with which I meant to kill him has pricked me. A drop of blood appears. I press it with the alcohol sponge. My fresh blood deepens the stain of his on the gauze. Never mind. The man in the bed swallows. His Adam’s apple bobs slowly. It would be so easy to do it. Three minutes of pressure on the larynx. He is still not conscious, wouldn’t feel it, wouldn’t know. My thumb and fingertips hover, land on his windpipe. My pulse beating in his neck, his in mine. I look back over my shoulder. No one. Two bare IV poles in a corner, their looped metal eyes witnessing. Do it! Fingers press. Again he swallows. Look back again. How closed the door is. And . . . my hand wilts. I cannot. It is not in me to do it. Not that way. The man’s head swivels like an upturned fish. The squadron of ribs battles on.

I back away from the bed, turn and flee toward the doorway. In the mirror, a glimpse of my face. It is the face of someone who has been resuscitated after a long period of cardiac arrest. There is no spot of color in the cheeks, as though this person were in shock at what he had just seen on the yonder side of the grave.

In the corridor the women lean against the wall, against each other. They are like a band of angels dispatched here to take possession of his body. It is the only thing that will satisfy them.

“He didn’t die,” I say. “He won’t . . . or can’t.” They are silent.

“He isn’t ready yet,” I say.

“He is ready,” the old woman says. “You ain’t.”
one not yet dead of his wounds, but still calling out in the language of the living. At the end of just such a night I went to the Maternity floor (I had no business there) and stood in the corridor outside the Delivery Room. Through the closed doors I listened and heard the first cry of a fellow human being. When I heard the newcomer . . . miracle! I was healed.

I understand your reluctance to leave your ward and move on to the next Service. I, too, suffered such dislocations. There is a certain melancholy one feels in passing through a ward full of new patients about whom one knows nothing but for whom one is to be responsible. It is the same sadness a forest ranger must feel in the contemplation of bonsai whose fate it is to be bound, twisted and amputated into facsimiles of healthy trees. But dwell among these patients for a day or two, become familiar with their wounds and their pain, and all at once you feel a surge of happiness. It is the gift of the patients to you—your knighthood conferred upon you by them. Now you are in a position for healing.

Within days, this new ward is like a village of friends into which you have stumbled and to which you are attached by chains of trust. These patients would risk everything, their lives even, to save you. You can see this from the little smiles they let play upon you when you pass. And you will love them to the point of pain and beyond. But loving them is not enough. To be of real help you must wish to prolong by one second some comfortable moment of their lives. To do this, a doctor must be able to do what even he cannot imagine doing.

Let us go then, you and I, to make Rounds together in this Memorial Hospital. It is a companionable thing for doctors to do.

ROOM ONE

A man carries a small bouquet of violets into a room where a woman lies sleeping. His feet both hurry and drag at the same time. As though his right foot were in desperate haste, and his left were reluctant. This man is not used to holding flowers. He is a plumber; his hands are stained with grease, and scarred. The violets seem even more fragile in his great burly fist. Now the man leans toward the bed, watching the face of the woman. His own face wilts under the onslaught of her labored breath. He stuffs the violets into a glass of water and sets the glass on the window ledge. He sits by the bed. Before long, he dozes. In the chair, he seems a pair of overalls with nobody inside.

Before, when she was still at home, when he was able to care for her there, she was awakened each night and many times each night by a housewifely summons heard through her dreams—a screen door to be closed or a cake to be taken out of the oven. He had always to be on guard then. Once, she had burned her hand with matches. Once, she had wandered out into the street. Then one day he pushed her bed against the wall. Thereafter he slept on the floor next to her bed. It was her bare feet stepping on his body that would awaken him.

“Come along now,” he would murmur. “You don’t want to be getting up. It’s still dark.” And he would nudge the woman back upon the bed.

“But the cake,” she would protest, “it needs to come out of the oven.”

“I’ll take the cake out. You rest,” he’d say, and lie back down on the floor, holding himself where her soft cool feet had pressed his belly.

Now, in the hospital, when he awakens, it is to the sound of water and gas churning in a pipe. It is an old sound to him, a sound equipped with fingers that reach for the deepest, cleanest place within him. It is a minute before he realizes that it is the sound of her breathing. In the mirror over the sink he catches sight of himself. The color of his eyes has faded; once, they had been blue. His head droops. He cannot hold it up. On the window ledge, the violets blaze on.

ROOM TWO

Melanoma. An eggplant and three plums plucked from the belly of a man. Split open upon a tray, the black meat bulged. Nor
could the sprung flesh be restuffed in its casing; it was already too large. It is a wild pigment that races like bad news from the founding mole into the farthest reaches of the body. Listen! The sound of chewing. He is like an oak tree infested with gypsy moths.

Out in the solarium his wife and two young sons wait. The woman wears garnets in her earlobes and at her neck. Her eyebrows are darkly penciled, her lashes elongated, caked with dye. She is dressed in black. As though the man’s tumor has metastasized conjugally. I tell her the news.

“It’s a great loss,” she says. “My husband was a brilliant man.”

“He is not dead yet,” I protest.

“Does he know?” I nod. “How did he take it?”

“He showed no reaction. He asked no questions. That will come later.” The woman shakes her head.

“His mother used to punish him for getting sick,” she says. All at once, her eyes lake and the mascara slides in runnels toward her mouth. One of the sons, the younger, lowers his eyes to cover the nakedness of his father that she has uncovered with her words. A silence. Then:

“Is it growing fast?”

“Very fast.” I think of the gypsy moths.

With a sudden movement the woman places her hand on my arm, and a faint smile blackens her lips as well. I watch her large buttocks grinding down the corridor toward his room. Garnets are wifely stones, I think, for the touch of blood about them.

ROOM THREE

Goiter. A tall blond woman with a long neck. From the front of this neck a mass the size of a lemon rises. She sits up in the bed, and offers the tumor with a simple gesture of her hands. A tiny gold locket in the shape of a heart rests upon the promontory. To either side, a chain burrows beneath the collar of her bed jacket. To each beat of the woman’s heart, the little gold heart responds with a shudder of its own. It has a brassy, impacted malice. It is the tumor’s heart, I think. Perhaps all I have to do is reach behind her and undo the chain.

“Let me see,” I say. And I go for the clasp.

ROOM FOUR

Acromegaly. Her pituitary gland makes too much growth hormone. She is a great tree, but the trunk only, with none of the arboREAL graces. See how she fills the bed with the pile and strew of her bones. The bed is too short for her. Overreaching the end, the immense feet of a granite Assyrian queen. Her head is unfinished—unequal halves opposed. One jaw shovels the air about it, the other is dented. Her nose deviates to follow a smell at its left. As though, years ago in the womb, she had been set aside for some more insistent errand. A smudged work in progress with His thumbprints still upon it. The slow head swivels to face us, the eyelids half drawn, the mouth hanging. All at once, she sees us, and something softens the landscape of that face. The crags and ledges shift, are not where, a moment ago, they were. She smiles, and is completed.

ROOM FIVE

All night the old man bays at what, to him, I suppose, is the moon of dread but to me is the lamp on his bedstand. Each breath is a bone he attempts to dislodge from his throat. Such suffering, I think, must atone for any amount of wickedness. This man will die out of debt. Into the sheet each night he looses his saliva, urine, sweat and blood, impregnating the linen with his own oils and gums and resins until the sheets grow heavy while he grows ever lighter. Every morning a nurse comes to change the mummy’s bed. But the old man does not die. Day after day, and many times each day, he must be turned in his bed, and lifted, and fed and injected. He has lost the control of his bowels and bladder. Pus drains from openings on his abdomen and thigh.

His wife is small and frail. She, too, is old.

“I’m taking him home,” the wife tells me.

“But it will be too much for you,” I say. “He needs too much
tending to. A nursing home would be better ... for ... domiciliary care.” She smiles at the word.

“His domicile is at 1834 Maple Street. That’s our house.”

“But what about all the mess?”

“How much mess can one man make?” she answers. And I am silent. For she has told me what I already knew, but had forgotten. Tending the body of another is an act of infinite loneliness, and carried out alone, a solitary commitment for which one is equipped only from the storehouse of his own heart. “How much mess can one man make?” I hear her words and I feel that I have been handed a secret letter which one day I must hand on to another, knowing all the while that this letter contains whatever there is to know about the care of the sick. When all else fails, the old woman teaches, take up reverence and proceed. In the throes of anguish one is far more likely to uncover his nobility than one is to show his cowardice. We are cowardly only in the expectation of distress. Once engaged, we shuck the ballast and, disencumbered, climb to higher ground. Disease magnifies both the sufferer and those who tend him. The patient in full dress of a wasting disease has no more clothing than a beggar. His skin is no more to be coveted than mendicant rags. His jaundice is a mark of autumn. Soon, he knows, it will be winter—cold and pulseless. No doctor worthy of the title will walk past such a dignified sadness unmoved, unstrirred, to give of himself whatever might be of comfort. As one can love a beggar about whom one knows nothing, so can one love a dying patient who has openly declared the bankruptcy of his flesh. I have known a vain and selfish woman who had done no secular act more arduous then the application of cosmetics to her own face, yet who, when called upon, irrigated the colostomy of her dying husband, and dressed his oozing bedsores. Why deny even to Narcissus that the face in the pool may be that of another?

Homer understood the power of the wound over those who both suffer and tend it. Toward the end of the Odyssey we find Ulysses at last deposited upon the shores of his homeland, the kingdom that he had left twenty years before. He is the very picture of the vagabond, dressed in rags and with his hair and beard tan-
gled. Trembling with emotion he makes his way to the gates of his palace and gazes within. What he sees fills him with horror and dismay. The suitors of his wife, Penelope, have assumed control of the palace. They are conducting orgies and revelry; they are squandering his treasure, defiling his house. Penelope and their son, Telemachus, have been helpless to stop them.

Now the crafty Ulysses steps inside. He has decided to keep his own counsel, to let the tatters and dishevelment of twenty years of wandering hide his identity. He is led to Penelope, who engages him in conversation. She likes him, but she does not know him. She requests of him any news of her husband. He offers none. Sighing, Penelope calls for the old nurse, Euryceleia, to bathe the feet of the stranger and to make him welcome.

Now it had happened that forty years before, Ulysses as a boy of ten had gone to visit his grandfather in another country. While there, he had been taken on a boar hunt, during the course of which he had been gored in the thigh by the tusk of a wild boar. The wound was severe and quickly became septic. For a long time it was feared that the boy would die. It was this same nurse, this Euryceleia, who had then been placed in sole charge of the wounded Ulysses. She it was who bathed and treated the wound. I see her applying unguments and herbs, and pressing out the poisons, and cherishing the blood of her little patient as though it were the last of the wine. Until, at last, she saw that the necrotic tissue at the base of the wound had separated and sloughed. New pink buds of granulation tissue appeared. These coalesced to form a healthy bed across which the epithelium raced, and the wound healed.

It is forty years later. The old nurse kneels at the feet of the stranger. Suddenly she feels the scar on the man’s thigh.

This was the scar the old nurse recognized; She traced it under her spread hands, then let go, and into the basin fell the lower leg making the bronze clang, sloshing the water out. Then joy and anguish seized her heart; her eyes filled up with tears; her throat closed, and she whispered with hands held out to touch his chin:
"Oh yes! You are Ulysses! Ah, dear child!
I could not
See you until now—Not till I knew
My master's very body with my hands!"

It was not his wife or his son who had recognized Ulysses. It was his nurse. It was the wound that had awakened the buried past, the wound that was the emblem of all the shared pain and despair, the disappointment and the exhilaration that are the measure of the tending relationship.

WARD THREE NORTH
The General Surgical Service, Men's Ward. Rounds with Ora Guilfoyle, the Head Nurse. She is the kind of nurse who, by the mere smoothing of a pillow, can induce sleep in a febrile insomniac. We make Rounds in the manner of people who have come to count on each other over the years. We advance through the ward behind a dressing cart. At each bed we clatter to a halt. The chart is reviewed, the data recited. A wound is exposed, examined, re-dressed. We move on to the next bed. As we come to the end of the row, I am called to the telephone at the nurses' station at the other end of the hall. Ora is annoyed.

"I'll make it fast," I tell her. From the phone, I see her approach the next patient. She takes out her bandage scissors as though to begin removing the dressing from the man's leg. All at once I see her move to the head of the bed. She bends to peer into the face of the man lying there. Suddenly, she flings herself upon his body. One knee on the bed, and she is aboard, her skirt hiked. Now she straddles the man and bends to clamp his mouth with her own. As though her tongue were a key that would unlock the secret that lay in his body if only she could find the right way to insert it. She beats his chest with her fists, and huffs, blowing into a grate to keep a meager ember alive. The whole bed rattles and slides.

Such a passion would raise the dead. And so it did. Almost at once the man groans. A breath is taken. Another. Ora straightens, lifts her bruised purple lips away, pressing her mouth with the back of her hand, daring him to abandon her again. A minute later, Ora Guilfoyle has been replaced by the machinery of resuscitation. There is a team of doctors and nurses about the bed. They are all very young. A hectic gaiety prevails, a monitor beeps, a tube emerges from the man's windpipe.

Ora and I resume our Rounds. I am suddenly shy, silent. I think to say something that will acknowledge this event. But I do not. I have seen this woman at her fiercest—wild and desperate. I have seen the rhythmic jounce of dead men's feet. It is best to keep silent. We finish our work and wheel the cart to the nurses' station. A woman is there. It is the man's wife. From the distance, she has watched the coupling of her husband with this nurse. The woman raises one hand as if to speak to Ora. Ora hesitates. But the woman, too, does not speak. There is a glance between them. Then they move apart, the one toward, and the other away from, the bed where it took place.

MATERNITY WARD
The door to one of the Labor rooms is ajar. A young woman half sits up in the bed. She is moaning in pain. Another young woman leans at the bedside. With one hand she presses the back of the one in labor. With the other hand she rubs the huge belly, all the while murmuring. I know them! They are famous in New Haven. A year ago I had seen them fighting in the street. It was a summer evening on Congress Avenue where I had gone to make a house call. I emerged from my patient's house to see them come percolating out of a doorway. They had all the arrogant intentions of cooch dancers: a tangle of shrieks and fury, punching, slapping, clawing. One was fat and with a furious fat-man's face. The other was slim and mean-eyed. She had small translucent teeth. Both were blond, the big girl's hair close-cropped, that of the smaller one, ivory, to the waist. It tossed and writhed about its mistress, falling across the face of her opponent so that she could not see, wrapping itself about the big girl's neck, loyally fighting alongside...
its lifelong benefactor. Or was this hair an agitated wraith trying to make peace? The big girl swore from her throat. Her lips and teeth took no part in the words that barked up from her windpipe in solid lumps. “Fuckin' whore,” she yelled. She was powerful and soon had the upper hand, beating the thin girl with relishment. But the desperation of the underdog was great and she found a way. Her translucent teeth indented an assertive, roaring breast.

Oblivious, the women had given birth to a circle of men who enclosed and nourished the struggle as though it were a flame that must be kept alive in a stiff wind. The faces of the men were wet with lust. They warmed themselves in the heat of the women. Their hands were in their pockets. They shifted from one leg to the other, whimpering and squirming like boys who need to urinate. I thought then of the ovaries and uteri of these two, and felt sick. What an elderly refined stomach I have, used only to the cooler colloquy of minds. But all that punching and blood, all that “fuck” in the air. There was a real possibility that I might vomit. I must leave this place, I thought. But I did not. I, too, had to watch. It was like spying on the faces of women in orgasm while they knew nothing but their own passion.

“You’d never know they were sisters,” a man said.

Sisters! Of course! Only sisters could hate like this. Mere friends would never care so much. At last I could not stay. Blind and deaf I hurried to my car and drove away, only then daring to think of those two, how it was their way to cling and grapple and bite. How eagerly they accepted the tyranny of the flesh that had always, from infancy on, been offered and taken in love and sincere battle. The next day or the day after that, these sisters would slip the straps of their clothing to show the marks left by nails and teeth. Then they would laugh together heartily. One day they would help each other through husbandless childbirth.

**THE EMERGENCY ROOM**

A man has been stabbed in the neck. I undress the wound. A clot comes loose from his carotid artery and I hear his leaping blood cry out: Tallahassee! Tallahassee! Tallahassee! before I

**Rounds**

stifle it with pressure. When blood escapes from a rent in a large artery, each jet makes a little noise, not much more than the whisper of gas that escapes from a burning log. It has, I suppose, to do with eddying and the flow of liquid through a narrow place to the outside air. I don’t know about that. But when the man died during the night, I wasn’t as surprised as you might think to find out where he was born.

“Oh, come on!” you say. “You must have known it beforehand.”

No matter. I know now that blood is a loyal conductor. It announces a man’s native land just in time for him to get off the train at the place he holds nearest to his heart.

**MINOR SURGERY**

A thin, dark woman lies on the table. She looks to be forty years old. She is dressed in red, slacks and a blouse. Her eyelids are smeared with blue and silver; the lashes are long and caked. Near the outer corner of her left eye there is a small, star-shaped laceration. A bruise surrounds it. A few sutures will be needed to close the wound.

“How did it happen?” I ask her. She makes a small gesture of impatience. I see that it has been caused by something blunt. A fist, perhaps?

“Do a good job,” she says. “My eyes are my only good feature.”

“That’s not true,” I say. “You’re very pretty.” The skin of her face is thick with makeup. It comes off brown and grimy on my alcohol sponges. I must use many in order to cleanse the wound.

“Will I have a scar? My eyes are my only good feature.” She says it again. Her hair is anthracite piled artfully. It is sticky to the touch and dry as hay. Not a strand moves when she turns her head to watch me draw the local anesthetic into a syringe. I must lift the hair away from her temple in order to work. When I do, I see the infected cyst just in front of her ear. A drop of pus hangs.

“What’s that?” I ask. She makes no move as I inject. It is not pain that concerns her.
LETTERS TO A YOUNG DOCTOR

"I have an awful habit. I pick at it. There's one on the other side, too. I can't help it. I pick at them. I'm so nervous." I begin to stitch and tie.

"Can't you give me something to keep me from picking at myself? I'm so nervous. Valium helps me." Her mother stands nearby. She is a short, stolid woman also extravagantly made up and coiffed. She has an expressionless face.

"Please help her, Doctor," says the older woman.

"Give me thirty. Five milligrams," says the woman on the table.

"No," I say, "I couldn't do that. I'm a surgeon. I don't prescribe those drugs. Have you seen your family doctor lately?"

"He died," says the mother quickly.

"Give me forty. Just to keep me from picking. I'm such a nervous girl."

"Help her, Doctor. Give her something." They are like gypsies. Their voices sway together, chant.

"Please help her, Doctor. Help my daughter."

"Give me fifty. Fifty Valiums."

"You ought to do something about those infections," I tell her.

"I will prescribe an antibiotic ointment. Apply warm compresses. When the drainage stops they should be removed. It is a smallish operation."

"Valium," she sings.

"Valium," they sing together.

"Help her, Doctor."

"Valium."

ROOM SIX

There are two sisters. They are neither young nor old. One, having married well, is rich. The other is poor. The rich sister has far-advanced leukemia. She will die unless she receives a bone marrow transplant. It is her only hope. The doctor of the rich sister has just asked the poor one to submit to an aspiration of her bone marrow in order to match the tissue with that of the patient. Only

in that way, he tells her, can he predict the success or failure of the transplant.

"There is a good chance that it will work," he says. "With sisters." They are sitting together in his office.

"How do you do it?" asks the woman.

"A local anesthetic is injected in the skin over the breastbone," he explains. "A tiny incision is made. Then a thick needle with a cutting edge is introduced. A small hole is bored in the crest of the bone and the marrow is sucked out. It is examined under the microscope."

"Does it hurt?"

"There is some pain, I cannot say there is not. Of course, we will try to keep it at a minimum."

"When does it hurt?"

"When the bone is punctured and when the marrow is drawn out."

Suddenly the woman shudders, then hugs herself as though her skeleton were a suitcase she was fearful of having stolen.

"No," she says, "I can't do it. I don't want to. I couldn't stand it."

"It is not really so bad. Perhaps I have made it sound worse than it is. It takes only half an hour."

"But then if I match up with her, you'll take a lot more."

"Yes. That is the hope."

"No. I can't. I won't do it. I'm sorry, don't ask me to. It is too much to ask—to give away my organs . . . my body like that. There's something wrong about it; it's not natural."

"But you have donated blood?"

"That's different. This is deeper. You drill a hole. It's tissue. You said so yourself."

"So is blood. Tissue. And you will make it up in a little while."

"Look, I'm not going to do it. You asked me, and I told you. The answer is no." She rises, takes out a handkerchief and dabs at her eyes, the corners of her mouth. "I'm a very nervous person." She begins to cry. "The idea of it—being sucked out. Like a boiled beef
Letters to a Young Doctor

The doctor is silent, but the woman knows that he is disappointed.

“Why will you tell her? Does she know you are asking me?”

“I will tell her that you do not feel that you can do it. I will try to make her understand.”

“Look, Doctor, I may as well tell you. We never got along. Even as children. She’s never lifted a finger to help me. She’s been lucky up till now. I’m the one that’s had to struggle.” Her voice rises with unexpected ferocity. “Did she give a damn about me? No! I don’t owe her a thing. And I’m not going to do it.”

“Then it is not because you are frightened?”

The woman starts as though caught off guard.

“Of course it is because I’m scared. The other has nothing to do with it.”

“It’s all right,” says the doctor. He shows her to the door.

Now he is alone in his office. Cowardice, he thinks, is easier to admit to than hatred. It is also more acceptable.

I am called back from home to the Emergency Room. An elderly woman lies on a stretcher. She is stout and gray-haired. Her apron is heavy and wet with blood. An hour ago, she had been beaten and robbed in her own kitchen. I bend to examine her smashed purple face. There is a smell about her, a wild smell. It is in her hair, upon her clothing. His smell. As though a wolf had urinated upon her before loping off.

“What did he look like?” the police ask. “Can you describe him?”

“It must have been awful for you, dear,” says a nurse.

“He was afraid,” says the old woman. “He shook all over as though to take a fit. I could see way into his eyes. After a while, when he didn’t stop hitting me, I just stood there and hoped he’d kill me. I wanted him to. There wasn’t another person in the whole world. Just him and me. He was the only one who could help me. But,” she sighs, “he didn’t.”

ROOM SEVEN

The man does not yet know that he is dying. His wife sits in the corner. They are conversing.

“How do you feel, Frank?”

“I don’t know. I’d have to read my chart to find out.”

“What were you thinking about just now?”

“How embarrassing it all is.”

“There’s nothing embarrassing about it, Frank.”

A small woman, she is made even tinier by the equipment that crowds the room—IV poles, cardiac monitor, cooling blanket, respiratory machine, suction.

“He says he has to pee and can’t,” she announces. I irrigate
the indwelling catheter in his bladder. It is plugged. It will have to be changed. I send for the catheterization tray.

"Why don't you step outside for a few minutes, Edna? I'll call you when I'm done."

She stands and picks her way through the machinery to the door. I notice again that she is dainty and very good-looking. I see also that she really does not want to leave, that she is surrendering him to me. When she has left I remove the old catheter, put on sterile gloves and take up his penis in my left hand. I bathe it with antiseptic solution. Then I insert the new catheter and connect the tubing to a plastic bag. He sighs. I go to the solarium to find her.

"We're in hot water, aren't we?" she says.

I nod.

"I feel so sorry for him," she says. "I understand these things. I've lived through it. Two years ago I had a brain tumor removed. I was supposed to be ninety-five percent blind. But look at me." She smiles. "But Frank is so innocent. He's never been sick in his life. Such a good, good man. What should I do? Tell me. Should I stay or go home? Should I go down and put another quarter in the parking meter?"

"Go home for a while," I say. "Come back at eight o'clock. I'll tell him in the meantime."

"Oh, God," she says, remembering. "My mother phoned this morning and told me not to worry. It'll be all right, she said, because of the raspberry bushes. She gave him some raspberry bushes to plant. She said he'd be just fine in the spring when they bore fruit. What about radiation?"

"No," I say. It's too late for that.

"How do you do it?" she asks. "I feel sorry for you. Never mind about me. I'm tough. But you, how are you?"

"How are you?" I reply.

"It's all that equipment," she says. "The tubes, the suction, and that ghastly bed that moves up and down and sideways and does everything but make itself. I've lost him, haven't I? To the equipment. I sit in that room and feel him recede further and further away from me. Already I wonder if I loved him so much as I