

The umbrella and the cigarette.

You fell in love with the umbrella, I with the cigarette. You liked the umbrella's elegance and dark compactness, its ability to furl itself quietly closed, its distaste for gusts. You preferred it hovering above you at a safe remove, distant and solicitous, unintrusive. I admired it while resigning myself to the fact that it was not for the likes of me. It could only have one borrower at a time, and when I stopped being glum about that, I was surprised to realize that I found its impassivity chilling. Anyway when I tried to hold it, the sleek grip palmed smoothly enough, but the polished crook kept getting caught on things: sleeves, doorframes, self-esteem.

At first I didn't like the cigarette, and for its own part it was merely amused and didn't care either way. But by then I had started to crave it. I hankered to have its dusty wet taste in my mouth, that ashy perfume of diatoms enlivened by a spattering of rain; I wanted faint ridges of nicotine to rib my teeth. It made me secretly breathless, burning carelessly down to its own nub, accepting wastage as inevitable. Like the umbrella, the cigarette was deliberate, yet somehow not maliciously so. In its small ferocity it radiated an affection for our surroundings. And then after all I felt oddly comforted to watch it gesticulate in total darkness, someone else present, not just the ember of Mars guttering in the notch of the valley, smouldering unseen.