



I was three people: the boy who smelled bad when I was with my sister; the boy who was wise and kind beyond his years when I was with my mother; but when I was alone not a boy at all but a principle of power, of absolute power.

No sooner would such a temptation present itself than I would smother it. The effect was of snuffing out a candle, two candles, a row of twenty, until the lens pulled back to reveal an entire votive stand exhaling a hundred thin lines of smoke as a terraced offering before the shrine. In this religion hidden lights had been declared superior to those that glared. Somewhere I was storing up merit, accumulating the credit I'd need to buy, one day, the salvation I longed for. Until then (and it was a reckoning that could be forestalled indefinitely, that I preferred putting off) I'd live in that happiest of all conditions: the long but seemingly prosperous courtship. It was a series of tests, ever more arduous, even perverse. For instance, I was required to deny my lover in order to prove it.

It seemed to me then that beauty is the highest good, the one thing we all want to be or have or, failing that, destroy, and that all the world's virtues are nothing but the world's spleen and deceit.

I suppose I suddenly liked myself and I could see a light in which I'd be plausible to others. My love for Tommy was shameful, something I was also proud of but tried to hide.

Every afternoon I'd sit on my cot and look at a black-and-white photograph of an early sculpture, "[The Age of Bronze](#)," a nude study of a Belgian soldier so realistic that the artist had been accused of casting it from life. I didn't masturbate over that picture, nor did I imagine coupling with the statue or the soldier. No, I loved him and I told him so, again and again, in whispers that never sounded right because I could never figure out who I was—his son? wife? brother? enemy? husband? friend? And there was the other problem of the century that separated me from the long-dead model and of the continent from the distant replica. I told myself that if I ever found him I'd know how to love him, but I had mistaken yearning for talent and I'd neglected to sort out the most essential thing, my own identity.