

## Coming To Terms

Paul Kameen

*[I wrote this essay about a month ago to primarily to share with my sister, who I felt was growing more and more concerned about my state of mind in the aftermath of my wife's death. I hoped to indicate to her that I had some ways of thinking about things that would help me along. I knew a personal letter could not serve this purpose. I chose the form of a personal essay because it is one I use often, know well, and, above all, can produce quickly, which was the most important factor in this case. It not only served its primary purpose, it helped me, too; and I am happy to share it with others who might find it useful.]*

I'm scared a lonely.

I'm scared a only one thing, which is me ...

John Berryman, "Dream Song #40"

About four months ago, on February 17, I suffered a terrible personal loss, the sudden and unexpected death of my wife, Carol. I've become more and more aware lately of the ways in which the conversations I engage in with myself and with others about my ongoing experience with this loss are regulated by the array of clichés we all instinctively turn to under such circumstance. I have no problem with

that, just the opposite. One of the things Carol and I realized simultaneously and independently about fifteen years ago, and often talked about, was that the “wisdom” of age had less to do with insights deep and complex and more to do with a realization of the great weight of meaning that was vested in these once vigorous figures of speech converted over time into tropes precisely because they are so reliable. One of them serves as my title, this “coming to terms” business that, by turns, I seem to be succeeding, working, or failing at, depending on the day and the conversation. I never thought much before about what that phrase actually meant, in its foundational figurative sense that is. It certainly doesn’t seem to convey anything literal about either “coming” or “terms.” Are the terms just sitting and waiting somewhere up ahead, defying me to “come” and find them? Or are there multiple terms, arranged in such a way that I have to come to each “term” in sequence? None of that makes much sense. Maybe it’s a business-related thing, as in contracts where there are terms we agree to, in both large and fine print, the things we know right off we’re on the hook for and the things we don’t pay much attention to until there’s a problem along the way. The condition I’m in certainly has aspects of that sort, both the large and the fine print. And there is also, of course, a temporal term to most contracts, how long we’re on its hook for until the other terms are satisfied. The duration of my current arrangement might have an exact value in someone else’s calculations, but it is not clear from my end what that might be. I was certain a couple of months ago that I’d be much farther along than I am. I’m not. I fear, as I told a friend recently, that I am only inches down a road that may be measured in miles. In any case, that reading of the figure is not of much use to me,

either, mostly because it implies that there is leverage on my side of the equation, a negotiating position by means of which an agreeable bargain can be struck. Clearly that is not the case, unless I imagine my status as akin to working for the “company story,” as my grandfathers did in the anthracite mines: “Here’s the deal, these are the terms. Come to them or else.” So what’s left? Well, there are the kind of “terms” we “come to” in intellectual work, the currency of words, these very clichés, read figuratively, which, when applied, help us to comprehend something, turn it to a purpose. I’m sure that could not have been the phrase’s initial relationship with practical reality. But I’ll make it my method here anyway. It’s what I know how to do after all: convert terms into learning via work, and vice-versa.

I’ll begin with the term “stages,” which we apply stereotypically to our concepts of recovery, especially in relation to grief. The underlying structure of this figure presumes that the process is like climbing some steps, either back to where we were or, perhaps, somewhere else that’s not down here. I have from the outset, for example, mostly for cultural reasons, my historical moment, imagined that I have during this interim been moving through something akin to the “stages of grief” Elizabeth Kübler-Ross outlined back in the late 1960s. I encountered her work for the first time shortly thereafter, in graduate school, while I was contemplating a career as a therapist of some sort. Late in my college career, while I was still a physics major but certain I did not want to spend my life in that profession, anxious about my future, I went to my college’s counseling center for help. One of the things they offered me was an “interest test,” which would provide at least some sense of

how my temperament and goals matched up with those of practitioners in many fields. The highest level of correlation for me turned out to be with psychiatrists and priests. I knew priest was off the table from a very early age. I was raised in an industrial strength Catholic culture. During one of my after-school Catechism classes, I was 10 or 11 at the time, the presiding nun was explaining to us about the possibility of a religious “calling” and asked us to take a few moments to look into our souls to see what God might be telling us about that. I assumed, for many good reasons that had nothing to do with my own desires or ambitions, that I would hear Him saying “Yes, you are called” and that I would simply have to go along. I was in the 5<sup>th</sup> grade, just starting to get interested in girls, one in particular. I vividly remember my first experience of, well, not so much “falling in love,” but more being overtaken by what now I would say was probably just an extraordinary hormonal overload. It happened on the playground one day, at recess, just like that, instant: I saw her and almost passed out. So I’m sitting there looking into my soul thinking, boy, I’m really going to miss following up on that. Surprisingly, I heard just the opposite of what I expected. I was not at all being called to clerical service, or toward anything else in particular that I could discern from what I heard. It was a little bit of a letdown, maybe, but mostly I was relieved. My life would be more my own to live as I saw fit. And girls were in.

So here I was a decade later pursuing a doctorate in English, mostly because I loved poetry, still uncertain, lacking, as I often had been, in a practical orientation, thinking, well, maybe psychiatrist, then. I started reading around in the field of

psychology, which was in the midst of a dynamic, transformative phase: Carl Rogers' client-centered therapy, Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs oriented toward self-actualization, Thomas Szasz's myth-based approach to mental illness that was emptying out the archaic network of asylums across the country right while I was reading him. I even took a couple of courses in the counseling program. I found all of this intellectually engaging, and I approved generally of the underlying ethic that animated the field's ongoing transition. But it just didn't excite me the way poetry did, full of the dimension and detail of real human experience, of life, which so obviously to me exceeded exponentially, and in certain moments even infinitely, all of our cultural efforts do delineate it neatly into healthy or dysfunctional states and stages, most especially as it pertained to *my* mental universe. So I stuck with English. But I had read Kübler-Ross, and this figure of the stages became mine.

Right now, today, the "stage" I'm traversing in whatever process is ongoing I would describe as an odd combination of being awestruck, sad, and (at least at my core, beneath the roar of all my normal-for-now emotional torrents) preternaturally calm, so much so that I am not even interested enough in spending the 10 seconds it would take to open Wikipedia to see if this is one of Kübler-Ross' official stages. What difference would that make to me? I am so deeply and fully and ensconced in this attitude that I have absolutely no choice about it, even if I'm out of synch with the preferred or standard schedule for these sorts of things. I've had a couple of people ask me lately, with an undertone of concern I guess, "Do you think you're depressed?" by which I take them to mean, "I think you're depressing, and I wish

you would talk to someone else besides me about this, someone who actually gets paid to listen. Or for godssake at least turn yourself back into something more like the version of yourself *I* knew *I* could turn to for help, who listened to *me*, instead of this new thing that I can't quite get my head around." I just answer "no," and the conversation moves on to some trivial affair of the moment in their life or mine. In any case, I am certain I am not depressed. I suffered depression, about 25 years ago. I realized then, by how awful I felt, that I had a "problem," I had a pretty good idea what caused it, I knew I would need professional "help" over the long run to regenerate myself, and I went and got it, for what it was worth. That depression was clearly an electro-chemical malfunction of my brain that was brought on by long-term abuse of my nervous system, an exhaustion or depletion of the resources that keep those imaginary things we call identity and purpose, and therefore "the future," afloat. It is a terrible and scary ontological condition. It takes many years and lots of work to overcome, and my belief is not that it goes away, but that it steps aside. So I keep a close watch for it out of the corner of my eye, try to stay abreast of exactly where it's standing on my sidelines. What I am experiencing right now, while akin to that on its face, is fully epistemological; it is grounded on the actual, real knowledge I have acquired thus far on my progress through the life that became "mine" last February. Depression is, in its essence, at least as I see it, a false reality. This one is true (with a small "t," if you prefer, to affirm its personal rather and universal aspect). They may be equally scary and terrible, but the latter cannot fairly be called a psychological dysfunction. I am in fact, I believe, in one of the healthiest

states of mind in my life. I just don't happen to like that much what I am having to come to know there.

There is what I would call a sort of supersensory state I have been experiencing during this time, one I have some prior familiarity with. I first became aware of it when I was quite young. I grew up in a large family in a small town. So everyone knew everyone else and people we knew died regularly. Going to wakes and funerals was just a part of everyday life, and we were indoctrinated into that culture from a young age. My first memory of that was when I was about 5. My uncle John, the youngest son in the large Kameen family, had died from cancer. We all went to the wake, then the funeral, then the cemetery, where we watched the coffin descend into the ground, my grandmother, beyond consolation, being held back from throwing herself in after him. At every stage toward that monumental tableau there was a lot of wailing and weeping that I couldn't quite fathom; but I remember feeling like I had been lifted up to a higher level of consciousness in some way, a level where what mattered about life, its ultimate value, became, at least briefly, vividly clear. There was real and practical knowledge I acquired from this.

Later on, I became an altar boy, a very reliable one, so for years I got called to serve almost every funeral in our church, dozens of them. I would get to be excused from school for a few hours to do this. I had the same experience at those occasions. All of the noisome grieving, especially at grave-side, that had nothing directly to do with me would prod my consciousness into this other dimension where I would stay for

maybe an hour or so thereafter. I would come back to school and think how shallow and misguided, sometimes even rude and stupid, were the ongoing transactions of everyday life. People had such great in-built value. I had just seen the evidence of that from those left behind after their loss. Why couldn't everyone see that every second of every day? Why would we treat each other so badly, or just blandly? This is, I will continue to insist, a form of real knowledge. That state of consciousness would diminish quickly and I would return to normal life, partaking I'm sure, quite shortly, in the same shallow, misguided, rude and stupid behaviors that afflict us at ground level in this world.

I've had a number of more substantial, and durable, encounters with this state of mind in the meantime. There was the whole era of the late '60s, for example, rife with the war, which we viewed evening by evening in nearly real time on TV, the incredible violence and savagery only barely mediated, all punctuated by periodic assassinations at home. Any college age male back then, playing out a temporary "deferment" from service, felt to some extent that college life was like a higher-end death row. Or at least I did, and especially so after the roulette of "the lottery" made my birthday an unlucky one. In a mere year, then a month, I would have a choice among three kinds of "death:" the draft, and a tour in Vietnam; refusal to report, and five years in jail; or exile, to Canada for example, without any prospect of ever returning home. I spent intermittent periods in that elevated state of consciousness, most especially while watching the national news between 6:30 and 7 each evening, trying to decide, finally, which one, for me, it would be. As it turned out, the year I



came out, with a lottery number of 121, my county drafted up to 119. In a rural area, with a small pool, I was surely next on the list. I knew then and have never forgotten to this day that I am “alive” only by dint of that small space between names on a list.

My most intense and memorable singular encounter with death occurred about twenty years ago during a long night sitting in a hospital room after Carol had some major surgery. Her survival was seriously in question, less than 50-50 I knew from how the doctors talked to me. The equipment attached to her gurgled and whirred, all I heard, sitting there in the dim green light emanating from that machinery. I know for a fact that death was in that room with us all that night. The presence was palpable and unmistakable. I came to understand, hour by hour, that death is not greedy, needy or grim. It is patient. It waits in its proper place politely and respectfully until what it is obligated to take comes fatefully forward to meet it. I entered that state of consciousness again, and that time I stayed there for maybe a few days. I have not forgotten what I learned that night. It is a body of knowledge acquired through experience, like any other.

What strikes me most about this state of mind is its seemingly symmetrical duality, the felt perception of being the one who both immediately experiences and immediately witnesses one’s life, of being simultaneously both passionate about (as the one who experiences) and dispassionate toward (as the one who witnesses) what happens to be passing through the spaces of one’s attention. It is the ultimate quantum state of consciousness: being, from one perspective, both here and there;

and, from another, neither. As long as some equilibrium holds, the spectacle is astounding. That must be the source for much of the “awestruck” part of my current stage. The extremity of my recent loss has been such that I have been in this state of consciousness now not for hours or days but for months. I called it supersensory because I seem to have a kind of clairvoyance about the people I encounter. Most of them at their approach to me are a little nervous, fearful I’d say, their not knowing, that is, exactly what to say or do. Some simply go out of their way to avoid me. Some say something quick, awkward, that caught-in-a-trap look, and hurry on. Some are surprisingly kindly. Most say little at all that I care about, in that they talk about something else entirely, as if nothing has changed for me because it hasn’t for them. I believe they all think I am in a state of shock that makes me oblivious to, and therefore forgetful of, these interactions. Exactly the opposite is true. I see, I mean literally see, three or four levels deep into everyone I meet, all the gears turning, the conflicting inclinations, the words that get said or checked, and so much more. The central hub for all those gears appears to me to be that fear I sense as they approach. For some, the gear revolves outward, toward me, inspiring a caring gesture, by means of which both their fear and mine resolves. We are both momentarily together, even if only a few words pass between us. For most, the gear turns inward, recoiling from the perceived risk that is always attendant to human contact, but most especially in situations like this, where the nearbyness of death adds an extra dose of the dark. In each instance, based entirely on which direction I see that gear turning, I have revised, sometimes slightly sometimes diametrically, my opinion of people I have known for 10, 20, 30 years, for better or worse. I remember all of

these interactions with eidetic precision, and I am completely confident that what I see is absolutely accurate and that I will remember it all forever, another ample of body of knowledge. That latter part may not turn out to be entirely true, of course, since, as I said above, I have always in the past reverted to a relatively standard human condition once the presence of death had passed. But I'm not sure this time. It has been so long. I almost can't remember any longer my not being able to see this way. I don't especially like being privy to these masked or hidden inner spaces, the ones we should properly get to keep to ourselves, and believe we can most of the time. But right now I have no choice. I see what I see. Maybe it's just a stage, and everyone will slide back into their original slot in my inner world once it's over, but I'm doubtful.

Another term we have for characterizing these made or missed mutual engagements is "reaching out." I now understand it as much more than an empty catch phrase, the great value that derives from the "reach" part, that is. I really like this one at the figurative level, the literal image in it of a hand at the end of an arm. Some people keep their hands in their pockets and walk by; some wave their arms around a lot mostly for show; some extend a hand, inviting a mutual reach-back, then withdraw; and some, the most saintly, persist and persist in this against the resistance of even such a prickly person as me, insisting that contact actually be made. Among these latter, the ones who actually end up "touching" me (another term with great weight for me these days) my guess is that what they notice most is my anger. It might be direct and forthright, a mild or, if I get really riled, even a wild rant; or it might be

strained through the cheesecloth of my harsh sardonic irony. But it cannot easily be mistaken for anything else. I make no effort to deny it: I am angry, at almost everything from God to the gopher out back. That expression right there, which I just came up with, lets you know that I know how irrational, overwrought and displaced it is. Perhaps rage is a more technically precise term for it. But it just feels to me to be anger, and fully justifiable. I'm pretty sure this was one of Kübler-Ross' stages, the rage part, I mean, one of the earlier ones. She might argue were she to talk with me now that I am moving on to some other phase because my rage is apparently tapering (I can make a joke about a gopher after all) toward, well, something with a different name. That would be wrong. The only difference for me is that I have learned better how to control it when I want or need to. One of the phrases that helped me to do that is the old sports cliché I happened to hear again, being used ironically, on ESPN in the middle of one of the nights I couldn't sleep: "You can't stop him; you can only hope to contain him." These days I work on containment. But rage contained is still rage. It doesn't boil over all the time, or even seethe. It simmers. It is probably what takes up most of the "sad" space of my current state of mind, inspired as it is not by the big horrors, like war or torture, but by the quiet, quotidian horrors of ignoring, for example, the person right in front of us who needs nothing more at that moment than a simple kind word and, fully knowing that, we choose instead to say something else, which costs us exactly as much in energy, time and attention, as if the vocabulary of care were a store of gold coins we would be depleting by dipping into it, instead of an infinite of reservoir of

words just like the pointless, rude or stupid ones we turn to in their stead, whose levels we don't ever seem to worry about depleting.

My philosophy has always been if you have something good to say about someone or something good you can do for someone, do it while they are here, and do it, whenever possible, right now, while they're in front of you. Above all, avoid the penury of passive aggressiveness, that grudgeful holding back, so distinctly, so wastefully our cultural norm. Then you won't be tempted to compensate later by filling pages with futile and useless effusions when they no longer have any object or point. Have I always been able to live up to this philosophy? No. I quite often, under duress, behave like a fool. Remorse may hunt me down and haunt me; but I'm smart enough to know I can't hide from it behind a fog of elegiac eloquence. Elegant sentences are not a suitable substitute for our life's self-induced lacks. The only words we need for that are "I'm sorry." We should keep them near at hand all the time, for all of the "deaths" we witness, both the big and the small, both the ones we inflict and the ones we can't help but notice as we pass by, those blank spaces that stand out precisely because they have been left vacant by life. Saying "I'm sorry" may not re-animate those spaces, but it rinses them out, lets us move on, become more human instead of less. There is no steady state in this regard. It is more or less, take your pick, minute by minute, day by day. I know down to my bones how many missed their moment to swab that space in me, when my grief was deepest, my need greatest, this chance to become more human instead of less. I have been struggling for weeks now to "come to terms" with the fact that all those people,

some of whom I have known for decades, were so immobilized, unable it seemed even to speak as they sidled by me. It all felt so cruelly dismissive in real time, but I know there must be more to it than that. I'm thinking now that it may have been, for some of them at least, the sense that a small gesture could not possibly make a difference for me, with my loss so grave, that a gesture copious enough to match its contours was too hard to execute, so doing nothing was preferable. I can tell you with certainty, based on what I now know, that it is not. I've had friends and colleagues do some very big things over the years to promote my career and celebrate my successes. All of them pale to insignificance compared to the few simple "I'm sorry"s that came my way last winter, quite often as it turned out from the margins, from those who know exactly what it is like to be passed by triflingly.

I believe on the basis of these experiences that I understand better now what Wordsworth meant by the "little, nameless, unremembered acts/ of kindness and of love" he alludes to in "Tintern Abbey," the ones that "have had no trivial influence/ on that best portion of a good man's life" (112-13). What possible value, one could fairly ask, could acts so little as to be *unremembered* have for anyone? To which I say: They may well be unremembered by the givers, precisely because they are so small; but they are never forgotten by the recipients. Such acts are the fount that sustains Wordsworth's compassion for all the ragged, solitary characters in this book, the Goody Blakes, the Simon Lees, the Mad Mothers of the world, these lonesome souls struggling to make it through another day. Many readers find the characters in these poems to be overly sentimentalized, even maudlin. I never did

and certainly don't now. This "unremembered" business helps me further to fathom the odd paradox that concludes "Simon Lee," the young witness to the old man's futile, exhausting attempts to remove a stump—having just cleaved it free for him with one blow, inciting Simon's lavish "thanks and praises"—saying to himself:

--I've heard of hearts unkind, kind deeds

With coldness still returning;

Alas! the gratitude of men

Hath oftener left me mourning. (60)

Why would Simon's gratitude be more mournful to this young man than all the hearts unkind, combined, that he has ever heard of, darkly returning kind deeds with coldness, a ghastly thought? Precisely because it illustrates both how easy it is to "reach out"—he just did it and it only took a few seconds—and how often such helping hands are withheld. When Simon wells up with tears, which he is man enough to hold back, the whole of the history of "what man has made of man" (65), which Wordsworth "laments" in "Lines Written in Early Spring," flashes forward all at once for the young man: again, not the great atrocities we all mourn instinctively, but the little ones we all, day by day, minute by minute, inflict with our inattention, our arrogance, our fear, making us, bit by bit, less human instead of more.

My students, surprisingly, all of them, were so kind to me, these young people who had known me for only six weeks. Maybe that made it easier for them to be so

spontaneously human, this not knowing me for long, that is, and, as a consequence, not feeling a pressure to be grand in their condolences. That's what I think in my lighter moods. In my darker moods I think it may simply be that the inevitable calculus of time has not yet, for them, been able to integrate enough of the tiny increments up or down, more human or less, to equate a definitive slope to their character lines, for better or worse. I actually had this in mind when I told them how grateful I was for what they did, how much it meant to me, how much it helped me. But I felt they didn't entirely grasp the seeming imbalance of the equation: How could such small gestures produce such deep effects? So, on the last day of class, when I gave my usual forward-looking "lecture" to firm up what they had learned and to insinuate its potential ongoing value for them, I also told them never to underestimate the potential impact of their seemingly small gestures of kindness. I insisted in the strongest way that while they may seem to require almost no energy to deliver, they can be inestimably impactful, as theirs were to me. I'm sure I looked to them in that moment just like Simon Lee does, peering out of his teary eyes toward those hands that reached. I could see on their faces how moved they were to hear this and, more importantly, how much to heart at least some of them seemed to be taking what I said. If even a few of them did, I know that many people, struggling with losses, will benefit down the line from my simple advice. What I didn't tell them, because it is too dramatic, though often true, is that just one of these gestures, just one, may be life-altering, even life-saving, to the person who needs it right then. Maybe it will get that person only through that day, but in such situations, that may be all it takes to keep him on here until the next day comes, or until he can start to



sustain some semblance of life again on his own. We are, every one of us, after all, on a “day to day” basis in this world. For some of us, on some days, the stakes are pretty high. We can never be entirely certain about who is at such a place or when, so why take a chance, when so little is required? Those little acts of kindness will be “unremembered” by the giver. His life will go on. They will never be forgotten by the recipient. His life will go on. I think you can calculate for yourself the potential difference between those two identical sentences.

For quite a while I thought it was shameful of so many people who knew me so well to be so dismissive of my duress, so cheap with their care. Now I think otherwise. It was shameful of me to be mourning the loss of those little gestures at the expense of mourning my real loss, the one who did love me, long and truly. For that I’m sorry. That sentence is not elegant; it is not meant to be. It is meant to be true. That’s really all I care about right now. What’s true, this life, my life, not what I want or wish or hope for, just what’s not there and what is. Simple. This process of coming to terms is not merely a series of painful accommodations, those grinding stages, just to learn to cope with what’s gone; it is also an opportunity, a means of learning to live with what remains, with ourselves, alone as we might now be, with what we can make good along our way or leave capsized in our wake, this ongoing work of becoming incrementally more human instead of less so during the precious, fleeting days we need to spend here.

## Part 2

As anyone who knows me knows, poetry has always been the first place I turn when I'm in deep need, sometimes to write it, sometimes to read it. Lovers of poetry from my generation, when they think about the relationship between death and rage, will probably remember Dylan Thomas' great poems, especially, I'm guessing, "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night" (128), his moving missive to his father. Nobody reads Thomas much these days as far as I can tell. I guess I can see why, with all his aural pyrotechnics and emotional flamboyance—too 1960s-ish. I liked him a lot back then, especially listening to recordings of his readings, that booming, bottomless, voice announcing his mountainous lines, and I like him still now, for all the same reasons. I've read that particular poem at least a dozen times in the interim, always with impact. I thought again today about one of the famous sentences from the poem—"Rage, rage against the dying of the light"—while I was writing this, and it suddenly struck me in a whole new way. I had always taken the rage in question to apply to his father, the poet's desire to fan the flames of his father's fight. Like "Stand up, old man, give it the business!" But the poem doesn't now seem to me to support that reading, even though it's most likely what Thomas intended. For all of the "men" in the poem, there is as they face their extinction, on the one hand a poignant recognition of how the rage of their preferred mode of *living* kept *life* more than death at bay, and on the other an almost graceful resignation, a welcoming warmth, toward the end clearly in sight. The "[w]ise men at their end", whose "words had forked no lightning," "know dark is right." The

“[g]ood men,” whose “frail deeds might have danced,” but apparently didn’t, simply cry. The “[w]ild men . . . learn too late” about the “sun” they “sang in flight,” and they grieve. The “[g]rave men” see only belatedly what they were “blind” to all along. And Thomas’ appeal to his father is that he “[c]urse, bless, me now with your fierce tears.” It is the *poet* who believes that “[o]ld age should burn and rave at close of day,” not all those dying men around him facing “that good night,” yes, “good” night. So what’s my takeaway from this? Well, that rage belongs properly, and fiercely, to those of us left behind by our loved ones. It is our light, not theirs, that is “dying” and we don’t like it much, no, not much at all. Thomas’ rage, my rage, is not with death, nor with the sense that anyone should have fought harder for themselves to resist it; no, it is with the death-in-life that presides in the aftermath for those of us left behind, precisely in the places that life once occupied, and with the selfish sense that someone, from God to the gopher out back, should have fought harder on our behalf to forestall the terrible heritage whose great weight we now must carry. I have no idea how Dylan Thomas died, and I don’t want to find out, given the few things I know about how he lived. But I’m guessing that when he came to the same juncture as all of these old men he’s trying to egg on in his poem, he saw what they saw: Death was not the cause of his rage, nor deserving of it; it was the solution. So, after a brief scuffle maybe, mostly for show I’m supposing for those guys watching from the other side—as was likely the case for his father and all the wise, good, wild and grave men before him—he went along amicably into that night, because, like them, he knew finally, for sure, that it was good.

As soon as I wrote the words “death-in-life” above I thought of the famous scene in Coleridge’s “Rime,” the grotesque figures of Death and Life-in-Death casting dice to see who will get whom among the crew on the mariner’s boat. Death wins the crew. Life-in-Death wins the mariner. He becomes a good example of the ongoing, gradually morphing, rage I have been talking about. At first he’s just bereft and pissed that he got left behind, the harder route to have to take. “Why couldn’t I die, too? Or instead?” is basically what he thinks. He begins to contain his rage to some extent through that simple expression of love for small things, the once slimy, now beautiful, water snakes slithering around the boat. When I wrote about the mariner previously, I probably thought (it never came up in quite these terms) that his rage was at that moment resolved by or into “love.” Now I think otherwise. I have (I know because I have mentioned it to one of my friends) an abiding desire these days to reach out to those who get ignored, even penalized, by their smallness, their off-the-margin-ness, a domain I have yet to decide the precise range of. One of the reasons, I believe, that the mariner and I are inclined toward the smalls is because of, rather than an alternative to, our rage at the bigs, a way of paying them back for their insolence, their nonchalance, their blasé contempt in the face of simple human need. In this case it seems “love” and “rage” overlap in the same space.

Once he gets back and recovers to some extent, the mariner is then repeatedly and intermittently afflicted by another kind of rage, the force that compels him to seek out, hold still, and instruct the unwilling person who most needs to hear his terrifying story. He behaves like and is perceived as a lunatic by everyone he

encounters in this state: the wedding guest he wants to help, the pilot and pilot's boy who drag him from the vortex of his sinking ship, the "hermit good" who shrieves him. Why? Because he knows something of consequence that they don't and don't want to. Knowledge is a hard burden to bear. That's why the wedding guest wakes not just "wiser" but also "sadder" once he acquires it (32). It's one thing to have the opportunity or inclination to share knowledge when it is desired. Teaching is most often like that: friendly and cooperative. It's another to be afflicted, as if from without, by a compulsion to force it on the unwilling. I hope that will not happen to me, for my own sake and for the sake of those who "must hear me" (30). Twenty years of hard-core Catholic upbringing and forty years as a professor have built for me a most authoritative, even oracular voice. Everything I say comes out of my mouth like an infallible papal decree, delivered *ex cathedra*. God help anyone who would have to listen to that, under compulsion, until I was fully done with the "tale I teach" (30). But, again, these turns of event are to a large extent out of our control. As Dylan Thomas says in another poem, "A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London" (112): "After the first death, there is no other," by which I take him to mean that the proper reaction to loss of this sort—and he's smart enough to know that such a grave loss as this is orders of magnitude more difficult to understand or manage than his and mine are—is not a depression we bounce back from in stages but a remembrance we build permanently into our fund of knowledge, and it cannot be overridden or overwritten just because we don't like it.

This calls to mind for me another “term” I have heard a lot lately: “turning the corner,” as in “have you yet.” I keep trying to imagine what that might mean. I have said repeatedly, and have every reason to believe, that the trunk of my life’s timeline just stopped at 5:45 P. M. on February 17 and has not started up again. It is an oddly disjunctive experience to wake up every morning to a “new” day. Calendar time has advanced, life time hasn’t, a variation on *Groundhog Day*, maybe my favorite movie (just nosing out *Animal House*, which tells you a lot about how classy my film tastes are.) Many mornings there is a brief interval, two or three seconds, just as I wake up, during which I seem to believe that my old timeline is still ongoing, that nothing had disrupted it, that I will just get up and go about my husbandly business. Then the clutch slips suddenly with a clunk, and I’m here again, mired in this mine-for-now time-stop.

For a few years after I abandoned my work in physics, I tried to keep up with the field, most especially to maintain my calculus skills. I thought it would be easy to do that. It wasn’t. Mathematics, I discovered, is not like “riding a bike.” You forget how to do it very quickly if you don’t use it routinely. And it takes a lot of use to keep it up to speed. So my knowledge of the field quickly devolved toward Discovery Channel caricatures of the latest, most exotic fads. These days, many of them promote the multiple/infinite parallel universe theory, the idea that our “life” is ongoing along different trajectories in many different dimensions simultaneously. I had been for some time skeptical of this way of construing temporal extension. Now I’m not so sure, because during those few seconds that inaugurate each day for me, I

actually feel like I am being bumped out of a parallel life that is still whirring along nicely on my old time-line and dumped back into this one, where I just can't get the wheels to work. Maybe each of our "lives" is like riding a new kind of bike, and one of these days I'll get this one balanced and going forward. I hope so. In any case, I might at any moment, right now even, be "turning" hard left or right, whereby I'm looking at things from a new perspective maybe. But, stuck as I am on the same temporal plane, I certainly haven't made any progress. I actually *feel* like I'm turning some significant corner about once every two or three days, things are that turbulent. That means I've turned about fifty corners so far, but I can never remember any of the ones that came before the last one. I could be turning left over and over, which means going around the same block repeatedly, good exercise maybe, but not meaningful advance to another stage. Or it could be completely random, like trying to find your way out a dark woods, this way and that, willy-nilly, until you are more utterly lost than when you turned the first time.

I know for a fact that I have in the past really turned corners toward the future, dramatically and successfully. I've written poems about some of them. The one that comes first to mind for me actually has to do with the figurative kind of "deaths" we sometimes inflict, as a matter of necessity, to "come to terms" with losses. I wrote it about 35 years ago, part of a series I called "Snow Man." They were about an imagined version of myself who, to overcome a great loss, went to the arctic wilderness, with all of its hardships, to force recovery. That sounds like such a silly and self-indulgent premise rendered so simply in that sentence. But I still consider

those poems among the coolest I've written (though the journals I sent them to must have thought otherwise.) I have them in mind all the time when I confront hardship. The specific poem I'm talking about now is on its surface seemingly about Snow Man killing a seal, in chilling fashion, simply to eat:

He rolled a smooth stone along  
the fingers of his left hand  
and hunkered motionless  
over an ice-hole  
seal-spear poised  
ready over his right  
shoulder stiffening  
as the surface gurgled  
slanting down fast then  
between seal eyes through  
seal bone into seal brain.  
A day's wait done  
he slung the carcass  
over his shoulder plopped  
the smooth stone down the hole  
and plodded off: one step  
always only one step  
ahead of the blood-stained snow.



What that poem was “really” about for me at the time was how, in order to survive in this world, we sometimes need to do hard and awful things, killing off something beautiful in the process, like our deep attachments to those whom we have loved and lost. In my case back then whom I had lost continued to live on without me, so that part was good. The “seal” was simply my memory of what was no longer there, figments haunting the now-vacated inner space, taking up mental energy I knew I would need to “turn the corner” toward a new life. I had to get them out. You can see in this poem very much the kind of “preternatural calm” I mention above. We all leave a “blood-stained” trail in our wake. The hard part is accepting responsibility for it. One of the great benefits of my success in this particular endeavor was that I got to meet Carol, on the very day, if you can believe it (it sounds way too storybook to be true, but it was), that I went out to celebrate the ultimate success of this corner-turning. I was young then, of course, and had to bring on this figurative “death” in order to clear a space for another real “life” to come my way. It is a great relief to me at this age to know I don’t have to do that again. I’ve had enough of the blood-stained snow for one lifetime. This time age takes me off the hook. The seal is safe to come up and breathe.

One (last) expression I use all the time for myself, and that has great value to me in practical terms is “getting my bearings,” as in re-establishing one’s orientation after it has become discombobulated. This is something one can do whether time has started up again, whether you’re lost, having turned too many corners, or found,

having joined hands with a reacher-outer. One of the first poems I thought of, once I started to get my bearings last winter, was John Berryman's "Dream Song #45." I've always loved that poem, so darkly funny in the way all the best poems in that sequence are. Berryman is writing there about the various kinds of "ruin" his protagonist Henry (the thinly veiled self-stand-in essential to the comic effect of the poems) has confronted in his life. It opens this way. "He stared at ruin. Ruin stared straight back./ He thought they was old friends." He then goes on to detail an assortment of potentially ruinous crises Henry faced along his way: a girl's father finding them "bare" "on the "stair;" a set of lost papers "rich with pals' secrets;" a night in jail; a day in bed; an "unsigned letter;" being lost drunk "in an Asian City;" "a telephone's threat;" a misdiagnosis of "epilepsy." These are the exactly the sorts of things we all think are epic challenges, so hard to face and fight. What could be worse, more ruinous, we say, at each such juncture? But then we learn otherwise, as the stunning end of this poem discloses:

But he noted now that: they were not old friends.

He did not know this one.

This one was a stranger, come to make amends  
for all the imposters, and to make it stick.

Henry nodded, un-.

That is exactly what I thought when the gravity of this experience began to dawn on me: "This one I do not know. This one is a stranger, come to make amends for all the

imposters, and to make it stick.” Yes, exactly that. I had seriously overestimated my capacity of handle the real challenges presented by life’s deaths. I thought: “I’ve been through so much already, instance after instance of potentially ruinous losses piling on over time. I thought death (literally and figuratively) and I ‘was old friends.’ And here I am, nothing but a rank amateur about to enter the ring against a pro, all of those predecessors just ringers, sneaky-weak sparring partners hoping to deceive me into thinking I was tough enough for the main bout.” I couldn’t believe I had been so stupid.

Now I see the close of Berryman’s poem—that nodding “un-”, which is what I meant above by stunning—quite differently. I don’t think he’s talking here about Henry’s undoing, his ultimate evaporation or disappearance at the hands of this “stranger,” that great final defeat that cannot even be put into a full word, only intimated by the ultimate negation; or even about his death, which he surely knows is not far down the line. And it is not about absence either, that peculiar sort of vacuity that our postmodernist assumptions imply resides at the outskirts of words. I think he’s talking about an encounter with transcendence, a knowledge, a meaning that exceeds in its depth and scope any attempt to coopt it via a vehicle as feeble as language. Henry is awestruck, sad, and preternaturally calm. He is right where I am. Right where I’ll be for a while, until my rage transmutes itself into yet another form I cannot quite imagine yet. In the meantime, I feel awkwardly both in and out of both life and death. I wish I could tell you more about what it’s like to be here. But I feel a bit like the Coleridge who, in the midst of his a laudanum-induced hallucinatory

amble through Xanadu, on the verge of writing an astonishing poem of “two to three hundred lines” about his encounter with transcendence, was interrupted by that damn “man from Porlock.” We have only the truncated opening scenes of the great opus that just evaporated with the knock at his door, but still, even at that, one of my all-time great poems, which says something about Coleridge’s, well, “Coleridgean” capacities. He closes “Kubla Kahn” so poignantly, lamenting what was lost, what was made “un-“ by that interruption, and the inevitable confusion that arises on the outside in its wake. Here is what he says about that:

A damsel with a dulcimer  
In a vision once I saw:  
It was an Abyssinian maid  
And on her dulcimer she played,  
Singing of Mount Abora.  
Could I revive within me  
Her symphony and song,  
To such a deep delight ’twould win me,  
That with music loud and long,  
I would build that dome in air,  
That sunny dome! those caves of ice!  
And all who heard should see them there,  
And all should cry, Beware! Beware!  
His flashing eyes, his floating hair!

Weave a circle round him thrice,  
And close your eyes with holy dread  
For he on honey-dew hath fed,  
And drunk the milk of Paradise.

You might wonder how this poem could possibly apply to my current theme. It has nothing to do with death. But I think it captures something essential about the contradictory impulses people like me inspire among those who happen to hear some small part of what we know, the full version of which is lost outside the province of words, “un-“done by dint of some interruption. I recite this part of the poem from memory every time I teach it, stopping to comment on it as I go along. It is, of course, a mesmerizingly beautiful array of images. But I’m more interested when I do that in highlighting, for those sitting right in front of me, all of the ways in which it says deeply and darkly true things about the human universe. I want everyone to listen to, and maybe hear, Coleridge’s exact words, and their astonishing implications, all the knowledge about life they point toward, without being able quite to say, in the hope that it may change things a bit, at least for a few of them, going forward.

There is the mystical, magical vision itself, the exotic damsel strumming to him from her ancient, mythic mountain. What could be more surreally beautiful! But it is now gone, something “once I saw,” just the memory of that music left behind. What a memory, though! If, if only, he could “revive” it, the “delight” he felt would allow him,

compel him maybe, to make his own music, equally mystical, magical, to such an extent that those simple sounds (not words, sounds) would “build that dome in air,” literally build it, in air for godssake, all of it, the dome, the caves, right there, in the air. Wow, that’s something! And it wouldn’t just be there for him, in his “imagination” for example; not for Coleridge, not with his conception of the imagination, which claims for us truly godly powers of perception, for bringing whole worlds fully into being, in the air, for “all” to see, right “there.” And they, all of them watching that spectacle, would be amazed and scared, the combination of which would incline them to believe he must be some kind of witch or wizard, possessed by something way outside of everyday reality, a force to “beware” of, those wacko flashing eyes, that wild floating hair! Yes, weave your protective “circle round him thrice,” not to stop from seeing this extraordinary sight, but to keep it up there, hanging in air, far enough away from the life you have to get back to after the show that you don’t forget the path that will take you there. Then all the eyes close, and it’s over. But note, even when filled to the full with their “dread,” the witnesses know there is something “holy” about this spectacle and the man, possessed as he might be, who brought it forth. It is “honey-dew” he has fed on, quaffed by the soft, sweet “milk of paradise.” He may be scary, but he’s not dangerous. Coleridge had encountered, experienced, lived with for a while, right there with, something so awesome as to be almost beyond comprehension. A man who knocked at the door took it away. He knows he cannot possibly revive it, to show to everyone, that astonishing place he has been in. Gone now, beyond words. There is only the

memory of a music that, could he even render that, might mark him as a madman, maybe worse. Same here. That's how this poem applies to what I now know.

## Coda

I have told people repeatedly lately that I will never pen a posthumous paean to my wife because to commodify her in that way would betray what she meant to me. And for what? An essay, a few poems, the sort of miniscule, fleeting notice (if you can even call it that) publication brings for us in my overblown profession. No. I hope that this missive will not be mistaken for such a thing. It is, I want to insist, entirely and utterly "self"-ish, about "only one thing, which is me," my grief, my rage, my terms. A good friend of mine has over the years sent me books of poems written by great poets in the aftermath of their wives' deaths: Thomas Hardy and Eugenio Montale are the two most prominent. I couldn't finish either one. Maybe its a gender thing: She might have an ear tuned to hear what a man might say from the shadow of these staggering losses as loving, conciliatory, honorific. I have different reactions to each. For Hardy, all I can think about, as a man, knowing what little I know about him and his life, what he wrote about and why, is that he must have been a dick to live with. Writing a bunch of mournful poems when it's too late is just what that type of guy would do. Montale I know less about as a person. He very well might have been a great guy to be married to, and his poems are more beautiful, so elegant and

gentle, to my tastes at least. But I'm still skeptical, guessing that maybe she's up there thinking: "Yeah, *now* you're so nice to me."

I wrote my poems for Carol while she was alive, the first, one of my favorites, not long after I met her. I premiered it at a reading I gave at a local bar, and she got to hear it then, dedicated to her, when we were so happy:

### **Crazy**

as the wind he was and wanted,  
for himself, nothing; but for her:  
the most glorious chrysanthemums,  
armloads of yellow held loose, huge  
blooms oozing dollops of sunlight;  
behind them his smile, so wide  
no one, not even her, could ever hope  
to resist; then he'd run toward her  
through the tall grass, in slo-mo  
maybe, his dozens of chrysanthemums  
bobbing every which way, crazy  
as the wind he was, and wanted.

Or so he told his florist in the morning,  
who recommended roses, or a nosegay--



anything but crazy, but chrysanthemums,  
but what he wanted, was: the wind.

In matters of the heart I have always been, by in-built temperament, an extremist: Go full tilt, all in. If it tanks, take the fall. Carol lived at that speed, too, so we hit it off fast. The world is full of boring, warning florists. I'm glad we ignored them. Skip the tight, tidy arrangements. Those suit bereavement. Give me a bushel of big ones to hold loose while I'm running like the wind. I was crazy about Carol from the day I met her until the day she left. I'm not saying I was ever the most fantastic person to be with. But I know I tried my best every single day. I'm sure someone, many men, out there could have done it better. But I couldn't. I knew for thirty-some years that I was the luckiest man in the world. Now I'm not. I have no idea how I'll ever come to terms with that.

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