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In Palo Alto

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Every day I have to learn more about shame from the people in old photographs in second-hand stores, and from the people in the photographic studies of damage and grief, where the light assails a window and the figure’s back is all we see—or from the very faces we never witness in these pictures, several of whom I passed today in their windows, some hesitant, some completely committed to worthlessness—or even from my own face, handed up suddenly by the car’s mirror or a glass door. When I was waiting for a bus, the man beside me showed me a picture of a naked youth with an erection, and the loneliness in his face as he held this photograph was like a light waking me from the dead. I was more ashamed of it than I was of my own a few days later—just tonight, in fact—when solitude visited me on a residential street where I stopped and waited for a woman to pass again across her unshaded window, so that I could see her naked.

As I stood there teaching the night what I knew about this sort of thing, a figure with the light coming from in front while the axioms of the world one by one disowned me, a private and hopeless figure, probably, somebody simply not worth the trouble of hating, it occurred to me it was better to be like this than to be forced to look at a picture of it happening to someone else. I walked on. When I got back to the streets of noises and routines, the places full of light of one kind or another, the motels of experience, a fool in every room,

all the people I’ve been talking about were there. And we told one another we ought to be ashamed.