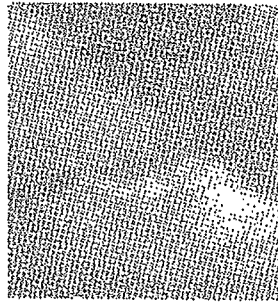


REMEMBER EARTH CLEARLY

“Snow,” says Claire, at the very moment a hailstorm of doves erupts upward from the brown silk soil of the MacArthurs’ yard next door. ¶The MacArthurs have been trying to seed their new lawn all week, but the doves just love those tasty little grass seeds. And doves being so cute and all, it’s impossible to be genuinely angry with them. Mrs. MacArthur (Irene) halfheartedly shoos them away every so often, but the doves simply fly up on top of the roof of their house, where they consider themselves hidden, at exciting little dove parties. ¶I’ll always remember the first time I saw snow. I was twelve and it was just after the first and biggest divorce. I was in New York visiting my mother and was standing beside a traffic island in the middle of Park Avenue. I’d never been out of L.A. before. I was entranced by the big city. I was looking up at the Pan Am Building and contemplating the essential problem of Manhattan.” ¶“Which is—?” I ask. ¶“Which is that there’s too much weight improperly distributed: towers and elevators; steel, stone, and cement. So much *mass* up so high that gravity itself could end up being warped—some dreadful inversion—an exchange program with the sky.” (I love it when Claire gets weird.) ¶“I was shuddering at the thought of this. But *right then* my brother Allan yanked at my sleeve because the walk signal light was



green. And when I turned my head to walk across, my face went *bang*, right into my first snowflake ever. It melted in my eye. I didn't even know what it *was* at first, but then I saw *millions* of flakes—all white and smelling like ozone, floating downward like the shed skins of angels. Even Allan stopped. Traffic was honking at us, but time stood still. And so, *yes*—if I take *one* memory of earth away with me, that moment will be the one. To this day I consider my right eye charmed.”

“Perfect,” says Elvissa. She turns to Tobias. “Get the drift?”

“Let me think a second.”

“I've got one,” says Dag with some enthusiasm, partially the result, I suspect, of his wanting to score brownie points with Elvissa. “It happened in 1974. In Kingston, Ontario.” He lights a cigarette and we wait. “My dad and I were at a gas station and I was given the task of filling up the gas tank—a Galaxy 500, snazzy car. And filling it up was a big responsibility for me. I was one of those goofy kids who always got colds and never got the hang of things like filling up gas tanks or unraveling tangled fishing rods. I'd always screw things up somehow; break something; have it die.

“Anyway, Dad was in the station shop buying a map, and I was outside feeling so manly and just so proud of how I hadn't botched anything up yet—set fire to the gas station or what have you—and the tank was *almost* full. Well, Dad came out just as I was topping the tank off, at which point the nozzle simply went nuts. It started spraying all over. I don't know why—it just *did*—all over my jeans, my running shoes, the license plate, the cement—like purple alcohol. Dad saw everything and I thought I was going to catch total shit. I felt so small. But instead he smiled and said to me, ‘Hey, Sport. Isn't the smell of gasoline great? Close your eyes and inhale. So *clean*. It smells like the *future*.’

“Well, I did that—I closed my eyes just as he asked, and breathed in deeply. And at that point I saw the bright orange light of the sun coming through my eyelids, smelled the gasoline and my knees buckled. But it was the most perfect moment of my life, and so if you ask me (and I have a lot of my hopes pinned on this), heaven just *has* to be an awful lot like those few seconds. That's my memory of earth.”

“Was it leaded or unleaded?” asks Tobias.

“Leaded,” replies Dag.

“Perfect.”