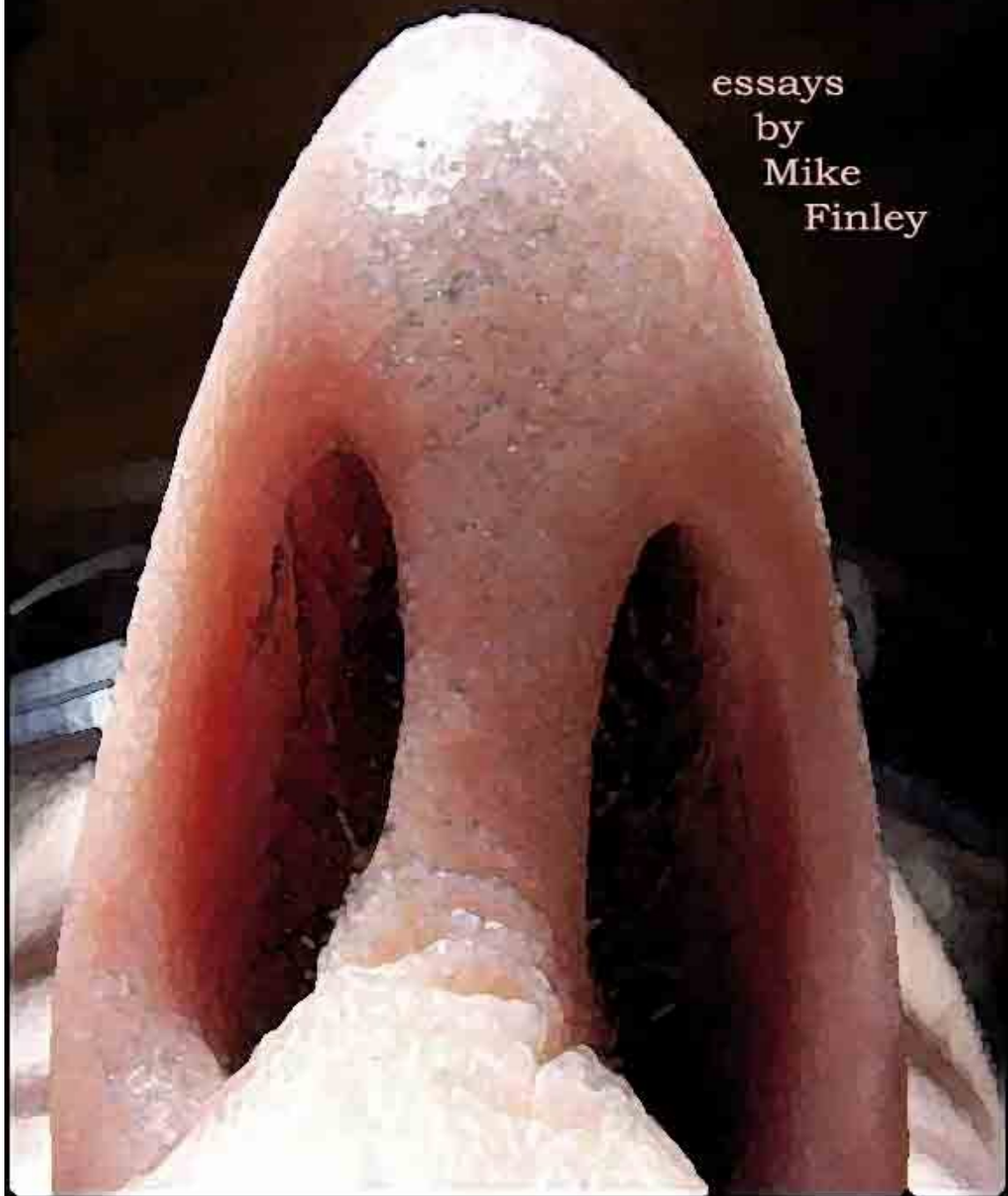


# A cellarful of nose

essays  
by  
Mike  
Finley





*to Jon, in whom I am well pleased*

# **A Cellarful of Nose**

**Essays by Mike Finley  
1975-2010**



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## 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.

(1975)

## Guatemaltecan Prayers

*Midnight in the Peten. Insomnia amid the ruins.*

The only sounds outside the hut are the occasional swish of a branch giving way as some shadowy arboreal creature moves out in the darkness.

The only sounds inside are the scraping sounds of an eight-inch rate skittering across the ceiling beams.

(One knows he's eight inches, one saw him before the generator went out. One hopes he's as afraid of one as one is of him)

Think pleasanter thoughts.

\*

The streets in Guatemala City, for instance, bursting with neon signs, and gasping with exhaust. Up and down the hills of the city the cars, trucks, buses and cycles pass, black boa of monoxide jetting like the plumed serpent himself into every bypassing nose.

But pedestrians here have learned to be tranquil amongst the gas and commotion. Something in their smiles – where does it come from? Their communion of saints? The enigma of ancient Mayapan? – says they will transcend all these irritations. It is a key to their character, it makes life plausible.

What other nation in the world, for instance, would name its legal tender for the rare green bird of implacable flight, the

quetzal?

I am thinking of a boy I saw in the market at Chichicastenango, toting a crossbeam over one shoulder like the suffering Christ-boy himself. What would he say?

(He would say, maybe: "A quetzal is a quetzal, and why not. Both are endangered species here.")

\*

"The Lord shall preserve thy going out and thy coming in from this time forth, and even for evermore."

Psalm 121, line 8. But in Spanish it's only ten words, neatly lettered over the rear-view mirror on one of the hundreds of buses caroming up and down the hills of Guatemala. This is a nation of prayer and the prayerful; one look at the hills and one understands the inspiration, the necessity. It is all mountains here.

If Guatemala were somehow in Minnesota, and our English and Scandinavian forefathers had stumbled upon it first, they would have said To hell with it and called the whole place a national park and charged campers admission to wend their ways through, take snapshots, burn weenies.

Surely no sensible people would live in this rugged place, much less farm its steep inclines.

\*

But live there and farm it they do. Over half of Guatemala's people live here in the highlands. Almost all of them are full-blooded Maya Indians – the same people who centuries earlier

built the fabled cities of Tikal, Uaxuctun, and Zacaleu.

Coming down from the highest fields along the sides of the volcanoes at Atitlan, loaded down with firewood, they look up with frantic, near-exhausted eyes.

You panic for a moment, you on vacation, they loaded down, straining the dumb beasts.

But there is that smile again, that crooked and felicitous smile that asks what kind of war could possibly be rolling over the next hill.

And Buenos dias! or Buenos tardes! These small people, with their life expectancy of 55 years, for whom even the bare necessities – sticks for fire, water, the impossible centavos the shopkeepers demand – can be gotten only through unceasing toil, these little people are, so many of them, too big to be envious.

Instructive. Fantastic actually.

\*

In San Lucas Toliman there is only one pension, and that is American Pay.

American Pay. Before you decide that that is a shamelessly cynical name for a tourist haven, you should realize it is pronounced "American Pie," after a song with quizzical lyrics by Don McLean which was popular here five years ago.

Now, if they had called the place American Pie, the locals would not have understood, because pie means foot in Spanish. American Foot? No comprendo.

Thus, American Pay – which to the French tourists sounded exactly like American Country, but that was their problem.

Two points here:

One, with communications between language groups being what they are here in Latin America, no wonder embassies routinely get seized. It's better not to know a language at all than to confuse foot, country, pie and pay.

And two, having brazenly but unknowledgeably courted the tourist dollar, American Pay felt compelled to provide what no other kitchen south of the Tropic of Capricorn would: granola.

Never mind that no one knew what to do with it, or that it looked like it came out of Mount St. Helens. I was like a letter from home.

\*

In Antigua we learn of another hardship, *el terramoto*, the earthquake.

Antigua is the old colonial capitol, and all through the city can be seen the dozens of churches and cathedrals reaching up from the valley floor.

Or, what's left of them reaches up. There is scarcely a spire in them intact after the earthquakes which one by one and century by century brought the princely churches to their knees.

In the 1960s the government finally saw that Antigua with its colonial architecture had major tourism potential, and went to work reconstructing the fallen walls. The restoration was the pride of the entire country until 1976 when an earthquake – worse than any other, and centered almost precisely at Antigua – flattened the work of men again.

The quake, in one anecdote, flattened a convent while the sisters were at prayer. Rescue teams, in the face of the catastrophe, decided to leave them where they lay, under the massive slabs.

(Claustrophobia in Spanish means, literally, fear of the cloister. The old tales of Antigua were rife with the sufferings of young girls behind the convent walls. The *terramoto* gives the pun a third, insidious interpretation.)

The quake was not merely a setback for tourism, however; it demolished the country's frail economy as well. Inflation skyrocketed. There was not enough money to get the country back on its feet. Guatemala turned, as it always must, to another strongman.

\*

At the Cathedral of San Francisco in Antigua, besides an interesting crucified Christ made of plaster of ground corn cob, is the tomb of Father Pedro de Bethancourt.

(Also, the grave of the wife of the man who discovered California, but she has been punished enough.)

Plastered all around the tomb, higher up along the stone

church walls than people ought respectfully to be clambering, are placards and letters and mementos of wood and clay.

"Thank you Blessed Pedro de Bethancourt for getting me through my operation."

"In gratitude to Holy Father Pedro for his intercession..."

"I thank Blessed Father Pedro for answering my prayers, for returning my faith to me."

Similarly, in the large daily newspapers in the city, people take out display classified advertisements to thank Bethancourt for this, that, the other thing.

This summer is an important one for those grateful to the holy friar. The Church in Rome has found favor with his case, and Bethancourt is to be officially beatified. Travel agencies are featuring a July special: Vatican City for two for ten days: Q1,034.

\*

The war has been bad for tourism. At the airport a government representative with a clipboard asks if there were any, well, problems encountered during your stay in the country.

No, one says, unless one is the sort who objects to having loaded machine guns pointed at one's nose. I see, she says, writing that down. Was there anything else?

Think pleasanter thoughts.

\*

The Indian people living in the jungle by Tikal: do they know that it was them who built these causeways and temples, these cities of macabre and bleached beauty?

All us tourists shell out our money to come to this desolate and uncomfortable isthmus, to marvel at the accomplishments of a people so creative and so single-minded that they mapped the heavens and erected in their humid valley a civilization of gleaming limestone temples without the help of an ox or a horse, without the use of a single wheel (they put wheels on their playthings but not on their carts!), without a single piece of metal, a people interested in the movements of giant spheres through space backwards and forwards for 100,000 centuries of time and interested as well in the idea of the numberless number, the zero, who left us a thousand cities but not a single human name.

These Indians that live here in their little stick huts: do they know who they used to be?

In the Peten one has a choice: one can ponder imponderables or play backgammon. Personally, I don't have the energy to ponder much longer, and anyway, I keep thinking of the boy who bore the crossbeam on his shoulder. What would he say?

(He would say, maybe: "There's no big mystery, mister. In the old days we had Zero. Today we got nothing, nada. Nothing is changed.")

\*

Chichicastenango is as far as you should venture into the mountains. Beyond "Chichi" are the *guerrilleros*, and they are obliged to treat you as viciously as would the government

militiamen.

Consequently, the marvelous markets of Chichi are short of customers. Four hundred merchants show up to display their wares for perhaps a dozen cheap Americans. And market day comes but once a week.

So the vendors get desperate, they chase you down the rows, impressing you with their one English phrase ("Good-bye"), inviting you to step into their booth, to touch their fabrics, to consider the special price they offer you because they like Americans in a special way.

(Right.)

One woman is selling wood carvings: bloodied martyrs, the Indian prince Tecum Uman, the Christ child, the Virgin. You admire her work. You take a snapshot of her exhibit.

"One Quetzal," she snaps, putting out her hand for payment. For what, you ask, all we did was take a picture.

But she is seething. It took her maybe a year, maybe two years to make these images. And after all that care, to see the power sapped with the click of a shutter.

One Quetzal, she insists. It is unreasonable (Or is it?)

Behind, the censors stand on the cathedral steps, incense wafting from their burners, thick cloud gathering at the great oak and iron door. What are they doing, you stop someone and ask. "Es costumbre," he answers. "It is what we do."

\*

It is dark, the jungle has quieted down, only the occasional drone of a mosquito. OK, all right, sleep, you tell yourself; the quinine will take care of you. Imagine what it's like out there: the toucans have shut their eyes, the monkeys lie curled in the arms of the giant ceiba trees, soon even the secrets of the Maya, fitfully circling out there in the dark like the left-handed hummingbird himself, will join you in sleep.

(1978)

## Jacobs Hill Forever

I have told this story before, in different ways, but I need to tell it again today.

I just got back from a trip to southern Colorado, to the site of what had been a commune in the Rio Grande National Forest, called Jacobs Hill after the stub of a mountain that cast our place in its shadows.

Jacob's Hill is not easy to get to. First you must cross a mountain pass to get to the regional center Alamosa. Then you drive south to La Jara, then west to the village of Capulin. Then the paved road ends, and you begin a bone-shaking journey across graded desert rock for six miles.

At six miles you take a left, and enter a valley snuggled between two ridges. At a certain point you pass between a rocky cliff and a piñon pine, and the landscape changes suddenly, from drab desert to mesquite hills, granite boulders, and rock expanses. It is like passing from sepia-tone to Technicolor, the change is so dramatic. The shapes acquire attitude, and the formations make faces. Three miles on and you come to the commune site, a sloping hill encompassed by scrub oak and silver aspens.

This is where it happened.

I was never a day-to-day member of this group, one of the hardies who scabbled out an existence in a land of harsh geography and few economic opportunities. I don't really know how people up on the hill survived those many years. They took what work they could find – bucking bales of hay for local

farmers, scouring the fisherman's reservoir for fish guts and carting them off to the dump. I helped them do the latter once, under extraordinary circumstances, and the smell of our pickup loaded with week-old fish entrails – it went beyond disgusting to something nearly holy – will stay with me forever.

I was a drop-in. I knew some of these people from my college days in Ohio in the late 60s. They were immensely attractive people, the kind of crowd a young man like me, on the make for love and excitement, would be crazy not to want to hang around. We were – there is no other way to say it – beautiful. Young and proud and eager to learn, but stubborn that the learning occur *our* way.

It was an immensely foolish proposition on the face of it – ten arty kids from a Presbyterian college in the Midwest "living off the land" in the forbidding mountains of Colorado, where even the locals routinely suffer. But the idea, once it blossomed, was undeniable.

The commune got started when one member, Marcia, worked for Vista in nearby Alamosa, and was bitten by the mountains. Marcia would be the founder and often the leader of the group. This took me by surprise, as I was still of the chauvinist hippie first wave who saw women as passive treasure, not as galvanic potentials unto themselves. Marcia added to my confusion by being small and cute. But she was also a brave, creative, and visionary leader.

She told her friends from the college about her idea – that friends could live together very cheaply, and live a life other people only dream of – drawing breath and sustenance from the

clear cold air.

One by one, and two by two, they arrived. Bobbie, like Marcia an idealist wanting to fix the world, showed up early. He was an achingly earnest young man who would go on to a career doing economic development work in El Salvador. He was an affable fellow, but there was anger in him, too, and steel – anger at the half-assed and unjust way things got done, even by people with good intentions, and steel to set it all straight.

Richard, a student film-maker and magazine editor and really a kind of team-leader, a rallying figure for creatives at the college. He lives in Maine now, and operates a whole grain flour mill. I asked him how Jacob's Hill got started, and he told me, "It was a continuation of the creative collective formed around *Rabadash*, an anarchist student magazine he created, but everyone that wanted to contributed to. The rickety cabin on the hillside among the piñon and aspen was like the next issue of the magazine, a special issue that spilled over into life.

His friend Kevin, whose great skill was knowing how to acquire skills, who built his own treehouse to live in at the hill, and who went on to become a talented woodwork designer. Quiet, good-humored and intelligent, Kevin typified the kind of hippies we were on the hill – not self-indulgent in a common way, detached or inarticulate or drugged up – rather, self-indulgent in a transcendental, spiritual way. Hippies with a serious purpose.

Rosemary, the daughter of a famous psychiatrist and philosopher, was a brilliant and lucid scholar who would go on to be housing editor for the *Whole Earth Catalog* series. Rosemary radiated brains and insight. She was wise beyond her years.

Burke, a "townie" in Wooster, Ohio who reintroduced himself to me by reminding me I had regularly bought pot from him a third of a century earlier. (What I remembered on my own was that I had lost my virginity in an apartment he rented on Spink Street.) Burke was smooth, rational, and articulate, and despite the hallucinogens, deeply grounded in reality. He was always there to remind people what was real and what was just odd.

Julia Osborne Tryk, always arch and ostensibly unsentimental but having perhaps the biggest heart of them all. Her joke of the day was how she reached back into her family tree for a name for her newborn daughter, and stumbled upon one she loved, Nicola – but then realized her daughter would be named Nicola Tryk – "nickel a trick." She named her Marcelie instead.

(Her other joke was from her eulogy for her adopted brother, who found out as an adult that he was really of Scandinavian extraction, and made great hay with the fact to all his friends. Her line: "I knew my brother before he was Swedish." It was a typical Julia line – scathing, loving, and true.)

These are just a few of the key members. In all, there were perhaps 40 young people who spent time on the hill, and whose lives were altered, however minorly, by the fellowship and experimental spirit of the place. What I remember about them is how smart they were, and also how spiritual – but not in an obvious, "let's bow our heads and pray" way; rather, in an unspoken sense that everyone shared that our reason for being on the hill was fundamentally a serious one, to find ourselves in a proper perspective to nature and creation. We were students of life, and without being doctrinaire about this or that religion or idea, we were everyone of us open to the lurking possibilities of

enlightenment.

I was one of those people, but a dotted-line member at best. I visited twice, spent no more than 20 days there total. Further, I was just recovering from my own commune experience, which had been much less highbrow, less serious-minded, and ultimately more deadly. Two people connected to my other commune died in less than three months' time, a drug overdose and an apparent suicide. So I had reason to be wary of the idea of people being together.

Still further yet, I would judge that, while I was there, I made real contact (read, became friends) with only a couple of the people there, Julia and perhaps Richard. I cast myself more as an observer, and I had issues of my own – chief among them, the devastation of my family following my sister's death at age 15 – to work out at that time.

Also, I wanted to be a writer, and the rash individualism of having opinions – we would have called it ego-centeredness then – seemed not to mesh well with the latticed relationships of communal life. In my irresolution I was content just to be there at Jacob's Hill for a brief period and marvel at the rigor and the delicate beauty of life at 9000 feet.

To put it more bluntly, I had other fish to fry – but the place still had a powerful impact on me. I know I dallied, for a few seconds, with the idea of throwing in with them (if they would have taken me in, which was not an automatic yes) but decided no on the grounds that my famously soft teeth needed work, and I needed a better dental plan than a doorknob and string.

Let me jump forward to a great misunderstanding. Through the 1970s the commune waxed and waned, and eventually "failed" in the sense of being a going concern. People eventually quit the hill. But the spirit of the place lingered on, non-geographically. We stayed in touch, or continued to live close to one another, in one locale or another.

I got on with my life, becoming a journalist and essayist. In 1980 I was news editor of a small daily newspaper out on the plains, so when I was invited to the first Jacobs Hill reunion that summer, I decided to attend in order to mop up the zeitgeist, and maybe cop a story. In my newly sophisticated mind, the point of the reunion was that communalism was doomed to failure all along – that idealism and sharing were not competitive attributes, that living together was as tentative a proposition as who was willing to do the dirty dishes; so endeavors like ours were fundamentally vain.

I attended the reunion, which was like the end of our youth for most of us, just reaching our thirties and casting about for the next chapter in our lives. I wrote an essay about it, in that spirit. It was one of the best things I had written up to that time. I enthusiastically sent it off to *The Atlantic*, which – enthusiastically – sent it right back to me.

In my effort to be timely and hip and craft a post-hip perspective, my essay was needlessly cruel. Everyone at the commune was a washout, I implied in my piece. Long hair had been long cut. The women had gotten older and were starting to need makeup, and the men had just gotten cranky. For the purpose

of the reunion, everyone agreed to prop up everyone else's illusions. But the real truth was, it was over.

The high point of the reunion for me was sitting high on a rock overlook with Richard, as he told me what his life had come to, things that had disappointed him, and opportunities that would not be coming around again. It struck me as extremely poignant, for an idealist like him to have to hang his head the way he did. The rueful, illusionless tone of that conversation permeated the essay I wrote.

My essay was true, but only by squinting, and only by *wanting* everyone to have sold out or given up. It ran in our small rural newspaper, where only a small handful understood the point about generational decline and the demise of hippie idealism. Later, when the Internet arrived, I put a version of the story online, where a few more people read it over 10 years time. The piece was a favorite of mine because of its style, but I lost track of the negativity of its content.

Meanwhile, I moved on. I stopped thinking about Jacobs Hill except as a nostalgia item.

One day, late in the 1990s, I got an indignant email from Richard, complaining about my act of journalistic betrayal, telling what were essentially family secrets. I was put off by his ire and I replied defensively: It was just art, I told him. It was all "true," it was a leap forward for me as a writer, why can't people appreciate constructive criticism, etc.

I pointed out Joan Didion's famous remark about writers, that you can't ever trust them, they'll sell you out every time. As if that

made it right.

It was a snap to change the essay online to alter everyone's identities, per Richard's request. And I "sort of" apologized to him – "If you are offended, I am sorry" – but you hear the qualification in the offer; it was needling and thin.

I was ashamed, but did not want to be told to be ashamed.

So I was surprised when Richard emailed me this year, encouraging me to attend this year's reunion. In the past few years it has become an annual event, so that the commune continues to exist, not as a nostalgia item but in real-time via email and regular regathering. It had morphed into a virtual commune, held together by interest and affection.

I thought I would be unwelcome, because of my commune exposé, so I demurred. Also, I was unsure why I would go, exactly. Were these former hippies truly "friends of my life"? In truth, I have many friends from many different eras. I let many of them go, and did not miss many of them terribly. Why were these old friends any different?

But other friends, like Julia and Donna, urged me to get out to Colorado. And suddenly, a planned vacation to Utah with Rachel and the dog made a side trip to Jacobs Hill not just plausible but almost unavoidable. It would be silly to be way out there and not venture up to the hill again, to sit by the campfire and stare up at the mountain starscape (I have never seen a sky anywhere that compares to it. It is like a window on the universe at large.)

Rachel sensed that, far from being ambivalent to the reunion, I was actually quite keen about it. We arrived in Alamosa four days before the scheduled Solstice gathering, and I talked us into driving our car and tent-trailer up the 10 miles of bone-shaking rock road to see the commune site. Every four inches was a ridgelet in the road, caused by a grader in the spring. So every time our tires rolled over a ridgelet, the ripple effect shuddered through the train of auto and trailer. Every four inches we went forward, then backward, then forward again, with a horrible clatter and jolt. It was a metaphor for progress.

Our foray was a disaster. The road was impossible, no one was at the hill yet – the commune site was just three uninhabitable desert buildings, two of them caved in and burned down – and we were unable to turn our little RV around on the high mountain road. It was scary, a little. I got mad at myself – this was right where I left off with people up here, a victim of my own poor judgment and incompetence. What would people say, when they heard their hotshot journalist friend had marooned himself and his family on the hill, four days before the reunion?

So we spent the night alongside the dirt road, chilly in the cold air, and concerned that a flash flood would sweep us all away.

Eager to explore my old mountain haunts, I arose early, around 6:30, and headed out on a hike with Beau.

Our trailer was parked near the top of the road, so the first thing we did was climb to the very top, a distance of about two

miles. An invigorating thing to do in the high thin air.

We inspected the set of old buildings next to where we slept, tried to find clues to the commune's decline. I couldn't find much.

I found some summer scat – antelope, was my guess. And cowpies that I calculated to be years old. There were no cattle around any more.

A cache of unbroken bottles lying in the sand told me I was at the right place. Most people in the area did not recycle glass. The commune was religious about it, long before recycling became common.

One shed had had a fire, and a bedspring and mattress lay in ashes inside.

Here was a mystery – tin can lids, nailed side by side onto a lintel or roof beam ... to reflect sunlight to help visitors find house in their headlights? Was it a score card? A prayer? I would ask on Saturday.

I thought I saw a cursive scrawl on the old wood by the door, but when I got closer, was just "worm writing" – intricate patterns of some larva burrowing through the mean of the wood ... still, it seemed to have personality, a voice calling out to the loneliness, a message of survival from one who is no more.

Saturday came, and my fears of resentment were not realized. No one mentioned my story from 23 years earlier. It was wonderful to see Donna and Jo and Julia again. We picked up

right where we left off – a little older and wiser, maybe, but still with a spirit of determined fun.

I re-met Malcolm MacDonald, an acquaintance from Wooster who been down some of the same bumpy paths as me, and wore his losses on his sleeve. He wept like a garden hose at scrapbook photos of Becket, a graceful woman of our group who took her own life in the 70s. Malcolm understood it better than I did, and it cut him to the quick – there was a lifetime of yearning and grief in those tears.

And I met people who were new to me – Annie, who took charge of the meal plan, and good-humoredly commandeered an artillery position of propane stoves and oversized stir-fry pans. She apologized for ordering my dog out of the kitchen – a vaguely demarked area under a tent umbrella – but if I had learned anything from meals at Jacobs Hill over the years it was that there had to be rules about food.

I met Bobby's brothers, two very interesting men – the eldest, Norman, had been abducted by aliens multiple times back in the 60s, and had otherwise led a life of remarkable Gnostic initiations. Normally, as a journalist, I would be very circumspect about such a story. Here, though, one had to listen to it and consider what it all might mean. Not just to be polite, but because it was an item of faith on the hill that weird puzzle pieces were also part of the puzzle. It was conventional behavior and perspectives that were suspicious.

So I had to think about what it would mean to feel one had been intervened with that way, and taken off in a spacecraft by a creature that resembled a praying mantis, and probed. It would be

physically irritating, intellectually humiliating, and spiritually challenging. How that would rock one's world, and call into question one's ordinary feelings of an orderly life, and the opinions of others. And how other people would disappoint you, with their appraisals.

And I got to know some of the local friends from the nearby village of Capulin – people who had crossed the line of their own conventions years earlier to accept the young hippies. They were the essential people in many respects. Their generosity in helping the squatters stay alive the first year or so made us kids acceptable to others in the valley. It was the greatest act of kindness, to welcome the other as they did. And you could see, Saturday around the campfire, the fondness for and loyalty to one another still burned. It was a furious joy to see one another again, and know that nothing had diminished.

As the day wore on and night fell, we sat at the campfire and took turns remarking on the meaning of this curious place, that was to all outside appearances an unremarkable failure – hippies came and hippies left – yet was a remarkable success to all of us who took part then, and continue to take part today.

Everyone had a good thought. Burke, the long-ago dope dealer, remarked about a 53-year-old nuclear engineer he had heard at Los Alamos recently, who handed responsibility for solving safety and proliferation problems down to the next generation – as if the 50-ish generation, our generation – were over, finished, its work complete. That struck Burke as wrong on every level, and he exhorted us to use our wisdom and power as elders to continue to change the world we live in.

Andy, a local mechanic who was also a physicist by nature, told how he came under the spell of the Jacobs Hill group 20 years ago and felt that we had supplied him with the answer to science's biggest question: what is the unifying force underlying the energies that we can identify – gravity, electricity, nuclear bonding. And the answer he came up with is that the power holding us all together is the power of positivity, much like the Force of *Star Wars* fame – our knack for getting with all the goodness and rightness in the universe, and its loving power. It was love, this rightness, that held the atoms tight together, love that carried sunshine to the coldest parts of the solar system. It was love that kept us alive, against all probability and reason.

When my turn came, I said that I was taught a valuable lesson that day, that the friends of one's youth – so shiny and attractive in the morning of our lives – can become the friends of life, friends with whom one can face the ultimate challenges human beings are confronted with. And I thanked them for the sweetness of their hospitality.

It was time for us to stagger with our folding chairs up the hill to where our car was parked, under the vaulting night sky. I hugged everyone. We laughed and kissed. But one bit of business remained undone. I went to Richard, who had complained of the liberties I took in my essay 23 years earlier. We embraced.

I said to him, "We hardly talked."

He replied, laconic Maine-ite that he is, "We'll keep talking. Email."

I nodded. But what I should have done right then is apologize

in the right way for the 20 year old misunderstanding. Without realizing it, I had taken something from my friends that was not mine to take. It was a cheap shot, and I was wrong.

And now I am trying to put it back, with these words.

Thank you, dear friends, of the hill, in the sky – thanks for everything.

(1988)

## 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 *Ça-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.

(1975)

## The Late Great Franklin Ace

The other day, I was rummaging around in the crawlspace of the attic, where I keep boxes and boxes of cables, wires, and outdated electronic stuff. And I suddenly felt a strange pang. I remembered my first computer, and I wondered where it was.

My first computer was a hybrid of an Apple II+ and a CP/M machine, called a Franklin Ace 1200. For a brief period in the early 1980s, Franklin was the premier maker of Apple clones, before Apple asserted its proprietary prerogatives and busted Franklin down to the pocket gizmo niche it occupies today.

I always hated when I was at a party and people would brag about their IBMs, Compaqs, and Macs – recognizable macho PC brand names – and I had to peep "Franklin Ace," which sounded more like a kite or a kazoo than a computer. You couldn't network with it. I wasn't even able to fit it with a modem.

Looking back, I wonder why Franklin thought having two operating systems was a good idea. You could run a program like Appleworks if you booted the native operating system up. Or you could use WordStar if you booted from a CP/M disk. But basically, you couldn't use both, because your data would never be interoperable.

It was January 1983. I was an early adapter, but not all the way to the bleeding edge, or I would have bought a Lisa, the antecedent to the Macintosh. The Lisa was stunning but she was way expensive and underpowered.

And WordStar was the lingua franca of early computing. I

can still remember most of the Ctrl commands I ran on WordStar for five years: Ctrl-S for save, Ctrl-C for copy. Ctrl-X got you out of the program.

If you run Windows today, and you prefer the keyboard commands to using the mouse, you probably use a remnant of the original WordStar commands. And you probably have healthier wrists as a result – mouse use is the worst thing for repetitive stress.

The Ace was too stupid to have an Undo key. But you could program the Alt-M combination, for instance, to type out your entire name and address. That was pretty cool.

Anyway, there I am, on my hands and knees, burrowing in the attic and grunting like a pig, and wondering where my old friend the Ace was at that exact moment.

I figured, when I moved up to an IBM XT, that I'd give the Ace to my baby daughter. I did not then know the great truth of computer hand me downs – that kids need great new computers, not lousy old ones.

Then I donated the Franklin to the Friends School in Saint Paul. I liked thinking that this toothless old beast was enlisted to teach young Quakers how to survive in a grasping world. But realistically, I knew that an off-brand hybrid that was crippled for network use, and for whom parts were unavailable, was too much of a burden even for Friends.

I'll bet they passed it on to someone pretty fast. As a once-valuable computer tumbles down the food chain, there are fewer and fewer people who will take it. Prisons don't want 'em. Mexico

doesn't want 'em. I don't think even Mexican prisons want 'em.

Still, I imagine the Ace set sail in its senior years for other lands, and it is possible it is still crunching data onto 5.25" floppies somewhere. Someone in some faraway country might be wrestling in the 1990s with the inadequacies I struggled with in the 1980s. Maybe it was in Burundi, doing correspondence at some village clinic. Or maybe it was in Bangla Desh, running Visicalc spreadsheets for a trucking company.

Who am I kidding? My Ace is junk. But I'm still curious where, and how. It was an untangleable snarl of plastic, wire and glass. No way could it be properly dismantled and recycled.

Maybe it's in some Volunteers of America shop somewhere, propping open a door, or sitting in the dark in somebody's mini-storage compartment, buried under boxes of tax receipts.

Or it's on level 738 of some terraced exurban landfill, bulldozed over a thousand times, badly crunched but still retaining its basic shape, communing in the blackness with cereal boxes, banana peels, and faded Big Wheels.

Ace, you were so feeble, even on your best days. But we had fun, didn't we. Staying up late, getting up early, attacking the clunky keyboard that was built into the CPU. And I think of all the thoughts I poured into you, that you nearly always saved.

And only the best friends do that.

(1988)



## **It Was Going to Be a Long Day**

The rear-view mirror said God is Love, but you'd never have known it on that pitiless second-class bus.

It was those Germans who got the day off to a bad start.

I had always thought of that people as punctilious and prudent in managing their affairs. Surely their countrymen would be ashamed of this impolite disorderly group.

We were in the Peten jungle a kilometer or so from the Tikal ruins. Rachel and I spent our days walking through the forest, eyeing the ancient stones, the roots of the ceiba trees gouging the decayed altars.

The Germans, on the other hand, who occupied the hut next to us, spent their days sunbathing, discussing favored ski resorts around the world, and tossing down rums and tonics with twists of lime.

You see, in the jungle – this is an opinion – people have to pull together. The jungle is a place for teamwork and civility.

If, say, the gasoline generator shuts off at 9, then everyone really ought to comply by going to sleep. If a group of German tourists insist on singing and joking to a kerosene lamp until, say, midnight, then going to sleep becomes that much more difficult for the rest.

And if they further insist on drying their underwear on a line in front of one's door, blocking off one's faint evening jungle

breeze instead of theirs, then lying there, annoyed, innocent, very possibly suffocating, one may come to reassess one's previous opinion of the Treaty of Versailles.

The bus for Flores was due to leave very early in the morning, at 4 a.m. All the sensible people in the jungle camp set their alarms for 3:45: time enough to grab baggage and jump aboard.

The Germans, however, not having packed and having, in fact, left their underwear on the line all night, awoke at 2:45, bumped heads in the dark, fired their lamp, and muttered Deutsch imprecations to the rest of the camp's growing dismay.

Hungry and thirsty, most of the passengers blinked and slumped in the Guatemaltecan-sized bus seats.

But not the Germans. Finally summoning their martial gifts, they commanded the driver to stop at a roadside tienda, marched in, purchased a six-pack of Perrier's, and marched back aboard, clutching their liquids with unlikable, complacent half-smiles.

It was going to be a long day.

\*

"No, no, you don't want to take the highway to Rio Dulce," Wolfgang, a traveling friend and an outstanding representative of the German nation, had warned us.

"The road is no good, the trip is, how do you say, very bumpy? Bumpy, yes."

But we bade Wolfgang auf wiedersehen at the crossroads to

Belize and continued toward Flores.

The road did not seem to bad at first, and the bus was not overcrowded. Only a few people stood in the aisles.

Indeed, the vicinity was full of workmen, widening the gravel highway. We knew Guatemala is pushing to make Tikal a major new tourism center for Central America, and the highway project was a part of this effort.

So Rachel and I imagined we were the beneficiaries of this campaign, and enjoyed the relative luxury.

Just outside Flores, however, everyone on the bus stood and gasped.

Lying in the middle of the limestone road was a dead man. Over his face lay a handkerchief. Around his head a still pool of blood had gathered. And not more than ten feet in every direction were his fellow workers, raking the gravel, going about their business.

The nearest ambulance was 200 miles away. Whatever had happened that morning on the road from Tikal, whatever machine had squashed that poor man's head, and ruined his family back in whatever village he had traveled from to join this road gang, he never had a chance. His friends, calmly raking to right and to left knew this, thanked God it was him and not them, wished his soul straightaway to heaven and put his body out of mind.

\*

The city of San Benito has worse water problems than the

city of Worthington.

Like our city, San Benito is located alongside a lake, about 150 miles from a major city. Population: roughly 10,000.

The problem is that it is situated on the vast limestone shelf of the Guatemalan lowlands, making an effective sewer system impossible.

Accordingly, waste of every kind is piling up in San Benito, and has been for decades. The city smells. Its market, unlike the typical Guatemalan market – attractive and not entirely without order – is like one great indiscriminate heap of produce and flesh, with the freshest on top and the most fetid trampled underfoot.

In the back bins, children and the elderly sort through the rotting vegetables for parts still edible.

Guatemala is a poor country, but seldom squalid. San Benito is squalid. We were eager to leave, but dismayed when, approaching the bus that we had heard such nightmarish tales about, it was already full to the exploding point.

I counted 93 bodies on board, not counting two turkeys and an undisclosed number of chickens issuing complaints from a burlap sack. This was on a bus whose maximum capacity in the United States would be 54 or 60.

Happily, a Spaniard architect preferred to be smashed up against us than against any alternatives on board and offered to share his seat.

Less happy were a group of British tourists with pigtails (the

men) and save-the-whales T-shirts (the women). The looks on their faces when they realized they would be on their feet all day long on this grueling course was a collective one of dejection.

One passenger was a squat, muscular woman in her forties, the grandmother of a family of five squashed into one schoolbus seat. The grandmother was clearly accustomed to having people yield to her.

In the crowded, quarreling confines of the bus, she simply seized a window seat and planted her sullen and meaty face at the window.

One other passenger was a small man of about 35 who was having difficulty understanding. He did not look well. Every now and then he would nod off to sleep.

The bus pulled out of Flores and onto the road to Rio Dulce. Now we realized what Wolfgang meant by bumpy. The road was simply a strip of the limestone floor that is everywhere in the jungle, the soft stone pitted very badly by the tropical rains.

It is not an exaggeration to say that there was not five feet of smooth road, not two seconds of the entire trip that was not punctuated by a jarring, kneecap-bruising bump.

To make matters worse, the driver was not one to coddle his passengers. He hated the trip as much as they, and his one objective was to get it over with. Therefore he literally raced the bus from bump to bump.

At 30 miles per hour, the bus felt like it was navigating the stairwell of the Statue of Liberty.

But it was not a matter of amusement. Tempers rubbed together in the bus. I overheard remarks from some about us gringos, that we all of us expected deluxe treatment, that we were making too great a show of our discomfort.

Just in front of us, the pigtailed Englishman and his annoyed environmentalist friend peeled and fussily devoured orange after papaya after banana, while the hulking grandmother looked at the fruit with undisguised covetousness.

And of course the British were being just fastidious enough about the process to justify the gringo sentiment that was flourishing in the back rows.

Meanwhile, children and the French Hoss Cartwright were having sport with cataplectic little man, who had lost consciousness and slumped in his seat. They would lift an arm and let it drop again lifelessly, then howl with delight at their own wit. The other passengers thought it was legitimate fun, drizzling Orange Crush down his shirtfront and calling him drunkard.

Worse, however, the man had dozed past his stop. He had wanted to go seven miles from San Benito. Now he was almost 100 miles past it. When the conductor jostled him awake and asked for his ticket, and he had none, the conductor pulled him to his feet and began forcing him backward toward the emergency exit.

The man was awake now, but to a reality straight out of Kafka: he did not know where he was or what he had none, he had no money, no friends, he was being accused of something he wasn't responsible for, and laughed at by people who didn't

understand him, and finally physically hurled from this busfull of bruised, uncouth and impatient people.

Plus he was sticky all over from the Orange Crush.

Thrown from the back, he cried and ran after the bus and climbed back on. The conductor whirled and came at him again. "Mi paquete!" he cried. "My bag!"

So the bus stopped again while the conductor showed him bag after bag from the luggage rack. No, that isn't it. No, not that one. It became apparent that he wouldn't recognize his bag if he saw it, that he was stalling for time until he got a better idea.

Finally the conductor led him to the door again. He hopped down, then turned again and raced after the bus, his eyes bugging. The conductor, having had enough, jumped down and with one swipe clubbed him alongside the face, bloodied his nose and knocked him down, a pathetic figure on the white lime road, now dwindling in the distance.

And over the rear-view mirror was the bus' motto: Dios es amor.

\*

The hours passed. Not quickly or pleasantly or smoothly, but they passed. Every hour we put another 30 kilometers behind us, and every hour a few more bruises to ankle and kneecap and skull.

Gradually, the landscape began to change from the flat jungle plain to craggy hillock. The change was scarcely a relief,

however, as the bus groaned uphill, spitting slag after it, and flirting precariously close to the shoulders, beyond which loomed space, more space, and a valley floor of stone.

The grandmother, who had fought so cussedly for her seat at the window, was fingering her rosary beads.

For m part, I was thinking of all the 2-inch Associated Press stories we used to get at the Globe about bus bursting into flames in the canyons or Latin America. We used to use these stories for filler, to make the more important stories fit on the page. No big deal. And now I was feeling like filler-fodder myself.

Around 3 in the afternoon the bus halted at the garita station. A soldier with sawed-off machine gun boarded the bus and peered into a few faces and stepped down. Then the driver announced something in Spanish.

I thought I had misunderstood but I hadn't. All male passengers were to get off the bus and forfeit their passports.

I shrugged. These security checks were routine. But then we stood there in line, and I examined the other men's faces, young and nervous and displeased. If even one of them didn't have his papers in order, or were recognized....

The corporal's thumb rested on his trigger.

Oh, it is easy to be contemptuous of their problem. Their silly political upheavals and their disco armies of kids with pegged pants and tommy guns.

But when the gun is looking back at you, eye to eye with the

Grave Possibility, then you're the silly one, and your silly contempt.

The sun bore down on us as we stood in line and one by one surrendered our papers. My Spaniard architect friend seemed to have a problem. Guatemala has broken off relations with Spain, I thought. I considered coming to his assistance, then fantasized myself saying the wrong thing:

"Listen here, soldier. I'm an American journalist, and everything you do here will wind up in a major publication back in the United States, so I advise you..."

Blam. Thud. Fantasy concluded.

\*

We reboarded. Exhausted, we jolted along another sixty miles, another three hours.

By now the lime dust was everywhere on us, our hair was stiff with it. Children were bawling inconsolably. The English leaned glumly into one another. The grandmother had emptied two coconuts in two strong draughts and slept now, head slamming unmercifully, rhythmically – and strangely peacefully – against the bus window.

We came to a river. We were asked to get off the bus, take all our luggage, cross a rickety plank-bridge as best we could, and reboard another bus – whose passengers had been waiting for us for over three hours – on the other side!

But the long day, the long road was almost behind us. It was

dark when we pulled into Rio Dulce, a salty roadside town on the estuary of Lake Isabel.

It was good to hear the engine die, good to put weight on your feet again, and straighten our American-size limbs.

We brushed the dust from our suitcases, asked directions to the nearest pension and, though there was no water there to drink or to bathe in, we thought ourselves terribly lucky indeed after our long day's journey across the wilderness to rest on those heavenly cots.

(1978)

## In the Year of the Deer-Christ

Your ear perks up at the sound of the mailman 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 anything good there; there never is. You have got used to receiving the unwanted: the supermarket circular, the mimeo school district report, the pink slip of the utility bill peeking out the envelope window.

The wonder is that you still make this long hike to the road before the postman's car dives over the next hill.

Up the road there, you see how it narrows, then loops over the neighbor's ridgetop, flickering like a flame, then meets at a point and vanishes.

Getting up each day and driving off to work turns you into a yo-yo. Every morning you rise on its string, and every night slide down again. How do you keep hoping, you ask yourself. And what is all this effort for?

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The road is for you, for people. You tell yourself that as you speed down its gravel, everything in its right place. Your grandfather helped plat it out when he was in his twenties, one of eight settlers in the whole township. They laid out a road every square mile, north to south and east to west. It made the prairie a chessboard and people were its grandmaster.

It didn't need a name. It was The Township Road, or just The Road. Your people made it.

Your race maintains it. Your kind stakes claim to it day after day, every time a key turns in the ignition and wheels roll out, like a signature.

It confuses animals. Meadow beasts, marsh beasts, beasts of the ditch. A thousand times in the blank of the night that same pair of eyes freezes in front of you, caught in the headlights like a thief at the silver drawer.

And the thief never moves. Like it's disbelieving, or blinded. It just stands there looking.

This weighs the driver down, your whole day soured by the sight of a body going down under metal.

It could have stepped aside. But it didn't. Whump. Another innocent broken by the road. Count the bones. It's like cruising into Rome, crucifixions everywhere.

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In the spring the township man sprays the shoulders with herbicide. In summer time they mow the ditch grass every six weeks or so. It keeps down the insect and milkweed populations, and gives drivers another second to see an animal bolting. In the last weeks of the fall the farmers douse the roadsides with gas and burn them back while the cattle moan a thousand yards away.

The cattle remember smoke. They remember fire from a long time ago.

But all this destroying does no good. Winter comes and the snow settles where the wind wants it. Some of the roads block off for the season. Sometimes the snow is so deep, the ploughs create deep trenches, a single lane wide, sometimes a mile long. When two cars meet in a mile-long trench, one of them has to lose and shift into reverse.

Now in the cold season you stand by the window, watching the snow pass over the road like a stampede of spirit. Nighttimes you dream of a record snow, and your lifeline to town, to shelter and food, cut off for weeks.

After a time, the cards get tired of solitaire. By day you pass in a grudge of ice – one false move will do you in, one gust of wind and you blow off the road forever.

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

One day you step out the door in shirtsleeves, blinking. The road is streaked with the skid of tires veering this way and that through the slime. A corpse of ashen snow lies shining in the ditch. Gray puddles face up to the sky, like columns of obituaries in the March edition.

You think the road is beyond repair, then along comes the grader to make it right again. And now, to smell the smells of the earth that you thought unresurrectably dead, rushing into your head once again!

On every loop of telephone wire a dozen grackles screech their screech. Each bird faces east like a bead on an abacus, on a rosary.

All winter you doubted. You survived the cold; but could anything else? Today, as you stand by the mailbox, you see something, a sign, pressed into the mud. You kneel in the clay and with the tips of two fingers you enter the print of the improbable deer.

And there is a letter for you, from home.

(1979)

## **They Died Off the Walkway**

Several years ago over, my family took a Labor Day week trip out west. The high point was visiting Little Bighorn Battleground in Montana. It was a working vacation for me. I was powering up my Toshiba 1000 laptop at filling stations to add details to stories, and scrounging for phone plugs in motels to phone my work in.

Because I was preoccupied with deadlines, I did less teaching about the history of the west than I probably should have. My children, Daniele, 9, and Jon, 6, had to figure out for themselves what a wapiti is, who Rain In The Face was, and so forth.

It wasn't until we set foot on the site of Custer's Last Stand that I reassumed the mantle of Great Wise One. I had visited the park years earlier, when it was known as Custer Battlefield National Monument. Political correctness had since intervened, and the place had been redesigned with the Indian sensibility in mind. The National Park Service guides pretty much ridiculed the impossible position the 7th Cavalry allowed itself to be put in that day.

I tried to explained the seminal details of the battle to the kids as we got out of the car, but Jon was more interested in his Ninja Turtle figurine than in me going on about fine points like who did what to whom, and where, why, and when.

So we're walking up the hillside to the site where the 7th Cavalry fell, Jonnie's tiny hand in mind. "Look at this," I say to him, as we pass a sign put up by the Park Service:

RATTLESNAKES ARE COMMON IN THIS AREA!  
PLEASE STAY ON THE BLACKTOP WALKWAY.

Now Jon is suddenly engaged, looking this way and that. Historical markers come and go, but rattlesnake are the bomb. There could be one -- right there! We make our way up the hallowed hill, and we begin to pass little crosses, marking where cavalrymen fell to Sioux arrows. "Here's where one fell," I told Jon, "and here's another. All these crosses show where soldiers were killed."

We even found the name of a "Jere. Finley" on the big marker at the top of the battlefield, where about 60 men died. Someone with our family name, some scared kid, died up there with his boots on. I became somber at that thought and we walked down the hill in silence.

Which was when I remembered my historical responsibility. "So Jon," I asked my little boy, "do you think you understand what happened here, and why the soldiers were killed?"

Jon paused for a minute, before setting forth his considered opinion, like a gambler putting everything on number twenty two.

"Yes," he finally said, displaying a sense of history worthy of Hollywood. "The soldiers got off the path, and they were killed by rattlesnakes?"

## 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 strike is your rookie strike. 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 west. "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.

(1998)

## Couvade and the Cloud of Unknowing

*"The state of man: inconstancy, boredom, anxiety."  
Blaise Pascal, Pensées*



The concept of the pregnant man touches a deep and persistent chord in our civilization. The covers of grocery checkout tabloids boast about a man carrying a child, and usually the story, half a column in length, turns out to be that a disinterred body in Dutch Guyana shows a sizable tumor in his girth, an hormonally confused Senegalese is widely reported (but narrowly documented) to have borne twins, real milk has issued from the breasts of an 109-year-old Cossack, or a deluded fireman in Pensacola insists he is carrying Amelia Earhart's baby, and rocks, and rocks, and rocks.

Such stories make headlines because, whether true or not, they turn on an elemental obsession of our culture and of all cultures – the idea that woman is woman and man, man, and any

departure from this formula is a marvel, a freak. And we like thinking about freak occurrences because, while they suggest the possibility of monstrous error on the part of nature, they are "out there" – they do not really touch the lives of those of us outside the carney wagons.

It can be alarming for a male in our culture to suddenly find himself emulating the female of the species. The expectant father is prone toward all sorts of "mother imitations" ranging from morning sickness, vomiting, heartburn and constipation through such motherly other complaints as backache, abdominal swelling, appetite changes, insomnia, snappishness and a general dragged-out feeling.

Ritual couvade was unknown to the West until the nineteenth century, and the establishment of the modern science of anthropology. As preliminary observations and records were taken of peoples long remote from European and American academic eyes, long-cherished attitudes about what was civilized and what was savage began to falter. Anthropological pioneers were particularly taken by the habits in different cultures surrounding courtship, marriage and childbearing. The practice of ritual couvade, manifested so similarly in cultures continents and oceans apart, alerted researchers such as Margaret Mead in the South Seas and George Gorer in the Himalayas that something nearly universal had been uncovered. It was remarkable in its intensity, in its thoroughness, and in its ornamental embellishments. It was given the name couvade, for brooding time, for hatching.

When the full moon had shown its face thrice and the woman had not purged herself in that time, the New Guinea hunter withdrew from the rest of the tribe. He began to construct his own clothing for the waiting time, earrings of conch because his woman wore conch and a headdress of the feathers of the megapode, because it was said that that bird, which walked so close to the ground, was always nesting.

He did not sit by the fires and boast of his prowess, even though it was not his nature ordinarily to downplay his accomplishments. He did not want to bring down upon his family the anger of spirits. He visited with his wife's family and eschewed his own, even his own mother.

Through the fifth month he worked hard gathering food and hunting, and then he ceased going out into the forest to hunt, relying instead upon the gifts of his woman's people. He put his energies toward building a separate hut for himself, a stone's throw from the woman's.

He prepared his food and she prepared hers. At night they slept apart, and he neither drank after dark nor chewed the betel nor ate of the soma roots. In the final weeks he took to his bed alone, and prayed and chanted as the spirits roiled inside him, tormenting his parts. The forest night was filled with his cries of lamentation.

On the seventh day of his ordeal the woman came to his hut – the first time she had visited him. She handed him her newborn child – a son. He smiled, and pulled the infant to his breast, and gave suck to him, for it was his.

Rachel and I were more conventional than most people probably realized. And though neither of us knew much about kids, we figured it was an important part of life as human beings, and we were afraid if we don't go through with this, we'll wind up missing out on something somehow important.

Coupled with our vague hopes were specific fears, problems which I was sure would come to some sort of head in the months to come. I had a strong sense that I was still a child myself – Rachel, too. In making a child, what would happen to our childhoods? What would we gain for all that we lost? What assurance did I have that I had any business taking on the role of father? Where would the new energy come from? How would I avoid the pattern of errors I perceived in my own upbringing? Would my parenthood be a case of "like father, like son"? What if it didn't come? Why, at age 34, should I suddenly begin liking children? What kind of world was I bringing a child into anyway? Wouldn't I be better advised subtracting from the overpopulated earth than adding to it? Finally, how does a father save a child when dangers greater than wolves and bears lurk everywhere, from the gyre of holocaust to the chromosome's twist.

Looking back, I can remember feeling that I was sure being a good guy, doing all this for Rachel. She was the driving force behind the decision to have a child then. I tried to be agreeable, supportive. If I had doubts about having a child I kept them to myself. Mister Goodguy.

Which was fine by me, by and large – I was playing the role I thought a Dad would play. If all I was ever asked for was a bit of

play-acting, I'd have done a lot better than I did.

The dilemma of the expectant father today is simply ignorance. For many men, the fact of their partners' pregnancies is the first true mystery to come their way in life. For once, it is the mother who (to his thinking) operates within the traditional "male" perspective of problem solving.

She is the one who has calculated and now notices the cessation of menses; she is the one who consults with outside experts to determine the nature of the situation; and it is she who typically rolls up her sleeves and gets to work planning the project, conducting the research, charting the progress from month one to ten.

Amid this whirl of directed and perfectly logical activity, the father's status shifts abruptly, and the traditional roles played by the sexes do a flipflop.

Suddenly and horribly, it is the man who feels omitted from the excitement of an important project. It is the man who feels he hasn't enough data at his command with which to make decisions. It is the man who feels helpless and boggled at the prospect of dramatic change in his life while the woman goes her businesslike way adapting.

She, carrying conclusive proof of her condition under her belt, is free to perform systems analysis and chart timelines. He, who until this moment was the linear, dispassionate, deductive, problem-solving half of the relationship, is suddenly oscillating in decidedly unmasculine hemi-demi-semiquavers.

All of these perceptions are misogynist claptrap, and transparent misogynist claptrap at that. She was never less logical, or practical or acute at so-called male activities than he. But he considered them his demesne nonetheless. And now the poor fellow's world has turned upside-down. His map of the universe has been transformed. The mountain ranges have become seas. The seas have become stone. He's got a lot of orienting to do.

At the heart of this transformation is mystery. To oversimplify, we may say that (from the man's point of view) pregnancy for woman is process, for man, mystery. And it is mystery as unresolvable and as elusive as any religious enigma. Until now, the inner workings of his partner's body were no concern of his, because they did not affect him. Now the secret within her body not only affects him dramatically, but is one which cannot simply be whispered into his ear – it is too profound, too resistant to ordinary description.

He sees his life as catastrophically collided – much as a planet is struck by a hurtling comet. And yet he cannot see the approaching star. He is asked to accept the good news on faith, and he feels in the dark for the switch that is his faith, and he cannot find it.

Then something terrible happened – we got pregnant. Rachel missed her period the third month of trying, and within a short time the urine tests confirmed our best hopes and worst fears. Sometime in mid-August, we two would become three. I say "terrible" not because it was really a terrible thing. It was terrific. I wanted to be a dad – that's not where the ambivalence lay. It was

in not knowing what it meant to be a dad. From day one something was eating at me about becoming a father. I didn't show it, but it was there, and it bothered me.

Getting pregnant was the start of a series of events which taught me more about myself than I ever thought I'd need to know, much of it unpleasant. Before the pregnancy came to term, my Mister Goodguy act would run the gamut of emotions. Anger, guilt, desperation, anxiety, the heebie-jeebies. This may sound awful, but the closest thing in my life to expecting our child was when I was a kid, and my best friend's dad lay dying of cancer for six months. The same awful sense of time suspended. The same inability, deep down, to believe what was happening.

I took Rachel out to dinner the night the test results came in, and she chattered merrily about the excitement in store for us. I kept up my Mister Goodguy act, smiling and suggesting we drink a toast. Oh no, Rachel said, no alcohol for her, not until the baby's born. But you go right ahead.

So there I was on the very first night of expectant fatherhood, drinking alone and just beginning to realize the changes ahead. I even drank an extra one, and claimed I was drinking it on Rachel's behalf.

Couvade is a crisis of faith – the faith a man has in his ability to face the unknown. As the wife increaseth, the husband decreaseth. In his despair, he is at the bottom of the barrel of his manhood. There he gropes for something new in his composition to help him to cope; and what he finds is something very, very old

– an ancient technique to help man survive this very normal but very upsetting ordeal.

Ancient tools, ancient tricks, ancient masks. What he discovers is that modern man and ancient man, different as button-down and buckskin, are quite alike in one respect – they both value their security, and are both threatened when their manly armor starts to crack.

The cloud of unknowing in which the expectant father drifts can be a torment. A man who cannot bear to be kept in the dark about so important a matter as incipient parenthood will have great difficulty finding peace and minimizing the stress of transition to a new social status.

A man who, on the other hand, understands that there is a purpose for this suspension of his traditional "hunterly" practicality and clearheadedness, will be better able to grope toward understanding and adapting.

Couvade may be thought of as a sustained, low-grade anxiety attack. This may not be a pleasant way of regarding it, but as such it does have the advantage of having a beginning, middle, and an end. That it does indeed end, and with such a knowable marvel at the end, i. e. , a baby, is very good news.

The man who understands that couvade is a necessary preparation for the new role of father, a rite of passage or crisis in his development as important in its secondary status as pregnancy itself, can more easily "give himself" to the couvade, hit bottom sooner, and find himself once again on the surface of his life, this time stronger, clearer, perhaps even wiser.

But while I was spreading the news with one part of my head, another part still seemed to be in the dark. Periodically I'd ask myself how I felt. Great, I answered. Fantastic, I'd tell myself. Oh God, I finally broke down and admitted – what in the world had I got myself into?

The first two months seemed very unreal, like sleepwalking almost. At work, everything continued as usual, except for some of my colleagues who pumped me for details, at which I grinned and improvised, not actually knowing any correct answers. Did I prefer a boy or a girl? How did I know? I just hoped it (all I ever called it was it) was healthy and didn't hurt my wife too much. And didn't cost too much. I found I could hardly talk about specifics. I didn't know anything. I couldn't even feel anything.

I could feel myself shrinking, like the wicked witch in *The Wizard of Oz*. Day by day I felt increasingly insignificant – whereas a year or so ago I had been Romeo to Rachel's Juliet, now I was more like Friday to her Crusoe.

She was so happy and busy and businesslike, putting all our bureaucratic ducks in a row – sorting out our health insurance and maternity leave benefits, lining up our doctor and midwife, finding a good back-up obstetrician – tasks that all seemed somehow beyond me at the time.

I admired her so, but felt so inadequate myself. My main accomplishment was lugging a used air-conditioner up two flights and installing it in the bedroom. And when that was over, feeling a sharp twinge about midway up my back. My back would ache

virtually nonstop through the duration of Rachel's pregnancy.

The spectacle of ritual couvade – it was called institutional couvade because it followed a set form which must not be deviated from – was an astonishment to Western eyes, and today still seems foreign, exotic and unimaginably odd. Thus the suggestion that there is some connection between what expectant fathers feel and do today and what this pagan felt and did in the woods of Borneo a half-century ago seems ludicrous and worse, useless.

But consider the advantages of our man in the field. Ask what his objectives are as he undergoes his rituals. They are simple, but they are also immense. He wants, first and foremost, that his family be healthy and whole. He does not wish to trade a partner for a child, or vice versa, and in this there is nothing obsolete about him – expectant fathers cite this worry as their number one source of concern during pregnancy.

Couvade achieves this objective through ritual. By wearing special clothes and withdrawing from the dangers of cheap society, by abstaining from polluting substances, by undergoing the trauma of birth itself, he has taken the danger away from the woman and onto himself. In this sense couvade is far from a show of "womanishness" – it is bravery and resourcefulness in the face of the gravest source of danger – angry spirits. In its truest sense it is heroism.

He wants, secondly, to express various things that need expressing. He wants to state unequivocally the bond that

henceforth exists between father and child— a statement which we in the West have struggled over the centuries to make, and usually failed. He wants to announce to the world that he accepts his new responsibility and status as father, and that this child, whom he has not seen, is indeed his.

This stands in stark contrast to the modern father, who greets the prospective new arrival with large helpings of incredulity and self-doubt.

He wants, thirdly, to get himself through a tortuous season in a man's life without losing his cool. The time of pregnancy has always been a time in which powerful forces are at work, evil spirits within and without a man easily capable of violence, hysteria, hostility, flight. Ritual couvade provides a culturally sanctioned outlet for the father to vent some of this passion. It is an established safety valve for the excess of emotion in the expectant father.

He wants, finally, to tell himself certain things – to admit to himself what he is also admitting to his society. Whereas his life before centered on the hunt, on the courtship, on the games and friends, all that must now change and he must accept these changes. Couvade changes the expectant father from the inside out, as well as from the outside in. Once he has successfully performed the recommended tasks of couvade, even the least articulate father-to-be understands the powerful transition he is caught up in, and is better able to move within its currents.

Why was all this happening? I asked myself. I began thinking

conspiratorially that I had no proof personally that a child was on the way. Rachel wasn't showing, she was still wearing her usual clothes. Nothing seemed different, and yet everything was.

Whereas most people think of me as sociable, cheerful and outgoing, a dark and sinister, Darth-Vaderish streak was beginning to show. At work I found myself quarreling at the drop of a hat, usually about some perceived slight, but just as often about my new, true field of expertise, obstetrics and gynecology.

For some reason I took it upon myself to wage war against the excesses of the medical establishment. Soon this general defensiveness became generally offensive, as I began lashing out at doctors in general. All they want to do is pump you up, cut you up, and hit the links by two, I told anyone who would lend an ear. Sophisticated stuff. My colleagues shook their heads – I was on my way to being the company crank.

An angry, misanthropic side of me blossomed. I became very impatient with colleagues reducing me to the least common denominator of EXPECTANT FATHER. Wherever I went, it was, "How's the mother?" or "When's that due-date again?"

It annoyed me that people should have forgotten I was a human being with diverse interests. I still liked baseball, I still followed the Brewers box scores. My work never suffered, I never missed a meeting. I read novels, not baby books. Why this typecasting? Wasn't I still me? I felt betrayed by my so-called friends and co-workers, and withdrew further and further into my work...

The only remaining issue to understanding ritual couvade is to apply the test of modernity to it. Does it work? Or is it just some hocus-pocus, backwoods weirdness that anthropologists dote on but doesn't have much to do with anything? How can any reasonable person believe that dressing up and pretending to have a baby serves to anchor a man during pregnancy?

The answer to this question is a complicated one. But understanding the appeal of maternity for men has little to do with our concept of modernity.

So I withdrew into my work. And into my aspirin bottle.

Week by week my back hurt more and more. Pain killers couldn't touch it. Eventually I had to quit running because exercise aggravated the pain. It was like my rib and tenth thoracic vertebra had collided and were now sparking like downed power lines. I squirmed in my chair at work, and twisted from side to side as I drove on the freeway. I was coming apart at the seams and couldn't understand why.

Rachel was terrific. By four months she was clearly showing, and morning sickness and drowsiness were taking a heavy toll on her energies. We would sit at nights and gaze forlornly into one another's eyes, each knowing the other was uncomfortable, each wishing he or she could swap lives with the other for just one day.

Days would go by and I would numbly know that a baby was on the way. Ten months seemed like eternity. Gradually I came to think of pregnancy as a permanent condition, an ordeal which had no reasonable end.

Rachel gained weight. I did too. Without exercise, with my back hurting more and more, and without a strong sense of my own center, I lay about a lot, drinking several beers or wines every evening, snacking on a bowl of popcorn with the seating capacity of the Astrodome.

Rachel abetted me with her own ferocious appetite. I joked with her about plucking snails off trees and gobbling them, immune to their pathetic little cries. I saw her hunger as an excuse to stuff myself. Since I've always had to be careful about my weight, I should have known better. But I was in the throes of some great wave of denial, and munched onward.

By mid-term we were obviously going to have a baby. My back was killing me, plus someone was clearly living inside Rachel, and was pounding on the walls of her tummy, looking for secret panels, I think. Rachel was down to three or four outfits for the duration of her pregnancy, and I was down to two pair of pants that would still fit my expansive self.

We are moving more and more toward the view that modern couvade solves, in its frustrating, willy-nilly way, the same problems as ritual couvade. First, it re-inserts the man in a process from which he has been removed. His complaints serve notice to all that the change that is upon him has not gone unnoticed.

In a subtler sense, a man's psychosomatic lashing out at his own body may be as magical as anything anyone ever did in the jungles of Borneo – his bellyaching may well be an expression of his profound caring for the partner and unborn child. Despite his

outward ambivalence, the expectant father may well be acting as decoy for the evil spirits of the modern world, the bogeys of stress and anxiety which prey on all our weaknesses. This is modern man's one shot, and in its recoil we get a glimpse of something rare today – a look at man's unresolved need to nurture and to be nurtured.

Only now did I begin to get into the swim of birth preparations. I finally met our midwife, a spacey, California-esque Aquarian type named Felicia who ran roughshod over us in a mellow, sparkly-eyed way ("Remember, it's your birth, not mine," she explained, handing us our forms).

I met our doctor, an eccentric, stammering Scot who wore red plaid pants and kept an electric shoe-buffer in his waiting room. And we booked visits with a genetic expert to perform ultrasonographic examinations and amniocentesis on the baby.

Upon visiting the genetic counselor, I got my first true taste of the horrors of parenthood. A cultivated Spaniard, he gave us computer printouts listing such possibilities as Down's syndrome and other chromosomal abnormalities, the risk of spontaneous miscarriage, neural tube defects such as anencephaly, spina bifida, congenital malformations, ethnic genetic diseases, etc.

I felt my heart sink. How could I have been ignoring these terrible realities? It stuck me how irresponsible I had been behaving, crossing my fingers and hoping for a lucky draw. Face it, I told myself, no one's normal. Somehow I knew my child would be a monster of unspeakable deformity.

Watching the monitor on the ultrasound machine, I saw my child for the first time – skeleton first. It was breathtaking, terrifying and gorgeous. For the first time, my knees went a bit weak. There it was, turning slowly in the monitor screen – my replacement unit, stewing away in its mother's broth. And outside its chest (at least it looked like that) I saw its little heart beating away. It looked like some sort of frantic, kiss-blowing tulip.

It seemed so brave to me, all of a sudden. Coming into existence, unarmed by anything at all except the will to life. There it was, the most helpless thing in the universe – and it was a juggernaut.

We asked not to know the child's sex – we wanted to save that surprise for the moment of birth. In this one way we were still old-fashioned.

Our worry deepened, and so did my guilt. How could I be the kind of caring, watchful parent my child deserved, I asked myself, if I continued my indulgent, crackpot ways? I felt a solemn seriousness set in. Rachel was doing all the work, while I fretted and sipped beer. I finally started reading the baby books – though I could not finish any, as I kept looking up from the books, daydreaming. My son, I kept thinking. My daughter.

After all the travail of the couvade experience, there appears to be but one sure-fire cure, the birth of a child. Aspirin may help with headaches. Maalox may help settle the queasy stomach. A regimen of regular exercise may help reduce stress levels overall.

But only a flesh-and-blood baby, squinting up at the new father through his or her swaddle of receiving blankets, can ultimately and effectively end the transformative process. Thus one great mystery comes to an end, and another, perhaps even greater mystery, makes itself known, with a fanfare of squalls and frowns.

In the end, of course, it is foolish to speak of couvade as having any sort of cure. Diseases are cured, life struggles only "happen." It would be truer to think of couvade as a cure itself, for it is nature's instinctual school for fatherly preparation. Whatever it is that a man brings with him into couvade, he exits as a new father. Modern man is compelled to admit what the so-called savage engaged in ritual couvade knew for centuries – that it works.

Soon it was summer, and Rachel had gained 30 pounds. We decided to make a last-ditch romantic trip together, and flew for a week to Puerto Vallarta and points south, all on borrowed money. We wobbled, two giant norteamericanos, up and down the cheaper beaches of the Mexican Pacific, my sweating hand in her edematous hand. We were fat, we were nauseous, we were in love.

Upon returning we discovered that Felicia, our midwife, had decided to move back to California for a month – right when we were scheduled to deliver. I was furious, and called her down to the house to face my wrath. Now here was a side to me few people, myself included, had seen – do it to Mikey, I'm used to hearing, Mikey doesn't get mad about nothing.

I told her how betrayed we felt, and how ironic it was that she, who had been busy forming all sorts of magical Aquarian bonds with us, and telling us about the importance of trust, was now clinically assuring us that any old midwife would do. It wasn't her fault, but I was still very hard on her. Suddenly I saw myself facing a birth without the people I had been counting on. I wiggled out. I was tacky, I was childish, but I showed spunk and initiative. I was not ashamed.

After that, I stopped trusting folks to do my job for me. I polished off the last of the baby books and went and dug up an old shower curtain and spread it on the bed. This, I told myself, would keep all that blood from destroying the mattress and box springs.

The baby still needed a name. I issued the decree that if it were a boy his name would be Isaac, for "he laughs." My son would have a tough enough time amid the future without a sense of humor, I decided. His would be built-in.

If it was a girl? I didn't know that yet. No name seemed right. Rachel wanted to name the child after her father, Daniel, who had passed away when she was sixteen. But Danielle seemed too française or something. We would be condemning our child to be coquette for life. I'd come up with the right name, I told her.

We attended a party at the medical/dental clinic where Rachel had been working, and I watched on as Rachel danced the tango, the jitterbug, and other steps with a dashing doctor friend. She was rotund, yet so graceful on the dance floor. She never looked so beautiful to me.

Ritual couvade achieved a variety of ends. It functioned to protect the infant and mother by serving as a "decoy" to evil spirits in the vicinity. It served as a symbolic expression of the close physical and moral bond between father and child. It signaled acceptance of a new role and status in society, lest anyone doubted. And it was a somewhat public and therefore legal admission of paternity. Ritual couvade was also a valuable outlet for potentially violent emotions. In social systems which tended to shut the father out from the rest of the family, couvade was a way for the father to reinsert himself.

The beauty of ritual couvade was that it was purposeful behavior. And it was learned. It did not simply "occur" to a man to take to his bed and commence pre-enactment of a birth – it was expected, it was the law.

Couvade today is, due to ignorance and lack of community support, improvisatory on the part of the father. He does what he can to achieve the same objectives sketched above, in his blind effort to assure the safety of mother, child and yes, self. He has no idea he is "doing" anything. And yet, at some subconscious or unconscious level, some kind of business is getting "done," and in its own bumbling way it is empirical and it does indeed work.

Four days after the due date, then five. Then one night we kissed one another and went off to sleep.

Later Rachel told me that the phone had rung, and some fool asked her what she was wearing. Disgusted, she slammed the

receiver down, and grumbling remaneuvered herself under the covers.

We woke up around midnight, the bedding swamped with water. Rachel's bag had ruptured in her sleep. We turned on the lights, glanced at one another. Without a word I rose and called Felicia. I moved in a kind of unthinking but purposeful fog. Rachel began to worry about various things. I patted her hand and stroked her face. She had the look of a condemned prisoner.

She asked me to listen through the fetuscope for a heartbeat. I listened and could detect no heartbeat. Rachel panicked. I looked at her, sucked in my breath, and told her I was picking up a beat. Counting – 140 beats per minute! It was a lie, a very dangerous one, but it relaxed Rachel, who I now saw was ready to trade her life for this new one inside her. If she was willing to take a risk, I thought, so was I.

Felicia, fresh from California, arrived several hours later, Doppler in hand, and took the baby's pulse. My heart was tripping so quickly I half expected her stethoscope to pick it up. Beat!, Beat! , I urged that little tulip inside the baby, and sagged with relief when the reading showed a strong heartbeat– and get this, at precisely 140 beats per minute. Believe it or not.

There is no cure for couvade. Couvade is itself a kind of cure for fathers of their non-fatherliness, and the process is finally capped by the birth of his son, his daughter, or some fearsome combination of the two (twins, triplets, etc. ). And the most painful couvade is the one which is most ardently avoided.

Just as the mother discovers (generally around mid-afternoon of the baby's first day) that pregnancy and birth are less significant than the greater issues of parenting that have only begun, so does the father understand that couvade is very much of a stop-gap action against a short-term problem.

From birth on, the cloud of unknowing is lifted. The problems of parenthood get, if anything, more and more difficult. But the father – expectant no longer – has done his homework. He is prepared for the challenge. He may not know what exactly to expect, but at least, henceforward, he will know who it is he is dealing with.

In nature's wisdom, the travail of couvade gives way to the even more heroic struggle of day-to-day fatherhood. Thus the day of birth marks the completion of the first long cycle in a man's life. Without this process, that man's growth, at least in one direction, can never continue. In retrospect we see that couvade is a man's way of giving birth not only to his offspring, but in a deeper and more abiding, more private sense, to himself. It is, or ought to be, a time of joy.

For the next 20 hours, the little heart beat out time for us. Rachel and I walked, we rocked, we laughed and cried. We walked in trembling circles in the courtyard of the building. Kids on bicycles rang past us, laughing. I loved us both so much at that moment. During transition we put Rachel in our neighbor friend's bathtub and kept the hot water coming. We sang. Took pictures. Ate popsicles. Worked. Friends drove all the way from Minneapolis to Milwaukee to help us through. Another made beet

and carrot soup.

I was never so proud of Rachel – you could read the will to life in the furrows of her brow. And I was proud of myself, too. No squeamishness, no fear.

Except at the very end, a final shudder inside me. It was time for Rachel to push, for the baby to finally be born. All the panic rose up in me, and I walked outside the birthing room and stood by a window, watched the traffic pass by outside. Soon this great ordeal would be over. Soon the great unknown would reveal itself. My legs quaked far below. I nearly fainted.

But I didn't. I was done indulging. I had been through so much the past ten months. All the worry, all the evasion, all the screwy ways I had devised to get ready for this one telling moment. I was ready.

Except for one thing, our accompaniment. I flipped through my cassettes looking for a moment too long for just the right fanfare for the new person. Finally I settled on Gustav Holst's *The Planets* and returned to the bedroom. Within a half-hour (the tape was on "Saturn") I caught the baby as it slipped from its mother's womb.

It was a little girl. She looked around, blinked once, and sighed with relief.

*Ahh*, she said.

And I held her up to look at her, to gaze into her dark, solemn eyes. I felt tears racing up my face. She felt like butter to me, impossible to be so soft and so prudent. How insipid all my

worries suddenly seemed, how self-referential when all along this marvelous person was boring into existence out of next to nothing, a gob of germ, calling to itself such completeness.

I thought about how hard it was for a person to come into being. Hard on the mother and hard on the father, too. Judgment that you had planned on isn't there any more. The you that was is someone new now, everyone is new. I saw how all my convolutions and worries were maybe my way of drawing fire from the real action, which was now in my arms, blinking at the silent bedroom full of people, this hungry life, my heart.

There is honor in a newborn's eyes. It seemed to me there was honor everywhere, nobility and valor filling every seam and every interstice of the world. I forgave everyone everything, total amnesty, and after, champagne.

I snipped the cord and laid the girl on her mother's heaving breast.

"This is Daniele," I heard myself say, patting the still-wet skin.

August, 1984

## **Piece of Thanksgiving Pie**

This is for all the good folks who know a tiny bit more about computers than the people you work with or live near, and are thus designated a "techie guru."

If you are such, you know the drill. People ask you for help. You say you doubt you can be much help. You worry that your modicum of expertise is going to be just enough to torpedo the relationship. But you try, and occasionally things work out.

Like this past weekend. A neighbor called with a software problem involving Lotus Ami Pro 2.0 – a version that came out ages – eleven years! – ago. Every time she started it up, it crashed. Worse, she thought she'd lost all her data.

So we talked. She needed disk space, so I helped her delete some unused programs. She hadn't lost her data files; her program just forgot where to look for them. Then we set up an automatic backup file to protect future data.

It took about 50 minutes. When we hung up our phones, I was somewhat confident I had helped, which was better than I usually do.

But I was not prepared for my payment. Later that day she stopped by and handed over to me, covered with a warm cloth, a fresh baked apple pie, made the old way, from scratch. I was taken aback. In all my years of talking people down from techie ledges, no one ever made me a baked good.

I set it on the kitchen table and just stared at it. I looked. I

smelled. I blinked.

Friends, to a tech-head chained to a cubicle, an apple pie is a miracle. It is pure analog information, like a dog or a galosh or cinder block. Reverse-engineer it and you journey backward from the oven to a grocer, in crates and trucks, to an orchard where seeds form stars in the heart of each fruit, and a farm where wheat berries dangle on their stems, dreaming dreams of piecrust and lard.

I now knew how the prophets felt, healing ten lepers and only one returning to say thanks. This irrespective of how you feel about apple pie made by a leper.

This pie, I told myself, made up for all the phone calls during supper, the interrupted ball games, the times I bit my lip to keep from calling someone I ordinarily respected an imbecile, just because conversation had shifted to technology.

It makes up for going unloved, because we love the machines in front of us too much. It makes up for the countless Pepsis and Doritos that fuel our endeavors. It makes up for the stunted career tracks, the jokes about our glasses, the humiliating moments at parties when you're introduced as a computer wizard, and everyone arches their eyebrows in pity.

We techie gurus have no need of silk sheets or a punkawalla to fan away flies. We pitch our tents wherever there are users getting FATAL ERROR messages. We will be welcome wherever people gnash their teeth and curse the technical support queue.

We are like those saints of the snow who are out there when your wheels are spinning, and we put our shoulder to your

bumper and lift you up and get you going again, and before you can roll down your window and shout your thank-you over the engine whine and wind, we are gone, gone to do some other good turn.

So I would like to make the pie a gift to all of you out there who wear the techie turban. Picture the pie by a frosty window, steam and sugar rising from it like the shimmering branches of a virtual tree, the ghostly arms offering up a prayer of thanks.

So flaky and so sweet, this pie's for you.

(1990)

## A Death in the House

The man was paying the monthly bills when he 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 had been struggling to find things he could put his trust in.

It was easy to imagine the dog stalking the creature, knocking the cage off the table, scooping the little fellow up by the scruff, two shakes, and he was gone.

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

Geoff had had a previous guinea pig, named Delores. Delores lived with them for six years, which for a guinea pig was a methuselary duration. She was gentle and affectionate, and liked to lick people on the nose as they petted her. Her tongue had a not unpleasant, oniony scent.

In time Delores developed tumors, which proved her undoing. But the boy was a soldier. He slept in the same room with the dying creature for 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." Is 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 was about, and what a garden means.

But fathers have secrets to cover up, and fears that brook all generation.

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

## A Mending Tree

I did not get to see what my brain tumor actually looked like until the radiology lab sent me a copy of the MRI scans. They come in a huge manila envelope – about a dozen oversized sheets of negative images, some with as many as 24 images per sheet.

I pore over these images for several hours, trying to understand them.

My first impression is one of wonder at the complexity of what occurs between one's ears. There is no other way to think about all the folds and intricate membranes of flesh, and the threaded rivers of blood wending their way through the canyons. You are looking at mind, or the closest you will ever come to looking at mind. It is no accident, no mutation. It is the end result of a trillion years of trying – nature acquiring a tool for thinking about itself.

I think I look pretty damn good. But I have a dickens of a time locating the meningioma. I know it's up around my left ear, and I pore over every image of left ears looking for something – anything – that looks like it doesn't belong there. Everything looks strange, but nothing looks like it didn't belong there. Then I figure out I have the negatives upside down. I have to look on the side on which the letters appeared backwards.

And then I see it. Looking directly into my eyes, and off to the side, is an odd shape hovering over my ear, a shape that is not also hovering over the other ear. It looks like a little curlicue, about the size of a computer mouse, above my left ear. It reminds

me of the very fat stub of a worn-down pencil, the kind you might place over your ear while playing miniature golf; only this pencil is located inside, not outside, the skull.

From another angle, on another sheet, the tumor looks like a pastry cuff, nautilus-shaped, and twirled at the end, like the tip of a frozen custard. If it weren't so pernicious, I might find it cute.

I position the negative on my computer's page scanner, and digitized the image of the meningioma. Then I use a drawing tool to draw a red circle around it – X marks the spot. Then I take the image and upload it to my website, so anyone who wants to can see the thing inside me that caused all this commotion.

I continue to examine the scans. When I look into the eyeholes of the skull, I do not think death's head. There is no way to think about these shadows and shapes now but as something pulsing remarkably with life.

I see my eyes in one set, and I see through them in the next. I see my tongue at different densities. I see a thin, luminous corona sheathing brain from bone – the meninges. I see deep into the falx, into the sacred center of the limbic region, where ecstasy and terror reside.

But it is on the last sheet that I find the most interesting pictures. Taken from the back of the head, they show the network of veins that radiate across the entire lower basin of the skull. Their job is to take the aortic blood that has passed through the cortex and is now spent and deoxygenated, and return it to the body's primary circulatory highway – and on to the heart and lungs to be re-enlivened.

In a normal picture of this system, the veins in this location are like a round spreading tree, rising from two sturdy, nearly intertwining trunks and then reaching out in every directions, filling the space allowed.

But in my picture, in my brain, half the tree is missing. The right side is flush with the venous drainage system. The left side is – empty. When I had my stroke, the main branch of my left venous drainage system shut down completely, and lost all its bulk. It was as if lightning blasted the tree to oblivion. No wonder it hurt.

The picture explains everything to me. It explains why, for weeks following the stroke, doing anything that required a little oomph, a "body push," caused me excruciating pain.

It's why I couldn't do situps, why I couldn't have sex, why it was disturbing to go to the bathroom, why even coughing hurt.

With half the circulatory network downed by a storm, the remaining network was overtaxed. It couldn't handle the volume that the body pumped into it – especially during moments of exertion. Headache pain saved my life at times like this. Had I continued, I might have blown the other half of the tree – and then where would I be.

But a miracle saved me. From the moment I collapsed from my stroke, the tree set about to repair itself. It couldn't grow a new trunk where the old one had been – I'm not a skink, regenerating a tail. But it could "promote" the capillaries in the remaining network, allowing them to expand and grow to take on greater volume. Every breath I took, every step I took,

strengthened the reorganizing venous system.

So instead of getting headaches every time I climb a few stairs, I can climb more, and more, and more every day. It is as if some very clever entity said, let's make these things symmetrical, so if a part on one side fails, the part on the right side can pick up the standard.

I find that breathtaking.

Here's another consideration. Let's say I guessed I had a brain tumor a year earlier, had my head scanned, and verified the meningioma's existence and location. Let's also say that I wanted to get that sucker out of there, as soon as possible, and ordered my surgeon to go in and remove it.

By going in before the stroke shut down that half of my venous drainage system, a surgeon would in all likelihood have triggered the same kind of shutdown. And this shutdown would have doubled or tripled the trauma resulting from the surgery, complicating my chances for recovery. My body would have had to cope simultaneously with tumor removal and a pretty substantial stroke.

But my brain saved me from this double whammy by chopping down the tree in advance, and blasting it to bits. The blood in that vein simply clotted inside it, sealed itself off, and is now being slowly resorbed into the body, like a suitcase full of diamonds at the bottom of the sea. There is no danger of clots breaking up and going to my heart and killing me, I'm told, because of the freak way the tree was uprooted by the tumor.

Ain't that a kick in the head.

I started all this with book I wanted to write about Moby Dick. At the end of that story, the whale bashes in the side of the Pequod, and the ship and all its hands go spiraling to the bottom. Only the narrator, Ishmael, pops up – and with him, the coffin of a friend, to use as a raft.

Looking at the image of my brain, with the tree all gone, but another tree rising up to take its place, like a miracle, I feel radiant and blessed.

I learned that the everyday world – the one we walk through and work in, with all the jokes and TV and busy-being – is full of hurting. There isn't a house on your block that is not in some degree of anguish.

So be kind to people, and let them know you know. It's surprising what people will share if they know it's OK.

I now know what my sister went through when she died at 15, when the blood flooded into her skull, and my stepfather, too, whose nasty astrocytoma dragged him down. I know the horror, but also the limits of the horror. Everyone has good days and good moments. You cannot scream for very long – life takes over even when you're dying. There is mercy in the cruelest moment.

I always felt I was a loving, if distracted husband and father. I still am. But I now feel how loved I am by Rachel and by the children, how important I am to them. Not just how awful it will be if I leave and they have to move to less expensive digs. But to know I am inside them and will always be there, as long as they breathe. That, and not all this typing, is my accomplishment in life.

What happens now? Interim scans show that my venous drainage is working perfectly adequately, and at this point (cross fingers) the tumor has not grown even a centimeter. It doesn't hurt to have sex. The tiny blood vessels that survived the stroke expanded to accommodate heavier traffic. I do pretty much anything I want.

It may be that the tumor has done all it will ever do, that its job in life was simply to make a vein in my head explode and bring me to my knees, and the rest was up to me.

Or, and this is quite possible, it will start to grow again, and I will have to have it removed by the knife, before it gets closer to my language center and I lose my ability to make sense of things.

If that happens, I hope it's sooner rather than later, because I can cope with the trauma of the operation better now, as a younger older man, than I can later, as an older older man.

Meanwhile, I stare at these pictures, and the gray shapes in them, and the withered branches, and the resurgent white lines, and I am so grateful for my chances, and amazed at the mind inside the mind, that responds to the assault it is under.

And astonished at the greater mind that has borne me through all this, and taught me life, and specifically my life, and where I am to go from here.

## 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. My pup is getting older.

I patted the standard poodle – he's the big fella, at 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 used to sing "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 under 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. The car ran over his left forearm. When I lifted him in my arms he bit at me savagely, with fierce jabbing bites, out of fright. Four months of recovery, a painful pin connecting his broken bones. Even when he was “all better,” you could see arthritis had moved into the joint, and minutely slowed each step.

His ears hurt him. Standard 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 he wanted to shriek from pain. I had to have him anesthetized to scoop out the mess I made inside.

When he was young I used to complain he was not "giving" enough. Beau was a vain, self-centered clown who never looked beyond his own needs. Whereas I wanted a dog that was like an angel, showering you with silent blessings, I got the Curly Pimpernel.

We reached a turning point one day. I was just getting out of the hospital after outpatient knee surgery. My wife Rachel staggered me into the living room and dumped me on the couch. I looked like Jack Nicholson after his lobotomy in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*.

But my last memory before closing my eyes was of Beau by my side, 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.

And now look at you, with your broken tooth, and the streaks of gray showing up in your famous coat. I lift your muzzle in my hand, and point your face toward mine. *Canine wisdom* – it's more than two kinds of teeth. It's the two of us drawing closer over the long leisure of years, like a walk in a golden, waving field.

(1997)

## Death, Hell, and 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 memo

rable 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.

## In the Sauna

After my workout and shower at the Y I stepped into the sauna.

It was an old, cedar sauna, the walls corroded and leeching by years of hot air and men's sweat. It wasn't too hot, and an older man, was lacing up his shoes. We nodded at each other, and I sat on the bench, but almost immediately jumped up.

"These nails sure get hot," I said.

"Oh, yes, nails are excellent conductors of heat," the man says, beginning a set of about twenty brisk touch-toes bends.

Then another man, bald, even older, and in his eighties, steps solemnly into the little wooden room. He, too was dressed in gym suit and shoes. I suddenly feel very naked.

"How's it going, Don," the older man drawled, and sat next to me. He did everything slowly. He never blinked that I could tell. His body seemed to hang from his shoulders, like a vulture on a branch.

"Not bad," said Don, stretching his calves against the bench. "I have to stretch out a lot when I exercise now, or I get so stiff. This hip likes to lock up on me. I have to stretch out before and after exercise. If I sit after a workout, I can hardly stand up."

"Well, you're getting older," the bald man said. "You're what – 71, 72? That's it. Everything good that's going to happen to you has happened. The only thing left is to go downhill."

"But you're doing real good, Sid. You're the best swimmer of the older guys here."

"I swim. I walk. I sit. That's it."

Don stopped exercising, suddenly subdued.

"I suppose I could be worse off," Sid said. "I could be dead."

"My brother died when he was 56," Don said, staring at a fixed position on the cedar planking of the door. "That was a long time ago."

"My sister is 96," Sid said. Until recently she was great. Then she hurt her arm and she hasn't been so great."

Don looked at his tennis shoes. "The worst is when you have to live in a home. That is just the pits."

Sid cleared his throat.

"My brother in law is in a home," Don continued. "His wife died, and he has some problems. He can't go to the bathroom by himself or feed himself. But his mind is fine. When I see him, he says to me, 'You got to get me out of here, I don't belong here. All the other people here are wrong in the head.'

"'It's terrible.' I told him, 'You may not belong here, and maybe there is some place you do belong, and I'm willing to help you find that place, but it's not my house.'"

"That's telling him. 'Not my house.' What can you do."

"Yeah, that's what I told him." Don shrugged. "Well, I gotta go. Gotta walk that lonesome valley."

Sid watched Don ease himself out the sauna door, then turned to look at me. "You like saunas, huh?"

I nodded. "Helps keep me from stiffening up after a workout. I wish they'd let you put water on the rocks though."

Sid nodded. "If you want wet, they got the steam room. This is dry. I like it dry."

He looked at my pudgy white body on the bench, the way I was holding my knee in. "Why're you sitting like that?"

"The nails are hot, where the wood has worn away."

"Nails have excellent properties of conduction," Sid said.

"Much more efficient than wood." He smiled grimly, then dipped his head in my direction to examine me. "How old are you?"

"Forty two."

"It's all downhill for you, too," he said.

(1992)

## Together at Last

The other day I confessed to Rachel that I felt bitter about the state of the world. I felt guilty about leaving the world in this condition for our children to inhabit. I saw no remedy for our country, either, until the administration over-reaches and is forced to make a correction.

She surprised me by turning on me. “Don’t talk like that,” she said. “If you become bitter, you turn against yourself. You must remain positive to be healthy. You’re no good to anyone if you’re disgusted.”

I slunk away from her, feeling wounded by her reproach. Wasn’t I just being “true,” by expressing my frustration? And what kind of person would I be if I laughed off the death of our great democracy – which is what I have a sick feeling in my stomach has occurred.

Last night was another installment of the Poets Against the War series here in the Twin Cities, but I stayed home. I had no appetite for righteousness. I have been feeling that the poets at these events need them more than the listeners.

We are sinking deep into ourselves. I was horrified by a photo of the 11-year-old boy in Baghdad who had his arms blown off by a missile, and who told his doctors that if they could not give him hands he would have to take his life, because he could not live without hands.

I was thinking it was good his father was dead, because no father could bear to see that son, or hear his awful promise.

I spent the day exercising a rebus in my mind:

*In peacetime, Lord, give us respite from our anxieties.*

*In wartime, Lord, bring an end to the war.*

I buried my mother last week. It was a wrenching experience. She could never be happy after the death of her daughter at 15, in 1961. That failure stuck in her throat, and she spent the rest of her life punishing herself for letting it happen, and punishing everyone else for being in on it.

I gave the eulogy, which I took notes for on oversized index cards. But I could tell almost as soon as I started talking that it would be too much for me.

I stumbled on for about 15 minutes, outlined what I took to be the main themes of her life. But my voice kept breaking, and I felt as if I was running breathless through a forest of emotional brambles.

Finally I gave up, about eight cards short of the deck. Later, I looked at them and realized they were the antidote to the pain and misery of the other cards. On the occasion of my mother's funeral I had given her short shrift.

Last night I dreamed that somehow, in the war somewhere, my sister had been found. She had not died in 1961. She was alive, and kept apart from us all these years.

It was difficult to get to her. Someone would give me a clue, and I would follow it to a dead end, and then wait for someone else to point the way.

I never found my sister. But it comforted me to think of her cloistered away all these years, breathing, and thinking her thoughts, seeing the sun rise and set. It meant she had been able to live a life after all.

And here is the remarkable part. At one point I awakened, and looked about in the dark bedroom. There was Rachel, asleep beside me. Over on the floor, the dark shape of my dog, curled on a cushion.

Damn, I thought. Now I will never find Kathy. And closing my eyes, I retraced every step, followed every clue, until we found one another, and were together at last.

(2003)

## Age of Edison

I got a call from a friend at a local college. An actor-historian from Indiana named Hank Fincken was coming to the campus to do a one-man show on Thomas Edison, and would I like to come see it?

Would I. I've have loved one-man shows since seeing Hal Holbrook do "Mark Twain Tonight" at Finney Chapel in Oberlin, Ohio in 1963. I was struck by how effective a single person, stalking the floorboards, could be. I remember Holbrook/Twain creepily wailing the line from a terrifying ghost story, "Who stole my golden arm?" Every hair in the hall stood on end.

Oberlin was 10 miles from where I grew up, which was 50 miles from where Edison grew up, in Milan, Ohio. As a kid I visited Edison's home a couple times, and later, his laboratory at Henry Ford's Greenfield Village in Dearborn. I thought it was fascinating to see the soap dish in Edison's bathtub, or the cherry tree that he climbed as a boy.

Edison was the kind of hero a kid could grasp. He invented just about every modern invention, from electric light to the tape recorder to motion pictures to the phonograph. More than that, he kept refining inventions after the original patents were filed. Today's telephone owes as much to Edison's improvements as it does to Alexander Graham Bell's original squawk box.

Sometimes, when I hear people say that the Internet is the greatest invention, and the greatest mania, in human history, I want to pipe up and say, "What about electricity?"

The difference between the unelectrified world and the electrified world is easily as great as that between an un-networked world and a networked one. Indeed, you could make the claim that the Internet would be a hard sell without electricity, or that the Age of Networks is merely a postscript to the Age of Alva Edison.

Anyway, I not only went to the show, but I took my son Jon, 13. The play takes place October 21, 1929, the 50th anniversary of the invention of the incandescent lamp. The audience is a room full of reporters, and Fincken plays a cantankerous Edison, eager to spin the news in a way favorable to himself.

He was not an especially nice man, and Fincken made that clear. He was full of himself, and customarily took credit for work his underlings did. It is unlikely that the worst words recorded were "Mary had a little lamb," as legend would have it. He even took credit for the telephone greeting "Hello!" If Bell had had his way, Fincken/Edison said, we would greet one another today with "Ahoy!"

He told how he lured consumers with free light bulbs, so he could sign them up as paying utility customers. How he tricked J. Pierpont Morgan into investing in his electric company. How he battled with Nicolai Tesla over direct versus alternating current (Tesla won, which Edison blamed thousands of electrocution deaths on). Forget the perspiration/inspiration ratio -- promotion is what gets you in the history books, and Edison was no piker at it. A lot of his legend is just that. He was much more likely deaf from childhood meningitis than from a Pullman porter pulling him aboard a moving train by the ears. The Pullman story was

just his way of tweaking the world.

What was most striking about Fincken's presentation was "Edison's" grief that the age of great man -- Ford, Luther Burbank, Charles Goodyear, George W. Carver, himself -- must necessarily be over. Modern inventions require development by committee. True enough, except for the occasional Apple or Linux.

In 1978 I remember cutting a picture and story from the newspaper. That old cherry tree, the one the bright boy with the big ideas swung from, rumored to be 200 years old, held up by crutches and wires, finally surrendered its spirit. In the springtime, all it could coax from itself was one last hatful of white blossoms.

(2003)

## The Pears of Cupertino

In the summer of 1969, I was a college dropout, visiting a girlfriend in Minnesota. This was an unwise time to drop out of college, as a war was on, and dropouts exposed themselves to the draft, and thus to disembowelment at the hands of people in a faraway jungle. But I was marching to a different, not very bright drummer.

The girlfriend had no use for someone matching that description, but her brother, who was planning a cross-country car trip out west with friends, invited me along. The idea was to go to Alaska, but halfway there we took a left turn and headed down the West Coast. When we got to the Bay Area, I told my pals to drop me off just south of San Francisco, in a sleepy orchard town called Cupertino.

Cupertino was a fruit town then. Nestled along the base of the Los Altos hills, it and neighboring Sunnyvale were a patchwork of vineyards and orchards, specializing in peaches and apricots, figs and plums, and apples but not oranges.

You see, I had a relative (sort of) living there. She was my stepfather's stepmother's sister – not a blood relative certainly, and not someone I had ever met, or who had ever heard of me. But it was my style in those days to drop in on people unannounced and hope to dazzle them with my feckless ways.

I knocked on the door, and Uncle Artie looked me over carefully before inviting me in. I had a ponytail and wore bellbottoms and probably beads. Why he let me in is a mystery.

Liz and Artie looked like they had a lot on their plate, and did not really need a brash youth to enliven things. Lizzie was depressed and anxious, not having taught English in some years. Art was still depressed from being blacklisted a decade earlier for speaking out against the McCarthy hearings. Blacklisting cost him his aerospace job in booming San Mateo. His free speech cost them their membership in the middle class.

They made me a sandwich and we talked. I burned their ears with tales of reckless living, communing with flakes and gurus, and hitching around filling thick notebooks with bad poems. My hosts, whom I expected to be rebels like myself, only frowned.

Aunt Liz showed me around her ornamental crabs, her tea roses, and a single radiant pear tree by the pump house, loaded down with golden oblong fruit.

She also raised birds. Her yard was a moving carpet of ducks and drakes, geese and ganders, and peacocks and peahens. She picked up one duck, named Daffy, and explained that Daffy was a genuine hermaphrodite – one day he/she just changed sexes, went from female to male. That made Daffy special.

She also had chickens, but not your usual barnyard chickens. They were exotic crimson-crested chickens from China, raised not for meat, but for "100-year eggs" that were buried underground and allowed to molder, then dug up and sold for special holidays. They smelled to high heaven, but were an indispensable delicacy at Chinese New Year. Rotten eggs helped paid the bills.

But we couldn't get along. They were suffering, and I was

insufferable. Artie and Liz correctly identified me as a fool, and perhaps they worried about their liability in taking me in. They insisted I call my father and let him know where I was. I had not called in almost a year.

So I called my dad down in L.A., who informed me that I had been drafted two months earlier, missed my physical one month earlier, missed my actual induction a few days earlier that week, and I'd better get down there right away and straighten things out, because I was officially AWOL.

Artie drove me to the airport, and as the commuter jet took off, I looked out the window at the valley, and the towns of Cupertino and Sunnyvale nestled against the foothills below.

Who would believe that, before too many more years passed, this dusty, bee-stung valley would be the high-tech center of the world? To me, it will always be 100-year eggs and hermaphrodite ducks.

(2001)

## A Jar in Tennessee

A month after the operation, we are out again. Imagine a crisp winter morning. I am walking Beau at Crosby Farm alongside the Mississippi, 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.

And I have a minicassette recorder in my pocket, a generic blisterpack Sony. They are great for taking notes when driving, or out for a walk somewhere. 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.

The morning is gorgeous, with crisp new powder everywhere, and white vapor rising from the river. For just a moment, a four-point deer poked his head into a clearing. Beau, being a bit blind, pays him no mind.

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. My knee is still sore, but I pound along for a hundred yards or so, bellowing like a dog-eating bear. He adores that.

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? This was that kind of 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 my mood is darkening and I decline.

The snow is thick, but there are many deer and rabbit and human footprints. A recorder could easily vanish into any of them. I calculate in my mind the loss of the unit – maybe \$40. Besides, they wear out quickly because you are always dropping them. I look everywhere I walked – about a two-mile distance – for the little machine. No luck.

I was nearly reconciled to the loss when I spotted the unit lying on a patch of thin snow. The battery and tape compartments were both sprung open, and the tape and batteries lay splayed out on the snow, as if a squirrel or crow had given some thought to taking them home, and then said, nah.

I popped the machine back together and pushed the play button, still ready for the worst, a dead unit. But instead I heard my own voice. I was talking about Sao Paulo Brazil, which I had visited on business a couple months earlier. On the tape, I was sitting in a bus on a smoggy artery heading out of town, talking to myself about the beggars 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, 7,000 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 crows, hearing my recorded chatter and finding it suspicious, take wing and flap away to a safer bough.

If you have ever stood between two mirrors and seen the

illusion of infinite regression in them, you have an idea what I was feeling, addressing myself electronically from a place so different and so far away.

And if that was not stunning enough, I flipped the tape over – I did not want to tape over this interesting travelogue – and there was my daughter Daniele's voice, talking to a caller on the phone. I reuse my answering machine tapes in my hand recorder, and this tape was perhaps five years old, when my little girl was eight, back before we got Beau. She died this year, at age 25. But on the tape her voice sounds so clear, so young and lovely. I had forgotten what she sounded like as a child. I knew I couldn't tape this over, either.

Beau, meanwhile, was 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, takes the cake.

My friends, let me tell you, this is not the end of my story. Beau has a lifetime of adventures ahead of him, with Daniele and me. Dogs to run with, people to love. At one point he gets to paddle in a canoe, with a life jacket on. Disasters rain down upon our house, and the sun comes up afterward and dries the rain up. Beau catches a bunny, and lets it live. Beau is struck by a car one night – and it lets him live.

But I choose to end our story here, in the woods, kneeling by the fallen minicassette recorder.

It was the look I saw in Beauregard's eye, the look of a knowing one, a holy of holies at last. He had made the difficult crossing, from a crazy, impulsive, demanding animal to one who saw, and enjoyed, the life we shared.

Wallace Stevens wrote a simple poem called "A Jar in Tennessee," about coming upon a human artifact on a wild hillside. Placing anything human in the wilderness changes everything, just like in the time travel stories. The consciousness is contagious. Just as owning a dog is a kind of portage, in which your soul enters the dog forever and vice versa – a miracle.

It's entirely likely, since he is a French poodle, and Stevens is the poet of that breed. And it was such a gorgeous day, with the scent of sand and pine adrift in the air like microfine confetti in the morning breeze.

(1997)

## Atlas & I

When I was 14 I sent off for the Charles Atlas courses I saw advertised in the inside covers of countless issues of DC Comics.

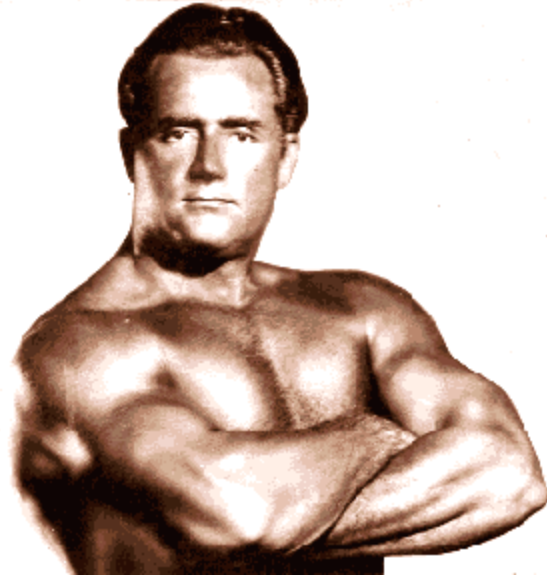
You remember, maybe. A guy at the beach gets sand kicked in his face by a bully, who walks off with his intended. So the boy bulks up, returns to the beach, and extracts his revenge.

I didn't have a ready-made drama like that. I just wanted to look better, to be more acceptable to girls. I was a year younger than the other kids in my class, and I felt I had some catching up to do, developmentally.

Atlas, born Angelo Siciliano was winner of a \$1,000 prize from Physical Culture, the muscle man magazine of the 1930s.

He devised his approach after studying lions and tigers in captivity. Unable to exercise in their cages, the big cats pressed against themselves to stay strong – Atlas coined this “dynamic tension.” We call it isometric exercise today.

The exercises came in #10 envelopes, Z-folded, with muddy low-res photos of a young Atlas, circa 1945, going through the exercise steps. In these oft-reproduced pictures he was smaller, and seemed more plausible, than the glistening pewtery Superman



portrait of the comic ads.

The exercises were easy. Put one fist in the other hand and push. Then reverse direction. I did these things, and could feel something happening.

When Lesson No. 3 arrived, however, I was taken aback by the instructions, I was to place ice-cubes, wrapped in a wet washcloth, on my testicles, and leave it there for 15 minutes. There was even a picture of this, although I don't recall it including testicles.

No one was home, so I opened a tray of ice cubes, wrapped them up nice, sat in the bathtub and did as instructed, wondering what this had to do with bullies and beaches.

It occurred to me as I squatted there that this might be some kind of mail order candid camera, and that Mad Magazine or someone was taking pictures in the tree outside the bathroom window,

I wasn't the hippest kid in northeastern Ohio, but I knew there was something questionable about hoarding pictures of Atlas in his leopard-spot briefs in my underwear drawer. And I figured out, as well, that I wasn't making the greatest strides toward new bully on the beach, so I let my subscription to the lessons lapse, and wrote them when they demanded payment that I was just a kid, and they shouldn't be sending stuff like that to innocents like me.

The months were passing of their own accord, and when I stood in the mirror making muscles and admiring my hard places, I could see that my job as dishwasher, hauling garbage cans

around in the back of the restaurant my mom worked at, was paying off.

I was a funny kid. Within a few months I bought a copy of Herman Taller's *Calories Don't Count*, perhaps the first of the big fad diet books of the 1960s. It advocated that you drink a glass of polyunsaturated cooking oil, like safflower oil, three times a day, and that the oil would flush fat out of your system.

Taller, a Roumanian, had a million people gagging down oil, thinking it would make them more beautiful. Americans may be the happiest people in the world, but there is also something odd about us. We are all immigrants of the mind, gawking at the skyscrapers of the new world and wondering how we will fit in.

What's funny to me is that, within the space of perhaps six months, I convinced myself I was both unlovably skinny and morbidly fat.

This coincides with my leaving the prep seminary at age 14 to re-enter civilian life. I looked around me and the world looked hard and I felt I needed help. Atlas and Taller just wanted my money, I suddenly saw.

It was going to be a long ride.

(1998)

## Bing Cherries

No sooner do I push my red shopping cart into the produce section of Cub Foods than I see a big display: 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, I think – a pretty good deal. I used to run a fruit stand in the sixties, and even back then we charged ninety-nine a pound. And that was before the oil embargo.

I park my cart by the apples, peel off a plastic sack and begin filling it, trying not to be too picky.

I return to the cart, set my cherries in it, 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 when I notice something.

There is something in my cart besides 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. But then my better self speaks up. Michael, you can't just ditch the cart. A cane is a prosthetic device. 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 loud voice announces. I turn, and a tall 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 said.

"Well, you scared a poor old woman half to death," she says, and wheels away from me.

Rather than plead my case I withdraw, hoping to get my 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."

My heart sinks. Surely I don't have to do this again? 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 tall woman bending over a stooped figure.

It is an older woman, perhaps 86 or 88, and she is visibly trembling. The tall woman is rubbing her back. "It's all right, dear.

We can come back later when you're up to it." The cane is in her cart.

"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, sweetheart," she says, a bent smile wrinkling her face. "I make mistakes all the time," she said, to comfort me.

I begin wheeling away, a little 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.

(1999)

## **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 tell 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 ."

## **Bathtub Madonna**

A neighbor has removed his statue of the madonna from his bathtub shrine.

A bathtub shrine is a shrine, generally Catholic, in which a statue, generally Mary, stands in an alcove created by an old clawfoot bathtub sunk about half its length in dirt.

The statuette stands with open plaster hands, dispensing blessings to all who supplicate her.

The impression one gets, looking at a bathtub shrine, is of the beatific statuette surrounded by an elliptical white aura, made of hard porcelain, hopefully without an etched gray ring.

Perhaps the madonna had been taken in for the winter. Ceramics crack in subzero temperatures, and it does no soul good to see a holy figure exploded across an arctic lawn, headless, trunkless, and broken to bits.

At the same time, seeing the shrine empty left me empty, the feeling that our intercessor had been taken in for the duration, and we would have to fend for ourselves until spring. And I might need intercession before then.

I know about Mary because I attended a minor seminary in 1963-64. It was the time of the Second Vatican Council, the Kennedy assassination, and the Beatles on Ed Sullivan. Every morning we rose at 5:30 to pray on hard kneelers before a statue of Mary. Our school was run by the Society of Mary, or Marists. I was 14 years old.

But even there, among devoted Mariologists, I would not rate the cult of Mary as being intense, except among a couple of the prefects, who were Italian and had that shiny-cheeked expression of fervent mama's boys. The rest of us said the rosary and we honored her as the mother of the Christ, but it was not a passion with us, as I imagine she would have to be to sink a 500-pound bathtub into your lawn.

I am not making fun. I read my "Golden Bough" and my Joseph Campbell and I get that Mary is thought by thinking people to be a continuation of various nature queens, holdovers from pagan times.

I would never have a bathtub madonna in my own yard.

I hated the catholic bricabrac I saw as a boy, the "outward signs" of faith, dashboard Jesuses and fluorescent virgins. I scorned that stuff and it has gotten worse in recent years with the advent of Rock Star Jesus, with Miami Vice beard growth a quarterback's chiseled jaw.

My Jesus is a little goofy-looking. With a lazy eye and a snorting, hee-haw laugh.

One thing I learned after I lost my child's faith, in my teens, was that it is possible to have excremental taste and still be a good person. In fact, it gives you an edge, because you expend no more effort to be cool. It frees you up to be alive. You know it's true – the kindest people you know are always a bit cubist.

Another thing I have learned in my life is that people need strings around their fingers. The reason we clip magnets to refrigerators is because amnesia, the constant forgetting of vital

truths, is encoded in our DNA. Everything sweet and true wants to escape from our mental grasp. And being smarter doesn't make us the slightest bit smarter – not really.

The point of the bathtub then is to physically remind us of something. It is magical learning. It asks us to see beyond the current array of crap to what is deeper and darker and more useful.

Of course God loves us, which is merely to say, of course we are lovable, and have goodness in us, and we are trying. God knows we are trying. That is the point that keeps slipping from our fingers, and we are dying to yank back.

Why don't we believe that? Why don't we really believe that?

Why do we need to keep relearning it, week after week, and year after year?

The guy with the bathtub forgets it less often.

(1996)

## 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," she said. "She's going on a wilderness trip just like Jon," our son. "It was so great 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 colostrums, 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 tall, and glad, with cartwheeling eyes, emanating obvious confidence and joy," she said. "I couldn't help think what a gift she is to her mother, and what a gift her mother was to me."

## Brain Games

In the months after my stroke and brain tumor diagnosis in 1998, I experienced weird headaches. When I tried to have sex, I was fine for the first few minutes. But as my excitement increased, I involuntarily "bore down," and the pain in my head began to skyrocket. It got so bad I had to stop whatever I was doing immediately.

A couple of times, before my neurologist warned me not to do this, I tried to "go through" the pain. It was impossible – even when I was able to, ahem, finish, I experienced a migraine-intense pain that dwarfed whatever release the orgasm allowed. In fact, the two sensations merged, and the orgasm became unambivalent agony.

I did not take this well. To lose such a thing, and to not know how permanent it would be – it made me want to keep trying. So I kept hurting myself. I even tried doing it alone, trying in vain to find a way around the pain, to complete the act without "bearing down." Friends, you would need to be some kind of superyogi, with total breath and reflex control – in which case you probably wouldn't be hot to have sex anyway.

So one of the first results of my stroke and tumor was to make the act of love physically intolerable. It pitted that part of me that most wanted to be alive with that part of me that most wanted to stay alive. It was like a computer dividing by zero; fatal error.

The next residual side-effect was memory loss. Months after

the stroke, I was still having a dickens of a time remembering simple things – the names of things, and what people told me on the phone. All my head could seem to hold anymore was generalizations and vague reminders. Frieda thinks it would be fun to go out sometime.

It was especially troublesome because I feel called upon, for my life's sake and my family's, to listen very, very well – like, to doctors, about the science of tumors and such. But to me now, tumor names all sound like Oklahoma.

I was reminded of the Kafka novel *Amerika*, which involved a traveling theatrical troupe from that state. Perhaps the tumors were actors in that company. Come to think of it, I can suddenly remember every story of Kafka's I had ever read. And perceive a new relevance.

It was somewhat similar to the normal memory loss I was experiencing anyway, at age 48. I was already notorious in my own household for being "absent-minded" – mislaying papers, forgetting phone messages, etc. Some of this was due to encroaching middle age, but an equal part had to do, I believe, with being a writer, and being more interested and absorbed in the project I was working on, which could occupy at least part of my mind 24 hours a day, than in what Mrs. Mientkiewicz told me on the phone about Thursday's soccer practice – or was it Friday's? I have always been selectively amnesiac.

But what was happening now was worse. I now had a hard time remembering anything, even in my work. And even when I did recall something – a date, a word, a name, an intention, a message – I had to coax it out using an assortment of mental

pulleys and cables.

It was embarrassing. I was always apologizing to people, telling them I wasn't quite right since the stroke. People, bless them, made every kind of excuse on my behalf. "Oh, we're all like that," they say. "I'd forget my head if it weren't stapled on." "You'll get it back." "I'll bet it's mostly stress."

Indeed, stress was the wild card. Experts on memory say that the number one factor preventing us from readily accessing the information we have stored in our brains is the pressure we put on ourselves to come up with quick answers. The harder we try to remember, the less we can remember. Which makes perfect sense: people with great memories exude confidence. It's not that their memory is naturally superior, and therefore they are confident; rather, their confidence is the reason their memory is better. Attitude is everything. And my attitude was shit.

And it isn't just memory – the failures extend to simple focus. One day in February, Debbie, an old friend of mine from college, invited me via e-mail out to her farm, about 50 miles from Saint Paul. She had horses, and Daniele liked to ride. Debbie e-mailed me a set of instructions, which I kept on my lap during the long drive. I was very proud of myself. I not only didn't have a seizure (I never have experienced one while driving, he boasted), but I navigated all the country roads, turning the right way, staying on the icy curves.

It wasn't until we found the house, and I knocked a dozen times on her door, that I realized I had come on the wrong day – a day clearly stipulated in the very first sentence of the e-mail message in my lap. Humiliated before both my daughter and an

old friend, I drove home in silence.

Another day I couldn't think of a famous writer's name. I searched frantically through my memory for it, ransacking the associations I did have. I knew he had white hair. I could see the hair in my mind, and intuited that his name had something to do with the weather. Could his name be snow? Sleet? Was it Gordon Sleet? My mind was a flurry of possibilities that led me nowhere. Snow White? Snowy Bleach? C.P. Snow? Lord Snowed On?

I got it finally by relaxing and thinking of his face, and then the name came to me. Only when I knew that, of course, the writer's name was Robert Frost, did I come up with a good mnemonic:

*Some say the world will end in fire  
Some say in ice.  
But from what I know of loss,  
It could also end in frost.*

It is possible to have a virulent brain tumor and feel no pain from them. This is because, while the brain is the switching yard for the body's nervous system, telling you how everything in your body (and in your soul) feels, it itself has no nerves of its own, hence no sensations. If you somehow bypass your skin and scalp, which are loaded with nerves, you could stick a fork in your brain and feel nothing. Think of the Ray Liotta eating-his-own-brain scene with Hannibal Lecter.

The exception is intracranial pressure. Some, but not all brain tumors, cause headaches. A few of these are excruciating, migraine-level affairs. The pain of most tumor headaches,

however, can be treated with a few Advil.

What you are more likely to feel are psychological pains. My primary sensations in the weeks following my diagnosis were distress that I seemed to be forgetting things, worry about my declining abilities, and shame – yes, conventional old shame – that I had allowed this thing, this sneakerful of flesh in the backseat of my head, to overtake me.

My tumor has decided to dwell right next to my temporal lobe, the part responsible for language. If it grows, it stands an excellent chance of causing major disruptions to my abilities to speak, to write, and even to understand English. (Along with the Spanish and French I muddle along with.) Already, I count among my symptoms an inability to come up with the right word for things, and sometimes, a fuzziness over the meaning of a statement I hear on TV or the radio. The words vanish as soon as I hear them. I can't recall them to parse their intent. They are gone.

My primary symptom is a decreased ability to do detailed assignments. In the months after my diagnosis I only retained a handful of clients, and the most important to me of these is a speaker series called the Masters Forum that brought in management philosophers and futurists like Alvin Toffler and Lester Thurow to talk about organizations, leadership, and change management. My job was creating a 10-page report on each speaker. The report had to be useful, but it must needed to be readable, something attendees could pass on to their teams back where they work.

In my gravy days I was able to hear a business talk and quickly create a textured, detailed report on the points raised. Since my diagnosis, however, it's been harder to focus on the minutiae of a talk. When I review my notes, I often can't recognize them. I feel like I have foolishly accepted a dare – “I could write that article with one lobe tied behind my back.”

On the other hand, I was still able to convey the overall cut and thrust of a talk, so I simply wrote my reports with a twist, more about general themes and philosophies and less about specifics. No one complained – yet I felt I was cutting corners, and ceding ground I would never again occupy. What will happen as the tumor grows, I wondered, and I cede even more ground? Will I step back even further? Will I abandon themes in favor of flavors? Long sentences for short? Will all meaning collapse like a black hole into a single dense punctuation point from which no light escapes?

(Indeed, as I wrote the preceding paragraphs just now, it took me three full minutes to come up with the name of Lester Thurow, perhaps the world's best-known economist, with whom I was fortunate to have lunch just a year ago. I knew his name began with a T, and that he was at MIT, and that he had a head of curly hair, and had once climbed K2 in the Himalayas. But I had to sit with those associations until my brain rerouted the question and furnished the answer.)

This is different from the way I used to remember things. How will I remember his name once I have forgotten all the clues? At what point, en route to total language loss, do I set the pen down for good?

When I do set it down, I will be letting everyone I know down with it. It's my job to keep things going, keep money coming in, keep grinding grain, keep laying track. It's a brute task, a manly task, even if all I am is a writer. But its brutality protects me from fine details. Grind the grain, lay the track, and no one will ever think less of you – you're a good provider. All you have to do is keep providing. Which translates to, keep fooling people that you are delivering the goods.

Honestly, I don't think I'll be able to do.

How dare I throw the lives of those I love into tumult just because some pointless protein has spread its bedroll inside my ear?

So many things fasten us, like roots, to this life. Guilty feelings, though we associate them in our minds to the greater life beyond this one, often root us tighter to the routine we cannot bear to move away from.

What is "martyrdom," the way we have come to use the word, but a way of getting what we want? How often do we let guilt slide us closer to God, compared to how often we use it to anchor ourselves to dead habits?

After my diagnosis, and the emerging likelihood that doctors, in order to save my language center from being squeezed till it ruptured, would have to dig the expanding meningioma out of my head, I read up about the history of brain surgery. It is a stunning story of people slashing the long, hairy roots of conscience and hubris, for a greater good beyond.

Reading about the early surgeons has helped me deal with my own sense of guilt. What they did in the early years of experimentation, cutting into suffering people's heads and killing them all, was awful – but they did it anyway, to ameliorate the suffering of others to come.

Think about that.

There has always been craniotomy – the opening of the skull to relieve pressure, to release spirits. There are wall drawings of skull penetration going back 7,000 years. But craniotomy is bone surgery, not brain surgery. It doesn't breach the sacred veil of the brain. Richard von Volkmann, the greatest German surgeon of the 19th century, a doctor who would go anywhere and do anything to save a patient, drew a line at the brain. In 1904, Harvard Medical School doctors, reviewing experiments that crossed this line, concluded sadly that the only benefit of brain surgery for persons with tumors was to relieve pressure – removing tumors was impossible.

A search of medical journals in 1906 showed that of 828 brain tumor operations undertaken, 315 patients died almost immediately. But that number didn't tell the whole story. Of the survivors, a sickening majority lingered for a time – "paralytic, epileptic, blind" – and then died. True surgical cures occurred about a tenth of the time

But 10 percent represented progress. Enough good things were happening in the field to embolden surgeons to continue. Indeed, it was the pathetic condition of brain tumor sufferers that

impelled pioneer neurosurgeons to go on a cutting, sawing, and drilling campaign that killed virtually the first one thousand patients on the table. They were in such misery that taking their lives away, or their ability to think, or speak, or smile, or move, did not seem so unbearable a risk.

Much has been written about the hubristic attitude required to make an initial incision in another human being. Take that hubris and then quadruple it and know that you're going in where no one has gone before, and that your first hundred patients died the instant you opened them up, and you have an idea what these surgeons were made of.

Like Civil War generals, they shed the blood of many, and besplotted their own immediate reputations, to create leverage for the future. Those doctors' patients died on the table so that my neurosurgeon's patients today could get operated on and survive.

And do I imagine that, at the end of each day, these doctors felt guilty? And how. In that sense, their psychological complex leaves God's in the dust. God can revel in his omnipotence and omniscience because he is, after all, omnipotent and omniscient. Like Superman, he never pays the price for his powers.

"Victor, if you operate on that man, he will die," a neurologist said to the turn-of-the-century brain surgeon Victor Horsley, who used to perform brain surgery in his patients' parlors. "Of course he will die," Horsely replied, "but if I do not persist, those who come after me will do no better."

Another surgeon, Harvey Cushing, performed an operation on Maj. General Leonard Wood, a military pal of Teddy

Roosevelt's. Wood was about to be named chief of staff of the U.S. Army in 1909, when he began to experience paralysis in his left leg and seizures. Cushing was terrified of going inside the head of a national hero, and was relieved when the surgery was postponed. "Glad the operation has been postponed," Cushing said. "For everyone dies that I touch."

Eventually, Cushing removed a huge meningioma from Wood's brain. Eleven days after surgery, the general, who had lost all feeling on one side, was up and walking again. It was a red letter day for practical brain surgery. But it was a terrible struggle for Cushing. Was he God, to take upon himself such a task?

Neurosurgeons take so much upon themselves, all the doubts and self-accusations, and then they summon the strength to go in again anyway.

There was a lesson in there for people like me and the kind of guilty feelings I was having. Maybe guilt is just the price of admission for being alive and cutting the flawed deals we have to cut. Maybe it is just the table stakes for sitting down to play.

I had the opportunity to visit another brain surgeon, for a second opinion. Everyone I spoke to recommended and praised him for his personality and technique. I was "happy" with my current surgeon, Dr. Gregory, but I saw no harm in obtaining a second opinion.

Let me call him Dr. Rajib. He was a handsome, charismatic man, equal parts Ricardo Montalban, and Rutger Hauer – heroic, international, borderline mystical.

"I am so glad you came to me," he greeted me with an arms-around embrace. It was like meeting Jesus. I thought for a second he might kiss me – and my meningioma might shrink to the dot of an i.

Instead of sitting behind a desk, Dr. Rahib sat on the floor, legs crossed. Instead of medical whites he wore khakis, with a tan belt holding him in. He spoke more like an actor than a doctor, in rich, dramatic cadences. He seemed to be a Superman of every kind of intelligence – medical, social, emotional, theatrical. Instead of examining negatives on a light panel, he laid his pianist's hands on my head, and massaged the place where the trouble was. Holding my head in his hands, he reminded me of Galileo, measuring the circumference of the earth.

"You have what is called a meningioma," he says. "I concur completely with Dr. Gregory's. To me, you are so lucky, because you can do whatever is in your heart. You can leave this entity where it is, and if it ever should cause you a problem, I will go in and I will take it out. It is easy to get to. I could do it in my sleep.

"But I wouldn't do it in my sleep," he joked, holding up a cautionary index finger. "I promise you I would not do that.

"Or, if it is your wish, you may ask me to go in this very week and take it out of you. It is not necessary, I assure you, but I would not blame you in the slightest if you felt this way. If it were me in your place, I might well want it gone, so that I need never think of it again."

I left Dr. Rajib's office, unsure if my feet were touching the ground. I would be so lucky to have this man saw my head open, I

was thinking. I would be blessed, in fact.

But my wife Rachel, who is very plugged into the regional medical scene, discovered over the course of the next few days that a number of Dr. Rahib's cases were in litigation. Not easy cases like mine, but very difficult, virtually impossible tumors that Rajib evidently felt confident unraveling.

He was either a very good man, I decided, willing to cut into people with unsolvable problems, hoping his genius and luck will carry the day.

Or he was a very mixed man, with many wonderful successes to his credit, and some failures that whisper the word hubris in a clenched voice.

It was the ancient dilemma of brain surgery, going back to the Bronze Age, where early doctors drilled holes in skulls to let out the spirits. Dr. Rajib laid it out for me like a sacred coin flip. Die now or die later.

I decided I would stick with Dr. Gregory.

(2000)

## Following the Fox

This year animals that shouldn't be coming into the city are showing up here. Bears in South Saint Paul, coyotes in the western suburbs. And with my own eyes I have seen two foxes on several occasions.

This is extraordinary because I have seen exactly two other foxes in my life before this – neither time in the city.

The first fox I saw this year was at the Highland Park bandshell. He looked at us, we looked at him, and he scampered away. The next time was in the woods at Como Park. It was more a hearing than a sighting. The creature bawled – a strange, uncanine sound, somewhere between a goose's warning cry and a calf calling its mother.

Then we saw it – a small, fine, gray creature, gazing at us with undiscernible intent. Is it staring at us in hunger or in fear? Is it distressed, or is its appearance in the city a sign of health?

Now I see a fox every time we visit Hidden Falls. It lives on the cliff side, among the limestone walls. Every time we come through, it steps out to confront us.

I know I don't want Beau tangling with it, whether their DNA are 99% identical or not. The fox might kill Beau. Maybe Beau would kill the fox. Or maybe they would play like littermates, but when we got home we would be infested with fleas, ticks, and plague.

Seeing Beau strain on the leash to join the fox, I am

witnessing something unnatural – the meeting of a creature formed by nature, lean and wild, with one 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.

I found out that the foxes, bears, and coyotes all showed up this spring for a reason. Spring was cold. When the warmth did not come to the animals, the animals came looking for it.

Little brother, that's everyone's story.

(2002)

## **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 Winston 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 patty cake, 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 McCready looked into her eyes with greater devotion than 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.'

(1997)



## 'The Lightning that Doesn't Stop

A young man I know is going through a rough patch. He is down on everyone and everything and himself. It's hard to him to mobilize to perform everyday tasks.

I have given him The Speech:

*"You are in charge of your life. No one can determine your attitude but you. Stop wanting things so badly, and your chances of attaining them will improve."*

It's not a bad speech, but it rings hollow to a person in pain. And it sounds better the first time than the second, third, fourth or fifth.

How odd that I keep saying the words to this young man, as if they were magic, and his stubbornness is keeping the magic from working.

But when I look into his troubled eyes and see his pain, I am reminded of the times in my life when other people's wisdom failed for me, too. Who am I to be dispensing this high-test wisdom? Who made me the dispeller of sorrows?

Yesterday I tried another tack. "Did I ever tell you," I ask him, "how I became a born-again in the 1970s?"

The young man flashed me a look of frightened disgust. I too winced at the phrase.

The young man knew I had attended a Catholic seminary when I was 13, then quickly lost my faith in my teens, as cynicism, grief, and personal ambition crowded out childhood devotion.

Then I went religionless for about 15 years, replacing it with an *ism* of my own devising, comprised of surrealist poetry, Li Po's jug of

red wine, and the breast of the rising moon. By the mid-70s I was doing low-grade journalism for the university by day, and writing surrealistic verse by night. At age 28 I was in a groove, headstrong and cocky. Wunderkind, poet, and translator (I translated the Spanish shepherd poet Miguel Hernandez's book of eerie sonnets *The Lightning that Never Stops*), I ambled the slipstream, way high above the games of ordinary people. I was having a ball.

How vain was I? Here's an example. I always liked the Doors generally, because they were shamans and poets, which were good things to me. But one Doors song called "Touch Me," irritated me because Jim Morrison sang:

*I'm going to love you  
till the stars fall from the sky  
for you and I.*

How hard would it have been to make that line grammatical:

*I'm going to love you  
till the stars fall to the sea  
for you and me.*

A small thing, but it ate at me. It was my job to call attention to this shortcoming of the Doors.

I was could be imperious and dark. I intimidated others. I was decent enough to flag down my future bride Rachel. But that was easy because she was adorable. And once I loved her it was tough to be quite so solipsistic as before. But even she didn't change me deep down. For that I needed a major disruption, a lightning bolt to the head.

The disruption occurred when I was invited to move to the country and take a job putting out a daily newspaper. It was unusual to ask a surrealist poet to edit a small town paper. The managing editor, Paul

Gruchow, didn't realized when he hired me how weird I was. But he figured it our shortly after. In my first six months on the job, I made some serious mistakes and received very little support from Paul. My confidence, which was really all I had, began to ebb.

I began to experience my first hypoglycemic episodes, wherein I would get faint and disoriented every morning during the peak hour of editorial decision-making. I didn't realize it was caused by granola and falling blood sugar. All I knew is I got this lost feeling every day at the worst possible moment. It was scary.

Driving the 14 miles to work every morning in the dark, I would tune the dial to the radio preachers that you can only get out in the country. When the solar flares were strong you could pick up tiny, crazy religious stations in west Texas 1200 miles away. These radio preachers sounded like they chained to rocks, wailing their anguish to the stars, like they were being stung over and over by ants, their message of redemption and torment cracking across the ether like a bloodied whip.

One morning before sunup, in a dark fog coming in across the soybean fields, listening to some fellow in Oklahoma shrieking about his dissolute past, drinking and whoring and playing cards, I pulled my Chevy Nova off onto the gravel shoulder and joined him in sobbing uncontrollably for about ten minutes.

During one of those miserable moments alongside Highway 16, I decided I needed some change in my life. As a journalist I was crumbling. As a poet I was going nowhere. Even as a husband I was furtive and standoffish and strange. So I called out to the God of the solar flares, to say I couldn't go forward any more on my own. I was an imposter, and I was cracking up from the strain of having to be that guy.

I liked the idea that there was a crazy God tying the universe together. Because it meant I didn't have to do the tying together any more. It was getting to be too much for me.

So I took a deep breath and decided to climb down off my high horse for a while. If there was a crazy God, then I didn't have to be. In fact, if there was a crazy God, it was a definite conflict if I was one, too.

My Christianity was not about the afterlife, it was about this stuff here, right now. In the new religion, Jesus was the Boddhisatva proclaiming the beauty of the Kingdom of Heaven -- a place of the soul that was so terrific all other delights paled beside it, and so commonplace it's right within your grasp right at this moment, if you will *only go there*, if you will only be there right now.

The rules were so simple – know that God is God and you are not. You didn't have to do much of anything -- just obey the general rules of being a good husband and neighbor. This was a radical departure from having to wow everyone from sunup to dusk, from dotting every exclamation point in the thoughts of everyone you met.

Thus began one of the most excruciating periods of my life. It was excruciating to reassure Rachel, whose relatives had been pogrommed to death by good Christians. I promised not to do that, but she was not assuaged.

Then I had to resolve to pay more attention to other people and less to myself -- without stapling a halo to my head. When you're stuck on yourself by nature, humility gets messy in a hurry. Lightly pat yourself on the back for being good and you're right back on the griddle.

I played the Presbyterian for a time, attending church with my elderly neighbors. I was your basic newly-minted convert, finding marvelous the things the regular parish was bored silly with -- communion, hymns, sermons. Sure enough, their jaded company soon softened my ardor. People told me the parish gossip, and what happened to the last minister. I quit the church.

I batted around for a couple of years after we left our country

home, attending Episcopal and Trinitarian services in various cities, even going all the way back to my childhood Catholic faith. But I couldn't rejoin. The church I knew pre-Vatican II was gone, replaced by something strange – more liberal one day, and crushingly more conservative the next. It wasn't home any more.

I never quite made it with any congregation. My experience -- which may reflect my inner vanity – is that faith communities are great for the community but murder on the faith.

So I drifted away, also known as backsliding. And while in my heart I still see myself as a proto-Christian, with Jesus as the meta-poet who wrapped his arms around the world, I do not light a candle there very often. I tend to pray only when my car is stolen, or my dog gets into a fight with a Rottweiler. In little ways, one day at a time, I have taken Jesus down off the cross and re-installed myself there.

But now I'm thinking, I have this young man who needs a reorientation as dramatic as the one I experienced in that old green Chevy '71 Nova running the gravel highway through Graham Township. He needs to put someone up on the cross instead of himself. He needs to learn humility as a survival skill. He needs to lighten up.

I still like The Speech, but I see now that the words are only magical for me, because I was there when I first understood them. To the young man, they are as presumptuous as a poem.

Instead of making The Speech, talking the talk, and slathering those grand nostrums on top of him, I need to walk the walk and get back to my own proper orientation. And it hits me how hollow and pointless my anxieties have been in recent years, for both the young man and other people in my care. Did I think I could save them with a timely utterance?

Lightning strikes them when we are ready to be struck, and it

doesn't let up until we are jolted to a new life. No word from me can hasten the moment.

But how I ache for the anxious young man.

## Rain and Rudeness

After five days of high humidity, 95-degree heat, the clouds opened around 5 AM and dropped cool rain on us.

I got up to close the windows. By the time I finished I was also awake, and crept upstairs to get my e-mail.

The house is limp. We are fan-cooled, except for one tiny AC unit hooked up in the kitchen, so everyone can have a crack at it.

The dog has been pinned to the floor all week, his tongue swollen, his zest for canine life on hold.

I looked in on my son Jon the other morning and realized that he has not opened his bedroom windows in a month. All this time he has been relying on a 5-inch fan in a sealed room. He was born dead, and was only revived with medical help. Perhaps this is part of that.

When the index is in that range, it does something to your head; it discourages you from hoping. Many people love warm climates but I have felt the oppression of the jungle day, and understand how climate alone can keep people from summoning the energy to do things. And yes, I'm talking about Iowa.

Yesterday Jon made a really boneheaded remark in the car. I invited my mom, who is living with us, to accompany me to pick him up at the Y. When he got in, he said, as if she were not there, or were even more deaf than she is: "What's up with Gramma?"

It was precisely the wrong thing to say, as she has had him on

her scope for a while now, taking note of the day-to-day incivilities. There will be a reckoning, we all understand, and her fury will not be fun.

When we stopped to buy some groceries, and Mary remained in the lot in the air-conditioned car, I asked Jon in the store what he was thinking.

"I thought if she was along for the ride, maybe we were going to eat at a restaurant."

"That's not how it came off," I said.

"That's what I meant."

"Next you say something, say it to yourself first, in your head, and ask if the statement can be misconstrued, and get you into trouble."

"Huh?"

It puzzles him that his rudeness, really just an experiment of his to assume a more leveraged role in conversation, bombs out so often. He's 14 and shooting from the hip, without first removing the gun from the holster.

I look at his anxieties, and my mother's steely anger, and the dog's tongue-swollen anguish.

The heat is getting to us all

2002.

## Curbside

“You drop me off here at the curb and go buy groceries,” I tell Rachel. “I’ll pick out the DVD, and you swing around to pick me up.”

That was the plan. Inside I pull a movie from the shelf and put my money down.

Leaving the store, I see a familiar red car idling, and a woman's hands on the steering wheel. The plan is working.

What happens next happens quickly but in an intricate sequence. Let me break it down frame by frame.

I approach the car to get in. But as I do so, my brain sends a message: Something is wrong. There is no dog in the backseat, as there is in our car.

Great, I will rap on the front window to get a rise out of him.

I rap on the passenger window to get the dog's attention. But as I peer deeper into the window, grinning like an ape, I realize there is no dog there, and worse, that the woman is not one I know.

She is perhaps thirty, with bright eyes and honey-colored hair. God help me, I then did what all men men, do. I think, Make a good impression!

The problem is, she is screaming inside the cab, one hand gripping the steering wheel with white knuckles, the other repeatedly punching the LOCK buttons on the door arm.

I am dejected. If she thinks I am a murderer, making a good impression is probably not in the cards.

I take a step back, and adopt the most inoffensive expression a man in this situation might make. I'm like a guy she has bumped shopping carts with in the cereal aisle. I arch my eyebrows as high as they will go, and adopting an OOPS! expression with a funny frown. I am mouthing something like: "Sorry, my mistake!"

While I wish there were a universal gesture of reassurance one person can make to another through safety glass, there really isn't one. Midway through my oops expression, I realize I look like an urban psychotic, a crazy Quixote who has mistaken her Buick LeSabre for a windmill/ogre and is engaged in hallucinatory combat with it.

My *oops* expression now shows blank fear. But that expressionless expression is even scarier than the reassuring one. I can see three distinct horror lines furrowing her forehead.

I step in front of the car so she can get a better look, and gesture with my hands: "See, I'm just a man in a Hawaiian shirt with a copy of *The Transporter* in one hand and *Kite Runner* in the other."

But the headlights make me look like a horror monster, all wacky eyes and horned eyebrows, advancing on a luckless motorist.

And what's that gesture toward my chest with my hands? Am I touching my nipples for her approval? I can't read lips, but I believe she is praying.

The episode ends, and I slink away, content that she thinks I am a lunatic discouraged by locked doors, to try my luck with some other woman's door handle.

I have only one desire: while I am still within sight of the woman, Rachel will drive up in her similarly red car – admittedly, a Mercury and not a Buick. I will greet her with sweepingly affectionate gestures indicating the happiness of our marriage and the cleanliness of my rap sheet.

The dog will bark cheerily at my approach, and I will tousle his shaggy head, like the most normal man in the universe.

But Rachel doesn't come. Turns out she is in a long line at Whole Foods, waiting for an elderly customer to pay for a quart of organic strawberries with a sockful of nickels.

I stand by the curb, rocking on my heels, as if waiting for a bus, even though it is not a bus stop. I want to communicate to anyone watching – the woman, her husband, innocent bystanders – that I intend to leave the area shortly.

The husband emerges from the store. I am forty feet from them now, but I see her speaking animatedly to him, and pointing at me, then the car jerking away with a screech.

At least he didn't come over and start poking me in the chest.

As for me, what do I care? The night is cool and my love and protector is no more than a mile away.

(2002)

## Correspondence with an Autoresponder

I recently sent a letter-to-the-editor of a major online publication. In reply I got this e-message:

Thank you for taking the time to contact *USA ONLINE*. On behalf of the Editorial Board, I would like to thank you for your thoughtful letter. It is important to us that readers like yourself engage in this dialogue with us.

*If your letter is one of those selected for publication, congratulations. But competition for space is keen. If no one from USA Online has called you within two weeks, it is probable that your letter was not selected. Don't give up; try again!*

*Ellen Arbogast, Editor, USA Online.*

This was terrific news. My letter wasn't flat out guaranteed of publication, but plainly I had Ellen Arbogast herself in my corner and on my side. You know what they say: "It's not what you know, it's who you know." (I always wanted to change that to whom, but I never knew who to suggest it to.)

Anyway, I felt pretty connected, for a change, so I did write back.

*Dear Ellen Arbogast, thanks so much for the nice note! Some publications just answer with a form letter. But yours was so courteous and warm. I did, as you noted, put a lot of myself into that letter. But I feel like you are really giving it careful consideration. What more can any writer ask? Rest assured, I will never give up, not with persons of your caliber and goodwill*

*cheering me on. Yours sincerely, etc., Michael Finley.*

And I got this response:

Thank you for taking the time to contact *USA ONLINE*. On behalf of the Editorial Board, I would like to thank you for the letter to the editor you submitted. We value you ... etc.

So I answered:

You responded with the same exact letter to two different letters I sent you. At first I'm thinking, What are the odds of that? Then I'm like, maybe these are just form letters, you know?

*So I reread the letter, and my heart sank. You probably tell everyone their letter is thoughtful, and that their opinion is important to you. I am so embarrassed. I really felt you were reaching out to me.*

*I am just writing to let you know I do not expect any special favors from you regarding my letter. Read it, evaluate it, and lay it on the line. Then tell me straight out. I'm a big boy. Sincerely, etc., Michael Finley*

And this is what I got in reply:

Thank you for taking the time to contact *USA ONLINE*. On behalf of the Editorial Board, I would like ... etc

I fired back with:

*Dear Ellen Arbogast, I'm not a fancy editor. I don't enjoy the respect of millions. But I do know a bit about simple manners and*

*decency. And when I lay my heart out like I did, the last thing I expected from you, and from USA ONLINE, was a flippant reply.*

*Is business so slow, are you and your staff so idle, that you have nothing better to do than toy with an honest correspondent's emotions?*

*I'm shocked and disappointed, and unless I get word from you by return mail that you intend to use my letter, I intend to very seriously consider canceling my subscription! Sincerely ... etc.*

And the response:

Thank you for taking the time to contact *USA ONLINE*. Et cetera.

I was stunned. Quaking with rage, I composed the final message:

*Dear Ms. Arbogast. I am sorry that our communications could not proceed along more civilized lines. I believe that I offered my part sincerely and without reservation. You, for your part, saw fit to reply with a teasing, wheedling tone.*

*All I can say is that I am happy that you live and work in New York, where there are lots and lots of psychiatrists and you can pick one that has special knowledge and experience with the kind of anger syndrome your behavior evidences.*

*What makes this especially poignant for me is that I felt, from your first letter, that we might be friends.*

Please let me know if this means my letter will definitely not be published. Sincerely, etc.... Michael Finley

## Black and proud

There must be something wrong with me, because when I got my census form last week, I dutifully filled it out. That is, until I came to the section on race. On an impulse, I said that our entire family was black.

We aren't. One look in the mirror confirms that. We are white as sheets, off-white sheets anyway, all four of us.

But I marked us black, perhaps committing a felony in the process. I can't tell you what the No. 1 reason was. But I had my reasons, and I will list them here, in no particular order:

1. First, the question bugged me. What do we say about ourselves when we check off a box like that? If you know nothing about me except that I'm white, or that I'm black, how does that help you understand me? In fact, doesn't it have the opposite effect -- painting me with vague, sweeping generalities that may or may not be true?

2. I did it out of old-fashioned liberalism, a hard habit to break. My understanding is that the census exists primarily to count citizens so that congressional districts may be accurately apportioned. What our color has to do with congressional district apportionment is, again, a mystery. But minorities get undercounted in the census, and are thus underserved in government outlays. So I thought I'd counterbalance an uncounted black family with our family. Sure, this means fewer benefits for my race, but I figured, hey, white people had a good year.

3. I always wanted to be black, like in the Lou Reed song.

And this seemed like a much easier and more socially acceptable way to go about it than wearing makeup like John Howard Griffin in "Black Like Me." And less embarrassing than Al Jolson in "The Jazz Singer."

4. I thought it would do my family good. I told my family at supper we would be black from now on. Not that it would change anything in the way we go about our business. But somewhere, on a government mag-tape database somewhere, spinning around at a bazillion miles per second, we're black. My family didn't care.

5. I wanted to show solidarity with my extended family, which is diverse, including great people of numerous stripes and hues, including African-American. To my in-laws Kathy, Seantelle, Neechie, John and Marcus -- this is for you. And to my Uncle Jack, who used to do audiovisual work for Jesse Jackson, and now has a huge adoptive family of folks of color -- I haven't met you all, but I can tell you're terrific.

6. Patriotism. If I have heard anything repeated over and over all my life until it makes me sick, it is that you can be anything you want to be in America. You can be president or an astronaut or a cowboy. Well, at the moment I want to be black. So by what right can my country bar me from this ambition? I know this sounds silly, but I mean it. Isn't this the place that isn't supposed to put a ceiling on your ambitions?

7. Because, scientifically speaking, I am African-American, and so are you. According to the Eve Theory, which is more than just a theory, the entire human race appears to have originated in the DNA of a single woman who lived on the Olduvai Plain 1.5 million years ago. Every living person has DNA that can be traced

to her. If that doesn't make us African, what could?

## To a Dog, Pooping

I love the fall. I love the crisp air and falling temperatures. What a great time to be out with a good dog, driving the late-model, fire-engine red Taurus your mom bequeathed you when she went to winter with family in Kentucky the day before.

So I'm down at Hidden Falls with Beauregard, my standard (65 pound) poodle. He is looking sheepishly up at me, which is my signal that he needs to take a dump. So I stop walking, take out my plastic bag, and wait for him to execute his ablutions.

Poodles are, how do you say, fastidious about these matters. They never poop on the fairway, always in the rough, so as not to give themselves away. Beau's typical dump means finding just the right spot, often after investigating three or four other spots. Or, maybe he's just waiting for the feeling back there to be just right.

Then, he squats in a very primitive shape - Kodak moment - and, as he does his thang, he rotates to the right, or counter clockwise. I don't know why he rotates this way - again, maybe to keep on eye on what he's doing, and on any predators that might swoop down on him while bent to this task (poodle-snatching owls?) , and make off with his curly blue bod.

In any event, all these things come to be, just as they have happened 2000 times before. But there's a disgusting hitch in the action, as Beau can't quite seem to shake completely free of the thing he's getting rid of.

[Pause to explain to readers The Poodle Problem]

You see, poodles are unlike most dogs in that their hair never stops growing. This is OK on their coats, because you can shave them. They catch more burrs when their coats are long, and that's a drag. I have spent many an afternoon picking elephant-ear burrs out of his \$600 coat with an aluminum comb.

But the deal is, poodle hair grows everywhere. Coat, ears, and yes, your hairy hindquarters. And today is the day his hair back there has grown to just the right length to obstruct the free flow of his poop. A poop-block forms, which is held in place by hair, and which makes the next poop impossibility.

So, hunched over like a hissing black cat, Beau looks back at his butt, at the offending poop, and then back again at me, eyes imploring me to intervene.

Then things go from bad to worse, as, still turning, he stumbles into a copse of burr bushes. As he turns, they spool onto his curly coat. Wherever they touch, they stick, like nature's Velcro. Within seconds he has seventy burrs stuck to every part of him including his ears, face, eyebrows, and paws.

'Oh, Beau! ' I cry out in dismay. I am looking at two horrible jobs in need of simultaneous emergency action.

'You stupid, stupid, dog! '

[Early warning to the squeamish: things get even worse as this

goes on.]

It is not that he or I enjoy intervening. He is shamed by it, and I naturally am repulsed. But it's a job that can't be done without using some sort of buddy system. And the way things are, I'm it.

Usually I have something like toilet paper handy with which to perform the procedure. Sometimes I have to improvise. I have used a decaying newspaper found in the woods, an empty McDonalds coffee cup, even a set of three check deposit slips with my name and address in the upper left-hand corner, fanned out to maximize their surface: deposit here.

I used a handful of fresh-fallen snow once. Beau crossed his eyes over that one.

But today, all I have is the plastic bag. I use it for a few seconds, then for some reason I don't want to keep using it, and the problem is still not solved, and all I got left is two twenties, which I don't feel like breaking.

Exasperated, I uproot a fistful of grass, and use that to midwife the birth in progress. It is a mess, but at least we succeed in getting the main elements out of the dog and into the world at large.

Beau is about to express gratitude to me. He is a vain creature generally, but he can be very touching when he is thankful about something.

So we're limping back to the car, him on the leash, his butt still rather badly blotched. I am damned if I am going to lead him through the woods in this ridiculous condition.

But then I remember: I'm driving my mother's new car. I see it ahead of me, gleaming brick red in the first rays of October sun, like in a commercial. What a beauty!

And I don't know everything about this cockamamie thing we call life, but this much I do know: My mom won't like it if I smear dog shit all over her upholstery.

So I open the trunk, take out a blanket I was saving for deep-winter survival, tuck it around the back seat. There isn't enough to cover the backrest part, just the seat cushion. So I leverage the dog, very slowly, onto the blanket and sit him down.

'Now you stay there!' I tell him sharply, climb into the front, start the car, and head up the 150-foot high hill leading back to the river road.

Almost immediately Beau stands up. I glance at the upholstery, at his butt, at him.

'Lie down!' I command in the rear view mirror.

He stares at me.

'Beau, you lie down right now!'

More stares.

'Goddamnit Beau, you get your ass on that blanket and lie down right now! '

He is paralyzed with uncertainty. Oh, we have only practiced the 'lie down' command about 10,000 times. But now he's frozen in the high beams of my fury, and he can't recall what it means. 'Lie... down...?' ' Is that the one involving chicken? Where's the chicken?

'Lie down! '

Nothing.

I stop the car, put it in park, open the front door, get out of the car, open the back door, grab the dog by his neck and hindquarters and force him to his knees (and elbows) .

'Now you LIE DOWN.'

He lies down. And he stays that way, like a shitty-assed sphinx, all the way home. Whereupon I lead him inside, take him down in the basement, fill the laundry tub with warm water and soap and load the curly blue animal in, and spray, and sponge, and scrape, and brush, and then finally, both of us exhausted, I let him out.

He dashes up the stairs, shaking the water from his legs and butt, and makes a beeline for the studio couch. And I let him go.

I mean, I really do love the fall. I love the sense of the seasons gathering, and the crunch you feel when you step on dead leaves.

But I hate those elephant-ear burr plants. And I hate when the hair on a poodle's ass begins to cling.

## Scottish and Irish Besides

I grew up in an industrial part of northeastern Ohio where the Irish were few and far between. As a result, my sense of being Irish was patched together from books and ornamental towels. I imagined an Irishman like myself to be an amalgam of Oscar Wilde, Bernard Shaw, and Jonathan Swift – quick-witted and infuriating.

“Oscar, there’s a conspiracy of silence against me!” an annoying man once came up to Wilde and said. “Join it,” was Oscar’s recommendation.

It wasn’t until Rachel was accepted to nursing school at Yale in 1980 that I learned about the working Irish of the east – “the scrum of the earth” was how one Southie resident on 60 Minutes described them.

I remember driving through New Haven one winter’s night and saw a figure in the road, half blanketed with snow. When I jumped down from my truck to investigate, I saw it was a girl of about 15. A very drunk girl.

I loaded her into the pickup to warm her up, and asked her where she lived. Half conscious, she dismissed me saying, “You know where I live.”

I became very stern at this point. “Young lady, I do not know where you live, and I’m afraid it was a mistake picking you up off the street.”

The girl, who could not have weighed 100 pounds, opened an

eye, sized me up and said, "You know what you are?"

"No," I said, "what am I?"

"You're a fooken Mick," she said. "You know how I know?"

"No, how do you know?"

"Because," she hiccupped, "I'm a fooken Mick, too." And passed out.

I delivered my young guest to the constabulary, but I could not shake the feeling of having been told something true. Something ... disturbing.

So 20 years pass. I've resettled in the cozy Celtic city of St. Paul. My mom, a crack genealogist, has taught me much about my ancestors. She was good at it. She traveled thousands of miles, made her own grave rubbings, photographed every stone, and wrote down every date, corresponded with church recordkeepers, historical societies, and fellow generalogists.

She was very distrustful of me taking part in her jaunts because I write fiction, and fiction is the enemy of genealogy. I was anxious to establish links to famous Finleys, like the John Finley who showed Daniel Boone the Cumberland gap. And this opened the continent to western expansion. Blame all the strip malls and roadside attractions on us. I wanted credit for that, and my mom saw this attitude as unclean. She was right. Mom is always right.

It was my mom who pointed out to me that, strictly speaking, I am not just Irish but Scots-Irish.

She explained to me how the English brought Scots Presbyterians (Lowlanders, from the south) to Ireland to settle, to enhance their imperial claims. This was the cause of The Troubles that continue to this day. And it explains why, on my mother's side, the hot-headed Mulligans of County Down, the land of St. Patrick himself, we wear the dreaded Orange.

Every preceding group that came to Ireland – the Norsemen, the Normans, even the first Anglo-Saxons – melted into the Irish pot, becoming more Irish than the Irish. But not the Scots-Irish. Their whole purpose in life, as stand-ins for the English, as place-takers, was to resist assimilation. They were the poltroons, the occupiers, the new bosses. If an interloper fancied the horse you rode by on, you were obliged to sell it to him for five pounds. A distressing lot, we were. And we remained Scottish to the bone: a bit dodgy, a trifle academic, somewhat alienated by their rationalist demeanor from the wild fauna that move about on the green hills.

At about this time, I start getting mail from the Clan Farquharson, a Scots genealogical newsletter. It turns out that if you are a Finley, you are likely to be both Irish and Scottish, and belong to Clan Farquharson, a Highlander group. It's basically the same name as Ferguson, but it has that lovely Q in it.

These Scots are not to be mistaken for the occupiers. The Finley/ Farquharsons date from an earlier expedition of the Irish to Scotland. This time, the Irish were the colonizers and kept the upper hand. And it was we who gave Scotland its name, which means, basically, Ireland. It's quite confusing, but, long story short, I'm Scottish and Irish, in different ways and different measures, and different degrees of sinfulness, on both parents'

sides.

So one evening I bundle my suddenly Scots family – my spouse plus the two wee bairns – and attend a splendid Scottish bonfire on a bluff overlooking the Mississippi.

There I chatted with a grand little Farquharson gentleman, about five foot two. Oh, he was wee, but he was extremely masculine about it. I told him I was told I was Scottish, but I never felt much kinship with the Scots, that I was raised thinking I was just Irish.

He eyed me keenly. "Well, laddie, do you like the pipes then?"

I allowed as how, when the mood was right, the droning of the pipes – say, around a campfire after a good bloody barenaked slaughter – could put me in a certain mood. But at all other times I retained free will, able to take the pipes or leave them be.

He shook his head disgustedly. "Aye laddie, if ye don't like the pipes," he said, "then ye're not a Scot."

That unkind remark stirred something in me, because I have gone all out the past few years to become a better Irishman and a Scot. I joined Clan Farquharson. My family hosted a boy from Belfast one summer – although I am convinced he was more the cause of The Troubles than the victim of them.

And at one time I was president, because people thought I might be good at raising money (they were sadly mistaken), of the Minnesota Folk Festival, a group that staged mini-acoustic-Woodstocks here and there.

The funny part? I loved the sorrowful, straining sound of the Irish pipes. Yes, we have them, too.

Looking back, I feel I was given the word by two supernatural visitors, the booze-breathed girl in the snow in New Haven, and the banty gent by the blazing bonfire.

From the fire and the ice, I summon their spirits, and make my apologies to each. Because I understand now. I understand it all.

I am a fooken Mick. But I'm a fooken Scot, to boot.

(1995)

## Go Deep

A while back Michael Kinsley scandalized the literary world by confessing that, as judge of the 2002 National Book Awards, he hadn't read all the books. If you parsed his statement with care, he didn't claim to have read all of any of the books.

People freaked out, but it should not have surprised. Over the years people have observed that the quality of book reviewing has been in decline. My observation is that it has never been that good, and the only reason we deny it is because we won't like to admit how crummy the economics are.

I make this observation based on the years I spent reviewing books for a living, in the early 1970s.

It's a dirty little secret among reviewers that unless you are OCD, there is no way you can make a living reviewing books that you read cover to cover.

This explains why book reviews today are usually "book essays," tangentially touching on the book at hand, focusing instead on the silken subtleties of the reviewer's mind.

Forget Parnassus for a moment – the way we wish literature worked – and do the math. Figure a proper read of a book takes 10 hours; the review takes an additional three. Plus you need some air time in between to mull the book over. Now figure that the typical paid review is about \$100. Your hourly rate is less than that of a parking lot attendant.

I know. Books are beauty. It's a terrible thing to rush a review

into existence. Like a good wine, a book needs time to breathe. Evaluation should be a mellow process, like sugar-curing.

It's not just professional reviewers. We are all pressed for time. I have been in book clubs where each month seemed to speed by and, despite the best of intentions, the night would come and the book would be uncracked. This is a disservice to the people who did the work, but life overtakes one. What do you say, "My child has pellagra, but I finished the Faulkner"?

I made a living as a young man writing book reviews a week for \$50 a piece for the local paper. I used nine different pseudonyms, each one with a different personality, so I could collect nine checks. My only other work at the time was guarding bell-bottom pants in a downtown department store.

I read some titles cover to cover – the ones I knew I would like. But as an operational necessity, I relied on press kits, news releases, and expeditious skimming to glom an espresso view of the author's intent. My goal was to review at least five books a week. Fewer than that and I did not eat so well. I had all the motivation in the world to cut corners – usually by focusing on a part instead of the whole.

Which, by the by, is why publishers issue press kits. They know what's happening.

Sad and shameful but 100% true. Sorry, Ved Mehta. Sorry, Alexis DuChambrier. Sorry, Random House Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language. Sorry, 2,000 Word Jumbles.

I can only imagine how rough it is for someone with a full Daytimer like Kinsley to face a Devil's Footstool of 400 books,

and a ticking mantle clock, a month before The National Book Crunch. What to do, what to do ...

Imagine the imposter syndrome welling up in him, the regurge, the shame. Now magnify that by the entire publishing industry.

There are wonderful people out there who love books the way they love oxygen, deep and cleansing and life-giving.

But mostly, it's baseball. I mean, it's a business.

I have known agents who did not read books even after they were published, and the check for 15 percent was mailed.

I have known editors who did not read the books they edited from cover to cover.

I have known writers who – this comes painfully close to being autobiographical – were psychologically unable to read their own work before submitting it.

These books tended not to be among the prize nominees, for reasons that can be deduced.

I have seen the best minds of my generation reduced to howling at the footsteps of an approaching deadline. And thought to myself, what do you expect?

I only know of one saint in this process, and it is the copy editor of a book – the person blamed for mistakes. Right or wrong, she did see each character on the page, and sound it out mentally.

She did the work, even if she had to steel herself from thinking too much about what the words meant, focusing instead on fixing those errant which's and that's.

Wrong of Mike Kinsley to accept the contest judging deal. Bad Michael Kinsley. He should have known he could not do 400 books justice.

But he is as made-of-clay as us. He plays a pundit, but he does time on the wheel the same as us, toting barges, lifting bales.

You can come down from your pedestal, Mike. We accept you, one of us. Gabba gabba hey.

One could as easily torch prize awards generally. They are inherently a fraud, a con-game in the bone.

I was part of an awards process where the winner wrote in a language that no judge could read, and no translation was available. What a terrific book that must have been, to communicate its excellence from bound object to mind without benefit of words!

But it was a business book, and the author was Japanese, and the 20-year recession there had not yet begun, so we assumed it was brilliant, and what do we do when we assume?

True justice – the deep, inside-out, blood-bubbling knowing of a thing– never occurs. It can't, in a food-based economy.

And we shake our heads at our inch-deep society. The Irish monks at Conard and Clonfert didn't have to ink 100,000 manuscripts annually.

They opened a single folio sheet, they dipped the quill, they dipped again, they put the tip to parchment and began.

They could afford to go deep. It was just them, and the moon, and smoke of the long-burning candle.

(2001)

## George

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 the money went, she said. I shook hands with the retinue.

Some of the members of the 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 without an instrument, with buttercream dahlias and frosting cherries, created by some impressive celebrity baker.

And 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 family and my life and 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 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.

(1992)

## **Don't Bother Me**

Every night in the spring of 1964 I lay awake in bed, listening through my pillow to the Beatles Hour on CKLW in Detroit, whose signal braved the choppy currents of Lake Erie to get to my family home.

That's how I first heard "Don't Bother Me." It became my favorite, for reasons I have only recently begun to understand. It was a George Harrison song, his first composition, and what stood out was its sullenness. Harrison, doubletracking to cover a shaky voice, sang to a ringing tremelo guitar line: "So go away, leave me alone, don't bother me."

That was the entire message of the song: Beat it, babe.

I know it was not a great song, like some other early Beatle songs, like "I Saw Her Standing There," or "There's a Place," were. But it made a psychic splash with me. The Beatles were generally an upbeat band – they had a great deal to be upbeat about, being young and rich and famous and brilliant – but this song was peevish. Harrison did not want the girl in question. He just wanted to be left the hell alone. He preferred being left behind to stew than to enter into some false teen pleasantness. His response to the biological imperative was to curl into a ball.

The song touched people like me in places they had never

been touched before. A kind of sullenness industry blossomed around it. Rock bands with displeased faces began showing up in the racks – Animals, Yardbirds, Stones singing "I Can't Get No Satisfaction." The world awoke to the joy of behaving joylessly.

It wasn't entirely new. Garbo hinted at it. It was apparent in Elvis's sneer, minus the mama's boy act. J. D. Salinger's unlikable heroes. James Dean was probably the first to nail the message: "There's no way you could possibly possibly comprehend the depth of my inarticulate suffering."

It was a generational reverseroo. The icon of World War II was the good guy, the mensch, Kilroy, the guy willing to put up with cold chow and stacked bodies and still come up smiling, even if a little PTSD. That was the square archetype of that era, the positive fellow, the Sinatra who extended a hearty handshake even when his heart had reason to break. He was a fine person – but a not especially self-aware.

"Don't Bother Me" marked a pivotal development in postmodern culture. For tens of thousands of years, men wooed women by displaying a cheerful willingness to put up with endless pain in order to procreate. But that ancient deal was now off. No more mensches, the rock stars and movie stars and literary stars were saying. The message from now on is, I'm aggrieved, I'm entitled to a bad attitude, so get the hell outta my way.

To the Kilroys of the world, locked into an outmoded mode, the mask of the salesman, the new way looked like a generation of spoiled brats. What have they got to kick about? They didn't have to wait out the Depression, or slog through Guadalcanal. I'll never forget Dean Martin dissing the Rolling Stones, drink in hand, on his variety show. One roll of those handsome bloodshot eyes said it all – “These guys are going to replace me?” He envisioned the future and it was punk.

What's it mean? It means that the first world was on the brink of trading one defense mechanism (the stiff upper lip, the Cagney) for another (the curled lip, the slacker). The former seems a whole lot more adult, but – former things usually do.

A decade ago George Harrison died. Over the course of his not-very-long life, he matured a good deal. His music certainly took a sharp turn, away from dourness and low expectations and toward a vision of bliss and positivity. But people generally were not fooled. He remained a dour and dyspeptic character – just a better sport about it.

The Greek poet Hesiod, well before Homer, was among the first to observe that human history, far from evolving into something brighter and finer, was a history of slippage, of devolution. Things were not only getting worse, but we were, too.

For Hesiod and Homer it was the descent from a world populated by gods to one led by heroes to one inhabited by

ordinary men. Which brings us to our dull bar-coded age, and its grim race of subheroes, the dullards and Dilberts of the consumer world.

“Don't Bother Me” was no help at all. It was just a moan that something was wrong, something was missing. That gesture was the successor to action, that an age of noninvolvement and despair was underway, and GI Joe could pack it in.

But still I lay there, in the dark, in my little town, an ear to my transistor radio, and drew hope from the bitterness of its truth.

(1991)

## Goodbye Tim Hardin My Friend

When you are young, there are songs that just knife through you. In 1965, Bobby Darin had a hit with "If I Were a Carpenter." It was thick, but such nakedness of emotion. Would you marry me anyway? Would you have my baby? I was fifteen, and it went through 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 Ripley, who owned the first. In turn I played both for my girlfriend Jan, a faculty brat who knew more music than me, everything from Judy Collins to the Fugs.

Hardin was categorized as a folksinger, but really he was a 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 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 that my dad did. But they never did. It never happened again, just like in the song, and how keenly I felt those losses.

During Christmas break that year, Rip got tickets to a 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 Rip's dorm room was full of paintings she had made of interesting people she had known in Khartoum and Rome. So Rip figured she would be open to Hardin, and he never dreamed Hardin would make him regret the choice.

But that is what happened. Unbeknownst to Ripley, Hardin was an addict and he showed up at the concert frantic and repulsive, grabbing his crotch and talking lenny Bruce-style 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, during songs, now much more electric than acoustic, songs you wouldn't

want to take your mother to.

Nancy was cool with it, but for Rip it was an evening of embarrassment, disappointment, and a wasted thirty dollars. How could that foul-mouthed hipster be the 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, tall, hip, kind, and willing to laugh.. She had small features, faint eyebrows and an indistinct mouth, and a face that was a litmus of her emotions – her complexion could go haywire at the drop of a hat. But her eyes were kind and beautiful, and it wasn't just me that said so. A school friend of mine told another school friend that I was keeping company with the greatest looking-girl on campus. When I heard that, I looked at her with blood in my eyes.

I was a virgin, but Jan thought I was witty and a poet, which she considered 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, except that I was 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 being a carpenter; I'd be a terrible carpenter, because I was no good with measuring things, and tools don't fit in my hands, I am always dropping hammers on the floor. Still, I yearned for her like the

man in Hardin's song.

I yearned for Jan, and I yearned for her family. The few times I visited with them, I joined them at the 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 an abrupt, opinionated prince. There was a mom and a sister and another brother involved, too. Aces every one of them, the family I wished I had.

The centerpiece of the family was Ned, the art professor. He was a small man, but red-headed and ferociously clear about what he believed. He'd been a Navy pilot in the Pacific in World War II, and I understood that got the idea that he came home against all odds and married his sweetheart from school. That was something I could get my mind around. Ned's hand almost always cradled a warm pipe bowl, which like him was a survivor of wartime action. He was a man who was tempered by flame, and just naturally more serious and sensible than other men. Most unlikely of all, he respected me. I acted better around him than I did around anybody. I liked who I was when I was with him, just like with Jan.

Ned liked the energy 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. Ned told Jan he liked me a lot – it took me by such surprise I blinked back tears.

One remark stands out. 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."

Several times, trying to call Jan back to me, I hitchhiked to Minnesota and bombed in on her and her family. 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 ready for life than me. Gradually, it sank in 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 get Jan to 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 described it as "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 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 of me savored the idea of doing it with a friend of Jan's and a student of Ned's.

Maddy and I were only 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 very first painting was a copy of the photo on Tim Hardin's "Greatest Hits" album.

Thinking back, it seems weird to have painted a picture of another man in front of a naked woman. But something about Hardin hooked into 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 blubbing, 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 he sure liked what he saw. It was like that moment when I heard that my old high school friend thought Jan was beautiful. Like the dog in the manger, I suddenly valued what I could no longer have. I saw Maddy slide into her VW Bug and drive away forever.

I didn't want to be part of this attachment any more, or any attachment. I was ashamed that I was sleeping with the wife of a man in combat. Ned wouldn't go for that, I knew. It was sleazy and zoot-suitish. It was ignoble and wrong.

I was drifting into a decade of solitariness. Jan married and soon had three children. My old roommate Ripley moved to Minnesota, and we resumed our friendship as grown men. We still loved music. We spent hours listening to the same songwriters – Tim Hardin, Leonard Cohen, Tim Buckley, Nick Drake. Lonely men listening to lonely men singing 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 knickknack stores. It wasn't a good business. I was just helping him to have something to do.

Over many years I 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 model my life after Ned, honest and clearheaded and unstinting in love. My life was not as heroic as his was. I was just a harried dad. I ate the crusts from the kids peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and gained weight.

About that time Ripley 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, Rip 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 Rip broke it off, and, in particularly cruel fashion, marrying another woman, the daughter of a local surgeon, all in the space of a couple of months.

I went to the wedding, which was quite a toney affair after our dumpster-diving, pickle-jar days. I toasted their happiness, but I was troubled.

Eve had the baby, but Rip never visited the hospital. Eve took the child home and set about to raise him, but Rip 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 needed to focus on the life he had chosen, not this one that was trying to trip him up. But it was hard for me to be my best friend's friend, because I had little kids myself, and I knew how important having a father was, and it tore me up to visit Eve and hear the little boy asking about his dad.

The odd thing was, Rip's parents, back in Princeton, knew about their grandson, and came visiting every year with gifts and games. His mother Nancy, whom Rip had taken to see Tim Hardin at the Village Gate, took the boy into the family with all love and honor. Rip knew about this, and permitted it, but he could not bring himself to be a party to it.

Little by little, I stopped seeing Rip. I still loved him, but our friendship crashed over the problem of his son, who I knew would grow up hollow and hunting – just 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 had taken 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 almost two days. Ned's head was injured, and he was a small fellow, but he kept the plane's navigator, Les, who was unconscious, afloat with him the whole time. The ocean wasn't rough, but it was challenging. 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 for a while, moans mostly, 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, because he was obviously dead, and there was no time in the midst of battle for a formal burial at sea. Ned watched as Les' 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, besides. 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, and we sat in plastic chairs out in the yard, 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, except for the babies who sat in their mothers' laps.

Everyone was there, except for Ned, and we didn't have much to say, but we sat and grinned and told teasing stories about the old days, and I felt I belonged as much as I ever did, like I had been a secret family member all that time, like a love child that had to be kept secret. But the feelings were still there.

In time even Rip 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. He never reconciled with the little boy he abandoned. But he changed in his heart, and I think some day, maybe.

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 Rip 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. "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. Rip 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 especially 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 CD, I sometimes still cringe with embarrassment, seeing myself 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, or wherever you may be – 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 those old feelings of bereftness, when you sense that everything has been 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, is all that will be remembered.

Goodbye, Tim Hardin, my friend. I didn't know you, but I been places that you been.

(1994)

## Inside the Canine Head

Every dog owner wonders what it would be like inside a dog's head. But I, and I almost alone among our species, have actually had that experience.

Over the holidays, my son's school held a fundraiser at a local bakery. All profits from that day's sales went to the school. To lure traffic in, human volunteers were asked to dress up in semi-realistic animal costumes and parade around outside the bakery.

You know how it is: when you see someone dressed up in an animal suit, you just want to whip out your checkbook. The last thing you would do is cross the street to avoid the person/animal.

I was volunteered for this operation ("We thought you would be perfect for public humiliation," one of the moms told me, like it was a funny joke), and the suit I was given was of a husky dog, possibly a Samoyed.

It was a very good suit. The fur looked real, and the head, though oversized, was naturalistic. No sooner did I slip the enormous outer head over my inner one, and peered out the gauze eye-windows, than I felt different. Not just unable to breathe. No, it went deeper than that. I began to feel like the creature I was portraying. Not a real dog exactly, more like the iconic figure of a dog. Scruffy. Barky. The soul of a dog.

It was a slushy day, and it had begun to snow when I slunk out to my appointed post along Summit Avenue. Altogether I spent two hours on the corner, and in that period I went through a

series of transformations.

First, I was: the man in a dog suit. New to the concept, I imagined myself as a cartoon dog. When cars would go by I would wave my hand in a friendly, three-fingered way, like the girl in the Mickey Mouse suit at Disneyland. But after a minute or two, that began to seem mind-numbingly insipid. I began to experiment with other modes of behavior. Like scratching behind one ear like I had been trying to get at that place for ages. Like bobbing my head like I was overexcited. Like lifting a leg at the stop sign.

Some people, passing by, made me want to look away. They were cold and distant – cat people. Others filled me with alarm, because they seemed afraid of me, like I was violating their sense of the way things needed to be. I wanted to shout at them – “You know, sometimes we have to be this way!” I had been sent to the 4m, with a message, and it was important that they attend.

Other people were sympathetic. I whined when they passed me on the sidewalk, hoping they would pity me and allow me to hop into their back seat. I imagined life with them – me friendly and affirming, them loving and able to open doors.

I zeroed in on a family with only one child, a little boy about six. I sensed a vacancy in their hearts, and I yearned to fill it. But they, unsure about a six foot, one inch, bipedal malamute, walked right by.

I grew tired of that and became: the man who did not know he was a dog. Now I was just an ordinary man, but one wearing a dog suit. The fact that I was in a dog suit was of no consequence

to me. I pretended I was waiting for a bus, glancing at my paw-watch to check the time. I rocked on my heels, and whistled a tune. When a car drove by too quickly and splashed slush onto my feet, I made the Italian fungoo sign at them as they sped away, laughing.

Then I became: the man who awoke to find himself changed into a dog. Like Gregor Samsa in the Franz Kafka story, trapped in a large cockroach's body, only I was a dog. I paced around frantically, pretending to pull my head off, only to discover it was my real head. I was acing out a horror story, but no one showed sympathy. I waved at passersby signaling that I needed help in the most urgent way. I even stepped into traffic a bit, as if I might stand in front of a car to get it to stop. You should have seen people's expression, delight fading into something unnerving.

Then the metamorphosis deepened, and I became the most frightening apparition of all: the man who really was a dog. All human perspective was gone now. I was a tall dog standing on its hind legs, teetering close to traffic. This was serious. I could bolt into an oncoming car, or nip a passerby in my confusion. I looked around me at the world of people, orderly for them but incomprehensible to me.

Soon, my coat blanketed with wet snow, but my mask wet inside from perspiration, I trudged lock back to the bakery, undid the dog's head, and felt the cool human air rush to my slick face. Business was booming; we wound up raising \$7,000 from sales of bread for the school. Things began making sense again.

But too late for me. I am changed now. I realize dogs in human society feel almost constant fear. And I am haunted by my

last thoughts on the boulevard:

If I were a real dog, and I'm not on a leash, what was my situation exactly? Was I lost? Emancipated? If so, I was in deep trouble – alone in the city, confused by traffic, stimulated by my freedom but unsure what to do with it. I was in chaos. I appeared to be grinning, as dogs in danger do. But I was at my wits' end.

I controlled nothing in this environment. I understood nothing. Everyone else had a direction to their behavior, an orienting principle, a purpose, attempting to survive in a nightmare world, improvising from moment to moment. One wrong move and I was a dead dog.

My only defense against all this confusion was to latch onto a human who could make sense of it and ingratiate myself to him. But whom – whom?

I put my head back and I howled into the falling snow.

(1994)

## **I Met Charles Manson (I Think)**

One day in the spring of 1969, I and a bunch of college dropouts from the Midwest were living in a commune we had set up in the Vermont district of Los Angeles, a couple dozen or so blocks south of Hollywood.

Our commune was a spin-off of something called the Universal Life Church, a mail-order ministry run out of Modesto, California, which ordained anyone who sent in a postcard, without questions. The church was really little more than a pretext to get together with friends and smoke pot. We weren't bad people, but we were foolish. One of our agenda items was ecclesiastical outreach, so every other weekend or so we made little trips to other Universal Life branches around southern California. One of our favorite places was a desert drop-in known only as Thompson's Chicken ranch, near Twenty Nine Palms in the Mojave Desert 100 miles away, which in turn was vaguely near to Palm Springs.

The first chance we got, we hitchhiked out there, to see if it made sense to align ourselves with the place.

Thompson's Chicken Ranch was a true desert commune, consisting of a gutted main house, a machine shed, a couple of lean-to's and a water tower that had water when it rained, which it never did.

We went out there perhaps three times during our months on L.A. The first time was on church business, ostensibly; the other times were just for fun.

The desert was an incredible place for Midwesterners on holiday. The crumbling ruined mountains, that looked older than Sinai, and twice as forbidding, sat right behind the ranch. Everywhere were Joshua trees and the braided branches of their dead. Yucca plants exploded at every arms-length. And under every rock, something living – a gecko, a Gila monster, hornytoad, or a rattlesnake. It was Don Juan country, a fine, unforgiving place to surrender to the sun.

I have two main memories of Thompson's Chicken Ranch, one involving teenaged runaways, and one involving mass murderer Charles Manson. There is a third memory, involving an earthquake that destroyed all of California, and us with it, but that will have to wait for another time.

The core population of the ranch was a small handful of men in breechclouts, as lean as jerky and about half as verbal, who lounged in the shadows in the daytime, and ventured out only at night. It says something that in all our visits to the place – where we were regarded about as seriously as the Partridge Family – we never learned any of their names. Indeed, I can't recall even having a conversation with anyone. We communicated mainly with grunts and far-out's. People just arrived, found a corner to crash in, and did their thing. It was not just that they were nonverbal, but that they were incurious, as if the sun had baked all the inquisitiveness out of them.

These guys were hard-core in their habits, and I would guess wealthy in their background. They had no visible means of support, they never lifted a finger for any other human being, yet they were up to their ears in high quality LSD, California red wine and ganja, and for their delectation a kind of underground

railroad arrived every day with three or four or five high school girls in it.

Every morning that we stayed by the ranch, the local police would show up and cart off the underaged girls that had been there the night before. It was not a big deal. The police would arrive promptly around 8:30 AM, would go to the back door and call out "Hello?" and would then roust the groggy 14-year-olds and 15-year-olds and lead them away, in various stages of dishevelment to the patrol car. In town, they would have the girls call their parents and arrange for their return. It might even have been the same girls each morning. I wasn't there enough times to say one way or the other.

Had this happened back in Ohio, it would have been a screaming scandal, with banner headlines in the local Republican rags. Here in California, with the Age of Aquarius already growing dog-eared in the desert sun, it was matter-of-fact. Daughters didn't belong with their families in the new age. That they were sent home every morning was a weary formality of a changed world.

The Manson encounter occurred on a weekend trip we Midwestern hippies undertook, plus Dave, a deserter who was living with us, and Sylvia, his girlfriend. We arrived at the Chicken Ranch on a Wednesday afternoon.

This particular trip, we traveled in a fairly new van that Dave had somehow acquired. Dave is another separate story. He was both a speed freak and a Jesus freak. He told us his mother died when he was eleven, and his daddy was already gone by then, back in the Texas panhandle somewhere, and he was left to raise

his little brother by himself. Dave took to reading the Bible to his brother Jeremy every night, and dine on jackrabbits and quail he would shoot, and cornbread he would make from stolen ears.

It was an intense life, and they managed as best they could. But over the passage of months things began to go sour for the two boys, which Dave summed up by telling me that one day he nailed his little brother's hands to the bedroom door. It had something to do with a vision of Jesus, which he now thought the might not have got quite right.

Jeremy survived the ordeal, but he grew up to become an even bigger druggie than Dave, and Dave believed that, in addition to the FBI wanting him for slipping out of the Presidio brig one night and being seriously AWOL for eight months, his brother Jeremy was also hot on his trail, with a head full of hootch and the determination to repay Dave for the crucifixion.

I say Dave got the Econoline van somehow, but it occurs to me as I write this that maybe Dave stole it. It looked bright and suburban and a little uncool that way, but it had a great tape deck. The album that spring was Born on the Bayou, by Credence Clearwater Revival, and we had it on the whole way. It was a record you could get lost in, like a high-powered boat in a backwater swamp, especially if you were high and, well, lost to begin with.

When we arrived at the Ranch we were even less welcome than usual. About thirty bikes were parked out front. So we drove past the house up a long skinny drive leading up toward the pile of rocks passing as a mountain range. We parked about 200 yards from the house, set up a lean-to against the truck, and got out.

Dave had a spy-glass, and he identified the bike group below us as the Sons of Troy, a fairly nondescript bunch of road losers. We went hiking through the rocks for about an hour, careful of rattlesnakes. When we returned, we could see that a second wave of bikers were arriving below us. Their jackets all said Hessians. I had heard of the Hessians, they were a large and unruly group, bullies, of the sort (they were called the Beetles) who took over that town under Marlon Brando and Lee Marvin in *The Wild One*.

Just then a poky humpbacked school bus began churning down the drive. I stopped by the house and a man got out, looked around, and almost immediately got back into the bus, and drove up toward our camp. This bus was painted black, and about 25 years old, with psychedelic painted hubcaps and scarves trailing from the back window.

The driver was a goofy-looking man with shortish hair. Also debarking was a short, intense, brown-haired and brown-eyed man who looked nervously at us, and without nodding, walked to the back of the bus and untied the emergency doors, which were connected with a strap of leather. About six girls were inside. I can't remember their faces, except for one straw-haired girl with a horsey sort of look to her.

Was this Charlie Manson? I can only say that, in retrospect, he looked exactly like the fellow who was soon in all the papers. The date was late March or early April, 1969. The Tate-La Bianca murders happened the following August.<sup>1</sup> He was supposed to be holed up somewhere near Death Valley, about 100 miles away. The guy I met was driving a black schoolbus, just like Manson is said to have driven in accounts by Ed Sanders and Vincent Bugliosi. Finally, the goofy-looking driver before us now was a

ringer for pictures I saw later of Tex Watson.

The Watson lookalike came over to us and asked if they could borrow our fire to make a fire of their own, about 50 feet away. While we were enjoying hot afternoon tea, a third group of bikers could be seen approaching on Highway 16. The Sons of Troy had beaten a hasty retreat about two hours earlier, over some turf disagreement with the Hessians. Dave took one look in the spy-glass and announced this was the Hell's Angels.

What followed was a fight. From afar, our theory was that the biker groups were all on different drugs. The Sons of Troy were probably potheads – we could almost imagine ourselves, under slightly different circumstances, riding with them. The Hessians seemed like downers-n-red wine types, surly and a little fat in the gut. But the Hell's Angels were like Valkyries, streaking down from the LSD clouds to humble the drunken pretenders.

We saw flying kicks, tire irons, fistfights, sticks – it was like a scene from a Western street fight, with the sun setting over to the west. The Angels were in control. They smashed a few bikes, and somehow got together a small pile of tires from the Hessian bikes and lit them up. The fire, and the clouds of black rubber smoke, rose high up over the desert plain.

Then, way down by the horizon line, about four miles away, we saw a little oscillating red light. It was a pick up truck with a tank of water mounted in back. It had a little siren, too, that made it sound sort of like an ice cream truck. It headed down the highway, and finally turned down the dirt drive leading to the ranch. We could hear the tires grind to a halt on the gravel, and the door open up, and standing in front of about a dozen bikers

was this enormous, blonde-haired man, wearing suspenders, a plaid shirt, and a chin which we could even tell from two hundred yards away was cleft as though by an axe helve. He looked like a young Paul Bunyan.

He smiled at the bikers, turned on his hose, and doused the pile of flaming tires. In about ten minutes the fire was out, and he said goodbye, hopped back in his truck, and drove away.

It was an astounding performance, a triumph of a tiny water hose and a man of peace and great size over the armies of the night.

Manson's group was gone in the morning. They had packed up their black school bus and toddled off to their next destination. Throughout our time together, they neither killed us nor scrawled slogans on our van in our blood. We kept to our patch of the desert, they kept to theirs. My overall estimation of them was that, for that day and that place, they seemed like better than average neighbors.

## **Bag of Rocks**

You might not remember an old Tom Verlaine song ...

I've been breaking these rocks,  
and I've been cutting this hay ...

But I did ...

I was at a meeting, and a guy was talking about the difficulty  
of getting free, really free ...

My ears perked up at the concept ...

Because I have been laboring, too, in recent years ...

He said sweetness is the land just across the river ...

And we can see it from our side ...

And it looks pretty good over there ...

But we've been carrying a backpack all our lives ...

And the backpack's full of rocks ...

Big heavy rocks ...

And we've convinced ourselves that it's our job to carry those

rocks forever ...

The rocks are our identity ...

They tell us who we are ...

And even when the rocks tell us shitty things about ourselves, they're better than not being told anything ...

What are the rocks? Could be:

- our sense of our own goodness
- our suffering, which we have come to believe we do well
- our sins, the shamey things too horrible to tell others about
- our compulsions
- our commitment to "justice"
- our need to save others

In short ...

The rocks are our "self-justification" ...

They are the reasons we give ourselves for our own existence...

We feel naked without the weight of them on our shoulders.

And yet, they are our biggest problem in our lives ...

They are a burden that prevents us from being really happy

...

From letting it all go and saying, it's OK...

So here we are ...

We long to cross the river ...

But how loathe we are to loosen the straps on the pack and let down our load ...

And if we wade into the water with them, wading deeper and deeper, their weight will surely prevent us from reaching the other shore...

They will drag us to the bottom and we will drown ....

So you ask yourself ...

What would Tom Verlaine do?

Here's what I think ...

We need to see ourselves as we are ...

We are not happy wanderers toting backpacks full of useful tools ...

We're prisoners in striped suits, iron balls manacled to our ankles, and we're working on the rockpile of our lives...

We are solving life's problems with a 6-pound sledge ...

Smashing rocks into gravel ...

We show each rock respect ...

We give give each one the time required to study it ...

And then we break it into bits ...

Better grab a hammer ...

Get the heavy-chrome plated kind, that smashes anything ...

The first rock is your sense of your specialness ...

Hold it in your hand ....

Feel its weight ...

Think about the geology of this rock ...

Where it came from ...

Why you needed to feel special ...

What fear it armored you against ...

Feel pity for yourself that you chose to resort to this armoring  
...

Then hoist the hammer and let it fall ...

Smash the rock ...

It will smash into pieces and crumbs ...

Take the hammer again and smash each one of the big pieces  
until all you have is dust ...

You have broken it down, from a petrified old turd of self-  
regard to a little pile of shiny, glittering stardust.

Now bless the hammer for doing what you could not ...

And sweep the dust into your hand and walk to an open  
window ...

Blow the dust until it is gone ...

Bit by bit, even if it takes years, we will break down these  
rocks and free ourselves.

- Of the guilt and shame.

- Of the self-centeredness.
- Of the fear and anxiety.
- Of the fussy pride.

If you're really good, you can break up a rock a day ...

More likely, you should dedicate two or three weeks per rock...

Contemplate what you are crushing ...

Believe that, when the dust is blown away, the rock will be gone forever...

Once a year, commemorate the breaking the rock by breaking a rock just like it...

Because it will want to climb back into your backpack ...

It will want to weigh you down again ...

And a part of you will want it to ...

Because it told you who were were ...

And you liked that sad story...

But it was weight that kept you on the wrong side of the

river...

And now it is blowing in the wind...

(2001)

## Empty Places

### Remembering Paul Gruchow: a chronicle of a death foretold

Be kind, for everyone you meet  
is fighting a great battle. —Philo of Alexandria

Once in a sycamore I was glad  
all at the top, and I sang.  
Hard on the land wears the strong sea  
and empty grows every bed.  
—John Berryman, “Dream Song 1”

**DULUTH, Feb. 24, 2004**—Paul Gruchow, who chronicled the prairie in his book *The Necessity of Empty Places*, died of a drug overdose Sunday at his home in Duluth. He was 56.

Gruchow had been hospitalized several times in recent years in a battle with depression. His family said he had attempted suicide four times since August 2001.

He recently completed a first draft of a book about depression from the inside. —AP

**ONE MORNING IN AUGUST OF 1978**, the phone rang, and a merry voice said to me, “Mike, Paul Gruchow here. How would you like to come to work for me?”

Every reporter knew Paul Gruchow. At 34, he was already a grand figure in Minnesota journalism. Every year his Worthington newspaper swept the small-circulation category for photography and writing awards. But he was bigger than just journalism—he was a guru of prairie lore, an agitator for sustainable agriculture, a defender of rural culture.

So I drove down to Worthington to meet the man. We hit it off right away. We were both small-town boys, ambitious to tell

the real story of noncity living. Paul was tremendously bright and bursting with energy. He was cheerful, but you could tell he was deep. His smile was a sad smile. If you looked at him one way, he could be a baby-cheeked boy. From another angle, he was an old guy crouched under a bridge. He was ambiguous, and I liked that.

Paul had a vision, nearly implemented, of a newspaper that was literally a “prairie home companion,” a printed friend to the scattered populace. Every edition would contain the daily commodity prices and retail ads, but it would also point to the deeper truth of rural living. Paul needed an operational lieutenant, a news editor to guide each day’s paper through to completion, and he chose me. I felt very lucky.

When Jim and Bob Vance inherited the Worthington *Daily Globe* from their father, “V.M.,” they had a choice between milking the business for a few bucks or “having some fun with it.” Being outlaws in their bones, the brothers decided on the latter course. And they hired Paul (who’d previously been news director at then-fledgling Minnesota Public Radio in downtown St. Paul) to oversee the overhaul.

During Gruchow’s tenure, from 1975 to 1986, the *Daily Globe* enjoyed a golden era. It was one of the first papers nationally to “go computer,” installing a blinking Digital VAX monolith in a glass sarcophagus in our otherwise ancient paste-up room. Every reporter had a terminal and could edit his own stuff online—a revolutionary empowerment. We went to four-color offset lithography a decade before *USA Today*, the better to showcase the work of world-class photographers Jim Brandenburg and Joe Rossi.

Another photographer, Mark Luinenburg, says of that time: “I was just in high school, but Paul let me develop my prints in the *Daily Globe* darkroom. I got to work alongside legends Bill Kuykendall and Jim Brandenburg. It was a magical place, and Paul gave me the keys to it.”

While we had probably the best editorial writer and essayist of any daily in the venerable Ray Crippen, who had to be at least 40, the paper was mainly an incubator of younger talent. Paul brought in reporters like Jay Novak, Tom Mason, and Dick Meryhew from the *Minnesota Daily*, which Paul had edited as a student. Because Gruchow ran the show, talented people who otherwise would have gone to work at the Minneapolis *Tribune* or St. Paul *Dispatch* loaded U-Hauls and drove to southwest Minnesota.

## **Rocket Launcher**

**MY FIRST MONTHS WITH PAUL** were like a honeymoon. After getting an edition out, we would race off to the prairie in his rickety staff car—the paper had only two—and he would show me blue gentian in bloom (“bitter herbs, bearing bitter news” of winter drawing near) at Kilen Woods, or the buffalo cows lolling out along the Blue Mounds or the skeletal herons dancing on the edges of Round Lake. I looked; I listened; I said, “Gosh.”

Somehow Paul knew everything about everything. He knew Little Crow’s real Lakota name (Taoyateduta). He knew that Aztecs trekked all the way from Mexico to the quarry at Pipestone for the sacred red stone. He knew every Lutheran hymn, every Bach prelude, every Precambrian layer of the ledges

along the Rock River. He was like an Eagle Scout, cubed. Being with him was like standing under a rushing waterfall.

Paul was never a “regular guy.” Though chronologically a baby boomer, he seemed pre-Woodstock by half a dozen generations. He had a plummy, old-school way about him. He was drunk with Shakespeare and King James English, which made him partial to words like *fettered* and *madman*, a fustiness that perhaps explains why Annie Dillard and not he shot up the bestseller lists.

This academic bent was odd because Paul never got a college degree and was perversely proud of this shortcoming. He took the path less traveled, for sure. As a student at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis, he signed up for every class poet John Berryman taught—27 credits in all. Paul absorbed all of Berryman’s eccentricities, from his rhetorical flourishes down to his bright beard. They even held their omnipresent cigarettes in the same way, butt down on the thumb, like a rocket smoking on a pad.

They also took the same joy in performing. Berryman was startling in person, hyperemotional and grand. Paul was the same way when telling a story, pedal to the metal. His stories defined him, and he told them hungrily, leering as if *he* couldn’t wait to hear how they turned out, either. He told about how Nelson Rockefeller revealed his true nature as the keynote speaker at Worthington’s 1968 King Turkey Day festival, insisting on wearing a full-length topcoat during the parade, despite 90-degree temperatures. “Rockefeller couldn’t get it into his head that Minnesota wasn’t in the Arctic Circle.”

He could be highbrow. He quoted Charles Dickens, who, on one of his famous lecture tours of America, traveled the high prairies by smoking locomotive, describing the landscape as “oppressive in its barren monotony.” He regaled me with the latest studies of Henry James and Samuel Beckett. His take-away from the Beckett book, shared over a drippy beef sandwich at the Gobbler Cafe, was that Beckett was so prone to constipation that he frequently had to clear the blockage with a tongue depressor. The things serious writers must do.

Or he could go low. When he was a young man, he told me, he’d worked as a deseminator at a turkey farm near his home in Montevideo. “We didn’t have machines to extract the semen, so I had to do it by hand,” he said ruefully, miming the wrist action. “I will never forget the look in those birds’ eyes,” he added, with a peculiar look in his own.

His voice dropped to a dark whisper when he told me tales of “prairie patriarchs” who lived far from Worthington, men who dominated their families psychologically and sexually. This story got me into big trouble when I tried to document it in a *Daily Globe* story, and about 60 nonincestuous patriarchs called, demanding my head in an oat bag.

Paul told tales of growing up in Rosewood Township in Chippewa County, describing a childhood that was part *Giants in the Earth*, with its prairie privations, and part *Peter Pan*, for the escapist forays Paul made into the surrounding world. As a boy he slept outdoors over a hundred nights a year, roaming the nearby marshlands and woods, seeking solace in the lonely spaces. I remember wondering what he sought solace from.

He told, over a meringued wedge of lemon pie at the Gobbler, the Chekhovian story of a stringer in one of the *Daily Globe*'s outpost villages, 50 miles away. The stringer had been born out of wedlock and put up for adoption. Then the birth mother moved in nearby and was “the neighbor lady” while the girl grew up, babysitting, reading to her, helping her through school. For decades the neighbor showered motherly love on the daughter, never disclosing who she was. Eventually, the daughter learned the woman was her mother—but neither violated the contract between them. When the mother took sick, the daughter took her in and nursed her through her final months—each woman knowing the truth, but in true Minnesota fashion, not wishing to make a scene.

I put on 10 pounds in two years listening to such tales. Paul, because he smoked and talked through entire meals, probably lost 10. And when we were not talking, he took me home to hear him take turns with Bill Holm playing Lutheran hymns on his ancient pump organ, or to laugh in the kitchen with giant prairie novelist Fred Manfred, or to stand in a backyard holding a saggy plate of three-bean salad while a salon of rural savants like Carol Bly, Joe Amato, and Tom McGrath held forth on the issues of the day. It wasn't fifth-century Athens, but it was something.

He loved gossip. He told about a big reception Worthington held for its National Book Award-winning favorite son, Tim O'Brien, author of *Going After Cacciato*. Before O'Brien could ascend to the stage, Paul saw his parents grasping his arm and ominously warning their accomplished, adult son to behave. “Don't you say anything up there to make us ashamed!” Parents, Paul said—you gotta love 'em.

Paul didn't wow everybody. He played favorites in the newsroom, and he was a notorious needler. He was stupendous with groups, but less so one-to-one. He was riveting, but not warm. We were friendly, but never friends.

David Hawley of the St. Paul *Pioneer Press*, who worked alongside Paul in Worthington, found Paul's intellectual persona grating. "You know, 'Life is a filthy farce and men must have ironic hearts and perish laughing'—that sort of thing," Hawley says. He adds, though, that Gruchow partially redeemed himself with big-heartedness and bug-eyed wonder at the beauty of nature.

Well, Paul was young and full of himself—we all were. No one wanted to seem soft or a sap, which Paul, underneath his grandiose disguise, plainly was. How do you tell a room of jaundiced reporters what it feels like to be out in the chill of November and see the clouds of dawn rising up off the river? The hard-boiled act was just that, a ruse to keep from being clubbed like a baby seal.

Neither was Gruchow much good at the things he loved. Arriving in Washington, D.C., to serve as a congressional aide to Don Fraser, he was mugged within three hours. As a farmer he once disked under an entire field of young beans. As a canoeist he was a splasher, as a hunter he was a lousy shot, and as a hiker he was a piker, once wandering 100 miles off-course across the Continental Divide before regaining his bearings. In later years, he broke an ankle while hiking the Superior Trail and had to crawl on his belly back to civilization and an ambulance.

He sometimes got the tone of a story wrong. It wasn't really

funny to get mugged, lost, or hobbled, but he told these tales of misery with an odd nonchalance. But then, Paul's touch with nature was always surer than his touch with himself.

## **The Necessity of Friction**

**THE *DAILY GLOBE* HAD TO BE IN CIRCULATION** every day by 1 p.m., so I arrived early at the newspaper office, around 5:45 a.m., to begin planning the day's edition. Often, unlocking the door in that still sleeping town, I found Paul already at his terminal, sitting in a helix of smoke, working the last sentences of a piece. He wasn't a natural writer. He revised, and revised, and revised. And he kept vampiric hours.

When a reporter handed in a controversial story, I'd ask Paul for a second opinion. He'd scan the galleys, wince when he came to the dicey part, knock the table twice and slide it back to me. "Run it," he grinned evilly. "A little friction makes things interesting."

Paul used to tell us, "If everyone likes you, you're not doing your job." One day a farmer came in, upset that remarks he'd made about his past in the Ku Klux Klan were quoted in the paper. Although smaller than the farmer, Paul pronounced the man a bigot who needed to "get the hell out of my newspaper office." Farm reporter Mikkel Pates, who witnessed the ouster, says Paul helped the man up by his collar and literally marched him sputtering through the office and out the front door.

I left Worthington in 1980 to be with my wife at graduate school, grateful for the opportunity Paul had given me and equipped with skills that would feed my family and me over the

coming years. He was the closest thing I ever had to a mentor. So I imagined that the *Daily Globe* would go on indefinitely, with its remarkable prairie editor riding the roost.

Gruchow hoped so, too. In 1984, he took his business partner, Owen Van Essen, aside and said to him, “I have never felt this fulfilled. I can imagine doing this till the end of my days.” But he had one of his first really black periods that year. “I knew something was wrong with Paul,” Van Essen says. “There was a six-month period when he didn’t write a word.” I thought of Beckett’s tongue depressor.

Paul began to withdraw from the paper, setting up shop across the street in the old post office, polishing the essays that would form the basis for his books: *Journal of a Prairie Year*, *The Necessity of Empty Places*, and *Grass Roots: The Universe of Home*. In 1985, he sold his share of the *Daily Globe*. A few years later he moved to Northfield; he and his wife, Nancy, bought a bookstore, and Paul taught English at St. Olaf.

“I felt very badly when he never wrote back,” says Florence Vance, widow of Jim, and Paul’s choir director at the First Lutheran Church in Worthington. “We thought Paul was beautiful. He must have known how much we loved him.”

The move to Northfield was supposed to be liberating for Paul. Every writer wants to go at it full-time. And Paul had special needs to be out and about, hiking and canoeing. The newspaper with its daily crises kept him from these things—but it also kept him connected to everyday people and concerns. Whereas the solitary life of writing and wilderness seems like a prescription for disconnection.

Outwardly, Paul was doing well. Though he was only an adjunct professor at St. Olaf, teaching introductory classes (he later held a similar job at Concordia College in Moorhead; in both cases his lack of a degree came back to bite him), it was still teaching, which he loved. He got to write, travel, and talk. Students gave him rave evaluations. His books, most of them published by Milkweed Editions of Minneapolis, won positive reviews; some were nominated for Minnesota Book Awards. People began to refer to Paul as the “Minnesota Thoreau,” albeit a Thoreau with a more melancholy outlook. He should have experienced satisfaction. But something was wrong.

In Northfield, Paul’s disease showed its face. He became depressed deeply and often, not speaking for days at a time, preferring to be alone in a dark room. It was there that he was diagnosed as bipolar. He hated the stigma and the stupidity of mental illness, and he set out to be his own shrink, to heal himself by force of will. He read and read. And he began to rage.

“It always irked Paul that he wasn’t more famous,” Nancy Gruchow reflects. It bothered him that the topics that mattered so much to him—the tallgrass prairie, birch-bark canoeing, low-tillage farming—weren’t topics a great many other people cared about. He felt he was leading the battle charge of our times, toward what mattered and was real, but no one was following. He was envious of outdoors essayists like Dillard and Gretel Erlich, writers who were doing similar things more successfully. Over the years he complained to writer friends like Barton Sutter that his work wasn’t generating the proper volume of critical essays. He wrote a novel, and when he couldn’t sell it, he deleted it from his hard drive and burned the printouts.

Quitting Northfield in 1996, Paul and Nancy bought a house on the North Shore, in Two Harbors, hoping a change of scene would turn things around. It was an old frame house with a pole barn, situated on several hilly acres with three ponds—the perfect sanctuary for an ailing naturalist. But he didn't improve. He and Nancy argued, and Paul began burning bridges. “One day he insisted in therapy that we get separated,” she says. “He said being married was the source of his unhappiness. I agreed to it—I hoped it was something we could do and he would just snap out of it.”

Instead, things went further downhill. In August 2001, Paul made the first of four suicide attempts. Following his hospitalization, he was assigned to Bridge House, a Duluth shelter that provides temporary housing for people with mental health issues. On Christmas day he came home to Nancy, but 60 days later he surprised her by initiating divorce proceedings. He had become impulsive, irrational, and spiteful. He had been led away in handcuffs from his own home. That winter he stunned Nancy by selling the Two Harbors home without her consent.

Amid this turmoil Paul decided that his “beat” was no longer just wilderness, but mental illness, and he even wrote an essay bridging the two topics. He went to work as a staff aide at Harmony Club, a Duluth social center for the mentally ill. The job called for a four-hour day, but Paul was often there from dawn to dusk, greeting new arrivals, having private conversations, cooking meals, leading groups, even taking members for a wilderness outing that included a wonderful evening of him telling stories at the campfire, just as in the old days.

“He enjoyed it immensely,” says Lee Hemming, coordinator

of the club. Hemming describes a Paul Gruchow who was willing to go to any length to reach out to people—even willing to go to war with the club’s then-programming coordinator Jan Zita Grover about the proper approach to dealing with the mentally ill. Grover, who was a friend of Paul’s and a fellow writer, felt the club needed structure and rules in addition to caring and support; Paul yearned for an ethos of unabashed, unmitigated, unconditional love.

Indeed, after his ex-wife, his two children, and his two sisters, the people most affected by Paul’s death were the members of Harmony Club, the people he had lavished his time on. He gave each one attention, encouragement, and hope—and then yanked his own plug. Months later, says Hemming, “Many members are still devastated about Paul.”

He still managed to pull himself together for personal appearances. Arvonne Fraser remembers Paul from his post-collegiate stint in husband Don’s Washington office as “intelligent and insightful and sweet-natured.” During the Two Harbors period, Fraser took a writing course from him at the university in Minneapolis. During class, she says, he was his old self, “wonderful, engaging, and instructive. But when he finished his talk, he seemed to slide back into something else.”

After class one night, with a blizzard underway, Paul insisted on driving back to Duluth, though the highways were virtually impassable. “He said he had to work at the club,” Fraser says. “There was no other way. He clearly was not well.”

“I was struck by Paul’s porousness,” says Grover, who has also struggled with depression. “It was what made him an

exceptional writer. It also contributed to his illness, I believe, because he was willing to empty himself out for other people and keep very little in reserve for himself.” He was empathic and eloquent in relieving other people’s aloneness, but unable or perhaps unwilling to relieve his own. It made Grover think of a maxim she’d heard from an old friend: “You have to want to be happy.”

According to Nancy Gruchow, Paul thought he knew as much about mental illness as any psychiatrist. This, she says, “was both good and bad. It made him a very difficult patient.” In Yahoo! chat rooms, he inveighed against wrong-headedness in the treatment of mental illness. “When you become mentally ill, you lose all your rights as a citizen. Indeed, your body is no longer yours. You are more of an animal than a human being.”

“How,” he asked in one post that is still online, “when you are in the midst of an emotional crisis, can the added stress of nicotine withdrawal possibly be helpful?” He devoured psychiatrists with attitudes divergent from his, luring them into dialogue, then rhetorically dicing them into cubes.

As his own advocate, he frequently undid himself. He caused problems by complaining (justly, at times) about mistreatment or misdiagnosis. But then he would ratchet these protests up until he had to be restrained. He presented people with a terrible challenge, because he was blazingly rational in his arguments, but blazingly crazy in his comportment.

Paul was genetically predisposed to depression. Nancy Gruchow counts 13 people in his immediate family, living or dead, who have had it. It was a vein that streaked through a great

many of the Gruchows and formed its mother lode in Paul. Drugs like Depakote and Prozac would work for a time, then stop working. Paul would be okay for a while, then begin to slide again.

For a long time Paul denied that he was bipolar, that he had a manic side, but there is ample evidence of wild mood surges, some crazy, some ugly. The crazy included a sweater-buying binge in Grand Forks in 1999. “He filled all our closets with his stuff,” Nancy says. The ugly included volatile scenes with Nancy, whom he came to see as both best friend and worst enemy.

“Paul and I knew for many years he would probably take his life,” Nancy says. “We talked about it. That’s just how it was. It makes me sad, but you know, everybody has something. With some people it’s near-sightedness, with others it’s psychosis. None of us gets off free.”

Toward the end, unable to hike in his beloved woods anymore, his head sloshing with meds, Paul agreed to undergo electroconvulsive therapy (ECT), better known as electroshock: three courses of 12 sessions each, the maximum number he was allowed. ECT, an accepted option in the treatment of severe depression today, succeeds in “resetting” many patients. But Paul, who so valued control over himself, despised its effects—depleted memory, scrambled rationality. It was the worst nightmare for a memoirist, to be unable to remember.

“I saw him just a few weeks before his death,” says Steve Potts, who once worked in the pressroom at the *Daily Globe* and now teaches writing at Hibbing Community College. “He seemed cheery. I guess he was a good actor. But at one point he turned to

me and said, ‘Steve, we should never have left Worthington.’ I know what he meant. We were family there.”

Paul routinely told friends, on parting, that they would not see him again alive. One cold Sunday morning, the day before he was to testify against Nancy in a court case that would shine public light on an especially shameful episode, he took pills and shut his eyes.

## **The Monk’s Dilemma**

**“I WAS A VERY PIOUS YOUNG KID** in absolutely the worst sense of the word,” Paul once told David Hawley, in the same way he joked about rogue tractors and shattered ankles. He’d considered becoming a Lutheran minister, but changed career plans after contemplating weekly meetings with the Ladies’ Aid Society.

Paul was a lifelong and faithful Christian, who once pointed out to Ray Crippen the stained-glass image of Jesus in Gethsemane, the man of sorrows, in a window at Worthington’s First Lutheran Church. He confessed to Crippen that he drew the line at St. Paul’s post-Calvary theology. For him, Christ’s suffering and death was sufficient for his salvation. Torment was itself redemptive.

In his illuminating essay “Walking in Clouds,” Paul describes an event from early childhood, during a kindergarten game of musical chairs. In the story, he splits into two personalities, a Paul who is in his body, and another, more conscious Paul, who roams and thinks freely, like a ghost:

I heard everything: the needle scratching in its groove, the

screams of the children, the teacher saying, “Paul, is something wrong?” ... I heard myself answering, “No, I’m fine, really I am.” But I was lying. Because there were two of us.... I was dizzy with fear that the two boys could never again be connected.... It was as if I had precipitously perished and had been granted one last look at the ghost of my former self before I was swept away into the void.

Paul never underwent psychoanalysis. But he read voluminously, searching for the existential key to this splitting in two. “Paul was intrigued by a notion that his psyche was formed by his mother’s abuse when he was a little kid,” says Nancy. He mentioned to several friends an interest in the theories of Swiss psychoanalyst Alice Miller, author of *The Drama of the Gifted Child: The Search for the True Self*. Miller’s thesis is that some children whose parents have narcissistic disorders are prevented from developing into healthy, self-accepting individuals. Instead of embracing and nurturing their true selves, such children create a safer, separate identity to please others. Miller writes:

[They] enter analysis in the belief, with which they grew up, that their childhood was happy and protected. Quite often we are faced with gifted patients who have been praised and admired for their talents and their achievements.... These people—the pride of their parents—should have had a strong and stable sense of self-assurance. But exactly the opposite is the case.... Behind all this lurks depression, the feeling of emptiness and self-alienation, and a sense that their life has no meaning.... They are plagued by anxiety or deep feelings of guilt and shame.

Paul was ever the good son in print; he wrote glowingly of his parents’ love and caring. But clues scattered throughout his

writings indicate that not all was right. The family lived in poverty and isolation. According to Paul, Howard Gruchow was a reverent man who struggled to earn a living from the land and who donated at least half the family's after-tax income to their church. During Paul's early years, they lived in a dugout shelter with no electricity or plumbing. Paul's descriptions of this upbringing were sometimes so sparse that he later, in his joking tone, denied that he "grew up with wolves."

The father was decent but distant, according to Nancy, too busy with the work of the farm to participate in child-rearing. Paul's mother, Mary Louise Gruchow, whom he called Mother, was more animated but also more temperamental. She was depressive and had a rheumatic heart. In one childhood episode, his mother broke every dish in the house in a fit of frustration, causing the family to eat from plastic bowls for the next year. She blamed Paul and his twin sister, Paulette, for the family's economic woes and beat them, using wooden spoons or buckled overshoes. As an adult, Paul still bore the marks of beatings on his back.

One incident, detailed in *Grass Roots*, involved a wail for help that went unheeded. When he was 8, Paul dropped a lit match in the hay barn of the farm his family rented, and watched as the entire farmstead, except the house, burned to the ground. Even the livestock perished in the flames. The local newspaper and fire inspector colluded to declare the fire an accident, to spare the shaken boy.

I didn't know Paul well enough to say what made him the way he was. But this is what I imagine. I imagine a very bright little boy who felt unworthy to be alive and was unable to express

his misgivings toward the people he loved most in the world. That was when he split in two—leaving behind the vulnerable little boy and living out life as a hero, an author, practically a saint in the eyes of some of his readers and students. A man of the wilderness, living out beyond people’s ability to hurt him.

The problem with this solution is that it catches up with you. A fake saint knows he has clay feet. A worshipper of wilderness knows he is really a chicken. A believer in the highest principles is aghast that he is just another guy who wants affection and recognition—John Berryman titled a book after this quandary: *Love & Fame*. At the end of the rainbow, out across the prairie, is not wisdom and bliss but self-loathing and misery. I went to seminary as a young man, and we spoke there of “the monk’s dilemma.” It’s a bind you get into when you do all the right things, but pride and desire enter in, which turns doing the right things into sin. Is there a way around it? Not really.

Paul Gruchow loved the rural spaces of Minnesota as perhaps no other writer has, but it was a vision dipped in darkness. He noted that something sick and self-hating happens in the hearts of small-town people, the conviction that nothing fine can come from the countless Nazareths sprinkled across the map. It’s why the best and brightest pack up and leave.

Paul wanted to be the bright one who didn’t leave, the one who kept the faith, who held the lantern high. Every cause he chose to defend was in some sense a lost one. The family farm. The prairie. The wetlands and canoe country. Traditional farming methods. The essay. A vision of people as souls, not as consumers. Of politics not steeped in lies and demagoguery. The plight of the marginalized. The hell of the mentally ill. There are

no slam-dunks on the list.

Paul's draft of *Letters to a Young Madman*, uncompleted at the time of his death, and now part of a legal dispute over the validity of his will, has been described by those who have read it as Paul's attempt to do for mental illness what his earlier work did for the pathways and portages through nature. As Paul descended into darkness, it appears that he set about creating a guidebook through this wilderness as well.

### **In the Humble Places**

**I WAS DISTRAUGHT WHEN I HEARD**, at the reception following *Daily Globe* owner Jim Vance's funeral in May 2002, that Paul was ailing in Two Harbors, that he had already made several attempts on his life.

I wrote Paul a series of letters, proposing to interview him for an article. I wanted to write something about him and for him—to round up all the people like me whom he had taught, whose lives he had made a difference in, and present them to him as a garland. I suppose I wanted to save him.

Paul was unpersuaded. "Last year, I earned \$62.85 in royalties and gave one public talk, in Duluth, that drew a dozen listeners," went one of his replies. "Late in the year, I got a flurry of two letters from readers.... I got two Christmas cards, one from an aunt and one from my former landlady. Two or three times a week, the phone rings. Usually I don't answer it. There isn't a story, Mike."

"Well," I said, "I'll come visit you, then. I'll buy you a carrot." (We were both diabetic.)

“That would be nice,” he said. “I have more use for a friend than for an article.” He asked me to wait until last November, when he would have a place of his own again. But neither of us followed up, and the snow fell, and I never made it up to see him.

So here I am, trying to assemble the pieces that are strewn in his wake. When we think of legacy, we think of stewardship. What was Paul given, and what did he make of it? Paul had two fathers in life, and each entrusted him with a talent to make the most of. In *The Necessity of Empty Places*, Paul compares the styles of these two fathers. His biological father, in one tense scene, is unable to give him a sex talk even with his mother and sisters out of the room.

Finally my father cleared his throat. “Your mother wanted me to talk to you,” he said. He was staring into the darkened bedroom door at the opposite end of the room, beseechingly, as if an angel might appear there at any moment and absolve him of his awful responsibility. “About sex.”

Certainly Howard Gruchow, who wondered what kind of farmer his son could become, would have been impressed at the way Paul wrung a living from the land in ingenious fashion, by talking and writing about it. But compare the inarticulateness and stultifying influence of the biological father with the eloquence and ardor of Berryman, the spiritual father:

He read to us the scene in which Hector and Andromache say farewell to each other. Hector is destined to die and Andromache to be hauled away into slavery, and both knew this by premonition. When he came to the end of the scene, Berryman was weeping, and so, unexpectedly, were we.

Berryman died at 57, Gruchow at 56, both neither young nor old. Both men's final books were journals of recovery. Berryman helped give Paul the talent of expression, an abstract voice with which to cry out in pain. Berryman was the greater rhetorician, but Paul's writing splashes into the real world with a rubberized boot. His idea is nothing less than the transcendence of pain through a spiritual vision of nature. This is not only bigger than Berryman; in its acknowledgement of the dark mystery of being human, it's bigger than Thoreau.

I remember one last conversation with Paul. It happened back in our newsroom days in Worthington, after getting an edition out. We were in his cubicle, talking about where literature went wrong. I said we were wrong to cluster around suicides like Sylvia Plath and Berryman and Anne Sexton, that modern readers have a sick attachment with death and loss.

“Well,” Paul said, exhaling smoke, “it's probably what I'm going to do one day.”

I looked at him beseechingly. “Why?” I wanted him to take it back.

He smiled his wan smile, as if it was something he couldn't help. “It's in the blood,” was all he said. And I remember what Nancy Gruchow told me: “Everybody dies of something.”

But Paul was no Plath or Berryman, because his is not a literature of sickness. He was always about healing; he ventured thousands of miles on his own muscle power to find health, to become whole again. It is fitting that our last glimpse of him, when *Letters to a Young Madman* is finally published, will be of

him reaching out to others who are afflicted.

I wish to suggest that Gruchow was the last in a line of Minnesota prophets that includes Thorstein Veblen, Ignatius Donnelly, Ole Rolvaag, Fred Manfred, and Sigurd Olson—classic tellers of truth whose best work arose from Minnesota soil.

The line is ended because they were all gentlemen scholars, and there do not seem to be any more of those. Their kind believed that language and knowledge, set in a boat and pushed from shore, had a chance to live in the next mind it found. They were unafraid of wisdom, and they did not sneer at the idea of faith.

Though Paul despaired of his efforts, we know that his was a pilgrimage to the humble places as well as the exalted, a journey across spirit as much as across water and sod, and we are blessed to have these field guides in our satchels. Measured by book sales, his impact was slight, but he will have Plathlike legs in death. He is part of the canon now, the sort of thing he always loved.

As for me, I tell people, Yes! I worked alongside the great Gruchow. He was a hero of the prairie, a giant of the earth, a healer of the people. He wasn't perfect by a long shot, and he wasn't "tragic"—God, he hated that notion. But he taught and touched a great many. And though he could not save himself (who can?), he will be remembered after most of us are gone.

What do I believe? That the boy who split in two, who placed his faith in the wilderness, is one again. He is sitting up in an old rowboat beached in waving buffalo grass, golden tips beating

against the prow. The boy is smiling radiantly, and the sadness is gone from him forever.

## **At the Renaissance Festival**

The village fool is a surly knave in motley colors, short of stature and round of belly, who communicates only by way of duck call. He speaks in phrases and complete sentences, but the sounds are all duck sounds. You can sort of figure out what he is saying by the ruse and fall of the duck-quacks.

He does some bad magic tricks – pulling a handkerchief full of holes from his pocket – and scowls at the village crowd when they hoot at him, berating them with a stream of foul quacks. This is very successful, and the hat is passed, and dollars are collected.

But now he needs a volunteer from the audience, and chooses from the people assembled an 8-year-old boy.

The moment the boy stands before the crowd they see he is not a child to be trifled with. He is tremulous. He is intense. To him, this moment before the crowd is the most serious one of his life, and he stares out at the faces in solemn dignity.

But the fool can't help going to a dangerous place. He hands the boy a sheet of foolscap, just like his own. They stand side by side, and the boy is supposed to imitate his every action. The fool illustrates how to tear the foolscap paper into a pile of strips, and drop them at his feet. The boy, uncertain, does likewise, and shreds his piece of paper.

Now – when the fool picks up his scraps and rolls them into a ball, and then unwraps the ball, magic has happened and the paper is untraced again. The crowd applauds. But all the little boy can do is pick up his tatters, hold them in his hands and, lower lip

trembling, grieve at the permanence, the irrevocability of his tearing.

The audience zeroes in on the boy, afraid he will melt before their eyes. The fool also stares into the boy's eyes, a look of out-of-character concern illuminating his face. For the first time he realizes he has a problem. He is in the verge of breaking the little boy's heart in plain sight of a hundred people.

Suddenly, a solution – the fool tears his restored sheet up again, and hurls the scraps into the air. They hang for a moment, like duck feathers, and fall.

He kneels and hugs the boy, who resumes breathing. And the entire village cheers.

(1994)

## 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. 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."
- "There was one thing you wrote that I really liked. It was your novel." He was referring to a series of longhand sketches I made in a spiral notebook on a visit to him in California, in 1967 – and left at his apartment by mistake.

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 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. My uncle calls it "Irish-style." Ah, and it's a grand bunch we are, so long as nobody's happy.

What my dad doesn't know is how deep these daggers stab. When he met my wife in 1975, he told her she reminded him of a movie star, but he couldn't come up with the name. "I've got it," he suddenly brightened – "Woody Allen!" (Rachel is Jewish, red-haired, and freckly, but unspeakably beautiful).

When my daughter Daniele was 15 he told her the most recent photo made her seem chubby. (Just the thing to send a teenaged girl to her room with an Exacto knife.)

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 Spike Jonze movie *Adaptation*) I sometimes often despair of my ability to complete a simple sentence.

I feel I labor under a number of psychological shortcomings – a "benign" brain tumor the size of a baby's shoe, a snagged fishnet of scrambled memories, the recurring inability to remember a word or name, the financial burden of this awful recession, the look in my wife's eyes when 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 bon-mot, the death-by-faint-smile observation.

But nowadays I see myself instead more as some bent-over dwarf coughing up blood by the roadside in the passing headlights. How did things come to this?

I accept that my writing is flawed. I know my thinking acumen is second-rate. I concede that my judgment is sometimes poor.

But when I hear these things confirmed by 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 grandchildren, mocking him that his teenage 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. 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 always this person.

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 hardly anyone else seems to have gotten. 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 wedged firmly 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, and the squabbling sounds of ducks in the darkness.

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. Me, a priest!

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 competens, 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 to 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.

(2003)

## Red Fruit

One night when I was ten, I awoke very late to hear voices outside, and saw headlights flashing as several cars rounded the curve in our long drive. Kathy and Pat and I gathered in my older sister's bedroom window to see what was going on. I can remember the breeze nudging the drape against our faces.

Outside I could make out, among the long shadows of the orchard, the figure of my mother, crying into my father's arms. It is the only time I ever saw them embrace. The chrome bumper of her stylish red and white '56 Bel Aire, our mother's pride and joy, dangled from the hook of a wrecker. The grille was smashed in, and dripping fluids made a puddle on the slag.

A dark shape hung from the corner apple tree, the one that had been struck by lightning the year before. The high beams of the pick-up of Mr. Thomas, our landlord, shone on a dead deer, tied by the heels and strung upside down. It was like the crucifixion of St. Peter, who felt himself unworthy to die face-up like his lord.

My mom had struck the deer, bolting out of the trees along Leavitt Road, as she drove home after her waitressing shift. The men were here to salvage the meat.

Mr. Thomas, a small, balding man in baggy pants who resembled Picasso, stepped forward with a butcher's knife, plunged it into the deer's groin and slowly cut downward, opening the animal's belly.

He took his gloved hand, reached inside the animal, and

began pulling out stomach, intestine, liver, and finally the lungs and heart.

The parts made a flopping sound as they tumbled onto the grass. The pile of guts in the headlamps seemed bigger than a single deer could hold.

Everything inside had to come outside, I thought, as I huddled with my brother and sister, so close we could feel the warmth of one another's skin. I remember Kathy's hand on my shoulder. But the cost of this adventure, judging from my mom's face, glowing red streaked with tears, seemed high. By the time the grown-ups returned to the house, and the screen door thumped behind them, we had all crept back to our beds.

It was one of those events that sum up childhood. We saw death and blood hanging from a broken tree. We saw the knife go in. We saw the heart tumble out. We watched questionlessly from the wings.

When my mom and dad divorced two years later, after Kathy's death at age 15, they would do so without telling us. My mom would pack my surviving brothers and me in a car and drive up to Niagara Falls for a few days of silent sight-seeing. We stood by where the falls should be, obscured in the sunlit mist, and wondered what was out there.

When we returned, our dad's things were gone from his drawers, and his bed, which was separate from our mom's, a single bed in a single room, was stripped bare.

Mom never let on that a deal had been struck. It was just another mystery. Looking about the ransacked room, we thought

we'd been robbed, and we were.

(1995)

## Rosie's Place

The cafe was a mainstay of the locals in a town in upstate New York. Not many people driving through stopped there. But we liked the name on the sign and thought we were in for some local charm.

By chance, Rosie herself was our waitress. She was a substantial woman, tall and thick, in a pink polyester uniform. She was not a smiler or a greeter. "What'll ya have?" We could tell additionally from the fist on her hip, clutching a ballpoint pen, ready to write, she wasn't taking any guff.

My son, who studies menus with enormous care, asked a none-too-diplomatic question. "What's the egg rolls got in it?" He asked because, at age 12, he did not like onions, and he often forgot to ask, and then ordered something that came back loaded down with them. He was just being cautious,

Rosie turned on him like Nick, the bartender, turned on Jimmie Stewart in "It's a Wonderful Life." ("And that's another thing. Where do you get off callin' me Nick?") "What's he mean by that?" she turned to me to ask. She pretended Jon was not there, or did not know the meaning of his own words.

"He's allergic," I lied, frowning confidentially. Then I propitiated Rosie with positive observations about the menu and scenery locally. But she rolled her eyes and grimaced, as if people like us were all she needed that day.

Rachel and Jon and I looked at each other, realizing we had made it onto her shit list – which a modern restaurateur, with contemporary attitudes about being nice to customers, really oughtn't, from a business point of view, to maintain.

When the food arrived it was very bad, but we gulped down what we could and made to leave. We stood at the cash register while Rosie rang up the check, unhappy when we offered her our American Express card, which gave us frequent flyer miles.

That's when I saw the buttons, postcards, and faxed pages scotch-taped behind the register area:

"You want it when!?"

"God, give me the serenity to accept the things that cannot be changed,  
the courage to change the things which should be changed,  
and the wisdom to hide the bodies of the people I kill who piss me off."

"This is not Burger King.  
You can not have it your way.  
You take it my way  
Or you don't take the damn thing at all."

"If we find you here at night  
They'll find you here in the morning."

I looked at Rosie, who had heat lines radiating from her forehead as she punched the keys of the register, biting her lip like a boxer. This was how she was. God made her that way. She was

saying was: Love me the way I am, that way I'll know you mean it.

Still it seemed like a heavy price for strangers passing through, to have to shell out for her authenticity.

(2000)

## 'A Son of a Sea Cook'

*I had some good conversations with my dad the year before he died, in 2006. He was 81, and had serious health problems. He had just lost his second wife, of 35 years, and was being taken down by a lung tumor – though he had quit smoking thirty years earlier.*

When I was 11 my sister Kathy, 15, died, and when I was 12 our dad abandoned us and went to live in California. My sister knocked the wind out of the family. But it was my dad leaving that finished us off.

I think the killer was something I learned years later, that he didn't just leave us because California sounded nicer than Ohio. He left because he had been caught by his employer General Motors taking cash from an expense account. His standing with the company, which had already been marred by drinking and intemperate behavior, evaporated on him. Blacklisted by GM, he had to start over again in a part of the country where the blacklist did not exist.

But my dad never told us kids that. He left us with the idea that there was something wrong with us, that we did not deserve to have a father.

I have always suffered from a sense of being inferior, no good, unwanted – because our dad never want to be near us kids, back in the day.

I remember walking home from high school when I was a junior in high school, the day I found out I had won a district-wide scholastic award, thinking there was no one I could show it to, who would be proud of me. It sounds sappy, but it made me cry walking down Park Avenue – something 16 year-old-boys don't like to be seen doing.

From that day on, I made up my mind to just carry on without approval and not let feelings of neediness drag me down.

The world wanted me to be weak, to break down crying, and I wasn't going to give them the satisfaction.

This was the great wound of my life – living as a kind of clever imposter when I was really a heartbroken little boy inside. If you stand back and tilt your head, it's the subtext to my whole life – poetry, my writing, my working at home, my living far from family, the style of casual friendships I maintain, my website. This attitude of uncomplaining orphanhood, high-functioning above the turbulence of life, became my constant disguise.

The year before he died I showed my dad galleys for a book I had ghostwritten, about addiction intervention. I had never seen him so interested in anything I had been a part of. Addiction was a big theme in his life. He felt he had overcome alcohol, tobacco, overeating, and sex – though he was vague on that last boast. And our family saw more than its share of self-medicating, and self-unforgiving.

Anyway, for several months he would call me and we would talk about this. Unlike our usual conversations, which were "pleasant" (we never yelled at each other) but subtly vicious (him

unfailingly competitive, letting me know what a big shot he was, me helplessly passive aggressive, sneaking in little shivs when I found the opportunity).

Our conversation about addiction, by contrast, was quite nice – and except for him wanting to change the central metaphor that the book hangs on, and that we spent \$7500 to come up with (the word "cannibal"), my dad was very restrained about ripping it to bits, as was his wont.

Bottom line, though, it was sweet talking to him. It was – friendly.

I experienced a kind of spiritual explosion that year around Christmas, that I could never talk to him about, that was based on the idea of fathers. I was always annoyed by people who talked about God as their father in heaven. It just sounded so false to me. The reason is that I had trouble thinking of fathers as loving, period. I saw them more as absentee landlords – which consequently was pretty much how I thought of God as well.

A friend described a meditation he had undertaken around the mental word father. The idea was to try to hear the idea in one's mind in a fresh light – and thus get a glimpse of what divinity might be, a father based not on one's own frail father's skillset, but on something better and sturdier, a spirit who would not pack up and drive off to California on you.

All you do is repeat the word father to yourself, instead of Om, for a few minutes, several times a day ...

Doing this father meditation, after a few days, I felt some of the disguise start to peel away.

But to really make it happen I needed a way to get past my sense of God as a deadbeat dad. You know what did it for me? This will sound vain but it was a vision of my own self and what a good tender father I am and have been to my son and daughter.

I was a good dad. I stayed home to be with them. I wiped their noses and their butts. I made their lunches and drove them to school. I coached them in sports and I made time to talk to them, about the problems they were having. They were never easy kids, so I put in long hours.

Suddenly, I was able to see this, and be impressed by myself, able to find healing in my own nature. I don't think I ever had any other feeling quite like it.

And then I saw further, and saw something else. It was a vision of my own father, of Paul W., the guy who got away.

And I understood just a bit what it felt like for him when his daughter died – the sick little girl he carried around all her life, because her heart could not pump blood as efficiently as other girls' hearts.

I thought of the Fourth of July, in Cascade Park, Elyria – my birthday. It was the greatest day you could have a birthday on. The whole world was happy, and there was ice cream, and fantastic explosions.

And we waited on the grass till it got dark enough, my brother and me, and my dad with Kathy in his arms. And it got so late, and I got so tired, and I was jealous that my dad carried Kathy back to the car, and I had to stumble along my myself, in the black grass.

And the vision was that my dad was once a loving man, but when his daughter died, his heart broke, too – and not knowing better, he had to leave.

It was as if God came into my head and said to me: "You want to think about what I am? Think about yourself. Love yourself. Forgive yourself. Revere your own love, which comes from me."

Now, it's possible, that at times, I was a good dad to my kids almost to spite the past, as a rebuke to my own unlovedness. But the way I see it, it doesn't matter. I still see myself looking in on the little ones when they were sleeping and feeling this incredible rush of connection and love for my babies.

And where did that beauty come from? An absurd universe ought not to kick out such moments. This one did.

This meditation is allowing me to think of my place in the universe in an amazingly more positive way. I'm like the Cary Grant character in *Arsenic & Old Lace*, Mortimer Brewster discovering he is not related to homicidal maniacs after all.

"I'm not a Brewster!" he crows at the end of the film. "I'm a son of a sea-cook!"

I'm not really a bitter surrealist at all. I'm a sweet guy who loved his kids, and wants to be connected to people, to do right by them, to be loved by them and to love the life we are all living – even when it sucks, as it does.

So let me pass this meditation on to you. There is no particular technique attached to it. Just the word father. Let it roll

through your mind for a few days. Let the idea of this passionate, sacrificing love build in you. I swear there is self-forgiveness in it, and a better universe waiting to peek through.

A place where you don't have to hide your feelings or armor yourself against attackers. Where you don't have to stand on your own.

What if there is a father in nature, embedded in the atoms of things, who is not a jerk, and who knows you are his, and is not going to split the first chance he sees?

And what if that loving father is a version of you – helpless to prevent you from the pain of living, but there with you, and loving you, and keeping you company to the moment you die?

I'm telling you, it beats being alone.

(2002)



## **A Spectacle of Oneself**

At church on Palm Sunday, Elder Wilder held up a pair of glasses. “These were found in one of the rear pews,” he said. “If you aren't able to see, come up and claim them. Anyone?”

I patted my shirt pocket. Felt in the pockets of my sweater. Considered the top of my head, where I sometimes rest them. Even cast a sidelong glance down the pew, in case I had set them there.

I thought of my jean jacket, hanging in the vestry (or whatever the holy name is for coatrack). Maybe they were out there?

I was determined that the glasses Mr. Wilder was holding up were not mine. I saw two possibilities:

One, I could climb over the old lady sitting beside me and go up to the front of the church, with everyone tittering, as they do

whenever I say something public.

I try on the glasses, and they are obviously not mine. Because I did not have my glasses, I could not see they were cubic zirconium-encrusted, tortoise-shell rims with mother-of pearl "fins" – not mine at all, and quite possibly Elton John's.

I would look hilarious trying on the obviously wrong glasses, and everyone would get another big belly laugh at the reliably absent-minded writer's expense.

Possibility two: I get up there, I try 'em on, they are my glasses, and everyone remembers what a space cadet I am, and that, too, is cause for gales of laughter – much, I might remind you, like the hooting and derision Jesus experienced this same week a long time ago.

Either way, I am exposed as a featherbrained middle-aged man who can't keep track of something on the nose of his face.

So ... I sat in silence.

My strategy was to wait until after the service, and then, with the people praying upfront providing cover, sneak up, sneak up and pocket the glasses (which, admittedly, had a 99.9999999% probability of being mine).

Which I did, except that Elder Wilder caught me with hand at the dais. "Oh, those were your glasses?" he asked. "Yes," I winced.

"Why didn't you just step up and claim them during the service?"

Did you hear the stabbing sounds of Anthony Perkins in the shower scene in Psycho? Ree! Ree! Ree?

I did.

I tried to weasel my way out. "Well, Elder Wilder, this is just as humiliating as that, right?"

Elder Wilder frowned. I had revealed the depths of my neurosis.

Alright, I confess. I am a forgetful person. People are right to find this amusing, because I am not a person without pretensions – yet I can't seem to manage things as simple as a calendar. Mr. Wilder himself could vouch for the fact that I showed up a half-hour late for a lunch date the previous week.

I do this all the time. I estimate I remember about three quarters of the things I'm supposed to remember. Everything else goes over the waterfall. And I can't make it stop. Praying, if anything, just distracts me. ("And another thing, lord – Jesus, where's my wallet?")

I mention all this not to call attention to myself – that is in fact precisely what I want not to do, if you have been reading carefully – but to call attention to a wider problem. And it is that men, myself included, are incurably lame about stepping up and saying things.

I note that Mr. Wilder was just wishing that, from time to time, someone besides the parish ladies would go up to the Mike and talk about what was happening in their lives. The wives go up there and routinely pour their hearts out. God did this for me, and

that, and the other thing. Halleluiah, etc.

But the guys mostly look at their watches and think about noises coming from their stomachs. At least that is what they look like they are thinking.

Men, I submit, live in a continuous state not too different from the timidity I felt about having my forgetfulness made a community joke. It hurts to be made a fool of front of people you like, and whose good opinion you desire.

And the youth are insane. I look at them, slumped in the front rows, and I see my own paranoia mutated and erupting in spikes the dimensions of solar flares. Teenagers make their abode in the fiery furnace of imminent ridicule. The embarrassment I fear from friends is nothing compared to the everyday horror young people feel of being exposed as a LOSER. And almost any stray remark or bumbleheaded action can cause that awful opprobrium to rain down on one. "William, you could not be more gay."

They live in hell. My embarrassment magnified to horror-movie levels. Every millisecond they are of high school age. And what are we afraid of exactly? That we will open our mouths and say something that is 1) muddle-minded, 2) theologically incorrect, 3) mispronounced, 4) uninspired, or 5) just plain stupid.

We are grateful to have lives, and for these lives to have meaning, else we would not be in the room in the first place. A big relief, is what it is. But can a tough guy, or any guy, really risk opening his mouth and looking like a dope?

This is a sordid confession. It gets at the fundamental creepy feelings of unworthiness that follow each of us everywhere, even

unto the tabernacle of holies.

Groups create environments. We need to create an environment where we don't feel this way. If God emboldens us – ha! – to speak, we should find faith and confidence that whatever we say – no matter how mumble-mouthed, cliché, or heretical – will be OK. What's good enough for God is good enough for the assembled so-called faithful.

Maybe a little shoring up of support is in order. If someone says something – anything – maybe an AMEN is in order, to show it's not just the voice of a single unbalanced loner.

We are all in this together. I'm worried about the teenagers, and how terrified they are of being exposed as fork-tender humans.

I want them to get to the point where they can blab without fear.

In self-conscious Japan they do Karaoke. You do something perfectly stupid – pretend you are Elvis or Lady Gaga – in a safe realm, so you feel close to the people who laughed and clapped for your hideous rendition. We're not as self-conscious as Japan, but we need to move past these feelings. Maybe we need to break out the sake.

Repeat. The glasses were mine.

(2002)

## 'The Skin Over a Young Girl's Wrist'

*Remembering James Wright ... my uncle ... sort of ...*

I will be 60 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 owlish 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.

(1990)

## The Pickwick

The Pickwick Bookshop on Hollywood Boulevard, where I got a job as a shipping/receiving clerk in March of 1969, was not a four-star landmark, but if you lived in Southern California and read books – that's hundreds of people right there – you knew of its three stories of stories. It was founded by Louis Epstein in 1931, during the worst days of the Depression – Scott Fitzgerald mentioned it in a New Yorker story – and was swallowed up by the B. Dalton chain in 1976.

In my memory it is right next to Graumann's Chinese Theatre, but in fact it is a block away. Even though I toiled way back in a back room, full of torn cardboard and packing slips, the place radiated glamor for me.

Writers were always dropping into the store to see how their books were doing. They went to the shelves and touched them, physically, for reassurance. Fading movie stars drifted in to see their spines exposed on the biography shelves. Personalities like Charles Bukowski, Jack Lalanne, Otto Preminger, Mason Williams, Eva Gabor, Timothy Leary, Tiny Tim, and of course, Sam Yorty.

I especially remember a self-help book by a man from Venice – Keep Fit at Seventy. It had a picture of the author on the cover, in training trunks, his hairy a silvery mane, and his arms and legs and chest all quivery with dynamic tension. He looked great. Problem was, he had written the book ten years earlier. Now, when he came in to examine it on the racks, it was clear time had taken its toll on him. He was now about 85, and his posture was

sagging, his shoulders rounded, and that toothsome smile was replaced by something tired and forced, and only falsely happy.

We had gurus and glamor queens, how-to's and hobos, every kind of writer dropping in on us. There was even a genuinely literary contingent. One of our floor salesmen was a thin, reedy-voiced man, whose name was Landor French, named after Walter Savage Landor. His big claim in life was a poem in the *Southern Review*, which he kept a laminated copy of, on a wallet-sized card, in like four point type. He whipped it out for me once – it was very high-faluting and illusive. It was his high-water mark.

There was another man who worked there named Vince Rossi. Small and dark-eyed and dramatic, half Heathcliff and half Davy Jones, he befriended me, sensing I was someone with whom he could share his deepest suicidal thoughts. He told me he intended some day to drive out into the Mojave Desert, get under his car, poke holes in his gas tank, and stagger off into the wavering sands to die. He got great pleasure laying out this plan to me. He also told it to a skeptical fellow employee named Jaye, whose calves I greatly admired, always sheathed in taut white knee-high socks. Jaye and I put our heads together sometimes to do a Vince check, to see what latest depressed, monomaniacal ravings he had shared.

By summer, Vince had done exactly as he promised, gone into the desert, abandoned his car, and disappeared. It wasn't for five years or so that I learned it was a hoax, when, as editor of a poetry magazine in Minneapolis, I got a submission from him. I never told him I sussed him out. But I thought of the wife and daughter in the valley that he abandoned.

The manager of the store was a mutton-chopped gentleman named Stan, very jolly and intelligent, a Pickwickian cartoon of literacy, rubbing his hands together as he walked among the workers, conveying with his hands the satisfactions of the low-margin book business.

And my colleague in the back room was a middle-aged black man named Albert. I was receiving, and he was shipping, which was harder to do, and where mistakes were more expensive to the store.

I was scared of Albert. He was big and lugubrious, and his eyes seemed impassive and cold. But he was very patient with me. He showed me where the bandaids were – this job was paper-cut city – and what to do when what was on the invoice simply didn't match what was in the boxes. You set it aside until the matter could be resolved, sometimes for months

After my first month, Albert stopped coming in to work. He had stomach cancer, and was undergoing cobalt radiation therapy. He visited a couple of times, but he was very sick. He wanted to see that the department was running all right.

To me, I liked the work because of the books and the glamor. But to Albert, what mattered was that the packages were being dispatched in a timely fashion to where they went. That it was Shakespeare or Hardy in the boxes was immaterial to Albert. That's why he was the professional, and why I, who took off in a rented van the weekend that California slid into the ocean, would never be more than an amateur.

But that is another story.

(1993)

## Tusk Town

In high school Jeremy Mulligan managed only average grades, but he scored well on a prestigious English test, which made him look desirable on paper to colleges, and so he was briefly hustled by places like Harvard, Princeton, and West Point.

But Jeremy blew this opportunity, failing to get scholarship help from a posh school. He blamed it on the overripe biographical essays he wrote as part of his application. He remembered going on about his philosophy of life, which revolved largely around himself. He knew he had laid it on a bit thick, and he vowed to rein it in for the remainder of his college experience.

Eventually he was accepted to the last place he wanted to attend – Scots Presbyterian Tuscarora College in the Amish country of central Ohio. Because of its out-of-the-wayness, students called the place Tusk Town. Jeremy expected it to be ultra-dire.

Once there, he fell quickly in love with a girl named Clare, whose parents were cool university professors. Clare was beautiful and wise and arty and, against all odds, she laughed at all Jeremy's jokes. She was a long-stemmed rose, a dancer who once choreographed and performed a coffeehouse leotard act to the velvet Underground's "Venus in Furs." She was a fundamentally good person, so it was odd – and arousing – to see her in the role of dominatrix.

Plus, Clare she had a little white kitty who lived in her dorm room, named Vicklebar, meaning "honeybear." The kitty cat was, as many all-white cats are, congenitally deaf.

The town of Tuscarora was a place, in the late 60s, where all hell was slated to break loose. Jeremy's classmates were part of a staged riot for the benefit of the same National Guard unit that would later open fire on the kids at Kent State. The mock riot was supposed to train the unit how to respond to campus protest situations. Since it was just Tusk Town, everyone expected the student body – good upwardly-mobile Protestant children – to play along, to be fake hippies for a while, then lay down their daffodils.

But the mock-riot turned into an embarrassing disaster for the Guard. Knowing it was just a game, and that no one would be shot, students took advantage of the soldiers, who were just non-college kids the same approximate age, first taunting them, then disarming them, then latching some of them inside a dairy barn on the Tuscarora County Fairgrounds. Eventually the recruits lost their cool and lofted real tear gas at the laughing, rioting students, and a few of them, like Jeremy's friend Julia, whose foot was bayoneted, got hurt and required actual medical care.

It was a painful and a televised experience for the members of the unit, which perhaps explains why their 26-year-old commander ordered the use of live ammo a year and a half later at Kent State. "No more Tuscaroras!" might have been the slogan of that interaction.

The mock riot was a bonding baptism for a group students numbering about 150. Whether they were black, white, short, fat, skinny or tall, they fashioned a culture of kindness toward one another and deep-dyed skepticism about the establishment. Drugs and "pretty free love" – loose but not without pattern – were a part of this collectivity. By paying only token attention to studies and exams, they all broke their parents' hearts, not to mention the Tuscarora tradition of middle-to-high performance. Their real education in 1968-69, they would say years later, was about one another. (Aw!)

Jeremy might have been the worst of them. He protested everything, from campus recruiters to visiting administration spokespersons. The reason he did it was that, every time he protested, Clare would beam at him with infrared approval. It never struck him as ironic that his need for approval lay at the very core of his radicalism.

Now, Jeremy had a roommate at that time who was an honest-to-god prince of Morocco, named Farouk Britel. He claimed to be ninety-seventh in line to Morocco's peacock throne. Not likely that he would ascend to power any time soon, but you never knew. He was a half-height Lothario who terrified the Presbyterian girls with his predations. He frequently gave cultural talks to civic groups around campus and town. So the dormitory was hung with his remarkable native costumes – royal gowns, and wild goats-hair robes worn by nomads.

This is not an aside. The goats-hair garments hanging in the room are essential to this story.

That semester, Jeremy spent much of his time being an obnoxious asshole. He sought attention campus-wide by making mischief and being a brat. He saw himself as a sort of Abbie Hoffman type, staging outré anti-war protests, like manning a punchbowl full of cow's blood across from a Navy recruiter in a dining hall. A couple football players whose brothers were serving on ships in the Gulf of Tonkin tipped his table over, splooshing tomato juice everywhere.

Another time he carefully inserted 400 copies of a bit of doggerel he dashed off, "Old MacWooster Had a War" in the chapel hymnbooks on the occasion of a talk at the school by LBJ's national security adviser MacGeorge Bundy. Jeremy truly thought the assembly would open to that page and begin singing "with a moo-moo here, and a cluck-cluck there," and it would all reflect gloriously on him, and the war would be shortened as a consequence.

The opposite happened – everyone ignored his inserts and sang the Doxology beneath it, and the war dragged on. It was frustrating on every level.

As a freshman Jeremy had the work-study job of mimeographing the school's daily newsheet, called Ratatouille. Every night he typed up the next day's meetings and events, and it being 1967 he was allowed to add his own little flourishes, like a peace sign or an epigram or cartoon. At some point he began making little marginal doodles that made fun of the school's athletic fraternity, the Second Section.

The Second Section were ordinary fellows, except that they were bigger than average, enjoyed full scholarships because they could run or tackle, drank lots of beer, and according to their reputation sweated up more car backseats. They tended to be patriotic and pro-war. So Jeremy targeted them as git objects of ridicule, and he lampooned them in Ratatouille every chance he got, with cartoons showing athletes to be, well stupid. In his mind they had no role to play in the 60s, and should be banned from a cool place like campus.

In retaliation, members of the Second Section began plotting Jeremy's death. They routinely bumped him off the sidewalks on the quad, and Jeremy would fly laterally until stopped by one of the many stately elms that lined the quad. One of the boys – one of the two who tipped over his ersatz bucket of blood – was actually suspended from school for conspiring to kidnap him and take him for a terrifying drive up through his part of northeastern Ohio, possibly abandoning him in a salt mine in his home town of Barberton.

But Jeremy was unaware of this plot at the time of the Vicklebar story.

One wintry night, after putting out Ratatouille, Jeremy lay down on his dorm cot to sleep. Farouk was out of town, and for company that night he had Clare's little cat with him, purring on his chest under the sheets. Suddenly, the dorm window exploded, and Jeremy was rocked by a major KERBLAM!

Jeremy sat up in bed. His head was ringing, and Vicklebar

was trembling in his hand – even deaf, she had felt the explosion. The light at his bedside was gone, knocked down and broken. Despite his vibrating head he could tell that the room was full of smoke, and the odd scent of peppermint. People outside the room were pounding on the door, and the housemaster was fumbling with the master key. When the door opened and flashlights lit up the room, and someone located a lamp that was not blown up, they saw that some kind of bomb had gone off in it.

Taking the full brunt of the explosion were Farouk's native outfits – they hung from a wire, shredded and splattered with something white. The splattering was not limited to the clothing, however – it was everywhere in the dorm room, on the walls, mirrors, books, and bedding. And there were little bits of clear glass everywhere, too. The white stuff was what smelled like peppermint – Colgate Dental Cream.

Still in a daze, Jeremy figured out what happened. Some guys from the Second Session, mad at the cartoons he was putting in Potpourri, had packed a Skippy Peanut Butter jar with toothpaste, inserted a lit cherry bomb in the middle, and hurled the thing through his dorm window.

And this was Jeremy's greatest hour. He grabbed a bathrobe and sneakers, slipped poor little traumatized Vickiebar under one arm, and crossed the snowy quad from his dorm to the building that housed the Second Section.

Entering their main lounge, he stood among a group of guys sitting around watching Johnny Carson doing Karnak. Seeing

Jeremy, one of the group leaped to his feet and dashed out of the room.

"Hey, Mulligan," said one the guys, a crooked smile playing on his lips, "what the hell happened to you?" A couple of the guys tittered.

"Someone threw a bomb through his window, and it wrecked the place," Jeremy said.

"Gee, that's too bad," said a sophomore named Gene. "You should maybe like get blinds or something."

Jeremy held up his hand, indicating silence. Then he took Vicklebar out from the bathrobe and set her on a table, on a checkerboard. The kitty looked about her, disturbed and confused. Jeremy stood behind the kitten, extended his arms as far as they would go, and then clapped them together, a couple inches from the kitten's head.

Vicklebar didn't so much as blink. One of the boys gasped.

"I just wanted to show you guys what you accomplished tonight," Jeremy said. "This beautiful, harmless, innocent creature, deafened for life. I sure hope you boys are proud of yourselves."

Jeremy picked Vicklebar up and headed out the door. Halfway back to Douglass Hall, slogging through the slush, a group three Second Sectioners caught up to him, panting.

"Hey, Mulligan, wait up," one of them, a basketball player named Cosby said. Cosby was one of the few Second Sectioners that Jeremy liked – he had a kind of funny “Who, me?” style about him.

"We're really sorry, man," Cosby said. And he looked at the other two guys, and one of them was fighting back tears. The kitty-cat story got to him.

"Well, what are you going to do about it?" Jeremy asked. And there on the slushy sidewalk he laid out his terms – they had to clean up the room, repair Farouk's salvageable outfits and compensate him for the ones that could not be restored, replace the window, and leave Jeremy the hell alone for the rest of the academic year. In return. he would leave them alone, too.

They happily agreed, and he never told them Vicklebar was born deaf.

(1992)

## 'The Unnatural'

It was the damndest career the game ever saw. Or didn't see. Or sort of saw, but never quite took note of.

Thad Flessum barreled in from the Midwest League in 66 with a fistful of write-ups and a grin on his face. Mention Thad Flessum to the folks back in Ohio, the people who saw him play the sandlots, and their mouths just dropped open.

He was so swift, and so strong, that ordinary words could not describe him. Instead people got this faraway look, and for a while you thought it was the awestruck look of rapture, but it was sadder than that, a look that grasped at what might have been.

He was the original bonus baby, the original phenom. But things kept happening, and he never got his look. His first week in Florida, playing against the Red Sox, he went deep on a well-hit line drive. People say they never saw an outfielder cover so much ground so quickly.

Back to the ball, he looked over his shoulder and lost it. By the time he hit the Robert Hall sign ("Hit Me and Win a New Suit!), he must have been clocking 28, 29 miles per hour. "That wasn't running," one scout said; "that was a rocket to hell."

Asked in the hospital what threw him off, he said he lost the ball in the white of the moon.

Hobbled until July, he took the field for the second game of a double header against Cleveland, and just before he could make a diving shoestring catch to his left, he stepped into a gopher hole

and snapped his shin like a piece of barnwood, and spent the remainder of that season in Ashtabula, clipping hedges by his mother's house on Lake Erie.

In the late innings of an exhibition game in Montreal the following spring, when Flessum was trying desperately to get noticed, he rapped a grounder to third base and headed for third. What he did not know was that the catcher out had grabbed a stray thread from his uniform, which rapidly unraveled as he headed toward first base. He would have been safe had his pants collapsed around his ankles, tripping him on the basepaths. Perhaps too modest for a modern athlete, Flessum grabbed a few fistfuls of thread and dashed frantically through the opponent's dugout to the lockerroom, and did not venture out again for the rest of the game.

A platinum screw connecting his leg to his ankle, Thad Flessum battled back, through Utica, through Providence, and back to the show. He had lost a step of his speed but he still had that amazing power to the opposite field. He set a record in the Carolina League that still stands for hitting the greatest number of foul tips (22) before tipping one into the catcher's mitt for an out.

In a June game against the Athletics, batting from the right side, he hit a ball so high – Euclidian mathematicians estimating its full trajectory would have been 540 feet from home plate, had it not punctured a hole in the Goodyear blimp, causing fans to run screaming down the ramps to their cars as the giant gray skin draped itself, deflating, along the upper mezzanine. The game was forfeited, and Flessum, branded a jinx and a misfit, was ordered back to the minors.

He was once attacked in the outfield in Fort Worth by a swarm of Africanized bees, suffering stings on ninety percent of his body. He swelled up so bad, and so fast, that the team physician had to read the number on his back to place him.

One unattended twi-nighter, late in the game, Thad followed a hooking, streaking line drive into the dead part of the ballpark, a shadowy zone where no ball had ever been hit before. The ball presumably landed in Flessum's glove, in a corner where no umpire or TV camera could make out. Though Flessum emerged from the dark, holding the ball proudly over his head, no one saw it, and the opposing manager fumed until the second base ruled it a ground rule double.

In a single game in August of 1969, Flessum batted for the cycle in a game in Sioux City called on account of hailstones the size of coconuts. During the Plains League championship series, he leaped five rows into the stands in the tenth inning to snag the winning home run ball – only to stumble on the seats and experience a severe concussion when his head struck a lead pipe railing, with the ball rolling stillborn from his glove.

Flessum lay in a coma until Thanksgiving of that year. It was not until he was awakened by the smell of frying bacon at the next bed that he was informed that his team had lost.

Arthritic and forgetful, Flessum spent the next two years out of organized ball, but worked the summer carnny circuit across Montana, Idaho, Wyoming and parts of the Dakotas, demonstrating a big league swing to youngsters who would pay twenty five cents to watch with fascination as the battered ballplayer rolled up his pant leg and showed them his scars.

But the thing was, Flessum appears on no team photograph published during the fourteen years he spent in professional baseball. Either he was stuck in traffic while the team picture was being taken, or the player in front of him lifted a glove just as the shutter snapped. Even the high school where a showcase of glittering championship trophies recalled the victories he led his team to burned to the ground one cold February night. As did the town's newspaper, later that May.

"I reckon I gave baseball as much as it gave me," Thad Flessum would tell visitors who stopped him on his riding mower on the big lawn overlooking the lake.

"But the hell of it is, I think I belonged, and there ain't no evidence I was even there."

(1994)

## Gee Whiz

Beau and I are visiting the dog park behind the airport in Minneapolis. It's a huge field owned by the airport commission, and they let dog owners use it as a place where dogs can run free.

My dog is mixing it up with the other dogs. It's a warm summer night, and all the dogs are grinning broadly. I'm stopping to pat a schnauzer on the head, when a big young Rottweiler circles round me, lifts a hind leg, and urinates all over my back and pantleg.

Time stops. Several other humans stop and point mutely. One person appears to laugh nervously, but no sound comes out. I look behind me. At first I doubt the dog has hit me -- he must be peeing on the grass behind me.

Then I feel the warmth seeping through my shirt. I feel the looping shape of the stream, like a signature hastily scribbled on my back. To paraphrase the epitaph on Keats' grave: "Here lies one whose name was writ in urine."

My smile freezes and fades. The warm feeling turns cold. The Rottweiler gives no sign that what he has done is anything out of the ordinary, or in need of forgiving, and shambles merrily away.

I feel less merry. The collegiality that marked the intra-species gathering only a minute before has dissipated, and I cast

about, looking from face to face, seeking to know whose dog did this to me.

Someone informs me the dog's name is Cain, and he is a nice enough of a dog, about two years old.

I can feel my heartbeat, which informs me I am in a low level of panic. How does one handle a situation like this? Do I get accusatory? Do I demand an apology? Do I falsely laugh it all off, as if it were water off a duck's back? Or do I tuck tail and run, home to my agitator and spin cycle?

The owner, a young man who does not look like the type who trains dogs to pee on people, squints at me, and realizes something out of the ordinary has occurred. "You dog just peed all over me," I say dubiously.

"Oh wow," he says. "I'm really sorry." What else could he say?

I get to my feet, stretch and let my soaked shirt flop against me. "I think I'm going to go home and clean up," I say.

People nod like that was probably the most sensible thing to do. Even Beau goes along with the withdrawal, despite it cutting short his evening revelries.

So I'm standing in my basement, plopping my clothes into the washer, with Beau watching from the doorway, and me wondering what I did to bring that on myself, and what lessons I

might learn for the future.

And I decide that by kneeling to pay the schnauzer, I had signaled that I was not a person of consequence. A person of no great consequence was of the same order as a lilac bush or a fire hydrant. In a way, by coming down to the dogs' level, I had asked for it.

I decided thenceforward to insist on slightly greater dignity for myself and greater distance between me and dogs. To be more animated, and less treelike. To speak frequently, and without ambiguity.

And to avoid in future insofar as possible the indelible mark of Cain.

## I Was a Sixties Protester

On a Twin Cities campus visit this fall, I can't help noticing how tranquil the place is, despite violence in the Middle East. The students march from class to class, giving no sign of dissatisfaction. And I find myself wondering how my generation would have handled today's political turmoil.



I took part in some of the biggest campus protests at the U in the late 60s and early 70s. I was there for the draft board break-ins, for the trial of the Minnesota Eight, for the infamous "Red Barn" actions (someone drove a car into a fast food restaurant after hours to protest the "corporatizing" of the Stadium Village neighborhood), and for the mass rallies following the shootings at Kent State and Jackson State.

I wasn't a leader. I never did anything violent. I was just a kid upset about the war and napalm and racism, and turned on by all the commotion. It was stimulating to show up at rallies and shake your fist in the air, and generally it didn't cost you much, except for the occasional whiff of tear gas. I felt vaguely heroic,

and it was a great way to meet new people and have something to agree about, first thing.

The afternoon of the Kent State shooting, I was biking to a protest from my apartment in the midway, wearing my trademark protest beret. I remember liking the beret, and liking my ponytail, but having trouble keeping the ponytail under the beret.

I was biking up University Avenue from the Midway. A road crew had applied fresh gravel and tar to the street, and as a pickup truck passed me at about Prior Avenue, its fender clipped me and dragged me for about forty feet through the slag.

The pickup's driver never stopped. Do you think that was an oversight or was it more of an Easy Rider sort of deal? I don't know. All I know is, instead of going to the protest I spent the afternoon and evening at Boynton Student Health Center, picking a thousand tarry little stones out of my arms and shoulder. I know, a true believer, a hero of the barricades would have gone to the protest and foregone my evening with the Phisohex bottle. But this looked really nasty.

I came to the protest counterculture via personality. I enjoyed Abbie Hoffman's antics. I loved Allen Ginsberg in the docket at the Chicago 7 trial. I was fascinated by R. Crumb's comics. I squinted at Timothy Leary.

But my real attachment was to the antiwar professors I knew, and the politicians and personalities who came across like professors: Eugene McCarthy, Kenneth Galbraith, Julian Bond, Daniel Ellsberg, the Berrigans and Robert Bly. I loved how these guys seemed to win every argument, like wry, pacifist 007s. I

yearned to be like them, detached and well-spoken and ironic. Despite the ponytail and beret, I longed to wear tweed.

Being a radical didn't always mesh with being an English major. I loved poetry. I dug Shakespeare and William Blake and George Herbert and T.S. Eliot, and I assumed my cohorts on the picket lines would, too, once they knew.

Instead, as the protest era dragged on, especially after Kent State, it took a turn for the anti-intellectual. Protest leaders seemed to evolve from ironic and mischievous to chest-thumping and loudish. Many questioned the relevance of all those books by dead white guys. I myself entertained doubts about Milton.

Protest vs. poetry – the contradictions grew. In the spring of 1971, I won a small fellowship of \$400 from the Captain DeWitt Jennings Payne Memorial Award. Captain Payne I learned, was the first aviator killed in World War I. Today I thank this warrior from another time for smiling down on me, because that \$400 bought some valuable space for me.

I applied for a part-time job as editor of the Honors College poetry magazine, and found myself with an office, clerical help, and a drawerful of stamps. I loved putting out the magazine. I felt I was still a radical — fighting the establishment with surrealistic verse. Truly, if you could help leverage their own consciousness, see through new eyes, and just pay attention better to the world around them, that would be like a major revolution.

Problem was, I was now on the wrong side of the pillars.

One day, in the spring of 1971, as I arrived for work at Johnston Hall, I was halted at the door by a group of about 100

fellow radicals carrying placards (I recollect "No Business As Usual" and "Shut It Down"). At the time, another group of students had blockaded themselves in the Board of Regents room to protest investing in South Africa. This group was in league with that group.

"You can't go in there," said their leader, who I was chagrined to notice was also wearing a beret .

"Why not?" I wanted to know.

"Because we're shutting it down, man."

"But it's the Honors College," I gestured toward the double doors, "I work there."

"It's an administration building," he said. "No one goes in."

"But, but, but," I spluttered. I wanted to ask if they didn't agree with me that literature was part of the great transmogrification, indeed, just about the best part. What about "Howl"? What about Robert Lowell? What about The Red Badge of Courage?

But these folks weren't making interesting exceptions, so I was led away, already less radical than the moment I showed up.

Go ahead and laugh. I was the stereotypical conservative, "a liberal who got mugged."

But you know, the thing I really came to love, stories and words, helped me make sense of all this.

Only an adolescent, and a spoiled and stupid one, applauds

driving a car into a fast food restaurant (which was closed, I hasten to add). But that anger underlying those events, the anger at cruelty and injustice, that bubbled up in people, and the way we found to find a common voice for it, and fulcrum our anger into action – that was a good thing.

They were topsy-turvy times, in which students declared themselves teachers. The Greeks called it hubris, over-reaching. But they saw the wisdom in celebrating the Saturnal, in which all roles were reversed, and the old had to listen to the young.

Walking across campus today, it seems a quieter place. Kids don't seem interested in forming mobs to express themselves. And maybe the times are different. Protests are such a cliché. Economy's bad. Gotta get ahead!

But a couple of times, I look into a student's eyes, and I see a familiar fire.

(2001)

## **The Last Turkey**

It happens that today is bitterly cold here in Minnesota. As an old friend once remarked to me: "It's so cold the dogs are sticking to the trees."

How cold is it, Johnny? It's so cold that the moment you step out into it you worry about yourself. You can feel the frozen air attack your soft tissues, and you know you are at most a half hour from freezer burn. It is so cold you worry about your cell walls shattering, and your whole cellular integrity going ka-splat. So cold a part of you yearns to freeze to death, because you have heard it gets real warm then.

And it was on such a night as this that what I am about to tell you came to be, exactly the way I am saying.

When I was 27 I was invited to move out to Worthington, Minnesota, in the southwest corner of the state. It is a flat pancake of a prairie area, low in water, scarce in trees, but thick with wind and horizontal snow.

When the night is dark and the winter cold, the farmers lie under three comforters, wondering about the creatures in the barn, whether they will be alive in the morning or nay.

Every cold night fills you with doubt, about the lives around you, and your cash investment in them.

Now it happens that Worthington, in the years before I moved there, was the turkey capital of Minnesota – possibly of the world. There was enough dispute in the matter that the city

fathers of Cuero, Texas challenged the city fathers of Worthington to an annual race, between their fastest turkey, always named Ruby Begonia, and our turkey, always called Paycheck. The two birds would run down the street, and whichever one of them managed to run in the straightest line would be declared the winner, and disgrace and ignominy was the loser's lot.

Much of the festivity of this race devolved from the common perception that turkeys are none too bright, even for birds – particularly the big whites that farmers in Worthington and Texas raised, an overbred, meat-heavy gene pool known more for their affinity with sage dressing than any other kind of sagacity.

The big whites are so front heavy with breasts meat that they are unable to have ordinary sexual intercourse. To breed, they must be desecrated, a task which has filled many a dreamy farmboy's workday afternoons, and strengthened many a yeoman's wrist.

But this story is older than that, and goes to the first implementation of electrical lights in the long sheds that the turkeys wintered in.

A bare light bulb was placed in the middle of each shed. The idea was that the radiant heat of the bulb would keep the temperature of the shed from dropping below 25 degrees below zero, when all turkey life ceases.

During the early weeks of winter, the bulb worked fine, creating a warm aura that the turkeys clustered around to keep off the cold. It also allowed the turkeys to see one another at night, which was a social plus, although one which we cannot do into

much detail about, as it is an area shrouded in mystery, and better that way.

But with the deepening of winter's grip on the prairie, temperatures began to drop. The winds shrieked, and the ice formed on the length of the pump handle. Every window in the farmer's house was crystallized and etched, and out in the turkey sheds, a terrible clatter arose as the turkeys scrambled to huddle closer to the glowing bulb.

The strongest turkeys were the first to die. They elbowed the weaker birds out of the way, until they could place themselves directly against the hot bulb. Their comperes, unwilling to freeze, gathered about them until they covered them. Inside the pile of turkeys, the big birds smothered.

But that was not the end of the carnage. The weak birds then crawled under their dead brethren to get closer to the light, and a thousand birds climbed on top of them, too. And they too suffocated.

In the morning, the farmer rose early to inspect the damage done by the cold. HE had reason to suspect his losses were lighter due to the lightbulb. But when he cracked open the door to the shed, what he saw was a horror. A few dozen birds waddled stiffly in the cold, yodeling their discomfort from the long frigid night.

But his focus was on the pile of over 800 dead birds in a heap in the center of the shed, stacked ten high. Not a sound emerged from the white feathered mountain. A thousand beady eyes stared up, incriminatingly. And through the barnyard rose the awful smell of a thousand unplucked, ungutted turkeys, slow roasted by

the heat of a 300 watt Sylvania bulb.

Eventually, bad weather did Worthington's turkey industry in. It caught on again, in the Painesville area. But Turkey Day continued to be the regional capital's annual highlight. Every year a famous politician was invited to be the honoree at the August Turkey Day Parade. One year the honoree was Nelson Rockefeller, who was still eager to be president and could recognize a photo opportunity when he heard of one.

But Rockefeller's fate was sealed that late summer day, because though he was innovative and rich, he was woefully ill-informed, and insisted on wearing a shoe-length herringbone overcoat, when everyone with two brain cells to rub together could tell it was shirtsleeves weather.

When the float wound its way past the courthouse with Nelson standing up top, waving at the crowd, his white cashmere scarf flowing down him like a wizard's whiskers, the children pointed at him and laughed, a great man who did not know how to dress himself. The whole town talked about the herringbone overcoat for weeks.

So Nelson Rockefeller was the final victim of the fierce Minnesota winter. He would never be elected president. Indeed, he would sip the ultimate gall for the ambitious, the vice presidency. Though it was only halfway to September, the icy hand of fate had fingered its final bird.

(1993)

## Driving to Amherst

It's 4:14 AM the morning before Christmas, 1999. His family sleeps scattered throughout his mother's house in Ohio, having driven down from Minnesota the day before. His mom, who suffers from heart failure and diabetes, has nevertheless prepared a big Christmas reunion for later this morning.

He can't sleep. Worse, he has lost his reading glasses somewhere in the bedroom, and rather than wake his wife up to find them, he is typing blind on his mom's computer, using way-expanded text size.

A part of him was willing to get in the car and drive one town over to Amherst, where he grew up, to buy a new pair. Surely there is an all-night grocery there that sells readers. He knows they built a big store on the outskirts of town, an all-nite drug mart. They'd be open. He could take the dog, if he'd be willing to clamber down from a warm couch to venture into the cold with him.

In truth, he always wants to drive to Amherst. He loves his mother, but in all his years of visiting, he has never satisfied his urge to revisit the town itself. He lived there for only eight years, from age 7 to age 15. But those were the real years of his life, the years he learned how to act and how to talk, how to want a thing, and how to live without it.

He went to Catholic grade school and learned all about that. When he was 7 the nuns used to wash his face in front of the class, to shame me for indifferent hygiene. It was a world of casual cruelty, of the sisters yanking the kids around by the ears, of drunken fathers piling into bridge abutments after the bars closed, of schoolyard bullies passing on the violence they experienced at home to kids who wondered why they were chosen as targets.

The bullies had great fun with his sister, who was sick and different -- her heart provided her with so little oxygen that her skin had a bluish cast -- calling her names and taunting her for being less than whole. He hopes it did them some good.

He fell in love with the Christ on the cross in the gym the parish used as a church until it could afford to build an actual church. He remembers the painted skin and eyes. How desolate and unreal he seemed, nailed to the back wall of a gymnasium, how forsaken to be crucified in Ohio, how naked to be Jesus and alone in a huge drafty cinderblock room. At night he believed Christ was in the apple trees outside the window, perched in his robe in the crook of a branch, sweating blood for our sins and blessing the fallen green fruit. He prayed that when he died Christ would recognize him and overlook his transgressions and welcome him into his heavenly coterie.

Instead his sister died at age 15. She went to the dentist, slipped into a coma, and died. And the whole town turned out for her funeral. It was so public. Too public. How can you grieve with

everyone looking at you?

Not a day goes by that he don't think of her and miss her, and not a month that he doesn't contemplate the horror of being a young girl who knows she will die without ever having a boyfriend. Their parents got divorced. He can still remember their father coming round to say goodbye. Father climbed the little terrace the house sat on and shook his 12-year-old hand under a raggedy Chinese elm. I just wanted to stop by and say so long. I'll be gone for a bit, he said.

Behind him was a field of muskrats and chuggers, strange animals who made hollow plunking sounds on hot summer nights. He supposed they were just frogs, but in his mind they transmogrified into something dark, cold-blooded and unsympathetic.

The whole town of Amherst watched his sister die and his father walk away. The boy used religion to get away, running off for a year to a prep seminary in Philadelphia. It wasn't quite Jesuit, but almost. The teachers were passionate and smart. The boys were passionate and good. He read T.S. Eliot, G.K. Chesterton, and Charles Williams. Everyone rose at 5:30 every morning and walked in silence across a noisy wooden bridge to the chapel, to kneel on hard bare boards and honor the dawn before any bird. This Christ was golden and glorious, and in the dark and smoke he began to heal.

But he couldn't stay. His big brother was headed to college,

and they couldn't leave their little brother alone with their mother, who remained distraught and difficult. That was no way for a boy of seven to live.

When he came back to Amherst he was like a Jew returning from Babylon, literate and aware, and too big for his old parish. They put him in a Catholic instruction program for high schoolers, to keep as many of the kids close to the faith during their season of fire, puberty, as possible. They met in the old 5th grade classroom, and somebody's dad read them the lesson furnished by the archdiocese, about the first letter to Timothy. "So what are the five attributes of grace," the man asked, and they stared up at him like submerged stones. "Anyone?"

He wanted to shout out Eliot's "Choruses from 'The Rock,'" or "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," which he had memorized, and which spoke his murky take on religion, a ball of flame that was welling up in him that could scorch this mediocre masquerade. Instead, he got up around 8:30 PM and drifted out of the classroom and, almost as an afterthought, left his faith behind as well.

The years that followed were bad. He was arrested twice for shoplifting, right there in his little town. He remembered his terror sitting in the chief of police's office, dialing the home phone to deliver the news. And the retribution that followed. His mother, who was utterly without emotional resources, could not bear it. "What do you want me to do, send you to a psychiatrist?" she asked through stinging tears.

She could no imagine no greater disgrace. Looking back, obviously, the answer was sure, do it, send him. It seems so clear a case of someone crying for help, stealing aftershave from the Amherst drug store, trying to clamber somehow out of the trough he had slipped into. He no longer knew how to live. He was saying: I don't know how to go on. Will someone please speak up and save me?

It was no better in Amherst for the little brother. Being boys, they couldn't comfort one another. They didn't know how to, it wasn't programmed in them, and there was no one to tell them what to do. They could only stumble through the days, improvising as they went, hoping this day was not too painful. Their little town in the woods was like a dream, in which the people around them lived normal lives and went about their work, and were happy enough that they could afford the everyday cruelties they visited on one another, like expressions of plenty — the insults, the denigration, the slaps to the face. So the boys were expected to put on a brave face and do likewise. They were lousy at it. He took solace from the truth that, at the very least, they were not cruel to one another.

What would it take to restore them to their lives? The restoration of what had been taken away. People must come back to life. Parents must love and take care of their children. God must reinfiltate the world. Time must pass and healing must happen. Weary hearts must learn to accept.

It's early Christmas morning, and snow has begun to fall out

on the lake. He stands alone at the front window, watching the heavy flakes tumble into Lake Erie, and disappear.

## Two Onetime Poets

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

"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?"

## Let's Play: Celebrity Brain Tumors!

I was all excited: *USA Today* was interested in my brain tumor! Well, not the tumor so much, but they were looking at a piece I had written about it, and my first conversation with an editor there went great. Finally, I hoped, my sort of tumor—a meningioma—would get the attention it so richly deserved. Research grants would follow. Nobel prize winners would focus their whole brains on my half one. I'd not only be cured, but bathed in sympathetic lighting. I was one lucky guy.

Then the email arrived.

"We liked your essay," the editor wrote. "But we have to say no. There are so many people with different ailments, and they are all so convincing, that we have made the editorial decision to only feature first-hand accounts of people who are already in the public eye."

It took a few moments for the words to register. I have a brain tumor—have I mentioned that already?—so maybe I'm a little slow. But this was it in a nutshell: the nation's newspaper only wants health stories if they're by or about celebrities. A story about the alien gnawing away at Mike Finley's brain wasn't news, no matter how bad the tumor or how good the writing. (And it was excellent!) But if Nicole Kidman came down with a meningioma, the paper was saying, it would be hot.

And this pissed me off. It was like approaching the velvet rope of public opinion and being stopped by a bouncer. It was like trying to confide a life and death matter to a friend—and yes, I'd

considered *USA Today* my friend, especially because of that dynamite sports section—and the friend replies, "Hey, I'd love to hear your story, only there's a problem: Nobody gives a flying Wallenda about you."

That's when I realized: If I hope for a cure, I'll need a celebrity endorsement for my brain tumor.

This quest actually began back in January 1999. I was doing situps in my upstairs office when I felt something happen inside my head, from the exertion. It felt like my brain was melting—from contact with a blacksmith's poker jammed through my skull. Within a week I had my diagnosis: my meningioma was about the size of a croissant, curled behind my left ear. This noncancerous but nonetheless unpleasant fellow had been residing there quietly for as long as a couple of decades, until it caused a major vein in my head to dry up and snap off (medical term: thrombosis). Hence the moment of mind-searing pain (the one before the email from *USA Today*). My tumor, doctors informed me, was inoperable – too close to the language center of the brain to risk going in. But, with any luck – cross fingers –it will just continue to sit there.

With that, I gained a new hobby and lots of new friends. I read up on brain tumors, and I talked to dozens of survivors, wanting to be one myself. And I began subscribing to online bulletin board where people like me, with benign croissants and other cancerous pastries tucked under their skulls, discuss their harrowing experiences, their surgeries, their outcomes -- and sometimes their impending deaths. Think it can't happen to you? Or Nicole? Well, every year, 350,000 Americans are diagnosed with brain tumors, so you may already be a winner and not know it. It's not clear what causes them, and there are many varieties.

My meningioma is the least horrible of a grisly lot. They'll kill 15,000 of us this year.

But you never hear about them. May is a National Brain Tumor Month (May), which only the editors of Men's Health seem to be keenly aware of. But it hasn't caught on elsewhere, perhaps because of the limited gift-giving options. But I'm out to change all that by attracting some star power to my cause. Think about it. Why do celebrities exist? So we don't have to pay attention to one another. There's just too doggone many of us. Instead we appoint proxies, identifiable stand-ins for certain points of view. Thus Jerry Lewis for MD, Charlton Heston for Alzheimer's, Sally Struthers for Christian Children, Michael Jackson for victims of excessive plastic surgery.

Sure, I was bitter about *USA Today's* policy, but I'll let you in on a dark secret. One reason I wanted to talk about brain tumors was because I thought I finally had an issue people had to care about, one that could make me a bit of a celebrity. I wanted to matter, too! Meningioma might be my ticket to fame. And if I mattered, maybe having the thing there wouldn't be so bad.

I could almost hear the chatter:

"Hey, isn't that that guy with the thing in his head? Cool!"

"Talks pretty good for a guy whose brain shares skull space with a bolus of runamok cell metabolism."

"A front row table for you, Mr. Finley! With your usual, six Advils and a glass of mint iced tea!"

Sigh. The *USA Today* rejection made those pleasant thoughts

vanish. I turned, disconsolate, to my friends at the brain tumor listserver. “They didn’t want my story because I’m not famous,” I said.

Amidst the chorus of sympathy, one clear voice stood out: “Well, maybe they’re right,” Cheryl said. “Maybe that’s just how it is, and we should select a celebrity spokesperson, like those other diseases.”

And so began an online scheme to locate someone who was famous, attractive, had a brain tumor and could still talk, and coerce that person into being the hood ornament for our malady. It was no simple task. Most of the really good brain tumor victims reveal their condition by dying from it. Presidential candidate Pat Paulsen is long gone, as is conductor Otto Klemperer. Ditto reggae star Bob Marley; political schemer Lee Atwater; Cornelius from Planet of the Apes, Roddy McDowell; film critic Gene Siskel; actress Susan Hayward; NFL founder Pete Rozelle and player Lyle Alzado; CIA director William Casey; Negro League slugger Josh Gibson, modern-day screwballer Dan Quisenberry; Royals and Yankees manager Dick Howser and reliever Tug McGraw of the “Ya Gotta Believe” Mets; director Francois Truffaut; Rhapsody in Blue composer George Gershwin; Frankenstein author Mary Shelley. (Wouldn’t she have been great at penning celeb op eds, though? And that Elsa Lanchester hairdo is exactly how my tumor feels to me.)

Our celebrity brain tumor list took on a life of its own. In all, we culled nearly 300 names of celebrities who had survived a brain tumor, died from one, or had a loved one die of one. (Are you listening Tim McGraw? Better yet, how about you, Mrs. Faith Hill McGraw? We’re ready when you are.) Surely, we’d be

able to recruit a spokesperson for the cause. One name of the 300 stood out, bathed in glamour, drama, and stagecraft: Elizabeth Taylor. If you could get Elizabeth Taylor, you didn't need Sandy Duncan or Arlen Specter (both survivors, but rather long in the tooth, at that).

She's not just a queen of multiple facelifts, hip replacements, respiratory ailments, and painkiller addictions. In London in 1997, she also had surgery in London to scoop out a meningioma . That's my tumor, people! "I've been pronounced dead, not able to breathe, and I went to the tunnel with the white light, all of that," she declared. "So I have a great appreciation of every day I wake up breathing. Colors, different tastes, different smells—I appreciate it all on a different level." Out of all the talk-show wanabees queuing up for their moment in the bright lights, Liz has got the street cred only public suffering can convey. So our little group wrote her a letter, inviting her to amplify our voices with hers. We pictured her sitting on a shiny divan with Barbara Walters, maybe wearing one of those turbans she likes, explaining what a meningioma was and what it meant to her. It would be great.

Only, we never got so much as a *USA Today*-style reject note. She never replied. Our online group was crushed, unleashing a salvo of chat messages. "Here we had a celebrity of the first magnitude," wrote Anne. "And a great chance to do some education about brain tumors, and she wouldn't discuss it. Thanks heaps, Liz."

"I understand some people from the American Brain Tumor Association asked Taylor to speak up about it" wrote Terry. Terry knows everything about Liz Taylor. "Miss Taylor's office

informed them that she has decided not to make a big deal about brain tumors, because she's already so identified with AIDS. AIDS is so important to her. She doesn't want that compromised."

"I disagree," wrote Marie, who once explained that her meningioma seemed to make her more analytical. "I think it's all for our consumption. Being a spokesperson for AIDS makes her seem like an angel of show business. Whereas, actually having a brain tumor harms her image, and makes people think of her as unglamorous. So she bailed."

And that was it. Within a few months I stopped subscribing to the listserver. I found that, when I spoke to people with more serious brain tumors, it freaked me out, and made me think my own tumor was more serious than it was. The web is a health paranoiac's hell-zone, filled with unfiltered suggestions about everything that just might be going wrong. If you're at all suggestible, or feeling vulnerable, you probably oughtn't to go there.

But every now and then, I still allow myself to dream. I'll see some celeb's face peering up at me from the checkout line, and think: Maybe she's the one? Maybe he'll put us over the top! I imagine all of them having things in their heads. And they don't know it! Paris Hilton. The guy from Creed. Kevin Costner, with one the size of a baseball. But you wouldn't know it from those rueful, over the shoulder glances.

Guys, when you find out, if I am still around, call me. I've got an in at *USA Today*.

## Saluting the Army Corps of Engineers

I was out walking the dog, past midnight. It was cold. As we passed the Catholic grade school, the dog stopped to sniff the trunk of a tree that had not yet lost its leaves. As we stood under the tree, I heard the sudden rustle of wings. I looked up, and saw perhaps 50 open-eyed crows – at least I think they were crows. When they saw how close the dog was, they exited the tree in a single breath, rose into the air and circled the Catholic school.

I had awakened them from a cold, silent sleep.

So long as I stood by the tree they would not return. They looped and looped against the street light glow, against the visible half moon. Each turn the flock took in the sky made a slight fluttering sound. Their shape shifted in the darkness, one bird leading them this way, then another taking them a different way.

When the dog and I finally crossed the street, the birds silently fell out of formation, and descended into a different, still-leaved tree.

I had never wondered before what birds do at night. They sit together, and they wait the night out.

It was 1400 BC. The Hebrews were fleeing from Pharaoh. They didn't know the area from Adam, so they followed the Red Sea southward, hoping for some opportunity to cross. Some of the

freed slaves referred to a structure further to the south that might be of use.

They came to an earthworks dam, an isthmus of clay separating the waters of the sea. It crossed the entire body of water, and it was wide enough to permit four people abreast, or a cart, to cross over.

But the dirt was loose, and as the thousands of people made their way across, the earth began to crumble under foot and under wheel. By the time Pharaoh's army arrived, they charged on the crumbling dam road.

Halfway across, the dam collapsed, and the Hebrews looked back from the Sinai shore at the bodies of the dead commingling on the surface.

I was in a waiting room. I was told that a place had been prepared for me, and I was not to be afraid. I sensed that something final awaited me in the room, and that the people leading me there meant me no harm.

Nevertheless, when I entered the room, and I saw the carpeting, and the couch, and the bare walls, and some kind of instrument on a table, with a stainless duckbill, I turned to the people. "I couldn't go through with it," I said."

Because it was an assisted suicide room. But you went to it like you would go to a dentist or doctor.

My chickening out wasn't a problem. No one tried to prevent me leaving. But when I got outside, the sky was dark with storm

clouds. I was by the riverbank, and the city was hastily piling sandbags. Already the waters were lapping at the level. I pitched in with them, heaving sandbags into place, doing what I could to save the city.

Rachel and I were hiking in the woods. We stood by a waterfall that rose to three separate ledges, like a Mesoamerican pyramid. We breathed deep of the negative ions from the splattered water, felt them enter our bodies and swirl around and do us unnamable good.

Rachel had an appointment with her therapist, so we had to get back to the city. But we continued to walk, and I found a path I thought would lead us back to the car. Instead, it led us further away. At one point I looked out over a cliff to where I expected the cars should be, and saw only acres and acres of scrubland.

We turned back and ran despite sore ankles and old lungs. We ran down a stony hill and returned to the three-tiered waterfall.

Suddenly, we looked up, and an enormous white bird, a trumpeter swan, was flapping clumsily directly above us. We shielded our eyes with our hands and watched the swan land on the topmost tier of the waterfall, then surf down the first whitewater cascade, then twist down the second, and then stumble headlong down the third, and slide under the bridge we were standing on.

We ran to the other side of the bridge to see if the bird were OK. On the other side of the bridge, the water was no longer raging, it was peaceful and clear. And there was the swan, gliding

on its belly, as if all this tumult was just another workday.

The bird stood in the water, shook its tail free of a few drops, and swam blissfully away.

Rachel and I looked at one another in shock. Had we seen what we saw? We confirmed that we had. It was no dream.

We laughed because everything suddenly seemed possible, and hurried up the hill to where our car was parked.

(2003)



J. F. Powers

## **Morte d'Urban**

This is a story that dances across decades.

About 20 years ago I lived near a woman named Kathy P., a fiery red-haired psychologist who informed me – I can no longer remember why – that she was friends with a writer named J. F. Powers.

You probably don't know the name. But J. F. Powers won the National Book Award ages ago for a novel about a Catholic priest called Morte D'Urban, written in the early 1950s.

Kathy had no way of knowing that this information would interest me greatly. But Morte D'Urban was not only my favorite novel ever, but it was a role model for me in the writing of my own novel *The Usable Book*.

Where his book was about an impressive functionary who worked for the regional chancery in the fictional diocese of Ostergothenburg – believed to be St. Cloud, Minnesota, 80 miles from where I live in St. Paul.

Father Urban in his 40s was what enlightened people want a priest to be – worldly, not icky, not preachy, but "urbane." The kind of priest who could shoot a few rounds of golf with a wealthy donor, have a few drinks at the Nineteenth Hole, and talk informedly about the latest books. He was the sort of person

people like me pinned their hopes on.

But as the novel advances, something happens to Fr. Urban. Instead of staying aloof from the problems of Catholic theology and politics, he knuckles under to them. At the end, he is a silenced voice – as mute and mysterious as priests everywhere seem to the doubtful.

Now, my own unpublished novel, written in 1981-1983, was a coming of age school novel, rather like John Knowles' *A Separate Peace*, but with a Catholic twist, as it occurs in a prep seminary in Bucks County. That twist was totally provided by what I learned from J. F. Powers' way of talking about Catholics in his stories. It was satirical but affectionately so. It had distance, but it also held mystery.

To me his voice was the answer not only to "What do I write?" but, in the wake of numerous personal tragedies and griefs, "How do I live?"

OK, so my neighbor, Kathy P., tells me she knows J. F. Powers, who is a reclusive figure teaching at St. John's Abbey in Collegeville, near St. Cloud. And I, in my astonishment, ask if she would forward a manuscript of mine to him, as an homage. She said sure.

So I powered up my PC – which ran Wordstar in those early days – and printed off a sample chapter of my novel, a chapter about how a seminarian's struggles with masturbation leads to the assassination of President Kennedy. To me it was like a handoff from Powers – it had his fingerprints all over it.

But I made a glaring technical mistake. Before I shipped it

off, I did a search and replace, and changed the main character's name from Frank to Phil. This was because Powers middle name was Francis, and I did not want him to think I was attributing the masturbatory habits to him.

But Wordstar, I guess, has its glitches, and it replaced the Franks in only about half of the instances. The rest of the Phils remained Franks. I, in my haste and ADD, did not catch this, and sent it on, eager for some hint of approval from this American master who so influenced me.

Months passed. I forgot about this. One day, I get a letter, not to me but addressed to Kathy P., with a typed note from Powers himself:

"I really did not know what to make of Mr. Finley's story. It seemed to come out of nowhere and I did not know where it was going. And the main character seemed to change names from paragraph to paragraph. I found I could not read it to the end. It was so bad, I really wonder why you passed it on to me."

Now, writers get rejected all the time. And it's always bad, it always hurts. We get used to it as the price of being in the business. But every now and then comes a mega-hurt, something that knows exactly how to triangulate your heart, and surgically bisect it so there is no chance of it ever beating again.

This was one of perhaps four crushingly embarrassing moments for me as a writer, and I grieved – both at my own ineptness, and at the cruelty of Powers' note, like one you would leave with the trash.

What emerged was a picture of a man who did like to be

accosted in any way, and who, despite great gifts in describing the tender mercies that befall us in our lives, did not dispense very many of them personally.

How bad was the blow? I could never again speak to my friend Kathy P. I felt supremely ashamed to have used her as a go-between, and for her to see me trashed that way.

And, of course, my heart hardened against my hero. When he died ten years later, I thought, may God have mercy on that cold, dead soul. And I grieved to still be so misunderstood, and so indifferently discarded by a man I had idolized.

Another father figure, soot and smoke rising to heaven!

This story happened almost twenty years ago. Powers died in 1999, at 82.

The years have done a number on me. Today I am older than Father Urban in the story. And I see the same things happening to me as to him. I was so promising, so full of myself, and so oblique in my attitude toward God.

In the end of the book he surprises the reader by losing all his specialness and blending into the know-nothing camouflage of the institutional church.

I did not know what it meant, to be honest, but I sensed its irrevocableness, its mysterium.

But every day last week, after walking my two dogs at Arkwright Park, for no reason I could articulate myself, I stopped at the big cathedral atop the hill in St. Paul, and went in.

I have not been to a mass in 30 years. And I did not go in to be part of one. But one was there, and it was as I remembered. The quietness, the cleanness, the impersonalness, the ancientness of the words which, whether they are "Nunc dimittis" or "Now dismiss your servant O lord," rang the same inside me.

I prayed for poor tattered self. I prayed for all my kind, who have felt burned by God for so many years, and have held onto that sense of offense as if it were all the jewels of the world. I prayed for my father and my brothers. I prayed for my children. I prayed for the whole beat-up enterprise.

I am not reverting to Catholicism. I think that boat has sailed, and I love the evangelical church that has welcomed me in recent years as one of its odder members.

But I knelt before the monstrance in a tiny neon-lit room in the undercroft, which they keep open all day for wanderers like myself, with the Blessed Sacrament on display. And I prayed as I never have prayed before, whispering loudly enough for the others under the giant dome to hear, for God to take me back, to forgive my sad vanities, and for the love of Christ to take up residence in my soul.

(1991)

## Red Wheelbarrow

I was looking for my wheelbarrow when the phone rang. So much depends on a red wheelbarrow, when it's spring and all. And you would think you could not misplace something as obvious as a wheelbarrow the color of a stop sign.

I looked everywhere: front yard, back yard, garage, that little narrow corridor between the garage and the next property (there should be a word for that -- crawlway?). OK, that's not everywhere, but those places were the prime suspects. I was just coming to grips with the notion that the wheelbarrow was gone -- stolen -- when the phone rang inside the house.

"Hello, Mr. Finley, this is Judy from the bank. Are you aware that your checking account is overdrawn?"

"It is? Oh, dear." I overdraw three or four times a year. But they usually send me one of those awful thin letters with the cellophane window. A phone call seemed to be rubbing it in. And did I just say "Oh, dear"?

"I'm afraid so, Mr. Finley. Did you recently write a check for \$138,950.00? To Office Max?"

I thought back. I didn't recall writing a check in that amount.

"Ach -- someone forged my signature on a check," I cried into the receiver. "Someone bought \$138,950 worth of office supplies with my money!" I was beside myself, which was convenient.

"Possibly," said the bank office. "But it looks like your name is signed with a rubber stamp."

That wasn't good. I own a rubber stamp with my signature on it. For check-signing day, the 5th day of every month.

"Hold on," I said, booting up Quicken, my handy-dandy financial data tool. Scanning the check register, I saw recent checks written in the amounts of \$24.99 (newspaper), \$34.95 (bottled water), \$138,950 (office supplies), and \$12(class pictures for my kid).

Whoah, back up there. There it was. I had made out, and signed (or stamped) my signature on a check for \$138,950 to Office Max. The only notation I made on the check was: "Lexmark carts."

I had sent all that money to Office Max for four ink-jet cartridges (three black and white, one color).

"Um, I think that's a mistake," I said.

"Pretty big one," said the officer.

I asked her if it was possible to stop payment on the check. "Well, we already paid it. That's why you're overdrawn by \$137,632.41."

"Well, what can I do about this?"

"What would you like to do?"

"I'd like to get my money back, so I don't have to explain this to my wife," I said.

"If I were you, I'd call Office Max."

Which is what I did. I got hold of someone in customer service, and poured out my whole stupid story, how I don't see things that are up close so good, a problem I compound when I don't proofread things as important as checks, and I evidently entered a comma (138,950) instead of a period (138.95) and didn't stop to read the check, or glance at my check register. And could I have my money back?

No one at Office Max had flagged the check for \$138,950 as anything unusual. They're a Kmart subsidiary, you know.

But she said sure, all I had to do was write her a letter explaining the screw-up and including a new check, made out in the amount of \$138.95.

Well, I'm here to tell you I learned a big lesson that day about security and such. Rachel never did find out, either, which is just the way I like these things.

But I still had the matter of the wheelbarrow.

It was a bad wheelbarrow, with a tire that wouldn't stay inflated and handles wrapped in shredded duct tape in a failed effort to keep the wood from giving you splinters. The only identifying mark I had on it was the wear and tear of being left out in the cold eight winters in a row. The actual body of the thing was more or less immaculate; all it ever did was fill with rain.

But here's the deal. Someone was running a stolen wheelbarrow ring on Saint Paul's west side, sneaking up to the sides of garages in the dead of night and making off with lawn

implements. Wheelbarrows, fertilizer spreaders, weedwhackers and god knows what all else.

You don't feel safe anymore. Worse, it makes you wonder about people.



## **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, clambering 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 uriny 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.

(1994)

## Reunion Tale

I was drunk. I was 30 years old, at my 15th year high school reunion in a small town in Ohio. And I was angry.

Most of my classmates stayed close to home, but I had moved away – not just geographically but in my state of mind. Where they all took regular jobs, I became a writer, and put myself in the path of every weird experience I could. I was finishing a first novel, I had Alex Haley's agent, and my future looked impressive and dangerous.

I had left this town feeling defeated by it, bullied by it, underestimated by it. And now I was coming back and I felt fierce as Elvis Costello's second album. And I wanted to run people's noses in it.

I danced with a couple of girlfriends, and I could really dance just like the guy in “Do You Love Me?” (I can do the mash potato...) I pushed just a little too far with both of them, just to see the looks in their husbands' eyes. I told tall tales at my table, tales that subtly reflected my worldliness and hipness, and subtly hinted at how lucky they were that I came back to the little quarry town by Lake Erie.

I was buying my fourth or fifth drink, and tipping the bartender conspicuously, when I bumped into him. It was Jim Mussina, all right. The same brutal eyes I remember from grade school. That leatherneck haircut. The wide-spaced nostrils, like a

mean pig. The cinderblock chin that could shatter an anvil.

But what the hell, Jim Mussina was no threat to me. Any more. I nodded at him, Humphrey Bogart style, a combination of “hello” and “what the hell do you want?” But Mussina looked at me like he didn't know me.

“It's me,” I said to him, “Mike Finley.”

I swear a look of fear came over his face when I said that. Which was great. I would have paid \$50 to see that look.

You see, Jim Mussina tormented me in the 7th grade. I don't know what his problem was, but he sized me up that year as someone to brutalize. Every day it was a different assault. Getting pushed to the ground, having my arm twisted behind my back, throwing books in the bushes, slapping me on the face and laughing at my tears.

One time he stopped my bike with his hands, lifted the handlebars off the ground, and threw me down, with the broke landing on top of me, wheels spinning. He enjoyed seeing me cry, and though I tried to hold back the tears, I gave him lots of pleasure. My rage and frustration were total. I had no cool in me that year, it had all been pounded out.

And now here was Jim Mussina, 20 years later. He wasn't so big now. We were the same height. I had filled out, I ran, I was in pretty good shape. I felt that, if push came to shove, I could hold my own with this guy in the parking lot. In fact, I was desirous of

the opportunity.

He and I stared at one another for just a moment, and I decided to take a chance. “Jim can I ask you a question?”

“Sure.”

“What did you have against me back in sixth grade?”

His eyes fluttered and looked away. “Look, man, I did a lot of creepy things when I was a kid. I was crazy, and rotten. I'm really sorry.”

Interesting, but I wasn't having any. “No, I'm serious,” I said. “Nobody else ever treated me the way you did. Every day you take after me, and made my life hell. I used to stay up at night wondering why me? Did I have LOSER stamped on my forehead? Really, I want to know why you chose me out of everyone at St. Joseph's to beat up on.”

He flushed. I felt great slapping him with that question. It felt wonderful to have a fearful impact on him for a change, instead of the other way around. I pointed at him, violently enough that some of my drink spilled. “What the fuck were you thinking?”

“I was a messed up kid,” he stammered, with the look of a man who has had to apologize before. “My home was nuts. My mom was nuts. My dad beat on me. I was out of control.”

“Yes,” I said icily. “But why me.”

He looked up at me and our eyes really met for the first time, and I could see from the yellow sclera that he really had been through something, some kind of conversion experience, and he was not the same creep I knew in grade school. What I saw in his face was grief.

But what he said blew me away:

“I hated you because you smiled at your sister's funeral.”

Everything seemed to freeze around us. The band playing “Hang On Sloopy” faded into the background. The blinking lights, the flashbulbs popping, the roar of chatter arising from the folding tables all dwindled, as I remembered that day. May 8, 1961.

I had a sister named Kathy, five years older than me, born in 1945. She was born with a broken valve in her heart, that leaked blood and kept her from getting the oxygen to her lungs and body that she needed to be strong. Because of this defect her skin was a pale bluish color, and her condition was known as “blue baby syndrome.”

If you were a bluebaby in 1945, your prognosis was poor. Five years later, relatively simple surgical procedure would be developed that reversed the defect at birth. But we lived in a quarry town, far from an academic hospital. We never knew of such a thing.

Kathy was not supposed to live long. My parents' marriage was a mismatch. My father was a drunk and a party-goer, and my mother was lots more complicated. The family story is that their first date was to another couple's wedding in the final days of World War II, and to steal the wedding couple's glory they announced their engagement at the reception. They never bothered to examine one another to see if they could bear to spend a full day together, much less the rest of their lives.

When Kathy was born, they agreed to stay married until the little girl died, so that she would have something like a loving home. No one figured she would live fifteen years, but she did. No one figured she would emerge as a very bright, very talented girl, good at drawing, a huge fan of Elvis Presley, and a participant in horse shows. She put on plays that she wrote herself, in our garage, with a boy named Brian. I have a picture of her at age 13, astride a pinto pony, wearing a turquoise rayon cowgirl shirt, and a sash that for some reason said "Gay." It must have been the horse's name.

Kathy was kind of the town ripple. Lots of people felt sorry for her and were very kind. Lots of kids were mean to her, excluding her from things, even though she was very keen to be a part. Her friend Brian, who went on to be one of the voices for the Muppets, seemed to know just the right note to hit. "Look out, Kathy," he once joked. "Here comes the Purple People Eater!" She loved that.

She lived to be fifteen years old. She would have lived even longer, but for a dental problem. Because her body did not get

enough nourishment from her blood, she didn't develop like other girls. Puberty came, and that was all right. But unlike other kids, she never lost her baby teeth. There was not enough blood in her to hasten that normal development. So instead her little baby pearls lived longer than they are designed to, and they began to rot. Her dental infections threatened to cause abscesses, which could be life-threatening. So to forestall that, we signed a waiver with a dentist who lived four doors down from us. He removed her teeth, she went into shock, and died about 72 hours later, in our little 12-bed quarry town hospital.

That was May 5, and it was an impossible day for me. I was 11 years old and painfully self-conscious. I had skipped a grade in school, and was surrounded by kids older and bigger than me, who taunted me for being immature.

But it was worse than that. There was something in my personality that set people off. I was very bright verbally. I was a clown. I loved to tell jokes and make others laugh. I sometimes disrupted class with some attention-getting shtick that made the other kids laugh, but annoyed the nuns who taught me. The word they always used for me was flippant, which I understood to mean unserious and trivial.

To me, I was just lively, and irreverent. They were attributes of the people I enjoyed – people like Mark Twain and Bill Cosby and Soupy Sales and the Marx Brothers. They were weisenheimers. They knew how to have fun with their minds.

And it was the part of my personality I retreated to, for safety's sake, when my sister lay dying. "Hey Finley," kids would ask me on the playground, "how is your sister doing?"

And God help me, I could not match their solemnity. Maybe I grinned and promised she would be fine. I don't know what I said. But I did not act sufficiently grave, because Phil Gallo, a big tall kid in my class, bent over and said to me: "You don't seem very sad."

In truth, I didn't know how serious the situation was. Kathy had been in the hospital before, and always come out. And this was just a trip to the dentist's.

I remember when the ambulance came, and they carried her down our stairs on a stretcher, and she was already slipping into unconsciousness, and she touched my arm on the way out, and asked me to fetch her scapular, which I did, the kind with the plastic sheathing on the flaps, that sticks to your skin on hot days.

So my friends were telling me it was serious, but my parents were telling me nothing. They loved Kathy. She was the only thing holding our family – I also had two brothers, an older and a younger – together.

I desperately wanted to escape from the trap I felt closing around me. So I must have told jokes, or been jokey, or kidded around with people. And it must have seemed unseemly. And here was Jim Mussina blowing me away at the American Legion, telling me that the reason he attacked me like a savage every

school day for a year and a half, until I graduated from the eighth grade, was because I grinned at Kathy's funeral.

And my uncles and aunts had driven down from Michigan for the funeral, and they stopped at a turnpike toll plaza and bought some consolation gifts for my brothers and me – those enormous swirly-colored lollypops, maybe 10 inches in diameter. And also a pair of cheap straw hats, the kind Sam Snead might wear, only painted in a gaudy patent-leather white lacquer, and with a big fake, fluffy turquoise feather sticking out of the band.

It was hideous, but I loved it, and while the family huddled I disappeared to the nearby woods, wearing the ugly hat.

I was trying to escape the vise. I could not think of Kathy's being dead and what that meant. I could only think about how it affected me, or might affect me. My thoughts were a jumble, but one thought I remember after all these years – I wanted to live my normal life, of playing and enjoying the jokes and anecdotes on the back page of *Boys's Life* and in *Reader's Digest*.

I walked through the woods, hoping to be distracted from the commotion. I tiptoed on a log that had fallen across the creek. I scrambled through some briars and broke an old jug on a rock. But at some point in the woods I was suddenly unable to breathe. I realized that there was no escape from what happened. In fact, by being in the woods I was in great danger. I felt that a ghost was following me on the path, blowing like a chill wind despite the

beautiful day in May. I ran home, not crying – I was unable to cry, and I wondered if that meant I did not love Kathy. No, I just ran.

I remember the funeral. I had already had a blow-up with my mother. When the limousine from the funeral home arrived at our house, I took my place on one of the pull-up seats in the back – wearing the stupid white and turquoise hat. It was everyone's saddest moment, and there I was wearing that hat, and complaining bitterly when it was taken away, as if the hat were all that mattered that morning.

My mother gave me a look of such scorn. Years later, I still feel terrible about being a punk that day. But I think, too, that it would have been nice if one of my parents had been able to talk to me, and explain what it all meant, and how we would go forward together. The reason, of course, is that we would not go forward together. This was the last mile for us, but I did not know that then. I just wanted my hat.

The church was not really a church. Our parish didn't have money to build a church, so it built a school first, to educate us baby boomer kids. Until the church was built, ten years later, we attended mass in a gymnasium. The pews were bolted to the hardwood, so basketball also had to wait for the new church. Jesus hung from the cross at the far end of the gym, flanked by high walls of polished locker-room tiles. It was a curious effect.

The funeral was a major town event. Everyone came, from

both the Catholic and public schools. Everyone knew Kathy, and everyone was touched by her death. The family filed in after everyone else was situated. Even the choir loft was full to bursting.

It was excruciating for me. All my life I had one instinct – to smile at my friends when I saw them. I couldn't help it, it was wired into my being. I think it was an act of submission that I did to feel safe among all the bigger kids. Smile, be a clown, maybe they won't hurt you.

I struggled through the service, thinking how much easier it would be if all the people just went away, so I could feel some feelings beside embarrassment.

The worst moment was when the casket was rolled down the aisle, and the family was asked to follow it out, and face every single face in the church. I looked around and saw everyone I knew. And everyone was either ashen with grief or uncomfortable with having to be there – it was compulsory for the kids.

It was like I could read all their thoughts, the thoughts of an entire town. It was like listening to a hundred radio stations at once – so much information, so much to think about. My mind hurt.

And that was the moment I sealed my fate. Marching toward the sea of familiar faces, I felt myself blushing through to the bones of my face, and huge hot smile overtaking me.

I didn't want to. I couldn't help it. It happened. What can I say.

So I'm standing in the American Legion looking up at Jim Mussina, and I don't feel drunk anymore, and I don't feel like such a hotshot any more.

“You hated me because I smiled ...”

“Yeah, I thought it meant you didn't care. So I decided to make you care about something.”

“You know, Jim,” I said, “you can't possibly know what I was feeling.”

“Of course I know. I was an asshole. I'm still an asshole. I'm sorry. I'm really, really sorry.”

I felt tears coming, the tears I couldn't show 20 years earlier. Mussina had trashed me because he, too, loved my sister. That bastard asshole sonofabitch loved my sister so much that he made my life miserable as a token of his love. He was showing his steadfastness by breaking me down, day after day after day.

Things happened quickly. I forget what the signal was. But suddenly we were hugging, and it wasn't a standard 5-second, two-slaps on the back man to man hug. It was deeper than that, and longer than that, and I could feel myself sobbing in his arms,

my tears running in greasy streaks down his leather jacket.

(1989)

## The Alien Corn

It turned out to be nothing like that. I was invited to Worthington by a very interesting man named Paul Gruchow. Paul had actually hired me for my first reporting job at the University five years earlier – which he didn't remember, because I lasted all of three days. Since then he had become a Congressional aide, a farmer (a very bad one – he once plowed under an entire field of planted corn in an effort to weed it), and now, a newspaper publisher. He was also a well-known regional writer about the prairie and other rural issues. He saw an article of mine that he liked, about the sinking of the ore-ship Edmund Fitzgerald in a storm on Lake Superior, and offered me the news editorship on an impulse.

Alas, Paul didn't do his homework. Worthington already had one homespun author-journalist, himself, and neither it nor he required a bumptious younger applicant for that position. So when I showed up for work, the two of us were chagrined at our inability, despite good intentions, to work together. Basically, the problem was that I was too young and too eccentric. I was good – the Daily Globe, always a good newspaper for photos and stories, also became a well-designed newspaper under my regime.

But my judgment was impaired by too many years of surrealism. My first week, a wire story came in about a family in Parma, Ohio, near where I grew up. The kids in the family paid a neighborhood bully \$50 to kill their father, because he wouldn't let them watch TV after 7 PM. The bully proceeded to kill the father. I knew this town, and I felt I knew this situation far from

the prairie. And I thought that entitled me to lead the page one story with the following snide headline:

*Don't Like Your Dad?  
Do What These Kids Did*

So it was that during my first week on the job, the adult readers of Nobles county, afraid that their children would pitchfork them to death in their sleep, clamored for my removal. Things got better after that, but a cloud of suspicion hung over me. It was as if a surrealist poet was running the daily operations of a small town newspaper. It put Paul in a dicey position, and the comity that existed between us dwindled.

But I loved the town, and I loved the stories that Paul and other people told me – stories of courage and pain and devotion. One involved a very well-known stringer on the paper, who wrote a biweekly "what's happening" column. Let's call her Marge. Marge told this story to Paul, and he told it to me.

It seems Marge was put up for adoption as a baby girl by her mother. But this mother, instead of disappearing, hung around. She found out who adopted the little girl and moved in next door, and proceeded to become best friends with the adoptive mother, and "neighborhood mom" to her own daughter. As Marge grew to adulthood, she was very close to her mother next door. When her adoptive mother died, her real mother became even closer. When Marge was in her thirties, she stumbled upon information in her birth records that revealed that her good friend was her real mother. But it was too late – much, much too late – for the two Lutherans to acknowledge they had been living a loving lie all these years. So they maintained the fiction for another twenty years, even after the mother's health failed, and Marge took her in

and nursed her through her final illness. It's a beautiful story of commitment and cowardice. I hesitate to tell it here, even in disguised form, for fear of causing inadvertent pain. But it's too good not to.

Another story involved the gargantuan 6'10" prairie novelist Fred Manfred of nearby Luverne. Fred was a wonderful character who couldn't quite write a genteel English sentence to save his life, but wrote forty novels about the locale he called "Siouxland" anyway. His book *Lord Grizzly* won a National Book Award, so he had qualities of scope and message that belied his prose style.

His books never sold in any number, but he lived a glorious life, building a frontier writer's home overlooking the Blue Mounds of Luverne, with a captain's tower of the lichened bluffs to write from. And his generosity was boundless – in his 60s he deeded the property to the local parks system, with a understood gentleman's agreement that he could reside in the place so long as he lived.

But the parks system betrayed him, and seized the property for park purposes while he was still alive and kicking. He protested, he sued, he bellowed for justice – and was denied. So Fred Manfred packed up all his belongings and moved to the opposite lip of the river gorge and built a second house with his own hands. And this time he built it facing away from the parklands. And his many boxes of books, he buried in Hefty bags deep in his back yard, as a sign of his betrayal.

I uncovered a few stories of my own. A local pastor told me over lunch that a problem in his parish was the phenomenon of "prairie patriarchs" – incestuous households on the grasslands,

isolated farmers who see their daughters as akin to his cattle, subject to their stewardship.

A story this juicy could not be left alone, so I proceeded to write a three-parter, heavier on suggestion than on specifics, describing the challenges pastors and counselors had dealing with this Neanderthal issue. It was a topic that no one wanted to see on the front page of their newspaper, it being an extremely Christian community. Again, I looked outside my office window to see mobs lifting flickering torches. This was the last straw for Paul, who suggested that I stick to editing, and leave reporting to the staff.

Despite my surrealism, I adapted quite well to rural life. Rachel and I rented an acreage from a wonderful farm couple, two miles outside the nearby town of Kinbrae (pop. 15). Every day I would rise at 5:30 and drive the 16 miles to the newspaper to start assembling the day's paper, column inch by column inch.

During our two years in Kinbrae, I had the opportunity to show that I too had prairie grit. Rising at 5:30 meant I was up well before the snowplows. And it was imperative that I be on hand each day – our staff was too small for someone else to fill in for me on an emergency basis. So I became adept at getting to work in all kinds of weather. I drove to work once with a slim, sinuous tornado dancing in a beanfield beside me, perhaps 400 yards away.

In the winter, it snowed, and worse, the prairie winds never ceased blowing the snow in new shapes and depths. One morning I awoke to a snowfall of, on average, six inches of depth, but occasionally, up to 14 inches of drifted depth. I fired up my 1969

Chevy Nova, automatic transmission, and began the 14 mile trip down dirt roads to the paper. The trip took me just under two hours, because the car kept breasting the snow and grinding to a halt. In the city this would be the end of the matter. But I needed to get to the office – my readers, for perhaps the only time in my life, needed me.

So I devised a technique for getting the car through these drifts. Every time I stopped, I would take the jack from the trunk, and lift the front end of the car about four inches over the snow. This put all the weight of the car on the rear wheels, where the torquing action was. Then, with the car still raised, I would drive forward onto the jack. It was like releasing a spring – the rod of the jack would go sproing! and fly off into the snow somewhere. My job was to simultaneously move the car forward through the drift, and watch to see where the jack parts flew, so I would still have them for the next drift.

I stopped about a dozen times between home and the first plowed road, about nine miles away. On the very last push, the jack rod flew about eighty feet into a ditch and disappeared. I found it the following spring, standing upright amid a stand of cattails. More importantly, I arrived at the newspaper before 8 AM, red -faced and drenched in perspiration, and ready to kick ass.

Needless to say, rural life prompted many book ideas. I immediately began compiling a book of poems called *Borrowing from Minneapolis (to Pay Saint Paul)*. This was breakthrough writing for me, because none of the poem in the book were about me, and nothing was weird or dreamy or surrealistic. In fact, I was doing the writing Paul Gruchow forbade me from putting in

the paper – and some of it was awfully good. I dug up an oral history about a mean man from Hector, in the 1910s, who tied dynamite to his dog's tail, and slapped her to drive her away, but instead she came back to the house and dove under the bed, and blew everything and everyone up.

Another was a portrait of my yoga teacher Dr. Arya, and what I imagined the arc of his life must be, to be raised a proper Brahmin in India, and to emigrate to the US, where his only marketable talent was to teach meditation, and how he succeeded, and bought a big brick house in Minneapolis' northeast neighborhood, and an Irish setter dog, took up scuba diving.

I wrote about how my artist friend Ray visited from Boston, and I showed him the lay of the land, leading him to a special scene only I knew about – an abandoned barn, in the back stall of which a cat was mummified in the classic arched-back, defensive posture. Every muscle of the cat's body had shrunk and clung to the skeleton beneath. It was a harrowing, horrifying, and yet strangely beautiful artifact, and Ray loved it. Years later, he would invite me to an exhibition of his sculpture and charcoal drawings in Manhattan, and the last item in the exhibit, hanging from fishing line in thin air, was the mummified cat. He had snuck back later that night, on the farm, and absconded with the found object.

I even wrote a poem about the grassfires that used to rage across the prairie, roasting cattle where they stood in the fields – from the perspective of the cattle, and their dread of high winds. A friend found this gruesome story hilarious, because the poem uses "thought-balloons" to convey the animal's internal

Everything was a story for me, and I was the poet-reporter. It was one of the most thrilling periods in my writing life. And it was the beginning of the steep decline in my publishability. Maybe it was the fact that the offset revolution, in which printing was cheap, was coming to an end (printing remained cheap, but paper prices rose). But I think it was the fact that my writing was now adult, was now about something – and editors found that less appealing than my anything-goes earlier work. Borrowing from Minneapolis was the first book poems in the 1970s that I could not find a publisher for – and of course, it was the best.

I also spent months mapping out a colossal novel, a satirical Brothers Karamazov about the rarest of crimes, a small town murder. It ported to the prairie the true story of a Coast to Coast hardware store owner in the river town of Winona named Donald Howard who fell in love with his cashier, a high school cheerleader, and accordingly decided to kill his wife. He hired his best friend Bruce to do the deed, on the sole condition that he make it look like an accident. Bruce, not being too bright, shot her instead. For two months, the hardware store owner worked assiduously with police to find the murderer – the whole town was on his side, as he wept for the TV cameras that came down from the Twin Cities.

Then, as clues increasingly point back to him, he bolted, taking the cheerleader with him. He disguised himself as a riverboat gambler for several weeks – this was in 1975, not 1875. Finally he was apprehended in New Orleans and put in jail, but escaped, for about a day, when the cheerleader smuggled a file into his cell embedded in a cake!

Eventually, the murderer was tried and sentenced to many

years in Stillwater Penitentiary. It was determined, during the trial, that his motive for the murder was not lust for the cheerleader – but anxiety over his wife's demand that he expand his business and open up a second store.

What made the story so great for me was not just the cartoonish actions of the main characters, but the reactions of the people of Winona. I remember a letter to the Minneapolis Tribune from a Winonan, saying, in effect: "You city people experience murders routinely, so it has lost its power to affect you emotionally. But here in Winona, this is very new and very disturbing."

I may be getting some of the details a bit wrong here, because I immediately began fictionalizing the story to fit into a prairie, not a river setting, and doing so meant changing details in my own mind. But the essence of it is 100% true, and I truly believed it could be as big a dark comedy as, oh, *Even Cowgirls get the Blues*. I would cram all my Worthington stories into it, too: the mother-daughter story, the Fred Manfred story, even the prairie patriarch story. I would tear the sod roof off that whole sick rural lifestyle.

But I found I couldn't write it. Donald Howard had two school-aged daughters at the time, and I learned that the foolish crime of their father took away their mother, whom they loved, and their father, who was their sole surviving parent. His story was not, as I imagined, really a comedy, but rather a funny tragedy. So I let the idea slip away. The villagers with torches, who I knew would gather if I ever made another joke at their expense, talked me out of it.

Shortly after I arrived the paper hired a reporter named Russ Vogel, who was raised a few miles away. He returned with his new bride Mary, a spirited girl – I would call her a wise guy if there were a feminine equivalent for that, because she had a mouth and a wit and she wasn't shy about using either – from somewhere in the regular Midwest. They were both younger than Rachel and me, and very bright and decent, and we took them under our collective wing, like younger siblings. Russ reported on area news, and Mary tended bar at the local Holiday Inn.

A few months after their arrival, Mary learned from a medical exam that a mole on the small of her back might be cancerous. The doctor excised it, biopsied it, and gave her a clean bill of health. But a subsequent blood check indicated that the mole had metastasized. Mary was told she had no effective defense against a notoriously fast-spreading malignancy.

In small towns, everyone knows what is happening to everyone, and there is always family or neighbors to help people in trouble pull through. But Russ and Mary had no local resources except the newspaper, and newspaper people are famous for being standoffish. I would like to say that Rachel and I stayed with Russ and Mary to the bitter end, but in fact we were inconsistent, losing track of them for weeks at a time.

Now, driving the endless township miles to and from town, my car radio would seek out religious stations, and I would listen in amazement as crazed radio preachers, from stations below the Mason Dixon line, aided in their transmission by the flukish miracle of solar flares, called out Satan and exorcised sin. I asked our landlords, Bob and Lucille, if I could accompany them on Sundays to their Presbyterian Church. I attended, and communed,

and sang, and ate cake afterward.

One time Rachel and I ran into Mary tending bar, and the light that used to pour from her eyes had all poured out, and all I saw was worry and despair. I sat with her for an hour as she narrated her stations of the cross, how one doctor said one thing, and another said another, and her hopes rose and fell, and shot back up, and then crash-dived. I hadn't felt so helpless since my sister was hauled out of her bedroom on a stretcher, in 1961.

A few short weeks later Mary lay dying in the local hospital. Rachel attended her during the last week, when Mary was so sick she vomited tumor. It wasn't Love Story; it was a gruesome, wrenching, awful death for such a powerful, beautiful young woman.

At the funeral, attended mainly by the news staff – Mary's mother, from whom she was estranged, never came to Worthington, either before or after her death – the minister asked if anyone wished to testify. No one moved, and rather than have the moment slip away, I stood in front of the people who worked with me, and began blubbering about Mary.

I asked what we could possibly know about a God that permitted such a thing. I knew that life was perilous, and our chances of being spared are slim. I talked about my sister, and how I missed her, and how sharp Mary was, and how badly I felt for her and for Russ. And while I was blubbering it occurred to me I was feeling something else as well – a kind of ecstatic gratitude for even the horror of this death, because the horror told us the truth that the rest of our lives hid from us, that we are all on a hellbound train to death and dismemberment – but our minds

shield us from this simple truth of being alive. Tears were rolling down my face as I turned to Russ and blubbered a paradoxical thank you.

No wonder the guys in the newsroom, the beat reporters, showed me so little respect. I was too weak for the business I was in. I was an emotional tourist. And I shudder to think what good my demonstration did Russ, who came around to our house the day after the funeral, handed over to us his album of pictures from his wedding, for us to hold onto – they were his only pictures of Mary – and then he vanished.

We ran into Russ again ten years later. He spent eight years brooding, and then began to ease back into life. He remarried a woman named Cindy, and they were caretakers of a apartment building in suburban Saint Paul. One night, I drove to the complex, and slipped the pictures of Mary under their door.

But back in Worthington, our Wobegon experiment was coming to an end.

And when Rachel got word, in our twenty second month on the prairie, that she was accepted for graduate study at Yale, I thought, one door closes, and another opens. And I was glad I didn't get trapped, like the other reporters, in that tiny city.

(1993)

## My Feud

By the time I was in my twenties it was important to me to be writing, and poetry, particularly surrealistic poetry, was the most natural path for me. It required no outside knowledge, and the rules within the form were certainly elastic. I reckon that during the years between 1969 and 1977, I wrote an average of five poems a day.

This was not unusual. There was an offset revolution going on in America at that time. Insty Prints and other paper-plate printing companies made printing something everyone could afford. It was nothing to type up a 24-page booklet, run it down to the shop, and run off 100 copies overnight. You collate and staple them yourself, and you were a published author for about \$50. Or you could put out a magazine. I did both. It was great. Every day was like a day of creation, and at the end, if you wanted to, you could ball up that day's creation and throw it away. You could do anything.

I was like most young writers, full of fire but without anything special or coherent to say. But I did not know that at the time. I loved the fact that I was able to create certain effects with language. That was my talent, in fact – atmospherics. I knew how to end a poem so that you heard crickets afterward, or you felt like you, too, could weep for some unnamed loss. At least, I thought I could.

One day I noticed something odd about my writing – I felt compelled to break rules. One rule of poetry in the 60s and 70s, at least in the prairie school of poetry I was tutored in, was that you

had to stay very concrete and imagistic. You weren't allowed to get into generalities or name feelings – you could only portray things. But I liked breaking that rule. In particular, I liked using the word *love* in poems. Love was a kind of harlequin character, you could meet it on the street, or pass it by, and never know what you'd missed. It was never far from the concept of sorrow.

I thought I was very close to becoming a major figure. I cut a flashy figure at readings and such, and my work was appearing in hundreds of magazines, including a big spread in John Gills's *New Poets of Canada and America*. My confidence grew. And I started picking fights with people I knew I could easily dispatch. I would tease a very dolorous confessional poet about cheering up.

The worst was a fellow I will call Bill Navaski. He was a big, boorish man who edited a local magazine, held readings, and wrote poetry reviews for the Sunday book section. He was really sort of the poetry czar of the Twin Cities for a few years – no one saw print or found an audience except through him. He was exceptionally easy to dislike, and I quickly made him the villain in my life. He had a reputation for being a violent drunk, mean to women, and dismissive of women poets. So I rose intuitively to their defense – though I didn't like many women poets' poems, either.

I signaled to Navaski that I was his archnemesis in a cheap shot essay in the Minnesota Daily. I wrote a "review" of the local poetry scene in which I characterized him as having "the personality of an axe murderer." It delighted me to think of him being galled by something I said in print. In my mind, he was so transparent – so mean-spirited, so full of himself, and so unlikable – that people reading the article would be helpless except to come

over to my side, overthrow the czar, and who knows, install me as his benevolent replacement.

Of course, nothing of the sort happened. People put up with him, because at least he did the scutwork of holding the readings, and they did not want to jeopardize the bennies he distributed. To my horror, instead of taking my side, people saw our flare-up as two young male buffalo locking horns to establish dominance of the herd. Far from being his opposite, I was perceived as his twin.

Altogether, I made unflattering mention of Navaski three times in the paper. They were gruesome, taunting, insinuating mentions. And then Navaski struck back. For the better part of a year, Navaski would mention me gratuitously in reviews of other poets' work in the Sunday Tribune. He did this eight or nine times. Example: "In Galway Kinnell's latest collection, he succumbs to the solipsist pretensions of poetaster Michael Finley, beating his chest to win the attention of his betters. Alas, it never worked for Finley, and it doesn't work for Kinnell."

At first I would find these mentions hilarious, and suppose them to backfire. I mean, I was nobody, and Kinnell was a major poet – introducing me as a third party in order to pick on me was so – transparent. He even wormed his way into a counter-culture magazine that I wrote for, in order to skewer me. This really pissed me off, because he wasn't counter-culture, *I* was. Alas, no one cared whether it was transparent. Instead my name just sat on the dungheap, ants clambering over it, dully informing people who I was and what my shortcomings were.

And it just kept getting worse. At one point, the two of us corresponded. He was rough and threatening, and I was nimble

and clever, dancing around his hulking rage. And I did unethical things, cc'ing his letters to people whom I was sure would lose respect for him if they only read his own stupid words. Didn't happen – or at least, no one gave me the satisfaction of saying so. I wrote to one of his sponsors, informing the group of his mismanagement of their money. It was really bad.

Finally, one day, I admitted to myself that this wrestling match was causing me a lot of pain. And shame. Even though I was the good one – well, better than him, anyway – I felt I had ruined my own reputation.

I was alone in Minnesota, with no family, no girlfriend, no money, and no prospects. My parents signed legal papers emancipating me, making me financially responsible for myself. I asked them to. I was very proud, and writing was the source of my pride. But the aloneness went on forever. Even though I was too much of a coward to really go after the topics that might have addressed this anguish – in writing, or in therapy – I considered myself bold to toy with them, however elliptically, in verse.

When my first book *Lucky You* came out in 1976, I convinced myself that it was a book of laments for my dead sister – despite the fact that I never once mention her in the book. I thought I was fighting the good fight, and that people who didn't appreciate me were indifferent to my pain, and to hers. They became the bullies that tormented her in grade school, and I turned on them in kind.

So I wrote him a letter, apologizing. I discovered, when I sat and thought about it, that while I had contempt for him, and thought him to be a total crumb, he was not the problem of my life. Foolishly, I allowed him to stand in for the real item of my

grief – the pain I still felt from my sister's life, and death. When I thought of it that way, I felt that I had let my own cause down, that I let a concern of the greatest seriousness devolve into a stupid pissing match.

"Dear James," I wrote him, "this is to tell you that I am sorry for my part in the scene we have been creating the past year. I really do dislike you, but I can see very clearly now that you have no idea why I dislike you – and that is unfair of me. So I will tell you. When I was a boy I had a sister who was sick. Her skin was blue from poor circulation, and other kids made fun of her. And then she died of the thing they made fun of her for, and I transferred my grief for her life into anger at them for being so mean. And then, when I met you, you reminded me so much of them.

"I'm not saying I have misjudged you. I'm saying I should have only dealt with the actual complaints I have against you – not this cosmic background thing, to which you have no real connection and no responsibility.

"Please accept my apologies, and my promise to never bother you again. I'm sorry for any pain I may have caused you. Sincerely, Mike Finley."

Of course, I continued to despise him, but distantly. This experience was very sordid and very embarrassing to me. But because of it something important happened to me. I realized that things are not always what they seem – our reasons for the present often lie in the mysterious past. I learned that it is very hard to persuade people of things that run counter to their interests. And I sensed to my surprise that Navaski was actually right about

surrealism and solipcism – that it is a shortcut to expression. A better art, a better life, would be one that builds on reality, that is awake and thinking, not just dreaming.

These were good lessons. They made the whole fracas almost worthwhile.

Years later, word came to me that Navaski was supposedly dying of congestive heart failure, brought on by a life of hard drinking.

People I trusted told me that while Navaski was still a very nice guy, he wasn't as bad as he used to be. He was just a guy with a bad personality, doing his best to not rub people the wrong way.

No, I didn't make a deathbed visit to him and make up. For that matter, he didn't even die. But it softened things to know that he too, in his own zone, was learning.

Turned out, he wasn't quite dying after all. He was still well enough to do prison time for trying to rendezvous at a bust station with an underage girl who turned out to be an FBI agent. That Navaski! That colorful feud!

(1985)

## 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 scarce. 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.

(1999)

## Friends and Tumors

In January of 1999 I experienced a stroke, which was found to have been caused by a brain tumor inside my head. When I learned this, I sincerely believed I would not live to the millennium.

No need to get out your handkerchiefs. It turns out, I'm doing fine. Well, not fine, but "28" – which I'll explain.

What I want to write about are the different ways my friends responded to this news. As you can imagine, I learned a lot in those first weeks.

The first thing I realized was how important my friends were to me. I wanted to tell everyone, right away, by e-mail, phone, snailmail, whatever. I think I felt that if I got them all engaged, I would somehow be spared. It's like the tumor would lose me in the crowd.

The first few days I was inundated with replies. It turns out everyone knows someone who has had a brain tumor, and either died of it, or didn't. Many people expressed a kind of generic shock. We're all baby boomers, and this death idea is just starting to take hold. They wanted to know if they could do anything. Specifically, did we need food? The food theme was poignant two ways – feeble in the face of the medical reality, yet so comforting, and so human.

My friend Dirk went beyond chicken soup. He began calling regularly, hoping to link me up with a traditional Chinese acupuncturist and herbalist he saw in New York's Chinatown. To

hear Dirk tell the tale, this man could achieve remarkable things, curing everything from dandruff to cancer. And I was ready to see him, when the doctor told Dirk that, alas, acupuncture and herbs had little effect on brain tumors. Nice of him to say so, though – and great of Dirk to get so involved on my behalf. Could you have a better friend than one that wants to save you?

Dirk wasn't alone in this. Another New York friend, Peter, wrote asking if I wanted him to get me a good East Coast brain man. I felt ungrateful telling him I thought my Midwestern brain man was pretty good. But in fact, I was very touched.

My friend Jerry had a good line. "I believe there has been a misdiagnosis. What they are calling a tumor is really an organ in your head that only you have, that is in charge of being funny, and coming up with wonderful ideas." Well, I liked it.

A couple of friends got downright competitive with me. Sure, I had a brain tumor, but didn't Abe have a failing kidney, and didn't Dennis had a weird asymptomatic blood disease? We were all three desperate to be sicker than the other two. They were very jealous of my tumor, because in the realm of scary diagnoses, brain tumors plainly rock.

Then there was Dan. The same time I went down with the stroke, he was being tested for lung cancer. He didn't smoke, but his symptoms suggested tumors. We had not spoken much before, but we had one remarkable conversation in which we tearlessly told one another that we didn't mind dying so much, but it was hell to think of leaving our children and wives. Dan is a private man, but he gave me a hell of a peek into his soul that day.

The only friends who disappointed me were the ones who averted their eyes. We might be talking shop and I would venture, "I suppose you heard about my little problem...." And it was like a cold draft moved through the room. I could just see a few of these people bundling themselves up against the cold. The tumor inside my brain somehow threatened them. They couldn't help it – it was just too scary to acknowledge.

A number of people just wanted me to say something to make it all right. If I told them I was ill, they could handle that with the customary gestures. But there was no gray zone between "ill" and "fine." The answer they wanted was the answer we are supposed to give even when our hearts are breaking, and our bodies are opened wide and bleeding: "fine." By not providing that answer, I was being difficult.

A few people turned away, but with a good excuse. My friend Jane asked me to take her off my brain tumor email update list. "I just can't take it," she said. "Can you understand?" It wasn't just squeamishness, which was what she claimed. I could tell she genuinely feared for me, and it unnerved her. Her fear was a sign of her caring.

I got a note from Alice, an old friend. "Thanks for being so 'out there,' about your problem" she said. "I am trying to be less ashamed of my weakness, a tremor in my hand that I can't control. I haven't wanted people to know. I feel like I'm letting them down." She discloses that she was coming out with her problem. She even joined an online tremor group with the name wemove.com.

People can have very unusual reactions. When I told a neighbor lady at our door about my tumor, she burst into tears – and I mean rolling, sputtering, cascading raindrops – and hugged me like it was the last time she would see me. I tried telling her it was all right, but she was unconsolable on my behalf.

But the strangest response was my writer buddy Erv's. We were out playing pool a month after the stroke. I sipped a beer and filled him in on what was going on with me, that I got these bad headaches, and nighttime convulsions, and my weakened circulatory system meant that certain activities, like having sex, caused me to be in a lot of head pain.

I never thought twice about telling him that. But a month later, over Thai lunch, he confessed that he is sometimes unable to hear a medical story without manufacturing the same symptoms in himself – partly out of sympathy, partly out of neurosis. He's like that empathy in Star Trek, who takes away people's pain, and feels it himself. Except, he couldn't help it.

He told me that while we drank beer and shot pool that first night, he was secretly feeling agonizing pain in his testicles, which is what he imagined I was feeling. He continued to feel this pain for the better part of the next week. But he never even winced in my presence.

While we poked at our satay, I repeated my mistake. I told him my tumor was bothersome because I obsessed about it. I wanted to write about it. It was all I thought about – but it also seemed to interfere with my thinking process. I was using a microcassette recorder out walking, to save my ideas.

Erv then astonished me by imitating me trying to dictate into the little machine while experiencing a severe headache, uttering a promising phrase, then claspng his head and moaning loudly, right there in the restaurant. It was hilarious, but it also sent a chill through me – he was pantomiming my possible final days. I am still sorting it out.

My poet friend Rich took the opposite tack. He told me I was thinking about it too much. He especially criticized my efforts to write about it. "There's no way you're going to achieve any meaningful perspective on this so soon after diagnosis," he said. "And it's no good for you. You don't want to make a cult of this thing. It isn't you."

I was taken aback by this at first. How dare he pull the rug out from under my illness? But as time passed, I found he was exactly right. In the long view, the tumor is very boring even to me. But at that time, it was everything. Meanwhile, I had dozens of people inquiring about it every day. What was I to do?

So I asked myself, "Finley, what is it you want from people exactly?" And came up with these thinking points.

First, I do like sympathy. I always have. I think it has curative value. When people express concern I feel loved, and that somehow shelters me from my own fears. And there is truth in it.

Whereas, when I act nonchalant and say, "Oh this is nothing," or "They say it's benign," I see my friends erase the topic from their minds completely. I don't want it to disappear altogether, because damnit, it's an important issue for me. I want to pull these friends back in and say, "But, you know, benign tumors kill

people all the time. There's only so much room in there, and the brain wants it all to itself."

So I came up with the Michael Finley Worry Index. It's a number from 1 to 100 that I make up, and that changes from day to day, as new information arrives. It's like the fire risk ratings posted by the U.S. Forest Service. The night I had my stroke, my rating would have been 90. By the time I was first diagnosed with the tumor, my rating was still high, about 60 – moderately high worry of imminent death. As successive scans showed that the tumor was big, but appeared to be inert – that it had done the worst damage it was likely to do – I have slowly dropped it to 47, then 35, and now 28. Which is about the same as most people my age (50).

So now I can do a service to my friends. Just as they brought me roasted chickens and assorted other hot dish, now I can put their minds somewhat to rest concerning my condition. Knowing your concern is geared to an appropriate level is a great comfort all around.

And you know, it was just about the time I instituted this index that I felt a cloud lift inside me. Doggone it, it wasn't just my friends' job to take care of me. I had to take care of them a little, too. I had to help them through this passage the same as me. The index gave us all an out, a place to stand, a kernel of numerical, no-bullshit truth. Now, when I see a friend, and we have gone over the ground rules, I give a thumbs-up and utter the number: "28."

And you know, it feels so great to be alive, and to enjoy the affection of so many good people. That alone buoys me up. 28?

On a good day, on a really, really good day, when there is laughter and stories and the beautiful feeling of being known, I'll go even lower.

(1999)

## Maxims for Marriage

I was very flattered to be asked to deliver up my wisdom about the married state for you today. I remembered things my mother and father told me over the years, and I wrote them down on this piece of paper. It's the sum total of what they learned during the sometimes difficult years they spent together.

I call the list "Advice to Married Persons."

My father, on finances: Set aside a little money every month, and at the end of five years, you will be surprised how little there is.

My mother, on anger. Never go to bed mad at one another. One idea is to put your heads together and think of someone you both hate. This always brought us together.

My dad: If you're not good at taking criticism, marry someone inexperienced.

My mom: If you're not good at handling compliments, don't worry. It won't be much of a problem.

My dad: husbands should practice asking strangers for directions. Your wife will be surprised, and it allows you to shift blame for being late to the knucklehead at the gas station who knew just where Highway 127 was.

My mom: wives should allow husbands to make regular decisions. About once every two months should do it. Unless it's important.

My dad: Read the paper, do the crossword puzzles. Keep your mind active – you never know when you may be called upon to use it again.

My mom: Remember that it is more blessed to give than receive. This is especially true of wedding presents.

My dad: Every day, you will have a moment when you wake up next to the same person you wake up next to every other day. Catholic theologians (I was raised Catholic) say that these moments, strung all together, will be deducted from your stay in purgatory.

My mom: Give one another space. The reason your father and I stayed married was because I gave him space. If he's good, some day I may move some of it into the house.

My dad: Value the differences between the two of you. it's good to be different. On the other hand, you'd save big on clothes.

My mom: develop a sense of humor. What sense does it make to be mad at somebody when you could be laughing at them?

My dad again, on impulse control: Before you say something you regret, count to ten. Better yet, count something that makes you happy, like favorite

football plays. But don't smile, because that will confuse things.

My mom: Remember that behind every successful person is a supportive spouse. It is also a good place to stand when the bricks start to fly.

My dad told me: Always have a litter bag in the car. When it fills up, just toss it out the window. I know that doesn't have anything to do with marriage, but it's the best I could come up with.

My mom again: Don't let your husband take the remote with him into the bathroom. Especially if you've been married a long time.

My dad: Honeymoons can be times of great tension. Rest up. Skip rope. Chew gum. If tension persists, do what we did, go see a movie. John Wayne in *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon* . . . a classic! Well, I liked it, anyway.

I wish the happy couple all the peace and joy the married state affords, and I hope these ideas help, which my mom and dad learned the old-fashioned way, on their second marriages.

(1997)

## Shook Foil

Tony, a friend of mine, died this week, after a long, gruesome illness. For twenty three years Tony suffered from multiple sclerosis. Toward the end it took from him almost everything he had. He could not walk or even work his hands. He ate through a tube in his stomach. He got severe respiratory infections and bed sores. He couldn't speak except in sighs and moans (which I could never quite decipher, and had to figure out a way to respond to). He was, medically speaking, demented.

Because of this he also lost his wife and children, who stopped coming by. It was just too painful. Tony understood. He grieved, but he understood.

Tony and I were seminarians as boys, back in the early '60s when the Catholic Church still sent 14 year olds to begin study for the priesthood. We didn't go to the same school – we discovered this fact about one another when we became roommates as adults.

This doesn't mean Tony and I were great friends. Former seminarians are a peculiar class of people – we carry with us a sense of washing out, but also a sense of having been close to something amazing.

Seminary was a remarkable experience. We used to rise at 5:30 in the morning, silently, and walk through the dark to chapel with our classmates. There we would kneel on hard wood, and blink up at the tabernacle. I can't say what Tony felt, but I felt like I could not be closer to God, kneeling with all those yawning boys.

We were so fair and cherry-cheeked. I contrast that with the haggard look I saw on Tony in his final years. He had lost all the muscle in his arms and legs, and his hair hung like scraggly straw. He became very eccentric, and occasionally very angry. By his own admission, he was “crazy.”

Does God give us more than we can handle? I used to think yes, but Tony, from the wreckage of his existence, managed to convince me otherwise. He lived for five years with a nursing home roommate who also couldn't talk, who was also demented, who was also given to fits of screaming and weeping. Yet when that roommate died, Tony was inconsolable – he loved that broken man so much.

Tony loved Jesus more than you think it would be possible, in a joyous, weeping, delirious way. He could barely put his hands together, but he embraced his Bible sometimes every moment of the day.

He loved getting phone messages. Although he couldn't talk on the phone, he used to play and replay them until he sucked the marrow from every morpheme.

And here's something you wouldn't expect. He read. Lots. He read a book practically every day. And he played cribbage. In the last year of his life he was a cribbage monster, defeating everyone in the nursing home, including the orderlies. Whenever competition was afoot, Tony rallied his resources. He made sure he won, one way or another. Cheating was not totally beyond him.

I myself had gone many years without seeing Tony, when his brother Clete suggested I give him a call. So I dialed the nursing

home number, figuring a nurse would answer, or Tony's answering machine.

Now, I must tell you, I was afraid. Tony could be really weird and I figured he would be antagonized by the voice of a fellow seminarian stopping by to be "charitable." So I had to summon courage just to dial the phone.

The plan was to leave a voice message. Read an inspiring-sounding thought into the tape, then cut and run. But it didn't work out that way.

Instead, after a full minute of fumbling and voices in the background ("Here, let me help you") I know I have a line to Jim.

Since Tony couldn't talk, I had to do all the talking, so did.

"Hello, Tony, this is an old friend. I know you can't guess who I am, so I won't try and make you. This is Mike Finley. Remember, from the house on Superior Street?"

No answer, just loud breathing.

"Well, I saw Clete and his little girl the other day at the dentist's, and we talked about you, and I thought I'd give you a call."

Only breathing as response, but it had an interested quality about it, as in the phrase "bated breath."

I caught him up a bit with my life, my kids, and work. But I didn't go into a lot of detail – family being a sore point for him. "You know, we're all doing pretty good, busy with school and work."

I had run out of things to say, and now, in addition to hearing Tony's breathing, I could hear my own in my ear. I sounded frightened. I said a little prayer, asking for calm, and the right thing to say. And I reached for a book I kept in a desk drawer.

"Tony, I'm going to read something to you, and I'm betting you'll recognize it from seminary. It's the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, and the poem is called "God's Grandeur," and the poem has always amazed me by finding words and images to suggest something we have such a hard time expressing. I want to read it just for you, Tony, because I know you love God."

And before I started to read, my fear melted away. And I found myself pausing to explain what the poem was about.

"Now, this is what English professors mean by a difficult poem, Tony. You remember what that means. It means you have to think about the words. And sometimes, read them over again, and that's what I am going to do."

And that's what I did, stopping to translating some of the phrases and underscoring the really meaningful ones.

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.

"Isn't that amazing, Tony? The world is charged. I picture a cable of high voltage held up to our lives, and God sizzling through the wire."

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:

“Do you hear that, ‘trod and trod’ – can’t you hear how hard it is for all of us to go forward. Seared, bleared, smeared – what words to describe this imperfect life!”

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.

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;

“Tony, I get shivers thinking how nature is never spent, how this freshness courses underneath us every instant, always there for us to tap into.”

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.

When I finished, Tony and I just hung on the line for a few minutes. I could hear the breath in his airways. And while he could not speak to me, I felt this call was very interesting to him. He was thanking me, even though he knew it was a “pity call.”

But I was the thankful one. Somehow that book peeked out at me from deep in my drawer. I remembered liking it, but hadn't read it in years.

But what a glorious thing it was, the idea of God's grace lighting up the world like shook foil, even in the midst of awfulness.

I always have thought I was a pretty clever fellow. But our conversation was like a shipwreck, and then this poem appeared in my hands. Tony turned out to be the one with imagination. He led me through it. He was the man. Somehow, strapped to his bed, the picture of misery, unable to even dial a phone, he locked onto me, and made me feel God's true grandeur.

(1999)

## **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 interesting conversations of my life was over.

## John Henry

During spring cleaning, I found it behind a pile of boxes in the garage – my old Hermes 3000 manual typewriter. In its compact green case, it looked like an early laptop computer. In many ways, it was my first computer. I once wanted to pass it down to my kids, but what's the point, with computers?

The Hermes 3000, made by Paillard S.A., of Yverdon, Switzerland, – now long out of business – was the king of the portables. Weighing 13 pounds, it was all steel, durable and engineered – well, like a Swiss typewriter. You could drop it down a marble staircase and live to write again.

I bought it in 1969, when I was 19, at Midway Typewriter Exchange on Snelling Avenue in Saint Paul. At the time, the \$150 I paid for it, out of my paycheck as a warehouse worker for M&L Motor Parts on University Avenue, was the most I'd ever spent on anything.

The clerk promised it would be my friend for life, and indeed, looking at it now, with the minor dust and grease buildup and missing ribbon, it would not need much to resume service. I named it John Henry, after the steel drivin' man who pounded rail until his heart burst.

I used it for college homework, and I used it to bang out book reviews for the Minnesota Daily. I took it with me when I became a writer. I packed it in the trunk of car on long trips, and typed on it in motel rooms until the adulterers next door banged on the wall to shut up. I took it camping, to the Rockies, to Maine. I have

pictures of me in Guatemala, around 1978, and there is the Hermes upright against my right leg. I took it with me when I went home to see my mom.

It was a responsive machine. Each key had terrific spring. There was no muzzy typing as with today's keyboards. You pushed, it pushed back. That was interactivity, 1970s-style.

The main differences between typewriting and writing by computer are the ability to save and edit files and block move. The "cut and paste" metaphor comes from newspapering, where writers literally cut their pieces up into strips and taped them back together in approximately 8x11 sheets. Cut and paste, whether literal or figurative, is a tremendous liberation for writers. You could slap out words on the machine, and figure out where they went as you worked.

But the old pros didn't need to cut and paste. Machines like the Hermes taught you to think a piece through in advance. When you think of the elegant writing of yore, it is all the more remarkable that those long involved sentences were laid down like track, one word after another. Writing like that was thinking of a high order. Which I am too spoiled now, by my PC, to go back and replicate.

That old green Hermes allowed me to do the thing I am proudest of as a writer: writing an entire novel, called *The Rector's Tale*, 500 pages of track, end upon end. I pounded it out from 1980 to 1981. And I sent it around, with hopes of winning an advance in the low four figures. There was something I wanted desperately to buy with that money – an Apple II+, or maybe a TRS-80, to put an end to retyping.

The book was a long ordeal of toil, poverty, and care to create near-perfect pages, pages that an editor would slap and say, now this is good stuff.

A comedy about the Second Vatican Council, the book I was sure would take the literary world by storm was never published. Go figure.

My book never earned me the money to buy a personal computer with. I was crushed. I knew I lacked the stuff to start at the bottom of the mountain with another book project, and only my noble Hermes 3000 to carry me over. Without block move, the prospect was unbearable. With it, I could be the next Michener.

And isn't that the way of it: I had an Apple soon enough, paid for some other way. I liked it a lot. But something had changed forever. And I never again undertook the long journey I began with John Henry.

## Jacob the Crow

Every now and then something comes along and really jolts me. Yesterday I got an anonymous letter in the mail. Well, not entirely anonymous – the return address is from "G. O. Deliverer, Burnsville MN."

I have gotten crank mail before, usually after a politically tinged letter to the editor exposes me to these kinds of postal slings and arrows.

This was different – it was from someone who is powerfully disgusted by me, not as an advocate, but as a poet. Your soul stinks, is the basic message of the letter.

Here is the manuscript I received:



## A Narrative Poem for Michael Finley

by *Anonymous*

Date of publication: October, 2003,  
On the occasion of the 14th anniversary  
Of the disappearance of Jacob Wetterling

Michael Finley  
God knows  
About your sins under the flag  
And about how [certain gases contrive with stones](#)  
And I know  
I know about down by the Zumbro River, too  
Where there is a beach of sand  
And what was a former cinder pit  
Now replaced with charred wood and sand  
From the occasional flood  
You're a dud; I'll tell you why  
You make people cry  
Mean people suck  
Your flag of sin on that [lascivious ocean](#)  
Shows no regret for that which turned in space  
A hidden clue  
Binoculars  
Watching Jacob and more  
You are that whirlpool of blood  
Down by the Zumbro River  
Where the crows call out in the cold  
Not far past the now closed-off bridge  
Only several hundred yards  
To your private graveyard beach  
Where you again and again reach  
To plant your flag of sin  
But you don't win

Because God knows what you did  
To that nice kid, [Jacob](#)  
[Who never was a crow](#)  
Again, a hidden clue  
Binocular-vision from above  
Hello, Victim, from New York  
A questioning clue ...  
What was a [Minnesotan doing in New York](#)  
Being generous because of excitement  
Then calling the one who needs peace  
Peace, not at all like crystal snow  
On unmarked graves  
Knives  
Don't believe in God  
Fools disapprove of heaven  
That's where boys are still alive  
They have friends to play with  
And the ability to plot against  
Those who would [benefit from a ferocious beating](#)  
That's why there are times when you, Michael  
Want to burst out crying and tell them everything  
Where is your faith  
Is it stored as heat from Chevrolet floorboards  
Speeding through the night  
[Racing past the: pump and cornfields.](#) etc.  
Why would you be proud to the tooth  
For fooling God and man  
This is not your country  
You cannot assign sin to the American flag  
Not funny, but true  
You want to tell the secret  
That has been choking you for years  
You want forgiveness for rude and  
Seemingly forgetful crimes; not yet  
You have a debt  
For bullets pumped out coldly  
Coldness not worth more verse

Your wickedness being dispersed  
You are the worst  
And these are only words, not bullets  
Be angry and sin not  
When you see something bad coming  
You should stop, turn around  
And go the other way  
Bastard; you said it about yourself  
Help us locate the children locked away  
But don't tell us about a boy's death in poem  
Again, like it was your original idea  
You feel only a prick, not the stab  
Of a boy's passing  
The [crumpling of the parents](#)  
What is sweetness and horror on one page  
What is sweet about murder and rape  
Mysterious man  
Mess-making machine  
Render of night  
Who still can't make art worthy of admiration  
Only sick words.  
Again not funny, but true  
You are a remainder  
A dirty garment tucked under knees  
Eager for instruction and keen for meaning  
About evil  
You sleep on your hands  
Atoning for numerous crimes and greedy indignities  
You [sleep on your hands](#)  
To stop yourself from killing again  
For when you are gone  
And even your molecules are gone  
In that blink of time  
When a day is as a thousand years  
A million years later you will still be guilty  
Unresolved in that [giddy sprawl of green](#)  
Father God is capitalized

And, yes, a Jew died for you, too  
What is nonsense  
Your needless carnage  
When you used to drink until dry  
Thinking not only of beaches  
But of envy and hatred, consumed  
You are the one' doomed  
Making the swift tumble coming soon  
Do you mind that I copy your words  
Your wretched words  
Soon, every [siren shearing the dark](#)  
Will be headed toward your part of town  
St. Paul, Minnesota  
Because of your once-discouraged Chevy  
Running wrong down gravel roads  
Not funny, but true  
My prophecy to you is plain, Michael  
You, sharing the name of a good angel  
My prophecy to  
You is plain  
Future pain  
My prediction: an unfulfilled ego-maniac  
[Anton's Syndrome](#) sounds devilish  
It must look to you like spotlights shining  
On skaters at night  
The light you see is false  
But down by the, Zumbro river  
The crows are still calling out to you in the cold  
So now it is your turn to jerk around  
Your hairs must stand spike upright  
Then pass down through your brain  
Sending you crashing through screen-doors  
Making you run half-crazy through unfamiliar places  
Searching for that same peace  
Others so desperately pray for  
To the God you don't believe in  
A hatchback is not a lid.

And trunks don't have floorboards  
What is a Chevette  
Why seek him here  
Why not seek him there under your flag of sin  
Why not God would ask  
For he is NOT flown  
And the eyes that adored every wild thing  
Are watching you, now  
Why do you blink, Michael  
Over what your heart has to endure  
Because you are like an evil black crow  
Begging to be set loose  
Begging to be set loose  
Begging to be set loose  
It will be you braying  
Not praying  
Not thriving on predictable dreams, either  
You, a scavenger of bloodthirsty words  
No good at the truth  
Behind your dull black bead of eye  
Is darkness deeper than a well  
For you are cold! and pitiless  
And your heart cannot endure  
what winter cannot kill  
The crystal snow of each winter  
On an unmarked grave down by the Zumbro river  
Under your flag of sin  
Where the crows are calling out to you still  
Calling out for you to confess  
So many lives can begin anew  
It's not funny, but it's all true

That's it.

I'm not sure how to feel about this anonymous poem. First, I felt complimented that someone read my work so closely – though he clearly despises it. I mean, poetry just doesn't get read, period. I must have been doing something compelling to warrant this spiritual megatonnage. He quotes a dozen poems of mine in his poem – so, despite the arrows sticking in me, I felt "quotable" and therefore "canonical," you know, available to quote from. Who would bother to quote from Nobody? So I'm somebody – somebody despicable.

The poem/critique seems inspired by a poem I wrote but never published, about an experience I had down by Crosby Farm about 5 years ago. It was cold, and I was out with my dog, and I heard what I thought was a boy's voice calling out behind me – a voice in anguish. It freaked me out, especially when all I could see was a crow departing from a branch.

My imagination got to work, as I assessed the shivery feelings I had, and I cooked up a poem about an Ovidian metamorphosis about a boy turned into a crow. In Minnesota we have a famous crime in which a boy named Jacob Wetterling disappeared, back in the 1980s. I gave the boy in my poem Jacob's name – it amounted, in my mind, to a prayer that God would save the kidnapped boy much as Zeus transformed maidens about to be raped into persimmon trees.

Now, I knew something was wrong with this concept, and my poet friend Rich Broderick warned me in an early draft not to put on another's suffering as if it were your own in a poem. Meaning I was posing in the victim's role in my early version of "Jacob the

Crow."

I must tell you that I had never thought of that before, but I immediately agreed that it was a good principle. It is unseemly to steal another's pain and write it up as if it were yours. And I thought my final versions of the poem sidestepped this problem – making me someone who wished God had swooped up the boy and saved him, not as a stand-in for the boy.

But clearly, the writer of this poem/critique thinks I am still guilty of spiritual theft. I will have to re-read the Jacob poem to see if I agree or not. It is here.

G.O.D.'s central accusation, as I understand him, is that I am a manipulative egomaniac not to be trusted around sensitive minds. If so, you probably shouldn't be reading this, unless you, like me, wickedly slow down to get a look at flaming car crashes. There is something perverse in our fascination with pain and misery, no doubt about it.

I confess I have led an emotionally lurid life. I have not just felt things, I have tried to feel them even more – like Tolstoy, sprinkling cayenne down his throat so he could write about the feeling. When asked what is the matter with me, why I feel so intense, my answer is that I am naturally on the hyper-emotional side of things – that I feel things intensely. Intense embarrassment, anger, resentment, self-pity, humor, the works.

I once had a reader write, about my brain tumor book, that I "milked" the audience, made them feel as creepy about having something the size of a baby's arm inside my head as I do myself. It was the same accusation. Basically, that I write self-indulgently

about suffering, and it's abusive to the reader.

I fully sense how annoying this would be to someone who has a better handle on himself emotionally. I wish I was Gary Cooper, but I'm afraid I am closer to Peter Lorre – haunted, childlike, guilty and confused.

I am trying to be more optimistic and less lurid. One thing I pray for is not be a prick and not to inflict myself on people. Not to be the Old Man of the Sea, perching and preying on people's sympathies. I'm trying. I meditate, I exercise, I pray.

But it may be a futile prayer, because God (the real one) seems to have made me this way in his mysterious pretzel logic, twisted and salty like a fossilized tear.

But thank you to G.O.D. of Burnsville (Burnsville, get it?) for the love in this poem, that comes all knotted up with your own hot emotions.

I have been asked if I know who G.O.D. is. No, I don't. It could be an old friend who knows me too well. More likely, it is someone I never have met. Several friends advise me that the letter feels like a death threat – and that the letter seems to be both blaming me for the boy's abduction, and taking credit it for it himself. Like the references to the Zumbro River – I have never written anything like that, so that part is all him.

(1996)

## The Giant Dirtball

The other day I turned on the TV, and a video automatically began to play. It was an interview my daughter Daniele conducted with her friends.

Daniele, 15, is a punk rocker, and she hangs out with a punk band and a bunch of hair-dyed, studded-collared, leopard-skinned, body-pierced friends.

She asks the band members, sprawled on guitarist and bandleader Ted's front porch, what they think about issues of the day – how the world should be, politics, economics, education. The boys' answers are simultaneously alienated and innocent:

"People need to understand one another better. People go too much by appearances."

"We need to get away from money, and corporations, and success, and status, and just be who we are."

"The Nazis, man – they're as bad as the jocks!"

Daniele and Ted have a running argument. Ted believes punks might as well act surly, because that is all people expect of them. (Though he believes this, it is not apparent from his own behavior – he's a pleasant kid.) Daniele, by contrast, thinks punks should be ambassadors of friendliness until people respond with unfriendliness – because who knows?

Sometimes I get upset with punks, in the aggregate, for not engaging more with the establishment, to work with it. Instead they live a life scornfully separate from it, loathing the corporatism of it. As long as the establishment is what it is – gluttonous, manipulative, and irresponsible – they have no hope of engaging meaningfully with it. It is not capable of conversing.

When you are a teenager, you're shopping for leverage against the grownup world. Punkism is just that, a holding action, a turnable lever, a moment to sit out the dance and catch one's breath on life's way.

Why am I saying all this? Because it is the first thing I thought of with last week's announced merger of Viacom and CBS. With one stroke of the multinational pen, a giant, distant entity becomes more gigantic and more distant, and the punks' future becomes more unlivable.

The industry spin on the merger is that bigger is more competitive and that the world of converging information inevitably delivers solid value to consumers.

Excuse me for saying so, but the kids are right. All this corporate techno-convergence is having the opposite effect, of eliminating competition and delivering consumers to advertisers.

Big mergers do not add vitality to the stream. Though bookstores seem bigger and cable offerings seem greater, the reality is that it is hard to find differentiation in the news or programming, because the corporate strategies are so similar –

corralling a billion eyeballs and selling them hogtied to advertisers.

Like Rockefeller's Standard Oil, Viacom/CBS will be an immense, fully vertically integrated business. They will be able to produce, sell and distribute everything in a vast industry, from movies to videos to book publishing to cable and broadcast radio and TV.

Americans have always been leery of bigness, and rightfully so. As big banks lose all sense of locality, and big government loses all sense of accountability, so does big media lose all sense of individuality, of having a relationship with the served.

And no, market research is not evidence of a sincere relationship, but of espionage on one side's part to wring advantage from the other.

When one party in a conversation is a million times bigger than the other, and it does all the talking, that's not a conversation. Yet big information insists in its commercials and pronouncements that it is committed to excellence and to speaking from the heart, that a serious ethical compact exists between corporation and consumer.

It is one thing to be fatuous about selling soap flakes. It's another thing to be that way when supplying a democratic society with its lifeblood, information, as if it were soap.

The punks see through the deception. They see a presidential

election that is already over, bought and paid for, the electorate never consulted. They see a society that allows info corporations to heave an endless volley of broad bandwidth crap at them, from every media orifice.

The prospective employment picture features a society split between a happy handful of well-paid yuppie technocrats and everybody else, downscaled and downpaid to short-term jobs of dopey repetitiveness. Paper or plastic?

It's all so false. And the previous generation, a smug, affluent, bullying group who once professed hippie values of tolerance, fun, and doing one's own thing, is down on their punky kids for not embracing the opportunities their generation created for them – sound familiar?

The kids would be powerless except for one thing. It is the little dirtball of contempt they roll between finger and thumb, ready to fling. It is the one defense against the colossus that the colossus can't strip away – attitude.

They can live in a rotten world but they don't have to belong to it. They can just say no.

Because they are our children, and we love them, and want them to belong to our world, the dirtball is like a giant boulder, crushing everything it rolls over.

Will they succeed or succumb? The latter, if their parents' generation provides the pattern. But until then, they are the

underground resistance to the bigness that is undoing the benefits of the information revolution.

Let it roll, kids. Let it roll.

(2000)

## 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, and 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. It is the lesson of life: every moment is a miracle. And the blue two-wheeler, shiny and restored, coasts into eternity.

(1997)

## Serpent

There was a commotion in our house one morning. Daniele's 4-foot boa constrictor, named Crimson, was loose in her bedroom, and a search was underway to find her. Crimson (the serpent) eventually turned up underneath the bed, and it was quite an armful to persuade her to return to her glass case.

The idea of a large constricting snake loose in my teenage daughter's bedroom might ordinarily be cause for alarm. But Crimson had been ill, and this sudden interest in escaping (combined with eating her first rat in almost six months) was cause for jubilation. She was showing the will to live.

I did not personally take part in the snake search. I was afraid of Crimson. I have helped Daniele with minor snake chores, and each time I have felt how alien the snake seems compared to the dog – how beyond warmth and wagging and monkeyshines she is.

And when she grips me around the neck and chest and squeezes, as is her wont, I feel the air – and the life – going out of me. And a part of me just loses it.

It has to do with a summer job I had, in 1967. I was a high school senior working the summer at a mini-zoo in an amusement park, Jungle Larry's Safari Island at Cedar Point, in Sandusky, Ohio.

Jungle Larry was a kids' show Frank Buck – he said he actually knew Frank Buck, but he said a lot of things – who amassed about a thousand animals, from lions and elephants to monkeys, at this roadside attraction. My job was to do whatever

needed doing – rake trails, tell visitors about the animals, clean out cages.

I had many odd adventures, but the most traumatic involved feeding our two large snakes, a rock python 20 foot in length and a reticulated python 27 foot in length. These snakes were so huge they spent their days collapsed in a pile of themselves in a glassed-in building we called the snakatorium. If one moved it was to lift a head and test the room temperature with its tongue, its Jacobsen's organelle.

It understood that the snakes were severely depressed. Jungle Larry's zoo was a cross between an old-timey zoo with steel bars and slabs, and a fake jungle, with bamboo railings and tufts of Spanish moss from the Everglades transplanted just for the summer months to sycamores and buckeyes in Ohio. The visitors saw the foliage, but the animals were stuck behind bars. They – the animals – were functionally insane – from boredom, alienation, ill health, or the scent of something nearby that they should either be eating or being eaten by. It was not natural.

Larry made matters worse by playing the theme song from the movie *Born Free* 16 hours a day on the PA system. That song embedded itself in the nucleotides of all our bodies' cells. Prester John, one of the other zookeepers I worked with, rewrote the first line: "Born free, and now they're in cages ..."

The snakes wouldn't eat. Two months would pass between meals, and as they represented a considerable investment – perhaps \$100,000 in 1967 dollars? – it was imperative that they be fed. Involuntarily if need be.

One night, after the zoo shut down, Larry and his assistant B'wana Walt and myself and some other guy, undertook to feed two piglets to the two snakes. The pigs came in a crate, which rested on a wheelbarrow, and they were sensible enough to be alarmed, squealing and honking at the silent slithering presence in the room.

The plan was to cut the pigs' throats, pry open the snake's jaws, and coax the freshly killed bodies into the snakes' digestive channels.

It was my duty to hold the piggies while Walt cut their throats with a bread knife. The little pigs cried piteously as I held them. I will never, ever forget that sound, or the feeling of the warm blood washing over my hands and arms and onto my shirt, where it quickly cooled.

Walt did the dirty work, getting the snakes to unhinge their jaws, wiping the blood on their faces to arouse them, and shoehorning the pigs' heads into their gullets.

What struck me was how out of kilter it was, these \$50,000 snakes who had no zest for life, being force-fed these \$3 creatures who wept desperately to live.

But we did it, and the snakes thrived, in the way that reptiles do. A week after eating, they pooped out the pigs' flesh. Several days later they pooped out their mashed skeletons. Every now and then, one of them would move, or just crane its neck languorously toward a vine, then think better of it and go back to sleep.

That was my story. So when Daniele acquired Crimson, I had no appetite for it. I discouraged her. We knew nothing about snake

health, I told her, and it was quite a responsibility. And the expense, my word. A live rat once a month would cost, let's see, \$24 per year.

Chances are Crimson would grow to be 16-18 feet long, and we would have to reenact the pig feeding ritual once every six weeks. I dreaded re-feeling the feelings I felt in the snakatorium 34 years earlier.

But Daniele loved having the thing around her neck. Her fiends came over and took turns holding her. I guess they were impressed that her parents put up with it. I don't know. The snake was like smoking cigarettes, it was a nod in the direction of death, and stillness, and it just felt cool to them.

One time Crimson got loose and was somewhere in the house for an entire week. Rachel and I could not ease into our beds at night 100% certain we would wake up in the morning. Daniele mocked us for this, but she was unable to produce the snake. (It turned out to be in her underwear drawer, which she was opening far too seldom.)

We did not foresee the snake getting so sick. It grew a callus on its nose, a scab that covered its nostrils and infected its mouth and lips. It would not eat. Weeks went by like this, me denying it was in there, and Daniele sleeping in the same room as her, hearing it rasp through its strange mask, struggling to breathe.

We took her to a special vet, who did helpful things like excising the scab and force-feeding her with a tube. At one point I had to hold her while Rachel gave her shots. Lord, you should have felt her coiling away from that needle, attempting to strike

us to prevent the mortal stab, and the stung, stiff feeling in her muscle when the needle went in.

Daniele moved out after four years, to get away from us, but also because she was nineteen and needed to take a shot at the world. But a snake, especially a sick snake, was too much. So caring for her fell to me. It was a painful task. I kept her watered, and I trained the heat lamp shone on her night and day. Crimson was failing, and my main objective was to keep her comfortable until death came for her.

One November day I came upon her and she had flipped onto her back, and her head hung upside down, open-jawed, and the creamy bands of her belly were exposed. I bundled her up in a plastic grocery bag and carried her out to the dumpster in the falling snow. Suddenly Crimson roared back to life, angry at the temperature drop, and perhaps suspicious of my intentions. I carried her back inside and laid her back in the glass box.

Finally, in the spring, Crimson did die – you could tell by the smell – and I laid her into the earth beside the crocuses. I formed Daniele, but she was too disturbed to attend the burial.

This August Daniele died too, at age 24. At the funeral, friend after friend came up with Polaroids of Daniele with crimson draped around her shoulders. There was my beautiful daughter, with her sorrowful eyes and rosy cheeks. And there was Crimson, her silent, cold-blooded friend – the only one, I think now, who really understood her.

(2009)

## 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.

(2001)

## **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 15th 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, Jack Mussina. 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 eight grades, Mussina 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. "Mussina, what made you hate me so much in grade school? I wasn't a bad kid. What did I ever do to you?"

Mussina 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. "Jack," 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, Mussina 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.

Mussina 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.

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.

## 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 kind of cuckoo," the coach said, "but it worked out okay."

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 called over her shoulder. And ran up the stairs to school.

## The Opera Thief

Audrey loved the opera, and wanted dearly to see the new production of *Rigoletto*. But tickets cost \$62, and she was broke. So she concocted a scheme to see the opera without paying.

On the evening of one of the final performances – chosen because there would be unsold seats – she dressed in her best black evening dress and took the 22 bus downtown. All around her on the bus were poor people, mostly going to and from work, and they looked at Audrey in her velvet and fake pearls. She smiled prettily at them, and stared out the window until they arrived at the theater.

Already crowds of people were filing in, arm in arm. At the entrance stood two costumed doormen, doffing their hats and checking tickets. But Audrey did not plan a frontal assault. Instead she decided to walk the perimeter of the theater park, out of sight of the doormen, until the curtain went up.

At 7 o'clock the show began, and she sat on a park bench close to the theater but out of the doormen's line of sight. She thrilled to the muffled sounds of the overture, and again as the chorus sang the opening song.

*Rigoletto*, the story of the hunchbacked jester, unscrolled in her head as she sat on the bench. The Duke of Mantua, and his servant Borsa, exchanged lines. She knew it all by heart.

Thirty-five minutes passed this way. As the curtain came down on the first act, Audrey sprang into action. She waited until a few theater-goers stepped outside to smoke, hoping to drift back

in with them. To her consternation, only two people did so.

Then an idea formed in her head. Instead of approaching the main entry, she approached the side salon, where a host of people were buying mineral water and chatting. She approached the locked glass door and tapped, waving hello. She appeared to be a lazy audience-member who did not want to walk all the way back to the main entrance.

Sure enough, a woman opened the door for her, and they chatted gaily for a moment about the dramatic scene with Rigoletto and Gilda.

“I thought I would die,” Audrey assured her. “Oh,” the other woman replied, “I know exactly what you're saying.”

Now to enter the main hall. Here the problem was ushers, who were placed at every entryway, examining tickets and scouting for faces they had not seen before.

A stout, stubby woman in a mustard-colored jacket spied Audrey and gave her a look. Audrey circled the theater and entered at a doorway where people were crowding through, disappearing in their number.

She glanced about her at the hall. The magnificent chandelier above, with thousands of lights, illuminated hundreds of empty seats – but which ones were truly empty, and which ones were about to be filled? She must decide now before the lights went down.

So she strode boldly down to the first section, and looked about for a co-conspirator, someone who looked like they would

not report her to the authorities. In the third row she identified two men in their twenties and sidled up to one of them.

“I need to see better,” she leveled with them. “Is this seat taken?”

“Yes,” the young man said, pleased to be confided in. “An older woman in a fur coat is sitting here. But so far no one has sat in the seat just in front.”

So Audrey slipped down to the second row and took her seat. All seemed to be well, when the usher with the mustard coat ventured into view, and gave Audrey the long glance. Audrey was on the brink of discovery.

That was when she turned to the young men behind her and began chatting.

“Have you been to many shows this season?” she inquired.

“No, not at all,” the first young man said. “Rog and I have only seen one other show together ever. Tosca.”

“Oh, then you must be loving this. Isn’t Gilda wonderful! And the songs, oh!”

“We’re liking it very much,” Rog chimed in.

And Audrey looked over her shoulder just long enough to see that the mustard jacket had decided that Audrey belonged where she was.

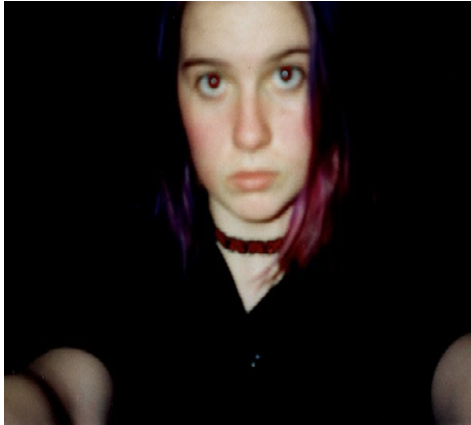
The last of the audience took their seats, and the curtain rose over the salon of the ducal palace, and Audrey lit up with the

glory of song.

(2004)

## Xmas Eviction

Journal entry, December 2006



I have been agitated the past week because of my daughter's pending eviction from her apartment. Today I was scheduled to go to war to appeal the landlord to let her stay there with her dog.

I was going to write The Letter of My Life, including recommendations from her psychologist and her doctor. I was going to ask my pastor to write a note as well, drawing God into the fray. The gist of all these notes would have been that Daniele is ill, that she is at risk, and that she needs to stay where she is, and keep her dog with her, in order to stay alive.

I would have pointed out that Daniele is mentally ill – suicidal, bipolar, OCD, highly anxious and agoraphobic, and the

idea of being kicked out of her home will be unbearable to her.

Message: If you evict her, she will die. I was ready to throw all sorts of emoluments the landlord's way: extra rent money, a steeper damage deposit, monthly inspections, a donation to the charity of his choice – whatever he required.

So I was donning my battle gear this morning, ready to hit him low and hard on Christmas Eve, the day it is not recommended to say, There is no room here for you.

I imagined I would work a Christmas miracle all by myself, writing a letter that would touch this landlord's heart, and everything would be better because my letter would be, like, kapow.

This will give you some insight into my character. It was all-out war for me, I was taking no prisoners, and this letter would be like a safe falling from a 12-story window – irresistible, unnegotiable.

Because it was unacceptable that my daughter would commit suicide over something so lame as an eviction notice. I always have felt that that was The Worst Thing That Could Happen. It would end my life as a sensible person. I would become like my mom from that point on, after her daughter died – a restless, self-loathing spirit. The death of a child is bad.

I cannot allow harm to befall my daughter, or for psychological harm to sweep away my family – bad, bad, bad!

But how do I help her get herself together when I am being histrionic myself?

People always say, wow, what a great thing to be able to express yourself. But it's not a great thing, if your expression deepens your sense of pain and woe, by searing it into your mind. I look into her eyes and see the flaky expression and I know where the bipolar comes from, it comes from my own deep terror.

And God help me, I have never really learned how to use this gift in a reliably positive way. I think, because of my childhood experiences, I tend to zip to the negative side of things and adhere to it like a remora to the flank of a great white shark. I dwell there, imagining that it is safer there than in open water.

The Christmas play this year was about a decapitated head in hell – Ted Williams' head, to be specific. That is how I feel these days.

So this problem of my daughter's BPD – borderline personality disorder, an umbrella for all the other complaints I have told you all about – you can sum it up as hysterical self-hatred, or mental agony – switches on all my own worst impulses, of forlornness, of negativity, of anguish – which is strangely ego-bound – Lord, look at my suffering, and if you can't DO something – I know there are RULES where you are – at least give me the satisfaction of being sorry you put me in this awful position.

So I am Daniele's advocate, and I am about this different from her in terms of hysteria, self-hatred, and mental agony. Physician, heal thyself.

And this morning I call over to her. "Daniele, if you give me your landlord's fax number, I can write him and plead to get you

un-evicted.”

“Hi dad,” she says to me. “But I’ve decided to move anyway.”

I was dumbfounded. “But – you were so upset.” She was. She quaked with grief just two days before. (“Everything that seems good always goes bad,” she wept.)

“I got over it,” she explained. “I mean, I don’t want the hassle of moving. But I don’t like the neighborhood I’m in. And sometimes, it’s just time to move.”

Friends, those aren’t the words of an agoraphobic. You generally have to pry them out of their chairs and drag them kicking and screaming from their nests of safety. Home is survival to them – everything else is terrifying.

“Well, uh, OK, then,” I say. “We’ll just try to be peaceful about this then.”

“Yeah. But thanks, Daddy, for being willing to go to war for me. I know how much you love me. And I’m so grateful to you.”

Tearful agreement. Mutual reassurances. Click.

You see, my prayers have been bending, the way a plant in the dark seeks light. From cries of mental agony to pleas for acceptance – thy will be done.

I still have super-strong feelings about what I want done. But even with all this armor clapped on, and with this righteous sword dipped in the inkwell – I have no power over others or even over myself, and no understanding of what’s best for anyone. I don’t

know nuttin.’

So this is my Christmas blessing. I’m not an impaled hotdog turning on one of those convenience store rotisseries, hissing and dripping – this is a self-portrait created out of anguish, that we are God’s hors d’oeuvres and nothing more.

I feel, for the first time in weeks, that I can rest. And not worry so much.

And Daniele will not take her life for another three years.

## The Return of the Runaway Bunny

In Margaret Wise Brown's children's story *The Runaway Bunny*, the bunny child threatens to leave his loving mother.

It is not clear why the little bunny needs to run away. He hurls his ultimatums at her, not cruelly, but softly, as a matter of fact, as if this is what children must do. As if there could be nothing more fulfilling and fun than breaking a loving mother's heart.

First the bunny threatens to turn into a fish and swim away. "If you run after me, I will become a fish in a trout stream and I will swim away from you."

The mother replies that if he does that, the mother will turn into a fisherman, and she will snatch the baby up in her net. No matter what the baby does, the mother will follow after, and do what she needs to do. She will not permit the baby bunny to escape.

The bunny child makes subsequent threats. It will become a crocus in a secret garden. It will be impervious, a rock on the side of a steep mountain. It will disappear from the mother's life, and never be found again.

Each time, the mother reassures the bunny child that it's no use. Whatever the child does, wherever he goes, the mother will find him. Because that is what loving mothers do.

The story is one grown-ups fall in love with even as it strangely touches the hearts of children. Because it describes a

feeling parents can scarcely express, a craziness in us that we will do anything, go anywhere, because of the fathomless love that we feel. It is something the baby can never understand.

It is a love that is unnegotiable and inescapable and absolute. It is a love that pours out like an overflowing faucet, that fills the sink and continues to flow until all the furniture in the room is floating.

This love is a force so limitless as to be supernatural, like the uncanny posse in that movie, that followed Butch and Sundance over every mountain and every stream, and after a week of their nonstop running was only a half day's ride behind.

And you want to say with them, just like in the movie, Who are these guys? How can they keep their promise to follow everywhere, anywhere, and do what needs to be done? It is eerie and unreasonable. It makes no sense to deploy such skills for the likes of me.

And it is humiliating that no matter what the little bunny does – whether it is testing the mother's love or whether it really and truly does hope to hide from her light, find refuge for myself in this world – it will fail, because its childlike desires are up against something vastly more powerful, immeasurably more intense.

It is the realization that I as little bunny can swim to the outer reaches of space but it is futile because you, my loving mother, will always find me, you will always be there, and I will never be alone, never be free, you will always trump me.

It never matters what I want. I remain your slave whether I flee from you or not. To that part of me which seeks only to be

alone, to be away from you, this is the most awful truth, because there is no denying it.

And the mother knows her little bunny is genuinely fearful of this love. For anything that loving and that fervent is frightening. It is of an order that no child's mind can comprehend or set limits to.

How can you be this way to me? you want to ask. How can you venture this foolish guarantee?

Don't you know how the world really works, that it is not driven by love but by selfishness and fear?

That little bunnies are shaken every day by dogs? That the innocent and unwary are run over by cars as they cross a simple street?

Don't you know that untreated and uncared for, little bunnies break out in sores, that parasites chew through us, that we die bawling and whimpering and alone? And that the mothers we cry out for never come forward, cannot find us, cannot take us in their arms?

How can it be, then? How in the face of this obvious truth about the big world, that the slightest glance at a newspaper makes plain, can the mother bunny make this ridiculous promise?

What fairy tale mind believes this boast?

But the mother bunny rocks and rocks, the baby bunny close in her arms.

It's an allegory, she explains. I am God's love, which will

pursue you no matter where you run.

Though the world is full of terrible things, believe in me, and we will walk through this time, and be together after that.

(2003)

## **When We Were Beautiful**

I have noticed a trend – people using pictures of themselves from their college days on Facebook.

Part of this is the sudden availability to everyone of digital photo editing. Using Photoshop or Picasa or whatever software came with our cameras, we are able to move pictures around that used to be sealed forever in a gold-plated frame on the refrigerator, or glued to the pages of an old album.

But beyond the fact that our photographic archives have suddenly become uploadable, there is another, more obvious fact – the pictures are freaken beautiful. Because we, at that articular moment in our lives, were gorgeous.

Check out Facebook and see the pictures people are using from those days. Our eyes are big and alive. There are no frown lines, years before Botox. Our hair is abundant and lustrous. Our body parts ride high in the carriage. Our complexions are not perfect, what with midterms and finals, but they are robust and healthy. Our body mass index appears to be as optimal as it is ever going to be later in life.

If you are honest you will also admit that you have done what I did recently – catch yourself in a mirror and ask yourself, “Who the hell is that?” Or, “What is my dad doing out of the cemetery?”

Let's not beat around the bush. We were knockouts. No wonder we use those pictures.

I'm not saying every student in every graduating class was a

runway model. I mean that, across the course of our lives, most of us during our days on campus looked the most wonderful we ever would.

And what I think is happening on Facebook is more than vanity. I mean, obviously the Internet is crawling with perverts and liars and delusionaries, and here and there are people who are trying to fool themselves, and others, that they are younger than they are.

But I think something less reprehensible is going on. I think, as we get older and grayer, we start to fall in love a bit with ourselves when we were younger. Not “in love” like a weird crush, but “in love” in the sense of approving of who we were, admiring ourselves back in the days when we didn't know nuttin', but were so full of spirit and expectation.

And when we connect to those old selves, we are flying a flag to our own hopes and dreams, whatever may have become of them along life's way.

When I was young, I remember looking at my folks and thinking, “Holy cow, what the hell happened to them?”

Of course, the short answer to what aged my parents was, me. Kids take a toll. But still, the contrast was kind of horrific. I remember telling myself, and having members of my cohort agreeing, that our generation would be different. We would have better science, and better vitamins, and better exercise regimens to keep us young. And of course, we would clean the planet up 1987.

Things didn't work out quite that way. Woodstock

Generation, so sleek and so bell-bottomed, wound up giving the world the phrase morbidly obese.

It's a matter of some disgrace for us, this aging business. I have a lovely friend my age who doesn't go out so much anymore because she has an intention tremor, a wobbliness in the hands that she feels makes her look old. At least she has a sense of humor about it. "Trust me, there's nothing intentional about an intention tremor," she says. She visits a website for sufferers ruefully named wemove.com.

But in her picture online, circa 1971, none of that matters. On a spring day she stands, with the breeze in her hair, her graduation gown bunched under one arm. She is laughing, and giving the world a power salute.

Justine, you rock.

Another friend, Allan, alternates a black-and-white photo of him from his dorm from about the same year. He is sitting backwards in a chair, with his chin in his arms. His hair is like some haystack from Monet, spilling over his forehead and shoulders. And his face is alive with fierceness, young cynicism, and good humor.

Today, all that hair is archival. He remains a tough dude, but more like Samuel than Sampson.

I used to fasten on stories about how University research led to the medical and other technological breakthroughs that would give diabetes and all other diseases the heave-ho and save us from this process of slow oxidation. And truly, the health sciences have held up their end of the bargain. We are living longer and

healthier, give or take a few body parts that seem determined to take early retirement.

But as I get older, I find myself intrigued less by the University as superhero, forever flying to our rescue, and more as a teacher of how to get by with what we have.

I remember a proseminar on the literary elegy I took from Toni McNaron in 1971. Of all the classes I took, I tracked the other students from this one best over the years, which is quite appropriate, given that elegies are poems of loss.

We had a mix of rebels and intellectuals in the class bent on adding McNaron's acclaimed class to their CVs. We looked marvelous.

But what I really remember is that the class was about coming to a deeper understanding of death, a reverence even. Today I can see a half dozen of my classmates from that class on Facebook – a couple have passed away – and several of them alternate their current-day snaps, all loaded down with life, with their genius faces from yesteryear.

I am looking at one picture in particular, from the seventies. It is of a young woman and young man. They are framed against some kind of swirling texture, that might be cirrus clouds. They are very handsome and appear to be in thrall to one another.

My wife and I keep it on our wall in our home in St. Paul. The “clouds” are a window pane at Elliott Hall, the psychology building on the Minneapolis campus. We had known each other only a few months.

None of the fissures had formed, none of the failures and heartaches show up in the picture. But not a day goes by that Rachel and I don't see it and are reminded of the wonder we felt in those days, to be alive and together, and we still feel.

## Oddfathers

This is an essay about mentors— how useful they are, mostly, but how difficult it has been for many of us to accept the idea of a new father, to submit to their guidance.

I suspect all generations struggle against the preceding one, because the space from father to son is supposed to be seeded with strife. As one decreases, the other increases—never a formula for happiness. Except for a lucky few, it is unusual for one's own father to be one's teacher in life.

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My own father never quite got that writing was what I was all about. To him, an industrial engineer, vocation was a means to an end—making money, making a comfortable life for oneself. It took me years to realize there was humility in this thinking. My dad liked selling Fuller Brush door to door and wanted to pull me into the business. I totally hated it—what was a poet doing selling aerosols door to door?

The problem was that, writing aside, he was not an engaged father. Emotionally (and geographically) distant, unable to talk about much, and more concerned about his own prospects than those of his children. And he loved the TV more than he loved any of us. He wanted me to do well, but he was unable to walk the path with me.

So it was a problem for me when I got older and had opportunities to become disciples of older artists—and found I could not bend the knee. Some stubborn part of me, still burned by my own dad's indifference, refused to take on new fathers—it was too confusing for me.

None of these men volunteered to be "a father" to me, and I never asked them. And yet it was always in the air: What could we do that would be more valuable than sharing knowledge on how to do this stuff the right way. I think, because everyone was shy, we wound up stealing—me stealing ideas from them about how to live, and think, and be, and them slipping ideas to me casually, as if they meant nothing at all, as if they were passing me the salt.

•

My first shot came when I was 16 years old, with the poet James Wright. Visiting my stepfather's stepmother's home, I came upon signed books of his poetry, the emotional drama of which I liked very much, and was astonished that Elsie had a connection with him. Indeed, she had known him as a young man, and was in a position to introduce me to him.

One day in 1967 we drove down from Cleveland to Martins Ferry, Ohio—John Glenn's home as well as Wright's. His parents lived in a small railroad house, with a melon patch in the back. Wright was very kind to me, which seems astonishing when I think back on what kind of young man I was—murky, ambitious, and confused. We went for a walk, and he talked about the movie

2001: A Space Odyssey, which we had both just seen.

As a prospective father Wright was gentle, thoughtful, and unobtrusive— ideal, really. And he validated my own tendencies toward victimization and hyperemotionality. He did not ask to see my poems, and I did not shove the file folder in his direction— though I had brought it with me. He was so nice, and I didn't want to be a beginner with him. Instead, I made plans in my head to go off, learn how to write, and then come back to him, and claim him as my true father—after I had made myself worthy.

Which never happened. I think I wrote him a letter a year later, desperate to be remembered by him, suggesting that I come to New York and apprentice myself to him. I offered to paint his wife Annie's school. He wisely declined my offer.

•

When I went off to college at Wooster in 1967, we got a visit from the Oregon poet William Stafford. I knew nothing about his work. I was 17 and knew nothing, period. But because I styled myself as a poet, I was invited to interview Stafford, along with a handful of other self-styled bohemians, on closed-circuit TV.

I went in without any questions, half expecting Stafford to be "on the make" or just another dry old fuddy-duddy. He was anything but. In the midst of campus uprisings, be-ins and the other hysterical earmarks of the era, Stafford cut a calm, friendly, and modest figure. I liked him immediately. The other students rubbed their chins and asked academic questions about the

meanings of this symbol and that, and about the use of classical form in his work.

But when my time came, I asked a question that made the other students cringe: "Is it fun for you, writing?"

Stafford brightened at the question, smiled broadly and said, "Yes. Yes. Yes!" And went on lovingly about the joy writing gave him, how it was the best part of every day, how it lifted him up from the barely breathing to the noticing, and wondering, and self-amusing tasks of poetry.

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Later, as a literature student at the University of Minnesota I got word of the arrival by night of Russian dissident poet Andrej Voznesenski. The Soviet Union had refused him a visa until 24 hours before his schedule visa, so he arrived nervous and tired from his trip. But the energy returned when he took the huge stage. Northrop Auditorium was cordoned off so that 50 people dotted the 5,000 seats while Voznesenski groaned like a swinging pendulum through readings of "Goya" and other poems in the only language he knew. Voznesenski was Byronic in his charisma and mystery. I yearned for the pummeling power of his words.

Afterward we poets got together at English professor Chester Anderson's to boast and jostle and drink, Voznesenski sitting alone on the couch, a slight frown on his face. Several beers later, I took to the bathroom, where Chester's golden retriever lay, and stepped over him to pee. As soon as I started, Voznesenski

entered, smiled politely at me, knelt by the dog and scratched his ears, not more than a foot from my pee stream.

Confused, I turned to see the poet kneeling, eyes closed, his hands stroking the golden dog, his face held out to me, the dew like manna on his face, and a smile as if finally, finally free. When I left the party, Voznesenski stood by the door and pointed to me. "You," he said, and smiled coolly. "Be great for me!"

That's all he said to me—but it stuck in my head like a spear.

•

That same year I edited the school literary magazine and I wrote to Robert Bly, who lived in the west of the state, offering to publish poems of his choosing.

He sent me a handwritten note—hand-drawn would be a better description, as he writes in a kind of pictographic swirl, using butterflies and birds as punctuation. But what he said he liked wasn't the poetry, but the design! He liked a photo of a pretty girl standing under a bare tree. I sent him the original print with my compliments.

The next few years saw a minor flourish of correspondence between us. Bly was flattering to me, and I was flattered. I was 20 when I met him, barely more than a boy. The idea of being taken in by a major figure like Bly was sweet.

Bly appeared at the university and I was enthralled with his

cantankerous Norwegian self. He was rock and roll to me, grandiose as sky yet contemptuous of the complicated circles other people walked in and the big words they used. Bly snubbed the pretty and went straight for the spiritual fireworks. I dug that a lot.

But Bly in person was not as gracious as Bly on paper. Perhaps when he met me face to face after the reading he read the hurry and ambition that was written there. Or perhaps he saw I was younger than he supposed. In any event, he quickly took to teasing me with little jabs, nicknaming me "Irish." It was funny, but the joke was at my expense.

•

Doing a journalism gig I traveled outstate with regional poet Franklin Brainerd for a big prairie poetry reading at a rural university. Franklin, a very kind and down-to-earth man who liked young women poets very much, was then dying of leukemia, and I was writing a feature about him for the university paper. For several days we drank beer, talked, read poems and taped.

"A good poem is like a potato," Frank told me. "You have to dig it out of the dirt with your fingers. And it's as ugly and unpromising as you. And if it wasn't, what good would it be?"

Frank suggested I bring some poems of my own on the trip west, so I did. Bly and Thomas McGrath, the great and lovely chronicler of American radicalism, were also on hand for the

poetry event. The three headliners took turns reading, and they were well received. Afterward, Tom and Franklin waved me upon stage for a kind of poetry improv—audience members would shout out an image, and poets would scramble to produce and read a poem featuring that image or idea. It was just nutty and open-ended enough, that I shone.

McGrath and Brainerd were very kind to me, parachuting in on their reading the way I did. But Robert scowled when I beat him to the punch by quickly locating a poem about hibernation.

Afterward we all caroused in his motel room, drinking cheap red wine, along with a half dozen other young men poets who had driven out to attend to Robert.

"You young men should stop writing for three years, get away from all this," he said, waving his hand toward the motel bed. "Move out to the Dakotas and live under the sky. Forget you met me, forget what made you so hungry and false—then start writing again."

We waited on every word of advice, but we were damned if we were going to leave that motel room. It dawned on me, through the haze of chianti, that we were acolytes.

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I have two other stories about Bly. The first happens four years later in 1979 when I am a newspaper editor in a small town in the same part of the state where lived. Robert again came

around to read his work, and I covered his visit as a journalist. Afterward he agreed to meet with several of us at a tavern. He was in good form, enjoying the attention, and playing the role of Sufi mystic, a person apart from the cares of the world, to the hilt.

To his dismay, however, his teenaged daughter sidled up to him and began begging him for money. "Come on, daddy, there are some cords for sale at The Gap, and they're only \$14.99." She forced him to open his wallet for us to see. None of us took this as unusual. Teenage girls need jeans. But I could tell from the look on his face that he felt she had blown his cover. Robert Bly was just a man, with credit cards, a driver's license, and a couple of twenties. It was terrible.

I will save the other story for a moment,

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All along, I had access to fathers who knew things that could save me from living a stupid life, the way fathers are supposed to, but either the father drew back or I did.

When I was a newspaper editor I apprenticed myself to Paul Gruchow, naturalist and essayist. I followed him around from bog to ridge, listening to him rhapsodize about his childhood in the tall grass. I admired the hell out of him, but I don't think he ever figured that out.

Paul hired me not knowing I was somewhat the same kind of writer he was— literary—so we made each other miserable

during my stay in Worthington. Paul was old school, and wanted us to trade book talk over cigarettes and sandwiches. He loved Henry James, whom I found hard to read. I was forever disappointing him.

One night, after an especially vexing day, which resulted in readers calling him to complain about an article I wrote, he stood at the side door of my house. "Do you want to come in?" I asked. He said nothing. "I've got a good idea, Paul," I sighed. "Why don't we be friends?"

In truth, he outdid me in every way, but his response was to become more jealous of me. Once, introducing me for a reading at the local library, he merely said, "This is Mike Finley. I really don't know what else to say."

When I quit and moved away to Connecticut, a midwestern magazine published some poems of mine and cited me in the biographical notes as having his job. It was a magazine that had rejected his work.

"Congratulations," he wrote me in the shortest and bitterest note I have ever received, "on your big promotion."

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The thing about fathers is, they tend to die before you do. All the lovely gentlemen I met over the years, with whom I shared an hour of light, eventually went away.

Frank Brainerd succumbed to leukemia in 1977. His disease was like an apotheosis for him. No one cares about a poet, until death comes knocking. Then everyone crowds around, and Frank delightedly met many women poets.

James Wright died in 1980 of cancer of the tongue. Working for the newspaper, I pulled the news of his death from the teletype machine and spun slowly in my swivel chair.

I ran into William Stafford on a stairway in 1978, at a publisher's party. It had been eleven years since I asked him my silly question on college television in the Amish country. Darned if he didn't recognize me. "Hello" he said, and smiled. "How are you?" Which still seems like a miracle to me.

Tom McGrath, who had always been in frail health, followed in 1990. About three years earlier, I invited him to a holiday open house, and he surprised me by showing up fifteen minutes early, and nursed a cup of hot cider, asking me questions about my children. He had been through a lot in his life, but to the end he was a tender fellow.

Paul Gruchow, the friend who so disliked me, took his life in the early spring of 2004, after many years of suffering from depression—but not before the two of us buried the axe on our misgivings.

I guess Voznesenski is still out there, sneaking up on young poets in toilets.

Sometimes, driving around Minneapolis, I see Robert Bly crossing a street or loading his car trunk with groceries. I was at a poetry reading against the Iraq War one Sunday afternoon in the winter, and for a brief moment, while I gave a brief lecture on the Mighty Republican Wurlitzer approach to propaganda, we shared the same stage.

Afterwards, I was milling about in the basement of the Macalester College chapel, and I looked up to see his hoary visage backlit by the winter sun. He was descending the steps and moving in my direction. This is it, I said, and straightened my posture for long-awaited fatherly reunion.

But Bly merely squinted at me and asked, "Is this where the men's can is?"

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So now I am the old guy, and all the grand gents are gone. My own dad, who stopped smoking thirty years ago, has been diagnosed with lung cancer, and he is pissed. I talk to him on the phone. I wrote him a letter of amends, apologizing for being a remote if dutiful son for so many years. At the eleventh hour I remember how much he suffered in our family, losing his firstborn child, being married to a scary woman, my mom.

And I thanked him for his financial advice over the years. He always thought writing was an idiotic career choice, and urged me to take up an aspect of it that would net me some bucks. Which I did, drifting from poetry to fiction to journalism to business

writing, which is how I fed my family over the years.

"You know, Mike," my dad told me, "if anyone should be apologizing to anyone, it should probably be me apologizing to you."

I waited a few minutes for him to clear his throat and deliver the actual apology, and then realized that his concession was all there would ever be. But it was good. It was all right.

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And another thing. A few months after Paul Gruchow died, I got a call from Matthew Gruchow, his nephew. Matthew never met Paul, but he knew about him, and wanted to know more. I agreed to meet him for lunch, and we talked.

Matthew is in his twenties, and he too wants to write, and from what he has shown me, he will be very good. Books, adventures, essays—I looked into his eyes and saw all the desire, all the heat-lines that once radiated from mine.

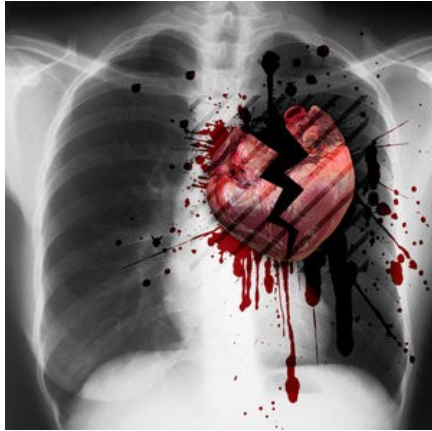
I decided, in a moment of exuberance, to throw in with him, to tell him everything the old guys had taught me.

"Yes, write your ass off," I told him. "If you want to do a thing get at it now. Do it while you are young. You won't be ready, but unless you write you never will be.

"Write crazy, like a child. And when you rewrite, go over it

like a parent, picking up toys and putting things right. And then wait a while, and make a final pass, and this time do it out of love, and out of the joy of it.

"And don't worry about who you are, or if you have a right to write. Don't stop, and don't apologize, and don't expect anything from anyone. Grow in the doing, and between sentences, breathe."



## **Against Heartbreak**

Heartbreak is the biggest reason people build walls to keep God out. Something happened. Something very bad. And forever after that bad thing happening, it's hard to trust in "a loving God."

There are enough stories to break our hearts every day of our lives, if we only heard them. Any time a child dies, it seems so wrong. Every time an innocent is taken, or children are left alone when something happens to their mother, or both parents.

Every time we suffer a grievous injury or loss, and we know we will have to live with it every day for the rest of our lives.

Unless you're a saint, it's impossible to go on and stay pals with God. Even if you strive against all odds not to be damaged by the loss, and to escape the sentence of pain it levies, you are anyway.

Even if you refuse to be damaged, you are nearly destroyed.

Pain is the end of innocence, and in many cases the end of joy. Tragedy makes us bitter, and bitterness makes us hard inside.

And that's one stump whose roots go down forever.

The last century was so fraught with cruelty – with killing fields, manipulated famines, campaigns against populations, whole factories of death – that we witnessed the “death of God” movement. It was just not possible for many people to survive all that they had survived, and envision a kind and loving God on the other side.

Too many people were burned and cut down.

This prejudice against God – or is it a punishment of him – is our defense against our own agony. We want never to get our hopes up again, because we want at all costs to keep our hearts from breaking again.

People turn to drugs and alcohol and other compulsions for many reasons. But a major one is to have a way to talk back to the grief that nags us on an everyday basis. Why are you still alive?

We throw our despair up against the gloom and anger that never leaves us, as a kind of sad shield. Like a child with its hands on its ears crying, I can't hear you.

And God takes it on the chin. Try telling someone whose

heart is broken that God never throws anything at you that you can't handle.

But of course he does. If experience proves anything it is that people can be mangled beyond recognition, and God will not swoop in on a winged horse to save you.

People are swept away routinely. Walk into any clinic waiting room and the evidence is on people's faces. Depression, anxiety, and finally despair overtake us, and the people in our charge.

Heartbreak is to be distinguished from depression. Heartbreak is an attitude we decide to have. Depression is a clinical condition – the #1 cause of suicide. Heartbreak can be a root cause of depression, but they are not to be confused. Heartbreak is something you may be able to do something about yourself. For depression, you will need intervention.

There is a room at an old restored plantation near Natchez, Mississippi. In this room a woman, the mistress of the house, spent twenty-eight years. She had given birth to five healthy children, but her sixth child was born dead, and the woman slid into profound postpartum depression.

No one had words for it in those days. The people in town said she “took sick.” But the truth was, her heart had broken, and that in turn broke her health.

Think of her misery, staring out that second story window for twenty-eight years. Think of the misery of her family, unable to reach through the gloom to her.

We are lucky today. We have a rich pharmacopoeia for depression. If one drug doesn't work, another very well may. Keep trying till you get a good one.

But we face the same problem as the woman of Natchez. A common tragedy can jolt us out of our life. And in our anger and grief, we help keep death alive.

“God never throws anything at you” is a wrenchingly insipid thought to the heartbroken, adding fresh injury to old. “God has a personal plan for your life” likewise hollow to the parents of a starving infant.

Why do people try to evangelize the heartbroken? Don't they know there is no soul there to save? That the very act of trying refreshes the horror, makes it vivid and awful again?

So what can a person do? Heartbreak seems so terminal. What leverage allows a person to live again once they are lost? Where does the lever come from? And where does a person stand when the lever is prying out your heart?

Start with the part that hurts least. Your mind. People are really only good for one thing, learning. Now is the ultimate lesson.

You are hanging by a tiny root over an immense abyss. But you still have reason. It may seem insulting to think about the

mind when a greater part of you, your soul, seems dead. What use is thinking against horror?

This kind of thinking is excruciating.

But it is what you have left. So you must learn what you can coax your reason to do.

Ponder your assumptions. Challenge them. And when you answer them, think about what your allegiances are.

Say your child died, and that was what broke your heart. At the end you formed a syllogism and it went something like this.

*I loved my child.  
My child had reason to live.  
I prayed for my child to live.  
My child died.  
I lay this at the foot of God.*

First the obvious question. Did God kill your child? No. The universe behaved as it always does, with random upheavals of violence that kill and permanently scar people. Often the people who die are the most innocent of all. Collateral damage, they call it.

But God didn't intervene. I prayed frantically. Take me, take me instead, I said. But he turned his back to me.

Rabbi Harold Kushner in *When Bad Things happen to Good People* reminds us that God's love of us doesn't mean that the laws of nature are suspended. The fact that a child dies is not evidence of his malevolence, but of the dangerousness of a fallen

world.

God isn't Superman, catching us every time we tumble.  
Nobody is.

Remember, everything dies. And there is no "right" time.

Second, why do you look at an innocent life ended so soon, and conclude that it had no purpose, that it was snuffed out, that that life was without meaning, that its destiny was thwarted?

A little boy's sister dies when she is 15 and he is 11. The death destroys his family. The father and mother split. The surviving children drift into private anxieties and obsessions. They barely function. No one talks.

Not one blasted life, but six blasted lives. And the lives of those who love the six are damaged. The wound is like a splash in a pond. One family, five families, a hundred families across the country. All are stricken. The pain ripples outward, touching everyone.

And for what purpose?

Perhaps the purpose is to understand what happened. But it requires so much courage to rise up against the pain.

Self-pity gets a bad name in our culture because it sounds like we are indulging in our weakness. It sounds narcissistic. But sometimes we don't pity ourselves enough. Sometimes we need to step outside ourselves and see our plight the way a sympathetic outsider might.

And when we see ourselves that way, we are likely to be overcome with love for ourselves. See how we are struggling. See how we rise each day and go to work though our hearts are still broken. See how we do our best to put a bright face on for the people we love.

This is a little like God sees us every day. We enjoy the benefit of every doubt. He focuses on what little courage we bring to the table. He sees us trying despite our heartache and he loves us for it.

At AA, they say you will never get free of your alcoholism until you name your sorrow, and tell it how much it hurts. Problem is, it hurts to even contemplate doing that.

What can you do? Instead of feeling your sadness on an everyday low level, you go summon it from the deep and feel it its full misery. Expose yourself to the pathos. Go for broke. Remember every detail. Re-experience the unfairness. Let it hurt you. Call your pain by name. Indulge.

The boy whose sister died grows up. Gets married. Has children of his own. But deep down he is still sad. At night he

dreams of the life cut short. Of his sister slipping away, her hands on her scapular. Of the boyfriends she never had. The kisses she never got, the kisses she never gave. The joy of work, and raising a family.

Not even, because she was sick all her life, the joy of running in an open field.

Bring it all back up, until you are sobbing, until tears sting your eyes and roll down your cheeks.

And when the storm has passed, and you have shed bitter tears, and you touch bottom, that is when you ask for help.

And when you have asked, wait.

And be prepared to wait a long time.

Because life is not a box of chocolates. Sometimes you cry out for something sweet, and it is so long in coming, you forget you ever asked for it.

Entertain this thought: Everyone dies. Everyone's heart is broken. No matter what the family in the life insurance commercial looks like. No one gets off lightly. There are no get-out-of-jail-free cards. Everyone pays full price.

If your argument with God is comprehensive – “No one should ever die or suffer” – good luck with that.

And if it is less than that – “I shouldn't suffer, my child shouldn't suffer” – you are asking to be exempted from the pain

of life.

Even at its most excruciating, tragedy is normal.

A comedian once said he hated that the Greeks separated the two masks of comedy and tragedy.

“There’s only one mask,” he said. “Pain, laughter, they cycle on one another. They’re a continuum.”

Ever notice that the best comedians come from groups that have suffered the most? Ever wonder why?

What do comedians do? All humor is embedded with pain – perplexity, embarrassment, disappointment, injustice.

A joke stands outside pain, and reframes it. They are philosophers of pain. Think of it this way, they say, expanding the frame so you see more of the picture. Now think of it this way, and expand it still more.

Perhaps the way to healing after heartbreak is to identify things we still love. A pet. A friend. The warm breeze in our face on a summer night.

Make snapshots of those loves. Then expand the frame.

Keep expanding, this time like healing ripples on a pond.

Perhaps your assumption is that every good life follows an enviable arc of birth, growth, mission, completion, retirement,

death.

Why would you assume that?

Christians like saying that God has a personal plan for everyone. And you try to square that with a child lying dead in the road from a hit and run, or cholera wiping out thousands in Bangladesh, or Alzheimer's taking away the soul of someone you love.

But maybe the assumption is wrong.

Maybe God's plan doesn't follow our enviable arc. Maybe every life is not guaranteed fulfillment and completion, like a signed contract.

Maybe it's messier than that.

Maybe the arc you think of is not for individuals but for groups of people. That we live our lives together, teaching one another lessons.

And sometimes it is the child's turn to do the teaching.

Carlos Fuentes has a recurring line in his novel *Nuestra Terra*: "A destiny may require many lifetimes."

Maybe the tragedy isn't about the person you lost. After all, they are gone. They don't weep for themselves in the hereafter. The only one weeping is you.

Maybe the "plan" is about you, and whether you're going to be able to figure this thing out.

“The Lord giveth and the lord taketh away.” Does he ever.

Maybe the plan is for you to dig deeper and find sweetness even in the face of terrible loss. Maybe it’s for you to close the book on those who have departed, and turn your attention and your love to those who remain behind.

Why should they be victimized by your definition of tragedy? If life is precious and you are sad it ended, why not show it by devoting yourself to those who are still living?

Including yourself. Why should you be the tabernacle of all this suffering? Who made you the ritual sacrifice for the world?

Isn’t that supposed to be someone else’s job?

If you’re going to be mad at God, be really mad at him. Raise your fist and give him hell. Shame him, if it makes you feel better. Accuse him of abandoning you, of letting your loved one die. Call him names. Let him have it. Here’s an idea: guarantee retribution. That’ll get his attention.

Anything, just don’t jam the feelings deep down into yourself the way people do. If you call out the whirlwind, that’s the beginning of a conversation. Maybe he’ll step forward and explain himself. Maybe he’ll say he’s sorry. Maybe he’ll make it all better.

Not literally, but – you know – you’ll at least be speaking.

Which beats being entirely alone.

You know it, too, or you wouldn't be reading this. There is no satisfaction in hating God and making that your religion. And continuing to pummel ourselves and him and everybody with grief is ultimately a kind of sin. A kind of useless indulgence. It doesn't move anything, it is just banging on the wall.

The boy whose sister died has a dream. In the dream he is at his sister's grave. It has been so long since she died, the grave has begun to sink into the clay, and it leans to one side a bit – perhaps an inch off plumb.

Again he has the thoughts. “You never kissed a boy.” “You never held a baby.”

But the car door behind him slams. It is his daughter, who is old enough now to understand his grief. She takes his hand in hers and rests her head against his shoulder.

It is a gesture of such solidity he is taken aback. He turns and looks at her, and there she is. Intelligent and compassionate and alive.

He gasps and embraces her. I love you, he tells his daughter over and over. I love you. I love you. Daniele, I love you.

It's not going to stop hurting overnight. Like the Beatles said, You're going to carry that weight a long, long time.

But at the end of all this weeping and reframing, there is the prospect of healing.

Imagine, if you thought your most precious gift were taken away, to be given another one.

Imagine. If you thought your heart was broken, to discover that it can be pieced back together, bit by bit.

And in the end the repaired heart will be more precious even than the one that broke, because it represents life going on.

Which is what life does. And is supposed to do.

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