As to what happened next, it is possible to maintain that the hand of heaven was involved, and also possible to say that when men are desperate no one can stand up to them.

—Xenophon

A time comes when creatures whose destinies have crossed somewhere in the remote past are forced to appraise each other as though they were total strangers. I had been huddled beside the fire one winter night, with the wind prowling outside and shaking the windows. The big shepherd dog on the hearth before me occasionally glanced up affectionately, sighed, and slept. I was working, actually, amidst the debris of a far greater winter. On my desk lay the lance points of ice-age hunters and the heavy leg bone of a fossil bison. No remnants of flesh attached to these relics. The deed lay more than ten thousand years remote. It was represented here by naked flint and by bone so mineralized it rang when struck. As I worked on in my little circle of light, I absently laid the bone beside me on the
floor. The hour had crept toward midnight. A grating noise, a heavy rasping of big teeth diverted me. I looked down.

The dog had risen. That rock-hard fragment of a vanished beast was in his jaws and he was mouthing it with a fierce intensity I had never seen exhibited by him before.

“Wolf,” I exclaimed, and stretched out my hand. The dog backed up but did not yield. A low and steady rumbling began to rise in his chest, something out of a long-gone midnight. There was nothing in that bone to taste, but ancient shapes were moving in his mind and determining his utterance. Only fools gave up bones. He was warning me.

“Wolf,” I chided again.

As I advanced, his teeth showed and his mouth wrinkled to strike. The rumbling rose to a direct snarl. His flat head swayed low and wickedly as a reptile’s above the floor. I was the most loved object in his universe, but the past was fully alive in him now. Its shadows were whispering in his mind. I knew he was not bluffing. If I made another step he would strike.

Yet his eyes were strained and desperate. “Do not,” something pleaded in the back of them, some affectionate thing that had followed at my heel all the days of his mortal life, “do not force me. I am what I am and cannot be otherwise because of the shadows. Do not reach out. You are a man, and my very god. I love you, but do not put out your hand. It is midnight. We are in another time, in the snow.”

“The other time,” the steady rumbling continued while I paused, “the other time in the snow, the big, the final, the terrible snow, when the shape of this thing I hold spelled life. I will not give it up. I cannot. The shadows will not permit me. Do not put out your hand.”

I stood silent, looking into his eyes, and heard his whisper through. Slowly I drew back in understanding. The snarl
diminished, ceased. As I retreated, the bone slumped to the floor. He placed a paw upon it, warningly.

And were there no shadows in my own mind, I wondered. Had I not for a moment, in the grip of that savage utterance, been about to respond, to hurl myself upon him over an invisible haunch ten thousand years removed? Even to me the shadows had whispered—to me, the scholar in his study.

“Wolf,” I said, but this time, holding a familiar leash, I spoke from the door indifferently. “A walk in the snow.” Instantly from his eyes that other visitant receded. The bone was left lying. He came eagerly to my side, accepting the leash and taking it in his mouth as always.

A blizzard was raging when we went out, but he paid no heed. On his thick fur the driving snow was soon clinging heavily. He frolicked a little—though usually he was a grave dog—making up to me for something still receding in his mind. I felt the snowflakes fall upon my face, and stood thinking of another time, and another time still, until I was moving from midnight to midnight under ever more remote and vaster snows. Wolf came to my side with a little whimper. It was he who was civilized now. “Come back to the fire,” he nudged gently, “or you will be lost.” Automatically I took the leash he offered. He led me safely home and into the house.

“We have been very far away,” I told him solemnly. “I think there is something in us that we had both better try to forget.” Sprawled on the rug, Wolf made no response except to thump his tail feebly out of courtesy. Already he was mostly asleep and dreaming. By the movement of his feet I could see he was running far upon some errand in which I played no part.

Softly I picked up his bone—our bone, rather—and replaced it high on a shelf in my cabinet. As I snapped off the light the white glow from the window seemed to augment itself and

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shine with a deep, glacial blue. As far as I could see, nothing moved in the long aisles of my neighbor’s woods. There was no visible track, and certainly no sound from the living. The snow continued to fall steadily, but the wind, and the shadows it had brought, had vanished.
Great Books Roundtable Reading Selections

Level 1

Orientation Unit
Gaston William Saroyan

Stage 1 Units (Fiction)
The Old Man of the Sea Maeve Brennan
Through the Tunnel Doris Lessing
Raymond’s Run Toni Cade Bambara
The Witch Who Came for the Weekend (from Juliet’s Story) William Trevor
As the Night the Day Abioseh Nicol

Stage 2 Units (Fiction)
The Parsley Garden William Saroyan
The Veldt Ray Bradbury
A Likely Place Paula Fox
The Mountain Charles Mungoshi
Afternoon in Linen Shirley Jackson
The Mysteries of the Cabala Isaac Bashevis Singer

Stage 2 Units (Nonfiction)
Rattlesnakes (from Our National Parks) John Muir
Throwing Snowballs (from An American Childhood) Annie Dillard

Poetry Units
Introduction to Poetry Billy Collins
[I’m Nobody! Who are you?] Emily Dickinson
This Is Just to Say William Carlos Williams
Mushrooms Sylvia Plath
Table Edip Cansever
The Road Not Taken Robert Frost

Level 2

Orientation Unit
The White Umbrella Gish Jen

Stage 1 Units (Fiction)
Harrison Bergeron Kurt Vonnegut Jr.
The First Day Edward P. Jones
Props for Faith (from Floating in My Mother’s Palm) Ursula Hegi
El Diablo de La Cienega Geoffrey Becker
The Cat and the Coffee Drinkers Max Steele

Stage 2 Units (Fiction)
The Box House and the Snow Cristina Henríquez
I Just Kept On Smiling Simon Burt
Mercedes Kane Elizabeth McCracken
Sandra Street Michael Anthony
Day of the Butterfly Alice Munro
The White Circle John Bell Clayton

Stage 2 Units (Nonfiction)
Wolf (from The Unexpected Universe) Loren Eiseley
Colter’s Way Sebastian Junger

Poetry Units
Harlem [2] Langston Hughes
An Irish Airman Foresees His Death William Butler Yeats
[n] E. E. Cummings
The Fort Marie Howe
Bicycles Andrei Voznesensky
Snake D. H. Lawrence

Level 3

Orientation Unit
The Summer of the Beautiful White Horse William Saroyan

Stage 1 Units (Fiction)
Sucker Carson McCullers
The Possibility of Evil Shirley Jackson
Superstitions Mary La Chapelle
Gryphon Charles Baxter
Fellowship Franz Kafka

Stage 2 Units (Fiction)
Approximations Mona Simpson
The Bet Anton Chekhov
The Secret Lion Alberto Alvaro Ríos
Star Food Ethan Canin
A Visit of Charity Eudora Welty
The Destructors Graham Greene

Stage 2 Units (Nonfiction)
How It Feels to Be Colored Me Zora Neale Hurston
I Have a Dream Martin Luther King Jr.

Poetry Units
The Hand Mary Rueffle
The Song of Wandering Aengus William Butler Yeats
Child on Top of a Greenhouse Theodore Roethke
The Parakeets Alberto Blanco
Mending Wall Robert Frost
The Fish Elizabeth Bishop

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