

# Last Spring

Essays

by

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Cover image:

If you look at the cover in direct sunlight, you will see what I  
saw exactly the way I saw it when I took that photo.

Back cover photo by Jean Ferguson Carr.



## Preface

I decided finally late last August (2017), after much back and forth the previous two years, that it was time for me to retire, maybe past time. It was too late then to vacate my place in the fall schedule, and I didn't want to move cross-country (my retirement plan) mid-winter, too cold and dark, so I decided to make my final year of teaching as memorable for myself as I could. The fall term was all of that, the best teaching I had ever done, I'd say, and many students agreed. The winter term started off strong, too. In mid-January, with my usual hubris, I decided I would write another book, a companion piece for *This Fall*, the book I wrote in the aftermath of my wife Carol's sudden passing in 2015, call it *Last Spring*, so cool, I thought (yeah, right!), taking advantage of the double meanings, as I had with the previous book. I planned to ground it in my daily walks in Boyce Park, as I had before, and get off to a start with it in January, figuring I could drift into it slowly, like the January snow, just a few essays, then gradually ramp it up through April, when I imagined my emotional intensity would peak. What a good plan. That's not what happened, though, and it never will now. I did write six brief essays from mid- to late-January, like the ones in *This Fall*, 4-5 pages, same style, etc. I was on my way. Then I wasn't.

I got the flu in early February, very terribly so, as sick as I can remember being since I had pneumonia about 30 years ago, deathly ill, I can see now in retrospect, though I didn't sense that at the time, with the ravages of fever and torpor clouding my judgement. It took me more than a week to get out of bed, then another few weeks to get back to a semblance of normalcy, some very scary vision impairments part of the healing process. I didn't get out for my next walk in the park

until March 10, a six-week hiatus. There were days in between I thought I would never see that place again. It was very emotional for me, what I saw, thought, felt on that walk. And I knew, with absolute certainty, about halfway through it that I would write one more essay when I got home. Then I would be done. I had no desire to write another word about my "last spring." No desire to write any more words at all. I already had said everything I had to say. So my book became this pamphlet, the fifty-some pages you are about to encounter if you turn the page, not *Last Spring*, but "Last Spring." I like it. It says everything I have to say about everything I have left to say. Done.

W.H. Auden, in his spare, haunting elegy "In Memory of W.B. Yeats," says, famously and ominously, that "poetry makes nothing happen." I think that's true. And at least today, right now, finally starting to see clearly again after weeks of blurry double-vision, I want to say, more generally, that words make nothing happen. Not the things that most matter, anyway. They don't create love or extinguish hate. They don't change minds at the deeper level, where it really counts. At least not my words. Believe me, I have tried to use them to make all of those things happen, and it hasn't worked as far as I can tell. Maybe your words work better. I hope so. Mine just don't.

So what's left, then, when all the words are gone, have left, bereftly, realizing their inefficacy? Well, Auden gives a clue in that same poem. Immediately after the clause I just quoted he says of poetry:

. . . it survives

In the valley of its making where executives

Would never want to tamper, flows on south

From ranches of isolation and the busy griefs,

Raw towns that we believe and die in; it survives,

A way of happening, a mouth.

So, yes, poetry "*makes* nothing happen." That's the line everyone always quotes, gravely. Yet somehow, away from the world's business, and the even more forlorn and pointless busy-ness that afflicts our more personal human endeavor, it survives, as "a *way*." "Of happening," he says. The difference between "makes" and "survives" between "happen" and "of happening," seems miniscule on the face of it, beyond subtle, but it must be of some consequence. Auden is not stupid or careless. So: a way. Toward what, it's hard to say. It must have something to do with that "mouth" at the end of this stanza, the close of the first half of the poem. That "mouth," which here, in the context of his figure, is where the river meets the sea, ceases to be itself and joins the partnership of many other rivers in the vast reaches of all that deep water.

Here's what I want to say about that today: The mouth makes sounds, all kinds of them, including the most beautiful. To hear them, you need to be near it, listening, paying attention. It belongs to the body that fills its chambers, and all the words that arise therein, with the breath of the life that body has lived here, of the time it has taken to get to their moment, compressed into every word that mouth shapes. Right now. To come to know all of that, and you can, believe me, all of it, every little bit, come nearer, open your ear, hear. With your whole being, meaning resonating in every nerve-end. And when you make words, care about them in just that way. Then they will "survive, a way of happening" for those who care to hear.

It doesn't really matter that they "make nothing happen."  
Maybe the sea can do that, if enough mouths pour enough fresh water into it, together, the many becoming one. Maybe not. I don't know. I do know this: If you want to know what and how I've survived, come here, come near, ear to mouth, close. You can do at least some of that, I believe, by reading words on a page, the listening, hearing, the nearness, all of it. I know that, too. I've spent my life turning other people's words on a page into my body, my life, all those mouths opening toward my ear, and then finding their way to my mouth. My mouth. Mine. I guess to do that you have to become like the sea, receptive to what each river delivers from its mouth. Maybe something like that.

You might recall that when the stupid-tricky Pharisees try to catch Jesus in a contradiction about his lack of interest in following all of the rules of the "tradition," specifically about what goes into the mouth and how clean the hands are in the process, he says, at the close of a stunning rebuke: "Listen and understand. A man is not defiled by what enters his mouth, but by what comes out of it." This, to me, is the moment the Old Testament becomes "new." The moment Christianity first opens its mouth to the wide seas. Yes, listen. And understand. Together. Right now. Two hard things. But without them, that second sentence, the one everyone focuses on, will never become a way of happening for anyone. As it doesn't for the stupid-tricky Pharisees.

All kinds of good and bad things, lovely things, vile things, come out of my mouth, of course. I'm inclined to say, today, though, that they are all worthy in some way. I am alone now maybe 98% of the time. I used to have someone who heard my mouth speak. Now I don't. I've been trying for three years to find a way to "make *something* happen" with all these words. As far as I can tell, it hasn't worked, not on a larger scale anyway. There have been a few quite moving responses my work has incited, delivered to me personally, for which I

am deeply grateful, all I needed, really, I guess I'd say. But the river of words that poured from my mouth to into the vast, horizonless sea of the public world ran dry on March 10.

There comes a time for every mouth to fall silent, not just the way it does between words to mark their passages, but completely, at least for a while, to gather the life left in the body toward some other purpose. I think that's where I'm at, my "writing" mouth run dry. You could turn your "reading" ear as near you want and you won't hear it make any noise. I need to be quiet now. For a good while. If you want to hear my words, my mouth, then come to see me. Or call me. Those of you who do, well, you know I can run on like a rattletrap when I hear another mouth turning voice into words across the table or at the other end of the line. Or send me a note or an email, even a text, a real one, I mean, one with your mouth behind it, your body behind it, your life in it. I will respond. To you, just you. And I will be right there where you, just you, can hear me. As much of all of me as you can bear. Words can do that, I know. And when they do, they are poems. No matter what they look like on a page or screen or sound like in the air. They make nothing happen; they are a way of happening. That's what I take away from thinking about Auden, and Yeats, even greater, today.

In a couple of months I'll be leaving Pitt and Pittsburgh for good, first for Olympia, Washington, to spend the summer months, maybe more, in the vicinity of my daughter, whom I haven't gotten to see much since she moved out there twelve years ago, who, along with my son, has stood by me steadfastly these last three years, through thick and thin, who actually wants to have me closer by! Bridget and Joe have been constant voices, mouths, lives, for me during this awful and awesome time, sometimes in person, mostly at the other end of a phone line. I love hearing their words. I can tell in an instant, in each of their voices, how they are doing, feeling, what I might need to say back, as a way of happening, doing.



They hear and know my voice too, just that way, all of me in it, right then, and they know what to say back, as a way of happening, doing. They survive and help me to do the same.

Beyond this summer, well, I have no clear idea about exactly the where I might end up, or exactly the what I might decide to do with my remaining time and remaining energy. Maybe I will just eat, sleep and walk. Maybe I will fall in love with someone who will fall in love with me. Maybe I will find a friend who likes to watch baseball games and drink tea. Maybe I will build rabbit hutches or carve birds. Maybe I will do some good for some people who need someone to do some good for them. Whatever it turns out to be, I hope I won't write about it. Or if I do, unable to shake this life-long habit, I hope it will be different, funny, strange, adorned with little painted figures maybe, hand printed and stamped on single sheets of parchment, each numbered, then corked inside many bottles, all dropped from a small boat into Puget Sound so a hundred years from now someone, in China, say, might find one and wonder. Not something specific, just wonder. Yes, that's it. Just wonder.



## January 15: The Same Eyes

This morning when I got to Boyce Park there was a lone bagpiper, kilt and all, standing in the parking lot playing the most beautiful tune, mournful and joyful all at the same time, as most bagpipe music is, to my ear at least. I just love to listen to it. I assume he was practicing in a spot that would not be bothersome to others, out here in the woods. I could hear this music, diminishing gradually in volume as I moved further and further up and the across the hill on my normal walk, the opposite side of the road from his. About a mile in, it stopped. I assume he just finished and went off on his way. There was something portentous, I thought, about having this soundtrack for the first walk I'm recording for this book.

Death and birth are all of a piece this world, the latter both contradicting and necessitating the former, or at least that's the thought I had in my head as I listened to this beautiful music. It is hard in our culture, embarrassing in a way, to admit mournfulness for a loss that occurred almost three years ago. So I don't admit to it. Much. It is hard in our culture for someone of my age to admit to a desire to begin again, be reborn, which I crave, though I know I'm too old for that. So I don't. Much. But those two things are all of a piece in my head today, the beginning and the end, the end and the beginning, simultaneous and co-dependent, together, always.

I am teaching Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself" right now, as I have many times over the years, such a magnificent poem. He talks, or doesn't he says, of the beginning and end in a way I find quite companionable on a day like today:

I have heard what the talkers were talking,  
the talk of the beginning and the end,

But I do not talk of the beginning or the end.

There was never any more inception than there is now,  
Nor any more youth or age than there is now,  
And will never be any more perfection than  
    there is now,  
Nor any more heaven or hell than there is now.

What more is there to say about all of this than that? I'm pretty good, but Whitman is always better.

The students in front of me when I teach are like a static template in relation to time. They never age year to year, are always about 20 years old, fresh-faced, forward-oriented. I wish I had taken a picture of myself from their vantage point on the first day of every term, or every class, thousands of images, a series I could view now, flip-book fashion, in fast-forward, not as some macabre Dorian Gray type experience, but just to remind myself of something important about the passage of time. I don't even know what that might be. Maybe what I would focus in on, visually cropping all the images, would be my eyes. I wonder if they would show on the outside what weight and depth I now feel resides right behind them, all that I know, about my field, of course, but also about life, a distinction that is barely legible any longer, even when I teach, my ambition being as much to share my "wisdom," when it is pertinent to the professional moment, as to convey my vast stores of knowledge. Then again, maybe they would look always the same, the one constant in an aging face, body, the black to salt-and-pepper to gray to almost white hair, the care lines around all my features, the changing styles of clothing. But just the same eyes, hazel, tight, alert-looking, a little quizzical maybe, revealing and hiding me all at the same time. All I know is that time has moved inexorably, sometimes slowly, sometimes quickly, in the front of the room even as it has not budged one second in the back of the room.

There is something momentarily discordant about all of this, like those first few unpleasant seconds of bagpipe music while the player fills the bag and gets his breath. And then when the music starts, the only time that matters is that interim which the beautiful music carves out of oblivion and assembles in a series of sounds that make perfect sense together, the feeling as a listener that an ending is up there ahead, one precipitated from the universe by the beginning, and it won't be averted. The rhythm of the song organizes the time-line coming toward it, one that cannot be sped up or slowed down by will power or desire, only traversed, for better or worse (depending on how much you like the music) until it is over. All of it so beautiful. Even a lone bagpiper at the edge of a great woods can accomplish that, as he did today, for me, step by step, the beginning, the song, the end, while I walked alone, out of his line of sight but captivated by that envelope of sound, for about 15 minutes this morning.



## January 17: "Stand Up Straight!"

The beginning of this term, the "spring" term, my final term at Pitt as I head now toward retirement, has been unusually stressful, exhausting, migraine-laden for me. Part of that, a big part I'm sure, has to do with the weather the last few weeks, brutally cold in general, and then, successively over the last week or so, a series of snowfalls, the first about 5 inches of very icy, dense snow that felt as heavy as any snow I can remember, like concrete when I went out to shovel it, tweaking my back in less than a minute because I underestimated its weight until it was too late. Then two more daylong stretches of "flurries," each of which added about 3 inches of its own.

Trips to the woods have been hard to squeeze in between the pressures of work and the physical demands of clearing snow and bundling up, what walks I've taken being truncated by the energy it takes to slog through deep snow or resist the biting chill. I did, though, get out today for a walk of maybe two miles, which felt like six. It is 14 degrees, but sunny, blue sky, serene, very beautiful. All of the trees, their many branches big and small, are laden with the fluffy stuff that came down yesterday and the day before, as much as six inches of it on the bigger branches, so light and soothing to look at.

I've been thinking a lot lately, and did so in the woods today, about memory, in the sense of reservoirs of specific memories, how hard it can be at this age to bear their weight, carry on with them. I'm not talking about a few terrible traumas that might keep rising up like demons to terrorize or distract. More the quotidian memories of the rudenesses, the stupidities, the selfishnesses, that I, like most others, have indulged in by dint of being human. I don't necessarily mind

so much having done the things that I knew at the time were rude or stupid or selfish. It's the ones I had no such insight into at the time, just did them blindly, even enthusiastically at times, like I had a right to them, the way Coleridge's mariner shoots the albatross with his crossbow, utterly thoughtless. When everything on his ship's journey through the Southern Ocean goes awry in the aftermath of that little bit of destruction, the rest of the crew blame him, hanging the dead bird around his neck. At my age now, some days at least, like today, I feel like I have dozens of such heavy dead birds draped over my shoulders, making it very hard not to stoop. And I hung them there myself!

I can hear my mother's voice, loud, scolding all of us when we were young and slouched: "pull back your shoulders, stand up straight." And I try to do it, over and over, but the weight is so hard to counter. Many older people slouch and stoop. As I think back to it now, my mother had a badly bent back, early on, osteoporosis, which became worse and worse as she aged until, near the end, her spine was nearly doubled over and would micro-fracture, very painfully, from any strain or stress. I think she always believed that she could overcome that by an assertion of will, or, when she couldn't, could at least pressure us, her kids, to force our backs straight up, our shoulders level, while we were young, and then work to keep them like that when the inevitable pressure of time and age weighed heavy on us, like that dense snow on the shovel I had trouble lifting just a few days ago.

There was a fallen log beside the path today, one I'm familiar with, that was piled very high with the recent snow, kind of a bent log, like my mother's back, especially high in the middle, all that white. It reminded me of an Andrew Wyeth drawing I saw for the first time in my early teens, "April Wind," a sketch of an old man, viewed sidewise from behind, sitting on a log, slumped forward, not like he's carrying the weight of the world, but like he's carrying the almost unbearable weight of



his own life, as I am right now. I made a charcoal sketch of that drawing, which I thought was lost but rediscovered recently in an old scrap book of some of my first poems, written in my teens. I've thought of that drawing hundreds of times over the years because for some reason, even at that young age, I identified with him, felt that pressure and weight, could see my future in his image. That snow piled on the log today was like an extreme version of that man, no longer distinctly embodied, just a mound of heavy memories staring at the ground.

I'm hanging my head here as I type these last words today, so ashamed, filled with sadness, embarrassment, at so much of what I have done and been. Outside the window the sun is shining bright. The trees out back are adorned with their shining coats of soft white snow. It is so beautiful. That, I guess, is life in a nutshell.



## January 20: Rebirthday

It is finally above freezing today, almost forty, feeling balmy, first time in a couple of weeks, but it seems like forever in January time. First thing I noticed as I started my walk was how different the snow on the ground felt, first to my feet, soft, welcoming, step by step, quite secure, not slippery and harsh-sounding, resisting my boots; and it was snowball sticky, irresistible to the hand, scooping. I have an assortment of tiny rituals that I repeat every winter, just to test myself as time passes, whether I'm still "young" enough to do them. One is with snowballs, on a day like this, each handful turning into a baseball-sized missile in seconds. My goal is to hit a nearby tree with it, like a pitcher trying to throw a "strike." First two today found their marks, ploof, ploof, beautiful. So I stopped, not wanting to test fate, or my aging arm, too steeply. Last couple of years, I remembered, my aim had not been so good, kind of wild, requiring multiple pitches, maybe not enough to "walk" the tree I was aiming at, but not controlled enough to assure a "strikeout." I could have tried for that third strike today. But I didn't.

As you know, if you've read any of my work, I draw symbolic meanings from even the slightest twitches of the natural world, as it "speaks" to me. I'm pretty sure I make up most of it, or maybe, more accurately, I'm pretty sure most people who hear me talk this way, while they might find it charming, assume I'm reading way too much into the trivial accidents and coincidences of daily life. In any case, today I thought, with deep delight: Last year and the year before, my aim was wild, with snowballs, sure, but with everything else, too, no precision, no repeatability, just all over the place; now it's not. I can see what's in front of me and hit it when I choose to. That may or may not be true, but two in a row is enough

proof for me. Any more would be inviting doubt, which I don't need any more of than I already have.

Next thing I noticed was that this snow on the ground, still about 6 inches of it, was not blinding in the sunlight, as it had been the last couple of times I was here, wishing I had heeded my optometrist's advice to get Transitions lenses to protect my eyes. At the time of my last exam, late fall as the days were growing shorter and darker, all I wanted was to maximize the incoming light. Snow changes that dynamic quite a lot, especially when it is extremely cold, all those crystals glinting every which way on the surface, like slivers on the eyes, way too much light, forcing me to squint, hold hand to forehead for shade, turn away from the glare. Today the light was soft, the snow creamy-white, some crystals still, but more like a car finished with pearl paint, the sparkle just right, the underlying color deep, like still water, inviting long, longing looks.

As I turned the second dogleg down on my preferred daily path, I noticed that the only footprints past that point, aside from those of a deer, were mine, from a couple of days ago. I knew that this portion of the path was less-traveled, most walkers preferring at that juncture to head up the hill to the wide, almost-road that runs past the picnic areas. Carol and I used to go that way. Now it makes me sad up there, so for the last three years I've mostly been going this way. I just didn't realize so few others did. I can see why. This path ends abruptly, down a steep slope, often slippery with snow, ice, or mud, at the road, with no apparent connecting point on the other side. As I explained in *This Fall*, to avoid walking up the road to the next connecting path, I started going down the pathless hill just over the guard rail right across the road. Over time, maybe a 1000 passages by now, I have created a very clear and distinct path there, one easy to see and navigate to the little stream down the hill, and then across the footbridge to the main path on the other side.

This section of the path, on both sides of the road, is mine in at least one more way than that: It is where, nine months after Carol died, I was "born," all of a sudden, my stopped clock starting to tick again to my astonishment, like a newborn plopping down in the middle of the woods, wondering what was up. If you are ever on that path, a couple hundred yards past the dogleg turn you will see a dead, barkless tree that has fallen from the left side of the path into a still-growing tree on the other, a crotch of its branching trunk lodged into it high enough so you can still walk under it. About a month ago, on its opposite face, the one you can't see as you walk on this path in pretty much the only direction for which the path is functional, I carved my name and my re-birth date: Paul, 11/17/15.

If you keep walking, about thirty feet ahead you will pass between two maples, both youngish, a foot or so in diameter, one on each side of path, maybe three feet apart at their base. Their main surface roots have grown together across the path, forming a step, about 4 inches high and wide, worn a bit flat on the top from all the footsteps. I always think of them as "married" by this connection they share. They seem quite happy together, comfortable in one another's company, willing to endure the foot traffic over their shared root growing thicker and stronger year by year. Every time I pass between them, I need to decide whether to use the step (thereby gaining the stability those two trees share and proffer) or stride over it (thereby avoiding undue wear on their intimate connection.) Right there, just past that "step" is where I was "born" again, a flotilla of yellow leaves fluttering above me, those leaves that somehow seemed to climb back up onto the trees from the ground I saw them on the day before, on one of the walks I describe in *This Fall*. It is a magical spot to me.

I spent a lot of time deciding how to mark my birthplace. The two maples are rough-barked and, of course, still alive, so I didn't want to scar them with my mark. The other trees in the

neighborhood are small and off the path. I considered nailing up a small sign, flamboyantly. But what I ended up doing seemed just right. The tree I carved is clearly dead and has been for a long time, so I'm not hurting it. It will likely slide all the way down and rot on the ground within a few years. And my mark is quiet, hard to find. As I said, you have look back to that tree after you pass under it, an unlikely turn for the walkers who might come by here, and they are few. It's possible, I thought, that the only one who ever sees that mark will be me, pretty much any day I want to right now, of course, but also maybe someday down the road, in the unlikely event I return to Pittsburgh for a visit.

Today, the path was still snow covered, so I stepped on the roots for safekeeping, headed down the slope, across the road, over the guard rail, and down my self-made path. As I headed back up the hill on the other side of the road I began to think about how other people react when I tell them stories like this, the natural world so full of signs and figures for me, making all these little myths out of my life. It probably seems strange, or charming, or, well, whatever. I don't even know why I'm inclined that way myself. Maybe it has to do with my genes: I'm half Irish, my mothers' side, all those sprites and leprechauns just part of everyday life in that culture, and Slovenian on my father's side. I recall about 35 years ago seeing a show at the Carnegie Museum of contemporary Slavic folk art. It was both surprising and amazing to me, a lot of it little wood pieces carved into lumpy, nymph-like faces, some funny, some scary, these fairies and gnomes who haunt the beautiful forests there. Many of the visual works, drawings and paintings, had that same aspect, the trees and flowers given shrouded human expressions and forms. I had no idea until then that the Slavic cultures shared so much in common with the Irish in that regard.

When I tell stories like this, or report some of my more unusual dreams, some people think it is all fake, that I just

make this stuff up to, well, I have no idea to "what." I know that because at least a few people have said directly to me, after I narrate something of this sort: "That can't be true, is it? You just made that up, didn't you?" or some variation on that. More commonly, I get that askance look, obviously skeptical, just writing it all off to my over-stimulated imagination. If you are one of them, all I can say is this: There are more things in my heaven and earth than are dreamt of in your philosophy. And I'm so glad there are. Today, it was the snow on my earth that got me started down this path. And now I'm already here, far enough away from your philosophy that I can forget it even exists. Other people go in the opposite direction, thinking I'm some kind of guru or sage. I say over and over them that I am not even remotely elevated in such ways, that I just see what I see and then say what I see. It may not be exactly what you see or would say. But it is only different in superficial ways, not in kind or degree. I am, as I keep repeating, just a guy trying to get by. And these little things help me to do that.

About a mile from my walk's end, the first time in a couple of weeks I've been able to tolerate the full four miles, I stopped several times just to look, listen. The first time was beside a small beech tree, its dry, brown leaves still rattling quietly in the breeze, like maracas with soft beads in them. Most of the beeches, large and small, still retain a pretty good portion of their leaves, crispy-sere, but they are starting now to fall. I could see that from all the beech leaves on top of the snow now, scattered about with what seemed artistic precision, like hand-made wallpaper, each leaf equidistant from the ones surrounding it. I have no idea how this could happen in the chaos of winter in these woods. But the symmetry was mesmerizingly beautiful.

The next time I stopped was at the bottom of a gully beside a small stream, free-flowing now after being locked beneath ice for a couple of weeks, water so clear, all the fresh snowmelt,

so pristine. Life is full of such stoppings and goings, or more accurately maybe, of different kinds of goings, the ones on the surface, fast moving, visible to all, and the ones under the ice, so hard to calibrate, though we know they continue no matter how cold it gets.

The last time I stopped was at the crest of a hill overlooking the whole forest on the other side of the road, acres of soft, ivory snow, bits of which I had just balled up and thrown, so easy on my eyes from this vantage point, with hundreds and hundreds of strong, tall trees throwing their shadows over it in clear, straight lines, striations of dark and light. Vast. Tranquil. Puzzling. That is what I saw.





## January 21: Three Trees and a Turkey

It was even warmer today, upper 40s when I got to the woods, cloudy, heavy air. The soft snow on the path was now wet-slick from the melt, icy in spots, demanding attention step by step. There was an eerie fog hovering above the snow, maybe 20 feet deep up from the ground, visible to my right, down the hill, to my left, up the hill, and behind me when I looked back. But, oddly, the air ahead appeared clear. The effect of all of this was to distort space like an accordion, a kind of doppler effect, the trees behind and beside me seeming quite far apart, the ones in front of me crunched up together, foreshortening the path.

Just after I took the dogleg down the path "less traveled" I noticed immediately something that surprised me: There was a set of boot prints, on the small side, a woman maybe, heading in the opposite direction I was walking, what I said yesterday was highly unlikely to happen given how this path abuts to the road. But there they were. So, later yesterday or earlier today, someone most likely saw my carved inscription on that downed tree. I was not sure what to make of all this disruption of normalcy. But it got me thinking about some of the more unusual experiences I've had in these woods, things hard to explain in terms of Newtonian mechanics, sometimes even stretching the perimeter of quantum mechanics.

One of them I mentioned briefly in *This Fall*, those huge, bulbous, old trees I ran into one day when I left the path and headed into the thickets after I got twisted around, then lost, on one my walks. There were, I remember vividly, both that day and now, three of them, much broader in circumference than the other trees around them, covered with what looked like huge globules of wax that had run down the trunks and

hardened into bark. I actually put my arms around one of them, just to be sure I wasn't making them up. What I didn't say in that essay is that I went home and googled a variety of combinations of terms to try to find out what they were and came up empty. I've seen something like those surface lumps on some sycamore trees, less runny-looking, but similar. But these trees tapered up in a way sycamores don't. And there are no sycamores on or near any of the paths I walk on in Boyce Park. Or any in these woods that I know of. The tapering shape was reminiscent of an African baobab tree, but Boyce Park is not in Africa. So I just let it slide.

A few months later, about this time of winter, all the leaves down, ground all white, every single tree trunk visible for hundreds of yards ahead and around, I decided to go and find them again. I knew roughly where I had left the one path and roughly where I had connected up with the one above, so I headed that way. There was not one tree even remotely resembling the ones I saw and hugged either in appearance or size. So I started searching in widening circles, a space maybe a mile in diameter on the ground. Nothing. A few days later, I tried again, widened the circle. Again, nothing. Those trees are not there. I am certain of it. How and why they were there the day I found them is open to question. My self-explanation at the time was it was a very large-scale quantum effect, the kind no physicist would believe could happen. But that rationale satisfied me. I didn't mention this to others or in my book because it seemed pretty outlandish even by my standards. One day on a walk, though, I mentioned it to a good friend who shares my openness to mystery. And she said, immediately, "Oh, it must have been a quantum experience." I was stunned and thrilled that there was at least one other human being in the world willing to entertain that thought. So that's how it got settled, a quantum version of Christ's promise: "Where two or three gather in my name, there I am . . ." and that is where those trees are! I could see all the trees in the woods today just like I did back then, over

two years ago now; I made no further attempt to try to find the ones that came that day to surprise and comfort me. I already know where they are and where they aren't.

About a mile further down the path there is an area of very thick underbrush, too dense to walk through if you leave the path. I had a very unusual experience there, too, in the summer of 2016, about 18 months after Carol died. I was coming down the narrow passage toward a little footbridge in that area when I heard a great commotion down to my right in the underbrush. At first I thought it might be a bedded-down deer I had surprised and aroused, but I know that sound and this was way too much of a ruckus for that. Then I heard it again, and then again, all in the same spot. So I stopped and tried to see what was up. All I could discern was a large, dark wing flapping just above the thickets at ground level. I thought it might be a hawk, having come down to prey but now unable to extract itself from the brambles. I said to myself, in my head, you need to go down and help it get free.

Then I hesitated, hoping for a second thought to come, knowing that in doing so I would likely get bloodied, all beaked and clawed. But I headed in anyway, figuring I'd survive and this bird wouldn't without my help. The flapping wing was only about 30 feet away, but it took me maybe five minutes to push through the brush and picker-bushes to get there, a furious flapping happening with each noisy advance I made. When I got to the bird, I could see it was a large turkey, mostly hidden in the greenery. And I re-calculated upward the beak and claw damage I should expect. When I reached in to make my first move, everything stopped, went perfectly still. I put my hand on this grand bird and could tell it was no longer breathing. It was dead, had died right in front of me there. I started crying. Not because I mourned for the turkey necessarily, but because it reminded me in the fiercest way of the fact that I was not with Carol when she died. No one was. The guilt I carry from that fact haunts me to this day.

And it always will, a failure on the largest possible scale. No one should have to die alone. Period. I should have been there. Period. So what if I could not have known what was about to take place that day when I headed off to work. I should have been there. Stayed home. Something. Anything. I went out of my way that day a year or so ago to witness a turkey dying in the woods. I prayed a prayer for it, shed tears for it, and Carol died alone. That is one of the weights that makes the stoop of my shoulders hard to counter.

When I passed that spot today I just kept my head down, step by step, footfall by footfall, snow, ice, dirt, step, step, step. The inside of my head was a nothingness. No thoughts, no words, no future, no past, no trees expanding or contracting around me, no quantum trees stepping in to comfort me. Not even tears. Just a searing, guilt-filled grief at what I failed to be and do that day, standing in for every single other thing I ever failed to be and do for Carol in all our days together. And for everyone else who has come into my care along the way. Unbearable. That was what became of my walk today.



## January 22: Water Features

When I woke up today my head felt leaden, deadened by a series of irritating dreams that came in sequence all night long. I woke up after 4 or 5 of them wishing I hadn't, the kind of dreams that say in mundane ways, "life in this world kind of sucks and there's not a damn thing you can do about it," the kind that remind you how swift is the river we find ourselves in the midst of, irresistible to our desires, our only choice to face the onrushing current, try to inch upstream against its force, or watch it flashing past and away from us, washing downstream the bits of flotsam we were so hoping to catch as they swept by.

I only remember details from one of those dreams, but I'm not going to write what they were, hoping that if I don't give it this additional purchase in the economy of my imagination (and yours!) I'll forget about it quickly. You might think this residual deadness in my head is entirely unpleasant to me, but it is not. I am actually grateful for it. The inside of my head is a wild and dangerous place most of the time, at one extreme, the "up," thoughts and feelings flashing, sometimes thrashing all around; at the other, the "down," fried circuits, migraines. I get migraines at an average rate of two a week, more than that when I'm teaching, less when I'm on break. They are, I have long told myself, the price I have to pay to continue to live in my head. I'm not happy about that necessarily, but when I have a debt, I pay it. There is a famous photograph of Nikola Tesla sitting in his laboratory, one of his giant "coils" spewing jagged lightning strikes all over the large room, he sitting in the midst of it, cross-legged, perfectly calm, that stoic, serene expression he was famous for lighting up his little oasis of safety. How he looks there is how I feel when my head is

dead. Not happy or sad, laughing or crying, hopeful or desperate, no binaries at all, just a singularity. Nothing.

It is even warmer today than yesterday, mid-50s this morning, all that ice on the path now slushy soft, running off in little rivulets. On days when my head is like this I always start my walk believing I will think nothing that day. Then, at some point, the action in my head heats up. Today it didn't, the whole walk, nothing. I was so grateful for that, a sign maybe my thunderstorm is dying down, finally, to a new normal. I had my head down most of the way, just watching one step after another. There was no need to do that for safety-related reasons. As I said, the ice was gone and the wet ground had not yet gone to mud. It was just because that was all I wanted or needed to see today, what was right at my feet as I took each step, no up-looking toward the figments of some unlikely future, no back-turning to reflect on what is done and gone. Just now, now, step, step, step. I did of course see the things in front of me. The ground around the path, and most of the path itself, is covered with a glaze of stuck-together leaves, the ones that fell in piles last fall, all mid-range brown, flattened. Every few feet, though, there was one of those crisp, still 3-D beech leaves I said yesterday had aggregated in regular patterns, golden colored, textured, almost architectural. My depth perception when my head is dead is especially keen, so this was a constant source of delight to me, step by step by step. And for some reason, my hearing was quite alert, maybe because the air was very still, heavy today, holding yesterday's layer of snowmelt fog much closer to the ground, especially around the little streams that crisscross the park, flowing free and full now.

I walk beside one of them on my way up the first hill, its brook-like gurgling reminding me today of the first poem I had to memorize, in the second grade, "The Brook," by Alfred Lord Tennyson. Here is the part of it I still sort-of remember:



I come from haunts of coot and hern,  
I make a sudden sally  
And sparkle out among the fern,  
To bicker down a valley.

By thirty hills I hurry down,  
Or slip between the ridges,  
By twenty thorpes, a little town,  
And half a hundred bridges.

...

With many a curve my banks I fret  
By many a field and fallow,  
And many a fairy foreland set  
With willow-weed and mallow.

And out again I curve and flow  
To join the brimming river,  
For men may come and men may go,  
But I go on forever.

I googled the correct text of course but left out the stanzas I didn't really remember. It's kind of a sappy-sounding poem most of the way through, then the kicker closing, and I love it, partly for that reason, it's being pointlessly beautiful for the most part--the "fairy foreland" and "willow-weed and mallow" are memorably cool figures--then the sort of "deep" thought at the end, good things

Near the top of the hill where I head off sidewise to the right, the stream runs through a deep gulley, down under a little plank sort-of "bridge." As I crossed it today I heard to my left, up the hill, a much louder water sound, like the kind you'd want to replicate if you had enough money to build a perfect backyard water feature. When I looked up, I could see that

the water was coursing in wide swaths down a series of outcrops in the stone up there, something I had never noticed before. I decided to go up and examine it more closely, not easy, given the steepness of the bank. When I got there I could see what looked like a thick slab of slate or shale bedrock, maybe eight feet long, that had been layered into separate steps, each about a foot wide, each about 2-3 inches high, the sum total of the noise of the water gurgling over them just transcendently beautiful today, perfect. I had no particular thoughts about it, just enjoyed it for a minute then went on my way.

On the other side of the road, there is a much wider stream in a much wider gully with a much wider and sturdier crossing bridge, one that doesn't require quotation marks. As I crossed it I could hear a louder, throatier flow of water upstream, not quite a roar, but not a gurgle, either. So I looked upstream to its source, a dam created by a fallen log and lots of leaves, the upstream side being about 2 feet higher than the downstream. This one I watched from a distance, equally beautiful, inciting no thoughts to speak of. I have been walking this path almost daily for years now. I never once noticed these two waterfalls. Maybe they just emerged recently, with all the runoff from the snowmelt and heavy rains that preceded the snow last month. But probably not. It's just like every other person and thing in this world we encounter, trying our best to pay assiduous attention, notice the minutiae that carries what meaning is worth gleaning, ending up missing almost all of it because the lightning or migraine takes up too much of the available space in there. Until what's out there makes enough noise to turn even the deadest head rightly in its direction.



## January 23: The Women Who Think I'm Handsome

This morning, once again, my head woke up blessedly blank. My first few dreams last night were unusually turbulent, disturbingly so, coming in the kind of cycle you cannot break simply by waking up for a few minutes. Back to sleep, the dream picks up right where it left off. Finally, I decided to get up for a while, do some paperwork, watch some ESPN. It worked. Then it was deep sleep for five hours straight, until almost eight, quite late for me, that continuous block of sleep quite a treat.

I walked for a long while with my head down, more than a mile, thinking nothing. I did notice that the path was different from a couple of days ago, those pattern-scattered beech leaves now coated with the granular snow/sleet that came down last night. But it was almost as if someone else was seeing it, utterly dispassionately. I am in such a state of mind so rarely, as I said, that I savor it, crave more of it. I tried a few times to force a line of thinking, that insatiable urge to write something down, but no dice. Just ongoing quiet. As I turned down toward the road, I noticed one leaf sitting alone on a wide swath of white, like a king or saint, so serene, and I remembered a photo my friend Yan sent me a couple of days ago, a single leaf on a field of snow. Yan is a writer, primarily fiction, but she also has a gift for photography. Every photo she sends me, taken from her phone, is breathtaking, the framing, the depth, the detail, the kind of images you just get lost in looking at. To her, they are just snapshots. My photos, which I rarely take and even more rarely send, are actual snapshots, the kind a 5 year old with a shaky hand might compose. They are comical by comparison. Anyway, I spent most of the rest of my walk thinking about Yan, about what a great gift it has been to have her for a friend these last few

years, the kind of friend that is so good you mostly don't even notice it, no drama. That good.

I recalled the first time I met her, just over from China, via India I think, to start an MFA degree here. I was scheduled to teach a rhetoric seminar that fall, and she came to ask me if I thought she could handle that kind of work. I could tell within a minute that she could. She is, for one thing, extremely smart, quick-thinking, capable I would guess of grasping almost anything. She is also quite kind, a quiet kindness, very human. And funny, a dark sense of humor. All things I like in others and that are, to me at least, just as pertinent to the question she came to me with as her intellectual acuity. But what struck me most is that she was not in any way struck by *me*. I am 40+ years older than Yan. I am an established scholar, a "professor," the sort of presence that inspires most graduate students to exaggerate my gravity, to which they react either deferentially or resistantly, depending on their mood or temperament. Yan just said what she thought, over and over, whether she agreed with me or not, like a normal grown-up might, neither dazzled nor irritated by my status or standing. The academy, you may or may not be surprised to find out, is not heavily populated by grown-ups. I could go into all my theories about or justifications for such a generalization, but I'm not going to waste your time or mine with that. I'm sure most academics would disagree. I don't care. I stand by my claim. So, for me, encountering a grown-up who will talk with me as if I am a grown up, too, is always deeply pleasing.

Yan took two of my graduate courses and did extremely well in both. One of the things I realized just today was that even when she was in one of "my" courses, that unbalanced power relationship that we, on the higher side, need to navigate so carefully, for all-good ethical reasons, I could still just have a conversation with her, a normal human conversation, about art, or writing, or life, or anything else at all. What a joy that has been, another human presence treating me as if I am

another human presence. I am always utterly and completely honest when I talk to other writers about their writing, whether they are freshmen in a composition course or eminent colleagues sharing a draft of an article. And I could do that with Yan without complication. She would still stop by my office from time to time, just to say hi and talk for a few minutes, send me a friendly email, often with photographs. In all of the meantime now, she has married (I stood in for both hers and her now-husband Guoxi's parents, who were unable to attend their very small wedding here in Pittsburgh), given birth to a beautiful son, Eli, whom I have spent some time with these first few months of his life. I joke with Yan from time to time that Eli is more grown up already than many of my colleagues. Because he is.

Via Yan, I have met a number of other Chinese women: her step-mother, two of her roommates before she got married, her friend, and now mine, living in England, Marian, who inspired my Li Po poems and who corresponds with me regularly, sounding always just as honest and human and funny and kind as Yan does. Every single one of them, quite independently and spontaneously, told me somewhere along the way that they thought I was "handsome." There was no awkwardness to it, just their honest appraisal delivered matter-of-factly, the way I talk about someone's writing when they share it with me. That is more than the sum total of all the American women who have told me I am handsome over the course of my entire life. I am not what you'd call classically good looking: a nose too big, a narrow chin, quite thin most of my life, and very self-conscious, almost embarrassed at times to look like I do. One of Yan's roommates, Julia, such a quietly strong person, was very sweet to me during her time here. When she was leaving to return to China to get married and start her career there, she gave me a gift, a photo of Ralph Waldo Emerson, and she told me again how handsome she thought I was, just like him. Most American women would not, I'm guessing, think Ralph Waldo Emerson was

handsome. But he does look a little like me, the over-sized nose, the pointy chin, the eyes, both soft and alert-looking. It helped me to understand what she and the others meant. I joke now that I just look better in Chinese than I do in English. All of that has been a blessing to me during this time of such great loss and repeated failures in the aftermath to get new relationships going here.

Yan has introduced me, via online links, to Chinese poets, Chinese opera, and, via conversation, to Chinese history and politics. Last fall on one of my walks, while I was trying to figure out something very vexing in my current life, I had a quick image flash through my head of a scene in a Chinese rice paddy. Just a few seconds, almost a still image. Somehow I knew, or thought I knew, that this scene was set 2000 years ago, in a far distant lifetime. That's how things come to me sometimes, just a brief "vision" like that. The "I" in that scene was maybe 20 years old, stuck ankle deep in the rich, black muck, bright clear sun, not baking hot, a cloud-infused blue sky reflected on the shallow water. I was looking up at a dirt road that ran alongside the paddy, on an embankment. There, a brocade-covered litter-carriage--the kind with two long poles that four men use to carry it along--was stopped, a beautiful young woman just visible through the side window. I looked up at her and was captivated. Falling in love with anything, which I do all the time, as you know if you've read *This Fall*, is always, I believe, a choice, that "yes" triumphing over "no" for reasons hard to fully fathom. Sometimes we make it slowly, over months or years. Sometimes we make it in a split second, "at first sight," which is what happened there. I knew that she was way too wealthy to be available even for me to talk to, let alone get to know, so I just went back to my work.

That image has many layers of meaning to me, most of which I won't go into because they are not pertinent to my purpose here. But I have come back to reflect on it over and over on

my walks, trying to fathom more fully what I suspected were its multiple and subtle significances, the way I might read and re-read a provocative poem, say, dozens of times, hoping to gather what it proffers. I came to believe late last fall that, if I do have come back here again (which I hope I don't because I already know everything I care to about this particular world, the dark, the light, all of it) this current iteration was not meant to be another occasion to indulge the earthly emotions that were instigated with that gaze; it is an opportunity for me to resolve them once and for all. I took to that work eagerly and immediately, and I think I'm doing pretty well so far. One thing I know for sure: If there ends up being a next time for me, I want to use it not to dig in deeper here, but to seek a way out of this earthly cycle for good. I know enough about Eastern religions and early Greek philosophy to recognize the road. That's the one I'll be looking around for next time.

All of that is, in any case, a sidetrack from the significance of that image more pertinent to this essay: If there are multiple lifetimes, then I was once Chinese. Maybe many times. There were four other figures, young people like me, planting rice in that paddy that day, two of them women looking at me, smiling, as I looked at that road. Because I was so riveted on the woman in the carriage, I didn't end up with clear images of them. But I have just decided to believe that they were earlier incarnations of Yan and Marian. My good friends. Maybe the two men were Guoxi and Eli. Two thousand years ago, we all stood together in a field planting rice. Yes, that's what I just decided to believe.

The more I learn about Chinese culture, art, customs, and people in this lifetime, the more it all seems a fit for me. I have no desire to become Chinese again, or even go to China. I just happen to like and get along with the Chinese people I meet here, and there are many of them now, as Pitt has begun to recruit more and more international students, most of them Chinese. Just last night, I got an email from a Chinese man I



had in class last year. It came in at 3:15 A.M. I was half-awake and heard the phone buzz on the side table, so I looked at it. Here's what he said:

Dear Mr. Paul,

I am sorry for emailing you obtrusively. I heard from Thomas that you are going to retire after this semester and move to another city. It is such a shame to hear news like this because I was actually planning to take one more class of yours next semester. Among all the teachers I have met in this university, you are the one that I like and respect the most. You are knowledgeable in a way that you can unconsciously influence us, and each time after our class was over, I always felt like I learned a lot from you. To be honest with you, my mind was opened after I took your class, and I learned to look at things from so many different perspectives. Sorry about all this nonsense. I just really want to tell you how grateful I am to be one of your students. I am really glad that I had the opportunity to take your class, and it was an honor to me. Thank you so much Mr. Paul.

I remember this young man quite well. If you had asked me yesterday how he might feel about me, I would have thought he'd be irritated. I put pressure on him to work up to his potential. But, remembering it all in more detail now, we had the same kind of conversations I have with Yan: I said directly to him exactly what I had to say, he responded honestly with exactly what he had to say back, like grown-ups.

One of the things Carol and I both noticed and talked about, once we passed 60, was the difference in the way we were perceived by young people in the current culture. At work, teaching, we, professors, were highly regarded, larger than life. Away from work, our elevated station invisible, we were

diminished, duffers I guess. This was sometimes funny, sometimes painful. All of my students now are young enough to be my grandchildren. They are, at least in part for that reason I assume, quite respectful, often sweet and kind to me. But it feels disproportionate in some way. I was quite puzzled for some time about why I just felt more "normal" with my Chinese students. One day last summer this thought came to me: Maybe they have a category in their head, a space, where old people are still fully human, neither larger nor smaller than life, neither more nor less valuable than younger people. So our interactions feel "real," more fully human. That may or may not be true. But, like so much of what I've written here today, it is all beside the point, which is this: Today was my day to cherish Yan, her good friend, now mine, Marian, and all the Chinese women who think I'm handsome and tell me so, matter-of-factly, in a way I am now inclined, and quite happy, to believe.



## January 26: When Singing Becomes Silence

Today was another empty-headed day. Not head down, plodding, just wordless. The 50 year-long post-modernist moment that has recently come to a close did its best to convince me and everyone else that human experience was bounded within the range of language, words. I never believed that when I was young and I don't believe it now that I am old. I have survived the penal colony of postmodernism mostly because I am very stubborn, very good at "passing," and very good at hiding what most matters to me when I have to, which is most of the time.

I had been walking for about two miles without words, but still "thinking." I understood that for some reason today, something that had been ongoingly turbulent in the seemingly eternal moment of my emotional universe was getting settled. It felt like a song feels just as you sing the last note. The residue of the sound is still in the air, the memory of the music. But that time-sequence is over. Maybe another song will begin, like the way an album of songs works, and another pattern of time will emerge. Maybe not, and time will just move randomly for a while, unorganized by sonic rhythms.

When I had this sense of soundless time, for some reason I thought of Beethoven, whose emotional spaces always feel as gigantic and overwrought to me as mine do, on the inside, out of sight. His symphonies, for example, seem to stagger to a halt, striving over and over again to reach closure, only to have the theme rise up violently out silence, trying to take over again. Sooner or later though the silence wins out. I love that staggering phase in my own emotional life, when something huge, something I am in love with or at a loss with, keeps trying to come to a close but won't, and won't, and won't. And

then it does. That's what I felt had happened today. Maybe the previous days of empty-headedness were like those hard brake-pedal-pushes Beethoven keeps trying to apply to his runaway music. I won't be sure this is true for a while, having the silence hold strong when the theme of this sound tries to become noise again in my head. That might take weeks, even months. But today I was so happy thinking that maybe, now, finally, I've made it.

The specifics of this are not important. Only the instant when singing becomes silence. At such a moment, there is not a change of tempo or pitch. There is a change of state. And it happens fast, just like that. The way distilled, unperturbed water can change states in a flash, as soon as you touch it. I've read about that, how a water bottle left in a car for example in freezing weather will appear to be drinkable, until you pick it up, the whole thing solidifying instantly with that jostle, or how pure water heated past the boiling point will not show any signs of it, the customary bubbling up, unless you disturb it. Then there is the ruckus. That was what I felt like today: Something got jostled and a change of state I hadn't quite processed flashed in instantly. Done. I am so grateful for that, I can't tell you how grateful. Well, I could, maybe this way: Think of a long period of time during which you try mightily, beyond your best, to make something you deeply desire happen, failing, failing, failing, getting back up, back up, back up, over and over, trying harder and harder and harder. And then one day you just stop. Or it stops might be more accurate. You are set free. You have nothing. But now there is room at least for some other something to come along and melt the ice or condense the steam so you can drink again. That's what I mean.

When I started to think in words again, the first image that popped into my head was the entire range of the electromagnetic wavelength spectrum, from gamma rays at 3000Hz to ELF waves at 3Hz. I just got those numbers from

Wikipedia, of course, I didn't have them memorized! I knew that the range of frequencies we could see, visible light from violet to red, was only a small part of this spectrum, but the way it was actually scaled out over the whole of it stunned me. So I checked further to find out what portion we actually see: .0035%! When I started to think about this today, it was with the sense that the visible portion of the spectrum was comparable to the portion of our experience that we can realize and render in words, so small, and we tend to think it is all, that there are vast spaces of active energy that both precede and follow words. We have direct experiential access to the inner and outer reaches of that spectrum, via our "presence" in the world and to ourselves. And we have, I believe, direct access to at least some of those inner and outer reaches in others, too, if we are present with them, pay attention, listen not just with our ears but with our whole body, that amazing antenna we are gifted with at our birth into this particular world, the one we lose connection with slowly over time because all we hear, both in our own heads and in others' voices, are words, words, words.

We have words that name what happens in those nether reaches of the spectrum: ineffable, sublime, transcendent etc. The problem with those words, I thought today, is that they are too grand, out of proportion. Yes, many pre- or post-verbal states of mind are sublime, many rise high toward the almighty-anything-or-everything beyond, many resist our best efforts to "eff" them, but many, maybe most, are just ordinary, like mine today, head blankly happy, away from both words and the names we use for those wordless spaces, especially beautiful to me exactly for that reason.

They are like me, what I aspire to be going forward, why I have to leave here to achieve it: the ordinary, a place where I can just be a person, where I am only "paul," small p, to maybe one or a few people who just like me, no big deal, not "Professor," capital p, or "poet," weird p, just a let's get a cup of

coffee right now and talk about whatever comes up, or let's get together tonight to watch a baseball game, or let's take a walk by the water tomorrow. All those other things that don't begin with a "p," aren't even words. No finger-walking up and down an iPhone to find a remote future date for it, no hesitation because, well, maybe he's weird or wants too much, something, anything at all, from me, that vertigo of control-being-lost that can only arise when the desire for total control, and the inherent distrust it breeds, over-fills the void of the mind with its baseless fears.

Here, though, you might counter (and several people have), I have a history, 40+ years of it, a track record, a big advantage when you're this old, too late to start anew. But a history, a record, under certain circumstances, like mine have been the last three years, is also baggage, heavy baggage, the kind you know you'll never be able to lift out of the way. My wife died and I went off the rails for a while. The little specter of death sat visibly enough on my right shoulder to scare people away, a sudden turn toward a rest room or a stairway as they saw me approaching from a distance, the awkward leaning-backward, wound tight-to-leap stances they took when encounters were unavoidable. The endless finger-walking down the iPhone when all I wanted was a five-minute conversation, right then. I got sad. I got mad. At people I have to live with here now. That's baggage you have to drag around forever, can't stick in the closet to hide. I wrote manically, essays, poems, books, and I shared them, for free, with everyone I knew, forced them forward unsolicited, as if that might help them understand better what I was up against. I wish I hadn't done that. Knowing that much about someone you have to see regularly is not good. All those things that won't be forgotten out there even if they are already forgotten in here, the terrible legacy of words, the illusory always-trueness of their actual only-onceness. That is baggage too, the kind you make others lug around if you "invite" them to read what you write.

I need now to stow all of that baggage in storage locker somewhere, fail to pay the bill, let Jarrod and Brandi or Moe and Mary pick it all up for a song at an auction someday. I need to get on a plane, just me, enough clothes for a weekend, and fly off into the sunset, I mean literally, to the west, where I'm heading as soon as I can after my last term is over here, first to see my daughter for a while, in Olympia, Washington, summer, fall, long enough to forget what I left behind here, long enough to begin to remember what I am, could still become. Long enough, maybe, to find a couple of people who know me just as the guy up the street, or down the hall, the one who is always singing or humming when he walks by, the one who sometimes smiles and says hi, seems quiet, might be kind, the one, hey, maybe you'd want to have coffee with, watch a ballgame with, walk with by the water. I might not find that with anyone anywhere. But I might, too. So why not go, take a chance? Who knows? Stranger things have happened in this world, and in my life. So why not?





## March 10: The Middle, The End, and the Beginning

Today, quite to my surprise, turned out to be one of the best days of my life. I don't have time or all the words to fully tell you why, so a summary will have to do.

About five weeks ago, on February 4, right after the Super Bowl, which I enjoyed, I went to bed feeling a bit off. I woke up the next day with the flu, this year's version, bad. I spent the next six days in bed with a very high fever, 103+ most days. Had I known that, I would have seen a doctor. I didn't. I was taking my temperature with the thermometer we used when the kids were still here and quite young, one of those plastic ones with the digital screen. After I got better and bought a new one, I realized it was reading two degrees too low. I was, I see now, too sick to know how sick I was. I spent all that time drinking bottle after bottle of water and changing my clothes and bed clothes when they got soaked through with sweat. The fever broke in stages on that Friday and Saturday. When I finally came to, I had lost 10 pounds (about 5 more than I had to spare) and looked, even to me, like a ghost. I tried but failed to go to work on the following Tuesday, too weak and whacked out to care. I did head off to work that Thursday, realizing while I was driving in that my distance vision was significantly compromised. I'm assuming I didn't notice it much before that because I was at home, everything close, and hadn't driven. By the time I got to work, I was quite concerned. By the end of the day, as my vision devolved, I was frightened. In the short run, because I still had to drive home. In the long run, well, that goes without saying. I waited about five more days before I went to my doctor (yes, I am that stubborn!), assuming, or at least hoping, it would all go away. It didn't. So I went. After several days of tests, I was given a series of possible causes and paths to

resolution. I'll only describe one of them, by far the best, because it seems to be the actual one: gradual self-resolution. Yesterday, I drove to the grocery store. Today, for the first time in about 6 weeks, I drove out to Boyce Park and took my full walk, having been building up to it over the last 10 days or so with longer and longer walks around my neighborhood. I couldn't believe I was there again, just cried on and off as I walked, saw some of my favorite things again, I was that happy.

The Chinese, I know from my friend Marian, whose mother died the same year that Carol did, which led her to my book, which is how I got to know her, attach a special significance to the third anniversary of a loved one's passing, I don't know much about why or what the protocols are. All I know is that Carol died three years ago, on February 17, which marked the nadir of my descent last month. I was too worn-out to be racked with grief. I acknowledged the moment, steeled myself through it, and woke up alive the next day. Not long thereafter, a few days maybe, I could sense that something about me was different, had changed. As I began to heal, I realized I didn't feel that familiar ceaseless rage seething inside me, the rage I said in *This Fall* would never go away. It had, maybe, been boiled off or sweated out of me, I thought, by that fever. Now, almost three weeks later, it hasn't returned, so I'm assuming and hoping it won't. I don't know if that's for better or worse. I am just happy it's gone for now, and perhaps, if I'm lucky, for good.

The day before I got sick, the CD player in my car went on the fritz. It would neither play nor eject the disk I had inserted. I preview and then listen to repeatedly all of the music I record, my own songs and covers, on that player as I drive, a process I really enjoy, so I tried everything I could think of to fix it, spent a half hour or so, this, that, to no avail. When I started to get better, I went out again and again (yes, I am that stubborn!) and tried to figure out what was wrong,

this, that, nothing. After several tries over a few days, I was finally able to get the disk to eject. But nothing would play, over and over, just a "CD error" message. I assumed it was broken for good. But from time to time since then (yes, I am that stubborn!), I have slipped in a disk, just to see what would happen: "CD error" every time. Today, almost mindlessly, I did it again, and the music started to play. I was stunned, amazed, deeply grateful. Not really because a silly CD player now worked, but because I felt it was an index to other things in my life starting to work, like my inner music, playing again. Like my appetite (I've been eating like a horse and have gained the weight back); like my ability to go to work and teach, up to my standard again, and above all, like my vision.

I was thinking today on my drive out to the park about famous historical losses of vision as they pertain to spiritual matters: St. Paul's sudden blindness, which, if my recollection serves me, is attributed in the Bible to his being a mindless prick. Or the composer of "Amazing Grace" who wrote that famous line, "I was blind but now I see" in his elder years as he swabbed the floors of churches trying to assuage his guilt over having been involved in the slave trade. I am neither a saint nor a reformed slaver. But I was blind and now I see.

So I will tell you a few things I saw today on my walk. I saw the sun, so rarely there this last month or so. I saw the trees I love and that love me. I saw the same path I most often walk on, beginning to end, just magical. The one detail I will report is this: The dead, leaning tree on which I carved my name and post-Carol birth-date a few months ago, and told you about in an earlier essay, was now down on the ground, laying across the path. I thought it would take years to find its way there. It took just weeks. Like me, February was too much for it. I had to climb over it to keep walking. Now, unless you know exactly where I had carved it, you will never see what I wrote, kind of half-hidden, down near the ground on the right side. In a few weeks, this spring, the county workers will

chain-saw the tree out of the way to clear the path. My inscription will return to the earth quickly thereafter. I was thrilled. I thought right then: The man that was born again that day, November 17, 2015, nine months after Carol died, died again last month "after a long illness." I am not him any longer. I have no idea who or what I am or who or what I will become. That remains to be seen, and thankfully I will be able to "see" it.

I was trying while I walked today to think of a poem to go along with what I was thinking, feeling, one of mine, someone else's, no matter. I couldn't think of one, not even a line, not even a word that seemed to fit. It was "sublime." Longinus, who wrote the book on sublimity a couple of millennia ago, the one that inspired the Romantic poets a couple of hundred years ago, basically, to my way of reading him at least, says that sublimity is not intrinsic to language or linguistic artifacts, no matter how powerful or beautiful they are. When I teach his book, I always use the analogy of a rocket ship. For Longinus, a "great" bit of writing is simply a vehicle that, if well-enough designed and crafted, can transport us right to the very edge of the medium it is made from, those words still held captive in their tiny province on the spectrum of human life in this world. Figurative language is the most powerful such booster, capable of thrusting us up to the very edges of our babbling biosphere. Once there, we just need to step outside, and we will go into orbit on our own, skimming off into the majesty of deep space, where we will float weightlessly, silently, the gravity of diurnal discourse too weak to pull us down, until we want or need to come home again. It takes a little courage to take that step, but the payoff is magnificent, an eternal here and now that is not parsed by grammar or syntax, those slaves of time we need for more mundane "communication" down here. There is no clear inside or outside. Just being.

As I have said, we have, historically, come up with a few vague words to describe that spacy state. I have never, of course,

actually travelled into space. But I've seen the pictures taken from there. The earth, this generous caretaker, which seems like all there is when we are fully in its embrace, looks suddenly so small, beautiful, blue, but fragile, so, so small. And the space it navigates its tiny little circuit within is as close to infinite as a human mind can apprehend. Here, we make things with words, very useful things, often beautiful things, sometimes so much so, so over-full of themselves, that they can convey us to the brink of this transcendent elsewhere. That is where I was today, right outside of words, and then everywhere outside of words, where crying, laughing, or just staring incredulously at what is right before our eyes, are the most appropriate media for expression. It was sublime.

The last day I went to work before I got sick, I went to hear the talk of a young woman competing for one of the jobs we were seeking to fill in our program. She does archival work related to Historically Black Colleges and Universities in America, important research at a volatily race-inflected moment like ours. I thought her performance was stunning. At one point, she talked in detail about the late 60s, and then vividly and passionately about what happened on February 13, 1969, which was my 20th birthday. She is maybe in her mid- or late-20s, so this is all "history" to her. I was there then, remember everything. I didn't cry audibly, but the tears just ran down my cheeks, so moved was I by her commentary and by my own memories. They are running down my cheeks now as I write this. I won't go into the personal details of this. I don't want to talk about it and you don't want to hear it, believe me.

The following week, her competitor for the job made his presentation, which I missed with my illness. I heard in advance of the decision meeting, which I knew I would not be well enough to attend, that he was stunning, too. And there was only one position open. I had been planning to file my retirement papers during the week I got sick but figured that

could wait until I got better. One night, though, it just struck me: Maybe if my chair had official notification that I would not be returning, I mean on paper, signed and done, he might be able to persuade the dean that hiring these two excellent candidates now, while they were right in front of us, would be prudent, assuring constancy, ongoing quality, in what we do here, and, more practically, avoiding an expensive search next year. I asked him, he said it might, I wrote the letter, emailed it, he went to the dean the next day, and she said "yes." I will never again see either of these good young people. But one of them, I will always believe, will be here because I am not. I am so happy about that. I know, both from my own children and the many, many undergraduate and graduate students I work with, how hard it is for young people to get established, find satisfactory employment, in the current culture. I am thrilled that I made room for one, and that I know who she is.

About 30 years ago I had a dream, in response to some question or crisis either Carol or I, or both of us, was confronting, the details of which I have no recollection of. But it had something to do with the frustrations of trying and seemingly always failing to find what one thinks one "wants," that bulwark of the human condition. In this dream, a disembodied voice told me exactly this: "In order to receive the gifts you want, you must first learn to receive the gifts that are offered." That's it, though I remember the emphasis on, and the importance of, the words "receive," "gifts" and "learn" in that sentence, as if this is not an instinctively simple process, these are not the just desserts of our birthright, and we don't either "get" the ones we want on our own initiative or have to "accept" the more meager-looking alternatives that come in their stead. I took those words to heart. It is, I discovered, very hard to live up to them, the temptations of wants, needs, dreams and desires, of getting and accepting, always so distracting.

I could see in my own life how often I simply ignored, or didn't even notice in the first place, which is way worse, the gift that was right in front me, the person, the situation, the place, the thing, brushed aside as if it were nothing because it wasn't exactly what I "wanted" right then. Even though, I came in time to see, it might be someone else's ideal. Even though, I also came in time to see, it could have been my ideal, if only I had taken the time to notice and value it! That is so stupid, so wasteful, so selfish, so arrogant, and quite often so rude, the experience than any person, place or thing inevitably feels when it is deemed inadequate, not enough, not because of what it is but because it is not something else.

I could see the other side of it, too, how often what I am, what I do, what I have to offer, has been dismissed, rejected, ignored, or, worst of all again, not even noticed. I have been dumbstruck, sometimes depressed, by the way so many people have averted their gaze from me, deked out of their way to avoid me, assuming I wouldn't notice, during these last three dark years. I know why they did that. But it was so stupid. What they have missed out on is not just the nuances of my astonishing journey, the kind of details that don't last more than a few days or weeks--and I can tell a pretty good story when someone is willing to listen--but also what I now know, have come to know, things almost beyond comprehension, that if they had just stopped with me for a few minutes, every now and then, asked a question and listened, would have astounded them. I have vowed to myself that if I ever come across someone like me in a situation like mine, I will spend all the time I can learning everything they have to teach me.

There are two ways to learn in this world: the easy way, by finding, talking to and listening to someone who really knows, or the hard way, by the trials and errors (two pretty good words for it) of your own experience. If you're waiting for perfection, obsessing over things that don't really matter,



avoiding those who know precisely because they know what you think don't want to or won't ever need to, you're doing it the hard way. Stop right now. Well, that's impossible, I guess. It's just not that easy. As Socrates says, being good, as a one-and-done, that's impossible; becoming good, for him, isn't, though. And it is a never-ending and deeply worthy process. Learn to receive the gifts that are offered. They are right in front of you. Could be me, could be anyone, could be anything, that tree you are standing beside. Everyone and everything knows. That is so much the easier way, believe me. You might think that tomorrow, next month, next year, you will find a worthier person, a more valuable thing, a more appealing place, the ideal moment. So why waste time on the seemingly lesser that's right there right now? I'm not saying you won't find those other things. I know people who, despite their being rude and stupid, do seem to get pretty much everything they want. But, of course, they are and will always remain rude and stupid, too big a price to pay, I'd say, way too big. Conversely, you might think that the darkness will never come your way, so why bother stopping to learn about it, maybe tempting it toward you in the process? Again, I'm sure there are people who are lucky enough to stay always in the light. But it's not something you want to count on.

I spent the last three years filled with rage. I probably had to be like that to survive. I was very mad at God. Maybe s/He noticed, maybe s/He didn't. No matter. Now I'm not. If you crossed my path during that time, I was probably very mad at you. Maybe you noticed, maybe you didn't. No matter. Now I'm not. I was very mad at myself. I didn't notice that. You are probably smart enough to figure out all the reasons I was and I didn't; I wasn't. No matter. Now I'm not. I was never mad at Carol. I know what she suffered here and what a relief it must have been for her to be released from all that. I have no idea what happens on the other side, but I have a faith now that if she is ongoingly present there, she is happier and being well cared-for. That tiny little space that stayed safe from my rage,

the one she left behind for me to stand in, is what saved me. Love, real love, the right kind of love, is so rare in this world. I have no idea why. It is the only thing that should matter, and quite often it's the last thing down the list. I had that. If you have that, or have had that, hold on to it, or the memory of it. When it gets all the way dark, that is the light that will let you see. And it will save you.



### **Postscript: May 3**

A series of minor illnesses, aftershocks from my flu I presume, has kept me apart from Boyce Park since March. Today I was finally able to take the first half of my "normal" walk, about two miles, and was delightedly surprised. There was no spring this year. It went from 30 degrees to 80 degrees in a matter of days. As a consequence of this, I assume, all of that season's floral stages are occurring at once. The skunk cabbage, usually fully fledged in March, is just now leafing out. The trillium, typically an April treat, are blooming weeks late, and there are many more of them than usual, maybe because the deer, which tend to graze them out, have better food options at the moment. And the May apples seem to be ahead of schedule, some already fruiting. What typically takes weeks is happening now. I suppose I could say something philosophical about that, but I won't. As is so often the case in the woods, the facts speak eloquently for themselves.

And remember that tree I carved my initials in? Well, it has fallen further down, an impediment hard to get past. In the six weeks since I've been here, a fully formed path now skirts around it, my inscription forever offline! I was about to say I can't believe it happened so fast, just like that. But I can believe it. That is the wisdom of the woods: If you can't get through, go over or under. If you can't do that, go around. Again, the facts speak eloquently for themselves.

I'll be leaving for good soon. I hope I will get to take my full walk at least once more. But even if I don't, I got to see what I saw today, and I loved every minute of it.

