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# Crazy Graces

by Mike Finley



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## Basement Toilet

A few years ago, we remodeled the back portion of our house to add a half bath, just off the kitchen. It's nice, albeit awful cold right now, as we live in Minnesota, and our boiler isn't strong enough to push hot water all the way back where that solitary toilet and sink stand. It tries, it shudders, it fails.

Still, frozen and all, the half bath is a big advance on what went before. Then, I would sneak down to the basement, to a gray and musty room next to the washing machine, pull the string to the bare 40 watt light bulb, and be about my natural business.

It was a grody place, all right, dank with groundwater, and rife with cobwebs and the mildewed dust that sifted downward whenever a body traversed the kitchen floorboards above.

No one in the family would go down there but me. The funny thing is, I kind of liked it.

Call me a cenobite, but I always feel a disconnect going to the bathroom in a room fitted out for Cleopatra and Rex Harrison. One feels unworthy amid the gleaming tile, the polished brass, the electric seat warmers and pink poof rugs.

But down there in the dirty room, the soles of one's shoes scraping against cement, and multi-legged figures staring glumly at you from the adjoining wall, form meets function. It feels right.

I went down there once or twice a day for about four years. Once a year I dutifully brushed the spiderwebs from

the pipes and rafters with the tip of a broom. The webs always grew back.

And when I brushed them down, I always felt bad, because those cobwebs were a lot of work for somebody. It was the Catholic in me, or maybe the Buddhist from a previous life. But somebody thought he belonged there as much as I did, and look what I went and did.

They were the creative ones, stringing floss across the ceiling, I was the jagernath, the destroyer of worlds.

Sitting on the toilet, I got to know one of the guys. He was a spider, not a daddy longlegs exactly, but long-legged, certainly. He was a wall-crawler, too big to be a line-climber.

And what was most amazing about him -- I just realized I never named him, not even in my mind; "Buddy?" -- was that he was always in the room. In fact, he was nearly always within a foot of where I saw him last time.

Now, I know nothing about basement ecospheres. Maybe subterranean arachnids dine on mites, or skin shavings, or trilobite eggs. I don't know.

But this guy had nothing. No web, no nest, not even a place to lay his head. All he had was a grimy spot on the whitewashed wall, and the occasional pleasure of my company.

He was poor, but so reliable.

It struck me too, how different I was as a grown troll than as a child. I remember, in the spring of 1954, visiting my Grandfather's farm in Otisville, Michigan, and sitting on one of two seats in their deluxe outhouse. So far, so good.

Until suddenly, a wolf spider sprang onto my naked leg and skittered across me.

It was as if someone had tagged me with a bare power line. I went from folded perpendicularly to vertical in 1/100th of a second, and exploded out the paintless door, my green corduroys bunched around my ankles, tangling myself in the blackberry brambles.

The idea of something with eight legs being on me, hiking up me like a tiny sherpa guide, confronting me with its beady-eyed reality, was more than I could bear. It was like an space alien; no, it was worse, like a visit from the beyond, the pallid realm where there is no personality and no flesh, only skeletal skin and those multiple, inexpressive eyes.

I had nightmares of spiders crawling all over me, climbing into my bedsheets, carrying me on a million tiny coat-hanger shoulders along the swarming Amazon floor.

It was a very threatening feeling.

So what happened to me in those 45 years, that I went from terrified of this tiny representative of the afterlife to this quiet comfort in its presence?

Did I abandon my tenacity to life, that made these little creatures so horrifying to me? Was I so close to death now, that I felt no fear?

Ah, who the hell knows. I just know that, when we remodeled the house, we suddenly had two perfectly nice bathrooms, and I stopped going down there. One day a pipe cracked, and I winched off the water supply to the toilet. Glug, glug, gluck!

Time passed, and the next time I looked in, the bowl was black with caked pumice. And Buddy, the spider -- I have started calling him that now -- was gone.

It's funny, the things that tie us to our lives. All the diapers that you change, all the vomit you towel up after a child's birthday party, the vernix you scrape like soft crayon from your nails following a baby's birth, all the tick-heads you pull off your dog's head with a pair of pliers, all the tiny dropped toothbrushes you fetch from the urinary bowl.

It hardens you to nature, it does. It builds a shell around you, like those tiny armed creatures you see when you tip over a rock.

For so long, life seems perfect in the darkness and cold, predictable and nutritious. You think you could do this forever.

Then somebody turns on the lights.

## Who Are You?

Rachel and I had a conversation last night, after our annual holiday party. It was a lovely party, but I thought of a couple of people that we thought might come but didn't, and I dwelt on the thought a moment too long, and pretty soon I found myself feeling tiny pangs of resentment, and soon after that major pangs of self-loathing. It took Rachel to soothe my ruffled feathers.

Lately Rachel, who is the absolute sunshine of my life, courageous and loving and honest and true, has surprised me by expressing her own negativity on some topics. I think it is part of a healing process happening deep inside her -- realizing that the plucky first half of her life is over, and therefore so is the era of striving for acceptance. We have concluded that this that you see is all that there is.

I'm not sure if the healing process is actually healing, but that's what it's trying to do. She reminds me of me a few weeks ago, endlessly "swallowing" in hopes I could open the closedness in my left ear. I was like a dog licking its belly, because there is cancer inside. Salves and ointments and saliva aren't too effective when the wound is hidden away deep. At least licking gives the sense you are doing something.

But as I was saying, for better or worse, this is what we are now at the half century mark. It's a milestone moment, not just for taking stock of ourselves, but others as well.

It is odd how after all these years and the hardening of our ways, we still crave appreciation and respect.

Some years ago Rachel was part of a women's group that included humanities graduates, masters of arts types. They were nice, very smart women, but Rachel felt self-conscious

about being a professional woman and a mother among intellectuals. She wished she could play their reindeer games better, but she just couldn't.

Now, today, she is a shining emblem of what a modern woman should be. She wonders if those friends or other friends know that she isn't a hospital nurse (not that there's anything wrong with that), but a nurse practitioner, who is the primary provider for people with a vast variety of illnesses and health problems.

She doesn't just do colds and pap smears -- she does everything. This will sound odd, but she is so good that sometimes her patients die. (That doesn't happen if all you do is stick bandaids on people's butts. Unless you are doing it way wrong.)

She is the GP of a generation ago, a flesh-and-blood Marcus Welby MD, only working at a third the pay scale. She is a highly skilled diagnostician, an intuitive counselor, and just experienced and knowledgeable and versatile and wise.

She served as president of the school council a few years ago, and became a skilled policymaker and peacekeeper between warring parent factions.

She taught herself to sing, taking lessons for six years. This year she competed for a position in three productions of the Minnesota Opera and won. She has already been in one production and did great. Not everyone understands how good you have to be to land a position in the choir. No, it's not Beverly Sills. But it requires talent and discipline and coachability.

But isn't it funny, this sad memory of not being good enough for the other women -- that she was a mediocre person, a

non-thinker, a person of no great account. It haunts her, and she can't shake it.

Why are we so crazy? In Rachel's case it is because she has made herself. Her parents were relatively uninvolved with her (though they loved her). When her dad died suddenly when she was 15, she was on her own in the world. Her plan had been to be a doctor, but she became depressed in college (paid for by Social Security moneys from her father's death) and was unable to do well in pre-med.

When the two of us met in November 1975, we were two mutts in the world, with neither pedigree nor portfolio, but with (at least we thought so) an interesting spark. I loved Rachel's intensity. She burned with a pure blue fire, and I could sense the broken-hearted girl just behind her striving. She was the perpetual trembling lip -- giving life everything she had, never holding back, because she knew from experience that death was always near, and she did not want to encounter it with a sackful of excuses.

When you love someone like I loved her (and her me), these little slights from other people should rightly dwindle to a speck. But she and I never really healed from our childhood losses. All we had was "bootstrap therapy." A resentful part of us still wonders if our better-educated friends know how hard we worked, and with what few resources.

I don't feel quite the same way as Rachel. But it is not for a lofty reason. The fact is that I dwell in a state of casual Irish despair that, after all the millions of words I have written, after all the blood I have shed from the soul for them, people peg me as a technical writer, or business reporter. Or fired columnist. Or failed poet.

The difference between us is, yes, I'm misunderstood, but I can do *this*, what I'm doing right now. Even if no one reads me, I know I set the record straight where it matters, among the seeds and goop inside the ripe, honeyed melon. I mean, I feel better already.

A favorite coda from a favorite Bob Dylan song, which I take to be a prelude to all meaningful peace:

If you won't underestimate me,  
I won't underestimate you.

I don't know why we do that to each other, that chronic habit of underestimating. I suppose it is Darwinian -- if we were to get our entire minds around one another, we would explode. We need to forage for food, not feel ecstatic love for one another. Better to edit one another down to job descriptions, and leave it at that.

The truth is that we are all looking for love in all the wrong places -- in the hearts of acquaintances, where our seed can find no purchase. They too are stumbling around in the dark, and we're no better to them than we ask them to be to us.

The only cure for this ache, for those who passed, and those in the past who could not love us as we needed to be loved, is tears, and forgiveness, and the reconciling power of dust.

## The triumph of memory

It's been an interesting week, with people parachuting into my life from long ago, themes overlaying, and lessons learned.

First and worst, my mother fell and broke her hip last week, while staying with my sister in Kentucky. She is 79, and was doing really well, tutoring her great-grandson in reading. This is a sad setback for her. If you are the kind of person who likes to wish strangers well -- a "good" person -- [click here](#). She is bedridden and would enjoy the attention.

Then, Saturday night, I was at an open house at the Jacquet-Morrison's, neighbor friends here in Saint Paul. We recounted our dog-crossed history -- how we met in the alley, when my dog snooped their dogs through the fence. Then one day Noelle invited us into the yard. Then one day she brought coffee out to the picnic table. Then one day she invited me into the house for coffee, and left the dogs to fend for themselves. But the dogs decided they didn't like one another, and we haven't seen so much of John and Noelle since then.

But at the party, I met a man whose son was enrolled in a college in Kansas City, and he said he knew nothing about the place. Well, neither did I, but that didn't stop me from rattling off a series of associations: Calvin Trillin, George Brett's hemorrhoids, the Hyatt walkway collapse, Charlie Parker, etc. Suddenly everyone at the party began singing:

*They got some crazy little women there  
And I'm gonna get me one.*

And I remembered, as a boy, thinking what a gas it would be to meet some really *crazy*, really *little* women, like

the flat-chested Paulette Goddard in *Modern Times*, grinning like an imp, hands on hips and open to anything, in the heart of the heart of the heartland.

And I've been worrying about my brother Pat in southern California, whose car was stolen the week before Christmas, and with it all the Christmas presents he was driving down to the post office. It was so depressing to him, I didn't hear from him until I called on Christmas day. It was clear he felt violated and somehow ashamed, to lose so much so suddenly. I made a note to write him a note, then forgot all about the note.

I got an email from fellow freelance writing friend Jim in Sewickley, PA, just outside Pittsburgh. He and I were buddies for much of the 1990s here in Saint Paul, then he disappointed me by packing up his family and moving home to be near his father. I was kind of hoping Jim and me would be friends for life, getting together decades from now to play checkers and drink cough syrup. But what can you do? People move away, and the distance becomes so great.

Jim's news was that his father had died, and he enclosed a clipping describing how his dad, in the 1960s, persuaded the village YMCA to integrate. What black people there were in Sewickley had to use the city pool. But with the liberation of the Y, the whole lily-white town underwent a permanent change, opening its doors to people of every spot and stripe. It wasn't Valley Forge -- that's a hundred miles to the east -- but it was an American triumph of a sort. You could tell in a moment how much Jim loved his dad. So how could I begrudge his leaving Saint Paul?

I have been suffering myself lately. I have all these medical issues, and only a limited amount of will to apply to them. I have to lose thirty pounds. I have to get my blood

sugar under control. I have to meet all these deadlines. I have to open my ear again so I can hear. I have to do something about this meningioma sitting in my skull like a chewed-up slipper. I have to be a good father to my daughter and my son, who are grown so tall and rangy, and so much themselves, and sometimes I look at them and wonder how I can possibly keep up, Daniele so paradoxical and brilliant, Jon so removed, and so discerning. I'm supposed to be the ringleader of this gang, but some days, it's all I can do to look at them and blink.

Rachel and I went and saw Larry Coryell last night at the Dakota. I tried to tell her who Coryell was, how he devised an electric guitar style in the 60s as flashy as Hendrix, at the same time as Hendrix, but he never caught on. Boyish and romantic and fast as blazes on the frets, he was the wonderboy of his age. But something blocked him from wide renown -- his personality, perhaps. So he made dozens of records, some wonderful, some not so wonderful, and I bought them all.

But last night, while he played brilliantly, he seemed almost like an old man, that giant head of black hair turned white as snow, and a sadness playing on his face -- disappointment at never "getting through"? And here's the kicker: in the small room he was playing, every voice could be heard, and between jazz numbers I playfully called out "Stravinski!" (He once made an unlistenable but otherwise remarkable guitar transposition for *Le Sacre du Printemps*.)

Coryell commenced to play a spectacular version of Miles' "All Blues" mingled with the 7-note theme from Stravinsky's *Firebird Suite*. He also played, on acoustic, a beautifully complex but wistful medley of Beatles tunes --

"She's Leaving Home," "Yesterday," and "Something."  
Think about those songs, each lovely but helplessly sad in a different way.

Two other things.

I got a book I ordered, from a friend of mine when I was 13 years old, at the Marist seminary in Bucks County. His name is Bob Dubiel, and he sort of saved my life when I was 13. He was a very strange boy, very thin and filamental, but possessing tremendous independence of mind. I was just a verbal kid from Ohio, but I enjoyed knowing this boy very, very much.

We wrote plays lampooning the priests and prefects at the school, which were discovered by the screws, and the two of us were subjected to a cruel inquisition, which I wrote about in my greatest hit, my 1981 novel *The Usual Book*, which detailed how Bob and I were accused of being homosexual -- well, the actual accusation was that we were *cliquish* -- I was not sophisticated enough either to know what they were getting at, or what that meant. But they shamed me, and I turned my back on Bob, and at the end of the year, went home to be with my mother and brother Brian, who needed me there.

Back home I went to public school, got depressed, stole some 45 rpm records from a local shop, got caught and humiliated, and dragged myself from day to day through life. But I made another friend, also named Bob, Bob Mason. Like me, Bob had been abandoned by his father. Like me, he was bright and hostile, dandruffy and determined, like me, to subvert the existing authorities.

We were pals for the better part of a year, plotting secession from the United States, dreaming up exquisite

revenge on the people at Marion L. Steele High School. We saw each other every day, listened to Stones LPs at his house, or Beatles LPs at mine -- it was the year of *Help!*, and we gave one another a little.

One adventure had us kidnapped by my stepfather, driven to Columbus where we escaped from the family and stood as silent as Cortez in a carnie trailer, staring at a pair of Siamese twins, joined at the hip and chest, reading a Baby Huey comic behind a viewing glass.

At one point, we heard from Alan Watts or somebody that you could get high swallowing ground up Pearly Gates or Heavenly Blue strains of morning glory seeds. So we bought a pound at the local elevator, boiled the poison residue off the shells, mashed the cleaned seeds into a despicable paste, and glugged it down with orange juice. Then we took a bus into Lorain to see the movie *Psycho*.

I think that's what happened. I don't recall getting any psychedelic rushes. But then, I don't recall the movie, either. Kids.

I later did the unforgivable, universal teenage thing -- I threw Bob Mason over for a girl, Julie Miller. Julie hated Bob, and the feeling was mutual. "Why do you hang around with that person?" they each asked. I wound up choosing the girl (before abandoning her, too, when my mother pulled me out of school and moved to the next town). More sadness.

And last night, I got an email from Bob Mason, asking if I'm the Mike Finley from Amherst, Ohio. I sure was. I was excited to hear from him, but I wouldn't blame him if he was still mad at me. He needed a friend, and I let go of him. I traded up, is how I put it.

So I get this book that Bob Dubiel, the other Bob, the seminary Bob, has written, called *The Practical Shaman*. Because Bob is a shaman without portfolio -- a walker through this land we all agree on, but also through the more controversial land of the spirit. He has had a lifetime of amazing experiences since I last saw him, in 1963, including a near-death experience that transformed him forever.

*The Practical Shaman* is about living in dual realities, understanding auras, and using this mystical awareness to alter the physical realm that our bodies inhabit -- how to heal, and change, and love one another better. I could easily look at this book, roll my eyes, and say *Really*. But I don't. Somehow, I can't. I owed it to Bob to read it through.

I had to go to the doctor's to get my blood checked, and hear my doctor tell me to lose those thirty pounds, and took Bob's book with me to the waiting room. Bob is an interesting writer -- there is almost no ego in his style, just placidly offered information about spiritual realms that most people would hoot derisively at if given the chance.

I found Robert via the Internet maybe nine years ago, and I very nervously sent him a copy of the novel, which he was very gracious about. Think about it, would you like to read a novel in which you are a main character? I took many liberties, and I got many things, I later learned, flat dead wrong. I could tell he thought some of it was wrong-headed or mistaken, but he never upbraided me about it. Which is rare; people are not shy about telling me they hate my depictions of them.

So I'm reading Bob's book, and it is like a lightning bolt in my heart. If you read these pages, you know I am fascinated by disappointment as a fulcrum in our

development. *That which does not destroy us can still do a hell of a number on us*, is my thesis in a nutshell.

But Bob writes that in each of us is an unhealed self that we must go to, and forgive, and have sympathy for, and love. Find that disappointed self, that has dissipated itself with life's panoply of addictions -- eating, drinking, computer games -- and speak to it, and love it, and ask it what it needs to heal.

And I did that, sitting in the doctor's room, waiting for the doctor. I prayed to my wounded self to forgive me for not taking better care of it. I showered him with sympathy and affection. And I was overcome with love for that 13 year old boy in Bucks County, whose sister had died, and whose father had abandoned him, and whose last refuge was the sanctuary of Jesus and the friendship of this gentle, peculiar boy.

And you know what -- that moment of meditation did *not* change my life.

Because what I am coming to is the idea that memory may be our glory as a race, but it is like shareware software that has some of its features disabled until you pay for it.

Which is why, in your life, you never learn a big new lesson. No, you keep learning the same old lesson over and over again.

I don't know what your lesson is. Only you do. But it could be something like:

*I deserve love.*

*I am trying so hard.*

*My father is like God to me.*

*Other people are real.*

*The world is real.  
Life is fleeting.  
The soul goes on forever.*

Or it can be a lesson you have to continually unlearn.

*People do not wish your destruction.  
You are not cursed by evil luck.  
You are not impossible to love.  
The world is not without meaning.*

The point being, these lessons come back again, and again, and again, and again. It is as if, each night we go to bed wise, and wake up stupid, and have to take up the cross of relearning.

Because the software is disabled, and memory is imperfect. The practical shaman knows that the soul wakes up every morning and has to go to work, just like the body. Gold does not sit in a vault, it runs downstream in tiny crumbs. And the work is remembering, and remembering, and remembering.

Some day, with all these reminders crying out to us, and hitting our heads like acorns, we'll get it finally right.

Oh, and I almost forgot -- the police called my brother Patrick and told him they had found his car, with all the presents still inside.

And Bob Mason? He's alive and working. In Kansas City.

## Burntside

In the moonlight, the chimney atop the old sauna glows red from the fires within. Inside, a furnaceful of men who accept the fire yet are not burned. They sit, they sweat, they slap, they melt. They die a little and are reborn.

This is his favorite sauna in the world. In fact, except for this sauna, he doesn't even like saunas. But from his first experience here, six years ago, it has always led to exhilaration and relief. He sits in the fire, he dashes into the water, he rises rise toward a star-splattered sky, transformed.

He did not want to go to the lake this weekend. The family had just finished a 19-day car trip a week before. Work obligations were deadlines piling up, the world was a mess. He felt stressed out, and needed time to cogitate. The prospect of driving up to Lake Burntside seemed only to add to his woes.

But neither was he strong enough to put his foot down and say No, I will not go north and restore my aching spirit, now leave me alone! Instead, he limited his visit to a single weekend, while his wife worked the week as camp nurse.

When he got there his wife was doing health assessments, so she urged him to drop in the cabin of their friends Ethelred and Louise. He looked forward to seeing them, but he was sheepish too. In recent months he had become ... a drag. Health, family matters, business problems -- the bad news never stopped. Even his dog, whom he betrayed to the kennel with a kiss, became insecure around him, licking and licking and licking.

Sometimes he thought of a prayer from an old poem:  
Lord, send *my* roots rain.

But instead of rain he got steam. Ethelred invited him to the camp sauna just before midnight. Three rows of benches accommodate perhaps naked 16 men. As late arrivals they become strap hangers, standing naked in the slow-flickering shadows. The furnace casts some light, but the air is so hot you can't look at the faces without burning your eyeballs. Best to draw your lids low, and cast your countenance downward.

Two men are talking about acetylene equipment. Another group talk about winter saunas. A youth is sitting on the lowest bench, his head buried in his hands.

A legacy man is saying that the sauna house was built in 1913 by Finns from Finland. The basic furnace cracks and must be replaced every year or so, so hot does it burn. Every ten minutes or so a clothed man enters, taps the temperature gauge and calls out the conditions: 190 degrees, 204 degrees, finally 210 degrees. It is too hot in here to live.

With a tilt of the head Ethelred and he agree they have had enough and bolt out the door, skittering like men in chains down the soggy-carpeted runway to the cold waters of Burntside Lake.

Astonishingly, the thing he thought he dreaded -- the heated cup shattering as it is held under running water -- becomes the thing most welcome to him. It is like going from salamanders one moment, radiating in the embers, to sea lions the next, racing under ice.

It is all a man ever is, from the clamber to birth to the experience of love, from death in battle to being seated in the mead hall of the gods.

The moment of reincarnation must be like this, when the soul sloughs off one wasted shell and dives fresh into a

new one. It is not brains thinking now, but every cell that has been scoured and refitted, a trillion bags of oxygen bursting in the body.

And as he stands looking north, though tall pines trees block the view to what may or may not be the northern lights, he feels the colors flashing inside him, rose and silver, turquoise and white, man rising though ice and fire.

He knows it's temporary. Life does not stop being life. The cycle continues, up, down. Astonishing bright lights will give way to dull blues. A man steps in front of a mirror and sags. Inhale the child, exhale the ghost.

But for the moment, he feels utterly beautiful.

## Paula Kelly

Rachel and I drank wine with friends in their cabin. She had spent the day acting as YMCA camp nurse, and had a story to tell.

"I met Paula Kelly's daughter today," she said. "She's going on a wilderness trip just like Jon," our son. "It was so surprising to see her grown up and beautiful."

I know I had heard the name Paula Kelly before, but I could not place it.

"I took Jon to see her when he was a week old," she reminded me. Then it all came back. Jonathan is our second child, and our first birth was a spectacular in-the-home-event. Daniele nearly high-fived me when she slipped out after 25 hours of contractions, and I caught her in my trembling hands. We expected as spectacular a showing from Jon, even though his would be a hospital birth.

But it didn't turn out that way. The baby who had seemed so active all through pregnancy was strangely quite during the four hour delivery. When he finally plopped out into my hands, he was gray and lifeless. It was like catching an underfilled bag of onions.

I quickly handed the baby to the nurses to revive, and went to the washroom, to scrape the cold waxy vernix from my forearms and hands onto brown paper towels, and to regain my composure.

The room seemed to fade away from me, as the baby was suctioned and a heartbeat restored. A voice stated that he was unable to move his limbs. I glanced at Rachel. She was taking note of all the she saw, and she was alarmed.

I accompanied the nurses as we moved the little boy to an intensive care station, where I hovered over him for the next 90 minutes, praying in a half-assed way that my son be OK, and I would do this or that, I would be a better man.

Rachel later told me that while I was away from her, a pediatrician named Inman visited her. "The nurses gave your baby an Apgar score of 3,5, but I downgraded it to 3,4," he said. An Apgar score measures the liveliness of newly birthed babies. "We're concerned that he may have sustained brain damage. We'd like you to spend the night here for observation."

Stunned, we slept the night, and in the morning took the quiet baby to our home. Rachel was worried. "The baby wouldn't nurse for five days. He didn't get any colostrum, and I was full to bursting, thinking about what Inman said. I looked at Jon for some sign he was an OK, healthy baby. But I didn't get anything from him."

After a week, she booked an appointment with a different pediatrician, a Dr. Paula Kelly. She took Jon and his sister Daniele to the appointment. From the first, Dr. Kelly, who was herself pregnant, spoke encouragingly.

"Apgars don't predict how a baby will do," she said, "unless the baby has a seizure, and seizures can be a predictor of future problems. But Jonathan didn't have any seizures."

Rachel was worn out, so Dr. Kelly changed Jonathan's diaper while they talked. Then, she took Daniele to the bathroom, and had a talk with her while she pooped. When she came back, she proclaimed that Daniele, 4, was a verbal prodigy. "She's amazing," the doctor said. We never learned what went on in that little conversation.

And that was it. Rachel left the clinic feeling new hope for her only son. When she got home she told me the great news about Jon, and how wonderful Paula Kelly had been to her. I nodded, in the way that I do, and forgot the name for fourteen years.

Oh, over the years, we still have wondered, whenever Jon blinked the wrong way, or had a facial tick, or couldn't seem to pay attention in school, or asked "What?" every time we said something to him, if that hard birth had taken something from him. Never mind that every 14-year-old boy since Jesus has acted pretty much the same way he does.

And then today, as Rachel did health screening for the kids heading out on wilderness adventures, she came to Kelly Walters, and Rachel remembered Paula was married to a man named Walters.

"Kelly's shy but she has lovely cartwheeling eyes," she said. "Meeting someone you knew only as an infant, suddenly grown in front of you -- it's extraordinary. I can't help think what a gift she is to her mother, and what a gift her mother was to me."

## Nincompoops

Last night I took a phone call from my father, 79. My father and I get along pretty well, but it is against an ancient backdrop of betrayal and misunderstanding.

When I was 11, and my sister Kathy died, he decided to quit our family and move to California. He was a drinker, and a gallivanter, and a child abandoner.

That has been his sorrow perhaps more than mine. We are fond of one another now, but not what I would call *close*. He always preferred the company of my brother to me. I never recall having anything like a conversation with him as a boy. He was always distant, or "grown up," or intoxicated, or just plain gone. We were father and son, yet we were not.

And now he's 79, and his second wife's health is failing, and he is under tons of financial and family stress, and he himself is starting to come apart. Fits of vertigo, eye surgery, and now most notably, he has become forgetful. It's sad for him.

He was a very sharp left-brain guy in his time, a factory engineer, so the loss of reliable memory is deeply painful to him. How bad? He apologized on the phone for not being able to come up with the word *trivia*.

"I can't even think of the word *trivia*," he said in self-disgust. "Dad," I said, "it doesn't matter -- *by definition*."

Maybe it's early-stage Alzheimer's, though I doubt it, because he seems sharp enough in other ways. I suspect it's just the normal loss that comes with age, plus the additional frantic quality that comes with living in a state of crisis. But my dad is suffering, and I grieve with him.

Nevertheless, several remarks on the phone seemed either designed to piss me off, or he was unable to slow the tide of insults that bubbled helplessly out of him:

*"I saw some of your items from the Internet. [I sent him a sampling of these very posts] They were interesting, but so -- incoherent. There appeared to be no organization to them that I could tell."*

*"Have you ever thought, in your writing, about thinking what the reader needs? So often you just seem to be saying what pleases you." [It's easy to recommend this, Pop, but it's hell to accomplish on a predictable basis.]*

*"There was one thing you wrote that I really liked. It was your novel." [A series of longhand sketches I made 37 years ago, when I was 15, in a spiral notebook while visiting him in California. It was unthinkably horrible, but he took a shine to it.]*

None of these things would have pissed *you* off, I know. But you, dear reader, lack my stupid history. To me they were each little daggers inserted between adjoining ribs.

I think I know why he does it -- he's miserable in his declining competence, and jealous of me, being in my prime and able to think and write at will. So he runs me down in little teasing ways just to put me in my place, Irish-style. Ah, and it's a grand bunch we are, so long as no one's happy.

What he doesn't know is that these daggers stab deep. When he met my wife 25 years ago, he told her she reminded him of a movie star -- "I've got it, Woody Allen!" (Rachel Jewish, red-haired, and freckly, but unspeakably beautiful, which Woody is not).

When my daughter was 15 he told her the most recent photo made her seem chubby. (The perfect thing to send a teenaged girl to her room with a straight razor.)

It would be one thing if he were a loyal father, who except for these moments of poor judgment has been steadfast and true, and a lover of his own kin.

But he ain't. He's a pleasant enough man, but he has been a godawful father. I sometimes think I work so hard to be "good" to my kids -- empathic and devoted and their friend -- just to stab back at him across the years.

Now, to the point of the knife.

When he assailed my writing, he touched a most sensitive nerve, because deep in my soul (think of Charlie Kaufman, not his larksome brother Donald in the new Spike Jonze movie *Adaptation*) I often despair of my ability to complete a simple sentence.

I feel I labor under a number of psychological shortcomings -- a brain tumor the size of a baby's shoe, a snagged fishnet of scrambled memories, the inability to remember a simple word or name, the financial burden of this horrid recession, the heartrending look in my wife's eyes when I see she is worrying in silence, my whole sorry personal history (despite a handful of pleasant and surprising successes) of disappointment, discombobulation, and dejection.

You see, all my life I pictured myself as a giant-killer, a quick draw artist always there with the deadly bonmot, the death-by-faint-smile observation.

But nowadays I see myself instead as some bent-over dwarf coughing up blood by the roadbed.

I *know* my writing is flawed. I know my thinking acumen is second-rate. I know I am susceptible to fits of poor judgment, as demonstrated by last week's momentary endorsement of the Israel-attached-the-WTC conspiracy theory.

I can think of dozens of people, just here on the blogs, that can zing circles around me in 9 out of 10 important categories. Scholars, journalists, activists -- even poets, which was supposed to be my category, and that really depresses me (because so little is at stake?).

So when I hear this from my father, who seems not to appreciate that this is not a game for me, it is my life, and a hard, often unfulfilling one, it's so brutal, it tears the lid off a fresh can of self-doubt and recrimination in oil.

I went for a walk after our conversation last night, and there I was, myself an old man of 52, angry at *his* old man! I was seething with anger, spitting at the indecency of a man slapping his son who is working long hours to hold things together, raising *his* gandchildren, mocking him that his 15 year old's sketchbook was the only good thing he ever did.

I looked up at the cloudy night sky and asked it, in all seriousness, what the fuck was I missing?

But then, as these things have a way of doing, the facts reassembled themselves.

(You should have seen it, it reminded me of the kaleidoscopic boom shots of the June Taylor Dancers on Jackie Gleason.)

Here's how it went.

This stuttering figure I describe myself as is not a recent invention. Yes, I have a goddamn brain tumor. But as I looked back, deep into my life, I see that the afflictions I attribute to the tumor were *always* there. I was in fact *always* this person.

(I ended that sentence with an exclamation point, because it surprised me, but I don't believe in them, so I took it out. But between you and me, it really does belong there.)

Though I skipped a grade, and won some scholarships, I was never a particularly good student. I hadn't the presence of mind to be a good debater. I was too lazy to be a proper analyst. I lacked clarity, even as a child, to be a master at things.

My memory is shitty, true, but everyone's memory is shitty at 52. I was generous enough to declare amnesty for my father for being old and forgetful -- why wasn't I entitled to grab a piece of forgiveness for myself?

And even after all the deficits are tracked down through the years and tacked down like butterfly wings, I still have gifts that no one else seems to have been given.

They are mysterious traits of the mind and heart, odd habits of passion and thought.

When I was a little boy of about 5, I daydreamed a lot about the religious tenets I was able to soak up while squirming through Sunday Mass.

I knew that this life was a shallow plane, and that eventually we advance to the thing that matters, whether God embraces us at Judgment, or lets us slip through his fingers to the fires below.

I spent an awful lot of time plotting a legal strategy and presentation.

The tone: beseeching.

The facial expression: extreme piteousness.

The pitch: "God, don't you remember me? Look into my eyes, God, and tell me you don't want me to join you in heaven. I want to hear it from you personally. Come on. God, it's me you're talking to."

I later used this approach quite successfully with magazine editors. Pretend they already love you, and keep that foot in the door.

I was like a cowboy captured by Indians, who bullshits the Indians into letting him go. "And did I mention how much I revere your woodland ways?"

As I grew older I knew I wasn't a terrific Catholic boy, like Dominic Savio (refused to masturbate while skinnydipping and was killed for being a prude) or Maria Goretti (was raped and stabbed to death by her brother).

I held to no absolute virtue, but I was damn good at summoning the momentary emotion. I wept when I saw crippled people in the back of the church. I laughed so hard at dirty jokes I became momentarily incontinent.

I lay awake at night pondering the certainty of cancer riddling my 9 year old body. (The black blister on my thumb was the tipoff.)

I was a quick study. I was the kid in the choir who didn't know the words of a Latin hymn, but was able to guess the next words from the kids beside me. I was the Green Lantern of self-delusion, able to talk myself into almost any attitude or perspective.

And once a month, to pay for all this trickery, I was visited by a dream about hell, as if the innocent blue sky we love came loose somehow and came crashing down on the world like a dome, and it was my job to piece the trillions of crunched pieces of it back together. It wasn't possible. But I had to do it. I picked up the first piece and began weeping copiously.

And in my horror at the task that befell me I would stagger into the bright light of the bathroom, sit on the lip of the tub, hide my face in my hands, until my sister knelt beside me and asked what was wrong.

"It's going to happen, Kathy," was all I could say.  
"It's all going to happen."

She was my friend, the one person in the family who understood my weird ways.

And sure enough, one day at age 15 she went to the dentist, and she never came home. She went into a coma and died in Amherst Hospital, on the second floor. And I remember my father at the funeral, unable to sit beside my mother. He was gone, too, although he had not yet left.

Everything good died then.

I came out of that experience strangely confident of my competence. I never worried about the gaps in my makeup. At seminary I was the happiest I would be for a long time. I loved the mystery of the incorporate Christ. I loved the moon rising over the seminary pond at 5:45 in the morning. I loved the sound of our footsteps in the dark.

I loved being on the inside where the incense rose in the candle-lit sanctuary, and my funny talent for shaping the

moment, seemed at that place, in that little envelope of time, to fit.

Alas, twas not to be, or I would surely be a renowned pederast today. Talk about bad fathers.

But a phrase from Latin flutters down to me from on high -- *non comptens*, meaning *unable*, or *incompetent*.

It is what we all are in our time, no matter what our best gifts obscure. We are all nincompoops about our true purpose, and the invisible thread that binds us all. Plato glimpsed it, on the walls of the cave. Jesus lifted it up the sun for us to see.

It is the unbroken world that is our real home -- the pearl, the seed, the buried talent -- that draws us nearer every day.

If we can only get with that, we can start pulling our pieces together again, and forgive them for breaking in the first place.

And Pop, next time, let me do the talking.

## Perspective

As you know, I haven't written in a while. I've been busy trying to build my business up again from scratch. So busy that I've not let myself think about the war we're in, or the danger we're in. It makes me less a citizen, and less a "commentator," but what can I do? I have to take care of my family.

You see, when I got the bad news about losing my best client, I grieved for about two days, then hit the street. Rachel had a tougher time of it. Usually she is the one full of spunk and can-do attitude. But this really seemed to crumple her. For the better part of a week she was visibly depressed. And a little angry at me.

I think it's because she has so many more plans than me. Plans to take singing lessons, to act, to learn Yiddish, to dance. Books to learn, jigong to do. When it comes to self-improvement she is like a many-armed Hindu goddess, spinning in numerous directions at once. My losing my job meant all these bright plans had to go, for the moment, on the shelf. She was mourning the obliteration of all these dreams. And I felt guilty because I never saw it coming. Or, I didn't have enough of a fallback plan.

So I've been rushing around, calling up old friends, poring over a shoebox of old business cards, looking for someone to appeal to. The economy is frighteningly bad, and the very sectors I am strongest in -- technology, newspapering, HR consulting, big company corporate communications -- are the ones hit hardest. I am probably afraid, but I am staying so busy that I just feel -- busy.

Now comes the story. In the midst of our middle class freak-out, while Jon and I were watching the Vikings

game, the our doorbell rang. Jon answered the door, and when he returned to the couch, he said, "That's funny. There was a girl on our porch, and she's crying."

"What did she want?" I asked.

"Daniele," he said. Daniele wasn't home.

I jumped out of my chair and ran to the door. A girl about 17, one I had seen a couple of times with our daughter Daniele, but whose name I couldn't remember, was drifting across the street, her shoulders hunched from sobbing.

"Hello," I called after her. "If you like, you can use our phone to call Daniele's cell phone."

The girl turned. Her little face was a river of tears. "Could I do that?" she blubbered.

"Of course you can," I said, ushering her into the kitchen. "I don't know where she is, but I'll bet she has her cell phone with her. Here's the number." I left the room so she could have some privacy.

I was aware from the dining room of her speaking in low tones on the phone, and several times breaking down in sobs. Jonnie was looking at me like, "What can I do?" I told him to go upstairs and fetch his mother. She would know how to handle this.

I went back into the kitchen. "You know, why don't you just sit here for a little while," I said, "until you start to feeling a little better. If you like, you can lay down in Daniele's room. Or I could make you a nice cup of tea. Things sometimes seem more manageable with a cup of tea."

"Thank you," she said. "I think I will sit for a while. It's just that --" and she broke down again, crying.

At this fortuitous moment Rachel arrived, and sat down beside the girl, and put an arm around her. The girl responded by caving in completely and weeping in Rachel's arms.

"Heat up some water," Rachel told Jon, as she gently smoothed the girl's hair.

And the girl finally told us what the problem was, in gulping, gasping syllables. "Justin and I -- I don't know -- we had a fight -- and we're engaged --" Her body quaked with her sorrow and fright.

This was my cue to back off, and I did so, knowing I was leaving the girl in good hands. Rachel is such a pro. Half of her patients at the clinic break down and cry. It's just part of the territory.

Later I found out that the great problem was not so great. The boyfriend, 20, suddenly looked at her and said, "What are we doing? Do we even know one another? Is this the right thing to be doing?"

Sounded pretty smart to me. Hell, Rachel and I didn't even meet until we were 25, and we took years to take the plunge. We didn't tell the girl that every obstacle to a too-young wedding was a good thing, because it made people think. To her, the problem was the only problem in the world, it was the center of the world at that moment, and it undid her completely.

And Rachel and I looked at each other, and we felt, for the first time in days, how strong we both were, and what a blessing this tearful moment was.

## Red Fox

I have been walking my dog Beau down along the Mississippi this spring. And this year I have noticed something new. Animals that shouldn't be coming into the city are appearing. Bears in South Saint Paul, coyotes in the western suburbs. And with my own eyes I have seen red foxes on six separate occasions.

This is extraordinary because I have seen exactly two foxes in my life before this -- both times, deep in wilderness areas.

The first fox I saw this year was at the Highland park picnic bandshell. He looked at us, we looked at him, and he scampered away. The next time was in the woods at Como Park. The fox bawled -- it is a strange, uncanine sound, somewhere between a goose's warning cry and a calf calling out for its mother. And we saw it -- a small, fine, gray creature, gazing at us with indiscernible intent.

In the 1970s I associated the red fox with my redheaded beauty Rachel. We got this idea partly from the books of Yaqui mysticism charlatan Carlos Castaneda, who detailed the existence of spiritual "allies" that manifest as creatures of nature -- like guardian angels, but you have to be on mescaline to interact with them.

One dusky evening on a hilltop in West Virginia, where Rachel was visiting, a red fox tripped across the road just steps ahead of her, and shot her a look that gave her chills. Somehow, she reported to me, the fox seemed to know everything about her progress in this life, and was coaxing her to hew to the path she was pursuing. So she went to Yale.

Later, spotting a red fox hand puppet at an airport gift shop, I purchased it for her. Sometimes we would have pretend conversations in which I was the fox guide, putting words in the fox's mouth, advising Rachel on what comes next.

The difference between those days and these days is that we were so quick then to "understand" what the fox was trying to say. It was a feral visitor from the *nagual* or supernatural realm, with a message for us about our destiny. It was our friend, but a fierce friend, who would upbraid us for our failures.

Whereas, today, seeing the fox nearly every time I take the dog out, I don't have a clue what it wants. Is the fox by the river male or female? Is it looking at us in hunger or in fear? Is it distressed, or is its appearance in the city a sign of its health?

One thing I know is that I don't want to get close to it, ally or not. Nor do I want Beau tangling with it, whether their DNA are 99% identical or not.

Maybe the fox would kill Beau. Maybe Beau would kill the fox. Or maybe they would play like littermates, but when I got home we would be infested with fleas, ticks, and plague. You don't know.

I do know that, seeing Beau strain on the leash to join the fox, I was witnessing something unnatural -- the meeting of a creature formed by nature, lean and wild, and another who spends each winter night on a warm rug by a full dish.

So I am keeping Beau on the leash. When I walk by Hidden Falls, I expect to see the fox on the forest floor, or perched on a stony parapet. And I expect to hear its crabbed call.

It turns out there is a reason the foxes, bears, and coyotes showed up this spring. We had a warm winter, followed by a cold spring. When the wilderness did not yield quickly to spring, the animals migrated to the city, in search of food.

Little brother, that's everyone's story.

## Two onetime poets

Two onetime poets are sit in an idling car in south Minneapolis, late Friday night. Steady rain dapples the windshield.

"So what was the worst thing you ever said?"

"I was in a funeral reception line, and by the time I got to the grieving widower, all I could think to say was 'Hey, Verne, nice to see you.' I think about it almost every day, twenty years later. And every time, I cringe."

"Geez, I did some dumb things. The worst -- no wait, that wasn't so bad. The worst was definitely what I did to a girlfriend in the 70s. We were young and very hot and having a terrific time. And I ruined it all one day by telling her the problem with us was that she wasn't smart enough."

"You're kidding."

"I'm serious. I got her some books to read and went hitch-hiking. I was quite sure I'd found a solution to the age-old problem of women not being smart enough for their poet boyfriends."

"So what did she do?"

"She read about half a book, then got really mad, and I was gone."

The wipers slap away the errant rain.

"What is it about young men poets? I used to just show up at women's doors unannounced."

"You just dropped by?"

"I lived 1000 miles away. It was like, I couldn't pick up the phone and say, 'Hey, I wanna visit with you.'"

"That would have ruined everything."

"No, it had to be like Jesus risen from the tomb."

Silence. The headlights of another car swerves at the end of the street, and is gone. More silence.

Finally: "God, were we the stupidest men on the planet, or what?"

## All Valentines Eve

It was the night before Valentines Day, and Rachel and I went out for a rare dinner and movie date. Money was a bit scare. I had just bought a print for us, by an artist friend, of two birch trees gently intertwining. It cost \$300, but I was in love. Wouldn't you know, I got an overdraft notice the very same day.

We choose an Indian restaurant, figuring it's cheaper than fancy Italian, and that not many people will think of celebrating Valentine's Day Indian style. When the waiter, a man named Dinesh, stiffly presents us with our menus and leaves, Rachel whispers that he doesn't have much of a sense of humor. But I held out for him. "He's got a sense of humor," I said.

We ordered wine, my first drink since the diagnosis two weeks earlier. What a difference it was, to be wearing clothes and drinking merlot in a nice restaurant, compared to that pitiful hospital robe and that pitiful hospital bed.

We ordered our dinner, telling Dinesh to cook our food no spicier than mild-to-medium. "We are from St. Paul," I said slowly. No reaction.

So I tell Rachel her about my poetry reading the day before. The downtown mall thought a poetry reading on the main concourse would connote romance, and about 30 poets read for ten minutes each, while shoppers passed us on escalators and on foot. Only a few ever stopped to listen. I saw an old poet friend I have known for 30 years, Roy McBride. Once we sat on the dunes by Palos Verdes on the Pacific Coast, and smoked pot and watched the waves roll in. Though we were both writers, we seldom spoke. We

embraced warmly, and he told me about his baby daughter, 22 months old.

When it was my time to read, I took the stage completely unprepared. Everything went wrong at once. I couldn't find my reading glasses -- they were buried deep in my jacket pocket -- so I had to hold my poems at arm's length. I was so amateurish, after all these years, I had to laugh.

People were passing before me like traffic at a major intersection. The microphone sounded loud and hollow. This was what I told the shoppers:

"Hi, and Happy Valentines Day. My name is Mike Finley, and as you can see from the patches on my elbows, I'm a traditionalist.

"You know, it's sure funny to be reading here. I've been doing this for ages, and this is the first time any business thought it could make money off free verse.

"The other thing I'd like to point out is how few poems these days are about the love we feel for our spouse and partners.

"And what's really strange is that this failure of romance began in the Romantic era, when poets stopped paying attention to what was around them, and started paying attention to what was in their heads."

At about this time Dinesh brings our dinner. It is spectacular -- a dozen little dishes and sauces and chutneys and breads. I continue with my speech in the downtown mall:

"The reason poets don't write love poems to their husbands and wives," I said, "is because they love their muses, their imaginations, more. That's why poetry seldom

seems to matter any more. It's not about love for others. It's not a gift we give readers. It's masturbation -- fun, but limited.

"I have a special insight into this issue because I just got a diagnosis last week. I have a brain tumor. They say it's not cancerous, but it may have to come out.

"And I've been thinking how I might be different after that. I might lose some IQ points. Maybe I'll lose my muse and my sense of humor. I'm not saying I will, but it's a possibility.

"And I'm thinking -- which is more important to me, my muse or my wife? And I'm thinking it's my wife. Poetry needs you to be at the top of your game, and have every one of your faculties clicking in perfect synch. But I have to think that, even if I come home from the hospital washed up as a poet, that she will still love me.

"And that's why I say, I love Rachel more than I love my muse."

Then I read a couple of poems I wrote to Rachel and finished, to no applause. No one heard a word I said.

So I tell Rachel all this over our tandoori chicken and naan. And she shakes her head. "I don't believe it," she says. "If you love me more than your writing, why are you writing all the time? Not that there's anything wrong with that."

I nod and think about all the times I have headed up to snuggle with the computer rather than climb into bed to snuggle. She had a point.

"But," I say. "If I come out of the hospital a vegetable, you'll still love me, right? Whereas I'll probably never hear from my muse again."

"I've been thinking about that," she says. "You'll probably be OK, you know."

"I know. But you know, if worse comes to worse, you have power of attorney. You can pull the plug on me if I'm really bad. If I'm just pretty bad, you have permission to put me in some kind of home. All I would want is that you come visit me sometimes. I mean, I would want you to have a life, maybe get married again, have relationships."

For a moment there is silence, as we mop up the curry with the bread. Then Rachel speaks.

"You know, if you vegged out, you could still live at home. There's no reason we couldn't all still be together."

"Then it's settled," I say. I ask Dinesh for the bill. He gives it to me, and I give it to Rachel. "Handle this, dear," I say. Dinesh cracks up. "See," I tell Rachel, "I told you he had a sense of humor."

We have an hour to kill before the movie, *Shakespeare in Love*. So we drive home, I clap the leash on Beau, and he and I go for a six-block walk through the neighborhood, sliding on the ice, checking out the alleys, mounting mock Godzilla fights among the trash barrels. Beau throws himself up against me with all the violence he has in him, and he hold my cuff in his teeth and growls ominously. He adores this game.

The movie is spectacular. It is the fictional story of Shakespeare's doomed love affair during the writing of *Romeo and Juliet*. The movie itself has all the tropes of a great Shakespearian comedy and tragedy. Rachel and I have such a ball watching it, and whispering excitedly in one another's ears, that the man sitting in front of me turns around not once, but twice, to insist we put a cap on it.

"Just enjoy the movie," I said to him, as if I was doing him a favor -- "please."

It was just what I wanted to say, the sort of thing you usually stay up for an hour later wishing you had said. Just enjoy it -- just enjoy it.

And when I got home, there was Beauregard, asleep on the braided rug by the door. But our arrival roused him to a fresh fury of violence, and out we went for one more walk around the block, so he could pee, and then -- to bed.

But not before I wrote you this letter.

## The Christmas Lion

I was at church, to see my son play a wise man in the Christmas pageant. But it was a phrase from the Old Testament reading, Isaiah 35 1:10, that caught my ear. It is a prophecy of a better place and time:

*The wilderness and the solitary place shall be glad for them; and the desert shall rejoice, and blossom as the rose.... No lion shall be there, nor any ravenous beast shall go up thereon, it shall not be found there; but the redeemed shall walk there.*

I hadn't thought about lions in a while. When I was a teenager I worked in a roadside zoo that had some. My main recollection is of their power, how their roaring shook the air around them for hundreds of yards. You can't imagine this sound, or you can only under-imagine it. When it happens, it is louder, and deeper, and more unignorable than your imagination wants it to be.

And if that is just its voice, imagine what the sudden presence of a lion meant in those days.

You could be arguing with your worst enemy. You could have drawn swords and about to do one another in. Then suddenly, there is the lion, and the two of you unite without a thought. So disruptive, so powerful, so unnerving was the lion in your midst, that you hastily rearranged the terms of your universe to deal with it.

When I was in college, taking philosophy, I wrote a paper in which I wished dinosaurs still roamed the earth. If these terrifying creatures still lived among us, able to crush us, devour us, sweep us away at whim, we would ourselves be a different species -- more nervous, less arrogant, and

probably a good deal more social. It would be a good thing for nature to supply such a visual lesson on where we fit in the mosaic of life.

Same with lions. They rend, they tear, they eat you up. What a horror that is for seemingly rational people, to be nothing more than food for some stronger, dismissive creature. I remember how unnerved I was by the movie *Jaws* when it came out. The lesson Spielberg kept making was that people believe they have destinies, but nature's red eye understands us primarily as protein. *O tempora, o mores.*

I recall a passage from the story of Samson, where the impetuous strongman encounters a lion in the desert, and kills it with his bare hands. My generation has seen so many Tarzan movies that it is hard to recapture the excitement people must have felt when this story was new, for a mere man to undo that which has undone so many shepherds, children, and unwary travelers.

Imagine the shiver down your spine as you imagine a human so capable he can stand up to such a creature, blast back to its blast, and impossibly, triumph over it. If such a thing is possible, what else is possible?

Some other old memory of mine -- I don't remember if it was Samson or Hercules or Gilgamesh, but one of those fellows came upon a lion's carcass, and inside found honey. Bees had made a hive of the bleached skull. And the discovery fulfilled a prophecy that there would be "honey in the head." From the direst violence sprang the sweetness of peace.

In Psalm 7, and later, in the account of Job, the singer describes God himself as a fierce predator:

*Lest he tear my soul like a lion, rending it in pieces,  
while there is none to deliver.  
Thou huntest me as a fierce lion: and again thou shewest  
thyself marvellous upon me.*

This was a god to get on the good side of.

And now, up on the steps of the sacristy, I see the kids of the parish in their shepherd get-ups of bathrobe and flipflops, guarding their flocks against the mysteries of night. When up in the sky is a nine year old angel, unable to hide her grin, there to announce the good news.

And the animals in the stable, gathered by the manger, have their own hopes of the messiah -- redemption from the lion perhaps chief of these. For how can there be happiness when a monster rules the world, unkillable and unnegotiable?

And I think of the wise men, one of them my son, wearing actual Saudi robes brought back from a parishioner in the 1930s, traveling across the trekless sands of India and Persia, drawn by a star, and protected from marauding lions by royal bodyguards.

And I made up a story in my mind, about a Christmas lion, who followed the magi following the star, lured out of his wilderness by the suggestion of something new.

Picture him, sauntering a distance from the caravan, head down, intent on the path, making his way from night to night under a pinpricked sky, his slightest exhalation an ominous groan. Uncomprehending but resolved, he traces the arc of a star.

Now imagine this creature as part of the church pageant, kneeling at the manger with his own present to the

newborn king -- the sacrifice of violence, the renunciation of death.

"And the lion shall lie down with the lamb," is one of those prophecies no one really believes. D. H. Lawrence said a lion could lie down with the lamb, but the lamb would be inside the lion. Or as we say today, trust, but verify.

What happens to the lion? Toothless and declawed, he bears the brunt of everyone who ever had a run-in with lions, everyone who lost a loved one to the beasts. The lion becomes a christ himself, suffering in peace the sins of pent-up years.

Like the lion we read about in the Kabul zoo, long since tamed, like Samson, behind bars, horribly wounded by a hand grenade, venting his forgotten power in roar after roar to the God that forsook him.

People who watched the war without shedding a tear were moved by the mangled animal, bellowing beyond an insensible world. Was ever greater proof of our fall than this, the fragging of a king?

In James Dickey's poem "The Heaven of Animals," he acknowledges that nature is fallen, but suggests that innocence and peace are deeper than we imagine. In animal heaven, predator and prey live together forever, each one beautiful in its way, torn to death one moment, and restored to life the next.

*In a sovereign floating of joy.  
And those that are hunted  
Know this as their life,  
Their reward: to walk*

*Under such trees in full knowledge  
Of what is in glory above them,  
And to feel no fear,  
But acceptance, compliance.  
Fulfilling themselves without pain*

I see the lion is walking tonight from ridge to ridge and tree to tree. I hear his breath roll down from the mountains. I hear him shake the night with his thunder.

But what do I do with him, take him up the Golgotha hill, have him kill and eat the Romans and drag Jesus to safety by the scruff?

That's what I used to think about, when that was me in the Christmas pageant. The lion from heaven would make it all right. The irresistible, the unchallengeable, the divine interference. Better than any movie.

It won't happen. Today there will be no untoward blood, no killing. The real story is the only story, the one taking place in front of us. The kids are telling it in their tablecloths and sneakers, with halting step and faltering voice. Ordinary people in humble circumstances -- our only lion the heart of hope that beats in every one.

## **Boddhisatva Dogs**

By the time my standard poodle Beauregard was a year old, fully grown physically but mentally still young, he was a mystery to me with his shifting moods and personalities. He was a hostile maniac one moment, a lovable clown the next.

In his first year I was boundlessly delighted with him, with the highest hopes that he would mature into the world's greatest dog, gorgeous and funny and companionable. I foresaw showing him and wining ribbons by the bale. Everyone would look and say, "Oh, my." He was that kind of dog, breathtakingly handsome and appealing.

Instead, Beau became vicious. He got into fights. He ignored my cries and importunings. Our relationship deteriorated. In desperation, and despite months of footdragging, which had more to do with me than him, I had him neutered, and felt guilt and grief for doing so. I felt I had given him my love, then betrayed him with a knife.

Our relationship entered a steep decline. I felt he had never shown me any true kindness or friendship. It often felt like he was exploiting me. I know, of course dogs exploit people. But a weird part of me expected more of this shining dog, expected him to sometimes take control, and show me that he cared. I wanted a boddhisatva dog, like I had seen in my dreams, the angelic creature who teaches and nurtures and offers his all. From Beauregard, I was getting diddly.

For his part, Beau seemed impervious, even to having his testicles lopped off. During the post-op phase, he simply laid low while he got himself back together. He was calm and patient through this period, which was very reassuring to me. Several times I saw him stare at his where his genitalia

used to be, but there was no questioning or accusation in his expression. His look was empty of emotion. He licked the area, and that was that.

A week later, as the last testosterone seeped out of him, he began feeling absurdly fine. He would tear around inside the house, scratching our wood floors with his toenails. Outside, everything was a game. He would bound out the door and run across the street to meet passersby, just as he had as a new puppy. He was willing to fetch sticks again, and not just the usual one and a half fetches, but a hundred fetches if need be, for a half hour or even longer -- eternity for a dog of Beau's high station. When he saw another dog, his face broke into a giant dog smile, and his tail stood at full-mast wag.

It was a second puppyhood, and we found this by turns encouraging (the operation must have been a success) and perplexing (what were we to do with this giant, curly child?).

Within a month that second puppyhood stage tailed off and Beau began to revert to his normal aloof self. Fearing another attack, we recused him from the company of all dogs but those he already knew. But of course he would pass strangers on the sidewalk, and occasionally his old self would assert itself and he would growl nastily at these dogs, baring his teeth.

What was happening was that the operation was a success, as these things go. The shutdown of testosterone manufacture in his system, plus the disorientation of surgery, resulted in an ultra-frisky period. But it did not eliminate the testosterone still in his system. Brigitte had predicted that it would be three months before we could see what kind of dog he would be.

As a result he became a playmate again to dogs like Britt, an elder Doberman female he had alienated with earlier hostilities. Once again they were able to paw the air in Britt's back yard, like dancing stallions. Beau even did the unthinkable: he abased himself in her presence, rolling onto his back in a display of mock submissiveness. And he developed a new addition to his mock-fighting skills -- the butt-slap. When Britt would encounter him from the side, Beau would shimmy his hind end against her and thwack her like a croquet ball. It was supple and funny to watch., like otters playing in a slippery cascade.

It was as if he had added submission to his repertoire out of fun, and found it to be a happy addition.

Suddenly, Beauregard changed again, losing all interest in dogs but finding squirrels fascinating. He became obsessed with them. No squirrel could descend from a tree without Beau clambering up on the drapes, banging on the window pane with his paws and yelling at it.

Worse, he discovered rabbits. Rabbits are not supposed to be a poodle's passion -- they are bird dogs, to the extent they are hunters. But Beau's interest in birds begins and ends with the occasional tidbit of chicken we toss him after supper.

Whereas rabbits are heady liquor. Our neighbors the Morrisons, who also have Sonja and Cobi, also raised rabbits, having had an older male named Chewbacca for years, and recently adopting a young black female they found in the wild at a picnic, named Agnes. The plan was to keep these creatures apart, but one day Beau, smelling rabbits, leapt through the kitchen door and knocked down a

partition separating the two creatures. Amid the 100 seconds of hullabaloo that followed, and before the two rabbits were resequestered, Chewbacca found time to have his way with Agnes. Thus Beau became a kind of bunny's uncle, or dogfather, to the litter that followed shortly thereafter.

By the time the rabbit litter was born Beau was like a doting uncle to them, waiting outside the Morrisons' basement door to get a glimpse of their squirming bodies. He was dying to go down there, and later, when they were placed in the hutch on their back porch, he would camp out there and press his nose against the stiff screen.

And then there were still more rabbits to fire Beau's bunny lust. Another neighbor, Fritz Ludwig, decided at that exact moment to grow rabbits for food, behind our alley. At times there were as many as six large Belgian hares crowded in a pen, dropping their milk duds through the chickenwire floor in a steaming, odoriferous stew.

The winds that winter seemed almost always to waft from the rabbit pen directly to Beau's nostrils. Twenty four hours a day, we would walk through the house on the tips of his toes, his eyes bugging out from excitement. If a door opened even a crack, he was out like a shot, racing past the alley to the Ludwigs' rabbits, whom he would eyeball, and occasionally address.

We asked ourselves, what would Beau do if he got at a rabbit? A poodle is a retriever, trained to deny himself the gratification of the kill, and to fetch the game back to the hunter. Would he kill it quickly, or slowly, or not at all? We didn't know. What we did know was that it would not go well with the Morrisons, who had shown Beau every courtesy in his young life, for him to devour their pets, or

with the Ludwigs, who have also been friendly, for Beau to devour their dinner.

We knew, at the very least, that we had to keep this exuberant animal on a tighter leash.

We took the same walks through the neighborhood as ever, but we kept more to ourselves. And I noticed that we were not the only dog and master undergoing upheavals. Everywhere I looked were sad stories. And where I couldn't see, I imagined sad stories, hidden by the shadows

The family of Reggie, a fox terrier, decided they could not keep him, that their house was just too busy with four kids to do justice to a little dog. So they handed him over to another family, a block away. Freaked out by his transfer, Reggie did poorly in the new household. He chewed the wrong things, he messed in the wrong places, and then the *piece de resistance*, he bit someone. He had had none of these problems at his original home, but they were deemed intolerable by his new family, who had him destroyed.

Barney, a gouty beagle whose owner always ushered him away from Beau, disappeared. I imagine he got sick and died.

Ginger, a funny boxer Beau played with as a puppy, never became the breeding dog her family planned. She was too broad in the back -- still cute, but no longer handsome. Worse, she developed a malignant tumor on her back, which left a divot of scar when it was removed. She was spayed, and is now just a house dog like Beau.

Some dog stories took a strange turn. Cobi and Sonja, Beau's best friends, cooled toward him after his neutering.

Whatever it was that he had before the surgery, he no longer had. Sonja, a Labrador, became hostile to him, preventing him from entering the house.

Mango, a golden retriever who as a pup seemed to share the same spark as Beau, seemed to lose that spark after he was neutered. Neutering seems to take an especially heavy toll on golden retrievers; they get thick and dull. Basil, the other golden in our neighborhood, about eight years old, was the poster dog for thick and dull.

I now, belatedly, came to understand why so many dog owners, seeing Beau and me toward them on the sidewalk, hurried their dogs away. It was not because they were party poopers, but because their dogs were like Beau -- they were willing to fight to establish dominance. The owners had been embarrassed many times, and they did not want to be embarrassed again.

A statelier death awaited the noble Sherlock, 13-year-old bloodhound and veteran of a thousand hunts, and constant prowler of Poodlevania, the place by the river where Beau and I and a million dogs walked. His owner Bob claimed there was not a better nose in the Americas. And I had beheld his magnificent self with my own eyes, his long flanks, his 170 pounds of defined musculature, and the face of a thousand sorrows. In my life I never saw a more dignified, impressive, lovely-hearted creature.

One day, following a week of 95-degree days, Bob found him in his bed, the mighty heart stilled by the heat.

Bob loved that dog like a bride. Sherlock's solemn dutifulness was the perfect counterbalance to Bob's invention and wit. I tried looking up Bob's name in the phone book, to tell him how sorry I was, and how great Sherlock was, and

how everyone who met the dog was moved by him. But I couldn't find a listing.

But the saddest story involved the Samoyed named Sophie and Belgian sheepdog named Bear. Both were angels and very childlike, but Bear, age 8, looked quite ferocious and was said to be part wolf. One day he slipped out of his rope and chased the neighbor's cat. Both Walter, his owner, and the cat's owner looked on in horror as Bear caught the cat and tore it apart and ate it on the spot. Walter cried out to him to stop, but too late. Bear never responded to the command, and thereby sealed his fate.

"I can't have a dog that won't respond," Walter told me. "So I took him down to the hospital, and we sat, and I fed him his favorite food, some raw beef I cut up for him, and I stroked him and sang to him as the injection went in, and he closed his eyes and died."

"That must have been so hard," I told him.

He nodded, tearing up all over again. "I blubbered for days."

One evening I was having a beer with my neighbors the Morrises. We told jokes, and then I sighed, and said I was worried about Beauregard. I'd taken him for several walks that day, including a nice long one down by the river. I even stopped at the Dairy Queen and shared a medium vanilla cone with him, taking turns licking. But now he still seemed to emit an aura of dissatisfaction, maybe even depression.

"All he did all afternoon was sit on his beanbag chair and roll his eyes," I said. "I hope he's OK. Maybe he's bored."

"Bored?" John said. "That dog gets as much stimulation in a week as I get in my whole life."

"Well, he's a pedigreed animal, John." John conceded the point. "He's accustomed to action. I know he'd like to be out all the time, but I have to work. I suppose he is kind of spoiled."

Both John and Noelle lurched forward, spewing beer and coughing. Noelle clapped John on the back to get him breathing again.

"What? What?" I asked.

On about Beau's first birthday, Rachel had me move a yew tree from the station wagon to the back yard. The moment I hoisted the tree on my hip, I knew it was too heavy. Too late -- I heard something snap in my knee. It was the meniscus that provides the cushion and glide for the knee joint, the "knee cartilage" that athletes are always damaging. It is an injury that, unless corrected, wrecks their careers.

I could still walk, but I could no longer run, and I especially could no longer do the pivoting, catch-me game that Beau loved to play. Instead of chasing him with my glove or hat or scarf in his mouth, I could only stand and watch him tease me. We still went on morning walks, but they were limping, desultory affairs. A little of the light in our relationship together grew dimmer.

By Christmas it was apparent the meniscus wouldn't heal by itself, and I would need surgery to correct the tear.

The last walks I took with Beau were quite painful -- occasionally my knee would lock up, or I would slip on the ice and force the joint to hyperextend, and the pain would be considerable. On these occasions, Beau never paid me any mind at all; he remained on his course of interests, sniffing trees and trotting along.

One snowy night before my surgery, we went for a last walk.

When Beau approached a Sheltie in one yard, the little dog yapped and a face appeared in the doorway, studying us to see if we posed his little dog a danger or not.

In another yard, behind a high fence, I couldn't even see the dog that whines and wags by the gate. Beau was just another shadow in the darkness, and when I pulled on his chain he resisted. He wanted to experience the dog in the dark yard. I let them get excited at the idea, but there was no possibility, what with the leashes and the gate.

I became morose thinking about the crummy deal dogs have cut for themselves. They ache to play with one another, but so many obstacles keep them from happiness. They can look, they can smell, but they seldom fully engage. We drag them here and there by ropes around the neck, and lop off their sex organs, as if that would resolve the fierce issue of their nature.

It can't. The dogs are still aflame with desire and love, but the ropes and gates and missing sex organs make it all so difficult. We drag them from their joy back inside our screen doors, and put them in their places, and they nuzzle our hands, transferring that wild unkillable love to us, who despite the ropes and razors are still beautiful to them.

They are better than us, I thought, and deserve better than us, but until such time, they circle on the rug, and close their eyes and sleep, and dream of big yards with open boundaries, and other dogs, and a happy life of tooth and eye.

I went into surgery the second week of January. It was my first experience with general anesthetics. The surgical nurses had me mount the table and extend my arms like Jesus on the cross, where they laced me down, administered the shot, and I counted backward to about 98.

I awoke, hearing two nurses behind me muttering about something unspeakable that I couldn't quite catch. I attempted to rise, in case they were talking about me, but I was unable to, and slid back into unconsciousness.

I awoke again, in a second room. Rachel was there. When I could sit, I saw my leg was wrapped in a heavy cast of gauze and drainage. I could stand, and because of the drugs I could feel no pain. I could hobble from point to point, like an enormous clothespin. But walking was out of the question for the next week.

Riding home, with Rachel at the wheel, I wondered who would walk the dog, and how the dog would manage. More immediately, I wondered how I would keep the dog from mauling me when I staggered in the door.

But it wasn't a problem. We arrived at the front door, turned the key, and Beau, excited at first, quickly apprised himself of my condition and modulated his routine. Instead of dashing his body against mine a dozen times, as was his wont, he circled me in tight spastic rotations, reining his power in, but wagging furiously against my wrapped left leg.

And when Rachel helped me onto the green couch in the living room, I was already losing it. We propped up my leg, and Beau knelt beside me. We were brothers now, twin children of the knife. My eyes were shutting against my will. But I patted him, and the last sound I heard before blacking out was the noise of his tongue repeatedly licking the site of his master's wound, a bodhisatva dog at last.

Good dog, I mumbled, spinning away from them both. Good dog.



## My Breakfast with Eugene

An old friend and I reenacted an old ritual, the Sunday brunch, at an upscale downtown eatery. Twenty years ago, in the heyday of our friendship, we did this practically every week. But with the passage of years the habit died away. Despite the gray hairs, and a few missing hairs, we were the same men deep inside, assured of one another's confidence.

Eugene, a theater critic and bon vivant who never married and who was always a little philosophical by nature, seemed almost luminous as he neared the end of his sixth decade. As he buttered his scone he spoke of change, and forgiveness, and moving on.

But I chided him over some old spat he once had with a local director. It had gotten very personal, and I knew that he stayed up nights dwelling on that old score. "Eugene, you may think you have grown up, but I know what you would say if Rothenberger walked into the dining room right now."

"I would probably look the other way," Eugene smiled demurely and patted his lips with his napkin.

"Same old Eugene," I teased him. "A battler, a Cyrano."

"Actually, Michael, this may surprise you to hear this, but I patched things up with Robert several years ago. I apologized to him for my part in the dispute." He shrugged. "I just didn't have the energy any more for all that conviction."

"You're kidding," I said. "You hated that man."

"I still don't like him," he sighed. "He's no charmer. But I did it for myself. I had to let it go. And I did it because

it was how I was brought up. My mother taught me not to hold a grudge, and I never understood what she meant. It wasn't about being good, it was about surviving.

"I'm still very proud, which is the root of the problem," he said, leaning over the table confidentially. "But I can't be proud about everything. There isn't enough of me."

I told him I was impressed. We talked about politics, and about writing, and about baseball. Eugene is a dyed in the wool Red Sox fan, and he knew every statistic, who was hot and who was not. So it was not as if all passion had left him.

"So what's eating you, my friend," he finally asked.

"You can tell something's bugging me, eh? Well," I said, "I've been sulking the past few months. For years I've been going to an annual Disraeli Club Dinner in Stillwater. It's just a bunch of journalists and political science types who like to get together, drink fine wine, enjoy a good meal, and discuss the state of the art of public discourse.

"The host is a man I've known for 20 years, Gerry Archbold. Gerry is a staunch Republican and as you know I am a Democrat drawn to Gene McCarthy/Moe Udall types, the nondoctrinaire liberal uncles of politics.

"Well, the election was upsetting to both Gerry and me, for different reasons, particularly the Florida part. The last time we spoke, he as much as told me he never wanted to see me again. He was very rude. And next month the dinner is coming up, and I am shut out of it, and I'm mad at Gerry for indulging himself. There was no need to blacklist me from the dinner."

"I see," Eugene said, spearing a chunk of pineapple. "And what do you plan to do about it?"

"What can I do? His mind is set. I'm afraid a very pleasant era has ended for me."

Eugene sat quietly for a moment. "You know, I think I know how you can get back into the club," he finally said.

"How?" I was willing to try any ruse.

"Go to Gerry's home in Stillwater and ring the bell. When he answers, say to him, 'Gerry, I feel very badly about our disagreement. I just need to tell you, to your face, that I am sorry for my part in it. My friendship with you is more important than any election, and I would like to be friends with you again. I know feelings ran strong during the election, but they aren't worth losing an old friend over.' What do you think would happen if you said that?"

"Wow," I said. "I think it would work. No one could refuse an apology that sincere."

"The only thing is, you have to believe it," Eugene said. I nodded, and wondered if I did.

It was a wonderful breakfast. Eugene ordered the egg-white omelet, while I made man's work of a frittata. Afterward the waiter brought us little glasses of Asti. To celebrate our years together, I saluted him with a toast. "To friendship," I said, gently clinking his glass.

"And to our mothers," he answered, with a slight, wise smile.

## Go Greyhound

Dear friends that I don't know,

This is Mike, the man who took the bus to Ohio in December. Our friend Dan heard I was using the bus and decided that was no good, so he passed the hat, to raise money for me so I would not have to ride the bus back.

You can't know how touched I was by Dan's concern, much less by the effort of going to friends and relatives to talk up my case. None of you had any idea who I was, but when Dan asked, you got out your checkbooks. That's Dan, all right. I guess it's you, too.

Anyway, I owe you something in return, so I'm writing this letter of thanks and explanation.

My name is Mike Finley. I live in Saint Paul with my wife Rachel and my kids Daniele and Jon. Dan's wife Sue is a patient of Rachel's at a community clinic on West 7th Street, and somehow or other Dan and I became friends. Technically I'm not supposed to be friends with my wife's patients' husbands.

But Dan and I hit it off. We are both baseball coaches, and we found we shared a kind of idealism, if that is not an egotistical thing to say. We have had some great talks, at O'Gara's and other places.

When I had my 50th birthday, Dan left a big computer monitor box on my front porch. Only instead of a computer monitor, the box contained a crazy autobiography of Dennis Rodman.

Dan's idea was that I reminded him of Rodman, a self-created person. Only it was crazier than that, because he

described Rodman as the "Mike Finley of the NBA." You know Dan better than me, so I don't have to explain that.

Also, he gave me a wooden head of Rodman on a steel rod -- get it? -- which he carved from some kind of bed post or something. It was an incredible artifact, which I unfortunately gave my son Jon to take to a show-and-tell at school, and he lost. I love my son, but I wish he hadn't lost my Dennis Rodman head, because it was really cool.

So 2001 was a pretty crappy year for my family. I am a freelance writer, but the recession hit publishing very hard, and we limped into the holidays pretty broke. Back in Ohio, my mom, whose name is Mary and who has been sick for some years -- heart failure and diabetes -- was being released from the hospital after nearly three months, and I felt I had to pay her a visit and look after her.

I could have paid for an airline ticket. I have a credit card. But it was expensive, and moreover, I wasn't sure when I would be able to return home, so I could not give a date for a return flight, which most "discount tickets" require.

I figured, why not take the bus. They get you there, you don't have to drive, and maybe you'll see some interesting people.

Rachel opposed the bus idea. She worried I would get hepatitis from sitting next to someone with a cough. I promised her I would not inhale until I got to Cleveland.

Not all bus depots, I found, are still in the downtowns of big cities. Saint Paul's is on University Avenue. Chicago's is right by the Dan Ryan Expressway, for easy on and off. Only Cleveland's -- good old, stolid old Cleveland -- is still where it was in the old days, downtown amid the biggest buildings.

I thought the people on the bus were nice. And surprisingly upscale, too. Several college students sat near me, reading Wall Street Journals. An older woman behind me got on the wrong bus by mistake, and had to flag the driver down before we got out of Saint Paul.

I sat next to a young black man, maybe 17, who seemed to resent me in a nonspecific way. He did not even want to share the armrest between us. For most of the trip I looked the other way and listened to Steve Earle and a bunch of Napster downloads on my CD player. I didn't speak a word to that young man for 19 hours. He didn't seem to want me to me, and I guess I didn't have anything to say. How about that!

A high point was the last 100 miles, when four other men joined me in a loud conversation about bad drivers. One of them was a trucker, and his stories were especially horrifying -- he had routinely seen the highway smeared with hamburger.

I debussed, apparently without hepatitis, and drove with my brother Brian to my mom's house. We were having a major hullabaloo with our mother, who has a bad heart and has been unable to remember to take her medicines. So she was rollercoasting, getting sick, going into the hospital, coming out, going back in.

It was plain to us that she was no longer able to live by herself, not even in assisted living. We discussed placing her in a local nursing home. But we agreed that, if we did that, we would be as much in the dark about her condition as ever. (We all live out of state.)

So, the idea occurred to me to bring her home with me to Minnesota. I discussed it with Rachel by phone -- I

think she may actually have been first to put Mary and Minnesota in the same sentence.

I brought the idea up with Mary and I was surprised at how quickly she agreed with the idea. It is a very big deal, as she has lived in that area for 60 years and has all her friends and social networks there. But she said, "Let's do it."

It was at this point, while I was packing up all of Mary's things, that Rachel called and told me about your donations. It wasn't like the last scene of *It's a Wonderful Life*, because I was calling long distance when I learned about your kindness, but it felt about the same way to me. In truth, I felt very alone taking on this new responsibility. And then there you all were, cheering me on, whether you knew it or not. At first I felt embarrassed, then glad to know someone like Dan, and in turn, glad to know people like you.

On January 12, I helped my mom out to her car -- a nice new Ford Taurus, a red one -- tossed her apartment keys under the descending garage door, backed out of her driveway for the last time, and sped out to the turnpike.

The trip was the opposite of the Greyhound Trip. Mary was still pretty sick, but she seemed to have a spark of adventure in her, a sense of making the most of a new life. We got home in a little over half the time the bus would have taken. We drove through Chicago and up and down the Wisconsin hills as the sun was setting behind them.

Oh, we still had hard times ahead of us. Lots of problems about money, and getting my mom up and down our stairway. We wound up installing an elevator chair for her to ride. And she misses her friends back in Ohio.

But every night we sit down at the table to eat, three generations of us. And it feels mostly good.

So thank you for your thoughtful gifts. Just as you intended, I did not take the bus back to Minnesota. I came back in a way I never imagined, and life has changed remarkably. Please wish us continued good luck, as my family wishes the very best for you.

## Death of a Pet

Last night the man was at work when he suddenly heard his wife crying. Her tears were unstinting, profuse.

"What is it, darling?"

"The dog got into Geoff's room and killed the guinea pig." Her face was a red contusion of grief. She fell into his arms, sobbing convulsively.

Now, this woman was no weakling. This wasn't sentiment for a pet on her part. She felt this was the last straw for her son, who has been struggling lately to find things he can trust.

"What is this going to do to him?" she said. "I'm so afraid. I hate it when things die in the house."

The man remembered knew all about fear. He remembered a story that happened twelve years earlier, with another pet death. This time it was a goldfish, named Icky, a present for his daughter. One day the man came down and saw the fish floating on its side. He, too, was overcome by the horror of life ending so miserably, of a creature whose job was to amuse and distract instead pulling the family down into the maelstrom whorl of a toilet flushing.

The man sought to brace his 3 year old daughter from the existential agony.

"Babycake, you know how wonderful life can be, when we love one another the way we do, and play, and have fun. Well, it doesn't last forever. This morning I came down and our little friend Icky was ... dead."

He paused to let the ramifications set in.

The little girl blinked. "Icky's dead?"

"I'm so sorry, yes."

She paused a moment, frowned and said, "Well, you know, Dad, it was only a fish."

Was that true? the man wondered. Are children made of stronger, more reasonable stuff than adults? Do we go overboard, protecting them from facts of life that, in truth, hold more terrors for us than them?

There was one other story. Geoff had had a previous guinea pig, named Delores. Delores lived with them for six years, for a guinea pig a methuselahy duration. She was gentle and affectionate, and liked to lick people on the nose as they petted her.

In time, she developed tumors, which proved her undoing. But the boy was a soldier. He slept in the same room with the dying creature for several months, and was there for her in her final moments. When he discovered her limp in the straw, he wept not for himself but for a sweet friend who had passed.

It was deep into January, the ground too cold to dig even a tiny grave. So the man placed Delores' body in a Ziploc bag, inserted the Ziploc into a grocery bag, and placed the grocery bag in box that had contained a pair of hiking shoes. This he set on a shelf in the garage, until the weather warmed and a proper burial became possible.

Then he forgot about it. Until a warm day in May, when he opened the garage and smelled not the scent of lilac and honeysuckle, but the thick stench of Lazarus.

Dismayed, he took the shoe box from its shelf. It was so bad, he felt that if he buried it in the yard, the dog would dig it up within five minutes.

In a moment of weak stupidity, he dropped the shoebox into the plastic mini-dumpster behind the house. He would leave the interment to Waste Management, Inc.

That was on a Thursday, a day marked by the dog being unduly interested in the garbage can. On Friday, the man went out, hoping to find the can emptied and his problem ended. Instead he found, to his horror, a patch of flattened fur pressed into the hot asphalt of the alleyway.

No doubt about it -- that garbage can lid-sized oval of matted hair was what was left of Delores. At that precise moment, the boy appeared on the steps of the back porch. Horrified, the father called to him to go back into the house.

"Why? What did I do?"

"I'll tell you what you did," the man said, and paused. "Later." Was it any wonder kids hate their parents?

Then he ran into the garage, fetched a snow shovel, and scraped the mass from the alley surface, dripping hot tar and shredding the fur. He dropped it on the edge of the family garden, and promptly spooned about a half ton of compost over top, and surrounded it with a ring of wire fence.

And there it lay through the rest of the year and into the next spring. No one was allowed to use the compost. "It's not ready yet," the father told the mother, who wanted only to grow carrots and cabbage and tall, waving corn. Which was what life is about, and what a garden really means.

But the father had secrets to cover up, and fears that brooked all generations.

"Give it time," was all he said. "We have to give it time."



## Chopping Down a Tree

I have a friend whom I'll call ... Dirk. We have a storied relationship history. He and I and four other lads made a celebrated Jeep trip to Alaska in the 60s that took a wrong turn and wound up at the Grand Canyon. In college we were roommates. Later, when he was in grad school in Germany he used to tape long soliloquies of his mind's inner workings as he hiked through the Black Forest and mail them to me in America, where I would listen in fascination and, sometimes, alarm.

It's not always been good. We've disagreed about things like art and philosophy. I like the power of the Internet, he hates its factory implications. We yammer at one another, and ignore one another, for extended periods. Then we glide together again, because we're like brothers who didn't find one another until we were young men, and once we did, we were somehow stuck with one another like regular brothers.

We're both artistic by nature, but I'm more of a journalist, more establishment, making a living on the edge of art and commerce. I am a weekender, writing when it is convenient or the spirit moves me. I do it for fun.

Whereas Dirk is the real thing, a poet-yogi pen-and-ink-artist, living a life as intense as Van Gogh's, viewing every day as an opportunity for enlightenment, maintaining exhaustive journals, dashing off lavishly illustrated 20-page letters to me depicting what's going on between his ears that day.

I think of Dirk as a Howitzer cannon, firing himself at life with crazy honesty and unstinting propulsion. Some

things about him aren't quite right. He can be disagreeable, obsessive, and inappropriate. He had a penchant for a while for starting Socratic conversations at the university sauna room. He'd ask a group of naked sweaty sophomores what they thought the purpose of life was, and my part was to hush him up and get us out of the steam room before these guys decided there was something not right about us that needed fixing.

Sometimes he splatters, but sometimes he lights up the night sky like a tracer. Then he seems as right as anyone I know.

I feel guilty about our friendship, which I cherish, because he puts so much more into it than I do. At my worst, I am a discourager: "Don't be ridiculous, Dirk." "Don't you think that's a little naïve?" "You just don't get it, do you?"

One time I was on a car trip with another friend and his two kids, 300 miles from Burke, and the car broke down. I didn't have anyone else to call, so I called Dirk, who dashed to his car -- whose muffler had just fallen off -- and drove the 250 miles to us, engine roaring unmuffled, and carried us back to the Twin Cities. Dirk is the heroic half of our friendship, and for years I have wanted to reciprocate somehow.

Last summer I got my chance. Dirk and his son Dane invited Jon and me to spend some time at his sister's second home, in the tiny town of Cornucopia on the Wisconsin Superior shore. We sped up in our van, not sure what to expect, but toting along an electric guitar and standard poodle, just in case.

In the morning, Dirk announced we were going to fell a tree. A sycamore standing by the bunkhouse had been

hit by lightning. One huge limb was already draped on the ground, and the rest of the tree looked like it would keel over any moment. It was a significant tree, measuring nearly five feet in circumference at the base. One look at it and I began to mentally backpaddle.

"We can't cut that tree down," I said, sounding my usual note. "It'd take two days."

"Then we'll take two days," Dirk said, nodding emphatically. "We got nothing better to do. There's nothing to do in Cornucopia!"

"Dirk, have you ever brought down a big tree? It's really hard with just an axe."

"I'll be really hard," Dirk agreed.

I began to get the idea. We were ostensibly cutting the tree down to prevent it from crashing onto the bunkhouse, killing our offspring as they slept. But something else was really going on -- an exertion of effort that was both epic and ridiculous, a vision quest to put two paunchy middle-aged men in mind of bygone times.

So for once I acquiesced. We studied the situation, and determined that in order for the tree to fall away from the bunkhouse, we needed to focus our attack on the trunk opposite that. And so we began hacking and hewing.

If you have not hoisted an axe in twenty years, it is a surprise how heavy it is, especially on the metal end, and how few swings you take before you are panting and sore. You have to hit the wood square, and not let the blade wobble in mid-swing. You have to be sure the axe is strong, and the head will not slip off and embed itself in your son's or anyone's son's forehead.

We had the boys stand off to a discreet distance. Their interest in the chopping ran strong at first, but as they realized it would be a long day, it waned noticeably.

Dirk and I took turns chopping, encouraging one another with stories about Paul Bunyan and John Henry, Samson and Babe Ruth. Working for us was the fact that the wood was soft, so the chips flew from the base of the tree at an encouraging pace. When we came to an especially hard, green spot, we heaped coals around it, and let fire do our work while we rested up for the next assault. We made coffee and wrapped rags around our blistered stigmata as we let our power return to us.

Then the woods rang again with the steady smashing of wood by hardened steel, and the boys drifted away to play board games. Dirk and I kept hammering. We chopped around the trunk from all sides, narrowing its girth the way beavers do, careful not to alter the direction the tree would fall. At one point, we were heartened to find a section of deadwood in the trunk -- you could chink it out with your hands, it was so soft.

By the third hour the huge tree was no bigger around than my leg, and the boys returned for the coup de grace. The weight of the already-fallen limb now became our enemy, as it functioned as a kind of crutch holding the weakened tree up.

But on we chopped, trying new grips with our stinging hands, trying at one point to wrap the axe with just our fingers. Finally, the tree began to make shuddering, groaning sounds with each blow. We cautioned the boys to stand back, as Dirk and I took turns taking individual blows at the whittled trunk.

Finally, with a whoosh, the old tree collapsed onto its crutch-limb, which bent and threw the tree back at a right angle. It was a big bounce, changing the tree's direction from nine o'clock to Noon. There was much residual trashing as the tree settled into the high grass pointing away from the bunkhouse.

Dirk and I looked at the tree, then looked at each other, and embraced, laughing, and clapped one another on the back.

I learned later that Dirk's sister was alarmed that we had laid a hand on the tree. Had we miscalculated, the tree could easily have destroyed the bunkhouse and the garage attached to it. She had even told Dirk, point blank, to leave the tree alone, and let a local handle it. This was the problem with Dirk in a nutshell, she said; he didn't listen to people, and took risks that weren't his to take.

She didn't get it, but I got it. The tree was Dirk's gift to me. The gift was the blisters on my hands, and the sweat running down my back. Just what I needed after a summer of licking envelopes. Dirk in his funny wisdom was challenging me to cast off my nagging big-brother role and roll up my sleeves and actually do something.

We spent the rest of the weekend reading and singing, and photographing the boys as they tiptoed through an elaborate treehouse -- a sort of castle parapet eight feet off the ground -- that Dirk had been lashing together all summer. I still have the color pictures Dirk blew up on oversized 8x14 Xerox paper, of my son Jon looming like a morose prince in the angular August sunlight.

This summer, Dirk and his boy Dane have been up at Cornucopia once again, and it has been my sincere intention

to go up with Jon and have a great visit. But hear the words: things came up. Writing deadlines, a family trip, and a computer camp for Jon all made it impossible for us to head north. And now August is winding down, and we have been unable to visit.

So I am writing this to you, Dirk, so you will know that I got it about the sycamore, and I am sorry to have come up short again. But in my mind, and in my heart, I am thinking of you, and stronger for the chopping.

## Bing Cherries

No sooner do I enter the Cub Foods store with a red shopping cart than I see a big display in the produce section: BING CHERRIES \$1.49 LB. A dozen people are milling around a mountain of cherries, separating the dark hard good ones from the lighter and mooshy ones.

One forty nine -- that's a pretty good deal. So I park my cart by the apples, grab a plastic bag, and begin filling it, taking care not to be as picky as everyone else seemed to be. I imagine the looks on my family's faces when I set a bowl of beautiful cherries on the table after supper. Oh, wow, they'll say, cherries! It's going to be a good day.

I return to the cart, set my cherries in it, and step away again, to examine some apples from Chile. I return to my cart, and push it idly out of the produce area, round the bend at the whole foods section, and am making my way past the fish and smoked sausage showcases when I notice something.

There is something in my cart besides bing cherries. Leaning up against the inner wall of the cart is an aluminum walking cane, with a curved gray handle.

My first thought is embarrassment. I have taken someone else's cart! Cripes, I can't let anyone know I've done this. Maybe I can sneak out the back way, and start over again at Rainbow Foods, just down the road.

But then my better self speaks up. Michael, you can't just ditch the cart. A cane is a prosthetic device. Someone back in the produce section needs it in order to ambulate. No

matter how embarrassing, you owe it to that person to go back and return the cane.

I exhale dramatically and push the cart back to the produce section. I want to get it back as soon as possible, so I hold the cane over my head, to attract attention. I scan the area with my eyes, my mouth open as if to ask, Did anyone lose a cane?

"There it is!" a mean voice announces. I turn, and a very capable-looking frizzy-haired woman of about 75 is frowning at me.

"Was this yours?" I ask miserably. She looks like she will club me with it when I hand it over.

"Shame on you!" she says. "My friend is going out of her mind, thanks to you. Why would you do such a thing?"

I hand the cane over, apologetically. "It was an accident. I had a cart with just cherries in it, and she must have had a cart with just cherries in it, too -- and the cane. I didn't see it until just now."

"Well, you scared a poor old woman half to death. I hope you're proud of yourself," she says, and wheels away from me.

That seemed a little unfair, but rather than plead my case I simply withdraw, hoping to get my day's worth of groceries and get the hell out of the store. I push my cart down the same route I have already traveled twice -- produce, whole foods, fish and smoked meats -- and a voice comes on the PA system:

"Will whoever took a cart containing a cane in it, please return it to the customer service desk. We have someone here who is very upset about losing her cane."

My heart sinks. I don't have to do this again, do I? Surely not. I toss a loaf of bread next to my bag of cherries, and push the cart down through the deli section. When I round the corner, I see the mean friizzy woman bending over a stooped figure.

It is an older woman, perhaps 86 or 88, and she can't be five feet tall, and she is staring into space and visibly trembling. The woman with her is rubbing her back and comforting her. She is saying something like, "It's all right, dear. We can come back later when you're up to it." The cane is in her cart.

Oh, rats, I say to myself, stepping back into the fray.

"Ma'am," I say lightly, perhaps a foot from her face. "I'm the man who took your cane by mistake. I had cherries in my cart, just like you did. I just want to tell you I was very dumb to do it, and I surely did not mean to frighten you."

The little woman lifted her face to me, and in less than a second I saw the most remarkable transformation, from a woman who has suffered many losses and reverses, and is reeling from this latest episode, to someone who knows it is her turn to Do the Right Thing.

"Oh, that's all right, sugar," she says, a bent smile wrinkling her face. "I make mistakes all the time," she says, to comfort me.

I begin wheeling away, a bit blissful from my moment of reprieve, when I hear the other woman clear her throat. I turn to see what she has to add to the scenario.

Her weight on one foot, she glares at me with unforgiving eyes. "What about the cherries?" she wants to know.

## The Blue Bicycle

The snowy woods echoed with the crunch of boots and the snapping of dry wood. "How much longer?" my 8-year old son asked.

"Not long," I said, huffing frosted steam. "We're almost there."

My 12-year old daughter was impatient, too. "What did you say we were looking for?"

"Yes," Rachel said, "what is it exactly?"

"Something you'll never see again," I said. I was in heaven, luring my kids out into the cold to see if they could spot the remarkable thing. We finally came to a clearing overlooking a small ravine.

We just stood there for a moment, our breath frosting up before us. "It's right here," I announced.

There wasn't a sound except the fluffing of heavy falling snow. Then Jon said, "I see it!"

He pointed up, into the lower reaches of a young cottonwood tree. There, about ten feet from the ground, was a rusted old bicycle. It was not sitting in a branch; rather, the branch had somehow grown around the bicycle. The main bar was entirely enclosed in swarming wood.

"Wow," Daniele said.

I had come across it a few days earlier, out walking the dog. I had actually passed that spot a hundred times and not noticed. But who ever looks up to see a tree embracing a bicycle? You need luck to see these things. And now I felt

like Merlin, letting young Arthur peer into a peculiar mystery.

Based on the bike style, the amount of corrosion, and the absence of tire rubber, I guessed that the bicycle had been in the tree for over 40 years. It was entirely rusted except for a narrow path of etched blue enamel just below the handlebars, by the little plate that still said Western Automatic.

The four of us were suddenly giddy with the idea of a bicycle growing in a tree. How did it get there? Did someone lean it against the tree years ago, and the tree slowly reached out and lifted it up, an inch a year, up into the sky?

Or did someone just throw it up there, and the tree grew around it?

Whose bike was it, and would that person remember the bike?

Did the bike think it was flying? Did the tree think it was riding? Did the wind once blow the wheels around, whispering stories of locomotion to the stationery tree?

Everyone agreed, on the way back to the car, that it was a wonderful thing, and we should always keep our eyes keen for other anomalies. They must be everywhere, we reasoned. We just have to train ourselves to see them.

But a funny thing happened. The next time I came to the clearing, in spring, by myself, not only was the bicycle gone -- but the tree was gone. A big wind blowing up the river has no trouble toppling trees rooted in sand. The cottonwood lay accordingly on its side, head down into the ravine, its roots reaching up like withered, imploring hands.

I looked under the tree for the bicycle. I looked around the area, to no avail. The snow was gone, and this year's vegetation was pushing up from the ground -- just high enough to disguise a jutting pedal or tipped wheel rim.

Over the next couple of years I gently obsessed about finding the bicycle, returning to the spot numerous times, to see if I had merely misplaced it.

Occasionally I thought I saw it. But it was just a curl of vine, pretending to be wheel, or the color of rot pretending to be rust.

I had already seen the outrageous sight, gotten credit for showing it to my family -- what more did I want?

My heart always quickened when I came to that space. A bicycle fashioned of iron from the dirt once roamed this city and raced up and down its hills. How many times did its rider trace a thrill from spine to chain? And then it lived in a tree by the river, gazing out at the barges and crows. And now it was returning to the earth.

I felt ... like that archeologist, Schliemann, who found Troy seven cities down, in reverse. What the earth lifted up, the earth was taking back. Everything combined to make it so. Every falling leaf covered it up in the fall. Each fresh clump of snow that blanketed it in winter. Each pelting splash of rain in spring, every summer hiker's footfall -- all buried it deeper in the wood.

And you know, everything buried was living once. Every moment is half of a miracle. And the blue two-wheeler coasts into the living world.

## Sometimes I Wonder

I don't know what it is. I should know by this point in my life what is important and what's not worth getting upset about. But I still get drawn in.

This past weekend we held the big folk festival I have been annoying everyone about for the past six months. It was a roaring success. We almost broke even, which exceeded our wildest expectations. But when it was all over, instead of relief and delight, my main emotion was peevishness at the folks who told me they come but didn't. Like a pebble in my shoe, I hobbled around worrying that minor pain into something major.

This is an ancient theme with me. In college, I planned an elaborate anti-war protest for a visit to campus by national security adviser MacGeorge Bundy. I inserted a fake song ("Old MacBundy Had a Farm") in every chapel hymnal. When the moment came, I expected the 100 people I had coaxed into participating to join me in song. None did. I was left standing literally at the altar, singing, "With a boom-boom here, and a bang-bang there."

I suppose it means I'm a lousy leader. No argument there. I never saw myself as that; rather, as an enthusiast, an Ezra Pound, someone who gets other people excited about stuff. The folk festival was terrific fun, and I wanted these friends to join in.

It being a free country (there are even songs to that effect), they chose not to. Leaving me unfulfilled, like a dog at the window, whimpering pointlessly at a teasing squirrel.

Or you could compare it to sex; it's just more fun with other people.

So I've been thinking maybe I need therapy. (Whenever I have voiced this possibility in the past, whoever I have voiced it to has answered in the affirmative awfully quickly.) Find out what's wrong with me that I have to drag people around with me through life, like a green commander calling out to his army to "Follow me! Follow!" but they can't be stirred from their pup tents.

But I'm afraid that wouldn't work, either. I can imagine looking up after my allotted 50 minutes and telling the shrink, "So you're not even going to ask me about my mother?" Always "pushing the river," which we are all plainly instructed not to do. I was especially a flop in the 60s.

Writing itself is an extension of this principle. Every week I take this initiative, which I am helpless to resist, but which the world feels much less helpless about. Every time I hit a key, it's like standing in someone's yard and asking Billy's mom if Billy can come out and play. Only in real life Billy and his mom are the same person. I have to get past the parent to get to the child. And I never do.

When I was a kid I was so bored that one day I decided to start a college, using an old shed down by the monkeyball trees as our Old Main. My family had lots of books about nature and history, and I thought the gang and I could take turns looking at these books and making charts from them -- the phyla tree, a timeline from the Paleozoic to the current era, the life cycle of the Nile crocodile. We could all be professors --of geology, of biology, of the Civil War. Could anything be more fun?

Well, you can imagine how far that idea got.

So I am forced to conclude that I have spent 50 years of my life -- and doggone it, the best 50 years of my life - annoying people. And even though I consider myself an avatar of change, and have even written books about how to do it (books that, as you may have guessed, no one bought), I'm no good at it.

I once wrote an entire book (unpublished, naturally) about how expectant fathers lag behind their expectant partners during pregnancy because, not having a baby growing inside them, and not spending an hour every morning with their head in a toilet, they live in inevitable denial. After I showed the book to about 20 publishers, my agent took me aside laid the harsh news upon me. "Michael, people don't buy books about denial. Think about it."

So here's the killer. I know I can change because I know the secret of change. Just change the behavior, the symptoms, and forget the flawed underlying structure. This is how people lose weight, overcome bad habits, become presidential candidates.

But it's a chimera. Because what I really want is to make the fluttering die down, the excitement that, if we just do something interesting together, right now, things will be immediately less boring. Say something. Bite into a lemon. Pretend we're eggs frying. And 50 years on, it doesn't go away.

You can change everything about yourself, until you are pleasing and undemanding and a dullard to everyone who encounters you. But inside, you will still be who you are.

Follow me?

## The 13<sup>th</sup> Beatle

Back in 1963 I figured that if a boy kept his mind on his work and avoided bad companions, he stood a chance to grow up right, toward an orderly and predictable future, free of bewilderment and free of defeat. So at age 13 I left home to begin studies at a junior seminary in Bucks County, Pennsylvania.

Kennedy was president and the world was Catholic. I was playing soccer when I heard the news he was shot. We all stood about in our long shorts, tugging at our shirts.

Perhaps six weeks later I was playing shuffleboard, and the Beatles came on the big upright radio against the basement wall. It was "Please Please Me." The sound stuck in my head, like bees. I could not get it out. The Beatles seemed like a new kind of person, and their songs seemed like visas to a better world.

And whatever they sang mattered terribly. "One, two, three, *faw*!" At the seminary we sang from a Gregorian hymnal called the Liber Usualis. But I put mine down and took up this much more usable other book. One, two, three, *faw* -- I went to sleep at night thinking about the syllable *faw*, its secular belligerence, the damnation of it. I was taken up in it and swept away. Deny it by daylight, but every night I joined them in my dreams.

Though I played no instrument and sang only a little and my hair wasn't right, the other Beatles sensed I was one of them and let me belong. They seemed to enjoy being in Pennsylvania and strode my front porch in their Cuban black heels, and I did my best to fit in. There were never misgivings or resentment that I was studying Latin or that I was sworn to chastity or that I was American or that I stood

about stiffly during the dream-concerts, banging a tambourine on my hip.

We were all doomed. I never made priest. Priests take vows that effectively rule out pop stardom. And English pop stars don't wait for 13-year-olds in Bucks County to catch up to them. Neither fantasy, neither priesthood nor Beatlehood, was real enough to keep me in.

Seventeen years pass, and the optimism sags. Tonight, listening to John Lennon's "primal scream" songs, I recall that it began with one killing and now ends with another. I will listen to his songs all night and all morning, grieving for his murder, and for the smirky murderer who was out there in a dream all his own. Angry that I had to hear the news from Howard Cosell on the Monday Night Football. Fourth down and punt for the Patriots.

I feel the same sudden cramp in the stomach. I stand to fix myself a drink, and when I reach down in the dark for a ginger ale I hit my head on the open door of the microwave oven. Lying face down on the kitchen carpet, I feel the wetness in my hair. When I pull myself to the bathroom mirror, a red line streams down the middle of my face and drips from my nose into the sink.

How different we are when we bleed. I see on my face that seventeen years have passed. And I hear an echo which seemed positively ancient now: Well she was just seventeen and, you know what I mean, and the way she looked was way beyond compare.

One, two, three, *faw*.

Seventeen more years pass. Last night I dreamt I was in LA, and a mutual friend said George was anxious to see me. We drove along the beach till we came to his wife's fashion salon, and I was led in. A busy, happy woman with cropped curls gestured behind her and laughed. This was where all the money went, she said. I shook hands with the retinue.

Some of the members of George's old band were still there, including the saxophonist with the scars on his nose, whose name I could never remember.

I met George's son, whom I had never met before, he was almost grown, and resembled his mother, handsome and quiet and composed. I was taken aback by him, and couldn't think of anything to say. They wheeled out an exquisite cake that said "Welcome back, Mike," with a picture of us five lads, one with just a tambourine who seemed cut-and-pasted into the picture. The cake has buttercream dahlias and frosting cherries, created by some impressive celebrity baker.

When George arrived everyone crowded around him, but after touching his son's face he went straight to me and hugged me and we rocked happily for a moment, reunited, and I remembered the good times on tour, and how they always dropped me off again at the gray house on the little hill, and I would sneak inside to bed.

I could see the lines in George's eyes, and his hair had thinned but his grin was still stupendous, and he peppered me with questions about my life and my family and he rebuked me for not bringing a photo with me.

During the meals, seeing the love they all had, I felt tears come to my eyes, and I burst out and told them I didn't deserve them as friends, they were so genuine and kind, and

I was sorry I had not stayed in touch, and I was so sorry about John, and I was sorry I had gotten old and fat and become a business writer and lost the music, and someone patted my back while I sobbed.

And in his thick scouse George quietly said none of that mattered, I had gotten away but we were together again, and we would always be mates, and this day was for us to remember and to share. And they all lifted their glasses of soda water and lime.

When the alarm sounded I went to my daughter's room. She lay there sleeping with her finger in a closed paperback. I kissed her several times on her smooth forehead. She emerged from her sleeping bag like a rose in bloom and told me my hands were cold, and smiled her lovely smile. We could hear the diesel idle of the garbage truck in the alley and the birds in the maple tree sang.

## Canine Wisdom

"Hey dad," my daughter said, opening Beau's mouth. "Look at this." The dog had broken a tooth off and the stump had turned gray.

I felt a pang when I saw the broken tooth. Another sign my pup is getting older.

I patted the standard poodle -- he's the big fella, 65 pounds -- on the head. He blinked, Keatonlike, with the impact of each pat.

*Old Beauregard*: the words belonged together, just as *Young Beau* did.

I thought of his prancing youth, and the joy I felt walking him through the neighborhood. I was always singing "Little Deuce Coupe" to myself. Beau was my hotrod, with flame decals and mag wheels. That rod ran a lot of races.

When he was one, he got in a tussle with a Rottweiler-Doberman mix down by the Lake Street Bridge. For his part, Beau was being theatrical, all fangs and snarls -- he certainly looked scary. But the other dog, more practiced at this sort of thing, or bred to it for a thousand generations, casually executed him, chomping through Beau's jugular.

I had to climb a cliff, dragging the bleeding dog behind me, and rush off to the vets. Got him neutered the same day, to keep him out of the next fight. It helped. Some.

Half a year later, one rainy Monday Night halftime, Beau chased a rabbit under the rear wheel of a Vanagon. Ran over his left forearm and splattered it like a blown New Years noisemaker. When I lifted him in my arms he bit at me savagely, fierce jabbing bites, out of fright. Four months of

recovery, a painful pin connecting his broken bones. And when he was all better, you could see arthritis had moved into the joint, and minutely slowed each step.

His ears hurt. Poodles have moist, twisty ear canals that bacteria grow in, and when they take over, misery results. I remember him walking to me with his head at a strange angle, as he tried to contain the pain. Ignorantly, I over-medicated him, spilling bottle after mottle of different herbal goos into the infected area, until it wanted to shriek from pain. I had to have him knocked out to clean up the mess inside his head.

People misunderstand. They think I fuss over Beau because there is an unbreakable bond between dog and man. It's weirder than that, because I wrote a book about Beau. A full-length, historical treatment. I called it an experiment in "bidography." It was the last book I wrote before I had my stroke and brain tumor. To hear what most people said about it, you would think it was my first book after the stroke and brain tumor.

The whole book is me complaining that my dog doesn't act "giving" enough. He was a vain, self-centered clown who never looked beyond his own needs. I wanted a dog that was like an angel, showering you with silent blessings. Instead I got the Curly Pimpernel.

The book ends with the story of me getting out of the hospital after outpatient knee surgery. Rachel staggers me into the living room and dumps me on the couch. I am looking around the living room like Jack Nicholson after his lobotomy - anything means anything, and the Percodans are calling me down, down, to a deeper kind of sleep.

But my last memory before closing my eyes is of the poodle, licking my wound in long, deliberate strokes. The selfish creature was trying, like a doctor with all his instruments arrayed before him, to fetch me back to life.

Publishers said I missed the boat on books on the psychology of the man-dog relationship. Three books on that subject were already in print.

My criticism of the project is that, as if often the case, I did not slow down and give the subject a chance to reveal itself. In my zest for the new, I wrote a biography of a puppy. The five years since have been better. Less dramatic, less traumatic. But deepening, the way a thing becomes what it is, richer, deeper, and wiser.

He stopped getting into fights. He stopped running into traffic. He stopped having to intimidate every male creature he ran into. One day, I even saw him kneel, sphinx-like in supplication, before an approaching Airedale. That just didn't happen. His coat went from the jet of night to a smoky blue color. His gait from a high, Deuce Coupe prance to a lazy, snaky slither. His eyes from orbs of idiotic impulse, flaring white with excitement -- to the still skies of the older dog, who sees what he knows, and knows what he sees.

Does a dog deserve a full-length biography? Not one at two, maybe. But the older dog has learned so many lessons. And then, years coming in bunches as they do, just as the wisdom sets in, the oral health starts breaking down.

*Canine wisdom* -- it's more than two kinds of teeth. It's things drawing closer over the long leisure of years, like a walk in a golden, waving field.

I lift your muzzle in my hand, and point your face toward mine.

Beau, I'm sorry I was not a better chronicler of your youth. And I'm sorry I'm too bored with you now, in your seventh year, with your broken teeth and straggly coat, with your undertaker's demeanor and state highway patrolman's sense of authority, to do you the literary justice you deserve.

But I would like to say, sure, it all happened. We were there. We know. Thank you for living the story with me.

## A Melting Pot

My mother's father didn't come over on the Titanic. A bad-tempered violent man, he lost his ticket in a pub fight. Or so I am told. He took his coffee with whiskey in it. Once he named a calf after me. Two years later he slaughtered it. I was one of his pallbearers.

My father's father was a diabetic most of his life. I remember watching him pinch a skinny shoulder and slipping the needle in. He was sweet by nature. A neighbor's son ran wild with a Model T once and killed my grandfather's favorite riding horse, a saddlebred stallion. Grandpa paid to fix the broken car. I remember when I was a boy and dropped by toothbrush into the toilet, he picked it out for me and washed it off. I dreamed of him once bursting into a fountain, his life shooting out all the holes he'd made.

In 1959 my mother is driving home late from her waitressing job. A stag bolts from the roadside into her beams. That night I hear voices, see a deer hung from an apple tree by the heels. Bread knife in hand, I see my father make the downward incision. The great heart tumbles onto the fallen fruit.

My father and mother's first baby was sick, and the two stayed together until she died. My mother went a little mad, in advance of the loss. My father went out, for a drink, or a dance. Sometimes he came home drunk and the two of them shouted. One time he hit her, and I hugged her leg on a bunched up carpet and cried.

My father told my mother that her mother was an imbecile, but that is not how I remember her. I see my grandmother's hands zipping open pale skin, and with one

hand pulling the unborn egg into the light. Inside the hen the shell was still soft.

On television men are spading up other men from a California peach orchard. My mother says my uncle John was one of the dead, he had left home and lost touch.

Two thousand miles away my father stirs his ice. He is looking at album with women and girls in it. Their names are Grace and Ruth and Rose and Mary, more beautiful than any I have seen, the way the light and shadow plays on their faces, the rosy cheek turned bronze, their hopes and smiles, gone into time. Someone ought to tell the story, says my father. Somehow it ought to be all gotten down.

A dozen families flee from famine to drought and depression to Michigan, Wisconsin, and Ohio. The branches of the trees intertwine in the pure product of our broken household, the girl upstairs, coughing in her sleep, the woman fretting to put things right, the man slipping through the boards like spilled water.

My mother's father, deep into Michigan, who married old and knew no more about Jesus than his druid roots, beats his daughters and sets them howling. Deep into summer they hack the milkweeds, head upon head. Something happened, I don't know what. My mother grew up anxious, as if she had a long head start on the sick child inside her.

My father's mother is on a nursing home bed in Milwaukee with a stroke. She is 85, I am 24. When she sees me, she thinks I am my cousin, my uncle, my father. How are my children? The poor sick girl? The boy who went away to seminary? In my grandmother's heart I live freely and all at once through four and five generations.

My cousins drive me to my motel room. They talk about senility, psychosis, the stroke. I half listen. My grandmother is right in ways I will have trouble remembering. We swirl together in a pot of blood. I will not see her alive again.

## My Splendid Cry

I am in a hospital bed. I have just been diagnosed with a brain tumor. Just before I found out, my wife Rachel had to run home to check on the kids. I am the most miserable I have ever been in my life.

Before Rachel comes back to be with me, a nurse comes upon me sobbing cross-legged on the bed, and sits with me for perhaps ten minutes. I won't remember the entire conversation, but I will remember resenting at first that she thinks she can talk me out of my grief. Her name is Carrie, and she asks me to say exactly what is tearing me up.

"I've let everyone down," I say, a rope of snot hanging from my chin.

"How did you do that?"

"Don't you know my diagnosis? I have a brain tumor."

"So? Maybe it's nothing."

"That's what they told my stepdad, who had an astrocytoma that killed him. Doctors told him it was nothing. I don't have confidence in doctors. My sister died getting her teeth pulled. Doctors --" I begin sobbing again.

"Your chart says Tim Rumsey is your doctor. I know him, and he's great. You don't like Dr. Rumsey?"

"Tim's a good guy," I concede.

"Well, there you go, then. What other doctors here don't you like?"

"I -- I really don't know any other doctors here." I was irritated with the radiologist who told me I had the

tumor, but I could see how vexed he was at missing it the first time. I make mistakes. I know how frustrating it can be, professionally. I can relate to how embarrassing it must be to screw up on something this important.

"OK, then it's not the doctors. What's really on your mind?"

"My family." Just saying the word gets me blubbering full boil again. "I feel I'm plunging them into something terrible. I can't bear to do this to them."

Carrie doesn't argue with me about that. She holds my hand for maybe five minutes, and tells me that when I actually see them, it won't be as bad as I'm picturing, even if my condition is as bad as I think it is. It never is, she says. It never is.

She asks me if I want her to sit with me until Rachel shows up. I look at her, and realize it isn't an act with her. She doesn't know me from Adam, but she is willing to spend time with me -- awful time -- to get me through the wait. What an extraordinary kindness that is, I think. Just knowing she is willing to do it makes it unnecessary. So I let her go.

"Is there anything I can get you?" she asks. "A drink? A little dessert?"

I ask if she could scrounge up a pen and some paper.

I am settling in now with the new reality. Harry, my 94 year old roommate, is asleep beside me, but his TV blares on. The fluids inside my head are still gurgling from the angiogram, but I'm already healing. I must be, because my hand is busy scribbling down my impressions and thoughts

about the hospital ward. It puts me at a distance from my misery -- I feel better just bitching.

After a few notes about the room and the day, I begin composing a compendium of the things that are bothering me -- fears for my family, fears about suffering, the terrible anger that this is happening to me. The canonicity of the list will be my strength -- this can't be happening, I think, because it's just too much like something out of the Book of Job.

Here's what I jotted down that night in the hospital. They are like a baker's dozen of supercomplaints, each one subsuming a handful of subcomplaints.

**Pain.** Here is something you sense only dimly now, but you know will become sharper and more real as time passes: pain. Dying has to hurt. And pain changes everything. People who think they can stand up to torture are idiots. They say they can do great things with pain medications nowadays. Why do they say that? You complain about the suffering that is in store for you, and how you would like to forego it, like Jesus weeping blood in Gethsemane. You think about the other people you have known who have gotten this diagnosis, people you loved, and the terrible things that befell them. About the triple gauntlet of poison, radiation, and surgery you must pass through, and the deficits you face afterwards, and the pain of recovery, and the vast stretches of time it takes before you die. You complain about losing your sight, about the headaches, about the strange symptoms that overtook you, like double vision, and the heavy feeling in your body that you drag around all day, because of the drugs. And the heavy feeling in your mind, that keeps you from being who you are.

**Injustice.** It is infernally unfair that other people don't have tumors in their heads and you do. The people on the TV don't have tumors. You complain picturing all the moments life could have been normal, that aren't going to be. Like a bulldozer of crazy tissue, the tumor will edge them all off the page, just like it's edging you off yours. You complain for everyone else that was ever in these shoes -- for the loneliness they must all feel, and the fear, and the grief. You feel a terrible anger stirring inside you, resentment of others, hatred of their comfort. You're like that genie who promised for the first thousand years of imprisonment in the bottle to reward whoever freed you -- but then too much time passed and you became bitter and vowed to blow whoever liberates you away.

**Change.** Your life is going to undergo major immediate changes that you can't stand back from. Your bankbook is in jeopardy. The things you enjoy doing, you won't be able to do any more. The things you thought you absolutely needed, you're going to have to postpone. You grieve for the lost opportunities. For the money you could have spent on the kids, or on that dream trip, that will be spent instead on some stupid medical apparatus, or an out-of-town specialist who'll just make things worse. All that money, thrown down the sewer, just so it will take longer to die. You complain because you see yourself losing your job and going on disability, or trying to go back to work but finding you just can't do it. You complain because you'll be getting phone calls during dinner from realtors and mortuaries. There won't ever be any rest from those vultures. You complain because you have the wrong insurance plan,

and because now your spouse can never quit her job -- because she'll be carrying you.

**Blame.** A death in the family is like a house without a broom. Everything seems right, but the place will never get swept clean again. You complain for your spouse, who will have to lie in bed beside this thing every night, alert to every weird twitch. You complain because you promised you'd take care of her, and now she's taking care of you. If you had done your job and stayed healthy, she would never have to be this strong.

**Guilt.** There must have been something you could have done to prevent this tumor. It was caused by your bad habits, your indifference, your neglect. But that boat has sailed, and here you are. You complain because you know there will be times you will act like a bastard to people you love. Because you will feel bad that day, or be impatient, or because the meds have distorted your outlook. Or you just want to hurt someone, because something's hurting you. You complain because you know you'll fail the people you love, and you'll do it a lot.

How dare we throw the lives of those we love into tumult just because our bodies are copping out? You cry for everyone you love, for all they're losing -- a father, a money-earner, a friend. They're going to have to go on without you if you die, or with only a part of you if you become a full-time patient.

You cry for your kids, who you won't be able to teach and impart what you know. To them you'll always be a mystery, someone with a problem, someone who could not

control his emotions around them, someone angry, someone frightening. And when you're gone they'll be bitter about it, and it will undermine them their whole lives, and a part of them will blame you for taking a powder.

**Diminution.** Everyone will know you are disabled now, or doomed, and they'll all be whispering about you. Or maybe they don't even dare to whisper. That's how bad it is. That's how gone you are. You complain about the phone calls you won't want to take, and for the friends you will drive away, because, really, you're already dead, and they've already mourned, and moved on to other cares. You become obsessive when you are sick. You go from being a rich, rounded character with many interests to a narrow person fixated on one thing, staying alive. In time you leave amateur status behind and become a sufferer by profession.

**Depression.** The idea of losing everything foretells an incomparable slide into grief. The depression is profound, it is a distancing from life. You complain because you feel so heavy now and you doubt you will ever feel light again. You see the idiots cavorting on the TV screen, and the canned laughter goading them on. Could they be less funny? Amusement is such a luxury in this world. Will anything ever amuse you again? You think you will never laugh again.

**Horror.** This isn't your elbow or your Adam's apple. It's your head. You have no way to retreat from your head when it goes bad on you. There are no mental tricks that can distance you from an assault on your brain. You know this. You have seen it firsthand. The brain is it, it is the thermostat

of the self. There is no backup for it. Character will not help you when it goes bad. Upset any corner of it and life becomes king hell. If your memory vanishes, who will you be? If language disappears, will you understand your own thoughts? What if you are in constant agony from migraines -- how philosophical will you be about that? What if every second of every day you are in a spinning torment of dizziness, and all you can do is hide yourself in a darkened room and hold your head and cry? How will God come into your life and give you peace when every second you smell shit, or blood, or vomit? Or you are paralyzed and cannot speak, and everyone gathers around you, and you can understand every word they say, but they don't understand that you understand, so they treat you like celery?

**Abandonment.** In a single day's time, you've become isolated and alone. Your illness may sit at the center of your universe, but it is on the periphery of everyone else's. Friendship is fine, but it has limits. How far will your friends stretch to include your problem? Won't they show concern for a while, then grow bored with your predicament, and finally blame you for obsessing about a problem they don't have? You cry for the thing you have become, an object of pity, something to be stepped over, and regarded in the rear-view mirror like a run-over animal. Imagine having friends ask you not to stop around so often -- because you upset the kids.

**Identity.** You cry about yourself, who never deserved to wear a stupid hospital gown, with your butt hanging out the back door. You don't deserve to be treated like some sick person. Don't these people know who you

are? You cry for the loss of your self -- that person who suddenly seems so glorious and tender to you, and so gone. How strong and unstoppable you were. How big with laughter, how strong with unknowing. How you will miss that sweet, grand side of you, in the haze and pain you know comes next.

**Forsakenness.** You complain because you're not a saint, but you're supposed to act like one. God knows you're just crumbling clay, and soon everyone else will know, too. Your haughty demeanor was never more than an act. You won't be able to hide your weakness any more, or your fear. And God -- where is he now, while you're bawling your heart out on this stupid bed? How does God watch over a hospital, like a helpless family member or like a fan at a cockfight? Or was he a million universes away, sleeping off a bad creation?

**Terror.** You worry about the final moment, when the stroke finally drowns you and your head lights up with pain, like an amusement park ride that is going too fast, and there's no way you can get the people to slow it down, and you grip the rails and you gasp. And what happens then? And how do you get ready for that? And you so young, and so good.

By the time Rachel shows up, wondering why I am in pajamas in a hospital room, I ask her to pause. The whining was healing me; even while I was getting into the feelings, I was standing outside them, making notes to myself.

Is it crazy to ask you to understand, that in the depths of my unhappiness, I was having a good time?

The hugs and reassurances can wait. First, I need to cry my splendid cry.

## Jumping in the Night

In a dream I am headed in a car with three friends across Saint Paul. We are going to a big meeting for a project we were part of. I suspect that our hosts are aliens, or some sinister force that has planted creatures in our bodies who at some point will blossom and be born, and kill us. We are living nests for their babies. But I am confident I can outsmart them.

As we approach our destination -- a school building -- the car descends a very steep hill, at an 80 degree angle. It is so steep the car actually falls to the bottom, where the road evens out again, the way a roller coaster does. Everyone in the car shouts out, "Whee!" like it was great fun to plummet.

Once we find the auditorium inside the school building, I become separated from the rest. Then I remember the sinister intentions of the alien group we came to meet, and I try to slip away. I hide in a stairwell, but one of the aliens, who appears to be a teenage girl, finds me and charmingly tries to lure me back to my seat. I tell her I need to go to the bathroom -- brilliant!

Now I am running away, though my running is clumsy and slow. A fat man steps forward to stop me and I slug him in the gut after much struggling. Then a little dog is assigned the task of fetching me back. I am running from the dog through a series of tunnels, and find a way up out of the tunnel, but my escape is barred by a couple of boards, screwed into place. While I pry the wood away with my forearm, I am kicking behind me to keep that little dog away. Get away, little dog, I am crying -- get away!

That's when I wake up. It's dawn, and the first rays of daylight are sneaking under the blinds, and I realize I have just kicked Rachel really, really hard in the shins. She looks at me with the level expression of a woman who has been kicked in the shins, but is worried more about something else.

I have just had a seizure, a big one. It was caused by a recently-diagnosed brain tumor, which has been growing and applying pressure to sensitive tissue.

I experienced my first seizure, a tiny baby of a petit mal, the day I came home. I was still in a low-level state of shock, and when I reached for a doorknob, one of the fingers on my left hand began to spasm. It was like the hand of a clock that shot from 3 o'clock to 8 o'clock, then back to twelve. And it did it all by itself. I saw it happen with my own eyes. Interesting, I thought.

After the first few nights, I see Rachel is taking an undue interest in my sleeping habits. I will wake in the middle of the night and she will be lying awake herself, with her arm over me, holding me close to her.

"You're still awake?" I ask.

"Can't sleep. Thinking about things. Hoping you're going to be all right."

"I'm going to be fine," I assure her. Pause. I recall wondering if she was to be trusted, as my online correspondents suggested. "Aren't I?"

"I'm trying to think it all through," Rachel tells me. "I think if we're lucky, we may just squeak by."

Meaning, we may never need surgery, we may never need to go on epilepsy meds, I may never be disabled, and my life will go on the way it used to. And I won't die for a long time.

In the morning Rachel tells me there is one thing that concerns her.

"What is it?" I ask. "The fact we can't have sex? Dr. Hoj says that will come back."

"You're moving," she says. "At night. When you sleep, you're all over the place."

I tell her I'm not wasn't aware of doing any moving outside the usual -- rolling over in my sleep, changing positions.

"It's more than that," she says. "You're like, jerking around in your sleep."

"Hmm," I say. "Like those funny jerking motions you make when you're drifting off to sleep, and suddenly you're driving a car into a ditch, and you slam on the brakes, and you almost fall out of bed?"

"Those are called myclonic starts. They're normal. But I think you might be doing something a little more serious."

"Well, what am I doing exactly?" I want to know.

"You don't have any idea?"

"No!"

"You're having little seizures all night long," she says. "I've been sitting up every night watching you. About

500 per night. You suddenly stiffen up, and it's like an explosion of neural energy. Sometimes you jump a foot above the bed. I'm worried you'll fall out of bed and break something."

The only nighttime seizure I remember is the one I just described, when I tried to kick the evil dog, and kicked Rachel instead. The other 10,000 seizures are news to me.

Well, there was one other seizure I remember, but it was a different kind. It happened when I was awake, in my office, about three weeks after my diagnosis. I was sitting at my computer and all of a sudden I got a whiff of a bad smell. I mean, a really bad smell -- like sour, sick menstrual blood. I could smell the iron in the blood, plus a fetid overlay, like blood-soaked rags dipped in bad milk.

There was no question in my mind that it was real, but I searched my desk area, I sniffed my clothes, I cupped my hand over my mouth to check my breath. I looked under my desk, and in the back drawers for a decaying mouse.

Truth is, I only smelled the smell when sitting upright and breathing normally. I was having an olfactory seizure -- consonant with the location of my tumor, along the saggital ridge.

We make an appointment with Dr. Hoj, my neurologist. I now have a team of my family doctor, Tim Rumsey, my neurosurgeon, Dr. Gregory, and a neurologist, Dr. Hoj. Hoj is a very smart, very decent, and very large. When I told him during our first meeting about experiencing pain during masturbation, he had quite a chuckle over that.

"Why is that funny? Do you have patients that don't masturbate?"

"No, I just enjoy having expressive patients. When you're in this work, that can be a novelty."

When we tell Hoj about the seizures, he orders a sleep-deprive EKG for me: an electro-encephalogram test conducted when the subject is tired in order to force you to have seizures, if you are seizure prone, by hyperstimulating your eyes and brain with a stroboscopic light show. With only four hours of sleep the previous night, I sit in the neurologist's chair while the technician attaches a kind of electric hairnet to my head. It is a net with about twenty electrodes connections on it. She has to screw each point into my head with something like a push-pin.

The effect of having twenty pinpricks in your skull is at least reminiscent of a crown of thorns.

Then wires are attached to the twenty points and the wires conduct analog input to a computer and graphing machine. For twenty minutes I stare into the psychedelic maw of unreason, as the machine does its best to provoke a neural damburst, and I do my best to keep my cool.

My score is ambiguous. Dr. Hoj assesses it as equivocal -- I either am having seizures or I'm not. "Just to be on the safe side," he says, "let's get to work defining a medication regimen that will keep this under control."

I don't want to go on the medication. I don't, don't, don't. It's because of the writing. I feel I have to be a certain way in order to write. I can write with a cold, I can write if the temperature outside is 95 degrees, I can write if there are radio reports of an escaped homicidal madman in my

neighborhood. I can write if my checking account is overdrafted or if a presidential election has been overturned.

But I can be very sensitive to other conditions. I can't write if I am depressed. I can't write if I've just been jogging. I can't write if I am tired. I can't write if I am worrying about something. I can't write if I have had a beer. I can't write if I'm not sure who I am.

I am afraid, first of all, that if I go on seizure medications, I will be just different enough that I will no longer be myself, and my special little thing will dry up.

Beyond that, I am afraid that I will cross a line into a new country -- the sovereign nation of seizure guy -- and I will never be able to cross back to what I was.

And the things seizure medications seek to prevent, grand mals sweeping you away in your daytime hours, when you may be exceedingly vulnerable or dangerous -- driving a car, or performing surgery -- aren't happening to me. I am dancing in my bed, and one time I smelled something stinky. As long as Rachel's shins can take the pummeling, I want to continue as I am.

So I refuse Dr. Hoj's advice. A year later, I am still medication-free. The seizures have gotten neither better or worse. Sometimes, I am aware after a seizure that something just happened. Other times, I get a floaty, feathery feeling in my legs that I sense might be the prior sensations of a seizure -- that I'm a colt who has wandered outside the corral and is ready to kick.

I try to make the floaty, feathery feelings subside. But the fact is, you never know if you have a seizure coming on or not.

I think I have been a good patient over the course of my problem. But I rejected Dr. Hoj's advice, and I have never looked back.

Here is the mystery. It has been two years since I saw Dr. Hoj. I have ceased to experience nighttime seizures. The tumor is still there, but it's growth is stalled for some reason. This isn't supposed to happen.

My explanation? I healed.

## Good Dog

I was driving with my daughter down Franklin Avenue, and I pointed out the apartment building I lived in in 1971. I told her the funny story about how I owned two dogs there, and I thought they were being good, but when I let them out the door at night to go to the bathroom, instead of running out the back door, they went down into the basement and pooped by the furnace. But I never went down there, and I didn't find out till too late.

The female was named Çasi. Originally I called her Zazie, after a character in a French movie. But it was too hard to say, and mutated naturally into Ç*a-si*, which I think meant "so-if." Meaningless but euphonic., or so it seemed to me.

Even as a pup she was built strong, big in the legs and haunches, square in the face. She was doleful looking -- all her life people would look at her and bust out laughing. But she was sweet-tempered, and so devoted to me, from the very start.

Her brother was named Che, who was unpredictable, and had a weeping eye that made a gutter down one cheek. They were the pups of my friend Worth's dog. When we traveled through the west the summer before, her dog was impregnated by a big farm dog in a tree house at a commune on a pile of rock called Jacob's Hill, along the Rio Grande in Colorado.

I was pretty confused and lonely then, and Worth gave me three of the puppies. They used to swarm over me on the carpet as little ones, licking me and batting me with their little tails. They made me feel wildly lovable, and I

swore I would protect the little ones. I was very depressed when they came into my life, but they lifted me out of it with their joy.

I gave one away. I can't remember his name. And Che went back to live with Worth, until one day he saw a rabbit by Lake Calhoun, jumped out the car window and was never seen again. Only Çasi stayed with me.

I remember defying the local leash laws. I never used one, because I knew Çasi would never bite or jump on anyone. I wanted her to be free as a country dog, even in the ghetto where we lived. Before Che left I tried adding a doggie entrance to the apartment door, so they could get in and out at night. I took the door down, cut out a square, and screwed in two two-way hinges. When I tried to rehang the door I saw I had put the dog portal on the top half of the door, not the bottom. The two dogs and I stared in perplexity at my handiwork. I latched the piece back onto the door and from then on just left the door unlocked. But they just ran down to the boiler room and squatted on the cement floor.

I didn't want Çasi to have a litter her first heat, because her mom had been a poor mother. But one day I was watering the garden, and I looked over, and this scruffy white dog was already climbing onto her. I cried out no, no, and I came over and tried to pull him off, but it was too late. I guess there's some sort of bulb in the boy dog's penis that swells, and keeps them attached to the end. But I didn't know that then, and I was pulling on the dog's head, turning the hose on them, and finally verbally imploring them to stop -- they looked sheepishly at me, but they didn't stop.

So when the landlord discovered the basement and all the dog poop and had us evicted, Çasi was already heavy with puppies. I told him I only had one dog, and those

messes were ancient, but he listened about as well as the dogs screwing did. Years later, when Rachel and I went to an open house for the home we live in now, the realtor was the same guy. I hated to tell him it was me, because we didn't want to lose the house.

Çasi had a bunch of babies, maybe eight. And sure enough, she was a mediocre mother. She lay down and nursed them, but the misgivings were plain on her face. After a few weeks we took the whole basket to the Humane Society to adopt. I never got a glimmer from Çasi that she missed them. Her great love in life was me. We spent every day together, running, playing fetch, watching TV together. Fully grown, she was a large dog, weighing almost 90 pounds. She was no speedster, but her intensity made her seem quick. I remember once biking to the University with her. When the fourth period bell rang, and the doors to Ford Hall opened and the sophomores exited their courses in Thoreau and Emerson, and there was Çasi, onto this astonished college squirrel in a moment and tearing it to bits.

She was so compliant. I could put my mouth on her nose and blow, and she would shake her so her ears stood up, as if my breath had made them stick up.

I joked that I had taught her a 50 word vocabulary. We would perform Dog Jeopardy in front of people. I would ask, "Who was called the Sultan of Swat?" "Ruth!" "What is the structure found at the top of most buildings?" "Roof!" "What is another name for the aesthetic movement led by Post-Victorian novelist Walter Pater?" "Art for art's sake!" "Good dog!"

I got a job as a security guard because the hours were good for us. I would spend the day playing with her, put on my blue uniform, go guard bell-bottomed pants or patrol a

parking ramp, punch in the clocks, come home, turn the key in the door, and she would be advancing toward me, roused from her slumbers, squinting with delight, beating the furniture legs with her tail, her hot breath and tongue all over my face.

She could spell. Early on I learned to avoid using the word 'park' in conversation because she would go nuts. But when I started saying 'p-a-r-k' instead, she picked up on it, and went into the same eager routine, fetching the leash and banging her head on the door. And we would go to Powderhorn Park or down by the Mississippi, and she would fetch sticks in the water in any season, dutifully bringing me the stick I needed back, dropping it at my feet, and gazing out alertly over the waters for signs of another errant stick.

She was not perfect. Little kids scared her. They were unpredictable. Toddlers especially sent her into a panic, and she would gallop away, excreting some awful anal scent everyone found repulsive. Every three months or so, if she thought I was neglecting her in any way, she would go on an odor binge, rolling in some neighborhood fisherman's fish mess, or dog feces -- anything to put stink behind her ears. And would come to me, slinking in a crouch, knowing I would go ballistic, knowing it was shampoo and quadruple rinse time.

I didn't date because I thought it would make her jealous, and I had no real need for another person. At night we climbed into bed together, me first, her second, treading circles on the covers till she was sure the coast was clear, and she would kneel and sleep with her chin across my knees. She never complained about my drinking, or sleeping in, or my lack of ambition. I could always see my perfection in her eyes, and I was just enough in doubt to benefit from it.

One day I was invited to apply for a job at the University. Somehow I ended up on a list of applicants, though I had never applied for a job there. I protested that fact, but went to the interview, and eventually got the job, and the salary and benefits. That was exciting but it was a day job, and full-time, and I wondered how Çasi would bear up during the days.

Some days she would get impatient and mosh an unabridged dictionary, or chew up some record albums. But we worked it out. I took her for longer bike rides, just before work and again just after. I even started going out on dates, and she seemed to bear them no ill. I guess, thinking back, she was fine just being my dog.

We traveled. We spent the holidays in Miles City, Montana, snowed in. I went out one afternoon and she trashed the basement bedroom she was locked in. Then we drove all the way from Minneapolis to Boston to visit my friend Ray. Ray and I walked around Walden Pond, with Çasi running ahead of us, peeing on the foundation of Thoreau's old shack. I have a picture of me that day, holding my giant dog against my chest. I look so happy in it, me and my beautiful dog bride.

At a Thanksgiving party at my house in 1974, I met Rachel. She was a wonderful girl. She came into my house, where I was cooking goose in apple and plum sauce, wrinkled her nose, and said, 'You're cooking meat?' Some crazy premonition came over me, and I said, 'You're from -- Indianapolis.' It took us awhile, but by February we were in love, with only one problem to overcome: Rachel was allergic to animal hair, and my apartment -- my entire life -- was full of it.

One night Çasi went out the back door, as she always did, and I awoke to feel her standing beside the bed, trying to jump up. She couldn't. I sat up and felt her. She was trembling terribly, her heart going a hundred beats a minute. I picked her up, and held her in my arms, as frightened as she was. In a few short minutes her heart stopped beating, and she was still in my arms.

Oh, how I cried in the middle of that night. I cried and cried, for Çasi, who was a good dog, and a good friend. And for myself, who would never be loved again like that. I put her down on the braid rug she used as her napping place and played my nylon string guitar for her, as I had done many times, just repeating the same three descending chords, over and over again, tears rolling down my cheeks.

When I was done, I called the animal patrol, and they agreed to get her in the morning. I placed her on the front porch, and went to sleep. She froze overnight. When the pickup van arrived in the morning. I slid her stiff body onto the steel floor, and watched as the van turned the corner and disappeared.

I have had sadder things happen to me. But I never *felt* sadder. I tried to go to work, but I kept breaking down, and I biked home before lunch. It took me a week before my voice cleared, and I could confidently finish a sentence. I wasn't unsure of myself, as I had been when I first got Çasi and her brothers. I was just in pain from losing her.

Deep down, I was fine. Her love made me feel so important, so lordly. And I had Rachel now, and we were suddenly free to be with one another and have normal fun together. I vacuumed the hair off the upholstery.

Months later I would come across a black sweater in the summer storage box and it would be herringboned with her white hairs, and I would hold it to my nose and smell her musky doggy body, and think of her. So powerful, so gentle, so serious, despite all our fun, so utterly humble in her love.

Oh Çasi, twenty three years have passed since you swabbed me with your frantic puppy licks, and made a man of me. But I doubt that a week goes by that I do not think of you.

The world is rich with adventure. Clever people doing remarkable things. Exquisite relationships, undying loves. But we learn can't from them, we can only learn from the experiences that come our way. In my life it was a big dog.

You fetched for me so often, in so many ways -- you taught me loyalty, and directness, and the joy of the moment. You taught me to laugh so many years ago, and I am still laughing today. If I could fetch you back to the life you loved, I would.

Çasi, you will always be my girl.

## The Ice Father

(AN AP WIRE STORY RECOUNTING AN EVENT FROM FEBRUARY, 1923. I WAS WIRE EDITOR AT A NEWSPAPER NOT FAR FROM THE SCENE WHEN I CAME UPON THIS STORY, AND RECONSTRUCTED IT)

We left home that morning in the single-seat sleigh, the thirteenth of February, my mama and papa, my brother Eldred and me, Leona, for Gramma's house twelve miles away, and Papa kept urging us, he'd say, You hurry up Leona, that wind is up to something or other, and aught but a fool would tempt it. And Papa wore his great brown coat, with the horse's hair collar, the one that reached all the way to his boots, and I sat beside him and held on to his pocket, and Eldred and Mom held each other for heat.

Frazie, at first she didn't want to go, you could see it plain when she looked over her shoulder, peering through her mane at the door to the barn and the straw-warmed stall. But Papa liked saying that an old horse couldn't do else but obey, and she lit out, headed into the wind already so strong it blew your eyes dry. None of us talked up top in the sleigh, and the shrill in the ear even drowned out Papa's coaxing the horse.

Wind weren't nothing new to us, and Hankinson was but twelve mile, and Frazie was a good enough horse, yet still the clouds took on a ugly look. Eldred, and he was older than me, began crying by and by, but I sat still while the snow commenced to swirl, and Papa cursed and Mama gave him the scold for that, and Pap flung down the reins and jumped off to unfasten Frazie, and slapped her for luck in

finding some still place nearby, and before that horse took two full steps she vanished in the white.

I swear that storm must of hated us, it swore and shouted and stomped for hours, shouted evilly every instant. Mama cupped her hands and called out into Papa's ear, but no one heard, and Mama looked on us terrible grievous, and just as grievous was what she said. She said Children, gather round my knees.

And we both of us knelt beneath Mama's petticoat and dress, Eldred holding her right leg and me having hold on the left, and Mama crouched over us two and Papa stood strong and tall in the single seater, the great brown coat teepeed around his shoulders and stretched down around us all. And there he stood bare faced to the storm that screamed through the day, until I began to hear, in the midst of the clamor, my heart and my mama's and Eldred's hearts beating in threes, and no one said nothing. Eldred and I held hold to the hem of Mama's dress, tucking it time and again underneath us. Throughout, Papa never shifted weight.

I recall when Mama started to shake and I knew she was weeping, and Eldred gone to sleep on my arm, and I did what I could to try and be brave but for one small second when I thought of my Papa and couldn't hold onto myself any longer and dug my fingers into Mama's leg, and though nobody heard me on top of the roar, shouted Papa, Papa, don't die.

He stood like that for twenty hours, all through the long night and on into morning. And when I awakened I knew from the cracking of ice outside it was over. All of us below lost fingers and toes and Mama lost both ears as well and almost lost her nose -- we were a fright to see. And Papa, why, he was dead. He was all froze through and could not be

lifted, not by the minister who came out from Hankinson to help the farmer from over the hill who showed up with Frazie tethered and well. We was only ten trees from help all the while.

I wished you could of seen my Papa, his eyes was frozen open, still blue, you could tell he was thinking of something far off. I tried saying goodbye but it was like tapping through ten panes of glass, and I had lost all feeling in my hands. The reverend backed me away by the shoulder but I pushed his mitt away and cried. Oh Papa, I told him that Valentine's day, how could you stand stock still and still leave us.

## **In the Year of the Deer Christ**

Your ear picks up at the sound of the mail deliverer pulling away in his station wagon. As you step out the door, his dust still hovers in the air.

You hike down the long drive to the box. There won't be much. There never is. A while ago you grew accustomed to receiving the unwanted, the supermarket circular, the mimeo school district report, the pink slip of the utility bill exposed at the envelope window.

There is a sister in Kansas City, but never word any more. You understand. Everyone has his life to live, everyone's gone off to live it. After a while you are no longer disappointed. Low expectations are easily fulfilled. The wonder is that after all these days you still make this long hike, every day, before the postman's dust dies down.

Up the road: you notice, not for the first time, how it narrows, looping over the neighbor's hilltop, dwindles, meets at a point and vanishes. Like a flame it flickers over that hill. And like a triangle it makes its point. On one side of the triangle is half the world, and on the other, the other.

It cuts the world, it is like a swath of desert surrounded by oasis. A bridge of beige light. A wedge hewn from rock.

A yo-yo. Every day you rise on its string; and every night descend again.

Well, you say. Well. It's your road, this rural route. And your wasted morning dream.

It's your road, did you say, speeding across the gravel. Uncle helped build it when he was in his twenties and one of eight who lived in the township. A road every mile, north and south, checkering the prairie. It had no name, it was simply the road, or, more simply, your road. Your people made it, your race maintains it, your kind stake claim to it day after day. Every time the key turns in the ignition and the wheels roll out onto it. Like a signature.

The only disputants are those who will never get it right. And they are all beasts, meadow beasts, marsh beasts, ditch beasts. Each year becomes a long and tedious inquiry. You wonder why they need to cross the road and they wonder why you need to steer between its shoulders.

A thousand times in the blank dark night that pair of eyes has frozen in the headlights like a thief at the silver drawer. And the being never moves, disbelieving or blinded or both, buoyed by an animal, other logic. This is a bafflement to the soft-hearted driver, the cheer of his day soured by the sight of this body diving under wheel. He could have stepped aside. Why didn't he?

*Whump.* Another innocent life broken by the road. Counting their bones is like cruising into Rome, crucifixions lining the highway.

An ancient dream: peeling apart the venetian blinds, the sight of men at work in the dark. Spotlight. The stag, tied tight at the hooves, hoisted on a pulley on the big limb of the old apple tree. Grandfather stepping forward, butcher's knife raised. The great heart tumbling onto the black grass.

In the summer we mow the ditches every six weeks to keep down the insect and milkweed populations. In the spring the township men come by and spray with herbicides. And in the last weeks of fall the farmers douse the roadsides with gasoline and burn them back to the shouts of the cattle, fearful of the smoke.

It does no good. Winter comes and the snow settles where the wind decides, some of the roads block off for the season, some take on the trappings of trench warfare, one lane wide, eight or ten feet of snow piled high on either side. To see sunlight you look straight up. But beware of oncoming traffic: when two cars meet in a five-mile trench, one backs down, shifts into reverse.

Now in the cold season you stand by the window, watching the snow pass over the road like stampeding spirits. At night you dream of a record snow, your lifeline to town, to shelter and food, cut off for weeks. After a time, the deck of cards gets tired of solitaire. By day you move in the tension of ice. One false move will lay you low. One guest from a passing truck and you shoot off the road.

In the month of suicides no word comes. The mailbox licks your moist fingertips.

Did you think spring would come? Still its coming is a surprise. One day you step out the door in shirt sleeves, blinking. You survived the season behind you; but could anything else?

The road is streaked with the skid of tires veering this way and that through the slime. A corpse of ashen snow lies coruscating in the ditch. Gray puddles reflect the gray spring sky, like columns of obituaries in a weekly newspaper's

March editions. You think this ragged road will never be repaired, but the township grader passes through that afternoon and makes its way straight again. What a sensation it is today to smell the smells of the melting earth you thought unresurrectably dead escaping once again!

Arrayed on every loop of telephone line the dozen grackles screech their screech. Every grackle faces east, like beads on an abacus. On a rosary.

All winter you doubted. Today now, as you stand by the mailbox, a letter in your hand, you see something, a sign, pressed into the mud at your feet. You kneel there, in the glistening clay, and with the tips of two fingers you enter the print of the improbable deer.

# **A Prophecy**

FOR MY DAUGHTER, FOR SOMEDAY

When I was eleven my sister Kathy died, she was five years older, born sick, a leaky heart valve that tapped her strength and turned her blue, and my role as brother was to fetch for her, and I ran up and down the stairs with colored pencils, teacups, Scrabble tiles, wires, beads, I never minded, she was a kind girl, she thought I was funny, she loved to draw horses, and before she died she won one of those matchbook art contests, with a charcoal of a black Arabian, and a year later the art company sued us for back tuition, and won, and that was our luck in those days, I remember disgracing us three times the day of the funeral, first I insisted on wearing a wite straw hat with a turquoise feather my Uncle Jack bought at a turnpike plaza, and making a scene when they wouldn't let me, second I broke into a horrible grin when I saw my friends in the pews at mass, and finally, I was caught throwing eggs at the parked cruiser of the police escort at the reception aterward, and watched the dripping yolk reach down the car window and door like raked fingers, and while people downstairs ate ham I fell on my bed and argued with God it was all a joke, and fantasized how scary it was to be you, carted off in a litter from the house, blue hand clutching the sheets, asking mommy am I going to die, and all because you never lost your baby teeth and they were rotting in your head and a dentist did his best and made us sign a release but something broke, some vessel inside you that led to your brain, and you lived three more days in a hospital in our little town, and what was your life but a box of notebooks of horses and letters to Elvis and the play you wrote and put on in the garage with the boy down the street who grew up to be gay, and the taunts of your classmates for being that way, and did you awaken in the night in your bed and wonder like me if the presence spooling in the dark would collect your life from you like a subscription fee, for I saw your death as a sign, a palmprint

on a piece of paper that says everyone dies and rather than become afraid I became hard and lived my whole youth that way, and I suffered because I wanted so to replace you but it was the last thing I could communicate, and when God decided to answer my prayer in the goodness of time and I married your mom and became father of your children, and you blessed my life with your beauty, it began again, the dreams, and I cry more than ever sometimes at the thought of a sick child hurt and dying and confused, and the hole it blasts in the mother and the father, in my mother who cannot talk about these things thirty years later, she became an amateur genealogist, I think because the dead do not disappoint, or my father, who left for California to slam his grief and failures behind him, there are craters of flesh opened in all of us, kids, there is war behind every painted fence, and I have learned no wisdom that can make this not hurt, we are unfortunately stuck with it like we are stuck with one another, all our lives and beyond our lives, crybabies like sand hollering at the water to stop, so let us have our cry and wipe our noses and forgive me my sadness and mixing you up in my mind, but you once had an aunt, a blue young girl who looked like you, who won a ribbon for riding in Pioneer Week, six months before she died, and posed in the glory of jeweled paste, black harnesses bearing the name Jaye, her rayon cowgirl blouse shining blue in the lens like aluminum foil and the glass teeth bared, a photo of weakness but how strong she was to survive this life, and live on in my heart, that is how strong we will have to be, courageous as children are carried away, and have to trust the carrier, because those hands are all they have, that a life sometimes takes many lifetimes, to learn and laugh and know, perhaps some mighty victory is growing in you now.



## Death, Hell & Santa Claus

My kids are reaching a certain age, and they are finding stuff out. About six months ago my seven-year-old -- she will want me to point out that she was 6 at the time -- asked me if there really was or was not a Santa Claus.

She had asked the question before, but then it was with a look on her face that seemed to say, "You won't believe what some of the kids at school whose folks are divorced said." This time, the look said, "I already know."

So I told her. "Santa Claus is a disguise for all the moms and dads and grandparents of the world, who want to show kids how much they love them, but don't want credit for doing it."

Not bad for no warning, right? Anyway, she bought it, especially when I took her aside and told her that now she was on our side, and it wouldn't do to spoil the fun for her little brother, 3.

My daughter is a gentle soul, and she absorbs these changes gracefully. But I can't get over the feeling that I am only giving her one thread of the tapestry at a time. I am aching to spill the whole kettle of beans in one summary blurt-out to her. "No Santa Claus, and we die, and there may or may not be a God, and if there is, maybe there is a hell you go to when you die, and injustice is not always punished in this life, absurd household accidents claim a million Americans every year, people's lives hit unspeakable dead-ends, they marry the wrong people, their kids move away, marry bums, and break their hearts, the social system breaks their spirit, and the universe is a gigantic pulsing mystery, and your parents have sex."

That is too much to lay on a kid. In fact, I'll bet you're a little shaken yourself -- I know I am. But adult life is a robust catalog of this kind of gloom. Whenever we tell our kids to grow up, what we really mean is get wise and give up.

I don't remember when I first learned about death. Probably Red Ryder meant to shoot a gun out of someone's hand, but the bullet ricocheted (zing!) and pierced his heart instead. But real death, as opposed to TV death, revealed its nature only with the passage of years. One night when I was 7 my mom had to pack quickly for a trip to Michigan. Her mom had had a heart attack, and was dead. In her grief, my mom said Grandma was "with the angels now," ostensibly to comfort me -- but probably more to comfort herself. To me it raised the specter of my Grandma -- a lovely warm-hearted woman whom I had seen tear a still-warm chicken apart at the kitchen table -- cavorting with angels. Surely that was as absurd as no afterlife at all?

In those days people were less nervous about death -- it happened, and you cried. We hadn't yet learned to be properly anxious about it. I'm 41 now, and I and a lot of my generation are listening with much closer attention to talk about such things as living wills, actuarial probabilities, and claims about canola oil and rice bran. The signs of our ripeness -- bulging bellies and IRAs -- are signs that we are ready to be plucked from the vine. And our kids, these precious custom units sent to replace us, are just barely coming to grips with "reality."

Family life gave us the basics, but it took the nuns at school to platte out the full ideology of death. We die because of Adam and Eve's sin, they said. If they had not indulged themselves at our expense, we would live forever.

I spent at least a year cursing Adam and Eve's stupidity. Then it dawned on me that they hadn't been given a very complete instructions manual for the Garden. God told them they would surely die. But what did they know of death? And since when were all the rest of us included in their fate? I can see Adam and Eve having to die, but what did I ever do to deserve to die? I had always been aces to everyone I knew.

Well, maybe not aces. Maybe not even deuces. By the second grade I had accepted the concept that someday, probably when I was really old and really didn't care much one way or the other, I would die. This was hard in itself. What made it worse was the new knowledge that I would almost certainly go to hell.

Hell? Yes. In its ancient wisdom my religion had decided that the death of the body was insufficient deterrent in and of itself. The soul must also be perishable -- it could be caught in the throes of death agony throughout eternity. If you were not really, really good. A classic case of double jeopardy.

As for why I would go to hell, it was only logical. There was just too much dishwater over the dam -- mostly lies. Virtually everything I said was a lie. Couldn't help myself -- still can't. So, around age 8, I adopted a modified limited hangout strategy. Yes, I would die. But on the day of judgment, realizing God had to make a lot of snap decisions amid all the hubbub of Armageddon, I intended to make a dramatic plea for clemency -- on the grounds that I was weak, that I was sorry, that I had always had the feeling that, somehow, God had a special feeling about me, and now was the time to put that feeling to the test.

That might not work, of course, so I probably had to be working on Plan B all along. In Plan B you look to others to save you, you work like crazy all your life to make a positive impression on people. Perhaps, if you did great and memorable things, when you died, a part of you would carry over -- your reputation. Maybe you would earn a line in the World Almanac, or have your picture appear in the daily paper, holding a big fish. Or maybe all you would be is a cherished thought in the minds of those who knew you, and they maybe would build a wax diorama of you doing something typical, like clipping your toenails, just off the living room of your great great grandchildren's house, and you would sit like that for eternity, a grin on your face and your foot in your hand. And the effigy would be smiling, because through it you had cheated the grave, sort of. That's if things went really, really well.

I haven't told my kids about hell. It's bad enough they know all about death already. All those people on getting gunned down on the news, blowing up, and going over cliffs in cars. They know all about death.

Maybe. One day my daughter threw herself on the sofa. "I wish I were dead!" she sobbed. But when I asked her why she wanted to be dead, she said she fell and scraped her knee on the bus, and whenever she flexed it it stung. If she were dead, she figured, she wouldn't feel the sting.

I was glad she didn't know about dying. I went through a morbid streak when I was an adolescent, in which I lay awake for hours at night, certain a tumor was working its way through my head, certain blackness, oblivion, and unfulfillment were my destiny. It was all about me, that death -- only I would make that dark crossing.

When my stepdad died last fall, after a long illness, I took the kids to the vigil. There lay my dear old dad, who had been a lion in life, always roaring about one thing or another, then sick and feeble, and now, all done up by the embalmer, well, he looked great -- noble, calm, patriarchal. My stepdad was what you would call a great guy. Always doing for other people, and impossibly generous. Even when I was on the outs with my family he always slipped me a few 20s when he saw me. His employees loved him, everyone in town loved him -- even his wife and children loved him. Toward the end he let his white beard grow, a kind of Santa Claus himself. When he came down sick, with a real brain tumor, this rough, loud man surprised everyone with a sudden meekness and peacefulness of heart. It was a tough time, and he bore it well.

I held my young son against my chest as we viewed the casket. He did not disgrace me. He stared solemnly at his grandfather's face, said, "Poppa's sleeping," and absently raised the arm of his Donatello figurine.

I worried how the funeral might affect the kids, if they would have nightmares, or what. On the way back, outside Chicago, I noticed a tear in Daniele's eye. "Are you all right?" I asked.

"I'm fine," she said. "I'm just sad Poppa is dead."

Maybe that's how it is, then -- fantasy death giving way to the real thing, obsessions and compulsions giving way to grief, and life going on, like a young girl. We drove home singing the happy hiker song, and that night I dreamed of the body of Santa at night, reposed in soft snow, and high above the crisp, still sky, the stars of heaven sparkling.

## DEAD CAT

I entered a barn on an abandoned farm in the town of Kinbrae where I lived. In a manger on a bed of old straw I found a cat, very dead, very thin, no fur, just taut leather surrounding. Its back was arched in a defensive posture, its face stretched wide in a final hiss, and in its mummified condition you could read each vertebra and tooth. I think it had a heart attack and died defending itself, against a German Shepherd or raccoon. The attacker then slunk away, leaving the cat a statue of life and death.

When my friend Ray came to visit the farm I took him for a tour of things I had seen -- the grave of Suicide Minnie, the sandpaper leaf of the lamb's ear plant, finally to the manger in the Sveringen barn, and we stared at the cat like reverent bad boys and walked home. That night we lay down in the township road and watched the aurora shift and split in the northern sky.

Ray was from Cambridge, a city guy, gay, into *est*, a sculptor, painter, performance artist. He flew back home the following day, and I did not hear from him for several years, and he invited me to read a poem at an exhibit of his.

The art was stupendous -- torsos in charcoal, roughcut wood, hairy ropes, chains. Ray couldn't draw his way out of a bag, but he had something, a fabulous vigor, that moved me. At the heart of the installation he had suspended on invisible line the dead cat from Sveringen's barn, and it turned slowly in the warm air of the gallery, whiskers stiff, eyes black, teeth bared to the ear.

It was like, the height of bad taste to exhibit a dead creature as art, and yet everyone who saw was overwhelmed at the brave agony of the cat. In a gallery that had seen

plenty of bad ideas and wrongheaded impulses here was life and death suspended in a haze, it was more than noteworthy, it was serious.

A part of me resented that Ray had stolen back in the night and taken my sacred pilgrimage object, half of me gratified that he thought it so powerful that he packed the dead animal in his dufflebag and drove from Minnesota to Massachusetts with it in the back seat.

And astonished to see it now, in its current setting, twisting in the light.



Afterward I lost track of you. We had been friends since college, you always so private, a dog-eared copy of *The Drunken Boat*, by your bed. Your posture was so bad you spent a summer walking through Europe with a backpack full of rocks to straighten yourself up. One time I went to your room to listen to *Highway 61 Revisited* and came upon your diary and read it, and I felt so ashamed of myself, that I started a diary of my own, and that I was only able to keep going a few days.

One winter I ran away from college to Boston and spent January in an apartment 20 inches from the El tunnel. Every 20 minutes the train passed near, but my friends and I were so stoned we thought it was funny. You had never been high and I took you to the Tea Party and the Velvet Underground was playing and we lay on our backs in a psilocybin haze and watched the ballroom dissolve.

Back at college you went crazy on dope, you began joking that you were Jesus. Later, it wasn't a joke anymore. Without a smile you turned in a 36-page paper to his religion professor called "Jesus," and every page blank. The

professor, a Scots Presbyterian as serious as his name, J. Arthur Baird, had you sent home to get better.

I didn't know then that you were gay, and I wasn't your type, and it never mattered. You worked for three years teaching painting at Walpole Penitentiary, to murderers and rapists and killers. On the last day you told them that you were gay because you wanted them to know you, and that a person could be OK and still be a faggot, but you didn't want them to have to kill you in the process.

I didn't worry about them so much as AIDS. When people started to die you assured me you didn't do the things that put a body at risk, but I worried anyway. You visited twice after the cat exhibit, and I had had two kids, and our lives took a sharp turn away from one another. For a while you were in Cleveland, teaching at the museum. Then Thailand, doing I don't know what -- and that was where I lost you.

I called your parents, I called all our friends, no one would tell me where you are or what became of you. I need to understand because we were friends.

You once called me a human being and it was a wonderful compliment coming from you, for whom human meant noble and feeling and alive and crazy was all right, a sign you were paying attention to things. I admired you so, and if I had the great spotlight of the world to direct you would be turning in it now like that dead cat, abused in life and abused beyond it, ugly and craggy and ridiculous and untalented but fully engaged, all muscle and mind alert to life and life's unlikely opportunities and the aurora borealis would shift and slide and light up our faces the way it did in 1977, and the light show on the stage in 1968, and that trip to Rockport in '73 when we lay in the back of the pickup truck

watching the electric lines loop by, when we were young and not yet treed or backed into impossible corners, and the world would see your courage, Ray, in the crowclaws of your broken grin and the dazzle of your eyes, radiant artist and friend of my youth, they would know.

JUNE, 1993

[Three years later I did find Ray, using a combination of personal letters, CD-ROM phone directories, and Internet e-mail. He lives in Singapore. He is HIV-negative, but he lives with a man who is HIV-positive.]

## Things I Meant to Notice

I meant for the longest time to think about the little tasks, about tying the shoes, and fitting the hands into gloves, I saw my big hands negotiating the laces and trying sleeve after sleeve over finger and thumb.

I could have had fun with the sand I dumped out of each sneaker, enough for a beach, enough for a castle and a moat.

I could have written about the look on their faces sometimes, that they saw us not as the oafs who yelled and sighed and lived stupidly above eye level, but shining gods, shining, omnipotent and perfect.

How when they cried in your arms they were praying to you to make it better, to lift the pain from their lives, and you could.

I could have written about the tiredness of the house, the exhaustion of the tabletops, crusted with crud, sponged pointlessly after meals, the flakes and globs spattered on the floor that fill the cracks in the hardwood.

Or the handles on the stroller that were not long enough, so you walked in a crouch, and the white plastic wheels that turned sideways on a whim or a pebble and skidded to a halt.

I could have remembered their bodies between us in bed when they were just babies, the smell of them there, the cramped caution of the dark, the wet exhalation from their noses. The kick of them against blanket, that wakes you and momentarily annoys you, then draws you even closer.

Why did they finally leave our bed, our big pink comforter and the warmth of the family, for beds of their own? There was space for us all, and another night would have cost them nothing, but they went.

I could have described the last night they woke up frightened and sauntered in barefoot and climbed in between us. They slept again immediately, and we tried, too.

But I know you were thinking, off on your side, that this is the moment, and this was our life, and the white skin of our children dove and fell again beside us, in the bright sun setting, out to sea.

## A Jar In Tennessee

You know those microcassette recorders, that cost \$29? I buy them not quite like candy, but often enough that there are several around the house.

They are great for taking notes when out walking. Sometimes people see you and think you are schizophrenic, talking to your hand, but that is small price to pay, in my mind, for being able to "write" on the fly.

OK. Imagine it is a beautiful fall morning, and I am walking my big standard poodle Beauregard at Crosby Farm Nature Area, alongside the Mississippi River in Saint Paul. It is an undeveloped park with lots of paths cutting through the trees along the shore. A perfect place for a scofflaw to let his dog run wild for a few minutes.

And I have the microcassette machine in my pocket, a generic blister-pack Sony. The morning is gorgeous, with newfallen leaves ankle-deep, and white vapor rising from the river. Once, a four-point deer pokes his head into a clearing.

My dog begs me to chase him. It's his favorite game, a role reversal because chasing others is the center of his life otherwise. But I'm game, and I chug along for a hundred yards with him. We take several switchbacks, going deeper into the trees. When we arrive at the riverbank, I feel in my pocket for the recorder. It's gone.

You know how when something is gone you check every pocket eleven times to make sure it's gone? Well, this was gone. I figure I either dropped it when I made my last note, or it fell out of my pocket during the little jog. So I

begin backtracking. The dog wants me to chase him some more, but I my mood is rapidly darkening and I decline.

Leaves have been falling in large numbers, so the ground is covered with brown shapes and jagged shadows, all of which look like my little machine. I begin calculating in my mind the loss of the unit -- maybe \$40. Besides, they wear out quickly because you are always dropping them and knocking them on tabletops. I look everywhere I walked -- about a two-mile distance -- for the little machine. No luck.

I am nearly reconciled to the loss when I spot it, lying on a patch of bare dirt. The battery and tape compartments are both sprung open, and the tape and batteries lay splayed out on the ground, as if a squirrel or crow have given some thought to taking them home, and then said, nah.

I pop the machine back together and push the play button, still ready for the worst, a dead unit. But instead I hear my own voice. I am talking about Sao Paulo Brazil, which I visited on business two weeks before. On the tape, I am sitting in a bus on a smoggy artery heading out of town, talking to myself about the beggars I see crouched by the highway signs, and the advertising, with the nearly naked models, and the infinite pastel rows of high-rise apartment buildings.

And now I am standing in a clearing in the forest, 7000 miles away, hearing my high, sped-up voice. The woods are so quiet that this little machine and its tinny little speaker ring clear through the air. Nearby birds, hearing my recorded chatter and finding it suspicious, take wing and flap away to a safer roost.

If you have ever stood between two mirrors and seen the illusion of infinite regression in them, you have an idea

what I am feeling, addressing myself electronically from a place so different and so far away.

And if that was not stunning enough, I flip the tape over -- I do not want to tape over this interesting travelogue -- and there is my daughter's voice, talking to a caller on the phone. I re-use my answering machine tapes in my hand recorder, and this tape is perhaps five years old, when my little girl was eight. Her voice sounds so clear, so young and lovely. I forgot what she sounded like then. I can't tape this over, either.

The dog, meanwhile, is standing there looking at me with that panting grin dogs wear when they are in their element to the hilt. But the look on his face just now is all wonderment and admiration. He "understands" very little that I do, but this latest trick, picking something up in the woods and having it talk to me in my own voice, well, this just takes the cake.

Insurance company executive/poet Wallace Stevens once wrote a simple poem called "A Jar in Tennessee," which said that placing a human artifact on a hill in Tennessee changes everything about the hill and Tennessee. Consciousness places frames of meaning on the wilderness.

That's what I see in the look in Beau's eye. It's entirely likely, as Stevens is his favorite poet. And it is a gorgeous day, with the scent of sand and pine adrift like microscopic confetti in the morning breeze, and I do enjoy walking.

## **"When You Meet a Classmate Who Has Been Burned... "**

I spent the last weekend of the summer at a favorite old camp in the Boundary Waters. When we checked into our cabin, I found the following list of suggestions on the cabin bulletin board. Evidently the group using the camp the week before us was composed of burn victims. It made me stop and think, and share it with you.

*Say HELLO! Be yourself.*

*Smile and let the person know that you are a friend.*

*Understand that a person who has been burned will have scars and may look different. That difference is on the outside only. On the inside that person is the same as before the burn injury.*

*Remember that the person who has been burned may need a special face mask, body suit or splints.*

*Know the face mask, splints and body suit are important ways to keep burn scars flat and smooth.*

*Speak kindly and politely to the person if you have questions about the burn or scars.*

*As the person who has been burned to join your activities or games.*

*Remember to see the person with burn scars as a PERSON.*

*Understand that a person with a burn injury probably has many talents and interests, just like you.*

*Try to put yourself- In the other person's place. Remember that we all have problems of different kinds.*

*Take note of what the person CAN do and the special and helpful Ideas he or she has.*

*Show friendly interest and acceptance. Problems often start from other people's attitudes rather than from the burn itself.*

## Florence McCready

"Tom, here's a story that tells you everything about our little town," said Gil, the publisher of the newspaper that had just hired me. Gil loved to tell stories. When he had a good one, he sometimes paused in the telling to close his owlsh eyes and smile at the power that shivered in it.

"You know our society editor, Flo McCready."

Indeed I did. Florence was a lively, sharp-tongued but decent reporter with the paper. She published the wedding notices and recipes, plus a very mild gossip column she wrote mainly involving who was visiting whom from out of town. As mild as it was, some folks in town still thought she came on too fresh and too strong. Can't we just let things be, they said. Must we stick our noses into other people's parlors?

But they kept reading, and Flo kept writing. I liked Flo for her edge, not as a writer so much, than as a person. She was a small woman about five foot in flats, with a funny smirk that put me in mind of Judy Garland, if she had stayed Judy Gumm all her life and never ventured out of Grand Rapids. At 42 she was steady and smart. I felt, when I talked to her, that she might hint at just about anything. Not say it out loud; that wouldn't do in a small town. Just to intimate that such things occurred caused the cracking of ancient chains.

"Here in Alastair we don't have to hate anything. We just say it's *different*."

"Prairie families are unusually close. Winters are long and farmers get used to their wives."

"There goes Agnes Svengstad," she said to me once as we hurried into a café. "Ask me sometime about her zucchini squash."

Something at some point had liberated Florence. Perhaps it was the summer she spent in London in 1968 with a girlfriend, seeing plays at the West End and laughing at the Kensington gentlemen. Perhaps it was her divorce a decade later to the head of the ag studies program at the junior college, after only a year of marriage. Out of that or some other experience, she was willing now to bear down on you with an intense, canny look that would follow you anywhere, hint at all sorts of improprieties without actually saying much, and the hell with the consequences. She was not a teller of truths so much as a reminder that there was such a thing as the truth. In a small town, where so many things are swept under the braid rug, and then a chair is placed on it to weigh it down, that was plenty. I liked her.

"Well, what you don't know, what nobody knows about Flo, is that she wasn't born a McCready. The story I am about to tell you came from her half-sister Josephine, who told it to me before she moved to Cuero, Texas.

"Florence was the daughter of an unmarried 17-year-old girl from down in Iowa, named Peterson. She had got pregnant with some fellow, and came up here to Barnum County to a home where girls could go to term in those days and give their babies up. Miss Peterson had the baby, gave it up, then returned home. After about 60 days Flo was adopted by a middle-aged couple named McCready. He worked the second night shift doing maintenance at the grain elevator. She was a stay at home mom.

"That should have been the end of the story. But the thought of the baby began to weigh on the Peterson woman.

Three years later, she moved to our town. Somehow she found out that Flo was born the same day as her baby. In small towns, you can learn things like this. So the Peterson woman did something very bold -- she bought the lot right next to the McCreadys, and proceeded to park a mobile home on the lot, and make her home there. She took a job at the local frozen food company, breeding shrimp.

"And she became a good neighbor to Allen and Mary McCready. She kept an eye on the house when they went away. She made zucchini bread for them when August came around. She smoked Winstons 101s, but she never smoked in the McCready house. And she offered to babysit the little girl, with whom she seemed to get along so naturally, playing pattycake, and planting hydrangeas in a tractor tire ring out by the mailbox, and going for walks by Lake Hornung when her mom was out shopping. The McCreadys were Congregationalists going back to the boat that landed just after the Mayflower, or the one after that; Alma Peterson attended the Evangelical Lutheran church a block away, but never took communion.

"At no time did she ever behave like anything but a good neighbor and friend. At no time did Mary McCready suspect she was anything but those things. At no time did the little girl suspect she was adopted.

"When Florence was a freshman in high school, her father Allen McCready died. He was 58, and a sudden heart attack at the elevator did him in. When Flo was a junior, her adoptive mother was diagnosed with cancer. The Peterson woman was at Mary McCready's side for the better part of a year, helping Flo with her schoolwork, helping around the house, and finally, toward the end, nursing Mary through the last painful weeks of her life. At the funeral, she stood in the

pew behind Flo and sang "Old Wooden Cross" in her strained soprano in her daughter's ear.

"Then a new chapter began between Flo and her birth mother. They became adult friends, still living side by side. Flo went to the local college, obtaining a degree in speech and communications, and Alma Peterson cheered her on. Flo married a dispatcher for a trucking company, and they stayed married for four years, having one child, a little boy named Adam.

"Then they split up. Alma listened to Flo pour out her tale of woe, and encouraged the young woman to stand her ground. Alma gave a deposition in the divorce, and afterwards, began babysitting for Adam when Flo went to her new job at the newspaper managing as manager of the morgue, the backlog of all the paper's stories.

"It was in the morgue that Flo, idly looking through back issues, found an odd birth notice, for an unnamed girl on the same date as her birth, to a woman named Peterson -- and no notice of a girl born to the McCready family.

"Flo was always so smart. She went to the courthouse and asked, as a reporter, to look at the child's live birth records. There she saw, under Identifying Characteristics, mention of the rose-colored birthmark on the right earlobe.

"She understood in a flood all that had transpired. Her mother was not her mother; her neighbor was. All that feeling, compressed into two city lots alongside an irrigation ditch. What was required of her now?

"She decided that the best thing was to continue the pretense. She did not want to embarrass her birth mother. Nor did she want to diminish the achievement of her adoptive mother, who had kept this information from her,

and never given her reason to wonder about her origin or her place in her mother's heart.

"And so it continued, mother and daughter living side by side as neighbors, neither giving the other for thirty years any hint that she knew the identity of the other.

"And it happened that in her sixty-eighth year Alma Peterson also came down with cancer, of the lungs, and this time it was Flo's turn to be the nurse. She finally took Alma into her house, and put her in the bed her mother had died in.

"In the end, the older woman was coughing up tumor and gasping for breath, but Flo did not call for an ambulance. On the twelfth of February, 1976, a few minutes after midnight, Alma Peterson died in her daughter's arms, their secret never conceded.

"But in the last six weeks of Alma Peterson's life, Florence McCreedy looked into her eyes with greater devotion that one could expect from a mere neighbor. Florence understood that a young woman who had been unable to give her life to her child at first wound up giving all that and more.

"And the daughter, knowing the terrible loving truth, but too respectful of her mother to break the rules of the game and express it in words, kept her part of the bargain as well."

## It'll Never Happen Again

When you were young, were there songs that just knifed through you? I remember in 1965, Bobby Darin had a hit with "If I Were a Carpenter." It was a little thick, but such nakedness of emotion. *Would you marry me anyway? Would you have my baby?* I was fifteen, and it cut me like sharp scissors.

The composer was Tim Hardin, and in college I bought his second LP, and would listen to it with my roommate Frank, who owned the first. In turn I played both for my girlfriend Jan, a faculty brat who knew much more music than me, everything from Judy Collins to the Fugs.

In those days Hardin was categorized as a folksinger, but really he was an early singer-songwriter, like Jackie deShannon or Paul Simon. What was striking to me was his ability to nail the feeling of a song in a few notes. In one, Hardin addresses Hank Williams, who dies before Hardin can hear him perform:

Goodbye Hank Williams, my friend.  
I didn't know you, but I been places that you been.

In another, he begins:

I remember our first affair.  
All the pain, always rain  
In our lives.  
It'll never happen again...

That last line, repeated three heartbreaking times, was what threw me: It'll never happen again. Could there be a more sobering thought, implying severance of love, and therefore severance of life? But isn't it true of everything

sweet that ever happens to a person. It never *can* happen again. Because that's how life is.

I thought of the sorrows of my own life -- my sister's death of a leaky heart when she was 15, and I was 11, and my father's coming round to the empty house a year later, to tell me he was going away, and shake my hand under the Chinese elm.

I dreamed at least every week that Kathy had come back, and it was all a big mistake somehow, or my dad did. But they never did. It never happened again, just like in the song, and how keenly I felt that loss.

After Christmas break Frank, my roommate, told me he got tickets to a Tim Hardin concert in Greenwich Village, and he and his mother Nancy drove up from Princeton to see it. His dad was in the foreign service and his mother was an artist, so Frank's dorm room was full of paintings she had made of interesting people she had known in Khartoum and Rome. So Frank figured she would be open to Hardin, and he never dreamed Hardin would make him regret the choice.

But that is what happened. It turned out Hardin was addicted to heroin and pills and I guess booze, and he showed up at the concert frantic and repulsive, grabbing his crotch during songs and talking to the audience about cunts and cocks, and flicking cigarettes into the front rows. And the songs weren't the tender ballads of our records, but jazzed-up going-nowhere heroin crotch songs you wouldn't ordinarily want to take your mother to.

Nancy was cool with it, but for Frank it was an evening of embarrassment, disappointment, and a wasted thirty dollars. How could that foul-mouthed beatnik be the

same tender guy who sang "Misty Roses" and "Reason to Believe"? We continued to listen to him that spring, but more as a conundrum than a fan favorite.

My girlfriend Jan and I had a good thing going. She was the kind of girl anyone would like to know, beautiful inside and out. She had small features, faint eyebrows and an indistinct mouth, and her complexion looked like it could go haywire at the drop of a hat. But her eyes were beautiful, and it wasn't just me that said so. I overheard this straight guy named Bruce that I went to high school with, who went on to the same college as me, once tell someone I was with the greatest looking girl there. When I heard that, I looked at her with blood in my eyes. She was tall, and hip, and kind, and she loved to laugh.

I was a virgin, but Jan got it into her head that I was witty and a poet, which was practically as good as not being a virgin, and we would walk around our college town for long afternoons in the warm October light, talking about everything and nothing, my arm around her waist, resting on the cool bare skin above her belt. She reminded me of my sister, but I was very hot for her, and the news that she would be pulling out of school and going to a place up in Minnesota instead, where her dad Ned taught art, distressed me no end. But what could I do? I had no intention of ever being a carpenter; indeed, I'd be a terrible carpenter, because I have no patience with details, and things don't fit in my hands, and she was the one who wanted babies, not me. Still, I yearned for her like the man in that song.

I not only yearned for Jan, I yearned for her family. The few times I visited with them, I joined them at the family dinner table and exulted in the conversation, which

managed to be both unselfconscious and intelligent. Jan was the oldest, a regal daughter. Her brother Will was a bodacious prince, innocent but very opinionated. There was a mom and a sister and another brother involved, too. Aces every one, but I can't describe them all to you.

The centerpiece of the family was Ned, the art professor. He was a small man, but red-headed fiery and ferociously clear about what he believed. He'd been a Navy pilot in the Pacific in World War II, and I got the idea that he came home against all odds and married his sweetheart from school. Which was something I could get my mind around. Now, his hand almost always cradled a warm pipe bowl, like him a survivor of wartime action. He was a man who was tempered by flame, and just naturally more serious and sensible than other men. Best of all, he seemed to honestly respect me. I found I acted better around him than I did around anybody. I liked who I was when I was with him, just like I did with Jan. I didn't want to lose these people.

He seemed to like the madness of the sixties, but not the predation or the laziness or the bullshit. He despised faculty members who fooled around with students. He despised shortcuts of any kind. "Do the work," was the advice he gave everyone. Jan once confided to me that Ned told her he liked me very much, and it took me by such surprise I caught myself blinking back tears.

One remark stands out for me. Ned was recounting a conversation he'd had with other faculty members that day. "Fred, you hold onto that pipe of yours like it's a friend," one teacher joked. "It's my only friend, Charlie," Ned said ruefully. "My only friend." And he chuckled violently at the recollection.

Several times, trying to call Jan back to me, I hitchhiked to Minnesota and bombed in on her. But each time was a disaster. Her mom and dad were patient and kind with me, but Jan had outgrown me. She had new boyfriends, older boyfriends, artists and actors, and they were more neurotic and therefore more adult than me. Gradually, it sank in to me that the thing we had at the college in Ohio was over, and it would never happen again, just like in the song.

A year later I dropped out of school and made one final effort to make Jan see my way, flying into Minnesota without a winter coat on a cold night in November. We talked, and became friends again, sort of -- we said we were "going unsteady." I took a job at a parts warehouse, and after work she reintroduced me to her life and to her friends, like Maddy, an artist who studied under Ned.

But in the end Jan shut me out. On the last day of the sixties, she told me she was engaged to marry a Vietnam veteran from her home town who had got shot up and shipped home. They never actually got married, but it was convincing enough to send me away again, this time to an apartment a half mile away.

One day, as I was lying on my mattress on the floor of my upstairs apartment, Maddy came by to look in on me. Maddy was five years older than me. Her husband, a chiropractor, had been in Vietnam for almost a year. She was blonde and attractive without quite being pretty. I don't think they were in love. When I looked at Maddy I saw an asymmetry that made her seem tentative. But she was smart and serious about painting, and she gave me fair warning when she pushed a sketchbook of self-portraits in pencil into my hands. In each picture, there was something disturbing

about her. Her face would be ready to cry, or the sun would be in her eyes, or her cheeks would be sallow and aged, or a shadow would be passing over her, a shadow of depression and doom, like March in Minnesota, the season of ice and obituaries. I told her they were great.



She relayed to me her sympathies regarding Jan dropping me, and something in her eye led me to kiss her, and we made love on the raggedy mattress. A part of me just wanted to be loved by someone, anyone, and this was great on that level alone. But a vengeful part savored the idea of doing it with a friend of Jan's and a student of Ned's.

Maddy and I were together for a couple of months. We never lived together, but we often spent the night together. Because painting was what she cared about, she set me up with an easel and paints, and encouraged me to paint ripoffs of pictures from her art books. I did what I thought was an OK version of a spooky landscape by the Nazi painter Emil Nolde. But my first painting was a copy of the cover of Tim Hardin's "Greatest Hits." Thinking back, it seems weird to have painted a picture of another man in front of a naked woman. But something about Hardin was hooked in me. He had a knack for sorrow, and I was starting to have one, too. I wished I could express things the way he did, that reduced all life to a blubbering, heaving heap.

Maddy and I didn't really work. Before we split, I took her to visit a friend of mine, a black cop I knew in Minneapolis named Roger. He and Maddy exchanged glances, and as we were leaving, Roger took me by the arm and asked if I would mind if he called Maddy, because she sure had a beautiful body. I swiveled to look at Maddy slide into her VW Bug as if I had lost her forever, and I had.

But I did not want to be part of this attachment any more, or any attachment. It surprised me to be ashamed of my actions, sleeping on the home front with the wife of a man in combat. Ned wouldn't go for that, I knew. It was sleazy and insincere. It was ignoble and wrong.

I was drifting into a decade of loneliness. Jan married and soon had three children. My old roommate Frank moved to Minnesota, and we took up where we left off, as grown men. The thing that still connected us was the music. We spent hours listening to the people who mattered to us -- Tim Hardin, Leonard Cohen, Tim Buckley, Nick Drake. We were lonely men listening to lonely songs.

We sometimes traveled together with our dogs on canoe trips and car trips, and trips to folk festivals. For a time we were even in business together, collecting glass jars from people's alleys and using them as candle molds to make candles we sold to knick-knack stores. It wasn't a very good business. I guess I was just helping him to have something to do.

It took me years, but I eventually began putting a life together, meeting and marrying Rachel, a freckled foundling from Indiana and a lovely girl, and having a daughter in 1984 with her, and in 1988 a son. As a father I wanted to be like Ned, charismatic and unstinting in love, but it wasn't in me. My life was too unheroic and too gruesome. I ate the

crusts from the kids peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and gained weight.

About that time Frank was going with a nurse named Eve. He and Eve and Rachel and I and our kids would sometimes get together at our place for a cookout, and to push the children in the backyard swings. As they had been serious for over a year, Frank indicated that if she got pregnant not to worry, that he would take care of her. But there was a misunderstanding, because Eve did get pregnant, and instead of marrying her Frank broke it off, and in cruel fashion, marrying another woman, the daughter of a local surgeon, in the space of a couple of months. I went to the wedding, which was quite a toney affair after our dumpster diving days. I toasted their happiness, but inside I was troubled.

Eve had the baby, but Frank never visited the hospital. Eve took the child home and set about to raise him, but Frank never came around. He agreed to pay child support on the side, but on the condition that he not be the boy's father. His excuse was that he was a married man, and he needed to focus on the life he had chosen, not this one that was trying to trip him up. But it was hell for me to be his friend, because I had little kids, and I knew how important having a father was, and it tore me up to visit Eve and see the little boy who asked about his dad.

The funny thing was, Frank's parents, back in Princeton, knew about their grandson, and came visiting every year with gifts and games. His mother Nancy, whom Frank had taken to see Tim Hardin at the Village Gate, took the boy into the family with all love and honor. Frank knew

about this, and permitted it, but he could not bring himself to be a party to it.

And little by little, I stopped seeing Frank. I still loved him, but our friendship ended in a flaming wreck over the boy, who I knew would grow up hollow and hunting, the way I did.

The following year I got word from Will, Jan's brother, that Ned was dying of lung cancer. His best friend the briar pipe was taking him down.

I went to the funeral, and saw Jan and her husband and family. At the reception afterward, at the house, a woman came up to me and asked if I recognized her. "It's me, Maddy," she said. "Maddy Anderson." I nearly choked at the need to reprise in a moment our relationship of a decade ago, but she put me at ease with a smile. Jan came up to me, too, and told me once again how fond Ned had been of me.

On the back porch was Will, sitting in a still glider. I sat beside him on the top wooden step and swigged from a bottle of beer.

"After the war," Will said, "Ned spent nearly a year in Idaho in a mental institution. He didn't speak during that period. People who knew him gave up on him ever coming out of it."

"What happened?" I asked.

"The plane he was flying, with a crew of about ten men, was shot down by Japanese anti-aircraft fire. They went down about 500 miles from Midway, and he and four crewmates floated in the ocean for the better part of a day.

Ned's head was injured, and he was a small fellow, but he kept the plane's navigator, Les, who was injured and unconscious, afloat with him the whole time. The ocean wasn't rough, but it was still challenging, you know. But Ned held onto Les all that day and into the evening, talking to him, encouraging him to hold on, help was on the way. Les talked at first, but as time passed he just spit saltwater out.

"Around nightfall a rescue ship arrived to pull them out of the water. One of the two other men was plainly dead by this time, floating face down. Ned and Les were still upright together, and Ned insisted that Les be pulled aboard first, clambering up the riggings after him. But just as Ned reached the top, the rescue team kicked Les overboard, obviously dead. Ned watched as Les's body toppled back into the waves, and something inside him broke."

Will looked at me. "The part I don't get is what happened to him in Idaho that year. He was empty and useless all that time. But at the end of the year something happened and he became who he would be for the rest of his life. Not just a healthy man, but a strong one, strong enough to raise us all, and be a decent artist, and a good man, too. I wish I knew what he did to heal himself."

It's funny how things come around. Thirty years later I remain friends with Jan and her brother Will. This past summer she invited me and Rachel and my kids out to her horse farm. All her family made it, even Will, who drove all the way from New York with his son Victor. It was a hot day, but we sat in plastic chairs under an oak tree so big and so spreading that no grass grew underneath. The ponies cantered in the enclosure, and the kids of all the families

climbed the corral planks to watch them, all except the ones too young to leave their mothers' laps.

Everyone was there, except for Ned, and we didn't have much to say, but we sat and told teasing stories about the old days anyway, and I felt I belonged as much as I ever did. It's not true that it never happens again, but it sometimes just feels like it.

In time even Frank and I became friends again. His marriage to the surgeon's daughter came apart after a couple years, and he suffered like a man in a parable, having created two families but being welcome in neither. In time he married again, and was a good father this time around, staying home with his two daughters and loving them modestly and with all his heart. I don't know that he ever reconciled with the little boy he abandoned. But he changed in his heart, so I suspect maybe he did.

One night the two of us went out to a steakhouse, and over meat and red wine I told him how sorry I was to have pulled away from him all those years. Poor Frank looked at me with dumb surprise. "I thought you were just tired of me," he said.

"I was always your friend," I said to him that night. "But every time I saw you, I thought about the boy. And living the life I've lived, I couldn't choose you above him."

It was about the time of Ned's funeral that Tim Hardin died of an overdose. Frank told me about it on the phone. Obituaries stressed that things went downhill for him early, starting about the time of his night at the Village Gate. A woman left him, and took his son with her. Tim Hardin made other records, and they had their moments; I remember

a tune called "Shiloh." But none ever resounded with people the way his first two did. That was a heady swirl of youth and nerve, and because he was young he must still have had hope, no matter how sad the songs. He wasn't finished yet. There would be other opportunities. But there never were. The moment of sweetness never came round again.

And when I hear him today on a CD, I sometimes still cringe with embarrassment, sitting in Maddy's apartment, painting Hardin's face instead of a naked Maddy. I know Ned would have understood my dalliance. Everyone has to heal, in Idaho or Minnesota, and we are all of us sanatoriums for one another, if we take the best we are offered. And look what happens when you do. My babies are grown, and in the fullness of my years I bask in the grace and love of so many.

But when the wind inside blows chill I can still summon up that feeling of bereftness, when sense that everything is stripped away, and your sister died in the night and your dad is upstairs packing his things. That's when you are alone in your soul, and your only solace is knowing your shout of surprise could not have gone unheard, and that look on your face, in acrylic or in oil, may be all that is remembered.

Goodbye, Tim Hardin, my friend. I didn't know you, but I been places that you been.

## The Greatest Arcade Hero Ever

The man stands behind the boy, observing him stalking down yet another corridor, laser gun in hand, intent on finding and meting out justice to alien malefactors.

This is all on the computer, of course. The boy has been doing this for about five years. But today the man decides enough is enough.

"I've got an idea," he says. "Let's come up with an arcade hero of our own. One that's better than these guys."

The boy turns to him and blinks, adjusting to the light of the room.

"How do you mean?" the boy asks.

"Well, let's think it through. To create something different, first you identify what's normal. What do most online heroes do now?"

"Mostly, they fight and kill things."

"OK," the father says. "Then our hero will do the exact opposite. Instead of taking away life, our hero will give life, create life, cause life to flourish."

"Like ET?" the boy asks. "You know, ET touches the dead flowers, and they come back to life. Or like the Genesis Project in *Star Trek*. One blast from the Genesis Bomb and life sprouts everywhere. It's got the power of making life out of nothing."

"Excellent. This hero will have super powers of inspiration to restore life, to bring things back that are discouraged, or defeated, or feeling low. That's an excellent idea, by the way. ET made a ton of money. So what else would be different?"

"Well, most heroes are always off on faraway adventures. That kind of hero is a visitor, a stranger."

"I see where you're going," the man says. "Our hero will be the opposite -- a hero who stays home, and does heroic things right there."

"Right. Here's something else. Most heroes in these games, I've noticed, are not much better than the villains. Everybody just shoots everybody else."

"So," the father says -- "our hero could be someone who interacts, and talks to people, maybe even brings out the best in them. Instead of blasting away, our hero could negotiate things. Find out what the bad guys really need, and see if there's a way to get them to stop being bad."

"Wow."

"In fact, the main thing about this hero is really caring, and having a gigantic heart, full of sympathy and understanding. A hero that could not just make you cheer, but could make you cry."

"Oh, dad, that's really good. How about a something like in the *Terminator*, where the hero is totally dedicated to protecting others. Like, a hero that would die rather than let harm come to people."

"Where loyalty becomes a superpower," the man says. "More powerful than a speeding locomotive. Leaps over tall builds with a single bound! Now here's the next thing. Lots of superheroes are invulnerable. Bullets bounce right off them. But how heroic is it if nothing hurts you? How about if we make our hero capable of being hurt?"

"Yeah, that means our hero takes greater risks. And that takes courage." The boy nodded solemnly.

The two jot ideas down right and left. To get more ideas, they think of movies they liked. "What's the scariest movie you ever saw?" the man asked the boy.

He frowned. "*Alien*," he says. "Where the creature grows inside the person's body, and when it's ready, it bursts out and kills the person."

"Gross," the father says. "Well, let's do the opposite again. Let's let our hero be the host, that the creature grows inside. But instead of being a completely evil creature, make it a nasty creature that will grow and change and one day save the world.

The man continues: "And the hero has to put up with the pain of this parasite, because the creature, who is very selfish and tyrannical now, will be really important one day. That's another superpower -- the willingness to suffer. The hero tolerates pain no ordinary person ever could tolerate. Because the hero's love is so great."

The son puts his hand to his forehead and arches his eyes. "Dad, this would make such a sweet game," he says.

"It is a sweet game," the man tells him. "Because everything we decided to call heroic is already happening right here in our house."

The boy frowns. "Huh?"

"You think about it," the father says. "Now go set the table for breakfast. Put out the good silverware. And when you get a chance, give your mother a kiss."

## Remembering James Wright ... my uncle ... sort of ...

I will be 50 in July, and my boyhood poet days are flown. But there was a time when it was my desire to crush the world in my poetic embrace. And I was so fortunate to have the American poet James Wright, if not as an outright mentor, then as an abiding example of what words could do, and as a personal friend.

You see, he was my uncle, sort of.

When my mother remarried in 1965 I acquired a stepfamily. Within that stepfamily my stepfather Richard had a stepmother, Elsie. Elsie had a sister named Elizabeth. And Elizabeth was James Wright's English teacher in high school, and for a brief period, his legal guardian.

Wright, of course, lived in southern Ohio, in Martin's Ferry. I lived in the north, 30 miles outside Cleveland. But when I visited my step-grandmother Elsie's house in the 60s, so full of weird bricabrac -- I especially remember a shelf of Herb Alpert records -- I was very taken by two of Wright's Wesleyan University Press titles, *Saint Judas* and *The Branch Will Not Break*. I was 15.

Elsie loaned me the books, and they proved to be a portal for me to a world that was both as real as the Hazel-Atlas Glass plant where Wright's father worked and as imaginative as the ghostly jungle shore along the Ohio River at midnight.

If you know this work, you know how intensely emotional Wright was. He was our Vallejo, a giant in the heart who could wring tears from grass. He was phenomenally gifted -- and vulnerable.

These early books of his, along with *Shall We Gather at the River*, my favorite, reveal him as a poet of heartbreak. His work was naturalistic and everyday. Yet certain moments had the power to suck you into a vortex of feelings, generally elegiac.

The poems had a profound impact on me. I was a teenager, which automatically made me susceptible, but I was also struggling with the death of my older sister Kathleen, who died of heart complications at age 15. Her passing devastated my family, me as much as anyone.

Wright's poems put me in touch with my own pain. There was so much sorrow in them, and so much hunger for love and reconnection. It was a good transition from the weepy mystical adolescent fiction I was reading at the time, like Herman Hesse's *Demian*.

But see for yourself. Listen to the gentleness of Wright's voice in a 1963 poem, "A Blessing," about two Indian ponies he stopped to touch, "just off the highway to Rochester, Minnesota." This is one of his best-known poems. If it does not send a sharp shaft of feeling through you, I wonder what is wrong with you.

I would like to hold the slenderer one in my arms,  
For she has walked over to me  
And nuzzled my left hand.  
She is black and white,  
Her mane falls wild on her forehead,  
And the light breeze moves me to caress her long ear  
That is delicate as the skin over a girl's wrist.  
Suddenly I realize  
That if I stepped out of my body I would break  
Into blossom.

This is poetry that makes one want to weep and pray. It soothed the wound that was still in me from my sister's death. I began to see the calamity that befell my family as

itself a kind of blessing. In my reading, the line about "the skin over a young girl's wrist" was always Kathy's wrist.

It surfaced a sense of the preciousness of the things we love, especially the fragile things that don't last long in the world. And it fired me to want to put my own stories, my own poems, down.

I showed some of my writing to Elsie, who picked up on the resemblance to Wright's work. So she arranged a car trip to New Concord, where Wright's parents lived. James and his wife Annie would be there, and I would have a chance to meet them. Elsie was doing in a small way for me what her sister Elizabeth had done for Wright.

Wright was there with his wife Annie. She was tall and strong and sympathetic. He was soft and sweet and genial, full of gentle quips and funny stories. He didn't put on a show for me. But he communicated to me in a respectful way that words could be part of a life.

What struck me immediately was his voice. It was incredibly soft and un-mean. And there was no fussing or high-faluting or show-offy about him. He knew I was a young dabbler, but he neither patronized me by offering to read my work, nor dissed me in any way. He treated me like a young colleague, a student perhaps. He respected me, and it rocked me.

After lunch we walked in his mother's vegetable garden, and he showed me the cabbages and zucchinis he helped put in. And he talked about the German poems he was translating, by Theodor Storm -- and surprisingly, by Herman Hesse -- that were knife-deep with the pangs of young wanting.

I bristled with pride that I already knew the name Theodor Storm. He was the heartsick poet Thomas Mann quoted in his novela *Tonio Kroger*, about the hapless lot of sensitive young poets. All I knew about him was the Mann connection, but I pressed it to Wright. Who was either impressed, or forgave me -- both great.

And he asked if I had seen the new movie *2001: A Space Odyssey*. He and Annie had seen it the night before, on the big screen in Columbus.

"You really should see it," he said. "And listen to the voice of Hal, the computer on the Jupiter spacecraft. In all the loneliness of space, his is the only human voice. I don't know -- I found it very touching."

And he told me that the secret of cantaloupe is the sweet smell at the stem. "With watermelons, you go by sound. With muskmelon," he said, "it's all smell."

And that was my day with James Wright. I rode back to Cleveland with Elsie feeling I had had an important meeting in my life. I fantasized about hitchhiking to New York City and offering my meager skills as handyman to Annie, whose Montessori school in Morningside Heights needed painting. Anything to keep the fresh bond alive.

I didn't, praise god. Even I was catching on that my surprise visits were more of a burden than a gift. But I did go to see *2001*, and I too was moved by the character of the computer. The voice, by the way, was identical to the soft tones of Wright's own voice, reaching out to the emotionally detached astronauts:

"Your drawing is definitely improving, Dave."

I don't think that was what Wright wanted me to notice. But there it was, unmistakably, the most human thing in the empty reaches of space -- an encouraging voice.

Truth is, I think I wrote him once, to tell him how much my afternoon with him, and his work generally, meant to me. But I did not want to be a pest. Or I did, but -- well, you know.

So it was with such regret, in 1980, that I snatched an AP report from the teletype machine at the newspaper I worked for, and read that James Wright had succumbed to cancer of the tongue in New York. God, what an ironic affliction for a poet as sweet-spirited as him.

I hoped -- and I think I was right -- that his life with Annie was a near-reversal of the difficult years he had spent before her, years of drunkenness, depression, and getting fired from the English faculty at the University I would eventually attend -- another minor coincidence -- in Minnesota. Healing came big time, and I understand he let it happen to him.

It may be what I liked best about him, that he could know the full meaning of sadness and still be on the lookout for joy.

Wright at his best legitimized something I hear many poet peers railing against -- self-pity. I often hear writers condemn another writer for obsessing about personal suffering. Writing about one's own hurting is suspect -- unmanly, and "stuck" in its own sorrow, not providing movement away from grief.

When I say he legitimized self-pity, I mean he found a way to love oneself in writing, to feel genuine sorrow for one's situation, not out of selfishness or self-absorption, but

out of forgiveness. How can we have compassion for what is outside us if we can't have compassion for what we know best? Not that we wallow in this feeling, either -- this sorrow is a necessary interim stage, like "hitting bottom," to a return to living.

Wright was the sort of poet who could, with a false turn here or there, have wound up as one of our poet suicides. What an execrable fate (and awful example) that would have been. And how grateful I am that he did not.

Wright was part of the confessional school, but he was bigger than it. Though his estimate of himself was humble, he wound up being important. He helped introduce us to great Latin and European writers. And he altered the poetic landscape, away from the owlsh academicism of the 1950s and toward something much more personal and passionate and alive. And his books live on as testament to a life felt fully and appreciated.

But I will remember him as a man who looked on a confused up-and-comer as someone worth a kind word or two. Thank you, Uncle James ... or whatever.

## The Coach's Daughter

The coach loved his daughter dearly, but she never played ball, not even T-ball. Now here she was, ready for college, and unsure what to do.

"So I guess majoring in parks and recreation is out of the question?" he asked as they idled at a red light. That was about all the career counseling he had in him.

"Dad, you know how I feel about sports."

He grunted. "How about teaching then?" He was a teacher, if you counted health.

"I see what it's like for my teachers. They're all dying for someone to show interest, but none of us ever do. I couldn't put up with that."

"Maybe something to do with computers," he said. "We got you that computer."

"I hate computers," the daughter said. "I especially hate mine."

"I don't know," the coach said. "But, it seems to me, there's got to be something you would really like that you aren't thinking of, or are crossing off the list too soon."

He noticed the oversized tokens in the dashboard coin tray. "I took your brother to the batting cages Saturday. He was hitting 'em pretty good."

The daughter rolled her eyes.

"It's a funny thing," the coach went on. "Most experts tell you that if you're a big strong hitter, you stand way back in the batting zone. That way you can extend your arms and get the most muscle on the ball. You hit it with your arms way out like that, the ball's gonna travel."

The daughter looked out the passenger window. It was going to be one of those conversations.

"But that's not such good advice if you're a poor hitter, or you're in a slump, or you're afraid of the ball," he said, mainly to himself. "That's when I tell 'em, 'Put yourself in danger a bit. Get up close to the pitch. Nothing happens if you miss the ball. But up close, anything can happen. You get a dribbler, or you beat one over the infield. Heck, you get hit, that's as good as a single."

The daughter grimaced. Was her father encouraging young kids to step in front of fastballs? "Is there a point to this?" she asked.

"A point, right. Well, OK, so your brother is swinging away. The first few times we went to the cages he's missing everything. But I move him in close, and he starts to make contact -- foul tips, ground balls and stuff.

"Then he does something interesting. He starts getting mad at the pitching machine. Or pitchers generally. Or something. Because he steps back in the box, and extends his arms. Now he's really getting around, and the ball is rocketing off his bat -- bam, bam, bam. And all the time, he's saying stuff like, 'Didn't think I could hit that one, did you?' and 'Just give me what you got.' The ball is flying out of there.

"It was sort of psycho," the coach said, "but it worked real good."

The daughter sighed. "So what you're saying is, I have to put myself in harm's way and commit myself to success for good things to happen?"

The coach shrugged. "It's just a story."

"Right, pops. OK, here's my stop, I gotta go."

"You have a good day in there, little girl!" the coach said, giving her the thumb-up sign.

She patted his forearm. "I love you, daddy" she said. And ran up the stairs to school.

## The Shoe at the Top of the Stairs

Last week I let word slip I was going in for my 6-month MRI scan of my head, and some have asked about the results.

I have been exceptionally lucky over the past couple of years. Every time I have gone in, the scan has come out negative -- no growth of the meningioma perched just inside my left ear.

I have done seven scans in all, and the last few had gotten to feel routine. With all the positive feedback I was starting to feel I was just too good to have an actively growing tumor. Like I had figured out the secret of how not to let tumors get the best of you, which turned out to be such a simple thing, an attitude really. Too bad those other people in the waiting room weren't so deft.

In reality, I was very aware of tempting fate, and half worried my smugness would come back and bite me. This last time, I had a gnawing sense that something might finally be wrong, and I was not alone. Rachel, who usually calls my doctor as soon as the films are dry, put off calling this time. She too had the feeling that we were sliding too casually into the cannon every six months. One of these days, perhaps this week, the cannon -- the scanner is like a piece of heavy artillery -- would have something to say.

I am pleased to tell you that the scan was another negative. No tumor growth of any kind. Which meant none in two years, which suggests that the tumor is just a bit of clutter now, a sneaker on a staircase, unable to do much harm unless I trip over it.

It was not always thus. In its heyday, in January 1999, that sneaker had enough juice crackling through it to snap a major vein in my head and cause me to have a stroke. I

remember the gurgling sounds, and the pain, and thinking I was going to die in the next five minutes. And the shock the next week of finding out a tumor was in there, like a snapping turtle lowered into a crib.

Besides feeling woozy and doomed for the next three months, I had problems with erratic memory, headaches, and floating anxiety. Because my stepfather died of a malignant brain tumor that doctors didn't properly diagnose until it was too late, I worried that my doctors were blowing my diagnosis, too, and that the tumor that had already munched through some perfectly good blood vessels would eventually sink its teeth into my life.

I didn't *know* I was going to die. Mostly I tried getting on with my life. But at least 100 times a day, for a shimmering moment I pictured the shoe getting ready to walk.

Neither did I *want* to die. But I felt the shadow of Dick's death before me, how it drained family resources, broke the hearts of grown-ups and sent a chill of fear and confusion into the young that they never got over. I saw myself doing that to my family, and it was a heavy burden to bear.

I created a 1-100 Worry Index, which was like a weather metric. It allowed me to tell people how much I wanted them to worry about me on a given day. In the first two months I was way up there in the 60s. Since then it has slowly deflated to 15. Only Superman and Green Lantern are lower than 15.

Lessons learned? I learned how needy and how continuously anxious I can be, despite a generally cheerful demeanor. I tried to slip my tumor into everyone's pocket when they weren't looking, with a sad story or a joke -- anything to get it out of my head and into theirs.

I learned not to do that with my family. They were in this with me up to their ears. If I was soggy newspaper with my friends, I managed to be pretty strong with my wife and kids.

And I reminded myself how I love to blab (write). When you think your brain is about to be devoured is a great time to set your thoughts down. There's a sense in which people have to listen to you, even if you're yanking their chain. We ignore people in trouble if we can, but it's hard to ignore them when they are standing in rush hour traffic, handing out flyers. Even strangers will slow down as they pass, and lower their windows to gawk.

Here's a vital bit of logic I ignored: How could I take two years to write a book about a three month death watch? On some level, I must have known I had time to do twelve drafts.

Anyway, I am more than fine. I am embarrassed to be well, but, otherwise, super.

Thanks everyone. Knock wood, I'll never write about this again

## **The Three Strikes of Life**

The Organic Produce Little League team was taking pre-game batting practice. The stars were smacking the ball hard. Everyone else was missing. After a bit, an old man in brown suit pants put his fingers through the chain links of the backstop. He looked eighty, though his shoes looked only half that.

"You kids want to hit the ball better?" he asked. The better players laughed. What did an old man know about hitting? But a handful of the lesser players tentatively put their hands up. They were willing to try anything.

"Listen up," the old man said. His hands trembled until they fastened around an aluminum bat. Then they seemed strong. His eyes were red, and complexion was mottled, with a stubble of white whisker.

"You get three strikes," he said. "Each one's different. Each strike, you change who you are."

The kids squinted.

"The first pitch is your rookie pitch. The pitcher doesn't know you. Anything can happen. Maybe you close your eyes, you get lucky, and beat one back up the middle.

"But usually you don't. You miss, and all the weaknesses of the rookie come down on you. You're thinking about failing, and getting ready to fail. You're scared of the pitcher, scared of the ball. You get revved up. You forget what your coaches say and swing crazy, hoping to get lucky. Or you stand like a statue while the umpire calls a strike.

"Most young hitters give up now. They swing at the next two just to get it over. They don't grow in the at-bat. The bat's a white flag, and they're waving it to surrender.

"To have a good rookie pitch, you have to be good inside. Good rookies go up to the plate respecting the pitcher, and humble about their odds. They respect the ball, and shut out everything else.

"You need courage on the first strike pitch, because you're a stranger in a strange land. You put yourself in harm's way, close to the ball, close to the plate.

"Maybe you'll get drilled. It'll hurt. But only a bit. You stand close anyway, because you good things happen when you put yourself in a little danger.

"You need faith that if you do it in the right spirit, things will work out.

"That's the *rookie pitch*.

"By the second pitch, you're in your prime. Now you know what the at-bat is about. You've seen the pitch. You know what you have to do to turn on it. The first strike filled you with adrenaline. Now you're strong. You feel electrified. You feel good. You grip the bat tight.

"The prime pitch is when good things usually happen. You're ahead of the pitcher, even with the first strike. Because you know what he's got, and you feel good. If you fail on the prime pitch, it's maybe you felt *too* good. People in their prime get overconfident. They swing too hard. They miss.

"That's the *prime pitch*." The old man spat, and the spit dripped out at about five points, and he had to wipe some off his lip.

"Third pitch. Now you're a veteran. You're at the end of your rope. If you fail now, there won't be another pitch. It's life or death. You're like an old prizefighter, and you stand almost perfectly still, waiting for your moment. The bat's loose and tight at the same time.

"You're not relying on luck, like the first pitch. Or talent, like the second pitch. Now you're calling on your guts, and everything you've learned.

"You mess up on the *veteran pitch* when you're angry at the pitcher for making you miss the other two pitches. The bad veteran is always making excuses. He's making up excuses for missing before he misses.

"But the good veteran welcomes the battle. It's serious, but it gives him joy, too. He knows that baseball means pain, and he welcomes the suffering. He may go down, but he's grateful he ever got up. If he goes down, it will be swinging."

"Sir, what if you strike out?" asked one kid, shielding the sun from his eyes with his glove.

"You just hope there's another game, and you're in it." The old man scanned the horizon to the western. "I gotta go, kids. Good luck out there." And he turned and was gone.

The kids mumbled as they got their equipment together. Did anyone know who that guy was? Maybe a retired sportswriter, someone suggested. Or an ex-player. Maybe even a Hall of Famer, one wishful thinker said.

"No, it's just my dad," said a slender infielder. "He was in the Sixties."

The players nodded sagely and they took the field. In the game, the Organic Produce team skunked the Subway Sandwich team 14-3. And every one of the kids who listened got a hit.

## "Memorial Day 2000"

Just the other side of the airport, on a bluff overlooking the Minnesota River, is Fort Snelling National Cemetery. It's a classic military cemetery, with thousands of identical markers laid out like poppies in Flanders fields.

The cemetery abuts the area where I walk my dog, so I walk through there frequently. Few people buried there were killed in battle. If you served in the armed forces, it's your right to be interred here, and your spouse's.

I always pause a moment, when I see on the marker a death date between 1965 and 1972. And think: there but for the grace of God is me.

It takes me back to my experiences with the draft. I'm a little hazy on it. It was 1969, the haziest year of them all.

I was a hippie wannabee, full of contempt for LBJ and General Hershey. I had a dozen plans for my life, and none of them involved rice paddies. I remember toying with the idea of filing as a conscientious objector, but it didn't work for me. They asked you whether you'd attack Ho Chi Minh with a tire iron if you came upon him raping your Aunt Sally, and I had to admit I wasn't too hot on that idea.

When the Selective Service form asked if I wanted to overthrow the United States Government by force or violence, I wrote, "force."

I was what you'd call a nominal draft resister. I attended a few rallies and read everything disrespectful I could get my hands on. I read in Paul Krassner's magazine *The Realist* that your draft board had to file everything you sent them. So I sent them a six-pound bonito, a handsome ocean fish I

purchased at the Grand Central Market in downtown Los Angeles. The idea was that the draft board would be helpless except to live with the stench of a decaying fish in their file cabinet. Instead -- figure this -- they drafted me.

I was in the U.S. Army, technically, for a couple of weeks, classified as AWOL. I wasn't even aware I'd been drafted; I was hiking around in Alaska at the time, away without leave, without a thought in my head, and only found out about my induction later. Then I applied to the nearest college I could find -- Pepperdine University in Los Angeles, also known as Pat Boone University -- and hid there, cowering, under its ivied protection, until the lottery replaced the draft.

So I never went to Vietnam, and I never missed it. But the war was part of my life anyway. I took my childhood friend, Paul Plato, to his ship in San Pedro when he shipped out.

For a while I knew a couple of actual deserters in Los Angeles. They were a pair of goofy guys who claimed to have escaped from interment at The Presidio. I never believed their stories, but one night they were rousted from their beds and led off by MPs.

At my first high school reunion, I learned that our one fatality was Skeeter Barnes, a sweet kid from the wrong side of the tracks, who stepped on a land mine somewhere and was no more. We played Little League together when we were nine.

It is hard to say who was the coward and who was the hero. Poor Skeeter was no one's idea of a hero; he was just a poor dope who couldn't work the system like I did. I thought I was an intellectual hero, full of higher ideals than flag and conscription, but I kept myself far from harm's way, didn't I? One more thing I have in common with George W. Bush.

When I think of 56,000 of my generation tossed out there to die defending our *Laugh-In* way of life, I get blue. Thirty years later, it still hurts.

But there is one thing I would like to set straight. When the war ended, an urban legend popped up, claiming that our returning soldiers were routinely spat on by those who didn't go, and called baby-killers. People who spread this awful story must have had an axe to grind: blame the defeat on the hippies and the liberals.

But I swear it never happened. Or if it happened on a couple of bizarre, sick occasions, they were anomalies. Vietnam vets suffered from a host of problems, from post-traumatic stress disorder and Agent Orange to unemployment in the stagflation of the 70s and early 80s. Many wondered where their reward was for the contribution they'd made. Where was their GI Bill?

What a terrible choice our country forced on a generation of boys: be good and die stupidly or be marked for life, or be smart and survive, but feel like a traitor to your own generation.

And I look at these graves at Fort Snelling, row on row on row on row, their gray faces from jet exhaust -- and I want to salute.

## **A Rose in December**

Sometimes the future and the past switch places in our lives. What went before foretells what is to come. And the future smiles back, and explains the past.

My family experienced a tragedy when I was 11 -- my sister Kathy, who was born with a leaky heart valve, passed away. Her life had been tough in many ways. She could never exercise, her baby teeth never fell out, and her skin was grayish from poor circulation -- she was called a "bluebaby," and kids made fun of her for that.

It's a condition that medicine found a simple cure for, to be administered at birth -- a few months after she was born.

Kathy was a girl of great gentleness and sweetness. She was a painter and drawer, and a lover of horses. All my childhood, my job, and my brother Pat's, was to run and fetch things for her, because she did not have the strength.

She was a sophomore in high school when she went into a coma and died. Her death made for a stormy adolescence for me. I stopped going to church, I got into trouble with the law, I became a bit of a hard case.

Now fast-forward into the future, to my 15<sup>th</sup> high school reunion, in 1982. I returned to my small town with a bad attitude, determined to show people how far I had come -- not financially (I was broke) but in daring and worldliness. I drank with old girlfriends, I kissed my old prom date on the lips. I pissed off their husbands, on purpose.

I had too much to drink, and I saw, at the bar, a big kid I remembered from grade school, Jim Frazina. He was the class psycho, built like an adult even as a kid, with a brutal jawline and a dead look in his eyes.

In sixth, seventh, and eighth grades, Frazina made my life miserable, chasing me on the playground, throwing me up against walls, and slapping and pummeling me. He hated me for some reason I didn't understand, and saw me as an appropriate victim. That's what bothered me the most -- I did not want to be a victim of anything.

Taking courage from the liquor, I challenged him. "Frazina, what made you hate me so much in grade school? I wasn't a bad kid. What did I ever do to you?"

Frazina winced. "Hey, man, I'm sorry. I was so crazy in those days. I had all kinds of problems."

But I wouldn't let him off so easy. "OK, but why me? Why did you choose me to pick on?"

He looked at me levelly, and I could tell something still bothered him. "Because you laughed at your sister's funeral."

I flashed backward. I was excruciatingly self-conscious the day of the funeral. I was upset about Kathy, and I didn't want people peering in on our problems. But the funeral was a big event in the town. My whole school, St. Joseph's, was taking time off to attend.

I remember glancing about during the service, looking for reassurance from my classmates that they wouldn't always know me by this moment. That this wouldn't mark me forever. I'm sure I tried to smile.

It was a terrible day.

Back to 1982. "Jim," I told him. "I wasn't laughing. I loved my sister, but it was no one's business but mine. I must have smirked, but you have to know I was dying inside. "

"I know, Mike. I loved her, too."

So that's what it was. When all the other kids called Kathy bluebaby, or warned her about the purple people eater, Jim was her avenger. He beat up a dozen kids, and some of them must have said something. He showed his devotion the only way he could -- with his fists. When she died, he transferred his enmity to me. Out of love.

Jim went to Vietnam and was a behavior problem there, spending time in the brig. Now he was better, and counseled other vets with emotional disorders.

And me, after what seemed like a lifetime of being alone, I met and married my best friend Rachel. Rachel, too, went through the mill, losing her father at 16.

It's been an interesting marriage, because we are so gentle with one another, so aware of the old pain. Sometimes it seems like we are brother and sister.

And I should mention that Rachel's last name, an unusual one, is different from Jim's by one letter. *Frazin*.

Now fast-forward to the present. My daughter Daniele, whose face so resembles my sister, is now her age, when she died. When I think of my sister's terror at that age, I can't help crying. I have a good one about once a month.

And as I try to prepare Daniele for the long future ahead of her, I am so grateful for her health.

You can not believe how rosy her complexion is, on a crisp December day like today. Or how embarrassed her brilliant color sometimes makes her.

Or how beautiful it looks to me.

## **My Conversation with Officer Bennett**

It happened a year ago, on the first of September. We live in a college neighborhood, and the duplex next to us is a rental, usually occupied by students. This year a group of suburban girls moved into the left half, and boys from Chicago into the right.

Rachel and I met the boys' parents and explained the bad experiences with loud afterhours partying we'd had with the house in the past. One of the dads gave us his home phone number back in Chicago, and told us to call him if the boys ever disturb us.

That night, the boys met the girls, and a small, but loud party, spontaneously broke out. Around 1 PM, I woke the father in Skokie and told him the good news.

The next afternoon was gorgeous. Our house was full of kids, our own plus neighbors. Our family TV, a brand new Magnavox screen-within-a screen model, was beaming Star Trek reruns from the living room. My trusted dog Beauregard lay sleeping in the sun on the front porch.

In the midst of this, someone entered our house from the back door, unplugged the Magnavox, and made off with it. I went to turn it on, and all I found was a warm spot on the TV stand.

I called the police, and within ten minutes I saw a figure in blue slowly approaching the house. It was a woman officer, but she walked in a policemanlike way, flatfooted, and with her head tilted back and at a fatigued angle.

She introduced herself as Officer Bennett as I told her the incredible story of the bold burglary -- right under our noses. Without blinking she eyed the house and adjoining properties. I showed her the TV stand, now cold.

"Do you suspect anyone?" she asked. And I told her I was wondering if the new neighbors had retaliated for calling their dad the night before. She nodded, and made her way to the backporch, and looked at the students next door, having a back yard barbecue.

"I'm just going to stare at them for a few minutes," she murmured. "You see, I have a psychic gift for surfacing emotional discomfort. If any of those kids feels guilty, I'll know."

While she stared, she spoke to me. "I think I know what kind of man you are," she said. "You're a nice guy, right? Leaves his doors unlocked? Has a hard time saying no to people?"

Yes, I agreed to all that.

"Don't feel bad," she said. "Those are good qualities, they just make you a victim in this world. You're weak on the outside, but inside, you're strong."

She turned to face me. "I wish my LeRoy was more like you," she said. "I know he loves me, but he won't say it."

She pulled at her holster-belt until the leather squeaked. "And I'll let you in on a secret," she said. "This belt isn't getting any looser, if you know what I mean."

"You're going to have a baby?"

She clenched her jaw and nodded. "And he and I are too much alike. I seem strong, but inside, I'm scared." She stared at the grass.

I swallowed. "So -- do you think any of those kids took my TV?"

She nodded. "The kid on the steps, smoking a cigarette. He won't make eye contact. He took it."

"What should we do about it?"

She shook her head and smiled dryly. "Nothing we can do. I may be psychic, but I'm not about to lose my job for it."

She wrote down some notes, and I grasped at straws. I didn't care about the TV any more. "You know," I said, "chances are, LeRoy is exactly where you are at -- full of feeling but unsure what to say. Maybe you have to trust his love until he's ready. And hope he's ready soon."

She folded her notebook up and packed it away. "That's the best advice I've got all day," she said. "And here's some for you. Don't replace the TV. It's a waste. Get your kids a computer."

And she ambled away. It was like the last scenes of *The Lone Ranger*, where the masked man gets away before anyone thinks to thank him. I wanted to tell her we had a computer. I wanted to wish her luck with LeRoy. And with the baby. And to get a case number in case the TV showed up.

But she was gone. And one of the most remarkable conversations of my life was over.

## God is at it again

I was dissatisfied with my column today, and with the note I appended to it, to you. The column was the sort I thought I had quit writing -- all it did was fill space. But it was the best I seemed able to do this week. What was wrong with me?

I'm the sort of person who changes a lot from day to day. Some days I'm very keen about my own intentions -- other days it's just thick smog, what I want to do, and how I'll go about doing it. Today was a smog day.

I wasn't kidding about my two cars dying. Our van lost its transmission, and my sedan also has something wrong in the drive train. Ugh -- money. I can feel the power going out of me, as Jesus said, when the cripple touched him and pulled healing from his hem.

In my note I said, "God is at it again," which was a theological cheap-shot -- I thought a purposefully cheap one. Still, someone called me on it and wrote me a "God never hands you anything you can't handle" note.

And you know, I pretty much believe that, though a part of me thinks he just sends some people screaming over the cliff -- they certainly aren't "handling it" all that well with the mental and physical illnesses that challenge them.

So I was at a lunch on the weekend with some dear old friends, especially an old roommate I'll call Sue. Sue and I go back 30 years, to communes, hash pipes, all that. When I talk to her today, I see she still has a crazy gleam in her eye. Not that she's crazy -- she's super competent. But there's an edgy-daring-thrill-seeking part of her that I can relate to. Always on the lookout for -- action! Sue is my sister.

And she was telling me about her brother Jim, who has had severe MS the past 20 years. Does God give us more than we can handle? I was thinking yes, but Sue stood up for the quality of Jim's life. Never mind that he eats through a tube in his stomach, is prone to severe respiratory infections and bed sores, can't speak except in sighs and moans (which only Sue can decipher), and is so -- I think this is the right word -- demented, that his own kids never visit him any more.

Jim figured out, from the depths of suffering, how to have a life. He lived for five years with a nursing home roommate who also couldn't talk. yet when the roommate died, Jim was disconsolate -- he loved him so.

He's really into Jesus, and describes himself as utterly happy. He loves getting phone messages, which he plays and replays until he's sucked the marrow from every morpheme.

He reads a book a day, can still beat anyone at cribbage, and is extremely keen mentally in a number of competitive ways.

Sue's description of Jim was a gift to me, and my first instinct was to tell her to give Jim my best. But damn, that sounded remote. So I asked her for his phone number instead -- I would call him myself.

Calling my bluff, Sue dashed off the number. So today, summoning up the nerve -- I admit, I was scared of the weirdness of calling him up after so long. (Truth is, we were never very friendly -- Jim was kind of sanctimonious, and i was a brat.)

But I only planned to leave a voice message. Read an inspiring-sounding thought into the tape, then cut and run. It didn't work out that way.

So I dialed, expecting his machine would pick up. Instead, after perhaps a minute of fumbling and voices in the background ("Here, let me help you") I know I have a line to Jim.

I had to do all the talking, so I reminded him who I was, and how I had had dinner with Sue, and we talked about him, so here I was. I caught him up a bit with my life, my kids, and work.

And I told him I knew that Jesus was important to him, and that I remembered that he, like me, was once a seminarian, in the long ago Roman Catholic Church. I apologized for reading him a poem whose words piled up together so much, but I knew I wanted to read him Gerard Manley Hopkins' (also a seminarian) "God's Grandeur."

And as I read to Jim on the phone, my crappy attitude, the same attitude i have been writing about here, started to melt away.

It's a difficult poem, which simply means you have to re-read the lines that seem difficult. Which I did, for Don, translating some of the phrases and underscoring the really meaningful ones.

And all through the chat I could hear Jim's gasping and sighing. He wanted me to know when a phrase or moment worked for him, and I got the drift.

I repeat it here for you, to challenge you this day. When you hit a bump in the poem, slow down, repeat the line, and hold on to the hammering, plodding rhythm that Hopkins uses to reveal, like shaken foil, how blind and lost and weary we are in our day to day lives despite the grandeur that peeks in on us from everywhere. Because -- God is at it again.

## God's Grandeur

THE world is charged with the grandeur of God.  
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;  
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil  
Crushed. Why do men then now not reck his rod?  
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;

And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;  
And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil  
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod. And for all this,  
nature is never spent;  
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;  
And though the last lights off the black West went  
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs--  
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent  
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.