

First, Summer

Essays from Olympia

by

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ISBN: 978-0-9989036-7-5

5/11/22 edition
corrected 11/22

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Introduction: My Picture-Perfect Summer

So, *First, Summer*. Once you get past this prologue and into the essays that follow you may be thinking, “What’s with that title?” Yes, many of the essays were written during what is technically summer, most if you prefer the equinox boundary, but only a few if you prefer Labor Day. “Summer” is, then, a stretch for the seasonal context. Well, I had two reasons for the title. One is simply semantic: This was my first summer in Olympia, Washington, and in the new life my arrival here inaugurated. I retired at the end of May. Nine days later, after having sold my house, a few pieces of furniture and my table saw, given away my car, the rest of my furniture, and most of my other belongings, I bought a first-class airline ticket for Portland, ordered up an executive limo to whisk me to the airport, packed up a carry-on suitcase, and flew off into the sunset. I mean literally: The sun was setting when I landed in Portland.

I did keep all of the artwork my kids—both visual artists and now art teachers—sent packing back home from college every summer, boxes of artifacts ticketed, by them, for garage-storage or the garbage. But by me, destined to festoon all the walls and shelves in my house, after I built the frames or stands or whatever they required for their presentation. I lived in company with all of that beauty for years, my house like a grand two-story gallery of priceless creations made by the only two people left, most likely, who truly love me. What could be better than that? I paid a storage-locker company to haul them out here, along with a few pieces of furniture I either built by myself or together with my son, the things I loved because our hands touched

them in the making, like artworks of a sort, I guess. And I threw in some clothes and kitchen supplies, enough to keep me afloat until I could get to Target or Kohls. On the drive up from Portland to Olympia with my daughter and son-in-law, the main reasons I picked this place to start over instead of just throwing a dart at a map on a wall, we passed a truck of the company I had hired, most likely the one carrying my stuff. Kismet.

I spent the first night at my daughter's house. The next day I went to a consignment/used furniture store downtown, nice things, and bought a couch, dining room table and chairs, a desk and chair, various end tables, etc.—took all of 20 minutes—which were delivered the next day to the house I had rented almost-sight-unseen in advance of my arrival, a place that has turned out to be perfect for me, way more perfect than I could have hoped for, what it's like, how it feels, where it's located: perfect. And then the storage container with my stuff arrived. That night I slept in a fully furnished, very comfortable, home. I adorned it with art the next day.

I am by nature determined and orderly when it comes to my personal spaces. I like feeling at home in them. Fast. I never understood how or why anyone would inhabit a new place for weeks or months with stuff still in boxes, furniture missing or disarranged. It takes so little time and effort to put all of those things where you want them. Which is what I did. By Wednesday of that week, three days in, I was here. All of me. And by then, I knew it was for good, too. I had initially planned to spend the summer, in the vicinity of my daughter who moved out here twelve years prior and whom I hadn't gotten to see much in the meantime. I would enjoy her company for a while until I had a clearer idea of what might be next. Well, what was next was already here. And I was living in it. I knew that for sure that fast. Kismet.

So, that's the first "first summer" in my title. The second is indexed by the comma. It's one thing to move, to move in, to start eating and sleeping and walking in a new place. It's another thing altogether to "be" there, especially when everything is so different, the natural setting, the local culture, the people, the size of the place, everything except, you might say, the language. Move to a foreign country without having mastered the language ahead of time, yes, that's exponentially more difficult. But for someone like me, most lately primarily a writer-of-place by trade, pretty much all of the words I knew to make sense of my world became instantly dysfunctional. I would walk down the street among flora and people and vistas I had no names for, or into the woods or by waters that bore almost no relationship by size or shape or kind to the woods and waters I knew back East, the places I had spent a lifetime walking in and around, describing, and, most especially, seeing, those circuits that connected vision with word so intimately, now suddenly broken. Such circuits are arbitrary, believe me, crafted over time like any made thing, which you come to know quickly when you move this far this fast, for good I mean, not as a tourist, for good.

My native dialect just didn't work here. I was dumbstruck. When I tried to describe what I was seeing, there were just no words for it. Yes, of course, I was able to pen a touristy-sounding sentence or two to send back to people who knew me. But it was just that. Packaged, generic, the surfaces, something that sounded right. But not what my eyes were trying their best to see. Tongue-tied like that, yet still wanting to catalogue my walks in the woods in some way, I started taking pictures. I am not typically a picture-taker. Of anything. It just never interested me, images like that. Okay, maybe I'd take a picture here and there to share with others. But they were never for me, and I never re-visited them in whatever repositories they ended up in.

My wife Carol was exactly the same way, but even more so. She hated, I mean hated, to have her picture taken, or to look at pictures. About two years before she passed away, she brought out the box of photos we had taken of and with the kids when they were very young, under 4 say, mostly to share with remote family, who were interested in them. There were many hundreds of them. Interestingly, about 80% of them were of our daughter, born 4 years before our son. Bridget loved having her picture taken. Joe could have cared less. And by the time he arrived we were picture-taking-burned-out in any case. We sifted through them to find the ones we thought might be most essential for them to find after we were gone, to have a visual record of their personal histories, so crucial in our current culture. And we threw out the rest. I mean piles of photos. Gone. That may sound ghastly to you, but not to us. Made perfect sense. I have the kept photos in a book with plastic sleeves in a drawer in my living room, where they will be found when the time is right.

This aversion of Carol's to picture-taking I've always attributed to her reclusivity. She hated in general to be the center of attention, to be looked at focally, as I did when I was a kid, still do less visibly to others, having worked hard to learn to hide it, so I understood that and tried to respect it when picture-taking time came around. But I'm thinking now, in reaction to a comment a friend made in an email to me, there must be more to it than that, if not pertaining to Carol, then to me, why it was always words I preferred for recording and reporting what I "saw" and not the camera lens, far more accurate and reliable in that regard. And I want to figure some of it out, as a way of explaining, upfront here, if only to myself, my mostly silent but image-saturated first summer here.

I'm pretty sure it has something to do with what I called in *This Fall* "loving eyes," what such eyes make of what they

see. Here is what the poet Hilda Doolittle says about Jesus in that regard:

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

Falling in love with “things as well as people,” yes. I’ll start with people because it’s easier to “see” love with a person at its focal point. Here are two lines from a poem in my *Li Poems* series:

I never remember exactly the face
of someone I love. Only later, a trace.

One of the things I know about myself, my deep emotional life, as it pertains to love, true love, is that when I’m “in love” with someone—could be filial or romantic—I can never form a clear facial image of the other in my imagination. It is always vague, soft at the edges, in motion. When I fall out of such love, as happens from time to time either because of circumstances or my own work (to free myself from dysfunction, say), the face appears clear, hard and static, and it’s fixed at the last point (time-wise) of my active love.

This pertains to what I’m thinking about in this way: To take a photo of a loved one, or to gaze at the photo of a loved one, is to fix that image in time, then or now, no matter, it’s the fixity, the doneness of it that is unsettling to me. If I’m still in love with that person, there is an innate resistance that arises, as if staring at that image for too long might wear away at, corrupt, the underlying love. I would be more concerned about how strange this sounds were it not for the cliché from Native American culture about a photo

stealing a piece of the subject's soul, thus producing an aversion to such capture that has nothing to do with reclusivity. That's a pretty good way of coding what I'm talking about here.

I do, of course, have photographic images of Carol (she was such a beautiful woman, and that shines through even when she's trying to hide herself from the lens), arranged now in a framed collage in the back of my sunroom, the farthest corner of my house. And I display very little else that reminds me expressly of her. Someone visiting might think: What a creep, keeping her hidden in this way, so out of the way you have to look hard to find her. There is, of course, a part of this spatial set-up that is simply emotional: It makes me terribly sad to see her image and know she will never be present again: *presence*, that magical force we are endowed with while we're here, quite often underestimating, even wasting its potential powers by our inattention to others, our culturally induced carelessness! So I tend to look at that collage almost out of the corner of my eye, and never for long, a way of honoring both her absence and her former presence simultaneously, of noting her stillness while keeping her in motion.

And now I'm thinking about this other thing at work: the fear that too long a gaze, without any prospect for the refreshment of presence, might lock that image in my head, make me less in love with her somehow. After I moved here I started, I mean right off the bat, dreaming about Carol much more vividly, and in more normal everyday circumstances, than I had been during my last years in Pittsburgh: always the same dreams there, she perpetually silent, grayscale, a tense despair in the air, like absolute loss was imminent, a kind of *noir* effect. Here, she suddenly appeared in color, said things, did things with me, quotidian things, intimate things. It was all so surprising and enjoyable. Nothing static. I took that as a good sign, that, in part, my

locked-in-place grief, stuttering over and over through stock still images, was releasing; and, in part, that my in-loveness was still intact, in motion.

Carol's first husband died very young and quite tragically. I knew him, which was how I met her. For all the time we were together, he was with us in one way or another. When we first got married my hope was she might "get over" him, that I might someday be the sole focus for her in-loveness. I realized after a time that that would never happen. She told me quite often that, at least for her, it was once-in-love-always-in-love. Not in a bad way, a way that diminished new love, just that, in the terms I'm using now, the inner images of previous lovers never came to a full stop.

I was not, for most of my life, like that in relation to past loves, my ambition always being to clear the space for what might be next, a process that usually took me some years and was never perfect. The sign for me that I was ready to move was, as I said, the static image of that face in my mind's eye: Yes, so that's done, let's move on. I see now not only what Carol meant, but also the deeper wisdom of her way of loving. Love is so rare in this life, this world, I mean all kinds of love. To proffer it, to receive it, and, even better, to have both of those states coincide, the ultimate rarity; love is not something to "get over" just because it stops. It is something to cherish, hold in the heart for as long as possible, forever even, no matter how complicated it makes subsequent relationships. There is a richness and density that comes with time, with age, in intimate matters of this sort, one that is enhanced not diminished by all the loves that came before. Some of those "souls" survive in the mind's life, and thereby make that mind more alive, more lovable in the sense that all these other presences come along for free. They might be parents, children, other lovers, all remembered and valued, "there" in a sense, just

like I was for Carol for all the days she loved me, and she for me.

Now, I'm like that, too. Would it be possible for me to love another woman deeply and fully and reciprocally, the way I loved Carol? That is highly unlikely, I know, given my age and my aversion to normal social channels, including the "media" kind that most people use these days to find partners, and that I won't. But should it happen, it will not come at the expense of my love for Carol. She will always be there, too, a welcoming presence, just as I came to feel Carol's first husband was for me, always approvingly generous. And I will try not stare at any of the images I have of Carol that I am lucky enough to retain—dreams, photos, the mind's eye—through the lens of some stupid cultural cliché of love as a singularity, long enough to fix her face finally in one place. Anyone who can't live with me with her fluid image in the "picture," at least from time to time, warmly welcomed, will not live with me at all.

Pictures of "things," of natural settings without people in them, are, of course, a different matter. The alive things of the world, especially flora, are, in my opinion at least, so fully present to themselves and their environs that their "souls" can never be stolen by a camera lens. Every time I walk at Woodard Bay for example, one of my favorite destinations here, as I approach the point that looks out over the water, I think to myself: Well, I have enough pictures of this spot, no need to bring out the camera again. And then I always do, my breath taken away by the broad sweep of water and land and sky, every time the same spot, yet so different, like I never saw it before, or need to see it deeply in this particular, unique iteration, and I take a picture, or several, same spot, same space in front of it, same deep love animating my view of it. Always moving, like Carol, except that Woodard Bay is still here, present, in

such a dramatic way that taking a picture of it every day for the rest of my life will not, cannot, diminish its true beauty.

Yes, it's loving eyes that see beauty truly. When the words for it have fled, they find another way. And that is what I learned today by thinking about my picture-perfect summer here: That was the only way I could actually "see" this world lovingly, keep an inventory of my presence in it. At least until I had some words again, the proper words I mean, not Eastern or Pennsylvania or Pittsburgh or Boyce Park words. Olympia words, indigenous words that actually said something loving about what I saw.

The right words for a place are surprisingly hard to find, I came to understand. I guess it's kind of like uprooting a plant and moving it to new place, or taking an animal out of its home territory. They can, most often, adapt. But it takes time. A lot of it. For me, it took the whole of summer. Thus, the comma in the title, as in, first came summer, the time it took to learn the dialect of this place, that long wordless or stuttering stretch I needed to adapt. Next came this, what you are about to read, which would not have been possible, or would have sounded stupid, if I had not waited, taking pictures, until I knew how to say it.

Right before I left Pittsburgh, I wrote the preface to a little book called *Last Spring*, which documented my final months there, dire, grim, scary months it turned out. It closes this way, the tail end of a commentary on part II of W. H. Auden's "In Memory of W. B. Yeats," which contains these famous lines: "For poetry makes nothing happen: it survives . . . a way of happening, a mouth." Here's what I wrote:

In a couple of months I'll be leaving Pitt and
Pittsburgh for good, first for Olympia, Washington,

to spend the summer months, maybe more, in the vicinity of my daughter, whom I haven't gotten to see much since she moved out there twelve years ago, who, along with my son, has stood by me steadfastly these last three years, through thick and thin, who actually wants to have me closer by! Bridget and Joe have been constant voices, mouths, lives, for me during this awful and awesome time, sometimes in person, mostly at the other end of a phone line. I love hearing their words. I can tell in an instant, in each of their voices, how they are doing, feeling, what I might need to say back, as a way of happening, doing. They hear and know my voice too, just that way, all of me in it, right then, and they know what to say back, as a way of happening, doing. They survive and help me to do the same.

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

might find one and wonder. Not something specific, just wonder. Yes, that's it. Just wonder.

What I have made here, you will find, is not funny or adorned with little painted figures or hand printed. It may be strange, but it still looks and sounds a lot like what I made back there. And that guy in China, well, he won't be finding it in separate installments washed ashore in bottles. It will end up on my website and for sale at cost on Amazon.

Once I decided to self-publish my books that way, in the aftermath of Carol's sudden passing a few years ago, needing the work out there now, right now, not years down the line after scads of "reviewers" pass judgements on it, I knew I would not find a wide readership for them. And I haven't. I think they are wonderful books, the best things I've written in my life, and I've written and published a lot via the conventional press. But they did find readers, loving, generous readers, real individual people I have gotten to know and love via their interactions with my work, more than ample recompense for the broader public invisibility. I hope this missive will do likewise, that I can keep doing enough to get you to the next page, over and over, because you just wonder.

August 25, 2018: It Has Many Layers

I was on my way today to a little overlook on the 5th Avenue Bridge in downtown Olympia to witness what to me seemed utterly implausible: salmon running on their way back to their birthplaces to spawn. Yes, I knew salmon ran this way all over the Northwest. It just never crossed my mind that I could watch such a spectacle right in the middle of town! The 5th Avenue Bridge is short, maybe 80 feet or so, spanning the narrow vesicle of water where the last tiniest finger of Puget Sound's saltwater ends at the tip of Budd Bay and continental fresh water begins, at Capital Lake, a man-made body of water at the mouth of the Deschutes river. There is a small viewing platform there specifically for people like me to watch the run. I had been there a few days before, waited maybe an hour and a half. I did see thousands of little fish, sticklebacks, I learned from the signage on the fence along the bridge, which also migrate upstream to spawn. But no salmon.

People came along, spottily, waited a few minutes and went, either not having as much time as I did or knowing something I didn't yet. I kept waiting. After I while I started up a conversation with a young man who seemed to be an experienced witness and found out it was entirely a hit and miss proposition, this salmon viewing. High and low tides were the most likely times for the salmon to be there. But it could be any other time as well. He left after about 10 minutes, on the assumption I guess that this was not going to be one of the times. Around 5 o'clock, maybe 40 minutes into my wait, one of the volunteer stewards, a man named Jim, around my age, showed up for his evening shift. He knew a lot, had worked in a hatchery, studied salmon, their life cycles, etc. I talked with him, casually, for a half hour or

so, found out, for example, that the salmon station and swirl around there below the bridge, sometimes for hours, even days, to make the transition from salt to fresh water, a process of acclimation.

Around 5:30 I left without having seen any salmon. But at least I knew something and figured I'd just stop by there any time I was downtown, take my chances, until I saw them. Today I did. Many hundreds of what another steward told me were Coho salmon, swirling in and out and around at the base of the bridge, waiting for the right conditions and moment to head up the "ladder" into the lake. It was hard to make them out in the dark water ten feet below me, but it was a stunning sight to see, herds of variegated-dark-green fish, each about 2 feet long, rushing up in waves and then retreating back into the black. I took a bunch of photos with my phone but found out later, looking them over, that the camera lens was not equivalent to eyes. I couldn't see the mottled backs of any fish in any of them.

There were two or three harbor seals cruising around maybe 100 feet out in Budd Bay. I could see their little heads surface here and there from time to time. They looked to be about four feet long, roundish, very cute-looking to human eyes. Not so to salmon eyes. Every now and then the salmon would become agitated, swirl around on the surface, even breach, water boiling from beneath. Then one of the harbor seals would surface with a salmon still flapping in its mouth. The seal would take the salmon back out to the fringes to eat its meal, a few seagulls sitting quietly on the water waiting for scraps. Three great blue herons glided around and settled here and there on the banks, sometimes sweeping in right below me from under the bridge. It was a stunning tableau, disproportionately grand for eyes Eastern-lake-schooled to grapple with, made even more so because I was standing right in the middle of town at the side of a bridge full of traffic!

But this is not primarily what I want to write about here. As is so often the case, it is incidental things, what I'll call hap-hazards, that end up giving shape to unfamiliar experiences, and I had one of those occur on my way to this second viewing. Right before you get to the bridge there is a small cafe with a "Folk Art" gift shop attached. Since I wasn't in any hurry to get to the overlook and figured I might not see the salmon this time either, I just wandered in there to look around. The inventory was the kind of "fair trade" craft items you might find in stores like this anywhere—there is one, for example, in the Squirrel Hill neighborhood in Pittsburgh: ceramics, fabric, small artifacts, all hand-made by "native" craftspeople around the world. The one distinctive and unusual display was an array of Indian tribal "fetishes," little carved-stone animals, bears in particular with tokens strapped on their backs. They were in a locked case, without visible pricing, so I assumed they were more than I wanted to spend right then.

The checkout counter was being worked by a very young woman, maybe 20 or so, full of quiet vitality, smiling at everyone, a genuine smile, cheerful. Two equally young men, most likely students from Evergreen College (long hair, hippy-style clothing, sweet-demeanored) were talking with her, asking her questions, real questions, I thought, not the kind of "chatting up" a man might initiate to see if a woman will "go out" with him: Where are you from? The Philippines. How long have you been in this country? A few months. Where else have you been? Just here (indicating to me that she might also be here to study at Evergreen College, which may have been part of this ongoing conversation before I tuned into it). And finally, what do think of Olympia? She smiled and said, with an air of wistful wisdom, "It has many layers." That was it. "It has many layers." The young men agreed and I wandered off to see the salmon, leaving these three to whatever

serendipitous paths their engagement might take from there.

I, too, have been in Olympia for "just a few months" now. I had no more idea what to expect from this place, I suppose, than this young woman from the Philippines did. I've lived my whole life up until now in the East, the previous 40 years in Pittsburgh. That was the cultural and natural world I was habituated to. Deeply. I knew Olympia would be different. It's much smaller, first of all, population about 50,000. The houses are simpler. In my neighborhood, most are 80-100 years old, cottage-like: one story, wood-framed, weathered-looking. Every house I lived in in Pittsburgh was much sturdier seeming, two-storied, all brick and stone and slate, basic housing-stock there. The closest analogies for my new neighborhood that I had in my head were the Atlantic coastal beach towns thirty or forty years ago, before they got big-boxed and millionaire-built out of their charm.

Olympia still had that charm, the same air of almost-quaint uniqueness, one of the other combinations of words I had been toying with to try to say what it was like here. Then, at my neighborhood street fair a few weeks ago, I just haphazardly started up a conversation with a very kind woman named Carla. We were both cramming ourselves into a little spot of shade (it was bright-hot-sunny that day) to listen to a folk-type band (2 guitars and a fiddle) play lovely Irish music, the kind that brings a tear to my eye when I hear it, not happy or sad, necessarily, just deeply sweet and moving, part of my personal heritage. Carla was, coincidentally, just back to Olympia from travels in Ireland, so we talked a bit about that, about why she was here, I was here. I said I really liked Olympia, and she did, too. Her word for it was "quirky," also accurate, in the sense that whenever you think you have a handle on it, something surprising strides by to say "wait a minute," like that street fair, so laid-back, so colorful, so friendly. Or the salmon.

But the word I'm going with now is the one this young woman from the Philippines gave me: "layers."

So, layers, like what? Well, I'll start with my house. I was in a big, big rush to leave Pittsburgh this spring, about 10 seconds after I retired, if I could. As it turned out, it took me a couple of weeks: to sell my house, dispose of my belongings and find a place here. My daughter scouted out a few I found online one Friday afternoon. That night, when she called to report, I could tell from her voice how stressed she was with work, her own life here, and I knew I needed to decide right then which of the three she'd seen I'd take. They were all very different: an urban, industrial-look apartment in a multi-unit building right downtown, a luxurious VRBO/AirBnB-type condo for long-term rental, fully furnished, right on Capital Lake, also downtown, and the place I ended up taking, this bungalow just up the hill from downtown.

I had been looking online for a couple of weeks. I'm pretty sure that this was the first place I clicked on to get the details. I thought then somewhere deep in the back of my head that I would end up here. But I didn't know if it was for better or worse. Bridget sent me a couple of pictures she'd taken of it that day. There were some renovations ongoing, so a lot of disarray. All she said is "This place is great." I asked her later why she thought that, given the unfinished state of it. She said because it had good a "feel" about it, and she trusted the man working on it, who told her it would be ready by my arrival date, as it was.

One of the reasons I had Bridget look at places for me, instead of flying out, for example, to see them myself, is that I trust her implicitly and completely. Even more than I might trust myself in a situation like this. She is utterly honest in her appraisal of everything and rarely if ever fooled by appearances or salesmanship. And she knows me.

For example, all she said about the downtown apartment was she wasn't sure if it was my "speed." I crossed it off my list right then. The other one, well, she liked that one quite a lot. If I knew for sure I was only going to be here for a few months, I would have taken it. But then, if I stayed, I'd have to move again. And, really, no matter how long I was here, I wanted my own stuff, most especially my kids' art on my walls, not possible in a place already fully decorated. So I took the bungalow.

I had no clear idea, really, how big it was (I assumed small, from the outward appearance, the façade), how "finished" it would be for livability (the photos showed a lot of upset and missing things), or what the neighborhood was like. But I took it anyway, to relieve both Bridget's stress and mine. Done, come what may, I thought. When I actually opened the door to the place, I was stunned. Not only was it charming—a sunroom, a huge stone fireplace—but large: spacious rooms, two bedrooms and a laundry room in addition to the living room, dining room, and sunroom, big kitchen (simple but more than ample), nice bathroom (clean, big tub for baths.) It was a real house. Almost as big as the one I was leaving, which I thought would be impossible, big enough to display all of the art work I took with me on its many freshly painted walls and shelves. That's what I mean by layers: I see a tiny image online of a place that looks equally tiny; behind the door is everything I could ever have wanted and more.

One of the things I most like, in general, about Olympia is the visual humility of its housing stock. The neighborhood I live in, Bigelow Highlands, is well over a hundred years old. There is in fact a "Bigelow House," the Ur-house for what's up on this hill, open for public tours, which reminds me, I need to do that one of these days. It was built in 1859. My house was built in the mid-1920s, as were, I assume, many of the other houses around me, since they look similar:

cottage-type houses, all different in appearance, but sharing these features: simple, wood-framed, one story, Craftsman-style roofs and porches, weathered-surfaces on the outside but colorfully painted, warm looking.

A few have been rehabbed, to enhance sale value I assume, but most are deceptively plain. I assume, like mine, they have many "layers," like once you go in you just can't believe how welcoming it is, how kind it feels toward your presence, how beautiful all the old stuff is, that massive river-stone fireplace in my living room, say, clearly hand-built, with the black-steel wood-stove built in, industrial-strength for heat, not just ambience, though the latter comes with the former; the basic kitchen cabinetry, unpainted wood, clearly hand built on site from plywood (the doors, single sheets to prevent warping) or one-by pine (including a series of little rounded shelves beside the over-sink window to display small decorative artifacts), the kind of kitchen you'd never find in brick-built home back in Pittsburgh, the kind of kitchen that would bring out the sledgehammers and crowbars on the Home and Garden channel, the kind of kitchen you feel at home in instantly, at ease, broken in, waiting patiently to receive your dishes, your food, and you. Mine has an old-style linoleum floor, marmoleum they called it, (recently enough installed not to be worn through), a nice little window over the sink, where I stand and wash dishes because there is no dishwasher. I thought that would be a drag, a constant irritation, but it's not. It's not the opposite, either, some wonderfully Zen-moment-maker in my day. It just makes that window something I get to look through for a few relatively pleasant minutes a few times a day. And when you're alone, there aren't that many dishes after all. Soap, wash, rinse, done. A nice metaphor for life, maybe.

And food, layers there, too. Olympia is, as I said, a town of 50,000. You'd think there would be a few good restaurants,

a bunch of fast-food places, and that's it. Not so. For one thing, the city at some point must have zoned its downtown to keep out franchises and big boxes. There aren't any. So everything there is a "local" business. Maybe because Olympia is the state capital, or who knows why, among those businesses are dozens of restaurants, each one unique. Bridget loves fine food and going out, so she and her husband, Mark, know all of them. Very well, as in they are recognized by name in many of them. And they know which one is best for what: steak, salmon, oysters, pizza, pasta, tacos, beer, wine, cider, coffee, tea, desserts, cocktails, gelato, you name it, there are places to find it at its best. And they took me to them. Those layers might have taken me many months, even years, to peel back. I'm sure it took them some time to create the catalogue. But as stunned as I was by my house, I was more stunned by the diversity and quality of the local cuisine. I knew a lot of Pennsylvania towns with 50,000 people. You'd be lucky in many of them to find one or two good meals, let alone a good meal on every block.

Want to eat at home, as I do most often? Go to the Farmers Market for fresh vegetables, fruit, fish and all kinds of other treats. Or walk to my local market, a little pricy by Pittsburgh standards, but the best meat and dairy and produce I've found in a standard grocery store maybe ever. I eat great food every meal. And when I want to indulge in something "unhealthy," there are three places within walking distance of my house where I can get a burger, properly incinerated to my taste, or a thick sandwich made with real meat, or crunchy French fries, or fried anything. And beyond that, the local culture fosters and supports not only multiple "craft" brewers of beer and (my new favorite) ciders of all kinds, even vinegars, but also a plethora of coffee places that roast their own beans and tea places that mix their own blends. And bakeries, at least a half dozen you want to keep going back to, one for their breads, one

for their macaroons, one for their puff pastries, one for their fruit pastries, and on and on. And hand-made chocolates, and . . . well you get the drift. All of this right there, within two miles of my house. That's layers upon layers with layers in my book.

Want to shop instead of eat? Well, there is an olive oil store, a violin store, a locally-produced cheese store, a guitar store, I mean that's exactly what and all each sells. And art and craft stores—photographs, paintings, ceramics, metalwork, almost any media you can think of—around every corner. And antique/vintage/“junque” stores, same thing, everywhere you turn. And a great, I mean great, hardware store, the old-style kind with everything you might ever need hardware-wise, one bolt at a time, if you want. And, well, again you get the drift. When every business is local instead of franchised, it is one of a kind, charming, unique, quirky, all creating in ensemble many, many layers.

And I still haven't gotten to the biggest thing with layers here: the natural environs, which I have struggled not only to grasp visually, so copious and grand it is, but to name for others, relying so far on weak words like “majestic,” or “awesome” to handle that business. I won't go into that here. The essays I expect to write this month will, as is my custom, be founded on my walks in the woods, though right now “woods” seems about as weak a word for the places I'm haunting as “majestic” and “awesome” seem as modifiers for it.

I want to end my opening piece this way: Today, the first day I'm actually able to process my perceptions of this new place into serviceable words, is, by happenstance (or not) Carol's birthday. She would be 65 today. I have an inner-contradictory reaction to all the special days I associate with Carol. It seems inappropriate to “celebrate” them. Yet I cannot let them pass without stopping to pay attention to

them, kind of like the character in Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy evening." These days are lovely, dark and deep. They are promises I keep. They still me to silence in that I generally experience them entirely privately: "He will not see me stopping here to watch his woods fill up with snow." When I am, by necessity on those days, with others, they may happen to notice for a second or two, as we often do when someone we are with lets down their guard for a moment, lifts the shade of the public person just enough to give a glimpse inside, like those old roller shades that might zoom all the way up when we just want to adjust them slightly, and, stunned by all that light, we zip them back down, all the way, very quickly. There is some mystery that becomes momentarily visible: "My little horse must think it queer to stop without a farmhouse near, between the woods and frozen lake, the darkest evening of the year."

This year, though, Bridget invited me over on the 24th for dinner. We had spaghetti, one of the foundational staples of our family life while she and Joe were growing up. Comfort food. For all of us. And she mentioned that "tomorrow is mom's birthday," how she always has spaghetti on its eve, her way of honoring Carol. I was deeply touched, moist eyes, not crying, not sad, just touched, complexly so. Layers. Partly, I realized that of course (how stupid of me) Carol's birthday meant something of consequence to others besides me. Bridget noticed this day, too, how sweet. And then the other side of it, the sad side, that Bridget had to feel what I feel, this great loss, how I wished, all the time wish, I could somehow redeem Bridget and Joe from that inevitable sadness. And I can't. Know I can't. Know I shouldn't, that death is somehow greater than and beyond even the deepest love. That safety is nowhere on days like this.

Yes, you can ignore it, pretend it is not there, that specter that waits around every corner for all of us. But that is even more stupid than taking the turn to face it, so serene in its

presence, so dark, incalculably dark, so sad and beautiful all at the same time, everything lost and found in a moment of recognition. We had such a nice meal together, talked mostly about our lives now, what was going on. Carol was, though, with us, I know, in spirit to hear it. And that's where I'll stop with this paragraph, before it turns into another and another, as it easily could, if I let it, as it could every moment of every day, if I let it. The line between stupid and smart is a very fine one. That fine line is right here.

August 28: Let the Rest of the World Go By

When I first got here, I didn't have a car, so I was walking. Everywhere. Lots of walking, probably 8-10 miles a day, up and down the steep hills, the two sides of town glued to slopes that meet downtown at Budd Bay. Way too much walking, I guess, for a previously injured knee that I aggravated in the process. My first walk was to the nearest grocery store, about a mile away. One of the streets I traveled on is lined with many small ornamental trees, which were in full flower, flush with green when I got here, just a spectacular avenue of warmth and color. I hadn't yet time-adjusted, so I did most of my shopping just after dawn. The store, like so much else here, was sound-tracked back to the early 1970s. I just happened to get there about the same time every day, so I heard the same few songs over and over: Delaney and Bonnie's "Neverending Song of Love," the Bellamy Brothers' "Let Your Love Flow," songs I had once loved but pretty much forgotten in the meantime. They became the anchor points for my first Olympia mixtape, a collage of early 70s soft-rock classics paired with equally famous early 20s croon-songs. I'd walk the aisles mesmerized by music.

I'm not much of a gourmet, but I like quality materials, produce, grains, meat, the best I can find. As a single person, the difference between the cost of average and good daily food is not very significant. And, oddly, now that I'm not being paid for my work, for the first time in my life, living on my retirement savings, I can afford not to pay attention to such costs. So every morning I picked out what I wanted for that day, then I'd carry my prizes home to cook. Except for my gradually more pained knee (even a

few groceries can weigh more than you think they will when you have to carry them a mile home) it was delightful.

When, after a few days, I wanted to expand my “horizons” beyond walking range, but wasn’t yet ready to buy a car, I needed to decide how I’d get around. I had used Ubers quite a bit in Pittsburgh during my final months there, while my vision was temporarily impaired, making driving both difficult and dangerous. So I could do that, and did a few times. But since there is, surprisingly, a bus stop right at the bottom of my driveway, why not figure out the bus routes, I thought? So I did.

I've always enjoyed riding buses. I'm not sure why. Most people don't. I think it's because there's a slice of the social universe you're more likely to encounter there: basically people who don't own cars, or can't drive for one reason or another, a diminishing cohort in our culture, but still a thick slice of the real world. I like that part of it. When I was young and had no money, I fit right in. Now that I'm old and temporarily a little gimpy-gaited, I fit right in. During my middle years, it was more a way to feel more fully human, I guess. The other thing I like about bus riding is that sense of not being in control of the passage, the opportunity just to sit back and Zen out. I often end up during that time making plans, even decisions, sometimes big ones, figuring things out. Or I just stare out the window placidly at what happens to be passing by.

I almost never use any technology on a bus. When I took the evening commuter bus from Pitt to my home in Penn Hills, about a 30 minute ride, I noted the tech-related striations in the riding populace: The youngest, mostly students, tended to aggregate toward the front, just behind the handicapped seating areas, earbuds in place, thumbing furiously away on texts, gaming, or scrolling through endless menus. The middle portion of the bus was primarily

working women between 30 and 50, most likely with clerical or service jobs downtown that made the cost of parking prohibitive. They tended to have Kindles or iPads and read ebooks, slower paced of course, tired from the day's work, relaxing. The back third of the bus was mostly older people, like me back then, many of them men who had worked hard all day, harder than I had, clearly. Like me, they sat there, face forward, unpreoccupied by any devices, and stared straight ahead. You might think those stares were just blank, as someone looking at mine might think. But I knew what was happening behind my eyes, a kind of meditation, or mental meandering, remembering back, thinking ahead, and suspected it was happening in many of those other seats as well.

The Pittsburgh buses were entirely unreliable, schedule-wise, almost never on time, sometimes so overcrowded you had to wait for another, sometimes not arriving at all. It was a crap-shoot, made especially tiresome on winter evenings, waiting in the frigid darkness. Add snow to that, and the odds were worse that relief would come into sight in a timely way. And they were overcrowded, often requiring a hand-strap stand all the way home, not pleasant when you were already weary from standing during the day. At their worst, there would be the crush of people pressing into one another, a bizarre kind of enforced, body-contact non-intimacy that, in another context, would be deeply intrusive, even illegal.

Here, the bus that stops at the bottom of my driveway, ten feet from my door, runs every half hour during the week, every hour on weekends. It is always, and I mean always, on time. The buses are clean and rarely crowded. I have never had to stand, for example. The drivers are polite and careful, waiting until you're seated before they move on. If you have a bicycle or are disabled, they take whatever time is necessary to get you properly situated, and no one already

on the bus indicates any impatience with this. Every person who gets on the bus has a friendly word for the driver, who sometimes knows them by name. Every person who gets off the bus says "thank you." I mean every single one, young, old, happy, agitated, slow, in a rush, every single one. I am stunned, nonplused.

Some bus riders in Pittsburgh would do that, too, of course. But most just came and went in distracted silence. And the drivers came and went in distracted silence. I'm not sure how to account for this difference. The clientele for the buses here is the same: people without the resources to buy a car or afford daily parking fees (though parking here is so cheap by comparison I don't think that's as much a factor for most): young people, old people, disabled people, disenfranchised people, many of whom, here at least, are homeless, people struggling in one way or another to get by. But everyone is sweet.

When I got here, I was stunned that I could ride the bus for \$1.25, about a third of what it cost in Pittsburgh, that I could get anywhere within 30 miles quite easily if I wanted, on time, clean, comfortable. The downtown Transit Center, the hub for the buses, is right across the street from a little homeless tent-city (one of several in town, a population being gradually amplified, I'm told, by the high cost of housing here) probably situated there because the Transit Center houses public restrooms. People come and go, come and go. I have never had a rude encounter with anyone, let alone one that instilled any kind of fear. I guess I would say in general, if you want to understand and appreciate the culture of this place, or any place, ride the buses for a while. You meet an interesting swatch of the real people who live there, often at the fringes, and how they behave is an index to how they are treated, which is an index to the deeper social ethic that animates what "community" means for the general populace.

I finally bought a car at the end of July, so I don't ride the buses much now. I'm so glad I did, though. It showed me that the general human culture here is warm, humane, polite, even kind in an at-arms-length way. Not overly friendly, but open, no obvious irritation with others. In my experience, you're likely to find at least some of the most unpleasant symptoms of social stress—impatience, anger, anxiety—on buses, people being so tired or hungry or poor (sounds like Ellis Island!). If you don't, you know that a generosity of spirit runs deep in a local culture.

There are a few paragraphs in *This Fall*, the first book I wrote after Carol passed, where I'm imagining a world "out West" that might be a better fit for me than the one I was in at the time. I describe it this way, in a conversation about the "albums" I'm recording to send to my family:

Just before the "home" album, I did a "West" album, those great, simple classics: "Don't Fence Me In," "Back in the Saddle Again," "Let the Rest of the World Go By," those songs. Having grown up in the 1950s, with the Lone Ranger, Hopalong Cassidy, Bat Masterson, the West has always been tuned to my longing for a simple, good world "where a friend meets a friend," and "the only law is right," "a place that's known to God alone, just a spot we can call our own," my kind of world. The one that doesn't exist anywhere specifically, of course, or does in small pieces almost everywhere, depending on the power of individuals to imagine it, embody it, enact it, a place where people work hard, are self-reliant, but mostly where they are straight up: They say what they mean and mean what they say, all the words tethered to something back where they came from and, then, tethered

again to the place they land. They promise something and they intend to keep their promise.

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

The world I live in right now seems short on those values, to me at least. Words are not attached to anything before they emerge, they don't have any express ambition to land anywhere, and they don't intend to stay there for a while. It's a sweet deal. No real promises to keep. I don't like it, never did, never will. I have come to associate it with the East, maybe because that's where I've lived my life thus far. I've travelled out West, but never lived there. Maybe, probably, most likely, almost assuredly, it's no better, at least in the real places people have to inhabit now, this same culture. But in my head it's still way better, a kind of Jack Palance paradise, especially all those characters he played when he got older, Curly in *City Slickers* and, my favorite, Rudy, the ex-Hollywood set designer in *Bagdad Café*, living in his little trailer out in the desert, making those garishly beautiful paintings, hardly ever talking. That's my retirement dream right there, alone, lovingly taciturn, out West, where balance is firm, depth is constant, the path

unwavering, letting the rest of the world go by. And so dark at night you can always find the Little Dipper.

Well, that world does exist. Right here. Right now. On the bus or off it. I'm in it. I am stunned, nonplused. And grateful to be here, more than ready to let the rest of the world go by.

September 1: Looking for Bigger Words

As I said, my eyes are not yet acclimated to the scale of the spaces they have to take in here, everything so much larger than they are accustomed to looking at. Here I walk by trees—Douglas firs, red cedars—eight feet wide at the base, twenty-five feet around, maybe twenty stories tall, I can't even see the tops, forest floors adorned with frond-fountains of fern after fern, “lawns” of them, some as tall as I am, each one gushing up and over like Sideshow Bob's hair-do. Even when I glue my eyes to these green things, they don't stay stuck there, just slide off, trying to find something more manageable.

And the words my eyes have customarily turned to, in the syntaxes they know, to say what they see, simply don't work now. I am, over and over, stunned into silence. I remember having the same sense of discombobulation for the first weeks I spent in the Rockies in Colorado, as if that sort of scenery had no symbolic equivalent in my head, at least none I could easily translate into language. When I finally was able to write poems there, they resembled the mountains, large, perambulating, craggy things, many edges, full of twists and turns, neverendingly open-wide. And when I got back to Pittsburgh, those poems stopped, their out-of-placeness, literally, evident in the tighter, hill-embraced spaces I made my way through there. I had that same feeling when I went to see the redwood forests north of San Francisco. I was only there for a few hours, so no words had time to rise up behind my eyes and speak what I was trying to see, only a slack-jawed awe, bordering on incredulity, like, really, these things could not have grown this way, must have been created here out of concrete by Walt Disney.

Olympia has aspects of both of those experiences, on a somewhat smaller schedule: the mountains grand but more imaginable, the trees gigantic but at least plausible. There is no tree anywhere in Pittsburgh that is as wide as a VW Beetle at its base and 200 feet tall. And nothing that would count as a mountain at all in this arena. So I walk, often very slowly now, around, through and among those things, trying to re-train my eyes to see them as normal, translatable. I keep looking for the words I need, but they are not there. Some days, it seems like what I need is not new words, but bigger words, like TREE instead of tree or WATER instead of water. But all that would do, I guess, is add empty space to what I write, like an inexperienced freshman turning to a bigger font to meet the page requirement. Silly.

Since I cannot yet write what I see, I take photos in these spaces and then try to assemble them in sequences that make sense to me, little “story-boards” of sorts. At first, all my photos were wide-scale, huge things, a mountain, a bay, gargantuan trees, or fish or flora in overwhelming numbers. That was really all I could witness and process. Then I started taking photos of individual things, set-pieces you might say, a bird, a tree, a sculpture, a sign, a boat, especially things you won't see in Pittsburgh. Sorting those photos into narrative lines—I'd choose twelve from the lot each day to create a “walk”-log, just for myself, a way of “writing” what I'd done—was as close as I could get to “words” and “syntax,” look and see, visual “essays” instead of verbal ones.

A few weeks ago, I started composing little vignettes about what I had witnessed, in emails, for example, to friends who happened to inquire. The one about the annual Olympia Street Fair in late July, three blocks of psychedelically decorated little stalls promoting peace, love, conservation, or selling art, poetry, tie-died clothes, and any kind of delectable treat you could imagine, a very young band on

stage with a female lead-singer who couldn't have been 20 belting out Janis Joplin tunes with the most amazing voice, the kind you can't quite believe can come out of a person, just like Janis, young and old people all decked out like it was still 1971, not costumes, I mean, their real clothes, long hair, lots of it very gray, flowing free or pony-tailed, headbands, torn bell-bottom jeans, long, flowing, flowery skirts, the aroma of weed, which is legal here, in the air, like a very pleasant "trip" that required no drugs to induce it. Or the one about the Coho salmon swirling in vast numbers just below the low dam in the middle of downtown Olympia that separates the last little finger of Puget Sound saltwater from the fresh water stream they're trying mightily to reach, waiting for just the right tide-height, the necessary acclimation, four-foot harbor seals stirring them up from time to time as they came in to take one. That sort of thing, a long sentence or two about as much as I could muster.

Today, on my walk in Watershed Park, one I've taken multiple times now—this old growth temperate rain forest, incredibly to me just two miles from my house, right in downtown Olympia—I found myself being drawn not just to individual things, but to little scenes with depth, a log hollowed oddly, a steep incline up to some trees, huge roots growing over one another. I take this as a sign of progress toward my habituation here. I've written before about the fact that I have lost depth perception from time to time in my adult life, most likely related to migraines, for periods lasting anywhere from hours to months. When I get it back after such a hiatus, it is breathtaking, seeing that way I mean. It's not that I have to learn to see again in 3-D. But it opens up a different catalogue of words and images for me. I feel a part of what's out there and around me, connected, in it rather than simply an observer, like it's real, not on TV. I think that's why today my eyes, beginning to calm down now after weeks of overload, felt drawn to see dimensional spaces again, openings defined by what closed them in,

clearings made legible by their borders. It took me well over an hour to walk the mile and a half around the main "loop" in the park, stopping, sitting, stooping, staring, lost in those spaces.

I just looked again at the photos I took today, typically terrible by any artistic standards, my medium being words, not pictures. And that re-viewing went very slowly too, which I take to be a good sign: that I am starting to actually inhabit this place as something more than a casual traveler, only "vacation" eyes to see with. Still, not one new word came into my head. The only way I might explain to you what I saw would be to point toward the picture, that weak semblance of the thing, and hope you'd "see" it, too. One day, maybe, I'll be able to say it, too, clearly enough for someone else to hear. In the meantime, well, there's this. And quiet.

September 4: Paul Gets Small

There are numerous parks in Olympia, all within a few miles of my house. Not little parks, a square block or two, though there is one of those right across the street here, huge trees there, too, and playground equipment for the neighborhood children. I mean forests, managed, yes, maintained walkways, that kind of thing, not wilderness. But huge. I've been visiting them in sequence over the last few months. One I keep returning to over and over is Watershed Park, thus named because it once supplied all the water for the town from its pristine springs. Moxlie Creek, which runs through the park in many seemingly (to me) criss-crossing, separate rivulets gathering all of that water to be dispersed, well, I'm not sure where, is characterized, on a path-side sign, as "magical." It is an apt adjective.

I have been here now for three months. Stunningly to me, it has not rained, I mean really rained, full out rain, once during that time. One of the first things I bought when I got here was a waterproof rain jacket, having been indoctrinated into the stereotype of the Northwest as chronically rainy. It has "sprinkled" a couple of times, "misted" a few mornings while the sea clouds still hung low over the land. But nothing I'd describe in Pittsburgh parlance as "rain." Not once, I am not kidding! When I call attention to this, incredulously, to locals they all say, ominously: "Just wait until November." Yes, I think: I know, it will rain. But what about now, my three months here, what's up with that? To them, it is just routine, what summer is. Every day is picture perfect, morning clouds, afternoon sun, high sky, quite dry so even 90 degrees seems comfortable, cool evenings. I find all of that as hard to process as the flora, almost nonsensical

in Pennsylvania terms, where the weather changes daily. And it rains a lot during the summer, thunder, lightning, downpours, floods, even, of the kind I was reading about back there a month or so ago.

But it has not rained once since I got here, which gets me back to "magical." Moxlie Creek runs vigorously at the same level every day, clear, cold water, with trout in it, the sign also says though I haven't seen them, as if it never heard of dry. Some days it actually seems to me to be running higher, after weeks of dry! I have no idea where that water comes from. The trees, and everything else green, seem also to flourish, overfull of themselves, lush to an extreme, leafed out over every inch of stem or stalk, flush with flowers, without any apparent liquid sustenance. I have no idea how that is possible. When I got here in June, the local yard plants and shrubs were burgeoning, each branch fully colonized by many somethings beautiful. I had, still have, a hard time naming the plants. They resemble plants I knew back east, but like they are on steroids, muscled-up with growth. And it never rains! I was thinking today that they must be very frugal by nature. When water is plentiful, as I'm sure it is for most of the year, they store it up somehow, somewhere. Then, when it goes dry, they just live on their savings. Magical.

I've been walking in Watershed Park pretty regularly for the last couple of weeks. The "loop" trail is a very doable 1.5 miles, about half of what I was accustomed to back in Boyce Park, but perfect for me right now. When I got here in June, I didn't have a car and I had an insatiable urge to see everything at once (how unlike me!) So I was walking everywhere, both to service my needs and to take in the sights, at least 5 miles a day, closer to 10 many days. Up and down the hills. It was ridiculous. After a few weeks, I ended up, as I said, aggravating an old knee injury such that I had to slow down, or as close to "slow" as I could tolerate. And

then I bought a car. Now, my wonky knee healing, 1.5 miles is ideal. Maybe in month or two, I'll take the loop twice. I hope so.

The trees here are, temperamentally, very similar to Eastern trees in that they exude a quiet confidence, always wholly themselves, staid in all the best ways, having committed themselves fully from the outset to their chosen patch of ground and, come what may, standing on it sturdily. Except that here, some have been standing for centuries not decades. They neither welcome nor resist my presence, just like their Eastern counterparts, at least not yet. I know from experience that you have to walk among trees many, many times before they have a faith that you care to be there as much as they do, are reliable, a citizen of the woods. And, in time, they will reach out, some quite warmly, others more guardedly, just like people, good people I mean, variously social but uniformly tolerant, kind even. I tried touching a couple of trees on one of my early walks. I could, they let me, but I felt I shouldn't, it was too soon, a kind of resistance coming back like a magnet with opposite polarity. Today, for the first time, I felt like they were beginning to recognize me, like "oh, that guy, he comes by pretty often now, seems okay, I wonder what's up with him?" Not yet eager for physical touch, but not necessarily averse to it. One of these days I'll be walking by laughing, and I'll hear one of them laugh back, like they know just what I'm talking about—and I do talk, out loud, just like I did in Boyce Park back in Pittsburgh, though I need to be more careful here because this is a park right in the middle of town, made for walking, and I encounter at least two or three others along my way every time I'm there.

These trees, not surprisingly, make me feel "small." But in all the right ways. In my last year or so in Pittsburgh, as I fantasized about a new life in a place I might make a home, one of the things I knew I wanted was to become "small."

Olympia, of course, is a small town. But that's not what I meant by it. I wanted to be just another person, not "Professor," or "Doctor," or "Poet" or "Author," just "paul" was how I named that feeling. Small p. And now I am. When I can, I even write my name with a small "p" and skip the last name entirely. For some reason, I fantasized, if I became small in that way, people would actually treat me better, be kinder, more polite, more tolerant. And, so far, at least here, they do, they are.

I know that has something to do with the general local culture, just humane in little day to day ways. For example, if you step off the curb into a crosswalk, cars will stop to let you pass, without any glaring or scowling to make you hurry. Just like that. Still, even when I cross with the light at intersections, I feel my eyes darting around, just to be sure I won't be run down from behind. I joked one day with Bridget that I still have Eastern eyes in the midst of traffic, self-preservation always front and center. Yes, it is the law. But it was the law in Pittsburgh, too, and it never, ever happened. It feels, as I said, quite polite.

I longed for those qualities that get buzzed out by the city and, more pointedly, by academia, everyone striving to be larger all the time, more famous, more important, sometimes at someone else's expense. I don't mean to imply that the academic world is some kind of "survival of the fittest" jungle, at least not in the extreme. If it were, I would not have survived there, and I did. It's just the kind of culture that tends, well, not so much to disrespect the "small" as to treat it as less consequential, the way one might a pet, talking down to it, or yelling at it, or just brushing it aside, not fully worthy. These trees I see are fully worthy, and they know it. When I am with them, I feel fully worthy. They could relate to me as if I were nothing, a piece of lint floating by. But they don't. Maybe they just don't live in a culture that differentiates big from small to mark hierarchy

or social class. The fir and the fern are co-equal colleagues. I know that sounds kind of loopy. But I also believe it to be true. They are just as happy being exactly what they are, "fir" or "fern," as I am being "paul." One of these days I know I will feel quite at home among them, small in all the right ways, making friends, as I did in Boyce Park. That, I know, takes time, and time is what I have in abundance and want to spend now being small, feeling worthy in this grand space.

September 7: I'm Still Here

"And into the forest I go, to lose my mind and find my soul." That's a quote from John Muir that Bridget sent me about a year ago, when I first starting thinking I would come here. I use it as my computer screen wallpaper, so I see it all the time, inset in the gorgeous collage of fern fronds, glossy leaves, and water droplets Bridget created for it. I lost my mind quite a long time ago, of course, as you know if you've read much of my work, or listened to me sing. I was just, in fact, singing and recording Neil Young's "Heart of Gold," and the lines "I've been in my mind, it's such a fine line" stuck with me, twice. It is a very fine line. In my mind, I mean. I've been in there. Very, very fine. Sometimes scary fine.

Searching for a heart of gold. Trying to find your soul. Same thing in the end, maybe. I don't know. Yesterday I bought a frame for another collage Bridget made me a couple of years ago. It looks like a series of pink and red and black and white and striped and dotted bulbous hilltops, a Chinese type effect, all those soft, rounded mountains in such lovely shapes and shades. So beautiful, with this quote, from Aristotle, floating up over the horizon like a sun: "A man who is content to live alone is either a beast or a god." Living alone, in my circumstances, is not a matter of contentment, I can assure you, but you can look as long as you want for a heart of gold, doesn't mean the one you had will be coming back, or that you'll find another one. So you'd better be able to take it, make your own heart suffice in as many small ways as possible. And wait. An unwillingness to settle for less may, I suppose, be a mode of contentment. I don't know. I can tell you this: I am both a beast and god, not by turns, depending on when you might

see me or my mood. I mean both, together, always, a beastly god, a godly beast. Maybe that's what it takes, along with the forest, to find your soul, or a heart of gold. Maybe they're the same thing. I'll let you know if I ever get there.

I just watched a pretty dark movie, "The Big Heat," a Glenn Ford *noir* movie from the 50s. It darkened my mind, my soul. I felt depressed. Bereft. Alone. Maybe that's why I thought of Neil Young, wanted to sing that song: this world, all the hearts of gold getting knocked off, and hearts like his and mine still beating, why? As I headed back to the kitchen, looked out the window, I saw the most amazing thing: a rainbow, a right-across-the-whole-sky-pot-of-gold type rainbow, bright, all the colors distinct, and, even more amazingly, I saw some rain, very soft, pleasant rain, rain I could walk out into and through to take photos of the rainbow which probably won't come out, but so what, take them anyway. I stood and watched that rainbow until it softened almost out of sight, some neighbors with their kids out in front of their houses, pointing, laughing, marveling, just like I was.

And the rain. One of those rare rains I've witnessed since I got here almost exactly three months ago now. It was, like the water in Watershed Park, magical. I have never loved rain so much. For itself. For its rainbow. I can hear it becoming stronger right now as I type, a real patter on the roof. My pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. My heart of gold. My lost mind, my found soul. Even if it only lasts a few minutes, I will be at least briefly more god than beast. John Muir would approve, even if I didn't go to the woods today, looking.

I had a very nice thing happen yesterday, an email from a professional colleague I never met who just published an article in *College English*, one that makes reference to my first book, *Writing/Teaching*, to open a conversation about

the role of spirit in teaching. He sent me a kind note and a link to the essay, which I just read. It is quite beautiful. I won't go into all the details, but one thing he makes reference to from my book is a question I used to ask myself back then, intentionally and repeatedly, to help me think reflexively about the material work of making a classroom function well: "Why am I here?" In the book, I write about the effect, and implications, of that question, highlighting sequentially each of its words.

When I wrote back to him, the question that arose in my mind and stuck there, kind of awkwardly, was this variant on the original one: "Why am I *still* here?" There is, I know, a part of me that believes I shouldn't be. Like Olympia, it has layers. The most obvious, though least consequential, has to do with retirement. I am not "here" any longer, literally, at least in a professional capacity, and most especially in the classroom, and I never will be again. But the vestiges of the man who was once "there" remain to some extent. I hope and believe he will not still be here at all one of the days, having overcome the temptations toward "teaching," a mission that is quite worthy in the places that others come for "learning," but is out of place in a normal social universe, particularly one where I want to stay small.

Another layer is the stereotypical sort of "survivor's guilt" I still feel quite deeply in the aftermath of Carol's passing. I wish she were still here. If that could happen by making me not here, I'd take it in a second. Beyond that, I am not here, at least not as a whole person, in her absence. I keep thinking I will be, believing I can be, any one of these days. But right now I'm not. Simple as that. My guess is I never will be, but I'm often wrong about so many things. So I'll just leave that be, wait and see.

And then there is the leftover, latent despair that comes after such a loss. And stays. There is a bluegrass song I like

where an old man sings, “The lures of this old world have ceased to make me want to stay.” That’s how I feel quite often. At one point my doctor back in Pittsburgh asked me, routinely, if ever feel “depressed.” I used that line to try to explain to her what it is like to look around this world and not see much that’s worth staying here for. It is not in any way depression. Nor does it deny that the time I have left to serve here is of value, great value to my kids, I know, and maybe to a few others who walk with me in spirit, or all those trees that might enjoy my company. I sometimes wonder, by the way, whether the trees in Boyce Park are curious, even sad maybe, that I don’t come there any longer. Sudden stops like that, well, they are concerning to experience, a kind of dying, from the point of view of the other. In any case, the lures of this old world may not make me long to go, but they don’t make me want to stay either.

And as to “why” I’m still here? I guess answering that question is above my pay grade. If I happen to persist in some way after I’m not here, and there is someone up there who has the right security clearance to explain things like that, I have a whole bunch of other “whys” to get through before I get to this one anyway. But I’m not yet there, even if I’m not quite here. From this liminal state between, the lures of this old world look kind of flimsy, filmy, see-throughly, at least compared to the lure I used to have beside me every day.

I’ve written several times previously about such liminal states where the line between death and life blurs. It always makes me nervous to do that, how easy it might be to misunderstand: to think, say, that I have some special knowledge as a result of my trauma, a weird-fake Carlos Castaneda type thing (I don’t, and I don’t think he did, either, though I do quite often borrow his “death on the shoulder” metaphor); or, even worse, that it is an inbuilt feature of my being, ESP, e.g. (I prefer to think of it as just

SP, which we all have built into our base model, no need for any expensive upgrades—the one that includes the moonroof, say—if and when we want it use it); or, worst of all, that I have had some special self-induced hands-to-the-forehead-type experience transform me from the ground up, that simplistic “born again” mentality that afflicts certain Christian sects (yes, Christ does raise people from the dead, literally, and he does transform many afflicted bodies with his touch, but that guy standing in front of the congregation ranting is, I hate to tell you, not Christ and neither, obviously, am I.) Being “born again” is possible, but it’s more like growing up again: It takes work, lots of it, which takes time. Still, I want to insist that our customary ways of marking boundaries between these two states, life and death, useful and necessary as they might be for our day-to-day lives, are just not accurate.

I recall, for example, all the funeral masses I served as an altar boy, many dozens of them, my trying to figure out from my detached perspective what was really going on there, this strange intermediate realm we all seemed to inhabit for those hours before the coffin was lowered into the ground. I never felt as if the deceased was quite with us, an individual presence, but I also knew that we weren’t quite all-there either, as completely separate individual presences, I mean. It was more as if we were hovering together for a while in a space that was neither here nor there, not quite life (in its diurnal aspect) nor death (in its eternal aspect), but just as real as both, a place where the very thin veil or mist that separates those two companionable states becomes translucent, partially permeable.

And It’s not like the horrific “death-in-life” that Coleridge configures as a spectral skeleton in his “Rime,” nor the more honorific “life-in-death” Dante configures as “he” is led through the realms of afterlife by his guide. It’s more

like a vague space where the laws of temporal sequence that organize experience here are temporarily suspended. Those minutes or hours or weeks or months or even years that it takes to properly grieve might take no time at all or forever; or more accurately, as they are felt, they are both instant and eternity simultaneously. I was just thinking that thought today as I got out of the car after my walk, how we humans dread the thought of an eternity of suffering that Christianity, at least, poses to frighten us toward betterment. My thought was: Just now, the instant it took me to step out my car, given what I happened to be thinking right then, was itself an eternity of darkness. And I've had long stretches of bright light that, right now, looking back, appear to have been an instant. Either way, we just need to traverse those measures of time. For as long as it takes. I have no idea why. That, as the song says, is for "the by and by," whatever that means.

I'm sure if you think about it for a minute, you will remember states of mind just like that. They are quite common when we are children and don't require the impetus of death to incite them. Maybe it's just watching an ant walk by on the ground. And take a look at Ezra Pound's *Pisan Cantos*, where that's exactly what he does while he's locked in an outdoor cage in Italy in the aftermath of WWII, contemplating his dreadful arrogance, awaiting his dire fate, if you think adults can't do that, too, when they are under enough duress to cease to care about this world's lures. For adults, it usually takes that great a loss to disorient us enough from the delusion of world-lure-time to fully grasp what we are and what most matters on our path through this world, the one we have to wend our way on to get to whatever, if anything, is next. Where, if we're lucky, we might get an answer or two to our most pressing questions, where instant and eternity, I'm hoping, amount to the same thing.

September 8: *Coup de Foudre*

Today was a "watershed" walk for me. I mean literally, in Watershed Park, my local temperate rain forest. It is finally starting to feel different, more familiar, like I was beginning to belong, not enough so yet that I could reach out and touch the trees, but comfortable enough to think about asking, maybe next time, or further down the line, that falling in love thing I've written about before.

I am, by nature, both flamboyant (on the inside) and careful (on the outside) when it comes to falling in love. And I'm quite different with people, of course, than I am with other living things. With good reason. Most people, in my experience, are relatively tolerant of unconditionally loving gestures, trust them and like them, no debt to pay, that kind of thing. They are gender-neutral, too, which helps. I try to do things like that as often as I can, when I see a need, because I know how much such gestures meant to me when I was fallen a few years ago. People are much more guarded in relation to gestures that actually invite a response, have a "quid" implied by their "quo." I have tried since I got here to be cautious about that with the people I meet, not to appear needy, just open, friendly. Whenever any opportunity presents itself, I start a conversation, casual, pleasant, engage. Most often I get a response in kind. Then I might indicate in some slight, gentle way that I'm open to more. No one thus far has taken that next step, which is fine with me. I know people here already have full plates, just as they did back in Pittsburgh. I used to have one, too, so I know what that means. You might be able to make room on that plate for a few more peas, but not another big chunk of meat. I am a big chunk of meat right now. And, besides, I don't really mind being alone, have been long enough to

know what's good about it, not just what's bad. I try to remember Christ's parable about asking, seeking and knocking. If I see a door here, I knock. Maybe one of these days one of them will open, I will find and receive. But no way I'm just barging in. No one wants that, including me.

Falling in love, on the other hand, in a romantic way, with a woman in my case, is fraught with peril, I know. I've only fallen that way four times in my life, maybe five, one's a close call, the first time in the 5th grade, that far back. And every single time it was "at first sight," I mean, head over heels at first sight, what the French all a *coup de foudre*, literally a bolt of lightning. I always knew, from movies and such, that women were skeptical of, if not outright suspicious of, that kind of manly reaction. So I've tried to hide it. Sort of. Careful. Careful for me, I guess, which for most people is probably not very careful. The only time I didn't get burned bad was with Carol. She was like me in that regard, kind of crazy when it came to falling in love. And she had been badly burned herself a few times. Fortunately, neither one of was fully deterred by our burnings. I'm only saying all of this because falling in love with non-human things in the world is so much different. Very few things out there are suspicious, quite often to their disadvantage, I suppose (think whales and redwoods, e. g.) They are open, gracious, receptive. Or at least not transparently defensive, in the ways that people are. Anyway, today I felt as if some of the trees I'm now coming to recognize as individuals were beginning to open up to me.

As I've said, my walk in the park is about a mile and a half. Most days now it takes me over an hour to make it. Not because of my knee, which does fine. But because I find myself over and over stopped dead in my tracks, staring slack-jawed at something awesome right before my eyes. Or I stop to take a photo. Again, I don't like taking photos,

either the process or the artifact. I like what I see to go straight into my head without having to pass through a lens. Well, maybe that's not exactly accurate: Words just happen to be the lens I prefer. They isolate and distort just as much as glass, more so even, but for me they just work better. Here, though, as I've indicated, my first two months left me speechless. I could not move what I saw into and through the assortment of lenses I had in my linguistic bag.

I turned to photos as an alternative way of recording, but also as a way of learning, of teaching my eyes how to see what I saw well enough that words might come. Some days, especially early on, I'd take pictures of alien things that were, by my standards, gargantuan, otherworldly. Some days I'd take pictures of familiar things that here happened to be oversized, a giant slug, say, shoving itself across the path, 6 inches of firm muscle, the kind that a few sprinkles of salt, the Eastern treatment for troublesome slugs, wouldn't even dent, let alone deter. Some days I'd take pictures of mottled grottos where light went to abide with shade, their gathering together there in the depth, inextricably in one another's embrace. Some days I'd take pictures of young things growing on top of dead things, a 4 foot stump of a dead tree festooned with the over-hanging roots of an Eastern-sized tree that just happened to sprout on its flat top, dragging water up the steep sides somehow with those thick, stiff arms reaching down into the ground. Some days it was birds, hundreds of them feeding, or fish, thousands of them migrating, or water, coming and going in lake-loads every six hours or so, or sky five miles high, or mountains standing guard at the perimeter of space, their great, gray shapes vague outlines on the horizon. Well, you get the "picture," literally I guess. I still take pictures on my walks. One of these days, I'll just stop, I suppose, words becoming available again. But, in keeping with the spirit of these woods, I'm not in any hurry. I really like all this quiet

in my head when my eyes look out to see. And then there's a lot less for you to have to read. Win-win with that, I'd say.

September 10: Cormorants, Quiet, Rain

Today I decided to visit Woodard Bay, my third trip there. If you imagine the southern reaches of Puget Sound as a long multi-jointed arm, the several "inlets" in and around Olympia are like crooked fingers. Budd Bay is in the middle of downtown Olympia, flush with hundreds of moored boats, all sizes and kinds, mostly white-hulled, like a picture postcard on a sunny day as I drive down the steep hill of San Francisco Street on my way to Woodard Bay, or walk by them downtown, bracketed off on the broad board walk lined with artistic and culinary amenities. About eight miles down the road is Boston Harbor, a sittable "beach" that comes and goes with the tide, nice restaurant, Friday night events, lots of craft beer and fine wine. Bridget and Mark took me there once.

Woodard Bay is about two miles east of that, fully natural, a narrow basin of water that fills up and empties out with the tides, lots of gulls and ducks floating around to feed on whatever all that moving water brings in and sweeps out. Henderson Inlet, much larger, is on the opposite side of the narrow peninsula that separates them. I heard about Woodard Bay from Carla, whom I met, as I said, at the Bigelow neighborhood block party. She said it was must-see for the hundreds of cormorants that come there to roost during the summer, the many thousands of bats that leave there and head downtown to eat insects every evening during the warmer months, and the harbor seals who haul out to rest, and in spring have their pups, on the remnants of the lumber-moving infrastructure still left in the harbor.

I went for the first time maybe a week or so later, impatient to see what she described. When I got there, a little parking

lot off a side road, I was stunned. The bay was empty, I mean no water as far as I could see through the trees. I had already witnessed this extraordinary phenomenon on one of my first walks downtown: There was the bay; where was the water? It was, of course, just low tide. It's not that I never saw tidal recessions. They happen every day on the Atlantic coast, the water moving back and forth on the beach by 50 feet or more. But no matter when you look out, the ocean is still there. Here, these little capillaries, it just comes and goes, full, then empty. I had difficulty comprehending it, as if one of the lakes Carol and I used to fish at, mid-size Pennsylvania lakes, would be there when we sat down for our lunch and be gone when we headed home for dinner, nothing but a huge mud flat with nothing on it.

I made a mental note to look at the tide tables before I headed back to Woodard Bay, assuming I'd see the birds, et al., once the water came back. I returned a few days later, at high tide and, sure enough, the water was back. I could hear the cormorants squawking just up around the bend, so I headed down the walking path, dizzying arrays of trees and understory growth ramping up on either side, like the most lovely and awesome gauntlet you could imagine having to traverse. About a mile down, I reached the end-point. Off to the right was a perfect vantage point to watch the cormorants, hundreds of them, just as Carla said, all on the other side of the bay, some in flight, but many dozens of them roosting in trees across the way. At first glance, from that distance, there appeared to be maybe twenty nearly-barren trees rising above the leafy green below, with what looked like many dark gray leaves on them. But I soon noted that these leaves could take flight, were in fact the cormorants, on their way to coming and going out into Puget Sound to fish.

To the left, at the end of the path where land meets water, was a complex system of heavy wood pilings with rail tracks

on them, stretching out into the bay maybe a quarter of a mile, an impressive sight even in its current state of disrepair. I had no idea what it was or was for. Today I found and read some of the informational signs describing the lumber industry in the first half of the 20th century, rail cars bringing thousands of huge logs down to the bay from the surrounding forests and dumping them into the water where men essentially walking on the water would “boom” them into “rafts” to be dragged up the Sound by barges toward Everett, north of Seattle, where the lumber mills processed them on their way to their ultimate marketplaces.

When that industry changed in the 1970s, all of this apparatus became irrelevant or redundant, much to my benefit, since the whole area became a nature reserve. Well, “became” after a fight between a few ardent environmentalists and developers, the details of which I don’t know much about but can imagine. The same thing happened with Watershed Park, I know from the signage, a legal battle to conserve that space in its natural state. Today I was thinking about the vagaries of time, of one’s own time, how, were I walking here 60 years ago, if that were even allowed, the din would be cacophonous, people everywhere, train cars rumbling in and out, nothing “natural” at all except for dead trees being dropped in the water and many living human beings risking their lives to scramble them into rafts.

Now, it is so quiet. Eerily so for my city-tuned ears. Gulls and ducks float and fly serenely everywhere. There are bird boxes for swallows nailed to all the huge poles out in the water where purple martins come to nest. The gravelly-looking areas between them attract the seals, which haul out to rest or give birth. Underneath those structures, the sign says, many, many thousands of bats are sleeping right now, dreaming of a trip to town for dinner this evening.

But, to get back to my story, today I walked at Woodard Bay. I hadn't checked the tide tables. The water was gone. I didn't care. I noticed that immediately and wondered why. Best I could tell was, really, now I'm just used to seeing this odd behavior of water. It doesn't shock or confuse me. And I knew I could still see the birds, et al., if I walked down the path. That made me happy. "Normal" is a hard state to reach when nothing you see looks the same as what you used to see. Having a lake disappear and reappear twice a day was my new normal. And when I started down the path, the first half of which is like a long valley between two upward-sloping hills, maybe twenty feet high, most likely man-made a century ago to get a road back here for logging purposes, I didn't just see a blur of humongous trees and way-overblown ferns. It was space, deep space, receding deeper and deeper up and back.

I am enamored with depth, that sense of the background drawing the eye further and further into its embrace, because, as I've explained, I lose depth perception from time to time, everything going flat, sometimes for months. Having lived during those interims without depth I have come to love it. And today, it was there in its glory. I tried to take a few photos of little scenes where it seemed most evident to me. But I knew before I even looked at them that that was pointless. I know that great photographers with great cameras can capture depth in its mesmerizing glory. My daughter does that. I am not one of them. I'm a clumsy guy with an iPhone. Half the time, wearing only my "distance" glasses, my fingers end up pushing buttons that flip the screen around—oops, why the hell is my face staring back at me—or activate the video—oops, why is this thing still going—or crop the edges of the frame—oops, why is what I was looking at not here now. If you want to see this particular depth, come here some day and walk with me. I won't even need to show it to you. It will take your breath away.

On my walk back down the path, having loitered long at the peninsula's endpoint, left to the inlet, then right to the bay, the little outbuilding with the historical signs between, loitering there to learn something, it started to rain, hard enough to wet me, then a little harder. Full-fledged rain. I was never much of a fan of such rain back East, but this rain was lovely to feel. I know from previous visits to the Northwest that the rain here is different from Eastern rain. It comes down kind of blotchier and softer, seemingly slower I'd say, drifting, maybe because it has had such a long way to fall from a sky so high it is more a seamless veneer of silky gray than a dark deck of individualized clouds. This rain was like that, a few big, gloppy drops of it, cool, soothing, commingled with a soft spray, more a mist, equally soothing. By the time I got home, it had stopped.

I know come November (everyone keeps saying, gravely!) it will be like this day after day. Maybe I'll get bored by it, even irritated by it, after a few weeks. Everyone else here seems to. But today, right now, this rain is just as pleasing to me as blue skies. It doesn't matter, right now, what I'll think in November, if I even make it that far. Today is what I have and it is surely much more than quite fine. Quite right! Right fine! Right now!

September 12: Dawdling is All Relative

Today has been a sort of recalibration day, moving the equalizer sliders around until you get just the right sound. For one thing, it is rainy again today, on and off, a thick, high deck of darker than usual (for here) clouds billowing up and around, the air damp, very cool-feeling to any exposed skin, which, for me, means basically just my face when I walk, hands in pockets. It reminded me of Pennsylvania, one of the sliders that finally moved, an "oh, okay, I know this kind of a day." None of the moisture here is quite the same, of course, the rain, as I said yesterday, more viscous, hitting with a soft spatter, the air heavier, maybe, like it can hold a little more moisture before it starts to discharge it, and the clouds flatter, bulkier, huge blooms of seal-gray. At one point in my walk today, back to Watershed Park, my default walk right now, at the bottom of a deep gully in the path, everything seemed "ominous." But as soon as I came back up the other side, it was just normal again, new-normal, the sliders trying to find the sweet spot behind my eyes, somewhere between Boyce Park's woods and Olympia's rain forest.

I saw a couple of other things today that were familiar, my first chipmunk, for example. Boyce Park is chock full of chipmunks. The one I saw today was my first here. What I noted immediately was that it looked exactly like the chipmunks I knew, same size, color, movements. I found that quite delightful, the fact that at least some things stay the same, here compared to there, no chipmunks the size of woodchucks, for example. And I saw a dragonfly, dark and darting, on the large side, maybe, but still familiar. I had just seen a nature show on TV a couple of nights ago about the world's great animal predators. Number one on the list

was the dragonfly, with a successful hunt rate of 95%, due primarily to its extraordinary wings, four separate filaments, each controlled independently, and very strong, so it can go up down, back and forth, hover, and take off after prey flying-saucer fast. I noted all of that today watching this one, its dusky gray color giving it a feel as “ominous” as the bottom of that gully I just went through. And I passed a couple of beetles on the ground, glossy shells, bronzy colored when dry, a slick iridescent black when wet, as they were today, also a familiar size and shape. I don't know anything about entomology, but these two got me thinking about insects in general and realizing for the first time that I have not once been bothered by flies on any of my walks. I have had a few at home. My front door does not have a screen, so if I leave it open a fly or two wanders in, mid-size, lazy, slow-moving flies. Almost slo-mo by Eastern standards. If I choose to, I can always get them without a lot of chasing and swatting antics. But that's it for flying insects.

Carol had a deep dislike, a hatred really, for the flies that so harassed us on our summer walks in Boyce Park. Mid-June to mid-September they were everywhere water accumulated, squadrons of them buzzing and striking. There were two primary types, a smaller fly that zoomed and hovered looking for any opportunity to alight, a whiny buzz. There would be at least three or four of these within earshot most of the time. The human ear must be tuned to hate that whine, which grates on the nerves. I know from time to time I'd try to Zen them out, but an instinctual aversion would soon take over and my irritation would be doubled for having tried to override it. I always wondered why only slightly adjusted high-pitched sounds, from some musical instruments for example, could be so appealing. Then there were the big flies, what we used to call "horse flies" as kids, partial to dive-bombing toward the head, scary, their dronier sound, equally grating, getting louder and louder as they approached, and capable of inflicting a nasty bite.

Carol carried one of those tennis racquet style fly-zappers all summer, the industrial-strength model, impressively “shocking,” swinging it up and around her head rhythmically as she walked. And they work. When they hit a fly in mid-air there is a loud snap and then the smell of burned insect, which delighted her, which delighted me. And at least for a minute or two, the other flies would back off. But here, there are no flies in the woods. I wish she could walk here. It would be like heaven for her. Hey, maybe that’s what heaven is. A long walk in a beautiful place with no need for a zapper.

I think all the work I’ve been doing with my camera, with light and shade, shallow and deep, is paying off. I’m beginning to feel like a real 3D presence, even in these woods, the size of things sliding into my eyes’ calipers, almost comfortable, not new-normal but now-normal. One symptom of that is I take fewer pictures, just letting my eyes channel what I see into my brain, side-stepping words, to be processed directly into my body, part of my presence. Today I just took photos of few banana slugs, which are out in force now with all the water, these four- to six-inch marvels slithering by almost in super slo-mo on the layer of slime they exude to slick their way. But even these seemed normal to me today. Okay, I thought, they’re big, but they’re everywhere. I know how to see them.

Music always accompanied me on my way to walks in Boyce Park: The drive there took about 20 minutes, just enough time to preview on my car’s CD player whatever playlist I was working on. Once there, once back, then back in the “shop” for revisions. Here, the drive takes more like five minutes. And, since my new car doesn’t even believe in CDs (preferring a SD-card set-up, and I haven’t gotten an SD-card yet) I have been hooking up my phone to do that work, listen on the way, then listen to the rest via earbuds

while I walk. This feels weird to me, aurally cut off from what's out there in that way, but I also like it, for the same reason I guess that young people like it: My life has a musical score, its own playlist, and I sang it myself, the ultimate mode of self-absorption, I suppose! So what, I think, so I'm self-absorbed. I'm pretty sure I wouldn't be if I weren't walking alone, well, I am absolutely sure I wouldn't be. But I am walking alone, I have gotten permission from myself to be by myself with myself, so I wouldn't call that rude.

Today, I listened to my Olympia Mixtape #1, twice. Which means it took me over 45 minutes to walk the mile and a half around the Watershed Park "loop," about half my Boyce Part walk rate, slow but still better than the hour-plus it has been taking me to dawdle my way, start-stop-start, lately. Which reminds me: I dawdle a lot here, when I walk, drive, shop, everything in slo-mo by my Kameen standards. Everyone dawdles everywhere here. The only time I have felt someone was behaving rudely to me since I've been here, and that's three months now, don't forget, coming from a world where road-rude was quite routine, was one day leaving the parking lot at a local big-box store. My head was meandering and my car dawdled. A car behind blew the horn. So I speeded up a bit. What was funny to me about that was I knew if that car behind me were leaving a big-box-store in Pittsburgh at the rate of speed it wanted to drive, someone behind it would have blown their horn to wake *it* up. Dawdling is all relative. Maybe, if I had been leaving a lot in Pittsburgh at the rate of speed I took that day, no one would have done anything, assuming anyone driving that slow was either way too old or otherwise impaired to make such judgments appropriate or effective.

It's bright and sunny out now, I see, that huge, blue sky fully back in business outside my living room window, after taking the morning off. Summer makes a comeback. Fall

will get here soon enough, and I'll get to see how this one compares with ones I know and love. But, right now, I'm going to head back out for a while. No car, no music, just a walk down the street to get something wholly unhealthy to eat and drink at my go-to diner, say hi to Margaret if she's waiting tables today, sit and read one of my own books, maybe *This Fall* today, absolute self-absorption, all small-paul all the time, my own sweet voice never too far away for me to easily find and enjoy.

September 14: Doing Chores

The dreams I have had here are utterly different from the dreams I used to have in Pittsburgh, right from the outset, so different in fact—very dynamic, action-packed, suspenseful, vividly colorful, full of characters I either knew very intimately or not at all—that I wondered for a while whether someone else's dreams were streaming into my head while I slept, some wire having gotten crossed while I was flying over Ohio on my way here, another guy out there now dreaming my dreams, wondering WTF? Last night's dream was a good example. I won't go into all the details of it, because translated into a narrative, they will sound very mundane, boring. But the impact of the dream was sensational, made me feel almost euphorically happy to be me, to have been me, made me wish I had liked myself this much all along the way, which I didn't, for many temperamental and cultural reasons.

But walking today, it got me thinking about the Biblical story of Mary and Martha, their party, how they attended to Jesus variously. I have always been bothered by the way this story gets deployed in sermonic terms: Martha is a robotic, OCD-type who just does the chores associated with party-making, doesn't realize how special Jesus is, or maybe how special anyone is. Mary is the opposite: She sits at Jesus' feet, lavishing her attentions on him, which Jesus accepts and revels in. I think all of that is just stupid, trivializing every character in this script down to the least common of his or her denominators, comic book versions of themselves. I'll just set aside for the time being Jesus. He is a man, I know men really well, how they think, why they do what they do. His motives in this situation are, to me, very nuanced, complex, many mutual contradictions intersecting

in each moment, the way men actually are in real life and not in commercials. Or sermons.

I want though to say some things about Mary and Martha, how each, in her own way, is a wonderful presence at this event, one that would never have happened, or, more to the point, been recorded as part of the official transcript, without their distinctive modes of service. My dream had to do with me washing dishes at a party. They were piling up in the kitchen sink so quickly, to overflowing, and the work had to be done. So I just started doing it. Several people I know (who will remain nameless here) chided me for doing this, "Why are you doing this work?" My answer was simple: "Because I'm the one who *will* do it," implying that no one else there would, at least not right then, when it needed to be done. So there is my testimony on Martha's behalf: She *will* do it, now, when no one else does. She, and not Mary, is the one who invites Jesus into their home. A gesture of that sort comes with a set of attendant duties, even in our own ultra-casual social culture, but much more so in hers. She puts herself on the hook for the work necessary to make Jesus feel comfortable and at home there, as we do when we invite guests over, makes it possible, really, for Mary to sit and marvel at his wisdom. Without Martha, none of this goes down.

Look, for example, at the context for this scene in Matthew's gospel. It comes immediately after the much more famous parable about the "good Samaritan," whom Jesus uses to extend the boundaries of love for others beyond the provincial territory of one's own family or tribe. The Samaritan cares for the injured man, at considerable expense to himself, and without any prospect for repayment or even "credit," because that man is in need, not because he is like him. He ends up doing it because he is the only one who *will*, right then, when it needs to be done, others just passing by.

And the passage immediately after the little vignette in Martha's house documents Jesus' instructions to the apostles before he sends them out on the road to spread the good news. Basically, he says to stay at the places that receive them properly, attend to their basic needs, as Martha does for him, and to get the hell out of town when they are treated rudely or dismissively. In other words, they will need a matrix of Marthas to make it possible to meet a myriad of Marys. You can't have one without the other, is basically how I see this story.

Jesus, of course, is smart enough to know this. He doesn't admonish Martha for not sitting at his feet, smitten. If she did that, who would do the essential work, after all? He admonishes her, *I think*, for feeling resentful toward Mary about being stuck with the role she implicitly chose by inviting him in in the first place. His implied message is not to be someone else in this scene, but to become more fully herself, humbler and happier, to do the work serenely because she said "I *will*."

What I understood from my dream is that even if you get no credit for this kind of service, and it is a very legitimate kind of service, humble service, the very kind of service Jesus engages in out there in the world, the very reason in fact that he is grateful to have Mary's attention lavished on him for this rare moment, don't complain, resent, fume. True love expresses itself in many forms, from attendance to adulation. But it can't be true unless it is done under the aegis of a firm, clean "I *will*." It is actually the first kind of service, the humble kind, that brings Jesus to his terrible fate, his destiny. Yes, the Romans and Pharisees may be resentful toward him, even afraid of him, because others lavish their attention on him instead of them. It is, after all, the weird procession on a donkey the Sunday before he is crucified that seems to congeal their fury. But it is the quiet

Jesus, the one who serves, who most subverts the established social order. Look, for example, at what Gandhi accomplished, more decidedly, by doing next to nothing threatening, in a similar manner, somehow surviving it. Maybe because West is not East. I could explain what I mean by that, but if you're curious read the *Old Testament*, then read the *Upanishads*. You'll see what I mean.

Jesus becomes Christ not in a moment of idolization, but from all those other moments where he is doing his "chores" in and for others out there in a world that could care less, most often, about any of them or that. At one juncture of the dream, dishes piling up faster than I can wash them, I long for someone just to say "thank you, good job." Instead, someone says, crassly: "I'll tell you when you do a good job when you've done a good job," which I took to mean after all the dishes were clean. Or never. Such compliments after the fact are of course both warranted and appreciated. But that is not when people most want or need them. It is in the midst of that work, that service, fully cognizant of all that is being forsaken on its behalf, that such support is most welcome. That is what Martha does for Jesus: She tells him, through her service, what a wonderful gift he has been right there in the midst of his own service. Mary does, too, of course, and that's a lot more fun to imagine and witness. But not more important, not more important. I hope I remember that.

September 26: A Froth of Bubbles

Today I walked at Woodard Bay again. My first instinctive adjective for this place, a few weeks ago, was "magical," like Moxlie Creek, but on super-steroids. There is one spot in particular about a hundred yards up the side path into the woods where the trees—firs, cedars, hemlocks—are huge, closely packed, rising higher than eye can see all around, creating an enchanting shade, both breath-taking and step-stopping, in that I always halt there and gasp. That magical. Today I tried to see if I could come up with some reasons why, though, of course, magic does not need and is ultimately beyond our "reasons."

The first thing I thought about was how quiet it is, almost preternaturally quiet by contemporary standards, even in a smaller town like Olympia, let alone the cities I've been living in previously, ceaseless traffic noise punctuated by an occasional siren that recedes beneath notice after a few days there. For some reason, this place has none of that. Part of it I'm sure has to do with how it is situated geographically, between two hills, blocking road noise, and two strips of Puget Sound water, preventing suburban encroachment. I mentioned earlier how you walk into the place: down a paved path between high banks, all of those old-growth trees looming high on either side, the mountainous riffs of ferns cascading up and around and over the ground beneath them, far as eye can see. It is instant serenity. Not many people come to walk here, and the ones that do walk slowly, calmly, speak very softly if at all, serene presences, almost like a dream. Watershed Park, in downtown Olympia, is busier, walkers who walk with purpose, exercise, say, or stress reduction on breaks from work, all of them passing me out on one of my slower days, sometimes lapping me

along the way! Even the serenity-seekers "work" at it, sitting on bench, say, in lotus position, breathing deeply. At Woodard bay, there is none of any of that. Just slow, serenity on the cheap.

I'm right now in the midst of one of my intermittent extended periods of disequilibrium, a balance disorder that got married to my hereditary migraines about 25 years ago. A very unpleasant couple they make, exponentially worse than either was before they exchanged their vows. This one has been going on for about a month, precipitated by something so stupid and boring I won't even tell the story. I figure it's got about another month in it, if I'm careful and lucky. It takes a lot of energy and attention for me to navigate my way during these interims, all of it entirely invisible to others. My left leg in particular is making constant micro-adjustments, like someone on a tightrope might be making even when everything looks stable. By day's end, that leg is tired.

One of the things I noticed this time, and wanted to change, was how I instinctively walked during these episodes. For one thing, I tend to look down, about 6-8 feet ahead, as a way of focusing on a straight, well-grounded, path forward. And my gait has a side-to-side sway to it, again, I assume, to make me feel grounded. I decided a couple of days ago to try to change all of that. Not so much because it would get me back to balance faster; just because I thought it made me seem even older than I already am. So my mantra has been: stand tall, look straight ahead, stride directly forward. Over and over. Even if it's harder than what I have been doing. Over and Over. I doubt it will help with my condition, but at least I feel like I have some "work" to do while it's here.

I also tend to rely very heavily on my vision to keep upright. Closed eyes especially are not good, taking a shower,

sleeping, things like that. I've read enough about this condition to understand why, and the one time I tried "rehab" a lot of the work was vision-oriented. But today, because of what I say above, I started to think about sound in relation to centeredness and grounding. It is, yes, very quiet at Woodard Bay, but not silent. So the sounds that emerge seem, actually, much louder than they would or do back in town. I thought for the first time about how hearing resembles seeing, which I've spent more time talking about here, in that it is relative. We acclimate ourselves to ambient sounds in much the same way that we acclimate ourselves to visual stimuli. Why I, a poet who makes sound my business in a way, never wrote much about this in the routine experiential way well, I have no idea, though I have written a lot about it professionally, via poetics. But, in any case, I noticed it today mostly and oddly because it was so quiet.

Given the topography of the site, the only way loud sounds can intrude is from above. Today, for example, I heard a very loud cloppity-clop, probably a helicopter, just as my walk started. I looked up, but could not see it, which means it must have been at least a mile away. Over the next five minutes or so, maybe more, the stutter of the rotors gradually blended into a continuous, well, roar, so intrusive was it on the surrounding quiet, which then gradually and very slowly diminished. And still I couldn't see the source. It was maybe ten minutes before I could no longer hear it, which means it was by then many miles away. I hear helicopters go over my house quite often, I have no idea why, maybe the military base about 20 miles up I-5. I can hear the rumble of such a sound right now while I'm typing this. If I'm recording, I need to stop. But I rarely hear them for more than a minute or so. Which means to me that the other ambient noise must mask their sound fairly quickly, noise-cancelling of a sort.

Once the copter sound stopped, it got very, very quiet. As I walked toward the point, the sound of my shoes on the gritty path was loud, annoyingly loud, and no matter how I tried to soften my step, the kind of sound my feet make all day long without my ever hearing it was, well, annoying. So I just stopped, stood still, overlooking vast stretches of very calm water (it was such a bright sunny day today) maybe twenty or so gulls of various sizes gliding around, taking flight, calling out, so peaceful. Serene.

I could hear quite distinctly the pounding of a hammer from a distance, some man, I figured, fixing something, since it would be 5 or 6 steel on steel strikes, quiet, then 5 or 6 more, maybe three or four iterations. It was clearly coming from across the bay, at least mile away, maybe more, way too far to see even a house let alone a man hammering. That's how quiet it got. I reveled in it. I've read that there is a spot in the Hoh rain forest a couple of hours from here where one can experience nearly complete silence, at least from human sources. One of the quietest spots in the country, they say.

What I thought today was that I don't really need to go there now, though maybe I will. Because I could experience a form of silence today even more precious than that: the kind that the imagination creates by editing out the one intrusive sound disrupting it. Or maybe it actually is that intrusive sound that highlights what silence might be, makes it almost visible in a way. I toyed with the idea of how sound might, like sight, become a centering mechanism for me when I'm off kilter like this. But as soon as I got back on the road I knew that would be pointless. On the road, in town, even at home in a very sedate neighborhood, there is so much ambient sound coming from so many directions, and the ears are so acclimated to it, that it would be impossible to triangulate positional space with it. Here, for a few minutes, I could do it, a form of balance.

I noticed today something else noise-wise I've always marveled at: Many of the sounds of nature are pleasant to the ear even when they are very loud, as the seagulls were today when they shrieked, or, my template for this oddity, the cicadas back East, almost deafeningly loud in late August, yet pleasant enough to fall asleep to. If it were a neighbor's generator, you'd want to take a shotgun to it. Obviously, we are genetically predisposed, by long exposure, to enjoy such sounds, feel at home with them. And, of course, there are rarely ten or twelve different kinds of sound competing and combining chorally there, as there are when we're in human company. The two or three that are become like music, very soothing, inducing calm, even sleep if you're in the right position for it.

One of the things noise does for us is to mark time. Music is the best example, that rhythmic structuring of the time it takes for the piece to run its course. We lend ourselves to that time sequence, enjoy it, sometimes even crave its continuation. But for me at least, almost always, when the musical phrasing ends, I'm satisfied with it, ready to move on to the next or just go back to the randomness of noise that emerges outside of music. Sound, then, almost always invites me to think about time, and I did that in intermittent stages on my walk today.

My meditation started right from the time I got out of the car, really. I stopped to watch the water rushing out with the tide, a strong stream of it coming from under the bridge and then into a narrow channel right in the center of the bay, a channel cut, I presumed, then carved deeper over time, precisely for this purpose. When I looked at the bank up toward the road, I could see countless tiny little trickles of water draining out from the earth there into the sunlight, a shimmering wall maybe 4 feet high and 40 feet long, all well above the water line, but still pouring their portion into the

outflow. It was mesmerizing. I wondered how much water could be stored back there in the bank, waiting to be released like this, how long it might last. When I got back to the car after about 45 minutes, the bay nearly empty, that shimmering wall of water was still going strong.

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.

Today, that shimmering wall of water, seemingly ceaseless, added a new layer to my thinking about time. To be honest, I'm not yet sure what it is. But "shimmering wall" and "froth of bubbles" may have some hidden mathematical convergence, the sum of which is "time." I'll have to come back to this for further thinking. Time, of course, moves in a much larger register in the natural world. For example, it is now "fall." On my walk, there was a fluttering of leaves, like single droplets, presaging longer and stronger showers later. One of the odd things I noticed here is that some of the trees changed colors very quickly and all at once. What was all green a few days ago was now all yellow, or brown, or orange. No reds yet. Maybe these trees don't traffic in that particular extravagance, being extravagant enough already in size and age. But the leaves stayed put, except for those few dribs and drabs floating in front of me. I wonder: Maybe the leaves here come down all at once, too, the way they changed colors. Time will tell, as it always does.

One of the ironies of my experience of silence in this place, Woodard Bay, at this moment in time is that just 60 years ago, the noise here, as I said, would have been unbearable, all those huge logs sawn and fallen in the surrounding forests hauled by rail car right out into the bay here and

dumped sidewise into the water, hordes of men with spiked shoes scooting around on this rolling wooden sea to herd them into "rafts" to be floated up and away toward their markets. When you look at the remnants of the infrastructure that made this possible, you can almost still hear the echoes of all that menacing mechanical fury, rail cars clanking, men yelling, big boats rumbling. Were I standing here then, I would not be hearing the sound of my shoes on grit. I would not even be able to hear myself think, most likely.

I've done some hard work in my life, not on this scale of course, but physically demanding work, sweat-pouring-out work. One of the most enjoyable things about that kind of exertion is that it shuts off thinking. The body just absorbs all of that mental energy, uses it to do physical things, make stuff happen. I'm too old for that now, but, like running fast as the wind, which I did as a kid, I miss it. There is freedom in it, from the monotony of the mind, from the rigors of silence, from time, even, to a certain extent, from being absorbed into an unbroken sequence of extended "nows." It is always just one "now-w-w-w-w-w" when you are a body working hard, sweating: sweet!

There are of course other echoes in this place, Native Americans making their living on the bounties of the sea much more quietly, much longer ago, for example. And then, before that even, just these same animals, otters, seals, seagulls, cormorants, herons, kingfishers, making their deeply pleasing sounds with and for one another, no one else here to listen. The world here right now is, fortunately for me, much closer to that than it has been for well over a hundred years. I won't say I'm necessarily lucky to be standing here now instead of any of those "thens." Time is neutral. You get what you get of it, whatever noises the world around makes while you're here. It allows for what space places in its path as it laps ashore, over and over, as it

is doing here right now at my feet, or shimmers like a wall of diamonds while we watch it emerge seemingly out of nothing, that hard dirt bank, so beautiful, endless, just there, and there, and there . . .

October 7: What's the Third Thing?

It is cool and rainy today, maybe 50 degrees, a constant shower in the air. I took my Woodard Bay walk, expecting this magical place to be even more mysterious in the mist, and it was, amazing, the trees bathed in moisture, all of that surface moss on the big-leaf maples and alders thickening visibly almost as I watch, deep enough on many trees to support little colonies of ferns, each stem 6-12 inches tall, poking up from the side or crotches of the branches and trunks. I noticed today that the moss seems to grow more copiously on the maples and alders than on the firs, hemlocks or cedars, at least on the lower trunks. Maybe it has something to do with the differing chemistry between the barks of coniferous and deciduous trees, like Ph levels. I suppose I could Google it, but I don't really care why. It appears to me to be true, based on very limited personal witness, no matter the reason, which is what I have to go on now.

I'm still trying to get used to the way it rains here. For one thing, the sky is much "higher" and that is especially so by the water, the rain seeming to materialize somewhere miles away up there, how it falls in such separate, distinct drops, yet so softly, enough so that a two mile walk in it today left me only a little bit damp. About a week ago, when the first fall rains started there was an actual downpour, like there might be in a thunder storm but without any of the flash and din. Just a downpour. It made me feel at home. A few days later the couple that owns my house, Sterling and Lisa, stopped by to do some yard work. Technically, they are, I guess, my "landlords," but they are such sweet, kind people, like friends to me, that such a word seems impertinent. In any case, Lisa commented on that rainstorm, how it

frightened her. That told me that such outbursts are rare here. And most of the rain in the meantime has been like today's, soft and friendly. Some days it comes and goes in waves, intermittent bright sun in between showers, some days it comes in the morning with clear, blue skies in the afternoon, some days are like today. Carol, I recall now, loved thunderstorms, would recline on the bed upstairs, facing the window overlooking the back yard, westward, where the storms came from, and watch the lightning with great delight, cheer the thunder, beginning to end, couldn't get enough of it. Maybe she would miss that here.

Today I walked all the way to the point to look out over the harbor, everything enveloped in a soft, wet shroud. I thought of Coleridge's mariner's line: "A fog, a mist, a shape I wist . . ." That's exactly what it was like to see the skyline, the mountains off in the distance: "a shape I wist . . ." The mariner, of course, is about to see what a horror that wistful shape actually is, the death ship come to take the souls of his mates. What I wist was nothing like that at all. It was calming, almost sleep-inducing, so peaceful. A couple of times I was tempted to get my phone out to take a photo, but that reflex passed very quickly.

I have pretty much stopped taking pictures of what I see. Part of that derives from my ability now to actually "see" what I'm seeing, turn it toward a few words to help me remember it, write about it if I want, but more so just to keep it inside me for myself. I needed to take all those photos for the first few months because I just couldn't get any of this inside me rightly. So I would put it in my phone, put that in my pocket, take it home and download it, arrange it in little story lines, put it in me that way, three steps removed. Now my eyes have adjusted and I can see. I don't need that other apparatus to know what I need to know. But it was also the weather today, the kind of day I thought I'd be seeing all the time here, had fully imagined

ahead of time, making it feel familiar now, finally happening before my eyes.

Out at the point there is a roofed picnic canopy. There was a young woman under the front corner today painting the scene I was heading out to look at. She had, I could see, four small panels, maybe 6 by 6, set on her small easel, all of which had some paint on them. I'm not sure exactly what the details were. It seemed rude to intrude on her work even by looking at it, let alone asking about it, like she should have some privacy to do what she wanted to do on a day like today. But I thought that if I wanted to keep an image of what I saw today, I'd have to paint it, take my time, slow.

I spent a good portion of my walk trying to come to terms with something that has been bothering me for quite a while, that I decided this morning I needed to settle, if I could. It had, at least superficially, to do with the music I make and the way it's received, or most often ignored, by people I send it to. It's been going on for some time now, so I'm used to it. But for some reason that sequence, sing, share, silence, always makes me sad. I wanted today to figure out why, so I could stop that last "s" from happening, the "sad."

I started to sing with purpose about five years ago as a way of coping with the overflow of emotions I couldn't quite fathom or control in advance of and then in the aftermath of my wife's death, such a sad and stressful time. I wrote as one way of handling that, yes, but there was so much still left in there, a complex of vexing, undifferentiated feelings I needed to get to. Get out. Get in. Or all of those "gets" all at once. For some reason, singing songs helped me to do that. I've loved and listened to music all my life, all kinds of music, from Stephen Foster to The Kinks, so I knew a lot of great songs. I started to learn them specifically, to sing in

private, in the back room back home, closed door so as not to bother anyone, strumming away on my guitar, whispering or wailing. It was so helpful.

After Carol passed, the process escalated. As I said, I started recording these “sessions,” maybe just to hear “another” voice, my own reflected back this strange, new way. I have no inherent skills as a singer or musician, so the first playbacks were, even to me, just god-awful noise. But I kept at it. It was that important to me. After a while, I made “albums,” covers of familiar songs that to me fit together, to send to my family and friends. They were somewhat better, tolerable, to some at least. I gradually winnowed my audience based on the responses I received: In simple terms, if I heard back, you got more. If I didn’t you didn’t, a generally reliable “review” system.

Then, two years ago, out of the blue, I started to write my own songs, make my own albums, a process I have come to love, I mean truly love, maybe because it’s like anything you’re terrible at and then work to become more competent with, how it ends up pleasing you way more than the thing you are inherently good at, like, for me, writing. I shared these albums as well, more broadly at first, then winnowing, same system.

A few weeks ago, I had quite a wonderful thing happen. I wrote a bunch of new songs right after I got to Olympia, kind of fluffy love songs, I mean like falling in love songs, sweet, which is what I was doing those first few weeks, not with another person, but with this place, I guess, becoming a kind of romantic partner to me. I made them into an album call "The Kiss," the title and cover image coming from a most charming sculpture on the boardwalk downtown, two metal-cast, middle-aged lovers, dressed like it's the 1920s, she wearing a long dress, flowing hair, he, mustachioed,

wearing a rumpled suit, kissing one another lightly but lustfully right there at the waterside. Yes, most charming!

Just on a whim, I decided to put this one, my third original album, up on Bandcamp, a first foray into the public domain. To my surprise, I got a few positive responses, one of which led me to an indie-music review site, which ended up reviewing my album, a short, moderately positive review, and then staging a follow-up interview, my 15 minutes of “fame” in the music business. I was so thrilled by that, like a kid I guess who gets a ribbon at a fair or something. So I shared this news with as many people as I could, links to the album and the review, like you might share any sort of good news in your life. I didn’t expect anyone to listen to the album, or even read the review. Maybe scan it—it was only a few paragraphs—look at the front page of my Bandcamp webpage, which I tried to make nice, that sort of thing. Take a minute or two maybe. Aside from my immediate family, I heard back from only two people.

This made me sad, a sadness that persists now, lapping my shoreline with its ripples, their tiny bubbles on my life’s froth coming and going, over and over. I spent time today up to my ankles in that surf, wanting to fathom my sadness, its “why.” I made some progress, and will continue the process, on an off, for more days, weeks, months, years, whatever it takes to settle things in my heart. I know now, having started, that like Olympia my sadness has many layers, some of them going back to what happened after Carol passed, some of them going back as far as I can remember.

I already know a lot about what’s at stake here, but I’ll spare you the details. I am trying, as I said, to sound less like a teacher, become smaller in all the right ways. This is a good opportunity to make good on that promise. So here’s all I want to say. When another shares their news with you, as

monumental as a death in the family or as inconsequential as a short review, you have three choices: You can say nothing back. You can say something back that has little to do with that news, but makes you feel better. Or you can say something that will make the other feel better, even if it's only "I am so sorry for your loss" or "I am so happy for your gain." Those words, when proffered, are some of life's greatest gifts, and so easy to deliver. Three seconds to say, thirty seconds to write, they yield eternity in an instant. If you have difficulty deciding which of those three things to do, just think what you'd most like to have done for you right then if you were that other. There is a reason almost every religious and ethical system known to man is founded on some version of the Golden Rule. This is just another example of it in ordinary, everyday life.

The thing is, each one of those three things takes the same amount of time and energy, relatively speaking. You have to look, decide, act, or not, a matter of seconds. But the payoff for each is so different. No one feels better, you feel a bit better, or someone else feels dramatically, even life-alteringly better. Incalculably different. So, when in doubt, do the third thing, which is a pretty good summation of most of what I've written over the last three years. Maybe I should just take all those books off Amazon, off my website, and tattoo that phrase to my forehead: Do the third thing. I'm pretty sure that's a mode of "publication" I can't put on my CV either. But I bet some others would read it. And maybe ask me what it means. For a few, the ones with ears to hear, there will be a few tears that well up when I tell them. If not theirs, then mine.

Paul is the author of numerous books of poetry, personal essays, and scholarship available in multiple formats at online booksellers and (for free, in PDF form) at paulkameen.com

Poetry:

light/waves (2022)
first: my newer tiny poems from (t)here (2022)
slights: my new tiny poems from here not there (2021)
In the Dark (2016)
Harvest Moon (2016)
Li Po-ems (2016)
Mornings After: Poems 1975-95
Beginning Was (1980)

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In Dreams . . . (2022)
Living Hidden (2021)
Harvest (2020)
Spring Forward (2019)
The Imagination (2019)
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First, Summer (2018)
Last Spring (2018)
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Scholarship:

Re-reading Poets: The Life of the Author (2011)
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