

Spring Forward

more essays from Olympia

by

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This is the “spring” panel from the seasonal series of paintings that has now provided covers for the three books in this group of interrelated seasonal projects: *A Mind of Winter*, *The Imagination*, and now *Spring Forward*.

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Preface

He did not go to the tundra
it came to him--
first a tickle in his teeth.
then a frost on his tongue
then a slab of ice
inching up his throat.

When it finally calved,
everyone else was somewhere
else but him: had left
by night, had left
by plane, had left him
bundling into his future
all animal handsome
in a thickening coat,
elk-sleek, moose-stubborn,
hammering hooves through snow
down to stubbled straw.

from my *Snow Man*

This book gathers together all the “personal” essays from *A Mind of Winter*, the half of that book that is based on my woods-walks, composed along the lines of the previous seasonal books, what has now turned out to be a circum-annual series covering all the seasons, including the mythical “fifth,” *Harvest*. Each of these essays was originally paired with a critical essay on a famous voice in the longstanding conversation in Western poetics about the nature and role of the imagination. I extracted and gathered those latter essays, too, published now under the title *The Imagination*. I’m about to birth the other “twin” here. I’m not entirely sure why I’m doing all of this. I felt along the way, and even afterwards, that the original mélange was interesting, effective, an “experiment,” yes,

to borrow Wordsworth's characterization of the poems in *Lyrical Ballads* when they were first published, disjunctive in many ways, yes, but still . . . Now, for some reason I want to separate the halves. Who knows why? I rarely any longer know why I do anything I do, so why should my writing be any different? I intend to leave *A Mind of Winter* out there also, in its current form. But, still . . . I just feel compelled to do this.

Maybe it's because it's winter again, a year after I wrote the original book, gray, cold, too much dark, all of it infiltrating into my bones and my spirit, reanimating a desire to imagine the magical coming of spring. Maybe it's because I just got a new mattress, reminding me of the *Snow Man* poems I wrote 40 years ago in the midst of a similar winter back in Pittsburgh, probably my all-time favorite "book," that series of eleven poems set in the arctic tundra, the final of which I used to close *A Mind of Winter*. Back then I had been living alone for about three years, two years of separation from my first wife, then a year divorced. Hard years. I was about to be terminated from my job, by my own doing for the most part, a desire I think just to break free and start over. But I had no idea of a where or a what or with whom.

I had a practice at the time of writing for a few minutes every night before I went to sleep, whatever came out, not quite automated in the surrealist sense, but unpremeditated. My bedroom was a converted attic, so even in winter it tended to be warm, all the heat in the building gathering up there. One night, waiting to sleep, I threw all the covers off the bed, just me there in my white underwear on those white sheets, which, for some reason, reminded me of an ice floe, that cliché of leaving the arctic village, climbing aboard, and heading off the meet one's fate. All that, as I first imagined it, seemed inspiring, scary and funny to me. That night I wrote the poem that

opens this book, above. And then over the next couple of weeks I extemporaneously wrote poems set in my bed-ensconced version of the harsh, austere, and gorgeous arctic wilderness. It was the perfect metaphor for my state of mind at the time, that combination of deprivation, fear, awe, and the steely resolve it takes to survive them, to move on, to make it back “home.”

At the time, I felt, oddly, a deep happiness: to be me, by myself, a new life, my life, ahead of me, its details unbeknownst. I just needed to find a right way forward. I feel exactly the same now, forty years hence, alone again, five years now since my wife Carol passed away suddenly and unexpectedly in the dead of a Pittsburgh winter, deeply happy again to be me, full of a firm resolve to venture forth. Carol was, in fact, part of what my “way” turned out to be back then, the “who” I’d spend my life with, though I hadn’t met her yet. That happened a few months later, the following fall, an incomparable gift from the gods of time. I’m at an age now, of course, where there is not likely another such way forward for me, at least of that kind and on that scale, which makes me feel, also oddly perhaps, peaceful, quite serene. The ice floe may not be right at my feet, but it’s on the way in and, honestly, I almost can’t wait for it. I have no idea what is on the other side of the divide it will ferry me across between here and there. It could be anything from the sanctuary of another land to a daring, dizzying dive into the deep. But if it’s something even remotely like what’s on this side, it will be quite an adventure and I look forward to it.

The tendency is to think of the ice-floe as a winter thing. But there is no water flowing in the arctic winter, everything frozen solid, as it is in my *Snow Man* poems, up until the final one. Ice floes are spring things, the fruits of the breakup, all those little islands of white, ragged

remnants of the sea ice or huge chunks of mountain water that have found their way to the open ocean all at once in the sudden deluge down rivers. There must, around then, be millions to pick from, each one an opportunity, a risk. Life and death together on a gradually melting raft. When you're young, there's a big difference between those two. At my age, not so much. Something new is coming, either way. I can't wait to find out what it might be.

. . .

Even though these essays are all, but for the final two, technically “winter” compositions by their dates, and they ended up initially under a winter title, they became, to me, the “spring” book I hadn't yet written, completing the conventional circuit of seasons. Yes, I know, I already had a book entitled *Last Spring*. But those essays were winter essays in both real time and in spirit, as dark and cold as can be. I wrote them during my final semester teaching at the University of Pittsburgh. The title is really a sardonic gesture to the academic calendar, which claims, absurdly, that January, February and March are the “spring term.”

I titled the book these current essays ended up in *A Mind of Winter* to close the cycle of seasons, but the essays themselves indicate how spring-forward-looking those two winter months felt to me, all the hidden life barely able to contain itself, waiting to burgeon, which it did, spectacularly, just as the book closes, the instant overflow of flowering trees, my “Snow Man” swimming with the whales, “his hunger lunging deeper . . . his love-song headed home.” Now I'm calling it by its real name: spring, my forward from here, whatever that turns out to be.

February 22, 2019: Too Much of Nothin'

One must have a mind of winter
To regard the frost and the boughs
Of the pine-trees crusted with snow;

And have been cold a long time
To behold the junipers shagged with ice,
The spruces rough in the distant glitter

Of the January sun; and not to think
Of any misery in the sound of the wind,
In the sound of a few leaves,

Which is the sound of the land
Full of the same wind
That is blowing in the same bare place

For the listener, who listens in the snow,
And, nothing himself, beholds
Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.

“The Snow Man,” Wallace Stevens

I was born with a mind of winter, I'm certain of it. It's probably why I cried continuously, according to family lore for a year after I was born. I came out in the middle of February, for godssake, so cold, the mountains of northeastern Pennsylvania, 1949, heading into the heyday of waist high snow, deep lasting freezes, the 1950s winters in a nutshell. I was a scrawny kid growing up, cold to the core all the time. The inside of my head was just as cold. I rarely spoke, again according to family lore. But I did “regard” things, “behold” things, “not to think” but to “listen,” that absence of self-generated noise in the head that allows words and others and things to find a resting place there, take on meaning. A “nothing himself,” I lived at a position from which one can behold “nothing

that is not there,” all the extra layers one might make up and extrude, supplanting what is there, and “the nothing that is,” a richness of being so elusive it is more like music than words. That, I would say now, is what my “imagination” was back then and is now, which gets me on my path here.

I just got back from a walk down to the point at Woodard Bay, a gorgeous nature preserve between two of the lower fingers of Puget Sound, maybe my favorite spot here, the first time in about two weeks I’ve been able to get there, primarily because of the weather. If you have read any of my work, you know how attached I become, and what an affection I feel, for the places I walk regularly. They become like good friends to me, always there, always welcoming, along with all the other smaller “good friends” I have made with the various flora and fauna those places host. And when I come back to them after an extended absence, it is quite moving to me, as it was today, standing at the point taking in that magnificent view. I stood there for quite a while just “beholding” it. No words. Nice.

My head made up for that quietude on my walk back to the lot, overwhelmed by way too many thoughts, recollections, reflections, speculations. I’m not sure why. Maybe my having been unable to get out for a woods-walk for several days had backed-up the reservoir. And today the dam burst. The process started innocently enough, just remembering the snow that had kept me home in this meantime. Before I got back to the car, I was riffing on God. As Bob Dylan says, “too much of nothin’ can make a man feel ill at ease.”

About two weeks ago, on a Friday afternoon, it started to snow here. I had read the weather report, which predicted one to three inches of snow. Not bad. Within an hour or so, there were already three inches on the ground and it was still snowing furiously. In *First, Summer* I describe the unique (to me) kind of rain that falls in the Northwest. The drops, I said, are large, splotchy, a little more viscous than Eastern rain. And they hit with

a very distinctive “splash,” on a windshield say, one that kind of stops for a second or two before it slides off. It is quite mesmerizing. Well, the snow we had that day was that rain frozen into very large crystalline flakes, each maybe an inch across, and it came down copiously, not quite a whiteout, but hard to see through. And it piled up fast. The closest analogy for me was the “lake effect” snow we’d get in Pittsburgh when the winds carried moisture down from Lake Erie. Depending on where you were when that snow came down, you could get anywhere from a few flurries to a few inches in an hour, more than enough fluffy white stuff to shovel in what seemed like a flash.

The snow here was denser than that, heavier, but fell at that sort of fierce pace. We got about five or six inches in a couple of hours, a shocking amount by local standards. The next day, same pattern, same forecast. This time maybe eight inches. The next day, same thing, except this time almost a foot. So, two feet of snow in about two days in a place that might not get that much in a decade. I read that it was the most snow to fall in one event here since 1949, the year I was born. The day after the snow stopped I turned 70. I had by then shoveled out my 75 foot-long driveway with the help of Lisa and Sterling, who co-own the house I rent. They arrived just in time: I had quit after finishing half of it, my breath getting shorter and my back starting to twinge in a way the said “stop or you’ll regret it.”

Only one factor I had failed to calculate, operating still on my Eastern sense of what happens after it snows: The town here is utterly unprepared for snow of this magnitude. So there was way too much snow in the road to go anywhere. A couple of days later, in the evening, one of the two plows the town operates made it to my neighborhood. I watched it move snow around for a while, very grateful, of course. But it was also quite comical. The operator clearly had no experience plowing snow of this sort, he’d move some, back up, move some more, twist and turn this way and that. It took about a half hour to open the intersection I live at. In Pittsburgh, plows flew around like big birds, clearing streets

so fast all you heard was the hard scrape while it tore by. They could do many blocks in a half hour.

One of the other oddities of the event was how it was forecast. No matter what was happening, the weather report said it would be 1-3 inches of light snow turning to rain, which it never did. Even after much more than that had already fallen, the report was the same. You could look out the window and see it was snowing, yet the report never updated. It was like the plows: the weather forecasters and their equipment seemed to have no capacity to imagine, or even recognize, actual snow.

There was so much snow pushed and piled around that it lasted for a long time, even as it got above freezing for days. I tried once to get to Woodard Bay, all the roads open by then, but the path in was covered with a layer of icy, packed-down snow, about 3 inches thick, very slippery, not much fun walking. I made it about a quarter of a mile before I decided to turn around. One of the obstacles I had to navigate to get that far was a red cedar that had fallen across the path. It was huge, maybe six feet in diameter at the base, and fallen in such a way, down a hill onto the path, that the only way to get past it was to walk under it down near the roots, which were perched about six feet above the ground, a huge crack in the trunk about eight feet further up, or now down, the trunk. It was a little unnerving. I thought at the time it will be weeks before they get this chain-sawed out of the way, and it will take a heckuva chain-saw to accomplish it. Today, it was all cut up, the path clear. There must be way more and better chain saws here than there are plows.

This morning, it snowed that way again, dense heavy flakes coming down in blinding sheets, all the while the weather channel on the internet claiming it was merely raining. Even the radar map showed rain-green instead of snow-blue. They must not have any of their instruments calibrated to measure snow. If it's falling from the sky, it must be rain. I actually became quite panicked, assuming the storm of the century would be reprised in the same

month. But it stopped after a while. It was raining when I got out of my car to walk. By the time I got to the point, the sun was out. The scene was breathtaking. There was a father-son team taking photos of it with good cameras. I took a few with my phone. I must have fifty photos taken from that very spot by now, the water, the forested horizon, the clouds, so captivating. Every time I get there I think, okay, you have enough pictures, Paul. And after a few minutes, out comes my phone for another. The scene seems somehow uniquely beautiful that day, every day, one that merits recording. I rarely look at any of the pictures I take, but someday maybe I'll take out all the Woodard Bay pictures and look at them in series. I bet I will love every single one of them.

February tends to be a dramatic month for me, sometimes life-altering, much more so than any other month. There are four days in the month that function as personal landmarks for me. One is Groundhog Day, February 2. Pittsburgh is only a couple of hours from Punxsutawney, and my wife Carol and I, both lovers of the movie by that name, took a drive up there one sunny fall day. It is not anywhere near as vibrant or glamorous as the movie makes it seem. Many of the movie's scenes (the dance on the pavilion, the ice-sculpture scene, the snowball fight, etc.) were, I'm pretty sure, shot in another quite charming town in Westmoreland County, Ligonier, a couple hours south of Punxsutawney, one Carol and I often visited for a walk and a meal. Punxsutawney, at least in late fall, is kind of drab, one of those down-on-its-luck Western Pennsylvania towns about 40 years past its heyday. We found a nice place for lunch and asked on our way out how to get to Gobbler's Knob, assuming, as in the movie, it was somewhere nearby. They told us it was several miles outside of town (not right up the hill, past the foot-deep puddle Phil Connors keeps stepping into) and how to get there. We asked if it was possible to walk there. They said absolutely not, given the terrain, uphill most of the way, the roads, risky. So, given our temperaments, we, of course, walked. It was pretty hot that day, so the walk up was challenging. To finally reach the site of the event, at the top of a very long uphill climb into a big park, was exhilarating. Or at least

a relief. We decided to come back a different way and got kind of lost, so that walk was just grueling, exhausting. But we saw Gobbler's Knob. And Punxsutawney. And Phil the groundhog in his little zoo/museum home. Then we drove home.

Carol died suddenly and unexpectedly a few years later, on February 17. That, of course, is one of the other February days that haunts me. I've written at length about that elsewhere, so I'll let it be. What I want to say here is how those two days, Groundhog Day and the day she died, got locked together in my head. In the aftermath of her passing, I felt as if I had become trapped in a timeless space, every day exactly the same, no advance. Like the rest of the world was enjoying its day over and over without being aware of it, and I was trapped outside it as a witness, the only one who knew it was happening repeatedly. Like Phil Connors, I'd wake up every day and it would still be Sonny and Cher and "it's co-o-o-l-d out there!"

I went through everything Phil Connors did over the course of his exile from temporal advancement. The anger, the selfishness, the despair, the desire to be gone from here for good, the various foolish attempts to start over. And over. And over. And every morning, Sonny and Cher. In many ways, four years later now, I still feel that way, though I am, I hope, in one of the latter phases of his journey, those attempts to become a better person, more human, do a little good in the world while I'm still stuck here. The main difference between us is how old I am. I'm pretty sure I won't wake up on February 3 beside someone like Rita Hanson, his producer, with her arm draped over me. In fact, just the other day, I was thinking I may now be too far gone to be of much interest to any loving partner, had reached some sort of "expiration date" on that. I won't go into the details. If you've lived alone for a long time, you know what I mean, that point of no return. If you haven't, you wouldn't get it.

And, of course, there is Valentine's Day, a holiday of great magnitude when you're with someone, the romance of it of

course, but also the stress, for a man, of coming up with a gift that will not seem clichéd or overly calculated, something I was not expert at, for sure. The process was sweat-inducing during the early years of our marriage. Over time it became less so, in part because our “wants” diminished in favor of our kids’. A simple, sweet gift would satisfy. And I’m sure in part because Carol became more and more accustomed to what an oaf I was in that regard, her expectations adjusting accordingly. Now, of course, with no one intimate in my life, Valentine’s Day is an odd sort of emotional *mélange*, no stress, a little sadness, good memories, that sort of thing. I’d give anything to have a little of that sweet sweat back.

The other major day on my annual February calendar I implied above: my birthday, February 13. My mother used to joke that if I had been born a day earlier, I’d be Abraham, a day later, Valentine. But I’m Paul. And I have a mind of winter. I was, as I said, for all of my childhood and well into my adulthood, very thin, a “skinny marink,” as they used to say. So I was always cold, even when it was warm. In the summer I hated to swim, those cold-water lakes, would end up shivering and blue-lipped within minutes. And winter, well, that was an ordeal. In all the pictures of me taken outdoors in winter, I’m kind of scrunched up, like I’m trying to remember what my extremities used to feel like. Everyone is ice-skating happily, rolling in the snow and I look like I’m trapped in giant industrial freezer, behind a locked door, and will die shortly if no one happens by to open it.

And my mind of winter tended to render me speechless when I was “beholding” something. That’s what I did back then and did today standing in peaceful silence at that little tip of land looking out over Woodard Bay, a kind of amazement, even dumb-foundedness, at the scene before me. Regard. Behold. Not to think. Listen. A way of being in the world. Carol’s passing amplified that quite a bit. My mind of winter went into overdrive, a self-isolation that I could not override. I was “nothing” myself, witnessing “nothing that was not there” and “the nothing that is.”

Times ten. Here, now, four years later, I would say I'm back to times two of that. Maybe, if I keep working at it, I'll catch up to my infant self before my time runs out. I hope so.

I'm quite superstitious and avoid almost anything associated with the number 13. But for some reason, I think of my birthday as a lucky day. Maybe everyone feels that way, no matter what day they're born. What choice do you have? Fear and hate the day of your birth? What fun is that? I enjoy a quiet birthday, with family if that's possible. If not, then alone. I have one little ritual I like to repeat on that day, akin to the snowball throwing I describe in *Last Spring*. For some reason, almost every year, there is a light snow on my birthday, just a ground covering, and I like to slide on it. Just take a little running start and slide on it. I don't know why. I think maybe it makes me feel young and free. In advance of my birthday this year I just assumed that would not be possible. And it wasn't, but for the exact opposite reason that I thought: Instead of too little snow, there was way too much. You could barely slog through it, let alone slide on it. But I was able to find a slippery patch on the driveway Lisa and Sterling and I had shoveled and took a few passes on it. It was fun.

And I always (until a few years ago, of course) had a magnificent cake that Carol baked. She was a professional pastry chef when I met her, so her desserts were amazing. This year, I hadn't been able to get to the grocery store for several days, nor could my daughter Bridget, who lives a couple of miles from me now, get here with the roads as they were. So I had to make do with what food I had in the house. I cooked some rice and vegetables and ate the two Pepperidge Farm chocolate chip cookies I had left in a bag on the counter. Sounds kind of pathetic, I guess, but it was the best I could do with what I had on hand. Which is, maybe, what I can say in general about most everything these days.

One of my great ambitions growing up was to reach the age of 50 and be economically self-sustaining. I was kind of frail and very impractical as a child, day-dreamy, socially remote, so the thought

of actually growing up and having a decent job seemed like a stretch to me. This year, I turned 70. I have had a real career, a beautiful wife, two amazing kids, and now have enough money to do what I want when I want. In other words, I have vastly exceeded my own expectations. It was nice to celebrate that, quietly, by myself, with gratitude and some pride, too, maybe tinged with a little sadness, the way you feel after a big, hard job is done, accomplished, happy to have made it, a little sorry to see it all looking back instead of ahead. And, especially, to have to “celebrate” this one snowbound, home alone.

Last year I was very ill for most of February, so the big days passed like a series of cryptic road signs on a tour of Nightmareville. In the aftermath, as I started to come to, I felt different, all that rage I carried having maybe been boiled out of me by a high fever. It did not, I now know, leave for good, though when it arises it is more appropriate to my age. 70 years old: a lot of bluster and noise, not a lot of muscle to back it up, pretty easy to fight off.

Yesterday, when I woke up, I felt again like something was different, not on that scale, but noticeable, more like a tweak than a major upheaval, a shift toward neutral in my inner realm, indexed by one of the things I say to myself repeatedly, multiple times daily, out loud quite often or silently even more often, like a mantra, when I have to confront the realities life now: “I don’t really care anymore.” There are other variations of it—“I don’t care about anything anymore,” “nothing really matters anymore,” etc.—but the underlying message is the same: What was there is gone and won’t be replaced; what you came here to do is done and can’t be redone. I call these phrases mantras because they arise in my mind so often, at least 25-30 times a day that I’m aware of and are designed to settle me down, help me come to terms with whatever is agitating me at the moment, allow me to see it as so small instead of all. Mantras are learned and repeated with intention. These function more like a fast-moving tickertape on the side of a building in Times Square, news being reported to

my nervous system from some external source. They are an index to my mind of winter, nothing myself, beholding nothing that is not there and the nothing that is. So what do I care?

That phrase (and its alter-egos) became gradually, over the last couple of years, a sort of shorthand to help me cope with the various losses I've experienced in the aftermath of the big one, personal relationships, my job, my long-time home back East, and the million tiny other things in the same vein that accompany those kinds of losses, including the unpleasant indignities associated with aging in general. So, over and over, I console, sometimes inspire, myself by insisting I don't care anymore. This kind of thinking is, I am certain, not depression. It is more a sign of mental health, the willingness to accustom oneself with what is there, to be satisfied, or least not pine away for what can't ever be, no wishing and hoping and praying for magical solutions to unsolvable problems. In its best version, it is akin the "learning to receive the gifts that are offered" (56) I wrote about in *Last Spring*; the ability to see what's still there, or newly there, what might under more favorable circumstances simply fall beneath the radar of perception, another form of invisible loss, or never have arisen at all. And my gifts are extraordinary. I can't imagine a more perfect place for me to have moved, exactly "my speed" as my daughter would say, such a lovely town, the bounty of natural beauty, all the places I get to walk through and see, the ones I wrote about in *First, Summer*. My daughter just up the road, my son in regular contact with me, both doing so well. And so much more. Those precious things now step forth and are found, blessedly.

Yesterday, when I woke up saying "I don't really care" in my head, that phrase took on a different valence, tweaked, as I said, to neutral, toward something more like detachment, a stepping away from caring about "anything," as a form of spiritual advance. I'm no expert on Buddhism, but I have read enough to know how to meditate and have meditated enough to know, fleetingly, what detachment from things feels like. What I felt this morning was

like that, very pleasant, this not-caring for what's not there in any case, or bemoaning what might be but isn't, or hoping for what could be but won't be. Or even stressing inordinately over what's left. Everything like dust made visible by sunlight through a window on a bright day, all equal. Why get agitated over it?

It had that Zen aspect to it, my tickertape breathing me toward genuine detachment. Where I was this morning was not transcendence, the real guru-goal. It was just calm, like a visage with a wry smile. No halo. Rage has no foundation there, or a weak one maybe, one that won't support it for long. Even if it arises, one can say: I don't care about that either. It, too, will soon pass. I liked that feeling, a strange form of inner "peace." I can't say I've earned it, because I never imagined it as a possible outcome to strive toward, and I certainly haven't done the hard work of meditating that the great mystics did to achieve transcendence. Maybe I evolved into it by looking up at the tickertape over and over.

More likely, it just happened on its own, like almost everything else in my life has just happened on its own lately. A good example of that is my moving cross-country when I retired, disposing of almost all my belongings and flying off that way. Some say they think that was courageous. Some find it inspiring. Some find it confusing. Some crazy. Some stupid. Whatever. For me, as I experienced it, it just happened. Any number of other things more or less dramatic could just as well have happened if circumstances or events had been tweaked ever so slightly, like with those barely off-kilter gravity waves right after the Big Bang, producing the highly particulated universe of light and dark and things and life that we have instead of a big pail full of dirty brown water spilling out amorphously into infinity. But they didn't. So this happened. Because it was the only thing left that could.

Most days are like that for me now. I have no idea whatsoever I will do on any given one. I showed my 2019 calendar to my daughter recently. I had one appointment marked in January,

medical, and one in February, taxes. Other than that it's just a very nice series of pictures of birds of the Northwest, more art than business. But it is not a vacuum. It is like a series of empty "appointments" with temporal spaces that I will fill with whatever engagements happen to garner my attention day by day. That is what this kind of not-caring is like. It is not a nothingness, nor does it cause me to do nothing. It is, day after day, the absence of any obligatory something, inviting me fill it with anything. Anything at all will do, really, and every individual possible thing is equally consequential. So, every day some various things happen.

I may start firmly fixed on one goal or destination, change my mind twice on the way for no good reason I can fathom, and end up doing something entirely different, or just turning around and going back to start over. I may end up seeing an astounding natural spectacle, like the Olympic Mountains arrayed in their long line when I look down from the end of the boardwalk downtown, if the air is clear enough, as it was just yesterday, a woman I was standing beside, dressed to the nines, having just come out of a beauty parlor, on her way to something of consequence I assumed, as we waited for the light to change, commenting on it spontaneously, how it was her favorite spot, that intersection, waiting for the light to change, gazing at that spectacle, when the sun is out and the air is clear. Or I may just vacuum the rugs. All equal.

It's possible that one of these days I will leave the house on my way to the grocery store and end up in China. Both equally amazing and surprising "appointments" to keep, from this position of equipoise I hope to find myself in on my better days now. Because, well, as I said, "I don't really care anymore," and that's one of the many things it makes possible. In a good way. On a good day. Like today. Woodard Bay. All the way to the point. Which is what maybe I should have been writing about here. Instead, you get my screed on the mysteries of meteorology and the inside of my head. Sorry. But at least I decided to spare you the riff on

God I actually wrote up, the one that left me so “ill at ease,”
because it was, like, yikes! So maybe we’re even.

February 25, 2019: So Much Depends Upon . . .

This is the forest primeval. The murmuring pines and the hemlocks,
Bearded with moss, and in garments green, indistinct in the twilight,
Stand like Druids of eld, with voices sad and prophetic,
Stand like harpers hoar, with beards that rest on their bosoms.
Loud from its rocky caverns, the deep-voiced neighboring ocean
Speaks, and in accents disconsolate answers the wail of the forest.

from "Evangeline," H. W. Longfellow

Today was just a gorgeous day, high sky bright blue, puffy white clouds just sitting up there, a Simpson's-summer sky, the only index to winter the temperature, around 40, still cold. This morning I walked downtown on the boardwalk. It was breezy, water dark and choppy, a couple of baffleheads diving down for food, their delicate brown crests perfectly coifed the whole while. But the air so clear. I stopped at several vantage points to gaze off at the Olympic mountains, 60-some miles west of here as the crow flies, only visible when it's very clear, an impressive series of sharp, jagged, ice-draped peaks, maybe 6 or so, in a long line at the far horizon, shoals of soft clouds hovering above them today, having swum up from the windward side to settle there, creating their own weather. They range in elevation from 7000 to 8000 feet (I just learned from Wikipedia), but the clearer the air the bigger they look. Today, they looked huge.

Mount Rainier, off in the opposite direction, also about 60 miles, is the tallest peak around here, over 14,000 feet. There are only a few good vantage points in town where it comes into view, when the air is very clear, like today, and I do mean comes into view. For example, just above my local grocery store there is a spot where you see it, driving. Nothing, nothing, nothing, then this massive monolith, like a mega-pyramid, icy white this time of year. A few seconds, and it's gone. Same thing coming down

the hill on the other side of Budd Bay, the road I take to the mall. You're coming down Harrison Avenue and all of a sudden this super-massive overturned snow cone juts up on the horizon, much bigger-looking even than the grocery store spot, because of the angle of vantage, I'm assuming. And another spot when you're walking around Capital Lake downtown, a stretch of maybe 20 feet where you can see it peeking between buildings. These mountains are mesmerizing to me, never having lived among such giants before. But they are equally mesmerizing to the locals, maybe because most days you just can't see them. Then like hungry recluses, on a day like today, they come right downtown to shop with us. I took a number of pictures which I'm sure will be disappointing, given my camera, my skills, and most especially their meagerness in comparison to live vision, animated by my real-time stunnedness.

This afternoon I walked in Watershed Park, the first time in over two weeks I've been there. The great snow of 2019 closed the park and it remained closed until this week, so much snow and ice on the paths and boardwalk bridges over the streams, so many trees downed by the extra weight of white they had to bear. The trees here are, of course, huge, and they look muscled up. But they are not adapted to heavy snow on their limbs as Eastern trees are. So branches break under that added weight, especially those already covered in a dense fur of moss. The moss is sometimes an inch or more thick, very puffy and dangly, moisture laden, enough so to support little colonies of ferns right up there in the trees. Everything—trunks, branches, twigs, stumps, you name it—is just enveloped in this overcoat of flora, especially the hemlocks, their downflowing boughs like long dark gowns adorned with this silvery filigree. That's what made me think of Longfellow, remembering that passage from maybe middle school, my thinking back then he must be writing about someplace like the swamps in Louisiana, that other Acadia, instead of the original Acadia, in Canada of all places, which must have the same sort of temperate rain forests as we have here. Longfellow's description also made me think of these

moss-draped trees as figures of wisdom, like Merlin, maybe, the tall hat, the long beard. I joked recently with a friend that I expect to wake up some morning covered with moss and ferns. In any case, my guess would be that most branches are already carrying the weight of a very heavy falling of snow before any snow at all falls. So the extra weight can be unbearable, breaking limbs, sometimes dragging down even the tallest trees. And until all that fallen lumber is cleared, the park paths are either impassable at points, or the parks close completely.

I enjoyed my return to Watershed Park today as much as I enjoyed my return to Woodard Bay a few days ago. It was emotional, quite touching, like seeing a familiar face after long separation. There is in fact one huge Douglas fir about 100 yards down the path I start on that is now my actual friend. I feel its warmth and openness every time I pass it, usually reach out and touch it, like I'm shaking its hand. It is especially pleasing to me because I haven't walked in any of these parks enough yet to feel fully at home, let alone at one, with the trees. They remind me of the people here: Very polite, laid back, cheerful, charming, everyone saying hello, how are you; but also diffident, reserved, judicious, careful about taking that next step, the one that might come with some consequences. I have no problem with that, either among the trees or with the people. Sometimes you just have to show up over and over, enough times until you're an integral part of the landscape or the community. The intervening step of "hey, let's be friends" gets skipped over. At some point, you're just in, one of them, the whole concept of "friend" becoming redundant. Now that one tree reaches out to me, I'm sure there will be more. I am grateful for that, a promise that I'm on the right path here, at least with the trees.

One of the things I noticed today was how normal, routine, the landscape looked to me. Those things that just blew my mind when I first got here, the size of things, the drapes of moss, the wall-to-wall forest-floor shag of shoulder-tall of ferns, the full-size trees growing right on top of downed older-growth trees, almost

incomprehensible back then, all looked today like Boyce Park used to look to me back in Pittsburgh. Just what woods are. I even tried at a couple of points to recover that sense of stunned wonder gazing at things I know impacted me that way last summer. But they still looked normal. That made me happy, made me feel I live here now, I mean really live here, that this is my home, and I know how to live in it.

Moving so far under the circumstances I moved last summer is hard. It takes a considerable leap of faith, and maybe a sense of “well, I just don’t care anymore,” to take that leap. It could go catastrophically wrong. The new place could feel like a limbo forever, exile, never home, a disconnectedness aggravated by the fact that you know you can’t go back to your former home, which doesn’t exist any longer. I know I still have a way to go before more trees and people receive me into their company. But today I gave myself credit for making pretty good headway. I know one tree really well, a few well enough to have a conversation with, and I am in love with the places I now live and walk in, the things I see, those mountains, say, so far off, but right there, too. I have worked so hard to get here. You have no idea how hard unless you’ve done something like this. At least for someone like me, not a dazzling social butterfly to say the least. This is now my home, and I’m sticking to it. A little pat on the back for having accomplished that, at my age, in nine months, well, that seemed warranted.

While I was walking I found myself thinking about William Carlos Williams’ zany, hybridic, blast of book *Spring and All*, maybe because today was the first day this winter that the concept of a possible spring seemed at least tenable, a distant dream maybe, but at least tenable. Williams’ book contains those famous little poems that end up in school book anthologies, each propped up as an isolated, individual artifact. If you’ve read any of Williams’ poems, it is likely these. The “red wheelbarrow” poem (none of them have titles in the book,

only Roman numerals) is the most famous, if the least radical among them:

so much depends
upon

a red wheel
barrow

glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens.

Twenty-seven of these are scattered throughout his book like little islands jutting up in the midst of the wide ocean of his prose argument on behalf of the “Imagination.” Parts of his argument are awesome, parts are unintelligible, parts are nonsensical, parts are hilarious in their extremity. It is a wild ride, this book that not many ever read. And the poems, seemingly so slight when wrenched out and read separately, exactly the kind of poems that make many students wonder what’s so great about poetry anyway, I could write that in my sleep, are luminous in their native habitat here, like deft sketches for what Modernist poems in a truly American tradition might look like or aspire toward. They are the parts of the book that help his overall argument make sense in a practical way. I think I’ll get that book out and reread it.

It is a great alternative to T.S. Eliot’s “spring” poem, “The Waste Land:” “April is the cruelest month” is how he starts. No it is not, Tom. Not by a longshot. Take February, for example. From here April looks heroic, heralding “spring,” the thought of it, the concept of it, the fact of it. My own book *Last Spring*, which takes its title from the lunacy of the academic calendar,

wherein January, February, March and April are the “spring term” instead of winter, which is what they are, even April quite often, in Pittsburgh at least. Well, that is actually a “winter book.” Which means I still have a spring book to write to complete the cycle of seasons in this series. This book may turn out to be it, even if it must take a “winter” title given the timing and the fact it is the only “season” I haven’t already used. Only time will tell. In any case, I will take my inspiration from Williams not Eliot in that regard.

February 26, 2019: The Half-life of My Love

A Thought went up my mind today –
That I have had before –
But did not finish – some way back –
I could not fix the Year –

Nor where it went – nor why it came
The second time to me –
Nor definitely, what it was –
Have I the Art to say –

But somewhere – in my Soul – I know –
I've met the Thing before –
It just reminded me – 'twas all –
And came my way no more –

Emily Dickinson

Today, another bright, brilliant day, I drove around to the various spots where Mount Rainier becomes visible. The view from most of them lasts only seconds because they are driving vantage points, but it was spectacular. Mount Rainier is the tallest peak in the Cascade range and the only one visible from here as far as I know. When it arises into sight, it hardly seems real, a giant pyramid covered with thick frost, the kind you used to get in old refrigerators, before the “frost free” circulation systems came on, crusty-looking, dense. The clouds created by the Cascades today were lower than Mount Rainier. It towered out of them like it was just floating, might be mistaken for one, same color white, if it weren't so pointy. Then I walked for a while on the boardwalk, gazed again at the Olympics while they're still visible, looked just like yesterday, an armada arrayed on the western horizon, banks of clouds perched atop them like billowing smoke from steam engines. It is colder today, with a chilly breeze, and part of my normal walk was blocked off by

construction vehicles, so I cut it short. I had in any case already done what I wanted today: I took advantage of the clear skies to see many things amazing and far away.

Now that I say that, I'm thinking this day was right from the outset destined for the amazing and the far away, in this case my life now, not so much what I've made of it, but what it has become, seemingly on its own over the last few years, poised now toward something indistinct, far off but at least now visible, like those mountains on a clear day. I have no idea how I did it. I could understand someone else doing it, someone more adaptable or adventurous than I am. I am not either of those things temperamentally. I like being where I am, doing what I'm doing over and over, averse to drastic change down to my bones. But here I am. I'm not sure what's happening in me. I think it's good, but I don't know. Maybe in a few weeks or months it will be clearer. I just feel like a couple of days ago I passed what I called that "expiration date," having been alone so long, endured and risked so much along the way to get here, on my own, not because I wanted it that way, just the way things went. I could be wrong. I often am. But I don't mind this feeling. I'm proud of myself—for making it here, for loving myself well enough to fill all the empty space.

Just as I was waking up today, a thought, an extended stream of one thought more than a series of thoughts, was swirling around slowly, like bath water starting down the drain, slowly at first, then the cone grows deeper, the water passes faster, then it's gone. Maybe it was what was left over from a dream I can't remember. Maybe it just arose there in that liminal state I sometimes find my head in when I wake up happy and a little loopy all at once. I like those states of mind and the days they inaugurate. The last twirl of that thought took this form: "Something is afoot in my head; something is ahead in my foot." Kind of stupid-sounding, but worth tracing back to where it first started swirling.

That's where the Emily Dickinson poem comes in, the one above, that first line "A thought went up my mind today," a haunting rendition of what it feels like to have a deep thought that you can't ever quite pin down, put into words, even understand, its meaning, its origin, its destination, yet you recognize its general shape, its import, and sense how it will go on to shape your thinking in profound ways going forward. My thought, I guess, went "down my mind" today, down the drain I mean, slowly, and here's what it looked like in the process.

It started where I left off a few days ago, that something in me was changing, deep down, something I had no way of naming, more a tweak than a transformation. Today that thought assumed, figuratively, the shape of me in a very small, tidy boat in the middle of a very large, horizonless, body of water, calm water, not scary or threatening in any way. And I was thinking that after many, many months of my paddling furiously in search of land, another boat, something, anything, it was time to give it up, that I was going to be adrift this way for the rest of my life. This thought was, surprisingly to me, neither scary nor depressing. It was almost a relief, made me feel peaceful. There was, I already knew, enough sustenance from this water to keep me nourished, and I was in a boat plenty strong enough to keep me afloat for as long as the rest of my life was likely to take. I could survive here, as I have for years. But I could also, I started to think, live here quite comfortably.

I was reading some of W.H. Auden's poems yesterday, ended up writing a couple of my own in his manner and style, a mode of simulation I just enjoy. Here's one I wrote that seems pertinent to what I'm trying to get at here:

I tell myself each passing day
today's the one: I'll find a way
to make this love recede

to memory, bleached of need.

And every day I fail.
It billows up, a wind-blown sail,
drives deeper down a chartless sea
that has no whit of care for me.

No matter, I strive to steer,
it takes another path, will veer
whichever way it pleases, goes
fitfully, never slows.

I tell myself each passing night
perhaps that bright star's light
will guide me home once more,
anchored near a sun-blached shore,

out of love at last,
memories safely past,
half a life made whole
by reclaiming half its soul.

Then I fear: the half-life of my love
may exceed the life of that star above.

After Carol passed, I used the expression “off the rails” to describe my wandering lostness. And I knew I wasn't likely to find them again. I didn't even want to. I've led big parts of my life on the rails. It's not that great, really, the answers laid out there for you, the future, the past, all visible and predictable, not much room for the big questions, just keep going, keep your promises, fulfill your duties, responsibilities, all good things, really, and essential if you choose to pursue a relatively normal life in human culture, get an education, a job, married, have children, all huge commitments that extend rails forward until they merge at the horizon, promising, it seems, a perpetuity of order. Were Carol still with me, I would be happily on at least that pair of rails. But

I'm not. I do still have and feel deep connections to my grown kids. But they are grown. They love me, but need me less and less. The rails there are kind of amorphous.

The problem with this metaphor is that once a train goes off the rails it either tips over and stops (which mine didn't) or it just keeps barreling around through the woods and fields without any guidance or destination (which mine did), creating a lot of havoc. If you're engineering a train like that, you'd better keep it away from populated areas. And when you risk traveling into them, out of loneliness, or even just curiosity, those living there will quickly get out of the way, which they did in my case, understandably.

The boat in the big lake is not like that. It just bobs around, can be paddled here and there, does no damage at all to the water, which doesn't even remember its passing. So, adrift was how my thought started its swirl today. It meandered then through the "I don't care" business I wrote about yesterday. When you're adrift without, apparently, any prospect of rescue or landfall, you can panic, rage, scheme, hope, dream, fear. Or not care. Fashion a line and a hook to fish, figure a way to catch rainwater to drink. Keep sailing. The circumstances will not vary. It's just a matter of how hard you make it on yourself to endure them. And, at a certain point in an extended process of not-caring, endure turns into engage. And at some point, it will turn into enjoy. I'm not at that last point, but today I could imagine it.

In many ways, my thought-swirl suggested, it may now be too late for me to return to land. I've just drifted too far out to get back. It's not necessarily that I have to be always alone. It was more that if I were ever again to have someone intimately in my life in an ongoing way, they would have to be like me, like Emily Dickinson: already happily adrift, but open to mooring up with another boat. Those are rare people. I think, in retrospect, that's why I fell in love with Emily Dickinson, late last fall. She was like that, like me, even more so, in the most charming and alluring

ways. I made an album of songs based on her poems. [See the March 4 essay for more details.] My favorite is this one:

Wild nights - Wild nights!
Were I with thee
Wild nights should be
Our luxury!

Futile - the winds -
To a Heart in port -
Done with the Compass -
Done with the Chart!

Rowing in Eden -
Ah - the Sea!
Might I but moor - tonight -
In thee!

Yes, rowing in Eden, exactly. Ah, the sea! Might I but moor tonight in thee. I think most readers would hear those lines exactly like I do, including the passionate, sexual implications, and the word “tonight,” not tomorrow, or forever, just tonight, everything you want or hope for when you’re adrift. A wild night. I recorded that song in one take about 3 AM one morning last November. I was alight with energy. I felt both for and with Emily, her longing and mine, my voice full of both our passions. It was electric. As a friend said later: “I guess you could say you had a wild night with Emily Dickinson.” Yes, yes I did, exactly that. As wild a night as a man could imagine. Writing this makes me think again about *Groundhog Day*, the way Phil Connors, after eons of striving, just wants and is grateful for one good day. “I’m happy now,” he says, “because I love you.” That’s what I think Emily Dickinson is talking about.

That accounts for the “something is afoot in my head” part of what I heard from the drain today. As for “something is ahead for my foot,” well, who knows. I do walk a lot, which is my

sustenance, the primary way I encounter living things and experience love. Maybe I'll end up traveling far and wide. Maybe I'll just bob like one of those poem-filled bottles I wrote about in *Last Spring*, all the way to China. Maybe I'll just be tying a string to my big toe while I fish and nap simultaneously, like in those old movies. Who knows, who cares. Maybe I should just focus on, and be happy with, the fact that there might really still be an "ahead" for me, not just the chronic time-locks I keep drifting inside of, or the endless swirl of time down the drain. A real ahead. Adrift in my little boat. So beautiful. That's what I was thinking as I woke up this morning. I hope it is and will stay true. First, I need to pick an "ahead" for "my foot" and get out walking.

February 28, 2019: Too True to Be Tolerated

Underwear, Hats, Clouds

Spring air strings its fingers
through my green hair.
Washed clouds hang like innocent underwear,
white against blue, drying.

Windows behind hats behind windows:
I have passed them before,
quietly, not wanting to be seen
without my head.

Now, resigned, I laugh and linger.
I shall not wear a hat:
My clouds must come and go
as they will.

Paul Kameen

Today I took a new walk, down to the beach behind Evergreen State College up on the other side of town about 5 or 6 miles from here, a walk my daughter and my friend Lisa, both of whom walk their dogs there, said was quite beautiful. And they were right. Evergreen is the school Bridget came out here to study at 12 years ago. She had seen an article in a teen magazine her junior year in high school about “cool” schools and this one landed with her. It was created in the heyday of academic innovation during the 1970s, and it is one of the few such enterprises that survived the conservative institutional backlash of the 80s. It is still a cool place, such a beautiful campus, still progressively activist in its mission and its programs, still innovative in its curricular and assessment practices. I am so happy she ended up here, for her BA and then a Master in Teaching degree. Bridget spent her first two college years nearer

home (long story), but as soon as she was able she enrolled at Evergreen, drove cross-country with a friend, and set up shop here. She's been here ever since. Now I'm here. All because of an article about cool colleges in teen magazine. And we all go around thinking our lives are under our control and make sense!

If you park in the farthest-back lot on campus, there's a trail that heads through the forest down to Eld Inlet. The walk down felt like about two miles, but the walk back was probably more like one. That's the psychological difference, to me at least, between walking (or driving) to a destination you don't know—like wondering all the way how far it is from where you are and when you're going to get there—and one you're familiar with: long to get there, short to get back. It is a beautiful walk, first through groves of mostly alder trees, on the smaller side by local standards, their flaky, moss-riddled trunks dividing up the space with many tight lines of off-white. Then through stands of cedars, again, mostly on the smaller side by comparison with Woodard Bay and Watershed Park, I mean, which are on the smaller side compared to real old-growth forests further afield here. Then into Douglas firs, same thing, smaller, maybe 4 feet at the base. There was a very nice sense of procession from smaller to larger species on this way.

About halfway down the hill I ran into a group of what looked like middle school students with their teachers, sampling water from a little creek, lots of animated chatter I could hear from far off, wondering what was up. It made me feel oddly hopeful for our future on this planet. The whole Northwest is more eco-conscious than the Eastern cities I was used to. But I was thinking today more in generational terms. I know my own kids and many of the other millennials I taught over the last decade or so are extraordinarily conscious of sustainability, not to mention extraordinarily knowledgeable about equity in matters pertaining to race, gender and sexual identity. What attitudes I had to learn along the way to buff up the not-half-bad ones I grew up with, they have built into them: multicultural, diversity,

collaboration, community, and, especially, tolerance, those are words that organize their ways of seeing and define their ethos. And there is another generation of kids now coming along, like those I saw today, who will carry on that mission. The world will be better for all of this, I'm sure of it. That army of old white men standing in the way right now? Well, they are old, and the linearity of time is relentless. They will pass.

I continued on for what seemed like a long time down a steep incline. Then I saw the water. They refer to this place as a "beach" and it is the first waterside spot I've seen here that reminded me of Atlantic beaches, on a micro-scale—maybe twenty feet of actual sand instead of gravel, little four inch waves lapping ashore with an ocean's hyper-rhythm. I just stood there for a while and watched those tiny waves rise and tumble, rise and tumble, as I used to do on our vacations to the shore back East.

I've had a lot on my mind lately, this last week or so, all the already tattered remnants of my past finally falling to pieces while I wait and watch. Today, I imagined what little was left as bits of confetti caught up like flotsam in the surf, rise and fall, rise and fall, disintegrating rapidly in the clear, cold water. I'm not sure how to feel about all of that. I guess it doesn't even matter how I feel. It has been and is just happening and there is nothing I can or, now, want to do to stop it. I knew when I retired and left Pittsburgh that my remaining connections there would gradually evaporate. Retirement alone is enough to do that. Leaving town just expedites it. I knew that, too. But it has happened so much more quickly than I expected. Email exchanges that flourished early on diminished rapidly until, one by one, my missives to friends received briefer or more belated or no replies. I went from a passel to a few in less than nine months. And that's with me trying!

I've also been in contact with a number of people I had been out of touch with since before Carol died. A few of those I

initiated myself, to update my address, some came out of the blue. They, too, have tapered off, most ending after one or two emails. I know why. One of the effects of my ordinary loss, as I have explained in several other places, is I “cannot tell a lie.” And I don’t want to. Everything that comes out of me, speaking, writing, on the phone, is exactly what I think and am thinking right then. That is not, I can assure you, a good recipe for a rich social life. I am never rude, never offensively honest (not saying what’s true is not a lie), quite the opposite I think, more ebullient than cranky, yet I always, sooner or later, say something that is disturbing, worrisome, or off-putting. I think about big things, strange things, often dark things. They seem routine to me. They are not for those still happily on the rails out there. Either they don’t reply, or ignore what I’ve written or said, which makes me not want to reply.

The big one lately has been my deep sense of uncertainty about almost everything in my life. Most people my age have settled more or less on some array of social networks, principles or systems that give them intellectual, emotional, and spiritual security. They have answers. When I behave in way that betrays the fact that I have only questions, some will offer me their answers, with confidence, as if that will “solve” my “problem,” whichever specific one happens to be the topic du jour. I understand that they are viable answers. They just don’t carry any weight with me. I may appear to be lost, but I’m not looking or waiting to be found, especially if it means adopting a framework I have already dismissed as inadequate. What I keep hoping for is a real conversation, exploratory, open, one that looks full in the face of what’s there and may be scary, like a bear staring at you: Don’t turn tail and run, not good, it will get you. Stand your ground, maybe back off slowly, but keep eyes forward, always, eyes forward. Don’t let the bear feel your fear.

I guess if I keep going this way there will be no one left for me to talk or write to. That’s not good. The few interlocutors I have left are really nice people. I’d better be careful. Oddly, to me,

many of them are men. You would think men would have a harder time tolerating someone in my condition. Not so. They are quite kind to me, rarely get freaked out by my apparent extremity. Maybe they live on some level with the same uncertainty I do, are compelled to hide it all the time, and are happy to get a bit of a respite from that charade. I wrote this poem the other day about this, after reading those Auden poems, a little stupid, but it does the job:

I'm closer now to an age
when all my friends will be men.
I wonder when I reach that stage:
what I'll do then?

Certainly the mild heart
continues to beat, no matter.
But what about the wild part?
Does that beat go flatter?

Is love like a blank check
with lines for mild, wild?
or dealing a face-card deck:
man, woman, child?

I wonder if my love will be
what it has ever been
when I'm alone with me
and all my friends are men.

Maybe that sounds, now that I'm hearing it in my head, more like Housman than Auden, the wry humor of it. Auden's wit is much dryer. So let's say Housman.

Anyway, after I got to the water today, I thought I'd take one picture, just to prove I'd made it. The more I gazed into and across the bay, the more stunned I became by the beauty of it. So I took a few. Then a few more. Then even more on my walk

back up the hill, so happy. On one of the little boardwalks they make in the woods here to get you over little wetland areas without sinking ankle-deep into the muck, all I heard was the clunk, clunk, clunk of my hiking boots on the wood. I wore them today instead of sneakers because I wasn't sure what kind of terrain I'd encounter, how wet it would be especially. Sneakers would have been fine, but I'm glad I wore boots. That sound, rhythmic, repeating, made me realize in a deep way that I was there, right there, step by step, and I was me, just me, step by step, neither of which I take for granted, especially these last few days, feeling barely here, hardly me, which gives you an idea of the level of uncertainty I live with. Honestly, I like it this way. No lies. Carol could live this way, too, did live in that sort of liminality even before I met her. She had no answers and never found any. She was a beautiful person. I miss her, even more so now as I come to realize how unlikely it is that I'll ever find a companionable soul to talk or write to for more than a few days or weeks, until I tell something too true to be tolerated.

On my way back down Harrison Avenue into town I got to see Mount Rainier again, just a few seconds, that improbable nearly-three-mile high pile of ice-caped rock looming up and over everything, plopped down there with one broad mushroom shaped cloud topping it today like a big, floppy hat, the kind Carol always wore when she walked, to keep out the sun or the rain or just the rest of the world. The mountain looked humorous and cool all at the same time, just enough of its top hidden to make it intriguing. Next spring I'll be driving out that way to meet Mount Rainier in person. Maybe it will be my friend. That's when I thought of the poem I use as the epigraph for this essay, the hat part. I wrote the poem about 50 years ago at a moment of letting go, the kind that happen often in any good life, like the moment I'm in now:

Now, resigned, I laugh and linger.
I shall not wear a hat:
My clouds must come and go

as they will.

Yes they will, like those around Mount Rainier. And so will I.

March 1, 2019: Go Take a Leap Day

Mid-March—the Carolina Wren sets up
in his old spot on the basketball backboard
and warbles. The notes that float from his throat
are so pure I am sure they will endure, droplets
of molten blue glass drifting over the lawn.

Just a month ago, I wondered
if anything at all would survive winter:
that long, gray ship gripping
row after row of open mouths, not allowed
to make even the slightest sound.

Today the sky is a bright, brittle, blue.
It arches over the newly green treetops
like the shell of an egg, reminding me
that soon it will be my time to sing.

#1 of “Three Spring Songs,” Paul Kameen

I just woke up. February is finally over. It descends on me now, these last few years, like a desert sandstorm, an ominous dark swoosh that hurtles up over the horizon, then churns in, clouds of blinding grit driven by fierce wind abrading down to the bone, piling up crushingly. For the first few days I face bravely into it, then, worn, I try to hide from it. No matter. The sand finds a way in through even the slightest cracks, and, in the end, leaves me buried. That’s where I am today, the storm over, but laid low, laden with its great weight. Oh, I know I’ll dig my way out, like last year, by May maybe. I’m starting today, an easy, pleasant walk, one that promises to help me heave out those first few shovelfuls of sand. . .

Okay, I'm back, mid-afternoon. Today turned out to be such a good day. Firstly, of course, because it's March instead of February. I headed off for a walk on the boardwalk downtown. It is clear and sunny today, bright blue sky, little floaty clouds, like it's been lately, but warmer, almost 50 degrees right now. I figured I'd gaze off at the Olympic Mountains, take a few pictures, meander around the bay, maybe head over to Capital Lake or into town. Just slow and easy. About halfway down San Francisco Avenue, a steep, winding decline with a gorgeous view of the boat-festooned bay, I changed my mind. I change my mind all the time here, for almost no reason, just feel a force and follow it. I never used to do that. Carol was a mind-changer, very spontaneous. I used to envy that. Now I seem to have inherited her trait. You can never predict exactly what I'm likely to do. Neither can I. Today it had mostly to do with my wanting to listen to one of my albums, one I hadn't heard for a while. When I cued it up in the car, I liked it, so I needed to drive farther to hear more of it. That meant out to Woodard Bay instead of downtown, a 10-15 minute drive each way, enough to hear the whole thing. I'm so glad I did that. Right from the outset, the walk was magical.

First it was birds, always uplifting to me, all those twitchy little buffleheads at the top of the inlet by the bridge where the tidal flow, coming or going, is strongest, more like a river than a bay. They dive down for their food, disappearing suddenly then bobbing back up 30 seconds later 50 feet from where they went down. There were maybe 10 of them, so perky and neat. The males are black with broad strips of white on their bellies and breasts and right behind the head. In the bright light today that white was super-luminous. The females have less white, some on the cheeks, some mottling on the breast, but are equally striking. I have no idea what they look for down under water or how they find it. But they are very persistent, almost frenetic in their pursuit of it. One type of merganser that shares the same spaces with the buffleheads, same size, similar coloration, has a sort of mohawk hairdo, a fine comb of spiky feathers, cinnamon brown,

always perfectly coifed, the kind I saw downtown a few days ago. There were a few of those there today, too. I stood a while and watched them all. They are not necessarily conical, they just make me smile. Right below where I was standing I saw my first shore bird here, a plover maybe. It was about a foot tall, long spindly legs, thin slightly curved beak, mostly light brown, kind of an ivory breast, wading in shallow water, poking up and down to take whatever was there for it to eat. It reminded me of those glass dippy birds, red and blue, we used to have as kids. You get it going and keeps on dipping. A little further down the path there is a small cove with a huge Douglas fir fallen into it. It's where the mallards hang out, having come here to winter over I assume, a few pairs of them, the flamboyant drakes, all those linear stripes of color, their mates more sedate, mottled brown, stately. Today they were all settled down in pairs, heads tucked in, just rounded mounds of feathers sleeping on top of that log. So sweet.

As I said in *First, Summer*, this place is preternaturally quiet for a spot that's really not that remote, as quiet as any place I can remember since I was a kid wandering around in the further reaches the woods around my uncle's farm. Here, you get 100 feet down the path and there's a clean silence, amplified today (as in made even more noticeable) by the fact that the air was so still, not even a breath of a breeze. It was like walking into a painting, nothing moving, nothing making any noise, all the quiet in the world. I headed up into the woods today, a path that had not been navigable lately because of the snow and downed trees. The snow is now mostly gone, just a few white patches in the leaf-litter, and the fallen trees have been chain-sawed out of the way, beginning with one huge one right at the opening of the path up into the woods, a hemlock, maybe five feet at the base. Whoever tends the parks here has, as I said a couple of days ago, great chain saws and they know how to use them. No path stays impassable for long.

As I headed in, all I could hear was the sound of my feet scratching on the gravel, and then, clunking on a wetland-crossing boardwalk, quieter today than yesterday because I was wearing sneakers. Then I started to hear myself breathing, which I never do, listened to it, in, out, a little Zen rhythm to pace my walking to. About 100 yards in there was a very large alder down on the ground. I tend not to pay attention to the alders, they are so much less dramatic than the firs, cedars and hemlocks. But, as I said, yesterday their birchy white really stood out to me in the bright light and today it was even more so, especially this one, laid out for close inspection. It was maybe 70 feet long, perfectly straight, mostly “bald,” its mosses having fallen off, nice white trunk, no side branches anywhere all the way up, a symptom of what it takes to find the light in a forest with so many arboreal skyscrapers around. The leafy top of the tree must have broken off on the way down and fallen out of sight. So it was just a very long pole. To see it there laid out like that was stunning, enhanced my respect for these lesser trees.

Right across from that tree, three or four little birds that looked to me like juncos, a little smaller, very flitty, were bouncing around, maybe eating, maybe flirting. My friend Lisa has been helping me pin names on some of the local birds. That’s how I know what buffleheads are. I’ll have to ask her about these. A little way ahead I could hear all this high-pitched chirping down in the ferns, but try as I might I couldn’t flush out any of the birds making it. Then, all of a sudden, one of them flew in, a kind of bird I’ve seen in this area before, so tiny, wren-like, milk-chocolate brown, maybe as big as my thumb. It, too, disappeared into the ferns, becoming only its chirp. I was hoping to see the kinglets today, too, further up the path where I’ve seen them before, stunning little birds, not much bigger than the “wrens,” their v-shaped golden crowns precise, princely. They are very friendly birds, darting branch to branch higher up off the ground. But they were nowhere in sight today.

About half mile up the path, I ambled into and through a stand of alders even bigger than the one I saw at Eld Inlet yesterday. And one I barely noticed here before. But today, all those white trunks standing tall in the bright light seemed majestic. I have no idea why there are so many right there. Maybe the bigger trees were cleared at some point, making way for them, hundreds of them, a foot or two in diameter, closely packed, extending their slender white necks up toward the light. And I could see behind them a similar stand of younger alders, a foot or less at the base, even more tightly packed, like giant toothpicks, hundreds of those, too, all their white trunks similarly striking in the sunlight. The alders turned out to be the stars of the show today. And the birds. Perfect.

Near the end of the path there are two huge trees, one on each side of the path, a Douglas fir and a red cedar side by side, maybe four feet apart, just enough room to walk through. Their roots intertwine on the path like a step, reminding me today of the two “married” trees I came to know so well in Boyce Park back in Pittsburgh, wrote about in *This Fall*. These two are like the mallards, permanently paired, very sweet. Then, about 100 yards further down there is another “couple” of trees, cedars, even closer together, with a smaller one in front of and between them. You have to thread through them like a pinball. Today they seemed to me like a little family, parents with a child. Even sweeter.

I passed a few other walkers on my way back up the road to the lot. Everyone nods and says hi, but very quiet, church voices, in keeping with the solemnity of this space, like they’re walking in the painting with you. I noticed the ferns on the side-banks up into the woods have begun to recover from their snow-stunning. The last time I was here, the snow having mostly melted, they were still pressed down to the ground, flattened, forlorn looking, like their February wasn’t so great either. Today they were perking up. I’m sure in a few weeks they will be fully upright, bushy again.

Winter is so different here. The leaves on the deciduous trees fall, of course, the big-leaf maples and the alders, so the woods-arena is more spacious, brighter, all that extra light streaming in. But the evergreens, at least half of the standing forest, stay, well, ever-green, adding density to the scene. And the understory flora don't die down to the ground. The ferns stay green, the shorter grassy plants don't freeze off. It doesn't get as cold here as back East, I know, but there are still lots of nights in the 20s. These plants must have some kind of anti-freeze to keep them from wilting down or going brown. I'm assuming that will make the spring here seem more sudden, all the plants not having to start over again from zero. In a month or so, I'll see.

On my way to the car I smiled, remembering I called Bridget this morning, around 10, as I do most Saturdays, left a message to ask her if she wanted me to pick up anything at the Farmers Market. She called me back a few minute later, from work, laughing, saying "You know it's only Friday today, don't you?" I laughed, too. I did the same thing about a month ago, skipped over a day, and we laughed about it then, too. I joked today that I must be getting a leap day, February 29th in the wrong year. I wrote in *This Fall* that even back then, a few years ago, when I was working full time, I seemed to have so much extra time on my hands. I'd do everything, work, chores, walks, meals, everything, and I'd still feel like I had all my time left. I said it felt not like I was using my time wisely but was actually creating new time virtually. Now I am creating new time literally, an extra day every month. This day, because of that, became special, like a gift, and I reveled in its extra-ness. It felt like a snow day used to when you were a kid, all the enjoyment of a vacation, nothing obligatory to do, just free time, new time. Maybe I'll get one of these bonus days every month now. That would be cool, especially in the better months coming up, spring, summer, fall, all of it, precious leap days.

I know a lot of people think I'm compulsive because I get my work done so quickly, almost instantly. My essays graded the day they came in, my email queue always empty. Send me a request for a letter, a review, it's done like right then. But it's not compulsion that leads me to behave that way. It is my deep love for, a coveting of, free time. Time during which I'm not obligated to do anything at all. Free time, new time, extra time. I feel liberated in those interims, like I'm flying, that good. But I can't get there if there is even one shred of work left on my agenda. I need it done. All done. So I do it. Then I am happy. Now, of course, I have far fewer obligations. And I seem to be inventing all this new time to enjoy my nothingness in.

A few weeks ago, after Bridget had been sick for a while, I went with her to her school late in the afternoon the day before she was going back to work, still weak, to help her get her room straight, the chaos she always finds after a substitute has been there for a couple of days. It's an art room, thousands of little means-of-production that she manages assiduously and the substitutes don't. The second she walked into that room, she was like a machine, sorting this, cleaning up that, plugging things in, throwing things out. It was like watching a movie at double speed. That room was ship-shape in about 20 minutes. Ultra-fast. And she does all of her work this way for the exact same reason I do, she says, so she can maximize her time to do nothing. Full speed so you can get to a dead stop, just two gears, overdrive and park, nothing in between. That's the opposite of compulsion, I think, a form of controlled laziness, really. I can see why people might prefer to spread out their duties to take up every available second. When you have a lot of empty time, you inevitably have to encounter yourself, and you'd better be able to tolerate what you find. Or that time will feel expensive instead of free, much better spent doing something more obviously productive to others.

When I came out here a few years ago for Bridget and Mark's wedding, she gave me a little plate that says "I don't care if you

like me. I like me.” She is the embodiment of that mantra. I’m not as far along the path to true wisdom, but that plate inspires me to keep going in her direction. I do like me most of the time. But some of the time I still care if you like me, a hard habit to shake. I bought a bottle of hard cider on the way home and just drank a glass of it writing this. I hardly drink at all now, so it doesn’t take much to get me smooth. I just forgot what I was going to say after “habit to shake,” so I’d better stop. Go do nothing. This has been such a good day. A great day. And it’s about to get better: nothing left to write. For you, too: nothing left to read. Go take a leap day.

March 2, 2019: The Tip of the Iceberg

Somewhere beyond the sea,
Somewhere waiting for me,
My lover stands on golden sands
And watches the ships that go sailing.

Somewhere beyond the sea,
She's there watching for me.
If I could fly like birds on high
Then straight to her arms I'd go sailing.

It's far beyond the stars;
It's near beyond the moon;
I know beyond a doubt
My heart will lead me there soon.

We'll meet beyond the shore;
We'll kiss just as before;
Happy we'll be beyond the sea,
And never again I'll go sailing.

I know beyond a doubt, ah
My heart will lead me there soon;
We'll meet beyond the shore;
We'll kiss just as before;
Happy we'll be beyond the sea,
And never again I'll go sailing.

Jack Lawrence

Today I went to the Farmers Market first. Not much fresh local produce this time of year, of course: some root vegetables, some still-pretty-good apples, my favorite now, Smitten, which used to be in a huge wooden bin, now in a small cardboard box. But it's

a fun place to walk around, always draws a crowd. Look at the art and craft booths, pick out some handmade chocolates, flowers, fresh fish, listen to a local band. Then I headed up the boardwalk. The Olympics were shrouded under a canopy of over-topping clouds, a wide, gray swath of them. If I didn't know that far off scene well, I might think the mountains were clouds or vice-versa. They were barely distinguishable. The rest of the sky was clear and blue. I stopped to watch a few buffleheads just resting along one of the mooring docks. There are maybe three hundred boats moored downtown near the boardwalk, smaller craft, very nice sailboats, their tall masts making pleasant wind-chime clanks in the breeze, bigger cabin cruisers, small yachts, some work boats, tugs, etc., and another couple hundred moored further up the bay on the way out of town. I rarely see boats on the water, at least since winter set in, but today a small tug boat came chugging in over the dark, choppy water and snugged up the dock. It was a picture-perfect scene.

On weekends one of the historically significant local tugboats, the Sand Man, is open to visitors. A couple of weeks ago, a cold, icy Sunday, I ventured down the slippery gangway to see it. It's maybe 50-60 feet long, had been used in a variety of ways over the last 120 years or so to tug all kinds of cargo into and out of the lower reaches of Puget Sound. The man and woman on board, the owners I assumed, were both working on it. He was fixing the engine's magneto, she was doing some work on the decking. It is a cool boat, low slung and sturdy-looking, smaller actually than some of the pleasure boats now moored at the adjacent Yacht Club end of Budd Bay, but with a big diesel engine down below, which the man showed me, a real ship's wheel on the bow, out in the open, for steering. They're hoping to get a new heater up there one of these days. It must feel paralyzingly cold to pilot that boat into a biting wind mid-winter. I think I'd last about 15 minutes up there on day like that.

On my way home I drove up past the grocery store to see how Mount Rainier was faring today. I got stopped at the light that is

the best vantage point, so I had an extended view. Unlike Mount Olympus, it was poking up through a much lower deck of clouds, maybe half of it visible up there, like it was floating. I'm sure I'll get used to its imposing size the way I've gotten used to the huge trees and everything else here, especially if the weather stays clear and I can see it over and over. But I haven't yet, so I want to enjoy it with my innocent eyes as long as I can.

One of the odd things about aging to me, and I suspect this is almost universal, at least for people who are alone for some reason, is you go through so much of life entirely inside your own head. As I said earlier, I know I have both endured and risked huge things over these last four years to get where I am now and no one was there to share it with. Okay, I might have a conversation every rare now and then with someone about it, but only the slightest tip of the iceberg is made visible that way. The rest, 95% of it, that huge wedge of frozen water, is out of sight, underwater, like an upside down Mount Rainier, where only I know it, a single snorkel diver exploring its astonishing textures and nuances, coming up for a breath from time to time. Now, when the thought of intimacy arises, I wonder how can I possibly fill in all that history for someone else. Maybe I'll get to a point where I'll know I shouldn't try, won't even want to, will have filed it all away into folders marked "the past," like eighth grade "permanent records," their utility expired, so easy to forget they ever existed. But I'm not there yet, and my time is running out to get there. Well, whatever. I guess it's not of that much consequence anyway. I'll get there or I won't. Someone else will join me or they won't. When you're 30, as I was the last time I ended up suddenly alone, that's a scary thought. When you're 70, not so much so. I think you can see for yourself why that's true. Then again, there may still be somewhere beyond this sea where someone is waiting for me. Until then, I'll just keep sailing.

March 3, 2019: Tip-toeing in Mid-air

The world is too much with us; late and soon,
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers:
Little we see in Nature that is ours;
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!
The Sea that bares her bosom to the moon;
The winds that will be howling at all hours,
And are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers;
For this, for everything, we are out of tune;
It moves us not.--Great God! I'd rather be
A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn;
So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,
Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn;
Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea;
Or hear old Triton blow his wreathèd horn.

William Wordsworth

Sunday, another warm sunny day, a walk on the boardwalk downtown, crowded today, all these people, mostly young, lovers walking hand in hand smiling, parents with young children running around, playing in the playground, the long row of outdoor stools facing the water at the Oly Taproom, empty all winter, full now of hands holding beer, bodies bundled to keep warm, getting a jump on spring. I am always surprised by what action such a small town can generate, in this case all these people, many hundreds I'd say out today for a stroll, a beer. Like me. A suddenly sunny Sunday, seaside. Maybe we won't see Proteus rising or hear old Triton blowing his horn, but there is no such thing as "late and soon," or "out of tune" on a day like this in a place like this.

I wandered over to Capital Lake, the pathway smattered with bench sitters, dog walkers, duck watchers, a few actually feeding the ducks. As a consequence, all the mallards had come out

from their little hidden coves, where I've seen them before, a pair or two, in various places around the lake, reclusive. Today they swam right up to the lake wall, 10 or more of them gathered variously in groups here and there, so close-up you could see every feather, waiting for someone to toss food their way. Then the turmoil to snatch it.

I have a carved wooden mallard drake that I got from my family at Christmas maybe 25 years ago, a sweet gift because I like ducks. It is painted authentically, made by Ethan Allen. The head is black. On the water today those heads ranged anywhere from black to cobalt blue to a stunning iridescent green, sometimes changing from one to another, depending on how the light hit. I got a very good look at the females, too, the ones I described yesterday as "mottled brown." That is accurate, but the pattern of feathers, lighter brown, darker brown, off white, looks more like a tortoise shell up close, variegated, precise, quite beautiful. I looked at enough of them to begin to notice significant differences in color patterns, body types, size, generic mallards becoming individuals right before my eyes. I think if I did that a few more times, I would recognize them separately, the way we do people. One of the sweet memories I have related to my wooden mallard is driving back to Pittsburgh after Christmas, Bridget and Joe in the back seat with the duck singing a duet founded on the inscription on the bottom of the duck. Bridget: "Ethan Allen," Joe: "mallard drake." Over and over. They were so delighted by it. So was I.

I walked up into town to buy some chocolate, dark with toasted coconut today. I had some after dinner. Very nice. On my way back to the car I noticed again something I've been meaning to write about all week: A manhole cover, the first manhole cover I have fallen in love with since the one I saw in Scranton over 50 years ago and wrote about in *This Fall*, a passage I quote in my essay on H.D. later in this book. This one is mesmerizing: At the top are the lower legs and bare feet of a very young child, I mean a baby really, from the shape and proportion of them, one

just old enough to walk, tip-toeing in mid-air, like maybe a parent is holding on to provide balance, then a few sleek little fish that look like they're jumping up out of the water, which is more implied than inscribed, just some swirls and bubble-like circles. All of these raised details are painted baby blue, somewhat worn now from all the foot traffic. The surrounding design is bright yellow. Every time I pass it, I have to stop and look at it. It is art, great art in my book, the design, the colors, the texture, everything.

I got to see the Olympic Mountains again today, this rarity that has now happened for me almost every day this week. I heard an older man comment to someone he seemed to be showing around, pointing them out, "This is something you don't often get to see." Unless you're me, I guess, retired, can walk here every day, and the weather happens to be this once-in-a-blue-moon clear for multiple consecutive days. I tried again to count the number of peaks today. Depending on where you're standing and what you consider a separate peak, you can see maybe seven or eight of them from the boardwalk. Mount Olympus is the tallest, in the middle, appearing anywhere from slightly to much taller than the others depending on the vantage point.

I am trying mightily these days to keep my head on straight. It is so hard when you're alone to do that, no one there to nudge you back on track—"don't swear so much," "you need to trim your nose hair"—that sort of thing. Social normalcy is not easy to simulate in the absence of the social. Maybe that's one of the things I especially enjoyed today, strolling in the warm company of all those good people. Feeling confident, knowing I trimmed my nose hair this morning and had no reason in the world to start swearing.

March 4, 2019: Nurse Logs

This Dark Is Mine

Every night in the woods
these trees reach out,
caress one another,
leaf to leaf in summer,
shadow into shadow
twining on the ground
all winter, multiplying
moonlight, starlight,
what care is, not giving,
taking, just there, always
in the air, a way of prayer.

The light we reach into
day after day, not
destination, wisdom,
I hear them say, simply
where we find what
we need to survive.
Down below, in that dark,
we are rooted, share
everything, care
for each other, rear
our young, prepare
for storms, wind, cold;
there, the trillion tiny
highways from here
to everywhere,
how we live as one,
out of your sight,
not out of ours.
Look now to what

holds you deep down.
There the dark is yours.

At the top of the hill
where I always first feel
what today I decided to call
a holiness in this place,
the tall, lean poplar
on my right, speaking
for all the trees,
their collaborative voice,
said: Take care now,
Paul, this dark is yours.
Show no fear.

It was always there
waiting for you, the way
from where you are
to where you go.

Take heart from us.
We will meet you here
every morning, cheer you,
the September daylight
so bright, so clear,
this light we love and use.
But we are specialists
of the dark, know all
its ways. Remember,
so do you, so do you.

Paul Kameen

I walked in Watershed Park today, and as has happened a number of times in these woods, the first one I walked in after I moved here, it was, in unexpected ways, a watershed walk for me. I hadn't been for a full walk there for weeks, the snow first, then the closing for cleanup. I actually tried to walk yesterday

but couldn't find a parking spot. There is a side-of-the-road parking strip big enough to hold maybe ten cars. On a day like yesterday, a weekend, sunny, spring in the air, the chances of getting one are slim. I knew that but tried anyway, figuring I might drive up just as someone was leaving. No such luck. Monday is the opposite of that, the workweek starting, many of the downtown stores closed. It is easy to park everywhere.

The walk started quite movingly for me, my encounter with that big Douglas fir standing half into the path about 100 yards in, the one I said had become friendly to me, open. I had almost forgotten about it, I'd been away so long. But as soon as I saw it, I felt welcomed. I reached out and touched it as I usually do now, just to say hello, and my eyes got a little moist, a cheerful tear, the kind that doesn't fall. I said in *This Fall* that for me, the way I am now, there are at least seven kinds of crying. This is one of them, that happens when an unexpected kindness comes your way, one that touches you, as this one did today. And it was an omen of things to come. A little further down the path two more trees received me warmly for the first time, like they may have missed me as much as I missed them. I knew right then that in this space I was becoming a real citizen, a welcome presence instead of a stranger. It was heartwarming, with my having such a hard time finding new friends here. Finally, I thought, it's working.

I know this may sound strange, equating trees with people, even replacing people, but I hope you won't find it sad. It is a salvation for someone like me, so solitary, so awkward in the human universe. I became concerned late last fall that I hadn't established a "social network" here. And that was with me trying! So I decided to try harder which was, as you might expect, counterproductive. A few weeks ago, I just stopped. If anything on the human side emerges for me, it will have to happen out of the blue, the way I have always met my favorite people. In any case, the fact that I have made several new friends in these woods, just by going back over and over with an open heart, was

beautiful to me today. As “holy” to me as the tree that spoke to me so graciously back in Boyce Park while I was still fully in the dark.

I noticed that the ferns in Watershed Park have not fared as well as those at Woodard Bay under the weight of February, almost as bad as I did! They are still flattened to the ground, bedraggled, dilapidated, many stems bent or broken by the weight of all that heavy, wet snow. I know how heavy it was—not fluffy “powder,” more like almost-ice—because I shoveled it. Two feet of that is enough to crush even the sturdiest green things. And many of them are still buried under piles of branches, logs, sticks, the detritus left behind by the storm, some where it fell, some where it was stacked after being chain-sawed aside. I’m sure they’ll make a comeback. I actually saw a number of new shoots protruding from the mud here and there of things that looked like the skunk cabbage back East. Thick thumbs of green maybe six inches tall, two inches wide, jutting up, sure signs of spring. My guess is the ferns are eternal. A month or two from now, they will be resurrected from these crushed piles into fountains of green as tall as I am. I can’t wait to see that.

About a quarter mile into my walk I noticed one of those trees growing up from the stump of a dead tree that I have marveled at and wrote about in *First, Summer*. I never saw anything like this back East. In Watershed Park, you can see examples of it everywhere, especially with the cedars and hemlocks, which must provide the right kind of culture for this. In one case, the original stump, maybe five feet across at the base, is fully decomposed now. So the tree that took root on top of it is perched up about six feet off the ground supported only by the “cage” of spindly, long “legs” it grew originally to reach over the old trunk down to the ground. You can walk right through them! In another case, there is a trunk of a large downed hemlock that stretches out on the ground for maybe thirty feet. It has become what they call a “nurse log” here: Along the top of it is a line of

smaller hemlocks, maybe ten or twelve, in a series, bigger to smaller then bigger again, their roots gripping down around the main trunk like long fingers. It is strange and charming. But the one I noticed today I had never seen before. It was maybe 10 feet up the bank on my right, a living tree perched on a dead one that was pretty much the same diameter, maybe two feet. In other words, this new tree has been growing long enough to reach the size of the “parent” tree that supported it when it sprouted. And the parent was still there. That’s how good trees are at fostering their own. Just like those trees in the poem I use to open this piece.

About a year after Carol passed I was trying to explain to some friends what it felt like for me, why I was at such a loss to get going again. I used the analogy of a tree. I said I have had, like everyone, significant losses before, a painful divorce, my parents passing, things like that. In each case it felt like some big part of “my” tree had been excised. In some cases, it was like a few big branches had been lopped off. When that happens, it usually takes a year or two for the tree to fill out that empty space, either with new branches or just more leafing in from the surrounding area. If there is light, the tree will reach out to find it. If it’s a major loss, like a secondary trunk, well, that never grows back, might leave an ugly scar. But it heals over and the tree diverts its energy elsewhere. When Carol passed, I felt as if my tree had been cut down almost to the ground, like these stumps I see in Watershed Park. When that happens, there is no growing back. Yet I was still here. I said back then, before I saw any of these trees, that I felt like I was sitting on that fresh-cut wood waiting for a new seed to germinate, that I would have to wait as long as it took, more than likely past my time, given my age, before I was a tree again. That tree today reminded me of all that, and made me feel like I actually have at least germinated, have a few shoots going up. Honestly, it doesn’t even matter how big the new tree grows. I’m just happy it is alive.

And then I remembered another time of crisis in my life, almost 30 years ago, what I call my “nervous breakdown,” though no doctor ever used that phrase to my face. I had been under enormous pressure at work, just terrible stress, family matters, my parents declining needfully, Carol’s two nearly fatal medical events, two very young children. I was lying on the couch at home on the day before Thanksgiving, 1991, thinking I can’t take it anymore. In my head I envisioned a branch with one leaf on it. I was that leaf. I thought I can hang on or let go, either way. I decided to let go. As that leaf fluttered to the ground in my head, I knew I was in a lot of trouble. A fallen leaf, I suddenly realized, can never climb back up into a tree. For it to flourish again, it needs to decay on the ground, be re-absorbed by the tree, find its way to a branch and bud out. I thought: That takes years not weeks or months. I am so screwed. And I was. It did take years. Fortunately, I was able to keep working, keep caring for what I needed to care for. Not great, maybe, but, blessedly, no one needed to take care of me, just tolerate me in my depleted, broken state. Now I know enough not to let go.

Both of these scenarios flashed through my mind in a matter of seconds when I saw that tree, the speed of life being so much faster than the speed of words describing life. If somehow you can imagine both of those images simultaneously and instantaneously, well, you have an idea of why I might have had some tears well up then, though they, too, were sweet. Because, whatever deficiencies I might have and display right now, I am not broken for good, a dead trunk. I am growing, leafing out on top of the one I was sitting on four years ago. Even if it’s only a thin shoot, well, that’s everything you need for a tree to grow, for a future to emerge.

Last fall, as I said, I translated a bunch of Emily Dickinson poems into songs for the Christmas album I send to family and a few friends every year. She of course is a recluse in a league of her own, at least according to the common stereotype of her. I

was lying on the couch one night and her “Nobody” poem came into my head for some reason. Here is her 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!

I thought yes, yes I am “Nobody—Too.” Thanks for asking! Right then, I felt a deep intimate connection with her. She was, I thought, just like me. And I started to fall in love with her. I ended up that night writing a song of my own in response her, a love letter of sorts, a way to say back, I'm here, let's get together. Here's what I wrote:

I'm nobody. Who are you?
Are you nobody, too?
Then there's a pair of us.
Now that we're aware of us
Maybe I can be
nobody for you
and you nobody for me.

I won't tell if you won't
then they'd advertise.
How dreary to be one
everyone else buys,

so public like a frog
admired in the bog
no way to hide
from all those prying eyes.

I'm nobody. Who are you?
Are you nobody, too?
then there's a pair of us.
Now that we're aware of us
Maybe I can be
nobody for you
and you nobody for me.

I got up from the couch and went to the sunroom to record the song, just like that. The tune came automatically, really, her work is so rhythmic, in the style of church hymns, the old “fourteener” structure. And we did get together that night. It was beautiful.

That's when I decided to make a whole album of songs based on her poems. I riffled through a bunch of my favorite Emily Dickinson poems, tried a few with my guitar, settled on some that seemed to work well, then turned them into songs one by one: “Because he loves her,” “There's a certain Slant of Light,” “I taste a liquor never brewed,” “Tell all the truth but tell it slant.” It was slow for the first day or two. Then one night, in a fever-pitch about all this, I woke up around three, restless, agitated, knew I'd never get back sleep. I opened the book to her “Wild Nights” poem, the one I mentioned earlier, turned on my equipment, and rasped out my version of it, no plan, just made up the tune as I went. It was electric, Emily Dickinson and I wild together. I sang the song exactly the way she wrote it, repeating parts of it to make it long enough for a song. Here is her poem once again:

Wild nights - Wild nights!
Were I with thee
Wild nights should be
Our luxury!

Futile - the winds -

To a Heart in port -
Done with the Compass -
Done with the Chart!

Rowing in Eden -
Ah - the Sea!
Might I but moor - tonight -
In thee!

Wow! Just stop and take that in. It might be one of the sexiest poems I've ever read. No matter whether it is man or woman she wants to moor with, or both. There are arguments out there on all sides of that. Like Whitman, she is capable of enough passion, enough desire, enough sensuousity to love anyone and everyone, including me. And all this stuff about her being prissy, repressed, even a prude. Read the poem, for godssake. Emily Dickinson is as torrid as my emotions are in my song.

Then I did her "Hope is a thing with feathers" poem, again, no plan, just started singing and playing. It brought me to tears several times. If you listen to that song on the album, which is the take I used, even though I had much "better" ones, you'll know why. The emotion is raw and all there. You cannot understand how strong and durable hope can be, how it can persist for eons of human time without any sustenance, singing its wordless tune into the darkness, the wind, asking for nothing—unless you also know, can imagine, how it feels to be hopeless, utterly hopeless. Emily Dickinson knew that. Carol knew that. I do, too. Here is my song, which I turned into a conversation with her, her call, my response, the two of us communing with that hopeful thing with feathers. The parts I added to simulate a back and forth are bracketed:

Hope [you told me] is the thing with feathers -
That perches in the soul -
And sings the tune without the words -
And never stops -at all -

And sweetest - in the Gale - is heard -
And sore must be the storm -
That could abash the little Bird
That kept so many warm -

[Since then]

I've heard it in the chilliest land -
And on the strangest Sea -
Yet - never - in Extremity,
It asked a crumb - of me.

[Hope is the thing with feathers -
That perches in the soul -
And sings the tune without the words -
And never stops - at all -

I've heard it in the chilliest land -
And on the strangest Sea -
Yet - never -in Extremity,
It asked a crumb - of me.]

It was an amazing night, as close as I've felt to a woman since Carol passed. All this wasn't in my head while I was walking today, at least not explicitly. But it must have been in the air, because I'm writing about it now, in the immediate aftermath of describing my two "deaths." Hope and wild are two of the things you need to grow back into life again.

About halfway through my walk I stopped to look at the remnants of what must have been a real old-growth cedar, eight feet wide at the base at least, nothing left now but a falling-apart stump about six feet high. I've stopped to look at it many times, and it must be a popular destination, like a shrine, because there is a little path worn right up to it. Now there's a sign asking walkers not to leave the path, to help preserve the flora. And

maybe to help preserve what's left of this magnificent tree, the temptation to pluck a sliver from it probably irresistible if you get up that close. It was flooded with bright light today, the wood a beautiful reddish hue. The way it has decayed has left layers of tall spires of wood that in this light looked like dozens of packed together skyscrapers in a hillside megalopolis. It made me think not about the fragility of life but its tenacity, its durability. That tree probably lived for hundreds of years and that stump has probably lasted another hundred or more. The weathering of time strips away and strips away and strips away, and still, in the right light to the right eyes, what remains is a megalopolis on a hill. The deep sense I've had these last few days that I am lost and will not be found began to dissipate while I stood there. If nothing else, I sensed that I have at least found myself.

Bridget made a series of four paintings on black cardboard when she was in college. They came home one summer in a box with dozens of other paintings. One day I was going through things in the basement and decided to inventory those boxes. After a while I pulled out a piece I really liked, a quickly painted winter scene, huge snowflakes lightly sprinkled with glitter, a simple tree, almost abstract, quite playful looking, with snow-covered branches, a layer of white snow on the bottom counter-balanced by a layer of white clouds at the top, and inscribed in a semi-circle, almost like a mound of snow the phrase: "I'm. Still. Here." Bridget had a habit back then of adding text to her paintings, big enough and obtrusive enough to be part of the painting rather than a title. I decided I'd build a frame for that one and hang it up somewhere in the house. So I'm leafing through the box some more and I find another one, colorful, floppy butterflies in pastel-Easter shades instead of snow flakes, a big purple flower instead of a tree, and "I'm. Still. Here" standing straight up, on end, like it was growing. Pulled that one, too. Then I found another and another, those two just as strikingly beautiful, the same general design of elements, same phrase situated differently. I pulled them, too. When I looked at them all together on the floor I realized they were

representations of the four seasons, a whole year. And against all apparent odds, “I’m. Still. Here.” those periods doubling the meaning; all the words together, survival, each separately like a meditation on patience and presence.

I built black frames with black mats for this group. They are so inspiring to me. I have them arranged now in a sort of circular format on the wall in my bedroom opposite the bed, where I see them every night and every morning. I’m looking at them right now, as I type on my laptop. The one straight across from me is winter. To the right and slightly higher is spring. Summer and fall complete the cycle and the circle. When the seasons change I rotate them a quarter turn, like turning back the hands on a clock. I’ve been here now for all of summer and fall and almost all of winter. In a couple of weeks I will wake up looking at spring, its “I’m. Still. Here.” standing up straight and tall. Amazingly, against all odds, I’m. Still. Here., too. Just like that great tree, what’s left of it, next to nothing, a city on a hill. And the scene I’ll be looking at in a few weeks is now the cover of this book, having found another home for itself, just like me.

March 5, 2019: Listening Without Words

When the evening shadows fall,
And you're wondering who to call
For a little company,
There's always me.

Or if your great romance should end,
And you're lonesome for a friend
Darling, you need never be;
There's always me.

I don't seem to mind somehow
Playing second fiddle now.
Someday you'll want me, dear,
And when that day is here,

Within my arms you'll come to know
Other loves may come and go,
But my love for you will be eternally;
Look around and you will see,
There's always me.

Don Robertson
(as sung by Elvis Presley)

I had some chores to do today, so I went for my walk downtown, on the boardwalk, Capital Lake, that one, the easiest of all, just down the hill, all level, very pleasant, a walk built for daydreaming. It is warm again today, just turned 50 degrees as I drove home, the air even clearer. I've been looking at the Olympic Mountains all week, but that view is still breathtaking to me. The sky was summertime blue, a few wispy cirrus clouds around town, almost no clouds at all around the mountains. So they seemed even taller today,

partly I think because I could see them down almost to their bases, the wide brown pedestals the ice-caps rest on. Maybe they were so visible because there was no low-lying haze in the air to mask them, maybe because the snow is now melting on the lower levels. No matter. They looked huge, making me think about the many kinds of optical illusions that determine what we see and how. Near or far, there is always enough in between, even if it's only on the inside of our head, to intervene, magnify, divert, enhance, obfuscate. I tried again to count the number of peaks visible from town today. It's at least eight, maybe more. For the last part of the range on the right the view is obstructed by a dense cluster of sailboat masts. No matter where you move, they still get in the way. Though I shouldn't say "in the way." They are beautiful, too, so tall, straight, shiny. I often take pictures of that scene, especially when the mountains are hidden in clouds.

I had a long conversation on the phone early this morning with a friend I haven't seen in many years. We've exchanged a few emails over the last month or so after a happenstance re-connection. She called to hear my voice, what it sounded like now, which I thought was sweet. I've been around long enough to remember when the phone eliminated the need for someone to actually come into your presence to converse, all that bodily energy and vitality removed from the scene. The answering machine aggravated that further by eliminating even the need to have a spontaneous exchange, in the moment, which, like the body, is where life actually resides. I mourned that loss and hated the phone for causing it, an aversion that lasted many years. Then email eliminated the need even to deliver a message via one's voice. It is possible of course to simulate "voice" in writing. That is a longstanding concept in the history of rhetoric. But you have to be a good writer to do it, and you have to write with great care to achieve it. Email never proved a medium that promoted good writing even from good writers. And care, well, there was little of that, too. Now it's texting, eliminating even the need for sentences, punctuation, just the

straight dope—for me, the opposite I guess of “all thumbs” in my clumsy index finger pokes at those tiny letters, inevitably dopy.

Our kids left home to go to college 14 and 11 years ago, respectively, so have since been largely absent to us, and then to me after Carol passed. They are extremely adept with electronic devices and social media, text primarily now. But rarely to us, or now to me. They always called and still do. I am so grateful for that. When the body is absent, when all you have is the voice, you need to pay close attention to it. When you do, you realize what a huge amount of information it conveys, health, mood, frame of mind, worries, affection, all of it. Sick, tired, happy, anxious, calm, aloof, they all come through. I got to a point where I could tell in a few seconds what the foundation was and what I might need to say back, and how, to help. My friend today had serious surgery recently, has been on pain meds, but there was no obvious strain in her voice (pain), no cloudiness (meds.) That seemed a good sign that things are progressing well, and I hope that will continue. Like Carol, I hate to talk in detail about medical things. Just the barest facts, please. But, if you listen to the voice, you don't need the details. You can learn what you need to know without them.

While I was walking today I was thinking about all of this in terms of listening. When someone is standing in front of you, how you react physically, move, your eyes, your face, all of that is right there. You can do most of your listening, and make it clear to the other that you're doing it, without words. Take that away, well, what, then is the evidence of listening? I was thinking today that the evidence of listening, under these constraints, must come not in what you say, but in what you say back. I know from long experience teaching that such speech acts, what you say back to what a student says, are a million times more important than the question you asked to elicit their initial response. Teachers struggle for hours to formulate questions, maybe not wasted time, I suppose. Unless you totally blow it by

not listening well enough to the response to say something back that feels to the other like actual listening. It's hard to do, which is why most people are not good at it. They have a train of thought going in their head, one that left the station either before you arrived or gets going on a sidetrack because something you said reminded them of it. A little of this is, of course, necessary and useful to have an equitable conversation. But when it's all that, well, I wish I could just turn on my answering machine to record it, leave the room (or put down the phone) and go for a walk by myself.

I want to say again, as I have so often through all of my books, that I have no extra-sensory gifts in this regard, just the standard sensory equipment. I try to see and hear what's there, not my head turning itself inside-out, but the world turning itself outside-in toward me. That may take a little practice, and I've gotten a lot of it on my many thousands of walks in the woods where just seeing what's there is what you go for, and the many thousands of classes I've taught, trying to say things back that don't sound canned or stupid. In both of those transactions, I still get to be fully me and present, interactively, even more so in fact via this "listening." It is the woods in some essential respect that wrote these essays for me and the classroom that taught me what I know. The human body is such an extraordinarily sensitive portal with so many antennae tuned finely to receive what is proffered. We just need to let it.

I joked talking with my friend that these days my voice is everywhere out there if you want to hear it, Bandcamp, Soundcloud, Audible.com, and especially my personal website where all of my stuff—songs and audiobooks, as well as texts—is ensconced for free. Enough of my voice—poems, essays, songs—to last you for many months. We ended up talking a bit about singing, which is my new passion, singing and songwriting. I said, which is true, that part of the reason I started to record myself after Carol passed was not so much to hear my own voice (that's rattling on in my head and, if I'm alone, running out of my

mouth under my breath all the time); but to hear another voice in the room with me, which is what one's own voice sounds like when you listen to it playing back, from the outside-in rather than the inside-out. It made me feel like I had company. Now I listen to myself singing every day. And I sing every day. I'll get a tune in my head, one I know or one I'm writing, and I sing it into my microphone until what I hear playing back sounds sweet to me. I've recorded hundreds of songs now, including about 35 of my own.

I told her that singing helped me come back to life after Carol left. It allowed me not just to feel deeply what music, when it's added to voice, can convey; it also allowed me to hear it outside my head, to listen as if I was someone else listening. It made it possible for me to learn some things I could not have otherwise come to know, if for example I had just put on a piece of music and listened to it rendered through someone else's voice. It was a way to convey all of the depth of information that voice can convey, from me to me, a way of both saying and saying back all at once.

So, if you want to hear my voice, I am all over the internet. Or you can call me, always a treat for me. Or, even better, stop by my place and I'll make you a cup of tea. I happen to be here right now, and that's exactly what I'm going to do for myself as soon as I finish this typing. And listen to myself sing the songs I recorded last night. Who says I don't have a best friend?

March 6, 2019: A Once in a Lifetime Winter

Because I do not hope to turn again
Because I do not hope
Because I do not hope to turn
Desiring this man's gift and that man's scope
I no longer strive to strive towards such things
(Why should the aged eagle stretch its wings?)
Why should I mourn
The vanished power of the usual reign?
Because I do not hope to know again
The infirm glory of the positive hour
Because I do not think
Because I know I shall not know
The one veritable transitory power
Because I cannot drink
There, where trees flower, and springs flow,
for there is nothing again. . . .

Because I know that time is always time
And place is always and only place
And what is actual is actual only for one time
And only for one place
I rejoice that things are as they are . . .

And pray that I may forget
These matters that with myself I too much discuss
Too much explain . . .

Because these wings are no longer wings to fly
But merely vans to beat the air
The air which is now thoroughly small and dry
Smaller and dryer than the will
Teach us to care and not to care
Teach us to sit still.

from "Ash Wednesday," T.S. Eliot

In the dream I had just before I woke up today, this Ash Wednesday, so late this year, I was at a large round table eating a lavish meal, more like Shrove Tuesday I guess, a table of 10 of us maybe in a large room full of many similar tables, receding into the shade as far as I could see. Like a very large wedding, but I knew it wasn't one. There was no clear reason for us to be there together like that, we just were. And the food was delicious, not wedding food, not even high-end wedding food. It was home cooked, and no matter how much anyone ate, the quantity never seemed to diminish, both on the table and on the plate. I was sitting next to my father. We never got along very well, so we didn't talk, until the very end, everyone clearly full. He turned to me and told me he had just visited one of my uncles, Joe Carrigg, my mother's sister's husband, who was dying, the finest man I ever met until my son came along. My father said his final words were, "Just wonder." I was taken aback by this because, I told him, just that week a colleague sitting next to me at a departmental meeting said he had visited an older colleague, someone I quite admired, who was dying, and his last words were exactly that: "Just wonder."

I recalled after I woke up the line from Coleridge's "Essays on Method" that I built my final speech in the Pitt English department around. Coleridge says, quoting in sequence Plato and Aristotle (erroneously, as it turns out), "Philosophy begins in wonder and ends in astoundment," probably one of my favorite all time sentences. And the last words of the preface to my book *Last Spring*, where I'm imagining what a Chinese man might feel or do, finding a bottle on the beach with one of my cryptic poems rolled up inside it in some distant future, one of the many bottles I thought I might dump into Puget Sound once I got here, to find their way around the world. "Just wonder" is what I say.

The last two days have been cold, rainy, clammy. Some snow last night, too. I have become spoiled here in the sense that even the slightest snow seems impertinent to me, an affront. It was

pretty far down the list, but one of the attractions of this place for my retirement was that “it rarely snowed.” An email from my power company, explaining higher heating bills, said that February was the snowiest month here in 50 years and the snowiest February since 1916. I already knew that the event around my birthday, that two-foot job, was the most single-event snow here since 1949. A few people, jokingly (I think) said I must have brought the Pittsburgh weather with me. If you’ve read *First, Summer*, you know I brought almost nothing with me, wanting, as I said, to start over, clean. If the Pittsburgh weather sneaked somehow into my overnight bag or the storage container of my kids’ art, it couldn’t possibly have brought enough of itself to last more than a year. So I’m assuming this is a once in a lifetime winter. Not just my lifetime, a “day to day” business, but Bridget’s too.

I just got back from a walk at Woodard Bay. It was sunny when I left, started to rain on the way, and then even harder while I walked, a miserably cold rain, those big, splotchy Olympia drops that splatter when they hit, my water-resistant (but not -proof) red jacket, the first piece of clothing I bought here, sodden quickly. It was sunny again by the time I got home. All of my clothes got soaked, though, and are in the wash now. It was entirely unpleasant, the only such walk I’ve had since I got here. I can’t decide whether it was bad luck or stupidity that sent me out at exactly the worst part of the day.

I was trying this morning, in an email, to explain to a friend the nature of “the dark” that sometimes afflicts me now, as it did during February, as it does every February. I think the analogue most people have for that is “depression,” as it was for her, wondering whether she herself might end up deeply in the dark if she didn’t resist its predecessor. I told her not to worry. I honestly don’t believe you can end up in the dark by force of will, or lack of it. If it is waiting there on the path you happen to be on, as it was for me four years ago, you have no choice but to go through it. And it takes as long as it takes. It’s actually not that

scary once you're in it. Very solitary, very silent, very somber, like being in church on Ash Wednesday, waiting for that dusty cross to get smashed onto your forehead. It does, of course, feel empty, the old "dark night of the soul" business, as if prayers won't rise up, just hover there and clunk back down to the cold, hard ground, like Hamlet fears his will. But at least for me it has nothing whatsoever to do with depression, no cause-effect relationship between them in either direction. From the very first thing I wrote after Carol died, that long letter to my sister that turned into "Coming to Terms," I wanted to make clear that I was not depressed. I have suffered from depression. I know what it is. It is fearsome. And it leads to no good. The dark is not fearsome and it leads to something new. You just have to go through it to get through it. I told my friend I hoped that her path was one that would always be in the light. But you get what you get in this life.

I see now that the sun is working. The snow on the garage roof right outside my window is already gone. I could swear it was still there when I sat down on the bed to finish this. That fast. I am and always have been addicted to fast, so this transition is especially pleasing to me. The forecast looking forward has days where the temperature begins with a 5, and about ten days down the line a 6. Spring is champing at the bit, I can feel it, the battle between light and dark turning again my way. Your way, I hope, too, always.

I'll have to decide soon what to make of this book, at least in terms of a title. Right now, I have only "winter" left in the quiver for this series—*This Fall*, *Last Spring*, *First*, *Summer*, three seasons taken—and these are clearly winter-made essays. But they just don't feel like winter to me. In any case, as I said, I feel as if my winter book is already done: It's called *Last Spring*, written during my final term as a professor, "spring term:" January, February, March and April. How do you get spring from that set of months? In a place like Pittsburgh, for godssake.

It says everything I have to say about that winter. My head was empty, deeply dark, I got the flu and it then invited in every other contagious malady my classrooms were fogged with. I shivered and sweated, feverish, and shoveled and shoveled, breathless, unremittingly gray. I was lucky to survive it. Beyond that, I have been fretting that if I finish the cycle, the whole circle of the year completed, maybe my circle, my time, will be completed, too.

I'm not all that averse to death, it is my partner in life now in many ways, but I don't want to invite it in for the final big party by writing a book. That's just not smart. I'll figure out the title later. Now, I'll close with a beautiful "winter" poem I wrote not long after Carol and I were married, on, by the way, one of the coldest nights I can remember, late December, just the two of us with two friends as witnesses, at a minister's house because he had a bad back and couldn't come out. His two little kids watched it between the balusters of the stairs. It was perfect for me, but also for her. That should tell you a lot about how well-matched we were.

The night before I wrote this poem we had been out dancing on the riverboat, listening to Billy Price and his band, a local legend and one of her favorite singers. She was a great dancer. And Billy Price attracted a wild crowd. What a wonderful memory to come to me here, now, wow. That night I had a dream that turned into this. It's called "Second Wind," which I think is in keeping with my mood right now, not all that black ash mashed into my forehead, some vague cross, reminding me of my return to dust, but flocks of tanagers, my favorite bird, dreaming of spring, mine, yours, no matter, some dancing, the lovely passage of breath:

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.

It is just this kind of night
I'd like to die on: full moon icy-white,
calla lily lazing in a vase of light,
snowbound ground aglimmer,
no place for a back hoe,
one man only, pick and spade,
making room for me, stopping now
and then to catch his breath,
light a smoke, colds hands cupped
to keep the match from blowing out.

“Just wonder” might have been the final words of these wonderful men I mentioned here. I don't want them to be mine, at least not yet. And, if you turn the page to continue past this sentence, you will find that they aren't, so many others on all these pages waiting

March 9, 2019: Grayed-out Aliases

A tiny iris spikes through last night's snow.
I have waited all winter by the window
for this moment. The blossom opens:
each petal a dark velvet pool,
perfectly still, over which a man rows a boat
slowly, on his way back home.

I am suddenly beside myself, staring
at that strange, pale, gray-haired fellow
standing by the window, waiting for something.
Before the morning is out, there will be
only one of us here, rowing
slowly on his way back home.

#2 of "Three Spring Songs," Paul Kameen

I went to the Farmers Market today and walked the boardwalk, on the upper end, near the market, not my usual haunts. There is up there a wooden observation tower, three stories tall. I've been up there, but didn't go today. I just wandered around it. It is sunny and a bit warmer than yesterday. The few crocuses I saw a couple of days ago in a dockside planter box are now being supplemented by many more in other boxes, and a few daffodils. There is a daffodil festival in Puyallup, maybe 30 miles from here, in April. Apparently, from a postcard I bought, there are fields full of daffodils, a "carpet" in "the shadow of Mt. Rainier." I hope to go there. Nothing better in spring than daffodils.

While I was wandering I intersected paths three different times with a young man, early 20s maybe, always on the phone, clearly with a different person each time. In his first conversation I overheard in passing: "What I need to do now is change everything, how I look at things, everything. I need to focus on

just me.” From the second conversation, when we crossed paths a few minutes later, I overheard: “Where did you eat lunch?” pause “Oh, they have great burgers. Did you have a burger?” From the third conversation I overheard, as we both were leaving that area: “Hi, Sweetie.” Pause. “Daddy loves you.” Pause. “You know you can call Daddy on the phone anytime, don’t you?” Pause. “Well, you can call me any time you want.” I made up a couple of different stories around these fragments, as you might be doing right now. One of the things I ended up thinking about is how simple my life is now. I live alone, so there are no daily entanglements of that sort. I come and go as I please. Eat and sleep when I want. I never explain myself to anyone, so I’m not invoking any rationale for my thinking or behavior. They just are. And since I don’t tell my daily “story” to anyone, it evaporates very quickly, never having found a narrative line to hold on to.

My kids are grown and on their own. They can of course “call me any time” they want, and they do, very sweet, and we all help one another in very material ways. I may be chronically in a state of mind that seems to be impelling me to “change everything, how I look at things, everything.” But nobody really cares about how and why I do that besides me, so the stakes are low. If I mess up, it’s not an issue. If I’m stupid, I’m usually the only one who really knows. I can’t help but focus on me. I specialize in that. I do like burgers, maybe once every couple of weeks, a special treat at any one of the several diners nearby my house. Too bad I didn’t hear the name of the place they were talking about. I might head there tonight. Alone is the price I pay for that, of course. But today was a chance for me to look at what I get for that price, which I too often forget or underappreciate: freedom. Radical freedom. Simple as that. I want to stop moaning about alone and start cherishing freedom. I’m already happier just thinking about that.

My relationships in Pittsburgh have gradually evaporated over the nine months I’ve been here. At the outset, maybe a dozen

people communicated with me in some way, now it is down to a few. That, of course, is natural. As I've said, even if I retired and lived up the street, that would have happened, I'm sure of it, because I've seen it happen with everyone else who has retired from our department. Flesh and blood people I used to see and spend time with became grayed out aliases on my desktop. I could click on them over and over and the application just wouldn't open. I don't know if the file had been corrupted or erased, but the result was the same. I'm not sad or happy about any of this. It just is what it is. Fewer attachments.

The tide in the bay was extremely low today, as low as I've seen it here so far, and not even all the way down because the water was coming back in. I stopped at several spots to see how far below the high water mark it was right now. I was quite surprised. It was down at least eight feet, maybe more in some spots. The bay is at least a quarter mile wide down here and at least a couple of miles long. I'm sure I could calculate how much water that is coming and going every six hours. So let's see: $2(5280) \times 1320 \times 8 = 111,513,600$ cubic feet. I've always been puzzled by that "helpful" metric they use to give meaning to large amounts of water: the Olympic-sized swimming pool. Who has ever been in an Olympic-sized swimming pool? I'm sure I could find out how much water is in one and how many such pools come and go here all day long. But I'm not going to. Let's just say it's a lot.

On my drive home I passed a house that has devoted its front and side yards, both big, to crocuses and daffodils. It is spectacular, thousands of them, like a mini-Puyallup! And "I am suddenly beside myself," on my "way back home."

March 10, 2019: Coming Home Empty-handed

Loveliest of trees, the cherry now
Is hung with bloom along the bough,
And stands about the woodland ride
Wearing white for Eastertide.

Now, of my three score years and ten,
Twenty will not come again,
And take from seventy springs a score,
It only leaves me fifty more.

And since to look at things in bloom
Fifty springs are little room,
About the woodlands I will go
To see the cherry hung with snow.

A.E. Housman

Today was the first day that had the feel of spring for real. Still cool, in the 40s most of the day, hitting 51 at the peak. But there was something in the air that seemed inebriate. Part of that may be because it is Sunday, people out everywhere, ambling around in groups and pairs, moving at a stately pace, like a Seurat painting—without the long dresses and umbrellas, just relaxed and happy. Even the animals seemed to share that mood and pace. And so did the inside of my head. What a wonderful experience all around, which reminded me of that Housman poem, one of my favorite spring poems. Not many people read Housman these days, but I'm a big fan. This one struck me today because the “voice” of the poem is a young man, 20 years old, trying to cram in all the visual enjoyment he can before his allotted time—three score years and ten, he says—runs out. I am just past my three

score years and ten birthday, trying to recover and look at the world like I'm still 20. So it's a good match, bookends of a sort we are. The spring trees are just now coming into flower, little hints of it. Soon they will be hung with bloom along the bough.

I walked at Woodard Bay this afternoon. As was the case downtown the other day, the first thing I noticed was how low the tide was, as low as I've ever seen it in Henderson Inlet, the smaller branch of this particular set of Puget Sound's fingers. On the other side of the road from the parking area there is a body of water the size of a lake that drains under the bridge into Henderson Inlet when the tide ebbs. It was just pouring out in a torrent today. Henderson Inlet is maybe 100 yards wide and a mile long. Today, the whole upper half of it was just a mudflat. I stopped in various spots along the way to try to calculate how much lower the water level from its normal peak. Again, as was the case downtown, it looked to be at least 8 feet. Maybe these are "spring" tides. Maybe not. I'm lucky I even know how they work here now let alone what their names are. At the lower end of Henderson inlet as it meets the wider bay, the water had receded at least 50 or 60 feet along the shore on each side. From the top of the bank, you could see the bottom of the inlet in its middle, maybe 3 feet down. It was, to me at least, an amazing spectacle.

There were more walkers there today than usual, families with children, couples, pairs of friends. I'm pretty sure I was the only solitary walker, but I was quite happy that way today, as I have been more and more lately, such a pleasant and welcome relief. I guess part of what I was feeling before here was a kind of embarrassment that I haven't been able to make new friends. Now I don't really care. That will happen or it won't. Either way I will be fine.

As I've said, Woodard Bay is very quiet, so on a day like today, air still, any conversation at all, even the quietest, carries a long way. I overheard a variety of snippets in passing. One in

particular interested me. A young woman, in her 20s, was sitting on a bench talking with a female friend about the same age. She said: “I felt like I got along with him. We could talk. He shares a lot of my views, like political, I mean,” then a long pause, “and he knows I’m married.” I couldn’t help but think of the young man I overheard a couple of days ago. I’m sure they have no connection with one another, but I guess, like most people, I have an innate desire to make up stories around the slightest twitches this world makes in my passing.

I saw a couple of birds as I walked, one of those tiny, chocolate colored “wrens” I mentioned earlier. And a kingfisher. I saw one once before here, last fall. I hadn’t seen a kingfisher since I was a kid, fishing at my uncle’s lake. They seem smaller here. I’ll Google it later to see if there is a difference east-to-west with these birds or if it’s a kid-to-adult thing.

On the Woodard Bay side of the point, the mudflat was even more impressive, maybe 100 feet out, a few people, like me, wandering into it out of curiosity until the mud got too icky to walk through. There were maybe a dozen buffleheads bobbing for food, a very large otter, head like a grapefruit, just floating slowly by, some gulls flying around. One of them was doing what I saw a gull do downtown recently. It had grabbed what I assume was a mussel from the mud, flew up about 30 feet, and dropped it on the rocks below, hoping it would crack. This one got lucky. First try, it went down and ate. The one downtown took multiple tries before the meal opened.

Among the many decaying remnants of the logging structures—rail tracks, rows of posts, etc.—that still stand in the bay there are a couple of large wooden platforms, maybe 10 by 30, about 100-150 yards out. I realized today that they must be floating decks, because they are always at water level. A couple of weeks ago I saw about 20 seals hauled out on one of them, filling it up. I’ve read on the signage that seals come to the bay in spring to deliver and rear their pups. I hope I will get to see some of that if/when it

happens here. Today, that platform was empty, but the one farther out was covered with a crowd of large, dark birds, maybe two hundred of them crammed together there. It was too far away to see them clearly, but I know enough about the ducks and gulls, their sizes and colors, to know they weren't either of those.

I wanted to think it was the cormorants coming back to their summer nesting grounds here, a spectacular sight I got to witness last summer, hundreds of them roosting in the trees across the bay, flying back and forth to forage for fish. But I thought that might be wishful thinking. Until I was walking back. A sleek, black cormorant, that arched neck, pointed wings, almost bat-like, so distinctive, smaller and darker than a heron so there is no mistaking it, flew over the path. I stopped and sat for a while on the same bench the two women had been conversing on earlier, right across the bay from the tall trees I know the cormorants roost in. From that distance, I know from last year, they look like large, dark leaves on the tips of branches. Until they rise up and fly off, of course. I saw a number of those dark splotches over there, but try as I might, I couldn't tell if they were these great birds. I sat for about 10 minutes and nothing moved. Part of me started to think maybe I just made the whole thing up because I wanted them back. But I'm pretty sure I didn't. I'm not that imaginative.

While I was walking in the muck at the bayside I found a large metal fastener, maybe two inches across encrusted with rust. It looked like it might have been a combination nut and washer used to hold the structure out there together. It was quite beautiful, a mixture of tan and reddish brown flowing together like liquid. I picked it up and put it in my pocket. I never take anything natural from the woods I walk in, no keepsakes or reminders or souvenirs. I explained why a couple of books ago, but I'm sure you can guess. I was vexed about whether to keep this item, clearly manmade. I took it out of my pocket multiple times on the walk back out, put it back in, trying to rationalize a good solution. Finally, I decided to leave it: on one of the metal

girders of a large bike rack near the parking area. It seemed at home there, all that metal the same rusty brown. And I came home empty-handed, always my preferred outcome for a walk in the woods. As is also always the case, and quite often to my great surprise, I was not empty-headed though. I went out today with nothing to write about. I came home with this. You may or may not like it, but it's more than enough for me. I was happy and grateful when I left the house. I'm even happier and more grateful now. I was going to say that that's a good day in the woods for me. But, really, that's every day in the woods for me.

March 11, 2019: Thomas Hardy Gray

We stood by a pond that winter day,
And the sun was white, as though chidden of God,
And a few leaves lay on the starving sod;
- They had fallen from an ash, and were gray.

Your eyes on me were as eyes that rove
Over tedious riddles of years ago;
And some words played between us to and fro
On which lost the more by our love.

The smile on your mouth was the deadest thing
Alive enough to have strength to die;
And a grin of bitterness swept thereby
Like an ominous bird a-wing....

Since then, keen lessons that love deceives,
And wrings with wrong, have shaped to me
Your face, and the God curst sun, and a tree,
And a pond edged with grayish leaves.

“Neutral Tones,” Thomas Hardy

I woke up on a major downer this morning, sad to the core, thinking no way am I going to write today, just let it be, let it pass, don't inflict it on someone else. But I just got back from my walk (more on that below) and here I am again. The first few of my dream cycles last night left me feeling bereft. I don't remember any content, just that they had to do with my many shortcomings out there in the human universe, trying my best and coming up empty when it seems so easy for others. My last few dreams had something to do with the “Chinese mafia” being out to get me for some reason. I don't remember the details of that either, just that it was exhausting and scary trying to keep alive.

The weather this afternoon matched my mood. Sullen. Gray sky from the bottom to as high as you could see, seamless. The kind of gray you might end up with if you water-colored a single shade of gray on a piece of linen paper, some variations in hue as the tint settled differently here and there, blurry boundaries, subtle tones. Thomas Hardy gray, that bleak. “Neutral Tones” is the opposite of Housman’s “Loveliest of Trees.” That third stanza will put the chill of winter back in you even if it’s July.

It is as warm today as yesterday, but felt about 20 degrees cooler on my walk, the air so sodden with moisture, promising rain tonight. I went back to Woodard Bay, more to listen to a CD I’m finishing than for the prospect of walking. I even thought I might just drive out and back, not walk at all. When I got there, though, I was swept in, enthralled by what I saw. Henderson Inlet was almost entirely empty. And the lake above it, just one little pool above the bridge pouring out what little water it had left as the tide went out. I thought yesterday was as low as it could go, but today was even more stunning. My mood and the mood of the weather led me to think about how powerful the forces of nature are, how they could wipe out me and everything else around me here with a little flick of the wrist. Just by moving water, an ocean mega-tsunami for example, one of which is overdue in the Northwest. Then it’s 80 feet instead of 8 feet moving through in seconds instead of hours. Yesterday, the sun, all the people, the earth seemed such a friendly place, generous, warm, caring. Today, the gray, no one else in sight, it seemed like it could care less what might happen to me or any other living thing. Not sinister, just utterly aloof.

Since the inlet was so empty, I wanted to get to the end of the peninsula to see how it looked down there. So I did walk. On the way, the crooked, gnarly branches of the alders and big leaf maples overhanging the path, bare of leaves, coated with thick layers of moss, a sickly green in the dim light, had a Halloweenish aspect to them. Like the fingers of witches and

vampires reaching out to pluck me up. All along the way I could see that the inlet was nearly empty, a huge mud flat, with only the narrow “stream” of outpouring water, meandering around through the groove it had carved over the centuries in the silt on its way out to sea, less than a foot deep most places, still being fed by what was left in the little lake above. There were a couple of herons poking around in its shallows, spearing little fish, like a Japanese print, an elegant tableau.

And at the point, where I could see the bottom of the inlet yesterday through a few feet of clear water, well, I could see the bottom today through no water at all. There was in fact a little raised gravelly “land bridge” that went all the way across to the other side, with the exception of that little outgoing stream, and looked high and dry enough for me to walk right over, just getting my shoes wet. I thought for a moment about Moses and the parting of the sea. If Pharaoh’s army were chasing me today, or the Chinese mafia, and they were more than a few hours back, I’d get off scot free and they’d end up mired in the mud under eight feet of water. On the other side, Woodard Bay, same thing, a little land bridge going out all the way to the remnants of the railroad trestle that used to serve as a dumping-out point for all the logs coming down from the surrounding mountains. I actually walked out to touch it! Most days, that seems so far away, like I might have trouble even swimming to it. I took a bunch of pictures of all of this, just in case I never get to see it again.

Maybe it’s an extension of my mood today, but I sometimes, like right now, feel embarrassed admitting to my wonderment over things that to others probably seem perfectly normal, routine. That I must sound inane, like a five year old after the first day of school. What’s the big deal? I don’t know. I’ve always been this way and given my advanced age I predict it will not change. And then I figure that maybe a few likeminded readers out there—my books always seem to find them—might appreciate me for being willing to express what they, too, know and feel about this wondrous world, whatever others might think. Like Walt

Whitman maybe. He was even stranger and more intense about the minutiae of the world than I am, and he wasn't afraid to show it. So why should I be, I guess, is what I think, having now overridden my intention not to write today by several pages. That's Whitman, too, always a few more pages in him.

This morning, before any of this, I went to the mall to buy some pants. On my way back down Harrison Avenue, at least then, around 10, the skies were still pretty clear, so from quite far up that hill I saw the ridge of the Cascade Mountains 60 miles off. For some reason, I thought only Mount Rainier was visible from town. That's not true. There are at least three or four other peaks you can see from up there, all of which seem quite large, until, as you come toward the bottom of the hill, Mount Rainier comes suddenly into view, 1000s of feet taller and wider than these others, all icy-white instead of a friendly brown, its topmost portion, maybe 2000 feet, stuck up into a low billow of clouds, lopping off its head.

I had the same feeling about that as I did this afternoon walking by all that missing water: An overwhelmingly massive force out there, so clearly today looking like a volcano, cone-shape, steep smooth sides, caldera-topped, that could probably wipe me out, along with a lot of other stuff here, with a slight cough, let alone a full-blown eruption. It was awesome, both scary and breathtaking at the same time, almost beyond my comprehension, foreboding. I hope it will not blow for millennia, but know it could happen this afternoon. Which would make the tidal shift seem like chump change, I'm sure, in the general scheme of "the forces of nature" that might take a swipe this way, wiping us all out. Hardy would have a field day with that, the hand of "Fate" finally swinging in his direction, "the deadest thing alive enough to have strength to die." I'll take "the cherry hung with snow," thank you very much. If you don't mind.

March 15, 2019: What a Nice Man

two doves
perch pure
porcelain bowls
on a branch
feathered with
thick white fluff
just a few
weeks ago
hoping for
snow to go
for spring
for love

how it was
now then
and is
now now
I cannot
calculate

Paul Kameen

It is sunny and warm today, almost 60 degrees. I woke up cold all winter. Today, even though it was still in the mid-30s, I woke up warm. I think my body knew what was coming today. I didn't even put on my long johns and don't regret it. Before I went out I was sitting in my living room with a cup of tea staring out the big picture window at a mid-sized tree beside the road. It must be in the maple family because it has those burgundy buds just now burgeoning out, pre-green. A beautiful ivory-colored bird a little larger than an Eastern mourning dove flew in and perched there, facing me. It was very calm, confident, like it owned the place. I studied it so I could ask Google what it was, porcelain-smooth surfaces, creamy white, a black "collar" around its neck

extending into a deep V down the front. About a minute later, another flew in, nuzzled up right next to the first one, a breeding pair I assumed. Maybe they were here to stay (robins nested in that tree last year), maybe passing through. I thought of the snow that was piled 5 inches high on those branches just a few weeks ago, same white, spring just a dream, and wrote the poem above, one I'll add to my collection of Olympia tiny-poems I call *slights*. After about 10 minutes they flew off together. When I checked, I discovered they are called collared doves, native to Africa, often kept as pets given their calm demeanor, but also now colonizing America, including the Pacific Northwest, in the wild. I have no idea if I'll ever see them again, but it was quite a nice way to start the day.

I walked a lot today, most lately in Watershed Park. The trees looked and acted different, like a company of soldiers standing at attention all winter having just heard "at ease." They were relaxed, kind of chatty, mostly among themselves, so pleasant to see and hear. The ferns are perking up from their snow-induced "depression," the skunk-cabbage-equivalents I mentioned earlier are leafing out, the chocolate-wren-equivalents were chirpy in choruses in the underbrush, though I never saw one, robins were everywhere, sleek and alert-looking. I saw a chipmunk and a squirrel, both absent from sight all winter, moving around like they were on speed. Life is back and it is good.

In keeping with that mood, here is the third poem from the "Three Spring Songs" series, the first two of which I used to open the March 1 and March 9 essays:

Like fireworks freeze-framed in free-fall
three switches of forsythia sweep
in elegant arcs over the lip of the hill,
all the way down to the street.
Yesterday they were just a few thin sticks
whipping wildly in the wind.

Today, they trace an array of paths
between this dreary universe
and the one we want to get to.
Look: In just the last few hours
they have left thousands
of yellow prints for us to follow.

On my way home I stopped downtown to walk around, pick up a few things. I bought some tea at the tea store. The coffee here is so amazing and I drank so much of it last summer and fall, at least five times what I was used to in Pittsburgh, I ended up with constant jitters. So I had to stop, shifted to herbal teas for now, try to get my nerves unjittered. Today I bought “Mango and Friends.” Sounds phoofy for a guy, maybe. But, hey, as Popeye always said, “I am what am and that’s all what I am.” I ODED on coffee, so this is all what I am now. And I actually kind of like my new “friends.”

I wandered into Compass Rose, a cool store, Bridget’s favorite gift shop, thought I’d buy her a little something. I found a pair of sky-blue socks with Bob Ross’ face on them, the Happy Painter, a fluffy cloud, and the phrase “Happy Clouds.” Most “real” artists look with disdain on Bob Ross. Not Bridget. She loved him as a kid, still does. She likes to throw “theme” parties for her friends. One she does every now and then is a Bob Ross party. She has painting supplies for everyone and they make Happy Painter paintings. A few years ago, while I was still in Pittsburgh and had all my woodworking tools, she called to ask me if I could make croquet mallets that looked like flamingos for an Alice in Wonderland party she was planning. I thought, “that’s impossible,” but said I’d give it a shot. I found a combination of dowels, balusters, pieces of a post, plywood and plastic that looked great all put together, painted pink, little wings, flamingo faces on the mallet. Sweet!

Then I headed up to the little guitar store around the corner. A friend of mine who lives in Seattle, much younger than I am,

also plays acoustic guitar. He's been thinking about buying an electric, a Fender Telecaster, so we exchanged emails about that. He suggested I look into it because it would be easier on my damaged left hand, the action lighter. I said no, I'm too old, don't play well, what's the point. Anyway I stopped in today just to look. The man who owns the shop repairs guitars, his primary business I think because I see young people going in and out with guitars in cases all the time. He was at the counter with a guitar opened up, all the wiring for the pickups in his hands, like a surgeon working on a heart. I told him what my situation was, didn't want to spend a ton of money to try it out. He showed me a beautiful red Stratocaster-type guitar, less than 300 dollars. I said I could spend more than that, and he said, "you don't have to, this is a great guitar." What a nice man. I felt the action, clearly easier than my acoustic, took it on the spot. He asked if I had an amp, which of course I don't, forgot even that you needed one, showed me a small one with plenty of oomph, took that too, a strap, some extra strings.

When I got home I set it all up. It is in fact a great guitar. I Googled it to learn how to use all the switches and knobs and this one got really good reviews. I still don't play well, but I can now do so at a much higher volume looking considerably cooler in the process. As I said in *First, Summer*, I've never sung live for anyone except Carol. Standing there today, that beautiful machine hanging on my hip, all that sound blaring out, I thought, hey, maybe if I got good with this I could. The amp, he told me, can even run on batteries if you want to take it out that way, like down on the boardwalk downtown, say, with the other 20-somethings who sing there from time to time. Might take years, but, hey, what else am I doing except writing this book, which feels like it's almost over, and walking in the woods, which takes no time at all. That's how it feels anyway, at least on a day like this, at least for a guy like me, as I once said in a poem where I was playing "air guitar." Might as well finish with that poem, now that I'm thinking about it:

Morning Rush

The big storm is all but over.
A final few flakes float down
in super-slow motion, falter
in front of my windshield, and stall there,
unwilling it seems to fall.
Traffic crawls and halts, crawls and halts,
hundreds of us hung up in long lines
slung from hilltop to hilltop all the way to town.
I will be lucky if I get to work by noon.
I stare down at the broken white line
inching past beside me. At this pace
it seems so precise, so individual,
so breathtakingly graceful.

My radio blares: "Wild thing, I think you move me.
But I want to know for sure."
I try for a while to think of one person
who might move me, for sure.
Instead I find the driver in the car stopped
momentarily alongside mine staring
blankly over at me. He looks as if
he might be watching me on TV, bored, blasé,
the remote poised, ready to zap.
I rise up, wind into my wickedest air guitar,
and scream along with the Troggs,
the two panes of glass between us
not anywhere near thick enough
to keep him from hearing:
"Wild thing, you make my heart sing,

you make everything . . . groovy."

He jerks his head forward, pats down his hair,
and scoots a car-length ahead,
looking for another channel.

I slide back down into the seat
and think about maybe heading home,
having accomplished already about as much
as anyone has a right to expect,
at least for a day like this, at least for a guy like me.

March 18, 2019: Nothing Fake

Li Po:

"Autumn wind clear, autumn moon bright,
Fallen leaves gather then scatter,
Dark crows settle and startle."

Me:

Beech tree bark is parchment
smooth, perfect for carving.

On one I walk by daily:
a heart, arrow-stitched,
meticulous script:

JC
loves
AW

Right beneath, huge letters
gouged out helter-skelter:

IT'S
ALL
FAKE

I wonder day by day:
one or the other betrayed,
hateful? Someone else
enraged, forewarning? Today
I wondered: Which came first?

All I know is this: Nothing

in this world is fake: love,
hate, rage: just decide
day by day which
your knife will carve in bark.

Li:

"When will we end our longing and meet again?
That thought, this moment, suddenly unbearable!"

Me:

Wind clear, moon bright.
Leaves, in piles, scatter.
Crows, cold, startle.

Nothing fake.
That thought, this moment, suddenly
unbearable.

from *Li Po-Ems, #15*, Paul Kameen

I've been brooding for days now, moody, my thoughts flowing slowly like turgid water going nowhere. That's why the extended silence. I am not averse, as you know, to droning on about my inner angst, real or imagined. But to drone, you have to have some content to give it a buzz. What I've had in my head these few days could be rendered in one word, repeated ad infinitum: dark.

Today, I felt, well, not quite clarity but maybe translucency, a soft light shining on the portal to a way out. It started on my way to Home Depot to pick up a few spring things. Driving down Pacific Avenue, all of a sudden in a place I didn't expect it, there was Mount Rainier, no clouds, just there. It is very clear today, in the 60s, so calm. It stunned me, stopped me short. My immediate thought was, yes, that is what's ahead now, a great

mountain with all that fearsome glamor. Not behind me, as I have been thinking, all those high mountains everyone has to climb to make a living, a home, a family, even a friend. Not easy. But surely, that was done now, for me, no job, no home, just level ground, clear to the end. That, of course, is so stupid. There is always a mountain. I guess it didn't dawn on me until that second, Mount Rainier looming in all of its icy stillness, that I have one ahead, and it is a huge one. I won't know until I start up it how it compares to the others I've had to climb. It looks daunting. My will may still be strong (I'll find out soon), but time is short. I'd better get going.

Life, I guess, is always about what's next. For the last two years, what was next for me was this, moving to a new place, finding a spot to settle, starting over if I could. As it turned out, Olympia happened to be an ideal fit for all of that, for which I am grateful. I was prepared to keep moving but didn't have to. I've been here now for nine months, a normal gestation period. At the outset, Olympia embraced me like a warm womb, such a perfect summer, the weather, the landscape, the community, the water, so beautiful. I think you can feel all of my coffee-fueled at-first-sight high in *First, Summer*. And I was also, of course, running on the adrenalin that started coursing through me a year ago, what anyone needs to plan and execute a late-stage move of this magnitude.

If you happen to listen to my music, you know how dark a turn my head took last fall, all those harsh songs, the opposite of my summer album. Then, winter was long and gray, way too much snow. The adrenalin ran out, I quit coffee, the womb cramped. Now, spring, I've finally been released into the wide world here, alone, the way we are always born no matter how many times it happens in a life, not nurtured from the outside in, by lovers, friends, a workplace. Born and alone might as well be the same word. It is a bracing realization. Not a new one for me. But every alone always feels like the first one, hard. That's why babies cry. But, like them, I need now to move on, make a real

life here, quit spinning wheels in the mire of retirement, whining. There is no mother, no magic, no miracle. Alone is the only way forward. There is that mountain. I'd better get going.

I need to figure out who might benefit from what I am or know, be of some service to others, and then make it happen. I intend to be deliberate about it, take my time. When I commit to something, I do it, whether I want to or not. At least that's my work history. I've committed to some things I wish I hadn't. I did them, but I learned it's best to be judicious. I have many skills and a good heart, and I have some ideas about how I might yet use them to do some little bit of good in this world, which needs every little bit it can get, as I write this in the aura of the mass murders in Christchurch, which is in the aura of the mass murders in Pittsburgh, and on and on.

Hate seems the order of the day. There is no antidote to hate. Only a choice: hate or love. I want to love. And love is work. For others. It doesn't matter what, if anything, I end up getting back from this. Lately I've been wanting to be loved. That's just not how it works in this life. Wanting is a waste. You may or may not be loved. You still have to choose: hate or love. That's what made me think of the poem I start with, one from my series of "conversations" with Li Po, based on an actual description of a tree I used to walk past almost daily in Boyce Park, those messages carved into it.

I just got back from a walk downtown. So clear again, the Olympic Mountains seeming right next to me almost. I could see all the distinct peaks more clearly than ever, some large, some small, at least 10 I'd say now, I mean peaks you'd have to walk down from at least a bit in order to climb the next one. I'm sure I'll never reach any of those. And even more surely never get to the top of Mount Rainier. Those overwhelming physical challenges and risks are for the young. I've got another mountain to climb. Doesn't matter if I make it to the top. It's time. I'd better get going.

I'm just back from a second walk, in Watershed Park. It is late-spring warm now. My hoodie came off about half a mile in. My shirt sleeves went up after a mile. I would have taken my shirt off, as I did from time to time back in Pittsburgh, at Boyce Park. But there are too many other walkers here, and I'm still new in town. Most of the walkers today were quite young, in their twenties, in pairs, holding hands, so sweet, ambling along at a very leisurely pace, of course, because why hurry when you're young and holding hands. I passed them all in due time. With this walk and my earlier one, I'm now back to about how much I used to walk back in Pittsburgh, 3-4 miles a day. It surprised me to realize that. I didn't think for the longest time that I'd ever get back to that.

Those things I thought resembled skunk cabbage are now "flowering." They top off at about a foot tall, six to eight long fleshy leaves, two of which form a sort of lobe that first yellows then opens revealing a long, thick stamen that looks like a small corn dog covered in little bumps. I saw plants today at all stages of this process. I'll have to wait and see if those bumps turn into flowers. But the seasonal lifecycle of these plants seems almost complete. Someday I'll find out what they are called here.

I'm always intrigued by that human desire to know names, as if it matters what they are called. In fact, as soon as I know the name, they will become generic, all of a piece, instead of many individuals, each at a different stage. I guess it would be hard to get to know every plant or animal we encounter as an individual, unique. But it would be good training to avoid the sort of mass groupings of people that lead to racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia, which the current political climate keeps redlining. Which are hate, plain and simple. Which is not love, plain and simple. Everyone has a choice. Take your pick.

I was thinking while I was walking about a genre of old movies I like to watch, mostly from the 30s, hard times for

everyone. A man who cannot find work to support a family in a culture that assigns him that role from birth gets “down on his luck.” In these movies, all his highfalutin friends, including his fiancé who hooked up with him before the fall, take a hike, fast. At his nadir, some bright young woman takes a liking to him, sees what’s in there as potential, falls in love with him, really. And I don’t mean that conditional kind of falling in love that says “okay, I’ll take a chance on this guy, see if it works out,” or “I’m sure if I flog this guy forward enough he’ll turn into what I need him to be.” I mean real love, the you’re-enough-for-me-just-like-you-are and we’ll make our way forward from here together. The kind that fills a man (or woman) with confidence instead of fear.

On my walk today it dawned on me, watching those young people strolling hand in hand: I was thirty-something the time that actually happened for me, down on my luck but full of drive, determination, life. When you’re my age, that doesn’t happen. I could list all the reasons, but you know them as well as I do. When that thought crossed my mind today I laughed out loud. There is that mountain. I need to get going. I can’t wait to see how it turns out. If I’m still alone when I get there, so be it. Nothing fake, that thought, this moment, suddenly . . .

March 19, 2019: How Things Happen in the Woods

Li Po:

"Sun rises over the eastern nook,
as if coming from the underground. . . .

Grasses never refuse to flourish in spring wind;
Trees never resent their leaf-fall under autumn sky. . . .

I will include myself in eternal heaven and earth,
become part of the Mighty Power of the world."

Me:

Just yesterday it seems
trillium carved starlight sparkle
into last year's leaf-fall dark,
up and down ravines too steep
for ravenous deer to reach,
the rare rosy-fingered ones
gathered at the dogleg turn
I take, the way down,
each a little dawnlit day.
Today sunroots, eight feet tall,
hundreds and hundreds, lean
into the portal of my path,
a palisade I pass through,
coming from underground
out into Mighty Power:
the light, right now and right now.
Do not refuse, they say, season
to season, resent. Myself: included.

from *Li Po-ems*, #5, Paul Kameen

Today I finally saw one of the trout that the signage says inhabit Moxlie Creek in Watershed Park. I've been looking for one since my first walk there last summer. There are a couple of small decks along the stream that overlook deeper pools, a few bridges to look down from, and the path abuts the stream directly at a number of points. Those are the places I've been looking from. Today, I was approaching the second deck thinking, yes, today I will see one. As I got closer, I could hear two men talking down there, and could see from how they were leaning on the rails that they would likely be there for a while. So I decided not to interrupt them. Instead, I stopped by the stream about 50 feet ahead of that point, looked in, and there, right there, well-camouflaged but clearly visible, was a trout about 8 inches long, it's tail whisking back and forth to keep it stationary in the current. After about a minute, I must have moved in some way that alerted it to my presence and it was gone in a flash, instant. Had those two men not been there, I would have been hurrying up to the deck where I would not have seen anything. So often, that's how things happen in the woods.

There is an equally elusive creature that inhabits Woodard Bay, one I learned about from the signage also: the rough-skinned newt. Every day there I'd scan the walkway and the woods and the water to try and see one, without success. One day, I had a similar feeling, that I would finally find one. I took the whole circuit of my walk through the forest, scanned assiduously, nothing. As I headed up the paved path back to my car, head down, having forgotten this pursuit, there, right there, at my feet, was the elusive newt. I watched it for quite a long time. I think it sensed I was there, so didn't move much. Then it started to walk again and so did I. About 20 feet down the road I realized that I had been so stunned that I forgot to take a picture of it. So I went back and did that, several pictures. In any case, same thing: I saw the newt after I had stopped looking for it in all the places I expected to find it. As I said, so often that's how things happen for me in the woods.

A little later on my walk today, about halfway around the circuit in Watershed Park, I caught a glimpse of something white up the hill on my right. It was a trillium! Then I noticed more around it, maybe forty or so scattered around a space about as big as my living room, just enough light making it in for them to feel at home I suppose. From then on I saw them all over the place, one or two or small groups but so many and so beautiful. And they were exactly like the trillium I used to so enjoy in Boyce Park back in Pittsburgh, mostly white, a few pink. That's what made me think of the poem I start with, another one from my series of "conversations" with Li Po. Again, so often, that's how things happen for me in the woods. One thing leads to another and another. But you have to notice the first one to see the rest.

I'll close with another poem from that series, now that I'm remembering it, one of my favorites (#10: 9/3/16), and pertinent to my mood and the season, having to do with such "small things," how much they can mean in this life:

Li Po:

"Short and tall, spring grasses lavish
our gate with green, as if passion driven,
everything returned from death to life.
My burr-weed heart--it alone is bitter.
You'll know that in these things I see
you here again, planting our gardens
behind the house, and us lazily gathering
what we've grown. It's no small thing."

Me:

All the small things, you always said,
what you would miss most not being here,
that first taste of coffee in the morning,

the feel of a knee bending on its way
down stairs, and me I'd say, laughing,
Paul, from paucus, Latin for small!
You never said yes, but you never said
no, just laughed, too, no small thing.

Some days I think only of small things
so I won't recall all I now know,
my burr-weed heart growing bitter.
Some days I recall all the small things
so I won't forget what I love,
my burr-weed heart growing bitter.

Some nights, the perfect ones,
grasses lavish, passion-driven,
I sit in the back yard with my guitar,
sing songs softly, your chair
beside mine, empty,
but no, not in my yard,
only a chair I am "saving,"
a sweater maybe flung on it,
until the one I came with gets back.

From death to life? Crazy you say. Never.
I know. I know. But still,
It's no small thing.

March 20, 2019: “You Saw Her Bathing on the Roof”

I thought of her as a crystal vase
and wanted cut flowers to fill it,
but it was March and the garden
was buried under snow.

So I carved her likeness out of ice,
and when she walked past me in the night
the sound of her long, white gown
disturbed my sleep.

Somewhere in the wilderness a deer
reaches for three green pears on the lowest
branch. He remembers her suddenly
and leaves the last to ripen.

“Memorabilia,” Paul Kameen

Today is the first day of spring. I don't think I've ever been happier to see the first day of spring. Not because this winter was that brutal, pretty tame actually (with the exception of the February inundation of snow) by Pittsburgh standards. It's more that it feels like a watershed moment in what has been such a long and arduous process of my getting here. In fact, as I was walking back to my car after a trek in the woods at Woodard Bay, the phrase that just popped into my head and keep repeating itself was: “Here I am,” in a way that sounded like “Here. I. Am.” I could unpack that, maybe will later, but if you have read enough of my work, I think you understand both the humility and the grandeur of that sentence.

I started on my path to “here” about 18 months ago, formulated a specific plan late in the summer of 2017. It took me nine months to finish up my final year of work, take care of my local affairs in Pittsburgh, sell my house, shed my belongings, that sort

of thing, and get on a plane to “here.” For a good portion of the winter before I left, I was very ill, scarily so, fearing I’d never make the move, even if I lived, for lack of the energy or inner resources to do it. After I got here, I entered, understandably, a period of emotional excess, long ups, downs, shorter ups, downs, not pathological, but intense, on either end of the spectrum. I wrote *First, Summer* in the midst of my falling in love with my new home. Once we got married, well, then the work started. I’m still in love with Olympia, happy to be here, in for the long haul, “till death do us part.” But the fall was hard and the winter harder, coming back to earth, reality, what it takes and will continue to take to make it here on my own. Those nine months passed grudgingly. Now it is spring. A new nine months maybe starting. Or maybe just a life, what’s left of mine, to grow into and live.

This first day of spring is also special this year because here it is actually spring now, weather in the 60s and sometimes 70s lately, the early spring flowering trees burgeoning all at once. On my way to Woodard Bay I saw groups and rows of what I assume are the western equivalent of eastern crab trees, plum trees, pear trees, pink, white, flush with flowers that weren’t there even a few days ago. All the flora here seem to be overfull of themselves all the time, and spring is no exception. These flowers cover every twig and branch to the limit of what it can bear. The first day of spring in Pittsburgh was usually just another step on the slog through the drudgery of winter, no matter what the groundhog said. Actual spring came three or four, or last year six or seven weeks later. The equinox was merely a passing formality of solar serendipity. Now, here, it is spring for real.

When I woke up this morning I felt serene. My guess is if you did a word search of all of my recent writing, maybe all of my writing, you won’t find me even once using the word “serene” to describe the inside of my head. In there is such a volatile place, exciting, scary, worrisome, playful. Or, as was the case last

winter, the absence of volatile, a sort of null space, empty of everything, pleasant for that, but not in any way serene. I have, of course, felt serenity at times in my life, and I have poems that depict it. But they don't use the word either, more show than tell. So I know this will pass, maybe very quickly. Today is also the full moon day for March. I love the full moon, always feel better under its monocular gaze. Tomorrow, well, I may be back to some version of volatile. I don't care. This is a great day. I will love it as long as it lasts.

My walk today, at Woodard Bay, was kind of magical. I went up through the woods, a space that was just as serene as my head, preternaturally quiet and full of life all at the same time. One of the first things that struck me was the shape of the cedars. There are some humongous cedars at Woodard Bay, that tapering upward shape, the droopy, loop-leafed branches, reminded me today of wizards, tall hats, long beards, Lord of the Rings or Harry Potter type stuff. Except all friendly, wise, kind, gentle, smiling.

About a mile in I saw a deer nibbling alongside the path about 30 feet ahead of me. She looked at me, I looked at her, she kept nibbling, I stopped a while to watch. The first thing I thought of is how much I love the look of deer in the wild, so sleek, strong, alert, confident. This is the first deer I've seen here in the woods. There are a few that amble through my neighborhood, scavenging. But they are like the deer that used to graze off the flowers in my yard back in Pittsburgh: slovenly, dull-eyed, disheveled looking things, hardly wild animals any longer, more like lazy pets, pests, really. They seemed not even to be the same species as the ones I'd see on my walks in Boyce Park, so alert, so spry, so alive. This deer today ambled a few steps further in as I walked past. It had a black tail, so I assume that's the equivalent here of Pennsylvania whitetails. As I passed by, I saw another deer just ahead of this one, equally nonchalant. That's what made me think of the poem I open with, one I wrote back in the 1970s, had forgotten even existed until today.

Nice poem I think now, all these years later. I went my way, they stayed and browsed. It was the kind of encounter I'm accustomed to here now, open, tolerant, no fear, no hurry to either avoid or enhance the moment of mutual presence.

Near the end of the path there is a small pond, not a natural one, the sign says, but the result of a deep gouge left in the ground in the aftermath of the logging era. It appears to be about 4-5 feet deep in the middle and is fully covered, always, summer, winter, spring, and fall with a full coat of some sort of small-leaved water plant, looking like a soft green lid. I stopped there to look for a while, maybe see one of the newts, which use it, the sign says, to lay their eggs in the spring. Instead I heard first and then saw a magnificent Steller's jay, the western blue jay. This one's head was a deep charcoal, including the crest, which is much more cavalier looking, like a feathered military helmet, than the eastern blue jay. And the body color was the distinctive cobalt blue, iridescent in the light. Its call is harsh and raucous. I have one that nests in my yard, came back a few weeks ago. When it gets going I have to stop any recording I'm doing, wait for a lull. This one kept squawking and squawking, like it was sending a warning, but to what? First I thought it was just trying to get me to keep moving. Then I heard some splashing in the little pond about 40 feet to my right, wondered what was up, way too much noise to be a newt. Through a thicket of fallen branches I saw a flash of beautiful cerulean blue. It was another jay, the partner, I'm sure, taking a morning bath. I could see the wings fluttering in and out of the water, hear all the delicate splashing. I thought of the Biblical story of Susanna bathing in the garden, the one I think Leonard Cohen is alluding to in "Hallelujah," feeling almost voyeuristic myself for a moment. Then, done, that bird clambered up through the branches of the overhead trees like a monkey, hopping, leaping, the strength and suddenness of the jumps, instant, just stunning. These two will make stellar new Steller's jays, for sure.

On my way back to the car, out of the general silence I could hear, but not see, a variety of birds: A woodpecker knocking methodically, maybe the red-headed one I saw here a couple of weeks ago, the tom-thumb wrens rustling and chirping in the ferns, always stopping when I would try to get a glimpse of one, robins, whose distinctive calls I recognize, a kingfisher, that raspy grind of a voice, and some song birds, quite melodic, which I could not identify. It was a cheerful chorus to welcome spring.

I stopped at the grocery store on my way home to pick up some things for myself and my daughter. After the great snow, there was a huge pile of snow in the area I usually park, maybe six feet high. It reminded me of the plowed mound of snow at the intersection right across the street from the house I grew up in, the final resting place for tons of snow cleared from both directions. As kids, we would dig into it while it was fresh, a giant igloo to enjoy when the winds were harsh or to stage whatever games we were playing that day. After a while, it turned black on the outside, all the dirt and cinders from the road accumulating on its icy surface. It often lasted until late May, melting slower and slower as it turned into harder and darker ice. There were similar plowed piles of icy snow in my neighborhood in Pittsburgh, and in town, where plowing was more random. They might last until late April. The pile in the store parking lot here was like that, huge, gradually darkening with soot over the weeks, rock hard, melting so slowly. All the other snow was gone here, even in the woods, and this pile kept resisting the heat. Even seventy degrees didn't finish it off. Today, I noticed it was maybe a foot tall, taking up about as much space as a large chair, melt water drizzling off in all directions. I was finally able to park in the spot it had occupied for the last six weeks. In a day or two, it will be gone. That's what I mean about spring being spring. Winter came and went. The equinox is more than a mere bookmark. It is a boundary here. I am so happy to have spring be spring.

March 22, 2019: My Lucky Day

He sat around clacking
the joke plastic teeth
on the kitchen counter
all afternoon overheard
the wide blue sweep of
a broom across the sky
full of tiny white birds
flapping happily away
from his brooding over
this earth so green so
good so much asizzle
with apple blossoms
cherry blossoms pear
blossoms swept into
deep drifts gleaming
in seamless sun-
light begetting one
beautiful blue brood
after another littering
cracked shells across
the green kitchen floor
he just keeps sweeping
a black mood clacking
back at him from
the kitchen counter
that his life is not yet
ready to start living
sunny-side up again
the morning paper open
always to the comics
which he reads and
reads can never quite
laugh at . . . or believe.

“Moving Out Day,” Paul Kameen

I woke up this morning knowing “this book is over.” I will, I told myself, write a few tag lines to close it and that will be that. I wanted to walk at Woodard Bay but decided ahead of time not to write about it, this place you must be bored silly by already, unless I saw something I had never seen before. And I did.

On the path in a little bird I didn’t recognize—the size of a large sparrow, black head that came down into a V-neck, brown body—was picking away at whatever was there to its liking in the cinders. I stopped to watch it for a while. When I started walking again, it just kept moving along, always about 15 feet ahead of me. Then it took flight, another V of iridescent blue-white feathers shimmering from its wide tail. Then I saw a few more, same thing. I thought this day could not get more special than that.

As I came up toward the tip of the peninsula on the Woodard Bay side I saw a Canada goose standing in the path, craning its neck up, looking around, like I do there. Just one. No flock in sight. It seemed quite odd to me. Maybe he was looking for his mate, or mates. I got within about 10 feet and then, like the little birds, it started walking ahead, slowly, right at my pace, maintaining that distance, those floppy webbed feet plopping awkwardly along. After we both stood at the bank for a while taking in the gorgeous scene over the bay, it took flight, came down with a splash on the water. There was a stiff breeze blowing in today, so the waves were working against it. Still, it glided along, out toward the pilings, as if there was no resistance at all. Further out, I could see maybe twenty of those dark shapes on the far dock that I assumed, or just hoped, were cormorants a week or so ago. But not having seen them in flight here since then, except for the one I mentioned, I was wondering whether it was all just wishful thinking on my part.

Then I turned to go to the Henderson Inlet outlook. I could see a man, maybe 50, sitting on a log there, camera with a telephoto lens on a tripod, taking pictures. As I came up he started picking

up his gear and I chatted with him briefly. He had been to the Nisqually Estuary this morning, now here, on the advice of a phone app, his first time, to take pictures of birds. I asked if he had been to the other outlook, over the wider bay. He said he had just taken some pictures there of 17 herons standing on the old rail line deck above those massive pilings. I was stunned, having just been there without even noticing. So after a few minutes I headed back that way. He was set up there again to take some more pictures and let me look through his telephoto lens and there they were, all those herons, standing stock still, their gray-blue close enough in color to the weathered wood to blend in. Once I knew they were there, I could see them without any artificial aid. He told me that the dark shapes out on the further platform, which I had seen indistinctly already, were, in fact, cormorants, which filled me with joy, to have them back and to know I was still connected to reality perceptually.

As we were talking a whole flock of big birds, maybe thirty or forty, flew up together from one side of the little harbor at the tip of the bay, most settling in trees on the opposite side, some on the pilings. They, too, were herons, an astonishing number of them, almost in one group as many herons as I had seen in my whole life before I got to Olympia, where they are more common. But on this scale, that many at once, no, never, a once in a lifetime event I'm sure. We speculated about what they might be coming here for in such numbers, a rookery, maybe, like the cormorants, or a stopover to refuel on the way to someplace else. Only time will tell whether they are here to breed and stay for a while or just passing through. Either way, I was there at that moment to see them. My lucky day, magnificent.

On my walk back to the car I saw more of those small black-capped birds. I just Googled the description and found it is the "Oregon" or western version of the eastern (slate gray) junco. Juncos back in Pittsburgh came in small groups like that at seasonal turning points, always passing through. Maybe that's true here, too. I'll know in a week or two, my first spring in Olympia,

who is here to stay, these brown birds, those herons, or not. The cormorants I know are back to stay. A few weeks ago I walked on a trail on the other side of Henderson Inlet, the side they roost on in summer. I could see in the trees they haunt, empty of leaves now, dozens of large, twiggy-looking nests, which I wasn't aware of last year. The path on that side is closed all summer, I'm assuming to make life easier on all those big birds. Maybe some of those nests will foster herons.

On my drive back home from Woodard Bay there is a sign on East Bay Drive as you come down through that long colonnade of evergreens on the way to Priest Point Park that says: Tree City USA, sponsored by the Arbor Day Foundation. I recall now having seen a similar sign on one of the first days I was here, feeling grateful, like I had made good choice for a new home, a guaranteed cohort of good friends waiting here for me to get to know, for them to get to know me. Friends I see now, here and in all the places I walk, every single day. I may not have yet, in nine months, made human friends I might walk with or talk with in any regularity. I say that a bit embarrassedly, an index to my failure out there in the socially networked human universe. But I say it anyway, because it is true. Today, I don't care about that. I have all the friends in the world, countless friends that receive me, welcome me, day in and day out, vast networks of friends I get to walk and talk with any time I want.

I savored driving under all the slender outstretched arms of the spring trees blossoming, more and more of them every day, so fulsome with pink blossoms, white blossoms, and the tiny buds of leaves on the alders and maples, little red nubs. Soon they will puff out in that only-once-a-year-for-a-few-days shade of yellow-green that turns so swiftly into the deep green of summer leaves. As I headed up the steep incline of San Francisco Avenue, I caught a brief glimpse of the Olympic Mountains off to my left, across the bay, across all those miles between us, all the lives being lived under their purview, a few puffy clouds floating up over them from the windward side. All of it so soft.

This afternoon I took a second walk, at Watershed Park. Those skunk-cabbagey things are all over the place now, dozens and dozens of them, anywhere it's boggy or marshy, which is a lot of places in Watershed Park, in keeping with its status as a temperate rain forest. The yellow lobes of leaves look like giant tulips. The little green bumps on the "fruits" are turning into miniscule yellow flowers. Wordsworth's daffodils could not be more beautiful.

It is no longer winter. I am so happy to be here and to be me, with all my friends, today, tomorrow, as long as I want, this earth so green so good so much asizzle with apple blossoms cherry blossoms pear blossoms fluttering down around me now in great waves like the February snow, blowing across the ground, billowing up and gathering in drifts that gleam in the seamless sunlight. It is spring. This book is over. Finally. Imagine that!

. . .

I with the first poem of my *Snow Man* and I want to close with the final poem from that series. As I said, I wrote it 40 years ago, If there was ever a catalogue of poems for my mind of winter, these are it. I love those poems. This one takes him down deep with bowhead whales, which, coincidentally, migrate every year to their feeding grounds right past where I now live. I think it says everything I have left to say about winter, about hopefulness, about love, about the beautiful sounds that accompany us on our way here, some of which we can even make ourselves, those gifts from within and without that come from the imagination, and about home, how it drives us forward, trying to reach it, no matter the season, no matter the weather:

He dove down deep in the coastal
where bowheads sang
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emerald he remembered like
his hunger lunging
deeper like his
love-song headed
home.

Postscript: June 17, 2019

As you know if you read my work, I inhabit time quite strangely, more like a sub-atomic particle sometimes, I think, than a human being. I have no idea why. In *This Fall* I describe an unusual encounter I had in Boyce Park in Pittsburgh, on a day I was deeply afflicted, ended up getting “lost” on paths I knew well. I wandered up into the woods to get back on track and saw three great trees, much larger than they should be in those woods, with strange shapes and features. I put my arms around one just to make sure it was real and I felt a great comfort come over me. I found my way that day. In *Last Spring* I describe my search to find them again, mid-winter, all the trees in plain sight for hundreds of yards around in every direction. I went to the spot I thought they should be and then gradually expanded my search in circles, maybe an hour or so, total, over two days. Those trees are not there, I am certain of that. I let it slide, attributing it to a very large-scale (impossibly large, I know enough about physics to know) “quantum anomaly.”

A few weeks ago on a walk at Priest Point, not one of my usual haunts, I realized (I had already seen this, but it hadn’t sunk in in this way) that some, not all but many, of the big leaf maples here have exactly the same “globules” on their trunks that I saw on those trees that day in Boyce Park. Maybe . . . but, I thought, they don’t have quite the same tapering-upward shape. Today, in Watershed Park, I looked at a cedar and saw that it did. Exactly. So it must have been some hybrid of those two trees that I saw in Boyce Park. I am certain of it. And I am certain, too, about why they came, at that moment, in my despair, locked in a time warp that never moved, to share with me their knowledge of a future, theirs and mine, here, if I could just “find my way.”

Oddly, on my walk today I had a similar sense of temporal discombobulation. I decided to take my walk in the reverse direction from normal, as I did in Boyce Park 4 years ago, to save the most beautiful and enjoyable part for last. A few hundred yards in, a woman in her fifties, on the phone, passed me walking from the opposite direction, then a woman in her twenties, running, same thing. About 5 minutes later, by my time, they passed me again, same people, same direction. The circuit here is a mile and a half around. I walk slow, but no way they lapped me in five minutes. It was then that I started thinking about all of this, and before I knew it, I was back where I started, in minutes, it seemed. And I had no recollection of the part of the walk I had been most looking forward to. Most likely, I just got so distracted by my thoughts that I “missed” it all. But maybe, I prefer to think, like those trees, I had to go somewhere else for a while to comfort someone lost. I hope so. I am not lost now. I am here. My time may move strangely, but it moves. I’ve seen the trees that came to meet me. They are here, too. Someday, I hope, whomever I might have met today will be able to meet me again, when they’re here instead of there.

Just so you know: The skunk-cabbagey things are called skunk cabbage here, too. That was nice to find out. The Oregon juncos are still here. I see them every time I walk at Woodard Bay, such cheerful, charming birds. So are the herons, though they don’t seem to be nesting on the other side of Henderson Inlet. Maybe they don’t like the kind of mass-collective rookery the cormorants clearly prefer. I’m still here, too.

Appendix

I opened with the first poem from *Snow Man* and closed with the last. I include here the whole series in case you're interested in reading what happened in between:

I

He did not go to the tundra
it came to him--
first a tickle in his teeth.
then a frost on his tongue
then a slab of ice
inching up his throat.

When it finally calved,
everyone else was somewhere
else but him: had left
by night, had left
by plane, had left him
bundling into his future
all animal handsome
in a thickening coat,
elk-sleek, moose-stubborn,
hammering hooves through snow
down to stubbled straw.

II

The world blubbered.
He trimmed and slimmed and leaned.
He hated blubber: the flaccid
feel of it against his teeth,
the fatty slick it left on his lips,
the slow, gelatinous curls it wound
down his throat, the way it lay there
like a wet log on the slow fire
souring in his gut.
There was nothing about it
he could love.

But when cold drilled
pinpoint holes in all his bones,
when wind thinned blood
to ether in his brain,
when his sorry heart wound
down to zero-dark,
he hacked off hunks of it,
ate it quick and raw and all
he could stomach,
until he was bloated, bilious,
all smiles to find
there was nothing
he could not love.

III

It went hard out there
for the flowers: flash-
card blurs of red dashing
past breathless upstarts
of yellow spattering
freak summer snow-thins;
pale pink, pale blue
pastel woozies bobbing
through thaw fogs
prickled by sunlight
still stiff from winter
and stiffening already
toward winter again.
A cold world for color
to go on coloring in.

Lucky.
He hadn't a mind now
for color.
He came to see snow-sheets
billowing up like bear thighs,
horizonless white
steaming out of infinity.

He courted each flake that fell
kissing bittersweet
on his cheek, unballad
his tight little fists,
limbered fingers into
each hexagonal hole
lifting back the delicate
tissue until his whole
head bobbed through
and he knew where

he was and what he had
found and a thrill
of guilt throbbed
in his throat
puffed up the muggy
steam-pots of his cheeks
tickled his quick
hot tongue until
the gentle rhythms
of snowflakes contracting
over and over slowly
into infinity pumped
voice-box wonders
out of his
mouth like words.

IV

"Ha," he said to the sun
when it failed to rise.
"Ha," he said to the snow
when it failed to fall.
"Ha," he said to the moon
when it failed to shine.
"Ha, Ha, Ha."

He stood and listened
a long time
to the flat black
echo of that laugh
wanting to be wrong.
But he was not.

His "Ha, Ha, Ha," re-
sounded nothing like
the laughter he had practiced
trying to be right.

But it was, mind you, a laugh.
The only laugh
he heard.

V

It was nice
those long nights to need
no words to have
no one to hear him
having no thoughts
to talk about
as if they mattered.

He sat in a sparkle
of stars and a low hum
rose through his throat
tickled his lips
pressed shut against
a silence that expanded
across the entire sky
without jostling
anything without even
nudging the tiniest
speck of light out
of its perfect place.

VI

Time was tiny
scissors snipping
here and deft
there unfolding
origami stories
whole sheets
of holes stiff
birds unable
to fly anywhere.

He tweaked
a beak it would
not speak
clipped a claw
it would not
clasp poked
tiny scissors
down every
hole but his.

VII

He was the dead
of winter so cold
he coughed a solid
block of fog
all motion slowed
to a stop or almost
he breathed
once a day
heart beat
every hour.

Gelid love he called it
frozen slow in time
never complaining
only to himself
a month-long monologue
a monotone of snow
a slow roll all the way
to the pole
which was where he was
when he awoke
and saw her
sitting like the dead
of winter on his heart.

VIII

He rolled a smooth stone along
the fingers of his left hand
and hunkered motionless
over an ice-hole
seal-spear poised over
his right shoulder stiffening
as the surface gurgled
slanting down fast then
between seal eyes through
seal bone into seal brain.

A day's wait done
he slung the carcass
over his shoulder plopped
a smooth stone down the hole
and plodded off: one step,
always only one step
ahead of the blood-stained snow.

IX

He had always had at least
seven names for the snow.
but tonight he had seven
million, one for each
flake that fell in its
uncanny uniqueness.

He called out one
after another until
one flake struck him
as so beautiful
he could spend
the night with it.

And while seven million
flakes fell somewhere
else besides here
this one zeroed in on
the tip of his tongue
and melted like none
of the names he knew.

X

He walked on water that
jackpot morning multitudes
thronged behind him waiting
to crow-laugh him under so
he jogs out all gingerly
and gentle each toe-drop
feathered under his weight
and it held the damn thing
it held so he strode step
after step goat-surer and
surer until the bored crowd's
sound pounded down
around him on the ice
he hadn't told anyone about
which is what he was
walking over after all
and when it got just quiet enough
for the whole universe to hear
a dull thunder rumbled
under the ice divided
his mind and the next step
he took flushed him
all bug-eyed and bony
into the krill-ripe swill
of the beautiful sea.

XI

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where bowheads sang
unearthly songs of hunger
and home and loved each other
with each rubber-hose bass-twang note
plucked whole from
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