Snow falls in many ways. In late autumn wet snow floats down in small clumps. It falls so thickly that you think the world will drown in snow, but the flakes melt soon after landing. In midwinter the snow is dry, with flakes like fine needles that seek you out and sting your cheeks and make you wish you’d stayed indoors. Sleet is snow and rain falling together and you can scarcely call it snow, except that it accumulates on roads and sidewalks and makes quite a mess of it for pedestrians at the crossings, not so much here but in the city where people actually get places by walking. There is light snow and heavy snow and snow that is so soft it doesn’t seem to fall but to gather imperceptibly until there are two or three inches of it on tree branches, the picnic table, the dog dish, the lawnmower you left out in the yard the last time you cut the grass. Tonight the snow is not falling but flying sideways. The wind is very strong, thirty miles an hour, the television said, eight to twelve inches expected, the flakes as fine and sharp as ground glass.

Daniel Arcilla remembers walking with a friend in Paris after a snowfall dressed the city in white. It was the first time Daniel had seen snow and he danced giddily around his friend, who looked gravely at him and said, You Cubans suffer from a prenatal nostalgia for snow. The Frenchman was right. Cubans hate the heat almost as much as they hate the beach and the tropical sun, which beats down mercilessly most of the year and drives them to shade, wherever they may find it. Daniel never became used to the desperation of summer afternoons when the air was as thick as molasses and as difficult to breathe. He understands now why the sidewalks of old Havana are lined with arcades where one
can walk out of the sun from one end of the city to the other. He is enthralled by snow, wants it to keep coming down until the roads become impassable and New Jersey comes to a complete stop. Utter stillness, that’s what he longs for most, and only the snow can provide that. On winter nights he sits for hours in front of the window, remembering his visits to Paris and Prague and the year he spent in Moscow, surrounded by tough Russians, his favorite people, and their vodka, without which they would not be so tough.

As he reminisces he notices a stirring in the bushes by the woods at the edge of the yard. He cannot imagine any animal, domestic or otherwise, moving about in weather like this and curiosity gets the better of him. He puts on his jacket and goes out the back door. Halfway across the yard he realizes the light leather loafers he is wearing offer no protection against the cold and his toes are beginning to tingle. He searches vainly in the pockets of his jacket for his gloves. Elena took them this morning and didn’t bother putting them back. He zips the jacket all the way to his neck, keeps his hands in his pockets and continues walking until he reaches the spot where he saw the bushes moving. Shoulders hunched, face turned downward away from the wind, he looks into the stand of trees, dark erect forms crusted with white on the windward side. The snow absorbs the ambient light like a sponge and reflects a bluish tinge. He rubs his ears with his raw hands and thinks, Cuban Frost, I am a Cuban Frost, or a frosted Cuban, and recites to himself those lines about the woods and frozen lake. Deeper in, about fifty feet away, two luminous eyes are staring at him and around them he can make out the form of a large cat, gray and fluffed, standing on a fallen log. He whistles to it and the cat leaps and is gone. Daniel follows in its direction, speculating that the animal is lost and unable to make its way home. The storm had begun as rain and so there is a slick layer of ice under the snow cover, forcing him to concentrate on where he steps. Distracted by the weather, he walks on until he hears a low growl. He stops to make sure it is not the trees groaning.
under the pressure of the wind, and he hears it again, a throaty sound no tree could make. His body tenses and the skin on the back of his neck bristles. Twenty steps away from him, where the path dips down toward a stream, is a black dog, crouched low to the ground with its ears bent back, wet and miserable. He saw the same dog, with features like a German shepherd but larger, three days ago when he chased it from the yard as it was approaching Ringo’s water bowl. Ringo is the mutt he and Elena picked up in the streets of Madrid and brought with them to America. Daniel retreats backward, not wanting to give his back to the animal, and when he can no longer see it, he turns and walks quickly back to the yard. All he can hear now is the wind blowing and the tops of the trees clacking against each other. His breathing is less labored and his heart is settling down to its usual rhythms.

The doctor has warned him repeatedly about exerting himself, just as he has issued warnings about his smoking and drinking, which Daniel ignores with a combination of disdain and temerity. He hasn’t bothered telling Elena about the heart condition. She will merely curtail his diet and drinking and harass him about what he can and cannot do. The snow has thickened and he can barely see through his glasses, which are crusted over with ice crystals. As he steps over a fallen tree to reach the yard, he is startled by the figure of a man heading in his direction, wearing a heavy parka and a hood that covers most of his face.

“Good evening,” the man says in barely accented English, muffled by the scarf tied around his nose and mouth.

“Good evening,” Daniel says warily, his jaw stiff from the cold and his eyes watering.

“Have you seen a cat?” the man says

“A large gray one, in the woods.”

“It ran away about an hour ago.”

“That is a brave cat.”

“Just old. Old and blind.” The man is quiet for a moment, then says, “You should dress better in weather like this.”
Daniel wants to tell him to mind his business, but instead gives a quick nervous laugh. “There was a stray dog blocking the path. I couldn’t go any farther.”

“I have seen that dog in the neighborhood. We better get back inside before you freeze to death. My name is Virgil Benami. I live two doors down. Come to my house and I will make tea for you.”

“And your cat?”

“He’ll make it home sooner or later. He’s been through worse.”

With Elena asleep there is nothing for Daniel to do at home except look at the snow, and there will be plenty tonight. This is what he tells Virgil by way of thanks while they wait for the tea to steep. Virgil Benami has just moved into the neighborhood. He is a professor of Spanish literature at the university, about ten years younger than he, Daniel figures. He was born in Guatemala to a Lebanese father and a Guatemalan mother and has been in the United States since he was twenty. An uncle of his wound up in Cuba where he still has relatives. A cousin is in jail and another escaped the island in a rowboat and has not been heard from since. He tells Daniel all of this unasked and Daniel counters with some comments about Guatemalan literature and offers a few facts about his own life: They have been in Queenstown for two years. They like the town, yes. It is so quaint, so American. He has just returned from Madrid where he gave a series of lectures on Cuban literature.

“The United States is not an easy country,” Virgil says, finally pouring the tea, which has sat on the table in front of Daniel for ten minutes. These Arabs are patient, Daniel thinks, unlike Cubans. Cubans like to drink everything fast, in one gulp—coffee, water, beer. Arabs will wait. “But perhaps yours is more difficult.”

“Right now it is,” Daniel says. “You know what Martí said.”

“My wine is bitter but it is my wine,” Virgil says, with pride in knowing the passage. “He stole it from Stephen Crane.”
“Not exactly. Martí said, ‘El vino, de plátano; y si sale agrio, ¡es nuestro vino!’ Crane said, ‘I like it because it is bitter and because it is my heart.’ How do you know he did not steal from Martí? Typical of a young writer, Crane was referring to himself. Martí was referring to his nation.”

“Perhaps it is coincidence,” Virgil says. He takes the mug and raises it in a toast.

“To warmth.”

“To snow,” Daniel says. “May it come down forever.”

In the morning Elena comes down the stairs with sprightly step and face alight with energy. No one Daniel knows sleeps as deeply or as fully as Elena, waking as if every day were the first of her life. She is a handsome woman, small and dark with glittering black eyes, from Guantánamo, in Oriente, that part of the island most unlike Havana, and where, it is said, the true spirit of the island was forged. He has coffee ready for her as usual, but she doesn’t linger over it. Instead, she takes the demitasse and goes straight to her work table like she used to do in Havana when they were still full of hope about themselves, their writing, the revolution. Now there is no hope, not for him. The days flow in their sameness into the endless river of exile. He sits on the couch where he has slept and watches her work. She doesn’t care about the snow outside or about Ringo, who is yet to be fed, or her husband, who is waiting for the slightest sign of attention from her; she cares about the proofs she has to read, lay out, and send to the printer in two days. She cares about the mission she has set for herself since coming to the United States: to write and publish everything that was forbidden them in Cuba. Every time he sees her working like this, Daniel is tempted to have a drink. You are drinking yourself into stupidity, she will complain. Two weeks ago she emptied his vodka down the drain and he, in his anger, drove to the liquor store and bought three bottles which he hid in various parts of the house. Now he can’t remember where they are. Only snow will break his mood, take him to places that resemble a past happiness or at
least the absence of misery. He goes to the kitchen window to make sure that it is still coming down, in those large flakes now: angel eyebrows, tiny birds’ nests.

After tea, he and Virgil had switched to brandy and spoken of many things. The university saved him, Virgil had said, from the political convolutions of Guatemala, and he is happy in the relative anonymity of a tenured life. He has not returned to his country in ten years, has no desire to see his family. He does enough research and writing to remain in good standing in his department, then goes to New York once a week, where he stays with friends who provide a modicum of social life. His specialty, Spanish Theater of the Golden Age, is comfortably distant from Guatemalan themes. It is a small country, he told Daniel, with little to offer the world except textiles, melancholy people, and grinding poverty. Daniel, encouraged by Elena, hoped to get that tenured life in this quaint provincial town of central New Jersey where there are still woods and wild dogs roaming the night. So far, all they have gotten is a snub from the university. I know who you are, Virgil admitted to him after several glasses of brandy. I have read your poetry. I know about you. You are considered a hero by many. Daniel took a drink of his brandy and dismissed Virgil’s statement with a wave of his hand. That sordid business is in the past, Daniel said. In yesterday’s paper I read about a man in Washington, D.C., who jumped into the freezing Potomac to rescue a woman from a sinking airplane and then disappeared into the crowd. That is a hero. Daniel does not remember the rest of the conversation or what time he finally made it home. He had sat on the couch to remove his shoes and the next thing he knew it was morning.

Daniel waits until eleven before going to Virgil’s house to inquire about the cat. The wind has subsided momentarily and the snow falls straight down, softening everything except the sharpest corners. It is over his ankles now, making the front steps to Virgil’s house impassable. He goes around to the back door, which is protected from the elements by an overhang, and knocks several times. As he waits, he notices a rusted barbecue next to
a set of sliding doors and three plastic garbage bins against the wall. Then he sees the cat, or what is left of it, on the ground by the garbage bins. A large red stain surrounds the carcass, which is headless and already being covered by the snow. The initial shock of the scene is quickly replaced by his attempt to make sense of it. One set of footprints leads away from the house and another, parallel to the first, leads back. He knocks again, waits a minute or so, and as he turns around to leave, he sees Virgil looking out through the glass doors. He is much smaller and rounder than Daniel remembers from last night. His hair is disheveled and his eyes are disconnected, turning in rather than turning out, as the Cuban saying goes. Daniel motions several times but Virgil makes no sign of acknowledgement. Before going home, Daniel picks up the dead cat by the tail and drops it into one of the bins.

The story Daniel tells Elena about the mangled cat is enough to convince her that their neighbor is not to be trusted.

“Guatemalans are *indios,*” she says. “They used to practice human sacrifice.”

“He is a university professor,” Daniel says. Her provincial nature, the same that first drew him to her, now exasperates him beyond belief. There was nothing sinister in what he saw this morning: a dead cat, a man grieving.

Elena still carries with her the mistrust of strangers that she honed to the sharpness of a blade in the years just before they left the island. It makes her see the world in terms of those who are with them and those who are against them. Daniel has often labeled his wife’s mistrust as paranoia, and it is true, it has all the markings of such, except that it is based on experience.

“We have enough problems without having someone like that in our lives,” Elena says just as they hear a knocking at the door.

It is Virgil, who has come to apologize. He is distraught, he says, over the cat’s death. He found it, mauled and half-eaten, in the woods early this morning. Daniel invites him in and Elena gives her husband a disapproving look. Still, she takes the man’s
coat and goes to the kitchen to prepare coffee. Daniel leads Virgil to the couch, where he sits and is swallowed by the cushions.

Ringo bounds into the room wildly and jumps on Virgil’s lap, licking his face and pressing his torso against Virgil’s chest. Ringo has never let go of the street dog’s instincts and senses that the stranger will tolerate his behavior. Daniel yells at Ringo to get off, but the dog knows they are only words. His master will let him do just about anything, not because he is tolerant but because he is lazy. Virgil pushes the dog’s snout away from his face and says nice dog, nice dog under his breath, as if flattery will be enough to get the mutt off him. The dog persists now in biting his hand, sinking his teeth into Virgil’s skin just enough to cause pain without puncturing it. Virgil winces, grabs the dog by the scruff of the neck and drops him on the floor. Realizing he has reached his limit, Ringo takes a quick whiff of Virgil’s pant leg then canters away into the kitchen.

“We must do something about that dog,” Virgil says.

“I warned Elena about bringing a Spanish dog to America,” Daniel says.

“I mean the stray,” Virgil says, trying to wipe Ringo’s hair off his blue corduroys.

“Horrible creature. Dangerous. Might even be rabid.”

“It chased one of the neighborhood children this morning. I called the animal control center but there was no answer.”

“Must be the storm. Perhaps we should wait until tomorrow.”

“The estimates now say that at least eighteen inches will fall in central New Jersey. Blizzard conditions tonight.”

Elena appears in the living room with the coffee, Ringo at her heels. Any traces of apprehension have left her face, and she smiles benignly as she offers Virgil a demitasse. Then she sits down on her easy chair, the legs of which show evidence of the dog’s teeth. Ringo trots over to the couch, wagging his tail nervously, and stands ready to pounce again on the visitor. Elena says his name in a threatening way and the dog slinks, tail between his
legs, to the other side of the room where he lies down under the settee. Deep in the cushions of the couch, Virgil looks like a man who has jumped into water too deep and now has to struggle constantly to keep from going under. He almost spills the coffee on himself, then has difficulty leaning out of the cushions to set the cup down on the coffee table. He asks if he can smoke.

“Of course,” says Daniel. “I will smoke with you and that will draw us closer.” He takes a cigar he started last night from the ash tray on the side table and lights it, filling his mouth with the smoke before blowing it out. It is one of the great pleasures in life. In his childhood he heard the old men who smoked well say that one should never relight a cigar.

Virgil offers Elena one of his cigarettes from a leather case but she declines.

“My wife smoked two packs a day until she discovered tobacco could kill her,” Daniel says. “She wants to live forever.”

“I just don’t want to die before my time,” Elena says.

“No one ever does.”

There is a moment of silence, which Virgil attempts to fill with a reference to an event at the university featuring a well-known Cuban poet. Elena gives Daniel a knowing look and shakes her head. She calls the poet an informer, an apparatchik, and a hypocrite, who passed as their friend at the same time that he kept the security apparatus informed of Daniel’s every move. It was he who led the repudiation meeting at the Writers’ Union.


“You egg everyone on,” Elena says. Her voice is at a high pitch and her black eyes are burning.

Daniel likes it when she gets this way. It reminds him of their first meeting at the Writers’ Union. She was nineteen years old, nervous and shy like a small bird, and beautiful in a primitive, provincial way. Her eyes were the eyes of a poet: fierce and restless, they captured everything. She had won a national poetry prize and had come to Havana to claim it. When her time came to speak at the annual gathering, her shyness disappeared and she
gave a rousing speech about the role of the poet in revolutionary society. Daniel fell immediately in love with her.

It was a heady time for him. He had just been named press officer at the Ministry of Culture. His poetry was on everyone’s lips and his arrogance was matched only by his talent. Early on in their relationship when he was still married to his first wife, he had told Elena, partially out of flattery, but also because her poetry embodied that spontaneous passion that his lacked, that she was the better maker, *la miglior fabbra*, echoing Eliot’s reference to Pound and expecting to impress her with his erudition. Elena was not impressed. She simply didn’t know “The Waste Land,” Eliot, or Pound. She was a poet from the gut and, as such, untainted by all the literary pretensions that urban poets carry along with them. Now, she is unquestionably better, since she is writing and he is not.

Elena asks Virgil bluntly why her husband has not been invited to give a talk, why no one at the university even called to welcome them. Virgil tells them that universities in the United States are hermetic, genteel places where news of the outside world enters late. He suggests that they should perhaps call the head of the Spanish Department.

“That madwoman,” Daniel exclaims.

“The head of the Spanish Department is a man.”

“That doesn’t keep him from being a madwoman. ¿Una loca?”

“How about you? Can you help us?” Elena says. Her directness used to alarm Daniel. Now he hides behind it.

“It is not easy to navigate the waters of the academy,” Virgil says. “You must be patient.”

“We thought people in this country would understand what we have been through,” Elena says. “But they don’t even try. Instead they invite the official writers, the mediocre ones who sold themselves to the system.”

Virgil nods in understanding. Elena gathers the cups back on the tray and goes to the kitchen.
“I will go home and get the gun,” he says to Daniel.
“Gun?” Daniel asks with alarm.
“To kill the wild dog. Look how it’s snowing. It will be days before animal control officers come around. Will you join me?”

This is Daniel’s opportunity to be a real hero. This time he will dress warmly. He and Virgil will go into the snow like Russian hunters. It is an absolutely ridiculous proposition, but he wants to do it.

“Yes,” he says. “But how is it you own a gun?”

“That is a long story,” Virgil answers with a forced smile, which is soon lost in the Levantine shadows of his face.

In the bright morning, Daniel is walking to school on a red dirt road rutted by the ox cart traffic that passes through on the way to the railroad depot. On his left is a small river that meanders through a stand of bamboo, which the Cubans call caña brava, or wild cane. The bamboo is about thirty feet tall and hangs over the river in a sort of rough, uneven canopy. On his right is a field of tobacco. The plants are about three feet tall and the leaves are a light green, which indicates that the tobacco is ready for harvesting. He is wearing a white shirt and tan shorts, the unofficial school boy uniform of the time, and although he has argued repeatedly with his mother about it, she insists that only grown men wear long pants. There are days when the walk takes forever, other days when he is so involved in his thoughts that he is at school in no time. Once, a large black bird with a red head landed on the road in front of him and would not move for a long time. Finally, it took a few steps in his direction, flapping its wings powerfully until it rose and soared over his head. His heart was in his throat and everything fell away except the black bird and the downdraft of air created by its massive wings. When he got to school, he found he had lost his voice. Every time his mouth opened to answer one of the teacher’s questions, he hissed like a snake or growled like a dog when it is threatened. At first the teacher thought he was mocking her in front of the other students, but
Daniel was not that kind of boy, and she soon realized that there was something wrong. She became alarmed and sent the school janitor to the Arcilla home to get Daniel’s mother as quickly as possible. The janitor, a former slave who was hard of hearing, took his time with the errand and when he arrived back at the school with Mrs. Arcilla, all the other children had gone home. Daniel sat patiently in the classroom while the two ladies had a conversation outside where he couldn’t hear them. That afternoon he rode home behind his mother on the bony mare while she explained in a voice punctuated by the jaunty canter that the teacher had recommended a few days’ rest as cure for his sudden muteness. Over the next few days he lolled luxuriantly about the house, eating special treats and reading for hours at a stretch the books his mother liked—languorous novels about war-obsessed men and lovelorn women. What wonderful times he had without a voice! A week or two later—he doesn’t remember exactly when—his voice returned and he had to go back to the long walks and the stultifying one-room school where children recited their lessons by rote and the teacher used her pointer to tap the black board with an intolerable singularity of purpose.

When it rained, and it rained often during his childhood, his mother kept him home. This weather will make anyone sick, she would say, and swaddled him in blankets that scratched his skin and made him sneeze, which to her was a sure sign that he was ill with a disease she called intoxicación. From the bed he listened to the rain beat on the zinc roof and on the ground outside the bedroom window, where it gathered in huge puddles that threatened to flood the house. Unlike other boys nearby who ran outside to splash and play, he was content to lie and listen to the music of the rain, accompanied by the monk-like chorus of frogs that would start up in the afternoon and suffused the atmosphere with a liturgical serenity he has longed for since and found, only fleetingly, in the silence of snow.
Elena is working. Let her. She expects nothing from it except the satisfaction of doing something she couldn’t do when the noose of power was tightening around them. Her enthusiasm is not idealistic; it is spiteful. Some day she will discover the futility of her labor: a little magazine published in their living room. Fidel would laugh as he laughed when Daniel was taken to see him just before he left the island. You will rue the day you abandoned the revolution, he’d said. You will look on these times as the best of your life. Fidel’s voice is that of a man convinced that there is one truth in life and it is his. Exile will destroy you. He was right.

Daniel watches Elena and is filled with tenderness. It was she who fought tenaciously to get permission to leave the island, writing letters to anyone of note, from the Pope to the Dalai Lama. It was she who confronted the State Security officers when they came to their apartment and she who got them to Queenstown and found the house they are living in. She borrowed money, she paid it back when she could. She solicited writers for submissions to the magazine and in the time she had left she wrote her poems and her books. Daniel admires her, loves her even, yet he cannot tolerate all that productivity so close to him, when he can barely finish the articles—sausages, he calls them—he writes for a Spanish-language newspaper in Miami. Then he remembers one of the bottles of vodka he hid under the sink, so well camouflaged it would take Elena months to find it. He is giddy with nervousness as he picks up the bottle, uncaps it and takes a swig. He swishes the vodka around his mouth then swallows. It burns his throat but Daniel is calmer now. Something in him is restored and he thinks fondly of his Russian friends who taught him to drink. He takes another swig in their memory, then replaces the bottle toward the back of the cabinet among the cleaners Elena rarely uses. Afraid his breath might betray his peccadillo, he sneaks past the living room and up the stairs to brush his teeth.

When Daniel comes back down, Elena is by the door with Virgil, who has just walked in and is stamping his feet on the mat. His hat and coat are covered with snow and he is carrying a
walking stick made of dark wood with a large knot for a handle. Daniel remembers an Irish neighbor of theirs in Havana—a former IRA operative—who owned one. Whenever he got drunk, he would stand on his veranda naked, matted red hair blazing in the tropical sun, and wave the stick over his head in warrior fashion, screaming Celtic war cries. Virgil raises his meekly as a greeting to Daniel.

“I brought my shillelagh,” he says. “Are you ready?”

“Ready for what?” says Elena.

“To find the wild dog,” Virgil answers.

The snow is so thick now that the houses across the street are barely visible. Elena looks out the window, then back at her husband.

“Es una locura.”

Daniel is about to say something when Virgil speaks.

“The dog is dangerous. You shouldn’t worry about us. This is not the Siberian tundra.”

If only it were, Daniel thinks. While in Russia he visited Novosibirsk in the winter. It was so cold, time came to a standstill. He saw castles and houses, whole civilizations of ice. He remembers sitting in a park with a friend in mid-afternoon, the temperature several degrees below zero. They passed a bottle of vodka back and forth and spoke of Pushkin, whom Daniel was then translating into Spanish. “El amor pasó, la musa apareció, el tiempo de la mente trajo una nueva claridad; libre ya, de nuevo hilvano la emoción y el pensamiento, una mágica sonoridad.” He remembers all his bodily sensations disappearing until he could feel only his heart, the sun just over the horizon, a thin layer of mist hovering in the light. If you hit that world with a hammer, it would crack and shatter into nothing. It did. Every time Daniel looks for it, he finds only shards scattered in his brain.

Daniel dresses quickly. He puts on a sweater over his shirt and wraps around his neck a woolen scarf Elena’s mother knit for him just before her mind quit working; over it all he wears a heavy coat Elena bought for him the last time she was in New York. Just
before they leave, Elena insists he cover his head with a hunter’s cap that is too small for him. As he and Virgil walk out the door, Daniel sees himself in the mirror—the cap’s ear flaps stick out from his head like small wings and the coat’s padding bunches up on the shoulder, making him look hunchbacked, hardly the folk hero’s visage he has imagined for himself.

The cold air stimulates Daniel and he feels better than he has in weeks. In the time it takes them to walk down the front steps and around to the back yard, a layer of snow has gathered on the cap’s visor. Virgil advises he should tie the scarf around his head but Daniel doesn’t bother, preferring instead to keep it around his neck. Let his ears sting, let his eyes tear. As they enter the trail, Virgil trips over a hidden root and Daniel is reminded that he has a gun in his pocket.

“Do you have the safety on?” Daniel asks.

“Yes,” Virgil says and pulls out the gun to show Daniel.

It is a 9-millimeter Beretta, sleek and compact, made to fit comfortably into a pocket, the kind of pistol professionals use. At one point during his interrogation, an agent had put such a gun between Daniel’s eyes.

“Do you know how to use it?” As soon as he asks, Daniel realizes it is a stupid question.

Virgil answers with a smile and puts the gun back in his pocket. Then he pulls out a flask from inside his coat and offers Daniel a drink. The brandy is warm going down and it gives him strength. They continue down the trail, Virgil leading the way. They reach the stream, which bubbles forth through the crust of ice that has formed over it, and cross it by stepping on two large stones. Except for the gurgling stream, the only other sound is that of the snow itself, which is very subtle and you cannot perceive it unless you listen carefully, putting all internal noise out of mind. Soon they leave behind the neighborhood houses. Daniel announces to Virgil that the fluid in his nostrils is freezing, a sure sign of how cold it is.
“Yes,” Virgil says. “Unusual to have it snow when it’s this cold.”

There is something incongruous about the situation, Daniel thinks: two middle-aged men from the temperate regions searching for a dog in the middle of an arctic extravaganza. Overhead, the tree branches interlock in a frozen grid like the ribcage of a whale. Ahead of them is a deep, dimensionless gray. The dog could be dead or hiding from the storm or gone out of the neighborhood. Daniel says this out loud but he is not sure that the Guatemalan, who is about thirty feet ahead, can hear. In any event, he is certain that nothing he says will convince Virgil to turn back. They move at a regular pace, following the trail that someone has marked with red daubs of paint on the tree trunks. After some time Daniel stops. He is breathing heavily and he can feel his shirt dampening underneath his sweater and coat. His toes are numb but the rest of his body feels energized by the exercise. He turns to Virgil and asks whether it wouldn’t be better to move perpendicular to the stream.

“Snow is deeper there,” Virgil says, out of breath himself. He is leaning on the walking stick and has taken off his glasses to wipe off the snow that has crusted on the lenses. “The dog knows to move parallel to the stream, not away from it. We should do the same.”

About a half an hour later they reach a corn field. The dry stalks poke through the snow, giving the field a ruined, desolate look. They follow the edge of the field and reenter the trail on the far side, where it moves uphill at a slight incline. The walking is more labored and they have to stop regularly to rest and take swigs from Virgil’s flask. One of those times Virgil drops a cigarette on the snow and as he bends over to pick it up, he notices some scat.

“The dog was around here not too long ago,” he says, poking it with his stick.

“It could have been dropped by a deer,” Daniel says. “I have seen plenty in these woods.”
Daniel knows little about deer, or any other wild animal for that matter, but he is compelled to speak with authority to keep up with the Guatemalan.

Virgil says that deer scat is more fibrous, less dense. “Besides,” he adds, “deer don’t move around much in weather like this.”

Not far from where they stand, the trail steepens and moves past a large flat rock that juts out from the hillside, a good place for an animal to get out of the weather. Virgil pulls out the gun and walks off the trail in the direction of the rock, sinking thigh deep into the snow drifts. Daniel can see him checking under the rock, then slowly disappearing behind it. Afraid to be left without a weapon, he looks around and picks up a branch that is all but buried under the snow. Unless the dog is rabid it will not attack someone waving a stick. At least Daniel hopes so. He thinks maybe he should follow the Guatemalan but doesn’t want to risk getting stuck in the deep snow. He hears a sharp noise to his right, away from the rock, and turns quickly to see a residue of snow float down from a tree, then he feels the flap of the wings of a bird that flies over him. It is so hot he can barely breathe and the sun beats down on him, boring a hole on the back of his head. When Virgil reaches him, there are drops of sweat running down his cheek and he is confused: the landscape keeps shifting its features from bamboo and tobacco to snow, wind, and barren rock. He hears his name several times, the voice diminished as if coming from very far away. Daniel is on the red road; there is tobacco to the right of him, the river to the left, and before him a stand of royal palms that rise into the indigo sky. But it is Virgil’s voice he hears through the snow. His hands are numb; his heart is beating loud and fast, muffling all other sounds. Daniel, Daniel, his mother is calling. Daniel, his teacher, Elena, the man in the jail pointing the gun at his face.

“Are you okay?” Virgil keeps asking.

“Yes,” Daniel says and shakes his head several times.

“Should we go back home?”

“I’ll be fine if we keep moving. What did you find?”
“He used the space under the rock as a lair. I can’t tell how long it’s been.”

“The dog isn’t rabid then,” Daniel says. “He is taking care of himself.”

Virgil suggests they go over the top of the hill and find the stream. If they follow it long enough, they will come to Herman Road and the walk back will be a lot easier. When they reach the top, the stream is nowhere to be seen. The wind is fiercer here, rising up from the valley and hitting them from beneath. While they are discussing whether to go back the way they came or to go forward and descend, lightning strikes close enough to make the ground shake and their ears rattle. Without saying anything, they start on the down slope simultaneously. Thunder peals all around them and the metallic smell of ozone permeates the air. Neither man has experienced lightning during a snow storm and they quicken their pace. The ground is icier on the windward side and Daniel keeps from falling by holding on to branches and saplings that jut onto the path. By the time they come to level ground, he is barely able to get enough air into his lungs. He is nauseous and his head aches badly. Afraid that if he sits down he won’t be able to get up, he asks Virgil for the flask and takes a long swig. The brandy restores him somewhat, but he knows he must get out of the weather soon. Virgil gives him the walking stick and takes the lead to open the trail.

They walk silently with their heads bowed and their torsos leaning against the wind, two solitary figures slogging through the snowy forest. Virgil pushes through drifts where the snow is up to his hips and Daniel follows close behind, leaning against the walking stick and taking slow measured breaths. In ten minutes they reach a utility service road. Over them rise steel transoms, their electric lines swinging in the wind. As they pause to decide which direction to take, uphill to the left, down to the right, Daniel senses a sudden movement behind him, nothing more than a displacement of air molecules that reaches him almost as imperceptibly as a thought. When he turns there is nothing there
but the huge trees swaying and the dark gray sky seeping into the landscape. His watch says 3:45.

“We have an hour of daylight,” he says to Virgil, who doesn’t hear. “Virgil,” he screams. For the first time there is alarm in his voice. “It’s going to be dark soon.”

Virgil looks back at him. His face is strained and he is grimacing under the hood of his coat. “I can’t feel my feet,” he says. “Perhaps we should turn back.”

Daniel realizes he can’t make the uphill climb and suggests that the road has to be close by on the right. In fifteen minutes they have walked perhaps a quarter of a mile. Daniel is exhausted and he is again out of breath. He pulls down his scarf so that he can breathe more easily and in so doing exposes his chest. Soon he is shivering uncontrollably. He can see Virgil surging ahead, leaving him behind; then Virgil stops and looks back at Daniel. He is trying to say something but Daniel can’t hear. Virgil waves and motions behind him. The dog, Daniel thinks. He looks and sees a dark form lope across the road and go into a clump of bushes. If the dog decided to come after him, he couldn’t move fast enough to reach Virgil’s side. His only weapon is the walking stick, pretty useless against a large, agile dog. Lightning strikes again, so close Daniel senses the sound in his jaw, and he forces himself to start walking toward Virgil, who is pointing ahead to a brick shed about one hundred yards away.

And then it happens. Daniel feels as if his heart has turned inside out and a huge weight like an anvil is pressing down on his bowels. All he can do is fall to his knees and try to catch his breath but when he inhales, the weight inside him grows and pushes the air back out before it can reach his lungs. He leans forward and props himself with one arm while the other is waving feebly at Virgil, who rushes to him as fast as he can move and tries to pull him back up. When Daniel attempts to speak, a growly moan comes out. The air, the snow, the woods, Virgil’s face are all turning dark and finally Virgil releases his arm and he slides forward onto the snow. Kneeling over him, Virgil says something but Daniel
only sees his lips moving, his arm pointing to the hut, then a chicken rolling on the kitchen floor after his mother has twisted its neck. The chicken bounces off the cupboard and begins to jerk involuntarily in Daniel’s direction, pursuing him until he is up against the counter and can retreat no further, when the bird suffers one final spasm and stops moving.

“The shed is close. We can rest inside,” he can hear Virgil saying through the howling wind. “A short walk away when you’re ready.”

Upside down, the Guatemalan’s face has a bizarre, inhuman look to it. His glasses are fogged over and his eyebrows are covered with ice crystals. His chin, stubbled with gray hair, is small and pointed. His lips are thick and dark, almost purple, and as he speaks they reveal yellowed, uneven teeth. There are acne scars around the edges of his jaw; otherwise, his skin is smooth and tight. It is the face of a bachelor, a man with few responsibilities other than taking care of himself. It is curious to Daniel that he should be thinking of these things at the moment. All the strength has gone from his arms and legs and he can barely raise his head to see the shed, where it is in relation to where he is lying and how much energy he will have to expend to get there. With Virgil’s help, he stands. The world is about to tip sideways when Virgil hands him the walking stick and grabs hold of his free arm. Daniel rests his forehead on Virgil’s shoulder until he regains his balance; then slowly, with deliberate steps, the two men make their way through the snow.