A DESCENT OF MAN

In later life, an odd disease
afflicted my great-uncle; no cellular morbidities
as such were manifest, no diminution in faculties—
there were postural changes, a growing addiction to berries,
a fondness for flints—then, of several psychoses
one came to dominate, an obsession with phylogenies;
he spoke less, read more, frequented the reading-rooms of
reference libraries.
As the syndrome progressed, arms hanging loose to his knees,
small bum in the air, he prowled the anthropological
laboratories
of redbrick universities,
convincing he was The Missing Link; these
embarrassing peculiarities
were never remarked upon; idiosyncrasies
in such purlieus are not uncommon. Even when in the trees
of Kensington Gardens he gambolled, ingesting bananas, the
park police
were not unduly concerned. At afternoon teas
in Sloane Square, great-aunt Maude would give technical
summaries
to enquiring family and friends (whose less interesting maladies
by tacit agreement were never pursued at length). By slow
degrees
his sense of frustration increased; his contemporaries
were polite, but unimpressed. He was in his late nineties
when recognised at last in one of the appendices
of Leakey’s standard work; great-aunt was in ecstasies—
he became much sought-after at Chelsea cocktail parties.
But the old man, having seen his salvation, was not lost in
reveries;
he, a latter-day simian, wished only to depart in peace;
he searched no more for fleas.
He eventually died in a fall from the frieze of the British Museum, a merciful release for a passing elderly widow. His obsequies were unmarked by further irregularities.