WHIRLING, TALKING, 11D began to enter Room 109. From the quality of their excitement Mark Prosser guessed it would rain. He had been teaching high school for three years, yet his students still impressed him; they were such sensitive animals. They reacted so infallibly to merely barometric pressure.

In the doorway, Brute Young paused while little Barry Snyder giggled at his elbow. Barry’s stagy laugh rose and fell, dipping down toward some vile secret that had to be tasted and retasted, then soaring artificially to proclaim that he, little Barry, shared such a secret with the school’s fullback. Being Brute’s stooge was precious to Barry. The fullback paid no attention to him; he twisted his neck to stare at something not yet coming through the door. He yielded reluctantly to the procession pressing him forward.

Right under Prosser’s eyes, like a murder suddenly appearing in an annalistic frieze of kings and queens, someone stabbed a girl in the back with a pencil; she ignored the assault saucily. Another hand yanked out Geoffrey Langer’s shirt-tail. Geoffrey, a bright student, was uncertain whether to laugh it off or defend himself with anger, and made a weak, half-turning gesture of compromise, wearing an expression of distant arrogance that Prosser recognized as having been his own in moments of schoolyard fear. All along the line, in the glitter of key chains and the acute angles of turned-back shirt cuffs, an electricity was expressed which simple weather couldn’t generate.

Mark wondered if today Gloria Angstrom would wear that sweater, an ember-pink angora, with very short sleeves. The virtual sleevelessness was the disturbing factor: the exposure of those two serene arms to the air, white as thighs against the delicate wool.

His guess was correct. A vivid pink patch flashed through the jiggle of arms and shoulders as the final knot of youngsters entered the room.

“Take your seats,” Mr. Prosser said. “Come on. Let’s go.”

Most obeyed, but Peter Forrester, who had been at the center of the group around Gloria, still lingered in the doorway with her, finishing some story, apparently determined to make her laugh or gasp. When she did gasp, he tossed his head with satisfaction. His apricot-colored hair bounced. Red-haired boys are all alike, Mark thought, with their white eyelashes and wise-guy faces, their mouths always twisted with an unearned self-confidence. Bluffers, the bunch of them.

When Gloria, moving in a considered, stately way, had taken her seat, and Peter had swerved into his, Mr. Prosser said, “Peter Forrester.”

“Yes?” Peter rose, scrabbling through his book for the assigned pages.

“Kindly tell the class the exact meaning of the words ‘Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow, / Creeps in this petty pace from day to day.’”

Peter glanced down at the high-school edition of Macbeth lying open on his desk. One of the duller girls tittered expectantly from the back of the room. Peter was popular with the girls; girls that age had minds like moths.

“Peter. With your book shut. We have all memorized this passage for today. Remember?” The girl in the back of the room squealed in
delight. Gloria laid her own book face-open on her desk, where Peter could see it.

Peter shut his book with a bang and stared into Gloria’s. “Why,” he said at last, “I think it means pretty much what it says.”

“Which is?”

“Why, that tomorrow is something we often think about. It creeps into our conversation all the time. We couldn’t make any plans without thinking about tomorrow.”

“I see. Then you would say that Macbeth is here referring to the, the date-book aspect of life?”

Geoffrey Langer laughed, no doubt to please Mr. Prosser. For a moment, Mark was pleased. But he shouldn’t play for laughs at a student’s expense. His paraphrase had made Peter’s reading of the lines seem more ridiculous than it was. He began to retract. “I admit—”

But Peter was going on; redheads never know when to quit. “Macbeth means that if we quit worrying about tomorrow, and just lived for today, we could appreciate all the wonderful things that are going on under our noses.”

Mark considered this a moment before he spoke. He would not be sarcastic. “Uh, without denying that there is truth in what you say, Peter, do you think it likely that Macbeth, in his situation, would be expressing such”—he couldn’t help himself—“such sunny sentiments?”

Geoffrey laughed again. Peter’s neck reddened; he studied the floor. Gloria glared at Mr. Prosser, the anger in her face clearly meant for him to see.

Mark hurried to undo his mistake. “Don’t misunderstand me, please,” he told Peter. “I don’t have all the answers myself. But it seems to me the whole speech, down to ‘Signifying nothing,’ is saying that life is—well, a fraud. Nothing wonderful about it.”

“Did Shakespeare really think that?” Geoffrey Langer asked, a nervous quickness pitching his voice high.

Mark read into Geoffrey’s question his own adolescent premonitions of the terrible truth. The attempt he must make was plain. He turned his attention from Peter and looked through the window toward the steadying sky. The clouds were lowering, getting darker. “There is,” Mr. Prosser slowly began, “much darkness in Shakespeare’s work, and no play is darker than Macbeth. The atmosphere is poisonous, oppressive. One critic has said that in this play humanity suffocates.” This was too fancy.

“In the middle of his career, Shakespeare wrote plays about men like Hamlet and Othello and Macbeth—men who aren’t allowed by their society, or bad luck, or some minor flaw in themselves, to become the great men they might have been. Even Shakespeare’s comedies of this period deal with a world gone sour. It is as if he had seen through the bright, bold surface of his earlier comedies and histories and had looked upon something terrible. It frightened him, just as some day it may frighten some of you.” In his determination to find the right words, he had been staring at Gloria, without meaning to. Embarrassed, she nodded, and, realizing what had been happening, he nodded back.

He tried to make his remarks more diffident. “But then I think Shakespeare sensed a redeeming truth. His last plays are serene and symbolical, as if he had pierced through the ugly facts and reached a realm where the facts are again beautiful. In this way, Shakespeare’s total work is a more complete image of life than that of any other writer, except perhaps for Dante, an Italian poet who wrote three centuries earlier.” He had been taken far from the Macbeth soliloquy. Other teachers had been happy to tell him how the kids made a game of getting him talking. He looked toward Geoffrey. The boy was doodling on his tablet, indifferent. Mr. Prosser concluded, “The last play Shakespeare wrote is an extraordinary poem called The Tempest. Some of you may want to read it for your next book
reports—the ones due May tenth. It’s a short play.”

The class had been taking a holiday. Barry Snyder was snicking BBs off the blackboard and glancing over at Brute Young to see if he noticed. “Once more, Barry,” Mr. Prosser said, “and out you go.” Barry blushed, and grinned to cover the blush, his eyeballs sliding toward Brute. The dull girl in the rear of the room was putting on lipstick. “Put that away, Alice,” Mr. Prosser commanded. She giggled and obeyed. Sejak, the Polish boy who worked nights, was asleep at his desk, his cheek white with pressure against the varnished wood, his mouth sagging sidewise. Mr. Prosser had an impulse to let him sleep. But the impulse might not be true kindness, just the self-congratulatory, kindly pose in which he sometimes discovered himself. Besides, one breach of discipline encouraged others. He moved down the aisle and gently shook Sejak awake. Then he turned his attention to the grumbling at the front of the room.

Peter Forrester was whispering to Gloria, trying to make her laugh. The girl’s face, though, was cool and solemn, as if a thought had been provoked in her head. Perhaps at least she had been listening to what Mr. Prosser had been saying. With a bracing sense of chivalrous intercession, Mark said, “Peter. I gather from this noise that you have something to add to your theories.”

Peter responded courteously. “No, sir. I honestly don’t understand the speech. Please, sir, what does it mean?”

This candid admission and odd request stunned the class. Every white, round face, eager, for once, to learn, turned toward Mark. He said, “I don’t know. I was hoping you would tell me.”

In college, when a professor made such a remark, it was with grand effect. The professor’s humility, the necessity for creative interplay between teacher and student were dramatically impressed upon the group. But to 11D, ignorance in an instructor was as wrong as a hole in a roof. It was as if he had held thirty strings pulling thirty faces taut toward him and then had slashed the strings. Heads waggled, eyes dropped, voices buzzed. Some of the discipline problems, like Peter Forrester, smirked signals to one another.

“Quiet!” Mr. Prosser shouted. “All of you. Poetry isn’t arithmetic. There’s no single right answer. I don’t want to force my own impression on you, even if I have had much more experience with literature.” He made this last clause very loud and distinct, and some of the weaker students seemed reassured. “I know none of you want that,” he told them.

Whether or not they believed him, they subsided, somewhat. Mark judged he could safely assume his human-among-humans attitude again. He perched on the edge of the desk and leaned forward beseechingly. “Now, honestly. Don’t any of you have some personal feeling about the lines that you would like to share with the class and me?”

One hand, with a flowered handkerchief balled in it, unsteadily rose. “Go ahead, Teresa,” Mr. Prosser said encouragingly. She was a timid, clumsy girl whose mother was a Seventh-Day Adventist.

“It makes me think of cloud shadows,” Teresa said.

Geoffrey Langer laughed. “Don’t be rude, Geoff,” Mr. Prosser said sideways, softly, before throwing his voice forward: “Thank you, Teresa. I think that’s an interesting and valid impression. Cloud movement has something in it of the slow, monotonous rhythm one feels in the line ‘Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow.’ It’s a very gray line, isn’t it, class?” No one agreed or disagreed.

Beyond the windows actual clouds were moving rapidly, and erratic sections of sunlight slid around the room. Gloria’s arm, crooked gracefully above her head, turned gold. “Gloria?” Mr. Prosser asked.

She looked up from something on her desk with a face of sullen radiance. “I think what Teresa said was very good,” she said, glaring in the direction of Geoffrey Langer. Geoffrey snickered defiantly.
“And I have a question. What does ‘petty pace’ mean?”

“It means the trivial day-to-day sort of life that, say, a bookkeeper or a bank clerk leads. Or a schoolteacher,” he added, smiling.

She did not smile back. Thought wrinkles irritated her shining brow. “But Macbeth has been fighting wars, and killing kings, and being a king himself, and all,” she pointed out.

“Yes, but it’s just these acts Macbeth is condemning as ‘nothing.’ Can you see that?”

Gloria shook her head. “Another thing I worry about—isn’t it silly for Macbeth to be talking to himself right in the middle of this war, with his wife just dead, and all?”

“I don’t think so, Gloria. No matter how fast events happen, thought is faster.”

His answer was weak; everyone knew it, even if Gloria hadn’t mused, supposedly to herself, but in a voice the entire class could hear, “It seems so stupid.”

Mark winced, pierced by the awful clarity with which his students saw him. Through their eyes, how queer he looked, with his soft hands, and his horn-rimmed glasses, and his hair never slicked down, all wrapped up in “literature,” where, when things get rough, the king mumbles a poem nobody understands. The delight Mr. Prosser took in such crazy junk made not only his good sense but his masculinity a matter of doubt. It was gentle of them not to laugh him out of the room. He looked down and rubbed his fingertips together, thinking mumbles a poem nobody understands. The delight Mr. Prosser all wrapped up in hands, and his horn rimmed glasses, and his hair never slicked down, the chef. His answer was weak; everyone knew it, even if Gloria hadn’t looked at the passage before he came to class, got through it as far as “And then is heard no more.”

Geoffrey Langer showed off, as he always did, by interrupting his own recitation with bright questions. “‘Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow,’” he said, “‘creeps in’—shouldn’t that be ‘creep in,’ Mr. Prosser?”

“It is ‘creeps.’ The trio is in effect singular. Go on.” Mr. Prosser was tired of coddling Langer. If you let them, these smart students will run away with the class. “Without the footnotes.”

“‘Creepsss in this petty pace from day to day, / To the last syllable of recorded time; / And all our yesterdays have lighted fools / The way to dusty death. Out, out—’”

“No, no!” Mr. Prosser jumped out of his chair. “This is poetry. Don’t mushmouth it! Pause a little after ‘fools.’” Geoffrey looked genuinely startled this time, and Mark himself did not quite understand his annoyance and, mentally turning to see what was behind him, seemed to glimpse in the humid undergrowth the two stern eyes of the indignant look Gloria had thrown Geoffrey. He glimpsed himself in the absurd position of acting as Gloria’s champion in her inscrutable private war with this intelligent boy. He sighed apologetically. “Poetry is made up of lines,” he began,
turning to the class. Gloria was passing a note to Peter Forrester.

The rudeness of it! To pass notes during a scolding that she herself had caused! Mark caged in his hand the girl’s wrist—how small and frail it was!—and ripped the note from her fingers. He read it to himself, letting the class see he was reading it though he despised such methods of discipline. The note went:

Pete—I think you’re wrong about Mr. Prosser. I think he’s wonderful and I get a lot out of his class. He’s heavenly with poetry. I think I love him. I really do love him. So there.

Mr. Prosser folded the note once and slipped it into his side coat pocket. “See me after class, Gloria,” he said. Then, to Geoffrey, “Let’s try it again. Begin at the beginning. Let the words talk, Geoffrey.”

While the boy was reciting the passage, the buzzer sounded the end of the period. It was the last class of the day. The room quickly emptied, except for Gloria. The noise of lockers slamming open and books being thrown against metal and shouts drifted in:

“Who has a car?”

“Lend me a cig, pig.”

“We can’t have practice in this slop.”

Mark hadn’t noticed exactly when the rain started, but it was coming down hard now. He moved around the room with the window pole, closing windows and pulling down shades. Spray bounced in on his hands. He began to talk to Gloria in a crisp voice that like his device of shutting the windows, was intended to protect them both from embarrassment.

“About note passing.” She sat motionless at her desk in the front of the room, her short, brushed-up hair like a cool torch. From the way she sat, her naked arms folded at her breasts and her shoulders hunched, he felt she was chilly. “It is not only rude to scribble when a teacher is talking, it is stupid to put one’s words down on paper, where they look much more foolish than they might have sounded if spoken.” He leaned the window pole in its corner and walked toward his desk.

“And about love. ‘Love’ is one of those words that illustrate what happens to an old, overworked language. These days, with movie stars and crooners and preachers and psychiatrists all pronouncing the word, it’s come to mean nothing but a vague fondness for something. In this sense, I love the rain, this blackboard, these desks, you. It means nothing, you see, whereas once the word signified a quite explicit thing—a desire to share all you own and are with someone else. It is time we coined a new word to mean that, and when you think up the word you want to use, I suggest that you be economical with it. Treat it as something you can spend only once—if not for your own sake, for the good of the language.” He walked over to his own desk and dropped two pencils on it, as if to say, “That’s all.”

“I’m sorry,” Gloria said.

Rather surprised, Mr. Prosser said, “Don’t be.”

“But you don’t understand.”

“Of course I don’t. I probably never did. At your age, I was like Geoffrey Langer.”

“I bet you weren’t.” The girl was almost crying; he was sure of that.

“Come on, Gloria. Run along. Forget it.” She slowly cradled her books between her bare arm and her sweater, and left the room with that melancholy teen-age shuffle, so that her body above her hips seemed to float over the desks.

What was it, Mark asked himself, these young people were after? What did they want? Glide, he decided, the quality of glide. To slip along, always in rhythm, always cool, the little wheels humming under you, going nowhere special. If Heaven existed, that’s the way it would be there. “He’s heavenly with poetry.” They loved the word. Heaven was in half their songs.
“Christ, he’s humming.” Strunk, the phys-ed teacher, had come into the room without Prosser’s noticing. Gloria had left the door ajar.

“Ah,” Mark said, “a fallen angel, full of grit.”

“What the hell makes you so happy?”

“I’m not happy, I’m just serene. Now the day is over, et cetera.”

“Say.” Strunk came up an aisle with a disagreeably effeminate waddle, pregnant with gossip. “Did you hear about Murchison?”

“No.” Mark mimicked Strunk’s whisper.

“He got the pants kidded off him today.”

“Oh dear.”

Strunk started to laugh, as he often did before beginning a story.

“You know what a goddamn ladies’ man he thinks he is?”

“You bet,” Mark said, although Strunk said that about every male member of the faculty.

“You have Gloria Angstrom, don’t you?”

“You bet.”

“Well, this morning Murky intercepts a note she was writing, and the note says what a damn neat guy she thinks Murchison is and how she loves him!” Strunk waited for Mark to say something, and then, when he didn’t, continued, “You could see he was tickled pink. But—get this—it turns out at lunch that the same damn thing happened to Fryeburg in history yesterday!” Strunk laughed and, still getting no response, gave Mark a little push—a schoolyard push.

“The girl’s too dumb to have thought it up herself. We all think it was Peter Forrester’s idea.”

“Probably was,” Mark agreed. Strunk followed him out to his locker, describing Murchison’s expression when Fryeburg (in all innocence, mind you) told what had happened to him.

Mark turned the combination of his locker: 18, 24, 3. “Would you excuse me, Dave?” he said. “My wife may be out front waiting. She picks me up when it rains.”

Strunk was too thick to catch Mark’s anger. “Help yourself,” he said. “I got to get over to the gym. Can’t take the little darlings outside in the rain; their mommies’ll write notes to Teacher.” He clattered down the hall and wheeled at the far end, shouting. “Now, don’t tell You-know-who! The ladies’ man!”

Mr. Prosser took his coat from the locker and shrugged it on. He placed his hat upon his head. He fitted his rubbers over his shoes, pinching his fingers painfully, and lifted his umbrella off the hook. He thought of opening it right there in the vacant hall, as a kind of joke on himself, and decided not to. The girl had been almost crying; he was sure of that.
Speech: “Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow.” By William Shakespeare. (from Macbeth, spoken by Macbeth). Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow, Creeps in this petty pace from day to day, To the last syllable of recorded time; And all our yesterdays have lighted fools. The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle! Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player, That struts and frets his hour upon the stage, And then is heard no more. It is a tale. Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, Signifying nothing. More About this Poem.