

Canes

I.

Six blind children struggle down the street,
clinging to each other, ungainly as a giant insect
with white legs flailing in all directions.
Are they runaways from the school for the blind,
I wonder, or is this part of their training?
The little girl who seems to be leading them
has turned her face up toward the winter sun
as if she is following instructions from above.
The light makes a halo of her blond, uncombed hair.

2.

She had lost the sight in her right eye when she was 14 and in her left when she was 16. Her parents insisted that she learn to use a cane, since it gave her more freedom than if she had to depend on a dog. She told me what she feared most was that she might blunder into an area where many bicycles were parked. The cane is less than useless in a forest of spoked wheels and handlebars. It had happened to her during her training. She had lost all sense of direction and had become helpless. She hated helplessness more than anything. She also told me a story about her adventure on a bicycle during her freshman year in college while she was living in a dormitory with a sighted roommate. One Saturday night they wanted to go to a party but had no car. She convinced her roommate, after much pleading, that they could make it on bicycles. Before she lost her sight, she had been an excellent cyclist. If the two girls rode side by side, she felt sure she could follow her roommate's verbal instructions. And so they began, with the blind girl riding on the inside next to the

curb and her roommate beside her, using her voice as a guide. Things went well for several blocks until it was necessary for them to head down a residential street with cars parked along it. She clipped a protruding rearview mirror, knocking it off and throwing her and her bicycle to the ground. The man to whom the car belonged, hearing the clatter, rushed out of the house and saw the damage to his rearview mirror while the rider was struggling to her feet beside her bicycle. He was furious. "Look what you've done!" he screamed. "Are you blind?"

3.

Once I met Borges in a crowded room
with his cane over his arm, led by a friend.
He was looking up and a little to the left
and seemed to be listening to words from above.
One does not inherit courage, he had said
in an essay on blindness. His courage had grown
as his eyes failed him. I shook his hand,
as close as I have ever come to worshiping
a human, and he quickly wiped his palm
with a white handkerchief. I was asking
for only a secondhand blessing but I should
have known better than to touch anyone
who was having a conversation with God.