the young Robber on the road and entreated him to return, nor to enter into the City of the Seven Sins.

And ever and anon the young Robber looked back at the Hermit and called to him, and said, "Will you give me this knowledge of God which is more precious than purple and pearls? If you will give me that, I will not enter the city."

And ever did the Hermit answer, "All things that I have I will give thee, save that one thing only. For that thing it is not lawful for me to give away."

And in the twilight of the third day they came nigh to the great scarlet gates of the City of the Seven Sins. And from the city there came the sound of much laughter.

And the young Robber laughed in answer, and sought to knock at the gate. And as he did so the Hermit ran forward and caught him by the skirts of his raiment, and said to him: "Stretch forth your hands, and set your arms around my neck, and put your ear close to my lips, and I will give you what remains to me of the knowledge of God." And the young Robber stopped.

And when the Hermit had given away his knowledge of God, he fell upon the ground and wept, and a great darkness hid from him the city and the young Robber, so that he saw them no more.

And as he lay there weeping he was aware of One who was standing beside him; and He who was standing beside him had feet of brass and hair like fine wool. And He raised the Hermit up, and said to him: "Before this time thou hadst the perfect knowledge of God. Now thou shalt have the perfect love of God. Wherefore art thou weeping?" And He kissed him.

Reading for Comprehension

1. What reason does his Soul give the Teacher for his feelings of sorrow and fear?
2. What does the Teacher do to make sure that he does not lose his knowledge of God?
3. Who does the Hermit see each day passing by his cave?
4. What does the young Robber say that he is going to do when the Hermit tells him that he cannot share with him the knowledge of God?
5. What is God's response to the Hermit when the Hermit has given away the last of his knowledge of God?

Reading for Understanding

1. In this story, Oscar Wilde portrays two ways of knowing God: with one's intellect and with one's heart. Reflect on the people in your life who know you primarily either with their intellects or their hearts. Both of these groups of people have a certain true knowledge about you. Give examples of each and discuss the value of each type of knowledge to explain and express who you truly are.
2. Who in your life knows you most completely? Why? Which type of knowledge most adequately expresses who you are?
3. In the spirit of this story list three ways that you know God with your head and three ways that you know him with your heart.
4. Discuss the possible dangers of seeking God solely with one's head or solely with one's heart.

Activity

The desire to know God is built into the very fabric of our being. However, there are many ways to know and love God. Select your patron saint using your baptismal or Confirmation name. Research how this saint came to the knowledge and love of God.

Creation and Nature of God

“Pigeon Feathers”

John Updike

I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life;
He who believes in me will never die . . .

—**John 14:6**

Author Background

John Updike (1932–2009) was a contemporary American writer who was twice-awarded the Pulitzer Prize. His body of work shows a profound interest in the spiritual life. In the following short story, “Pigeon Feathers,” Updike shows how the God of all creation manifests himself in a surprising way to a teenager who is seeking him.

Before the Reading

God is eternal, all good, and all-loving. He reveals himself to humankind through the wondrous work of his creation. The encounter with God, however, takes place in the individual soul and is different for each person. Moreover, the encounter with God calls for a response from the individual; that is, an act of faith. In John Updike’s short story, “Pigeon Feathers,” a teenager confronts his own mortality and his desire to truly have faith in the words of Jesus.

“Pigeon Feathers”

When they moved to Firetown, things were upset, displaced, re-arranged. A red cane-back sofa that had been the chief piece in the living room at Olinger was here banished, too big for the narrow country parlor, to the barn, and shrouded under a tarpaulin. Never again would David lie on its length all afternoon eating raisins and

reading mystery novels and science fiction and P. G. Wodehouse. The blue wing chair that had stood for years in the ghostly, immaculate guest bedroom, gazing through the windows curtained with dotted swiss toward the telephone wires and horse-chestnut trees and opposite houses, was here established importantly in front of the smutty little fireplace that supplied, in those first cold April days, their only heat. As a child, David had been afraid of the guest bedroom—it was there that he, lying sick with the measles, had seen a black rod the size of a yardstick jog along at a slight slant beside the edge of the bed and vanish when he screamed—and it was disquieting to have one of the elements of its haunted atmosphere basking by the fire, in the center of the family, growing sooty with use. The books that at home had gathered dust in the case beside the piano were here hastily stacked, all out of order, in the shelves that the carpenters had built along one wall below the deep-silled windows. David, at thirteen, had been more moved than a mover; like the furniture, he had to find a new place, and on the Saturday of the second week he tried to work off some of his disorientation by arranging the books.

It was a collection obscurely depressing to him, mostly books his mother had acquired when she was young: college anthologies of Greek plays and Romantic poetry, Will Durant's *The Story of Philosophy*, a soft-leather set of Shakespeare with string bookmarks sewed to the bindings, *Green Mansions* boxed and illustrated with woodcuts, *The Tiger*, by Manuel Komroff, novels by names like Galsworthy and Ellen Glasgow and Irvin S. Cobb and Sinclair Lewis and "Elizabeth." The odor of faded taste made him feel the ominous gap between himself and his parents, the insulting gulf of time that existed before he was born. Suddenly he was tempted to dip into this time. From the heaps of books piled around him on the worn old floorboards, he picked up Volume II of a four-volume set of *The Outline of History*, by H. G. Wells. Once David had read *The Time Machine*; this gave him a small grip on the author. The book's red binding had faded to orange-pink on the spine. When he lifted the cover, there was a sweetish, moldy smell, and his mother's maiden name written in unfamiliar handwriting on

the flyleaf—an upright, bold, yet careful signature, bearing a faint relation to the quick scrunched backslant that flowed with marvelous consistency across her shopping lists and budget accounts and Christmas cards to college friends from this same, vaguely menacing long ago.

He leafed through, pausing at drawings, done in an old-fashioned stippled style, of bas-reliefs, masks, Romans without pupils in their eyes, articles of ancient costume, fragments of pottery found in unearthed homes. He knew it would be interesting in a magazine, sandwiched between ads and jokes, but in this undiluted form history was somehow sour. The print was determinedly legible, and smug, like a lesson book. As he bent over the pages, yellow at the edges, they seemed rectangles of dusty glass through which he looked down into unreal and irrelevant worlds. He could see things sluggishly move, and an unpleasant fullness came into his throat. His mother and grandmother fussed in the kitchen; the puppy, which they had just acquired, as a watchdog in the country, was cowering, with a sporadic panicked scrabble of claws, under the dining table that in their old home had been reserved for special days but that here was used for every meal.

Then, before he could halt his eyes, David slipped into Wells's account of Jesus. He had been an obscure political agitator, a kind of hobo, in a minor colony of the Roman Empire. By an accident impossible to reconstruct, he (the small h horrified David) survived his own crucifixion and presumably died a few weeks later. A religion was founded on the freakish incident. The credulous imagination of the times retrospectively assigned miracles and supernatural pretensions to Jesus; a myth grew, and then a church, whose theology at most points was in direct contradiction of the simple, rather communistic teachings of the Galilean.

It was as if a stone that for months and even years had been gathering weight in the web of David's nerves snapped them and plunged through the page and a hundred layers of paper underneath. These fantastic falsehoods—plainly untrue: churches stood everywhere, the

entire nation was founded “under God”—did not at first frighten him; it was the fact that they had been permitted to exist in an actual human brain. This was the initial impact—that at a definite spot in time and space a brain black with the denial of Christ’s divinity had been suffered to exist. The universe had not spat out this ball of tar but allowed it to continue in its blasphemy, to grow old, win honors, wear a hat, write books that, if true, collapsed everything into a jumble of horror. The world outside the deep-silled windows—a rutted lawn, a whitewashed barn, a walnut tree frothy with fresh green—seemed a haven from which David was forever sealed off. Hot washrags seemed pressed against his cheeks.

He read the account again. He tried to supply out of his ignorance objections that would defeat the complacent march of these black words, and found none. Survivals and misunderstandings more far-fetched were reported daily in the papers. But none of them caused churches to be built in every town. He tried to work backwards through the churches, from their brave high fronts through their shabby, ill-attended interiors back into the events at Jerusalem, and felt himself surrounded by shifting gray shadows, centuries of history, where he knew nothing. The thread dissolved in his hands. Had Christ ever come to him, David Kern, and said, “Here. Feel the wound in My side”? No; but prayers had been answered. What prayers? He had prayed that Rudy Mohn, whom he had purposely tripped so he cracked his head on their radiator, not die, and he had not died. But for all the blood, it was just a cut; Rudy came back the same day, wearing a bandage and repeating the same teasing words. He could never have died. Again, David had prayed for two separate war-effort posters he had sent away for to arrive tomorrow, and though they did not, they did arrive, some days later, together, popping through the clacking letter slot like a rebuke from God’s mouth: I answer your prayers in My way, in My time. After that, he had made his prayers less definite, less susceptible of being twisted into a scolding. But what a tiny, ridiculous coincidence this was, after all, to throw into battle against H. G. Wells’s engines of knowledge! Indeed, it proved

the enemy's point: Hope bases vast premises on foolish accidents, and reads a word where in fact only a scribble exists.

His father came home. Though Saturday was a free day for him, he had been working. He taught school in Olinger and spent his free days performing, with a kind of panic, needless errands. A city boy by birth, he was frightened of the farm and seized any excuse to get away. The farm had been David's mother's birthplace; it had been her idea to buy it back. With a determination unparalleled in her life, she had gained that end, and moved them all here—her son, her husband, her mother. Granmom, in her prime, had worked these fields alongside her husband, but now she dabbled around the kitchen, her hands wagging with Parkinson's disease. She was always in the way. Strange, out in the country, amid eighty acres, they were crowded together. His father expressed his feelings of discomfort by conducting with Mother an endless argument about organic farming. All through dusk, all through supper, it rattled on.

"Elsie, I know, I know from my education, the earth is nothing but chemicals. It's the only damn thing I got out of four years of college, so don't tell me it's not true."

"George, if you'd just walk out on the farm you'd know it's not true. The land has a soul."

"Soil, has, no, soul," he said, enunciating stiffly, as if to a very stupid class. To David he said, "You can't argue with a femme. Your mother's a real femme. That's why I married her, and now I'm suffering for it."

"This soil has no soul," she said, "because it's been killed with superphosphate. It's been burned bare by Boyer's tenant farmers." Boyer was the rich man they had bought the farm from. "It used to have a soul, didn't it, Mother? When you and Pop farmed it?"

"Ach, yes; I guess." Granmom was trying to bring a forkful of food to her mouth with her less severely afflicted hand. In her attempt she brought the other hand up from her lap. The crippled fingers, dull red in the orange light of the kerosene lamp in the center of the table, were welded by disease into one knobbed hook.

“Only human individuals have souls,” his father went on, in the same mincing, lifeless voice. “Because the Bible tells us so.” Done eating, he crossed his legs and dug into his ear with a match; to get at the thing inside his head he tucked in his chin, and his voice came out low-pitched at David. “When God made your mother, He made a real femme.”

“George, don’t you read the papers? Don’t you know that between the chemical fertilizers and the bug sprays we’ll all be dead in ten years? Heart attacks are killing every man in the country over forty-five.”

He sighed wearily; the yellow skin of his eyelids wrinkled as he hurt himself with the match. “There’s no connection,” he stated, spacing his words with pained patience, “between the heart and chemical fertilizers. It’s alcohol that’s doing it. Alcohol and milk. There is too much cholesterol in the tissues of the American heart. Don’t tell me about chemistry, Elsie; I majored in the damn stuff for four years.”

“Yes, and I majored in philosophy and I’m not a penny wiser. Mother, put your waggler away!” The old woman started, and the food dropped from her fork. For some reason, the sight of her bad hand at the table cruelly irritated her daughter. Granmom’s eyes widened behind her cockeyed spectacles. Circles of silver as fine as thread, the frames clung to the red notches they had carved over the years into her little white beak. In the orange flicker of the kerosene lamp, her dazed misery seemed infernal. David’s mother began, without noise, to cry. His father did not seem to have eyes at all, just jaundiced sockets of wrinkled skin. The steam of food clouded the scene, which was grim but familiar and distracted David from the formless dread that worked, sticky and sore, within him, like a too-large wound trying to heal.

He had to go to the bathroom. He took a flashlight down through the wet grass to the outhouse. For once, his fear of spiders there felt trivial. He set the flashlight, burning, beside him, and an insect alighted on its lens, a tiny insect, a mosquito or flea, made so fine that the weak light projected its X-ray onto the wall boards: the faint rim of

its wings, the blurred strokes, magnified, of its long hinged legs, the dark cone at the heart of its anatomy. The tremor must be its heart beating.

Without warning, David was visited by an exact vision of death: a long hole in the ground, no wider than your body, down which you are drawn while the white faces above recede. You try to reach them but your arms are pinned. Shovels pour dirt into your face. There you will be forever, in an upright position, blind and silent, and in time no one will remember you, and you will never be called by any angel. As strata of rock shift, your fingers elongate, and your teeth are distended sideways in a great underground grimace indistinguishable from a strip of chalk. And the earth tumbles on, and the sun expires, and unaltering darkness reigns where once there were stars.

Sweat broke out on his back. His mind seemed to rebound off a solidness. Such extinction was not another threat, a graver sort of danger, a kind of pain; it was qualitatively different. It was not even a conception that could be voluntarily pictured; it entered him from outside. His protesting nerves swarmed on its surface like lichen on a meteor. The skin of his chest was soaked with the effort of rejection. At the same time that the fear was dense and internal, it was dense and all around him; a tide of clay had swept up to the stars; space was crushed into a mass. When he stood up, automatically hunching his shoulders to keep his head away from the spiderwebs, it was with a numb sense of being cramped between two huge, rigid masses. That he had even this small freedom to move surprised him. In the narrow shelter of that rank shack, adjusting his pants, he felt—his first spark of comfort—too small to be crushed.

But in the open, as the beam of the flashlight skidded with frightened quickness across the remote surfaces of the barn and the grape arbor and the giant pine that stood by the path to the woods, the terror descended. He raced up through the clinging grass pursued, not by one of the wild animals the woods might hold, or one of the goblins his superstitious grandmother had communicated to his childhood, but by spectres out of science fiction, where gigantic cinder

moons fill half the turquoise sky. As David ran, a gray planet rolled inches behind his neck. If he looked back, he would be buried. And in the momentum of his terror, hideous possibilities—the dilation of the sun, the triumph of the insects, the crabs on the shore in *The Time Machine*—wheeled out of the vacuum of make-believe and added their weight to his impending oblivion.

He wrenched the door open; the lamps within the house flared. The wicks burning here and there seemed to mirror one another. His mother was washing the dishes in a little pan of heated pump-water; Granmom hovered near her elbow. In the living room—the downstairs of the little square house was two long rooms—his father sat in front of the black fireplace restlessly folding and unfolding a newspaper as he sustained his half of the argument. “Nitrogen, phosphorus, potash: these are the three replaceable constituents of the soil. One crop of corn carries away hundreds of pounds of”—he dropped the paper into his lap and ticked them off on three fingers—“nitrogen, phosphorus, potash.”

“Boyer didn’t grow corn.”

“Any crop, Elsie. The human animal—

“You’re killing the earthworms, George!”

“The human animal, after thousands and thousands of years, learned methods whereby the chemical balance of the soil may be maintained. Don’t carry me back to the Dark Ages.”

“When we moved to Olinger the ground in the garden was like slate. Just one summer of my cousin’s chicken dung and the earthworms came back.”

“I’m sure the Dark Ages were a fine place to the poor devils born in them, but I don’t want to go there. They give me the creeps.” Daddy stared into the cold pit of the fireplace and clung to the rolled newspaper in his lap as if it alone were keeping him from slipping backwards and down, down.

Mother came into the doorway brandishing a fistful of wet forks. “And thanks to your DDT there soon won’t be a bee left in the country. When I was a girl here you could eat a peach without washing it.”

"It's primitive, Elsie. It's Dark Age stuff."

"Oh, what do you know about the Dark Ages?"

"I know I don't want to go back to them."

David took from the shelf, where he had placed it this afternoon, the great unabridged Webster's Dictionary that his grandfather had owned. He turned the big thin pages, floppy as cloth, to the entry he wanted, and read

soul . . . 1. An entity conceived as the essence, substance, animating principle, or actuating cause of life, or of the individual life, esp. of life manifested in psychical activities; the vehicle of individual existence, separate in nature from the body and usually held to be separable in existence.

The definition went on, into Greek and Egyptian conceptions, but David stopped short on the treacherous edge of antiquity. He needed to read no further. The careful overlapping words shingled a temporary shelter for him. "Usually held to be separable in existence"—what could be fairer, more judicious, surer?

His father was saying, "The modern farmer can't go around sweeping up after his cows. The poor devil has thousands and thousands of acres on his hands. Your modern farmer uses a scientifically arrived-at mixture, like five-ten-five, or six-twelve-six, or three-twelve-six, and spreads it on with this wonderful modern machinery which of course we can't afford. Your modern farmer can't afford medieval methods."

Mother was quiet in the kitchen; her silence radiated waves of anger.

"No, now, Elsie: don't play the femme with me. Let's discuss this calmly like two rational twentieth-century people. Your organic-farming nuts aren't attacking five-ten-five; they're attacking the chemical-fertilizer crooks. The monster firms."

A cup clinked in the kitchen. Mother's anger touched David's face; his cheeks burned guiltily. Just by staying in the living room

he associated himself with his father. She appeared in the doorway with red hands and tears in her eyes, and said to the two of them, "I knew you didn't want to come here but I didn't know you'd torment me like this. You talked Pop into his grave and now you'll kill me. Go ahead, George, more power to you; at least I'll be buried in good ground." She tried to turn and met an obstacle and screamed, "Mother, stop hanging on my back! Why don't you go to bed?"

"Let's all go to bed," David's father said, rising from the blue wing chair and slapping his thigh with a newspaper. "This reminds me of death." It was a phrase of his that David had heard so often he never considered its sense.

Upstairs, he seemed to be lifted above his fears. The sheets on his bed were clean. Granmom had ironed them with a pair of flatirons saved from the Olinger attic; she plucked them hot off the stove alternately, with a wooden handle called a goose. It was a wonder, to see how she managed. In the next room, his parents grunted peaceably; they seemed to take their quarrels less seriously than he did. They made comfortable scratching noises as they carried a little lamp back and forth. Their door was open a crack, so he saw the light shift and swing. Surely there would be, in the last five minutes, in the last second, a crack of light, showing the door from the dark room to another, full of light. Thinking of it this way vividly frightened him. His own dying, in a specific bed in a specific room, specific walls mottled with a particular wallpaper, the dry whistle of his breathing, the murmuring doctors, the dutiful relatives going in and out, but for him no way out but down, into that hole. Never walk again, never touch a doorknob again. A whisper, and his parents' light was blown out. David prayed to be reassured. Though the experiment frightened him, he lifted his hands high into the darkness above his face and begged Christ to touch them. Not hard or long: The faintest, quickest grip would be final for a lifetime. His hands waited in the air, itself a substance, which seemed to move through his fingers; or was it the pressure of his pulse? He returned his hands to beneath the covers,

uncertain if they had been touched or not. For would not Christ's touch be infinitely gentle?

Through all the eddies of its aftermath, David clung to this thought about his revelation of extinction: that there, in the outhouse, he had struck a solid something qualitatively different, a base terror dense enough to support any height of construction. All he needed was a little help; a word, a gesture, a nod of certainty, and he would be sealed in, safe. The reassurance from the dictionary had melted in the night. Today was Sunday, a hot fair day. Across a mile of clear air the church bells called, celebrate, celebrate. Only Daddy went. He put on a coat over his rolled-up shirtsleeves and got into the little old black Plymouth parked by the barn and went off, with the same pained hurried grimness of all his actions. His churning wheels, as he shifted too hastily into second, raised plumes of red dust on the dirt road. Mother walked to the far field, to see what bushes needed cutting. David, though he usually preferred to stay in the house, went with her. The puppy followed at a distance, whining as it picked its way through the stubble but floundering off timidly if one of them went back to pick it up and carry it. When they reached the crest of the far field, his mother asked, "David, what's troubling you?"

"Nothing. Why?"

She looked at him sharply. The greening woods crosshatched the space beyond her half-gray hair. Then she showed him her profile, and gestured toward the house, which they had left a half-mile behind them. "See how it sits in the land? They don't know how to build with the land any more. Pop always said the foundations were set with the compass. We must get a compass and see. It's supposed to face due south; but south feels a little more that way to me." From the side, as she said these things, she seemed handsome and young. The smooth sweep of her hair over her ear had a calm that made her feel foreign to him. He had never regarded his parents as consolers of his troubles; from the beginning they had seemed to have more troubles than he. Their frailty had flattered him into an illusion of strength; so now on this high clear ridge he jealously guarded the

menace all around them, blowing like an invisible breeze—the possibility of all this wide scenery’s sinking into everlasting darkness. The strange fact that, though she came to look at the brush, she carried no clippers, for she had a fixed prejudice against working on Sundays, was the only comfort he allowed her to offer.

As they walked back, the puppy whimpering after them, the rising dust behind a distant line of trees announced that Daddy was speeding home from church. When they reached the house he was there. He had brought back the Sunday paper and the vehement remark, “Dobson’s too intelligent for these farmers. They just sit there with their mouths open and don’t hear a thing the poor devil’s saying.”

“What makes you think farmers are unintelligent? This country was made by farmers. George Washington was a farmer.”

“They are, Elsie. They are unintelligent. George Washington’s dead. In this day and age only the misfits stay on the farm. The lame, the halt, the blind. The morons with one arm. Human garbage. They remind me of death, sitting there with their mouths open.”

“My father was a farmer.”

“He was a frustrated man, Elsie. He never knew what hit him. The poor devil meant so well, and he never knew which end was up. Your mother’ll bear me out. Isn’t that right, Mom? Pop never knew what hit him?”

“Ach, I guess not,” the old woman quavered, and the ambiguity for the moment silenced both sides.

David hid in the funny papers and sports section until one-thirty. At two, the catechetical class met at the Firetown church. He had transferred from the catechetical class of the Lutheran church in Olinger, a humiliating comedown. In Olinger they met on Wednesday nights, spiffy and spruce, in a very social atmosphere. Afterwards, blessed by the brick-faced minister on whose lips the word “Christ” had a pugnacious juiciness, the more daring of them went with their Bibles to a luncheonette and gossiped and smoked. Here in Firetown, the girls were dull white cows and the boys narrow-faced brown goats in old men’s suits, herded on Sunday afternoons into a threadbare church

basement that smelled of stale hay. Because his father had taken the car on one of his endless errands to Olinger, David walked, grateful for the open air, the lonely dirt road, and the silence. The catechetical class embarrassed him, but today he placed hope in it, as the source of the nod, the gesture, that was all he needed.

Reverend Dobson was a delicate young man with great dark eyes and small white shapely hands that nickered like protesting doves when he preached; he seemed a bit misplaced in the Lutheran ministry. This was his first call. It was a split parish; he served another rural church twelve miles away. His iridescent-green Ford, new six months ago, was spattered to the windows with red mud and rattled from bouncing on the rude back roads, where he frequently got lost, to the malicious satisfaction of some parishioners. But David's mother liked him, and, more pertinent to his success, the Haiers, the sleek family of feed merchants and tractor salesmen who dominated the Firetown church, liked him. David liked him, and felt liked in turn; sometimes in class, after some special stupidity, Dobson directed toward him out of those wide black eyes a mild look of disbelief, a look that, though flattering, was also delicately disquieting.

Catechetical instruction consisted of reading aloud from a work booklet answers to problems prepared during the week, problems like, "I am the _____, the _____, and the _____, saith the Lord." Then there was a question period in which no one ever asked any questions. Today's theme was the last third of the Apostles' Creed. When the time came for questions, David blushed and asked, "About the Resurrection of the Body—are we conscious between the time when we die and the Day of Judgment?"

Dobson blinked, and his fine small mouth pursed, suggesting that David was making difficult things more difficult. The faces of the other students went blank, as if an indiscretion had been committed.

"No, I suppose not," Reverend Dobson said.

"Well, where is our soul, then, in this gap?"

The sense grew, in the class, of a naughtiness occurring. Dobson's shy eyes watered, as if he were straining to keep up the formality of

attention, and one of the girls, the fattest, simpered toward her twin, who was a little less fat. Their chairs were arranged in a rough circle. The current running around the circle panicked David. Did everybody know something he didn't know?

"I suppose you could say our souls are asleep," Dobson said.

"And then they wake up, and there is the earth like it always is, and all the people who have ever lived? Where will Heaven be?"

Anita Haier giggled. Dobson gazed at David intently, but with an awkward, puzzled flicker of forgiveness, as if there existed a secret between them that David was violating. But David knew of no secret. All he wanted was to hear Dobson repeat the words he said every Sunday morning. This he would not do. As if these words were unworthy of the conversational voice.

"David, you might think of Heaven this way: as the way in which the goodness Abraham Lincoln did lives after him."

"But is Lincoln conscious of it living on?" He blushed no longer with embarrassment but in anger; he had walked here in good faith and was being made a fool.

"Is he conscious now? I would have to say no. But I don't think it matters." His voice had a coward's firmness; he was hostile now.

"You don't."

"Not in the eyes of God, no." The unctious, the stunning impudence, of this reply sprang tears of outrage in David's eyes. He bowed them to his workbook, where short words like Duty, Love, Obey, Honor were stacked in the form of a cross.

"Were there any other questions, David?" Dobson asked, more softly. The others were rustling, collecting their books.

"No." David made his voice firm, though he could not look up at the man.

"Did I answer your question fully enough?"

"Yes."

In the minister's silence the shame that should have been his crept over David: The burden and fever of being a fraud were placed upon him, who was innocent, and it seemed, he knew, a confession of this

guilt that on the way out he was unable to face Dobson's stirred gaze, though he felt it probing the side of his head.

Anita Haier's father gave him a ride down the highway as far as the dirt road. David said he wanted to walk the rest, and figured that his offer was accepted because Mr. Haier did not want to dirty his dark new Oldsmobile with dust. This was all right; everything was all right, as long as it was clear. His indignation at being betrayed, at seeing Christianity betrayed, had hardened him. The road reflected his hardness. Pink stones thrust up through its packed surface. The April sun beat down from the center of the afternoon half of the sky; already it had some of summer's heat. Already the fringes of weeds at the edges of the road were bedraggled with dust. From the reviving grass and scruff of the fields that he walked between, insects were sending up a monotonous, automatic chant. In the distance a tiny figure in his father's coat was walking along the edge of the woods. His mother. He wondered what joy she found in such walks; to him the brown stretches of slowly rising and falling land expressed only a huge exhaustion.

Flushed with fresh air and happiness, she returned from her walk earlier than he had expected, and surprised him at his grandfather's Bible. It was a stumpy black book, the boards worn thin where the old man's fingers had held them; the spine hung by one weak hinge of fabric. David had been looking for the passage where Jesus says to the good thief on the cross, "Today shalt thou be with Me in paradise." He had never tried reading the Bible for himself before. What was so embarrassing about being caught at it was that he detested the apparatus of piety. Fusty churches, creaking hymns, ugly Sunday-school teachers and their stupid leaflets—he hated everything about them but the promise they held out, a promise that in the most perverse way, as if the homeliest crone in the kingdom were given the prince's hand, made every good and real thing, ball games and jokes and big-breasted girls, possible. He couldn't explain this to his mother. There was no time. Her solicitude was upon him.

"David, what are you doing?"

"Nothing."

"What are you doing at your grandfather's Bible?"

"Trying to read it. This is supposed to be a Christian country, isn't it?"

She sat down beside him on the green sofa, which used to be in the sun parlor at Olinger, under the fancy mirror. A little smile still lingered on her face from the walk. "David, I wish you'd talk to me."

"What about?"

"About whatever it is that's troubling you. Your father and I have both noticed it."

"I asked Reverend Dobson about Heaven and he said it was like Abraham Lincoln's goodness living after him."

He waited for the shock to strike her. "Yes?" she said, expecting more.

"That's all."

"And why didn't you like it?"

"Well—don't you see? It amounts to saying there isn't any Heaven at all."

"I don't see that it amounts to that. What do you want Heaven to be?"

"Well, I don't know. I want it to be something. I thought he'd tell me what it was. I thought that was his job." He was becoming angry, sensing her surprise. She had assumed that Heaven had faded from his head years ago. She had imagined that he had already entered, in the secrecy of silence, the conspiracy that he now knew to be all around him.

"David," she asked gently, "don't you ever want to rest?"

"No. Not forever."

"David, you're so young. When you get older, you'll feel differently."

"Grandpa didn't. Look how tattered this book is."

"I never understood your grandfather."

"Well, I don't understand ministers who say it's like Lincoln's goodness going on and on. Suppose you're not Lincoln?"

"I think Reverend Dobson made a mistake. You must try to forgive him."

"It's not a question of his making a mistake! It's a question of dying and never moving or seeing or hearing anything ever again."

"But"—in exasperation—"darling, it's so greedy of you to want more. When God has given us this wonderful April day, and given us this farm, and you have your whole life ahead of you—"

"You think, then, that there is a God?"

"Of course I do"—with deep relief, that smoothed her features into a reposeful oval. He had risen in his unease; he was afraid she would reach out and touch him.

"He made everything? You feel that?"

"Yes."

"Then who made Him?"

"Why, Man. Man." The happiness of this answer lit up her face radiantly, until she saw his gesture of disgust. She was so simple, so illogical; such a femme.

"Well, that amounts to saying He doesn't exist."

Her hand reached for his wrist but he backed away. "David, it's a mystery. A miracle. It's a miracle more beautiful than any Reverend Dobson could have told you about. You don't say houses don't exist because Man made them."

"No. God has to be different."

"But, David, you have the evidence. Look out the window at the sun; at the fields."

"Mother, good grief. Don't you see"—he rasped away the roughness in his throat—"if when we die there's nothing, all your sun and fields and whatnot are all, ah, horror? It's just an ocean of horror."

"But, David, it's not. It's so clearly not that." And she made an urgent, opening gesture with her hands that expressed a willingness to receive his helplessness; all her grace and maternal nurturing were gathered into a passive intensity that intensely repelled him. He would not be wooed away from the truth. I am the Way, the Truth . . .

"No," he told her. "Just let me alone."

He found his tennis ball behind the piano and went outside to throw it against the side of the house. There was a patch high up where the brown stucco laid over the sandstone masonry was crumbling away; he kept trying with the tennis ball to chip more pieces off. It was difficult, aiming up; the ball kept falling short.

Superimposed upon his deep ache was a smaller but more immediate worry—that he had hurt his mother. He heard his father’s car rattling on the straightaway, and went into the house, to make peace before he arrived. To his relief, she was not giving off the stifling damp heat of her anger, but instead was cool, decisive, maternal. She handed him an old green book, her college text of Plato.

“I want you to read the Parable of the Cave,” she said.

“All right,” he said, though he knew it would do no good. Some story by a dead Greek just vague enough to please her. “Don’t worry about it, Mother.”

“I am worried. Honestly, David, I’m sure there will be something for us. As you get older, these things seem to matter a great deal less.”

“That may be. It’s a dismal thought, though.”

His father bumped at the door. The locks and jambs stuck here. But before Granmom could totter to the latch and let him in, he had knocked it open. He had been in Olinger dithering with track-meet tickets. Although Mother usually kept her talks with David a secret between them, she called instantly, “George, David is worried about death!”

Daddy came to the doorway of the living room, his shirt pocket bristling with pencils, holding in one hand a pint box of melting ice cream and in the other the knife with which he was about to divide it into four sections, their Sunday treat. “Is the kid worried about death? Don’t give it a thought, David. I’ll be lucky if I live till tomorrow, and I’m not worried. If they’d taken a buckshot gun and shot me in the cradle I’d be better off. The world’d be better off. Hell, I think death is a wonderful thing. I look forward to it. Get the garbage

out of the way. If I had the man here who invented death, I'd pin a medal on him."

"Hush, George. You'll frighten the child worse than he is."

This was not true; he never frightened David. There was no harm in his father, no harm at all. Indeed, in the man's lively self-disgust the boy felt a kind of ally. A distant ally. He saw his position with a certain strategic coldness. Nowhere in the world of other people would he find the hint, the nod, he needed to begin to build his fortress against death. They none of them believed. He was alone. In that deep hole.

In the months that followed, his position changed little. School was some comfort. All those sexy, perfumed people, wisecracking, chewing gum, all of them doomed to die, and none of them noticing. In their company David felt that they would carry him along into the bright, cheap paradise reserved for them. In any crowd, the fear ebbed a little; he had reasoned that somewhere in the world there must exist a few people who believed what was necessary, and the larger the crowd, the greater the chance that he was near such a soul, within calling distance, if only he was not too ignorant, too ill-equipped, to spot him. The sight of clergymen cheered him; whatever they themselves thought, their collars were still a sign that somewhere, at some time, someone had recognized that we cannot, cannot, submit to death. The sermon topics posted outside churches, the flip, hurried pieties of disc jockeys, the cartoons in magazines showing angels or devils—on such scraps he kept alive the possibility of hope.

For the rest, he tried to drown his hopelessness in clatter and jostle. The pinball machine at the luncheonette was a merciful distraction; as he bent over its buzzing, flashing board of flippers and cushions, the weight and constriction in his chest lightened and loosened. He was grateful for all the time his father wasted in Olinger. Every delay postponed the moment when they must ride together down the dirt road into the heart of the dark farmland, where the

only light was the kerosene lamp waiting on the dining-room table, a light that drowned their food in shadow and made it sinister.

He lost his appetite for reading. He was afraid of being ambushed again. In mystery novels people died like dolls being discarded; in science fiction immensities of space and time conspired to annihilate the human beings; and even in P. G. Wodehouse there was a threat, a bland mockery that acquired bite in the comic figures of futile clergymen. All gaiety seemed minced out on the skin of a void. All quiet hours seemed invitations to dread.

Even on weekends, he and his father contrived to escape the farm; and when, some Saturdays, they did stay home, it was to do something destructive—tear down an old henhouse or set huge brush fires that threatened, while Mother shouted and flapped her arms, to spread to the woods. Whenever his father worked, it was with rapt violence; when he chopped kindling, fragments of the old henhouse boards flew like shrapnel and the ax-head was always within a quarter of an inch of flying off the handle. He was exhilarating to watch, sweating and swearing and sucking bits of saliva back into his mouth.

School stopped. His father took the car in the opposite direction, to a highway construction job where he had been hired for the summer as a timekeeper, and David was stranded in the middle of acres of heat and greenery and blowing pollen and the strange, mechanical humming that lay invisibly in the weeds and alfalfa and dry orchard grass.

For his fourteenth birthday his parents gave him, with jokes about him being a hillbilly now, a Remington .22. It was somewhat like a pinball machine to take it out to the old kiln in the woods where they dumped their trash, and set up tin cans on the kiln's sandstone shoulder and shoot them off one by one. He'd take the puppy, who had grown long legs and a rich coat of reddish fur—he was part chow. Copper hated the gun but loved the boy enough to accompany him. When the flat, acrid crack rang out, he would race in terrified circles that would tighten and tighten until they brought him,

shivering, against David's legs. Depending upon his mood, David would shoot again or drop to his knees and comfort the dog. Giving this comfort returned some comfort to him. The dog's ears, laid flat against his skull in fear, were folded so intricately, so—he groped for the concept—surely. Where the dull-studded collar made the fur stand up, each hair showed a root of soft white under the length, black-tipped, of the metal color that had lent the dog its name. In his agitation Copper panted through nostrils that were elegant slits, like two healed cuts, or like the keyholes of a dainty lock of black, grained wood. His whole whorling, knotted, jointed body was a wealth of such embellishments. And in the smell of the dog's hair David seemed to descend through many finely differentiated layers of earth: mulch, soil, sand, clay, and the glittering mineral base.

But when he returned to the house, and saw the books arranged on the low shelves, fear dully returned. The four adamant volumes of Wells like four thin bricks, the green Plato that had puzzled him with its dialogue form and hard-to-picture shadow show, the dead Galsworthy and "Elizabeth," Grandpa's mammoth dictionary, Grandpa's old Bible, the limp-covered Bible that he himself had received on becoming confirmed a member of the Firetown Lutheran Church—at the sight of these, the memory of his fear reawakened and came around him. He had grown stiff and stupid in its embrace. His parents tried to think of ways to entertain him.

"David, I have a job for you to do," his mother said one evening at the table.

"What?"

"If you're going to take that tone perhaps we'd better not talk."

"What tone? I didn't take any tone."

"Your grandmother thinks there are too many pigeons in the barn."

"Why?" David turned to look at his grandmother, but she sat there staring at the burning lamp with her usual expression of bewilderment. Her irises were pale discs of crazed crystal.

Mother shouted, "Mom, he wants to know why!"

Granmom made a jerky, irritable motion with her bad hand, as if generating the force for utterance, and said, "They foul the furniture."

"That's right," Mother said. "She's afraid for that old Olinger furniture that we'll never use. David, she's been after me for a month about those poor pigeons. She wants you to shoot them."

"I don't want to kill anything especially," David said.

Daddy said, "The kid's like you are, Elsie. He's too good for this world. Kill or be killed, that's my motto."

His mother said loudly, "Mother, he doesn't want to do it."

"Not?" The old lady's eyes distended as if in alarm, and her claw descended slowly to her lap.

"Oh, I'll do it, I'll do it tomorrow," David snapped, and a pleasant crisp taste entered his mouth with the decision.

"And I had thought, when Boyer's men made the hay, it would be better if the barn doesn't look like a rookery," his mother added needlessly.

A barn, in day, is a small night. The splinters of light between the dry shingles pierce the high roof like stars, and the rafters and cross-beams and built-in ladders seem, until your eyes adjust, as mysterious as the branches of a haunted forest. David entered silently, the gun in one hand. Copper whined desperately at the door, too frightened to come in with the gun yet unwilling to leave the boy. David stealthily turned, said "Go away," shut the door on the dog, and slipped the bolt across. It was a door within a door; the double door for wagons and tractors was as high and wide as the face of a house.

The smell of old straw scratched his sinuses. The red sofa, half hidden under its white-splotched tarpaulin, seemed assimilated into this smell, sunk in it, buried. The mouths of empty bins gaped like caves. Rusty oddments of farming—coils of baling wire, some spare tines for a harrow, a handleless shovel—hung on nails driven here and there in the thick wood. He stood stock-still a minute; it took a while to separate the cooing of the pigeons from the rushing in his ears. When he had focused on the cooing, it flooded the vast interior with

its throaty, bubbling outpour: there seemed no other sound. They were up behind the beams. What light there was leaked through the shingles and the dirty glass windows at the far end and the small round holes, about as big as basketballs, high on the opposite stone side walls, under the ridge of the roof.

A pigeon appeared in one of these holes, on the side toward the house. It flew in, with a battering of wings, from the outside, and waited there, silhouetted against its pinched bit of sky, preening and cooing in a throbbing, thrilled, tentative way. David tiptoed four steps to the side, rested his gun against the lowest rung of a ladder pegged between two upright beams, and lowered the gun-sight into the bird's tiny, jauntily cocked head. The slap of the report seemed to come off the stone wall behind him, and the pigeon did not fall. Neither did it fly. Instead it stuck in the round hole, pirouetting rapidly and nodding its head as if in frantic agreement. David shot the bolt back and forth and had aimed again before the spent cartridge had stopped jingling on the boards by his feet. He eased the tip of the sight a little lower, into the bird's breast, and took care to squeeze the trigger with perfect evenness. The slow contraction of his hand abruptly sprang the bullet; for a half-second there was doubt, and then the pigeon fell like a handful of rags, skimming down the barn wall into the layer of straw that coated the floor of the mow on this side.

Now others shook loose from the rafters, and whirled in the dim air with a great blurred hurtle of feathers and noise. They would go for the hole; he fixed his sight on the little moon of blue, and when a pigeon came to it, shot him as he was walking the twenty inches of stone that would have carried him into the open air. This pigeon lay down in that tunnel of stone, unable to fall either one way or the other, although he was alive enough to lift one wing and cloud the light. The wing would sink back, and he would suddenly lift it again, the feathers flaring. His body blocked that exit. David raced to the other side of the barn's main aisle, where a similar ladder was symmetrically placed, and rested his gun on the same rung. Three birds

came together to this hole; he got one, and two got through. The rest resettled in the rafters.

There was a shallow triangular space behind the crossbeams supporting the roof. It was here they roosted and hid. But either the space was too small, or they were curious, for now that his eyes were at home in the dusty gloom David could see little dabs of gray popping in and out. The cooing was shriller now; its apprehensive tremolo made the whole volume of air seem liquid. He noticed one little smudge of a head that was especially persistent in peeking out; he marked the place, and fixed his gun on it, and when the head appeared again, had his finger tightened in advance on the trigger. A parcel of fluff slipped off the beam and fell the barn's height onto a canvas covering some Olinger furniture, and where its head had peeked out there was a fresh prick of light in the shingles.

Standing in the center of the floor, fully master now, disdainful to steady the barrel with anything but his arm, he killed two more that way. Out of the shadowy ragged infinity of the vast barn roof these impudent things dared to thrust their heads, presumed to dirty its starred silence with their filthy timorous life, and he cut them off, tucked them back neatly into the silence. He felt like a creator; these little smudges and flickers that he was clever to see and even cleverer to hit in the dim recesses of the rafters—out of each of them he was making a full bird. A tiny peek, probe, dab of life, when he hit it blossomed into a dead enemy, falling with good, final weight.

The imperfection of the second pigeon he had shot, who was still lifting his wing now and then up in the round hole, nagged him. He put a new clip into the stock. Hugging the gun against his body, he climbed the ladder. The barrel sight scratched his ear; he had a sharp, garish vision, like a color slide, of shooting himself and being found tumbled on the barn floor among his prey. He locked his arm around the top rung—a fragile, gnawed rod braced between uprights—and shot into the bird's body from a flat angle. The wing folded, but the impact did not, as he had hoped, push the bird out of the hole. He fired again, and again, and still the little body, lighter than air when

alive, was too heavy to budge from its high grave. From up here he could see green trees and a brown corner of the house through the hole. Clammy with the cobwebs that gathered between the rungs, he pumped a full clip of eight bullets into the stubborn shadow, with no success. He climbed down, and was struck by the silence in the barn. The remaining pigeons must have escaped out the other hole. That was all right; he was tired of it.

He stepped with his rifle into the light. His mother was coming to meet him, and it tickled him to see her shy away from the carelessly held gun. "You took a chip out of the house," she said. "What were those last shots about?"

"One of them died up in that little round hole and I was trying to shoot it down."

"Copper's hiding behind the piano and won't come out. I had to leave him."

"Well, don't blame me. I didn't want to shoot the poor devils."

"Don't smirk. You look like your father. How many did you get?"

"Six."

She went into the barn, and he followed. She listened to the silence. Her hair was scraggly, perhaps from tussling with the dog. "I don't suppose the others will be back," she said wearily. "Indeed, I don't know why I let Mother talk me into it. Their cooing was such a comforting noise." She began to gather up the dead pigeons. Though he didn't want to touch them, David went into the mow and picked up by its tepid, horny, coral-colored feet the first bird he had killed. Its wings unfolded disconcertingly, as if the creature had been held together by threads that now were slit. It did not weigh much. He retrieved the one on the other side of the barn; his mother got the three in the middle and led the way across the road to the little south-facing slope of land that went down toward the foundations of the vanished tobacco shed. The ground was too steep to plant and mow; wild strawberries grew in the tangled grass. She put her burden down and said, "We'll have to bury them. The dog will go wild."

He put his two down on her three; the slick feathers let the bodies slide liquidly on one another. David asked, "Shall I get you the shovel?"

"Get it for yourself; you bury them. They're your kill. And be sure to make the hole deep enough so Copper won't dig them up." While he went to the tool shed for the shovel, she went into the house. Unlike his usual mother, she did not look up, either at the orchard to the right of her or at the meadow on her left, but instead held her head rigidly, tilted a little, as if listening to the ground.

He dug the hole, in a spot where there were no strawberry plants, before he studied the pigeons. He had never seen a bird this close before. The feathers were more wonderful than dog's hair, for each filament was shaped within the shape of the feather, and the feathers in turn were trimmed to fit a pattern that flowed without error across the bird's body. He lost himself in the geometrical tides as the feathers now broadened and stiffened to make an edge for flight, now softened and constricted to cup warmth around the mute flesh. And across the surface of the infinitely adjusted yet somehow effortless mechanics of the feathers played idle designs of color, no two alike, designs executed, it seemed, in a controlled rapture, with a joy that hung level in the air above and behind him. Yet these birds bred in the millions and were exterminated as pests. Into the fragrant open earth he dropped one broadly banded in slate shades of blue, and on top of it another, mottled all over in rhythms of lilac and gray. The next was almost wholly white, but for a salmon glaze at its throat. As he fitted the last two, still pliant, on the top, and stood up, crusty coverings were lifted from him, and with a feminine, slipping sensation along his nerves that seemed to give the air hands, he was robbed in this certainty: that the God who had lavished such craft upon these worthless birds would not destroy His whole Creation by refusing to let David live forever.

Reading for Comprehension

1. What is the name of the book in which David reads an account of the life of Jesus that denies his divinity and resurrection from the dead?
2. Identify the reason why David feels so anxious about the thought of his own death.
3. What was the question that David asked Mr. Dobson in Catechism class?
4. What does David's father say about David's fear of death?
5. What gift does David receive for his birthday?

Reading for Understanding

1. Why does David lift his hands in the air when he is going to bed? What does he want to happen? How does he eventually receive what he's looking for?
2. Why did David find the Reverend Dobson's and his mother's explanations about the afterlife so unsatisfying?
3. Why is the number of pigeons David kills in the barn significant? What other descriptions in that same section reinforce the significance of the number of pigeons David kills?
4. A theory for the existence of God is called "the argument from design." This argument states that the order and symmetry of the universe gives evidence of an Intelligent Creator. How did David experience the "argument from design" for the existence of God in his examination of the dead pigeons?
5. In light of this story, how is the revelation of God made to David through the pigeon feathers an example of knowledge by both head and heart?

Activities

1. The most famous series of rational and philosophical arguments for the existence of God were constructed by St. Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa Theologica*. Review the five arguments for the existence of God found in the *Summa* (www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/aquinas3.html) and select the argument that you find most satisfactory and persuasive.

2. The experience of the absence of God, a difficulty of sensing his Presence, even a difficulty in believing in him and his promises, is not an unknown occurrence in the lives of people of faith. St. John of the Cross, one of the greatest writers on the spiritual life, called this experience of God's absence, "the dark night of the soul." Read selections from the letters of Mother Teresa of Calcutta found in the book *Come Be My Light*, by Mother Teresa and Brian Kolodiejchuk. Write a report that traces how Mother Teresa experienced a sense of the absence of God and what she came to see as the reason why God gave her this trial of an experience of darkness.