

Harvest

Essays on Time from Olympia

by

Paul Kameen

Cover Image: "Self Portrait With Rake," by Joseph Kameen

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Equally good is the answer given by the person . . . who when asked what is the object of all the trouble he took over a piece of craftsmanship when it would never reach more than a few people, replied: 'A few is enough for me; so is one; so is none' . . .

Seneca

I am yours alone: for each of us is audience enough for the other.

Epicurus

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Preface: Some Notes on My Method

“He has many problems, and they are great.”

Chuck Noll, the Pittsburgh Steelers coach from 1969 to 1991, said this (if my memory serves me) about John Rienstra, the offensive tackle the Steelers picked in the first round in 1986, who was undone not by his bulked up, sculpted body or his bulldog attitude, but by anxiety attacks, the bane quite often of high-talent, perfection-driven people in all lines of work. The remark was not made in a mean-spirited way, just matter of factly. Rienstra lasted two seasons with the Steelers, played little, and then a few more with Cleveland, I think. I just found out via Google that he is now a happy man, with some wisdom to offer:

Have fun. Don't worry about what other people think or say. Realize that your football life is short, and that it goes by too fast. Don't make more of it than it is.

I'd like to borrow the initiative of Noll's comment and Rienstra's wisdom to say some things about my preferred method for bringing my work to market these last five years, that burgeoning DIY phenomenon called self-publication, which has many “problems” but is also “fun.”

The most significant of those problems, from a professional point of view, is that such artifacts have no official sanction, no status, no prestige; in certain respects, at least in the academic universe, they don't even exist. My department chair at the time I started writing all these books, in the immediate and chaotic aftermath of my wife's sudden and unexpected passing,

was quick to remind me: “You know,” he said, “those books don’t count,” as in you can’t put them on your resume or submit them as accomplishments in your annual report. The comment was, like Noll’s, not mean-spirited, just matter of fact. He must have known that I knew that. But I don’t think he had any clue how little I cared. Because he had no reason right then to imagine that his own life could end while he was talking to me, all of that scholarly work in the endless pipeline, years away from publication, potentially lost, “not counting,” wasted in a sense, part of one’s “effects,” papers in a box about to be closed and stored, or disposed of, files on a computer that no one will ever open. I did.

Self-publication, as it is practiced these days, resembles but is not identical with its predecessor, common until about 15 years ago: the vanity press. Making a good-looking book used to be hard, required professional skills. Now it doesn’t. Once I have a manuscript in digital form (easy to do now) and a digitized cover image (easy to create now), I can make in less than an hour a book that looks like it could sit comfortably on a bookstore shelf. There was a time not long ago when that was not possible. Thus, the vanity presses, which would do that for you at your own expense, often a considerable one. Vanity publications probably had even less status than my books, in part because you “bought” them instead of made them, but also in part because of the name, all those negative connotations. So those in the know rarely read those books either.

This indexes one of the potential detriments of depending on outside authorities, instead of your own judgment, to decide what is worth reading and what is not, whether you put “self” or “vanity” before the word publication. I could point to all kinds of significant historical examples, but I want to focus on a very small

one, a book not one of you reading this is likely to have heard of let alone read. My case in point is a little book written by John Bowman, the Chancellor of the University of Pittsburgh between 1921 and 1945, a force of nature who got the world-famous Cathedral of Learning built during the Great Depression, in a working-class town, against the express wishes of all the “powers that be” at that moment, and partially on the dimes of young school students. The book is called *Unofficial Notes* (an unpromising title, to be sure) and was “privately printed” (via a vanity press), most likely by his family (T. and F. Bowman), in 1963, in the immediate aftermath of his death in 1962. My guess would be that he had it all up and ready to go before he passed. It is one of the most compelling memoirs I’ve ever read, documenting both his astonishing boyhood relationships with trees, akin to my own, and his history as a great leader, all from an “insider” point of view.

The book is, of course, unavailable in the marketplace. The only reason I ever read it is because it was left behind on a shelf in the office I moved into in 1991 (by an eminent older colleague who was teaching at Pitt when it was published), along with a lot of other books and journals about disciplinary and institutional history. Over the next 20 years or so, I gradually winnowed that collection down to make room for my own things. But I always left that book. It just looked too innocent and pleasing to dispose of. One day, a few years before I retired, I was sitting in my office, bored I suppose, maybe waiting for a meeting to start, or to head off to class, and I plucked that book down and started to read it, expecting it would be at least slightly less boring than sitting there. I became instantly enthralled by his story, read the whole book, if not that day (I can’t remember what I was waiting for, but if it was a meeting instead of a class, I hope I skipped it to finish that book), then as

soon as I had the time. And I've read it multiple times in the meantime.

As I've explained in previous books, when I retired and moved out west here, I wanted as little baggage as possible. I set a limit of 10 books to bring with me. Bowman's was one of them. I'm tempted to say that if I could only have brought one book with me, it would have been that one. That's how amazing it is. I never thought of this before, but it's possible that someday down the line, some bored English professor will see one of my books sitting on her shelf, having been left behind by a more aged colleague, pluck it down and be similarly astonished. That is what every author hopes for, I guess. Well, Bowman got that from me.

But I digress. So, self-publication, low-status, yes. One of the obvious derivatives of that, of course, is a small audience. There is huge chunk of the academic audience that would never read a self-published book almost on principle. I made a few jokes about that in the "fake reviews" I made up to preface my first self-published book, *This Fall*. I concocted them on one of my more playful walks in Boyce Park, the site of the walks that book documents. They still make me laugh. I copy them all here for your amusement (though the sixth one down, the "professorbogusjbigwigIII" one, is the most pertinent one) and just to let you know I entered the self-publication world with my eyes wide open about its primary "great problems:"

What critics are saying about *This Fall*

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

paulkameen.com

“I laughed, I cried! Oh, wait, maybe that was him.”
catharsisnow.com

“This book is so cool I want to live in it!”
frostythesnowman.org

“Reading this book is a walk in the park. Literally.”
boyceparknews.com

“This book has everything: love, death, Emily
Dickinson. No sex, though. Sorry.”
trueconfessions.xxx

“Free? On a website? It has to be crap!”
professorbogusjbigwigIIIPhdMaBaAA.edu

“I like the cut of his jib! No, I *love* the cut of his jib!”
popeythesailorman.net

**STEAL THIS BOOK! Oh, wait, it’s free. STEAL MY
BOOK! AGAIN!**

abbyhoffman.com

“*This Fall*=(Paul Kameen X Paul Kameen)! Whew!”
paulkameenxpaulkameenwhew.com (181)

Further complicating this already built-in resistance in the marketplace is the fact that a “self” has no attendant “marketing department.” The only one available to market the work is the author, in my case me. I have the marketing skills of a block of granite, zero clue how to do it and zero interest in finding out. ‘Nuf said about that. So a miniscule audience is guaranteed, mostly family and friends who get free copies of my books when I finish them, and every now and then a total stranger

who happens on my website, likes what they find, and tells me about it. High quality readers all.

OK, so low status and tiny readership. That's two "problems, and they are great." But there is another side to the equation, the one that brings it all into balance, at least for someone like me, who could care less now about "what other people think or say," and wants to "have fun." And who, because of that deeply instilled imagined existential threat to life itself, is in a very big hurry. One of the things I came to realize about 35 years ago, at a difficult moment in my career, struggling with my own apparent deficits, for public performance in particular, was this: On the opposite face, as in a coin, of every weakness is a great strength; they are in fact one and the same, more a matter of emphasis and control than of variation. And, importantly, vice-versa. I decided then to use my apparent weaknesses as the foundation for my strengths, and to be quite cautious about relying too heavily on my strengths to carry the day. The dynamic of all this is a little more complicated than that, as you know if you've attempted it, but that's enough to give you the gist of it. The point I want to make is that self-publication is the same. Out of its "problems" emerge its "strengths," and they are equally "great," believe me. I'll just focus on two of them here: speed and control.

My wife's death was like a Big Bang in my life, time-wise. For some while thereafter, I was able to measure a future for myself, imaginatively, in terms of a day, two maybe, what I had to do to perform my job well and to keep myself alive. Gradually over about a year, that bubble of time expanded to include a week, then a month. Right now, five years removed from the traumatic moment I found her, it is maybe a year, which may be why I feel now like I have "all the time in the world:" I can foresee

an end to it, but it's probably not tomorrow. So it looks long and generous!

If you have ever published via the traditional press, as I have, you know the timeline they operate on is glacially slow by those metrics, multiple years, three if you're lucky, five if you're average, as many as twenty, or never, if you're not so lucky, and I don't mean from the time you start writing, I mean from the time you first start looking to place a manuscript. It's easy for someone who is warm or not hungry to wonder why anyone lacking one of those can't wait a while, days, weeks, even months, the time it can take for the wheels of the helping systems in our culture to turn, for a home, a meal. Well, time is like that. If you think yours is about to end, you want to finish what's important to you now, **RIGHT NOW**, urgently. I was always a speed freak to begin with, so that became amplified. If you've written a book and want it out there that fast, your only alternative is to do it yourself. An hour from now it will be "in the presses," tomorrow you can order a copy, a day or two later it will be at your door. You can read it before you go to bed that night. It is actually that fast. And what you end up with looks awfully nice, the tools available online are that good.

Even more pleasingly, it is a thing you have made entirely yourself, from the first word on a page until you turn off the light that night. It is yours. Everything. You control it all. That's what you gain by forsaking status, the after-glow of the elaborate peer-review and/or accounting process for vetting a manuscript through a publishing house. I am as much a control-freak when it comes to my own writing as I am a speed-freak when it comes to my affairs. So that is, for me, an enormous plus to the process. No one, and I mean no one, even sets eyes on what I write now until it is published, first to my

website, then via my preferred online vehicles, printed to be sold at cost online. I've written before, in a lighthearted but accurate way, about how stubborn I am in relation to "advice," saying, which is true, I have often ignored advice even when I knew it was good. I'm like that times ten with my writing.

I "learned" that through my poetry. I figured when I started writing and publishing poems that I'd never make any money from it, which I didn't, so why should I cede even the meagerest amount of control over what I made in that genre? I never took a creative writing course, signed up for a workshop or applied for a grant to spend time at a "colony" or retreat. I never even vetted my poems through other trusted eyes or ears until they were done, beyond the reach of outside intervention. When I did a reading, I'd know what went well and what didn't. But I rarely changed a word because of it, and only then provisionally. That level of intransigence may sound pig-headed, even stupid, and it probably is, but it is how I am in my deepest core, my go-to quote to explain it the one I learned from Popeye as a very young boy, I mean took deeply into my heart: "I am what I am and that's all what I am." It may be even more stupid to establish your founding ethical principles on the basis of a cartoon character, but, hey, Popeye is a way better role-model than most of the real people I saw back then, or see now, trying to peddle their ideological wares in the cultural marketplace.

I did the same thing with Horton the elephant: "I meant what I said and I said what I meant: an elephant's faithful one hundred percent." I saw this Dr. Seuss icon, from his classic "Horton Hatches the Egg," for the first time in a TV cartoon, with an egg in a sling underneath him (or at least that's the image I still have in my head from that moment) when I was quite young, less than ten I'd say. It

brought tears to my eyes back then, that's how deeply and vividly it impacted me. I knew right then, or at least hoped, I could live my life by that code, and I've done my best along the way to be that faithful to my word. And to my words. Which is why I covet them so. I've read tons of philosophy, ethics, spiritual and religious material. But Horton was and remains my template for understanding what John meant in his gospel by "the word was made flesh and dwelt among us." Words are nothing if you don't live up to them, in the flesh, dwelling right here among those who depend on you to keep them. Okay, Horton is not Christ. But he got the message across to me: They are your words, don't forsake them to others, and make sure you keep them, one hundred percent.

Once again, I digress, having now forgotten what track I was on, so I need to go back and reread. Okay, two strengths: speed and control. The equation is balanced, move both parts to one side, one minus the other, and they equal zero. But what if, I was thinking with this book, I could tip the balance to the plus side? Do some things with this book that could not be done via the traditional press. That would be cool. So that's what I'm going to at least attempt. May work out, may not. But why not, I thought, take it to the next level? That is, don't just simulate a "real" book as closely as you can; do some things that are possible via this method that real books can't do.

And the first thing that crossed my mind, in keeping with the theme of many of these essays, was time, temporality, movement, all of which are very hard to simulate in a stolid artifact delivered to the market in fixed form at a single moment in time: it's date of publication, which is more like a funeral, the finished corpse being placed in the crypt of history (Whitman uses an equally disturbing

funereal image in his preface to *Leaves of Grass*, so I don't feel I'm entirely alone in my creepiness here!), than, say, a wedding, the book joining up with its partner to explore new territory, or a birth, the beginning rather than the end of an adventure. Again, Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* is the template for both of these latter metaphors for publication. He published the same book, his mate and his child, over and over for his whole career, and the final edition documented the whole life that was initiated by the first edition. I'm getting going on this way too late in life to do anything of that magnitude. But, I thought, at least I could try something new, some way to make a weakness a strength. You already see a minor symptom of that decision is this piece, my "digressions," which I might have made a more concerted effort to mask were I more concerned about creating the illusion of seamless temporal flow.

This ups the ante in relation to control. I have in all of my previous books done my best to model the traditional press in terms of process and product. I write, revise, proofread, text-edit, cover-design, buy my own ISBN numbers, upload, review: everything, beginning to end, wearing each of those "hats" in a conventional sequence. If you've received or bought any of my books, you know that they resemble "real" books, very nice editions. I've enjoyed all of that immensely. But for this book it struck me: Why not take advantage of what self-publication makes possible, by contrast with the traditional press, which produces single-stage one-offs: once it's out there, it's done forever (unless you sell humongous quantities and earn the right to a "second edition")?

Such artifacts are static in both space and time. If you don't like some part of it, want to add to or clarify something, even correct obvious errors, you're out of

luck. Averting the prospect of any of those dilemmas is one of the reasons the process takes so long, manuscript to book. Get it all out of your system, fix it, clean it up ahead of time. So what if that takes years. There is no way to remediate anything after the fact. In short, real books don't grow, or even move after they're made, thus the funereal metaphors.

I know from my experience with self-publication, especially with *This Fall* and *A Mind of Winter*, that I have taken some advantage of my interactive access to the original "published" version, my ability to revise, change and correct things, any time I want, forever, one "edition" becoming extensive over time. *This Fall*, for example became significantly longer when I added the two postscripts. And I probably "updated" *A Mind of Winter* ten times after it was released. A lot of that was more like proofreading, my once prodigious skills in that area now significantly diminished, by age I suppose. Or maybe just a relaxation based on my knowledge that it's no longer a be-all, end-all process. But a lot of those revisions were substantial, too. That is a huge plus for any author, most especially one who is being impelled by the fear that his time will run out, needs to get it done and out there like yesterday, flaws and all, willing to risk the embarrassment of making those flaws public on the assumption that if his time doesn't run out he can renovate the product ongoingly toward a more suitable version of itself.

I'm only saying all this because for this book, I decided to take even greater advantage of the built-in malleability of this mode of publication, at the level of form and method, give it, in short, another dimension, temporality, like Einstein incorporating time into space, a fourth axis, instead of an extrinsic universal constant, as it was for Newton. For the most part, that will involve

making the revision process any good writer goes through more visible to you the reader, rather than opaque.

For example, with my previous books, I did a lot of local revision in advance of putting it up online, all invisible to a reader, of course. When I did local revision after that, either online or in the “published” books, there is no way you would be aware of it unless you downloaded or purchased multiple copies along the way and compared them assiduously. All of these changes were fully absorbed into the original dated pieces as if they happened then, too. But many of them didn’t. Even in the case of the substantial additions to *This Fall* in the form of those two epilogues, each of which is dated, anyone purchasing the book after that point would assume they were written in advance of its “publication,” even though they weren’t. My plan, or at least my hope, with this book—only time itself will tell if I can make it work—is to build temporality into the text in ways you can see.

Say I have a “finished,” dated essay and some days or weeks or months later I come back to think again about something related to what’s in it; I will add that material not seamlessly, collapsing the time interval to zero, but date-stamped in a way that makes it clear there is both a “then” and a “now.” That accounts for a future-oriented “arrow” (a metaphor, commonly used by scientists to characterize the directionality of time, that I examine in one of the essays) in the process. And I will incorporate a past-oriented “arrow” by “going back” to poems I’ve written, some since I moved to Olympia, a book-in-process (2018-19) called *slights: my new tiny poems from here not there* (available for free on my website and in paperback form on Amazon.com), some from my poetry-writing binge in September, 2016, and some of

which I just discovered in a folder in my closet, all unpublished, things I wrote almost 50 years ago, in my 20s, that sound, to me at least, a lot like the things I'm writing now. I'm not sure how to account for that resemblance. Perhaps I have simply regressed, like Shakespeare's Jacques' seventh stage man, reductively child-ish again. Perhaps it is more like one of Coleridge's conversation poems: The image at the end is sometimes the same as the image at the outset, but it is deeply enriched by the "time" of the poem that has intervened.

These poems appear as my epigraphs (many from a poem called "notes for walk-taking" that I wrote a couple of months ago) or on separate pages, as insertions into the essays, each chosen because it seemed to fit the moment, this past coalescing with the "present" of the essay, all clearly marked with date-stamps to lay out a temporal axis. My ambition is to illustrate the palimpsest that is any author's history, not as an opaque surface image covering up all the previous images, but as a series of transparencies, each layer visible, arranged in a fractal manner. This may or may not work, or if it does, be to your liking, or even mine. But I'm going to do it anyway. In part at least because I just want to, in part, of course, because given my medium, I now can, so why not?

The last several weeks I've been reading books on time written by quantum theorists. For all of them—quite surprisingly to me, given how exotic they are with their models and metaphors of space, all those quarks and strings and loops—time seems nearly incomprehensible, even experientially, let alone mathematically or experimentally. They basically write whole books to say they don't know much about it or even how to talk about it yet. I wrote about some of that along the way in these essays, the parts that intrigued or interested me. But I don't want my own method to have that sort of elusive

mystification about it. I hope simply to build time dimensionally into my project, because, using the standard means of production, the traditional press, I couldn't.

At some point, of course, this book will be “over” for me, no more additions, deletions, complications or corrections. That may take months or years or, as was so for Whitman, the rest of my life. I've chosen a title that has no outward boundary to it. Everything I do from here on is, quite legitimately, part of my “harvest.” And this book will either adapt to contain it or, at some point, it won't. Until then, I want to keep it fluidly open to change. And change is time, or, more precisely, time is change, my best approximation of a definition for it right now, even in scientific terms.

I opened my book *Writing/Teaching* with the assertion that “to teach is to change.” So I guess teaching and time are companionable, at least in the human universe. You can't teach everything in an instant, just as you can't learn it that way. You can't write everything in an instant, either. It takes time just to type the next word here, which is this one, now this one, time passing along the way, your time to read it as well. There is no “instant” of apprehension for anything linguistic. No eternal present. Maybe, I speculate at one point along the way here, there is no such thing as the present at all. The traditional book creates the illusion of just such a stasis. It exists as a frozen instantiation waiting for you to consume it, as a whole. That of course, for anyone who writes and/or reads, is a very thin illusion. Nothing is ever that still, that “done,” on either side of the transaction.

This book is not finished. Like any living thing, it will evolve. If I wrote it for the rest of my life, even with the

paucity of time I have left, the final version may be quite different from the one you read early on, or any of the other ones I wrote along the way. So that's what I'm going to do, following John Rienstra's advice:

Have fun. Don't worry about what other people think or say. Realize that your . . . life is short, and that it goes by too fast. Don't make more of it than it is.

I hope you can and will do the same, if you decide to join me in this venture, a partner of sorts. One of the most enjoyable side-effects of my mode of publication has been how personal my relationships with my readers are. I probably know, and have had some meaningful conversational exchange with, almost everyone who has read my work. I joke sometimes that instead of signing books for my readers, I should ask each of them to sign a copy for me, keep them on a shelf in my study, take one down from time to time and read it, as best I can, from the point of view of the signee, which I can at least attempt to simulate based on what they told me and what I know about them. That would be the palimpsest of palimpsests, I guess!

There is an intimacy in that, a feeling of closeness I get, this knowing who reads my work and what they think about it, one I didn't feel with the books I published in the traditional press. Yes, there were a number of quite laudatory reviews, a prestigious award for my first book, some gestural references in other books, comments at conferences, formal and informal praise or criticism, all very much appreciated. But for some reason, very little of it felt personal, responsive to what mattered most to me about what I thought and wrote, what I cared most deeply about, the two "topics" of these books: teaching and poetry. Nothing, in short, that seemed to "change"

anyone. I was an “author,” not a guy who writes something I’m inviting you to read and respond to, to me, directly to me. I prefer now to say I’m “sharing” my work, not publishing it. And when I say “you,” here or in an essay, I mean you, my friend, my companion, my interlocutor. I actually often imagine specific people when I use that pronoun, depending on what I’m saying and who is nearby in my imagination at that moment. That’s how personal it gets for me. I find it immensely enjoyable. To a certain extent, given my reclusive temperament and the disconnections that my move out west has caused, my social “network” is now the sum of all the readers of my books, give or take a few outliers who could care less about all that, whom I also love.

I’m going to upload this piece as soon as I proofread it, probably today (September 12.) I may [and did, I think you can tell by following verb tenses here] make changes tomorrow or at any time until this book is done, or I am. My initial plan was to upload the essays intervening between the “first” and the “last,” which I uploaded early in the process, only when they were “finished.” Having said all of this, I’m going to upload each one, even if out of order, as soon as it looks relatively “clean” to me. And I’ll update them directly online when I feel like it.

The last time I performed a full-fledged reading of my work was in April 2018, two months before I left Pittsburgh, an event in the lovely garden-yard of two of my long-time (longest-time actually, 40+ years) colleagues, maybe 30 or 40 others there, all of whom I knew well and liked. You would think it would be an idyllic experience for a writer, this lovely swan-song, and I fully expected it to be. But it wasn’t. I read, for the first time to a present audience, selections from the three books of poems I wrote in a fever-pitch during September 2016, poems that left me riven and drained

after I made them, the final cataclysmic paroxysm of my grief. It was an epic performance that beautiful spring night, memorable for all I think, including me, but it left me physically and mentally exhausted. I felt like my skin was being flayed as I read those poems to people I knew and cared about, and I ended up with a migraine that lasted a week. It was the last time I read before an audience and I never expected to repeat it.

Until I moved out here, where I read one little poem every couple of months in the open-mic portion of the Olympia Poetry Network events, to an audience who, if they know me by any name at all, it is only “Paul.” It is so pleasant. That’s all I want to be now, a guy called Paul who writes some things for people I like, a guy who hopes you will say something back to him about them, as a few people always do at those events. Anything at all will do. A guy who is no longer a scholar, a poet, an author, all of those culturally overloaded personae I was relieved to retire from, who prefers now, has always preferred, to spend his time having some “fun.” With words. With what time is left me. With Popeye and Horton. And with you.

Essay 1: Emily, Amanda and Me

before there was anything

god took a walk

creating exactly what

he saw along the way

from my “notes for walk-taking,” *sights*, 2019

August 16, 2019 (the full moon)

To the extent that I do anything that might legitimately be called thinking, it is while I'm walking in the woods, which I do for an hour or so every day, sometimes twice if I have the time and inclination. This thing I call thinking tends to erupt spontaneously, serendipitously, and bouts of it tend to run in cycles, what I called "waves" in *A Mind of Winter*. One of these waves will last a month or so then pretty much nothing for a few months, or more. I don't miss thinking in these intervening interludes. Quite the opposite. In part because it is very relaxing, just seeing what I see, kind of blank-headedly, sweetly, my mind peaceful, calm. In part because I know I won't have to turn anything into "writing" when I get back home, like I'm doing here, impelled by the thinking I did on my walk, all that pressure in my head seeking release, relief.

To the extent that I do anything that might legitimately be called writing, at least over the last 5 years or so, it is this way. I walk, I think along the way, I sit down when I get home and write something that is founded in all of that, the fragmentary, recalled details of which become a kind of platform to build sequences of sentences upon, sentences that appear on the screen just like this one did, starting arbitrarily somewhere and heading off in ways I cannot "script" predictably. If I like the way a sentence turns and turns out, I leave it, as I just did that one. And this one. If not, I cut it or revise it, right then, or later. Which gets me back to this thinking I was doing this morning in Watershed Park, one of my two go-to woods-walking spots in my new home here in Olympia, Washington.

It started off innocently enough, the first actual “thought” I’ve had on one of my walks since last spring while I was writing *A Mind of Winter*. I had been reading last night a book called *Materia Prima*, a partial “collected poems,” in translation, by the famous Uruguayan poet Amanda Berenguer. The one poem (among dozens and dozens of long, flamboyantly surreal or “concrete” or political poems, a grand tour spanning her lifetime, all quite memorable), that arose in my head this morning was a tiny one, written “in the manner of Emily Dickinson.” I’ve composed poems of my own in the manner of a number of poets I like, including Emily Dickinson, and I assumed Berenguer did it for the same reason I do: to inhabit another imagination intimately, like taking a walk in their woods, lending oneself to the ways their head organizes space, the “things” it notices, and then “thinks;” but even more importantly, to the ways it organizes time, the primary rhythms that pace out their steps, like fingerprints, no two people ever the same, as you know if you walk with others, the language of walking, turning movements, space and time, into words, otherworldly. There is nothing better to me than inhabiting another imagination, which is why I read. It redeems me from my own, such a blessed relief, which is also why I write, in that only writing it all out sets me free from the sometimes infernal buzz of my thinking once it gets going.

My Poem in the Manner of Emily Dickinson

Settled in a second—
how her eyelid moved,
the words I had just heard—
disproved.

Truth by definition
finds respite in the small.
Words are—weak—
eyelid says it all.

(unpublished, spring 2018)

In any case, the book closes with a late-life interview with Berenguer in which she talks about her love for Emily Dickinson, some of whose poems she translated. Like me, she senses in Dickinson “a kindred spirit . . . someone who could be at home with us, running around here and there. And every little thing has meaning in her constant search for transcendence” (239). Well said. It dawned on me today thinking about this that Dickinson presents the perfect template for kindred spirithood, someone we can feel at home with, those poems so intense, vexing, a seemingly impervious matrix, yet somehow like a sponge we can become absorbed into. In other words, she is fully human, open, approachable, a seeming contradiction for someone with what turns out to have been an undeserved reputation for utter reclusivity.

I said in *A Mind of Winter* that I had fallen in love with her, felt so intimately close to her in my current circumstances. Today I realized I’m not very special in that regard (always a letdown for someone in love), nor is Berenguer. Over and over when I taught her poems I watched students fall in love with her, women, men, no matter, most of whom wouldn’t normally read even one poem of their own volition. But they read hers and loved her. So Berenguer and I are not unique; we are two in a million. That is part of the paradoxical miracle that is Emily Dickinson, who never (most likely) found fully requited love in her lifetime, now finding at least the possibility for it everywhere.

Then, in response to a specific question, Berenguer talks about Dickinson’s preference for the dash, seeing it not as a substitute for commas, semi-colons, periods, etc., but as an alternative to them, what I would describe, following her logic, as a different way of organizing the

relationship between space and time in her universe. Berenguer says:

It felt like a great discovery about her writing, the day when I realized that in her poetry these dashes signified the places where mystery is made. There is the silence that separates one thing from another, but they are united in the background. And those dashes leave you floating in the air. (239)

That is the passage from the interview that I just happened spontaneously to think about a quarter mile into my walk today as I remembered Berenguer's poem, thought about the mystery of a silence—what's unsaid, a sonic void—separating but also uniting two things, a sort of oxymoron, between which we are left floating: space and time organized impossibly but truly.

I've written myself about Dickinson's fascination with dashes, suggesting that they are in fact a key to her work. Here's what I said about that in *This Fall*, in an extended discussion of her 20-year correspondence with Thomas Wentworth Higginson, who seemed incapable of grasping her meaning—in her temperament, her poems, even the letters she wrote him, always resisting any inclination to promote her work toward publication despite its obvious merits. Until she died, of course. But why then, I wondered, why not right at the outset, that first magnificently slippery letter she sent him, those enigmatic poems, which he claims, after the posthumous volume of her poems he had edited was well-received, that he recognized from the outset as the work of a “wholly new and original poetic genius?”

His refusal to do that (which he accounts for in a doofusy-sounding explanation about the work's being “elusive to criticism”) was his way of keeping

her on the hook for 20-some years. And the key to me, on both sides of this fight-forever-to-a-draw is her signature mark, the dash. Oddly, before Higginson ever saw her work, he commented specifically in his 1862 *Atlantic Monthly* article ["Letter to a Young Contributor"] about how poets should avoid eccentric punctuation. And he made a particular point about the dash, as in don't use it. I honestly think that if Dickinson had just stopped sending him poems with dashes in them, he may have pushed her work toward publication. But that is exactly the thing she would never be willing to give up, as anyone with reclusive tendencies would know. Not that reclusive people like dashes. Just that they have certain small stylistic preferences that happen, for them, to be self-defining, important, key. Take them away and the rest falls apart. Simple as that. That is, I now believe, why they were at loggerheads. And also why Higginson was willing to "edit" her poems toward publication only after she died. Then, he could, among other things, get rid of those pesky dashes. And he did. (45-6)

And in so doing, something he was never able to apprehend was eviscerated from those poems. All of that has, of course, been restored in the meantime by subsequent scholars and editors, the tension and vitality, the mystery.

The whole point of that section of my book was to say something about the reclusive temperament, how, among other things, it relies on such tiny little inward-turning devices to achieve and retain its identity in the absence of the social, which is how most people accomplish unity, outward-opening moves, I mean. You can see such eccentricities in my own style, not just in

how I write but in how I dress, talk, all of it. And were I prohibited for some reason from doing those tiny things, I would become mad in a way, unhinged from myself, to me at least, even if it was not visible to you. That's how Dickinson would have experienced her reading of that first edition of her poems, edited by Higginson: These are not mine, they have become unhinged, and so, as a consequence, have I.

Berenguer and I agree in general, then, about how crucial that little mark is not only to our understanding her work, but was also to her making of it. And I liked Berenguer's treating it as a material element of her poems, not punctuation, but active, semantically operative, as she makes clear in her response to the question about the dash in Dickinson as "a silence:"

No, it's not a silence because the poem goes on.
It's something that grows. It's as if she'd suddenly
taken a little leap, arriving at a higher level. It's
something that ascends, each time making itself
more complete, but never reaching completion.
(240)

So this silence is also not a silence, another oxymoron. In other words, I think she is saying, it is not mechanical but active: growing, leaping, arriving, ascending. Not void but movement. But how, I wondered, do they do that, these innocuous slashes in the space of these poems on the page? The word that just popped into my head at that moment in my walk to explain it for myself, thinking about my becoming unhinged by the loss of certain tiny eccentricities, was the root of that word, "hinge," and I liked it. Then the real thinking started, the kind I have come to both love and fear, the kind that portends more, enough more maybe for a month-long "wave," an enterprise that rewards me with so much—lately, these

last five years, a book—and also takes so much out of me in the making. But, be that as it may, there it was, that thinking, and I followed it.

nodding to Descartes

Amanda stands in an avalanche of language
I abide wide landslides of silence
between us clean sheets wait to be folded

I think I am

too old to think
straight

when I hold Amanda's hand to my heart
another landslide starts

(from my *slights*, August, 2019)

So, hinge: A hinge is not a bridge, yoking two things, though it does that; it is not a weld, fusing two things, though it does that; it is not a wall defining the boundary between two things, though it does that. We have plenty of punctuation marks specifically for those purposes. It is, I thought, a fulcrum, a pivot, a mode of both juncture and disjunction that provides the possibility of flexion in two directions, of opening and/or closing, of, in Berenguer's terms, both separating and uniting, the foreground and the background, two separate planes, fixed but floating. And Dickinson's poems are, to me, defined by her attempts to both disjoint and connect the interfaces between such planes. I'm not talking here only about the ways she does this thematically, her "moment-of-death" poems, say, that liminal state she captures so hauntingly between the diurnal world of human enterprise and the eternal world that, we are told, precedes and follows it. There is no one better at capturing that fissured space where life and death meet, the fly's buzz, the clop-clop of the horse drawing a carriage. But she also does it structurally, the gaps, the suspensions, the eerie spacelessness of the between places the poem seeks to make palpable, viscerally. And she does much of that structural work with dashes. Dashes all over the place, buzzes and the clop-clops refigured into these scratches on the page.

I have a little book of what are called Dickinson's "envelope poems," short, embryonic proto-poems she wrote on scraps of envelopes from letters she received, many of which didn't make the cut for her finished folios but that show so much about her process. The poems are not dated, though I assume from both their form and content that they were written later in her life, when her compositions got more cryptic. These poems are the very embodiment of "hinged" compositions, in that the paper each is written upon (and they never exceed the

available space) is, in fact, a folded envelope re-opened and flattened back on its hinges. The authors of this book provide photos of every example to illustrate this. It is so hard in Dickinson's *oeuvre* to draw a line between what is a poem and what is not. Everything she wrote, in my opinion, is a poem, her letters, even these little scraps. Here's one that offers a good illustration of how the dashes get built in right from the outset. I'll try here to simulate how it actually looks, forced into those contours of the envelope sleeve:

Oh Sumptuous
moment
slower go
Till I That I
may/can gloat on thee —
'Twill never
be the same
to starve
now/since I abundance
see —
Which was to

continued then in a column on the opposite fold:

famish, then or
now —
The difference
of Day/to
Ask him
unto the Gallows
led — called
with morning
By/in the sky

This one, of course, did make the final cut, looking this way:

Oh Sumptuous moment
Slower go
That I may gloat on thee -
'Twill never be the same to starve
Now I abundance see -

Which was to famish then or now -
The difference of Day
Ask him unto the Gallows called -
with morning in the sky— (#425, p. 247)

You can see all of her choices here. What stays intact are the dashes, except for the final one, added, the structure around which everything pivots. Every dash marks a sudden turn of thought, a contrary, “gloat” to “starve,” “abundance” to “famish,” “Gallows” to “morning in the sky,” improbable but essential junctures to get at the meaning that inheres to that “Sumptuous moment.” And that last stanza is both pellucid and mysterious, impervious to translation, at least for me. All of it hanging on hinges, like the gallows door dropping downward to reveal morning in the sky. Hauntingly beautiful.

One of the distinctive features of many of these embryonic poems is that dash at the end (not there in the “envelope” version of this poem but in the finished version), the final mark on the page, as if to indicate that there is more, so much more, residing in the silences on its forward-looking side. No poet I know is better than Dickinson at intimating all of that, the vastness of eternity, really, in one cryptic sentence that leaves its door open at the end toward an infinity of thinking, enticing us to float into it.

Same is true, of course, in her all her “finished” poems. I could probably open *Final Harvest*, her collected works, to any page, which is what I just did, and find both comparable and quite different ways of hinging meanings in her poem. Here’s a poem on the page I just turned to:

Me from myself - to banish -
Had I Art -
Impregnable my Fortress
Unto All Heart -

But since Myself - assault Me -
How have I peace
Except by subjugating
Consciousness?

And since We’re mutual Monarch
How this be
Except my Abdication -
Me - of Me? (#267 p. 165)

What a remarkable poem, halting, turning, gathering, not one that typically ends up in the kinds of anthologies we read in school, those more accessible poems about nature, death, loss, love, valor, etc. There is an almost torturous twisting in this one, from the opening opposition of Me and Myself, to the Myself assaulting Me, to the We that is the mutual monarch of the two, yoked inevitably if incompatibly, to the final, but futile, threat of abdication: Me - of Me? Here is that poem without the dashes:

Me from myself to banish
Had I Art
Impregnable my Fortress
Unto All Heart

But since Myself assault Me
How have I peace
Except by subjugating
Consciousness?

And since We're mutual Monarch
How this be
Except my Abdication
Me of Me?

Still impressive, but somehow flatter. Some of it reads almost prosaically, some almost nonsensically, some just gnominically, like shorthand. The force is there, but not the torture. That's the best way I can describe the difference to me as a reader. In the first version, I feel all the stress and fear, the desperate desire, really, involved in considering this conundrum of how to banish the Me from Myself when they are yoked so intimately, like Siamese twins, mutual death a likely outcome from their separation. In the second version, I get the point that it is an impossible contradiction, this me vs. myself, yes, but it's more as a matter of logic than inner torment. All those hinges flipping me back and forth at every turn keeping me both on and off balance make that much of a difference, all the difference really, if you are temperamentally inclined to be afflicted by exactly that inner strife, as most reclusives are.

Just by way of contrast, here is Walt Whitman trying to get at something similar:

Clear and sweet is my soul, and clear and sweet is
all that is not my soul.

Lack one lacks both, and the unseen is proved by
the seen,

Till that becomes unseen and receives proof in its
turn.

Showing the best and dividing it from the worst age
vexes age,
Knowing the perfect fitness and equanimity of
things, while they discuss I am silent, and go
bathe and admire myself.

Welcome is every organ and attribute of me, and
of any man hearty and clean,
Not an inch nor a particle of an inch is vile, and
none shall be less familiar than the rest.

I am satisfied—I see, dance, laugh, sing;
As the hugging and loving bed-fellow sleeps at my
side through the night, and withdraws at the
peep of the day with stealthy tread,
Leaving me baskets cover'd with white towels
swelling the house with their plenty,
Shall I postpone my acceptance and realization
and scream at my eyes,
That they turn from gazing after and down the
road,
And forthwith cipher and show me to a cent,
Exactly the value of one and exactly the value of
two, and which is ahead?

Trippers and askers surround me,
People I meet, the effect upon me of my early life
or the ward and city I live in, or the nation,
The latest dates, discoveries, inventions, societies,
authors old and new,
My dinner, dress, associates, looks, compliments,
dues,
The real or fancied indifference of some man or
woman I love,

The sickness of one of my folks or of myself, or ill-
doing or loss or lack of money, or depressions
or exaltations,
Battles, the horrors of fratricidal war, the fever of
doubtful news, the fitful events;
These come to me days and nights and go from me
again,
But they are not the Me myself.

Apart from the pulling and hauling stands what I
am,
Stands amused, complacent, compassionating, idle,
unitary,
Looks down, is erect, or bends an arm on an
impalpable certain rest,
Looking with side-curved head curious what will
come next,
Both in and out of the game and watching and
wondering at it.

Backward I see in my own days where I sweated
through fog with linguists and contenders,
I have no mockings or arguments, I witness and
wait. (30-32)

Whitman is Dickinson's temperamental opposite, opening always outward, absorbing everything into the whirlwinds of his words. This passage is also beautiful, rich, deep, wise. And nicely punctuated. The present and the past are there, the poet's bifurcated identity, still there, those long lines lapping along so gorgeously, flamboyantly. Where there is pulling and hauling, his "what I am" stands apart from it, his "Me myself" remains one, unified, even his soul and his not-soul are companionable. Dickinson's identity is uncompanionable with itself right to the root, flipping its hinges on other hinges, always threatened by dissolution,

divorce. That inner battle goes on forever for her, the
“Heavenly Hurt” of “internal difference - /Where the
Meanings, are - .”

Actually, now that I’m quoting it, let me give that whole
poem, one of my favorites. Here you don’t see or feel
the Whitmanic vortex swirling in more and more things,
images, words, but the eerie calm of the cyclone’s eye.
While you’re reading it, gasping at the scary power of it,
look at how oddly and perfectly she places all those
dashes, sometimes to heighten the tension, but often,
seemingly, to hold it back, control it, “hold its breath,”
keep it from deflating that “Despair” from a “Heavenly
Hurt,” an “imperial affliction,” into mere quotidian
desolation:

There's a certain Slant of light,
Winter Afternoons -
That oppresses, like the Heft
Of Cathedral Tunes -

Heavenly Hurt, it gives us -
We can find no scar,
But internal difference -
Where the Meanings, are -

None may teach it - Any -
'Tis the seal Despair -
An imperial affliction
Sent us of the Air -

When it comes, the Landscape listens -
Shadows - hold their breath -
When it goes, 'tis like the Distance
On the look of Death - (#66, pp. 36-37)

The staccato phrasing in the final two stanzas, opening with that jarring “None—Any” move, especially conveys all the energy being spent to keep the horror and drama of this moment from overwhelming the purity of it, a sort of discipline of silences enforced by dashes. Whitman is also good at rendering “the Distance/On the look of Death—” as he does over and over in “Song of Myself” and then, most overwhelmingly in the “Drum-Taps” poems about his time working as a nurse, what he preferred to call “visitor and consolatory,” during the Civil War. But not like this. This is the kind of despair that arises not from the spectacular, bloody carnage of war but from next to nothing, “A certain Slant of light/Winter afternoons - .” If you are reclusive in temperament and prone to such afflictions, you know that is exactly how they feel and what they do, dashes and all.

And finally, one of my favorite Dickinson dash-mashed poems:

This was a Poet—It is That
Distills amazing sense
From ordinary Meanings
And Attar so immense

From the familiar species
That perished by the Door
We wonder it was not Ourselves
Arrested it—before

Of Pictures, the Discloser
The Poet—it is He
Entitles Us—by Contrast
To ceaseless Poverty

Of portion—so unconscious

The Robbing—could not harm
Himself—to Him—a Fortune
Exterior—to Time (#176, pp. 106-7)

The first few instances of the dash here are pretty straightforward, related to temporality, the movement from past to present tense in the first stanza, the jump to “before,” left hanging, at the close of the second, the shift from “He” to “Us—by contrast” in the third, also implying historical or at least biographical time. Then the last stanza ups the ante quite a bit, like a knot of words that never quite resolves into clarity with the untangling; all that halting, loose ends, tongue-tied meanings stammering out in a staggered rhythms, continuing the thought of the previous stanza, the “ceaseless Poverty/ of portion—,” we feel by “Contrast” with “the Poet,” an “unconscious” “Robbing—,” which is “to Him—a Fortune/ Exterior—to time.”

There is an intense compression here, one that translation into normal speaking patterns diminishes the emotional impact of. And that final line, without the dash, almost banal, with it, explosive, the dash forcing us to stop, leap, think, float, as we move toward the ultimate theme (what a weak word) of the poem, “Time.” A thought that passed through my head, though I am certain it is not true, is that Dickinson’s first move in writing a piece might have been to put all the dashes on the page, a sort of timing sequence to parse her inner mood, one that to some extent pre-scripted the words necessary to complete the poem. That would be very cool.

This poem has the sound of a late-life epitaph, but Dickinson wrote it in 1862, still a young woman, an unknown, a poem that, to me, gets back in an interesting way to the “internal difference” that she is able to

explore in her poems, she both poet and reader all at once, never resolving the divide between them, the “Myself” to “Me” that the reclusive temperament is always trying to negotiate, a hinge, the present struggling to harken back to the past and forth to the remote future simultaneously, almost by definition “Exterior—to Time.” Yes, that is it, what I’ve been trying to fathom, the hinge, time to timeless, inside to out, yes, that is the dash in a nutshell.

the poet

I'm nobody—
I know
some some-
body
I said
(to myself)

wondering—
what difference
“no”—to “some”
made (to my-
self)
so kept—walking
without—

(from *slights*, August, 2019)

So that is what I was thinking today. I was hoping that would be it, just a few pages to write, to quiet my mind, not another book, which is, as I said, both exciting and daunting, enlivening and exhausting. But just as I was finishing my walk I thought about today's date, August 16, nothing special about it, except it is nearly the end of summer, my second summer in Olympia. Yes, I thought happily, this is my fifth season here. All of my other recent books of personal essays, the ones based on my walks, are, of course, seasonally titled. And, you might be saying right now, there is no such thing as a fifth season, so I won't have to read another one of this guy's books about that. But I immediately remembered an email exchange I had with a friend of mine last winter, who pointed out that in traditional Chinese medicine there is in fact a fifth season, the most important and joyous one, called "late summer," the time "of rootedness," preparation for the harvest. Here is a brief description of what that season means in this context:

The additional season, the fifth season, however, is what is referred to as late (or Indian) summer. This is the period of unusually warm days that can come anytime from the end of summer to around the middle of autumn and even later. In TCM [traditional Chinese medicine] and holistic arts, this season (and its unique energy) is the center of the entire cycle. Coordinating all the other seasons or energy movements so that they make sense -- in your life -- this season is your headquarters. In TCM, centeredness and balance are essential. This is because when you are centered you are most self-aware; you attract thoughts, behaviors, and activities that are for your most good as well as for others. So this energy cycle helps you cool off negative aggressions, yet at the same time, fire up

positive ones, prune what is not pulling its weight in your life, discover and nurture what is. You see who you have been, who you are and who you want to be. It is from here, within its middle cycle that nature, and thus you, can coordinate and harmonize the rest. The trick is in learning how to sync up and stay connected.

(https://www.huffpost.com/entry/nature-cycle_b_3423989)

I remember thinking when she explained this to me (she may have sent me this exact quote from an online source, it sounds that familiar), I'm not sure about that, a fifth season, throwing the whole year out of whack? And, besides, I just finished what I hoped and believed would be my last book anyway, my spring book with a winter title. So why think about it? But, as I said, today, for whatever reason, I started thinking again. And reading that passage makes me realize that is exactly where I am and what I feel right now, calm, centered, self-aware, the way opening between what I am and what I hope to become, between where I am and where I'm heading, from this world-now to the next world-now, whether here, there, beyond, who cares, just next, up ahead, on this path, the little one I walked this morning, the big one we all wend our way upon while we're still here. No matter, both the same. Here, harvest, the season that centers the year, holds it in balance. Yes, the hinge.

And besides, I thought, what a pleasure it would be to harvest something, anything, at this late stage of my life, all that work of "thinking" coming to some fruition, a flush or lean crop, no matter, just something to show for it. Harvest, of course, is by definition a temporal concept, a coming to the end of all the time that has been invested in the hope of some recompense, the hinge not only between work and bounty, summer and

fall, but time and timelessness. That— time—is a most worthy topic for my current thinking, my final wave, something I've been fascinated by and enmeshed in for as long as I can remember, the questions planted in my youth, the furrowing, tilling, tending of reading, thinking, speaking and writing, 60 years of my 70 at least, a long season.

I am not famous and never will be. No one will publish a “collected edition” of my work when I pass, as they did for Berenguer or, even more famously, Emily Dickinson. So I have no sense of historical obligation, the burden of “legacy,” that externally imposed stricture on one's public time, say, that animates any expectations about, or constraints on, what I might harvest now, which is actually a relief to me, makes me happy I've lived my intellectual life in relative solitude and anonymity, reclusively. Just a generally more serene sense that there may be a few more things I can think on my walks and maybe write about when I get home, these simple moment by moment meanderings of my mind along the temporal paths that draw me through whatever “woods” are there for me day by day. Things I can write down later to be read, if not for you, then for me.

Essay 2: Where Parallel Lines Meet

to see something

be nothing

until something

sees back

from “notes for walk-taking,” *slights*, 2019

August 17, 2019

It's Saturday. You might think the relatively slack pace of life here in laid-back Olympia would slacken even more on weekends. Not so, at least not in the places I go to walk. These grand natural spaces, available to me at my leisure any day, any time, are a lure for a variety of action-seekers who work all week. Today I went to Woodard Bay, which has a kayak launch, just a designated path down to the water really, but a well-worn one during the summer months. The tide was going out, a great rush of water under the bridge that separates Henderson Inlet from its tiny fingertip on the other side of road, the portal to the long meandering estuary further up alongside the Chehalis trail. So the first "shift" of kayakers was coming out, having started around dawn I assume, to avoid getting trapped a half-mile down as the inlet dried up. The second shift was just coming in, to catch the last flow out for a while, the lot clotted up with Subarus and SUVs as they mounted or dismounted their gear.

I parked right near the entrance to avoid getting caught up in the jam either now or when I got back from my walk, as often happens here on weekends. I could hear a woman swearing as she fiddled with the strap holding her kayak to the roof rack. I was going to ask if she needed help but could clearly see it was not a physical issue. Then I heard her explain to one of the out-coming kayakers that she was "just so pissed" at herself for forgetting her paddle, had come down from Everett, way too long a drive to go back and fetch it, so was out of luck for the day. If I had a paddle, I would have given it to her. But I don't walk with a paddle. I almost suggested to her that she could park the car (everyone seems to unload in the middle of the lot, which is why I

sometimes have to wait to drive in or out on weekends) and take a walk in the park, a lovely way to un-waste a long drive and a nice day. But I thought better of it. She was pissed and wanted to kayak. And the way that exiting kayaker gushed about how the seals followed them around out there, how amazing it was, only made matters worse. So I headed off.

Love Song

broken bottle:
chunks of brown glass
scattered
on the grass

any piece
held as a lens
brings evening rushing
down and the leaves

bronzed shards
tensed apart
in awkward poses: nothing
left to hold

(unpublished, circa 1972)

The frenetic pace in the lot seemed to envelop the whole park, at least the animals, as if they, too, were almost frantic to take advantage of this late-summer Saturday, not waste it by going at my pace. The path in was full of Oregon juncos picking seeds distractedly enough that I could walk right up to them, which is not their usual comfort zone, fox sparrows flitting manically from one low branch to another looking for whatever fox sparrows look for on a day like this. There were a number of backpackers on the path in, some packing children, some packing gear. The roads and streets and paths here are speckled with backpackers every weekend, young people mostly, trekking from somewhere not here to somewhere else not here. I've had conversations with a few at Woodard Bay, and they come from prodigious distances on foot, many, many miles, more than I might walk in three or four days, to pass through here to walk many, many more miles to what's next, or just back to from where they came. They look around admiringly at what's here, but don't stop long, just keep walking.

Down at the point of the peninsula between Woodard Bay and Henderson inlet, that same sense of overload: the shore was lined with gulls, maybe two dozen of them, way more than I usually see there, shrieking bickeringly, not sure about what, maybe the mussels just now becoming visible as the tide receded. The seals that tend most days just to laze on the floating docks about a hundred yards out were in the water, at least a half dozen of them, swimming about, diving, fishing I assume to pack on some pounds before it gets cold again, or maybe just to work off the tension in the air. The sky was overfull of cormorants coming and going from their haunts on the other side of Henderson Inlet, squadrons of them, same hurried pace. And the trees they roost in were loaded with others waiting to take off.

I watched all of this for quite a while, then headed back up the path. I noticed that I was walking at a pace much faster than my usual stroll, having caught the hurry bug, too. So I watched the trees for a while, to try to slow down. Trees never hurry. Oh, I know, in early November a big wind might drive out most of the remaining leaves all at once, filling the air with a flagrant turmoil of fleshy colors. But, left to their own devices, trees will, I know from long watching, go about this undressing in a much more leisurely and casual fashion, like the way I get ready for bed sometimes, discarding clothing piecemeal over a half hour or so, which you can do when you live alone and have no obligation to get to sleep or wake up at any prescribed time.

What I noticed today more than usual—the sunlight just beginning to peek in through patches of blue behind a deck of fluffy clouds, some of which were softening at the edges, like large wads of cotton pulled thin, so hard to tell where cloud-white ends and sky-blue begins, calming me—was how the trees on each side of the path had over the decades gradually reached across to one another to gather the available light. There was a lean to everything, both ways, the massive trunks and crowns levered out from the fulcrum of their root balls, a mile-long A-frame of foliage granting shade down here, garnering light up there. But they were still and stable, motionless, poised forward in mid-tip, the epitome, to me today, of patience, not waiting for or doing anything, just there, fully and completely there, Zenlike, but by nature not by practice. One day some heavy snow or hard wind may bring one down on that lean. But not today. It calmed me even more.

By the time I got to my car, the tide had gone too far out to launch a kayak, so the lot was peaceful, too, no

loading or unloading, no banter, no swearing. I felt relaxed and happy. I hope the birds and the seals did, too, by then. But what I actually spent a lot of time thinking about on my walk, which gets me to my point, was, again, hinges. The heads of the juncos poking up and down to eat, the stiff wide wings of gulls pushing air to make possible what would seem, logically, highly improbable, the glory of flight, the trees leaning in or out, their massive weight poised in full repose, all those hinges, glomming on to the metaphor left over from yesterday's writing, and finally that A-frame, the hinge joining its "sides" just empty air, leaving them "floating," which reminded me of something I've been thinking about for maybe a week or so.

A few months back I joined a poetry discussion group, meets every third Tuesday at Browsers downtown, such a fine bookstore, the kind I loved to wander into in the 60s and 70s, a warm, human feel, the books so kindly displayed, easy to access, and still sections called "philosophy," "metaphysics" and, of course "poetry," with enough books in each, the good ones, to keep you looking for a while. We—six or seven true poetry lovers—meet in a very serene, recently renovated loft space overlooking the store, clean conference table, comfortable chairs, the walls always adorned with an array of pieces by a local artist, a gallery that seems to rotate out almost every month and somehow stays always good. The young woman who coordinates the events and facilitates the discussion is a wonderful combination of warm spirit and sharp mind, both informed by deep reading. It was the reason I have been reading Berenguer's book, which we'll be discussing in September.

This week it's Julian Talamantez Brolasky's *Of Mongrelitude*, equally challenging and worthy. What was

on my mind today, though, was the last book we read, Andrew Joron's *The Absolute Letter*, which was not particularly well-received by some in the group. I found it stunning, as did the young man sitting to my right, who, I found out, has a similar interest in strange physics and weird temporality, part of what made this book enjoyable to me and less so to others less inclined that way. But mostly the book is about language, afflicted in so many ways by an intractable weirdness that even the most exotic physicists might find mind-blowing if they studied it instead. And it all coalesced for me under that A-frame of trees I just described, arching over the path.

I had been thinking about Joron's book with an eye toward having a conversation with a man I've become friendly with in the group, one also new to Olympia, a poetry-lover seeking companionable spirits, like I was. We also sit together at a back table at the Olympia Poetry Network readings at Traditions Café (a very comfortable vegan eatery attached to a fair trade gift shop, the one I opened my first Olympia-based book with: *First, Summer*) joined sometimes by a younger local minister who has just started to write poems and wanted to check out the scene. They are both such smart, friendly men, a gift for me to get to know now. Here's what I wrote to prepare for my conversation with him about Joron:

“If the letter A's parallel lines shall meet.”

Andrew Joron

This is the nonsensical line that seems to subvert the possibility of logic, if not intelligibility, in Joron's

argument in “The Absolute Letter.” The letter A becomes, in fact, “hero/villain” of this whole book, a figure that stands in for all the other figures that follow it alphabetically. Joron introduces it in the very first poem “First,” as:

A, ad-
vance, a
Threat
of dark upon
light
...
a

connective void (1)

A, “a threat,” is the acolyte of the dark, the counter to light, what the sun stands for later in the book. And it is, again contradictorily, a void that connects. But what to what? Maybe the “nothing” that “comes first,” creating the “Riot of time,” which is how the poem opens; or

That thought of *that*, that
thought of thought
alone—(2)

another mode of nothing enacted in time, that thought of thought, vacuous and overfull all at the same time, which is how the poem closes.

The book’s second poem, “The Absolute Letter,” introduces the problem of parallel lines meeting this way:

Fallen letter, avian V, in-
verse A.

Two parallels meeting at

A

Road eroded to a line—

A

dark abstract stroke. (4)

The most immediate problem of meaning here is how the letter A can be said to be made of two parallel lines, an apparent absurdity. But the poem itself offers a path toward resolution: their “meeting at A road eroded to a line.”

Imagine if you were to propose this to someone naïve about perspective: “Here I have many long metal rails and many boards of the same length. I will lay the rails nailed to the boards, always exactly the same distance apart. If you watch me long enough, you will see those rails meet.” They would say, of course, that that was preposterous. But if they watched long enough, it would become true, at least seemingly. Those two lines do “meet,” “a road eroded to a line” at what we call “the horizon,” the point past which we can no longer see. The opening lines of the poem say pretty much the same thing:

Proof primitive:

That two sticks
point toward

A

vanishing:

A

accumulation.— (3)

Here, it is the sticks that terminate at a point and vanish so improbably at their horizon. The whole poem is in some ways an elaborate exploration of this conundrum.

Now imagine that one proposes this to someone naïve about writing: “Here are some random squiggles I made in the mud, 20 or 30 them in different shapes. I can arrange them into any word you know or could ever imagine, and someone else, right now, or, equally, thousands of years from now, will be able to “hear” what you have to say. That, they would say, is even more preposterous. But it also turns out to be both true and untrue in exactly the same way as the merging rails are. Writing is a sort of sleight of hand, a way to code with the illusion of permanency, both transparently and opaquely, a “voice” that is no longer making, maybe never made, the sounds the letters stand in for.

In a subsequent poem, “The New Explanations,” Joron writes:

A stern star, styling, stilling—

A
behavior of
bad heaven

...

A
look, a cycle of lack

Or
the lore of mirror’s mere aether

...

A
single rebellious angle—

bent nail
to hold together
the god of hell

...

A

dash, then sure erasure—

the rest, wrest
as sound asunder—No

(the name of)
Shown
(to mind alone)

(39-41)

Yes, “bad heaven,” “the god of hell,” the play on “fallen” angel, recalling the “fallen letter” of “The Absolute Letter.” That is what writing is like, the dash, Dickinson’s hinge a black smudge that erases itself in its making, styling to stillness any vocalization. That seems at first take a pretty standard poststructuralist way of thinking about writing, but one to which Joron gives a scary, out-of-keeping, moral twist.

This poem returns in its conclusion to the meeting parallel lines, the line I started with:

Explanation: To all the uncalled. Dome of
order = the moral rind of
random. If the letter A's parallel lines
shall meet. Cold national ash,
post notice. *Sum, answer sun. (41)*

For all the “uncalled,” with its implication of the ungodly, the “order” of writing is a “moral rind of random,” which is why the original naïve person thinks it's preposterous. How could such squiggles code permanently, truly, futurally, what one is, believes, means, right here, right now, presently? They are more like dried up rinds of sounds, and are of course, random. I read the “Sum” in that final sentence as both mathematical, what everything adds up to, and as philosophical, the Cartesian “sum,” that “I am” thinking at the center of Western thinking, whether infinite or just inside a head, that does in fact answer “sun” (which *is* what it is, not what it makes or thinks, is utterly averbal) at the horizon where those two modes of being meet.

All of this speculation about the strangenesses of space turned out in the end to be relatively pointless. When I raised the issue with my friend at this week's meeting; he had already figured it out for himself, all of it, and he still found Joron's move off-putting, overly arcane, which it is in many ways. So it was just a 10 second conversation between us. But it was not a waste for me to have thought about it because what it got *me* to was time, my bailiwick here, and Joron is quite good at capturing *its* strangenesses as well, in ways I find profound and appealing.

Every discussion session each of us reads a poem by the author of the day somewhere along the way. The one I

read, toward the end of the Joron meeting, many of my favorites already off the table, was, by happenstance, this one, called “Why Time?” I’m so glad I did. I’ll quote the whole thing so you can hear it (even read it aloud to yourself, which is how it best comes into clarity) before I comment on it:

Stand outside to know why.

Once, unknown noun, you have no need of the
verb “to be” to be out-
side of time.

Nothing repeats, nothing is exact. To be exact,
repeat your answer. A
red letter, unread now, is curling through the air.

To appear to be caught disappearing. That
sentence (never to be
stated) wants to advance into the future, but *now* is
going the other
way. *Now* can only vanish. You can’t stay here.

Time is not a container, but a point of contact.
Because you & I have
names, we stand in the way of whatever wants to
meet here.

In the old book, all or nothing has a name. Most
names seem ciphers
for suffering. But words desert their owners.
Unless, until, we track
them down in the desert.

What comes first partakes of nothing; therefore, if
we can grasp any-
thing, we can grasp only what comes second.

These letters fell out of time: *EIN SOF*.

The wine glass fell slowly to the floor and
shattered--soundlessly. The
spilled liquid immediately assumed the shape of
the universe.

Truth of mind over matter: an ant crawling across
a page of script.

Why time? Why this rhyme of *light* with *night*, of
first with *thirst*?

What last will will *last* cast backward to *word*?
Because no atom is
alive, but accusative of being—

(R)endings, (m)endings: the job of legend. This
(sp)ending of—

This sounding of, the anti-angel.

Say, unsay, snake-wheel, O noose of Gnosis!
Unlikely likeness: no eyes
no yes.

Count chance's chants. To choose ruse as if to
choose ruse. (57-58)

One of the things you notice right off is Joron's word play. He was influenced early on by Philip Lamantia, who lectured at, among many other places, the same college Joron teaches at: San Francisco State. Lamantia is a straightforward surrealist in the mode of Andre Breton, even more so than the famous New York School poets of the 50s-70s, a form of poetry I find entertaining but

ultimately not “deep” enough for persistent rereading. Joron’s early work was in this vein as well.

But this book is not, to my way of reading in any case. Here the word play is not liberated from rationality but guided by it, purposeful instead of “automatic,” not just aurally but semantically impactful, displacing us from quotidian rationality not to promote a wild, associative, dream-state, but to penetrate deeper into realities that remain hidden in either of those (equally delusory I would say) mental realms, reason or hallucination. And, in this instance, he gets at one of the fundamental conundrums about time that has always fascinated me, that originary moment when both time and the word, inextricable partners in the human experience, came into play, establishing our world, the why of which is always elusively/ineluctably outside. Here is the famous opening to John’s gospel, God, Word, flesh and time put in their intimate relations:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

...

And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth.

In the beginning, before the word, in Joron’s scenario, even time was not a noun, needed no verb “to be” because it wasn’t—the Garden of Eden as it were, blissful temporal stasis. Thereafter, came the fall, of course, the snake peddling not good and evil—who would fall for just that?—but the *knowledge* of good and evil. Yes, the knowledge, that’s worth falling for. And knowledge, it turns out, is not only all the nouns but all their verbs, the

non-iteration of answers, the appearance disappearing, the vanishing “Now” going both ways at once, no “here” to “stay” in, the point that contains nothing, the names, our flesh, that prevent “whatever wants to meet here” from meeting.

He then explores the elusive evanescence of words, which are coincident with time, “ciphers for suffering,” which “desert their owners.” And the key lines of the poem to me:

What comes first partakes of nothing; therefore,
if we can grasp any-
thing, we can grasp only what comes second

What comes second, the human universe, one afflicted by the futility of logic—“therefore”—and chance—“if”—even the separation of any and thing.

Here is a Wikipedia passage explaining Ein Sof, a concept I was unfamiliar with:

The Zohar explains the term "Ein Sof" as follows:

Before He gave any shape to the world, before He produced any form, He was alone, without form and without resemblance to anything else. Who then can comprehend how He was before the Creation? Hence it is forbidden to lend Him any form or similitude, or even to call Him by His sacred name, or to indicate Him by a single letter or a single point... But after He created the form of the Heavenly man, He used him as a chariot wherein to descend, and He wishes to be called after His form, which is the sacred name "YHWH".

In other words, "Ein Sof" signifies "the nameless being". In another passage the *Zohar* reduces the term to "Ein" (non-existent), because God so transcends human understanding as to be practically non-existent.

Why time? Well there is no more of answer to that than why he turns to those rhymes. Yes, light and night, first and thirst, are suggestive, but only figurally, and figures never tell us why. Then the examples again, the irreversible shattering of a fallen glass, soundless, the "matter" of the ant crawling "over" the mind of a page of script. Then the almost lighthearted wordplay whose sounding ends with the anti-angel, the snake-wheel, chance's chants, and the final tautological ruse we choose. A brilliant intimation of the whylessness of time.

Time is never outside our experience of it as a condition of being-here. Like today, so frenetic at the outset, enough to fill even the animals with anxiety, drama. Then, a slow walk, that A-frame of trees meeting the sky at a point that vanishes, and calm, wind, water, sky, me. You need to get past that point to "stand outside to know why." But you can't.

star
light left long
gone still
shines
here

not

(from *slights*, winter, 2019)

Waiting to Sleep

The landscape is always the same:
a single tree lush with leaves,
a woman seated in its shade,
legs pulled up against her chest
watching three ducks feed
quietly in the shallows.

A million years ago a star died.
Yet careful astronomers still measure
its faint light nightly,
while we go about our business
in our own faint light
laying out the traces of one complaint
after another, waiting to sleep.

After all the leaves fall,
the woman gathers her belongings
to leave, the ducks will leap
up in a sudden clamor of wings,
and while whole galaxies sleep,
the night sky will flash up like tinder
and turn a deafening black.

(unpublished, circa 1972)

Essay 3: The Great Creator of Being

a walk is the particular

assortment of things

waiting for you

to meet them

from “notes for walk-taking,” *sights*, 2019

August 18, 2019

Today is Sunday, sunny, sky a bright, deep blue, just a few soft clouds. I wanted to walk at Evergreen College, about 6 miles from here, up the hill on the other side of the water. I felt so calm this morning when I woke up, a great pleasure to me when that happens. I decided to listen to the audio file of the final talk I gave in the English Department at Pitt, about two years before I left, addressed primarily to graduate students about to enter the field via the job market. It's an argument on behalf of navigating one's time in a receptive, generous way, called "All the Time in the World." I had just added it to the SD card I use for music in my car, hadn't heard it for a while. It's very inspiring to me, and I listen to it once or twice a year.

Like most of what I make, I wrote it first and foremost for me, something I'd enjoy coming back to if it wasn't well-received. It was well-received. It is, I think, a great talk, if not my all-time best, at least my most favorite. That's why I keep listening to it. And it seemed perfect for today, following up yesterday, all the frenetic rush around me at Woodard Bay, my trying to counter it by slowing down. Now, Sunday morning, by definition slower, my head already calm, the perfect accompaniment for my drive, and just the right length, 20 minutes. I sat in the car after I parked to listen to the last minute of it, tears welling up, as they always do when I hear myself say what I say there:

You have all the time in the world, too, believe me, that is true. Care for yourself and for those around you. Be kindly whenever and as much you can, and when you can't, be polite. Listen whenever and as much as you can, and when the

need to speak arises, as it will, speak up with passion and care on behalf of what matters most to you. The work will get done much more quickly, more quietly, so much less drama, if you do, I guarantee it. And you will be much the happier in the doing, your time here so much sweeter, and the time others spend in your company sweeter as well. Our field is ensconced pretty much at the center of that academic galaxy we call “the humanities.” We are closing out its dedicated year here almost as I speak. We all, every one of us, every day, need to remember that at the root of that word is a human, and it’s not just some inscrutable concept; it’s a me and a you and that passerby over there, struggling maybe, glancing our way, hoping we might walk over, that guy behind the email, trying, those dozens, then hundreds, then thousands of good young people who pay to spend their time with us, whose lives we are changing, even if only slightly, every day, for better or for worse. Humans. So be one. Be as great as you want to be along the way. Yes, be as great as you want to be along the way. But if don’t take the time, all the time in the world, which I am telling you is what you have, to also be good, to do some good with and for those fellow travelers who cross your path here, which is what we humans are made for and called toward, don’t ever say you learned anything of consequence from me.

I thought when I wrote the talk that if even only one person heard this call and changed a bit because of it, it would be a most worthy enterprise. As is usually the case when you teach, I have no idea if something that good happened, but, as anyone who teaches also knows, you just have to have a faith that it does every now and then.

September 6 interjection:

It just dawned on me as I re-read that sentence that I did teach at least one person something that day: me. That's why I keep going back to that speech, to learn more fully what it means, or at least remind myself not to forget the lesson. This is a kind of internalization of the Socrates/Plato conundrum I've written about so often, those instances where the teacher and student are in a reflexive relationship, the vector of authority between them oscillating like the quartz crystal in a watch, too fast to be conscious of.

Theirs is not a simple puppet/puppeteer equation, Plato on the one hand repeating what Socrates said and believed, which become his beliefs, or, on the other hand, making up a version of Socrates in his dialogues to mouth what he believes. Socrates was an historically extant person who in some respects "taught" Plato some of what he "knows" via his many arguments with the sophists of his day. Socrates then becomes an imaginary character that Plato uses to try to teach us, his readers, something he now knows, in the process, I'm sure, also teaching himself, exceeding his puppeteer by transforming him into a puppet. That is kind of what it's like when you teach yourself something by learning it to teach to someone else, which is the key to becoming effective as a teacher of anything: first, teach yourself.

I said in the very first sentence of my first book, *Writing/Teaching*, that "to teach is to change," and then explained how that applied equally to both parties, teacher and student, their collaborative changing via real-time classroom dialogue. In this instance, it also implies that a teacher needs to be changing both before and after

these “events,” a constant process as she “learns” what she has to teach and then changes on the basis of what it means to know that. And you don’t need to get a job as a teacher to do that. It’s enough just to imagine yourself as the student you are trying to teach. One is “you” the other is your interlocutor, and it doesn’t matter which you imagine is which, they are that coequal, like Socrates and Plato.

Another way of saying the same thing is that this speech, like everything else I’ve made since Carol passed, came to me from an “outside” agency, the imagination as I defined it in *A Mind of Winter*: not a faculty of everyday consciousness, but another much smarter inner force; or, alternatively, an interjection of an extrinsic font of wisdom, like the conventional “muse.” I won’t call what arises from that interaction a “gift” necessarily, because you still have to make it yourself, sometimes quite painfully, and it requires even more additional work to fully grasp what it all means. But it often comes unbidden, “free” in that sense.

As I also explained in *A Mind of Winter*, and I’m sure this is typical of all such processes, I don’t simply write what I already know. I need to learn what it is possible for me to know from what I write by rereading it many, many times. Maybe whatever knowledge is there for you will reveal itself the first time through. One and done. I wish I were you. I am very slow to learn, even when I’m teaching myself. And I don’t retain it well, need to refresh my memory over and over, like getting a booster vaccination I suppose. That’s why I keep listening to that speech, to remind myself of what this outside agency went to the trouble of trying to teach me. So I guess there may, in fact, be four of us in the equation: the teacher, the writer, the reader and the student. No

wonder I have trouble knowing who or what I am most days!

September 17 interjection:

I just wrote this in a response to an email from a friend asking if I missed teaching and whether I now felt like a “student,” trying to get better on my guitar. It’s pertinent to this line of thinking.

I didn’t think I would miss teaching and for the most part I don’t. I do miss spending time with young people, most especially freshmen, the students I most enjoyed, the teaching I most enjoyed, all that hopeful energy. What I thought was that I gave my all, all the time, in that part of my work. When you do that, there is nothing left to miss. . . .

If I am a student of guitar, I am a very poor one, don’t work very hard at it. The main self-teaching I do now is via my writing. I’ve just been writing about this. I actually re-read my own work many times to try to learn what it has to teach me. I hope others enjoy and learn from it. But even if they don’t, I do. I know that sounds counter-intuitive, like how could you write what you don’t already know, to such a degree that you have to spend a lot of time and energy studying it to learn what it has to offer. But that’s how it is for me. I think sometimes what ends up on *my* pages is not “myself” [the concept we had been talking about] at all, but some other force or agency, inside or out, same thing, that speaks through me. And the main one it wants to get the

attention of is me, too stubborn to learn any other way. Maybe that's why my writing "waves" are so stressful and exhausting. I'm doing the work of writer and reader, teacher and student.

September 18 interjection:

I woke up this morning with these thoughts, pertinent to this general matter, forming in my head, so I'm going to write them up before they evaporate into the steam of my shower. It picks up where the last interjection leaves off.

I've been thinking about this conundrum of writing/reading/teaching/learning for some time. It started decades ago with the simple reaction that, I assume, all writers have from time to time when they re-read something they wrote when they were younger and are astonished by it, can't believe on some level that they wrote it, were able to write it. And, quite often as a corollary of this, don't "remember" it even generally let alone eidetically. That is, they are actually re-learning what it was they "knew" at the moment they wrote it. And, further, as is often the case when one rereads anything, they also learn something entirely new, something the original version of themselves as a writer did not "know" at the moment of composition, but that somehow got coded into the text anyway. So, two questions: who is it exactly that is writing that piece and who knew what when?

There are at least four figures in this dynamic with some agency in the process. Just above, I specify them as teacher, writer, reader and student. It's possible just to separate them temporally, of course, the simplistic

model for how rote (and certain kinds of scholarly) learning works: A student indentures himself to teachers, learns via reading what they have to teach, and then writes what he has learned from them, amalgamated via a “myself,” to teach others. But as anyone who teaches, writes, reads or learns knows, it is never that simple. Most often, and especially in relation to the most significant things, all four agents are in play from the outset and then throughout the process, even if that process, via multiple re-readings, lasts a lifetime.

I’ve written on a number of occasions about Parmenides, after Plato my favorite philosopher. If experts who place him in the curriculum of Western philosophy are correct in classifying him as the original “monist,” then I actually disagree with his “position,” at least taken in its most simplistic form, which is usually how it’s presented. But I am utterly taken by his way of rendering it, so poetic, and, to my way of reading at least, so complex, even in relation to that position, which doesn’t seem simplistic to me at all. Only a portion of his work, no one knows exactly how much or how little, survives, in a series of fragments that appeared in other texts. These have been reassembled into a brief, single relatively coherent form much, much later by scholars. So it is hard to make entirely reliable generalizations about any of it. But his “poem” (as I said, my preferred term for assigning the work a genre) illustrates the interplay among these four figures quite brilliantly, in part by separating their functions distinctly from one another.

The poem opens with a “me,” the writer, clearly established as the authoritative source of the material elements of the text:

The horses that take me to the ends of my mind
were taking me now: drivers had put me

on the road to the Goddess, the manifest Way
that leads the enlightened through every delusion

I was on that road. . . . (11)

So there is a me, he's on the "Way" through delusion to enlightenment. And, apparently, he is on "that road" to the Goddess "now" to learn what he needs to know to teach us something. When he gets there, he assumes to role of the student, the Goddess his teacher:

friendly
my right hand in hers
a goddess receiving me

she saying:

. . .

Welcome, young man, and be glad

. . . you shall also learn this:

how the interpreted World really does exist,
all of it one throughout space and time

I am your teacher. Remember my words. (12)

So, apparently, he lends himself to her authority and memorizes her words, which are quite stunning, and then comes back to report to us, his students, what she has to offer. It is interesting, to me at least, that the "I" of the poem is characterized here, by the Goddess, as a young man. I have no idea whether Parmenides, the "me" who opens the poem, was a young man when he

composed this, but my inclination is to think that the young man is more like a character that Parmenides, the “me,” creates as a vehicle to carry this knowledge back to him, “now,” the writer, who *is* that “me,” and then to us, given how relatively docile “he” is in the transaction up there, a quality clearly inapplicable to the authoritative “me” that writes it all up.

So let’s say, at least hypothetically, that the “me” is reporting on a younger version of himself who went to the heavens to have the Goddess teach him what “he,” now as an older man, has learned from thinking about what the younger man brought back to him. All of that collapsing time into a simultaneous “now.” That’s a complex dynamic, and I haven’t even gotten to myself, the reader who is trying to function as a student to this teacher in order to learn something I might be able to teach to someone else, or even just to me, over time, which is how I learned what Parmenides has to teach, over multiple re-readings separated from one another sometimes by decades.

It’s possible, of course, to read his poem quite literally, as a *Chariots of the Gods* type story: Parmenides as a young man was taken up into space by some craft, met this female form up there, listened to her “lecture” and memorized it. Then he came back down and, after the fact, perhaps long after the fact, wrote it all down. Or it’s possible that it all just happened “at the ends of [his] mind,” internally, each of these functions an invention of his own imagination, in its traditional sense as an intrinsic creative faculty. Or it’s possible the Goddess was a kind of muse that met him there, at the junction between the ends of his mind and the beginnings of her domain. Or maybe it’s just a function of language, which is an engine of invention in its own right: He starts to write a poem, and it takes over from him to a certain extent, leads him

to the ends of his mind and tells him what it needs to say in order for it to make enough sense for him to teach it to others, and, subsequently, to learn it for himself. One of the things the Goddess tells him, in fact, is that “Speaking and thinking are the same as what is,” another way of saying what I just said about language. There is no way to know for sure which it was for Parmenides.

So, back to my point: there is, for me as well, no way to know for sure where what I seem to know has come from, either while I’m writing it or subsequently when I’m re-reading—not to revise or proofread it along the way, I mean, but later when it is a fixed entity, just like any other text by any other author I might be reading. The within and the without, the teacher who is his student, the writer who is his reader who is his teacher who is his student. I know that sounds complicated, but my guess is if you write, and then re-read what you write later on, it will sound like a matter-of-fact representation of how the process works, or at least feels, with all of its intrinsic complications.

September 20 interjection:

I just wrote this in another note to that same above friend.

Not long after I gave my speech I was out walking with a younger colleague, someone I very much hoped to persuade away from that ongoing manic distraction that has become the academic default attitude toward time. Just spontaneously I re-explained it this way: I held out my right hand and closed it into a fist. I said this is how most academics relate to time, as if it is scarce, never enough, needs to be grasped, squeezed, even fought over; in other words, the enemy. Then I opened my hand and

held it out. This I said is the other way of relating to time, as if it is rich and generous, wants only to be welcomed and received, and then enriched by whatever small gifts we can hand back; in other words, a friend. In the former case, you are always short on time, in a rush, complaining, inattentive to others, even bitter. In the latter, you have all the time in the world for your work, for yourself, for others, and you still feel like you have all of it left. I know that sounds counter-intuitive, even ludicrous, but I also know it is true. I'm sometimes tempted to believe that time is a mode of "love" that permeates the universe. Who knows, maybe that's what "dark energy" is. There is always enough. Until your local time here is up, of course. Then there is no time at all, a liberation from it into something I hope is better.

Back to August 18:

Then I got out to walk. Adjacent to the Evergreen campus there is a patch of woods that runs down to Eld Inlet, maybe a mile along a soft-earth path, the usual woods here, a mix of firs, cedars, hemlocks, alders, an occasional bridge or boardwalk over the streams and wetlands, just beautiful. When I started my walk, my head was empty. I thought: Sooner or later it will start to fill up with itself, what it's thinking, but until that happens, I'm just going to enjoy seeing what I see, letting it in, as itself, to occupy that empty space with something besides me. When I'm in that frame of mind, the natural things in the world take on an almost surreal aspect, in a

good way, their depth and color and vitality seeming to exceed their physical dimensions, each one becoming more a presence than a thing. Oddly, though, most of what really caught my eye along the way were people and the scripts they often leave behind to mark their passages.

One of the first things of that sort that got my attention me was the graffiti scrawled on the railings of a bridge over a little creek. I've taken this walk a number of times and never noticed any of this at all, which surprised me. The one I actually stopped to contemplate was this: "Oh, Great Creator of Being, grant us one more hour to perform our art and perfect our lives." It seemed such a righteous sentiment on a Sunday morning, this hour I would be spending on my walk as a substitute for going to church, a practice I engaged in intermittently during my life but finally abandoned completely during the late stages of my wife's life.

I could go into a lot of detail about that, but I'll make it brief, more an explanation, I hope, than a rant. I was raised an Irish Catholic in a small town in the 1950s. 'Nuf said about my credentials as a church-goer. I think I spent more time in church as a kid than I did in school! That lapsed, of course, when I went to college in the late 60s, another thing that almost goes without saying. After our kids came along, Carol wanted them to learn about religion, so we tried one denomination after another, hoping to find a church, or even one clergyman (and they were all men back then as they pretty much are now), that seemed a worthy spokesman for that "Great Creator of Being." Year after year, one after another, church after church. Squat. Our kids are experts on religion, know any number of approaches and alternatives in extra-ordinary depth and detail. They are both now atheists.

My longstanding skepticism turned to cynicism, then to rage (after Carol passed), then simply to not caring. I go to holy places every day now, the ones in the woods, where trees actually care about one another and about me, where there is peace and quiet, where the infernal politics, or just self-righteousness, that has infected religion in this country has never even been heard of let alone argued over. That's the long-story-short of it. I'm assuming you could fill in most of the details if you wanted to. Just btw, that quote above is attributed to Jim Morrison of The Doors, which may or may not be accurate (I'm not even going to check because I want that to stay true in my head), about as unpriestly a figure as you're likely to find. That's what made it perfect today, maybe why it came so vividly to my attention as I began my walk.

There was something magically spiritual about the first two people I encountered thereafter, like I was in a fairy tale instead of real life. The first was a very young (I mean late teens, maybe an Evergreen student) and very slight (I mean 90 pounds) woman seated in the lotus position on the left side of the path. I figured I'd give her leeway to sustain her meditative state, so I moved to the far right as I passed, nodded, just so she knew I acknowledged her presence there. She looked up and said "good morning" in the most melodic and mellifluous voice, upliftingly so, angelic really. A little further on, I saw a burly mustachioed man, maybe 30, coming from a side path wearing big earphones. As we passed at the intersection, I said hello and also nodded, assuming he wouldn't hear my voice. He slowly slid the earphones down around his neck, and said with a deep nod, in a leisurely, baritone, Barry White-like voice: "greetings and salutations." It was awesome, like the voice of God!

sunday prayer

everything I write
a little
poem today
including this
for you

miss
lotus blossom
on my path
mellifluous
cherubim

and mister
mustachioed
magician
arriving sidewise
greeting gladly
godly

(from *slights*, August, 2019)

A little further down I could see from a distance what looked like brightly colored patches on a tree, wondered if they were some strange form of fungus. As I got closer I could see they were painted sea shells attached somehow to the trunk, maybe 20 of them, vivid, primary colors. Down below, ground level, in one of those hollowed out crotches that are so common in the old trees here, this one maybe two feet deep, narrowing as it went in, was a little “room” full of little furniture, brightly painted, made from popsicle sticks, a little shell “fire pit,” shell utensils. Outside was a path made from painted-shell “stepping stones” that led to a kind of “stairway” made from popsicle sticks. And off to the right, at the doorway, a sign: “Fairies welcome.” Talk about magical.

Then I passed a middle-aged couple. The woman, on the left, had such a sweet smile on her face, beatific; as I approached she said her “good morning” softly and pleasantly in reply to mine. The man had a scowl on his face the whole time, not necessarily, I felt, directed at me—he didn’t even look at me—just his foundational state now, his wife having assumed, or been assigned, all of the duties of interacting with the rest of the world. One of the things I’ve noticed on my many walks is how friendly and open solitary walkers are. Sometimes I serendipitously end up in extended conversations with one, usually a man of my vintage. They just seem to trust me implicitly, open up quickly. But even when that doesn’t happen, those who walk alone, male, female, young, old, are always polite, gentle, friendly. They all nod and say hello, maybe comment on the beauty of the day.

Couples tend to be like the one I saw today. One or the other has, over time, taken on primary responsibility for interacting with others, and I’ve seen it go both ways,

gender-wise. The other just tags along, aloof at best, grouchy at worst. On the one hand, there is, I suppose, a kind of efficiency to this. Why expend two energies to do what one can do well enough? On the other hand, well, it's just not a very good way to go about things. It may seem on the face of it kind of innocuous, but I know from experience with many couples that doing that for too long has a corruptive effect on both parties. One is always saying the hellos, thank yous, I'm sorrys, both for themselves and for the other, way too much to ask of a partner, and way too heavy a burden for half a couple to have to bear. The other becomes sooner or later, well, like that guy I saw today: silent, inattentive to others, sour. So I guess I'd say, if you do that, especially the tagging along bit, stop. Walk alone for a while, until you remember how to be pleasant again. It takes so little time. Much less in the end than scowling takes. As I said, you have all the time in the world to be human, at least when you're walking in the woods on a Sunday morning.

When I got to the beach at Eld inlet, a slim stretch of sand that is elongated into a mudflat as the tide goes out, there were three mergansers cruising along, maybe eight feet from shore, not bobbing to eat, just paddling happily, the first of their kind I've seen here. They have a slick, brown crest that sticks out in the back when their heads are up, like one of those ducktail haircuts tough guys used to have back in the 50s, at least where I grew up. They look kind of scary and stupid on people, but on these ducks they are magnificent, like a spoiler on a muscle car. Then, when the head bobs down, they stand straight up, like Indian headdresses. I walked along with them for a while just enjoying this rare treat. There were two empty sailboats, sails rolled, moored further out, 50-100 feet, maybe far enough to keep them afloat when the

tide is lowest, though inaccessible, it seemed, now, one a catamaran, one a sloop, very picturesque.

two
boats float
sails rolled
stock-

still one
sky sea blue
there
never moves

(from *slights*, August 2019)

On my trek back up the hill I saw a number of dog walkers, getting closer to noon then, the time for pleasant chores of that sort, not for substitute-churching. They are akin in some ways to couples, in that, if they interact with you at all, it is through their dogs, talking to them, explaining them, eyes and voices always focused that way, a kind of ventriloquism. You can tell a lot about how friendly they or their dogs are, but it's never direct. Unless you're another dog walker. I see conversations between and among dog walkers going on animatedly all the time on my walks, the dogs yanking or heeling. I guess dogs are a foundation for trust. How could they know in any case if I might be skittish around dogs (which I'm not) or be bothered by pawing (which I'm not.) I have no problem with this social culture. It's the same thing, really, as those AARP-eligible men who talk to me. They see the invisible dog *I'm* walking and I see theirs!

I also stopped and read graffiti here and there, and there's a lot of it I now know on this path, on bridges, trees, logs, roots, everywhere, maybe because it's a college campus and this is a mode of self-expression. It's often the kind that ends up in a "string," the first one inspiring another and then that another, etc. Nothing much really gripped me like the Morrison quote, except these two: "For a good time call 911," which I thought was both funny and politically adept and "Love Hide's," with that strange apostrophe in it, which made me stop and read it multiple times to try and figure out what it was about. Maybe love is hidden, maybe it's an ad for a place or person named Hide.

On the drive back home I listened to the album of William Blake songs I made last winter, as a follow-up to my Emily Dickinson album. I don't listen to it much because I usually find it more boring than the Dickinson

one, but for some reason, when it came up immediately (alphabetically on the SD card, “Blake” following “All ...”) after my talk sound file, I thought it was perfect for the moment, all but one of the poems from his darker side, *the Songs of Experience* (as opposed to his *Songs of Innocence*, which I am no longer qualified to sing, I’m afraid!) rendered in my voice on a Sunday morning on my way home from my “church.” The first three of those songs seemed a perfect accompaniment at that moment. The album opens with “The Tyger,” a pretty good set of questions to be asking about the “Great Creator” when you’ve spent enough time in this world to know how “experience” differs from “innocence:”

Tyger Tyger, burning bright,
In the forests of the night;
What immortal hand or eye,
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

In what distant deeps or skies.
Burnt the fire of thine eyes?
On what wings dare he aspire?
What the hand, dare seize the fire?

And what shoulder, & what art,
Could twist the sinews of thy heart?
And when thy heart began to beat,
What dread hand? & what dread feet?

What the hammer? what the chain,
In what furnace was thy brain?
What the anvil? what dread grasp,
Dare its deadly terrors clasp!

When the stars threw down their spears
And water'd heaven with their tears:
Did he smile his work to see?

Did he who made the Lamb make thee?

Tyger Tyger burning bright,
In the forests of the night:
What immortal hand or eye,
Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?(24)

The second song on the album says pretty much what I was saying above about the relationship between organized religion and love:

I went to the Garden of Love,
And saw what I never had seen:
A Chapel was built in the midst,
Where I used to play on the green.

And the gates of this Chapel were shut,
And Thou shalt not. writ over the door;
So I turn'd to the Garden of Love,
That so many sweet flowers bore.

And I saw it was filled with graves,
And tomb-stones where flowers should be:
And Priests in black gowns, were walking their
rounds,
And binding with briars, my joys & desires. (26)

And the next one, "The Clod and the Pebble" says everything else you need to know about love, heaven and hell on a day like this:

"Love seeketh not itself to please,
Nor for itself hath any care,
But for another gives its ease,
And builds a Heaven in Hell's despair."

So sung a little Clod of Clay

Trodden with the cattle's feet,
But a Pebble of the brook
Warbled out these metres meet:

"Love seeketh only self to please,
To bind another to its delight,
Joys in another's loss of ease,
And builds a Hell in Heaven's despite." (19)

So, that takes care of God, the church and our general
culture, boom, boom, boom, my Sunday sermon
delivered, via my voice, straight from William Blake!

The Tiger

Somewhere unseen
in stiff reeds he flexes
loins to leap
the engine of his voice
revving up stale air
like thunder late at night
while we lie alone in bed
wait for lightning to strike
nearby enough to stand
hair on end stop
heartbeat and breath
relieve us of
the difference between
our selves.

(unpublished, circa 1974)

Later . . .

I just got back from a stroll along the boardwalk downtown. I expected it to be busy with lovers hand in hand, families with small children, the ones I usually see on weekend evenings like this, just enjoying this glorious late-summer weather, temperature 73 right now, no humidity, bright sun, perfect, as so much of this summer has been, eternally beautiful from my point of view, maybe a bit wetter than last summer, but also pleasantly cooler, nothing like the rest of the country has been enduring. And by “wetter” I mean it’s often cloudy in the morning and sometimes drizzles. About a week ago I was reading in bed and heard thunder in the distance, could see some vague flickers of lightning. Then some real rain, the kind I was used to back east in the summer, routine weather there, a downpour. Just for a few minutes, though, not even enough to get up and look out the window at. This “storm” was so moderate it would not even have counted as one back there, but it was the first thing people mentioned if you spoke to them: “How about that storm this morning!” That’s what I mean by “wetter.”

In any case the boardwalk was as quiet as the woods were this morning, everyone, including me, seeming to be moving in slow-mo, as if time might just come to a full stop any second. So enjoyable, this whole day, so enjoyable. I know this essay is meandery, and kind of preachy, too, I guess. And I don’t care. It’s what the day gave me, a Sunday no less, so often an unpleasant day for me, and I accepted it with a grateful heart, pass it along here, if you want it, no pressure, slow-mo on its way to a full stop. If you want more, I think I’ll just refer you to that talk I opened with this morning. It’s on my website, free.

You might be saying, sure that guy has all the time in the world: no work, no spouse, no social universe, easy for him to meander and preach. Well I had all of those things not that long ago. And I still had all the time in the world for the things that really matter. You can do that, too, if you want to. And that's *my* sermon for this Sunday.

Walking by Budd Bay on Sunday Evening

maybe a million
tiny fry breech:
rain drops

a flagrant leaf
dawdles:
no plagiarist

shoals of shiners
shimmy sidewise:
shimmer

one jellyfish
undulates:
sun-stunned

I take this
step forever:
without

(from *slights*, August, 2019)

Essay 4: Monday Walking

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.

from "This Dark is Mine," *In the Dark*, 2016

August 19, 2019

That's the opening stanza of the poem I'm planning to read this Wednesday during the open mic segment of the Olympia Poetry Network's monthly gathering at the Traditions Café downtown, another group I participate in, such a warm, easy-going way to listen to and present good poetry. Its pertinence to today's walk will become clearer as I go here.

I love Mondays, I decided, or maybe just realized consciously today for the first time, having felt this way for as long as I can remember. Yesterday, I thought I'd do something different today, drive out to see the Mima Mounds, an interesting geological formation that I had heard about and had a hankering toward long before I even thought of moving here. It's only about 25 miles away, a quick jaunt, one I probably should have made long before this. I plotted it on Google maps, woke up ready to roll that way. But on my way out to door, I changed my mind, as I often do here, and which I can do without any consequence to anyone, even me. I have no one else to schedule with or around, and I have no actual schedule at all, really. For some reason, I really wanted to go back to Woodard Bay, maybe get past the unpleasant hurriedness I felt there on Saturday. So that's where I went, and I'm so glad I did.

When I got out of the car I realized that I arrived just as the tide was at equipoise, all the way in but not yet going out, the very first time that has happened on my many jaunts there. Henderson Inlet appeared to be perfectly still, glass-smooth, a rarity, though wherever little shreds of detritus floated on the water you could tell that in some spots it was circulating slowly in, in others slowly out. The water had the most lovely shade of vernal or

sylvan green to it, one I had never seen there. I stood for a while looking at it, wondering why. Then I realized it had borrowed its hue from the surrounding trees, which were perfectly reflected on the mirror surface, seeming to reach “down” their full hundred feet or more, though I knew there was only eight feet of water there. Once I deciphered that, I could see each shape, each tree, reaching deeper and deeper. Just that, the remarkable stillness, was in itself an adequate antidote to Kayak Saturday. But it got even better along the way.

I actually started to think about how much I love Mondays, a much-maligned day of the week by contrast with its preceding weekend cousins, have felt this way unconsciously for most of my life. Part of that derives from how much I generally dislike Sundays (yesterday a rare exception) that historically valorized “day of rest,” which it has never been from my perspective. I’ve been aware of that for some time now, at least 25 years I’d say, when I started to become conscious of the anxiety and sadness I often felt, quite distinctively (i.e., compared to how those symptoms of my nervous system’s engagement with reality tend to express themselves on other days) on Sundays. There was, I noticed, an emptiness to those visceral feelings on Sunday, an underlying sense of both frustration and inadequacy. No matter how hard I would try to “enjoy” Sundays, or dedicate them to something godly, it just never took. And it had nothing to do with my inability to “rest.” I’m quite good at that most days. But Sundays always seemed long and low-grade stressful. Going to bed on a Sunday night came to be a relief to me. I thought at first that it was an index to my “fall” from religion, especially the practice of attending church, guilt maybe, something crucial to my spiritual health missing. But, having tried that again a number of times in the interim, sometimes for multi-year stretches, I knew that just starting up again

here wouldn't help, would likely make it all worse. Church wasn't the solution to this problem, for me at least, just highlighted it.

For most of my adult life I've felt a deep sense of dissatisfaction with that experience, churchgoing, and I couldn't quite pin a name to it. Today I realized it went all the way back as far as I can remember, a little kid, and, while it was incited by going to church, which we did all the time back then, Sundays the centerpiece, it wasn't entirely due to that. I recalled for example my time as an altar boy. My pre-assigned day to serve a mass was Tuesday, 7 AM, so I had to get up early, get to church, then hurry to school, unpleasant you might think. But it wasn't. There was something authentically peaceful about it, not joyful by any means, but at least godly, for a number of reasons I started to think about today.

First of all, mass on these weekday mornings was just mass, the formally required parts of it, no sermon, very brief gospel readings if any, streamlined, quick, much to my liking. And it was all in Latin, the priest's parts, my parts, all memorized and repeated rotely, like you might pray a rosary, almost beneath consciousness. If you've ever seen someone praying that way you might think of it as just going through the motions, what a waste, almost sacrilegious. But if you've prayed that way you know it's the opposite of that, a way to make prayer integral to your moment, a comforting routine was how I thought about it today. One of the occasional visiting priests, who went on to become a monsignor, could flash through the mass in twenty minutes, like he was always running late for an urgent appointment, liturgy on speed. He was quite memorable for that. All the altar boys enjoyed his visits to town. The parish priest took about 30 minutes, no hurry, very reasonable.

Additionally, aside from the priest and me, almost no one came to the service, half a dozen people or so, mostly older women, always alone, women I knew (I grew up in a very small town, so everyone knew everyone else), women who had very hard lives, struggled just to get by, there every other day also, not just Tuesdays, because sometimes I “pinch hit” on other days and saw them, maybe as a way to keep sane in the face of various kinds of social and economic deprivation they had to endure, such strong, good people, the kind Wordsworth might have written about in his early work, those poignant *Lyrical Ballads* poems. These were the kind of people Jesus actually sought out to care for. By contrast, so many of the ones who flocked to church flamboyantly on Sundays, dressed to the nines, marching in like there was silent fanfare in the air, were, I also knew from experience, the kind who would likely have kicked Jesus out of the Temple, complained about him, been sanguine about his being turned over to the authorities, even if they weren’t a party to the process. Hypocrites. That’s the word I attached to them as soon as I learned that word as a kid. It used to depress me to be in this holy place with them. None of them ever showed up on Tuesday at 7.

Here’s what I thought today about all of that: If you want to take the temperature of someone’s spiritual health, including your own, don’t do it on Sunday. Do it on Monday. Or Tuesday, around 7 Am. Watch who they are and what they do then, at work, on the street, how they treat the people they earn their livings from or just meet. And most especially so when they have to encounter one of those women I saw every Tuesday morning, humble, strong, good people struggling to get by, used to being ignored or dismissed, yet still good enough not be cynical about God, which made them way

better than me, both back then and now. Though I guess, on my own behalf, I'd say that despite my beefs with God, the way I at least try to act on Monday is more like them than those others who seemed such an affront to me (yes, I was always this intense!) on Sundays back then.

So if it wasn't church, what was it made Sundays still so unpleasant for me? Maybe God? Okay, I know, I have a very strained relationship with God, have for some time now. I've written about it a more length elsewhere, and I could have written about it at much more length at the time, but I didn't and won't now either. I actually wish I could become an atheist, but the concept of God was driven way too deep into my psyche during my formation to pull it out now, like one of those dandelions that always grows back if you leave even the slightest root in the ground. I think that way about God, though, the same every day. Sunday may exacerbate it somewhat, but not much. So there still has to be more to it than that.

What I thought today was that at least part of it was the expectation that you had to do something more vacation-like on Sundays, like what Saturday is for kayakers here, pressure to make the best of this last smidgeon of time before work starts again, the opposite in many ways of a "day of rest." Like go to the Mima Mounds instead of Woodard Bay, for example. When someone asks you what you did on vacation, they don't want to hear: same-old, same-old. Like, what a loser. Wasted that time. Could have been sweating in a long line to take a nauseating ride at Disney World and went to Woodard Bay instead. Well, today I went to Woodard Bay instead, at least the 150th time I've been on that same walk during the year or so I've been here, which means I've walked well over 400 miles there on that path. How

boring can a guy get? Well, I'm here to tell you, I can get way more boring than that without hardly trying. I calculated recently that over the last 15 years or so of Carol's life we walked together in Boyce Park in Pittsburgh, on the same array of paths every day, for a total of somewhere between 15,000 and 20,000 miles. And I can't speak for her now, but I wasn't bored for one second of it.

Woodard Bay Today

a walk is one step
repeated once
that deep shade straight
ahead made for me
one owl
woos me
wattled sunlight
dazzles dampens
eyes delighted
try receiving
rotting logs
all knobs and knots
the bay laid out
glass the past
blue water
blue sky
one cormorant
glides silent
out then one
in breath
out then
in walk
in then out
a walk is
one step
repeated once

more

(from *slights*, May, 2019)

I've been reading some books about walking lately. Not intentionally, just by happenstance. The first book we read after I joined the Browsers poetry discussion group was, coincidentally, Cole Swenson's *On Walking On*. Swenson selected a variety of historically significant walkers—like Chaucer, the Wordsworths, Thoreau, Breton, Sebald, etc.—and wrote poems based on their unique experiences with that activity. Quite beautiful poems. She seems capable of inhabiting their sensibilities via their language, to walk in their shoes as it were. If you've walked at length with another person by your side, you know you need to adapt your gaits to stay together. Sometimes it's a mutual adjustment, sometimes only one party makes it. But it gets made or you can't walk "together."

The wide variety of styles in Swenson's poems about other walkers seemed to me to be her way of adapting her gait to keep on pace with each one individually. I admired that. She intersperses these simulations with poems about her own walking, dated specifically, which to my ear at least sound nothing like the other poems, had a consistency about them, a sameness, her gait being her gait, walking alone. In some ways they seemed more "boring," but that is both inevitable and an illusion if you know anything about walking alone. First of all, you are absent a partner, and when your partners are famous, well, that sets a high bar. Note the difference between: Today I walked at Woodard Bay with Coleridge, and today I walked at Woodard Bay by myself. The former is a month of Sundays, a very long story to tell to many avid listeners; the latter is Monday, no need to elaborate for anyone. Boring.

I just went and got that book to make sure I got the title right, opened it up randomly to a poem I'll quote to give a sense of it, a poem called "Thoreau: 'Walking,'"

Thoreau's famous lecture "Walking" started out
as part of another lecture
titled "The Wild," but grew apart, in a sense
wandering off, he often walked

for several hours a day, gradually becoming
indistinguishable from everything
around him. If you walk in complete silence,
other beings are not forced

to rearrange themselves into recognizable things.

* * *

He brought the two lectures back together in
the 1860 essay
"Walking," in which he most clearly defines
his concept of wildness

as a door within most animate things, he saw, or
thought, a flight
of steps, that endlessly rising, the wild in body,
becomes the self

becoming more and more
an emptiness
seen from the back
heading backward through trees
that walking exceeds

Thoreau used the word "wild" not as an
adjective, but as an exile
sifting an estranged country through overhanging
leaves. He watched

internal distances increase, as walking precedes

time and is its single necessary condition of possibility. (16-17)

It's a beautiful poem, worth reading *in toto*, as is the book. To me, this makes Thoreau sound like a Monday walker, but he's just too famous now to count as one. Wordsworth is definitely a Sunday walker, for example, high drama. His sister Dorothy, well she might be my speed, a Tuesday walker, 7 AM, though I don't think I could keep up with her and I'm not sure she'd slow down for me. But the one thing about all of these walkers, including the author, is they are famous and they walk far and wide. I am not and don't. A nobody, totally Monday, Woodard Bay.

I'm right now reading another book on walking that a friend sent as a gift, also beautiful, Rebecca Solnit's *Wanderlust: A History of Walking*, a prose rendition of a history of walking, well-researched but not overburdened with academic weight, some of the same players, again all famous, all walking far and wide. Either walking is all the rage these days or I'm just happening on these books serendipitously. That same friend sent me a link to a webpage for a young man, a student in the university he teaches at, who walked clear across the country, coast to coast, 2000 miles, and is now walking every single street in New York city, all boroughs, an estimated 10,000 miles. These are epic journeys, newsworthy accomplishments, like what Everest-climbing must have seemed like in the 1950s before the human traffic jams started clogging up the ridge toward the peak, and getting there became more a cultural trope than a heroic accomplishment. That is Sunday-quality walking, a great story to tell. I've walked many more miles than that young man, over, yes, a longer time, but still, including what I've walked since Carol passed, easily enough to go around the world at the equator. I've never

gotten on the news once, and never will. That's Monday walking and it's why I love it.

Today, when I started my walk, the woods were so peaceful, silent, still, like the water, no one else in sight, just the birds making noise, and even they much more sedate than on Saturday. There is a little stretch on the woods-path, maybe a quarter of a mile, that seems to host more life, or at least I encounter more life there than other stretches. Today I saw a lot of it. The hairy woodpecker, for example, that must live in that section because I see it quite often, pecking away, slow tentative pecks usually, until it finds a meal, then full on drilling until it pulls it out. It seems very comfortable around people, never flits off until it's ready, no matter how close I get, like chickadees, which I also see there from time to time, though not today.

I could hear a little further back the heavy hammering of the pileated woodpeckers who live there, two of them I know from previous encounters, a breeding pair I assume, though I couldn't see them today. And an owl hooting from just across the last little finger of the bay, one I often hear right there if I get going early enough. I've only seen it once, most likely a barred owl by its markings and call, on the only walk I took out there with my son and his wife when they visited last month, such an exciting and lucky find, for them and for me. It's also the area I most often see two black-tailed deer, like the hairy woodpecker completely nonchalant around people, though that, too, is a rare encounter. And there's a very large (for a garter snake) garter snake, maybe two and a half feet long, thick as my big toe, that seems to live in and among a pile of old, downed trees. So peaceful. All these animals in their Monday moods, slow, friendly.

hairy woodpecker
path picking
I walk
right behind

scruffy pate red
jumps jaunty
just enough ahead
to be . . .

then sudden
flight
claws to trunk
waiting for
me

to pass

(from *slights*, August, 2019)

there

where white-tail
bobs into thicket

fleet song darts
back into

silence I lean
looking for trace

of what moves
ever away from

forked track
fresh enough

to follow there
and again

there

(unpublished, circa 1972)

Just past this point are the two huge trees I wrote about in *A Mind of Winter*, a fir and a cedar, one on each side of the path about 5 feet apart. I think of them as “married,” as they are in their roots across the path. When I walk between them I reach out and lightly touch each one, a way of saying hello. When I did that today, I was filled with emotion, enough to bring tears to my eyes, the kind that come when you experience a genuine kindness. I recall seeing a Monet painting, a small one, in a special exhibition at the Frick Gallery in Pittsburgh after one of my walks in Frick Park. It was a very sedate looking scene—Monet-soft-and-blurry—of a house and some breeze fluffed trees by a peaceful looking lake. I started to cry almost immediately, I mean tears running down my cheeks crying, for no reason I could fathom.

I was stunned and baffled. What in that serene scene could incite such an intense response I wondered? Then I read the sign describing the painting, how Monet made it while his wife was deathly ill in that house. At first I thought, well, no matter how you might think you can evade it, whatever you make, if it’s done well, will convey your feelings. Monet’s tears became mine. Or vice-versa. Then I thought, maybe it was the scene itself, having recognized the great sadness of the man witnessing it, reflecting it back, out of care for him. Maybe both. Anyway, those trees today reached my deepest core, shared something of consequence with me, something beyond words. Maybe if I painted them with the skill of a master, you could feel it, too.

It started me thinking about what trees have and do that we humans can learn from. I’ve called it “love,” before, but that term seems too corrupted by our culture today to describe what happened, its being so often associated with romance or religion or relatives, clichés. Then I

thought of empathy, but that too, has been coopted, in this case by the psychological discourses, including New Age ones, that pepper the air waves and book shelves. Then compassion, but that also seemed weak, kind of angsty, the sort of thing we're prompted to feel for the downtrodden, often via canned religious jargon. The word I settled on was care, which made me think of the poem I open with. Trees often, at least some of them, seem genuinely to care, for one another and, sometimes, for those of us passersby who get to know them, reach out to touch them.

A little further along is the "family" of cedars I also wrote about in *A Mind of Winter*. I always touch them, too. Today they made me laugh, like out loud, a kind of playful laugh. Maybe they were joking with one another. Again, I'm not sure how or why these interactions happen, whether for example, it is a matter of each tree's temperament or of their sense that something is needed at that moment and they provide it. Or maybe it's just me making it all up. I guess it doesn't matter. Either way, it is still "care, not giving or taking, just there, always in the air, a way of prayer," which is what real care is.

Down at the point on the Woodard Bay side I saw three *plein air* painters, two women, one quite young, one older, but I couldn't tell quite how much with the hat she was wearing and the fact that whenever I see *plein air* painters I give them a wide berth so as not to intrude on or distract them. The third was a man about my age, further down near the water. It's possible they were all one family, though they didn't look at or communicate with one another. The scene there this morning was just gorgeous, the clouds, the water, the soft morning sunlight, the water all the way up to shore, the trees, everything.

I took multiple pictures there and then also on the Henderson inlet side. And so quiet. There were, I noted, just as many gulls lining the shore as there were on Saturday, but not a peep from them, just calm, friendly. One flew directly over my head and I noted how the wings moved, how it didn't seem possible that such a slight back and forth of feathers hinged on stiff shoulders could keep that bird so smoothly and quietly aloft in thin air. And just as many seals out on the docks, but they too were quiet, dozing. Only a few cormorants were coming and going, also quietly. As I got to the Henderson Inlet side, where they all roost, it was inordinately quiet there, too. Out on the water I saw what I think was a loon, too far out to know for sure. A couple of them live near the boardwalk downtown, swim up close enough to see clearly, so I recognize that unique profile on the water, the body sunken, like a submarine surfacing sometimes looks, just the tower and a bit of the tank visible. Then the thin, pointy bill.

On my way back to the car, on the paved path, I encountered an armada of women with children, at least a dozen women with at least 30 children, all young, some in strollers, some in backpacks, the ones old enough to walk walking. They stretched out for a couple of hundred yards. First I thought it must be a daycare jaunt, but it became clear from the interactions that specific kids belonged to specific women: Bridget pulling Zoe in a cart; Nora and Truman meandering to the rear. One young boy seemed inattentive heading toward me. His mother, had to be, spoke sternly: "Remember, no means no." It was such a strange parade, all of these mothers and children heading off *en masse* down to the bay. When I got to the lot, it was full, even more so than Saturday, all those Subarus and SUVs, just like then, this time having offloaded a cargo not of kayaks but kids. It had the opposite effect on me, very sweet, almost funny

in a way. The kind of busyness that is made for Mondays.

I was so happy I came to Woodard Bay today. I'll get to the Mima Mounds one of these days. Today was a perfect day to not be famous, to not walk far and wide, to disappear into the scenery, to not even write about the wonders of walking. Well, unless you count this, which is what I got for free today for following my heart to Woodard Bay.

Essay 5: Everything Ends in Astoundment

a walk

takes up

no time

may make time

for you to

take up

walking

from “notes for walk-taking,” *slights*, 2019

August 23, 2019

When I arrived at Woodard Bay this morning the tide was at the same equipoise level it was last Friday, water appearing perfectly still, except that today it was partially covered with a fine golden sheen, not oily, more like a powder, which was being swirled around slowly by the underlying movements of the water. If it were spring, I would have guessed it was pollen. Maybe it has something to do with the evergreens dropping cones, which are everywhere now, or some other early-fall process. In any case, while the water was still rich with borrowed color from the surrounding trees, it was a murky green, very little definition and depth, more a bow of deference to the forest than a mirror image of it.

I woke up happy today, the kind of happy I covet now. It is not mirth, or joy, or pleasure, or even a good mood, but more like the water today, a pleasant stasis belying the strong forces that will keep complete stasis from ever occurring. I wanted to find another word to describe it for myself, so I might be able to instill it more easily when it was absent, had that on my mind as I started my walk. When I headed up into the woods, I was simply overcome with, what? I wasn't quite sure. I noticed it first with the ferns, many of which now have outer leaves burnished a soft bronze by their long season in the heat, but still flush with green otherwise. They seemed hyper-real, almost unreal to me, absorbingly so, like I felt as if I might just melt into them and would not put up any resistance if it started. My eyes widened and widened and I still couldn't apprehend them fully. I kept trying to come up with a word to describe it all. It was a kind of awe that has no element of either fear or fervor about it, more an absence of routine feelings than the presence of several together.

Just by happenstance I had been listening again on the way out there to the recording of my last speech to the composition program at Pitt, the one I mentioned last Sunday. When I arrived, I was just at the point where I talk about Coleridge's amazing sentence: "Philosophy begins in wonder, ends in astoundment." That's the word I finally settled on: astoundment. I talk about this word a bit in that speech, describing it finally not as "wonder times two, wonder with a few smiley face emojis after it," my reaction to the word the first time I read it fifty years ago, but "wonder times a million," now that I've read a lot of philosophy and lived a full life. That's what those ferns made me feel today. And I decided further that it was because they were just overwhelmingly present there, presences without any tinge of absence, some things with no nothing in them.

That reminded me of two experiences I had in college that I never put together this way before. One happened while I was reading Jean Paul Sartre's *Nausea*, that scene where Roquentin is just overcome by a tree simply by staring at it, feels the existential sick-to-the-stomachness that gives the book its title, the one that derives from apprehending the presence of natural things, what he calls in *Being and Nothingness* "Being-in-itself," a full self-identification, which highlights how we as humans, what he calls "Being-for-itself," lack and can never achieve that unity, coherence, self-stillness. Human consciousness is the corresponding absence to the presence of these natural things, their complementary nothingness. We are vacuums of a sort, and when we become fully aware of that, as Roquentin does looking at that tree, we become literally nauseous. Today, I felt just such an overwhelming presence emanating from the ferns, but without the gut-upset. I was filled, on the contrary, with a sense of well-being, a presence of my

own, one that could, in fact, relate in a deep way to these incomparable things I was walking among. I kind of knew I didn't agree with Sartre even back then. Today I understood why.

The second experience I remembered was a conversation I had as a college freshman with another student, a friend, who offered me some LSD. It was 1967, so drugs were everywhere. I had grown up in a small town, insulated until right around that time from the emergent drug culture, hallucinogenics especially. So I asked him what effects it produced. He said something like this: "Everything will appear hyper-real, even unreal to some extent, things will morph into extreme versions of themselves, even other things, like a Dali painting maybe. Time will both slow down and speed up, like eternity in an instant, if you're lucky. You may find yourself communing with spiritual forces or entities. You may reach deep religious insights or just be frightened out of your wits and totally creeped out." I stopped him there, saying, that's what the inside of my head is like most of the time already. I think if I took something to amplify that I would go away and never come back (as some people I knew didn't, later on, when I became more aware of the potentially deleterious effects of the abuse of hallucinogenics.) I told him I'd pass. I'm so happy I did. Further, I never thereafter took any hallucinogenic drugs, for the same reason, stuck to entry-level stuff, and not even any excess of that. I wanted to be here not somewhere I'd never find a way back from.

I was in that "natural" state of mind for much of my walk today, everything hyper-real in the most amicable way. About a quarter mile in I spontaneously started to pray. The woods is the only place now that I can raise a prayer, and not even always there. Today I felt as if God was not just nearby, but was flooding the space, all of its

things, including me, with presence. The difference between his presence and our presence was almost indistinguishable. I started to think about religion again, how organized religions in particular have simply lost their way, no longer speak to the spirit, the presence, we both have and yearn for.

I am a big fan of Jesus, the way he is rendered in the Gospels at least (not so much later, via Paul, e.g.), especially his idea of the Kingdom of God. Today I felt like I was in the kingdom of god (small letters: I am paul, not Paul!) Most of what I believe about Jesus has been either declared as or is simply treated as heretical by the many Christian denominations. Somewhere along the way they just “jumped the shark,” to borrow a phrase from *Happy Days* (yes, I am that old), could use a dose of LSD to wake up again.

Part of the problem from my point of view, especially among fundamentalists, is that they basically operate as if the Old Testament—all those wars and rules and God such a prick—is 90% of the underlying rule-book. The most ideologically extreme these days just mine it for quotes to warrant fear and hate. The other 10% is a kind of a rind of Jesus’ actual teachings, what’s left after all the radical is squeezed out, the love really. And I don’t mean love in any of its routine guises and functions. I mean it in the sense I felt it today, in the woods, exuding from everything, even me, not a feeling, an emotion, even an act. A presence.

I had some very emotional moments on this walk, not grandiose, just quiet, deep. Late in the walk, in that section of the woods that I said was overfull of living things, I could hear as I walked the heavy knock-knock of one of the pileated woodpeckers. It is an unmistakable sound, unlike any other woodpecker,

much louder and slower, as if you were hammering carefully with a heavy mallet on a hollow log. I stopped to see if I could get a glimpse of it. After a few minutes I triangulated its general location from the sound, down to a specific tree, about 30 yards in I thought, and still couldn't see it. After a few more minutes I was about to give up and walk on. But I decided to be more patient, keep waiting and looking. Then I saw it, on the side of the tree I had picked out, just above the fern line, that beautiful crested head bobbing back and forth, knock-knock. Then I heard its call, responding most likely to its mate who was calling from some distance on the other side of the path, way too far in to see. It is a gorgeous, haunting cry. I had heard it in the woods many times but had no idea until today what bird made it. Now I know. The pileated woodpecker has a special significance to me, from my walks with Carol. Now I will know when it's there not just by its luxurious black plumage, that crimson headdress, or by its knocking, but by its song, all those beautiful symptoms of presence.

When I got to the point, a breeze had picked up, the water wrinkled by it, ruffled, lovely soft wavy motions. I watched it for a long time, along with an Asian woman about my age who went right down to the shoreline and bent down, head almost to water level to see what it was doing and/or what was in it. I thought that was quite a lovely gesture, like bowing to its presence respectfully. When I got back up to my car that same undulation had cleared away all the "powder" from the surface, pushing what was left up against the shore. All mirror again, what's there on the shoreline, all those trees, deeply repeated. Like in my head.

might be
trees
the sea
a breeze
might free
me

(from *slights*, winter, 2019)

If you pay attention to the dates on these missives you know I skipped a few days. I started writing last Friday, feeling as if one of my “waves,” which I have come to both love (for what I learn from them) and dread (for the havoc the wreck on my nervous system) had started. I wrote pretty intensely on Saturday and Sunday, then feverishly on Monday. Monday night I had a bad migraine and couldn’t sleep, the inside of my head in full dither. I had promised myself a month ago that I would never do this to myself again. And there I was doing it.

On Tuesday (the 20th), I decided I would just refuse to write. If thoughts intruded while I walked that seemed to be pressing to be documented, I would just ignore them, not allow them to link up with memory in any way. And it worked. I just saw what I saw, empty headed in the most alluring ways. About a quarter mile into my walk that day, at Watershed Park, I came up behind a man roughly my age who was fiddling with the grip-wrapping on his walking stick, peeling it off. It was quite a nice stick, one I could tell he had made himself, so I commented on it. He showed me how the upper end still had the teeth marks from the beaver who had cut it down. We chatted about walking sticks for a minute and I turned to move on. But he kept talking and I knew he wanted to keep on talking. So I slowed down, walked a couple of steps ahead of him on the narrow path.

He told me in detail about a recent trauma, how he had just started walking in the woods as one way to recover. He asked how long the circuit was in Watershed, about twice as long it turned out as he had been doing, but he said he wanted to keep going. He kept talking, I kept listening, interjecting now and then with a comforting comment, some simple advice, having myself been through every single thing he was talking about, the physical part, the emotional part, the mental part, and I

knew he would be okay in time. He didn't know that yet. I'm not sure I entirely persuaded him, but he calmed down, kept walking, his breathing labored, kept talking. When we finally reached the parking area, he was exhausted. We introduced ourselves, shook hands, talked a little more. I said I was retired now. He asked what I did, then answered his own question, maybe half-jokingly, I couldn't tell: "You must have worked as a life coach. You're good at it." I told him I was a teacher, and he said that made sense, too, hoped maybe we'd meet again on a walk at Watershed. I hope so, too. He is a very nice man. I knew I had made the right choice that day. Not to think, obsess about some stupid writing I might do. Just walk with this man and listen, say some human things back to him, what anyone needs when they are suffering something, what anyone needs any day, really, and so easy to do.

When I told this story to my daughter and her husband, he said "Aw, you're too nice!" As in *so* nice, extra-nice. I said no one can be too nice. And in our culture right now, the bar is set so low that saying hello is often enough to get over it, onto the "nice" side. I've had an idea for a while of something I'd like to get involved in to make some small difference in this awful world, waiting until I felt I was fully ready. That walk told me I was ready. I probably won't ever tell anyone about it except my daughter and son, just do it, as best I can, quietly. Yes, I'm ready.

On the drive back today from Woodard Bay I listened again to the album of songs I made from William Blake poems. As I said, it's not one of my favorites, but it came up in the queue again and I just let it run. I'm glad I did. Maybe I should have just copied and pasted those poems again right from the outset and stopped there. Blake is so much the better poet than I am. Read his

poems when you have a chance. And then go out and do something too kind. If you can't think of anything, just say hello to anyone, to me. If you do, I will be deeply grateful.

Essay 6: I Dreamed I Saw St. Augustine

feet are neat

no hollow

mouth

to swallow

follow

from “notes for walk-taking,” *slights*, 2019

August 24, 2019

Today, Saturday again, the mood, the vibe at Woodard Bay was exactly the opposite of last Saturday. And, in other ways, of yesterday, too, with the exception of a very animated conversation among 4 or 5 people in the parking lot, friends who must have coincidentally met there, judging from the tone of the conversation. I didn't pay attention to any of the words, but it had that over-loud, higher-pitched timbre that is typical when such chance encounters produce excitement, or over-animation, depending on whether the enthusiasm is genuine or not, which I was not able to tell and didn't really care about in any case. I just wanted to escape to the woods.

Within a minute or two, all of that din was gone. As soon as I turned into the forest, I could tell something had changed dramatically from yesterday, all the presence flaring up and out everywhere, sending a charge through me, my presence. Today the mood was muted, everything utterly still and silent. This is, as I've said elsewhere, an extraordinarily quiet place, but today it was even more so, enough to make my ears perk up, to try to find some sound somewhere to key into. There was none except for the sounds I was making, my feet on the path, my breathing, the slight swoosh of my clothing moving. That quiet. I could hear a very muted "roar" in the background, like maybe the sound a waterfall would make if heard from a great distance, Niagara Falls from two or three miles away, say, just a slight drone or whirr. It could have been breeze in the trees or it could have been entirely inside my head, my ears making up a background sound to compensate for its complete absence. There was no way to tell.

The ferns were, of course, the same ones as yesterday, physically, shapes, colors, size. But they might as well have been a different species in terms of their feel and effect. They seemed at first blush almost to be sullen, forlorn, like the absence of presence, I thought. But I changed my mind almost immediately, realizing it was more like their just being asleep instead of awake. The trees had that aspect, too, like they were napping. It made me wonder whether all these flora do what I do when I fall asleep: upload all their new information, then rearrange, via addition or subtraction, synaptic connections to bring their OS back into a fully functional mode. At least that's what some scientists say dreaming does. Though I don't know how that can explain the dream I had last night where a doctor's office was being used as a front to lure healthy patients into a bar where robotic but very lifelike-looking zombies were injecting them with sedatives so the doctors could surgically transplant the zombies' brains into those living beings—for a very hefty fee. And then some healthy young men who had psyched out this scam came in and started to inject the zombies with poisons before they could complete their own injections. All while I was slamming one of the zombies in the chest with a sledgehammer to get him to release from his grip the friend I had brought to the doctor for a routine checkup, but it escaped with my friend in tow. I finally tracked them to an adjacent bar by following a coffin being carried there by zombies with a living woman moaning inside it. I have no idea who ended up alive, zombies or dead because I woke up. I hope those ferns don't need as much synaptic upkeep as I do!

Anyway, I began to feel as if I was the only thing there that was operating in time, everything else suspended, floating, fixed in the “present,” like a photon of light is,

unaware of the time it is taking it to get where it's going, which is quite different from being present as a presence, fully ensconced in time. About a quarter mile in, I heard the knock-knocking of a pileated woodpecker, but subtle, dull, way too far off to have a chance of seeing it. That rhythm seemed to generate a little time wave that was not mine, but it only lasted a minute or two until the sound evaporated into the ether. All of this got me thinking about time again, what a strange and mysterious feature it is of our experience of life in this world, the defining feature of it I, and many others much smarter than I, believe.

One of them is Carlo Rovelli, a contemporary quantum physicist, whose little book *The Order of Time* I have been reading the last few nights in bed. It is a much-lauded book—"dazzling," "the new Stephen Hawking," "an elegant grapple," "profound," etc., as per the back cover. I found it fascinating, engaging, and finally disappointing. As you know if you've read some of my work, I am deeply enamored by the mystery of time, have been thinking about it since I was kid, like to read about it, and write about it quite often. I have had many strange experiences with temporality, enough so to convince me that even the most advanced forms of contemporary physics have barely scratched the surface of its strangeness. I was expecting Rovelli's book to be the one that would finally blow even my mind in regard to time, would get time up to speed, as it were, with space, something akin to the many kinds of exotic oddnesses that quantum physicists are exploring at the subatomic level now.

It didn't. Okay, he knows a lot physics (a proponent of "loop theory," which I know nothing about); could expound his argument carefully, precisely, in terms of thermodynamics, entropy, and quantum mechanics, all

using only one equation, a very basic one at that, in the whole book; is quite adept at locating historically the primary arguments about the conundrum of time; and writes lucidly, accessible to any reader, really. But there was really nothing he said about time in the book that I hadn't already read or thought about, or at least felt based on my experiences, most of it before I started to study physics myself in college in the 1960s, when people were still trying to grapple with the implications of Einstein's concept of space-time, a useful conceptual antique these days. In the end, Rovelli seems to me to settle for a tepid combination of St. Augustine and Einstein, those bookend theorists on time in the Common Era.

St. Augustine was truly baffled by time, contemplated what exactly could be this thing we call the "present." Here's what he asks in the *Confessions*:

What then is time? If no one asks me, I know: if I wish to explain it to one that asketh, I know not: yet I say boldly that I know, that if nothing passed away, time past were not; and if nothing were coming, a time to come were not; and if nothing were, time present were not. Those two times then, past and to come, how are they, seeing the past now is not, and that to come is not yet? But the present, should it always be present, and never pass into time past, verily it should not be time, but eternity. If time present (if it is to be time) only cometh into existence, because it passeth into time past, how can we say that either this is, whose cause of being is, that it shall not be; so, namely, that we cannot truly say that time is, but because it is tending not to be? . . .

See how the present time, which alone we found could be called long, is abridged to the length scarce of one day. But let us examine that also; because neither is one day present as a whole. For it is made up of four and twenty hours of night and day: of which, the first hath the rest to come; the last hath them past; and any of the middle hath those before it past, those behind it to come. Yea, that one hour passeth away in flying particles. Whatsoever of it hath flown away, is past; whatsoever remaineth, is to come. If an instant of time be conceived, which cannot be divided into the smallest particles of moments, that alone is it, which may be called present. Which yet flies with such speed from future to past, as not to be lengthened out with the least stay. For if it be, it is divided into past and future. The present hath no space. Where then is the time, which we may call long? Is it to come? Or if we do not say, "it is long"; because it is not yet, so as to be long; but we say, "it will be long:" When therefore will it be?
(Chapter 11)

Good questions all. I especially like his notion of the past passing away to make space for what's coming, a real something, from the future, the arrow moving that way. After a series of explorations, here are some of his conclusions:

But what now is manifest and clear is, that neither are there future nor past things. Nor is it right to say, "There are three times, past, present and future." But it might be right to say, "There are three times; a present of things past, a present of things present, and a present of things future." For these three times do somehow exist in the soul. Otherwise I would not see them: present of things

past, memory; present of things present, sight;
present of things future, expectation. If of these
things we are permitted to speak, I see three times,
and I grant there are three. It may also be said,
"There are three times, past, present and future,"
as usage falsely has it. See, I trouble not, nor
gainsay, nor reprove; provided always that which is
said may be understood, that neither the future,
nor the past, now is. For there are but few things
which we speak properly, many things improperly;
but what we may wish to say is understood.
(Chapter 11)

That's pretty amazing for a Christian Bishop (strikes one and two) writing 1500 years ago (strike three, at least in relation of high-end physics.) You would think a 21st century quantum theorist could put some real flash to this problem. Here are Rovelli's conclusions later in the book:

In the end, therefore, instead of many possible times, we can speak only of a single time: the time of our experience—uniform, universal, and ordered. This is the approximation of an approximation of an approximation of the world made from our particular perspective as human beings who are dependent on the growth of entropy, anchored to the flowing of time. We for whom, as Ecclesiastes has it, there is a time to be born and a time to die.

This is time for us: a multilayered, complex concept with multiple, distinct properties deriving from various different approximations. (197-98)

It is hard for me to imagine any human being who has experienced something of consequence—and I mean

normal things like falling in love, the death of a loved one, the birth of a child, a grave illness—who doesn't know all of this already. Okay, we may not be able to translate it into the terms of entropy, positionality, perspective, flow, but we understand generally what those terms mean in our bodies, our being.

“I dreamed I saw St. Augustine”

Bob Dylan

day breaks
I ache

my heart makes
no sense

cut glass bowl
just slipped from my hand
aghast I stand
silent
for a second
the floor approaching

not yet
shattered
that future
according to Augustine
cut glass whole

still

shatters
always
the present

cut glass cuts
according to me

then eternal
not now
a million pieces
to be swept

all the women
I'm in love with
not here
now
fear fills

daybreak
glass half
empty

but for one
who doesn't know

they say ghosts are souls
trapped on this side

of the glass
waiting

for day to break

not entirely sure
here or there
not yet not now

both
always

the mourning widow's veil
all there is
barely there
between

no either side
just veil

UFO researchers say
a disproportionate number of abductees
have hazel eyes
39% compared to 8%

I have hazel eyes

why my day breaks
achingly

these eyes of mine
they are lonely
lonely
from wanting you

as a kid
hypnagogic sleep
unable to move

cry out
nothing

buried
in a body
on a spaceship

they say up there
it's all about sex
how they take
what they want
to make what they want

send you back
slack
satiated
oblivious

I don't believe
any of that

not yet

but why did that stiff sleep stop
when they fried me
unfruitful

no use to anyone
who wants to make
someone

even aliens
gone elsewhere
for bad seed

I wake
 hardwood waiting
 day breaks
 glass

dropped
no use to anyone
who wants

just pieces
swept up
even me

(written today, 8/24/2019)

Cut Glass

This morning I am surprisingly myself.
I scratch across frosted glass
revealing the wide expanse of white
that overcame the city last night,
little by little, while no one was looking,
or while all of us looked the other way,
knowing it would not otherwise attend
to the symptoms of our daily disarray,
still for a moment the small glandular
happenings that push men and women
together or apart, unpredictably
extreme, like the weather in late
March when a confusion of seasons
makes anything possible, even
this dispassionate silence of snow,
unaware, as we are not, of its
fragility: a cut glass bowl just
dropped from cold hands about
to shatter on the ice to remind us
with its shards how hard it can be
to hold on to anything at all.

(unpublished, circa 1971)

Rovelli says further:

Perhaps the emotion of time is precisely what time *is* for us.

I don't think there is much more than this to be understood. We may ask further questions, but we should be careful with questions that it is not possible to formulate properly. When we have found all the aspects of time that can be spoken of, then we have found time. (201-2)

This may be the most disappointing passage, for me, in the whole book, the suggestion that only questions we can formulate properly will lead us to something true, and that everything we can know about anything is what we can put in sentences (and here he means the kind of declarative sentences for which Aristotle was famous: this is this, that is that, and that's the end of it. If I can't say it clearly, it can't be known. Any questions? No? Great. Aristotle in a nutshell.) If time comprises only all that can be spoken of it in sentences of that sort, we will never really know time, not in its true nature. Or at least physicists won't.

Rovelli then aggravates this (and me) further with the following sentence:

When we cannot formulate a problem with precision, it is often not because the problem is profound: it's because the problem is false. (202)

I'm inclined to reverse all of that: When we *can* formulate a problem with precision, it is often not because the problem is profound: It's because the problem is false. Maybe it's time to turn to poets, who are willing and able to risk gesturing clumsily, posing

awkward, half-formed questions, pushing ahead with metaphors, figures, intimations, those hazy border-dwellers of cumbersome language, reaching as best they can toward what resides outside it, unsayable directly, but not entirely unknowable. Take Parmenides, for example, about whom Rovelli says:

I believe, as Hans Reichenbach suggests in one of the most lucid books on the nature of time, *The Direction of Time*, that it was in order to escape from the anxiety time causes us that Parmenides wants to deny its existence. (200)

Hello? Have either of you read Parmenides? There is, to my way of reading him, not a shred of anxiety that drives the young man who is the primary “character” in his great poem to board that flaming chariot for a trip to the heavens to meet the Goddess who teaches him, in her own words, not his, her gnomic wisdom about Being. He wants to know, really know, and he listens, comes back to report to Parmenides, his authorial creator, what he has learned. It is magnificent, haunting, courageous.

And Heraclitus is his opposite, as Rovelli posits? The book is full of historical figures who are pitted against one another in terms of the nature and meaning of time: Aristotle and Newton are contrasted in this way, the former, according to Rovelli, arguing for a “local” conception of time, the latter for a “global” conception of time. Always contraries posed contrarily, irresolvably, the bane of Western thinking. Rovelli does make a pass at “mediating” this one via Einstein, but not a convincing one. And, really, what Einstein had to say about time was revolutionary a hundred years ago. What about now? Rovelli also says some general things about “quantum” time, but most of it is, once again, pretty routine by

comparison with what physicists are able now to say about matter, “space,” time’s intimate and inextricable partner in Einstein’s spacetime carnival, at least in part because they are willing to think figuratively about it, poetically.

Rovelli, to me, makes the fatal error of relying too heavily on logic, what he calls “reason,” instead of either poetry or mathematics, to justify all these binary oppositions. You might be surprised by my putting mathematics in the same breath with poetry, coequal to it. Mathematics is to me, past the most basic level at least, a very special kind of poetic discourse, quite elegant, and fundamentally “figurative,” literally figurative you might say. How do I know this? Because I experienced it. I can barely balance my checkbook now, but I was a math whiz in college when I majored in physics. For our midterm assignment in my junior year physics class (Advanced Differential Equations), we were challenged to solve a particularly difficult problem. I can’t remember what it was, but the professor said none of us would even come close to succeeding (he was not what you’d call inspiring as a teacher.) I vowed right then that I would. We had two weeks to work it out. I spent those entire two weeks, 24-7, waking and sleeping, working on that problem. It was one that you could make good headway with, then hit an apparently insuperable roadblock. I would research math books, think, calculate, signs and variables whirring through my head like cotton candy. Walking down the street, eating, talking with others, sitting in other classes, reading, those equations would be playing out in the back of my head. At times I would become so distracted I didn’t know where I was or where I was going.

The cultural illusion about mathematics is that it is very close to “reality,” a perfect “abstract depiction” of it.

Nothing could be further from the truth. The problem posed to us in that exam did have a foundation in the physical universe. It was a “real” question. But if you’ve ever worked with mathematics beyond checkbook balancing, where the number of dollars gone or left is clear, you know that within about ten seconds all you are thinking about is equations, which lead to other equations, and others and others, the very first one pre-scripting the possible array of paths toward its completion, a solution, the future destined, utterly immaterial.

As I worked on that problem, all I could see were long streams of equations like whirling dervishes dancing out to the borders of the universe. I did not enjoy it. In fact, I thought what I was experiencing was pretty much what that guy who wanted me to try LSD described, except it was no fun and led to no deep insights. But I did solve that problem. Back then, before computers or text editing, everything was handwritten. Once I was satisfied, I copied out the final version of my solution, 30 pages worth of equations, just beautiful. When I got it back, I received credit for 39 of the possible 40 points. I had mistakenly copied a plus as a minus, or vice-versa, at one point. The next day, I went to the professor and dropped the course. He thought I was a fool wasting my gifts. Then I went to the registrar’s office and changed my major to English. They made no evaluative judgments.

People say poetry is way strange. No it’s not, not compared to advanced mathematics. The thing I feared about that kind of thinking was exactly what I feared about LSD. I would get out so far I’d never come back. Poetry is, by definition, grounded in the body, the earth, things, close by, at hand. I knew I would never lose my way or my mind there, and I didn’t and haven’t. Or,

more accurately, to the extent that I have done either/both along the way, here and there, it was never poetry's fault. That's a long tale to tell, but think of this story not as Socrates' "language of the gods" but as an elaborate analogy, a poem of sorts, like Socrates' chariot and charioteer standing in for the soul, one that explains why, when I want to think deeply about time, I now prefer to read poets instead of physicists. Their discourse gives me answers much more quickly, as figurative discourse does for Socrates.

If Rovelli's thinking on time is typical these days, and I've done enough additional online reading to know it is, scientists these days haven't gotten much farther than Augustine along the path toward fathoming what time is, why it is, how it is. I'm only saying all of this because today I felt like the only time that was being produced or experienced in this woods, at least for the first mile or so, was coming from me, the scratching of my shoes on the dirt, my rhythmic breathing. Otherwise, the clock was stopped, as it is in some respects for us when we sleep, unconscious, doing the dreamwork we need to do to accommodate the other kind of dreamwork we do, ensconced in time, while we're awake, walking. Today, I was awake and the forest was asleep. Rovelli would approve of that way of attributing time to human consciousness, but I don't think he would have a clue about what I felt there. Or why.

“ . . . a dream I can call my own”

The Clovers

thick black
candles split

sex-calm
wandering

white walls
block all
doors not

morning

(from *slights*, August 23, 2019)

Maybe because of all this woods-sleepiness, I began to notice the various layers and kinds of mosses on the trees in much more detail than usual, like light blankets covering everything. It started with that fallen alder I wrote about in *A Mind of Winter*, 70 feet long, perfectly straight, just laid out there on the ground. It appeared almost moss-free last winter, but not now. And then the many other alders in that section of the woods, which is full of alders. I had just recently learned online that the whitish color of the alder's bark, birch-like (in fact I initially thought these trees were aspens for that reason) is not intrinsic to the tree but derives from the lichen and moss that colonize the bark benignly. They are in fact "red" alders, fully that color while they're saplings, or in the areas that are not so colonized after they mature, or when the bark is bruised. The lichen-induced white patches range from a few inches to a foot or more across, the outer reaches of which seem not to rise proud of the original bark, more like a stain or a bleaching than an organism. The moss that seems to prefer to layer up over that red bark is very light green, almost white, copious and close-cropped this time of year, as much as a half-inch thick in large splotches that cover parts of the trunk and then most of the lower branches. It is like a layer of worn clothes, a tattered sweater say.

A little further up the path, Douglas firs start to mix in, young ones there, maybe 2-3 feet at the base, that portion of the forest having, I assume, been clear-cut in the middle part of the 20th century. In most cases in most places—as for example at the entrance to this path, where the Douglas firs are huge—their bark is moss-free, maybe because it so rough and deeply furrowed, like a plowed field. Here, the surface a little less rugged, there must be enough traction for moss to take hold. Some of it is like the moss on the alders, but most of it is more like what you might see on the ground, sphagnum-type moss, in

rounded clumps 4-6 inches across. I had never noticed this before. And then further along, where the hemlocks and cedars start to come in, larger ones for the most part, there is the kind of shaggy moss that Longfellow describes in the famous opening to his poem *Evangeline*: “bearded,” which is what it looks like, draping down off every lower branch, some of which it so fully occupies that the branches are otherwise bare, no other green surviving there except these very pale droopy veils.

Just past this section, the woods seemed to start to wake up, prodded by the tiniest of things, a very busy chickadee picking away at a layer of moss, finding some things to its liking there, about 10 feet over my head, chirping. I stopped to watch it for a while, busy, bobbing up and down. These western chickadees look a bit smaller to me than eastern chickadees, with the same coloration, and are similarly unafraid of human company. I loved to watch the chickadees at our window-ledge bird feeder in Pittsburgh and concluded at one point that their courage in that regard was a function of their speed, which they had enough confidence in to assume that no matter how close you got, you’d never catch them. One flick of the wings and they were gone. I could run like the wind when I was young, faster than anyone around most often, so I know what that confidence feels like: I can get as close as I want, and if you try to catch me, you won’t.

Today I recalled one of the times that didn’t happen, midwinter, lots of fresh snow on the ground. One of the neighborhood bullies was rubbing snow in my youngest brother’s face and I was determined to stop it. And to make him pay. I grabbed a very big chunk of crusty snow, maybe 2 feet square, not icy but firm enough to stay together in my hands as one piece, sneaked up behind him and threw it at the back of his head, where it

exploded into many bits, some of which went down his neck inside his coat, very unpleasant as you know if you've ever had that happen. I was about 12 years old. He was three or four years older than me, very athletic, muscled, and mean-spirited. He became infuriated, lost interest in my brother, which was my goal, and turned to get me. I ran. He was fast, too, but he wasn't gaining on me. It was about a block and a half to my house, safety, I presumed, and I made it, right up onto the porch, went to open the door, which was never locked, except that day it was. So I got trapped there and got doused with snow. Not that bad really. I had done what I wanted. My brother was still a block and half a way, going about his business, and this guy had completely lost interest in harassing him. Maybe a chickadee comes a cropper every now and then by relying too heavily on its sheer fleetness.

All at once in a flash the chickadee flew off, warp speed. Neither I nor my ancient neighborhood nemesis would have a prayer of catching it. All the time it was eating, as its head bobbed back up, it made its characteristic call, then again as it flew away, much louder. It was the first time in my life I actually perceived how and why that call is the bird's name: chick-a-dee! Perfect! I'm not usually very good at recognizing birds by their voices. For some reason, this week—the pileated woodpecker and now the chickadee—it's sinking in. Especially today, I think because of the sleepy silence. Nothing much moved, so my brain could focus on what it heard.

The path on the way back to the lot was now crowded with parents with children, same as yesterday, back packs, front packs, strollers, double strollers, kids old enough to walk running up ahead, one little girl, maybe eight, driving one of those battery-operated cars, her father on a bike about 50 feet behind, peddling as fast as

he could but unable to keep up, calling to her repeatedly, wanting to keep her in sight. She would have none of it, kept speeding along. It made me laugh, a sympathetic, generous laugh, feeling a kinship with both of them, the dad, attentive, careful, wanting to keep her in sight, she wanting to run like the wind as far and as fast as she could. I silently wished them both godspeed along their ways. Me, I just took my time, time, time, walking back to the lot, packed now with cars, happy.

The Interpretation of Dreams

Someone suffers.
Then there are wings.

(unpublished, circa 1972)

Essay 7: A Time to Mourn

eyes wise

so don't say

what they

don't see

from "notes for walk-taking," *slights*, 2019

August 25, 2019

Today, Sunday, is as much the opposite of last Sunday as yesterday was of last Saturday. Like a different dimension almost. It was hoody-cool and gray, as it has been early mornings many days this summer so far, when I headed off to Watershed Park for my walk. I almost said “cloudy” there, but here, on mornings like this, there is nothing distinctly discernible in the sky that resembles a cloud. The sky is, in fact, quite high, could just as easily be bright and blue it seems, but it’s a thin, consistent gray, very soothing. In the area where the sun is trying to shimmer through, the gray takes on a very beautiful light yellow tinge, almost white.

It is womb-warm and humid here.
I could not be more at ease,
with myself, with you.
As we walk, long, lush fronds of fern unfurl
eerily green before us.

Just behind the steamy haze
that rises between us,
hundreds of white horses
are thundering over a tundra,
their eyes wild with desire.

Do you hear them coming?
Do you hear?

(from "Fives Scenes from My Final Dream of
You," unpublished, circa 1978)

I felt quite at ease when I entered the woods, utterly empty-headed, my preferred state to start a walk. I thought I wouldn't "think" much of anything today, preferred not to, trying as I am to conserve my nervous system as this "wave" proceeds. I decided to walk in the opposite direction from "normal" for me. The last time I did that was about three months ago, in June, the day I wrote the "Postscript" for *A Mind of Winter*. That day, I got caught in some kind of time warp, "missed" most of the walk. I haven't wanted to repeat that, so I've avoided that reversal in the meantime. Today, for some reason, it seemed safe to go that way. About fifty yards into the walk in this direction there is a grand space, a solemn space, created by four trees, like corners in a vaulted "room" about 20 feet by 40 feet, two Douglas firs, a cedar, and an alder, all huge. I don't notice that space as much coming from the other direction, a little winded from the hilly terrain that precedes it at the end of my walk. I was so happy to see it with peaceful eyes today, full of breath. I stopped there for a minute, touched each of the trees. Just past that point, once I got going again, I started to pray, spontaneously, without any intention. As I said, the woods is the only place I pray now, even can pray, but it's usually by choice. Today it just started. Maybe because it was Sunday, I thought, all that solemnity in the air. There is another similar "room" a little further along, a bit smaller, all cedars, very uplifting.

I wrote at some length in *This Fall* about such a space in Boyce Park back in Pittsburgh, how it seemed to me not to inspire, by analogy, the sort of spiritual elevation generated in man-made sacred spaces, churches and the like, but was much more like the actual inspiration for the design of those man-made spaces in the first place. These two "rooms" are similar. If you wanted to design a godly space, you'd come here for ideas about how to spatialize it.

Today is my wife Carol's birthday. She would have been 67. It's always a hard day for me. Tonight, like last year, I'll spend it with my daughter and her husband eating spaghetti, the staple comfort food among the meals Carol made for us while the kids were growing up. I am so happy to share this day and those memories with Bridget. As I passed through this second "room" I started to think about the strange ethereal "space" in which I spent the first nine months after Carol passed, a neither here nor there realm, not alive or dead, two words that had no real meaning there, or maybe meant exactly the same thing. The gray veil in the sky today reminded me of that, what it would be like, I mean, to reside exactly there, its thin boundary, between earth and sun, neither quite visible but both palpable, that gray veil their boundary. I felt back then, and said a number of times, that "I knew everything" while I was in that space, if not in fact, then in potential, as if I could find out anything if I just entertained the question, a sort of super-Google. It was, I said, both awesome and creepy and I was relieved when I made it back to the diurnal world here.

Today, I started to think about that in exactly the opposite way, like the direction of my walk: that I now know nothing, and probably did then, too. The odd thing was it didn't feel like the absence of everything, but more like the presence of everything, a convergence of multiplicity into unity, many to one, all as nothing and vice-versa. I thought about the classic Buddhist image of the circle with the wavy line dividing white from black, both coequal, each with a dot of the other in its "wave," like the "tabs" that click them together. It's an effective way to capture the mutual inter-dependence of light and dark in this world. But as soon as I formed that image in my head, it turned into something else: a circle that was

both wholly white and wholly black at the same time, a flickering back and forth at first, but then just a simultaneity, a singularity. All black and all white at the same time. Knowing everything and knowing nothing at the same time. Waking and dreaming all at the same time. Everything and its contrary all at the same time.

I thought a bit more about time, how even at such a stillness, as seemingly inert as the one T.S. Eliot locates in *The Four Quartets* at the axle that drives the wheel of this world, there is still motion, something timely, inescapably so, like the movement of water in Henderson Inlet at the tidal equipoise, visible only if something swirls on its surface. Rovelli calls attention in his book to the way the Buddha, and now Buddhism, sees time as the source of our suffering here, the necessity of upwellings of life to inevitably recede, the living to die. It is another one of Rovelli's examples to illustrate the sort of anxiety, fear, loss, that time initiates and requires. But, I thought today, it is also a source of exactly the opposite, of peace, and the Buddha achieved that, too, don't forget, freedom, not entirely from time perhaps, but from some of its fearsome costs. All of that is in the liminal space of the gray veil, quite permeable, between the here and the there, whatever each of those is, a place where, in effect, they are both the same, dark and light, everything and nothing, not yet and not now, all the same. All the same.

More mundanely, one of the things I noted along the rest of the walk was the bark of all the red alders, how some of them, at least here in Watershed Park, actually still retain their red color, have not for some reason been colonized by that lichen that makes most of them look white. It seemed to me (and this is based, of course, only on very minimal anecdotal evidence) that the ones closer to the creek tended to be redder, those further away,

whiter. Maybe water has an impact on this anomaly. I thought of a variation of that old joke: What's red and white all over? An alder, if it's not too close to water. Or maybe: why did the alder cross the creek? So it wouldn't have to stay red? I don't think I'd make a good stand-up comedian.

Later . . .

I was just downtown, to pick up a few things for Bridget and some fish for me. I stopped at the boardwalk to look out over the water. It is now a perfect summer afternoon, how days typically progress here, by afternoon bright sun, high sky, today a layer of soft cumulus clouds just above the horizon circling the town, from the tops of the Olympics off to the west to the state office buildings off to the east, to everywhere in between, a huge dome perched on them, painted all blue. So peaceful, almost too much. It was odd the effect this had on me, not peaceful at all, this August 25th, my wife's birthday, having now been sent back down here from the gray fringes where time stops to the diurnal world of sun and water, dozens of seagulls screeching on the bay like the little kids in the playground behind me, boats coming and going from their moorings, claiming a share of this last Sunday before Labor Day, people everywhere, cars, all that vitality and action, but not me. I was back in the Buddha's time, of suffering, loss, just overwhelmingly sad.

I know so many things, things I never tell anyone. You may be surprised to hear that, I seem to tell so much. But not everything, never everything, things that haunt and afflict me to the core on days like this, beyond any words I can use to share them, things, as Wordsworth says, that lie too deep for tears, yet tears are in the end their only vehicle. And those depths hold all the water in

the world, all the tears I can muster never enough to make even a dent. I thought of some lines from a song I wrote for my most recent album that get at this relationship between time and certain kinds of suffering:

The past is a wound you can't heal with thinking
no matter how hard you try.

Time won't forgive what was done without thinking
no matter how hard you cry.

Trying and crying, both such a waste, yet all I seem to have right now, so I keep doing them. As Heraclitus says, "The way up and the way down are one and the same." Yes, knowing everything and knowing nothing, the same. Suffering and serenity, the same. Dark and light, the same. Gray sky, blue sky, the same. Not intermixed; the same. At least today. Then from Eliot's "Burnt Norton," for which he uses those very words from Heraclitus as an epigraph, these lines:

Quick now, here, now, always—
Ridiculous the waste sad time
Stretching before and after.

And sometimes even here, now, a ridiculous waste sad time, too.



Clearing the Air

I wanted to explain to her
how the blood sky spurts up
some evenings, how whirlpools
of dark drain it all down
where the sun goes,

how it happens so fast
it leaves me breathless,
vortices
of wings beating
black as the sun
before it goes
back to be born.

(unpublished, circa 1972)

Later . . .

I'm ironing my clothes in advance of heading off to Bridget's house for dinner. I want to look sharp, nice, classy for our "birthday" dinner. As I said previously, one of my reclusive-related eccentricities is how I dress, sharp, nice, classy, even when I don't need to. Like today: ironed pants, crisp shirt, clean underwear, including a new turquoise undershirt, and under my new black leather boots, a pair of turquoise, cloud-infused Bob Ross socks, like the sky this afternoon downtown, declaring in big white letters: "Happy Clouds." I'll wear my new straw hat, too. Carol, a hat person, would like that.

I'm listening to my latest "release" of cover-songs, a group of super-sweet Big Band and doo-wop era love songs—"At Last," "Life Could Be a Dream," "Have I Told You lately that I Love You," "All of Me," songs like that. The only ones in my gradually shrinking audience who seem to really like these kinds of songs as much as I do are my sister-in-law and my brother Joe, such a sweet man, in a challenging stage of his ongoing battle with ALS, unable to respond, but still able to listen.

Bridget has an Instagram site on the local food culture that has gone Olympia-scale "viral." She has well over 2000 followers so far, rising every day, after just a few months, pretty amazing I think in a town of 50,000. It is such a cool site, upliftingly so. I check in on it just to improve my mood. My music audience is going the opposite way. No one has listened to anything on my Bandcamp page for well over a month. I finally took down my Soundcloud page because it was too depressing to watch no one hearing me. I send my albums to just a few people now, a very, very few, the ones who truly

seem to enjoy my music. I am, oddly, even to me, as proud of my increasing invisibility as I am proud of Bridget's accruing fame. That's a sentence you will either understand immediately or never, so I'm not going to try to explain it. Thinking about my brother brings to mind something I've known for a while but don't think I ever said directly in any of my essays, so I'll say it: the three sweetest men I've ever known are named Joe: My uncle Joe Carrigg, my brother Joe, and my son.

Whenever I iron now I think about Howard Borden from the old Bob Newhart show, the good one, where he's a psychologist in Chicago, Suzanne Pleshette, whom I always had a crush on, even when she got to be my age, that voice growing more and more gravelly, his wife. What a great show. Carol was a big fan, too. We had the series on DVDs and watched a show or two together when we needed a laugh. Howard always listened to the same kind of music I'm listening to right now when he ironed, "As Time Goes By" type songs. Maybe there's just something inherently poignant, sweet about a man standing alone ironing his clothes for no reason except he wants to. I always smile when I think of Howard, such a weird, klutzy-smooth man. I like sweet men. Which reminds me that one of the comments on my RateYourProfessor.com page is: "He's the sweetest man alive." Well, that's a stretch. But, on a day like today, I'll take it, even if it's not true.

Later . . .

I just got back from Bridget and Mark's. Right as dinner went on the table, Bridget's dog Sadie, whom she loves and adores as much anyone loves their child, hurt her foot somehow, was in some distress. Bridget and Mark did what any parents would do: They attended to her,

decided it was serious enough to warrant a visit to the pet ER, found a place open on Sunday night, and went off on that errand. I told her I was absolutely fine with that, not to worry, go, take care of Sadie, in part because that's the right thing to do, in larger part because that's exactly what Carol and I would have done, did do from time to time, with and for Bridget and Joe. No matter who was there. They came first. Always. And second through a million, actually. No matter what. Bridget and Mark hurried off with my blessing, will text me about the outcome. I ate the spaghetti they made by myself. It was delicious. I felt calm and happy. I'm not sure whether Carol was there with me or off with them. Either way, I'm grateful to have spent those moments honoring her. Wife, mother, two hard jobs. Well done.

.....

Essay 8: Word Problem

Word-Problem

Consider the problem: nothing,
to be it.

Add it all up,
consider.

Ten-digit fists clench
around: nothing.
Add them all up,
problems.

Consider nothing: the problem,
to be it.
Add it all up,
consider.

(unpublished, circa 1971)

August 26, 2019

When I got out of my car today at Woodard Bay I could hear a loud din of bird-yipping down by the water at the head of Henderson Inlet, the tide about halfway in, big mudflats extending out from the shoreline. So I stopped to see what was going on. I saw a passel of little birds down there, right at the water lip on my side of the inlet, most picking away at the muck for whatever delectables they found there, a few dabbling wings in the shallows and then preening, birds I'd never seen before, maybe 5-6 inches long, brownish on top, whitish underneath, black toothpicky legs about three inches high, long pointy beaks, very skittish, zipping around at hyper-speed. At first I noticed a couple dozen, which is way more shore birds than I've ever seen there at one time. Or the total of all the times! Then I saw another group of a couple dozen nearby, then another, then a huge cloud of them swirled in, not sure from where, it happened so fast, many hundreds of them. It was amazing. The flurry of scurrying feet, dipping beaks, and all those yips blurring into one continuous note was exciting, delightful.

Since I'd never seen these birds before, and there were so many, I assumed they were stopping on a migratory route, to freshen and fatten up before heading on. When I got home, I consulted my bird book and concluded they were sanderlings. The range map for these birds suggests they would be rare here, and their primary migratory routes, from the arctic tundra where they breed to all points south, seem to run through central Canada. A more likely candidate would have been the sandpiper, same size, demeanor, much more common in these parts. But I paid attention to the coloration of

those birds, the way the white from the belly blends up into the tan of the back with prominent shoulder patches, and the sanderling is a closer match. So I had to decide whether to trust the relative indeterminacy of my eyes or the documented probabilities. I chose my eyes, which gets me to what I ended up thinking about today: the “relative indeterminacy” that is built into everything, most especially, given my focus here, time.

Of course, I am not a theoretical physicist. Maybe I could have been if I spent the last 50 years with math instead of poetry. But I didn't. I turned to current theories on time this month just because I've always been fascinated by the phenomenon of temporality. I ended up reading four books. Carlo Rovelli's *The Order of Time*, which I've already commented on, is a quiet, rational, and highly regarded examination and explanation of where physics is these days vis-à-vis time, except for the last chapter, my favorite, which is more personal, subtly poetic in some ways. His discourse is univocal, his translation of relativistic and quantum theory into a readable, “reasoned” prose, without any recourse to mathematics. He is a proponent of “loop” theory, about which I know nothing. He seems primarily to want to say that contemporary physics has just begun to address this whole matter of time and has few if any answers. I was entertained, but finally persuaded that his preferred mode of discourse was both weak and ineffectual in the face of the conundrum it purported to explore.

I then read Sean Carroll's *From Eternity to Here*. His book is about three times as long, full of examples, stories, thought experiments, and historical tidbits, quite engaging and readable as well. There is a section at the end that brings some mathematics into his inquiry, but it's low-key. He is a proponent of the multiple universe

solution to the problem of time, so his argument is often driven by that assumption. He had no clear answers either.

The third was Brian Greene's *The Fabric of the Cosmos*, a justifiably celebrated introduction to *Space, Time, and the Texture of Reality*, the book's subtitle. His chapters on time are the most detailed, lucid, and straightforward of the lot, especially the sections on quantum temporality and its relationship, or lack of one, with classical and relativistic conceptions of time. He, too, acknowledges that time has thus far eluded the grasp of theoretical physics in quite fundamental ways. He seems to favor string theory as the path forward, at least in relation to spatial matters, though he is adept at explaining multiple alternatives for approaching the fundamental questions he raises.

The fourth was a more eccentric book, *The Stubbornly Persistent: Melting the Frozen River of Spacetime*, by Anderthal Kord. His ambition is more philosophical, to find a way of salvaging the concept of free will from the general tendency among both quantum and cosmological theorists to see the universe as deterministic. Mostly, he patches together a lot of interesting quotes from others to make his case, which, in the end, seems somewhat forced.

I may read more books of this sort, just because I'm interested, but I don't now expect to find out anything fundamentally new if I do. I have no interest in critiquing any of these arguments on scientific grounds. I just want to think about time, and none of them helped me much to do that. Instead I'd like to comment on a couple of the primary figurative tropes they deploy, all relative boilerplate in the field now as far as I can tell, to launch and extend their analyses.

I'll start with that "frozen river," a longstanding metaphor in spacetime physics, that is Kord's bugaboo. The implications of the figure are that spacetime is already extant and fixed as a whole, full extension, space and time in eternal communion. Kord feels, rightly, that this threatens the concept of free will and he intends to be "stubbornly persistent" enough to "melt" that frozen river, make it "flow" again. The stubbornly persistent part derives from a comment Albert Einstein made in a 1955 letter to the son and sister of a cherished colleague of his, Michele Besso, who had just died. He says:

People like us who believe in physics, know that the dividing line between the past, present and future is only a stubbornly persistent illusion. . . Now he [Michele] has departed from this strange world a little ahead of me. That means nothing. (Rovelli, 114)

Einstein himself died shortly thereafter. This quote seems to have taken on a legendary status in the field, borrowing all the authority of its maker, a kind of deathbed assertion that must be true, enough so that Kord writes a whole book to try to at least dampen, if not refute, its implications. Carroll doesn't write about it specifically, but takes its general initiative as a given. Greene addresses it briefly and clearly. Rovelli writes at some length about it later in his book, taking care to contextualize it in its own moment, a letter of condolence, an expression of both grief and faith, neither of which, to the best of my knowledge, are integral to quantum mechanics. Anyone who has lost a loved one, or just been attendant in a meaningful manner at a wake or funeral, knows the ways in which time seems to collapse in that aura, reveals itself as an illusion, one we will, once the grieving is "past," need to

recover and continue to persist with. So it's risky to attach too much significance, in a scientific sense I mean, to what Einstein says.

Einstein also (allegedly) made this even more general statement about the fundamentally illusory nature of the world we imagine to be real: "Reality is merely an illusion, albeit a very persistent one." I'm still trying to track down exactly where and when he said it. My Google search is quite telling though as to how legendary its status is in the quote market. You can buy posters, bookmarks, even a pendant and necklace with this quote on it. Commentators range from amateur scientists to New Agers, all borrowing what they prefer to hear in it. One (Tom McFarlane, a "Stanford physics grad") claims "Einstein didn't say it. It is not consistent with his views." I suspect that this one is more likely just a trope for quantum-mechanical indeterminacy, the fact that every "thing" at the subatomic level "exists" only as array of probabilities until we measure it, thereby apparently materializing it in space and time.

Heisenberg's "uncertainty principle" was the cue stick that got this ball rolling. All it says is that at the subatomic level you can never measure with precision both the location and the momentum of a particle. Sounds pretty tame, but he demonstrates that this is not a matter of imprecision with equipment, or derivative from our intervention as observers, it is built into the very fabric of being: Things are not really "there" in the way Newton imagined they were. That principle, and its many subsequent permutations and inevitable corollaries—quantum duality, the wave-particle dilemma, etc.—have all been verified experimentally. So there is no doubt that it's true. In that respect then, reality is an illusion. Not "merely" but amazingly. There is no point in persisting to believe otherwise.

As to time, well, of course that is illusory in experiential, phenomenological and theoretical terms. But even more so, in that no one seems to have come up even with a discourse, let alone a mathematics, that could begin to explain, let alone verify experimentally, exactly how or why it is. In other words, there is no “uncertainly principle” to start with. Just uncertainty. The four authors I read, and scientists generally, prefer to approach this problem “rationally,” presuming, it seems, following Aristotle, that language can in fact function transparently, or at least with clarity, even in the face of such a mystery. Socrates reserves that absolute representational capacity for the gods. He tries often to emulate it, but when push comes to shove, it is metaphors that win his day, poetic devices, even if they are never acknowledged as such. And that is what happens with these scientists, too

The one I want most to focus on here is “the arrow of time,” a commonplace in scientific discourse, certainly in Newtonian mechanics, but even more powerfully and problematically in post-Einsteinian theory. Time, in essence, only has some reality, even if it is to a degree illusory in the larger picture, if there is some irreversible change that takes place. And that change is in only one direction, “past” to “future:” entropy at the traditional macro-level, which always increases in a closed system; and the collapse of the wave-function at the quantum-level, that change of state that measurement institutes, even requires, which cannot be played back into some state of probabilities. So, time is change. Or at least irreversible change. Which is the only kind of change that is of any consequence, I think. I said that in my preface. And in the human universe, there is no more extreme example of that than death, which is why we experience time so strangely in its presence, not just

understanding but “knowing” its fundamentally illusory nature.

Dog Day Afternoon

the soft smell of death wafts
in from the yard

some small animal
too tired to survive

crawled all the way
down in the dirt to stay

this moment: enormous
as the heat.

(unpublished, circa 1974)

But why, I want to ask, use an arrow for this? It is such an aggressive metaphor, one of the implications of which is that there is always a forward-oriented thrust from a “something-already,” a past, toward a “nothing-yet,” a future. That is the stereotypical way we have for imagining the passage of time in our lives, in history, in everything: the past is fixed, done, like what a book is when it’s published. The future is empty, open, like the rest of this page waiting for me to fill it with typing. The arrow of time is the vector that drives the now extant past forward into that space-awaiting. That seems so extreme, clumsy. Even the most trivial kinds of things we do pre-construct the future before it happens. That sentence, for example, or this essay, from the very first word: an expanding bubble of potential “realities” is created, a “field” of possibilities, which we then traverse along a single emergent path along the way, until it closes, becoming fixed, a past, when we’re “done.”

Mathematics is exactly the same. That “unsolvable problem” my physics professor gave us? From the very first equation I wrote down on the page, a limited number of possible outcomes—hopefully but not necessarily the “correct” one—became extant. And the rigors of the symbolic system made it an inevitable destination, if, of course, you could solve all the other littler “problems” along the way, many of which could be navigated in multiple ways. And you could say pretty much the same thing about every layer and process in the universe. The future is never “empty” and is to a certain degree always pre-scripted. The question is not if but how much.

There are all kinds of metaphors we could use to characterize the fuzziness of the intervening time it takes to get from here to there. But, to me at least, an arrow is one of the worst, presuming there is no intervening time

which has been pre-cast by the first gesture and must be traversed, sometimes for a considerable way, to get to “there.” It would be like thinking “born” and “die” are the only states of a life. Yes, the former necessitates the latter, but it doesn’t account for anything that comes between.

I could probably come up with a half dozen better metaphors for that liminal space between past and future, which we call the present (also, to me at least, merely a metaphor and a fundamentally illusory one), but the one I like most is a “froth of bubbles.” I wrote about this in *First, Summer*, and I’ll quote that whole section here, just to give you a sense of what happens if you just shift metaphors:

A year or so ago on a walk back in Pittsburgh, when I was thinking about time, I had an image come into my head which looked like a froth of bubbles. That image was, I believed, trying to tell me something about time, that it was not at all a linear vector, piercing forward from the richness and doneness of the past into an unconstructed, blank future, fiercely regulated by the kinds of increments we measure with clocks; but more like incoming surf, a wavelength repeating itself, the same liquid over and over, coming in cycles, continuously new and renewed.

These “waves,” in time, I thought, just as they are in space, could be mild and rhythmic, or massive and scary, or, really, infinitely varied. I rushed home and wrote up what I thought about that day. I shared this piece with as many young people as I could, in the hopes that one among them might someday be able to determine, mathematically, whether it was plausible. I think most of them thought it was

interesting but a little weird, like why even bother. I put it up on my website and, like everything else there, it incited no replies.

I know enough about physics to presume that time, in its fundamental essence, must be just as unfathomably strange as quantum mechanics tells us space is. The right minds just haven't spent enough "time" thinking about it, experimenting with it. Things in space are so much easier to work with. Einstein, of course, did bring time into intimate dimensional relationship with space, a huge advance, but I'm sure there's way more to it than that, mind-blowing strangenesses.

One day my sister was talking about a high level string-theory physicist she knew through her legal work. I asked her to send what I wrote to him, in the hopes he might say that it could have some mathematical plausibility in our universe. He never responded. But for some reason she shared it with a few of her other friends. One of them did respond to her, saying how beautiful this way of thinking about time was, how it moved her to tears to read it, helped her to cope with some things ongoing in her life. I have no idea about the what or the why. I'm just thrilled to have had my image land so softly in the right place. That's the wonderful thing about the kind of writing I do now, never publishing anything in the traditional marketplace. Somehow, over and over, pieces seem to seek out and find the one person, and it is often only one person, who needs to hear it right then. It has happened repeatedly that way, someone I never met, or someone I've known forever, who is moved in exactly the way any writer hopes to move others. And they tell me. Every single time I, too, am moved, forget completely whatever

irritation or frustration I might feel about my inability to find a larger audience. Moved to tears of my own.

In any case, here's what I wrote that day back in Pittsburgh (You didn't think I'd let you off the hook that easily did you?):

I have always been skeptical about the "infinite alternate universe" aspect of the multiverse model, at least the way it is rendered in Discovery Channel shows, my primary contact with contemporary physics. In its simplest form, as I understand it, at each juncture in one's life (and the temporal frequency of such junctures seems never to be clearly specified), by either choice or accident or necessity, my lifeline goes off on one path while multiple alternate versions of me proceed on multiple (again, the exact number is never clearly specified) alternate paths, like particles flying off after a collision in the Large Hadron Collider. And on and on, all of this times billions of other lives and trillions of other junctures. This model seems to be exceedingly complex, random, clunky, and, honestly, nonsensical. I (prefer to) think that the universe is more elegant than this. Still, there is so much theoretical framing for something of this sort (inflation, gravitational waves, quantum duality, string theory, etc.), it is equally unlikely that the old standard model (one life, one path, that's it) is adequately explanatory.

So I was walking in the woods one morning trying to fathom exactly what was wrong with the stereotypical infinite alternate universe model, and this thought came to me: It depends on a unilinear

conception of time, the past always and only pressing into the future, the arrowhead of the vector of time locked in at the present moment, past receding behind, now fully formed (in infinite iterations), the future essentially empty, a blank slate waiting to be occupied by all those scattering particles. This way of thinking about time has seemed naive to me ever since I was a kid, frankly, and more and more so as I think and read more about time.

Time I believe is a fully extended, fluid field, the future already extant as something analogous to potential energy, and it approaches us, actually comes toward us, in a generally amicable way, as we stride into it, come to occupy it. In other words, the future is just as real as the past, though it remains immaterialized until we inhabit it. The image that came to me to capture this, at least as it pertains to infinite alternatives, was a wave tipped with a froth of bubbles, an infinite number of such bubbles, as it slips toward "shore." All of the bubbles, as a whole, are relatively undifferentiated, like a froth is, rather than singular, like the ones we might blow in the backyard. Each individual bubble pre-constitutes a futural space with the potential for life, but it remains indeterminate, "empty," until we interact with it, filling it with life, realizing it in time. As we cross into that froth, we encounter only a small number of those bubbles, of course, and these are activated. As a consequence, a certain number of other bubbles on that wave and successive incoming waves become viable for life, waiting for us, full of potential, and a huge number of others become untenable, unlivable, dead, and these pop, done, gone. Only one life goes on, though it still has

infinite alternatives available to it in the future that approaches it. Time in this model is more like a series of interacting tides, future approaching, past moving forward, back and forth, the present the scene of their interaction.

About a month later, on another walk, it struck me that this could also account for one of the other conundrums that has long afflicted my thinking: What part of our lifeline is a matter of choice, free will, responsive to our desires, controllable, and what part is a matter of "fate" or, my preferred word, "destiny," essentially out of our control, even if not entirely pre-determined. I do believe that choice is foundational to the human experience, organizes our ways of being in the world. But I also believe, based on my experiences, that certain paths, events, whatever, are pre-cast, obligatory, insist on happening or not happening no matter how hard I might try, (have tried!), to avoid or achieve them.

The frothy wave accounts for this in this way: Many, maybe most, of the waves we walk into and through are relatively mild, yielding to our intentions, letting us choose, more or less, the "bubbles" we prefer to interact with and enliven. Others, come at odd angles, surprise us, are beyond our control, like the sort of extrinsic historical or cultural or physical forces that are non-negotiable, belong to the time period and the body we are, for whatever reason, compelled to inhabit. These enliven what I'll call "accidental" bubble chains. Then there are other waves that come head on, but strong, forcing us to "live" in certain bubble chains whether we like it or not. Many of the major events/changes in my own life

seem to have been inescapable in this way. They just had to happen, for whatever reason. This is what I call destiny. All three of these can be accounted for, interactively, in the froth.

Finally, I think this can also account for that common human experience of seeing one's life "flash before our eyes" when we think we're about to die. There is no way one could "see" all the junctures and variations in the standard model of IAU theory in a flash. But one could see in an instant the string of interconnected bubbles that, in the end, account for our "life." We might even be able to see them as one bubble, all of them collapsing into that single, integrated whole. When we actually die, of course, all of the infinite number of remaining bubbles on the waves incoming probably pop or evaporate. But who knows? Maybe we go to another level where we can see, simultaneously, not only the whole, "time"-less bubble of our lived life, but even all the other unrealized lives in the infinite number of bubbles that popped or remain. Maybe we can even see all of that in a flash, too. That would be cool.

Note: The bubbles in my metaphor have nothing to do with the "bubble universes" that inflation seems to make at least theoretically possible. Mine are bubbles in time first, then space, not vice-versa. (96-103)

Okay, I know that's a long path to have walked just to get to a new metaphor. But I think there are considerable advantages to this one for the boundary between past and future we call the present, compared for example to the arrow, which doesn't seem to leave any room for the present at all, just a vector thrusting "forward" from past

to future, the present almost by definition non-existent. It is, of course, easy to argue that the past and future don't "exist," are illusory. Augustine does as much by using negatives for each: not now and not yet. Contemporary physicists have a variety of more exotic, sometimes esoteric (to me at least) ways of arguing essentially the same thing. So what is left of the "present"? Is it really "nothing," too?

Actually, I'm more than willing to accede to the relative nothingness of the present. It's like Zeno's paradox: No matter how small you imagine it, you can always cut it by half. But what about the past and future? If they, too, are nothing, then temporality is nothing. Maybe that's so, the "frozen river" business, but my froth of bubbles at least leaves open the possibility that time, like space, is a something, in that what we call the present is the active interface between a past moving ahead that remains momentarily real as it reifies its long trail behind, and a future approaching that becomes momentarily real, as it reveals its emerging trail ahead.

The realest dimension of all, from this point of view, is the future, which is always coming with force, an array of potentials, much like the ones I describe for linguistic and mathematical constructions. Is it fully fixed, determined? Who knows? But at least with my metaphor, possibilities remain open. What we think of as the present, then, is more like a vague interim where determinacy (the "frozen river of spacetime" Kord is angry about) and indeterminacy (what Kord calls "free will," though I don't like either of those words for it, because it's never "free" and it's rarely "willed" in any simplistic sense) get negotiated, along with whatever other invisible forces, beyond our ken, might apply there. And what happens in the froth is what we can know of time, which is quite a lot compared to the

“arrow” model. In fact, if there is any vector at all (and I know that term has almost all the same problems as the arrow, so I prefer to avoid it) it is coming “toward” the present from the future, not vice-versa.

All of that becomes eligible for consideration simply by shifting metaphors. A scientist may well argue that “a froth of bubbles” is just too poetic a figure. I would counter-argue that so is “the arrow,” except you can more easily pretend it’s not. That is, in a nutshell, why I’m glad I spent my life with poems instead of equations. At least poems admit they are poems. Theorists who work primarily with “space”-related matters, quantum theory for sub-atomic particles, say, seem to have embraced the necessity for a figurative discourse to even begin to imagine, let alone try to explain what they find there. And they’ve come up with some wild stuff.

Theorists who speculate on time have not advanced that far yet. And I honestly don’t think they will ever get that far until they abandon an unquestioned faith in rational and/or representational discourse—Socrates’ “language of the gods”—and get poetic, which is the discourse even Socrates turns to for the gnarliest problems. Reality may be an illusion, yes, time may be an illusion, yes, mathematics may be an illusion, yes, and words may be an illusion, yes. So what? Just because we will never be able to explain them in the language of the gods doesn’t mean we can’t ever get at some aspects of the “reality” of these “illusions.” And maybe, who knows, when Socrates got up into that higher realm after he drank the hemlock, as he presumed he would by dint of his occupation, “philosopher,” the highest level of human enterprise, just maybe he discovered that the language of the gods is poetry—his Homer Simpson, palm slammed to forehead, “Doh!” moment of ultimate insight. And maybe one day these contemporary thinkers on time will

do the same. And that, friends, is today's gospel according to Paul!

Essay 9: “Nice Fedora!”

while you walk

nothing moves

but you

with you

from “notes for walk-taking,” *slights*, 2019

August 27, 2019

Today was a stressful day, for personal reasons. I wrote about my morning walk but decided to cut that. Some things are best left unsaid, to anyone but yourself, I mean. In any case, I handled it all quite to my satisfaction, and after lunch I decided to take a stroll on the boardwalk downtown. The boardwalk runs for maybe a mile and a quarter along the bay and then up the bay side of the narrow spit of land between Budd Inlet and Capital Lake. It starts at the timber yard just below the Farmers Market, many thousands of huge debarked logs stacked up in high piles, having been trucked in on the backs of big rigs like the ones I see on Plum Avenue when I drive to Watershed Park, waiting for tickets to their next destination; and it runs all the way up to the Fourth Avenue Bridge.

It is a beautiful walk, leisurely, rarely many people for some reason, quite relaxing. As I got to the bridge I saw a harbor seal, just its big round head, surface and then duck down again, like it might be fishing, then another same thing, and maybe ten seagulls sitting on the water waiting, maybe, for scraps from those meals. The salmon, of course, back again, must be, their annual migration, I mean! I hadn't yet processed it was that time again. I got quite excited, assuming they'd be there in numbers today, so I walked over to the Fifth Avenue Bridge overlook, the actual point where they leave saltwater for fresh. The water was dark, a little murky, moving fast on the way out of Capital Lake, their next destination. Try as I might, I couldn't see any salmon. No one else there could either. Finally one, a big one, swaggered in, what I overheard one man refer to as a "pioneer." Maybe most of the salmon today were farther out, near the seals, biding their time during the

acclimation period from salt to fresh water. But even one salmon is impressive, so I was satisfied.

I ended up thinking about an encounter I had on the boardwalk with a man maybe ten days ago just up past the Olympia Yacht Club. I generally dress pretty casually for these walks, of course, and wear a baseball type hat. That day, for some reason, I had the strongest urge to wear the very sleek straw fedora-type hat I had bought downtown, just because I wanted it, to wear for special summer occasions, like my wife's birthday, when I "dress up." I don't wear it on my "regular" walks to avoid sweat-staining it. But, as I said, I had this urge to put it on that day, so I did.

As I was heading back down the boardwalk past the Oyster House, I saw a man, maybe mid-50s, sitting on a dockside bench, about twenty feet to my left, had biker-type clothes on, a bandana on his head, rolling a cigarette or a joint. I said "hi." He said, very enthusiastically, "nice fedora!" I thanked him and was ready to turn on my way, but he kept talking, just like that man in Watershed Park did the other day. So I stopped to listen. He started with a story about his son borrowing four hundred dollars and some change to buy a fancy fedora a number of years ago, where he got it, what it looked like, then talked about his son for a minute or two, then talked about his son's very tragic death, his being buried with that hat on, the most poignant story, the kind of experience you're amazed a parent can survive. He was never overly emotional, just telling the story, so beautiful. I extended my sincere condolences, praised his courage and resilience, lauded his son, who was, according to the story, quite heroic, and then went on my way.

I understand that such a thing—my wearing that hat that day—may have been entirely coincidental. But I don't believe that. Haven't believed that for years now, since Carol passed, my attempts along the way to do some little kind thing for others, every day if I can. Out of the blue kind, I mean, responding to a call that just arises in the moment, like it did that day, that hat opening a portal to connect meaningfully with another human being, one struggling with something, not in need of "help," just looking to engage for a moment with another human presence.

I know, and have written previously about how meaningful, I mean sometimes life and death meaningful, such gestures were when I was broken a few years ago. Those who made them didn't and couldn't have any idea how meaningful. They just made them, spontaneously, probably do every single day. I wanted to be one of those people going forward, a healing presence, at least when a portal toward that presented itself, have tried my best to live up to that aspiration. And I have come to believe that every now and then, like that urge to wear my beautiful new hat, one you would never in a million years think a biker would do anything but laugh it, I am being called in a small way to do some good. When you teach, the opportunity to do good is there every single day. When all you do is walk, well, you just have to be open, receive, and respond. So that's the rest, and the best, of what I saw today. Thanks for listening.

Later . . .

After I woke up from my afternoon nap, a little woozy, I just kind of absent-mindedly decided to take another walk downtown, on the boardwalk again, see the sky, water, clouds, some sailboats, all so lovely today,

because, well, why not, which is all the reason I have or need to do anything anymore. And maybe the salmon. I went across to the lookout over the Capital Lake outflow, and it was pretty much like my visit earlier in the day, one big salmon, most likely a chinook, two+ feet of well-camouflaged muscle flapping mightily away to remain stationary in the outflow from the fish ladder, amplified because the tide is low, gravity as a multiplier. But I saw many, many thousands of tiny sticklebacks, most of them today avoiding the rushing water in favor of a quieter spot behind a concrete bulkhead, a huge, dense shoal of them, almost like a “bait ball,” waiting for a more favorable flow to migrate the last 100 feet from the bay to Capital Lake where they spawn.

I realized then that these must be those endless parades of little fish I’ve been watching circulate around the Budd Bay shoreline all spring and summer, always going one way or the other, in accord with the tides, I assumed, though I never did verify, growing from tiny fry, a half-inch long, pencil-lead thin, to run-ready adults, two inches long, thick as pencils. As Ecclesiastes might say, there is a time to circle and a time to spawn. Today it is the latter. At least for them. I’ll remember now to go down there every few days until I get to see the hordes pouring in, the seals feasting, the whole tableau of natural selection playing out ten feet below me while I stand on a bridge in the middle of town.

Essay 10: A Very Special Kind of Love

someone says

"love"

so what

is it

isn't

see

say stay

away

days come

go "love"

so someone

says so

what

from *slights*, spring, 2019

August 28, 2019

I took my walk later than usual today, mid-afternoon, a hot one by Olympia standards, about 90, but a dry heat; in the sun you feel like you're in a nice sauna. I like that kind of heat. I had a lot of chores to do this morning, all up in the Sleater-Kinney Road area, a compact big-box "strip" in Lacey, just east of here: Food Coop, dry cleaner, Kohls, Target, Goodwill, a very nice semi-circle, executed with machine-like precision, just the way I like it. Then lunch, a nap, and my walk, to Woodard Bay today.

In *A Mind of Winter* I write about a day when the alders and birds were the stars of my walk. Today was another one of those days. It started right off the bat with the birds, a flock of crows by Henderson Inlet, maybe 10 or 12 of them, way more than I ever see around there together at once. I'm not sure if that qualifies as a "murder" of crows, but it was a lot and they were raucous, agitated. Then I heard something that sounded like a crow on steroids, a very loud, growly screech from the same tree, and a reply to it from across the path, but even more gravelly. I wondered what it was, thought maybe a raven, which as far as I know I've never seen here, though they are indigenous. I thought I'd check when I got home what a flock of ravens is called: It's a "congress" (at first I thought that was a political joke, but it's not) or an "unkindness." Yikes, murder, congress and unkindness, what a triumvirate. Try as I might, I couldn't see either one of those birds, so I just let it go and went into the woods.

Almost immediately, I heard a very light tapping just overhead to my left, knew it was a woodpecker, but had to be a small one, which it was, a downy woodpecker,

very cute, little red spot on its pate. I saw one here once before, so it's probably the same one.

If you happen to recall my previous alder-bird walk, you know the alders dominate the early portions of the walk in this neck of the woods, quite large ones. Today I decided to continue my inquiry into the nature of the lichen that gives the alders their ashen appearance. This time I looked very closely and studied several. The underlying "red" bark of the alder is ringed with tiny bumps, a line maybe every half inch or so, the bumps about an inch apart, much like a birch tree, that pebbled look. The white areas share that feature, most of them quite smooth, no dimension, look just like the red bark, as if it might have been bleached or thinly whitewashed. Then there are the slightly raised areas, clearly extrinsic, the lichen plants. Today I noticed that they, too, had tiny bumps, but tons of them, like maybe a 20 grit sandpaper. On some, the bumps were closed on others open at the top, like miniscule volcanoes. That probably has something to do with their life cycle, but, clearly, I am no expert, having studied now maybe a dozen alders without any foundational knowledge in either trees or lichens. But the whole process made me feel more intimate with, more respectful of them, both the trees and the lichens. I guess that's as good a reason as any to stop and pay close attention to anything, a very special kind of "love."

The mid portion of my walk was uneventful, except for the fact that I was quite at ease, relaxed, quiet-minded, the great stress of yesterday not passed (that will take a very long time to resolve, if it ever does) but settling, clearer, more manageable. I felt grateful and happy about that. The phrase that popped into my head and kept repeating itself, Zenlike, was the one I write about in *A Mind of Winter*: Nothing really matters anymore, or its variant, I don't care about anything anymore.

Always soothing to me. I do care about some things, of course, most especially my children, Bridget and Joe, my world in a way.

I recalled with a smile a conversation I had with some friends back in Pittsburgh maybe four or five years ago. Very nice people. I drove out to their place for a brief visit, saw them at the bottom of their driveway as I drove in, walked down to chat. They asked about the kids, as they always do, caringly, not fake, I know. I sometimes have a tendency to rattle on about them, so boring to others, so I tried to keep it short, a few factual statements delivered ebulliently, then closed off this way: “As long as the kids are happy, I’m happy.” I figured that was a pretty benign capstone for the story. The woman seemed taken aback, commented, “That sounds like codependency to me.”

When I remembered that exchange, I decided to think about it more, what I might say, to myself, to persuade me that at least those two relationships in my life are not dysfunctional. The first thing that came to mind was the sort of remote connections that grow between people who love one another. Some of them are “intuitional,” the sensation that you know, under certain circumstances, what is happening to the other and what you need to do about it. I’m not talking about clairvoyance, or even ESP, but much more normal abilities that everyone has. I spent much of my life ignoring those twinges when they arose, allowing them to be overridden by logic or wishful thinking, two of the stupidest expressions of human mentation, both locally and historically. My wife Carol was the one who, by example, persuaded me to quit them both and start trusting my intuition. One example should suffice. We were sitting eating lunch at home one day, Joe and Bridget at school. Joe was in the second grade. All of a

sudden Carol sat bolt upright, said with intensity, “Something just happened to Joe; I need to go.” She got up, rushed to the car and drove off. Maybe an hour later she came home with Joe, who had been injured on the playground, seriously enough to warrant coming home and a trip to the doctor. That is not co-dependency; that is a very special kind of love.

I believe now that these remote connections are simply large scale examples of the duality on the quantum level that scientists have demonstrably proved: that two subatomic particles can be partnered in such a way that they can communicate their states, and change them, instantaneously from any distance, across the universe theoretically. That is a very strange but compelling form of inter-relationship, one we can simulate if we remain open to its possibilities. I even suspect that at some distant time in the future, scientists will prove that love of that sort is a fundamental force in the integrity of the universe.

I closed out my walk with a couple of encounters with birds I’ve seen multiple times at Woodard Bay: the hairy woodpecker, in its usual haunts, then a fleeting look at the yellow warbler I saw a month or so ago, such a beautiful bird. I thought that would be it, but as I got to the parking area, I saw a big bird glide from the tree where I heard all that ruckus when I came in, fly out across the inlet and disappear into the distant foliage. It was brown, so not a crow or cormorant, wide winged so not a brown gull, looked raptor-like. I have seen bald eagles here a few times, patrolling for an easy meal in leftover seal-stuff. This bird was not white-headed, though. It might have been a juvenile eagle or a large hawk. It didn’t call out, so I can’t be sure, but I recalculated my encounter as the walk started. I bet a crowd of crows was harassing a pair of raptors to clear

them out of their air-space. Took a while, but looks like it finally worked. If crows were still there, they were quiet now. So was I.

When I got back home the finalfinalfinalfinalfinal “edition” of my book *A Mind of Winter* was waiting in the mailbox for me. I can’t remember how many times I’ve updated the manuscript since I first “published” it on Amazon. A lot. I write very quickly, typically, when I’m riding one of these waves, but this last book was extraordinary, 300 pages in six weeks. When I’m “done” with anything, a musical album, a book, by which I mean when I first have the whole thing together in what feels to me like a finished form, I publish it immediately, assuming it’s done. Well, in reality it never is. No matter how many takes I’ve done for my songs, I always do one or two more for some of them not long after they go up on my website or in the mail to friends. Then I have to “release” it all over again, awkward. And no matter how many times I proofread a manuscript, I always find more errors once the printed version first arrives. To some extent, I think I can only “see” those errors once I’m holding the book in my hands. It is one of the embarrassing temptations of self-publication, the sense that it’s fine even without running it past any outside eyes to help make the final copy “proof-perfect.”

The traditional press is, as I’ve said, glacially slow at least in part to make sure that all of this work gets done before the first edition comes out. The forgiving part of the online self-publication process, of course, is that all you have to do is upload a new PDF to your website or a new text file to Kindle Direct Publishing, the book production arm of the Amazon empire. It’s possible by this means not only to make corrections but also to revise the text, even add significant amounts of new

material. The edition I got today, for example, included a new font/typeface that dramatically changed the look of the text for the better, much more like “real” book. I do all of those things multiple times over a period of months after the first offering appears online or for purchase. This process only abates once I get surfing another “wave” toward a newer book.

For some reason, maybe its length, maybe my aging eyes, I had an unusually hard time cleaning up the errors in *A Mind of Winter*. I would guess that along the way I re-read that manuscript 15 times. So I know it well. A process like that can go two ways, especially with a book I had some reservations about at the outset, having written it so fast, one of those likely too-good-to-be-true writerly events. I could come to rue the day I put it out there, realizing I had finally written what I call in the book’s preface my “piece of crap” book, essentially ending my saga as a writer, perhaps in the process undermining readers’ faith in the previous books, which I think are good.

I’m not sure if or how much those who have read the book respect and admire it, too soon for that. But today, when I held the “8/22 edition” in my hands I felt proud. It is, admittedly, a strange hybrid of a book, the warp of my personal walk-stories interwoven with the woof of mini-essays on historically significant thinkers about the imagination. But I actually think it works. And really, in the end, I write mostly for myself, to learn something I don’t know, something that I need to read a book many times to fully get, which is what I did, the reading and the getting. And I got to correct (almost?) all my typos in the process!

I’ve read thousands of books, and I have made a living as a reader of others’ work—reviewer of books, scholarly

peer reviewer, journal editor, consultant to colleagues and graduate students, and teacher to thousands of young writers trying to learn to get better. I have a reputation as an exceptional reader, fast, astute, detailed, useful; and I've earned it. So I don't think I'm easily fooled, even by my own work, at least not in the longer run, after the first blush of the accomplishment wears off. I quite often read in bed before I fall asleep. Tonight I started reading Tom Pickard's latest book, *Fiends Fell*, a combination of short prose pieces and poems, quite beautiful. I was about to turn off the light, then thought it would be nice to read some of my book, just to get a feel for how it compares to his, and how I compare to him, a generational peer, while his work was still fresh in my head. Here's what I concluded: His book is good, but so is mine; he's a good writer, but so am I. That's a lot to gain when what you put out there risks its life by flying without any external guidance systems, entirely on its own power. I was very pleased.

Essay 11: Walking on Empty

those gulls

in the road

lull me

no hurry

white boats

sail off

wing tips

stop where

air starts

wind whirls

from “notes for walk-taking,” *slights*, 2019

August 29, 2019

I woke this morning to the rumble of thunder, a rarity here, and when it comes it always sounds distant, not like it might rattle your cage, as it often did back east. I looked out at the sky and it was, as always, high, gray today, not at all ominously dark, maybe why the thunder sounded far-off: It was just high-up. My worry-stress was back, in my body, I could feel it, the kind you get out of concern for someone else's troubles, someone you love, the kind you can't address by doing something, so it stays, more or less, depending on the day or moment. About 10 minutes later it started to rain, not anything I'd even remotely call a "storm," again by eastern standards. Just a stiff rain, one you might be tempted to walk through but would regret doing so after a few minutes. I decided to take it slow today, head downtown: find fruit and vegetables at the Farmers Market, check on the salmon run, stop at the hardware store. A nice, easy walk.

As I approached town I saw something that truly stunned me, the upper branch of Budd Inlet empty, I mean completely empty, dozens of gulls out in the muck looking for delicacies normally out of reach, underwater. I didn't think it was possible for me to be jaw-dropped by anything here anymore, accustomed as I am to the size and extremity of the natural systems. But this was not a normal tidal recession, as I've come to know most of the daily events of that sort. I just looked at the calendar and tomorrow is the new moon. Maybe that accounts for it, a once or twice a month thing that I just happened on today, something called "king tides," I think.

I went to the Farmers Market, got my stuff, and headed over to the Boardwalk. The downtown finger of Budd Inlet, maybe twice as wide as the upper one, was equally extreme. I wrote, marveling, in a previous book about a tidal drop of 8-10 feet along the boardwalk. Today it was almost twice that, at least 15 feet in places, things I had never seen becoming visible on the broad mudflats. I calculate those heights in a number of ways: one is the top of the barnacle line on poles and posts, the high water mark, compared to my height, so it's not precise, but it's not far off, either. It's Harbor Days this weekend, and some of the cool, old wooden boats that came in for that were docked downtown. I love seeing those boats, so colorful, like movie props.

Then, coincidentally, given my wondering yesterday about the crow/raven business, I happened upon two large black birds perched on the railing, wide beaks, scruffy under-feathers, ravens, I thought, had to be, or some heavy-duty mutant crows! They just slide-stepped along the railing, calmly, to stay about six feet in front of me. They looked avuncular, half smiling. Then, having had enough of that, they took off.

As I came to the upper end of the boardwalk near the Fourth Avenue Bridge, I was stunned again by all the wildlife patrolling the low waters for food. There were dozens of gulls in the nearby mudflats, and then more specks of gull-white as far as I could see up the bay. There were five or six loons, more than twice as many as I've ever seen there at once, ducking under in a more hectic rhythm than normal. And a dozen or more herons scattered in regular intervals along the shore, stabbing in for their meals. A squadron of Canada Geese, maybe eight of them, flew over. They must migrate south from here, because I didn't see any this past winter. Maybe that was starting, or, more, likely they

were just heading over to Capital Lake for easy pickings. I saw the heads of two harbor seals poking up and down in the water, so figured I might get to see some salmon. No such luck when I got to the Fifth Avenue Bridge overlook. They may have been there, but because the water was so low in Budd Bay, the outflow from Capital Lake, off the fish ladder, was a raging torrent, couldn't see a thing through it. One of the loons, dunking down for sticklebacks I assumed, got into a pretty good tiff with a big gull intruding on its space, chased it off. That was the extent of the drama there.

I walked across to Capital Lake, equally bird-busy. There is a very thick soup of algae along the shore now, all the summer heat, an inch or two deep on the surface, maybe 10 feet wide. I saw a group of mallards, young ones by their size, this year's crop, all female-marked, though that also could be their non-gender-specific juvenile colors. From a distance they looked like boats caught in the grip of Antarctic ice, trapped. Up close, though, they were quite free, just feasting on all those easy greens.

After a quick stop at the hardware store, it was back to the boardwalk. There I saw the most beautiful pair of sparrows in a small pine tree, white streaked crows, firm stature, regal looking. I just checked the bird book to find out exactly what kind of sparrow that was (lark sparrow), and while I was at it checked on ravens, too. No question what I saw was a couple of ravens. I can see why Poe picked that bird for his great poem, they are so cool, enigmatic, friendly-seeming I thought, by comparison with crows, which can be prickly. I have no idea why you'd call a group of them an unkindness.

Just got a phone call that put my mind much more at ease. You might be saying "what has this essay got to do with time?" If so, think about what a minute or an hour

or day feels like when you're worried. Then think of the same when you're not. If you can't imagine the feel of the temporal difference in the pit of your stomach, well, I'd say you either don't know anything about time or about how to worry. Anyway, as Gehagin the sweet-bumbling cop always said in the old Torchy Blaine movies: "What a day, what a day!"

Essay 12: I Swear. It's True.

unbearable how
much light knows
once it learns
to walk

from "notes for walk-taking," *slights*, 2019

August 30, 2019

“Mornin’ Ralph.”

“Mornin’ Sam.”

If you are of my vintage you will recognize that pleasant exchange from the Ralph and Sam cartoons, part of the Looney Tunes library. If you’ve never seen one, Ralph is a wolf and Sam is a sheepdog. Every morning they meet at their time-clock to punch in, greeting one another amicably, very low key, like friends about to start their shift. Once the work-whistle blows, they become instant enemies, Ralph trying get the sheep, Sam trying to stop him. They fight furiously, over and over, all day long. Those wham-bang-whirling-blurs of violence Warner Brothers was so good at depicting. When the end-of-day whistle blows, they stop, instantly, in mid-air, walk wearily to the time clock and punch out. Then “G’night, Ralph.” “G’night Sam.” It is all hilarious, for reasons as many layers deep as you’d like to go in thinking about our taken-for-granted ways with work in our culture.

One of my uncles was a plumber. Every now and then I’d go out on a job with him. Outside of work, and in the truck on the way, he was easy-going, even jocular, very laid-back. The minute he started a plumbing job, he’d start to swear, pound on things, twist things, wham his tools, a violence to every move, and swear, swear, swear. It would go on all day long, an endless stream, any and every curse word you could imagine. As soon as the work was done, he’d go instantly back to his pleasant, easy-going self. That was also hilarious, in that very quickly you could tell that, like Ralph and Sam, his “rage” was not real, just a surface abrasion attendant to his work, all those frustrations with the inevitable

recalcitrance of pipes to do exactly what you want when you want. He had to fight them, swearing all the way.

I'm only saying all of this to set a context for the apparent extremity of the early part of my day today. I woke this morning in a really foul mood, no idea why. I slept as soundly last night as I have in weeks, got up late, for me, after eight. But it was there, my mood, like a bobcat trapped in a corner. I did have some extreme dreams last night, one in particular that I woke from, briefly, thinking I must write down a few details of this so I'll remember it in the morning, not to write about but to think about, where something that outlandish could possibly come from. There is nothing, I know, in Freudian, or even in surrealistic theory that could possibly predict or account for what happened in that dream. But, I thought, there is no way I'll forget a dream that extreme, and I went back to sleep. Well, I forgot it, gone, not a shred left, as is always the case when you tell yourself to write something down, anything really, and don't. That wasn't why I was so pissed, though. My mood was attached to nothing even remotely as consequential as dreams or Freud or a failure to take notes or memory, to nothing at all really, or to everything, same thing I guess. It just was. The work whistle blew when I woke up, and I went off, just like Ralph and Sam and my uncle Billy.

I had housecleaning chores to do this morning, work I usually enjoy, or that at least doesn't irritate me. Today, the liturgy that accompanied that "service" was an endless stream of profanity. Even a recalcitrant bit of food on the floor could inspire a chorus of vile hosannas. I do swear quite a lot under normal circumstances, more than most people I suppose, though I don't know for sure because I'm not with most people when they're alone, as I am with myself when I

get into it this way. Usually such flurries, for me, erupt abruptly, seemingly out of nowhere if you happened to witness one—like what is up with that lunatic? But they do have a motive: almost always, some very unpleasant memory, could be from as far back as my childhood, arises unbeckoned out of my inner cloud, barks at me to get mad or sad, like Ralph after my sheep. A burst of dark epithets instantly bark back, like Sam reacting. I've come to understand, just in the last year or two actually, that their purpose is to drown out that memory, chase it back, get it gone, and it works. Most often these outcries last just a few seconds, delivered under my breath. Memory, swear, swear, swear, over. If I'm alone at home and unselfconscious, they can come out aloud, though no one else can typically hear them.

Today's were attached to and precipitated by nothing except what I was doing, no matter what I was doing, which is rare. As if Ralph and Sam continued to fight even if no sheep were there, which, now that I think of it, they may have done once or twice during their "shift," even more hilarious. At one point, vacuuming the rug in my bedroom, swearing up a storm, I realized the window was open and I toned it down immediately. The house on that side is the only one close enough to ever hear anything going on in here, even my electric guitar on loud. That house is within earshot, most especially when the window is open, because I often hear what's going on over there when their window is open. I looked out and the window across the way was dark. I'm pretty sure no one was home. If they were, the men with strait jackets may have been at my door shortly and I would have had no recourse but to go along, swearing my head off at them, too.

I knew I needed to go to the right place to walk to get quiet, and that, of course, is Woodard Bay. After I ate I

drove off. As you head out of Olympia on East Bay Drive, just before you get to Priest Point Park, the road divides, a mile long boulevard with a 15 foot greenway between the single lanes on each side, all lined with a thick colomnade of trees, on the younger side by Olympia standards, maybe 60 feet tall, 2 or 3 feet in diameter, cedars, hemlocks, maples, spruce, the usual forest clients here. It is so serene and beautiful, like being lulled in a hammock of lush greenery while you're gliding along that highway. I started to calm down immediately, as I hoped I would. By the time I got to Woodard Bay, another five miles or so down roads that get a more and more rural feel to them as you go, I was pretty well settled, had "punched out."

When I got to the lot I could see Henderson Inlet was empty on the scale of Budd Bay the other day, all the way down, the whole of it a mudflat. I was tempted to walk right down to the point to calculate the water loss, but I had my mind set on a walk through the forest, and I stuck to that. Wisely, it turned out. The forest was so calm and quiet. It is warm today, a little humid (at least by the dry standards here), air heavier than usual. It was as if everything was fixed in place, very happily so, floating, the ferns, the trees, everything. My mood was smooth as could be within a minute. One of the odd things I've noticed in that section of the woods is that, on days like this, still as stone, I might see one or two fern fronds wobbling frenetically back and forth, as if they are waving at me. Everything else so still, and this one thing gyrating. It is quite amusing. I'm sure it's just some anomaly in the air, but I always wave back and chuckle a bit. That happened today, lightening my load even more.

I heard the chit-chit of one of the tiny, charming, chocolate-brown wrens I've written about before, the ones that rarely show themselves. But this one did, on a

twig tip of a small shrub about four feet high. These birds must nest on the ground, because that is always where the disembodied sounds come from, rarely venture even this high up. I watched it for maybe 20 seconds as it flitted around from shrub to fern, then it was gone down into the ground cover, only its chit-chit emerging. I just decided to find out exactly what these beautiful little birds are called: winter wren, best I can tell from the big bird book my friend Lisa lent me while she's on vacation. Now I know.

A little further up the path, I heard, off in the distance, in the direction of its "neighborhood," the sharp call of the pileated woodpecker, three whoops, one burst, that's all. Then just silence, a warm, comforting silence today, for about a mile. The next action was a bird calling from the low brush on my left, definitely not a wren. I assumed I wouldn't see it, but I was wrong. Like the wren earlier, it showed just enough of itself for me to identify: a towhee (pronounced "toe-wee," Lisa told me recently, not "tau-wee," the way I've been saying it since I was a kid.) The western towhee is different from the eastern, more orange on the sides, almost robin-like. Except for its call, which is quite different from a robin's, enough to identify it when a quick glimpse is all you get.

I stopped at the small bog near the path's end, as I always do, very still today, almost dried up, and had a brief conversation with a young woman walking there for the first time today, then to the path toward the point, where I saw, fleetingly again, between leaves as it flitted from branch to branch, the yellow warbler that lives in that neck of the woods, so small and sleek, as pale yellow as the almost-white tulips I picked up last week for Bridget, in advance of her starting back to teach this week. I began to think about birds as a kind of clock for my walks out there, each one a marker of

the time it took to get to it from the previous one. I liked that as a way to measure intervals: no predictability or regularity. One chimes in and then some while later another chimes in. Today it was four chimes. Some days it is more, some less. Like time is everywhere when you are just walking with it, undifferentiated until you set some markers.

When I raise my hands,
thousands of yellow finches
stop, wheel in a whirling mass,
waiting their turns to pass.

Tonight I will teach you
how to reach out for them,
how to keep each one in your hand
an instant only,
fingers parting as they close,
holding and letting go all one motion,
your only measure
the delicate pressure
of feather-edge against skin.

In precisely this way
your time will be saved.
Until morning.
Let us begin.

(from "Five Scenes from My Final Dream
of You," unpublished, circa 1978)

When I got to the point, well, I can't say I was stunned because I had seen the impact of these "king tides" downtown on Friday, but it was amazing. The water on the Woodard Bay side had receded at least a hundred yards. The old railroad trestle out in the bay, built originally on some raised gravel, is usually surrounded by 8-12 feet water, with maybe 50 yards of water between it and shore. Today it was high and dry almost its full length, an additional 100 yards out into the bay. Even the floating docks the seals and cormorants rest on, further out, seemed accessible, like I could reach them without going in over my head. I calculated, from the top of the barnacle line on the posts that support the rail line, that the water was up to 15 feet below high tide, as extreme as I've seen it, maybe as extreme as it gets.

On the Henderson Inlet side of the peninsula, same thing. The inlet is only about a hundred yards wide, so it was entirely empty, just mud flat, but for the tiny stream of outflowing water winding through the raised "land bridge" that divides the inlet from the wider bay. That flow is being fed by whatever water is left in the fresh water estuary, a small stream with intermittent pools and marshes, that meanders for miles up toward Lacey, I know from having walked up that way a few months ago.

Today was the first time I noticed how much that land bridge looks like the one on the other side of the point, the one with the remnants of the trestle still perched on it, and I finally realized that it, too, had an elevated rail line on it at one point, all that gravel actually hauled in or dredged up to support it. I have no idea why it took me over a year to see this, it is so obvious. There are, in fact, two stretches of the old tracks preserved (ensconced in concrete) that go from the bank on the Henderson Inlet side across toward Woodard Bay. As I said, so obvious. That's why going back to the same place over and over is

kind of like rereading a good book. Almost every time you notice something new, wondering how you could have missed it. But, as with a good book, there is no way you can “read” it completely in one pass. It’s just not humanly possible, every detail, every nuance, every symmetry and asymmetry. Just not possible.

Speaking of reading and re-reading, right now, as I said, I’m reading Tom Pickard’s latest book, *Fiends Fell*, a sort of diary, in very short prose and poetic pieces, of one year of the ten he has now spent living in a drafty attic on an “escarpment” in the highlands on the English-Scottish border, working piecemeal in a local café, coping with bankruptcy and a paucity of everything, it seems, except women, alcohol and drugs. He is of my vintage, a few years older, came of age as a writer in the 1970s via a set of haphazard contacts with, first, Basil Bunting, whom he is credited with resurrecting for the dustbin of oblivion in England, then the American Beat and Black Mountain poets, who were invited to participate in the now legendary reading series he co-founded with his first wife in the Morden Tower Book Room. He was friendly enough with Robert Creeley, now passed, to refer to him as Bob and his own poems have a Creeley-feel to them, short, tight, free of intellectual mystifications or complications. Likewise with Ed Dorn, also now passed, a close friend with whom he shares an innate wildness. Pickard would likely feel at home in the lifestyle of *Gunslinger*, say, though his work is more austere, straight-up, than any of Dorn’s. Like this:

the emptiness
of winter fells

claws of cloud grip a far hill
topped in snow

a raven croaks (111)

Pickard mentions Basho at one point in the book, the great Japanese haiku specialist. This poem has that feel to it. Nothing in Dorn ever does, to my ears at least.

I haven't even had a passing thought about Pickard for at least 30 years now, and what little connection I had with his early work was via a friend who was heavily involved in a circle of poets who helped inaugurate the Language poetry movement. He was especially close to Bob Grenier (whom I never met, but call him Bob instead of Robert here because that was all I ever heard him called by my friend, also now passed.) Grenier became famous for the phrase "I HATE SPEECH," in a piece he wrote for the first issue of *This*, which he co-edited with Barrett Watson, the primary vehicle early on for what soon came to be called the Language poets. If you ever feel like you're losing your way in comprehending some of early L=a=n=g=u=a=g=e poetry, just repeat this phrase in your head. It locates the movement in a very specific way with the early stages of poststructuralist philosophy that were just then making their way ashore here.

I'm not even sure why I'm saying all of this or what I want to set up here. On the face of it, I have almost nothing in common with Pickard. But reading this book, I feel a genuine companionship with him, his solitary struggle (two words he would not likely use to describe this life he leads now) to survive the austere, dire weather, the winds and the cold, of his current home and its mirror image on the inside of his head. These little pieces are both inspiring and depressing to me, a combination much like the rage I woke with today. Maybe I had that feeling, and all those hallucinogenic dreams, because I was reading this book, even though

there is nothing in it that shares qualitatively the connotations of those words: inspiring, depressing, rage, heartbreak, hallucinogenic, all much too dramatic for characterizing Pickard's lean, hard style. Like this:

Blue these last few days and woke that way this morning and would have stayed in bed, but the slut hill opposite was flouncing her wares—mist veil tinged with dawn—so, still groggy, I grabbed my camera, made a flask of hot cocoa and honey, set the fire for easy lighting on my return and headed across the crispy snow up into the clouds and freezing fog. (p. 112)

Nice sentence, Tom, a way to take us on the tour, inside and out, playful and dark all at the same time. Yes, very nice.

One of the things I marvel at in his narrative here is how many women he seems to find for sexual interactions in a place where almost no one lives, and they're not women who are aspiring poets, or even read poems, probably could care less what he writes. He must have some magical spirit to be my age and so alluring. Like this one:

A razor-slashing easterly breathes ice between gusts.

A lover visited Saturday night and we drank wine, smoked grass, fucked and sniffed poppers. When I slid beneath the duvet the bottle spilt and I was breathing pure amyl until I fell out of bed and lay trapped against the wall in a paroxysm of hilarious overwhelm. (p. 120)

I am familiar with paroxysms of overwhelm, but they are never, these days, either drug- or sex-induced, therefore rarely hilarious.

A lot of these pieces are short bits of nature writing, describing the world he lives in there, in the way that my pieces are long stretches of nature writing, describing the world I live in here. He sees things crisply, clearly, renders them with both precision and unexpected originality. Like this, one piece on one page:

As I sat in my homemade shelter on top of
Fiends Fell the sun appeared from behind a
dark low cloud just as a hawk caught sight of me
at the last moment, only a few feet away. It came
so close that I could feel the whisper of its wings
as it suddenly banked above my face. (p. 116)

A clean scene, sun, sky, hawk, him, all of it feeling “only a few feet away.” Lots of birds in his world, too, closely noticed, ravens, larks, wrens, various kinds of harriers, raptors. Worth the read just for that.

I have a feeling reading him that I should strive for that kind of economy in my prose, one page instead of ten, but I know it’s futile. I am not him. I am me. I may be in love with Emily Dickinson, but I sound more like I’ve got the Walt Whitman thing, once I get going, in my prose at least, sentences that start rolling and don’t seem to want to stop, like this one, which I’m going to keep writing until I can’t think of anything else to add to it, even if it starts to become insensible, which it has, so I’ll stop, maybe, okay, there. Pickard is more like Dickinson. Say it, done. Amanda Berenguer, also a lover of Dickinson, is more like me, too, an avalanche of language. Maybe it’s true: opposites attract.

Pickard's poems are like Dickinson's but even more so, brilliant little vignettes, luminous and dark at the same time, another set of yoked opposites that will make sense to you if you read his work. Like this:

wind-driven rain
hits the window

a rush of nipples
ripping silk (p. 135)

Where we do share economy is in our poems, especially the kind I've been writing since I moved here, short, often cryptic little things I call "slights," or "tiny" poems, more like Zen koans (wiry, tense) than Basho (smooth, soothing) but many of the same features. Like this:

two ravens
slide-step up
the rail
sidle to
each other
eyes wide

seagull screeches
from pole-top
wings flap
without flying

fat seal goes
down slowly
grips fish
flesh
between lips

woodpecker
pokes pounds
picks specks
out of
hard bark

(from *slights*, August, 2019)

It's called "Freudian slippers." I think you can see why. I had been thinking in fact about trying to work a few of these new poems into this series somehow, and seeing him do it so fluidly makes me think that would be both a good idea and easy for me to do, too, which I just did here, of course, without thinking [and have now done retroactively, thinkingly I hope, throughout the series.]

One other thing I really connected with, oddly enough the most important one for my sense of commonality with him, is his dreams. His are as weird as mine and he actually writes about them, as I do, as if they have relevance, on the same scale as waking thoughts or observations. And, more amazingly, he talks at one point about poems being composed in his head while he sleeps, his just waking up and writing them down. I have from time to time awoken with a poem half-formed, some lines, a place to start; I sit down and it's done in a flash. But when I wrote *In the Dark*, as I explain in the book's preface, the first two poems in that series were written, completely and exactly, in my head when I woke up. I just copied them out. I didn't even know what they were about until I saw them typed up. It made me feel more normal to hear Pickard say that has happened to him, too.

September 14 interjection

I've had a lot of dreams lately featuring some of my high school classmates. I mean a lot. Not my friends or people I hung around with or dated, more the background cast, people I haven't had a conscious thought about in many decades. Yet there they were, clear as day, and I knew their names. I wake up from these feeling like I've gone flipping mad, in a good way,

amused, bemused, smiling, or just baffled. Some of them are quite sweet, some surreal.

Last night I dreamed I was at a kind of “pool party” at our graduation, a little stretch of sand by a fast-flowing stream. One of my classmates—a man in real life back then, but appearing as a woman in the dream—had, over the years, decorated that “beach” and then the bottom of the stream with toys, thousands of them, very beautiful. I told him/her they should be so proud and I’d remember it all. (S)he hugged me, tears in eyes, and said thanks for noticing. Then I had a conversation with a guy who had graduated the year before, was there with his girlfriend. He said he was completing a Masters degree, writing his thesis on the little-known Elizabethan poet Chidiock Tichborne, doing his research at the Forest City High School library, which, I was surprised to find out, had a trove of documents from that period (which, of course, it didn’t.) I probably haven’t thought about Tichborne for as long as I hadn’t thought about this guy. Tichborne wrote a few poems (before he was executed for his part in the plot to take down Queen Elizabeth, all that religious turmoil at the time), his most famous “Elegy,” which opens this way: “My prime of youth is but a frost of cares,/ My feast of joy is but a dish of pain.” Memorable lines. I just found out via Wikipedia that the poem is notable for being made entirely of monosyllabic words.

Last week, I had a dream in which I had been teaching a group of classmates. I can’t remember what, but it just seemed routine. After it was over, one member of the group, a classmate I hardly knew back then, thanked me. I was surprised, feeling I hadn’t done much of anything out of the ordinary. So I asked her, “Why, what did I do?” She said exactly this: “It isn’t what you did, it’s what you don’t.” I asked “like what?” and she said “You don’t

make excuses and you don't lie." I've written before about how I constructed my teacherly persona: not on the imitation of features from positive models but on an aversion for the behaviors of negative models. I wish I could be that good in my real life.

September 16 interjection:

I've been going back and forth with a younger colleague about an essay he's writing on the process of commenting on student essays, a piece that ends up examining the larger processes of identity-formation for writers and teachers, specifically the genealogy of influences that become elements of what he calls "the myself that ends up on the page" or, similarly, what I'd call "the myself that ends up in the classroom." The conundrum at the center of this, and it's one I've been trying to fathom since I started teaching, is whether that "myself," however it gets formed, has some (of what became called, derisively, in the postmodernist era) essentialist aspect to it, one that is uniquely "ours," founded in an identity that preceded those influences and to some extent shapes them toward an individual purpose; or whether it is a cobbled together amalgam of the many "voices" we accrue along the way, some deliberately, some unconsciously, orchestrated into some unified, or at least functional form. It is a version of the long-ongoing argument in composition theory between essentialist and social constructionist explanations of that thing we call "the self."

Here's a paragraph from the email I just wrote him, which locates the problem, for me, in an autobiographical moment:

In the *Pre/text* article [a piece I wrote in 1980, and he had recently read], which I wrote before I came

to Pitt or had any clue I might end up there, I included, in a footnote, Bill [William E.] Coles among my several examples of teachers who espoused an “expressivist” approach, the term that was in the air in many of the comp arguments in the 70s. I concluded that based on my reading of the “I” in *The Plural I* [his classic account of a composition course he originated back in the 60s]. I didn’t think much of it at the time, just a name in a footnote. When I interviewed for the job at Pitt, a two-day process back then, Bill asked specifically for a lunch, just the two of us, so we went to Ali Baba’s [a local Greek restaurant]. I ordered rice and a salad, he ordered the tartare, which they still made back then. So he’s sitting there eating raw meat, I’m eating rabbit food. I knew he was pissed about something, and it was that footnote. He argued that his “I” was not essentialist, more like what was then called social constructionist, though he never used those terms. We went back and forth. It was a much more amicable discussion than I expected. Bill was a bull of a man and prone to outbursts when he was pissed. I witnessed my share of them along the way at Pitt. I appreciated that he came on straight and I think he respected the fact that I didn’t just cave to get the job. We got on quite well thereafter. Anyway, that’s one memorable instance of the conundrum getting framed in my head around the figure of the “I,” what precisely it was, where it came from, how it got made, who owned it, especially in relation to the power dynamics that constitute the classroom. I’ve been puzzling on that ever since.

I ended up telling a version of this story at the event the English Department sponsored to honor Bill’s work after he passed, made it more on the personal, light-

hearted side, a human moment with a larger-than-life man, which was not in general keeping with the elegiac tone of the other presentations. I think some were offended by it. But one who wasn't was his wife, Janet Kafka, a wonderful person and teacher. She loved that it cast Bill as a fully-fledged and complex human being. He was all of that and more.

My younger colleague's model for teacher-formation—and his was at least partially in the Colesian lineage—is the standard one: you appropriate, assimilate, or borrow in some way the qualities, behaviors, values, etc. from those teachers along the way that you admire and assemble them coherently either into the context of a previously existing “myself” (essentialist) or into a singularity you will call your teacherly or writerly “myself,” which comprises all of these elements (social constructionist.) I'm not sure which of those two he would prefer.

I did construct my writerly “myself” in a positive manner, mostly by reading and re-reading writers I admired, loved for some reason or other. It was not a process of emulation, more like an absorption. But I never paid any attention to what teachers told me about it, resisted that sort of intervention quite mightily, sometimes at my own expense. I constructed my teacherly myself the opposite way, on the basis of negative models, a desire to avoid all of the attitudes, behaviors and values I abhorred as a student, less like a process of sewing in what you want than boiling off what you don't. Either way, you end up with something you can call “myself,” but I'm still stuck in neutral with that expressivist/social constructivist explanation for it. So, which is it?

Maybe, actually quite likely, those two terms are just too clumsy to serve well in sorting any of this out. Better to

start with an example and see where it leads. So, one of the things I abhorred as a student was a teacher who seemed not to want to be in the room with us, their students. I could tell, even early on, that there were many different reasons for this. Some teachers just seemed to hate students. That may sound harsh, but a very high-level colleague in the School of Education at Pitt once told me he thought that some teachers get into the profession precisely because they hate young people and this gives them a suitable venue to express that attitude without reprisal. So, number one I thought: Figure out if you hate young people. If you do, don't become a teacher. Simple as that. And if you start to hate in those ways as your career progresses, for many understandable reasons, get out and do something else. Yes, that is awkward and hard to do. But at least you won't be doing harm to those who come into your presence for help.

Let's say I pass that part of the test. Then what do I actually want to do in the classroom? One thing that bothered me about poor teachers was that they didn't seem to care much about their classroom subject matter, what they were actually being paid to teach me. I don't mean their field or their "specialty," which most educators and scholars enjoy, or at least like. I mean what they were being paid to actually teach. In high school, it was those teachers who worked essentially by rote from notes they had made 20 or more years ago, just sit at the desk and narrate them. These days, they could just prop up a laptop and have it read it all out in that nasally computer voice. What a bore. For others, both high school and college alike, it was a dismissive tone, as if they were too enlightened or advanced to be bothered teaching their material at such a primitive level to the unenlightened. Sometimes this was expressed: sardonic comments, that sort of thing. Sometimes it was

tacit. For example, early in my career, many composition teachers and creative writing teachers had this sort of entitled attitude, in the former case (most composition teachers back then having been trained in literature) the sense that teaching writing as a “basic” craft was beneath not only their dignity but the dignity of their institutions; in the latter (creative writers just then coming into the academy “out of the cold,” i.e., trying to make a living entirely with their creative work) the sense that teaching was “just how you paid the bills to continue writing, so spend as little time and energy on it as possible.” I didn’t want to do any of those things. Ever. The classroom is a legitimate forum for genuine intellectual work, as much so as any other that academics share, and at any and all levels. That’s just a fact.

But mostly, what bothered me about so many teachers was an inattentiveness to the human beings present in front of them, not expressly dismissive, more like there was an impenetrable fog in the air that prevented them from really seeing or hearing who was there with them. I vowed, once I made the unlikely and unexpected decision to teach, not to do that. And I didn’t. I don’t want to go into a lot of detail, but I’ll tell one more story that gets at what I’m talking about.

I had a reputation at Pitt for being excellent at what gets loosely called “the discussion method” [as opposed to what gets loosely called the “lecture method”] and was invited to give a presentation to other university faculty members through the teaching support service office that was in place then. I can’t remember what its name was, some acronym. I had 30 minutes. I began by telling the group, maybe 30 people, that there are no “tricks of the trade” or secrets that I either knew or could offer them about any of this. Only simple behavioral things, the kinds of things that human beings do routinely in other

social settings. And the classroom is, first and foremost, a social setting.

First, I said, learn students' names. It is not that hard to do in a small class, which is what most "discussion-based" classes are. I have a reliable method for doing it on the first day of class, and it's one anyone else can use, too. I demonstrated the difference the name makes by asking a simple question and then pointing to someone as "you back there" for a response. Then I asked her her name, did it all over again with the name instead of "you," asked if it felt different. Yes, of course it did. That is how human beings are. If you act like you know someone as an individual instead of a function, they generally like it better. And, in this case, are much more likely to continue to "participate" in your discussion.

Secondly, I said, put students in a position where they will have something to say when you open the discussion. A short piece of writing either in-class or assigned ahead of time, I mean a paragraph or two about a specific issue or text is adequate. Then, when you call on someone by name, even if they are hesitant to speak in a group, and many students are, for very good reasons, they can just read what they wrote. I want to hear something from every student, in their own voice, almost every class. Even the most withdrawn students open up fairly quickly when you make it easy for them, part of the daily routine. And it avoids the tendency to depend on the same easy-speaking students all the time to keep a discussion afloat. I did a little exercise demonstrating that.

Thirdly, and by far most importantly I said, listen, I mean really listen to what a student says in response to whatever your prompt is. Enough so that you can say something specific back about it, like what you

understood them to be saying, and, ideally, a follow-up question, a legitimate one, one that their actual response made you think about, not one you have pre-scripted. This is what people do all the time in conversations with others they care about. Students are others that teachers should care about in that way. I did another enactment, in the first instance just moving from the first respondent directly to another “student” for another response, no comment, no transition, which teachers do all the time. Then I took a minute to have a real interchange, a back and forth, based on the initial response. Again, I asked which felt better, made them more likely to continue to participate. Of course, the latter. I did a little group exercise on listening, and my 30 minutes was up. I could sense from the room the disappointment. It was palpable. I think most of them still felt there is a trick or a secret to this, and I was just too stubborn or selfish to tell them what it is. I didn’t see the evaluations for the session, but I was never invited back. For the best, I guess. I would just have said and done the same thing over again, inciting the same disappointment.

I’ve been writing along the way here about both presence and time. My advice to any teacher would be first, be present in the moment in your classroom. And second, make the time you spend there as pleasant for yourself and the others who meet you there as you can, given that the work needs to get done on both sides of the equation. The rest may not “take care of itself,” but without those two pre-conditions, there is no “rest” to “take care of.”

Back to August 30:

So, Tom Pickard and I write about nature, we document our daily lives and mundane experiences straight-up, we

write crisp, tight poems, we dream weird dreams and sometimes make poems in our sleep. That's a lot to have in common. But I guess I most admire Pickard because he is an old man like me and won't give up. He sees what's there and says it back, best he can, for me, you, anyone who wants to see it, too. It's what I hope to do as well with my remaining time, energies. See it, say it. That is time in a nutshell, its "arrow," two irreversible processes: seen, said. One then the other, hinges of silence between, birds on a path marking intervals of walking, words on a page taking the time they take to make sense. Same thing: wings, sing.

"G'night, Tom."

"G'night, Paul."

Essay 13: One Dimension Too Many

Downtown Today

lilac blossoms fade

frayed blades

the flower

that is its color

almost not lilac

now wilted but

still

“Look, this is Mitch.

He had no interest

In me two

weeks ago.

Now hahaha!”

she says pointing

to her phone

for friends

the morning

moves I don't

the boardwalk

walks I don't

gulls squawk

kids gawk

people talk

I walk

by

don't

I

(from *slights*, summer, 2019)

September 1, 2019

I had another series of strange dreams last night, a few details from one of which I did write down. When I woke this morning I could see in my head two or three pages of typed text, in revision, I could tell, from the markings on it. If I had an eidetic memory, which I don't, I could have taken a "photo" of it and just copied it out here, done for the day, but I don't. It's possible what I'm writing now is some version of that, but I'll never know. In any case, the dream I documented is too complicated to fully detail. In general, it was a sort of lost-in-the-funhouse type cartoon that took place in the building I spent most of my time in back at Pitt, a world-famous 40-story gothic tower constructed during the Great Depression called, modestly, the Cathedral of Learning. As the dream opened everyone, including me, was a three-dimensional animation, the kind you might see in a movie. Then I entered a maze of rooms with multiple doors opening to various dead ends, blank walls, empty space, that sort of thing. I finally found a long bright-lit, asylum-white-walled stairway that took me to the basement where everyone but me was a two-dimensional animation, like a newspaper cartoon. I was young, short, pudgy, jocular, and black. The "regular" inhabitants there, two-dimensional, were very friendly, welcoming. Then a bigger muckety muck came in. I feared he would recognize me as having an extra dimension and I would be in a lot of trouble. In the end, after a number of close calls, he didn't and left. Maybe that's my career in a nutshell: The fact that I didn't belong was never found out.

In a subsequent dream I was trying to make out with one of the women I met in that basement. She was cute, liked me, I liked her, nice. I won't go into detail, kind of

gross, but you can imagine how awkward and in some cases painful it is to try to merge three dimensions with two in those ways. Doesn't work. Like the way so much of my life in that regard doesn't work any more. And the reason I'm kind of stunned by, and jealous of, Tom Pickard's rotating wheel of intimate affairs. Women seem to come from far and wide to share a bed with him for a night. His roof leaks, the room is freezing most of the time, the winds howl. His bed must be miserably lumpy from all the wet and cold it absorbs. But there they are, no problem. Huh? As the Everly brothers say, maybe "all I have to do is dream."

The Same Old Story

On the bed she stiffens:
the sheets, sweat-starched,
a second skin shedding.

Words work up
from her lungs, hunger
for another history.

The same old story:
love's delicate membrane
abraded—a cough.

Into blue moonlit pools huge
schools of orange fish swirl
suddenly up from the deep.

(unpublished, circa 1976)

It's Harbor Days downtown, lots of cool, old boats, booths of stuff for sale along the boardwalk, gorgeous sun, water, sky, that sort of thing. Bridget came over for lunch, we walked around for an hour or so, took pictures, got gelato at Sophie's, talked, that sort of thing. My son called while we sat eating it, doing so well in South Carolina, told me the incoming hurricane wouldn't likely be much of a problem for them, that sort of thing. I am such a lucky man. Not Tom Pickard. Me. Sweet. That sort of thing.

Essay 14: I Was Not Attacked by a Cougar

every day

advance

this to that

what's left

behind

decides that

itself

by not saying

stay

what stays

is me turning

into

more me

if you want

to be

more me

then

say

stay

(from *slights*, winter, 2019)

September 2, 2019 (Labor Day)

I walked in Watershed Park today. There was a sign at the entrance warning about a recent cougar sighting there, some advice, etc. Watershed is a nice size for a good walk, but it is a “park,” after all, hardly big enough to provide reliable sustenance for a large predator. The biggest animal I think I’ve seen there is a squirrel, not one deer yet on any of my many walks. And there is a lot of human traffic on the paths, on a scale, especially today, Labor Day, that is likely intimidating to a solitary stalker. So that cougar won’t stay long if it has any sense. The only effect this had on my experience of the walk was a little more attentiveness in the areas where I might be ambushed from above, the steep hillsides, knowing from nature shows I’ve watched that a cougar prefers such launching pads, a way to add gravity as a multiplier for the force of its impact. As you can tell, I was not attacked by a cougar today.

And my head was blessedly empty, no attacks of thinking either, except for thinking that this wave of thinking might be nearly over, just the clean-up work left to finish it off, get it out there in some format, somewhat faster than usual, less than a month, but roughly the same number of pages, maybe 200 so far. I am surprised by that. I actually tried to slow down the process to conserve my nervous system, and it turned out faster, achieving the desired effect in the process. I feel great, not depleted at all. That, I guess, is another example of how mysterious time can be: feel slower, go faster. Maybe something like overdrive in a transmission: Once you get up to speed you can save energy with a smaller gear ratio and still accelerate.

I feel like I can now head back into the kind a mindless pleasure that is everydayness, my walks, my reading, my songs, maybe some poems, nothing of magnitude, the equivalent of those long savannas in the Catholic church's annual calendar called "ordinary time," none of the hype of Christmas, the austerity of Lent, the drama of Easter, more like serving the 7 AM mass on Tuesday that no one goes to than Sunday's max-mass, all that crowdy flash. Just pleasant, quiet, solitary, serene.

today
in watershed park
my lens
found light with dark

to learn
how light
is made
seek shade

(from *slights*, fall 2018)

Later . . .

I just got back from what I assumed would be, and was, a very quiet walk on the boardwalk downtown. Harbor Days is all over, all the booths gone, and the crowds, too, the ones I walked through just yesterday with Bridget. There were fewer people even than a normal (typically very slow) Monday, everyone home barbecuing I assume. I ambled over to check on the salmon, see if they were back in numbers yet, and I was not disappointed. When I approached the overlook I could see a half-dozen people looking intently at the water, so I was sure something of consequence was going on down there. I took my spot and watched dozens then hundreds of what looked like mostly chinook and chum salmon circle in from the bay in long processions, rotate through the fresh water pouring off the fish ladder from Capital Lake, then head back out, over and over, this extended process of acclimation they need to go through before they head upstream to spawn.

There were at least four, maybe five, harbor seals staged about eighty feet out, waiting. One by one they would submerge, charge in, and shoot for a meal. The bulkhead below the dam is only about fifty feet wide, so when a big school of salmon came in, it was dense with fish. All of a sudden, the water would boil up, some fish breaching, and I'd get a fleeting glimpse of a big seal body swooshing through them. I stood and watched this drama replay over and over for an hour or so, it was that mesmerizing. As far as I could tell, only one salmon got caught in dozens of seal-surges, so either the salmon must have very good evasive tactics or these particular seals need to work on their technique. A single seagull waited on the concrete spillway, swooping in every now and then to pick off a little stickleback that got too caught up in the flurry.

I learned recently on some TV show that the term mesmerize derives from a German doctor named Franz Mesmer who developed a sort of New Age theory of “animal magnetism” in the mid-18th century. He was quite famous for a time. One of his procedures involved producing an ethereal music on an instrument called the glass harmonica, or armonica, invented by Ben Franklin, which made sounds kind of like the modern theremin, without the electronic overtone or after-taste. It apparently induced a state of deep relaxation that came to be called hypnotism, often resulting in apparent cures.

Ironically, Franklin was “instrumental” in debunking Mesmer’s methods—Mesmer failed to cure his gout, I think, using Franklin’s instrument, so Franklin, who had some clout, claimed he was a fraud, leading to his being ostracized and exiled. I also learned on a recent TV show that the inventor of the theremin, a young Russian physicist aptly named Leon Theremin, was immediately recruited—i.e., forced—to find ways to translate this touchless production of sound into Russian spying devices, which he did. I found watching those salmon that hypnotic today, time slowing to a near stop, my eyes armonica-mesmerized, my head theremin-thoughtless.

salmon seethe
one seal
swirls beneath
water boils
flesh flaps
hapless trapped
by teeth

I
 deeply

breathe

(from *slights*, August, 2109)

I have no idea what the rest of that story has to do with any of this, but I enjoyed telling it. And I hope you enjoyed this labor-less holiday as much as I did, will savor these lovely late-summer days, so well-suited for growth and ripening, as I plan to, and then the equally lovely fall days, in advance of harvesting whatever you've planted this year to reap. I'll bring my harvest to market when it's ready. As I said, I have all the time in the world now. So do you.

Essay 15: My Phantom Thespian

I depart as air I shake my white locks at the runaway
sun,

I effuse my flesh in eddies and drift it in lacy jags.

I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I
love,

If you want me again look for me under your bootsoles.

You will hardly know who I am or what I mean,

But I shall be good health to you nevertheless,

And filter and fibre your blood.

Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged,

Missing me one place search another,

I stop somewhere waiting for you.

Walt Whitman

September 3, 2019

I woke this morning with the inside of my head harboring the vivid remnants of a mildly humorous dream that had loosely to do with newly invented devices for “remote viewing.” One was a virtual simulator to allow you to relive the experience of catching “the fish of a lifetime.” So you’d have to be a fisherman with such an experience in order to use it. You would sit in a chair with a rod in your hand, no line or lure attached. Across the room was some sort of 3-D projection-like device where all the action in the water was happening. You would actually experience—see, hear, feel, smell, full sensory contact—what it was/is like to catch and reel in that fish. I use the was/is to suggest that this was a way to make the past fully present, to “be” in two places simultaneously, the difference between that-was-then and this-is-now almost fully elided.

The second was more language-oriented, the invention of a new term by a theoretical physicist studying quantum duality, i.e., the way an electron can be both here and across the universe, communicating state-related matters instantaneously through parsecs of space, those two things that are one, or vice-versa, that has been demonstrated to be true, at least on that scale. (S)he (I never saw a person or name) wanted to come up with a jazzy name for this, so that when it became possible on a larger scale, people would be able to talk about it without scientific jargon. The term (s)he came up with was “phantom thespian,” as in remote actor. I liked that term quite a lot, as a way of naming so many of the seemingly wacko things about space-time that fascinate me, not in their arcane laboratory-based contexts, but in real life, everyday experience. All those phantom thespians

speaking with and to and for us as we navigate a path here, fishing for whatever.

I then recalled something I thought was completely disconnected from this, a little ritual I go through before I go to sleep every night. As you know if you've read any of my work, I took up singing a few years back, then recording my singing, then writing and recording my own songs. I have six albums of original material now, maybe thirty mix-tapes, which I have along the way shared variously with family and friends and then entombed on my personal website (most of it), Bandcamp, and Soundcloud (the original material only.) Outside of my immediate family and a few friends, no one ever listens to any of it, something I have always found saddening, much more so for some reason than the fact that almost no one reads my writing.

About a month ago, I was thinking about happiness, concluding that you can increase it in two ways: Do more of the things that make you happy and fewer of the things that make you sad. I decided right then that I would send my music only to those people who acknowledged receiving it in such a way that I believed they actually listened to it. That's a more-than-enough-fingers-on-one-hand cohort. I also terminated, expunged, my Soundcloud site. I could tell that the traffic I got there was completely illusory, robot-driven to increase the number of "followers" on other feeds. Oddly enough, the only song I actually believe human ears heard was "Today I Woke Up Sane," from my *while I sit here with me* album, an anthem of pissed-off resolution to quit buying into a dysfunctional relationship. Here's the chorus of that song:

They say the definition of crazy:
You do the same thing day after day,

and expect it to work out different
just because you want it that way.

So it didn't work out like I wanted.
I guess I shouldn't complain.
I was crazy about you yesterday.
Today I woke up sane.

Such a cool song, harsh and funny at the same time, one the world didn't have and needed, so I wrote it. At least five or six listeners, all young women in their 20s, sent me "likes" and added it to their feeds, which is an index both to their actually listening to it and to how many stupid men there are out there when it comes to love. And the sentiment applies to more than how you share your love, to anything really, like how you share your music, say. I decided to leave the Bandcamp site intact, primarily as a semi-permanent archive for all my original work after I pass, just in case someone along the way actually listens to it and thinks, "yeah, these are great songs [which I think they are], maybe I'll record some." I felt so much better about myself after this, almost like I had finally given up "hooking" for a living, gone straight, clean, just me with me listening to me.

So, last night: The last thing I do before I turn out the lights is check Bandcamp to see if anyone has listened to any of my songs. It has been on a flat line at zero for well over a month now. I thought: Do I really want to see that flat line again? Okay, show me. When I saw it last night, flat to the horizon, I actually, spontaneously, did a fist pump, like I had just won the game with a last-inning home run or something. I was so happy, proud really, that no one had listened to even one of my songs! I felt like Scrooge leaping around like a lunatic on Christmas morning, assuring myself, as he does his maid "No, I have not taken leave of my senses." How to account for

that, turning sad into happy that way I mean? Well, it is, I believe, the work of my phantom thespian, the one I've been in cahoots with my whole life without realizing how beautiful, how powerful, how everything it is, our being alive together in the universe, each seemingly alone so much of the time, but a party to everything, a party of two that fills all the spaces between them as it parties on.

I've spent so much of my life trying to recruit notice from the outside, evidence that what I was or did was actually pleasing to others. I won't go into the details. You know them as well as I do. After Carol passed, it became more the equivalent of flailing your arms from deep water in the hopes that that passing ship would take notice. It didn't work, none of it, then, now, none of it. I have, as you also know if you've been reading along the way with me, gradually been weaning myself from this futile desire, this need, the phantom thespian in the back of my head calling over and over to me just to be happy me with me, the two of us, across the universe, communicating instantaneously with one another about the variations in our state, all the company anyone ever needs really to be truly happy in this world.

Now I am happy to be alone, I am happy with the micro-audience my writing finds, all those, as I've said, with "ears to hear" and no other unhearing ears trying to gin up some flash-in-the-pan fame, or relatively miniscule amounts of money, for me or themselves. Self-publication, at least at this historical moment, such an inane one, guarantees, I can attest, that no one with those kinds of goals or ambitions, those ears, will hear your work, or if they do, take it seriously. That no longer bothers me. In fact, I actually feel like I won that game, too. Only people I like read my words. What could be better than that for any author?

And now, the music, same thing. Even fewer, almost no one, YES, finally, it's basically just me, the ultimate narcissism you might say, but you would be wrong. I am now my own phantom thespian, singing back to myself from the edge of the universe, all in, all in all, amazing. I am enough for me, almost unbearably more than I can stand or understand! And part of the reason I'm telling you this is so you will start to believe, if you don't yet, that you are enough for you. Doesn't matter how much else you have, or don't, who loves you or doesn't, who cares about what you make or do or doesn't, out there in the rest of the human universe. In the universe where matter matters, your matter, where time is that beautiful froth of bubbles your matter intersects with in space, you are everything you need. It's all there all the time, and it's all free. Forever.

Right now, I'm thinking again about Emily Dickinson, how hard she tried to get someone, anyone, to pay attention to her and her work, to truly love her and her work, all those years, writing thousands of poems and letters, astonishing things, but only a faint breath of what her presence must have been like, felt like, if you were there with her, ethereally beautiful on a scale that is almost not human any longer, angelic, otherworldly, and she, well, nothing but a "Nobody—too." People seem to lament all those latter years of her life which she spent largely alone, in her own room, as if such self-isolation is either a sad commentary on her (the psychological stuff) or on human society (the cultural stuff.) If you think that way, stop it. Today I can report to you that she was happy, deeply so, to be herself, to be with herself, writing it all out, and, I would say also singing, at least to the extent that her poems are rhythmically grounded in standard church-tune formats, though I wouldn't be surprised if she had a nice guitar and some primitive recording equipment to sing those poems out into the

infinite of space so she could hear her phantom thespian sing them back to her, in the privacy of her room, her own mind, the universe, all the same thing in the end, what home is, everything here, there and in-between.

I am in tears right now, tears of joy not sadness, for both Emily and me, and for Carol, who shares our spirit, with us where we gather in one another's name, so glad I wrote this, figured it out in the writing, heard myself thinking it, all that past history wanting, needing, trying, longing, wishing, hoping, praying, for what? Nothing I ever needed. What a waste. Today, done, I am happy, not ecstatically so, just humanly so, to be me, by myself, with me, me and my phantom thespian, the only "we" we need here, listening to one another across the vast reaches of space, instantaneously, ineluctably, eluding and eliding time. Somewhere in between the two of us, if you are one of the lovely few who read this, is a you-with-me. Don't doubt that I know it and feel it and love it. There is a point in the dynamics of the universe where it becomes possible for two to become three, the mystical number. If you are reading this line, it just happened. These days, all the rest of my days, that is more than enough to keep me happy. Thanks.

need it?

did before
don't any more

(today, 9/3/2019)

Later . . .

Just back from my walk, to Watershed Park today, a last-minute decision. I had an assortment of time-consuming chores this morning, then the writing I did, almost called off the walk. I'm so glad I didn't. Today is just a gorgeous late-summer day, sky that crystalline-topaz-blue that not only allows the sunlight to transect it without any apparent diminution or distortion, but actually seems to magnify it. The only clouds in sight were on the Olympic Mountains side of the sky, ruffles of cotton-ball-cumulus clouds just high enough to see between the low-slung buildings in town and breaks in the tree-line, from the road.

I never take a hat or sunglasses when I walk at Watershed. It is a kingdom of shade, soft and comfortable shade, the high canopy allowing light to dissolve fully before it wafts softly around you on the ground. What light gets through is mottles, speckles, patches, never enough for ocular discomfort. But today it was different. There was sunlight on the ground all over, in places and in ways I've never seen it there. Maybe it was just the timing of my walk, mid-late afternoon, the perfect angle of incidence for the sun to win its way through the foliage, though at points it seemed almost like the sun had taken on x-ray powers, could go right through the leaves, not just around and behind and over them. Everywhere the world seemed to be as overfull of itself as I was today, unable to contain its bounty, the way it always is in advance of harvest, an almost unimaginable excess of fruits to proffer. It was glorious. Every second of it. Glorious.

I have no idea whether the bounty I have harvested for these essays will be of any interest to anyone but me. That is, as I explained in *A Mind of Winter*, almost a

given when you write and publish as I do, no head or eyes but mine involved in the process. Doesn't really matter. If I had to write this whole book for the sole purpose of feeling this happy for today, for one day, it was a bargain, believe me. Maybe I'll get more days like this going forward, the fall, etc. Maybe not. It was still worth it. I'm going to make myself some dinner, just vegetables and rice, some fruit, things I gathered at the Farmers Market on Sunday and on my chore-run today. I will think of the harvest, this late-stage of my life, all I've gone through to get here, you have no idea about so much of it, even if you've read every word I've written, the truth, nothing but the truth, but, as is always the case with life, for everyone, never the whole truth, which exceeds all the words and their permutations that we can invent. That was worth it, too, if it was necessary to make this day for me.

To repurpose the quotes I opened the book with: Yes, I may have "many problems." And yes, they may be "great." As in hard. But also, I now know, as in awesome, great in a good way. Because they help to make me me and not you, not anything else in the universe, except for my phantom thespian, who shares me with me, on the fringe of our mutual froth of bubbles, that thin moist hinge from here to the edge of the universe, where the future welcomes us in and we get to have some say in how it will turn into our past on the way out, where even "all the time in the world" "goes by too fast," and where, if we "don't make more of it than it is," "don't worry about what other people think or say," we can just "have fun," like today, say, this "paroxysm of overwhelm" filled with a heavenly hilarity, one that didn't need sex and drugs to induce it, or Ralph and Sam to fight for it, or even Popeye and Horton to keep it centered. Just me with me. And every now and then,

when we're lucky, like now, like right now, this second,
with you, too. Yes! . . . So:

hi

high

I fly

by

bye

(from *slights*, summer, 2019)

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