

different stations at the same time, husbands and wives arguing, mothers shouting at their children, babies crying, drunks cursing on the stairs and tenants gabbing and laughing on the front stoops. Everybody had complaints about something or someone. My university friends idealized humanity. Not my neighbors. They had a low opinion of almost everyone in the neighborhood. What are you studying? The old woman I was renting my room from asked me one day, and I told her: History? What kind? European, I replied. Aha, she said with a knowing look in her eye. The kings, the priests, the people being led by the nose, all scum. I didn't know what to reply. Despite her gloomy view of aristocracy, she fed me like a prince. In fact, the moment one entered our building, several ethnic cuisines came to compete for one's nose with their tantalizing smells, making it impossible, even with all the typical disappointments of youth, to feel sorry for oneself for long.

Still, thanks to the hurricane and the hours of darkness it 5 imposed on me, I and many others had a kind of high school reunion with boredom. It brought about a sudden and unmistakable realization that we are only puppets jerked this way and that way by whatever device we think we are operating. With its strings loosened for the time being, there was nothing for us to do but slump idly in some chair with our heads dangling and our smiles fixed crooked, while Irene ran around the yard beating up trees like the riot police and in the process telling us what little regard she has for us personally and everything we've done over the years to make our home more attractive.