

This Fall

Essays by

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Table of Contents

Preface	4
Essay One	12
Essay Two	16
Essay Three	20
Essay Four	35
Essay Five	49
Essay Six	55
Essay Seven	58
Essay Eight	69
Essay Nine	76
Essay Ten	88
Essay Eleven	91
Essay Twelve	103
Essay Thirteen	108
Essay Fourteen	112
Essay Fifteen	120
Essay Sixteen	126
Essay Seventeen	130
Essay Eighteen	134
Essay Nineteen	137
Essay Twenty	146
Essay Twenty-One	148
Essay Twenty-Two	152
Epilogue: Take 1	156
Epilogue: Take 2	170

Preface

I'm writing this preface retrospectively, on New Year's Day, 2016, just before I open the folder that holds the files that my "book" will comprise, this series of personal essays I wrote during a one month window this fall, thus the title, starting late-October and running until late-November. It was a warm, spectacular fall this year, courtesy of El Niño, the ongoingly pleasant days just perfect for a splendorous leaf-fall. I have always loved that time of year, every day such a dramatic change from the day preceding, as if time is accelerated, trying to close down the show before Thanksgiving gets here, nature finally revealing, rapid-fire, all the glitzy layers it kept under wraps in the heat of the summer, like some mega-stage magic show, the pace breathtaking.

As you will find out soon, I walk in the woods every day, usually in the morning, for an hour or so, as my wife Carol and I did for years before she passed away last winter. We used to have on those walks wonderfully circuitous conversations about anything and everything all rolled up together, day after day, completely unscripted, always surprising, like elaborate mazes we navigated to pass the time pleasingly together while we walked. We would wonder from time to time what it might be like if we tried to write them down, these meandering, vivid riffs on life, love, time, death, all of it. But, like dreams, about a minute after we got back to the workaday world they were wiped clean, receding simply into our nervous systems as a gathering residue of embodied wisdom, or

wackiness, which are, we both agreed, right next to each other, sometimes even simultaneous, on the tachometer of human understanding. These walks and these talks somehow kept us grounded, steady, ready together to take on what we had to take on to make a way in a world where “normal,” or at least a convincing simulation of it, is often obligatory.

I was in a state of great agitation this fall, all kinds of loose threads flipping around looking for a pattern to turn into, my trying to figure out how to live now that I’m alone. Carol was not there to talk to about this, so I talked to myself in the one place I knew would let me do that without inhibition, in the woods, and with the things that had always seemed eager and able to listen to us, daily, which is what I needed, what anyone needs, when the stakes are so high, the entanglements so baffling, all these trees, such good company, so smart, so sweet, so beautiful, like my wife. I had no plan for each day and no plan for the series that emerged from the amalgam of that month. Basically, I’d just start walking, see something out there that would trigger something in here, then and on and on until it ended. I’d try while I walked to keep enough of an inventory so I could write at least some of it down when I got home, which is what I did, day by day by day, 3, 6, 9 pages each sitting, typing as fast as I could, then dropping it, un-re-read, into the electronic folder so I could make breakfast and get on with my quotidian affairs. I am about to open that folder to see what I have. I hope it is as fulsome as all those days, what I saw, what I thought about, ravaged and ravished by turns over what I have lost, what was falling all around me, dazzlingly, crazily; and that it may take me, after this long winter maybe, to meet who I am to become, just up ahead there on the path, waiting.

...

There are, I now see, 22 essays here, ranging in length from 2 to 12 pages, though most are 3-5 pages or so, easily negotiable at a brief sitting. There is a weak narrative line among them, some back references, that kind of thing, but no “plot,” so you don’t have to read them in sequence. You can if you prefer just dip in somewhere, read until it’s too boring or depressing, jump to a new spot, or wait for another time when you can start somewhere else that strikes your fancy, doing the same thing. That is actually one of my favorite modes of reading, especially poetic texts, and this book strives to have that aspect. Just open a book to a page, glance around, a few glimpses, flip to another, getting a sense of rhythm, style, flow. Then backwards, forwards, whatever. I often read poems that way, the first time through, from the inside out. Sometimes I even read sentences that way. As I write about it now it sounds more like how you look at a painting. You don’t start in the top left corner and process the pixels in sequence. Your eye lights somewhere, moves, aggregates perceptions, revises, moves, reaches, etc. You “get” the whole thing, just along a less predictable and more instinctive path. In any case, all of this is to say that I hope you will stay with the parts your eye can’t look away from and slip away whenever it gets too dark or too meandery.

...

Carol died some time during the afternoon of February 17, no one can say exactly when, while I was at work. I found her when I got home. My life stopped dead right then. When I described my odd, out-of-body feelings last spring, I said that time, for me, had halted and hadn’t started up again yet. But that was, I see now, came to see through the series of walks I write about in what follows here, while true, just one symptom, among others, of this

larger crisis. Time, I have no doubt, and many philosophers and poets agree, is the primary criterion that defines life for us in this particular world. It is what orchestrates the glories and horrors of our journey here, defines all of the binaries we take for granted in the organizational paradigm of our this-worldly experience, the ones that seem to me now to be right on top of each other, always co-present. And when our life here is over, time is, I believe, something from which we will be set free. As I say in a poem I wrote about 25 years ago after my mother-in-law's former lover took his life:

*I wonder how long it is after the last breath
before time evaporates?⁹
The past, the future, all of it,
just a ball of smoke caught in the throat:
one small cough and it mingles with infinity.*

...

*None of us ever lives in the moment,
except maybe at the passing of that last breath,
past and future colliding, finally,
at the only point they will ever have in common.*

Between February and November I resided in a strange nether world that is neither of this world nor of the next, whatever that might be. As I explained to a friend at a restaurant a few weeks after Carol died, I felt as if I were watching myself, my old self, on TV, in a series populated by all the characters I knew, for whom the ongoing narrative went on, normally. But the real me was now outside the plane of that reality, simply a viewer. My character in the program, I could see, was not a very good actor, forgetting his

lines, mucking up the story line. The writers would have to get him out of the script soon. The me watching, on the other hand, was on fire, full more of rage than of words, that feeble currency of human experience; but, like most of us when we watch TV, so captivated by those moving pixels, without an identity of his own. And the rest of the cast was, of course, as oblivious to him as characters on TV are of us, sitting in our living rooms watching them.

I had some strange powers of perception during that interim, simultaneously awesome and creepy. They diminished gradually over the months. Now they are mostly gone, for which I am grateful. You can't make a life in this world if you're not in it. Time started up for me with a gentle click on one of my final walks this fall. I felt it. I know exactly where and when it happened. I realized right then that I was coming to life again, like a newborn plopping down right on that path in the woods, inhaling air, wailing. I later calculated that it was almost exactly nine months since Carol had died. I write about this in one of the essays that follow. Now I'm here again and need to figure out what I can do with the time I will still spend here.

This preface is a good example of how the following pieces move and why they have been so functional for me. Writing, for me, is and always has been a future-oriented instrument. A lot of the conventional ways of teaching writing imply the opposite, that it is a way to record and render a quantum of knowledge one has already acquired and formatted. In other words, it reaches back to and extends the past. I almost never write that way. I begin in confusion, wonder, hope, dismay, whatever. I find some words to start with. Then I type and think, or think and type, at almost exactly the same time. Like that sentence I just wrote. I had no idea I was about to say that until it came out. If I hadn't liked it,

or don't further down the line, I'll excise or revise it. But even if I do, the future that sentence oriented toward me is here.

I am seeing now, having written that, like a flash of insight, both how and why people who have been shocked out of themselves by life events are drawn toward the arts (writing, painting, music) to recover. These media help to elicit, out of almost nothing, a possible future. I guess this is to say that what follows here is very self-serving. I hope that will not make you stop reading, that I will be able to make some of this interesting and useful enough for you to keep going, or coming back, to give it a chance. Maybe I shouldn't have said what I said these last few paragraph. But, really, I couldn't help it. As I tell people over and over, the only things that come out of me now are exactly what I am thinking right then. I can't fake it, or even tweak it. I can only speak it or not speak it. So, if I'm to have a book for you to read, I can't not write it.

...

I am about now to start my sabbatical, that scheduled respite professors earn every six years. In practical terms, that means I am free from my teaching responsibilities until next September, eight months from now. At one time, I'm sure, given the name of these interludes, rooted in sabbath, the day of rest, the expectation was that all work would be suspended to promote reflection, emotional restoration, intellectual invigoration, such that the person returning to the classroom would be reanimated, more dynamic. Now, in the contemporary academy, it's more a time of tacit pressure to finish a book or start a new one, research being the be-all, end-all of academic culture. That is, the period of rest is not now intended to make you a better teacher. It is

designed to relieve you of the burden of teaching in order to do your real work, which is not writing and thinking, per se, but publishing. That may sound cynically reductive, but I don't mean it that way at all. It is just an honest appraisal of what work in my profession happens to be about now. I've adapted myself to that culture as best I could and been quite successful on its terms. My great good fortune at this stage of my career, so close to retirement, is that the economic impetus I have previously felt toward publication (to keep my job, get promoted, get a better raise, etc., a significant impetus to be sure) is now gone. I don't need to worry about that any longer, a great relief. Whatever I write now can go up on online platforms when it's ready and stay there until I take it down. All as close to free as I can make it. I had a number of other (to me) very good reasons for short-circuiting the publishing process in this way. But that was the main one: I do not want the profanity of money intervening on either side of the transaction for this book, so deeply personal to me, either payment to read it or profit potential (and everything that issues from that) for a publisher. Period. The fact that making it available this way will be the equivalent, from the academy's point of view, of never having written it in the first place is of no consequence to me. And, paradoxically, if I do it well, my "work" on this book will be the very "rest" I need to come back, renewed, not to teaching, but to life, a life, my life, whatever that's meant to be.

My brother and his wife stopped by a few days ago for an overnight stay on their way back to New Jersey from a visit with their son in Chicago. It's entirely possible that that will have been the last sustained encounter I have with people who love me until I fly out to Washington for my daughter's wedding in April. I am surprised by my response to writing that sentence. It doesn't upset or unnerve me in the least. Carol was my world. She truly loved

me every single day. Now she's gone. I understand that I have been irrational, running amok, in my attempts to find some semblance of that in the interim. I knew how stupid that was while I was doing it, but recognizing stupidity and stopping it are two different things, as the whole of human history, including my own, amply demonstrates. It's time for me now to take my time.

There are a number of terms that cross my mind to describe this upcoming interlude. "Pure solitude" was a phrase I used with one friend, a sort of romantic, self-induced separation from society that allows for meditation, reflection, emergent self-understanding. Seclusion, as in going into it, is another term that comes to mind, that conscious choice anyone can make to get off the main track and on to a side line for a while, as a way to rest, recover. Isolation is another, in the sense of an enforced separation, via confinement, from society, like a prisoner kept apart from the general population, a way to "do time." My isolation will certainly not be "hard time:" I'm actually free, radically free, to do, think, say anything I want. I know I have work to do to overcome the effects of my loss. I've done time before, not on this scale, but for analogous reasons, so it's not a new thing. Thinking of this time that way, as something I am about to "do," actually makes it look sweet, appealing, inviting me to use it wisely, toward rehabilitation rather than the kind of chronic recidivism that results when the future is forever resisted or declined.

So, sabbatical, my month-of-Sundays times eight! I hope I will use these days respectfully, make something of them, from them, come to terms not with death (who ever does that?) but with life, what's left of mine. Solitude, seclusion, isolation, just me with me, starts. Right now.

Essay One

There is a stand of woods about five miles from here, one large enough to be better measured in square miles than in acres. It is named after William Boyce, the founder of the Boy Scouts, which is why it is called Boyce Park. The park includes many recreational amenities, but the part of it I'm talking about is, really, just a big woods, like the kind that surrounded the town I grew up in and through which I wandered happily back then, those casual, loose-fitting, natural spaces that sit halfway between large, urban parks, of which Pittsburgh has several, some wild enough to get lost in, but visibly carved into and cultivated by human engineering, and wilderness areas, like the Allegheny Forest, say, a long drive from here, rich with old growth trees and prime for daylong, strenuous hiking.

In the woods, the trees are on the younger, smaller side, maybe a foot or two in diameter; relatively densely packed, hundreds and thousands of them, creating a visually deepening space that evaporates gradually into infinity, the topography through and among them criss-crossed by a maze of foot-worn dirt paths arranged more like randomly crazed paint than logically organized avenues for transit, paths that surely emerged and evolved serendipitously, organically, glued to the features of the landscape that allowed for the easiest (rather than the most efficient) passage from one place to another, paths that one can when so inclined, as I sometimes am, imagine a Native American

might have traversed on his way from one tent or village to another, paths made by and for walking.

I love these woods, these walks, and so did Carol. We started walking daily in this particular one about 10 years ago, rain or shine, hot or cold, about four miles typically, on a combination of the intersecting paths that varied from day to day, guided mostly by our collaborative whim. After Carol passed away last winter, it took me more than a month to overcome the resistance of my sadness enough to return. Now, eight months later, I'm back at it every day, by myself, of course, but in many important respects still with her as well, in this sense: Carol was like me in that she really enjoyed what Socrates calls "ethereal speculation," "stargazing," that scattered sort of thinking without a purposive goal, motivated more by curiosity than results, the free play that comes before argument, writing, work. She would talk with me excitedly, exploringly, about all manner of philosophical, psychological, artistic, or just plain "human" matters without inhibition or plan. Or, conversely, she could stay comfortably silent for stretches in my company. That's what we did on those walks, one or the other in an unpredictable rhythm.

Since I spent most of my free time alone with her, this was my idea of normal. I tried after she passed to start up such unscripted conversations with friends and colleagues, or to sit with them in silence, expecting it just to take. As best I could tell, the effect was more confusing, even unnerving, than engaging, as if I were violating some of the essential conventions, ones I either never knew or had long forgotten, that regulate social intercourse in the normative world. So I stopped. On these daily walks, though, I still live in that relationship with Carol, with time, with nature, with language. I talk animatedly to myself, often out loud, in a gesticular fashion, about all manner of things, a torrent of words

that would surely sound nonsensical, maybe maniacal, to anyone who wasn't in on it every day. Or, by turns, I simply inhabit the vastly rich experiential places that one can only navigate a way through in deep, full silence. I rarely encounter another walker on my way, so none of this is either embarrassing to me or impertinent to anyone else.

Today's walk was a good example. I was thinking, quite entertainingly, about the relationship between "art" and "life," a conundrum that has always engaged my thinking, and Carol's, too, as I assume it must for most others in a profession like mine, in which we promote the great value of textual artifacts, our domain in the kingdom of art, to audiences who, while skeptical, are at least tentatively hopeful about their potential to illuminate their lives, whirring on outside of our interventions. There are, of course, an array of cultural and philosophical matrices that regulate our merging through the mental traffic as we move back and forth from one lane (art) to the other (life.) But today I was thinking about it in more personal terms, specifically, how such texts help, or don't, someone in my shoes, or someone who has to face someone in my shoes.

If we read literary texts for a reason, what is it? They cannot or at least should not simply be alternatives to, or escapes from, the realities of life and death, talismans to delude us into thinking "reality" can be safely forgotten or ignored when it rears its head in front of us. Are these stories, poems, plays, movies, supposed to enliven us with experiences as a mode of enrichment, carrying their weight over into our daily affairs, helping us cope and helping us help others cope? And what, then, is the status of such an experience, by comparison for example with one like my walk in the woods, which is not being induced from without by an extant text from which I am absent as a character? I started to

think through some of this last spring in my essay “Coming to Terms,” and I was digging deeper into that muddle in ways that would now take me many pages to document. But that is not my purpose here.

What I want to talk about is this: At one point, walking fast, head down, looking vacantly at the ground, I began to think about Walt Whitman, whom I will be teaching in a few days, and particularly about his extraordinary ways of organizing relationships between things we stereotypically might say are either “inside” us or “outside” us, bringing them into confluence with one another, even full merger from time to time. Just at that moment, I noticed, at my immediate left, alongside the path, a single wildflower, tall-stalked with large arrowhead shaped leaves, thin stems, upon each of which was perched a dime-size, daisy-shaped flower in the most subtle and lovely shade of purple. I stopped to consider it, in least in part, I think, because that’s exactly what Whitman would invite me to do. Then I noticed that there were several other such plants in the immediate vicinity, each with its own array of four, five, six of these flowers. When my gaze wandered up the steep slope on that side of the path, I saw they were everywhere, galaxies of these glorious, star-burst flowers spiraling off up over the cusp of the hill. I was stunned, breath-taken, filled utterly to the brim with elation.

I stopped thinking, stopped talking, was empty of language, full of thankfulness. I felt on the verge of tears but knew that was merely a figurative way in which my body was reacting, out of gladness rather than sadness, and all of which was simultaneously present in my embodied experience of this exhilarating moment, extending its temporal reach casually toward me as I reached back to grasp and gather in this spectacle. I believe now that if I had not been thinking about my problem du jour, this conundrum

about art and life, and specifically about Whitman at that moment, and more endemically, as a foundational matter of fact in my unfathomable internal constitution, about my beautiful wife whom I loved and lost, I could not have experienced all of that. But it was clear to me also that had I not glanced off to the side, outside the perimeter of my thinking, none of any of what was present there would have taken me into the moment that went its leisurely way with me. I'm not sure how long I stood there, or, thereafter, how long it took me to traverse the next 50 yards of the path, which were similarly surrounded, enveloped, by these delicate blooms. But after some while it was over and I was on my way. All I can say is this: If we read for reasons, this must be one of them. I have no clear idea about the "life" part of my original equation, whether there are reasons for that, too. I hope so. But even if we only make them up ourselves, to ease our own way and the ways of others who have to journey with us here, this is a good place to anchor. Maybe it's just a scrim that makes it possible for such serendipitous moments as this to weave their way into and through the time we spend here, making it momentarily and memorably magical.

The brief verbal sketches that follow here document intervals like this from some of my walks this fall, an unpredictable tapestry made from what I'm seeing, reading, teaching, remembering. I am sad to have to write them. If Carol were still walking with me, I wouldn't need to. And I'd still think I was normal.

Essay Two

There is a bar-grille about four miles from where we live that Carol and I really enjoyed going to. We'd head there maybe once a month, sometimes on Sundays for their unique cod-fillet-over-eggs breakfast or a weeknight for a great steak, which they were willing to prepare to our incineration-level tastes without the exaggerated eye-rolling that is generally *de-rigueur* at steak houses. It is a large floor plan, divided up into two parts: On one side is a long, old-style (wooden, mirror-backed) bar, right across from which is row of about 8 very comfortable, puffy, red-vinyl-clad bench-seat booths; on the other side is an open, spacious dining area, maybe twenty tables, lots of action in an out. There are tons of TVs scattered on the walls, in a "sports bar" format, maybe four over the bar and, on the table side, a number that gradually increased over the years from a handful to a passel. The only thing separating the two areas was a wood and glass half-wall attached to the booths, maybe three feet high, just enough to block the visual stimuli from the TVs and some of the hurly-burly din from the table traffic on the other side of the room. We always sat in one of the middle booths, the ones best insulated from the peripheral intrusion of the bar-side TVs. It was intimate, casual, fun.

About two years before Carol passed away, for reasons unbeknownst to us, they removed the glass half-wall, such that not only was the restaurant area with all of its TVs suddenly in our

perceptual field, but so was the first line of tables on the side right next to us, maybe two feet away, way too close, the people eating at them seeming viscerally with us, at ours. The effect of this small change was dramatic. Instead of feeling semi-private, alone-together-in-public, we felt on-display and overloaded by impertinent stimuli. We stopped talking about the things we enjoyed talking about, stopped laughing relaxedly, stopped enjoying the food, and, soon after, stopped going there.

I was thinking about this on my walk today as a sort of complex analogy to help me explain to myself one of the most difficult and haunting effects of Carol's death on my everyday life in the workplace. I am not an innately social person, but I try in my public roles to be as positive and generous as I can without losing depth of character. I believed I was generally well-liked. People would seek me out for advice from time to time, implying to me that I had some sort of knowledge that would be helpful to them, urge me to assume leadership roles, or just chat with me casually. I tried, to the best of my ability, to be a good colleague. Because of that, I truly believed that when I returned to work the week after Carol's death, there would at least be a welling up, maybe even a groundswell, of emotional support. I didn't expect Christmas Eve in George Bailey's living room, he, having devoted himself to the general welfare of his community, sacrificing opportunities from time to time, brought now through no fault of his own to a great despair, a debit to his name that he cannot possibly pay, standing dumbstruck as all the town folk troop into his living room with their dollars and cents, yes, but more poignantly with their affection and good cheer, redeeming him in every possible sense of that word from his great loss. Academics don't do things that way. But I didn't expect to have to pay the debt back all by myself, especially during those first two months while I waited, alone, terrified by the extremity of my grief and by the ongoing

official inquiries. Those grim winter nights passed by grudgingly like great silent glaciers nudging their way toward a cold sea. A night like that lasts long and pays well. Every morning I would turn over what I had earned to Potter, waiting there in his wheelchair, silent, grumpy, glassy-eyed, slightly smiling. One of these days, when I wake up, he won't be there.

That's where the glass wall comes in. It is, I know, a silly way to explain such a puzzle. But it helped me today when I thought: "Yes, that's it. Carol's death was like taking down the glass wall in the conversational spaces I shared in the workplace, the one that kept all the dark, overly-real material just enough out of sight and sound to make it tolerable to others, just a background buzz, while they spent their time with me." So, I thought, those who had enjoyed a brief, occasional visit in my quiet, charming booth were suddenly overwhelmed by all that flash and din. It stopped them cold at the door and turned them toward another meal at another place. Part of what I think I've been doing in the meantime is trying to rebuild that glass wall, making myself appear once again comfortably normal to passersby, such that they might be inclined to stop by my booth, the din and drama of the main room enough out of range to be tolerable. I'm pretty good with tools, so I know that one of these days I'll get that job done. Today, I'm just going to enjoy my good memories of the time I spent with Carol in that bar-grille, on our own side of the glass wall, happy together.

Essay Three

I have a thing for birds. I've been like that all my life. Seeing one fly by fills me with delight. Like most people, I wish I too could fly, and like most people I often dream about exactly that. It's never an extreme kind of flying, more just a strong push upward and forward from my legs, a spread of the wings, a long, slow, sweeping glide about 20 feet off the ground. Sometimes, it's more a lightness, the ability to leap up off the floor and float up to the ceiling of a very large room, a gym, say. It all makes me feel strong and free.

I've seen a number of unusual birds on walks in Boyce Park, especially in early spring before the canopy fills in, engulfing them in green so that just a song makes its way out. There is a pair of Pileated Woodpeckers for example that sets up there every year, tree-knocking explosively, flashing into sight from time to time. I heard that knocking today, very, very loud. I could triangulate its direction and height, but the actual bird was entirely masked by the canopy. That's probably what got me thinking along these lines.

Last summer I saw a Scarlet Tanager on several occasions, my favorite bird. On one walk it seemed almost to be following me, flitting ahead from branch to branch, so out in the open! I actually felt it was Carol, come to walk with, this rare bird she knew I loved. It's only the second one I've seen, the first when I was

maybe nine or ten, at my uncle's farm. I was smitten by it then, so I got one of those life-size, plastic bird kits and built and painted my own, the sleek torpedo shape, the smooth scarlet red, jet black wings, fantastic. I loved that bird. For some reason, I believed that the word tanager had another "n" in it, as in tananger. One day my sister, a couple of years older, corrected me. I was almost irate in my adurance that I was right, enough so that she backed down, no easy accomplishment. It wasn't until many years later when I was writing a poem with that bird in it that I realized I was wrong. Here are a few lines from that poem, called "Second Wind:"

*Tonight I dreamed my own death,
escaping it, as always, narrowly.
Now the sound of you breathing
beside me: flocks of tanagers
dreaming of spring. I smoke
one cigarette, then another.
The darkness floods my lungs.
Earlier, while we were dancing,
I caught my second wind and wished
the lovely passage of breath
through my chest would never cease.*

I have always taken this incident with my sister as an object lesson pertaining to personal commitment. You may think my takeaway is a simple one: Be more humble, open to criticism, ready to acknowledge mistakes, and that's a part of it. But I also see the opposite side: Be confident, stand up for what you strongly believe, don't back down until you see for yourself the error of your ways. I often say at work, to myself or to others: "Just

because you're the only one saying something doesn't mean you're wrong." In fact, I think that's often a sign that you're right, maybe just ahead of your time or not in the right place. That's not, of course, so with my tanager mistake, in which case I was way ahead of my time, but with the wrong answer. I call attention to this basic stubbornness because I was thinking on my walk today how out of step I've always been with the dominant trends in my field. I've written about this variously before, so I won't dwell on the specifics. I'll tell the story that crossed my mind while I thought about my "that's my spelling and I'm sticking to it" tanager.

When I interviewed for my current position, in 1981, I read an essay on metaphor for my job talk. The most fervent interrogator at these events was, I was told, a young, ambitious scholar with a forensic temperament, postmodernist in his ideology, the definition of a "theorist." I knew enough about that stuff to stand my ground, but could have cared less then, as now, about my ideological purity or up-to-the-minuteness. So I finish my paper, the question session opens, and he leans forward in his chair, which I had been told was a precursor to his question, a dismissive one that ended with what I'm sure he assumed was a dagger-thrust: "Don't you think your position on this is nostalgic?" Nostalgic in that era, in his discourse, was shorthand for old-fashioned, naive, or maybe just stupid. I knew that. I told him then what I still think today: I do have a deep longing for a time that is not now, but it is not in the past. I have no interest in going back to anything. I'm eagerly, hopefully, eyes-forward, to borrow a figure from Emerson. I longed for two worlds: The one that is not here right now because we have not lived up to the past promises of our own words, translating energy into fact; and the one that will be coming down the road once the current regime has passed, which happens to be the world just emerging just now,

one I feel much more at home in. I don't think he understood a word of what I was saying. It sounded almost insane, I suppose. It wasn't even "theory" itself that I was waiting to pass. Much of that was timely, urgently necessary in the dreary critical and cultural landscape left to us by late-Modernism, a way of cleaning house, making room. It was the power dynamic it seemed to promote in our field, in the academy, an elitist, specialist culture, a book-fetishistic economy of knowledge, a perfect re-incarnation of everything that was wrong with the academic dynamics of the 1950s, the king we went into the streets to dethrone and behead, opening up so much vitality and user-friendly diversity in the university communities of the late 60s and early 70s. Then we, my generation, brought it all back, except now we ran the show, ensconced at the top, the industrial-size shredder of postmodernism grinding up everything in sight until there was nothing left to demolish, all the kings and all their minions in bits on the ground. There were three choices then: Shut off the shredder and wait to see what came next. That would have been pretty neat. Have the shredder shred itself. That would have been spectacular. Or have the shredder look around and say: The king is dead, long live the king, who in this case is even worse than the old king because he denies he is king in the very process of doing everything kingly.

But back to birds. This week, in our "Figurative Language" seminar, we were reading the work of some of the British Romantics, so I was looking again at a couple of poems I know well and I just happened to focus on the birds that make those poems work. One is Shelley's "To a Skylark," an astonishing tour de force of Romantic figuration. Here is the first stanza:

*Hail to thee, blithe Spirit!
Bird thou never wert,
That from Heaven, or near it,
Pourest thy full heart
In profuse strains of unpremeditated art.*

It struck me for the first time how odd this assertion is, telling this bird that it was never a bird, making my tanager mistake seem like chump-change by comparison. All of a sudden, the skylark is entirely disenfranchised from his own birddom, at the poet's behest, reduced only to its song wafting down from the clouds. I suspect there is a technical name for this specific kind of figuration, but I don't know exactly what it is, or care enough to look it up. It is the act of radical disembodiment that interests me here. And what Shelley does with it in the rest of the poem, the array of similes he uses to re-fill the empty space his absent skylark creates for him, transforming the spectral song into the apotheosis of poetic inspiration, slowly at first, in the opening stanzas: "Like an unbodied joy whose race has just begun . . ." or "Like a star of Heaven/In the broad day-light." Then cascadingly:

*Like a Poet hidden
In the light of thought,
Singing hymns unbidden,
Till the world is wrought
To sympathy with hopes and fears it heeded not:*

*Like a high-born maiden
In a palace-tower,
Soothing her love-laden
Soul in secret hour*

With music sweet as love, which overflows her bower:

Like a glow-worm golden

In a dell of dew,

Scattering unbeholden

Its aerial hue

Among the flowers and grass, which screen it from the view:

Like a rose embower'd

In its own green leaves

By warm winds deflower'd,

Till the scent it gives

*Makes faint with too much sweet those heavy-winged
thieves.*

Note that in each case, there is a “thing” there, at the base of the comparison, but it’s never quite tangible, embodied; it’s always barely evanescent: the rainbow clouds, the hidden poet, the tower-ensconced maiden, the screened glow-work, the scented rose. Nothing solid anywhere, but still filled to the full. That’s impressive. The rest of the poem then uses this re-figured bird-base to amp up things like Wordsworth’s “Let nature be your teacher” and Coleridge’s “damsel with a dulcimer” to their maximum pedagogical volume, what the poet aspires to be but can never even approach becoming. That’s very cool, I think, at the material level of the poem, this bird that is not a bird, these things that are no longer things, enspiriting in the most majestic ways, haunting in the most alluring ways, the similarly disembodied figure of the poet who can only listen, listen:

*We look before and after,
And pine for what is not:
Our sincerest laughter
With some pain is fraught;
Our sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest thought.*

*Yet if we could scorn
Hate, and pride, and fear;
If we were things born
Not to shed a tear,
I know not how thy joy we ever should come near.*

*Better than all measures
Of delightful sound,
Better than all treasures
That in books are found,
Thy skill to poet were, thou scorner of the ground!*

*Teach me half the gladness
That thy brain must know,
Such harmonious madness
From my lips would flow
The world should listen then, as I am listening now.*

Shelley wrote this poem right around the time he wrote his hyper-drive starship of a “defence” for poetry, the apogee, in my mind, of Romantic valorization of the power and force of both the poet, as a cultural figure, and poetry as a mode of discourse. Here are a few passages, just to give you a flavor of Shelley’s ecstatic paean. My favorite one comes about halfway in, the ultimate phallic analogy for verbal invention:

Poetry is a sword of lightning, ever unsheathed, which consumes the scabbard that would contain it.

Yikes! But there are many others, more extended and wonderful:

Poetry is indeed something divine. It is at once the centre and circumference of knowledge; it is that which comprehends all science, and that to which all science must be referred. It is at the same time the root and blossom of all other systems of thought; it is that from which all spring, and that which adorns all; and that which, if blighted, denies the fruit and the seed, and withholds from the barren world the nourishment and the succession of the scions of the tree of life. It is the perfect and consummate surface and bloom of all things; it is as the odor and the color of the rose to the texture of the elements which compose it, as the form and splendor of unfaded beauty to the secrets of anatomy and corruption.

...

Poetry turns all things to loveliness; it exalts the beauty of that which is most beautiful, and it adds beauty to that which is most deformed; it marries exultation and horror, grief and pleasure, eternity and change; it subdues to union under its light yoke all irreconcilable things. It transmutes all that it touches, and every form moving within the radiance of its presence is changed by wondrous sympathy to an incarnation of the spirit which it breathes: its secret alchemy turns to potable gold the poisonous waters which

*flow from death through life; it strips the veil of familiarity
from the world, and lays bare the naked and sleeping
beauty, which is the spirit of its forms.*

• • •

*Poets are the hierophants of an unapprehended inspiration;
the mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts
upon the present; the words which express what they
understand not; the trumpets which sing to battle, and feel
not what they inspire; the influence which is moved not, but
moves. Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the
world.*

Wow! Can't go much farther out there than that. Shelley doesn't seem to be very widely read or admired these days. I've come to enjoy and respect his work more over the years, but there is something oddly "cold" in the overwhelming "heat" of his images, a glassy, almost dispassionate, beauty to the poetic surface, hard to penetrate, reminding me of Walter Pater's famous dictum: "To burn always with this hard gemlike flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life." That is Shelley exactly, I think, burning, burning, yes, but with gemlike flames.

No one in our seminar was a particular fan of Shelley's work, but everyone, to a person, "liked" Coleridge, and it struck me for the first time how "warm" Coleridge felt in the reading. No matter how odd or over the top he becomes in his poems, or nearly unintelligible in his prose, he remains likable. One of the poems I ended up talking about, though it was not assigned, is "Frost at Midnight," which has an owl in its opening and a robin in its

closing. In between is that extraordinary meditation he engages in beside the flickering fire in his cottage, his infant son cradled beside him. I have always loved this poem, so elegant, soothing and poignant, and I've read it dozens of times. This time I just happened to be thinking about Coleridge's early adulation of David Hartley's bizarre associationist system for orchestrating the relationship between perception and memory, those tiny vibrations in the brain that sensations initiate to encode their presence, actual physical perturbations that can also be instigated in the absence of external stimulation, becoming disparate "memories" in the associative company of one another.

That term, "association," became a keystone to Romantic poetics. Wordsworth uses it multiple times in his famous "Preface," having simply absorbed it from Coleridge, I'm sure; and Coleridge, who really read Hartley, relies on it heavily to jog his thinking toward his definition of the imagination in his *Biographia*, though he has to recognize and then abandon Hartley's highly deterministic system very early in that process to get here:

The IMAGINATION then, I consider either as primary, or secondary. The primary IMAGINATION I hold to be the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM. The secondary Imagination I consider as an echo of the former, co-existing with the conscious will, yet still as identical with the primary in the kind of its agency, and differing only in degree, and in the mode of operation. It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate; or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still at all

events it struggles to idealise and unify. It is essentially vital, even as all objects (as objects) are essentially fixed and dead.

This is the most exorbitant definition of the imagination I'm familiar with, and it comes out of nowhere in his argument. He's been trying to get to it for pages, chapters, the long Kant-like drudgery of his foundational thinking, striving, grappling its way toward where I'm sure he knew well in advance he wanted to get. Just before he announces the above proclamation, he clearly reached an impasse and knew it. Most theorists at that point would likely just cover over the huge chasm from one paragraph to the next with an authoritative "thus" or "therefore." I do it all the time. No one ever notices. Coleridge, to his everlasting credit, doesn't do that. I think it's actually because he believes that we, his readers, are smart enough to see all the steps that are missing, which we are not, or at least I'm not. I would have trusted him, or been enough carried away by the fervor of his argument to overlook this crucial apostrophic moment. Coleridge does here the most charming thing: He inserts a letter from a friend that, basically, warns him not to publish that portion of the argument because it's both incomprehensible and inflammatory. His reputation will be marred. So, out of deference to his wise reader, he complies. The letter of course, we know now, was one Coleridge invented himself, and it's a wonderful bit of ironically deceptive rhetorical flourish. At least to me. Other readers might be less generous. I think it's a gas.

In any case, while I was thinking through what I might say about Hartley in class, I recalled that Coleridge named his son after him, the child in the room with him the night he wrote "Frost at Midnight." That's why (by this process of "association") I decided to look at the poem, a kind of opportune excuse just to enjoy it

again. Reading it this time, I couldn't help but see it as a literal enactment of Hartley's (or at least Coleridge's Hartley's) associative process. The poem starts outside with the frost, then moves transmissively via the owl's cry inside the cottage, to little Hartley, to Coleridge, meditating there in the silence until all the outside world is absent, except for the little flame fluttering on his fireplace grate.

*The Frost performs its secret ministry,
Unhelped by any wind. The owl's cry
Came loud—and hark, again! loud as before.
The inmates of my cottage, all at rest,
Have left me to that solitude, which suits
Abstruser musings: save that at my side
My cradled infant slumbers peacefully.
'Tis calm indeed! so calm, that it disturbs
And vexes meditation with its strange
And extreme silentness. Sea, hill, and wood,
This populous village! Sea, and hill, and wood,
With all the numberless goings-on of life,
Inaudible as dreams! the thin blue flame
Lies on my low-burnt fire, and quivers not;
Only that film, which fluttered on the grate,*

*Still flutters there, the sole unquiet thing.
Methinks, its motion in this hush of nature
Gives it dim sympathies with me who live,
Making it a companionable form,
Whose puny flaps and freaks the idling Spirit
By its own moods interprets, every where
Echo or mirror seeking of itself,
And makes a toy of Thought.*

That perception vibrates his mood and his memory, jogging him back to his lonely school days, watching that same “fluttering stranger” (a metaphor back then for the little flame.) An elaborate series of associated memories ensues, concluding with his poignant hope that some actual stranger he knows (“townsman, aunt or sister more beloved”) might show up at the door to rescue him from his solitary work.

*But O! how oft,
How oft, at school, with most believing mind,
Presageful, have I gazed upon the bars,
To watch that fluttering stranger ! and as oft
With unclosed lids, already had I dreamt
Of my sweet birth-place, and the old church-tower,
Whose bells, the poor man's only music, rang
From morn to evening, all the hot Fair-day,
So sweetly, that they stirred and haunted me
With a wild pleasure, falling on mine ear
Most like articulate sounds of things to come!
So gazed I, till the soothing things, I dreamt,
Lulled me to sleep, and sleep prolonged my dreams!
And so I brooded all the following morn,
Awed by the stern preceptor's face, mine eye
Fixed with mock study on my swimming book:
Save if the door half opened, and I snatched
A hasty glance, and still my heart leaped up,
For still I hoped to see the stranger's face,
Townsman, or aunt, or sister more beloved,
My play-mate when we both were clothed alike!*

Then instantly, he is back to himself and his son, for whom he has such loving and elaborate high hopes, a kind of long prayer that could never have issued forth had he not been transported first back to his own lonely childhood moment at school:

*Dear Babe, that sleepest cradled by my side,
Whose gentle breathings, heard in this deep calm,
Fill up the intersperséd vacancies
And momentary pauses of the thought!
My babe so beautiful! it thrills my heart
With tender gladness, thus to look at thee,
And think that thou shalt learn far other lore,
And in far other scenes! For I was reared
In the great city, pent 'mid cloisters dim,
And saw nought lovely but the sky and stars.
But thou, my babe! shalt wander like a breeze
By lakes and sandy shores, beneath the crags
Of ancient mountain, and beneath the clouds,
Which image in their bulk both lakes and shores
And mountain crags: so shalt thou see and hear
The lovely shapes and sounds intelligible
Of that eternal language, which thy God
Utters, who from eternity doth teach
Himself in all, and all things in himself.
Great universal Teacher! he shall mould
Thy spirit, and by giving make it ask.*

The moment gradually emerges into this peroration, returning to the outside world, and, finally, to the frost, this way:

*Therefore all seasons shall be sweet to thee,
Whether the summer clothe the general earth
With greenness, or the redbreast sit and sing
Betwixt the tufts of snow on the bare branch
Of mossy apple-tree, while the night that
Smokes in the sun-thaw; whether the eave-drops fall
Heard only in the trances of the blast,
Or if the secret ministry of frost
Shall hang them up in silent icicles,
Quietly shining to the quiet Moon.*

The lovely circuit of associations closes where it opened, but so much more enriched, as is always the case with Coleridge, by its path of transit, in this case the ministry of the frost having revealed at least a few of its beautiful secrets.

A woodpecker, a tanager, a skylark, an owl and a robin. A pretty good day, for me, with a bunch of birds. I can't remember any longer what I was trying to get at in this piece, or even where I started. That's the beauty of the associative process when you're walking alone in the woods.

Essay Four

I love the late October leaf-fall, a day like today, the light so bright, quartz-clean, every detail in high relief, the sky a satiny blue veneer, as if the deep azure of summer has been washed out a few times, halfway now toward the almost-whites of winter, the air perfectly still except for the slight waterfall-like flow of the cold air pouring slowly straight down over my face, just enough weight, without the wind, to keep a steady smattering of leaves, 6 or 8 of them always in the air around me, floating leisurely around on their way back to the ground, each still glossy with the first hard frost, half wet, half shimmering with melting flecks.

Today I took a path that heads up a steep wooded hill, my favorite one, especially this time of year, the first full layer of leaves already down, a rag-rug of red, yellow, brown, obscuring the path so you have to know how it goes to stay on it, all the knowledge of past walks automatically kicking in to keep you on course going forward. Near the top of the incline, I turned around to look back, the staccato of separate leaves clicking as they hit the ground. I remembered a poem I wrote 30-some years ago about another “looking back” moment on a similar walk in another time and place in my life, the closing poem of a series called “Autumn Walks to Work:”

*I have lost
just about everything I can think of*

*at least once in this town:
One night, firestorms
afloat on a foam of smoke,
smelting; by morning
nothing but empty
shells of mills, tame as sheep
asleep on their feet.*

*Raucous autumn: I walk
across broad yellow pools
of dead leaves, my gait
steady, geared it seems
to a dream of my own making.*

*A shutter clicks, fixing
in black and white
the empty frames of trees,
the leaf-strewn hill,
and me—grateful
the fallings are all over,
this fierce season—
at the brink, glancing back,
almost halfway home.*

Back then I was trying to come to terms with a different kind of loss, and the echoing difficulties that inevitably follow from the first big one, before the space is fully cleared for what's next. It was a moment of insight, full of resolve and hope, a fine brew for a young man to savor for a moment as the calendar of life made a decisive seasonal turn toward a new, imagined, but unrealized yet, home. I am, of course, now way more than halfway home, though

I'm not sure any longer what home actually is, if it even exists for me, in this world, or the next.

Today, as I looked down the hill through the perfectly clear air, all the way back to where I started, I watched the leaves twirling down, all about to merge into the raw detritus of autumn. Some big, some small, all disconnected until they get back together on the ground. How fleetingly delicate each seemed, none either a gain nor a loss, just a brief fluttering, then, now, gone. I turned and headed up toward the hilltop, and in front of me the same scene playing out, leaf after leaf cascading absently as far forward as I could see. I could unravel some elaborate analogy here. But I don't want to. I don't want you to do it either. Just picture what I saw. That is all there is, and enough.

As I hit the apex I started to laugh, rowdy, deep, complex belly-laughs, for no reason in particular, or at all. It just came out, as it has quite often on these walks over the last two months or so. I'm walking along laughing apparently hysterically (if anyone happened to encounter me, which has happened only a couple of times) like I'm off my rocker. It is, as I said, a complex laugh, full of joy and sadness, all of a piece. Sometimes I find myself crying that way, full of joy and sadness, all of piece. Sometimes it's hard to tell which is which. We tend to think of those things, joy and sadness, laughing and crying, past and future, life and death, as polar opposites, that it would take arduous, daylong slogs to make it all the way from one to the other. They are not, at least not for me lately. They are right on top of each other, indivisible, together in every step, like sunlight flickering on and off over the surface of each leaf as it twists and turns on its way down: The leaf inscribes the boundaries of the light just as much and the light delineates the space of the leaf. That is what I am laughing at, exactly, just that.

About halfway down the other side of the hill I encounter, literally encounter, am stopped in my tracks by, the laid-out trunk of a long-downed tree, sunk ankle deep in the grass, askance to the path. It has been there, I'd say, by the state of its decay, at least 10 years. So I have walked by it now hundreds of times without ever noticing it. The landscape in that part of the park is littered with such logs, angled akimbo in this direction or that. I stopped to look at it to try to figure out why it became noticeable to me, intimately so, today. Its rounded top surfaces were laden with a layer of lime green moss, shaggy, happy looking, iridescent in the bright light trickling in, like a poured ice-cream topping, spread out flowingly on its way down over the curvy cold surface until it finally freezes in place. Maybe it was the disjunction between all of this falling, falling, the leaves around me, the log long ago having fallen, all of it, and that eruption of thick mossy green, life intruding, as it always does, undeterred. Again, I don't want to push so much on this that it gets buggy. Better to leave it enigmatic, a dead log on the ground, a froth of moss.

I've actually been thinking a lot this week about enigmas, about Emily Dickinson in particular, the enigmas that are her poems, the enigma that she was while she was here. We were reading her work in my graduate seminar. At the end of class, when I am always kind of tired and more apt to ramble, I went off on a jag about how, both culturally and academically, we too often deploy the discourse of abnormality (psychological, social, sexual, whatever) in relation to great artists, putatively as a way of "explaining" how they could produce the works that then produce the great or strange effects we read them for. The older I get the more offended I am by this. I see it as a way to diminish, distance, even discredit their force, their beauty, separate them from us categorically, disparagingly, in a backhanded way, with names like

“bipolar,” “neurotic,” “schizophrenic,” (all modern inventions, by the way) as if this allows us both to indulge in and protect ourselves from (via our imagined normalcy) what art has to offer.

Emily Dickinson is a good example. I’ve been reading her poems on and off for over 50 years now. I liked them on day one, in the American poets anthology I bought in the 7th grade, and I like them still. Whenever I teach the poems, student after student, taking us to one of their favorites, will say, “I really enjoyed this poem, but I can’t figure it out/I’m not sure what she means/I don’t understand it,” or some other variation of the same response. I’ve taken lately to asking them: Does that make you want to just put it all down and never read it again, a perfectly legitimate, even appropriate, readerly response to texts that resist comprehension, or to come back to it over and over. They all say the latter. Just like I have for 50 years now. But there has always been an edge there for me, a barrier I couldn’t quite seem to climb over, something that kept me, I knew, from fully “getting” the poems. But why? I could never pin it down exactly. It was not I knew because they were enigmatic. So is Crane, Hopkins, roughly contemporaneous. I got them. Maybe it was gender, I kept thinking, maybe . . .

I suspect that when I read her the first time, found out a bit about her, I simply embraced the then-standard stereotype: She was a fidgety, staid, hair-in-a-bun, old maid-ish, recluse, gliding silently around in her father’s oppressive New England house, like a tight, tidy ghost, writing her cryptic little poems and sticking them in a drawer. Kind of weird, fearful maybe, afflicted by what we now so churlishly call a “social anxiety disorder,” but still compellingly deep and sometimes scary, both of which I liked. I came to understand, also fairly quickly, that some kindly, influential man helped her family get the poems published after she died.

Thomas Wentworth Higginson, that is, who was for some time thereafter lionized, an honored, even heroic figure, the one who single-handedly salvaged this great work from the dust bin of her desk. I read her work again from time to time through the 70s and 80s while feminist wave after feminist wave took legitimate issue with this characterization of Higginson, often flogging him mercilessly and deservedly for his obsession with punctuation and word order, his veritable “translation” of her distinctive, “eccentric” style into the preferred poetic vernacular of the moment, as if she were some unschooled, basic-writer whose errors needed to be corrected.

At some point, maybe in the late 80s or early 90s, I looked into their relationship a little further, read the “Letter to a Young Contributor” that Higginson published in *The Atlantic* in 1862, his combination of a call to arms for new, young American writers and a compendium of hard-bitten advice about what to do and avoid if you want to get published in a highly competitive literary marketplace, which was what seemed to have instigated Dickinson’s first epistolary contact with him. Then his long article in *The Atlantic* in 1891, after her death, the book of her poems he edited having found a more favorable reception than he expected, inciting him to recount, self-interestedly, his long history of correspondence with this now-“genius.” But I read him then in the same limited way, through a feminist lens, as self-absorbed, arrogant, kind of oafish, basking in her fame after her death, a well-connected, influential man in a man’s world. Yes, all of that. But I was no further along in my efforts to crack her code than she was in her efforts to crack his, or at least the one he stood for synecdochically.

This week, though, because my theme was “abnormality” as a mode of control, a conversation I started when we talked about

both Coleridge and Whitman, who tend to be subjected to the same sort of patronizing dismissals, again via the routine discourse of abnormal psychology, I decided to go back and read the Higginson texts again, and, as it happened, with different eyes. One of the organizing concepts for our discussions in the seminar is “gender,” as in how it pertains specifically to the material we’re reading. I realized when I sat down to look at these materials again that for the last 30 years or so I’ve been trying to encounter Dickinson through the figurative lens of feminism, and I was about to do that again. Then I thought about it. One of the symptoms of this approach was my tendency to try to read her work, with my ultimate hope of finally “getting” it, as if I were a woman in the latter half of the 19th century, as much a man’s literary world as you’d find, well, forever up until then. This, I thought, is just a stupid way to read. I am not a woman. Period. What would ever make me think I could read that way? What I just spontaneously decided to do instead was to read her (both the poetry and, especially, the correspondence with Higginson) as if I were a man, but one trying to make a way, and a name, for myself in a culture that had been dominated by women for 2500 years. What, I thought, would I do if poetry and poetics had been rendered for all that time via whatever might be the feminine translation of Shelley’s “sword of lightning, ever unsheathed.” I re-read the opening of her first letter to Higginson:

MR. HIGGINSON,

--Are you too deeply occupied to say if my verse is alive?

The mind is so near itself it cannot see distinctly, and I have none to ask.

*Should you think it breathed, and had you the leisure to
tell me, I should feel quick gratitude.*

*If I make the mistake, that you dared to tell me would give
me sincerer honor toward you.*

*I inclose my name, asking you, if you please, sir, to tell me
what is true?*

*That you will not betray me it is needless to ask, since
honor is its own pawn.*

Wow! What a fantastic way to declare yourself, so confident (no “dear” crap in the salutation), so clever (indexing some of the very things he talked about in his article), so elusive, slippery, as if the meaning is tantalizingly just beyond grasp (inviting, no almost requiring, a response from someone like him, who would feel compelled to pin these things down.)

The poems she sent him were also all of that, and more. It is, I thought, masterful! And exactly what I would say and how I would say it, as a man, were I in her cultural position. So, I thought further, gender is not the key here. What then, is? Then it hit me: It is temperament! I would write that way from my position as an outsider looking to get in not because I felt subordinate, deferential, but because I was reclusive, the source and reservoir of my power, and many of my problems, in the world. Like her. Just like her. Yes, that was it! And as soon as I saw that, everything opened up. I got her, get her. Finally.

The thing the normative majority (whatever binary imbalance you want to fill that in with) doesn’t realize is that the non-normative

minority understands them much better than they even understand themselves. I demonstrate this through my actual experience with a reclusive temperament in a gregarious world. As a child, I hated to be in front of, noticed by, others; I hated even to be looked at; I hated to talk and didn't unless I absolutely had to; I would sit for long stretches in the company of others, quiet, listening, and when asked a question I'd respond briefly, deflectively. I could go on. If you are reclusive you know. If you're not, it doesn't matter. My point is this: I realized at some point that in order to survive in the normative social universe—I mean, like get and keep a job—I would have to learn how to behave normally. So I set to that task. I taught myself, first, how to tolerate being looked at; then how to stand up in front of others; then to speak; then to speak up; then to speak up in front of others; then to sound smart when I spoke, etc. It's a long list of skills you have to teach yourself if you are not born with them, believe me, and it takes a lot of hard work and a long time. By this means, I became not only socially proficient, but quite knowledgeable about what's involved in acquiring that proficiency. I could do it. But I could also teach it.

Like every other quality we say people come “born with, not made,” well it's not that. In some ways, I might say, because of how I came by these traits, I am actually better at them than those who were endowed with them “naturally.” On the opposite side, my sense is that socially normative people have little to no clue what makes people like me (and Emily Dickinson) go and tick. I say this because I often hear at either first- or second-hand the things that people say to interpret my demeanor or behavior. Their explanations account for every detail in a meticulous and logical way. I would, if I chose to, have no way to refute them, or even begin to dissuade someone of their accuracy. Yet they are absolutely wrong. The “real” me, and my perfectly accurate way

of accounting for “him,” is on a parallel path that will never intersect with those versions of me dancing around in other heads. Never.

So, this week, that became my common ground with Emily Dickinson. Just by happenstance, the first poem someone picked to talk about in class was her famous “nobody” poem:

*I'm Nobody! Who are you?
Are you - Nobody - too?
Then there's a pair of us!
Don't tell! they'd advertise - you know!*

*How dreary - to be - Somebody!
How public - like a Frog -
To tell one's name - the livelong June -
To an admiring Bog!*

One commentator felt sorry for her, that she would have to think of herself as a nobody, a terrible fate for such a gifted writer. But that's not at all what I hear in that poem now. A nobody, for a recluse, is not, of course, a somebody; but a nobody is not a nothing; a nobody is, in fact, the ultimate something, exactly what you don't want to let others get a hold on. Otherwise, “they'd advertise.” Arrgh! not that! And then, stanza two, well you can see where this goes yourself.

To generalize then, I'd say the best way to establish a bond of understanding with whatever side of the cultural equation happens to be weaker is to look at it via an equation in which you happen to be weaker. And what I discovered this week was the

potential power of my non-normative temperament. That's my now-new connection with Emily Dickinson. When I read her letters this time, I heard her over and over not seeking his petty commentary by return post, not deferring to his authority, but asking Higginson straight-up to take a chance with her work, stand up for it, walk into some publisher's office (which he could have done and she couldn't have) and say, "Here it is, what I was calling for in my article. Let's run with it." But he doesn't. He won't. Over and over he won't. For twenty-some years he won't. And, reading his readings of her letters in the article he wrote after her death, and remembering the article he wrote to incite her first foray into his world, I could see why. It had nothing to do with gender. It was because she was reclusive and no matter how hard he pushed (tell me who you are, send me a picture, I'd better come up to Amherst to meet you) she wouldn't give up what he wanted or give in to his prying, his need to pin her down, so he could "advertise" her. As I read through her letters this time, I found myself laughing, over and over, at her deft brilliance, her parries to his jabs, the substance or impact of which has to be adduced from her subsequent response to him, since his letters to her were "lost" (meaning to me that she destroyed them, which for a recluse has significance.) But she doesn't ever give him what he's asking for. He keeps coming on, she keeps floating, stinging, rope-a-doping. It's brilliant.

Had she approached him the first time in a socially normative way, he would never have responded even once. She was able to keep him on the hook for twenty years. Part of it, of course, was she was a great poet. But if that were enough for him, he would have jumped to publish immediately the work of what he claims he recognized, "at the first reading" of her four original submissions to him as that of a "wholly new and original poetic genius." His refusal to do that (which he accounts for in a

doofusy-sounding explanation about the work's being "elusive to criticism") was his way of keeping her on the hook for 20-some years. And the key to me, on both sides of this fight-forever-to-a-draw is her signature mark, the dash. Oddly, before Higginson ever saw her work, he commented specifically in his article about how poets should avoid eccentric punctuation. And he made a particular point about the dash, as in don't use it. I honestly think that if Dickinson had just stopped sending him poems with dashes in them, he may have pushed her work toward publication. But that is exactly the thing she would never be willing to give up, as anyone with reclusive tendencies would know. Not that reclusive people like dashes. Just that they have certain small stylistic preferences that happen, for them, to be self-defining, important, key. Take them away and the rest falls apart. Simple as that. That is, I now believe, why they were at loggerheads. And also why Higginson was willing to "edit" her poems toward publication only after she died. Then, he could, among other things, get rid of those pesky dashes. And he did.

You can see this same dynamic echoed in the equally dysfunctional relationship between Anne Sexton and James Dickey in the 1960s. Sexton was, I heard then (though I never saw her in person) and have read since, quite stylish, dramatic, glamorous, exuding a sexual energy of the sort that was possible in the 1960s in a way it would never have been for Emily Dickinson, even if she was inclined that way, which I am not willing to say with complete confidence that she was not. I actually think now she would have been a gas to get to know. Anyhow, Dickey was brash, confident, Hemingwayesque in his masculinity, sexually aggressive and inclined to affairs with the women to whom he was attracted. I didn't know back then but have read since that he made a move on Sexton and was, not surprisingly, rebuffed. The

1960s were not the 1860s. She didn't need anything from him to get ahead.

What I did know back then was how rude and stupid his reviews of her work were, the first two of her books especially. He was particularly incensed by her references to female body parts and functions, which he found "pathetic and disgusting." I remember having arguments with others about whether he was a good poet or just a big tool, to borrow a pretty useful word from the lexicon of that moment, an argument that history has settled in the meantime in favor of the latter. I bring this up here because Dickey made his money in the advertising business. He was, in other words, a big frog in the socially normative bog. He was also, you may be surprised to know, quite a prominent poet at that time, widely published, deferred to in literary circles, a force. I say surprised for a reason. His poetry was as packaged as his prose. But it had an air about it that appealed to the marketplace of the moment. I asked my class last week, for example, who had heard of and read some of the work of Anne Sexton. Everyone had. I asked them who had heard of and read some of the work of James Dickey. None of them had. He is actually, as best I can tell, more famous now for his ridiculous assault on Sexton's femaleness than for his own work. Same, I'd say, for Higginson. Nobody now would have heard of him, be writing about him, or cared at all what he said in 1862 about how to get published, if it hadn't been for Emily Dickinson.

I could go and on about all of this, the kind of ragged rant I often devolve toward at the end of a long class. Suffice it say that once I came to this insight about Dickinson, I felt like one of those old adding machines, after you've punched in all the numbers, then pressed "total," and the paper would just fly up off its roll printing while you watched and waited, calculating everything all at once.

That's how I "got" Emily Dickinson. I plan to reread all of her poems this winter and laugh and puzzle and cry with her. We are finally two of a kind.

I narrated a truncated version of this for the class. But I had another point to make with it: Higginson could have and should have gotten her poems published when she was 31. She would have loved that, I'm sure of it; her life would have been happier and better, no matter the din of the "admiring Bog." He didn't. He waited until she was dead and he could make all of his corrections on behalf of his hard-nosed cultural marketplace. He added a dismissive preface to cover his ass, too. Here's what I told my class: Most people who come and ask you for things, well, if you say you can't do it, they go to the next person, and the next. They always have a back-up plan. Every now and then, though, you will encounter someone for whom you are the only plan. If you say "no," or just dodge it, because it seems a little risky or they seem a little weird, it will not get done. Ever. Maybe it shouldn't. But maybe it should. Emily Dickinson is a good example. Think about it. Don't wait until somebody like her, whom you could have stood up for, is dead, and it's safe for you to do what you want to do for "posterity." Higginson may have done us a favor by conserving Emily Dickinson's poems for us to read in all these classrooms. But he did nothing for her. Nothing. He could have changed her life. He could have made her happy, even famous. All he did for her while she was alive is pester her and string her along. Shame on him. Shame on anyone and everyone who withholds the good they can do for the living because of, well, because of anything. Don't do that, I told my class. Don't do that. Do not do that.

Essay Five

We never step into the same river twice. Heraclitus said that. We never step into the same river once. I said that, to myself, today, on my morning walk. As I mentioned before, Boyce Park is a mish-mash of chicken-scratch paths going every which way, intersecting everywhere. I've walked almost daily on those paths now for about 10 years, which means multiple thousands of treks. Today I just serendipitously took a combination of turns that created a path I had never traversed before. One of the things Carol and I noticed about these walks in the woods and talked about often was how unrecognizable the same walk would be from one day to the next, or even if you just took it in reverse on the same day. It all looked brand new. That's not what got me thinking about Heraclitus today, but it's a sort of example of what I think he meant, this unremitting, ongoing changefulness that is especially noticeable in "natural" settings, like over his river or through my woods. Today's walk was in fact a first.

What got me thinking about Heraclitus was something else about our woods-walks that Carol and I both noticed and talked about: On some days, we would be halfway through the walk and feel like we had been on those paths for weeks, forever even, like this was the whole of the life we could remember, time somehow having come to a full stop, each step being taken into empty air, without advancement. On other days, we'd be getting back into the car after the walk with the sense that we had just gotten out of

it. Time, it seemed, was not only flexible in these spaces, it was almost infinitely malleable, going, by turns, unpredictably, from full-stop to warp speed and back again. I've mentioned before how my life's time seemed to squeal to an abrupt halt the second I found Carol. No past, no future, followed from that moment, just a sequence of disconnected instants, not moving forward or looking back, just one after the other, timelessness moving faster than the speed of light, both of which may be impossible in the physical universe, regulated as it is so stringently by temporal sequence, but not in human experience when it encounters that kind of shock.

Last night it rained. The leaf fall has accelerated, so on the odd path I took today, one apparently less-traveled-by, the ground was obscured under maybe three layers of leaves, glued together in flat patchwork fashion onto the wet dirt, like a giant decoupage. I found myself looking down a lot as my feet stuttered over it in what seemed like a frame-by-frame sequence, the way film works, except I could see the separations of one shot from another in real time. That's what made me think about my variation on Heraclitus: In some respects, we don't even do the thing we are doing once, let alone twice, it is that instant-to-instant, going nowhere faster than the speed of light, all the time. I stopped at one point at the top of the hill to look down at the endless layers of trees, fulsome today with thick thatches of dull yellow leaves. The sky was smoke gray, obscuring the sun, so they were not glossy looking even though coated with a residue of rain. The leaves that fell, and they are coming down now in a much more rapid cascade than yesterday, went straight to the ground, wet-heavy, to mesh together with the already-fallen into the beautiful, gluey mosaic-still-in-the-making that I stood there on.

All that action, motion, life turning to death on its way back to life again along a timeline I can imagine and describe. But it's not mine. Not now. Not yet. Maybe not ever. I would say "ever again," but that would imply a movement of time I simply don't experience in a bodily way right now. I don't really like or dislike this condition. How could I? Those two preferential states imply a scale for differentiation: "It was better (or worse) then than it is now," for example. There is no "then" and "now" for me. Only "now" and "now." The scene I looked at from that vantage point did not reveal itself in time but in space, the sense of deep, deep space that is created by a woods-full of trees, each trunk and leaf sprawled in front of or behind another, reiterated physically toward infinity, not just out ahead, like those training sight-lines inexperienced artists use of simulate "perspective," but peripherally, too, both sides, wider and wider and wider, all around me.

I've seen paintings of trees that achieve this effect. One of them is a very large (maybe 9 by 15) painting of a birch forest in the fall hanging at a local museum. Another is a much smaller (3 by 4 or so) Monet painting of some scrubby brush on a hillside just above a few houses, one little tree in front with one little puff of snow on one of its little branches, the effect of which is to expand all the space behind it suddenly, almost vertiginously. I saw this painting only once, in Chicago. The experience is unforgettable, that little white fluff centering a whole universe of space around it. It's exactly how I felt today, like the accordion of space was being drawn out rapidly, breathing in its necessary air, further and further, enough air to last the rest of the day, squeezing out music. And time was this instant, so small it did not even exist as a "once," let alone a "twice."

Carol was deeply afflicted by her past. It glommed on to her daily life, dragging her back into the dark swamp behind, like a long, fat anaconda, its muscly mass lagging, forcing her to drag it forward. On a bad day for her it would be as if it had just fed on a large capybara, a bloated lump stuck in the mud there like a fallen tree trunk, she stuck there with it, unable to slither ahead. Sometimes when she talked about it, this slug of the past she had to lug around with her, not just the terrible traumas, of which there were many, but the quotidian affairs of her family life, of growing up, it was as if it was all happening right there, right now. It filled her days with stresses, despairs. During the last year of her life she decided to seek help, counseling, to address all this. Carol had a well-earned contempt for medical practitioners. She had three nearly fatal events in my time with her, all caused by stupid medical interventions for benign conditions. And she had had comparable experiences before we met.

Carol tried a variety of therapies to come to terms with her ongoing distress, from the most traditional, to the newest new-age. They ranged in their effects from pointless to ludicrous to destructive. The worst in my view was a kindly old gentleman, addicted himself to his own children, needing, keeping them addicted to him in fact and in memory, which he talked to her all the time about. She told him expressly that she needed to overcome her attachment to her past, to free herself from the subtle but repeated-over-a-lifetime guilt twinges, the sad, plaintive pleas not to grow up, go on. He kept urging her to “think back and remember the good times growing up,” on the assumption, I suppose, that anyone who wanted to evade the ceaseless whine of those cries to hold back, look back, come back, stay back, was intrinsically unhinged, needed to change themselves rather than their circumstances. It was an utterly insane therapeutic strategy, animated, I think now, by his own fear of having, perhaps, to

admit to himself that he was doing exactly that to his kids. Carol saw him several times, coming home always in tears, so much the worse off from his blithe stupidity. She saw several others in the “helping professions,” a pair of words that is often double-reverse oxymoronic. Or, as in this case and all the others she had the misfortune to try, just plain moronic.

I decided from day one after Carol died to try to deal with the trauma on my own. I’ve seen numerous therapists during my own life, none of which did enormous damage or much good. Most became at my stages of greatest duress useful placeholders, placebos maybe, people I could pretend to talk to so I wouldn’t have to pretend to talk to my friends or family, who were, I was smart enough to see, not getting paid for that kind of duty. The most ludicrous one I saw was a young woman, maybe 25, a novice Eye Movement Therapy specialist, all the rage back then. I was in my forties, maybe two thirds along the way to recovery from my early-90s nervous breakdown. So I’m doing this eye movement stuff in connection with relevant traumas in my life, one of which at that time was the gradual falling-apart of my parents, leaving them despairingly impaired, dependent on me and my siblings in ways that created great stress. They lived 300 miles away and we had young children. So when they called with an emergency, a “you need to come” thing, it was hard. After a while I started to call them every day, just to check in, maybe boost their spirits, let them know I was there. I mentioned this offhandedly to her one day. She was, as I said, about 25, likely in the midst of her own first fling of sloughing off parental oversight, breaking free, feeling quite self-satisfied by it, as I probably was at her age. She laughed at me derisively and said, “you mean you’re over forty and still need to call you parents every day?” I had two choices right then. I could have been justifiably insulted, upbraiding her for her complete lack of understanding for what I was having to do and

why, for the exact very reason I was there that day, to deal with this trauma. Or I could just smile, keep quiet, finish the session, and never come back. I chose the latter. She was too much a fool, I felt, to even try reasoning with, exactly the kind of fool, I felt, who, when she was my age (which, as I think of it, she is right about now) would likely still be either too self-absorbed to make those kind of calls, or, if she did, too arrogant to remember having been so rude to me, this ghost of things to come for her.

I have no idea what happens to us after we pass from this world. I'm absolutely certain though that all the scenarios and alternatives we humans have invented over the ages to explain it are utterly inane, loon-crazy. I suspect the actual thing is beyond my ken in any case. For a while after Carol died I feared she would forget me, not wait for me, or even recognize me when I came her way. Now my fervent hope is that she will not remember any of what she endured in this life, that she will not simply shed the stretched-thin skin of that snake, but the whole damn thing, all of its great weight sinking back into the swamp where it belongs, with all the therapists who never woke up to see her, so desperate, so beautiful, so she can flit about like one of those little white butterflies I see around the flowers out back in late summer, lightly, in the bright white light of a new now. And another new now. Maybe Heraclitus will be with her, having forgotten not only the second step he never took, but also the first he did. Maybe someday I'll be there, too, and I'll meet her in the garden, like none of this down here ever happened, step after step going nowhere fast, the past, all gone, just bright light, flight, now and then now.

Essay Six

Understory, what an interesting word, as it pertains that is to the bottom floor of a forest ecosystem, the first 10-15 feet above the ground. I never thought about that word until today, its implication that the real story is happening up above, in the canopy for example, all of those lush layers of leaves propped up there 70 or 80 feet, lifted on long trunks to luxuriate in bright sunlight. Down here, down under, it's a different story, not much of a story at all most days. In these woods the trees are spaced far enough apart, maybe 15-25 feet, to allow in just enough light to support a structure that hovers between 3 and 10 feet above the ground. No ferns billowing up from the ground. Only some wildflowers, weeds, a sprig of grass here and there, then just layer after layer of a scrubby-looking, small "tree" I don't know the name of. They may be sapling beech trees, of which there are many mature versions around. But the bark on the small ones looks different, mini-pocked, like birches, rather than the muscled-up gray of the adult beech. In any case, they are scraggly, ragged looking things, if you notice them at all: a stick-like stalk of a trunk, an assortment of crooked branches arching out and around in a weeping fashion, like broken umbrellas littered here and there, with broad, tear-shaped, ragged-edged leaves, proportionately outsized for the spindly branches they hang from. A bland, bedraggled band of tramps, entirely beneath notice most days, truly under any possible story. But today it was different: Today they were the story.

The path I walked on today traverses laterally an incline that slopes down generally toward the east. At my typical walk time, especially this time of year, the leaf-peak moment, the sun is just above the tree line on the other side of road. Sunlight streams in straight sideways, illuminating the first floor of the forest, the understory, with an astonishing brilliance. As I headed up the incline toward the crossways top path, I started to notice it, the bright flood of light, transforming what, without it, would be simply drab ochre-colored blobs of leaves hanging listlessly in the still air, into now spectacular arrays of lemon-drop-topped waves, a broad ocean of them, wide, peaking, about to crest over, flash frozen in place, each tipped and riddled iridescently with sun-flecks. It was breathtaking. I started and halted my walking every 20 feet or so. At some places I stopped to watch them as if from “shore,” their mountainous shapes tumbling off toward something like a horizon, as far as the eye can process, at least in the contained space of the woods. At other places I was floating out among them, surrounded well above head-top by their gentle, warm, undulating swells.

My daughter was born on October 20, tomorrow. The day before she was born, Carol and I went on our daily walk in a woods we had been to before but were less familiar with. It was gorgeous. She was gorgeous. After about an hour, we realized we were lost, had missed a turn or taken the wrong fork. It took us at least another hour, maybe more, to find our way out. Carol was exhausted. We both thought at one point, without saying so to one another, that Bridget might come into the world right there, scarily, on the late October leaf fall of 1986. I tried to prepare myself to handle it, which is of course impossible to do when you have no knowledge whatsoever about, or prior experience with, matters of that sort. I figured I would wing it and hope for the

best. As it turned out, we found our way that day and Bridget was born in a proper hospital the next day, safer, even though that additional day added no knowledge or experience whatsoever to prepare me, to prepare us, all three of us, this now-new family, for what was to come. It was such a beautiful walk up that long, sloping hill together, with a son, Joe, joining us a few years later. No knowledge, no experience, nothing to remember or forget along the way, just the climb, forward, together, the year-after-year leaf falls, together. Today I took a quick look back, so beautiful, every leaf perfect, turning this way, that way, an eternity in each turn, where I have been, all the leaf falls I have seen, and then forward again, alone I was tempted first to say, on my own, but not really. They are there, every step of the way, all three of them, with me on my way, the understory, today, the whole story.

Essay Seven

*I am learning how to dance
because
I have no one to dance with
so
dressed to the teeth
I cup my hand against
the supple small of
no one's back, stride
off to any music,
effervescent, expert,
elegant as velvet on my feet.*

*I am learning how to dream
because
I have no one to sleep with
so
undressed to the teeth
I lie down with a whisper
next to no one, trace
my fingers along each cheek,
touch behind each knee,
then I let my quick, wet
lips do all my talking.*

*I am learning how to write
because
I have no one to read to
so
some nights you should see me:
nothing but skin and bones
in underwear and socks
reciting my finest lines
to the bare walls until
they whisper and applaud.*

*And when I have put enough
love in my words to last us
till morning,
there is a dance goes on
in that room
that they do not teach
in any class.*

I wrote this poem almost 40 years ago, the last time I found myself suddenly single. It's called "Social Dancing," the name of a course I was taking right then. It seems on first take like a bit of fluff, a nothing-much poem. I sent it out a few time to no takers. I can see why: I'm sure some editors thought, "Oh, give me a break. Nobody does this." Well, I did. I liked the poem then and still do. Here's why. The first two sections describe exactly what I started to think about today: the experience of falling in love with nothing, no one. The history of poetry is rife with poems about falling in love with something, someone. But human beings also fall in love with nothing, no one, almost have to in order to do the other things. If I could have found a poem that said that, I probably wouldn't have had to write this one. In any case, that's

what I started thinking about this morning, how I'm falling in love with nothing, no one. And then there's the last section, well, that tells you everything you need to know about why I write: It's not the thing that ends up on the page, it's what I do beforehand in "underwear and socks" and what comes after, the "dance" that "goes on in that room," wow, that sweet, unteachable dance!

In any case, much to my surprise, I spent most of my walk today, this perfect late autumn morning, the leaves mostly still up and airbrushed in shades of red-yellow-orange, thinking about love. Not the standard versions that consume so much of our time and attention, romantic (love for another), fraternal (love for kin and kind) or spiritual (love for the transcendent), the ones we inherit from the cultural air and then tend (or pretend) to practice in rote ways. I mean "true" love. It's been kind of simmering on my back burner lately because it came up in a conversation I had with a member of our seminar group right before class started up a few weeks ago. I think it was because we were about to discuss Plato's *Phaedrus*, in the middle of which is Socrates' transcendent speech on love, the right kind of love, that "madness" from the gods that possesses us from the outside in. True love.

We talked briefly about Paul's "Letter to the Corinthians," with the famous "love is patient, love is kind" speech, his attempt to tamp down the stupid bickering in the early church. My daughter made a white-on-black painting of that passage when she was in college, the long series of qualities Paul assigns to love circling gradually outward on the canvas, getting smaller and smaller, until they fill it up right to the edges. When I need to get myself centered, I look at that painting. Pick any two of the qualities he mentions, and you have a place to start getting yourself right when you're not. I say look at rather than read because it has the kind of physical impact a painting can have, so difficult to match in a

text, especially if it's all cramped up inside a thick, little Bible, taking you half an hour to find it. I know Bridget was dealing with some hard things then. Right in the middle of the canvas, the line "love endures all things" is in big, broad strokes. That always moves me. "Endures." Such a good word. "All things." Even better.

There's another painting of hers I have in the bathroom, where I can see it when I take a bath, one of my favorite modes of relaxation. It has a purple background with thick, clunky, brown tree trunks jutting awkwardly all the way up so whatever leaves they have would be outside the perimeter of the canvas, hogging the sun. Right in the middle is a much smaller tree, so fragile looking, spangled with the most beautiful emerald-green leaves, individualized but cascading down like liquid. From the sky above dozens of gold droplets are drizzling down and over it, the only real "light" in the scene. It is so inspiring to me. If I saw it in a museum I would sit there and stare at it for a long time. I would wish it were mine. She had the habit back then of titling her paintings with black paint at the bottom of the scene, large text, quick and messy, like it's part of rather than index to what the painting depicts. This one is called "A Small Tree in a Wooded Forest." Sounds pretty tame. Until you start to think about some of the ways that "small" and "wooded" play out in real life.

I didn't talk about these paintings in that conversation we were having before class. I just thought of them today when I was walking. We did, though, briefly talk about the opening of John's Gospel:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God . . . And the light shineth in darkness;

and the darkness comprehended it not . . . And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us . . . full of grace and truth. . .

I'm always taken aback by that sequence, how radical it is: The word, how it's out there with God, is God, before anything else. Anything else at all. Even Derrida doesn't go that far. But it is really nothing, mumbo jumbo, until it is embodied, made flesh in the world. I may not be on particularly good terms with God these days, but I believe that if you don't embody your word, make it fully flesh in the world, fulfill through what you do the promise of what you say, well, to me what you say is empty, mumbo jumbo. Words need to mean something outside of words. That's another kind of love I'm thinking about today. The kind I had for and from Carol and the kind we have always had for Bridget and Joe.

If you had asked me in July, say, just three months ago, whether I would love again, in a deep emotional sense, that is, the kind that both exhilarates and hurts, often both at the same time, I would have said "No. Never." Period. My heart was, I would tell you, "broken for good," to borrow a phrase from a poem I wrote about Roy Orbison a long time ago. It was off and was not going to come back on again. Period. It was closed and was not going to open again. Period. This was not a matter of choice on my part, a decision I made in grief, some grand, promissory gesture to my lost lover. Or out of anger, a passive-aggressive holding back. It was just what reality had done to me. Death comes in many stages and ways. This was mine and it was final. My heart was down, done, dead.

I wasn't even that bothered by it. All of the things I want to do in the world with the rest of my time, the ones that require love at least, may be more easily done when the emotional switch is on, to be sure, the circuit open, a good charge running through. But they can be accomplished just as well, and sometimes more surely, purely on principle. This is right, this is good, this is what I will do no matter what. End of story. The love I needed to do what I wanted with the rest of my life was, in July, founded on that and that only. Clean, efficient, principled. Carol is the one who got me thinking about this very thing a number of years ago as she explained to Bridget that the love we both showered on her and Joe, that they felt and appreciated so deeply, so unremittingly, though it may often have a rich emotional aspect to it, was not dependent on emotion, which is by definition unreliable, up and down, here and gone. The love we operated on was principled. It did not change with the diurnal vagaries of life. Hard or easy, light or dark, cold or hot, it was there, we were there, in place, on time, always would be, steady, utterly dependable. It was a promise we made and kept, would always keep, no matter what.

Carol and I had that kind of love together: better or worse, richer or poorer, sickness and health, until death do us part. We said those words once. Then we lived them every day. I never had that kind of love from a woman before and I'm pretty sure I never will again. Amazingly, Carol was the smartest, sweetest woman I ever met. And she was so beautiful, stunningly so. That she picked me, well, as Yeats said: "It's certain that fine women eat/ A crazy salad with their meat." I am a crazy salad. Last summer someone asked me whether I thought I would find love again. I said what I believe: I have no philosophical objection to that. But it's highly unlikely. I am old and weird and I'm only going to get older and weirder. Carol liked me that way, exactly that way. So I know how it feels to be loved for who I am. I can't imagine this "who" that "I

am” right now is going to be very appealing to anyone else, that way, ever. So, no, I didn’t expect to find love again. In any case, when I said that, my heart was off. Now my heart is on again. I am stunned.

It all started up the weekend I spent in central Illinois for my son’s wedding. I won’t go into elaborate detail, though I could, pages of detail, just this: The wedding, so perfect, so beautiful, these two good young people, my son and his now-wife, so much in love, so devoted to one another, my daughter who turns on the lights in every room she enters, she is that electric, the exotic theme-based rooms in the B&B she picked for us to stay at, Bridget and Joe doing so well, miraculously rising up from the wreckage of last winter into the beautiful blue skies of their ongoingly good lives, my being able to meet and greet all these new people so happily, gracefully, sociable at my upper extreme: all of it magical. That was the word I chose immediately and instinctively to describe the weekend to others after I got back. Magical. Heart warming, I’d say now, today. Literally, I mean, in that my heart was warmed back into action again, slightly at first, like a light laughter at a slight joke. Then the gradual relaxation that often follows, a laughter that doesn’t need a joke to inspire or sustain it. I didn’t realize it then, but I see it in retrospect. Then warmer and warmer over the next few weeks, not so much like turning the heat up in the winter to make your space livable. More like opening the blinds and windows in mid-summer, the sun heating things up in its own good way, outside in, for free, easy, day after day, lounging in its luxurious, cozy warmth.

A few weeks after I got back from the wedding, I started looking around for old, happy love songs from the late-60s, my coming of age era, some sweet, disarming songs for the next CD I would send to my brothers. I picked out an assortment of the most

charming ones I remembered, some in the “bubblegum” pop vein, and had a blast singing and recording them: “I’m into Something Good” by Herman’s Hermits, “Crimson and Clover” by Tommy James and the Shondells, “Love Is All Around Me” by the Troggs, “I Think It’s Gonna Work Out Fine” by Ike and Tina Turner. Songs like that. Fantastic. I actually felt like I was young again, but better, because I know so much more than I did back then. I felt it happening in real time, my heart starting to warm back up. But it was not for any anyone in particular, anyone at all. Wow, I thought, I was falling in love with no one! Again! A normal person might have put a halt on it. I am not a normal person; I did not put a halt on it. Why should I? I liked everything about it, just let it go, lay back in it, that mid-summer sun, happy to be able to feel warm again. I thought today about Don Quixote, how he knows he’s just a jackass on a jackass carrying a stick. But he does it anyway, because he feels like it. It’s better than reality. Way better.

I’ve never read advice columns in the newspaper. I don’t like “advice” to the degree that even if I know the specific piece of it coming my way is “good,” I’ll ignore it, even do the opposite, on principle. After Carol passed, I found myself glancing at them, though, reading a letter here and there, sometimes several. I was struck, first of all, by the “problems” people felt they couldn’t solve for themselves. I’d read the response and think “duh!” But the other thing that struck me, and I’m pretty sure now this is why I was being drawn them, was what people thought of as “problems,” got really agitated about, felt distressed by. Maybe there was a time I had “problems” like that. I hope not. But I know I don’t now and never will again. Those things are not problems; they are life. A wife’s death, a husband’s, a mother’s, a father’s, or worst of all, a child’s: Those are problems. And no advice is ever going to “solve” them.

In any case, I mention this because recently I read a letter from a mother who was concerned that her young son (he was four or five, I don't remember exactly, but very young) walked around "humming." She wanted to cure him of this right now so he wouldn't grow up to be the "office whistler," apparently, to her (and I assume many others, because there is such a term, which I never knew before) quite a terrible fate. I didn't bother reading the response. It is too late for me: I am the office whistler. I have been my whole life. Maybe I started down this wayward path with humming. Don't remember. But as soon as I learned to whistle I did it all the time. It irritated people. I was chided for it many times. I assumed back then it was because I was a bad whistler, unpleasant. Now I know: These people had my best long-term interests at heart! If only I had heeded their advice.

I whistled my way through many years at many jobs. I can see now the error of my ways. I would have been much more successful if someone, that boy's mother say, had really scared it out of me when I was five. I talk about this here because when I started to sing, all this escalated. I am now the office singer. Most days at work a tune will get in my head, maybe a song I'm learning, and I sing it whenever I'm in a public space alone, especially the stairwells, which at Pitt go up and down for many stories, huge echo chambers, making my voice sound powerful, like everyone's does in the shower, all that tile to bounce it around. I always stop, though, when someone else comes into view, up or down, primarily because, well, I don't know why. I just do.

One day I was walking up the steps toward my office's floor, alone, singing "My Blue Heaven," such a lovely song, and I think I carry it off pretty well. I was distracted, so I didn't see the

woman who was descending from one of the floors above, about my age, someone I didn't know. I stopped singing when I saw her, but much too late. I said hello as I approached and she said: "I heard you," kind of sing-songy. I couldn't tell whether she meant "nice song, thanks" or "you're one of those stupid office whistlers, except worse, you sing, loud." I can still see her in my mind's eye, the way she kept walking, the look on her face; I can still hear in my mind's ear the tone of her voice. It could have been either.

A few weeks later, before a meeting at work, I was sitting in my chair flipping around on my iPad, singing softly, to myself, without even being aware of it. A colleague a few rows up asked, I know in a friendly way because she's a nice person: "Is there music on your iPad." I said, "No, there is music in my head." She asked why, again friendly. And I said, without even thinking, something I never put into words before: "Because it's the only way I can tolerate reality." I knew when I said it I had fathomed the truth about my lifetime of humming and whistling and singing. It was always the only way I could tolerate reality, a way of marking clearly the boundary between out there, the reality you can't shake no matter what, and in here, the one you'd better take possession of early and hold on to hard. That little boy, the hummer? If I could write the response I'd tell his mother to cherish him, thank him. And to hope that her son grows up with music in his head. Because the out-there has already defeated and fully occupied her in-here. It is too late to save herself. He still has a chance. Tell him every day what a great hummer he is. Teach him to whistle, to sing, all of it. Say how much you enjoy that, too. Don't take it away from him just so he (or maybe it's you, which is way worse) can save some face in that horde of morons who might not take him seriously, ignore him, even make fun of him

at work. They're not worth it. He is. His in-here is still there. Help him not to trade it all in for what's out-there.

I am, I can assure you, a full-grown man with, especially now, a full grasp of reality, how intractable it is, what it demands without any intention of taking no for an answer. I wake up in that reality every morning and go to sleep in it every night. That little bird in the rose garden in Eliot's "Burnt Norton" saying "Go, go, go" because "human kind cannot bear very much reality," well, he's being kind. Yes, go, if you still can. But what if you can't go? And quite often you can't. Then you'd better learn fast how to bear reality, even if there's "very much" of it. At least if you want to stay "human" and "kind," two words that Eliot oddly separates. Anytime you fall in love like Carol and I did, you're putting some part of the charge on a credit card. You live as long and happily with that debt as you possibly can. One day, one or the other of you will have to pay what's left of the bill. It came due last February. At some point pretty much every day, I sit down, write the check, and send it off. That kind of love.

And, by the way: The next time you hear me singing in the stairwell, don't think, "Wow, what a clown. Didn't he get the memo about office whistling?" Think, "Wow, whatever he has going on in there, I wish I could get me some of that!"

Essay Eight

Today is turning out to be an inventory day, a see-where-I-am-on-my-path day. I don't know why. I just woke up that way. The fact that I got to start that work on my path in the woods, the one I take most often now, is making it especially satisfying. There are two "my paths" in those sentences. The second one, the woods one, happens to be the one I've made my baseline walk lately. If I'm not in a conscious, choosing state, I tacitly defer to that one. It is not, I realized today, one that Carol and I took very often. Maybe not ever in this precise configuration. That tells me something about where I am right there: I'm making a way of my own, if only on these morning walks. There is in fact one spot where I am literally making a new path. After I cross the road from the west, the connecting path on the opposite side is about 1/4 mile up the road. I prefer to enter the woods immediately. I need to navigate a stretch of 100 feet or so of untrammelled ground down the hillside to the existing path. I have, in keeping with precedent in these spaces, instinctively chosen the easiest route between and around the various obstructions, downed trees, protruding branches, little gullies, that sort of thing. I noticed today that I can already see a faint impression of that path. In another year, it will be an official path, I expect, that others will find and take, a fact that makes me feel more connected to, an actual contributor toward, the functional culture of these woods. Maybe that is why I think of these walks now as the foundation

for my life going forward, step by step, mile by mile, day by day, my path, not because I want it that way but because that's the way it is. The other "my path" is in a higher level portion of my mental universe, the life path I have been traversing since last February, a vantage point a rung above the one I'm walking on in the woods, from where I can look down and take a reading, not so much of the "progress" I've made—after all, I'm still walking the same ground over and over—but the changes that have taken place. The swift shifts that define the autumn leaf fall are a perfect space-frame for that sort of reflection. Changes are constant and dramatic, one day to the next. They help to foreground process, transition, the "this turning into that," which is the abiding law of a world geared, as I have been saying, around time. My actual time may have come to a halt, like a CD when it hits a scratch: the same syllable stuttering speedily and incessantly. But things still change. There may be humans who can stay at this higher path of temporal flow—I think for example of Einstein and Heidegger, who tried hard to crack time's deeper codes a hundred or so years ago—but I can't. I'm just up there for little while, then back down, here, walking. That might be a blessing for someone like me, not a good sense of direction generally, prone to getting lost. Better down here than up there.

The first thing I noticed today, heading up the hill, was how different the leaf-litter was from even two days ago, when it dazzled like Joseph's coat as far as I could see. Today, the base-layer leaves were already crinkled up, flaking apart, halfway down to dust. The middle layers had lost their differentiating hues. The range was from a dull—not quite but almost sallow—yellow, to a drab—not quite but almost dour—brown. There were still a few smudges of color smattered around on top. The canopy is thinned out, about $\frac{3}{4}$ down, the understory about $\frac{2}{3}$. What a few days ago at the lower level looked like a churning sea, today

seemed silly-spindly, the remaining leaves tacked up like scraggly sale-tags against the all-shades-of-beige backdrop. The air was so still nothing moved at all, like I had entered a painting of the woods. It was soothing to walk through it.

About halfway up the hill, this path doglegs down, hard to the right, an exciting turn because its angle is compound: You look down straight ahead and also, even more steeply, to the side on the right. I like the sensation there, a pleasant tippiness. Just as I took that turn today, I became deeply aware of the trees around me. They are more spread apart at that point, respectful of each other's space, stately I'd say. You feel walking through them as if they welcome each other, and you, warmly—no embraces, just many friendly faces. I was suddenly moved to tears. Surprised, I stopped. I felt the deepest gratitude for them, toward them. They have been, I knew right then, my best friends through all of this path-walking, the daily ones, the higher one, all of it, there with me, for me, every single day, listening to me rant, understanding my sad silences, watching me laugh or cry, wildly, delightedly, quietly, all of it. They stand there, witness. They do not interrupt or intervene, they simply care, deeply, patiently, knowing full well my seasons will turn like theirs, better, worse, and back around again, not rushing, not patronizing, not avoiding, not advising. They are my friends. They love me, I am sure of it. And I love them.

You may think this is sad, that humans should do that for one another, that one should not go to the woods to find a friendly face, a kind presence to reside in. Or that I am a sad excuse for a man, should try harder to make those kinds of connections, establish relations, create a better “social network” for myself. Maybe so. I don't know. My world just doesn't work that way right now and it never did. I was with Carol and had a complete

world. Now I'm not and I don't. It's that simple. It doesn't matter whose "fault" it might be. All I know is that when I think of my friends now, the ones that joined me on my path, that stood up for me, stood with me, day after day after day, it is these trees. I thanked them from the bottom of my heart today. I don't know why I am still here. I don't think I would be if it weren't for them. I told them I would, when I could, do for others what they had done for me. Even if it's just to stand there, like a man, like a full-grown man, and take the wind that comes my way, day after day after day, saying silently, to anyone who needs it, you can make it, too. I am here, witnessing. Or just, like today, thanks.

I headed toward the road, thinking to myself that the rest of today was going to be down, all-drab, like the leaves at my feet, when I found myself looking right at, and then up at, a small maple, maybe 15 feet tall. It had about a hundred leaves left on it. They were the most mesmerizing, astonishing shade of deep rosy red I've ever seen. You might see something akin to this shade in a mid-autumn sundown, like the one I watched for almost an hour last night, about 10 different shades of salmon, or on a mango in that area where the red is transitioning toward an orangy-yellow. But seen today, looking up, while they just sat still there, translucent in the light that illuminated them from behind, well, no, I knew there is nothing else exactly that shade, and that I'd never see it again. I stopped, stunned, and looked long at them, this eruption of ineluctable color on a day destined for drab, and smiled. I could tell this tree didn't mind my meeting with it that way, waiting for a while to watch it. It welcomed me.

Just before I turned to leave, I thought about reaching up, plucking one of those leaves to take home, to meditate on that color, find the right name for it. But I didn't. I don't know why. After I crossed the road, I kept thinking, well, yes, I should have

picked one, well, no, I shouldn't have. I had walked about a quarter of a mile in this vexed state when I stopped to decide. I almost turned around, then laughed, knowing how selfish and futile that would be, taking this leaf, which is properly waiting to meet its destiny on its own time-path, just another instance of the ongoing obsession we have humanly to stop time, fix it, go back to it, keep it, the good, the bad, archived in photos, mementos, souvenirs, leaves pressed inside books we never look at. Stupid. Time doesn't work that way in this world, and we shouldn't try to make it. The path is always before us, opening, if we let it come up to meet us, full-face-forward. Firm in my conviction not to look back, I looked right in front of me instead, and there, another tree, this one a small ash, maybe 25 feet tall, still flush with enough leaves to look fleshy and full, the color of which transitioned from a lemony-limy green on the far left through a buttery yellow in the middle to bosc-pear brown fringe on the far right. Stunning enough to get visually lost in, which I did. So there, I thought: Had I turned back I would never have seen this, at least not just this way, just now, so beautiful it, too, moved me to a few quiet, happy tears.

As I walked on I felt a fierce, fiery, determined force steeping in me, in my heart, deepening my drive to go forward, which I did, strong step after strong step. I thought for the first time in while about my rage, how refined it had now become, not that wicked firestorm driven wildly every which way by spiraling winds of fight or flight. No, this one is more like the cool-blue to yellow-hot flame at the tip of a plumber's torch. Not so bright you can't look at it, as a welder's torch is, but soothing, perfectly still, its edges blending imperceptibly into the surrounding air, which it heats, just enough, to do the work you need it to do, melting solder into the joints, sealing water where it should be, inside the pipe, instead of all over the floor, the walls. I said last spring that I

didn't think my rage would ever go away, transitioning over into one of the subsequent (much more boring I would say now) stages Elizabeth Kübler-Ross names. Now I know I was right. The tank that fuels this flame of mine is full. I love being able to point its cool-hot blue tip wherever I want. This rage is good. It seals the leaks. It keeps the water where it belongs, flowing toward a purpose or just waiting to be drunk. I can use it and I will.

During the last mile of my walk I found myself thinking about the costs associated with love that I wrote about yesterday. Carol's first husband died suddenly and unexpectedly at 29. She found him the way I found her, a horror that never left her, just as mine will never leave me. She lived with a dread that she would have to go through something like that again with me. I told her over and over again that I would not die and leave her alone again. That's a ludicrous promise, of course. Who controls things like that? But I was determined to keep it no matter what. When she was not well, I also promised her, over and over, that I would take care of everything, everything, if she went first. Everything. Calculate for yourself what that includes. I had no idea, no idea, none, how hard it would be to keep my promises. And I'm not going to tell you or anyone, ever, all I had to do or how I did it. But I did and I will.

There are, as I was saying yesterday, two different "realities" at odds, often, in our lives. There's the one out there, the one that's not optional. That part of it I just have to endure, like you do, clamped tight in those thrashing jaws, every day. All I can say is this: On the path I'm on now, that reality stops at the tip of my nose and it stays out there. Because I want it to. You could do that, too. Anyone can. I get to make the one inside my head the way I want it to be, just like you do. In there, people do right for one another, they care quietly, patiently, they love and they are

loved. They say thank you and I'm sorry. They say what they mean and mean what they say. They keep their promises, all of them. I know the world is full of people who imagine that same reality and try every day to bring it into being. Carol was one of them. You may be, too. Everyone else can kick up all the dust they want out there in the other reality. I can bear all the time I have to spend out there with them, believe me, no problem. All I'll say is this: If they want to get in here where I spend as much of my time as I can, they'll have to take off those dirty shoes.

On the drive home I listened to my own voice on the car stereo sing some sad songs. I cried, for what I have lost, for how Carol suffered her life for as long as she could. Like a child cries, not because of some great pain or some pressing need or some deep sadness. No, more like sitting on a stone, looking down at the grass, feeling the gravity of reality press in, thinking, if you think anything at all: I did it because I said I would, and this is what that costs. I pay what it costs gracefully, gratefully, along with a few tears, maybe, if that's what it takes. Because I said I would. And I'm going to keep doing what I say I will until my path, the higher one, the one I'm looking down from right now, this astounding spectacle of "my" life unwinding beneath me, with me in it, until that path, once and for all, ends. Maybe I get to go up to a higher path then, from which what I'm looking at now starts to actually make sense. Maybe I get to go nowhere and be nothing. I don't care. I will love this way every day I'm here. Because I said I would. So there.

Essay Nine

It rained almost all morning today, a warm, stuffy, dank rain. The leaves still up must be hooked on strongly enough to stand it. They droop but do not fall, such lovely flat lobes, just hanging there. I stop and start on my walk, trying to really look at, connect with, some of the trees I pass, looking to give and take, well, love, you might say. I stop below a beautiful, small maple, look at it. Its answer is clear: Please don't look at me today. I want to be alone. It gave no reason, just this honest, very politely stated request. I respected that and moved on. About a half mile down the path I encountered another tree, similar, small, that reached back to me so charmingly, so happily. Not like it was just waiting for me, but delighted to see and connect with me. I stayed there with it for a while, happy with it. This is the kind of love I want to think about today, the kind that says generously, respectfully both "yes" to "no" and "yes" to "yes."

A few days ago, at work, I re-read H. D.'s *Notes on Thought and Vision*, such a unique, inspiring exploration of her notion of the creative process, orchestrated through an array of fully female, not feminine, not feminist, *female* figures. The first of its kind as far as I know, and still the best, concocted at an historical moment generally, and a life moment for her, that made the likelihood of producing such a treatise infinitesimally small. She actually grounds her metaphoric grid so interestingly, so surprisingly, in the female body, brain connected to womb, by establishing the figure of the "jellyfish" at the center of her system and then

elaborating its implications. It would be 50 years before “vagina,” “uterus,” became commonplace terms in discussions of female creativity. They are not words H.D. uses, here in 1919, preferring the very tame (by our standards) “love regions,” but she might as well have. It’s that clear, to me at least, that they are included and implied in the way mind connects to body via the jellyfish.

She talks a lot about this jellyfish business early in the book, so provocatively, engagingly. But it’s halfway through the book before she fully shows her hand in her translation of male to female, and she does it in two succinct sentences:

The world of vision has been symbolized in all ages by various priestly cults in all countries by the serpent.

In my personal language or vision, I call this serpent a jellyfish. (40)

I laughed out loud when I read this passage this time. It is brilliant: How do you get a jellyfish from a serpent? Who makes that move? Well, she did. And if you think about it figuratively rather than physically, it makes perfect sense. One is a penis, the other is a womb. All of a sudden, along the central figurative axis that organizes what poetry is, what creation is, what thinking and feeling are, a woman’s body is at the core and a man’s is not. H.D.’s whole career, a dramatic re-ordering of Western myth (*Helen In Egypt*), religion (*Trilogy*), poetics (*Hermetic Definition*) that installs female figures in the positions that have been held down by male figures for as long as anyone could remember, is just a footnote to this little slip of the tongue in *Notes*: You say serpent, I say jellyfish, let’s call the whole thing off. And in my

little thought experiment, the same one I used to “get” Emily Dickinson, I could see that if history had been gender-reversed and I was stuck on the Scilly Islands in 1919 trying to get my life together, wanting to be player in the world of poetry, I would have to do what she did: See a sea full of jellyfish contracting orgasmically around me and think: Well, how about a serpent instead. Brilliant.

This is a book almost no one reads. I don’t think I’ve ever run across anyone who had read it before I taught it. As is the case with H.D.’s work generally, that staggering and magnificent *oeuvre* produced over her lifetime, clearly, to me, equal in innovation, scope and eloquence with anyone in the top-tier of male poets from her generation—Eliot, Williams, Pound, Stevens, any of them. As the magnitude of her accomplishments became more and more evident to me over the years, just through more and more exposure to the work, I started wondering why I hadn’t been apprised of her status when I was in college, reading all of those Modernist master-poets in my first survey course. So I went back to the *Norton Anthology* I used that term. I have no idea why I still have it, but I do. This iconic compilation, the gold standard for surveys back then, three inches thick, containing a little bit of everyone and a lot from all the big boys. I wanted to see what part of H.D.’s work was there. Well, it wasn’t, none of it, nothing. I couldn’t believe it. And now, further, why don’t we read this little book I was reading. We read Eliot’s *The Sacred Wood*, all those short, sharp blockbuster essays, and Williams’ *Spring and All*, every bit as eccentric, serendipitous, outlandish as H.D.’s little book, tuned to the masculine register of tropes. But not *Notes on Thought and Vision*.

I was thinking on my walk today about how liberating it is, as a man, to have to think through the opposite set of figures, imagine

how, if at all, my creative enterprise might or might not be channeled through a “womb,” imagining that I am trying to write my way into a “tradition” that has been owned by women for millennia. What would I do? I might of course say, well, I don’t have a womb so this doesn’t apply to me. I guess I’ll do something else. That is the exact conundrum out of which women creators have needed to emerge if they had any hope of being “writers” until well into the 20th century, all of the defenses, approaches, systems, rendered unreflexively through a figurative web that was masculine, patriarchal, or just plain phallic, my synecdochic example being the one I used in an earlier essay: that “Sword of lightning, ever unsheathed, which consumes the scabbard that would contain it.” Again, yikes! Women could easily have said, as I am supposing many did: “Well, this says I have to have a white-hot dick to do it, and I don’t, so I can’t.” But many didn’t say that. So what did they do that I now have to do as I sit and read this remarkable little book, me, Dr. Old White Male, the exact one who should be most readily precluded from this womb-based mode of creation? That’s what I was thinking about today, riffing out, as I often do on these walks, some of the things I might want to say about it in class, animated, hands flashing around dramatically, my manifesto-performative mode, most of which, I hope, will winnow itself down to something manageable by 2 PM tomorrow. I won’t go into all of that here. Or in class tomorrow, most likely. But I had a lot of fun thinking about it.

I actually read the book kind of backwards this time, as I often do when I re-read, starting somewhere *in medias res* that attracts me, re-assembling things piecemeal, back and forth, in and out, until I’m done. The section I ended up centered on this time was her description of the Chinese poet Lo-Fu’s intimate relationship with a tree branch, which he first notices, then approaches, then gets

so engrossed in, detail after detail, deep and deeper, that it becomes his “mistress,” accompanying him back to his room, where he meditates caressingly on the memory until it comes even more fully to life, present in its absence. It starts out this way:

Lo-Fu sat in his orchard . . . and looked in a vague, casual way. Against the grey stones of the orchard wall he saw the low branch of an apple tree. He thought, that shoot should have been pruned, it hangs too low. Then as he looked at the straight tough young shoot, he thought, no, the apples are excellent, so round and firm. Then he went on looking. (43)

You see Lo-Fu’s shift here from a “vague” to a clear way of looking. Then “his conscious mind ceased wondering and, being an artist, his intensity and concentration were of a special order.” (43) He uses these powers to study the branch in the most intense and exotic ways until the “leaves” were “continents” with “rivers” and “many, many little fields.” (44) It is an astonishing process, almost timeless, of falling in love, as a result of which “[h]e really did look at it. He really did see it.” (44) Then he goes to his room where “his love, his apple branch, his beautiful subtle mistress, was his. And having possessed her with his great soul, she was his forever.” (45)

Such a beautiful set of observations, both his and hers. But to me it ends puzzlingly, unsettlingly, disturbingly even, with the word “possessed.” That word just stuck in my craw, and it’s still stuck there. I have been re-reading *Notes* and especially this section over and over trying to find my way out my discomfort. All of this sensuous, gentle loving between Lo-Fu and his branch reduced, finally, to possession, ownership, why? At first, because Lo-Fu is

figured male, I thought H.D. might simply be saying that that is the only possible outcome for a man, whether for cultural or biological reasons, no matter. It's just what men always end up doing with what they love. This was heartbreakingly depressing to me. I could not accept that. Then I remembered the note at the end of the book, in which it is made clear that the real Lo-Fu was in fact a woman. I was relieved, seizing on this as a way out of my depressing "gender" trap. But that, of course, only generalizes the problem. It doesn't solve it. So I kept re-reading and re-reading, trying to figure it, to re-figure it, literally.

Here's what I came to. H. D. had been writing about a certain kind of "love" from early in the book, exactly the kind I have in mind these days when I think about my relationship with the trees, with the "things" that make up the world around us in general. Throughout, I hear H.D. arguing that poetry arises from and derives from our "falling in love" with things. I couldn't agree more. I started thinking about this sort of experience in a conscious way almost 50 years ago, walking down an empty street in Scranton, Pennsylvania, a rainy-gray afternoon, something of consequence on my mind, though I cannot recall what that might have been. I will say now I was "depressed," though that might go without saying if you ever walked down an empty street in Scranton in the late 1960s. The Northeastern Pennsylvania I grew up in was always characterized back then as a "depressed" area. I was in college before I realized that the term was being used economically rather than psychologically. So I'm walking distractedly, head down, and I pass over a manhole cover. For some reason, I noticed some faded patches and flecks of red and green paint all over it. I calculated unconsciously that at some point, many decades previously, when it was new, it must have been painted flamboyantly in those colors, more a work of art than a sewer lid. And suddenly I was stunned out of my

inattention. I gazed at the manhole cover. I could not take my eyes off it. I literally fell in love with it, what it had been, what it was now, both so beautiful. I was enthralled. I don't know how long I stood there. I can see that manhole cover in my mind's eye right now, stunning.

I don't recall exactly, but I'm quite sure that whatever had been afflicting me right then was gone, that I was not depressed but ecstatic, how anyone feels when they fall in love. I didn't think much more about this experience until maybe a decade later, when I was at a point where I knew I was going to need "credentials," publications, to get and keep a job. I decided to write something about the value, the real value, of poetry, for me, how it was more an approach toward the world, things, objects, people, everything, than a body of texts or a series of words. I called the piece "Thinking Poetry." Somewhere in it I made reference to this "falling in love" business and used my encounter with the manhole cover as an example. I got the piece published in a small journal that had "teaching" or "teachers" in its title. I don't have the piece, so I can't check. Well, you might ask, check your CV. But here's what happened with that. I got my first full-time job at a relatively elite college in 1977. I knew I would have to publish, and present my publications for others to evaluate, if I intended to sustain my position there. I had this one, "Thinking Poetry," going in. But after a while I started to think what the reaction among my senior colleagues would be to this upstart who had a habit of falling in love with manhole covers. Not good. Not good at all. You might say, well, maybe not. No, I knew these people. Not good. So I removed the line from my CV entirely. No one but me would ever know what I really thought about "thinking" poetry. I laugh now remembering all that. I got "terminated" (what a great word, so antiseptic and incendiary all at the same time!) there anyhow, for being, well, that's beside the

point. It is, though, looking back from here, the “moment” in my career for which I am now most proud. It was exciting, interesting, hard. I stood up for something. And at least no one involved in that process ever got to say it was because I fell in love with manhole covers.

In any case, I have fallen in love with things, almost any category of thing you can think of, thousands and thousands of times in the interim, as I have with all the trees I meet on my daily walks. I’ve never regretted one of them. This is what gets me back to “possession.” The thing about things is you cannot both love and possess them. They are where they are. You can return to them. But they never belong to you. And here’s the other thing, which I have realized in a deep way only on my walks this fall, all of these trees reaching out to me: Many of the things you fall in love with love you back. Really, truly, the best kind of love. Not all of them, of course. You can tell which way it is going if you pay attention. I believe, in retrospect, that the manhole cover I fell in love with also fell in love with me. I think it never forgot the day that guy fell in love with it. It has a good story to tell, too.

This sort of experience, these kinds of intimate relationships, are hard to account for, almost impossible to explain, in the context of postmodernist critical and philosophical systems. If you know something about them, you’ll know exactly what I mean. If you don’t, don’t bother checking. Believe me. That’s part of why I took that article off my CV. But they are not as hard to account for in the context of the now-emergent object-oriented otology movement. At the extreme, maybe, but possible. Again, if you read that work, I think you’ll see how and why it’s true. If you don’t, don’t worry about it. If you really want to know what I mean, read poetry, good poetry. Read H.D. She fell in love with things all the time. If you read enough of that, you will find

yourself doing it without having had to read philosophy to learn how or explain why.

Very early in *Notes* H.D. introduces the theme of love via a reference to Socrates' famous second speech in the *Phaedrus*, when she refers to his way of orchestrating "vision" and "love:"

Socrates' whole doctrine of vision was a doctrine of love.

We must be "in love" before we can understand the mysteries of vision. (22)

If you read his speech, true love actually changes how we see, or look at, the beloved, and our eyes are only opened this way if we are filled from without by a godly madness, are possessed in that way, outside-in. Everyone knows what such "loving eyes" look like in everyday terms. You don't have to read Plato or H.D. to know that. We have all witnessed them and displayed them at some point. For example: When Bridget was in elementary school, either Carol or I would pick her up after school so she wouldn't have to sit on a bus. Whenever possible, even if Carol was going to do that, which was most days, I'd go, too. Seems like overkill, I know, two parents with two cars to drive one kid two miles. But here's the thing: I did it because I couldn't wait to set eyes on her, and I truly believed she couldn't wait to set eyes on me and Carol. Parents had to wait for these pickups about 100 feet in front of the school, beside a flagpole, a small and devoted band of us who got to know one another there over time. When school let out, hundreds of kids from all grades would flood out to find buses or meet parents. I would have my eyes trained on this sea of faces, and as soon as Bridget came out the door hers would be the only

face I could see. It would fill up the universe with a bright light. Her eyes would be trained toward the flagpole, and as soon as she saw us, her eyes would light up like the sun. You might say, how could anyone see that from 100 feet away? Well, that is exactly what “loving eyes” can and will do.

H.D. talks about some of the things her eyes love:

The Delphic charioteer has, I have said, an almost hypnotic effect upon me: The bend of his arm, the knife cut of his chin; his feet, rather flat, slightly separated, a firm pedestal for himself; the fall of his drapery in geometrical precision; and the angles of the ingatherings of the drapery at the waist. (24-26)

Just a statue, but the most miniscule details of it so vividly observed, rendered, enlivened by her loving eyes.

Da Vinci, she goes on to say, “went mad if he saw a boy’s face in Florence or a caged bird or a child with yellow hair that fell or stood up in tight whorls like the goldsmith work he had learned with Verrochio.” (26) And Jesus, whom she calls “the Galilean” here and elsewhere, loves this way as well:

The Galilean fell in love with things as well as people. He would fall in love with a sea-gull or some lake-heron that would dart up from the coarse lake grass, when Peter leapt out to drag his great boat on shore, or the plain little speckled backs of the birds bought in the market by the poor Jews.

• • •

He looked at the blue grass-lily and the red-brown sand-lily that grew under the sheltered hot sand-banks in the southern winter for hours and hours. If he closed his eyes, he saw every vein and fleck of blue or vermillion. (28)

If you want to know exactly what I mean by falling in love with things, well, here it is. I am not Jesus, to be sure. But this capacity of his is, I am sure, while it may begin with a “godly” possession, fully human. It is I would say what makes and keeps us human, ensconced intimately in a material world so vivid, so enchanting, why would we not take as much advantage of it as we can, before we are marched off to a heaven or a hell or a nowhere that is spectral, disembodied, dull, dull, dull by comparison.

For H. D. this kind of love is the only way we can save our life here:

There are two ways of escaping the pain and despair of life, and of the rarest, most subtle dangerous and ensnaring gift that life can bring us, relationship with another person—love.

One way is to kill that love in one’s heart. To kill love—to kill life.

The other way is to accept that love, to accept the snare, to accept the pricks, the thistle.

*To accept life—but that is dangerous.
It is also dangerous not to accept life. (39)*

So now I am back to Lo-Fu, and I have answered my question, relieved my troubledness with the concept of “possession.” The kind of love H.D., Lo-Fu, the Galilean, Socrates, and I are talking about is not ownership, domination, control. It is a being taken over, enthralled, from the outside in, by a godly madness that is only possible on a physical plane, this earth we need to stay at for whatever reason, for whatever time we’re told. I know: In the sentence where that word appears, this meaning of possession is syntactically impossible. But I also know that if I could have a conversation with H.D. about this, she would say, “Oh, yes, I see, that’s what I actually meant. Let me change that right now.” I may be re-writing history here, but isn’t that exactly what H.D. is doing when she calls a serpent a jellyfish? What she would want all of us to do when we find ourselves closed off for some reason from what’s truly good and true in the “reality” we have to live in? Re-write it. Right now.

Essay Ten

Last night there was a hard rain and a big wind. There are a few days like this every fall around this time. The weather hits and what's left up there comes down in torrents rather than dribs and drabs.

Just before I woke up I had maybe the most vivid dream of my life. Carol and I were sitting in bed together, having just returned from some work-related function out near the airport. Carol had been offered a low/mid level job opportunity of some sort and we were talking about it, as we often had as she tried mightily but unhappily to situate herself in some "professional" capacity. She finally said she just didn't want to take it and looked up at me, those beautiful blue eyes simultaneously plaintive and hopeful, asking me without ever saying anything whether I would still love her if she were just her, not "somebody" in the world's eyes. I looked back at her, instinctively, my eyes wet with emergent tears, almost mournful, that say I will always love you, to my utmost, from the bottomlessness of my heart, no matter what the world out there says or does about either one of us. Jobs, money, houses, cars, friends, fame, credentials, status, none of it means anything at all to me by comparison. All I said was, "Carol, I just want to be with you. That's all I ever wanted or ever will." Then I asked her, repeatedly, if this were real, if I was awake. She didn't answer but I went through several testing stages: I rose up on my knees and shook my head as if to clear it, asking "Am I really

awake?” We were both still there. I pinched myself hard, asking again. We were both still there. I was thrilled, ecstatic. I was just about to tell her about a horrible nightmare I had had, for months, that she was dead, gone, that I was alone. I couldn’t contain my joy to know that, finally, it was over. When I opened my mouth to start speaking, I woke up.

You might think I would be overwhelmed by grief, rage, at that moment. I wasn’t. I just felt the soft weight of despair, like a light blanket on a cool night, settle over me. Reality. I knew I was back in it again. It’s that look on Bill Murray’s face in *Groundhog Day* the umpteenth time he wakes up to Sonny and Cher singing, “I Got You Babe,” like a prisoner at his 10th parole interview, believing for a second that this time it would go in his favor, then the same old decision comes down. You don’t rant and rave then. You go back, take it. Reality. It does not yield to preference or desire in matters of this sort. It is. Today. Tomorrow. Forever. “It’s co-o-old out there.” It took me maybe 10 minutes to get out of bed. Then I hung my head and cried, quietly, just a few tears. No drama, no rage. Today would be just another day.

My favorite song to sing to Carol, one of the first I learned because it’s simple, was “You Are My Sunshine.” One of the things we both learned about these seemingly cheerful old songs is that they have a hard spine of “reality” to them. This one is no exception. Here are the lyrics to the first stanza of that song, as I’m sure you know:

*You are my sunshine, my only sunshine;
You make me happy when skies are gray.
You’ll never know, dear, how much I love you;
Please don’t take my sunshine away.*

Very nice so far, isn't it, a great dream. Then the second stanza:

*The other night, dear, as I lay sleeping,
I dreamed I held you in my arms.
When I woke, I was mistaken.
I hung my head and cried.*

That's reality. What you too often have to wake up to in this world.

My walk today was slow and steady, not much thought. The trees, as I said, were stripped down last night, not to the bones yet, but enough to look bedraggled, tired. Like Bill Murray's face. Like mine. That doughy, pale, blank eyed, thin-lipped look, mouth corners turned almost imperceptibly downward, the look that says it can stay exactly that way for hours, days, weeks, years, that "this is how it is and I just have to take it" look. The trees know exactly what this look means, how to do it themselves, especially this time of year, November, hard rains and big wind and you just have to take it. They welcomed me stoically today, said nothing. I knew if I could see their faces they would look just like mine. I don't care how many times I have to take that long, dreary walk upstairs to my room, settle into that soft despair, fall asleep. I still hope I dream of Carol every single night. Maybe one of these mornings I will start to talk and I won't wake up.

Essay Eleven

The first thing I'd say about today is: gray. I woke up way before daybreak and had to wait, wait, wait to take my walk. I am very impatient. So I drove off right at first light. The sky this time of year here is a very distinctive gray, day after day of it once November rolls in. It's milky, smooth but viscous, like whey maybe, what's left over after you've taken what you want. Not gray, grey. The very first thing I noticed heading up the hill was the scattered wreckage of toppled trees, big, brown carcasses skewed around all over the place, like industrial scale pick-up sticks scattered randomly around. They are there all summer and fall, of course, but hidden in the thick thatch of green; and by Christmas you get so used to seeing them, they recede into the backdrop. But the first time you see these vast fields of the fallen, on a leaf- and green-bare day like today, so gray, it's stunning, all that history laid out, decades of it in various states of decay and disrepair, amplified this year by a number of freshly downed trees, huge, taken out in their prime by teams of men Carol and I saw working last January, to slow down, I'm supposing, the advance of the emerald ash borers. Those trees are at least three feet thick at the base, a hundred feet of trunk chunked up by chainsaw and rolled away from the path any which-way they went, fat slabs littered up and down and around, their rough gray bark just a few shades darker than the sky.

I thought to myself: “I don’t think I will think anything today. It is so gray.” I was mistaken. It all started a half mile in after I took the dogleg down. There is a deep gully off to the right, up from the base of which grow a few tiny tree-like things, maybe three feet tall, the broken-umbrella-types I mentioned a few days ago. Their spindly, gray trunks and branches evaporate on a day like today into the gray base of leaf meal beneath. So their remaining leaves, maybe 30 on each, bright yellow, seem to be suspended in mid air, like you threw a handful of them up in the air and their lobes flash-froze at all angles in a clear glass globe. Today, they made the world look topsy-turvy: crazy chandeliers hanging up from the ground, gravity reversed, everything around them then hung up from the ground, too, the trees, even me. Upside-down. My life, I thought, is just like that now, all upside down. It has been that way for so long I am used to it, oriented to it, as I will be to all these downed trees in a few weeks.

I thought about the little dust-up I had with that tree a couple of days ago, the one that rebuffed me at my approach to look at it. I mentioned this event in class this week, and I remembered how for most of my youth, well into my teens, I was like that, too, didn’t like to be looked at, beet-red-faced as soon as the spot light hit me, at school, home, anywhere. One of the most terrifying dreams I ever had was having a hand, just a big disembodied hand, holding a broad brush paint my face crimson red. I was about five years old. It lasted maybe 30 seconds and has haunted me ever since. That terrifying. It is, for those who know this, a very unique kind of embarrassment, not attached to anything in particular you may have done, said. And it has nothing at all to do with the sort of male aggression that can be invoked by being looked at the wrong way. Socially normal people might see this as aberrant, a “morbid” kind of shy. Morbidly shy is exactly what they used to call it. Contemporary psychology has pegged it

“social anxiety disorder.” I can actually recall how crestfallen I felt the first time I saw this term in print a few decades ago. Morbidly shy has some drama to it, even dignity; social anxiety disorder, well, that’s just sick, one might say. Now, I thought, a frame of mind that was formerly simply an eccentricity, perhaps in certain cases even a sort of “gift,” a sign of saintliness or genius, now, well, just plain abnormal, neurotic, your ticket to take a trip to therapy. Carol was like me in that regard, except much more so, refused to have her picture taken, didn’t even like mirrors. Ours are mostly, for that reason, on the inside of doors: You have to open the door to see how you look then close it so you won’t have to encounter your own image inadvertently while you’re walking by. This may sound like a head scratcher to the socially normative. It all makes perfect sense to me.

That’s one of the things I’ve been trying to think through since our discussion in class of Emily Dickinson a few weeks ago, the one that took me back to her correspondence with Thomas Higginson. I’ve known for many, many years, of course, decades, that in most of my “identity” features I am pretty normative. Why then, I wondered, did I always feel so out of step with the general drift of things, an outlier? It struck me like a thunderbolt when I read those letters, Emily Dickinson trying to negotiate a way of advance for herself through her social opposite, this swashbucklingly “manly” public figure, my seeing every one her rhetorical moves, understanding perfectly each thrust and parry, while, by his own account, Higginson was always simply reduced to saying “Huh! Who are you?” My “minority” status came, as I said I realized then, from my reclusivity, the aberrant class of off-beats who, like me, tend to be chided and derided--“Why are you so private?”--until, of course, we die. Then, if we’ve accomplished something, something I might add that could only be accomplished from this outlier position, we are celebrated,

valorized, honored. Like Emily Dickinson. That's precisely what Higginson did with her, to her. Waited until she died, then took over her poems, changed the syntax and punctuation to fit his prissy, public standards of correctness, so he would not have to endure his sort of embarrassment, the kind his high-flying socially normative position would expose him to if he had promoted an outlier like her, this "original genius" he "discovered," without fixing her mistakes first. He could, again as I said (I guess I'm still pretty riled by this, thus the desire to say it all over again), have promoted her, her work—she walked right up to him, strong, in that first letter—thirty years earlier, gotten her career off the ground, while she was alive, still a young woman, able to enjoy it. But he didn't. The price he demanded for that, tacitly, from his socially normative position of power was, to her, too high. She evaded his gaze at every advance, but in such a way that he couldn't help but keep gazing. I know all those moves. Carol did, too.

This took me back, in the most salutary way, to my reading of H.D.'s little story about Lo-Fu's possession of the apple tree branch. That is: perception as a mode of love. At Lo-Fu's first encounter with the branch, I recalled, he thought that it was out of place, should have been pruned out right at the outset. An outlier. That, I am thinking now, is exactly the first step toward "loving" something, anything: Its out-of-placeness provokes our notice, it steps forth, unavoidably present. He has, we have, a number of choices in cases like this: turn to look at a more "normal" branch, one in its proper place, more suitably beautiful because of all that; take out a saw and get rid of the rogue lower branch right then, a drastic attempt to right a wrong from long ago; walk away in confusion or disgust. That, I thought, is what socially normative people are tempted to do when they see someone like me, the

way I was last winter at least: avert their gaze toward something better, try to pretend what had happened had not, walk away.

Lo-Fu, to his great credit, does none of those things. He acknowledges the out-of-kilter branch for what it is, and he recognizes immediately how strong and productive it is. That is the second step toward love: seeing what's good in what has stood out for us. Then, he studies it carefully in order to understand it for what it is, its intrinsic nature and qualities, down to the finest detail. That is the third and final step toward love. The best kind of love, no grasping, no taking, no grappling toward change. The "you're perfect just as you are" kind of love we all crave, unconditional.

Then Lo-Fu goes back to his room with his understanding (not memory) of the branch and revels in it, loves it even more. He is, as we often say about something we love: "taken" by it, a possession, as I said, that comes outside-in, like we might say an angel or a muse takes us over, all good, not fully out of ourselves, not fully the other, but in a balanced liminal state between, poised, a tension, a creative state of mind. The branch, with all its apples, its leaves, gets to stay where it is, as it is, waiting for his return. It may choose to love Lo-Fu, for staying with it, paying such careful attention to it, coming to know it, not aggressively, intrusively, just letting it be what it was, openingly. It may have paid just as close attention to him as a way to learn to love him. It, too, may have gone to its "room" to contemplate this man. To love him. The right kind of love. Possession of the best sort. I got all this worked out today, to my final satisfaction, by turning my reading upside down. Like my life. Like those little trees reaching down from their upness.

I had something amazing happen to me this week. A former student of mine, John Kennick, such a brash thinker, an outlier, the one who first got me hooked on object-oriented ontology, someone I run into from time to time, always enjoy talking to, not so much mentoring as cheerleading, something he doesn't seem to get much from some other professors he encounters, sent me, at my request, a number of essays he had written over the last year or so, just to catch me up on his work. So smart, so strong, so original, one after the other. I had saved the longest one for last. Near the end of that essay—a stunning analysis of, well, it evades easy categorization—I encounter this sentence, one of most surprising sentences I have ever read, one that, if you had asked me a second before I read it, I would say would never, ever be written, for more reasons than I can go into now. He says:

For some leverage on Ashbery, I move fluidly away, as Ashbery does, and as objects do (I'm sure you've noticed), turning to Paul Kameen's "The Poet Comes out at Night," another poem (about poetry, he says) that brings many of its own objects afore from the putative background for consideration, speculating:

He then inserts the poem [formatted here as I wrote it, which he could not have known, as I make clear below]:

*He waits in a thicket
like moonlight seeping
down along twig-tip,
leaf-vein and branch.*

*Suddenly the razor
edge of his voice leans
cold and gentle against
my throat, prodding.*

*I follow each flick
of the blade all adazzle
with moonlight and
do not know what to say.*

*I empty my wallet
in his hands, empty
my pockets in his hands,
empty my hands . . .*

*He leaves behind
nothing but moonlight
in a thicket, all that
he wanted to say.*

I thought immediately, how in the world did he find that poem. I wrote it over 40 years ago and never got it published. I actually went right then and checked my CV, just to be sure. I know I never read it to a live audience, either, because I wrote it about five years before I gave my first reading, making it too “old” to qualify for one of those. Most of my poems are unpublished for many good and bad reasons. I am at an age that I don’t care. Three years ago this month, I decided to make a website to archive some of them, ones I really like, in my own voice, no texts, just readings, in little 5-10 minute units of related (to me) material. I didn’t remember picking this poem to read, but I went to the site and listened. And there it was, near the end of the last

track, an assortment of “poems about poetry.” He must have found this poem there, I thought, listened to all the tracks to get to it. Even I had forgotten it was there. But there it was. Then I read his commentary:

The poet “waits” in the “thicket,” separate from the poem’s narrator: “his [the poet’s] voice leans” against “my [the narrator’s] throat.” The “thicket,” more often an object in the background than a major subject of a poem, is brought forward when its parts, “twig tip, leaf vein, and bark,” are enlivened and described in detail by the “moonlight,” which is also usually rendered only as a condition of the scene, although here it figures prominently not only as an image but as an agent in the narrative. Two versions of the “blade” are established, one with “moonlight” and one without, first leaning languidly, “cold and gentle” in the dark, and then “flick[ing]” with a more frenetic sense when it is “all adazzle with moonlight”; accordingly, the versions of language associated with the blade changes, from, first, the “gentle” and “prodding” for language like “adazzle” to frantically not “know[ing] what to say”—which is a problem if you are narrating a poem. Not knowing what to say, the narrator just describes his actions in more ordinary language, thrice repeating “I empty...” As an allegory of writing poetry, I think it is fairly obvious that the “emptying” refers to all that it requires from all of the objects associated with the entity called “Paul” to interact with the object “poet” in order to bring about the object-entity “poem.” For, the entity that we call “poem”—words on a page, usually—is never the poem. Parts, such as words, language, margins, author, reader, and so forth, do not summarize the poem. And yet no holism will do. The poem is not more than the sum of its parts; it is

not even just its parts: the poet “leaves behind ‘moonlight in a thicket’” but not the contents of the narrator’s wallet or pockets. The poet does not remain there in the language, nor does Paul. Rather, a particular aesthetic of the poet remains as a particular aesthetic of the poem, but these are versions of a real object, withdrawn. What I think I learn about Paul from this poem is an aesthetic of my aesthetic of the poem. I cannot be anything but a part of the poem, and I’d be remiss to forget it. Studies of embodiment until now have tried to find unlimited (metaphysical) meaning as an aesthetic of limited (physical) meaning by an analysis of symbol—to find the metaphysical as an aesthetic of the physical, but forgetting in a lucid phenomenological trip that symbolism is not real, having no real objects “behind” it, and that symbolism is, instead, a way of explaining in our own, human, limited terms the aesthetics of the objects (themselves limited) behind the physical entities in question. Weird essentialism is beyond interconnectedness between closed objects; it is about openness alone, for everything like a “symbolic” process or “connection” is figuratively “taken care of” by the objects’ openness, their being in each other and being nothing else. Symbolism is not real but a makeshift phenomenological explanation. And hence rituals do not really (emphasis on real) achieve their effects symbolically.

Wow, so beautiful, exactly what that poem was trying to be and do even though I had never put any of it into any words at all, myself, could not in fact possibly have found these words back then because they didn’t exist in the intellectual air we breathed, and, of course, there being no need to, since I was its only reader. I had tears in my eyes when I was done. Not for me, but for the poem. I have such an attachment to, such a love for, the poems I

make, which I make out of love, write and revise lovingly, like Lo-Fu's branch, each and every one of them, so beautiful, so out of place, so perfect to me. I have a special affection for the ones that have never found a reader other than me, as if they need and deserve my care. I try to think of them from time to time, recite them silently to myself, like when I'm walking. When a poem of mine finds a right reader, even one, I am thrilled for it, like it has grown up and can fend now for itself. John gave this poem everything I been hoping for it, and more, for the last forty years. And everything it could possibly have hoped for itself. He was, until I copied that material above, most likely going to be the only person other than me to ever have read that poem. And that would have been enough, everything. That's what paying attention to anything does. It realizes it. Brings it into being, not for a purpose but for what it is, what it had always promised but needed another to fulfill it. If you are an outlier, you will understand exactly what I mean and why it brought me to tears. That poem feels now I'm sure exactly what any loved thing, that manhole cover for example, feels. It has been looked at with loving eyes.

In his reply to the long email I wrote back to him, he posed a lot of questions. Not to me, just questions. I picked out a few of them to "answer," in my terms. "But what about writing," he asks, "for unintended audiences when you know your actual one and it isn't it." That is a great question, the inevitable position of the outlier. The right reader is highly unlikely to be the one who picks up the work right off the bat, maybe ever. I responded with a version of what I always say about my relationship to "audience:"

I write for my intended audience no matter what. My first and foremost audience is me. I was also telling [my class]

that day that once I finish writing something, 99% of its value, for me, selfishly, in my bookkeeping system, has already been achieved. I got to think it, say it, and learn it for myself. I have to publish to keep my job, so I work hard to do that. I fully expect and believe that almost no one who reads what I write actually gets it, loves it, thinks it, like I or it would hope. I'm fine with that. I always fantasize about a few ideal readers that maybe someday will find what I write and be taken by it, be inspired in some good way. That's a lot to ask for and to accomplish. But I've had it happen many times, a few responses here and there that make me feel, yes, great, that was worth it. Like yours. That's basically how I felt reading your comments on that poem: OK, this one finally landed, great! One right reader is enough.

The reversal of my reading of “possession” in H.D.’s depiction of Lo-Fu calls to mind for me the pivotal transitional insight in my long-term relationship with Walt Whitman. There was, for me, for years, a big snag I hit right at the second of line of “Song of Myself:” “What I assume, you shall assume.” Sounds like a command to me. “Think what I think.” I don’t like commands. They’re like advice, but harsher. They set my teeth on edge, so off-putting, this one for example, making it hard for me loosen up and love the wonderful long poem that ensued from it. I just couldn’t get over that hump. Until late in my graduate studies. Then, all at once, I saw it: He didn’t mean “assume” as in his assumptions, what he believed and thought, how you’d better just take all that at his word, stop thinking for yourself. No, not that at all. He meant “assume” as in “taking in,” what I have taken in from the world, all of these wonderful, loving perceptions, stories, relationships, I lay them out for you, who can enlarge yourself by assuming them as well, my gift to you, the purpose of which is not

to fill you to the full but to whet your appetite to go out and “assume” your own life, as lushly, as lavishly, day after day, down to the finest detail, with loving eyes. What goes into me goes out to you. He says basically that all through the poem. What could be more generous than that.

Today, every day, if I am open enough, a small part of the world will take possession of me. If I can contemplate it lovingly enough, I will assume it, into myself, like these three great poets. If I can carry some portion of all that into my words, you can assume it, too, if you want, no pressure, just there for the taking. What could possibly be easier or better than that, the ultimate antidote to gray.

Essay Twelve

I wish I could say otherwise, but I am not the forgiving type. An affront to me is one thing. Maybe I can get past it. Maybe. An affront to one I love, well, no, I can't, at least not if you look at my historical record. I struggle with all of this on a daily basis.

As I've explained, I felt let down in the aftermath of Carol's death. After about 6 weeks I became very sad, dangerously sad I began to think. I say sad rather than depressed because that feeling would build and build throughout a workday, press down on me during that evening alone at home, scare me. But if I had a day off, it would gradually lift, be almost gone by the time I went back to work again. I was sitting on the couch one night, distressed, baffled, by the fact that so few people took note of this loss, said something consolatory. Just then, I heard a voice in my ear, soft, sweet, very kind, almost musical, so I knew it was Carol. All she said was, "You know, Paul, you can't make people care about you when they don't." That was my answer. Immediately I felt better, much better. Like Occam's Razor, it explained everything. I think I may have laughed out loud. Or maybe just in my head. When you're alone long enough it can be hard to tell the difference. As T. S. Eliot reminds us, not all worlds end with a bang. Some end with a whimper or, more accurately, a long series of whimpers, each so subtle, barely audible, we don't take notice, a process we can remain blithely unaware of for years, even facilitate through this inattention. We all carry a headful of these dead worlds, dark cinders where light once shone, believing

blissfully that what once was there still is. That sentence reminded me of some lines from a poem I wrote well over forty years ago, one I had completely forgotten and just went to find, in which a similar image works to capture this temporal illusion:

*A million years ago a star died.
Yet careful astronomers still measure
its faint light nightly . . .*

But then, in the blinding flash of a supernova in the neighborhood, some of those cinders become suddenly visible for what they are rather than what they were. Like this one, my workplace world. Sad is a natural reaction to a realization of that sort. Just not a good one, for me at least, right then. I know enough about my own psychological dynamics to know that for me, as for many people, the way out of sad, which I both don't like and fear, is mad. So I got mad, very mad, not angry, mad. Anger, to me, is a response to an immediate, singular stimulus. It may last a long time, but it's local. I was very angry about Carol's death. Not mad. At her or at anybody. Angry. Mad is broad, unfocused, more an attitude than a state of mind. I just preferred to be mad instead of sad, so I was.

My actual loss was exponentially more consequential than the sum of all of the perceived slights that I felt in its aftermath. Times a million. Even in my rattled state I knew that. So why was I so mad? Because, I think now, I felt on some level as if every one of these miniscule affronts was directed not to me but to Carol, each a little way of saying I don't care enough about her to say anything to you to acknowledge her passing. And maybe not even her passing. Her life, that lovely brightness I had known.

I don't like being mad, either. I don't really fear it, like I do sad, because I understand enough about myself to know I won't act on it in any way that is very damaging, except maybe with some words, the occasional "rant" and "sardonic irony" I mentioned in the essay I wrote last spring. But I just don't like it in the general scheme of my emotional economy. Carol had a favorite quote she had tacked up, speaking directly to this, attributed variously to many people across history, including the Buddha: "Holding onto anger is like drinking poison and expecting the other person to die." It's even more true of "mad." It's self-ingested poison. My way out of mad is to make decisions. Last summer I sat down, inventoried everything, and made decisions, hard, firm decisions, in or out, all around, done. I have a very disciplined mind when it comes to living out my decisions. If I say, even if only to myself, this is what I'm going to do, I've thought it out and decided, well, I do it, crisply, easily, because there is no longer any emotion involved, no up and down, here and gone, just like the love Carol and I have for our kids, principled, promissory by definition. I made many promises last summer, to myself, and I've been keeping them, no problem, for months now.

I had the sense this morning that I might need to start toning it down, make it a little less fierce. I don't even know what that means or might involve. It's not a going back, a saying I was wrong, etc. I wasn't. It's just that now I need to move all of this work into the category of autonomic behavior, not think about it so much, trust that the work is done and will not need to be redone, move on.

Maybe this is pertinent, ultimately, to my relationship with God, which, as I said, is not a particularly good one now, a fact that has been on my mind more lately. I am "pissed" at him and all his

minions, yes, just that, pissed. I am by birthright and long indoctrination a Roman Catholic, the Harley of the Christian sects. And the Irish version of it, via my mother, an O'Neill by way of the MacAvoy's. So I had some dark humor to sweeten the taste of it growing up. The Christian God is, of course, supposed to be loving. That's the whole deal with the "good news," and the "new covenant." Not that Old Testament my-way-or-the-highway God who would, for example, turn Lot's wife into a pile of salt just for looking back at her lost home. That God has anger management problems. When I hear people throwing around selected hits from the Bible to justify their current biases I think exactly what I often think when I read or listen to some academic arguments: Hello! Have you actually read the book! The God I feel like I'm dealing with now is this throwback version, scary, like those bumble-bee uniforms the Steelers break out every now and then.

When my son was in the fourth grade, one of his classmates started tormenting him, often with some violence, throwing rocks, things like that. We were invited to this other boy's parents' house for some sort of school event. Carol approached his mother to ask her to intervene, assuming that would just take care of it. Surprisingly, she said she knew exactly what her son was doing and had no intention of trying to stop it. Carol asked, well, can you at least tell me why he's acting this way, to which she responded: "Because he can."

Joe was attending a school run by Reformed Presbyterians, a sect we had little first-hand experience with. Carol had been raised kind-of in the Presbyterian church, but in one its iterations, and in a family, that was more like: Stop by church every now and then and try to be nice. The mother's response told us everything we needed to know about the culture of the school we had gotten

ourselves and our kids hooked into. They believed that they were all already “saved,” incontrovertibly. It was somehow “written in the book.” For a Catholic, that’s lunacy. And cheating. Joe, being Catholic, was not saved and, given the book-ness of all this, never could be. Same for me, and Carol, and Bridget. This God-endowed power allowed them to do what they wanted. Because they can. They should have put that on the school’s shield: “Why? Because we can.”

Carol and I were stunned and pissed, and I use that word the same way I used it above. So, over dinner that night, we had a conversation with Joe about how to fight back, something I learned a lot about growing up. Carol seconded my suggestions. Joe listened quietly. Then he said the most stunning thing I have ever heard anyone say to me. Remember, he is nine years old: “I think that’s wrong. If I do those things I am sinking to his level and going against my own values and principles. That’s not how I want to live. I have other ways to solve this problem. They will take time, but in the end I will win, and I will get to keep my integrity.” We both were drop-jawed, stopped talking, said we were sorry for trying to induce this inappropriate behavior, how we admired him for what he said. I know I had tears about to emerge from my eyes so moved was I by the innate goodness of what he said, though I don’t think he saw them. It is the single most godly thing I have experienced in my life. Joe did win the war with that young man, quickly, in a surprising way that is, in itself, too long a story to tell here. But I’m glad I remembered all of this. Maybe I can continue the arduous process of working my way back from mad by aspiring to be more like Joe. Today is, by happenstance, daylight savings time. I have an extra hour. Might as well put that time to good use, make a start, forgive somebody for something, anything. Because I can.

Essay Thirteen

The woods were majestic today, first take, breathtaking. Just yesterday everything looked lackluster, licked. I knew better, having been through this before; but you never know for sure about anything. The lower deck of the cloud-throttled sky was disrupted with infusions of blue, fierce blue, the higher sky fighting back, breaking through. The air was the kind of crisp that yanks eyes wide, even if you haven't slept well, the outside flying through them as if the head inside is a vacuum sucking it all in. The trees looked regal, all of them almost bare, standing there, legions of them arrayed as far as the eye can see, relaxed, at ease, leaning on their long, tanned limbs. Carol was like that. Regal. Big winds and hard rains came and went in her life, as big and as hard as any you can think of, taking, taking, what she loved, what she wanted to hold on to, taking. I know almost every detail of that, sixty-two years of it, loss after loss after loss, sobering. I don't know how she made it as far as she did. Well, I do. It's built into that word: regal.

We operate normally on the basis of what look to me now like such trivial concepts of death: You're alive, alive, alive, and then in one second you die. That is ludicrous. Every life in this world is taken, taken, taken, every second of every day. Big winds, hard rain, yes, sometimes. But even more so sleepy eyes, unawake. They take, too, by what they miss, leave back, their focus always on one falling leaf instead of the whole spectacle, emerging,

evolving, until today, these trees, still standing, regal. Carol's life was being taken from the second she entered the world, umbilical cord wrapped around her neck, strangling her. She was supposed to die right then, they said. She didn't. I could go on for pages to detail both the horrific and the quotidian losses she had to endure. All the times she was supposed to die and didn't. I won't, except to say that if my life had been like that I would not have made it. Maybe you would. Not me. I don't even know how I survived last winter. She lived almost as many winters like that as these trees have. She stood there, like they do, over and over, took it, keeping watch over both what was left alive, down to the roots, and what was not, all those fallen fellows strewn around on the ground. Regal.

I have, of course, been thinking and writing a lot about love this month. Part of that is informed by our discussions in the seminar room, starting with Plato, and part emerging from what I have lost and now long for. Plato's *Phaedrus*, our first reading, takes love as its express theme, this dialogue that explores all of the intricacies of speaking, writing, how we use the words we use, for what. They are, saying and doing, in the context of his text, inseparable, as they are in John's gospel. What a remarkable and accurate way of thinking about what words are for. They may arise before the flesh, but can only take their meaning from it, and return to it, if we are to live right, love. That's why I had to go back to that little scene with Lo-Fu, had to know what he meant by possession, not just because I prefer not to think of perception as a mode of possession. At some mechanical level it may be. But because I prefer to think of perception as a mode of love. And I wanted to believe that both H.D. and Lo-Fu were thinking the same thing. If the words that emerge from perception are not informed in some way by love, they are boring to me, empty of life, all that mattered either already having fledged or never having been in the nest to

begin with. Likewise for the perceptions that follow them, equally fulsome, saturating a temporal space measured on the one hand in miles, on the other in microns.

My perception of time this year has been like that, the temporal equivalent of miles and microns at the same instant. What I saw on February 17 is happening in the back of my head every second of every day, on a time loop with no intervals. Over and over. I know that trauma has that aspect to it. When it repeats in the memory it is just as vivid and impactful as the event itself. Carol had that sort of memory about her past, not just the traumas, all of it, as far as I could tell. When she'd recall an event, a person, a moment, it was right there, every minute detail, the emotions, all of it. I was never like that in relation to any part of my past, until last winter. By the same token, the time intervening between then and now has been blasting past at an astronomical speed, as I engage in my process not so much of recovery as rebirth. I died. A new me took my place. Now I am having to grow into that me day by day, week by week. Not quite like a baby. I still have the same old body, the same old job, the same old life around me. I can simulate my old self well enough in all those places that no one really notices. But inside, I have to become something new, and it is happening at a breakneck pace.

This creates its own set of social difficulties for me. Most of the people who see me do so once every few months. Their time is real time. My time is dog time on crack, every day a week, or two, or more, speeding by. So when they meet me for an hour or so, after what has been, for me, many intervening years, and ask "how are you?" they might as well be asking a graduating senior they haven't seen since the eighth grade, "well, how have things been going since I saw you last?" In those situations, you only have two options: You can give them the five-volume version or

the five-word version. And as every graduating senior knows when asked that question, no one, I mean no one, wants the five-volume version. They, like me, use the five-word version: “It’s been going pretty well.” You may right now be wishing I had just said that simply on page one of this book and stopped there. I probably would have done that if I just hadn’t been so pissed. Instead, it’s a book. But at least it’s not a five-volume book. You’re welcome.

Essay Fourteen

Today the woods looked like a super-sprawling bronze monument park, everything, the mazes of trees, each leaf, trunk, branch burnished with the patina of great age. I have a migraine and it rained last night, both of which have a stultifying effect on my synapses: no connections, no explosions, almost no language, actually. I've gotten migraines at a rate of one or two a week since I was about 12. My father had them, exactly the same rhythm, so I suppose it's hereditary. Fortunately, mine are tractable, in that I can work through them, seem pretty normal, do what I need to do. Maybe twice a year I am incapacitated, though I have never missed a day of work solely for a migraine. As was the case for my father, who generally got his worst headaches on Saturday night, the work week over, mine tend to come not during the stress-time but the down-time immediately following it. I've tried a variety of treatments and techniques to stop or minimize them, none of which worked in any meaningful way. I gave up on all that about 25 years ago when a migraine specialist prescribed a drug I would have to self-inject into my thigh. I hate needles, pass out when I give blood, so that was a big barrier. Still, I entertained it, until he said he wanted me to do the first couple of injections in the office. I asked why. He said it was possible for the drug to induce a heart attack, and immediate treatment would be necessary. I decided right then to forego the medication entirely. A headache is bad, but at least it's not a heart attack. Not long after that, maybe as a way to persuade myself that I wasn't that unlucky after all to have

inherited this malady, I started to think of these migraines as my friends, in that they compelled my head to come to a stop, or at least go to standby, like regular, fortuitous, electrical outages that induced rest. My brain does some pretty wild things when the wires are whirring. If I did that 24/7 for months it would be fried. Migraines make it pause, make me pause. Like today.

So I was walking among the bronze monuments not thinking about anything. I turned one of my corners, to the right, as I almost always do now, down the hill. Carol and I used to turn left, up a short, steep hill to a wider path where we could walk side-by-side together. That path makes me sad now, so I don't take it. About 50 feet down my path I became aware of a loud swell of bird sounds, from what must have been, I guessed, a very large crowd of them, up the other way, out of sight. It was like a thousand squeaking wheels, the noise made up of many tiny, intermittent chirps that on the whole sounded like one continuous stream, or scream. I was intrigued, but kept on, a few more steps, away from them. I rarely turn around for any reason. Driving, walking, working, thinking, whatever. It's just my temperament. Back doesn't exist. Just ahead, go. Today, though, I did.

I went back, went up the incline, the noise getting louder and louder. Clearly a huge flock of birds had decided to stop in a stand of trees, a group that for some reason was still leafed-out in green. The birds had congregated about 100 yards up the hillside from me, a great din pouring down. I strained and squinted to identify what they were, but try as I might, not one bird was visible. They all just blended into the backdrop. Someone who didn't know what birds were might think it was the trees getting chippy over the stresses of the season, commiserating up there. Then one took flight, a few seconds up, flitting, then alighting,

again instantly evaporating into the backdrop. It all happened so fast, and so far off, I couldn't tell what kind of bird it might be. Maybe a bit smaller than a robin, and flitty in flight, fast, changing direction almost like a bat. Then a group of three did the same thing, then one larger explosion of maybe a dozen, up, swirls, gone. I still couldn't tell what they were and didn't want to scramble up through all the brambles to get closer, partly for me, too lazy, partly for them, why flush them up just because I need a name to go with what was already a memorable eavesdrop on their voices? So I kept on, and the din gradually diminished at my back until it was gone.

I have what might seem a very peculiar relationship with natural events of this sort. My instinctive tendency is to think they are there to teach me something. I actually wrote a poem about that maybe 25 years ago, at exactly this time of year in fact. It is called "Indian Summer:"

*The sassafras I sit under is a tangle
Of mango-colored hands. With each easy breeze
They wave bravely, cavalierly even,
As if there were no such thing as November.*

*Lots of other leaves flutter
Down around me--beech, maple, oak--
One, a couple, a dozen at a time.
They are crisp and flat and make a pleasant clatter.*

*But the sassafras leaves stay where they are,
Their August-sundown oranges
Growing more and more gorgeous
In the warm, late-morning light.*

*I try to figure out what they are here to teach me.
I already know every shade of sundown they can think of.
I know the secret of holding on when others won't.
And I know all about November.*

*Still, I cannot turn away.
I decide to sit a little longer than I'd planned,
Enjoy, while I can, this heat
The breeze, these mango-colored hands.*

I won't spend a lot of time reading into it. I wanted just to locate that instinctive tendency I have in the face of certain perceptions. I teach Wordsworth and Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads* quite often in my gen-ed lit course. Two of the poems I spend time on are the tandem of "Expostulation and Reply" and "The Tables Turned," in which two young men, William and Matthew, argue back and forth about where knowledge resides and how we should best acquire it. In the first poem, Matthew is giving William a hard time for lazing around, just sitting blankly on "an old grey stone," instead of reading, studying. Matthew says knowledge is in books and it takes hard work to get it. William says it's in nature and is received directly via a "wise passiveness," "against or with our will." One of the standout lines in that argument is William's command to "let nature be your teacher."

I read poetry, always, in the most matter of fact manner I can. Which is to say that in a case such as this I want to actualize in my head some set of attitudes or behaviors that might help me to implement, at the level of daily practice, what that all would work like, how it would play out, what it would lead to, letting nature be my teacher. In this case, I happen to have a plethora of

experiences that allow me to say, yes, I know exactly what that means. With other poems, I have to work hard over long periods of time to get that built-into-the-blood-brain-and-bones sense of what they might mean, how they might make an actual, embodied difference in my life, how I would do that. It is a process I genuinely enjoy, this translation of words into my body, into my life. What else is literature for, I guess I'd say, if not for that, to enliven and enlarge our experiential connections with the world?

In any case, today, I couldn't think of one thing those birds were there to teach me. They just were. There. Maybe that's all they had to say. Some things just are. There. They flare up, complex, perplexing, evading even scrutiny let alone explanation. Then they go away. Or you do. Same thing. That is not something nature teaches, but it does tell us over and over again that we need to learn it. When I got home I looked at the Wordsworth poem again. I saw a line this time, felt a line this time, lived a line this time, that I never had before, the one where William says, right before he answers Matthew's critique: "When life was sweet, I knew not why." Life, I thought, is never sweeter than when we don't know why. All of the sweetness of my life, with my wife, my kids, playing outside when I was a kid, writing and reciting to myself all my poems, walking in these woods on a day like this when all I can think about is how much my head hurts, well, I have no idea why I have gotten to do any of it, so lucky, I know now, only because almost all of those things, except my headaches, are now gone. I miss them, yes, sometimes terribly. But that's not even the point. The best of my life just was. Like the birds today. There. So sweet. No idea why.

For whatever reason, once I crossed the road, I started thinking again, the cataract of my migraine clearing a bit, thinking specifically about my course, our next class, when we'd be

discussing the essays that come due that day. The last time that happened, I used the moment to invite everyone to think reflexively about the nature and purpose of a course, our course, which is proffered as the “core” graduate course in composition studies, open to those both in the field and not. I do this work through what I call “thought experiments,” like the one I described earlier for reading Emily Dickinson. This one was simple: Every week, pick one of the texts we are reading and ask yourself, sequentially:

Is this a text I would teach in a composition course? If so, how? If not, why?

Is this a text I would teach in a literature course? If so, how? If not, why?

Is this a text I would teach in a creative writing course? If so, how? If not, why?

There is probably not one text we have or will read all term that “belongs” solely to any one of these three distinct areas of English studies: Plato, Aristotle, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, Wollstonecraft, Whitman, Dickinson, etc. into and through the 20th century. You get the picture. Any part of English studies could use any one of them in a myriad of ways.

I had just, for some reason, done that little experiment for myself a few days before the class, for all of that week’s assigned texts, and was surprised how I answered those questions. It led me to think about how we decide, individually and collectively, consciously and unconsciously, who and what is going to matter to

us in our “field” and for how long. I ended up that day, kind of spontaneously, recounting a story about how one of the College Composition and Communication Conventions I went to back in the 1980s foregrounded this process very dramatically, for me at least. Anyone who attends these big annual conventions knows they have a pre-assigned “theme” that no one really pays attention to, except maybe to throw a few words gesturing toward it in your proposal to increase your odds of being selected. But they do very often develop a strong extemporaneous identity, one that just emerges, or explodes, once everyone gets in the restaurants and halls talking. The one that took over this one was “what is our canon in composition,” which quickly morphed into “who are our stars,” with a pronounced focus on the present, the luminaries who were actually there. It was quite interesting to observe, especially to see who would be talking him/herself up in public or in private and who would be trying to keep an arm’s length from the “nomination” process. It had the feel of one of those big, deadlocked, political convention from the 1950s and 60s, lots of goofy hoopla.

Just by coincidence, I had been assigned ahead of time to a little panel that, because of this issue, became a bigger deal. I can’t remember exactly why. But we were moved from a small, classroom sized space to a ballroom, each of us trotting out on stage in sequence, like “h-e-e-r-e’s Johnny!” to deliver our three-minute blast on the topic du jour. I was miffed to start with by the whole conversation, so got more and more agitated as I talked, unscriptedly, blah, blah, **BLAH!** I realized I had to stop and had no conclusion, so I ended with a call to “just blow the whole thing up.” I got a lot of applause, at least that’s how I prefer to remember it in the utopia of my greatest hits. A blast. Literally. And I had a blast setting it off. This, I said, is quite often how disciplines create and establish their identities, their “canon,” like

a bevy of old pols marching around the ballroom with signs until enough of them vote for a candidate to put forth. You can't just ignore it or escape from it. But it's a good idea to do at least a little bit of thinking yourself. Then you won't be stuck just genuflecting to a big woods full of bronze monuments or obsessing about lot of noisy birds up on a hill on their way to or from nowhere you can figure out.

Essay Fifteen

I found the Little Dipper today! First time I've seen it since I was a kid. I've been living in cities all of my adult life, all that light pollution. Some nights it's even hard to find the Big Dipper. I've been getting up lately before dawn. Lots of days the last few weeks, when I go out to get the paper, the sky is unusually clear. First thing I see is the cool three-planet dance among Venus, Mars and Jupiter going on in the Eastern sky. They are all there every day, but in a new, random (to me) arrangement with one another. Venus is so bright. How did I not know that? Then off to the left of them, toward the north, the Big Dipper, bright, can't miss it. I have been using the usual technique to find the Little Dipper: Follow the trajectory of the two stars that form the bottom of the Big Dipper's dipper until you hit Polaris, then circle back down to locate the rest of the Little Dipper. Today it worked! It took a while looking up, blocking out with my hand a house light up the street, but there it was. What a sight!

I have a balance disorder that makes it risky for me to look up into a dark sky for very long. Without nearby landmarks to orient me, my head starts to spin. That happened today. Usually, once I do that, it lasts for a while, that sense of disequilibrium, a few hours, now, maybe a day or so. When this affliction first hit me about 25 years ago, it would be a month, maybe more, before my head cleared again. It gradually diminished over time to this minor penalty I wish I didn't have to pay to see what I saw up

there this morning. But at least I saw it. I'll try to remember that when I'm working to keep myself steady until I get back to balance.

Because of this, my walk today was anything but normal. When I have these vestibular problems, I need to rely almost entirely on my vision to keep a steady path going forward. So I focus intently, head down, about 5-10 feet ahead while I'm walking. The up and down rhythms of my gait create a kind of flip-book effect ahead of me, each step a separate photograph, followed by another and another. The faster I walk, the more seamless the sequence seems, so I walk fast when I can. This effect is amplified by the fact that I lose depth perception during these events. So everything looks flat and bland. From time to time, it will flicker on and off, like a faulty electrical connection. That happened as I was heading up the first hill, looking down. All of a sudden the leaves on the ground started leaping up and falling back, like a pop-up book. When that happens, things become quite captivating to my attention. One thing—today it was an ordinary brown oak leaf, kind of large—will take over, as if it's the whole of the universe right there while I stare at it. That lasts only a second or two, of course, and it recedes back into the wallpaper ground. But it's memorable. I can still see that leaf popping up in front of me as I write this.

Since I was focused on the ground, all I saw was brown for the next mile or so. Then, as I turned a corner downhill, one of those moss-draped logs, bathed in sunlight, caught my eye off to the right, all that velvety, iridescent green the only living thing on the bleak leaf-litter sea. Given my perceptual disorientation and the vivid shade of green, I felt like I was bobbing in toward Ireland, on a small boat on a wavy sea, this island of shamrock and emerald greens, enchanting, inviting me in after a long journey,

home. That got me thinking about some of the songs I've been learning and recording lately, all dealing with the theme of "home," which has been on my mind quite a lot. When Carol died, this place, all of it, house, town, workplace, people, all of it, suddenly was no longer "home" to me. It used to be where I am. Now it was just somewhere between where I was and where I'm going. So I keep thinking about "homes" past, the ones I felt connected to, or future, the ones I might again feel connected to.

I got thinking about this specifically when I heard a snippet of a song in an Amazon.com ad, "I Was Born Under a Wandering Star." I knew I had heard it, so I googled it. It was sung by Lee Marvin, of all people, in a movie called *Paint Your Wagon* back in the 1960s. That's where I must have heard it. My mother loved those big, splashy movies back then, *Music Man*, *Windjammer*, that type, the "Cinemascope" ones, or whatever the latest innovation in big screen technology happened to be. The town I grew up in, Forest City, Pennsylvania, had 2000 inhabitants, but we had a big, pretty nice theater, at least back then. The actual Roxy of the great Roxy Theater in Times Square back in the 1920s, Samuel L. Rothafel, began his career, opened his first theater, in Forest City. You would think those two places, 150 miles apart, one in the middle of nowhere, one the center of the world, would be utterly disjointed from one another. But I know from stories my mother told us that back in the 20s, 30s, 40s, you could walk right down the hill a block from our house and get a train into New York. She used to take it to visit family or just have a good time. And it got you there faster than you could drive until well into the 1960s, when the interstates were finished. Except those trains stopped running long before that. I have vague memories of the roofed platform itself, abandoned, a nice kind of Craftsman-style structure, painted green, because we would play

around it, until they tore it down, most likely, given the quality of my memories, before I was six or seven.

In any case, I must have seen *Paint Your Wagon* and heard that song. It is fantastic, so hard-bitten, funny. It was the first “home” song I learned and recorded this fall. Here is the stanza that hooked me:

*Home is made for coming from
For dreams of going to,
Which, with any luck,
Will never come true.*

Think Lee Marvin singing that while he slogs across the plains with a wagon train and you get the whole picture of that great song. I learned a bunch of others, some tear-jerkers, like Bobby Bare’s “Five Hundred Miles,” cultural ones like “The Rivers of Babylon,” rockers like Creedence Clearwater’s “Lookin’ Out My Back Door,” little break-up laments like Ry Cooder’s “Go On Home, Girl,” and The Left Banke’s “Walk Away, Renee.” Just cool songs with “home” in them.

I started doing this recording about four months after Carol died, for the reasons I list on my website. The process has helped me enormously, as music often does when you are in distress or under duress. First I did “albums” with all the songs I used to sing for Carol, a powerful catharsis. Then I’d key them to where my head was at right then. Just before the “home” album, I did a “West” album, those great, simple classics: “Don’t Fence Me In,” “Back in the Saddle Again,” “Let the Rest of the World Go By,” those songs. Having grown up in the 1950s, with the Lone

Ranger, Hopalong Cassidy, Bat Masterson, the West has always been tuned to my longing for a simple, good world “where a friend meets a friend,” and “the only law is right,” “a place that’s known to God alone, just a spot we can call our own,” my kind of world. The one that doesn’t exist anywhere specifically, of course, or does in small pieces almost everywhere, depending on the power of individuals to imagine it, embody it, enact it, a place where people work hard, are self-reliant, but mostly where they are straight up: They say what they mean and mean what they say, all the words tethered to something back where they came from and, then, tethered again to the place they land. They promise something and they intend to keep their promise.

A falling leaf is a good analogy: It was connected to where it came from, grew up there over a long season of work, earned its standing in its community. Now it was headed down to keep its promise to help get things going next spring. One leaf, one promise. Kept. Or a hundred, or thousands and thousands, if it gets cold enough and the wind blows hard enough. Like these essays, maybe, way too many words you might think. But it’s fall, don’t forget, my fall, they all have to come down. That’s just how it works. When it’s done it will be done. Promises kept.

The world I live in right now seems short on those values, to me at least. Words are not attached to anything before they emerge, they don’t have any express ambition to land anywhere, and they don’t intend to stay there for a while. It’s a sweet deal. No real promises to keep. I don’t like it, never did, never will. I have come to associate it with the East, maybe because that’s where I’ve lived my life thus far. I’ve travelled out West, but never lived there. Maybe, probably, most likely, almost assuredly, it’s no better, at least in the real places people have to inhabit now, this same culture. But in my head it’s still way better, a kind of Jack

Palace paradise, especially all those characters he played when he got older, Curly in *City Slickers* and, my favorite, Rudy, the ex-Hollywood set designer in *Bagdad Cafe*, living in his little trailer out in the desert, making those garishly beautiful paintings, hardly ever talking. That's my retirement dream right there, alone, lovingly taciturn, out West, where balance is firm, depth is constant, the path unwavering, letting the rest of the world go by. And so dark at night you can always find the Little Dipper.

Essay Sixteen

This week has been extraordinarily warm for mid-November, highs in the mid-sixties Monday, well up into the 70s today, the sky true-blue through and through, not even a wisp of a cloud anywhere, air dry and breezeless, fall stalled, photograph-frozen in its late October glory. What I noticed first today on my walk was how shriveled-down all the leaves on the ground were, not that multi-hued, plastered-together look from last week, all now an ochery-cocoa brown, very noisy to walk on, crumbly underfoot. About halfway through the walk I took off my hoodie. A few minutes later I rolled up the sleeves and unbuttoned the front of my flannel shirt. Then I took the shirt off. That's how hot it felt. Sweaty hot, especially the way I was dressed.

All I could really think about today was yesterday, which turned out to be a terrible day, the kind of terrible that changes things, when the bottoms of bottomless problems suddenly appear clear, right there, all done. It all started with my disequilibrium, which, thankfully, abated as the day wore on. I went to work late, for a meeting in advance of my evening class. I got there early, as I always do, and took a walk around the neighborhood. I happened into a man I hadn't seen in maybe 25 years. I knew him pretty well back then, not a friend, but pretty well. At some point on our path, I think he took a dislike to me. I have no idea why. I never try to fathom those kinds of things. Nor do I try to talk anyone back from it. It just goes that way, and I let it. Today, I recognized

him and he recognized me, we exchanged “how are you”s. When my turn came, I almost said just “Oh, fine.” But for some reason (part of me said not to) I added, “But my wife died this past winter.” Not emotional, just matter of fact. I could see his jaw tighten, teeth clench. He knew he was going to have to say something socially acceptable about that. I saw that exact look on some other faces last winter: not happy that some tragedy had come my way, just not happy about having to say something consolatory to me. When they did they did just what this man did: They let out a clipped “I’m sorry” and dipped their head sideways as a signal for me to say no more. Just as I said what I said, another man about my age happened to be passing and overheard. He said, “I don’t even know you, but it makes me sad to hear that.” He asked if I had kids, how they were, and then wandered on. I must have learned something complex and durable right then because it reminded me of one of my favorite Stephen Crane poems:

*The sage lectured brilliantly.
Before him, two images:
"Now this one is a devil,
And this one is me."
He turned away.
Then a cunning pupil
Changed the positions.*

*Turned the sage again:
"Now this one is a devil,
And this one is me."
The pupils sat, all grinning,
And rejoiced in the game.
But the sage was a sage.*

I'm not sure exactly how this poem applies to that minute of my day. I just know it does. Perfectly, depending, I think on who gets to play the sage.

A few years ago Carol and I met a friend of ours at a restaurant downtown, someone dealing with a traumatic loss at the time. I was sitting across the table from her. Her reddened face looked like it was in an invisible vise, which was squeezing out tears a few at a time, an agony in the eyes. It brought tears to my eyes to witness that much pain. I glanced to my left just then and saw a young couple striding by outside the window, just inches from my face, laughing, happy. I turned back to the scene in front of me. I made no value judgments one way or another about any of this. What I realized, and decided to remember, was that these two realities, seemingly so opposite, so remote, from one another, are pretty much always just like that. Whichever one you're looking at, the other is right there in the corner of your eye, a few inches aside, that nearby. Thereafter, whenever I have found myself sinking into, being sucked into, a deep muck, I just look askance for a second or two. The other world, the rest of the world, is always there, walking by.

I went then to what was a long, pointless meeting with some of my colleagues. Two of them, people I work closely with, have never acknowledged my loss with even an "I'm sorry." Another hid behind anyone else he was with when he encountered me. When they said something socially appropriate, he would draw his lips back tight, as if to say, yes me, too, though it pains me to say it. Today they appeared to me to be funny, like cartoon characters, not smart ones, like Bugs Bunny or Daffy Duck, not happy ones like Sponge Bob and Patrick. More like Elmer Fudd and

Squidward. Funny that way, each of them blabbing their same old blab. I blabbed my blab, waited for it to over, made some social pleasantries, and left. "Th-Th-Th-Th-Th... That's all, folks."

Essay Seventeen

On the far left edge of the little lot I park in for my walk is a sweet gum tree, maybe 15 feet in height and spread. You don't notice it much most of the year, but in the fall it flares up like a little reddish sun, leaf tips fringed with yellow, prickling out with spikes of light every which way. You almost can't take your eyes off it. I see it every day of course, but today I noticed it was finally giving up its halo of leaves, leaving big bald patches here and there. I decided to go over to it for a closer look, a way of saying "good job and see you next year." To my astonishment, I could see immediately that it was not one tree but three, close together, merging their canopies in a smooth, seamless collaboration of color. I walked closer, up to the top of the berm that separates the lot from the woods, just dirt piled maybe four feet high, as if it were plowed up there when the lot was paved. I had always imagined that the area on its other side was a kind of saucer shaped scoop in the landscape, probably swampy with whatever water it accumulated and could not discharge. The little tips of things poking above that berm had a kind of sedgy look about them, enhancing that swampy impression when viewed from the lot.

When I got over the top of the berm I was once again astonished. It was nothing like that on the other side. There were, in fact, 10 or more sweet gum trees scattered around a dry, serene-seeming meadow of grass, now flattened-down brown with the weight of

the season. These trees were smaller than the one I always noticed, but still 6 to 10 feet tall. I imagined that scene a few years from now, all those fall-fanned forges flaring up, tall enough to be visible from the lot, mounds of red merging into one billowing mass, like the three trees I realized today were not one. Since I was already heading that way, I started up the hill in the opposite direction I have been going lately. Maybe that's why most of what I ended up thinking about today was opposites, how so much of my life has been on the opposite side of the trends, uphill.

I am not what I would call an instinctive contrarian, in the vein of those Christopher Hitchens was trying to talk to in that ludicrously self-satisfied book that came out about 25 years ago. I think I am more of just an underdog-rooter, wanting the one the money is against to win out in the end. I've been on the losing end of a lot of battles over the years, but felt the good fight made a significant difference in any case. Or, when it didn't, was fun. Deep down, I always believe I will be vindicated in the long run, even if the long run runs past my run. It's just the way I am, "out of hopeful green stuff woven," as Whitman would say.

As I came back around on the other side of the road, toward the lot again, the very bright sun was just about eye level ahead of me, streaming in through the empty frames of the trees. It surprised me. I normally have it at my back when I'm going through this, my favorite stretch of the woods. I had to look down and squint most of the way. Rather than be irritated by this, I decided to think of it as an instance of "going toward the light," which I am trying mightily to do on my way through "the valley of the shadow of death" I ended up in last winter. I suddenly remembered a vivid dream I had about 30 years ago. In this dream I had just died, the only time I've ever not escaped my own death in a dream. All that was left of me was a small, delicate bird, porcelain

white all over, glossy, smooth, a nice aerodynamic shape, like a combination of a swallow and a dove, flapping up into an infinity of velvety pitch blackness. This little bird, me, what was left of me, wavered a bit, like a fledgling in first flight. Then it noticed a pinprick of light far, far off in the distance. With no other navigational points to orient its flight, it started off in that direction. Slowly, that dot of light got bigger and bigger, brighter and brighter. It was mesmerizing, like the sweet gum tree. The bird got closer and closer until it could hear a low choral singing sound, more like a rich, deep hum than a song. No words, just a plenitude of voices, harmonious together. At that point, another voice said to it, “You have a choice now. You can keep flying out here and stay who you are, what you are, yourself, your memories, all of it. Or you can enter the light, in which case your individual identity will dissolve into that vast, singing light you see.” These were presented as equal, and equally good, options.

It was a simple choice for the bird, for me. That light was so beautiful, so serene, exactly the place and way I’d like to spend eternity. And, as a bonus, I would get to escape from my individual history, my identity, all of the obsessions, digressions, explorations, this desire to find something, figure something out, anything, some fixed point I could stand on, speak from, at least hold ground in a losing game, that dynamic driving force that “through the green fuse drives my flower,” others’ words pouring in, mine pouring out, these essays, for example, day after day, saying everything I think and going nowhere; and, above all, I thought today, I would get to erase the horrific images I have in my head from the day Carol died, haunting every second of every minute of every hour of every day I have to spend here now. All of it, gone, just like that. That’s the deal I’ll take, if it’s offered, for sure.

I had a number of very unusual spiritual experiences, dreams, insights, actual voices, during my years with Carol. She drew in those kinds of forces for some reason. Most of them I have never mentioned to anyone and probably never will. The summative effect of them, though, as I said a few essays back, has been to convince me down to my shoes that the various scenarios humanity has created to account for the transcendent, images of gods or God, heaven, hell, all of it, cannot possibly be true. It's like what I thought was over the berm behind that sweet gum tree. Wrong. It was way more interesting. And better. I won't ever bother, don't even want, to argue with anyone about any of this. All I know is that today I want to believe I actually will get to make the choice that little bird got to make. I can understand fully why someone else might say, no way, I'm staying me, I'll keep flying. Not me. I'm taking the light.

Essay Eighteen

This Sunday I am having lunch with a young man I never met, the son of a hometown friend whose wife died very much like mine did. I'm not sure if we are being brought together precisely for this reason. But I am apprehensive about it, thinking I may be expected to say something to him, talk, about all of this. I know I need to decide ahead of time how I will handle that.

When I found Carol last February, I tried and failed to revive her. That sentence sounds pretty tame. The actual experience was not. I truly believed I could bring her back to life, so I engaged in a variety of futile actions to try to do so, disrupting the "scene" considerably in the process. There were consequences to this, a lot of obligatory and understandable questions, inquiries, from official sources. Everyone who came in response to my 911 call, the EMS medics, the police officers, the detectives, the coroner, all asked in their sequence the same things: Describe exactly what you found, describe exactly what you did, tell us exactly everything you know. I understood exactly what was at stake. Part of me was grateful to them, that they would care for her in this way, look after her. Part of me was, again understandably, terrified. So I said, as exactly as I could, over and over what I saw, did, knew. When they all had left at last a few hours later, I knew one thing for sure: I was never going to describe that scene, those moments, again for anyone for any reason, ever, and I haven't.

I recall when I was a child being around men from my father's generation, small groups of them, getting together to have a good time, and how the conversation often turned to their experiences in World War II. They all had them and stories about them. After a few beers, the stories would amplify. As a kid, you wondered at the fact that war could be so uproarious. But you could always tell the ones who had seen and done the most horrible things. They kept quiet, said nothing about what they knew. Oh, they would laugh with the rest of them. But if a specific question came their way they'd very politely deflect it. Even a child could see the great weight that sat on their hearts and understand that they did this not to protect themselves, from having to remember and relive those traumas, but for others, knowing even at second hand some horrors dig in deep and never leave. My trauma is not, of course, on that scale. But I feel the same way about it. I need to hold it to my heart, that great weight now simply a part of it. I do it for me, for Carol, whom I will never, ever, reduce to fodder for a story. But I do it for you, too. Last summer my sister asked me for more details about those moments. I told her I wouldn't say, for these very reasons, the last of them especially. I told her that if I described exactly what I saw, heard, did she would, at some point, a day, a week, a month, a year from then wish she had never asked. You can't un-ring a bell, as they say, and you can't un-hear a story that should not have been told.

Last night I had the most vivid dream. I was deep-sea fishing, trying to land the big fish that had just hit my bait. It was a long fight, an hour or more of hauling, reeling, running in and back, then, finally, up it came, a huge, sleek, gorgeous, shimmering, multi-hued fish flopping around on the deck. What, I thought, could I possibly say to this fish, landed but still fighting for life, a flat slab of fleshy muscle that had been gliding in the deep just

minutes before, out of my sight, but, I somehow knew, had also been in my memory, day after day, month after month, year after year before I ever got there. So beautiful. Indescribably beautiful, this magical thing now on display up here, the wet wooden deck of a small boat heaving up and down on the ocean swells. I studied its luminous rainbow sides for a while, the maw widening with each breath, so stunned, waiting, wondering, just instinct and my memory keeping its breath coming and going. And then I lifted it up and let it slide over the side. It righted itself when it hit water, glided a while, then flashed back down into the deep.

I know that no matter what I might tell this young man on Sunday, or anyone, ever, about any of this, no matter how I turn it, they will never, ever see that fish or hear that story. He has one of his own, too, the fish he had to let go of just like that, and he knows exactly what I know. Last night, maybe, he caught his fish in the deep of sleep, saw it struggle, threw it back, his dream forever, just like mine is mine. If we end up telling fish stories, they will be about other fish, very beautiful, multi-hued, but bought at the market; like any good story, a commodity, a staple, laid out there carefully for someone else to savor, consume. But his won't be his, and mine won't be mine.

Essay Nineteen

*There they were, dignified, invisible,
Moving without pressure, over the dead leaves,
In the autumn heat, through the vibrant air . . .*

These are some lines from the opening section of T.S. Eliot's "Burnt Norton," the first of his famous *Four Quartets*, the poem I mentioned in Essay 7. I have always had an ambivalent relationship with these late poems of Eliot's, so austere, so moving, yet, what? Something both too much and too little about them. So high on solemnity, yet so low on, well, life, haunted, past and future collapsing into a present that doesn't go anywhere, no legs to walk with. Right now, I cannot afford either of those luxuries, too high on solemnity, too low on life. I thought of these lines today as I headed up the first hill, all those trees just standing there, stripped bare now, straight up, stiff, like thick oars stuck into still waters, no hands to drive them, or tall spars carving up the sky, a growing chorus singing, praying, almost inaudibly, under breath to themselves at first, then, separately, to one another, whispers, out of cadence, I overhear as I enter their domain, until all together, in unison, louder: "Winter. We wait." They are arrayed all the way up the hill, as far as I can see, armadas of them, thousands, tens of thousands, maybe millions, every shade of gray between white and black blending in the distance to a tall wall of taupe, no leaves now to dress out their

taut frames. All of them saying, one great wave: “Winter. We wait.”

I am so grateful to them. My great friends. Not much left to do or say now, they know, as I stride past them or stop to bide my time with them. Patient, willing to stay, stand by, knowing nothing can make it go away. They already know what I am trying to learn here with them. They teach me patiently. So loving, gentle. With me day after day. Not afraid of anything, even me.

For the first mile or so I cried, intermittently, sometimes convulsively, seized up bodily not by pain but the idea of pain, pure, so great it takes over, shakes you

until

all

the tears

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down

Those letters scatter now viscerally on the page, so silly-seeming. But that’s how they walked up there, explaining exactly how to arrange what they had to say. So I let them

say

that way what

they

said

I took a scattered, switchback kind of walk today, willy-nilly, no plan. At one point I realized I had doubled back on myself, the little bridge I had crossed about 10 minute before now right down there again, on my left. I did not want to turn back, retrace the path. I hate turning back. And I did not want to keep going forward, over that bridge, where I came from, just another form of turning back. So I headed up a steep bank through the brush, certain I would cross a familiar path sooner or later. I passed a group of great, tall trees, about as big as trees get in this woods, trees that have waited forever, year after year after year, 100 or more years, way more than I can even imagine, their bark, which I stopped to feel, thick as elephant skin, rough-textured, like huge, brown syrup drops frozen in layered cascades down their sides. They said quietly, with the slight smiles of those who know, down to the bones, that there is no way now to fight or flee: Winter. Wait. This is not negotiable. The survivors, these great trees, know this reality. I am listening to them, today, as I do every day, and I pay attention.

Reality. That's exactly why "Burnt Norton" came into my head months ago and keeps speaking up, over and over, saying exactly for me to anyone willing to listen long enough what I want them to know, for their own sake:

*Go, go, go, said the bird: human kind
Cannot bear very much reality.*

Finally, I struggled up a very steep mulchy bank, no traction, which crested on the wide open path Carol and I almost always finished our walk on. We never said so, but I think we both gravitated to this path because it was wide enough for us to walk

together, side by side, instead of single file in an awkward rhythm, each of us trying to decide not which one of us would lead, but which position was the best to protect and defend the other: up front, warding off the future, or down back, warding off the past. We loved each other in just that way, every day, for as long as we could, walking together, side by side on the wide path when we could find it.

Between everything and nothing a line always gets drawn. Sometimes it's a hard one. Not negotiable. No turning back. Life and death. Sometimes softer, a little give and take. I have been floating through the liminal space my line occupies for months now, falling, always falling, but going nowhere. In and out of myself, this world, time, watching and wondering at it, whatever it is. I may never get to leave this space. But

I know

*this fall
is all-*

*most
over*

Toward the end of my walk, I thought again of Emily Dickinson, how happy I am to have finally come to know her now. In my mind, I went to visit her, in that great house in Amherst, my good friend. We chatted casually at the door. Then she took me to the drawing room where we sat side by side in large, soft chairs, angled askance so we could glance at one another without the affront of continuous full face forward, just far enough apart to keep from intruding too much on the other's separateness. We sipped tea and talked intermittently, in brief bursts, intense,

punctuated with laughter ranging from deep guffaws to the slight breath that escapes from a wry, knowing smile. She knew already that I am “nobody, too,” so she didn’t have to ask. She and I sat and smiled in our nobody-ness, that vast universe where life and death meet routinely, where all the flies buzz, the carriage stops, the slant of winter-afternoon light weights the day with cathedral tunes. This is the place where everybody who is somebody, all those frogs in the bog advertising, stays away from, mostly because they don’t know exactly where it’s at. If they only knew how beautiful she was, I was, Carol was, this fall, everybody would want to be a nobody, or at least walk with one, talk with one, laugh with one, cry with one, just a few minutes every few days is all it would take to change lives, theirs, mine, hers. So easy. I can’t believe how easy. Neither can she.

I am laughing now. The trees are laughing now, Carol and Emily are laughing now. They know what I know.

Yesterday afternoon I wrote two poems. I have not written a poem in many years, at least fifteen, maybe more, for reasons I explain in *Re-reading Poets* and will not go into here. Suffice it to say, I stopped so I that could become a poet I loved instead of a man I can’t stand who writes poems. I was on my way to the Carnegie Library today for the cappuccino and crumb cake I sometimes reward myself with before I teach. As I stepped on the first stone step on the way up, a man about my age was sweeping up some of the dead leaves cornered between step and wall. I froze, one foot on the bottom step the other poised to reach the next, and watched him, so kindly, so patient, catching one leaf at a time on the broom-tip, as if he cared for each one, loved it. Time came to a stop, for a second, or two, or a week. The lines to this poem came to me and told me to write them, exactly as they appear here, so I did:

*He
sw
ee
ps
each
leaf from
the step I
step
on each leaf
dust
pan handle
an
gled
up to
hand a man
sweeps
each leaf
like me
each
step*

As you might guess, we are reading the “l=a=n=g=u=a=g=e” poets this week in class. A good antidote to Eliot.

Later that day, after class, in my office, trying to gather myself for the ride home, that hard transition from the social animation of the classroom to the reality of being alone for the whole weekend, stiffening myself, I looked out the window. In the safety netting a floor below I saw a bird’s wing, just the wing, white, stuck in the

netting, disembodied, literally, unable to fly anywhere, which wanted me to say what it had to say in this way.

dingy
wing flipping
white
back
and forth stuck
in netting
stretched
to catch
all
falling white
wings from
f
a
l
l
ing all
the way
down on me
down
there about to
walk by

this wing's
fall all
over

Today, I simply wrote down what I was asked to write. I call them poems, but they could as well be phone calls. They are not even mine. They are theirs. The sound of one wing flapping. The sound of one hand sweeping. Someone asked me recently what a

poem is, how it's different from other kinds of texts, genres. If you read the l=a=n=g=u=a=g=e poets you know that question has no easy answer. I really have no idea, I said, what a poem is any longer. It's like all things in life: Somewhere between everything and nothing we decide to draw a line.

*Poems
draw
lines*

That's a good place to start. And end. The end of my work, this writing, my "book," clip-clopping now up to the curb to let me off, I can feel, a fall, all full: For a month it was everywhere, all over; now it is done, all over. Eliot says it:

*Words move, music moves
Only in time; but that which is only living
Can only die. Words, after speech, reach
Into the silence.*

. . .

*Words strain,
Crack and sometimes break, under the burden,
Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,
Will not stay still.*

. . .

*Love is itself unmoving,
Only the cause and end of movement,*

*Timeless, and undesiring
Except in the aspect of time
Caught in the form of limitation
Between un-being and being.
Sudden in a shaft of sunlight
Even while the dust moves
There rises the hidden laughter
Of children in the foliage
Quick now, here, now, always-
Ridiculous the waste sad time
Stretching before and after.*

Essay Twenty

*that stump once
one
trunk
toppled*

*whippet
thickets
too wet to
get to*

*wide as sky
lop-topped
my life
left like*

*I let it
be
that stump once*

I thought today when I started walking I would think nothing. Head down, plodding ahead, one more day, just another thing in the woods, like that stump I just described. As I came down toward the road about two miles in, I noticed an understory tree in front of me, still full of leaves now pale, pale yellow, a beautiful hue, subtle, serene, clean, depleted but not tired, like once-tanned

skin going mid-winter white, as it must. I lifted my head. As has happened so often this fall, I realized I was surrounded there, swept up into, wave after wave of those beautiful trees, their yellow leaves floating in the still air. Just yesterday I thought fall was all over. All the leaves on the ground. Now this. I know the leaves did not climb back up off the ground. But I can't account for what I saw.

Right there is where I found myself, found myself, that's what I mean, in the midst of my walk, my life. I heard it, just barely, a little click as my clock started up again, the one that stopped last winter when Carol died, when I died. Right there, as I was about to head down the slippery little incline to cross the road. Right then.

After I crossed the road, I saw a big buck, an eight pointer. A very big buck. He was crossing the path about twenty feet in front of me, stopped and looked right at me, those soft dark eyes so calm, so confident, so caring. Then he sauntered on. About twenty feet down the incline, he bolted into a sprint and leapt up, ten feet, twelve feet, I'm not sure, just higher than I've ever seen anything leap. He came down lightly, precisely and cantered off, evaporating into the thickening thatch of trees. There are three does that live here. I see them all the time bounding away from me when I roust them out from whatever they are doing. I never even once saw a buck. Never.

Essay Twenty-One

*This morning
a herd of elephants
stampeded through the trees.
For no particular reason except
it is November now
and there is nothing
left to wait for.*

*I dressed hurriedly
and stepped out into
the thick, gray
flesh of Thursday, thinking:
sometimes it is hard
to know what
to love
and when.*

*Then I remembered
the elephants who love
everything even
Thursday and November
and I kicked my way to work
through the beautiful
wreckage of leaves.*

Today at the start of my walk I felt as calm, strong, and confident as I can remember being in a long time. Just there, myself, alone, ready for what's next, the next step, the next turn. I actually felt what I would call happiness, the solid kind, the kind you feel without smiling, or smiling only imperceptibly.

It was so beautiful today, sunny and warm, the day before Thanksgiving. I went straight up the hill on the side of road I park on, on a route I've ended up on at least partially several times over the last couple of weeks. At the very top is a tall poplar, maybe eighty feet up, big trunk, 2+ feet in diameter, consistently that size all the way up. About every ten feet, the trunk zigs one way and then, further up, in switchback fashion, zags back the other way. It must have been something about the way light and shade changed as it grew. But its contortions are bizarre, charming. Today I walked right up next to it and noticed that each switchback had a very slight spiral curve to it as well. So from now on, it's the corkscrew tree to me. I feel companionable with it because my life is like that now. If you stand back there's a strong trunk, all the way up. But if you get up close, pretty screwy.

I know I will never be loved again in the way that Carol loved me. I can't believe I was lucky enough to have that kind love at all, 32 years of it, half my life, and then the double echo of it from my daughter and son, 29 years of it and counting. Who gets that? Who deserves that? Once is everything. Besides, as I said back in essay 7: I'm old and I'm weird, and I'm only going to get older and weirder. Maybe I should put that up on Ourtime.com as my profile. I know there was a period, last winter, spring, early summer, when I was pretty shaky, longed for kindness, care. I made it through that treacherous terrain on my own because that's how it worked out and, well, I'm quite fine now being old, weird, and on my own going forward.

But there are many other kinds of love both like and different from what I had, some of them actually becoming stronger and more active precisely because the big one is not there, like the stars coming out when the sun goes down. I've written for example about the woods, the trees, the whole space that hosts my daily walks, this place I love enough to come back to every single morning, and which, I will insist, loves me enough to welcome me back each time. And there are the smaller-scale affairs I engage in there almost daily, with this tree or that, this leaf or that, this scene or that, so intense I remember them all as if they are always happening. And each of those trees, leaves, scenes, I will insist again remembers me in just that way, too. Some of those engagements went swimmingly, some not so much. I detailed all of that copiously along the way here.

This kind of falling in love can happen anywhere, any time, for anyone. I'm recalling now one of my odder and most surprising events of that sort. It happened one winter morning, stopped in traffic just outside the Squirrel Hill Tunnel on the Parkway East on my way to work. My car was moving almost imperceptibly forward, so slow it was barely noticeable from the inside. I think that's probably why I opened the window and looked down at the road, to be sure I was actually moving and not just imagining it. There beside me, a long white lane-dividing line on the highway glided slowly by my car, so stunning, so white, so precise, as beautiful in that instant as anything I have ever seen. I say I fell in love with it. I say it loved me back. Someone, anyone, you, may read this and think: That is ludicrous, loony. A white line cannot love or be loved. Maybe so. But it's no more surprising to me than the fact that Carol loved me. Just me, a long-white-line of a guy gliding by. And I say as well that my infatuation with this white line is no more ludicrous or loony than the attitude that construes

the world, its things, as ineligible for such flings. We may through many millennia have chosen to agree among ourselves that that's the way it has to be. But why? It's as arbitrary as my way. So why should the ample evidence of my experience (and, I might add, the ample experience of countless poets, philosophers, prophets, priests, sages, recluses over those same millennia) not be compelling enough proof? And, really, be honest, if you could pick which of those two worlds you'd rather spend your time in (and you can!), wouldn't you prefer the latter? The one where the elephants love everything, even Thursday, November, this beautiful wreckage leaves.

Essay Twenty-Two

I am always surprised by what happens on these walks. I start thinking, today, no, nothing was going to come to me. Certain of it. Then, this: About a mile into the walk I started skipping, kid-skipping I mean, the real thing, just like that, for no reason, skipping. Me. Who skips? Even kids don't skip any more. I laughed and laughed. I actually woke up laughing today. I do some days now, a sort of half-awake loopiness, lasting 5-10 minutes, sometimes more, between the time I get out of bed and then get on with the business of the day. The longer I can stretch that interlude out the better for me.

I was that kind of loopy when I woke up today. An hour later there I was, skipping through the leaves. The last time I skipped was about 35 years ago when I wrote the poem, "Morning Song 2," that opens yesterday's post. Where in the poem the word "kicked" is now, it was originally "skipped." Why? Because that's exactly what I did that day, too. Not the whole way to work, of course, about two miles back then, but like today, a few short, spontaneous bursts of it, thrilling. I sent that series of poems, four of them, out to *West Branch*, a very nice Pennsylvania small magazine. Just a few days ago while I was in sitting the main departmental office waiting for someone, I picked up a journal from the desk beside me. It was, of all things, *West Branch*, the latest issue, still going. And I read all the poems, still very nice. Maybe that's why I have had this poem on my mind. *West*

Branch took the whole series except for that one. It was the word “skipped” that killed the deal for the editors. Seemed too precious, forced, fake I suppose. So that poem languished for quite a while. One day I just changed that word. I’m not sure why. I think I thought it made the poem too vulnerable, too easy to pick on out there on the playground with the big kids. So I changed it, to mollify them, keep them off it, the ones I mean who would never skip. Anywhere. Any time. For any reason. I read the poem at a number of readings thereafter and it always went really well. People liked it. I knew if I had stuck with “skipped” they wouldn’t. Too precious, forced, fake. Too bad. The poem is all mine now. It was never published and never will be. Later today I think I will open that file and change the word back. And when I recite the poem in my head (as I do very often because I love that poem) it will be “skipped” from now on. In honor of today, this new November, half a lifetime later, the elephants done with their work, all the leaves stamped down, so full of love, for everything, even the grand dismantling, so essential to the process of recovery, rebirth, the serene sleep of winter, lean trees gleaming white, lazing away, awaiting the big bang of buds next April, all of it. Without the elephants’ great love, none of it happens. So boring, month after month, year after year, the same green trees stuck in playback mode, over and over. Unable to skip.

I’ve been trying for days now to reach the down-path at the end of the upper road Carol and I took most days. There are several down-paths in advance of it, tempting, looking like the right one to someone who hasn’t gone that way for nine months. I kept taking those in sequence, realizing about 20 yards down, oops, not far enough yet. Some kind of resistance, something keeping me from going all the way to that endpoint. I wanted to. Day after day. The next one, this is it, oops, wrong. Today I was

determined to keep going. Then it was there, the great, sudden opening into that huge, green tabletop field, like coming into heaven. I had forgotten about this field completely. Was astonished to see it, remember it. Really. Saw it again today like it was Carol coming back to meet me. Couldn't believe it. So beautiful, the whole of the blue sky like a huge 360 degree dome overhead, the level green of the grass, acres of it, laid out in front of me. I'm not kidding, like heaven. I ran thorough the opening in the fence and into the field like I was crossing a finish line. I was crossing a finish line, back to where we left off, nine months ago, together, traversing this field on our way back down to the car. I stood in the middle of that field, hands raised to the sky, smiling, as I say in the poem that closes the essay I wrote last spring, "so wide no one, not even her, could ever hope to resist." I jogged in place, my Rocky moment. Made it.

I said last spring I would "never pen a posthumous paean" to Carol, "because to commodify her in that way would betray what she meant to me," and, if you have made it this far, I hope you know I haven't done that, or at least that what of it I've done has been careful, clean. That essay, I said back then, was about "only one thing, which is me," a line from one of John Berryman's *Dream Songs*. So are these. I think she would like it that way. She hated, hated, to be looked at, the center of attention. If I did that to her now, and I'm lucky enough to see her again on the other side, she would take me to task for it. I hope she knows in every fiber of her being that she is everything, the whole story to me. Carol met me here, right here, at the top of the world, in this great, green field, me, just the way I am, a mess more often than not, just like you have seen me here, weird, out in the ozone, but good enough, for her, the way I am, to love. Everything. I said last spring I was the luckiest man in the world for the 32 years I got to spend with her. And then I wasn't. Now I know I still am.

“What’s not there and what is” was how I divided things up back then. Now it what’s not there and still is. Time is a delusion, our conventional ways of orchestrating it, all that coming and going, then and gone, perpetual sequence, silly. It’s all there, now, everything, everything now. I know that, here, now, the top of the world, this great green field, sun so bright, blue sky, my arms raised to the heavens, all the leaves down, the elephants settling down for winter, dreaming their dreams, or mine: “Love everything.” Yes. Love. Everything.

Epilogue: Take 1, 8/10/16

*The Child is father of the Man;
I could wish my days to be
Bound each to each by natural piety.*

William Wordsworth

It is now mid-August, just over eight months since my sabbatical started, only a couple of weeks left now until I've fully "done my time," will return to my work, which is teaching, always has been, always will be, teaching. Everything else on my CV? All those books and articles and titles and awards? I did it so they would let me keep teaching. I just finished teaching one of our summer's six-week session courses, a freshman composition class, primarily as a test, for me, to see if I still "had it" as a teacher, after my time off, at my age, too late now for another foundational reinvention, the kind I've done a couple of times before, earlier in my career, when the way I was working in the classroom wasn't working any longer the way I wanted it to work. If my summer course had been a dud, I would not be returning to teach this fall. I'd have to pay back my sabbatical salary, yes, and so what? At least a bunch of young people wouldn't have to endure poor teaching, nor, way worse, would I, well worth the investment. But it was not a dud. It was fantastic, all still there, one of my best summer sessions ever. There may not be much gas left in the tank, but the octane is still

plenty high enough to keep what those two British car guys, Mike and Edd, on “Wheeler Dealers” call the “lump” under the “bonnet” “burbling,” well-tuned, powerful rev, throaty exhaust note. I was, as they also say quite often, “chuffed,” even “gobsmacked.” Here is my favorite sentence from the students’ course evaluations: “This man’s mind is very open; he really knows what students need and seek.” Thank you, whoever you are, for saying that. We all need and seek someone who is open and knows. When you can’t find it, you can still be it. There’s my two sentence teaching philosophy right there, after a lifetime’s work of condensing it down to its essence. So, as I said I was hoping it would in my book’s opening, all of this work has in fact turned out to be the rest I needed to refresh me, or at least keep me steady at a level that satisfies me.

I also said at the outset that I wanted to use my time wisely, toward rehabilitation, the antidote to recidivism, that always-falling-backness that so often afflicts our ground-level lives, which I think I have. I see now, looking back, how pertinent that word is, rehabilitation, not just in its penitentiary sense, but in the medical sense as well. Healing is hard. It takes patience and persistence, waiting and work, in equal measures. These latter two, waiting and work, well, they are not my strongest suits; but I did both as well as I could during this time. Have I healed myself completely? No. I don’t even think that’s possible, nor should it be. Life has meanings which need to be held, kept in front of us, used. The deepest scars are the ones that stay, reminders, signs of a lived life. But I wanted, needed I knew, to clear out space in there so if anyone else ever wanted to love me, in any of the many ways we can love one another, they could, assured that I would never, ever, receive that gift as a replacement for, a substitute for, or worst of all a forlorn reminder of, the one I have lost. That is a terrible fate to endure, always striving to fill a hole that cannot be

filled. I know all of that in my own bones, via my lived life. And I wanted to be able to love again like it's now and new, even if it's only white lines and manhole covers that come my way, want me to. Or all those trees that welcome me back every day. I have worked at and readied myself for both of those things and I feel pretty good about where I'm at with all that. A process of this sort, of course, never really ends, so I will work and wait my way along, hopeful now that the harder parts are past.

I had three specific things on my minimal checklist for this interim: finish this book (check), make it to my daughter's wedding out west (check), and learn how to be alone. That last one, well, I certainly attended all the classes and turned in all my work on time, only to find out, finally, that it wasn't even a real course. Alone, I know now, is not something you learn. It's something you do, bit by bit, day by day, just like everything else of value and importance in life. You can't fake it and you can't make it go away just because it's hard or came along unscriptedly.

I used three terms in my preface to forecast how this time might feel or go in that respect: solitude, seclusion, and isolation. None of them turned out to be accurate predictors of what it felt like in the doing. The first one, solitude, I modified with the adjective "pure," which implies an almost timeless contemplative state of mind, the purpose of which is to achieve, via "transcendence," some sort of "enlightenment." There was nothing transcendent in my experience of this aloneness, not at least if you imagine it figuratively as going upward, out of this material world and into a spiritual one. It was just the opposite. I became vividly conscious of even the most trivial details of my daily existence, cutting up vegetables, doing laundry, vacuuming the floors. I could say that these routine chores turned into profound meditative moments for me. But they didn't. They were real. Hyper-real. Hyper-there

while they were there. Then done and gone, no residue of wisdom or insight, as far as I could tell, to index any sort of enlightenment. In retrospect, I'm glad it turned out that way. I am neither a saint nor a guru, as I told a good friend over coffee earlier this summer. I'm just a guy trying to get by.

The second term, seclusion, well it wasn't that either. I did sometimes go for weeks without any social contact outside of lovely phone calls from my kids, extended philosophical conversations via email with two very smart young friends, and, of course, regular forays out into the world for essential supplies, groceries, say. I set as one my daily tasks doing one unexpectedly kindly thing for someone who crossed my path, as a way to start to pay back the many tiny kindnesses others did for me, most often unknowingly, when I was shattered last year. To count, it had to be unplanned, just emerging in the moment. And it had to be something I did, not in the way that made me feel better, but in the way that made the other feel better. So I had to be paying attention, not on auto-pilot, some rote cliché sufficing. During my longer wanderings across the savannas of aloneness, that was accomplished via chance email interactions or just social exchanges with the men or women who bagged my groceries. I did a few very big and many very small things of this sort. They are all, I discovered, the same, equally valuable. Someone else's day gets somewhat richer, and it costs me nothing. That's a good investment, I'd say.

The last term, isolation, well that was pretty accurate, at least in that sense of "doing time." As I said above, alone turned out not to be something I learned how to do. It was just something I did, may well have to do forever. Don't know. It has no beginning, no mid-term, no finals. It is life, not school. I wish I could tell you more about this, but I can't. One of the things I kind of expected,

based on prior experience, though not to the degree it actually happened, was that I would not “remember” my daily life in the customary ways we do when we are in constant contact with others, especially intimate others. A husband, a wife, well, they tell their daily story daily to someone else. It’s just a natural routine. And by story, I do mean story. We convert the currency of our “experience,” that fluid whoosh through the world, into a narrative, plotted, a this then that, via the alternative currency of words, a medium that enforces segmentation, instilling discontinuity, in what otherwise is seamless, whole. The exchange rate between these two distinct currencies—experience/story—varies from person to person and day to day. But when there is no person there from day to day for long stretches, there is no need to make the exchange at all. The habit is soon broken, that “skill” forgotten. Life then just flows right through like a river, and it leaves very little residue behind, at least not any we can easily share with others. When my kids would call and ask me what was up, I would tell them, laughingly, that I didn’t remember exactly what I had been doing the last few days. I did a lot of things, I would tell them, just so they wouldn’t worry I was losing my way or my mind, but they just weren’t catalogued in there as stories in words. I could tell them quite vividly what I had done that very day, as I always had done with Carol. But that was it. The rest, that great river of my life had simply swept by. I had lived it, yes, fully, completely, often loved it. I just hadn’t bothered to translate it into story. Because there was no need to. Simple as that. That was my experience with isolation. Simple as that.

And now, having written all of this, I think I understand better why the passage of time has seemed so uniquely strange during this interim. In my next-to-penultimate entry to this book (#20) I announced that my clock had restarted, tick-tocking again finally. I’ve had my doubts about that in the meantime, not the restart,

but whether it's even time that my clock now measures. Its hands advance in such a willy-nilly fashion, no standard unit of progression, each duration like a little bubble that fizzes up, floating extant for a second, an hour, a week, before the next one erupts, and the next. I have the sense quite often that I might actually be creating time, not by slowing it down, but by supplementing it with new time. That seems highly unlikely, of course, but I can't otherwise explain why I have so much of it on my hands, a seemingly endless store of it. I do everything I need to do and still feel like I have all of my time left over, like all those beautiful yellow leaves I saw up on the trees overhead as my clock started last fall, when I was sure they were all down on the ground just the day before. Only time can do that with its mysterious comings and goings. I attribute all of this to the fact that my life now has no "plan," no "anchor," or, to use the word I most often turn to, no "traction," by which I mean nothing or no one to give it a grip on the ground here, forward-oriented, nothing that sticks, or even wants to. So it slips, drifts, spins. That may be true or false. That may change someday or not. Only time will tell and, as I said, time, for me, seems to have a mind of its own, one I can't quite fathom.

I truly enjoyed writing and revising this book. I posted it in first-draft form in early January and then continued to revise and proofread (so many typos!) until the end of February. So if you read it early on, you might want to look at the final "clean" version. I have probably read it myself 30 times, maybe more, always tinkering, making corrections, the beauty of self-publishing it online in a form I control, and I love it each time. I said in the book how 99% of the value of what I write, for me, selfishly, is accrued in the doing, and that I hope what I write will then find at least one other reader who truly loves and needs it, right now, the other 1%. I know this book has found at least one such reader.

She told me so in January, only days after I posted it. I was thrilled. And fully reassured that I had proffered it in the right way. You may be one such, too. If so, I thank you for fulfilling my hope. My self-publishing this book online has proved puzzling to some of you, I know. All I can say is that I had the strongest sense, a mandate even, almost inviolable, arising within me, or arriving from without me, not sure which, that this book had to be free (on my website), or as near to free as I could make it in its various online iterations. I think you will understand more fully what that word, free, means by the time this epilogue is done. I realize it will find fewer readers this way. But I believe they will be right readers, you, a few, ears to hear, the ones I care to share my time with. I am so glad I followed that mandate. I will say it came to me from Carol because I actually believe that. She had the best instincts in the world, and she followed them, always, would not and could not be deterred. Mine have always been tainted by logic, clouded by reason, susceptible to suasion. When she passed, for some reason, I inherited her trust of these inner voices, the ones that come not from the head but from the heart. I wish I had done it this way all my life. So much clearer and simpler. Never wrong.

Just around the time I posted my final revisions, late February, a year after Carol died, I had a dream. It was different. I was present in it both as a character and a viewer, the same identity, but separate functions, like that state I described in “Coming to Terms,” being both actor and witness simultaneously, both in and out of this world. So I remembered every single detail of it, in its aftermath, when I woke up, of course, but without effort, because I had already watched and recorded it all while I dreamed it. It was like viewing a movie you have made yourself. I knew it had to be important. I’ve been thinking about it over and over in meantime, what I’m supposed to take from it, do with it. I finally

told it to a couple of people, earlier this month, and the story came out just as weird, scary and funny (all the things I like in a poem) as the dream was. I decided this morning on my walk in the woods to write this epilogue and make that dream its centerpiece.

The main character in the dream is a young man, about 30, long dark hair, a little curly, flowing to the shoulders. He had a sly, impish smile, a sweet, plain face. He did not look like me exactly, but I knew he was “me” in the dream, even as the other “me” watched all the action unfold. Anyway, he wakes up one day, out of the blue, in a small town he has never seen before. He has no recollection of where he came from, who he was, nothing, not even his name. But he is inflamed by a passion to tell everyone he meets two things: “This is such a beautiful world! Look at it; love it!” and “You have such a good soul! Keep in touch with it, listen to it!” Those two things, exactly, that’s all. I add the exclamation points to give a sense of his inner voice when he thinks them or his outer voice when says them. As he sets off, he realizes he needs a name, so he looks up to the sky and asks “the universe” (that is exactly how he termed it, the universe), “Who am I, what is my name?” A voice answered, “Your name is Free.”

Thereafter, any time he met anyone, he would shake their hand and say, “I am Free!” I’m not kidding. Even in the dream, the me watching laughed at that. It was so cool, this little morality play unfolding in my sleep. Then he would deliver his message, just those two things, and move on. In the beginning, everyone liked him and what he said. It made them feel better, more hopeful, a tad lighter in their step. But after a while, when the implications of his message began to sink in, this started to turn. People became uncomfortable, irritated even, as they realized that they might have to change, give up some things they had come to like, if they took his dictums fully to heart. They preferred the lives they were

used to, the amenities they were accustomed to, a kind of thoughtlessness that demanded little and gave a lot back, at least in the currencies that everyday culture traffics in and values. So they started to grumble, resist. As it happened, the only ones who continued to value and listen to him were young children, who had not had time to forget yet what he knew, understood it implicitly. Their parents did not like this, either, grumbled more.

The “powers-that-be” in the town (and that is exactly the terms in which they were cast, even as they remained invisible, off-screen, throughout, no names, faces, anything) heard all the grumbling and decided that Free needed to be stopped, that the adults were getting chafed and feared their children were being tainted. The status quo had to be firmed up again, reasserted. Their first instinct was just to kill him, but they knew it had to be done indirectly, for obvious reasons. One of the members of this group said he knew a man, one of the townspeople, who truly hated Free, already wanted to kill him but was disinclined to suffer the consequences of that act. They directed their colleague to approach this man, tell him he could kill Free without any fear of reprisal.

One evening Free was sitting with some friends on the screened-in front porch of one of their homes, laughing and goofing around. The only things I ever saw Free do in the dream, besides delivering his message, always with a beaming, off-kilter smile, were laugh and goof around. The hired gun happened to walk by right then and saw him up there. He hurried up the steps and came in through the screened door. It was one of those old-fashioned wood-frame doors on taut-spring hinges that closed with a “whack” behind anyone who entered, which it did, “whack,” after this man passed through. You may be old enough to remember those doors, common on screened porches back in

the 50s and 60s. And this is a good example of the level of detail I “recalled” from this dream by being in it as a witness. Wood-on-wood, “whack!”

The man had a holstered six-gun, slung Western style on his right thigh. He started to reach for it. Free knew he was about to be killed, but it didn’t seem to bother him at all. He just stood up, walked up to the man, close, looked him in the eye, like he was seeing something beautiful deep inside, something even the man had forgotten. Then he told him, in the most sincere and loving way: “You know, I can see, inside there, you are such a good man!” The man stopped in his tracks, then turned around and left, out the door, “whack,” back down the steps. He never drew his gun, he never said a word, he didn’t even smile, oddly. Just left, and that was that.

Soon word gets back to the powers-that-be that this plan failed. So they told the cops simply to “bring him in for a few questions.” They would take it from there. Three cops came to escort him in (not arrest or apprehend, but escort) from that same porch. They looked like cops from “The Simpsons,” kind of jovial, slapstick even, not menacing in any way. He went along quite happily. They all ambled slowly down the middle of the main street all through the town, the four of them, like a little parade, joking, laughing. The sidewalks were lined with people who applauded, said how happy they were to have had Free come to their town. But not one of them either said or did anything to forestall his being taken away. It was just a long goodbye. Some of the children ran out into the street, thanked him, patted him on the back, said they would remember what he said. Free was filled with a calm joy. He knew absolutely, in his heart, that when he came to the end of that street, far enough out of town to be turned over to the powers-that-be, alone with them at the edge of the woods,

their woods, one of two things was going to happen: They would put a bullet in his head and bury him right there or send him off to an insane asylum where he'd stay for the rest of his life. Nothing else, one of those two things, both of which were equal to him, not good or bad, just equal. He was placid, happy. He knew, had known in some way from the start, that those are the only possible outcomes for someone like him, and he accepted their coming as easily and smilingly as he had everything else along the way. They all walked on, heading out of town.

Then I woke up. I narrated this dream to a couple of friends last weekend. They were very engaged with the story, animated by its telling, until that point. Both were instantly, expressly disappointed, that it didn't have an "ending." I tried to tell them that it did have an ending: One of those two things was absolutely going to happen to him on the outskirts of that town, and they were both the same, exactly equal and effective ways to put an end to a story of this sort. And, from the point of view of the powers-that-be, they are both smart solutions. A bullet to the head outside town, a quick burial, is so much the better for them, in the long run, than a public execution (think Socrates and Jesus, for example.) And the insane asylum is so much the better for them, in the long run, than imprisonment (think Gandhi and Mandela, for example.)

But it is not a depressing or hopeless outcome, not to Free and not to me. Because of the children. We are all, every one of us, children at heart. We know what he knew. It's all there. Just need to remember it. In *Re-reading Poets* I tell a story about how I cried, continuously, inconsolably, scarily, for the whole first year of my life. As the story goes, on my first birthday, I stopped and, as far as anyone knew, I never cried again. Well, I did of course, but it was rare and I tried to do it privately. When Carol died, I

cried and cried. Every day now I cry, not necessarily about that, could be anything, the trees in the woods, a person on the street, anything. I just cried while I was writing that sentence. That's how close my tears are every minute of the day. I don't know why I cried as a baby or why I stopped. I don't know why I'm crying most of the time I do it now. Same thing with laughing. I do it all the time, for no reason that would be apparent to someone watching, no reason I could provide to such a witness. And, as I've said, sometimes they both come together, a seamless whole, laugh-crying or cry-laughing, my heart full to overflowing with what I know and what I don't, all unstoppable, so unsayable, laughter and tears the only way it can get out.

I have come to understand over the last year and a half how many different kinds of crying and laughing we have available to us, at least a half dozen of each, maybe more, distinctly suited for getting what's in there out in the best possible way. I was thinking this morning on my walk that I feel like an Eskimo now who has to think about his world in English, only one name for "snow" instead of his seven. Not possible he might say, or just stupid. You can't possibly believe that this snow and that snow warrant the same name. I wish I had seven names for crying and seven names for laughing. And maybe another seven for laugh-crying or cry-laughing. Then I could get this across to you, why I am like this now every day.

Carol's favorite Christmas movie, might have been her favorite movie of all now that I'm thinking about it, was *A Christmas Carol*, the Dickens/Scrooge story. She was partial to the older one, with Alistair Sim as Scrooge, which we watched together as a couple and then as a family every year. After the Muppet version came out not long after Joe was born, with Michael Caine (one of her favorite actors) as Scrooge, we watched that one, too. If you

want to see what I mean by this laugh-crying business, watch the scene (in either one, though I'm also partial to the Sim rendition) after Scrooge wakes up no longer what he was. He skips and skitters around the room laugh-crying like a madman, no reason apparent to anyone who might happen in on him. Like a child. That's me now, no longer what I was, looking like a madman sometimes, maybe, if you happened in on me at one of these moments, when I wake up, while I'm walking, whatever, as Scrooge's maid does later in this scene, frightened by what she sees, not because he's dangerous but because what she sees makes no sense, might in fact, she fears, be otherworldly. The thing is, if she saw a child doing that it wouldn't scare her at all, it being just what kids do, instinctively, so charmingly, their being so alive.

I have read and reread the things I've written in the aftermath of Carol's death over and over. I gauge my "progress," I guess you'd call it, though I think that's a stupid way for me to put it, along my rehabilitary path by how often and how much I cry and laugh while I'm doing it. I have this idea, again, most likely grounded in stupidity, that when I can get through the whole thing, my essay, this book, without crying and laughing, I will be done, healed, restored, released, whatever. But the child in there knows better, that there is no there to get to, wouldn't want to go to that there even if there were one there. All those townspeople lining the route, and then, what: the powers-that-be. I want to cry and laugh every day, just like this, about nothing, about everything. Then I know that what matters most to me, the things I want to tell you, this is such a beautiful world, you have such a good soul, will come out of the deepest ocean of my heart and not the shallow puddle of my head. That you will hear a child's voice in there, your own, the one you love, still love, have always loved, like I love mine, the one who loves us back, the best kind of love, true love. That you will remember everything, laughing and crying,

whenever it moves you to do so. If even one of you does that, and I know you will, I have no problem going to the end of the street, just outside of town, handed over, awaiting my fate. I don't fear being dead (though I've seen enough hard dying to have a healthy dread of that) and I don't mind being deemed crazy (though I've had enough trouble in my head to want to do my best to keep the real thing corralled.) Either way I figure, I get to be Free, free.

Epilogue: Take 2, 8/11/16

*The fireman told himself a lot more garbage of this nature.
Then he told himself some true things.*

Donald Barthelme

OK, wait a minute. The child::free analogy is a true thing, sure, at its root. Not garbage, I wouldn't go that far, no, just that it could easily end up there if I'm not careful, throwing those big words together and around that way, leaving them like that, both too much, all that life-and-death angst, drama, and too little, easy to underestimate, keep at bay, just another cutesy-kitty (lol!) internet meme, something the townspeople wouldn't even need to grumble much about, so squishy-sweet, or the powers-that-be wouldn't have to worry about, a neat figure of speech but no threat even to the quotidian status quo, let alone the social order, something maybe "epideictic," to borrow an Aristotelian term I have never (I hope) once used in my public writing. So all day yesterday I had a nagging sense that there was something else, had to be, something more, something missing there, the teeth. I just couldn't put a finger on it, or a word to it.

Since I'm the only body in my bed now, no one there to calibrate my clock in collaboration with, I often sleep erratically, out of kilter, off-tempo. I get all the sleep I need, but it's often in disconnected increments. Sometimes I wake up, wide awake, in the middle of the night, or just way too early, like I did last night,

the last filaments of a dream receding forever into oblivion, leaving only a faint trace of what it “meant.” I knew the dream I had lost all the details of had something to do with who Free was and what I needed to say about him. One thing the residue of my dream made clear was this: Free was not me, at least not the whole of me, the one you might think “I am” all the time if all you know about “me” is this book, the impression I might have left you with yesterday. Whitman says it best: “I am vast; I contain multitudes.” So do you, so do we all, myriads of “mes.” Our culture, our lives, may compel us to think and act most often as if we are only one of them, “I”, the necessary one, the normal one, the one induced from the outside in by whatever we need to be to survive our public lives, with all of those opportunities and obligations and problems pouring in toward us. But what about the rest of the multitudes? Where do they get to be in the equation that we keep trying balance in there?

I was asking my class the other day, as I often do when I’m teaching anything that makes the question pertinent, whether or not they believe anyone else can ever truly “know” them, the way they know themselves. This particular occasion for the question was prompted by Susan Griffin’s claim, in “Our Secret,” that she wants to get “inside Heinrich Himmler’s head,” via the arsenal of biographic and fictional tools she has at her disposal. I am always surprised, stunned really, by how many of them, usually more than half, think that’s possible, easy even. I certainly don’t. I feel that if someone trying to write my biography could get access to everything I’ve written or made, to everyone who knew me, they would still get it wrong. And I am one of the most self-revelatory “scholars” in the academic universe! I will (and have) disclosed just about anything you can think of about “myself” along the way, in my books and poems especially, as you now know just from having read this one, the most intimate, confidential things in my

head, my heart, no inhibitions at all it sometimes seems. All out there for all to see. That's one of the reasons I'm always amused when others describe me as "private." I am, in my writing especially, the least "private" person I know, with no apparent barriers to self-disclosure. As I often think: "Private? Hello! Have you read the book?"

I am, on the other hand, reclusive, as I made clear along the way. And that covers all the parts almost no one ever gets to see, hear, know, except maybe for Emily Dickinson or Carol or some other "nobody, too" who actually asks me "who are you?" I'm not really trying to hide any of that. It's just that you have to be with somebody, doing something, walking, laughing, crying, together, side by side, eye to eye, for it to show. Then the words that come, well, they come alive, embodied, made flesh, right there, in the woods, over coffee, in my office, me and you, alive, together. Writing, just words, all alone there on the page, no, they won't do it. If that distinction—private/reclusive—doesn't make sense to you, well, think about it. Or re-read what I said about Emily Dickinson. One day it will.

That's one of the mes, then, that never takes on a public face. And there are tons of other mes, too, I never say anything about, just like you don't, for good reasons. For example, you never have to endure the me that cleans the toilets, eats ice cream at night, stares vacantly at the TV as if it is just a window facing a blank wall. That man is boring, functional but so boring. Carol could have told you that. So boring. He knows Free, lives in the same head with him, likes him quite a lot actually, but he isn't him. Nor do you get to measure my deepest grief, my greatest rage, neither of which ever finds, or even could find, a way out into words. That man is intense, dramatic, scary maybe, the one everyone fears might show up if they ask the me in front of them

about my loss—though, of course, he never would or could, for lack of those words. I can't believe they don't know that! He knows Free, too, same way, good buddies, but he isn't him. None of those mes, and most of the multitude of others in there striving to collaborate, to get along, appear unitary in public for decorum's sake, is Free. Who, then, is he? And what do I most need to say now to qualify, or add to, what I said yesterday?

Here's what my dream told me to say, even though I couldn't remember the details of it. Free is not even the me you see when you read this book; he is the me I get to be with, near, while I'm in there. In some figurative way, he is the book itself. Yes, I thought, of course, exactly, obviously, so obvious I couldn't believe it took me six months (and a forgotten dream) to see it: What's the first thing my book says when it walks up to you, shakes your hand in those wacky fake review blurbs [at the end of the book now, on online platforms]: "I am free!" Just like Free, who came to me in that dream the very week I both marked the anniversary of Carol's passing and "finished" my book. As soon as I thought that I started laughing, a laugh that came on with one of those side-of-the-mouth Popeye yuk-yuks and culminated in a couple of guffaws. Letting loose like that in bed in the middle of the night is one of the very few perks that come with sleeping alone, no one there to wake up wondering what has taken possession of her partner.

Since I had woken up so early, about 5:30, I had to wait to take my walk, left right at first light. The woods are beautiful, so soothing, in that kind of light. About a quarter of a mile up the path on the walk I take most days, there is fulsome space, a grand space, where the trees are farther apart and quite large. It's the space I mention in Essay 8, when I was brought to tears by my recognition of their obvious, ongoing love for me, so steady, so

always-there. Each one. And all together. Every time I enter that space, I feel a sense of solemnity, not in its Eliotic too-highness, but in its diurnal just-rightness, a deep awareness, very placid, of the weight of those trees, spiritually, their dignity, their care. I try to remind myself to carry an awareness of that weight in my bearing all that day long, like they do. I'm not that good, of course, that steady. But I keep thinking that if I try to do it enough times, in recognition of their gift to me, I will get better at it.

Lately, and especially today, I've been contemplating the physical structure of the space in that place, all those tall columnar trunks reaching up until they evaporate into the dense ceiling of leaves above, so late-summer lush now. I believe that is exactly what we humans keep striving to emulate in our most sacred spaces, all those columns reaching up, the safe closure overhead. Egyptian, Greek, European, Asian, Islamic, the monuments, churches, synagogues, mosques, temples, shrines, all of them, trying to prompt us to feel, when we walk into them, the solemnity that such spots in the woods have always made us feel, humanly, deeply.

I was watching a show on the Parthenon recently in which experts claimed that the column was what it was primarily for engineering-related reasons, just the best way to hold up a big, high roof, at least until the arch came along. But I think it's the other way around: Someone starts wondering how they can make a space that emulates the one I walk through every day, the one that makes me feel both larger than life and more fully human, small in all the right ways. The available materials, stone and wood, make it necessary for them to regularize everything, same height, right angles or round contours, a replicable sameness. The woods doesn't have to abide by those constraints. It is free. And it

doesn't cost anything to build itself. That is free, too. I'm sure those architects designing their buildings lamented the fact that they, too, could not be that free. Not at least if what they built was going to stand up and last. We're not free, either, at least not most of the time. We have to clean toilets, want to eat ice cream, crave blank-faced distraction, we rage and despair. Free, as I said, is not those mes. He is the one I get to be with, near, walking through the solemn space those trees make for me. And the one I can carry in my bearing as long into, or as often during, the day as I'm able. And when that me is with me, he, I, we, feel fully and forever free. That, in the end, is the difference, to me, between manmade sacred spaces, of which I have seen and loved many, and the woods. In one, solemnity is the end of it, or maybe, if you have the faith going in, a gateway to some gods, out of this world. In the other, it is a gateway straight to free, in this world, right now.

OK, that's a least part of what I knew I needed to figure out, and add, to get past that nagging in my head yesterday about Free and me. There is, though, another layer down, I know, and I'm having a hard time trying to get a grip on it. It pertains to that "bullet and asylum" business outside of town there, so over the top, wow. It's possible, I guess, that Free is dangerous enough to warrant such extreme measures. Maybe. But I'm surely not. I am, at best, a "poet," and even that might be a stretch, a poet, that cultural figure who, sure, from time to time or place to place can end up with a bullet to the head (think certain parts of Central or South America in the 1970s during the heyday of military juntas, for example); or in an asylum (think Russia or Eastern Europe during the pre-war and cold war years), but the United States is not one of them. Our poets are just not perceived to be very serious threats to the social order, no matter what they say. Amiri Baraka can read a poem that says "kill whitey" to a white audience that

then applauds him! That's how unscary poets are for us. Why? I think it's because there are an arsenal of figurative bullets and asylums that do all of that work for the powers-that-be quietly, antiseptically, and way ahead of time.

Figurative bullets? Well, remember what it was like to read poems in school? All those tiny 19th century poets, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, Whitman, Dickinson, Crane, being called, one by one, out of thick books to stand in the middle of little desks imploring the teacher, "please, shoot me now, before we're all bored to tears here!" Then the teacher says, excuse me for a moment, I need to reload before we start the 20th century. No wonder no one listens to them, cares what they say. They never made it out of those rooms alive. And then so many of those of us who somehow smuggled a few of them out under our shirts, maybe with the help of an unarmed teacher, well we write about them inside closed systems for one another, our prose unreadable to anyone not in on the code. We carry loaded guns, too, and we know how to use them. Don't get me wrong: I am one of them. I get paid to do that, too. I just lament it more than most. I sometimes think that if the powers-that-be made it illegal for any of us to teach poetry, poets would come back to life again. They may not warrant real bullets then, but at least they'd be a little scary, enough to have the powers-that-be ask the cops to bring them in for a few questions.

And figurative asylums? How about those discourses of "abnormality" I ranted about at the end of one of my classes last fall: Bipolar, schizophrenic, even homosexual at certain times and in certain places, yes, they will do, neat little verbal cells to keep some "true things" cordoned off over there, exotic creatures behind bars that we can visit any time we like, admire, enjoy, without having to take any of the wild home with us. Or even

littler words--weird, off beat, oddball, eccentric--they do some work for the powers-that-be, too. And how about the other end of the spectrum, those seemingly honorific terms--prophet, sage, visionary, mystic, genius--well, they're not so bad either, stringing up ropes around the museum exhibit so we don't stray too far into those sacred spaces, can get back home unscathed. To be honest, I don't think the me you see here, or any of my mes, warrants even that sort of circumscription, no need to "weave a circle round [me] thrice," that is. My "dreams" are small, so small, tiny, as you know because I've showed you some of them, not dangerous at all.

So what's left then from what I said yesterday? Well I guess it's the child over there on the other side of the analogy from Free, smiling back at him and out at me. Yes, I do like that child. Children are rarely scary, of course. That's what's great about encountering one or remembering our own inner one. Yet, they have enormous power to instigate change, real change, the kind the powers-that-be fear because they have no good way to forestall it. Bullets and asylums just don't apply to the child. Not at least if you want to stay powers-that-be for a while.

I had a hard July this year, in my body first, but then in my head, which is more crucial to me now: It was "reality" again, right there, when the next layer down of it starts to work its way up through what you were certain was already rock bottom, becoming faintly visible, not frightening solely in itself, but more by what it hints toward, that there are likely many more such layers deeper and deeper down, waiting for you to wear through to them. And you know you will. Scary, sobering. What to do now? It was one of those moments where your spirit better stiffen or it's going to give way. That's where my child comes in. I might buy Wordsworth's "child is father of the man" business (though

I'd be much more inclined to say mother, given the differences between what, and how, each of these figures "delivers" to the process), but not the rest of his system. He says in his famous "Ode" that we come into this world "trailing clouds of glory." No we don't. No way, I say. What we come in with is an instinct, not a need but a desire, to love and be loved. And with an instinct to resist the petty injustices that adults inflict on children (because they can!), those precursors to the horrors they inflict on one another out there in the torrents of history.

Our culture has such sappy ways of talking about love, just another cutesy-kitty (lol!) meme most of the time. Love is hard, both to do and to keep doing, out there in reality, a July like mine was. Most of us, not all but most, have some experience with loving and being loved as children, real love, I mean, copious for some, a sleek yacht to speed us over rough waters, maybe just a few shreds for others, bits of flotsam we can cling to when stormy waters churn. But, in both cases, love nonetheless. It is so important, foundationally, for a good life, a life that strives toward the good, to keep a memory of that love alive. That's why we need to remember it and why, when we can, instill it in children, make sure they feel it, so they will remember it, too. That's one of the things that Free knows and does. That's what scared the powers-that-be. Not him, them, those children who might be listening to him. The powers-that-be can't afford (literally) to let that kind of love get too much out of hand. But the cutesy-kitty (lol!) kind, no problem. You can see why.

And, I want to argue, even those who never felt, or can't remember, anything of that sort, well, we have rage, the potentially generative rage that can turn us away from trying to repeat that cycle and toward trying to break it. For example, nothing, and I mean nothing, is more powerful in my motivation

to be a good teacher than all my memories of the bad teaching I endured along the way. I took umbrage at it back then, every time, burning with a belief that even I, who had no tools, no natural “gifts,” none, for public performance, could and would do better than that someday. I was lucky, on the other hand, to be loved. But even if I hadn’t been, I hope I would use my rage in that area exactly the same way I do in the classroom: OK, Paul, pony up, do better, right now. Or shut the hell up.

So. July. My July. Finally, the end is in sight, this summer, my sabbatical, “This Fall,” all of it, the end in sight, I promise. It’s almost next fall, for godssake, Paul, so shut the hell up already!

Reality can be such a frightful place. It will beat us down and then kick us while we’re down. I was about to start my next sentence with “we” but I stopped, did way too much of that in my “first take epilogue,” which made me have to write this one. And I’m still doing it. I don’t want to have to write another one. So I just stopped and set you free right then, pre-sentence, to make your own way forward. I’m just going to say “I” now, because I can’t speak for you any longer, probably never should have; and I don’t want to lecture here, again, always my fallback rhetorical posture. I’m a professor, after all. It’s what I know how to do, unfortunately. You are an adult just like me. You know everything I know already and will make your choices accordingly.

So, let me restart that sentence: I need to stand up again now, no matter how hard it is, no matter how tired I am of doing it, not to prove I can take it (I’ve done that) but to show, I mean really show, that I can make it. Not to “them,” all those townspeople clapping distractedly while I walk out of town, or the powers-that-be waiting, or even you, but to me. You don’t need to read my book. I do. And I will, over and over, trying to let Free teach all

these other mes what we need to keep remembering. Read and reread it. Again and again. Cry and laugh, cry and laugh. Every time I get knocked down I need to stand up. Again and again. Every single time.

I'm just about at the end of the street now, I see. The crowd has thinned, what little applause is left is light, intermittent, the children have gone off to play. The edge of the woods is right up ahead there. I can hear the powers-that-be chatting, still hidden in the shade, as they always are, no matter how hard I might try to dream them into sight. I can't make out what they are saying and don't even care. They will do what they will with me when I get there, in their woods, their rules. All I can say is this: Tomorrow morning, just after I finish my coffee, or whenever I feel like it, I'll be heading out to my woods, where I'll walk for an hour or so, on my little path, for the more-than-many-thousandth time, acting like I'm seeing it for the first time, amazed, looking maybe like I'm alone there, but really with all those trees, the ones that truly love me, with Carol, who truly loved me, my kids who truly love me, all always in my heart, such goodly company, maybe even with you every now and then, if you don't mind talking haphazardly about whatever comes to mind, or just being quiet for a while, together with me. The "garbage-of-this-nature" world has an endless supply of bullets and asylums. I know a guy who knows a guy who knows "some true things." That's where I'll be if you're looking for me, in Boyce Park, with him, just walking, free as a bird, all for free.

What critics are saying about *This Fall*:

"You may or may not like it. But it's free. I mean really. Free!"

paulkameen.com

"I laughed, I cried! Oh, wait, maybe that was him."

catharsisnow.com

"This book is so cool I want to live in it!"

frostythesnowman.org

"Reading this book is a walk in the park. Literally."

boyceparknews.com

"This book has everything: love, death, Emily Dickinson. No sex, though. Sorry."

trueconfessions.xxx

"Free? On a website? It has to be crap!"

professorbogusjbigwigIIIPhdMaBaAA.edu

"I like the cut of his jib! No, I love the cut of his jib!"

popeythesailorman.net

"This Fall=(Paul Kameen X Paul Kameen)! Whew!"

paulkameenxpaulkameenwhew.com