

# Living Hidden

Essays on Identity

by

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cover image:

*Hidden Girl*, Bridget Underdahl

Bridget made this remarkable ceramic sculpture while she was in college. She also took the photo for the cover.

September 14, 2021 edition updated 11/20/22

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Was it really some other person I was so anxious to discover, when I did all of that looking, or was it only my own solitude I could not abide?

Wandering through this endless nothingness. Once in a while, when I was not mad, I would turn poetic instead. I honestly did let myself think about things in such ways.

The eternal silence of these infinite spaces frightens me. For instance I thought about them like that, also.

David Markson, *Wittgenstein's Mistress*.

Talking with another person to process what you learned or experienced doesn't mean having a friendly chat with them. It means *describing an event that had meaning for you, while the other person listens with caring, full attention, a calm presence, and a settled body*. This might involve both of you letting you tremble, cry, sway, shake your head, or move your body in some other way . . .

Resmaa Menakem, *My Grandmother's Hands*

. . . and when there is no other person out there who is willing or able to do that with you, the "other" you hold entirely in yourself can do it all for you. You write what you don't yet know and then read it with caring, full attention, as often as you want, to learn as much as you can about yourself. And to heal.

Paul Kameen, *Living Hidden*

## Preface

August 9

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

Epicurus

My working title for this book while the essays were in draft stage was “This Book Is Not a Book.” It seemed to me to be an inchoate jumble of mismatched parts, what I was calling “little snippets,” ranging from 1 page to maybe 10 pages or so, all different kinds of voices and styles. No clear theme or narrative line. A mishmash. But I wanted to keep writing it for my own sake, to try to figure some things out at this new and salutary stage of my progress from where I was to wherever I’m going. So I did, figuring even if it never saw “the light of day” publication-wise, what was the difference? That it would miss out, for example, on the few readers who typically consume my work, with varying degrees of interest? So what? It would still have me, an audience of one, eager to read it to find out what all this writing is trying to tell me, “each of us . . . audience enough for the other,” the only reason I really need these days to keep going.

It is not, though, a mishmash any longer, having come together so quickly and unexpectedly, “gelled” I’d say, that sudden change of state from a liquid to semi-solid that happens through constant stirring and seems utterly improbable, almost alchemically magical, when it happens. I am actually stunned by the speed and efficacy

of the transformation of those raw materials into a this now new, whole thing. The procession from chaos to order began a couple of weeks ago. I figured I had enough pages. They just didn't "add up" in the right ways. So I started pushing pieces around the way we used to do with that old puzzle game, my generation's 2D version of Rubik's Cube: the numerous flat tiles, locked in a closed square, that you had to shuffle up and down and back and forth, until you reached the "solution," some consistent pattern or image. I can't remember exactly what it was right now. Then, all of a sudden, *voilà*, it's there!

Yesterday, I read through this whole thing, with revision now foremost in mind, and, *voilà*, it's there! It actually made sense. I mean really. Okay, I realize my concept of "sense" can be a little loose at times: It still has no strong narrative line to hold it together (as some of my other books do); not even an orderly temporal sequence (the essays and their parts are not in chronological order, by date, for example, just inserted where they seemed best to fit); and the overriding theme is hard to home in on (like trying to track a large fish moving underwater.) In fact, I may be taking here the next logical step along my disestablishmentarian regimen in relation to the conventional institutional relationship between writer and marketplace: Don't embrace the book, as *This Fall* does, don't even seek to exceed it, as *Harvest* does, see if you can evade all of its imperatives and still have it make sense. Hide it in plain sight!

That is at least partly why I chose its current title, a phrase I take from Epicurus, an ancient Greek philosopher, and use also as the epigraph for my final essay: "Live hidden." That's what this book does. And that is what I have always done, I see more clearly now, living in deeper and deeper states of hiding, over the last five years, certainly, since my wife Carol's sudden passing, but over the course of my

lifetime as well, doing everything I possibly could to avoid celebrity, public acclaim. It was a temperamental thing first of all, my reclusivity, an inbuilt aversion to being the focal point of others' attention. But as a series of Zoom conversations with my siblings over the last several weeks made quite clear to me, it was also an ideological choice based on my singular experience with "fame" when I was in high school.

As a "gifted" student in my small town high school, my reputation in the community gradually grew. I aced every course, excelled at all kinds of standardized tests, SAT, National Merit, you name it. Based on the latter, I got numerous scholarship offers of various kinds before I even started applying to colleges. I was, in particular, a whizz at math and physics. In the aftermath of the Sputnik embarrassment in the late 50s, any exceptional student was steered toward science and engineering, transformed invisibly into a small agent for the recovery of national pride. My hometown neighbors were, if not proud of me, at least hopeful. I became someone they felt would carry their banner into the national arena.

The stress of this externally impressed burden was unbearable to me, someone who wanted not to be seen at all, now elevated into the public eye that way. It was like living in a panopticon. And I felt like I was losing my identity in that turbulent, tepid sea of other people's vague approbation, akin, on a microscopic scale, to what celebrities complain about, their loss of what they call "privacy." The difference is they actually craved and sought out their fame. I didn't. And I didn't want it. Times ten. The pressure built on me during my first two years in college, a star in physics but finding no joy in studying it. Finally in my junior year I changed my major to English, partly so I could spend my time reading and writing poetry, which I loved, instead of equations, which



I didn't; but also, I knew even then, to get all these people out of my head and all their weight off my back. The blowback was instant. I was a disappointment to almost everyone, even a pariah to some, those who most hoped to find some reflected glory from my accomplishments. It was quite a painful "loss," but one I was eager to endure, had actually precipitated, to get back a life I wanted and to escape from the life-for-them that they wanted.

I know this sounds overwrought and implausible. How could so much "celebrity" accrue to such a small person in such a small town? But here is one story I'll tell to index what I'm talking about. Four years ago the son of a woman who had graduated with my brother, two years behind me in school, and with other family connections, took a job at another college in Pittsburgh. He and I had a number of things in common, both professional and personal, so she asked me via my sister if I would like to meet with him. I said of course. She was scheduled to come to Pittsburgh on business so we arranged a lunch, she and I with him and his then fiancé, now his wife. It was a very enjoyable get-together. We got on quite well. He was at one point a brilliant math major who shifted to history, so we compared notes on that. As I was telling my story, his mother interjected that she still remembered the "shock" she and everyone else felt when I changed my major from physics to English.

Remember, this is someone who was not in my immediate social circle at that moment, i.e., someone I might consult or inform about my decision; and this is 50 years after the fact. That's how cataclysmic a routine life choice can become when others depend on you for some part of their identity. Think about how many changes of majors you remember from college now, and I don't mean of your college classmates or roommates, I mean of high school friends with whom you were, by that time, out

of immediate touch. You may not even recall your own changes of major as traumatic, enough so for you to remember them with “shock” many decades later. I never, ever wanted to find myself in a similar position, and I vowed not to court any sort of excessive public notice, let alone the “star-system” that infiltrates even the “small town” communities that disciplines in the academy surely are as well. And, above all, I never wanted to fall into the trap of forsaking myself, the internal equivalent of my “privacy,” to become a “writer,” sometimes in our culture a rose-petal-strewn path to self-destruction, most especially among poets back in the 60s and 70s, alcoholism and/or suicide seemingly *de rigueur*. So I lived hidden.

Don’t get me wrong. I was and am an arrogant man, ambitious, even while hidden. I actually harbored a hope, a confidence almost, that I would, despite my recalcitrance, gain notice, respect perhaps, as a writer I mean, and especially as a poet. I just wasn’t willing to pay the toll for it. So obviously it never came. Why should it? That’s not the way things work in our culture. You always need to pay for what you want. I was just too naïve and conceited to admit it to myself back then!

I am at this stage of my life so happy I experienced what I did as a teenager, inoculating me early on against an addiction to public adulation. And I’m so happy I have remained true to the path I chose for myself those 50 years ago, keeping me safely beneath the general radar in the meantime, free to be just me. To the degree that I became recognized, and I did in certain ways—as a radical outlier in my field, as an ethical presence in my department, and as a teacher *par excellence*—it was belated and all good.

My retirement benefits package now includes solitude, seclusion, peace of mind, long lazy days with nothing to do except what I choose to do and no one to do it with, or for, except me. It is serene, a freedom from outside pressure and expectation that many of my generational peers don't now enjoy. Okay, I know they don't want what I have, would prefer to be invited thither and yon for talks and readings, to be feted and celebrated. I had my fill of that before I was twenty. Now I am finishing a book that, perhaps, no one will ever read but me and a few friends and family, those who love me and/or have ears to hear. What could be better than that? If you understand that last sentence, you get me. If not, well, my guess is you haven't made it even this far in any case. For which, among all the other wonderful freedoms I savor, I am also deeply grateful.

Honestly, I have no idea if this book will continue to excite me this way as time goes on, so I can't make any promises about it to you. As I tell new readers of my work all the time when I send them one of my books: Read a few pages. You'll know by then whether what's there is something that seems to warrant your further attention. And as soon as you feel it doesn't, put it down. There are, of course, some who have paid to read my books, for which I am deeply grateful. But few, since they are all available in PDF form for free on my website (for reasons I explain there). I do sell the paperbacks I design, at cost, on Amazon, but I most often send even those for free to the people who I think might want to read them. Likely, if you are actually holding this in your hand, you didn't pay for it. So what's the risk? You spend 5 or 10 minutes trying it on. If it doesn't "fit," you don't even need to return it. Shelve it, throw it out. I will not be offended. On the other hand, if you find something you really like here, my guess is you will let me know. That is the "return" I receive from publishing this way. My readers actually talk

back to me. Even if it's only a few, or just you, it means the world to me. And even if it's none, there's always still that "me" talking back to myself, each "enough for the other," an ongoing wild conversation I have indulged in all my life, especially the last five years, and even more so now that I'm retired and living alone under the COVID-19 protocols. This book actually has that self-interactive aspect built into it, a symptom of how and when I wrote all of this, as you'll note if you continue.

As I say over and over again, publishing the way I do—without any other eyes but mine even scanning what I write let alone commenting on or critiquing it—is inherently dangerous. I think there is some adage about the barber who gives himself a haircut being a fool. It's like that. Still, that's just what I prefer to do now. And I cut my own hair, too, if you have to know. So, am I a fool? Yes and no? Anyway, who cares?

I've done a ton of early-stage reviews of manuscripts for others and for publishers. If I got this one, here's what I think I would say:

It has a charming weirdness to it that I like, sounds like a multi-hour version of the three minutes of between-here-and-thereness I often wake up with these days, some maze of thought or syncretic fusion in my head, there in its all-at-onceness, that just makes me smile, maybe laugh lightly. Now that I think of it, that's exactly the response I have to inscrutable poems and jokes when I first hear them. My instinct is not to analyze or interpret them, critical instruments better suited, I think, to more normally intelligible material. I either "get" them, which makes me smile knowingly, laugh lightly, or I don't, which puzzles me, inviting me maybe to try again. And maybe even again, hoping

to win, not earn, that smile, the laugh. I think that at least some of what's here has that sort of ineffable wisdom at its core, that sort of worthiness.

That said, this is a book best read with your head set to "loose," more like surfing a wave than lapping the pool, moment to moment balance adjustments more important than unwavering fortitude.

I had fun writing it. So far I'm having fun revising it. I hope you'll have some fun reading it. Or at least get a knowing smile, a light laugh or two out of it along the way. Six months or a year or so from now, I'll have gained enough distance on this to judge it fairly. If I'm disappointed, the nice thing about my process is I can "unpublish" it with a single click. I hope I won't want to do that. And I hope, if you read further, you won't end up wishing I had done that already.



## 1. Communion

July 20

*One of these mornin's, you're gonna rise up singin.'  
Then you'll spread your wings and take to the sky.*

“Summertime”

There is a little park I walk to quite often these days, now that the bigger woodland parks here are overrun by herds of what I'd call “tourists,” not outsiders coming in to enjoy the natural amenities of Olympia, or even native nature lovers trying to take advantage of the gorgeous summer weather while it lasts, but masses of locals afflicted by the mania of COVID cabin fever, careening around in search of some respite, most likely unable to cope with the inevitable confrontations with oneself that arise during periods, like now, that enforce social isolation, and at least occasional solitude. Most of these tourists are there in small groups or family units, parents with little kids. So even in the woods they are not alone. And there are lots of them. The first wave hit right before the various woodlands closed last spring, again seemingly mania-driven. I drove out to Woodard Bay one morning for my usual solitary walk and the parking lot was full, cars parked on the road even. It was ridiculous. Soon the state closed these places for safety's sake. So I started walking in town instead, the streets deserted, plenty of solitude, finding in the process how beautiful, how charming, how colorful my little neighborhood is, resulting in all those Youtube slideshows I made, with photos I took, my singing along to them, to share with family and friends.

Once the bigger woods opened up again, they went quiet for a while, pretty much normal. Until the second wave of the virus hit, threatening further closures. Then the crowds came out again, driven by the same mania, I suppose, to consume this commodity before it went off the market once more. Like tourists everywhere, they have little understanding of or regard for the culture of the forest or of those of us who are citizens there. One glaring symptom of that is a general refusal to wear masks, even though they are legally mandated in situations where social distancing is impossible. Situations like this, where groups of people troop around on paths that are 2 or 3 feet wide, seemingly nonchalant about close contact, as if the woods should provide, I guess, some special protection from infection just because it's outside. On the few occasions I tried to take my normal walks, I found myself repeatedly having to wander well off the path and into the brush just to gain the recommended distance from them, or from runners who barreled around on the paths, wheezing as they flew by.

In any case, I have once again stopped walking in the bigger woods here. Which gets me to this little park I visited today for maybe the 10th time. It is called the "Rhododendron Park," because it hosts in a small setting many dozens of naturally growing rhododendrons, from shrub to tree size, the understory there for a typical local fir/cedar/hemlock "forest," a term I enclose in quotation marks because the park is so small, one square (Olympia-size: small) block and the trees are on the younger side, all between 50 and 150 years old I'd say by their size. Even the ground cover is unique, most likely some form of clover, but with triads of leaves so large, each lobe the size of a quarter, that they look to me like shamrocks, maybe why, with my Irish blood, I feel the laughter of leprechauns in my ears when I walk there. I would never have found this spot if my daughter Bridget, who knows



all the local jewels, hadn't told me about it this spring. She explained to me that it was just off a dead-end street and that it was best to be on foot looking for it, the path in almost invisible from the road, so you might drive by it many times without knowing it's there. It is just about a mile from my house, so with the back and forth and a twirl around the little maze of paths, exactly right for my daily jaunt.

My first visit there was in the waning days of the rhododendron bloom, and it was just spectacular, those dozens of fleshy-leafed trees flush with their flashy floral displays. And even then, in the midst of its season, I crossed paths with only one other person, who was wearing a mask, which told me she was a caring presence in these woods. I've been back enough times now to know some specific trees well enough to share greetings with, feel quite welcomed and at home. I never now encounter another walker there, which allows me to let down my guard in the specific way I most enjoy in the woods, essentially to expand my presence up and through the trees until I am no longer "myself" but feel in some exuberant confluence with all of these other living things, a sort of ecstatic experience, not in any great spiritual sense, transcendency, say, but in the very practical sense of feeling literally outside myself, unbounded by the contours of my body, something akin to what Thomas Merton calls "communion," which he says is "beyond words, and it is beyond speech, and it is beyond concept" (173). In other words, it takes place in silence, in the company of others (he is talking about people, but, as you know if you've read anything else of mine, I don't draw hard lines between people and natural things when it comes to being "in the company of others"), a sort of mutually shared solitude, one I experience as a lightness.

This sort of outside-myself-ness started five years ago in the immediate aftermath of my wife's sudden passing, and I wrote about it quite extensively in both *This Fall* and *Last Spring*. It has been evolving gradually during my time in Olympia, just over two years now. When I first arrived here, I knew no one, of course, except for Bridget, so for the first six months or so, just trying to get my feet under me, I had no social contact with anyone except her and her husband and the young couple who own my house, Lisa and Sterling, all four such kind people. I'd say I spent 95% of my time alone and, except for long phone conversations with my son in South Carolina, was largely silent, a sort of quasi-monastic existence, I guess. Excluding, of course, the kind of gibberish I indulge in when I talk to myself. Since I am temperamentally reclusive to begin with, this was not a problem. It was in fact a joy, proffering time to go deeper into myself, which, entering my retirement, I wanted very much to spend time doing, just to find out who I was, at my age, and, more importantly, who I might become, uprooted and alone: to calculate what was there, in need of conservation, exploration, preservation, or eviction; and what was not, in need of reclamation or construction.

About a year into my residency here, I started to "socialize" a bit, paul-scale, small, mostly through a couple of poetry-related groups I joined: one little, about six of us, for discussions of recent books, one bigger, event-oriented, for listening to scheduled readings and, from time to time, reading a poem of my own in the open mic session. Just as these relationships were starting to come to fruition as possible friendships (I'm quite slow at that), the COVID crisis hit, bringing all of it, and everything else, to a sudden stop. For months now I haven't even gone into stores or restaurants for formulaic interactions with service or wait staff, let alone socialized. So my 95% went to 98%. Basically, I see only my

daughter, about twice a week, for 10 minutes or so, on my front porch or hers, properly social-distanced, as we deliver food we have purchased for one another. And I chat with Lisa, sometimes Sterling, when she/they come to work on the gardens and the yard.

I truly enjoy my own company, so this lifestyle is very comfortable, has actually quite suited me. As the shutdown progressed, a number of people, mostly former students, some but not all of whom I had been in touch with intermittently over the years, for letters of recommendation, etc., reached out to me electronically, seeking, I assume, some friendly intellectual engagement, craving company maybe and having lots of alone time to pursue it. My longtime practice has been that I answer every personal inquiry that comes my way. Every one. It doesn't matter whether I like you, or your work, or what you think. I answer. Honestly, in detail. I'm guessing these young people cast a wide net, and the catch it turned up was me: because I responded, most likely when others didn't. So they picked it up with me and we've been having at it ever since, a Zoom here, a Skype there, a phone call, a text, and emails, of course, so enjoyable.

I miss face to face interactions with the people whose company I enjoy, all of that electricity of presence in the air. But virtuality has its charms, too. With email for example I have the opportunity to think and write "conversationally," but with care and precision. Sometimes I just think more clearly and deeply with words on a page than with words in my voice. And Zooms, to which I adapted very quickly and quite enjoy, offer a comfortable compromise, actually seeing the other's face, being able to read its nuances, but providing enough "distance" to promote calm, and so easy to set up, no remote appointments on the calendar. Or, since none of these people live here, long plane rides, impossible

now. All of this has been immensely pleasurable. As I tell others over and over, I am likely one of the very few people in the country whose social life actually improved during the COVID closure!

The effect of all this solitude and virtuality was that my sense of my “self” and the “space” that my body occupied grew gradually vaguer and vaguer, as if my edges were blurring and I was growing “larger.” I described it this way in an email to a friend:

One of the odd things about my life now is it feels like the boundaries that separate my inside from the outside, my “self” from other selves, my eyes and ears from the world I’m traversing, even past from future, are literally coming apart at the seams. There is hardly an “I am” left there, more like “we are,” one that includes my now multiple inner and outer me’s. My head feels like an undulating, porous membrane that can’t restrict traffic in or out, or even between the many layers in there that don’t often communicate well with one another. It all flows along at its own mixed-up pace, seemingly with its own will, not mine. I sometimes feel like I just happen to be floating along, no distinct identity, in all that flagrant turmoil and joyful overwhelm. It is mostly a wonderful feeling, not mystical or saintly exactly (I haven’t done enough “work” for that), just human, the way human should feel in this world, and would if culture and society didn’t fill us all from day one with so many lies, prisons of lies so hard to escape from, as we struggle, so fraught with their inevitable stresses.

My little jaunt through the park today was “human” in just that way, my presence unbounded, some little bits of it

flitting out and up every now and then to flirt for a few seconds with corresponding bits of the flora surrounding me, a kind of tiny butterfly effect, fluttering and alighting, then back to base. Quite magical, that literal sort of ecstasy, a standing-outside-myself-ness, light and feathery, no clear spatial barriers most of the time, and then the brief exits and returns, the self momentarily multiple, up there, down here, all around, nowhere, the kind of thing words just can't convey. In the same way that words can't get you all the way there in the first place. Merton goes on to say about "communion:"

The kind of communication that is necessary on this deep level must also be "communion" beyond the level of words, a communion in authentic spirit which is heard not only on a "preverbal" level but also on a "postverbal level."  
(175-6)

bell hooks, a considerable advance from Merton, has a whole book entitled *Communion*, that term now liberated from Catholic theology, though it retains much of the mystery that Jesus embodies in the New Testament, blending it with some Buddhism and a mild Marxism, reminiscent of Paulo Freire in that regard, a seamless ethic of radical care, ensconced in the brilliant Black feminism she perfected, if not invented, during the last two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Her term is keyed not so much to the silent other, the one Merton is indexing specifically in these passages, as to an immediate, familial community of others, the one Merton imagines figuratively but that hooks lives in and among and makes so vividly present. Pretend I just quote her whole book here, it's that good. And read it when you can. Also, her book *Killing Rage*, the best among the many, many books on race I've been absorbing over the last six months, so up-to-the-moment in its manner and message, even

though she wrote it over 25 years ago, when almost no one was listening. She is that good and was that far ahead of her time.

I have been thinking a lot lately—in part because of a weekly Zoom with a former student, now good friend, living in Colorado, where we explore all manner of philosophical matters related to communication, her professional world now—about the limitations of language, my longstanding belief that there must, for me, be something that comes both before (a promise) and after (an action) words, but is not enmeshed with them, for language to achieve its ultimate value. I understand that such a position is deemed nonsensical in the context postmodernist ideologies. As you know if you've read my previous work, I quite enjoy embracing and indulging in the nonsensical. Here for example is how I described this before and after unwordness in *Last Spring*:

I was trying while I walked today to think of a poem to go along with what I was thinking, feeling, one of mine, someone else's, no matter. I couldn't think of one, not even a line, not even a word that seemed to fit. It was "sublime."

Longinus, who wrote the book on sublimity a couple of millennia ago, the one that inspired the Romantic poets a couple of hundred years ago, basically, to my way of reading him at least, says that sublimity is not intrinsic to language or linguistic artifacts, no matter how powerful or beautiful they are. When I teach his book, I always use the analogy of a rocket ship. For Longinus, a "great" bit of writing is simply a vehicle that, if well-enough designed and crafted, can transport us right to the very edge of the medium it is made from, those words still held captive in their tiny province on the spectrum of

human life in this world. Figurative language is the most powerful such booster, capable of thrusting us up to the very edges of our babbling biosphere. Once there, we just need to step outside, and we will go into orbit on our own, skimming off into the majesty of deep space, where we will float weightlessly, silently, the gravity of diurnal discourse too weak to pull us down, until we want or need to come home again. It takes a little courage to take that step, but the payoff is magnificent, an eternal here and now that is not parsed by grammar or syntax, those slaves of time we need for more mundane "communication" down here. There is no clear inside or outside. Just being.

. . . That is where I was today, right outside of words, and then everywhere outside of words, where crying, laughing, or just staring incredulously at what is right before our eyes, are the most appropriate media for expression. It was sublime. (53-4)

Merton puts all of this much more plainly and succinctly, under the rubric of communion. I've referenced Thomas Merton twice here, primarily because I happen to be reading his work right now, quite incidentally. Two weeks ago in the weekly Zoom with my siblings, my sister was complaining about Merton's *The Seven Storey Mountain*, her dissatisfaction with the program for self-abnegation he seems to be promoting, the erasure of the personal will in favor of God's will, etc. It all seemed so oppressive and negative to her. I tried to read that book in college, in the late 60s, at a Jesuit school, Merton a force in the antiwar community I was part of. Seemed a natural. I didn't make it far, though. I can't remember exactly why, just that it

wasn't what I expected or hoped for, turned me off in a way.

So a few days after our conversation, I made another pass at it, same result, disappointment, put it down; maybe because of all the reading I've been doing lately about race and gender in the aftermath of the police murders in Minneapolis and Louisville, among others, mostly books I'm borrowing from the extensive library Bridget has curated and absorbed over the last 10 years or so, just an amazing resource under the broad heading of "social justice," dozens of books of the highest caliber. She is, without a doubt, the most deeply informed person I know right now in that arena. And she reads more like an activist than a scholar, has an admirable way of assimilating this material into her actual life in the world: She rarely talks about it referentially, and when she does it is matter-of-factly, never pedantically, simply a body of knowledge she has self-instilled and can draw from behaviorally. She doesn't read these books to impress or argue with others. She reads them to change. Herself. What she thinks, how she speaks, the way she lives, down to the bone. To really "know," I mean, word becoming flesh. It is inspiring and exemplary. And it is the reason I, too, have always read, as I've explained multiple times in previous books, pretty much everything, but especially poetry, my apex genre. That is: I want to change myself and I want to use what I read to accomplish that. Down to the bone.

I was hoping Merton would take this time, a way to maybe resurrect some sense of spirit in my life on the foundational material of Catholicism, with which I was so imbued when I was young that it, too, lives in my bones, maybe even my DNA. I have, though, over the years, come first to distrust, then to resist, and finally simply to reject all of that baggage, the hopeless duplicity of the



Church in relation to a whole range of gender-related matters, among many other political matters, having, finally, become intolerable to me. So I'm constantly doing battle with my bones, a very uncomfortable experience.

My reaction to the book this time, and Merton's conversion narrative, was that it was so obviously and classically "male" in all of its elements. These masculine conversion stories in the Christian tradition start with Paul, an anti-Christian fanatic struck blind on the road to Damascus who, a few days later, becomes a pro-Christian fanatic, doing the administrative work of setting up the early church. I like a lot in Paul's letters, so many gentle and beautiful ethical imperatives, but there's a hard spine, too, the old Paul still back there jacking him up. Maybe he just reminds me too much of me in his temperament to be fully agreeable. St. Augustine is another good example, serving a similar function in the church's evolution a few hundred years later, a wild philosophical curiosity propped up on a strident moral frame, the latter gradually overriding the former as he got older. And there are others. In every case, you have an educated, strong-willed man with an upper class background living a "worldly" life (the level of debauchery or excess varies case by case, and, in the telling of the conversion story is almost always exaggerated, at least according to historians who have taken the time to try to find some facts) who suddenly feels moved to "redeem" himself, quite often via an extrinsic "godly" intervention of some sort, as in Paul's case. There is a dramatic, even agonistic, quality to these stories, so over the top, so heroic, so simplistic. In other words: so male. I put the book down as quickly as I had 50 years ago.

The next week I mentioned my inability to get far in the book, and my sister said immediately exactly what I just said: It is a stereotypically male story, has no real

application to anyone except another stereotypical male. We put this topic on the agenda for a future conversation, and I decided to give Merton another try, this time with a book called *Thomas Merton: Essential Writings*, (edited by Christine M. Bochen), a compilation of many of his much shorter pieces, from later in his life, the 1960s especially. As I began to read I noticed a pattern to my response: long stretches of what seemed to be kind of boring boilerplate, vague, unfocused, my growing similarly vague and unfocused. And then a few sentences of just stunning insights. I mean clear, direct, memorable thoughts on a wide range of spirit-related matters. And suddenly I'd be wide awake for a while. These eruptions of clarity happen more and more often as the book goes on, as he got older, the world falling apart around him, as it did around all of us back then.

The pieces he wrote in the mid/late sixties are especially passionate and often quite brilliant: his critique of contemporary culture, war, organized religions, his embrace of ecumenism, this spirit fully in the air then during the last progressive era of the papacy, the reigns of Pope John 23 and Pope Paul 6, before John Paul 2 started to ratchet this energy back a few notches in the Reagan/Thatcher matrix of the 1980s. John Paul was especially antagonistic to "liberation theologies" wherever they had cropped up, but especially in the Americas. He had come of age in Poland during the communist era, tanks in the streets, so was fiercely anti-communist, which made him fiercely anti-Marxist. Liberation theologies were committed to serving the poor, the disadvantaged, the persecuted, the underprivileged. And in places like Central and South America, junta-ridden, the only political allies radical clergy had were at least loosely, sometimes expressly, Marxist. Paulo Freire is exemplary in this regard, the *conscientization* of indigent field workers in Brazil, his approach an exquisite amalgam of

Christian and Marxist values and methods. I'm assuming that all John Paul could see in this was, sooner or later, Russian tanks in the streets. So he set his sights on eliminating liberation theology wherever it had cropped up. He assigned Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger to do the dirty work of this, for which Ratzinger earned the nickname God's Rottweiler. Pretty much any alliance among priests, monks and nuns trying to work collaboratively for social justice was subject to threats and intimidation from the Church hierarchy. Like excommunication, say.

When John Paul died, Ratzinger was elevated to the papacy, Benedict 16, to complete this unrelenting attack on anyone and any group that didn't properly accede to the Church's patriarchal authoritarianism in relation to doctrine. Or had any hint of Marxist compassion for the poor. One irony of this process is that when Benedict 16 was forced to retire, the cardinals chose as their next pope, Pope Francis, Jorge Mario Bergoglio, an Argentinian born cardinal, who had come of age in the heyday of the liberation theology movement in South America, who was, in spirit at least, a genuine advocate for the poor, coming now on the scene when the Church had fully neutered any progressive tendencies toward that mission at the ground level, its clergy reduced by then, for the most part, to anti-abortion skills for right wing politicians. For that reason Francis feels to me like a perfect example of too little too late, which, I'm quite sure is what the Church fathers intended, more a pleasant PR man for a gutted ideology than a radical interventionist in Jesus' image. He's the "good cop" brought on to make everyone forget how bad the "bad cop" was, except way too late to change anything, all the damage already done and institutionalized. Had he or someone like him become the Pope immediately after Pope Paul, this would be a different and better world, and I might not

have so much contempt for organized religions, including the one that owns my bones.

Well, okay, that all came out of nowhere, didn't it, Paul? A rant I've had running in my head for a while now, fully revealed, finally. Maybe my underlying rage over this will finally dissipate. And, now that I think of it, maybe I can become more generous and loving, somewhat transformed, via, ironically, Thomas Merton, who died at the last hopeful moment I recall, institutionally, in the Catholic church, a powerful spokesman for the genuinely ecumenical initiatives in the air then. In any case, this iteration of Merton was much more satisfactory to me, done by then with his obligatory self-deconstruction, now radicalized, fully catholic (small c, in its general sense as comprehensively inclusive), reaching out to Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Sufists, Native Americans, you name it, all part of his search for "communion," and not Catholic (capital c, in its historically privileged male-dominated authoritarian sense.)

That's a long sidetrack to go down just to get back to my own ongoing process of self-renovation here in Olympia. But that's how self-renovations tend to go, their own way, as mine has. I didn't control it, I followed it. Here's a quote from another author I've been spending time with lately, (for another essay, on androgyny, next up in this book now), Virginia Woolf:

When this happened, Orlando heaved a sigh of relief, lit a cigarette, and puffed for a minute or two in silence. Then she called hesitatingly, as if the person she wanted might not be there, 'Orlando? For if there are (at a venture) seventy-six different times all ticking in the mind at once, how many different people are there not — Heaven help us — all having

lodgment at one time or another in the human spirit? Some say two thousand and fifty-two. So that it is the most usual thing in the world for a person to call, directly they are alone, Orlando? (if that is one's name) meaning by that, Come, come! I'm sick to death of this particular self. I want another.

. . . but what appeared certain (for we are now in the region of 'perhaps' and 'appears') was that the one she needed most kept aloof, for she was, to hear her talk, changing her selves as quickly as she drove — there was a new one at every corner — as happens when, for some unaccountable reason, the conscious self, which is the uppermost, and has the power to desire, wishes to be nothing but one self. This is what some people call the true self, and it is, they say, compact of all the selves we have it in us to be; commanded and locked up by the Captain self, the Key self, which amalgamates and controls them all. Orlando was certainly seeking this self as the reader can judge from overhearing her talk as she drove . . . (174-175)

As I said in an email to a friend today, this passage “made me miss smoking and realize how often I call out to myself, ‘Paul?’, wondering who’s there at that moment, all those 76 times and 2052 people trying to negotiate toward some consensus long enough to pick one to answer me.” This gives “talking to oneself,” which I do all the time (have been doing it in my writing for years now, including this installment, if it ever coalesces enough for me to be listening to it) a very different valence from the stereotypical one we tend to assign it, the assumption that only one other, our Key self, the Captain, the self-

appointed spokesperson, will respond to our call, maybe initiating a dialogue, but one with only two parties.

In reality, though, and I agree with Woolf on this, the respondent could just as well be any one or more of the other 2052 others in there, some right up front, the easy talkers, some buried so far back in the lecture hall they never need or intend to speak. For me, maybe 20 of those voices are easy speakers. Maybe a hundred more are at least grudgingly willing to speak up if required. Then there are the many hundreds of others lurking in there, many of whom have never even learned how to talk because they haven't ever needed to. And would prefer not to learn, happy to stay silent and hidden.

Part of my process now is first to silence the “easy talkers,” the ones that I always hear talking back when I ask for “Paul,” in order to make some headway with some of the hundred grudging ones. It is analogous to the problem teachers face in a “discussion-based” classroom. If you rely on a *laissez faire* system, I mean just pose a question and wait for hands to go up, a few students always dominate the discussion, to the irritation or delight of the others, depending on how inclined they are to “participate.” I developed methods over the years not just to encourage, but to require universal participation, my techniques premised on the belief that both over-talkers and nontalkers move to their extremes because of what I decided to call “an anxiety of presence.” I was a very determined nontalker in school, never said a word, so I know all the moves for avoiding notice. It had nothing to do with not being prepared or not knowing the answers. I did both of those in spades. It was a combination of hating being “seen” and not wanting to be embarrassed, by faltering or making a mistake, for example.

I always assumed that the easy talkers were somehow more confident than I was. It struck me one day while I was teaching, though, that, in fact, they were just like me, except at the other end of the verbal spectrum: I hid in silence, they hid in dense, vague clouds of words, so many you couldn't hold them accountable for any of them, just as I evaded accountability by not uttering a sound. Once you create an atmosphere of safety in a classroom, one in which everyone is both encouraged and allowed to speak easily and equally, that anxiety is first diminished and, for the most part, goes away. The nontalkers talk at the same rate as the over-talkers. Introverts are still introverts, of course, and extraverts still extraverts; but they are able to "commune" amicably in this egalitarian space. I'm trying now to use something akin to that to get some of the more recalcitrant Pauls to pipe up when I call. One day, if I live long enough, am clever enough, and have enough stamina, maybe I can coerce at least a few of the "silent majority" to show their hands, the ones hidden so deep in there, ensconced in positions of privilege that reach back to before I was even born, the hardest Pauls to reach. Maybe that's impossible. But maybe not. I won't know unless I try.

This is one of the reasons why, as I keep saying over and over, changing oneself is so hard. It's easy-peasy to change the Captain and those few of the crew who follow his dictates. When we do, we often feel so self-congratulatory, self-righteous even, some little attitude or value tweaked in a better direction, with "better" usually defined by some extrinsic social force or cultural matrix that happens to be in the air. Right now, for example, all this BLM rage in the aftermath of the George Floyd murder: Read a book, put up a sign in the window, give a few bucks, kneel for the anthem when everyone else is doing it, all without any of the risk that would have attended those things even a few months ago. Then back to business as usual. That is

not change. That is self-delusion. Real change will cause way more upset than that, will induce pain, some of it from the recognition of the horrors one's own ignorance has inflicted on the world, directly at times, but certainly tacitly, via patriarchy and white supremacy for example, if, like me, you are male and white in Western culture. It is heart-rending. And that's the easy part.

Feeling guilty and changing a few words in one's vocabulary, some in, some out, well, that is not real change, either. Change is of little consequence if it doesn't result in growth, too. Spiritual growth of some sort, I mean, which leads to changed behaviors, some of which are brand new, uncomfortably unfamiliar and sometimes risky; and there are at least 1000 of those silent voices in there that will do their best to inhibit all that to protect their turf. If they can. If I let them. They may refuse to answer when I call, but that doesn't mean they can hide forever. If I read and think and ask and speak and write and act long and hard enough, get voices unlike mine to move in to stay, those silent inner voices will be displaced a bit, become uncomfortable maybe, start chafing. Then, solely out of self-interest, seeking to protect their "neighborhood," they will start to whine. And reveal themselves in the process, defeating their own purpose (staying silent) in these instinctive gestures of self-defense, as we all do all the time, so human is that tendency. I may still not be able to call them all in, but I can call some of them out. And even if I can't, with all those other diverse voices settling down to stay, their sway will be diminished, their neighborhood demographic diversified whether they like it or not.

So, one of the crucial steps, for me at least, in becoming someone else is to give up at least some degree executive control over who "I" already "am," an identity-related conundrum I examine in more detail in essay 3 here.



Woolf's description captures the wonderful, almost carnival-like, mystery of that process, Orlando declaiming: "I am sick to death of that particular self. I want another." Sick to death is exactly the way to put how it feels at that moment, one's "particular self" expiring and all of the other 76 times and 2052 people coming forth from their lodgings at once to celebrate, as Whitman does at the outset of his great poem about "Myself," on his way to becoming "large" and "contain[ing] multitudes," the whole of the universe, really, all its persons and things, as grandiose a celebration as Woolf's is wryly charming.

I want to be clear: Mine has not been the sort of renovation that guts the building, the way a religious ascetic might on the way to transcendence or a Marine might on Parris Island. I don't believe in learning that way, by clearing the ground, a sort of "slash and burn" approach to make way for new "crops." That doesn't necessarily lead to, but it can invite fanaticism, a loss of personal compass, always a dangerous state of mind in a world like ours. Empty space is just too unnerving, and the temptation is to fill it with whatever lunacy is being promulgated by the loudest voices in the room. That's why the military uses it, to assert control. And why propogandists use it. And dictators. And authoritarian religious leaders. And . . . well, you get the picture. In relation to my inner community of Pauls, I think that's impossible in any case. There are just too many others in there to eliminate, some of them buried so deep you can't even find them let alone extricate them.

My process now is nowhere near as dramatic, then, as the ones St. Paul, St. Augustine, and Thomas Merton engaged in. In fact, it is relatively cosmetic by comparison to those more radical surgical procedures. Part of it involves merely stripping off the trappings of entitlement I had become accustomed to by dint of my education and

profession. Like most professionals in Western society, I had spent much of my life “credentialing” myself, with degrees and titles and lines on my CV, that exotic veneer, inlaid maybe with mother of pearl, some high-end wallpaper, elaborate Victorian filigree, things like that. After a while, there is an awful lot of that surface decoration, the kind that impresses others but doesn’t really add value or integrity to the structure, though you (or I at least) begin to act as if it does. My retirement and cross-country move forced me to demo all of that, the more decorative surfaces, which had no relevance any longer, revealing the “bones” of the structure beneath.

Another part of it was simply a continuation of the kind of loosely “ethical” work I began after Carol passed, creating such vast empty, identity-less spaces inside, like a volcano’s caldera after the thing has blown its insides out, that I had to do something just to become functional again. One of the themes that has dominated my work since then is “love,” not in any of its wispy cultural senses but in its practical, everyday spiritual sense(s). And I have kept working on that in my new home here.

Every religious or ethical system I’m aware of has a version of the “Golden Rule” at its core. Carol bought a calendar once that listed how each one was specifically phrased, at least a dozen of them from all parts of the world. The one we’re most familiar with is the Christian injunction to love our neighbor as ourselves. And I don’t think any longer that the key here is in the translation of pre-existing love from self to neighbor, it’s in understanding at a deep level how and why we love ourselves. Or don’t. And changing that if we find it superficial or unsatisfactory. In order to do that, we need to get beyond the artifice of our surfaces, check the structural elements, especially the foundation, those bedrock principles and values that support everything

else. This is no simple matter. Most of us, like me, want to think we're already pretty great in that respect, or at least quite satisfactory, that our self-love is not problematic, naturally endowed even.

But, to a degree, most of us also “hate” ourselves in certain ways. Some of these are obvious, the ways in which we feel or fear we don't measure up to cultural standards of “perfection,” and have been repeatedly reminded of it along the way. Those are the easy ones to work on. But most of them, I think, are too deep for us even to be aware of, in that we have covered them over with fancy bric-a-brac or had them buried in us away from our conscious understanding by the dominant values of our culture or religion or family before we even learned to talk let alone think. These are the ones that my process of de-composition is beginning to reveal. It's kind of scary just scratching the surface, knowing there's way more down there. And they need to be attended to. Why? Because if you hate yourself in those ways, you will hate your neighbor in those ways. Simple as that.

Our current obsession with tribal differences, which leads to so many kinds of misunderstanding, conflict, and, sooner or later, violence is ample evidence of that. Organized religion is a good historical example. All the major Western religions—Hebrew, Christian, Muslim—revere essentially the same God. And they routinely kill one another, at times on a grand scale, in that very God's name. That is lunacy. And even the various Christian sects, all of which share exactly the same God and God-given instruction book, the Bible, in common, as nearly identical as you can get, routinely kill one another over trivial differences, a Cain vs. Abel dystopia, if those two had been identical twins. The Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches split over a disagreement about a few words in the creed for godssake! It would be

comical if it weren't so horrifyingly insane. That is not love. It is hate, and it has the converse effect from the one I described above: If you hate others in these ways, you will inevitably learn to hate yourself more, or at least feed the hate already in there, the one that creates these bigotries to begin with. How they are allowed to masquerade as love, well, that gets me to the problem: You can hide almost any ugliness under superficial makeup if you work at it. So I'm starting to take it off to see what's there when I'm bare. Merton's late-life ecumenism has been helpful.

And there are all kinds of more deeply sublimated layers of "killing" that don't end in actual death (of the body at least) that organized religions engage in as a matter of course. When I was growing up, going to confession, we were advised to interpret the sixth commandment—thou shalt not kill—very broadly, to include pretty much any kind of anger, hatred or ill-will to others, not just deeds but thoughts. Would that the church had done the same along the way! Missionary work is a good example. It's one thing to have a Jehovah's Witness at your door with a pamphlet, mildly bothersome perhaps if you already have a settled sectarian bias. It's a whole other thing to destroy Indigenous cultures, oppress and enslave native peoples, wipe out eternities of cultural memory, resistant populations decimated all in the name of "saving" their "souls" for your God. That is not salvation, it is psychosis. All done quite blithely under the umbrella of the Golden Rule, perverted to the extreme. Why? because the "self" love at its core is really a rabid form of self-hatred, extraverted on a grand scale, toward every available "neighbor," the underlying message being, "if you are not like me, I mean exactly like me, I will kill you if I can, or, if I can't without imperiling myself, I will kill you metaphorically in every way I can imagine. That's how much I 'love' myself."

One of the things about change that I came to realize about forty years ago was that it must always be ongoing, continuous. I was then in the midst of a period of personal frustration, a very distinct kind that I knew felt familiar but I couldn't put my finger on why. Then it struck me that it was because I was stuck in place, on the inside, a sort of identity-lock, so I was getting further and further out of step not only with the general culture but with "myself." I likened it, figuratively, to tectonic plates, how they need to keep sliding along and past one another to keep undue tension off the system. When they don't, sooner or later, there is a surge, an all at once catch-up that is quite unnerving at best, things rattling around, stuff falling off shelves; or, at worst, catastrophic, whole structures collapsing. Better to keep the juncture well-lubricated, moving smoothly, instead of waiting for a trauma, or even a breakdown, the quake that takes buildings down.

So I vowed to keep watch on that, make sure, as Heraclitus says, I never stepped into the same river twice, identity-wise. It has, as Edd China the *Wheeler Dealers* mechanic says, "worked a treat." In quiet times, that is relatively easy to do, minor adjustments, that sort of thing. At cultural moments like this [and the only one in my lifetime that it resembles is 1968-70, a comparable systemic collapse] it's like being on a treadmill that has suddenly been accelerated. You need to run faster to keep up with it, the rate of change amplified just so you can stay on your feet. Otherwise, you're holding on to the bar with your feet strung out behind you, or are just flung off the apparatus entirely. Running faster is a challenge at my age, but I'm actually enjoying the demands of the process, getting "up to speed" as it were.

So what's the upshot of all this meandery narration? I guess I'm not entirely sure. But there are certain things that precipitated it that I am reasonably sure about. I saw a bumper sticker on a truck while I was walking home today: "We're all here because we're not all there." It made me laugh, the double meaning of both the "all here" and the "not all there" parts, that is. My most recent poetry collection, *slights: my new tiny poems from here not there*, uses those same terms to suggest what is "new" about what I'm doing with those poems. I am now all here precisely because I am not all there, in both senses. My title is not funny in the way the bumper sticker is, but it is playful, ironic, smile-inducing, if not for you, then for me. This here and not there has been one of the foundational tropes guiding my renovation these last two years, both spatially—I moved cross country—and temporally—as in the ambition toward presence in the moment. The other term that has motivated me, in keeping with so much of what I've written here, is community, my search for one.

My wife's passing devastated the small "community" we shared, not just with one another, which was the vast majority of my sense of "communion" back then, but with other friends who were a part of it. I was divorced in my late 20s, and I found out how vulnerable such couples-based communities are. Mine fell apart gradually, over the course of a couple of years, and a new one didn't emerge until after my second marriage. My last two years in Pittsburgh were especially disheartening to me in that regard. Death is like divorce. But times ten. Grief by itself is off-putting for others. My off-the-rails-ness in reaction to my loss put people off even more. I was filled with both grief and rage. All of that was disruptive and I knew it wasn't going to get better *in situ*. I needed to leave, if only for that reason, to have any hope of redemption.

Then, when I decided to retire, it got amped up even more. I had, of course, seen many “friends” retire. And I knew how quickly they evaporated from the scene. Work-based relationships are hard to sustain when you’re no longer present at work; almost impossible, really, whether you move up the street or across the country. The problem with “up the street” for me is I had no outside-of-work community to speak of. I imagined that my alienation and aloneness would be amplified by my memory of what had been there and wasn’t now. And I believed that going somewhere entirely new to “start over,” clean slate, was, at least potentially, preferable to that, in the same way that “nothing” is generally preferable to the “absence of everything.” So that’s what I did. Uprooted myself and came here.

During my final few months in Pittsburgh, a brutal winter, I was afflicted first by the flu, a terrible one, and then by a series of viral aftershocks brought on by my compromised immune system. By the time I got here, I was a shell of myself. But, still, committed to my search for “community” “here.” I spent my first year overwhelmed by enthusiasm on the one hand—adrenaline- and caffeine-fueled, a falling in love feeling with this new place—and anxiety—all of my familiar identity-related touchstones and landmarks destabilized or gone, kaput, my feeling like I was always falling into an abyss. The combination was like being constantly electrified, always on. I kept looking for a new footing, somewhere firm to stand. Everything I did toward that end was ineffectual, as it always is when you pursue new things in a fervor of “need.” Then, as I said, the COVID crisis intervened, to my benefit really. I had to shut down like everyone else, and I did, just relaxed into myself, did everything I describe above.

I admit I haven’t yet found a community of others. What hope I had of that went into hibernation once the

pandemic hit. What I have found though is a comparable community in myself, all of those various voices and versions of Paul who might answer me back when I call, no longer administered iron-fistedly by the Captain, the Key locking the rest down. My community is me, an ongoing carnival full of costumed deities, fools, pretenders, heroes, clowns, saints, singers, poets, little butterflies, heretics, you name it. And I have come to accept, even love, them all. I may not be able to call up exactly the one I want at any given moment. But that's how communities work. Your preferred company could well be busy when you call. So you meet up with whoever answers. Those Pauls are "all here," and, as consequence I am "not all there." And that's the best way I have right now of explaining how and why I am, quite often now, not myself, and, on days like today, flitting up and around among the rhododendrons, I am not even *in* myself, but out and about, floating free. All of those hidden Pauls, the ones I can't really make "participate," well I am at least beginning to see them, where they're hunkered down, so I can put some pressure on them, ask a few pointed questions. None of us ever comes clean of all of these. It's not humanly possible. But any headway is progress, and I've still got some time left to work on it.

On my walk back home today I saw the pair of collared doves that live in my neighborhood, such svelte, lovely birds, always together, partnered. They have a grace and beauty to them I so admire, feel always calmed when I see them, good omens for the upcoming day is what I think. They alighted on the power lines above my head, flitted down the street to a great tree, seemed to welcome me at every step on my path. I felt like I was up there with them, in spirit, yes, but it was more than that. As the song says:



One of these mornin's, you're gonna rise up singin.'  
Then you'll spread your wings and take to the sky.

Today was one of those mornin's for me. Every day, if it's a good one, can be one of those mornin's for me now, no longer myself, or any self, just a reveling multitude, 76 different times, 2052 people. All "me," a community of one with which I abide in intimate, loving communion.



## 2. He Tells Herself Their Story

May 9

*But the sight of the two people getting into the taxi and the satisfaction it gave me made me also ask whether there are two sexes in the mind corresponding to the two sexes in the body, and whether they also require to be united in order to get complete satisfaction and happiness? And I went on amateurishly to sketch a plan of the soul so that in each of us two powers preside, one male, one female; and in the man's brain the man predominates over the woman, and in the woman's brain the woman predominates over the man. The normal and comfortable state of being is that when the two live in harmony together, spiritually co-operating. If one is a man, still the woman part of his brain must have effect; and a woman also must have intercourse with the man in her. Coleridge perhaps meant this when he said that a great mind is androgynous. . .; that the androgynous mind is resonant and porous; that it transmits emotion without impediment; that it is naturally creative, incandescent and undivided.*

Virginia Woolf

*Creative individuals to a certain extent escape this rigid [male/female] gender role stereotyping.*

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi

I want to sketch out a story here, a personal illustration, yes, but also a more general argument on behalf of androgyny as a preferred state of being in relation to gender. I've made tentative and indirect passes toward this in previous books, most specifically in my discussions of Emily Dickinson and H.D., both of whom had to override longstandingly, almost eternally, dominant masculine stereotypes for creative enterprise to accomplish what they did, in part at least, I now see, by overriding the feminine stereotypes for creative enterprise that were dominant in their historical moments. And I had to do the same, in my own time, to come to some genuine understanding of their work. Virginia Woolf, about whom I have not previously written specifically, though I taught her work numerous times, is a like-minded colleague in this regard, having written quite expressly about gender-morphing in both *A Room of One's Own*, which I quote above, and, even more dramatically in *Orlando*, where the main character actually changes gender, male to female, at age 30.

All three of these writers were enigmatic in their foundational identity features, most especially, for my purposes here, those pertaining to gender and sexuality. All were "involved" with men—Woolf and H.D. were married at some point, clearly sexual relationships, and some critics guess that Emily Dickinson was similarly attracted to men, who are variously identified on the basis of flimsy evidence. And all were similarly "involved" with women, expressly in Woolf's case (*Orlando* is a "love letter" to her female lover and friend, Vita Sackville-West); at least romantically, though apparently not sexually for Dickinson, most obviously in her relationship with Susan Huntington Gilbert, who ended up marrying her brother (see the lifetime's worth of both ecstatic and seductive letters she wrote to Gilbert, collected in *Open Me Carefully*, edited by Ellen Louise Hart and Martha

Nell Smith); and H.D. was clearly bi-sexual as evidenced by multiple affairs with men and women and her subsequent befriending of Sigmund Freud, in part to understand better, via his therapy, her sexual identity (a relationship chronicled in her essay “Writing on the Wall,” and a journal she kept which became “Advent,” both available now in *Tribute to Freud*, and the array of letters she sent to friends, now collected in *Analyzing Freud*, edited by Susan Stanford Friedman.)

There are comparable male examples, of course, Whitman most obviously, more omni-sexual than bisexual, in love with everything, his “Song of Myself” ample documentation of his plural gender identity. And Samuel Taylor Coleridge, whom Woolf alludes to in my epigraph above, whose sexual ambiguity is much more heavily veiled, only intimated here and there in his poetry and prose.

The mythical ur-example for binary sexuality is Tiresias whom, in the Greek myth, Hera changed into a woman because he killed a couple of snakes, only to change her back to a man seven years later, after she had borne children, a dizzying set of shifts to be sure. In one iteration of the myth, Hera and Zeus consult Tiresias to settle a bet about which gender gets the best of it in sexual intercourse, each thinking it’s the other, an interesting marital argument. Tiresias, based on their own experiences, settles it decidedly in favor of the woman, which angers Hera enough to strike them blind, which then incites Zeus to give them powers of foresight and prophesy as a means of compensation.

T.S. Eliot, also afflicted by various kinds of sexual ambivalence, uses Tiresias as one of his voices in *The Waste Land* to comment on what he perceived as the sexual dysfunction of his own cultural moment, which he

shared. Here's an extended passage to illustrate the kind of seamy shallowness that Tiresias (and Eliot I presume) are witness and party to, depressingly:

I Tiresias, though blind, throbbing between two lives,  
Old man with wrinkled female breasts, can see  
At the violet hour, the evening hour that strives  
Homeward, and brings the sailor home from sea,  
The typist home at teatime, clears her breakfast, lights  
Her stove and lays out food in tins.  
Out of the window perilously spread  
Her drying combinations touched by the sun's last rays,  
On the divan are piled (at night her bed)  
Stockings, slippers, camisoles, and stays.  
I Tiresias, old man with wrinkled dugs  
Perceived the scene, and foretold the rest—  
I too awaited the expected guest.  
He, the young man carbuncular, arrives,  
A small house agent's clerk, with one bold stare,  
One of the low on whom assurance sits  
As a silk hat on a Bradford millionaire.  
The time is now propitious, as he guesses,  
The meal is ended, she is bored and tired,  
Endeavours to engage her in caresses  
Which still are unreproved, if undesired.  
Flushed and decided, he assaults at once;  
Exploring hands encounter no defence;  
His vanity requires no response,  
And makes a welcome of indifference.  
(And I Tiresias have foresuffered all  
Enacted on this same divan or bed;  
I who have sat by Thebes below the wall  
And walked among the lowest of the dead.)  
Bestows one final patronising kiss,  
And gropes his way, finding the stairs unlit . . .

She turns and looks a moment in the glass,  
Hardly aware of her departed lover;  
Her brain allows one half-formed thought to pass:  
“Well now that’s done: and I’m glad it’s over.”  
When lovely woman stoops to folly and  
Paces about her room again, alone,  
She smooths her hair with automatic hand,  
And puts a record on the gramophone.

Talk about a creepy date, each gender so held captive by their cultural stereotypes that neither can experience intimacy, let alone love.

Virginia Woolf pulls off a mega-scale Tiresias-like transmogrification in *Orlando*, whose main character, having lived as a man for the first 30 years of his life (which takes up centuries in the subplot about history that accompanies this “biography”), wakes up one morning this way:

He stretched himself. He rose. He stood upright in complete nakedness before us, and while the trumpets pealed Truth! Truth! Truth! we have no choice left but confess — he was a woman. (75)

Woolf makes clear, though, that this gender shift, extreme on the outside, with of course significant worldly ramifications, on a par with Tiresias in the details, is not as outlandish as it might seem, on the inside at least:

But in every other respect, Orlando remained precisely as he had been. The change of sex, though it altered their future, did nothing whatever to alter their identity. (75)

This is at least part of the point I will try to make below with the story I tell, that identity is far more nuanced and complex in relation to culturally stereotypical gender characteristics than we are led to believe, a nuanced complexity that is, ironically, much more visible to you when you're very young (as in my story below) or very old (as in my life right now.) It is culture (as multiple waves of feminist theory have insisted and demonstrated) that accentuates the differences, based on biological markers, as Orlando soon finds out after their transformation:

If we compare the picture of Orlando as a man with that of Orlando as a woman we shall see that though both are undoubtedly one and the same person, there are certain changes. The man has his hand free to seize his sword, the woman must use hers to keep the satins from slipping from her shoulders. The man looks the world full in the face, as if it were made for his uses and fashioned to his liking. The woman takes a sidelong glance at it, full of subtlety, even of suspicion. Had they both worn the same clothes, it is possible that their outlook might have been the same. (104)

And it is as children that we wear "the same clothes," as Coleridge says in "Frost at Midnight," remembering his "sister more beloved, My play-mate when we both were clothed alike!", the friendly face he so hopes to see while he waits alone at school.

Woolf's story is much more in keeping with the spirit of my argument here than anything in Greek mythology—a compendium of inter-sexual and inter-generational dysfunctions—or T.S. Eliot, fully captive to the cultural conventions of his historical moment.



For her, gender blending is something that “most people” experience, while all the men who wrote all the books her “Mary Seton” was studying in the British Museum in *A Room of One’s Own*, insist otherwise, blinded as they are by the binary categories their discourse enforces, primarily as a means of conserving their own power. As Woolf goes on to explain in *Orlando*:

For here again, we come to a dilemma. Different though the sexes are, they intermix. In every human being a vacillation from one sex to the other takes place, and often it is only the clothes that keep the male or female likeness, while underneath the sex is the very opposite of what it is above. Of the complications and confusions which thus result everyone has had experience; but here we leave the general question and note only the odd effect it had in the particular case of Orlando herself.

For it was this mixture in her of man and woman, one being uppermost and then the other, that often gave her conduct an unexpected turn. (104)

All of which is to say, yes, how not just “[c]reative individuals” but “every human being” “to a certain extent escape[s] . . . rigid gender role stereotyping,” with sometimes exciting, sometimes debilitating effects. And it’s probably way more detail than you need to see what you already know, from your own experience, trying to regulate your relationship with both the dominant cultural gender stereotypes and your own inner drives and dreams, whether you imagine yourself as a “creative individual” or not.

What I want to do here, as I said, is to sketch out a story about the ways I am one of those, a “creative individual” of sorts, and am perhaps also one with you in that regard; someone who has tried my best to evade the oppression of cultural stereotypes in relation to gender; who hopes to remind you, even persuade you, that you are also one with me in that regard. My story has nothing to do with being gay or bisexual in relation to sexual practice. I have no experience with either, and I’m not concerned here specifically with that sort of “intercourse.” I am thinking now about the *possibility* at least for gender balancing at the foundational level of personal identity, the sort of intercourse Woolf alludes to so wryly, metaphorically, in my first epigraph, one that happens within, one that is vested in tendencies and qualities, both of which may seem on the surface to be based on simplistic stereotypes but which can be redeemed from that oblivion if conserved from the outset and then translated into attitudes, values and practices.

And my story is expressly a testimony against the extremity of the binary system—an either/or option—that our culture endorses and enforces in relation to gender. That’s why I include the quote about “creative” individuals.” Our tendency is to treat such “creative” people—artists, writers, musicians, say—as eccentric, sometimes “special,” sometimes weird, sometimes aberrant. But always, to a greater or lesser extent, depending on their level of accomplishment or celebrity, as different from the norm, not in degree but in kind, thereby exempt to some extent from the “rules” the rest of us must abide by. I don’t believe that and never did, as I make clear in *This Fall*, where I use an elaborate “bullets and asylums” metaphor to explain some of the ways we have, culturally, for neutering art before it even gets apprehended:

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

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

some work for the powers-that-be, too. And how about the other end of the spectrum, those seemingly honorific terms--prophet, sage, visionary, mystic, genius--well, they're not so bad either, stringing up ropes around the museum exhibit so we don't stray too far into those sacred spaces, can get back home unscathed. (176-78)

Which gets me back to my sketch, my story, so small, seeming more like a dream I suppose, and remembered that way now, than an actual series of events, one that will sound, I know, like it can't possibly be true, though I'm quite sure it is; so I will tell it as if it is, will insist on your believing it, even as you think, "that cannot possibly be true." I tell people over and over again, because it's true, that I don't write fiction, don't even read it much. I think it's because I have no confidence in narrative, that way we have of pretending that time makes sense, one thing following after another as if it must, that something happening now somehow knows its place in the order of things and then takes it, no questions, no complaints. Then, contrarily, when I write especially, I go ahead and thread time together just like that one word at a time, because that's the only thread you get to do this kind of telling, each stitch separate-looking on the surface, except if you sew you know that it looks exactly the same on the back side, too, stitches offset, and that if you could look at both sides at the same time you'd see one long continuous thread. Like time. One thread. But you can't ever see both sides.

So this is where every story starts, a dysfunction in the relationship between time and words, one speeding along like a great river, all of a piece, the other like a sharp cleaver taken to fresh meat; one like music flowing mellifluously, the other jarring clicks of a metronome, timing the time my fingers take to make words pop up on

the page here, unable to yield the mysteries they strive to create, disconnected, until it is too late for the present to be present for its moment, with me, with you. Because words exist in the past, always and only, gone before the last letter is typed, never the future, like this sentence before it's written, so beautiful, waiting to be released in its glory and the words mangle it all forward, have minds of their own now, and I type up those minds mindlessly, each letter taking longer than the "present" to go from my fingers to here, this sentence that saw a future stretching out luxuriously before it, then lost its way, unable to say what it so hoped to say. It's possible my fingers are the future, sublime in its majesty; but every word they type is not.

This story I'm going to get to when I get around to it, goes back to when I was four or so and involves, in one way or another, everything I would become, everyone I knew then or would ever know, every possible word I can imagine, every second of time I have spent or will spend here, against or with my will. It is true, I will insist, even if it never happened, could not possibly have happened in the way I tell it now, with all the millions of words I've earned and learned in the meantime. It is a story only an old man can tell about the moment he became himself, before time and words parted company. Had I told you the story truly, right when it happened, when I was four or so, it might have sounded more like that old SNL sketch with Tarzan, Frankenstein, and Tonto, lots of grunts and monosyllables. I warn you of that at the outset so when you think "that could not possibly have happened," which people do all the time when I tell stories like this, you will know that that might be so. All the other times you thought that, reading what I write? It was not so then. Those things happened, I'm pretty sure of it, almost sure, more than maybe sure. This one, even I'm flabbergasted

by it. I know it's true but I can't stop telling myself it can't possibly be so.

So, the story: I'm four or so years old, sitting on the top step of our back porch at the Depot Street house I grew up in in Forest City, Pennsylvania. It's summertime, I know because I'm in shorts. Not ordinary shorts, but the kind little kids wore back then with some sort of straps over the shoulders, like suspenders, and "short" shorts, like 1950s short, the kind of shorts "babies" wore. I am pulling on the bottom edges of them, trying to stretch the "legs" down over my knees, or at least closer to them. I have a glum look on my face. You would think it blank if you saw it, maybe "depressed," that apparent sadness for no reason that is temperamental in people like me. But here's what I'm thinking. Number one: I want to cover my knees, which even then looked to me like knobby softballs hinging two dowels, just ugly to look at. My brothers had "good" legs, the kind where the knee looked more like a "waist" in a well-proportioned torso. Mine were the opposite, burls in the middle of branches. I believed if I pulled hard enough the material would stretch, sooner or later, as far as I wanted it to. I had that much faith in my powers to make things other than what they were, and I still do, which is probably why I'm telling this story, even if none of it is exactly true, what happened, the length of my pants, my faith, a chance I'm willing to take. That is the good part of the story, the foundation for my hopefulness. But it's not the whole story.

And I'm sitting there thinking, I mean right that second (and you can already see why this story is not entirely true, because these sentences should be right on top of the ones about my knees, but you can't do that with words.) I'm thinking: I am not a baby. These are baby clothes. And I'm not thinking I'm really a "boy" who should have

boy-clothes. I'm thinking I'm a person, as fully-fledged and complete as anyone who might right then be walking down the street, and I want to be treated like one. Not just dressed like one, treated like one. And I know in every fiber of my being that cannot happen, which is part of the reason I have such a glum look on my face, how profoundly stupid a world is when its children are not full-fledged people, a mistake I vowed never to make when I was an adult and interacted with young people, a promise I made right then and kept forever, because it had so few words in it: "Don't do that!" The only kind of promises we can really remember well enough to keep, because if you don't do something you despise almost anything you do in its place even if it's doing nothing will be better.

But that isn't the whole story I want to tell now. My story goes on, the part I most wanted to say here, except sometimes I just can't stop saying everything instead of just saying one thing, and sometimes, like now, all the seemingly impertinent preamble is really important, so you can see at least a few of the layers involved, even for a "baby" sitting on a porch step. So I'm sitting there thinking about becoming a person, a man, I was smart enough even back then to know, thinking I really want long pants so I can be one, or at least be treated like one. And I am trying to think about what that means. I knew a lot of men by then. And even if I only knew a few, I was smart enough even back then to know that everything was run by men, not one of which I could think of right then I wanted to "be like" when I "became" one, I mean exactly, or even generally. Many had some admirable and good qualities, but not one appealed to me as the whole of which I aspired to become, at least not buying the base model out there on the showroom floor. And that whole "being" and "becoming" part is the conundrum on my mind then, because I wanted to *become* a man, but not to *be* like any man I knew and not even, more so, at all like

what “man” meant in that world run by men which, admit it, even a “baby” is smart enough to understand is way out of whack that way. So, I’m thinking, you’re not treated like a man right now, almost genderless as a “baby,” and the man you want to be treated like doesn’t exist right now as best you can tell or maybe ever will.

So I’m sitting there still thinking, okay I don’t want to be a “man,” not on those simplistic terms, so what *do* I want to be? And I’m thinking of all the women I know, what is admirable and good about so many of them, all those admirable and good qualities I still have myself, as all babies do, before they get fully processed by the machinery of culture, I know that for a fact, and I’m somehow now supposed to start giving all that back, to *become* what I’m *supposed* to be, and I’m thinking no way am I going to do that, it’s just plain stupid, and I’m thinking, I’m going to get in a lot of trouble if I make a big deal about what I won’t give back, a price I’ll have to pay over and over, and I don’t mean all the “names” I might be assigned or called for that—none of which I knew in any case, and I knew, of course, that I wasn’t a woman any more than I was a man, and I knew I would have to keep all of this quiet, I mean fiercely quiet, to myself, just refuse to give it up, like a “conscientious objector,” hoping no war would come along to make me pay the big price, but knowing if it did, I’d pay it, which gets me now to the gist of my story, because I’m thinking all this mumbo jumbo about he and she is just another lie, that at least for “babies” he and she are both there pretty much still together as one, the way real meanings are before we start parsing out words for them: this is this and that is that and that is not this and this is not that. Lies.

And that’s when it struck me, yes, exactly that, which is why I’m telling this story: Everyone is born with an almost equal balance of he and she in there, masculine and



feminine, though they are not named yet that way, therefore remain unified, indistinct from one another, amicable, interactive, quite peaceable before the binary lies culture tells you to force you down one road or the other, from day one, take this one or that, but you can't take both. And I mean really take it to the extreme, no keeping the other even in sight, no turning back either, ever. Me sitting there in my short pants which were not pants at all, might as well have been a dress given how stupid they were, the same bony knees protruding below the hem, wanting them to be covered so I would no longer have to become what I was supposed to be and could start to be what I was.

And right then I thought about the "he" in there and I thought about the "she" in there, how beautiful they were, so alike and so close together, loving one another, true love, I mean, not lovey-dovey love, before they got turned into words, I mean, before time started clicking, before the road not taken got taken away, and this is what I decided: He will never give her away, and she will never give him away. They are married now and will not be divorced, though those, too, were lies I hadn't yet learned how to properly name. I also knew that he would have to cherish her in secret to get by, and she would have to cherish him in secret to get by, the origins for, I now think, and the ultimate explanation for, my reclusive temperament, which you know, if you have one, is not soft but fierce, will not brook interference, impregnable, the perfect way to hide what was mine from whatever and whoever might want to take it away, a temperament you aren't necessarily born with, but choose on the top step of the back porch pulling at the bottoms of your shorts or your dress, which are almost the same thing when you're four or so, because it is only in the hiding that true love can flourish, at least inside one's head, that room of one's own, the only one we will ever truly own.

And I can't remember if I smiled but I will tell you I did since I am not telling a totally true story here anyway, because I knew right then I was and would be safe and strong, not half of me, all of me, and anyone, everyone could use every ruse in the book to split me up and none would work, because that's how true love works. And if everyone else out there had any brains—and some of them did, I would find out along the way—they wouldn't give up their other half, which is their "better" half because it is always the half someone is trying to take away. And I could see how hard that would be, how clever and daring I would need to be, and I smiled, because it was all in so few words: "Don't do that!" So few I knew I could not ever forget them. And that was the day I became a "creative individual" and started living hidden in earnest, as a way of maintaining the joy of the oneness of the twoness we are all born with.

Now this story, all of it, if it were true, or at least told truly, would take about 20 seconds to tell in its all-at-onceness, and it would take no words at all, would just be the flow of mind of a child pulling at the legs of his pants as he realizes and decides right then: Don't do that! Do not do that! With a hope that the regimen of their decision would be firm enough to endure for a lifetime, this love story "he" told "her." Which, so far, it has.

August 3:

I'm going to make now what might seem like a disconnected, even impertinent addendum to this piece, one that struck me as I walked for a second time today around my neighborhood, communing with all the lovely living things I see along the way. bell hooks borrows Martin Luther King's concept of "beloved community" to conceptualize her vision of what human society can be, to

some degree is in small ways for most of us, even me, seemingly an island but connected so intimately now, so lovingly, with the inner community of identities I feel deeply a part of, but to a much deeper degree for more mature souls, like her and King. What progress I've made toward a beloved community recently has happened gradually and incidentally along the way, as all good things tend to happen. I am no longer enthusiastic or anxious all the time, the way I described my early days here, inevitable and healthy responses to self-induced emptiness. I am more often calm. Just happy to be here, not there. Now not then. I never feel alone even though I spend almost all my time seemingly solitary. I am truly and deeply grateful to be me, to be here, to live now, with all my other me's, a very enchanting community of "others" with which I am in a very strange kind of communion, free at last.

I can hardly believe it has finally happened, starting about six weeks ago quite noticeably, my two year anniversary here, the landmark I had in sight for my "assimilation" when I got here, even if I didn't believe it was possible; and then culminating on July 16, a remarkable day, the day I realized I was finally and fully "free." From there. And then. And then. All the attachments, human and otherwise, that were so burdensome and disheartening to me. Something small happened that day, a disappointment that previously might have put me in a funk. I noticed it, acknowledged it, and let it pass. I was fine. And I was stunned to be so fine with it, which I wouldn't have been even the day before. I went right to my wall calendar and circled that day, marked it "FREE." Forthcomingly, I will celebrate it annually. You don't need to know the details of all this. I have held them close to my heart for years now, and that's how long it took to settle, never speaking them. And I never will. But that day, I realized I had, yes, set *myself* free. Myself. My self!

As you can, as anyone can, as everyone must sooner or later, if genuine freedom is truly to be had. And with that freedom has come a daily joy, not from without, though I am blessed to be living in such a beautiful place, enspirited by the two children that love me, well set in all the material ways that matter in our culture, but even more so from within, a self-love that is simple and in moments of joy here and there, boundless.

I wrote above about how hard it is to love others as we love ourselves, as Jesus mandated, when we actually hate ourselves and deny it, such large numbers of the selves that live in there, full of hate, whatever number of those 2052 whose hate we haven't excised or at least tried to corral in some way. There is no beloved community when the currency of the moment is hate. It is hard work to find the main culprits. Very hard. If you don't think so, you haven't tried. I know I have a long way to go. What I now know is that there is no genuine beloved community on the outside, among others, unless and until you can create a beloved community on the inside, a culture where at least most of those selves are collaborating, in love, toward the good. Then, there is beloved community everywhere.

For me, now, in the midst of a social isolation I first chose and then had amplified by circumstance, among the many beautiful things I meet as I walk, flowers, trees, clouds, rain, sun, houses, people I pass and greet, the local storekeepers who keep me stocked by delivering to my door or preparing things for pickup, the mailman, on the cusp now of becoming a cultural hero, my internet friends, my family, in my own solitude, living together with all the many men and women still in my head, those "better halves" whom I actually like to be around, old enough now to be exempted in many ways from culture's threats, I'm happy. With all of it. The experience of

spiritual lightness I felt a few weeks ago in the Rhododendron Park is, I now know, available to me anytime, anywhere. As long as I can get most of my “me’s” to cooperate lovingly, a beloved community. I can’t even imagine, I’m sure, what it would be like to enter into the state of mind that Jesus calls “the kingdom of heaven.” But what I get to feel now is, I believe, a good first step in that direction.

Which gets me back again to Woolf, where I started, to the many who are one in there, men and women, getting into taxis together, in intercourse with one another. Like her, when I was four or so, I had

a profound, if irrational, instinct in favour of the theory that the union of man and woman makes for the greatest satisfaction, the most complete happiness. . . . And I went on amateurishly to sketch a plan of the soul so that in each of us two powers preside, one male, one female; and in the man’s brain the man predominates over the woman, and in the woman’s brain the woman predominates over the man. The normal and comfortable state of being is that when the two live in harmony together, spiritually co-operating. If one is a man, still the woman part of his brain must have effect; and a woman also must have intercourse with the man in her. Coleridge perhaps meant this when he said that a great mind is androgynous. It is when this fusion takes place that the mind is fully fertilized and uses all its faculties. Perhaps a mind that is purely masculine cannot create, any more than a mind that is purely feminine, I thought . . . that the androgynous mind is resonant and porous; that it transmits emotion without impediment; that it is naturally creative, incandescent and undivided. (Chapter 6, *Room*)

I thought so, too, sketched our plan amateurishly. And together we have lived hidden, happily ever after.

August 17

I'm going to close with a "love poem" I wrote right around this time, pertinent to all of this, and read last month at an open mic poetry session downtown, a happily ever after dream called "a fairy tale." The lovers here are multiple, both those who carry and those who are carried, those I have loved and now love, including, I know only now, having written this essay, the two together in me:

every morning now  
I wake on the other side  
of something  
all those dreams

like the last one  
last night you  
in my arms  
feather light  
and I carried you  
for miles surprised  
thinking you are so light  
I can carry you  
for miles  
there must  
have been a reason  
but I don't remember it  
the way we never remember  
the reason for anything  
sooner or later just  
that we do it and do it and do it

and one day we wake up  
on the other side of something  
and have done it  
and you were smiling  
yes, smiling I remember now  
and it was like I was carrying you  
“over the threshold” but it was  
outside in the open air  
sunny and warm  
greenness everywhere  
greener than green everywhere  
a lightness even to the light  
which was everywhere  
and we were together there  
my carrying you in my arms  
your arms slung loosely  
carelessly  
over my shoulders  
as if you were carrying me  
and I was so light  
you could carry me for miles  
your eyes sunny  
and warm a lightness even  
to their lightness  
and I was smiling  
thinking yes  
we can carry one another  
just this way  
all the way to the other side  
of whatever was there  
to get across  
all those dreams say  
the ones that come  
night after night  
some of them staggering  
through the darkness  
unable to carry the weight

of anything to anywhere  
unbearable  
and then the one  
with you right in it  
still in my arms as if  
it was not yesterday  
or never  
but now right now  
the only part of now  
still worth remembering  
carrying one another in our arms  
and then out of the blue  
I kissed you right  
on the lips felt  
the taut softness of them  
like it was not yesterday  
but now right now  
and the moisture we share  
when we kiss was right there  
like a mist  
lingering on my lower lip  
right there right now  
and how surprised you were  
that my lips and yours  
were touching like that  
not for the last time  
but for the first  
and when I woke right then  
on the other side of something  
I was not who I was  
and I knew I could still  
carry you in my arms  
all the way to the threshold  
and then over it  
home for the first time  
on the other side  
of all that green



and all that light  
smiling into the light  
on the other side  
even lighter than light  
everywhere  
a greenness greener than green  
a lightness  
together  
ever after  
happily



### 3. I-identity

August 20

*How many lightbulbs does it take to change a lightbulb?*

I had that variation of the old joke in my head when I woke up today. And I knew it had to do with this essay. There is always a piece in every book I write that concerns me, the one that seems like it's just too much, the one that will make you put the book down and not pick it up again, the one that takes what might be called "navel gazing" to an extreme, the one with the navel gazing at itself, not genius but nonsense. In *Harvest* it was the essay "Where Parallel Lines Meet." In *This Fall* it was "This Essay is for the Birds." And I always seem to put these pieces early in the book. This is that one here. I was thinking about it last night after I had put the finishing touches on this manuscript, ready to upload it to Amazon this morning, a monumental step for me in committing myself to any project. The way I publish, I can always revise a book after it's up and out there. And I do, over and over. But that act of putting it between covers means it will put up a lot more resistance to my interventions. I found that out with *Harvest*, which I fully intended to become what I called my "accordion book," one I would just keep adding to, never having to write another one, like Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*. It just didn't work, I mean at all, as you can tell because here's a whole 'nother book now. *Harvest* did change, but it was more with tinkering than new thinking.

This morning I thought: "Well, if you're that concerned about it, why not bury the essay deeper in the book, even take it out." And then I thought: "No, this is a book about

change, about how we can and do change ourselves, sometimes in radical ways that seem as if they should be impossible, like the lightbulb changing itself, not just upping its lumens, say, hard enough to imagine, but literally unscrewing itself and putting a new one in, one that is both still and absolutely not itself.” Which is impossible, of course. Except humans do it all the time. And that’s what I’m trying to write about here, a tautology, an Escher stairway, a lightbulb gazing at a navel. “This piece,” I further thought, “is about that. How can I bury it or take it out?”

I was at an impasse. So I did what I always do when I get to one: I wrote something, which is this. I’m not sure if it’s an *apologia*, the sort of “defense” writers often turn to for self-justification; or a warning, like the one on cigarette packs. But I’m inserting it here as a heads-up: If you find this one really irritating, stop reading it, skip to another one. Maybe you’ll want to come back to it someday, maybe not. I read that way all the time, skipping around I mean, in and out, back and forth, up and down. I almost never, ever read linearly, beginning to end, in part because of this risk, that I’ll reach a patch that just irritates me. If I can’t skip it, I know by the time I’m done with it I’m going to be a much less friendly reader thereafter. No book deserves that, not for one “screw-up,” as it were. And that’s all I’ll say about that.

So, about that lightbulb . . .

July 18

This morning while I was walking at Woodard Bay, just after first light, that misty drizzle still in the air, so typical for early morning hours here when the sea breezes win

over the land heat and ferry their light liquid cargo inland, lost together with myself in the endless seas of ferns that stretch out in every direction, all those roiling green waves flash-frozen in mid-fall, tall masts rising up from them, similarly stilled in time and place, I had the most joyous thought come over me: that I was deeply happy to be here with myself. Not *by* myself, *with* myself, that other, that “you” “I” address all the time when I’m talking to “myself.” Just the two of us I thought at first, like the quantum tandem I wrote about in *Harvest*, me and my “phantom thespian,” but now right together at once, not across the universe from one another, inhabiting the same space, the same presence, both distinct and indivisible, aspiring toward communion. It was a magical feeling, helping me to start to make some sense of the odd phrase that kept intruding unbeckoned into my poems last winter, like an unwelcome guest in many ways, not quite rude but insensible, coming from a place, and in a voice, that seemed not to be my own saying over and over in various ways:

I am  
not  
I am.

What could this possibly mean, I wondered back then?  
Today I think I began to understand.

We are led culturally to believe that our “I am” is individuated, monolithic. A singularity, an identity, “my” identity, the word itself suggesting oneness. Yes, composed of multiple components, but still unitary. Not twoness, which is how “I” experienced my time this morning with “myself,” realized not as another “I” but as a “you.” I thought about Whitman’s great poem, “Song of Myself,” how he introduces the “you” right at the outset:

I celebrate myself, and sing myself  
And what I assume you shall assume  
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.

I have always read that “you” as a gesture to include “me” the reader, drawn from the outside in, his promise to share with me all that he has assumed into himself via his presence in the world. But today I added another dimension to that “you,” in this case his gesture to another aspect of himself, the one who wants and needs to learn what he has to teach “them” through that same presence. And one that allows him, foundationally, to reach out in the most amicable and loving way to every other “you” out there, the unity we all, as humans, share on some levels, via our inner otherness, becoming companionable precisely because we are, in our own identities, always also other to ourselves in the most intimate and loving ways.

This gives Whitman’s final line above, about all those shared atoms, so preposterous sounding when read as an actual atom for atom exchange between him and me, an entirely new valence, now not only more plausible, but factual, when you think of it, that is, first as an address to his own inner “you,” the other that he is simultaneous with, like that other that I am with today walking, so joyful, already sharing all the same atoms, a celebration of communion, yes, exactly.

Then I thought again about Whitman’s exuberant declaration later in the poem that he “contain[s] multitudes,” so easy to understand when we see that our identity ultimately comprises vast stores of “I’s” and “you’s” seeking to collaborate in some amicable, sometimes even choral way to achieve communion, more like the trees in the forest, sharing resources along the billions of byways underground, helping to sustain life in

“others” as much as in themselves. And I thought again about Jesus’ imperative to love others as you love yourself, so hard to do when you imagine the other as categorically different from yourself, an inaccessible sphere of presence locked in its own orbit, the way the injured wayfarer appears to everyone who passes him until the “good” Samaritan comes along; how, for so many of us, almost everyone not of our preferred tribe(s)—race, creed, religion, country, ethnicity, whatever—looks: not only hard to love, but unworthy of it, unrealized in humanity, as we are.

Every historical argument for hate, slavery, and any other mode of categorical oppression depends for its efficacy on that foundational distinction: I am fully human, worthy of love; you are not. Many of those arguments validate that paradigm under God, who, they say, parcels out love similarly, thereby justifying the many forms of brutality, all the way up to genocide, missionary zealots perform in His name. But if there is an “other” than our self, a you, right in there in our own inner midst, one who shares that quality of otherness with everyone else out there, then self-love can be much more easily achieved, transferred and broadly shared. Those forms of cultural violence may not disappear, but at least it becomes much harder to deploy God, or some perversion of her word, from the Bible say, to explain and justify it, as Christians have done for centuries in relation to slavery and antisemitism, among many other atrocities. I have read in both Eastern and Western mystical traditions about such a oneness that has, potentially, universal reach. But I never quite understood what it was, what it might feel like, or how it could possibly be achieved. And I’ve tried, believe me, tried hard. Today it happened, all of it, briefly at least, without any trying at all.

Which gets me back to that mysterious, intrusive phrase that kept cropping up in some of my recent poems: the “I am” in the act not just of seeing itself—some straightforward arrangement of the manifest “self” under the gaze of an ethereal overseer, for example, by means of which the self appears to come to “know” itself, even change itself, all normal functions we tend to aggregate under the cultural cliché of “self-consciousness”—but of negating itself toward some more creative or generative end, not self-consciousness but notself-consciousness, identity not as singularity, or even duality, but as multiplicity. Or at least today, that’s what it felt like that phrase was trying to get me to think about, to know, to enact.

So how to explain all of this, this I am I am not? I’ll begin at the end, where every “story” seems to begin before I start to tell it. I might see where I hope to end up, just have no idea how to get there. So that’s where I’ll start. And at the end here is that “I am,” which I am, at least from time to time, not any longer. As I said, while I was writing the most recent section of poems in my ever-expanding book *slights: my new tiny poems from here not there*, one called “tiny poems shelter in place,” versions of that odd and enigmatic phrase—I am not I am—kept cropping up as I wrote, out of the blue, one I had not forethought in any way, one that didn’t quite often even seem to fit the poem it forced its way into. Not “I am not who I am,” as in I am somehow destabilized in a way I can’t yet recognize, which is kind of how I felt right after I moved here, unable to find words to say what I was seeing. And not “I am not who I was,” what you might say after some sort of “conversion” experience, which I have not had, or after just moving across the country to start anew. But “I am not I am,” a feeling of being what a deconstructionist might call “under erasure” in the very act of inscribing my “I.”



That kernel took many variations in the actual poems I wrote, like this one, for example:

i  
am not

i  
i am

not

not  
i

The contradiction here appears to be doubled, an I am that is both not an I and not not an I. Wallace Stevens' great poem "The Snow Man" seems to me to be getting at something akin to this enigmatic and ineluctable relationship of a listener to a nothing that both is and is not there:

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

Parmenides is another, more ancient, thinker who explores the mysterious relationship between being and nothingness when he says:

There are two ways for the seeker to understand  
the world.  
The first is  
IT IS  
and that IT ISN'T cannot be

this route is committed to reality and truth.  
The second is  
                  IT ISN'T  
and that IT ISN'T must be.  
No information comes back from this road.  
You cannot know nonexistence  
                  which cannot be accomplished  
Cannot even speak of it. (12-13)

He goes on to warn in the most extreme terms against even thinking about that kind of "Nothingness:"

. . . I bar you from the road the witless wander,  
the splaybrained masses without self-direction,  
deaf blind and astounded, the paranoid millions  
who compulsively confuse what is with what isn't. (14)

I have for some time now been reading this admonition as simply a warning against becoming overly enamored by the dark allure of nothingness, of the kind Sartre, for example, attributes to human consciousness, which is for him, by definition, ulterior to everything it encounters or perceives, and which, more alarmingly, when given purchase in the "I," can lead to despair or worse. Now I'm thinking there is more to it than that. The Buddhist concept of nothingness for example, as well as kabalistic concepts from the Zohar, conceive it as entirely outside the perimeter of our understanding, as foundational for somethingness, as God either specifically (the Zohar) or broadly (Buddhism) imagined. And like God, it is beyond our ken: we cannot know it because we cannot even name it let alone apprehend it.

Parmenides says: "That Nothingness exists will never break through./ Withhold your mind from that way of inquiry." (14) Which is not the same as saying it is not there, in the way that things just outside the periphery of

our vision never come into focus, as objects for our attention, but remain as the context for whatever does. We cannot simply dismiss nothingness from the scene of our experience, making our “I” safe, always full of itself. That leads to crass empiricism, about which Parmenides says:

But don't let fashion force you to travel  
the empirical road either  
using the blind eye for instrument  
the ringing ear and the tongue,  
but use your mind to respond to my challenge  
and the disturbance it causes. (14)

The word “force” suggests to me the ways in which one’s mind is actually lost when we seek safe passage via the established conventions and, especially, the power structures of our local cultures, forsaking our own “eye” and “ear” and “tongue” in the process. And “disturbance” suggests further that there is inevitable turmoil in coming to grips with what “IT ISN’T” means to “IT IS,” what I’ll call, in my own terms, the presence of absence in human experience.

It’s possible that I am missing his point, that Parmenides, whom I like quite a lot and prefer to think I am coming to understand more and more deeply over the course of a lifetime attending to his work, and find myself always agreeing with, even when I think something entirely new about it, as is the case right now, might, in relation to this not-I-am-ness judge me to be both witless and splaybrained. I hope not. But even if I have lost my way, I can’t really help it. I didn’t write these phrases that entered my poems, they wrote themselves.

Another example took this form:

no  
I am  
not

no  
not  
am I

Here the negative “no” opens the scene, in two separate but analogous iterations, seeming to negate the “not” that follows, a instance where two negatives definitely do not make a positive. This one sounds to me more like the kind of thing Emily Dickinson does when her innards are in mortal conflict, as in this case, where her “me” and “myself” can’t reconcile:

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

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

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

Here’s what I said about that poem in *Harvest*:

What a remarkable poem, halting, turning,  
gathering, not one that typically ends up in the  
kinds of anthologies we read in school, those more  
accessible poems about nature, death, loss, love,

valor, etc. There is an almost torturous twisting in this one, from the opening opposition of Me and Myself, to the Myself assaulting Me, to the We that is the mutual monarch of the two, yoked inevitably if incompatibly, to the final, but futile, threat of abdication: Me - of Me? (37)

That last tag—"Me - of Me?"—especially reading it now with her question mark inflecting the "other" me, sounds now to be akin to the I am that is also not I am, the two "yoked inevitably if incompatibly," the foundation for all the other I's and you's that aggregate into the one we call "Me."

Another permutation that showed up was this:

I am  
now  
not

I  
am but  
what

Here is an analogous sort of alienation, not just from the foundational "I am" but its temporal "now." I'm not quite sure what that means, though I think it might have something to do with the concept of "negative time" that I was trying to play with around that time, a translation into time of the common artistic technique of using negative space—the absence of line or color—to suggest, by their absence, the contours of what is being depicted "sketchily." Here's what I said about that in one of the "little snippets" I was writing last winter and spring:

My experience of temporality now is akin to the what artists call negative space, the way the whole

of something can be fully intimated even if parts are left missing, the sense that in some ways the whole is better registered only if and because those parts are missing. I call this negative time. It is not the absence of time, nor is it the sense that time is either stilled or going backwards. Just that its dimensionality is shifted, slowed maybe, or refracted, even inverted, depending on the angle, like light through a water glass. It is, like negative space (the way artists use it to suggest contours) both a rich and pleasant experience, that sense of the whole being gathered in the most minimal and efficient way possible. The phrase that erupts spontaneously now in several of my poems to describe this is:

it is  
not  
not now

The immediacy of being, the “is,” is not “now,” our customary way of thinking about the present, but not “not-now,” the double negative replacing the positive quite precisely without contradiction or confusion.

I wrote that fragment more than three months ago, in May, and then hit an impasse. Today for some reason I started thinking about it again on my walk. I got up early and decided to attempt this walk at Woodard Bay, the first time out there in about a month, because of the number of mask-less walkers I had been encountering on the narrow paths there. It was empty today. Just me. Brilliant! I spent the first part of my walk praying. I have no idea why the woods is the only place I can raise a prayer. It just is. And I honestly have no idea whether there is any presence out there who might receive it when

I do. But I do it anyway. It is not only further calming to me, it is more importantly directly expressive of the already-calm I feel in these spaces, more an extension of my presence than a plea for assistance. I sometimes use Jesus' idea of the kingdom of heaven to characterize that sense of presence-in-place. My state of mind most likely has nothing to do with his, but his figurative expression gives me some way to name it sensibly for myself.

About halfway through this walk, in the deepest part of the woods, I began to think about time again. It was the ferns that precipitated it. This part of the woods is marshier, so the ferns there grow to humongous sizes, as much as eight feet tall with a similar spread, densely thatched together to make impassable forests of them on each side of the path, which I suspect they would simply overwhelm in a matter of months if people stopped walking on it. It struck me how simple the economy of the woods is here. There is massive overstory with a mix of five different trees—cedars, firs, hemlocks, alders and big leaf maples—ranging in age from seedlings to many hundreds-of-years-old giants. There is one big leaf maple that is as wide as my driveway and taller than all but one building in Olympia. And a few Douglas firs even larger. The understory is ferns, almost exclusively, I mean millions of them, stretching as far as eye can see into the depths of the forest. Caught today momentarily in their overwhelming midst, I had the strongest sense of their seemingly eternal presence in this place, tens of thousands of years I assume, looking exactly like this, placid, elegant, filling the stillness with a stillness of their own. On the one hand, the scene seemed timeless to me, outside of time, one mode of negative time. On the other, I felt I was walking into the maw of a huge vortex of time, one that was at once both drawing the future back into the present and spewing the present out of the past. It was an awesome feeling, all of this swirling time suddenly stilled

with each step among these grand ferns, time negating itself in both directions to allow each moment of the “present” to feel endless. What a wonderful walk that was.

On my way back up the road to the parking lot, in an area that is predominately alder trees, their white-lichen-glazed trunks shimmering in the bright sunlight, such friendly trees, I was restored again to space, but in a strange way, the field of my presence there radiating outward in every direction. My attention felt like a bright light. And, like a light, it was not shining to make me visible to me, just as a light does not shine in order to see itself. It is there to reveal what it falls on, like a mode of creation. If there is a God, I’m pretty sure this is how she brings worlds into being. First, there is nothing there, not even “the Word.” I mean not even a nothing that assumes its meaning because of the absence of somethings in it. I mean the nothing that comes before even the word “nothing” is formed. And then in the light of her gaze, all this stuff just appears, not like it’s brand new, but like it has been there forever, the vortex of time whirling out from that moment of creation to invent both a remote past for all these lush things, and also a remote future in which they are existing as well right then. That light shines everywhere at once and forever at once. I have no idea if this makes any sense, but today I thought this is at least a tiny part of what I feel when

It is  
not  
not now

Yes, that eternal “is” that is not only now but also not not now, an oddly positive double negative, which is what negative time is, is what I felt. I think . . .



These cryptic phrases—again, I had no clue what they meant or where they came from, so out of keeping with the poems they intruded upon—I began to realize captured perfectly the liminal state I have been navigating since I moved to Olympia, post-retirement, two years ago. And they embody the conundrum I am not just thinking about now, but actually living, both vexing and generative, one that pertains to identity, self-identity, in some complex set of ways that I want to try to write about here, in part to help me to fathom it better, in part to further facilitate the important work it is doing on my behalf.

I've written at some length in *Harvest* about the two primary ways Western systems have for thinking about identity, which, for simplicity's sake I name as essentialism—we are born fully endowed with an individuated spirit of sorts that emanates outward to shape our destiny with or against the grain of the general culture, a cartoon version of Romanticism—or social constructionism—we are shaped from the outside in, unconsciously for the most part, by the dominant culture of our historical moment, primarily via discourse systems whose values we inherit as we acquire them, a cartoon version of postmodernism. I have no interest in elaborating more refined versions of either of these forces for “creating” a “self,” an “I am.” I'm only interested in the inside-out and outside-in dynamics of all of this, in their most simplistic forms, both seeming to assume that the result is an “I am.”

The problematic surrounding the “I am” is rooted deep in the psyche and now collective unconscious of Western culture, finding expression at least 3500 years ago in the odd conversation Moses has with God when they first meet via the “burning bush.” After God promises to “deliver [the Israelites] out of the hand of the Egyptians,” assigning Moses the task of leading them, they exchange

names. God has already introduced himself: “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” What could be plainer than that? But Moses insists on knowing more exactly who is speaking to him. He wants not a description, a set of references, but an actual name:

“Indeed, when I come to the children of Israel and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they say to me, ‘What is His name?’ what shall I say to them?”

And God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM.” And He said, “Thus you shall say to the children of Israel, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’” (Gen. 3:13-15 NKJV)

God answers, in irritation it seems to me, not so much at the impertinence of the question as to its foolishness: “I am who I am” (most often now translated, more suggestively, as “I am who am”), a nonsensical response from a human perspective. Everyone of us is who we are, Moses must be thinking. That’s not a name. How are you different? That difference between a human and God is made clear when God shortens his name to, merely, I AM, his “first name” sufficing, the ultimate in self-identification, basically his saying “I don’t need a last name, like you humans do, to differentiate my am-ness.” My last name is the same as my first. There is no genealogy involved. One of the implications of this, for those of us who are not God, like Moses and me, is: Okay, I see, you and I are not in the same league when it comes to our “I am’s.” I am not and can never be simply an “I am who am,” self-symmetrical, a closed identity that also encloses everything in its infinite compass. For us, Moses and me again, there is always a fissure, a separation, a gap, between the I am and the who I am,

one that can never be fully abrogated. Thus the chronic tension, sometimes utter incompatibility, we tend to feel in that relationship between the “I” which is and the “I” which wonders about the “I” which is.

This tension afflicts all of Western philosophy as well, extending at least as far back as Heraclitus around 2500 years ago. I happened to be rereading Heraclitus this winter. I can’t remember if it was before or after those enigmatic phrases started intruding into my poems. But he clearly is pertinent to the problem they index. Heraclitus is a master of the mysteries of negation. He doesn’t write about the “I” specifically, which seems almost not to have been invented yet, at least in its egocentric form. But he does write about the mind’s internal dynamics, in a passage like this one for example:

The mind, to think of the accord  
that strains against itself,  
needs strength, as does the arm  
to string the bow or lyre. (31)

Here is a duality that is never at ease. The mind needs strength, arm stretching the string taut, because even “accord . . . strains against itself,” an absence of unanimity in the very pursuit of it. And a mind of this sort, to work that way, must of course be both something it is and something it’s not. God never needs to do that, is never *not* I am, which is why, I assume, Heraclitus doesn’t seem to know quite what to do with God in his search process. Here, for example, is a passage that elevates the problem toward a transcendent level:

The oneness of all wisdom  
may be found, or not,  
under the name of God. (41)

I love this one, implying that there may be something akin to a oneness, but it is unreliably affiliated with God, which calls it all into question right at the root. There seem to me to be two ways to read this: (1) We don't need God to find the oneness of wisdom, a fully human pursuit; or (2) We are so far away from being godlike in our being-here that even if we do find the oneness of wisdom under God, it is "under the name" only, and it's a name we can't fathom in the first place. There are numerous traditions, both religious and philosophical, that insist on not naming God, on "hiding" the mystery of the I am who am. I think Heraclitus is inclined that way.

Heraclitus is also one originary source in Western thinking for the imperative to "know oneself," the one that Socrates and Plato made *de rigueur* for any serious philosophical inquiry, as in these passages:

Applicants for wisdom  
do what I have done:  
inquire within. (51)

Or this one:

All people ought to know themselves  
and be wholly mindful. (71)

I index this bias in our engrained systems to highlight the problem of self-negation at stake here. In order to know oneself, there must be another agency of knowing in there that makes it possible, one that by definition is "not." And in order to use that agency to make change one sooner or later has to become what one is/was not. In other words, not only is my I am not ever "who I am," it is not even "not now I am."

Western philosophy is rife thereafter with further explorations and arguments about all of this, from the pre-Socratics to now, the most famous contestant along the way being Descartes, whose “I think therefore I am” has become a cultural cliché, one you might put on a T-shirt or a computer decal. The “meditation” that takes Descartes to this conclusion and then leads him to interrogate it deeply is, to me, both profound and comical. He purports to strip away all of the arbitrary and non-essential aspects of his identity, clearly impossible, until he reveals the jewel at its core: his *cogito ergo sum* moment. He is at first quite self-satisfied about this discovery. Until he begins to wonder whether or not he can really trust the thinking, the *cogitoing*, that this *sum*, this I am, is doing. In the end, he is so anxious about whether the “I am” is authentic and legitimate in its relationship to “who thinks” and not a trick of the devil, that he turns it all back over to God. In effect, he says, something experienced as such a “clear and distinct” idea, as self-evidently true to my “I am,” must be the work of God, who sanctions it; which, to me at least, seems to undercut pretty much any authority both of his process and of the primary dictum it produced, suggesting that the “I am” “who thinks” (instead of “is,” like God) can only survive as a reliable duo if God provides the ground for their relationship.

A couple of hundred years later, in his *Biographia*, Coleridge defines the “primary Imagination” this way

The primary Imagination I hold to be the living Power and prime Agent of human Perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM.

Which, as is the case with all these thinkers, comes around sooner or later to the way in which our “I am” is

both like and unlike God's. Hers creates *ab nihilo*. Ours recreates, via perception.

Maybe my favorite thinker about matters of this sort is Mikhail Bakhtin, about whom I've written variously over the years, quite often in relation to the conundrum of self-identity, which he specifically precludes as a possibility. Here's my favorite quote, from his *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, as wild a ride as you're likely to find in relation to this matter:

A man never coincides with himself. One cannot apply to him the formula of  $A=A$  . . . [T]he genuine life of the personality takes place at the point of non-coincidence between a man and himself. (59)

Maybe I just should have used that passage at the top of this essay and stopped there. Even my own childhood iteration of this riddle, Popeye's "I am what I am and that's all what I am," [which is, I found in doing this, very close to one of the translations of what God says to Moses!] is almost unfathomably rich, the "I" no longer even a who, but a what (maybe Timothy Morton would like that), with the "what I am" clearly limited in some severe way by "that's all." Okay, Popeye is not referencing or afflicted by his unlikeness to God, the ultimate  $A=A$ . Or maybe he is?

My long meander here is simply to suggest that the problem at hand is eternally vexing in the human universe, at least in Western systems, whether you think about it in the context of cultural history or your own little life. But there is a much more practical side to all of this philosophical humbuggery, and it has to do with the primary reason I left Pittsburgh, and the 40-year foundation of a settled life there, immediately upon my

retirement to start again anew here in Olympia: I wanted to become someone other than I was, not “something” other, as in finding a new kind of work or a new wife or a new house, but “someone,” a whole new “I am,” as it were, even if I didn’t know quite what that meant or would involve.

I did not leave Pittsburgh to escape from “myself.” Were such a thing possible in this particular universe, I would have tried it. But I’ve been around long enough and have read enough to know that this ambition is folly, guaranteed to disappoint. What you are and have been goes with you, wherever you go. Everyone says so, including a lot of people smarter than I am. And I’m smart enough to listen to them. On the other hand, I also know from the same reservoir of knowledge that change is possible, even tectonic change at the level of the “I” who “am” if you take the initiative toward that, do the work, and get lucky along the way. And I knew the sort of change I craved at that moment was not going to happen if I stayed where I was, or would happen with such grueling labor over such a grindingly long stretch of time I would not live to see it come to fruition.

And I left Pittsburgh at least in part because I knew my life, my established “I,” was “over” there, could tell in my nervous system and bones it was not just dysfunctional, which is sometimes tolerable and often changeable; it was “disappeared” and was never going to be found alive again. I was, as I said earlier, a shell of myself, and not just because of my extended illness during my final months there. That just made me “a shell of my former shell,” as the old joke goes, merely impersonating the person I remembered being because I couldn’t find an alternative “I am” to fill all of that empty space in there. I am a teacher, so I am also a good actor, part of that skill set. I could recreate a very convincing simulation of myself at

work and in social settings. Then, at home, just an absence. Not an entirely unpleasant one. But absence is not life. It is nothingness. Exactly of the sort Parmenides warns against: IT ISN'T.

I wrote about all of this in *This Fall*, explaining that in the shadow of my loss I felt all the time as if I was just watching myself on TV, pretending, with others, to be who I had been because there was no one left in there to “be,” my “I am” having absconded. And in the absence of any family nearby, my daughter Bridget and son Joe living far away, on the verge of leaving my workplace for good, Pittsburgh, all of it, no longer felt anything like a place where I could recover from that—a home, which is what such a recovery requires—but more like a waystation between what used to be and what Stevens says above: “Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.” So going someplace new was the first essential step along my imagined path toward another I am. I chose Olympia because it was far away, my daughter lived there, a big plus, I had been there a couple of times and had a good feeling about it, and, according to my daughter “it rarely snowed,” which after my final grueling, flu-ridden winter in Pittsburgh was the clincher. I had a back-up plan if Olympia didn’t pan out. I didn’t, and never will, have to use it. I couldn’t have landed in a better spot for me and for my self-renovation.

I was also, for reasons I didn’t quite understand, chafing to escape from the external identity-related categories and constraints that had defined me for most of my adult life, the ones that never made perfect sense even in their heyday, felt always like a baggy suit—which is why I preferred to have students call me Paul rather than Professor Kameen, even that last name seeming an excess—but had no meaning, really, any longer, none: husband, teacher, professor, poet, Dr., those names and



titles applied to me by culture, society or circumstances while I played those roles, the ones I could use as shorthand when I was introducing or explaining myself to others. All irrelevant now, inapplicable. I intentionally don't include father in that list, the role I was disinclined toward and least likely to be successful at in my pre-imagined life, but that, with the help of my wife and children, I think I truly excelled at, deeply enjoyed, much to my own amazement, and that I fully understood, right from the moment I first held Bridget, would be my truest calling. I cherished that role and still do.

After both of the kids had left for college, on a way to lives of their own, Carol would hate it when others asked about our "empty nest." She would tell me in irritation afterwards that a home is not a nest, that we are not birds who will brood again, the kids were not fledglings now off on their own never to return. We were grounded and bonded in relationships that would, of course, change over time, already had to get to this point, but would always be foundational, essential, for all of us. I felt that instinctively, but her argument gave me a way of reinforcing it in figures and words. I tell people all the time now that the distance between those first moments of afterbirth in the hospital and now, both my kids thirtyish, enjoying their lives, is both vast and microscopic, that all of that time seems to flash forward in front of me every time I see or talk with them. And they need me just as much now as they did then, for different things, of course, but things just as important and urgent to sustaining a life.

The way I coded all of that disrobing of baggy identity markers in previous books was I would get "small, just paul, that's all." "Just a guy trying to get by" was another phrase I liked for it. I thought that process would be relatively easy, smooth, even pleasant. It wasn't. Disrobing leaves you naked, obviously, like in one of those bad

dreams where you're without clothes and can't remember what your speech was supposed to be about in front of a big audience, all fully clothed. That's how I felt when I got here. As I said, I was riven by anxiety for the first year or so here, unable to comprehend how I could feel so vulnerable among others, and so easily dismissed by them in areas I had great expertise with, most especially poetry since the local groups I ventured into were all poetry-related. But that's what nakedness in a clothed world induces. Thus, the bad dreams.

I soon realized that the process I was engaged in was not simply making someone big become small, someone arrogant become humble, a relatively straightforward transactional exchange. I became preoccupied with both the concept of and the feeling of being "nothing," which I experienced quite vividly and painfully, an absence of "I am" quite different from the one in Pittsburgh. Here, now, I couldn't impersonate my former self. He simply did not exist in the social memory of the community. An impersonation would be quickly found out. So right from the outset, "nothing" seemed to be at the core of my search for becoming something, a necessary stage along that path. I don't mean "nothingness" in any conventional philosophical or religious sense. I mean nothing in the sense of nobody, just a guy not even trying to get by, beneath notice to everyone here, who were already somethings on the basis of their longstanding presence amongst one another. For example, one day while I was shopping for cookware in a nice "estate-sale" store downtown—Olympia has many such thrift stores, with great stuff very cheap, I'm not sure why—the very elegant older woman, working as a volunteer, dressed to the teeth, which is not Olympia-normal, clearly a "somebody," was looking me over, wondering (I felt) whether I was one of the homeless people who reside in Olympia, staggering numbers of them, many my age,

dressing like me, casual, looking like me, bearded, thin. Without a ground of my own to stand on, as it were, her gaze made me deeply uncomfortable, aware of my nobodiness in a world of somebodies. Were I actually a homeless resident, I would not have been bothered by that, knowing who and what I was, all fine. But I was neither at home here nor homeless here. Just between. Nobody. Yet . . .

As I put it to myself: the only way to get from who I was to someone other—which I had no way of even imagining let alone conceptualizing—was to slide all the way down the long left side of a parabolic curve toward the base of its trough, however long that took, however hard it turned out to be, until I got to zero, where the absence of who my “I am” was might establish the ground for another “I am” it might become. That descent, I also discovered, had two aspects to it. One was obvious, because it was here, where I was: I had moved from a place where I was something (somebody, i.e.) to a place where I was nothing (nobody, i.e.), and I had to accept that demotion. I could do it gracefully or grudgingly. Either way, it was just true.

On the other hand, I worked quite tenaciously to hang on to the tattered remnants of my identity still vested where I came from, in Pittsburgh. I sent former colleagues my books, albums, long emails, hoping for ongoing validation. They of course were fully occupied with lives where their own “I”s were urgently important and well-established. Much more quickly than I expected most of them responded more briefly, or more belatedly, or not at all. In other words, I began to realize, I was becoming nothing just as quickly there as I was here. That was quite painful for me, more so than I expected. I was the one who left, after all, not them. Rationally, of course, having seen colleagues retire, I understood it was perfectly normal, even necessary, for those people to move on

without me, as I had always done with retiring colleagues. There may be a short-lived surge of interest in keeping a relationship afloat. But absence is absence, whether it's up the street or across the country. And very shortly those kind of ties loosen and unravel.

I had done this so many times with others I claimed to care about, I don't know why it surprised me. I guess, like every other unpleasant thing that we see happen to others, even inflict on them, we persist on some level in believing we are or will be exempt from it. So the left side of this parabola I was sliding down had not one but two sides to it, and they were complementary in significance and timing. That quite surprised me. Last spring, when all of these "not I am"s kept cropping up in my poems like unruly dandelions in the lawn, I began to realize that while I may not have hit zero yet, it must be right up ahead. I had no idea then, and still don't, about what if anything was on the right side of that parabola, or even if it has much of an upward slope to it. I just wanted to get to zero. I decided that my target date for that would be June 9, the two-year anniversary of my move, and I set to it.

As I said earlier, it actually took about a month longer than that, until July 16: a minor disappointment that day which, as it settled into my nervous system, became the "final straw," dropping my "I am" down to zero, now fully "not," both here and there. But instead of sadness or irritation, I was suddenly filled with elation. I mean almost instantly, like a fog had been lifted. I was stunned, felt a sense of liberation, circled the date on my calendar and scrawled the word FREE above it. I will celebrate it every year now, my personal Independence Day. I had imagined that the next step in my process would be to start up the right side of the parabola, "here," I mean, in Olympia, my home in every sense of the word now, and

just stay zeroed out “there,” not just back in Pittsburgh, but every other “there” I had ever been, back to my childhood.

Now I’m not so sure, about the former I mean. The latter, yes, that zero will remain, as it now must. What relationships “there” have survived, and there are several such genuine friends still quite vibrant in my life, for whom I am deeply grateful, now feel “here” to me, part of my now, not there or then, additional nodes in my still small but now worldwide digital community. But I actually like my zero here quite a bit. I am neither not-nothing (a cypher in the eyes of others) nor not-no-one (without any status or prestige), which is what I expected; I am now simply not-I-am, a radical freedom from the dimensions even of my own body quite often, which seems to blur out into my surroundings, and from my past, which blurs back into oblivion, even from to my own “soul,” that booty of cultural baggage I inherited, absorbed, or intentionally learned along the way, as if it would matter, would guide my way. It didn’t. Only nothing did, my quest for it, when I set out for this new home, accelerated by the COVID-19 induced isolation we all had forced on us, for me so fortuitously. I’m sure I will either have to move on one of these days, back up the identity ladder, or will want to. Right now, I like it here, plan to stay as long as this “not I am” will have me. And that’s the best I can do to explain to you, or at least to that “you” in me who is my potential connection to you reading this (if any you other than mine ever does) why I am so happy now, as those cryptic lines in my winter poems were promising I would be if I just trusted them enough to keep sliding on down into the outstretched arms of nothing. And that’s how and where a lightbulb can actually change itself.



#### 4. If I Live or If I Die

June 24

The sky this morning was divided into several distinct layers of clouds that seemed utterly incompatible with one another. Just over the rolling hills to the west of town was a thick strip of clouds, flat edged on the top, mimicking the shape of the hills and about the same shade of dark gray, rising up several hundred feet. It looked like a thick layer of felt pressed against the ridges. You could easily mistake the hills for mountains if your eyes added the grays together. I know the height of those hills so could see the boundary. Just above that was an equally wide stripe of bright blue within which was a thinner band of clouds, a microcosmic summer sky caught between two darker forces, the one above it a lofty dome with many soft, gray blobs of clouds daubed against a lighter gray background. The whole of it was like a parfait, each layer utterly distinct and seemingly out of keeping with the one(s) next to it. I'm sure there is an analogy to life there just waiting for me to force it forward, some cranky "wisdom" I could invent. But I don't want to do that. This array of layers was so strange I think it should be allowed to stand on its own. Or maybe there's something deeper than an analogy that I'm just disinclined or not imaginative enough to find right now.

Which reminds me of a poem of mine I haven't thought about for a while, one I happened on yesterday while I was searching for some poems a friend wanted that were "about absence" and "upbeat." This one didn't make the cut, but I stopped long enough considering it to remember it here today. The poem opens with this same inability to translate an observation about a feature of

nature analogically over to a corresponding insight about life, a disjunction that ultimately led to an even deeper insight about *my* life, the one I was then actually living in this world. It's called "Breaking the Ice:"

Last night's freezing rain slipped  
like a tight glove—precisely,  
down to the finest detail—  
over twig and leaf and bud,  
each one iridescent now  
in the bright March sun.

I've been studying this scene  
for the last half hour or so,  
trying to find a way of saying  
how life is sometimes like that:  
You know, the ironic play of fire  
over ice: thin, shimmering fingers  
burrowing into the firm light.  
against all odds, achieving something.  
Or the other way around: slivers of heat  
intruding into the good wood,  
which shivers, gives way.  
I can't make either one work.

In the ninth grade  
I prayed day after day  
that she'd stop and talk to me  
on her way out of school.  
I'd stand by the door  
hoping to catch her eye  
as she hurried by, or try  
to come up with a clever line  
to break the ice.  
I couldn't make either one work.



So, every afternoon at three  
for the last thirty years--  
in my mind's eye at least--  
she breezes right by  
without noticing I'm there,  
hugs her smug boyfriend, climbs  
aboard the same clunky  
bus and chugs away.

I walk down to the bus stop  
to meet my son.  
By the time we get home  
the ice is crashing down  
in huge slabs and splashes  
all over the back yard.  
We sit on the back steps  
and laugh like crazy, amazed  
at all that dazzle and disarray.

As his bus heads up the hill  
I could swear I see her  
looking out the window at us, big eyes,  
like it just dawned on her  
that tomorrow, when she's heading home,  
I won't be there.

I like the leaps in this poem, the initial scene, where the “meaning” of the scene eludes my grasp because of its inbuilt contradiction, which incites the sudden jarring memory of my frustrated infatuation in the ninth grade, one that has obviously grated on me for, by that time, 30 years, the way failures of that sort from adolescence tend to haunt us forever, until we address them directly, choose to put them to rest. The next leap takes me back to the present, there with my son, picking him up at the bus stop, always a laughing-happy moment, our sitting on the steps while all of that strange ice just flops down,

releasing everything it encased. Whether “frozen” encasements of that sort last one night or 30 years, the sudden release is celebratory, awesome. And then the final leap back to his bus there now, the one from the past there now also, figuratively, the tables turned once and for all, a resolution to let it all go. So I guess, in the end, the analogy does work, but in quite mysterious and unpredictable ways, which is a good reason not to force it when it first presents itself but to allow it to leap its way toward something utterly unpredictable, magical in a way, what poetry can and will do for you if you just give it free rein to lead the way.

As I said, yesterday I spent a few minutes scouring my various reservoirs of poems, picked out a half dozen poems that seemed pertinent to my friend’s request, and sent them to her, no big deal there. What turned out unexpectedly though to be a bigger deal was my reaction to scanning the dozens of poems I considered, some newer, most much older. I really liked what I found. I mean I really liked those poems, all of them. I kept thinking: “These are really good!” Over and over, one I had just recently written and wasn’t sure about until then and especially the older ones, so much better-sounding than I thought they were when I first wrote them, in a few cases as long as 50 years ago. I don’t know what to make of this. Maybe with age I am becoming more generous even to myself. Maybe my critical faculties are dulling. Or maybe, because my history as a poet is afflicted by so much failure, an inability in particular to find any takers for my various “books” along the way, I had simply translated those rejections into a deep sense of the inadequacy of the material.

Now I think, no, my critical faculties haven’t dulled, they have become much more acute, in part because I not only don’t any longer care about finding a publisher

(other than me), I am actively opposed to it on all the levels I've described previously and elsewhere. Those poems, I know now, *are* really good. Lots of really good writers, historically, can't find a proper reception in their own time. Some of them do later, most of them I'm sure don't. I have no idea which of those fates awaits me, way down the line. And I don't really care about that, either. Public recognition on the diurnal plane can be very satisfying while you're still on it. I doubt it means much, in a personal way, once you're not. Then again, I also think the things one writes have spirits of their own and would enjoy being "seen" and valued for what they are. So I guess my hopes rest more with them than for me. Either way, it's all out of my hands now. I mean my fingers, not one of which I will lift again to pursue that sort of public renown.

Maybe that's where all those layers of the sky come in. I've now risen up from dark felt to the narrow blue between, happily so, basking in the brief interlude of sunlight, riding the white clouds in this transit from there to here. What's beyond here is as vast and indeterminate as the gray, blobby sphere above. What's below, that flat, indistinct stack of gray so easy to mistake for real hills, the one we spend so much time obsessing about when we're young, wanting, wanting, wanting, look at me, look at me, look at me, I am higher than the hills, this vaporous haze is really *terra firma* . . . well, it's not that at all, just some flimsy clouds. I'm glad I lived long enough to understand that, not so much to rise above it, as the analogy of that striped-out sky might suggest, but simply to escape it, into a little oasis of tranquility before the next layer of grays turns out either to be next to nothing or a thin veil behind which is an infinity of blue sky where I might float along without any recollection of the thick gray blanket that smothers us while we're still too much there instead of here.

June 23:

I'm Zooming with my siblings later this morning, so I decided to walk in my neighborhood today, heading toward the bay, downtown, maximizing my walking time by eliminating my driving time. About five blocks from home, on Olympia Avenue which is wider so the sky opens up more fully to view, therefore my preferred path in, I could see over the bay that the lapis lazuli of the early morning sky had faded a bit under the strong sun to a lovely robin's egg blue. The thin strips of cirrus clouds I saw earlier just above the horizon have begun to wash across the sky in two widening stripes: one, gradually flaring out, looking something like the Amazon River estuary as seen from space, the broad flow splitting first into many, many smaller streams and then into a single murky stain as it pushes into the blue of the ocean; the other more like a giant feather, a gull-wing feather maybe, but a hundred miles long, flared in the middle, tapering at each end.

I always listen to music when I walk in town. No idea why. Today for some reason I started with an album I rarely listen to, the songs I made from the poems of William Blake. I have listened to that album a few times when it came up in sequence on the SD card in in my car, but I can't remember the last time I actually chose it on my phone. I generally think of that album as flawed, maybe boring, my voice off, my guitar not quite right. But today I chose it. And I thought exactly the same thing I did about those old poems: These songs are really good! I'll give the primary credit to Blake here, whose poems—all but one of the songs are taken verbatim from his *Songs of Experience*—are capable of overriding my musical deficiencies. But I also really liked my renditions, the

strained voice, the musical scores. I won't go into a lot of detail about that, just quote the last one, which is so dark and funny, and settled into my mind nicely today. It's called "The Fly:

Little Fly,  
Thy summer's play  
My thoughtless hand  
Has brushed away.

Am not I  
A fly like thee?  
Or art not thou  
A man like me?

For I dance  
And drink, and sing,  
Till some blind hand  
Shall brush my wing.

If thought is life  
And strength and breath  
And the want  
Of thought is death;

Then am I  
A happy fly,  
If I live,  
Or if I die. (23-4)

Exactly, William. Thought is great, the "waves" I ride twice a year into these books, which may be where my writing the last couple of months is headed. And the want of thought is great, too, those long interludes between books where all I do is walk and see. Maybe life is like writing a book, lots of energy and work, a very pleasant kind of everything. And death is like just walking and

seeing, a very pleasant kind of nothing. Either way, as he says, it's pretty great.

The images Blake created to accompany these poems are always surprising, in how they run counter to or askance from the most apparent reading of the poem, this one, maybe more so than most, actually made me laugh out loud at its curious nature. Here it is:



When I read the poem, given who I am, where I am in my life, what I know about Blake, I imagine an older man talking to the fly, commiserating with it to some extent, understanding the same general fate they share, living at the whim of forces so much larger than themselves, which can flick them away permanently not only willfully, if any

one of them chooses, but just by accident, without even noticing, the difference in magnitude is so great.

But here we have instead a mother with very young children, such a surprising twist. As the mother attends to the little boy (I'm guessing) trying to lend him a helping hand as he learns to walk, the somewhat older daughter is reaching up softly toward the fly, out of the mother's ken entirely, no apparent aggravation or violence, not to swat it but maybe just to "brush its wing," unaware of how devastating that might be for the fly, more like a game for her than an attempt to get rid of a pesky insect. There is a playfulness, a genuine innocence, about the scene that forces me to re-imagine the poem. That "blind hand" may, of course, be something like "God," my first instinctive reaction, but, if so, it is quite a whimsical even gentle version of one, one who has no conception of her strength when she's just playing around; and if not that, it is at least not sinister. Our fate is in some essential respects always really "child's play" in the general scheme of things, I'm inclined to think that Blake wants me to think. And whether we think at all, or not, whether we live or die, even, is not in our control, more a matter of happenstance. But, fortunately, in his vision here at least, we can be happy along the way, and either way, or not, our choice. But happy, he believes, is just better.

Another quite dark poem I translated to music also caught my fancy while I listened today, this one about the mysterious ironies of love and loss:

Never pain to tell thy love  
Love that never told can be  
For the gentle wind does move  
Silently invisibly

I told my love I told my love  
I told her all my heart  
Trembling cold in ghastly fears  
Ah she doth depart

Soon as she was gone from me  
A traveller came by  
Silently invisibly  
O was no deny (467)

I'm never entirely sure what to make of this poem. I feel I both understand it completely and, on some level, have no idea what it's trying to say. My go-to example for things like this is the choral imperative from The Band's "The Weight:"

Take a load off Fanny, take a load for free.  
Take a load off Fanny, and put the load right on me.

In the context of the song, you have no idea who Fanny is, what her load is, or why you should end up with it for free. But with each surrealistic stanza, you get another variation of the everyday ways burdens often get shifted to us, seemingly beyond our immediate control.

I checked the lyrics, just to be sure I got these lines right, and got sidetracked, finding a web link that purports to explain the song, a piece by Seth Rogovoy for Forward.com. Here's some of what he says:

As for the title character, such as she is, Robertson confirms once and for all that she is "Fanny," and not "Annie," as many have often misheard it to be. (Try singing "Take a load off Fanny" to yourself and you can see how the two easily converge). In fact, there was a Fanny upon whom the tune was based. As part of his



self-education in European avant-garde cinema, Robertson studied Bergman's and Bunuel's film scripts, which he found at the legendary Gotham Book Mart on West 47th Street in Manhattan - located in a neighborhood with which he was already familiar from his days running diamonds from Toronto to New York City on behalf of a Jewish mobster uncle. The bookstore was originally opened on New Year's Day, 1920, by Frances "Fanny" Steloff, who still ran it when Robertson haunted the film section in the late 1960s. Steloff eventually donated the building to the American Friends of the Hebrew University Foundation. Those film scripts had a huge influence on Robertson both thematically and as a songwriter; they gave him permission to write songs that included jump cuts and fadeouts and used surrealistic symbolism in a particular manner that became Robertson's trademark, while dealing with questions of God, mortality, and fate. In sum, a far cry from the Band's origins as a mostly Canadian bar band called the Hawks who backed rockabilly star Ronnie Hawkins on blues and R&B numbers like "Who Do You Love?" and "Further on Up the Road."

Rogovoy concludes his piece this way:

As for the song's ultimate meaning, Robertson recounts to Myers a conversation with Roebuck "Pops" Staples in 1976, when the Band re-recorded the tune with the Staple Singers for inclusion in the Martin Scorsese-directed farewell concert film, "The Last Waltz" (which just celebrated its 40th anniversary last week on Thanksgiving day). At the session, Pops Staples asked, "Robbie, what's this song actually about?" Robertson replied, "Pops, you know as well as I do."

As Robertson recounts, “He looked at me, laughed and said, ‘Go down, Moses’.” As it turns out, the song written by Bob Dylan’s former lead guitarist was a civil rights anthem which, like many before, connected the plight of Southern American blacks to the ancient Israelite slaves, albeit one disguised as a weird country-rock tune. Whether or not the song’s main vocalist, native Arkansan Levon Helm, the only American in the group, had any inkling of this, we will never know – Helm died in 2012.

I’m so glad I found this, and I’m just going to assume it’s accurate. This way, the song takes on an astonishing currency in the racial crisis playing out right now in our streets and media.

Anyway, to get back to Blake: Is he calling attention to the risks of telling someone you are in love with them, how often that goes badly, a “bad” aggravated by the fact that the next one coming down the line, almost randomly, wins the day, without any investment at all? Or is the “traveler” the heartache that inevitably attends to such a moment, and, as in the case of “Breaking the Ice,” above, hangs around for way too long a time afterwards? So long that you wish you never pained to tell what couldn’t, or shouldn’t, be told. I don’t know the answer to that, and I don’t want to, which is why I’m not going to Google the poem to get the sort of “readings” poems like this invite for “educational” purposes, almost always trivializing the mystery of the original. Suffice it say, for me at least, I’ll keep as many variations of meanings for this poem, and for Fanny’s load, too, together in the air, like juggling axes, for as long as I can.

Which reminds me (sorry, I think I’m on one those jags that Robbie Robertson, the Band’s main songwriter goes

off on in songs like “The Weight”) of my favorite poem from my *Harvest Moon* collection, which describes exactly this type of scenario, remembered from long ago, as is the case with “Breaking the Ice:”

9/17: All these silly silences inside

I woke suddenly with you still on my mind,  
harvest moon, last night's light,  
the time we spent together  
out in the front yard, so sweet,  
yet how might I continue to write,  
my mind asked in my last dream,  
with all these silly silences inside?

It is 4AM. I was sure  
you would not still be here.  
But the bright pool of light  
on the silk rug in the sunroom  
stuns me as I walk past,  
that pale glaze on the grass  
out back, your so-soft touch.

I am sorry I am so shy.  
I never understood why words  
left when light shone down.

I know now, at my age,  
what I should not say to you  
and why: "I love you," never,  
how it stirs up still-still  
water, little waves rippling  
across a too-dark sky  
lapping fine-sand shores,  
brittle white, wearing  
thin edges thinner.

I know how silly silence  
sounds from my side  
of the table, that restaurant,  
dim as this moonlit night,  
so romantic, my heart  
full to overflowing,  
needing to be free  
of the weight  
of those three words,

and I knew not to say them,  
but I did anyway,  
as I always do, just  
pushed them right out  
into the soft light,  
all that hope and fear,  
no place left to hide,

and from the other side  
of the wide-open sky,  
those vast still waters  
of togetherness  
stretching out forever  
as far as I could see,  
well, silence, statue  
smiling stiffly, staring  
back, saying nothing  
at all, and everything  
at once, not silly  
that silence, I will tell you,  
nothing silly, except maybe me,  
if you were there that night  
outside the window looking  
in, trying to fill my head  
with silence instead of  
those three words,

fool, I knew, as soon  
as I heard them.

And for some reason  
we went on eating.

Now, again, sitting here,  
all these years later,  
filled with a silly silence  
that tries to hide those words  
in its dark waters, down deep  
where even I might not  
overhear them . . .

such a fool, I tell myself,  
every night, every hour of every night,  
even in my sleep, I tell myself,  
a fool, so full of love rippling  
through my dreams,  
and when I wake like this,  
4AM, wanting just to say  
the only three words I know,  
the last three I remember,  
you are here with me  
listen, smile, but sweetly,  
reach out and touch me,  
all anyone needs  
when those words  
can't echo back,

just one soft touch that says  
I know, I know, I know,  
and I will hold this moment  
forever in my heart,  
those words so sweet to hear,  
chalice for my joy  
and sadness, always with me,

and when we part tonight  
I will kiss you lightly  
on your lips,  
so soft and warm still  
from the few words  
they let pass between us  
here, and mine, forever  
silent, you know, but still,  
still, this dark water.

Fingertip caresses  
of moonlight on  
the back of my hand,  
along my arm  
resting here with you,  
me, in that pool  
of your soft light  
in the back room, glowing,  
another little moon,  
and I know, I know, you will be  
back tomorrow, sit with me,  
all these silly silences still inside,  
how I might, yet, continue to write.

I don't have much to say about this, except if someone good ever tells you they love you, be the moon, just be the damn moon. It's not that hard. The one you walk away from that night will feel so much better for having risked it. And if you're good, too, so will you.

Then I cued up my Emily Dickinson album, one I always enjoy, all of those great poems I rewrote into conversations between me and this remarkable woman with whom I am truly in love. Here's a poem that struck me quite poignantly today, as it always does:

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

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

I’ve heard it in the chilliest land -  
And on the strangest Sea -  
Yet - never - in Extremity,  
It asked a crumb - of me. (34)

I’ve written numerous times about Dickinson’s dashes, how they contribute semantically to her poems. This one is quite stunning in that respect, those dashes everywhere, sometimes in the most unexpected places, fracturing and halting the progress of the poem, almost a kind of stuttering, as if the words of the poem keep resisting her attempts to bring them forth, her needing to stop over and over to consider which one should come next, the only thing that keeps the poem going, maybe, a “hope” that it might reach completion against all the odds of indecision to avoid imprecision, which is exactly the theme of the poem. And what I noticed for the very first time rereading the poem today is how she puts hope between quotation marks, a sort of gesture maybe, via punctuation, of the possibility that hope can remain insulated from all the turbulence—the ceaseless, ongoing stuttering—that threatens to overwhelm it; that, in its isolation from the rest of the poem, it needs no external sustenance, not even a “crumb,” to remain intact. Or maybe it’s a way of saying that the word, hope, is more like a metaphor for something we can’t quite name, let alone fathom, if it even exists at all.

I thought today, as I always do when I hear this poem, of my journey over the last five years, one that started in the chilliest land, so unbearably cold in the shadow of death, where all you have are the quotation marks of your own warm arms to keep you, too, from freezing. And then, once movement became possible, my setting forth on the strangest of seas—"set keel to breakers, forth on the godly sea," Pound says in the opening lines of his lifelong voyage via the *Cantos*,—where all you have are the quotation marks of your little vessel to protect you from being swept under by surging, turbulent waters. What I have seen and come to know in that chill land and on those strange seas is beyond my words to tell, though I've clearly used tons of them to try.

I'm remembering also now the tale Coleridge's ancient mariner tells, his voyage into the reaches of the then-uncharted, almost surreal Southern Ocean, both strange and chill at the same time, a journey that is heart-rending, life-shattering, fearsome, by turns both traumatic and awesome. My sea has been almost that strange, and I'm still on it, the calmer part, headed home maybe, which, for the mariner, becomes a place where, every now and then, he will be seized by a compulsion to tell his story to a recalcitrant listener, as I clearly have been these last five years, too. Except he gets simply to tell the same poem over and over. I have to write a whole new book every six months or so to contain it. Though it's always the same story, of course, as you know if you've read more than one of them.

Time for me does not stand still, as it does for the mariner. It changes, and it's not just the future intruding on the present to change that moment. It's the present intruding on the past to change everything that's back there, too. Over and Over. We like to live with the



illusion that the past is always intact, fully extant, finished, coherent, that what it was is what it is and will be, always the same thing. But anyone who is even the slightest bit reflective understands that the past is as inchoate and shapeless as the future. We “fix” it firmly in place first of all by turning it into a “story.” But today’s story is just for today, sometimes needs to be “fixed” again tomorrow to be seen more clearly. Think of how many historical heroes are now perceived as monstrous; how many of those invisible in their own moment, as nothing as Blake’s fly, are now our heroes. All those statues put up only to be torn down later and replaced. Or simply how often you, like I, have changed our view of what we “were” or “did” so fundamentally that it no longer even resembles let alone is identical with what we first made it seem in that initial “story.” I’m just thinking now that maybe the mariner creates a whole new and different poem every time his affliction leads him to the one “who must hear me,” one that tailors the details of his ordeal specifically to fit his new audience, or even his “new” self. That would be pretty cool.

I’ve been trying to fathom for quite some time how I can so agree with Dickinson in her “hope” poem, even though I know I have felt utterly hopeless quite often, sometimes for long stretches. Today it dawned on me: As long as you can use the word “hopeless” to name your state of being, you can still imagine some possibility of the “hope” that stands, in its cocoon of quotation marks, at the foundational core of its negation. Hopeless is not the opposite of hope or the absence of hope. It is the “less” that waits for more. And in extremity, as it sings the tune without the words, it asks for nothing from you, not even a crumb.

My listening process today ended with my thinking about an odd phrase—“far sufficiency”—from the Dickinson

poem that begins “Because He loves Her.” I’ll give the whole poem here for context:

Because He Loves Her  
We will pry and see if she is fair  
What difference is on her Face  
From Features others wear.

It will not harm her magic pace  
That we so far behind—  
Her Distances propitiate  
As Forests touch the Wind

Not hoping for his notice vast  
But nearer to adore  
'Tis Glory's far sufficiency  
That makes our trying poor. (1229)

Maybe you can tell me precisely what this poem means. I puzzled over it for quite some time before I rewrote it into the song that's on my album, which takes considerable liberties with her text in the interest of saying what I guessed the poem might be about: That for some reason we become much more interested, sometimes almost obsessively, in someone once we know they are loved by someone else, and especially by someone famous or important. I think for example of the most recent Royal marriage, Prince Harry to Meghan Markle. She is, of course, an interesting woman to us in her own right, if we happen to have heard of her. But she becomes exponentially more so once the Prince loves her. You can go the opposite way, too, how someone like Sonny Bono, as unlikely a figure for cultural attention as you can imagine, became universally recognizable because Cher married him and sang his song.

But the phrase in that poem that most perplexes me, keeps attracting my attention in much the same way as the new princess does for some now, almost obsessively, is “Glory’s far sufficiency.” What the hell I wonder is a far sufficiency? Both “far” and “sufficiency” seem so ill-suited to the “meaning” here, whatever it is. Neither far nor sufficiency are, almost by definition “glorious” in the way we associate that term with people. They even seem derogatory. As if to say: If your status in the public mind depends almost entirely on the love you receive from one who is legitimately great, like the moon depending entirely on the sun for its “shine,” well, that may be sufficient, and it may be far. But it’s kind of delusory, too. Take the sun away and you’re back to just a bleak cinder spinning around a bigger, bleaker cinder in a backwater of the universe.

An earlier draft of the poem used this line there: “Glory’s overtakelessness that makes our running poor.”

“Overtakelessness” may be a more legible adjective in this context, but it is just as awkward. I don’t even think it’s a word, or at least the red line Word keeps placing under it suggests so. And in what respects can “running” be thought of as poor? Even more of a stretch than “trying.” Maybe, in fact, Dickinson chooses the most awkward terms she can think of here to suggest how weird, almost inexplicable, it is to fake-“love” someone, simply because they are actually loved by someone else. Humans do it all the time. I know for a fact that I was more attractive to other women while Carol was here, to certify that I was in fact loveable, and that was amplified considerably by the fact that Carol was very beautiful. Once she died, all that sunlight went dark. I was, in many respects, a cinder again. That, of course, is just as stupid a way of seeing as the opposite. No one’s light is derived entirely from the outside. What we need most to do is try our best to filter all of that extrinsic light out of our perceptual field. So we

can truly see what genuine light glows out from the person we are witnessing. It may be greater or lesser in the end, but as long as we're distracted by reflections or the lack of them, we will never, ever know what's true, its far sufficiency or overtakelessness. I'm pretty sure I am still everything that Carol loved me for. If you need to see her with me to see that, please stay away from me. It "makes our trying poor."

And a quick note about this poem: For the first time, and remember I rewrote and recorded this "song," I notice the distinct paucity of dashes here. I checked multiple sources to be sure of that. They all give only the one, right in the poem's middle, like the pivot of a teeter-totter as the poem moves from a relatively intelligible opening to its bafflingly obtuse close. Maybe that's what loving from afar is like. Maybe that's what living from afar is like: You're all the way up and then the sudden turn, the hard bump on the ground.

I guess I've wandered pretty far afield here, this little walk down and back to the bay. As Heraclitus says "the way up and the way down are one and the same." Just like the teeter-totter. As I headed up the hill on my way back home a Steller's jay swooped across the street in front of me and alighted on a gate by a nearby house. I see these birds in the woods quite often, but rarely in town, where the less flamboyant scrub jays proliferate, like the one that lives in the hedge in my front yard. The Steller's jays are truly stunning birds, the incomparable cerulean blue of their bodies offset and made even more dramatic by their jet black, high plumed heads. The blue of this bird was more like what I saw in the sky when I woke up than what I see now, the widening streams of clouds further diluting and whitening the sky. I stood and stared at it for a while, stunned, until it flew off, all of that deep endless blue on the wing, the thing with feathers, "Hope."



## 5. Nurse Logs

August 6 #1

“Everything’s okay, Paul.” I woke up mouthing that phrase without really thinking as I lay in bed half-awake just before I got up this morning, wondering what kind of day it might be out there. The Olympia sky is a kingdom of clouds, from the sheer veils of winter, every possible texture and shade of gray you can think of, sometimes stretched-out so taut the sun seems caught in their fibrous webs, a small almost ivory orb that slides slowly up and then down during the day; or sometimes crumpled up like many bats of gray linen unrolled and tossed on the floor while you decide which one is best for whatever you might want to sew that day; to the riotous whites of spring, every possible permutation of cumulus cloud, from huge multi-sailed schooners, roiling around, shape-shifting in whatever wind is up there even when it’s not down here, to popcorn-like daubs moving slowing along like the little fish I see in Budd Bay, this way today, that way tomorrow; to the pulled-thin summer streamers almost but not quite cirrus, broad whitewash strokes swept on when the brush is almost dry, making translucent stripes that stay stock still, pale stains on a big blue wall.

All blue is rarely a sky here. Almost never. I sleep with curtains drawn to keep the room dark, so I don’t know what kind of day it is when I first get out of bed. I often guess on the way to the window, testing my intuitive acclimation to the weather here, and I’m usually right. Today I guessed that it had rained lightly during the night, would be a little wet but with a brightening sky. I was wrong. When I threw aside the curtains I was stunned. All blue, the sky was all blue, the most pellucid, liquid blue you can imagine, like you could start wading into it and it

would never end. I went quickly around to all the windows in the house, and there are lots of them. All blue in every direction. Except one, toward downtown, the bay like a broad open hand holding the distant mountains, a thin sheen of white right at the horizon line, just a hint of clouds, a cirrus strip, barely there. Yes, everything is okay today, Paul!

August 6 #2

My primary focus when I walk tends to be toward the flora, trees and ferns in particular, the dominant clients in the Northwest woods. But today, at Woodard Bay, the fauna were equally enchanting, probably because I got going so early, all the birds and animals seeking morning meals. My first surprise was a winter wren that not only emerged into view from the ground level ferns where it spends all its time, usually evident to me only by its cheerful, disembodied chirp; but also flew from branch to branch ahead of me, so I got a good look at it. These birds are the length of my thumb, little round balls of feather about the size of a tater tot, with barely-there beaks and short, blunt tails, less than an inch, maybe because they never have to navigate far, and certainly never where wind would be a factor.

All along my walk there were the little groups of Oregon juncos bounding down the paths bobbing to pick seeds, staying always about 10 feet ahead of me, their comfort zone. The males have charcoal black heads that end sharply where the chocolate brown of their bodies starts, the females all chocolate brown, heads only slightly gray, small, perky birds all of them. When I got to the bay a big blue heron rose up from one side of the water and lumbered over to the other, those big, floppy wings so powerful it was almost like slow motion, at least

compared to the cormorants, which beat their wings furiously in flight. I saw one of the cormorants taking flight from the water, those long duck-stepping motions as it uses the water like a runway to get airborne, all that ruckus of splashing along the way.

There is a stretch of the path through the woods, just before you come out to the paved “road” down to the water, where I always hear now the deep, growly grunting of what I assume to be seals, their noises similar to but a lot louder and lower-pitched than the cormorants, which roost in the hundreds, very raucously, on the other side of Woodard Bay. I know from the signage that seals use Henderson Inlet as a rookery to pup. The area where I hear those noises, inaccessible down a steep slope from the path I walk on, must be the spot. Today, maybe because it was so early, it was especially noisy down there. When I got to the lookout, I could see two seal heads poking up out of the water, just lolling there, one larger one smaller. I’m guessing it was a mother and her youngster out for a morning fish. There were also about 10 seals, some big, some small, hauled up on the floating docks out in the bay, some of the leftover infrastructure from the now defunct logging operations here, all dozing quietly.

Similarly, I saw a doe with her mid-sized fawn, another mother with offspring, both late summer sleek, trotting down the path ahead of me very relaxedly before veering off into the dense undergrowth, disappearing instantly. The most spectacular episode happened when I walked over to the Woodard Bay lookout. As I said, hordes of cormorants roost over there every year, April to October, using the same dozen or so tall trees, leafless now, ash-white from all the droppings, to stage their flights in and back from the bay to fish. The bare upper branches are usually dotted with them, looking like big, black leaves;



some smaller number, maybe a dozen, in the air, coming, going, or just circling around. Today, when I got there, the air was dark with cormorants, hundreds of them, looking more like a flock preparing for migration than a bunch of individuals attending to the needs of their families. They all whirled and wheeled around for a few seconds then started to scatter, on their way out to fish. It was a stunning tableau, one I had never witnessed before. And it lasted, the whole thing from the first flights to dissipation, maybe a minute. My timing today was just perfect.

August 6 #3:

I'm just back from my second walk today, this one to Watershed Park, one of my favorite places, which I haven't seen in about a month to avoid the surge of mid-summer pods of social walkers who, as I said, seemed more inspired by COVID mania than an appreciation for the scenery, none of whom wore masks or made any attempt to respect social distance. It all put a real crimp in my deep-seated respect for the remarkable culture of care I've experienced in Olympia thus far. My walk to Woodard Bay early this morning, completely solitary and such a delight, made me wonder whether Watershed Park was also "safe" again. It was around three, my natural lull time, usually a good moment for one of my daily naps. But I walked out to check the mail first. It was such a glorious day today, temperature in the low 80s right then, pure blue sky, low humidity, it seemed a shame to sleep through that part of it. So I headed off, fully prepared to just come back home if it was inordinately crowded. It was not. I saw only four people on the walk, a mother and her son, who stepped far off the path to let me pass, and a young male couple standing on one of the little bridges, leaning on the railing, talking.

They realized too late that they couldn't get out of my path, but turned away respectfully. I put on my mask and skirted them as best I could. It was soothing, redemptive, both the beauty of the place and the genuine care those few people, who must be regular visitors there, showed toward me.

One of the things I've noticed in these woods ever since I arrived, and been puzzled by without thinking too much about it, is how close the trees often grow to one another, still somehow being able to achieve full size. Back East, for a tree to reach "specimen" proportions, like the glorious, old trees that surround the Cathedral of Learning, the building I worked in at Pitt, they need a space at least as broad as their full crown, for most maybe 30 feet in each direction. In the woods, where they grow helter-skelter, the ones that grow closer than that always seem stunted in some way, smaller, more spindly, often twisting off in screwy directions to seek enough "space" to find more light. For some reason, here, those laws don't seem to apply.

There are multiple examples of this in Watershed Park. One type are the trees that grow right on top of what are called "nurse logs," a term I had never heard, and a phenomenon I never saw, before I got here. From what I understand, this is a way the forest clients share resources to promote new growth, the fallen trees for some reason a more amenable foundation to support new growth than bare ground. I'm not entirely sure why that's the case, maybe the acid soil, which is suited of course to all those evergreens, but which may be harder for a sprouting seed to gain traction in. Or maybe it's that a fallen tree just opens some space for light to get in, and seeds maximize the opportunity by germinating right on the tree itself. But, in any case, these logs "nurse" the next generation of trees as best they can. The most extreme examples are

trees that have sprouted on top of still standing stumps, maybe the remnants of trees blown over in storms. These stumps range in size from two to four feet wide at their top platform. Some of them are as much as six feet tall. The new trees they support are in some cases now as broad at their base as the trees that fostered them, long tendrils of branch-barked “roots” thick as my arm, snaking down the trunks to the ground to get traction and draw water.

Another type are the trees that grow up on fallen logs. There is one particularly striking example of that on my typical walk, a long hemlock log, maybe 50 feet of it still visible before it disappears under the path, about 5 feet wide at its base, dead maybe 30 years I’d say by its state of composition, still a real log I mean, not rotten. On top of it now are as many as 20 young hemlocks at various stages of growth. Down near the base of the log, the oldest among these are a closely grouped array of about half a dozen, each a foot or so in diameter, growing next to one another, as if they were one unit, like a candelabra, its array of arms spraying up. Then, spread out along the log are about a dozen more, spaced evenly, some smaller, some bigger.

Another type are the now older, more mature trees that sprouted on stumps or logs that have almost fully decomposed: living trees either straddling empty spaces where the logs once lay; or, in the most charming cases, having grown over stumps, perching now six to ten feet above the ground on pyramids of many “roots,” ranging from thick as my forearm to the size of my thigh. The most amazing of these affords enough space to walk full upright through its root maze!

One thing I noticed especially today, though, were the trees that grow from the ground right next to each other. I

started thinking about it when I saw a “couple” of trees again that I know well, one a big leaf maple, the other a red cedar. They must have sprouted a few feet apart a couple of centuries ago. Now they are massive, each 6 or 7 feet at the base, and fully fused together for their first 5 or 6 feet heading up, a charming sort of interspecies melding. There is another group, all big leaf maples, maybe 6 or 8 of them, clearly individual trees, each about 2 feet wide, clustered together, that have fused into one massive “trunk” at ground level, maybe 10 feet wide, arms swirling up in a cascade.

This may well be another example of the culture of care that animates life in the forest, “marriages” of a sort, a way to share resources instead of competing for them. There are several examples of such mated pairs at Woodard Bay. The two such “couples” I notice most, and did again this morning on my walk there, are trees that reside right across the path from one another, roots intermingled where I walk, each with a “youngster” immediately nearby, little “families” is how I think of them. I put all those terms in quotation marks because I understand the impertinence of this sort of anthropomorphizing. But they help me to think about these arboreal relationships figuratively. In one instance, it is a fir and a red cedar, both huge, with another much smaller red cedar standing about 8 feet off from them, kind of leaning away. I have always felt a compassion for this young tree, as if it were an adolescent struggling to make a way of its own, angsty. This feeling is, again I know, purely human, but I sense it so strongly in the presence of these trees it is hard to ignore. Today, though, it was different. I’d only been away from this woods for a month or so, but that smaller tree seemed so much bigger and more confident today, like a young adult finally feeling some independence. The “parents” seemed to be much more relaxed and happy,

too, willing still to share resources with it, but relieved it was now able to make it mostly on its own.

A little further down the path is a pair of large cedars with a very young cedar growing between them, nearer to the larger “parent” cedar, but right in the path so you have to navigate around it one way or the other. I actually have names for these trees, the only trees I think I have ever related to that way, always touch each of the parents and put my arm around the youngster as I swing by. They are a sweet family, always happy it seems. I can see from how close the young tree is to its parent that they will merge at some point like the trees I see in Watershed Park, two becoming one, a collaborative fusion.

July 2:

*Just by coincidence in one of the weekly Zooms I share with two of my siblings, I was using the nurse log as a complex analogy for white privilege, which has been one of our topics of conversation lately, in keeping with the times. I wrote this piece the following morning:*

I woke this morning with the last shreds of a dream fluttering off like confetti in the wind. I remember a number of different elements of it, but they have no cogency, so it would take forever to write about all of them separately, and in the course of doing that I’d likely forget, or just get sidetracked from, the most important among them. I have to decide right now what that might be, and I can’t find a metric that allows me to see clearly a hierarchy. So I’ll do what I usually do: start to type some sentences and see what comes of it.

The dream (at least the final parts of it) had to do with a sort of “interview” session where my sister, one of my

brothers, and I had 5 minutes each to make a presentation to both a panel of judges and a very large present crowd, all lawyers, about our qualifications and ability to perform as a trial lawyer. I don't remember now the exact question posed to us, but it had the word "ethnic" in it somewhere. This wasn't the central term of the question, but we all chose to start with it, and to use it to interrogate things that had no specific connection to one's heritage or bloodlines or race or identity. Since I can't remember the details of the arguments each of us made, including mine, this is now a dead end. But what spontaneously I began to think about while I was talking in the dream was "privilege," the way that term has now come into play in the political arena, where it comes from, why it is so invisible to those who have it, which is why it is so pernicious.

I ended up framing my response in the context of the conversation we three had last week, via Zoom, about (among many other things) religion, all three of us frustrated (to varying degrees, ranging from irritation to rage) with the inability of Christianity, and most especially, the Christian "right," (which has, like the Justice Department, now become just another arm of the Trump administration) to respond with strength and depth of conviction to what's happening in this country right now, the horrifying inequities of the American system ripped open for everyone to see, inequities that Christianity, or at least what Christ actually says and does, seems ideally suited to redress.

One of the things we talked about was the "lost gospels," those amazing texts excluded from the canon early on (under Emperor Constantine, at the Council of Nicaea in 325), most of them intentionally destroyed as heretical, some because they offered matriarchal instead of patriarchal ways of imagining the community of the

church, a clear threat to the early church leaders. And some just because they are weird. I saw a TV show about a few of these, maybe five or six years ago, and the one that most amazed and entertained me (I can't remember now which one it is) accounted for Jesus' "missing years" in this funny way: Jesus, having been born as the son of God, had extraordinary powers from day one, but he had a childish human character, which means he had some difficulty trying to manage those powers. In his adolescence in particular, this became a problem, in some instances leading him to be a very aggravating prankster, displaying his powers just for the fun of it. In other instances he was more like a juvenile delinquent, doing a lot of damage to others or their property because he didn't know quite how destructive those powers could be to mere mortals. Or just because he felt like it, a sort of godly entitlement, the way we might feel entitled, unthinkingly, to flick away a fly, as in Blake's poem.

Now, some of you readers may know the lost gospels and may say there is none even remotely like this. You may be right. I could go out and buy them again (I didn't bring any of those books with me when I moved), or track down that TV show somehow, try to get it right. But I don't care here about the veracity of any of this. Maybe I just made it up in a dream. Doesn't matter to me because none of that is the point, just as none of what I ended up arguing to my audience in last night's dream was pertinent to the point. Which is this: After I saw (or imagined) that (at least hypothetically plausible) depiction of Jesus, I began to think about it allegorically, in the sense that this is perhaps what God is like. That is, she has such enormous powers she doesn't really understand how hard it can be just to survive down here, or comprehend how devastating her powers can be to those who don't have them, all of us just flies getting flicked aside, our wings

damaged, perhaps enough to lead to our demise. The *Old Testament* God is like this, times ten. A real prick.

What makes the New Testament appealing to me is the way it is advertised as a “the good news,” a “new covenant,” basically a renegotiation of the power relations between God and humankind. The vehicle for this, for Christians (you can make a similar argument, I think, in relation to the other major world religions, Eastern and Western, which have godly human figures at their origin point) is, of course, Jesus. But as I considered this conundrum back then, I mean about God as human or human as God, I thought, what if the conventional way of thinking about this—that Jesus is from day one the son of God, is in fact *a* God—is all backward. What if Jesus was born a human being, just as Buddha was, as Muhammad was, as Mary was, as Therese was, as Hildegard was, as Josephine Bakhita was, as Mohandas Gandhi was, as Martin Luther King was, as every other deeply spiritual human being ever was and is. But, like those others, he was simply exceptional, in a moral sense, worked really hard to be truthful, good, loving, to fathom the mysteries of existence in this universe, which is how Jesus is documented, even in the four much tamer canonical gospels that made the cut. And what if God is, like Jesus in his unruly adolescence, a super-powerful entity, utterly unfamiliar with the frailty, anger, hunger, temptation, fear, etc. that afflict her apex creations down here; but who truly wants to learn how to better understand, relate to, and care for all of us “flies” in her domain, not so much to raise her consciousness as to become more careful about how she brandishes her power in our immediate vicinity.

So, throughout human history, whenever a truly noble human figure begins to emerge from the masses, she chooses to enter into their good spirit, at which point, and



only then, they become sons and daughters of God. It would be her way of “listening” to us by inhabiting the very forms, these bodies, we have to endure while we’re here, doing our best to overcome the limits of those forms in order to become something better, or even, in these rare cases, godly. This would be a way of learning what it is only possible to come to know when the Word is made flesh.

God, of course, in this scenario, is the Word, which, according to John—and Heraclitus, among others—was there before anything else. It is not, by definition, flesh, which it can’t, also by definition, fully understand. So figures like Jesus become in-the-flesh vehicles God chooses to cohabit with, in order to dwell among us, not an assertion of power, or even a gift, but a truly humbling act, an expression of unconditional love, via one person, for all of us, a means for our redemption, just as Jesus promises and the Church believes, but for an entirely different set of reasons. In such a scenario then, our goal here would not be to follow all the rules, to punish ourselves or others when we/they don’t, to subjugate others via violent acts of “conversion” or “assimilation” in the name of “almighty” God. That would be a blasphemous relationship with the Word. It would be to do our best to turn ourselves into human forms that God would want to inhabit for a while, as a way of listening to us, learning more about love by loving us. And that, I would argue, is doable at least hypothetically by anyone who truly attempts it, works at it, reflects on what it might mean to create a flesh the Word would want to visit for a while. Listening was, in fact, one of the main themes I addressed in my talk in the dream, saying that the function of a lawyer, while it required deep knowledge of the textual history of the law, of the practical elements of rhetoric and persuasion, ultimately rested on one’s ability

to listen, to a person or a text, to inhabit their “words” in the flesh, a kind of small-scale godly gesture.

But what does this have to do with privilege? Okay, so here is my point. I’ve known tons of Christians, of course. And read a lot of history. The ones that seem to me to be most destructive in the world are the ones who think they were godly from day one, born that way. And that others (however wide or narrow that category is) weren’t, are in fact benighted, and therefore less than fully human, need to be elevated out of their degraded state by some sort of conversion, forceful or otherwise. Here’s the problem, though: Yes, you can work to convert the benighted, but by definition they will always remain relatively less than fully human compared to you, because they weren’t born into godliness the way you were. And on the basis of this distinction, you can justify forever almost any atrocity you want. For example, even when slaves “converted” to their masters’ faith, they were not freed. Even when native populations converted, they were annihilated. Why? Because they were still inferior, second-hand godly, not the genuine article.

More specifically, the same power dynamic operates in relation to the cultural divide between Protestant and Catholic traditions, which, in American culture tends to privilege the former over the latter, as a sort of “class” structure. The Know Nothing movement in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century is a good example. One index to this is the argument about the hierarchical relationship between “faith” and “good works.” For the Protestant denominations I’ve had the most exposure to, faith is not only key, it is king, came before everything, even life itself. It is, in effect, the special gift that the godly-from-birth are born with, the ones whose names were “written in the book,” part of the Word before they even got here. Good works are, in this context, almost profane, or at least

beside the point. For Catholics in general, and for me in particular, this is insane, a way of saying that what I do is not determinate in any significant way to my ultimate fate, even while I'm here let alone some hereafter where "justice" might somehow be done. What sort of an ethics is that? It's not one, simple as that.

I'm going to skip over a bunch of steps in my argument, and probably did in my little speech in the dream, because they are boring to me. And there's no way I could have said all of this in five minutes anyway, except in a dream, time suspended that way. And half of this probably came into my head as I was waking up. And, really, I can't imagine what those steps might have to be in any case. Right here you can consult Coleridge's great ruse, that "letter from a friend" he composed himself, and inserted into his argument in Chapter 13 of the *Biographia*, to explain why he had excised all the intermediate pages between the long and tortuous leadup to his famous definition of the imagination and the definition itself, the pages he never wrote, of course, because there was no logical way he could get from where his argument left off to where he picks it up again, that famous definition, utterly out of keeping with the path he had been on. It is a brilliant ploy! So I'm borrowing it.

My "skipping over" is, like his, an indirect admission that I have no idea how to get from there to here, where I want to be now. Which is this: What I ended up thinking about was how insidious this sort of privilege is, this born-into-specialness. And, again in my experience, it ends up being rooted not in godliness, the divine, but in worldliness, the profane; quite often simply money, the way being born into it feels akin to being born into godliness, so much a part of the fabric of one's life that it is taken as matter of destiny, not only deserved, but already earned in a way. And those that are not born into

it, who don't have it, well, it's because they either don't deserve it or haven't earned it. The arrogance, the hatred, and sometimes the violence that arise from this sort of privilege is best evidenced in the dead eyes that are its outward portals.

Well, these are the sentences I've gotten so far. They may or may not be true. They may or may not be persuasive. They may or may not be exactly what I think now, this far removed into the delusions of awakesness. But they are, I'm pretty sure, at least part of, or somewhat related to, what my dream wanted me to say. A lawyer needs to listen. Everyone does. It is a godly thing to do.

August 6: #4

Now that I've put these pieces together, I think you can see how I wanted to use the nurse logs as an analogy for privilege. It is not impossible of course for trees to take root in the ground here. The forests are full of such trees. It's just easier to get a good start if you have a downed log or freestanding stump to draw safety and nutrients from. Human privilege works the same way. I have no idea whether these more well-fostered trees understand the advantages they have from the outset. My guess is they do, in that trees are simply wiser in general than people. Almost no one I've ever met understands deeply and admits easily the degree of privilege they have been afforded by their circumstances. It takes hard work, reading, thinking, discussing, arguing, to fathom that. And that is especially so with racial privilege, so many believing instinctively that their cultural position is a baseline, and others who don't rise to it, fail out of their own inadequacies. That, of course, is stupid.

In some ways, it is just as hard to understand one's lack of privilege as an endemic feature of a culture when that culture is set up to keep it secret, hidden from view, the case for all cultures where privilege operates, which is of course all human cultures I'm aware of, at least those in the "civilized" world, both East and West. Some Indigenous cultures operate differently but only as long as they remain fully insulated from the domineering patriarchal cultures that surround them.

This built-in blindness is well-illustrated in the work of Amiri Baraka from the 1950s through the 1970s. I wrote about it in more detail in *Writing/Teaching*, which I'll summarize. Basically, in his first book, *Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note* (1961), LeRoi Jones (Baraka's given name) takes the weight of his apparent inadequacies and failures almost entirely upon himself, a matter of personal responsibility. This is the primary means by which unjust cultures sustain injustice: If you don't rise up to the norm or above, it's because you are weak, or lazy, lack discipline, are corrupt in your values, or, well, you get the picture. Once you enter into this economy of argument, there are infinite numbers of reasons to assign blame to whatever individuals or classes are oppressed: Basically, it's your own fault, so "pick yourself up by your bootstraps" (a physical impossibility by the way) and, in the meantime, be quiet.

By the time he wrote *Black Magic* (1968), having abandoned his given name in favor of Amiri Baraka, he sees this dynamic in a whole new way, embracing the Black Power ideology of rebellion and revolution as the only means for eliminating the forms of oppression that are so built into the framework of the American system that they can't be extracted without some serious de(con)struction. Radical change of that nature can only even be contemplated, let alone attempted, at historical

moments when the established system is already breaking down, as it was in America in the late 1960s. But extreme as the crisis was then, it was nowhere near severe enough to be fatal to the system, which fully recovered before the 1970s were over, and actually (in my view) became considerably worse during the Reagan/Thatcher/Pope John Paul II years.

Baraka seemed quite conscious of this, and by the time he wrote *Hard Facts* (1975) he shifts to a Marxist discourse to critique the ways in which racial and class inequities are built into capitalistic systems. In other words, he understands that to some considerable extent, privilege, certainly, and many of its attendant habits of hatred and oppression, are economic. And, again, the only way to change the economic structure is by means of some sort of radical change, one that could, perhaps, be accomplished politically (taking the long view) or require violent revolution, in this case one guided not by rage but by ideology.

We happen to be again in a moment of crisis that reminds me of the late 1960s. Unfortunately, I don't think it's an extreme enough threat to the status quo to precipitate structural change of magnitude. White supremacy is indigenous to American culture. At least in the 60s there were large numbers of young white males as angry at the inequities of the system—instantiated for them in the military draft to support an unjust war—as more marginalized groups. Many were in the streets with them, going to jail with them, resisting mightily. Others, though, used their privilege to evade the draft and are now a significant part of the cohort that continues to endorse a white supremacist power structure. Donald Trump is, in my view, not an extreme but a typical example of the elite white culture of my generation that now dominates the Republican party. I understand that there are horrifying

white supremacist cohorts of all ages in the middle and lower classes. But it is the elite—and I don't exempt academics from it—that do the most damage because they wield the most power, thereby fomenting the “lower” classes to support policies and practices that are actually against their own interests. That's how insidious the power vested in privilege can be, victimizing as many of those who don't have it as it can, both to hide and to sustain it. The fact that I am ashamed by my historical cohort, and aghast at it, is no solution to the problem it represents now. Actually, I think we will have to die off before significant change can take effect. And it will take a lot more than COVID-19 to do that. It will take time, which is relentless, perfect actually, in performing such cleansing work.

August 12

I'm not sure how I could have started with “everything's okay” and ended up here, this darkness and shame. I've been trying for a while to revise some consistency into this piece, but it just won't work. I don't want to cut any more material than I just did, and I don't want to move any of these sections to other essays. I just feel they “belong” together, even if I can't quite fathom how or why right now. What I can do is take another turn here. It may not lead me back to everything being okay with me. But it might help me to make better use of my shame. Toward that end . . .

I was reading some of the Roman Stoic philosophers this winter and spring. Their approach just seemed to be in keeping with the requirements of the moment. Marcus Aurelius in particular appealed to me because he uses an aphoristic style suited to translation into behaviors, which is even more key to me these days than usual, with the

ongoing challenges to stay focused and centered when external supports have been eroded or removed. I think I will just arrange a few of my favorite dictums from his work and see where that takes me.

The first is an enigmatic one to be sure, most likely a fragment of something larger: “Straight, not straightened” (87). I’m inclined today to read that in relation to the problem of external authority—religious, cultural, political—as it is applied strenuously to enforce attitudes and values, like privilege, for example, in all the ways I describe above. When one’s inner core is weak, wavy, all over the place, as is commonly the case for those who don’t reflect much on who they are or want to be, the world is more than happy to provide the “straightenings.” Some of them are quite severe, some more cosmetic. We are amenable to them because they allow us to “fit in,” or “pass” our way into the hierarchy of power. Or at least avoid doing any mental work of our own. What Aurelius makes me think about today is the importance of first getting “straight” on one’s own, from the inside out, eliminating the need, and removing the temptation, to be forcibly straightened from the outside in. Or at least providing a ground for resistance to the inevitable straightening forces being applied at the moment. Okay, that’s a start.

On the same page in my current translation is this passage:

What is rational in different beings is related, like the individual limbs of a single being, meant to function as a unit.(87)

Again, this could be read variously, depending on the needs of the moment. Today what I hear is his injunction to use reason, our ground for relations



among others different from us, to strive toward unity, coherence, maybe something like the “communion” I wrote about earlier. I am, I know, generally quite critical of “reason,” at least when it is counterposed to “imagination,” say. But my sense from reading his work is that Aurelius does not rely on such a simplistic distinction among “faculties” of mind. His aphoristic style is evidence of that. You need to read these bits not like as logical argument, but more like riddles or parables. That is, you need to develop “ears to hear” before you “get” them, which requires melding reason and imagination.

Much of what this essay attempts to do so far is to think about change, specifically how to effect real change in oneself, a formidable challenge in a cultural context that has been so heavily pre-processed for us, from the minute we are born and most susceptible to influences of that sort. The established religious, political, and economic systems to which we become inured are obvious forces of that sort, the things most of us just take for granted not only as incontrovertible, just part of the obligatory furniture of our local “home,” but as better than the other alternative systems out there in the world. Identity markers are another such of course: race, gender, class. And then there is the originary propaganda that arrives with our native tongue, its shaping the contours and limits of the worlds we can even imagine, let alone think about. Rationality may not by itself dislodge any of that, but it can mitigate it, reveal it as cultural instead of natural, the first step toward the possibility of change if not change itself. And rationality is, according to Aurelius, one big thing we share in common, a starting point for conversation toward communion.

In that very same section of the book I now see this one:

Everything is interwoven, and the web is holy; none of its parts are disconnected. They are composed harmoniously, and together they compose the world. (86)

This is not exactly the same as “everything’s okay, Paul.” But it gets me closer to the culture of the forest, all those nurse logs, all the trees, the many subcultural layers underground, fungi, microbes, each doing its part not just to survive individually but to collaborate on behalf of the general good, by which means individual survival is made far more likely. That “web is holy.” So might ours be.

I understand the imperatives of “difference” in our current culture, the ways they are created and enforced by structures of power far surpassing any individual desire to override them. Sameness is not a solution. Sameness excludes, sometimes with violence, but always by oppression, what looks different. It disconnects parts in order to serve itself. White supremacy is a good example, and why the phrase “I don’t see color” is so objectionable in its context. If you don’t see color, all you see is white.

Still, I retain a real faith that it is possible to “compose a world” in which everything is interwoven and harmonious. Natural ecosystems, left to their own devices, do it all the time, which tells me it’s a tendency built into the fabric of life in this particular universe. Achieving that would require abandoning the hierarchical power dynamics that sustain “caste” structures like patriarchy, supremacy, and privilege; and creating one with permeable interfaces that allow for easy migration from one layer to another—like what is happening in the forest, both underground, the roots coalescing with

microbes in the unitary pursuit of general wellbeing; and in the crown, the leaves basking acquiescently in sunlight to create nutrients to shuttle downward—one that promotes collaboration over isolation, cooperation over competition, such that in seeking what we need to survive, we “naturally” contribute what others need, to sustain the whole “ecosystem,” including us. That may sound utopian, but I honestly believe, and I think Aurelius would agree if I had a chance to talk with him about this, that if you get *yourself* straight by thinking rationally, you will see that it is all quite simple and doable. It is in fact much closer to what “democracy” aspires to be than the demagogic aberration we have turned ours into. There are a few, a very, very few, at the top of the pyramid living parasitically at the expense of everyone else who stand to lose something, a lot really, via such a transaction, doing *their* best to “straighten” the rest of us to their will, self-servingly. I feel pretty sure that you are not one of them, or you would have put this book down a long time ago. You will gain immeasurably from such a simple adjustment. Then everything will be “okay” for all of us. Including Paul.



## 6. Part 1: Faker, Fraud, and Fool

June 22

I feel strangely calm this morning. Like I have entered a state of wonderland uncertainty about everything and hope I will never have to leave it. It was already bright and sunny when I woke up, not the usual morning clouds. And warmer. So instead of reading the daily news online, my usual routine while I drink my tea, I decided to sit out on the front porch and read, actually reread for the umpteenth time, parts of my book *Harvest*, which I just got yesterday with the latest revisions. After a few minutes I heard a bird call I wasn't familiar with, a quick, whiny, almost sireny sound, quite haunting. I looked up where I thought it came from, but couldn't see anything. A minute or so later, I heard it again, this time from a bird in flight that swooped in and settled on the top of the telephone pole at the corner in front of my house. As soon as it landed, I saw its mate up there, the one that first called, exactly the same color as the weathered wood, which is why I didn't see it at first. They are the pair of collared doves that must nest nearby. I rarely see them, this is only the third time this year, so they must be somewhat reclusive, and quiet most often, unlike the mourning doves that used to come to our yard back in Pittsburgh, much more comfortable around people, there in large numbers every day, cooing lightly, to eat the birdseed that got strewn on the ground by the birds who ate at the feeders.

This was, then, already a special day, but it got better. A few minutes later a jaunty Oregon junco flew in and sat staring at me from the top of the stone post right in front of me on the porch. These birds are smaller and

differently colored from Eastern juncos, the “slate gray” variety I was most familiar with before I moved out here. They pick around on the ground, for seeds I assume, hopping along in the most exuberant fashion. I see them all the time out at Woodard Bay, where they will keep bounding up the path as I walk, always about 10 feet ahead; and also quite often now in the front yard, especially in the freshly mulched areas where there is no grass. This one soon darted down to that open ground to search for seeds. Then another one flitted in, the black of the head more dramatically separated from the brown of the body, so most likely a male, sat on the post for while, and headed out to join his mate.

I knew I had made the right choice to start the day this way, away from the dreary news that seems never to change its tenor, just its details, the chronic cultural dysfunction of, well, I was going to say this moment, but, really forever. All of the promising rhetoric in the aftermath of the George Floyd murder, the way it arises from the ashes of burnt neighborhoods over and over, the fires not yet having fully died down. Every time, I hope those words will turn into promises kept, and then, after a few weeks or months, nothing much of consequence changes. White supremacy is seemingly intractable, and very, very patient in the face of resistance, prone to long silences designed to outwait the crisis. Then the tension begins to slowly build toward the next inevitable paroxysm of grief and rage, a year, or many years later, depending on the gravity of the issue and how successfully it was suppressed in its previous incarnation.

I already see symptoms of the initial cultural inertia becoming evident. You read the news, so you know them, too. The anguish that afflicts me at moments like this, the realization that, oh, yes, nothing much will change this time either, is rooted in the underlying question that

keeps repeating itself: “Why? Why does nothing really change, despite all the promises that arise in the moment of crisis?” Well, as I’ve said repeatedly and was telling a group of graduate students via Zoom a couple of weeks ago: because change is hard to effect. Really hard. And the best way to find out how hard is to try to change yourself. I mean for real. Not superficial, the kind of that arises weakly from a moment of crisis, a marital argument, say, the vague compromise it evokes, lasting a few months maybe; and not pretend, the kind that arises just after New Year’s Day, say, and lasts a couple of weeks. I mean deep, abiding change, from a promise that is kept, truly, fully, over and over, unrelentingly, for years, forever. If you think that is easy, then I guarantee you’ve never tried it. Self-delusion, the right-sounding words without any action to back them up, is so much easier and more convenient than change.

Last night I had a series of dreams both scary and hilarious, not really terrifying, more just so bizarre and atypical you can’t help but keep staring at them, trying to fathom what in the world inspired them and what they might mean. I won’t go into all the details, for many reasons, but will say that the whole message seemed to be that I had spent my life in a state of arrogant selfishness, that most of what I had devoted my time to caring about and doing, quite assiduously as if it was for the “good,” most especially on the intellectual and scholarly side, was a waste of time at best, destructive at worst. The primary voice for all of this in the dream took the form of surrealistic version of my mother, like mom-as-Munch’s-scream, who said, among other things, that I was “a faker, a fraud and a fool,” something she never, ever did say or, I’m pretty sure, even think, while she was alive. She told all of us over and over not to get “too big for our britches,” but faker, fraud and fool are much too big for

any britches I ever wore. It was riveting, mesmerizing, jaw-droppingly awesome, more spectacle than critique.

At first I resisted her terms, utterly flabbergasted by them, mounted defense after defense on my own behalf, each of which was rebuffed with stern gestural force before I had a chance to extend it, suggesting not that each defense was flawed or weak, but that any attempt at defense at all was ludicrous. The only actual sentence I remember from her rebuttals is this one, because I wrote it down when I woke up: “Debating begins with forgetting that what was, is, now.” I’ve been thinking about that sentence ever since I woke up, the way it characterizes debating, whether internal or external, as a self-defensive gesture rooted in the delusion that what obviously was, isn’t now, the “reality” of the past conveniently overridden by the duplicity of forensics. Individuals do it all the time when their stereotypical and deeply ensconced assumptions, about almost anything, are challenged. And cultures do it on a mega-scale, as in the intransigent racism and sexism that is built into our white patriarchal systems of power, which chronically proclaim “progress” toward some better state. Most of it fake, fraudulent, foolish.

I have been thinking a lot lately about matters pertinent to that, reading voraciously books pertaining to race and racism, in the aftermath of the George Floyd murder, trying without much success to write about them, hoping to fathom not so much the general culture, which I think I understand quite well, but myself, which, as for everyone else, is much harder to reach, through the faker, the fraud, and the fool that protect it from genuine inquisition, and therefore real change. The overall theme of all this writing is “identity,” my own in particular, which I find myself more attendant to right now because almost every certainty that sustained it for the last 50 years, except for fatherhood, is now gone—my job, my wife, my



friends, my home, my status and “titles”—my having moved cross-country quite intentionally to escape from all of those (except for my wife, of course, who died, instigating my desire to exile all the others and start over), having concluded that uprooting myself from any familiar comforts was the only way I could actually “find” the “who” I was looking for, craved really, this late stage of life my final opportunity for another retooling, this time not in relation to my primary profession, teaching, which requires that kind of labor every 10 or 15 years, but in relation to my spiritual core, where the term spiritual has nothing, and I mean, intentionally, nothing, to do with any organized religious system, or even any specific texts. And I needed, hoped, I might find some alternative mode of relative “truth” to hold me together from the inside-out instead of the outside in. To get myself “straight.”

Most recently, last week actually, for reasons, again, that would take too long here to fully explain, I was thinking about brokenness, how every single one of us is broken in one way or another, how we spend so much time and energy, of necessity quite often, trying to hide that from others, in the workplace of course, and especially in one like the university where any sign of weakness is like blood in the water, drawing the sharks, but also in our personal lives, where our pre-defined cultural roles, in relation to gender say—son/daughter, brother/sister, husband/wife, father/mother, even friend, though you can set up a similar set of simplistic binaries for race and class, and, really, pretty much anything you want to think about, if you intend to think badly about it—pre-shape how we think and behave, where those gender, racial and class markers pre-condition the lives we are allowed to lead. Or at least how we think we should or must. I have no problem with all of that, really. Reality is the “already there” we have to inhabit in our historical moment, beyond our personal choice. What I did think though is

that doing all of that work just to fit in sooner or later leads us to forget our own brokenness, to hide it from ourselves. And when we do, we are lost, will end up as aimless wandering fakers, frauds, and fools, unable to control our own destiny or even to relate in any meaningful way, as a mode of compassion, to the brokennesses of others.

I became deeply aware of my own brokenness when my wife died. Not just the brokenness that event created, but more so the one(s) that pre-existed it, many of which I had been hiding so long from the world at large that I had lost sight of them myself. I was talking with a friend via Zoom the other day, trying to explain all of this for the first time via the figure of the “clown.” She had sent me a transcription of a talk an established writer had given to a group of student writers, where she tells a story about going to clown school, as a way to “find” herself, how the whole agenda was to break down inhibitions until, while you are up on stage, you are what I’d call some primally real version of your deepest inner self, the one that, she says, is finally capable of “making others laugh and cry.” The final “lesson” in this process is an event at which each novice clown performs and is then assigned a name by the master teacher. She watches your performance and, when it’s over, gives you what seems your “natural” clown name.

As I finished the piece I thought: I have no need for, or interest in, such a training now. And specifically I have no interest at all in standing on a stage with the express ambition to make others laugh or cry. As you know if you read my work, I left the public stage the day Carol died, having already been transformed into nothing but a clown. Everything I write, as I explain over and over in different ways, is primarily, sometimes only, for me to help me to figure out how to live now, and then now, and

then now, ad infinitum, in this new reality that makes no sense to me. One of the ongoing symptoms of this process is laughing and crying, which I now do, spontaneously, multiple times a day, sometimes for an express reason I can see, sometimes seemingly for no reason at all, or at least not one I can see without work and attention. I explained to my friend that I am now a clown who performs for an audience of one, me, laughing and crying to try to gain and keep his attention, to teach him what he needs to know to keep going. I do offer my work for free, in the hope that a few others, with pressing needs to reach deep into themselves, will watch my performances, will laugh and cry with me, not to learn anything I have to teach, but to figure out how to create a clown of their own to teach themselves. And the only one authorized to name me now is me.

The very first thing, I finally realized, you have to do to achieve this redemptive state is remember your own brokenness, recover it, as much as you can, from the amnesia that life in this culture creates by forcing un-remembering over and over. Survival out there in the world does require that chronic hiding. But survival in here, the heart, the mind, the soul, or whatever other figurative term you might prefer, requires remembering as vividly as possible what you are trying to hide, that brokenness. The only way you can truly live hidden is to be sure you are not hidden from yourself. In other words, “debating [and every other mode of rationalization, self-defensive forensics, passive aggression, even violence] begins with forgetting that what was, is, now.”

Brokenness comes with the deal here, in this particular world. Many different kinds of it. That first cry when we come out of the womb is in recognition, I think, that we are permanently broken, off and away from the mother who carried us, on our own now, most often still cared

for, yes, but separated, alone. As I say in one of my poems from *In the Dark*:

Alone [is] the word  
we are born with,  
the language of I am;  
the language of "you,"  
of "together" of "share,"  
the one we work  
so hard to learn . . .

and today that foreign  
tongue of mine, tied  
in knots, no matter  
how hard I try to say  
I am not.  
I am not. (10-11)

The obvious corollary of this, which I just thought of for the first time (duh!) is that we also do a lot of breaking along the way, of others, sometimes inevitably, sometimes intentionally, sometimes inadvertently. There is no way around that. But, as I think this through right now, the same principle applies: If we forget our own brokenness along the way, we will also forget—by misidentifying, self-justifying—all the breaking we are doing along the way. We will deny it. We will blame someone else for it. We will call it by another name. As if we are entitled to it, that it is our right and privilege to do any and all of that to elevate ourselves, on the basis of whatever supremacist assumptions we feel emboldened by.

I just looked at the discourse of that sentence. It contains a few fragments of the discourse that has arisen in the last few weeks in response to the racial injustices and unrest in the wake of George Floyd's murder. The whole universe of "privilege," of course: How urgent it is to come to at

least some rudimentary understanding of what that means, a starting point toward change, especially if you're white and male, as I am, all "places" that provide very good cover for forgetting your brokenness, a forgetting that makes it easy then to forget the deeper brokennesses of those who live without that cultural cover, and the breaking we further inflict on them from the oblivion of our forgetfulness. And which, almost inevitably, leads one "to protect and serve" oneself and one's own domain, and not others, especially "others" who do not share our cover zones. You can see this enacted in the streets on an almost daily basis now, as demonstrations continue, as I saw it enacted in the streets fifty years ago when I was forced to face my potential brokenness, as a male who could be sent to die in a foreign jungle for an immoral war, or to jail if I refused to submit to that evil, and endured the brutality of the "powers that be" that enforced those injunctions.

Back then, as now, so many of the structural "forces," (and I choose that word intentionally to highlight the militaristic aspects of domestic policing) put the words "to protect and serve" on their various shields, but enacted them on behalf of themselves—killing and maiming more out of entitlement than out of need—and for their own kind. Selfish. To the extreme. Which gets me back, amazingly even to me now, to where I started: faker, fraud, and fool. Both individually and in our many cultural roles, we pretend to be protecting and serving others when we are in reality simply being arrogantly selfish. We keep breaking others under the pretense of fixing things. And we don't even have to "forget" it because we never "remembered" any of it in the first place. Everything bad, in one way or another, begins with forgetting that what *was* still *is*, right now. Our personal history, our cultural history, the history of universe, really, from the Big Bang onward, is riven with brokenness,

apartness, individuation, separation, isolation, aloneness. It is what makes life itself possible. There is no way back to wholeness. It is a lie to try to create a simulation of that for ourselves, a convenient way of forgetting, in the face of overwhelming and ongoing evidence that we are, all of us, broken. That's what connects the "was" to the "is" "now." And now and now. It connects us all, one of the things, in fact, that makes genuine communion possible. And it's what we must first learn to remember, on our own behalf, and on behalf of all the "others" whom we can, when we do remember, rightfully protect and serve along our way here.

## Part 2: Zero, One, and Two

May 8: #1

I have been preoccupied since I was quite young with the concept of nothing, reading about it, thinking about it. That preoccupation shares many of the same features with my interest in time. I'm not sure why those things attracted my attention so early in my life, or what, if anything, time and nothing have in common. Maybe I'll figure some of that out here, maybe not. I was then, as I am now, introverted, the focal point of my attention, and the reality it illuminated, always inclined to point inward, to perceptions and reflections rather than outward to the external world. There was a certain anxiety I experienced because of this that I could relieve only if I could get that focal point outside myself, located at a nexus of external things.

I recall a practice I started when I was in my early teens, yearning to be free from the anxiety of my immediate and

constant presence to myself, the burden of my own being, going outside on dark nights and staring variously and progressively at lights in the sky. I would start with the streetlight at the corner beside our house, try to project myself outward toward that, not literally, of course, just to imagine my point of attention outside and up there instead of inside and down here. I'd take a few minutes to do that. Then I would pick out a more distant light, across the strip-mined valley that separated Forest City, where I lived, from Browndale, the closest nearby town, maybe a mile away. I'd take a few minutes to migrate my attention there. Then I'd use the moon, much more absorptive in this respect, easy to lose oneself in. Then a star. I knew enough about light by then to understand that the light I was looking at had left its source some time ago, maybe a micro-second for the streetlight, millions of years for the star. In other words, I was not just projecting my attention outward across unimaginable stretches of space, but also backward across unimaginable stretches of time. After maybe twenty minutes of this, I would feel utterly calm, realizing I was less than a speck in the cosmic scheme, as close as you could get to nothing without literally becoming it, my "being" occupying negligible space and my "life" a mere nano-second of time. Whatever petty problems or stresses I had felt seemed almost comical in such a context, not laughably so (experience still carries weight) but wryly so, inspiring a slight smile.

The odd thing to me, and probably why I kept doing it, is it didn't make me feel insignificant. Not at all. Just the opposite. By becoming next-to-nothing, I became something of great value, not just a tiny mote on Depot Street, but a part of the whole of the visible universe. The key I realized was to create these opportunities, via such disciplines, to inhabit just that space and occupy just that time with my life, an absence wherein presence could abide. And that became for me a way of understanding

what self-love meant when it was right and good, the “nothing” without which no other kind of love could properly emerge.

I recall seeing a TV show some time ago that talked about the crucial importance of the “invention” of the number zero for modern mathematics, what a dramatic impact it made on what it is possible to do with calculation. If you presume, as that show did, that numbers were, initially, simply a convenient way to count and keep account of “somethings,” then “nothing” needs no number. It would be counterintuitive, let alone counterproductive, to symbolize it. But if you imagine numbers as the foundation for mathematical systems, even simple ones like algebra, which relies on letter-denominated variables to index numbers, then zero is quite useful. The sum of two sides of any balanced equation is of course zero, which makes it crucial, foundationally, to the efficacy of the system. Calculus depends on it even more heavily, couldn’t exist without it. And now the digital culture that organizes our various universes for us is, what?, just ones and zeros arranged in patterns. Zeros have, then, advanced from non-existent, to  $1/10^{\text{th}}$  of the decimal system, to one half of the binary system.

I read a piece online recently that said the earliest inscription of something akin to zero is on some birch bark manuscripts created in India as texts for Buddhist instruction. These first versions were just dots to indicate absences in number sequences, the missing 10s number in 503 for example. The zero-as-a-donut-hole came later. All of this may or may not be exactly true. My guess in fact is that zero must have come along much earlier than that. But what struck me about this was its connection to Buddhist teachings. I had just finished reading a book called *Nothing*, three long essays by famous contemporary philosophers on the role of “nothing” in



Buddhist teachings, and the analogy to some Western meditative models, most especially the various mystic traditions in Christianity, though one of the essays explores the similarities among Buddhist, Marxist and Freudian models for reaching various kinds of what the author argues are analogous modes of transcendence.

There is something inherently mystical about the concept of nothing, the absence of something which ghosts in figuratively what it claims is not there. So it was inevitable I guess that in certain traditions it would also become affiliated with the heretical. A simple example is the Jewish habit to spell God without the o, that “zero” in the middle, a way of saying-without-saying the name of “I am who am,” the absolute expression of self-identity with everything. This is, I assume, a simplistic extension of a more esoteric tradition, exemplified in the *Zohar* for, example, which uses the concept of Ein Sof to convey this. Here is a Wikipedia passage explaining Ein Sof:

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

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

In other words, "Ein Sof" signifies "the nameless being". In another passage the *Zohar* reduces the

term to "Ein" (non-existent), because God so transcends human understanding as to be practically non-existent.

Christian traditions carry this forward in part by the way they read the third commandment, that phrase "in vain" about the taking of God's name. As a child I assumed it meant don't say goddamit, say goshdamit. Later on, I realized that it meant not using God's name to wish any harm on others, including yourself, or, really, to invoke it for any non-spiritual purpose. And even later, reading various Christian mystics, I realized it went deeper than that, not just a not-saying, an absence, but also a form of the "nothing" I've been writing about here, that sense of presence that relies for its very vitality on the absence of anything that founds it, which cannot be said in language, can only be felt and intimated via certain kinds of transcendental experience.

This is akin in some figurative ways to the relationship between speaking and silence. Without silence, all language is just uninterrupted noise, gibberish. Silence is the field against which language becomes legible, the nothing out of which something manifests. If you can't differentiate among the words in a sentence I speak, which is how most of us experience listening to a native speaker in a language other than our own, there is no way to extract meaning. And with writing, well, the silence that creates meaning is literally inserted not only as spaces between words but also between letters. Same with punctuation marks, like the period that will end this sentence, exactly the figure those ancient Buddhists used in their number system to express zero, nothing, even now that dot saying there is nothing more there.

Eastern traditions, with which of course I am merely a dilettante, not having been raised that way and not now practicing any of them except in the most simplistic ways, are even more complex and subtle in relation to zero and nothing, as those early Buddhist texts suggest. I do “meditate,” but it is pretty much like what I did when I was 14, except I also attend to my breathing. And I do some Tai Chi daily, but that is more to promote joint flexibility, muscle tone, and relief from a couple of old sports injuries. Exercise, in other words. Yes, I’ve read Thich Nhat Hahn, but I still have to look up how to spell his name when I write it. And Gary Snyder. And bell hooks. And the Upanishads. And a lot of Chinese poetry and philosophy. And a bunch of other books in that vein. But reading about a spiritual practice is fundamentally different from being raised in its context. The former is intellectual, “knowledge” at best. The latter is embodied, “being” at best. And, well, you get the point: I know next to nothing about Eastern mysticism. But that doesn’t mean I know nothing about nothing. I do. I mean I know something about nothing not nothing about nothing.

May 8: #2

This morning I walked down the hill into town, about 3/4 of a mile, just on a whim, wanting to see some water, a big sky, which today was stratified in much the same way as it was a few days ago, a charcoal coating of clouds adhering to the hilltops, leaner than last time, but still distinct, a layer of robin’s egg blue with striations of stretched-thin cumulus clouds, this one a bit thicker than last time, and perched on top of it all, as if it were floating, a huge dome of cloud-mottled gray. This “roof” was not at all oppressive-looking, quite light-spirited in fact, uplifting in the same way that it, too, was being uplifted by whatever

forces kept the layers beneath firmly in place as its foundation.

When I got to Budd Bay, first thing, about a dozen cormorants flew in and wafted down on the water, way more in a tight group than I ever see down there. Then another dozen joined them, all floating around in a large flotilla. They weren't dipping down to groom or plunging in to eat, so I have no idea what brought them together like this. A little further up the shoreline I saw a similarly oversized gaggle of Canada geese, one that I realized as I walked closer was maybe 20 strong, about evenly divided between the land and the water, again way more in one group than I had ever seen here. I took a bunch of pictures as I approached, assuming they'd head out into the Bay as I got close, which they did, but at a very leisurely pace; and I noticed what I've noticed before about the movement of geese on water: You see no apparent motion or effort, all the action ongoing beneath the surface, those huge webbed feet stroking away; they just float off so smoothly and steadily, like they're being drawn forward by some extraordinarily strong gravitational force.

I also saw a heron standing tall in the shallows. It looked straight at me as I approached, very intently (they have quite piercing eyes) trying to decide at what point it would have to fly off, even if it didn't want to, which seemed to me to be the case. When I got about 10 feet away, off it went, more a floating than a flying, those long, angular wings keeping it aloft without any apparent strain. Herons, to me, are the most graceful of creatures, their stature, their shape, the way they stand, the way they fly, all of it, just breathtaking to witness, this one no exception. I took a bunch of quick pictures as it headed off. I hope at least one of them will be good, that magnificent bird in flight, because it is quite difficult to get that close to a heron here

for a good picture, at least using an iPhone with limited magnification.

On my way back up the hill I started thinking, kind of blankly, about time, my default subject when my head is empty, how strange and pleasant my time feels here. Not even passes, just flows. Not even that, more washes over and past me, then back again, like the tides. I wanted to find a word to describe it and the one that floated up is the one I've used several times so far, including right there: float. I'm not sure if time floats for me here, like that magnificent heron heading out over the bay, my eyes following it, a constant, steady flow; or if I float on it like those cormorants and geese on the water, a firm enough foundation to support my swimming about on it, not forward or backward, but following the tidal sway in and out that regulates what is it possible to do on this upper stretch of Budd Bay, full or empty depending on when you get there.

I was reading some of Heraclitus' fragments again this morning before I left, while I drank my tea. His work, like that of most of the pre-Socratics, survives not in its originally composed form, the extant texts of which were destroyed somewhere along the way, but via bits and pieces quoted in others' works, the way I'll quote some bits and pieces below here, to serve my own purposes, while, I hope, conserving some of his, or at least not butchering him up into simplicities that would make him glower like that heron or skedaddle like those geese. For some reason, the gist of this passage struck me as I walked up the hill:

Two made one are never one.  
Arguing the same we disagree.  
Singing together we compete.  
We choose each other

to be one, and from the one  
both soon diverge. (39)

I've written a couple of times elsewhere, most recently in *Harvest*, about my irritation with the ways in which these early Greek sages have been commodified into the Western tradition as chronically contending contrarily in some ongoing agonist dialectic. You said this, so I'll say the opposite. Heraclitus, as this passage suggests, is the master of contraries, of twos that are never ones, ones that are always twos. Parmenides, coming shortly thereafter, gets to play the obligatory role of his antagonist, for whom twos are always one until everything is always one. I've read them both. Do they agree? No, not hardly. But are they polar opposites in relation to the potential integrity of Being? Also no. My own reading of their works suggests both differences and commonalities, the way any two thinkers worth thinking about are in real life, not susceptible, that is, to reductive summations. Here's a pertinent passage from Heraclitus:

For wisdom, listen  
not to me but to the Word,  
and know that all is one. (5)

And then again, a passage I quoted earlier toward a different end:

The oneness of all wisdom  
may be found, or not,  
under the name of God. (41)

This is essentially what Parmenides argues a generation later. So for Heraclitus at least two things, wisdom and the Word, have a oneness, which they seem to share. And the way to find it is not out there but in here:

Applicants for wisdom,  
do what I have done:  
inquire within. (51)

Here is the mantra that winds its way down to us through Socrates and Plato: Want to know stuff? Know yourself first. Further, for Heraclitus, it will be found not via words, but is beyond them:

Of all the words yet spoken  
none comes quite as far as wisdom,  
which is the action of the mind  
beyond all things that may be said. (13)

So the Word is not identical with words. It is, I assume, the ground for their possibility, as it is in many mystic traditions. Logos is another name for it. Parmenides has more faith in words (“Speaking and thinking are the same as what is.” 14), in keeping with his position (“. . . for to think and to be are one and the same.” 13), but there is an ineffable component in his system as well: Nothingness: “That Nothingness exists will never break through” (14), which sounds to me a lot like all those ways I’ve described of understanding God as the unknowable nothing that makes the knowable everything available for speaking and thinking. The word that comes even before there is a word for “Word.” And Parmenides is quite willing to float where this thinking and speaking lead, not stay where some historian wants him to.

In keeping with Heraclitus’ spirit, I think it’s important to keep inherent contrariness always in play, not intergenerationally, but internally, for every thinker. I would never try to make into one the two that are Parmenides and Heraclitus, of course. But neither are they the equivalent of a 1 and 0 in binary terms, mutually

exclusive. Yes, together, “both soon diverge”. But also, apart, “both soon converge.” Even within ourselves, we end up agreeing with what we think by saying something to contend with it. Or contending with what we say by thinking something we agree with. That is life, being alive, plain and simple. Two made two are sometimes also one. Disagreement can be founded in sameness. Voices can vary and remain harmonious. And sometimes one voice becomes two, each with equal import. The key to me, as I’ve said elsewhere a number of times, and which Philip Sydney and Percy Shelley seem to me to agree in their respective “defenses” of poetry, is to read everything, philosophers, sages, prophets, even scientists, the way we read poetry, which is always capable of holding two contraries peaceably together, such that simplistic binary duality never wins the day.

How does any of this pertain, you might fairly ask, and I was also wondering while I walked home, to the birds I saw today. Even I was stymied by that for a while. But, based on long experience with walking as a forum for thinking, I’m inclined to assume that what I end up thinking after any walk is in fact inspired by what I saw along the way, even if the relationship is not immediately evident, often quite deeply hidden. I just needed to find a fulcrum to lever it out. In this case, I’m going to start with the metaphor that emerged in common from my witnessing of each of those kinds of birds today: floating, which is central to the experience of poetry, whether you use that term narrowly to describe the specific genre or more broadly, as Shelly does, say, to characterize a way of being in the world, life itself, utterly independent from any verbal artifice.

Here are a few poets talking about floating as a mode of poetic experience. The first example is from an approach that migrated into American poetry in the 1960s, via



James Wright primarily, what Robert Bly later called “leaping poetry,” one of whose features he describes this way:

In many ancient works of art we notice a long floating leap from the conscious to the unconscious and back again, a leap from the known part of the mind to the unknown part and back to the known (1).

This poetic quality, as both Wright and Bly understood, is more prominent in certain cultural contexts than others; for example, the Spanish and Chinese traditions have used it for much longer, and to much greater effect than English speaking cultures. Thus Wright’s eagerness to integrate it here, as a counter to more traditional Anglo-American poetic practices that had been dominant for at least a couple of generations, practices he in fact deployed himself in his early work.

Here are a couple of passages from poems that illustrate what they and I are talking about. The first is from “Romance Sonambulo” by Federico Garcia Lorca, writing in the 1930s:

Green, how I want you green.  
Green wind. Green branches.  
The ship out on the sea  
and the horse on the mountain.  
With the shade around her waist  
she dreams on her balcony,  
green flesh, her hair green,  
with eyes of cold silver.  
Green, how I want you green.  
Under the gypsy moon,

all things are watching her  
and she cannot see them.

(trans. William Bryant Logan)

You can see, via the color green at first, which infiltrates the poem, all of the transfigurations taking place, in and out, person and thing, nature and feeling, all afloat, darkly and mysteriously, carried on a strong sonorous stream. Even in English, the beauty of the sound as a means of conveyance comes through. But it is much more evocative in the original Spanish:

Verde que te quiero verde.  
Verde viento. Verdes ramas.  
El barco sobre la mar  
y el caballo en la montaña.  
Con la sombra en la cintura  
ella sueña en su baranda,  
verde carne, pelo verde,  
con ojos de fría plata.  
Verde que te quiero verde.  
Bajo la luna gitana,  
las cosas la están mirando  
y ella no puede mirarlas.

Just gorgeous, all those assonances and alliterations like a pebbled riverbed over which the images rush. Even if you can't understand Spanish you can mouth these lines and find yourself floating outside and inside yourself, in exactly the sleep-walky, dreamy manner that the title suggests.

And here's one of the most famous, and simplest, poems by Li Po (Li Bai in the Chinese tradition), written in 8<sup>th</sup> century, called "Thoughts on a Quiet Night:"

Seeing moonlight here at my bed,  
and thinking it's frost on the ground,

I look up, gaze at the mountain moon,  
then back, dreaming of my old home.

(trans. David Hinton)

Here the poet goes all over, inside, out, observation, memory, conscious, unconscious, word to image, thought to feeling, all of it floating in and out while he reclines in his front yard. And he does it all in four exquisite lines. And that's just in a translation into English, which is quite poorly suited to rendering the intense drama of Li Bai's work in Chinese. Here is an alphabetic transcription of the Chinese characters:

### Jing Yè Sī

chuáng qián míng yuè guāng,  
yí shì dī shàng shuāng.  
jǔ tóu wàng míng yuè,  
dī tóu sī gù xiāng.

Each of these lines in Chinese comprises five separate characters, each one pronounced as a distinct, single syllable, more like a series of drum beats than “words” synthesized into a “sentence.” What seems such a bland sentiment in English, becomes dramatic and poignant. Again, even if you can't understand Chinese, or read the poem via its original, singular characters, you can mouth these lines and feel the impact of his rhythmic style. If you want to listen to it in his native tongue, there are multiple

examples online, of this poem in particular, because it is so widely read and appreciated.

In both of these poems, there is, as Bly notes, a leap, a float, from “the known of the mind to the unknown and back to the known.” But there is more to it than that. There is also a floating leap from the inside to the outside and back, and in such a way that the boundaries between them become permeable. And there is floating leap in the sounds as well. If you listen to either one spoken in its native tongue, without understanding a word, you’ll feel a profound impact simply in terms of sound, on the waves of which attention can float, not inhibited by attachments to “meanings,” the way we typically translate what we see on the page into concepts in our head.

When we are alienated from that instinctive tendency to decode, and this is amplified in the Chinese by the fact that most of us couldn’t make any aural sense of the figures on the page even if we saw them, those characters so different from English words, our translations needing twice as many syllables to carry their weight. There is no way to translate the actual rhythm of that music. It is unique and magical, and all we really need to enjoy the float.

On a more technical level, Amanda Berenguer, the celebrated Uruguayan poet, uses the same metaphor to describe the effect of Emily Dickinson’s trademark dashes on the feeling of movement through a poem. She says:

It felt like a great discovery about her writing, the day when I realized that in her poetry these dashes signified the places where mystery is made. There is the silence that separates one thing from another,

but they are united in the background. And those dashes leave you floating in the air. (239)

So, via the dash, I go on to comment in *Harvest*,

. . . in the mystery of a silence—what’s unsaid, a sonic void—separating but also uniting two things . . . we are left floating: space and time organized impossibly but truly. (35)

I go on to demonstrate how this works in a specific poem:

I have a little book of what are called Dickinson’s “envelope poems,” short, embryonic proto-poems she wrote on scraps of envelopes from letters she received, many of which didn’t make the cut for her finished folios but that show so much about her process. The poems are not dated, though I assume from both their form and content that they were written later in her life, when her compositions got more cryptic. These poems are the very embodiment of “hinged” compositions, in that the paper each is written upon (and they never exceed the available space) is, in fact, a folded envelope re-opened and flattened back on its hinges. The authors of this book provide photos of every example to illustrate this. It is so hard in Dickinson’s *oeuvre* to draw a line between what is a poem and what is not. Everything she wrote, in my opinion, is a poem, her letters, even these little scraps. Here’s one that offers a good illustration of how the dashes get built in right from the outset. I’ll try here to simulate how it actually looks, forced into those contours of the envelope sleeve:

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

continued then in a column on the opposite fold:

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

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

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

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

You can see all of her choices here. What stays intact are the dashes, except for the final one, added, the structure around which everything pivots. Every dash marks a sudden turn of thought, a contrary, “gloat” to “starve,” “abundance” to “famish,” “Gallows” to “morning in the sky,” improbable but essential junctures to get at the meaning that inheres to that “Sumptuous moment.” And that last stanza is both pellucid and mysterious, impervious to translation, at least for me. All of it hanging on hinges, like the gallows door dropping downward to reveal morning in the sky. Hauntingly beautiful. (35-6)

I quite often have dreams about floating, among my favorites. It is not quite flying: I don’t have actual wings and I don’t rise up and soar. I am myself, just my legs to propel me, first up off the ground, slowly, then a rising up, my arms taking over, slow sweeping motions. I never get more than twenty or thirty feet off the ground, and gravity slowly brings me back down, more like gliding. It is all quite lovely.

I used a different type of image to suggest a floating in *Spring Forward*, myself in a little boat on a wide sea:

It started where I left off a few days ago, that something in me was changing, deep down, something I had no way of naming, more a tweak than a transformation. Today that thought assumed, figuratively, the shape of me in a very small, tidy boat in the middle of a very large, horizonless, body of water, calm water, not scary or threatening in any way. And I was thinking that after many, many months of my paddling furiously in search of land, another boat, something,

anything, it was time to give it up, that I was going to be adrift this way for the rest of my life. This thought was, surprisingly to me, neither scary nor depressing. It was almost a relief, made me feel peaceful. There was, I already knew, enough sustenance from this water to keep me nourished, and I was in a boat plenty strong enough to keep me afloat for as long as the rest of my life was likely to take. I could survive here, as I have for years. But I could also, I started to think, live here quite comfortably. (30)

And live here I have. Sometimes I just stand on the boardwalk downtown and watch the gulls careen around the sky, those slashes of white against all that blue, their long, narrow, curved wings slicing into the air. When it's windy, it looks more like they're surfing than flying, just tipping a wing this way or that to change directions, dipping down and around at hyper-speed. It is mesmerizing to watch, and makes me wish I could do the same physically, not just mentally and psychologically. The geese are equally amazing when they hit the water. Those cumbersome, floppy feet that hobble their gaits on land all of sudden take on a turbocharged power. They seem to move across the choppiest water, even against the wind, at an amazing speed. And so smooth. In both cases, floating *par excellence*.

When you're nobody, nothing, neither a one nor a two, but both figured against an infinite "ground zero," all in ethereal motion, floating is almost a permanent condition, not vertiginous, but a lightness, a freedom, one that allows me to harbor not an illusion but a confidence that land, sea and air are places I might navigate happily, whenever I want to. Hauntingly beautiful.





## 7. Listen . . .

April 8

### *End white silence.*

That's the message scrawled on the rear window of a car I included as an image in my most recent slideshow, the one with Nina Simone singing "I Wish I Knew How It Would Feel to Be Free." I have been reading and thinking a lot about racism these last six weeks, that harrowing history and legacy of white supremacy in the Western world, most egregiously in our own country, one that rears its ugly head daily even now, often in the visage of the grotesque and despicable man we elected president four years ago. My own face daily now reading the news must, at least on the inside, look like a version of Munch's scream. Stunned. Horrified.

I'm saying all of this, and have recently posted a couple of pertinent slideshows, in an effort not to be silent. It is though, if you are white and trying to do likewise, a very hard beam to balance on. My poem on the George Floyd murder, which served as the soundtrack for one of those slideshows and I also read in a local open-mic forum, could for example be read as self-indulgent, a way to claim, even rebrand, Black grief as white grief. I have been troubled by that from the outset, tempted to take it down. Yet I can't and I won't. That would be silence. Safer, yes, seemingly more respectful, maybe. But still complicit, just another expression of the waiting game that whites in America, even the ones who claim to be "woke," play until the flames die down, "normal" is restored, and we can go back to our self-satisfied "liberal," even "progressive" business. That kind of passive aggressive silence is offensive to me. I'd rather be deemed a fool for

what I say clumsily than to feel like one for not having risked the saying in the first place.

I've been thinking a lot about grief lately, who has a right to it now and why, specifically, for me, the way these bleak events tap into and resonate with my personal loss five years ago, which I have been writing about ever since, trying to make peace with it. But, as my poem on the George Floyd murder makes clear, the primary resonance is with an even deeper reservoir of grief, the one I started filling up back in 1960s, all the assassinations, then demonstrating in the streets of Scranton, Pennsylvania, against the war, yes, but against everything culturally that engendered such wars, including racism, sexism and homophobia. All of this was hyper-amplified in witnessing the brutality of the Chicago police in Grant Park outside the Democratic convention in 1968. I will never forget those horrifying scenes. Unbridled violence on a militaristic scale enacted by Richard Daley's police mob. To this day, they play back in my head like it was yesterday. My life changed right then. Permanently. I was filled with a rage—the intimate and very productive partner of grief, I can assure you, based on long, deep experience—that has never dissipated. And I'm so glad it didn't. It made me a better teacher, a better scholar, a better father and a better man.

One of the differences between then and now, as I've said, is that in 1968 young white males had their own life and death stakes in the ongoing arguments in the streets. That's how much of an impact the draft had, in wartime, the ongoing debacle in Vietnam, the sense that you were likely going to be sent off, against your will, come back maimed or in a coffin, so what's to lose by fighting in the streets? In other words, white silence was not an option then, not at least if you were between 18 and 25 years old from the working or lower classes, the real draft pool.

And if you had long hair, there was even risk in just going out for a walk in mainstream America, that you might at least get roughed up, if not worse. The final scene of *Easy Rider* may not have been typical, but it could have played out that way in almost any state in the union. And Kent State proved, of course, that you could get shot dead, military-style, right here at home, even if you were a young white woman marching for peace. Our time now reminds me of those times in certain structural and emotional ways, a slow-motion civil war. Both of these eruptions are, admittedly, orders of magnitude smaller, both in demographic and historical terms, than what African Americans have endured, enslaved, murdered by institutional forces, routinely, right here, not on the other side of the world, not for 4 years but for 400, which took an *actual* Civil War to even begin to address.

Nixon, it turned out, was clever enough to end the draft, which quieted a lot of the white men of my generation, many of whom then slipped into the “silent majority,” and are now a pretty good portion of the MAGA movement who keep another Nixonian despot with dictatorial ambitions propped up in power, facilitated and insured by his equally silent Republican minions in Congress. Old white men. Who didn’t march in the streets and didn’t go to Vietnam. Arrogant, self-centered, greedy, obsessed with acquiring and maintaining power, both individually and racially. White supremacists. Shameful. That is a big part of the legacy of my generation, now 50 years hence. Not ending the war or ending poverty or racism or sexism, all of which were in the air together back then. But Donald Trump, bone spurs and all, who like so many other white men I knew had power cards to play to avoid risk, and they played them. Black Americans never had those cards and don’t now. Which gets me back to my awkwardness. What right do I have to speak up now? Maybe none, at least arguably. But silence is just not an option, not to me,

not ever, especially not now. That's what grief does, when it is partnered with rage: it leads to speech, which, if there is ethical force behind it, leads to action, doing what you can, doing the best you can with who you are and what you have to promote change. Silence may be, and often is, golden, while you're listening, if you actually take the time to listen. I mean really. But if your listening doesn't lead to saying something back, and then to doing something, all that silence is, at best, a waste, at worst a cover for cowardice, self-protection, complicity.

August 9

*Rage and grief are savage companions . . .*

That is another quote I took note of recently, from one of the many window-shielding plywood panels downtown now, shatter-protection during this time of turmoil, all more like elaborate art installations, painted by young, local artists, so dramatic and colorful, than security instruments, this one a stunning image of two Black women with a multi-colored swoosh between them. The quote is attributed there to "MIA," who I discovered, by Googling it, is Mia Farrow, a passage from her autobiography, which I've never read but now want to just because of the brilliance of that quote. I mean brilliant in the sense that when I heard it, I thought: "Yes, of course, that is so obviously true I can't understand why I never put it all together that way."

I have been living with a fervor, sometimes a furor, of rage ever since my wife passed so suddenly. I write about that quite a lot in *This Fall*, the first book I made in the aftermath of that loss. Here's a sample passage, in the context of a longer critique of Elizabeth Kübler-Ross'

stages of grief, which seemed, until then, entirely plausible depictions of how grief moved, during the many kinds of routine grief-inducing experiences I had endured earlier in my life: my parents' natural, late-life deaths, my unexpected divorce as a young man, things like that. But this rage was different, I knew:

As I walked on I felt a fierce, fiery, determined force steeping in me, in my heart, deepening my drive to go forward, which I did, strong step after strong step. I thought for the first time in while about my rage, how refined it had now become, not that wicked firestorm driven wildly every which way by spiraling winds of fight or flight. No, this one is more like the cool-blue to yellow-hot flame at the tip of a plumber's torch. Not so bright you can't look at it, as a welder's torch is, but soothing, perfectly still, its edges blending imperceptibly into the surrounding air, which it heats, just enough, to do the work you need it to do, melting solder into the joints, sealing water where it should be, inside the pipe, instead of all over the floor, the walls. I said last spring that I didn't think my rage would ever go away, transitioning over into one of the subsequent (much more boring I would say now) stages Elizabeth Kübler-Ross names. Now I know I was right. The tank that fuels this flame of mine is full. I love being able to point its cool-hot blue tip wherever I want. This rage is good. It seals the leaks. It keeps the water where it belongs, flowing toward a purpose or just waiting to be drunk. I can use it and I will. (76)

Had Kübler-Ross studied my responses to the earlier grief-inducing losses, she would have found further evidence for the veracity of her system, with rage a stage I

would pass through. But the one I found myself in the midst of when Carol passed was not like that at all. Kübler-Ross would not have recognized it.

That's when I began to realize that this kind of rage is not a "stage." It is, to use another fire image, more like a campfire in a forest clearing, quite docile when the ground is rain-dampened, flames flashing and dancing, beautiful and useful; but not so after months of searing heat, which is what grief can feel like. Then those flames flare up, threaten and yearn to spread out everywhere, consume everything they can reach, blazing out of control. Containing a rage like that takes a lot of care and work, and even then there is no guarantee it won't make the leap.

So I've spent a lot of time thinking about my rage, which I've come more lately to realize has been with me not just since Carol passed, not just since 1968, but forever. And, I've further thought, it is with everyone forever, from that first moment when we are thrust forth, against our will, from the dark, warm saline sea of the womb in which we have been floating until then, all the time we have known, before we even know what time is, negative time, it not yet having wound down to the zero that inaugurates our first year here. Then, of a sudden, all that blinding light, these days sterile hospital light, the need to suck in air and keep doing it over and over just to stay alive, the craving for sustenance that has to be sought out and worked for. Such a loss is instantly and inevitably grief-inducing, and it inspires a rage that is essential for staying alive, thus all that noisy crying.

This rage, I want to insist, is both healthy and necessary. Our survival depends on it. The problem with it is it can get amplified in quite dysfunctional ways by the hurts, pains, and, worst of all, abuses that we encounter as

children, when we are most defenseless. Even before we have words, those memories get stored in our bodies, our psyches, and sooner or later we have to deal with their consequences. Later, extreme or repeated traumas can do the same thing. I was talking about all of this in a Zoom conversation with a friend a couple of days ago, explaining how rage is and always has been my constant partner in life, which I think surprised her because I seem so mild-mannered, even-keeled and positive most of the time. But rage, to me, is not anger, its short-lived aberration that comes over us, the “red mist,” the “must,” careering us out of control for its duration. It is a fire that burns. It’s just a matter of how much.

Rage is not only essential to life but also, I’d say, to love, genuine love, the kind focused truly on the other, the kind of love that Jesus, for example demonstrates over and over for the lost and forgotten souls he encounters, while he rages justifiably against the self-righteous, self-serving elites, the hypocrites, who persecute them. His parables are full of examples of his critique of dysfunctional rage, as in the case of the debtor who, after his own loan was generously forgiven remembers the pain he felt in carrying that weight, the shame he felt in seeking to eliminate it, and ends up abusing all of those who owed lesser debts to him. Instead of forgiving them, too. Yes, his choice is our choice, a simple one. Take your pick.

The point I wanted to make with my friend is that as we become conscious of our rage, thereby enabling some control, we have two choices: We can use it to re-inflict on others the damages inflicted on us, the “hand it all down to the next generation” mentality that is characteristic of abuse-cultures of all sorts, in marriages, in families, in schools, in whole societies. It is bullying writ large and larger and largest. Or we can say: “This stops with me. I will not hand it back out or hand it down.



Period.” Either way, the rage doesn’t then dissipate or go away. It either inflicts harm or does good.

March 15

*Mr. Knight’s two volumes of autobiography remind us of the story told by Charles Lamb about Coleridge. Charles Lamb had paid a visit to the philosopher at Highgate, and, as usual, was detained in the garden by an eloquent peroration on some obscure point of metaphysics. To make sure of his friend, Coleridge seized him by the coat-button, delivering his grand monologue with closed eyes, legs firmly set, and his head thrown backward as if addressing the clouds. There seemed no escaping the terrible flow of eloquence, but Charles Lamb’s ready wit suggested a means. He quietly took a penknife from his pocket, cut the fatal button, and then made off in great haste to visit another friend at Highgate. Returning the same way, some hours later, he peeped in at Coleridge’s garden gate, and—there stood the great metaphysician, exactly as he had left him, the button between his fingers, and the head thrown up into the sky. The soft flow of his silvery speech was pouring forth as melodiously as ever, without stop and without break.*

From a review of Charles Knight’s autobiography in *The Spectator*, vol 3, July 23, 1864.

Coleridge, from many contemporaneous accounts, was notoriously garrulous, more and more so as he got older. It can, I know from experience, be quite taxing to stand in front of such a seamless wall of language, the temptation

being to just glaze over, respond robotically if at all, as Lamb does here until he is able to substitute one of his buttons for himself.

You can see symptoms of something quite similar in many of Plato's dialogues. Socrates, of course, was also notoriously garrulous. In the *Phaedrus* for example the long conversation he has with his younger colleague about love reaches soaring heights at points; it also wears on Phaedrus as it goes, especially after Socrates turns to more pragmatic matters, like rhetoric, say. At the outset of the dialogue, Phaedrus is full of a coy animation, responding authentically if briefly, posing questions and sometimes just posturing. Socrates counters over and over with authoritative proclamations, or grandiloquent speeches, or circuitous strands of reasoning instead of straightforward answers, the balance moving more and more to his side of the equation, with Phaedrus' ground, and level of attention, diminishing in the process.

This may in fact be Socrates' intention, his preferred way of "teaching" his listeners something they don't already know and are likely to resist. His strategy seems always to press them steadily toward some sequence of befuddled self-contradictions, and the consequent confusion and uncertainty they engender, to knock them off balance as it were, which, to him, is preparatory for foundational change, the "moral" at the end of the "lesson." The ugliest example of this is in the *Meno*, a process that fails miserably because Meno is even more prickly, rude and resistant than Socrates. The movement with Phaedrus is much gentler. But if you just read aloud Phaedrus' responses as the dialogue proceeds, they get shorter and more mechanical, until toward the end they actually sound vacuous, like he has stopped listening. He seems to be hoping not to incite any more of Socrates' lectures so he can escape, like cutting off that hypothetical button (I

don't think the Greeks trafficked much in buttons) Socrates has in his grip, maybe so he can go right back to Lysias, clearly a manipulative opportunist for whom Socrates has utter contempt, the very one Socrates wants to scare Phaedrus away from. But at least, Phaedrus might be thinking as he drifts off into some inner daydream here, Lysias wants to have sex and doesn't talk, talk, talk all the time!

You might think after all of this that I'm about to write a cautionary piece about over-talking. But I'm not. Not that I want to recommend the sort of unbroken word facades that many people create once they get going. Quite often, they are just as vacuous as the inattentive silences they provoke. Two nothings that don't equal a something. I've heard my share of them, some that seem almost to buffet me into unconsciousness, like a million tiny punches all adding up until I'm staring up at the breeze-fluffed treetops wishing I were up there instead of down here. But not all of them are. And being a good listener sometimes means having the ability to curate the speeches worth attending to and those that are not. I can't say if the one Lamb escaped from is such a one because we have no record of its content, though the narrator above uses variations of the word "eloquent" twice, borrowing it I assume from Lamb's account, which is, by implication, backhandedly laudatory.

I do know from long reading (that other mode of sustained listening) that Coleridge is a very smart man. Longwinded, yes, confusingly intricate sometimes, yes, difficult, yes. But most often worth the work it takes to get what's there to be gotten. Maybe Lamb, himself a smart and famous man, thinks he doesn't need any wisdom or advice from Coleridge, whom he would think of as his peer, his equal. But I've read Lamb, too, much easier to endure. I'll still take Coleridge, with all the irritation his

long-windedness incites. Same thing with Socrates. You're hardly likely to find a bigger pain in the ass in Western intellectual history. But he is a very smart and very wise man. Which is why we are still "listening" to him at second hand (and that's what it is, since Plato is doing all the writing, not Socrates) to this day. Lysias and Phaedrus are names we know, and in Lysias' case still read, primarily because they end up in Plato's dialogues, part of Socrates' aura.

Some things that are hard to listen to are worth it. Developing an ear to tell the difference between those and the ones that aren't is a crucial life skill if you want to promote change, including changing yourself.

August 10

That was the first of what I was calling "little snippets" that I started writing over four months ago, which have now somehow metastasized into this unbooklike thing I'm still fiddling and fetling with. I'm pretty sure I had an idea of what I wanted to make of it, this piece and a larger whole it must have promised, and I'm pretty sure it was to have something more substantial to do with listening. But that's not what happened, and it never will. The world kind of fell apart in the meantime, the ongoing nightmare of COVID-19 ravaging the country, the ongoing demonstrations on behalf of racial justice in the aftermath of the George Floyd murder, now 70 straight days of it down the road in Portland, a "riot" last night, the news says, as demonstrators engaged with police once more.

So I've been listening to a lot of things in the meantime, reading voraciously on matters pertaining to racial justice, roaming the Olympia streets taking photos, singing and writing. It's like the general culture has turned into a

garrulous Coleridge. Except I can't and don't want to turn away from what it has to say. I want to hear, to understand, to change, and to speak back. I guess that's a good example of how things go sometimes when you actually do listen, to whichever "Coleridge" happens to be talking to you. If the stuff is good enough, sooner or later he turns into his Ancient Mariner mode, gradually escalating from "He holds him with his skinny hand," and you can still do the buttony-button escape if you want; to "He holds him with his glittering eye" and all you can do is "[stand] still" and hear the whole story. That is the nature, and the beauty, of good listening: You have no way of knowing where it's all going and no way to seize control of the process without intruding, turning it into a conversation, at which point, you are no longer listening, just planning or making your next move, a necessary step, the saying back, but not listening.

So basically you have to decide, when the discourse coming at you is seemingly seamless, resisting your entry, whether what you're hearing is worth the energy it takes to really listen to it. When it's a person, that is usually easy. For me, if the person were Coleridge, that would always be a simple choice. I'd skip my appointment, even the wedding from which the Ancient Mariner waylays that recalcitrant young man, for that. Sometimes it's the general culture, which can be much harder to fathom in that regard. But sometimes, as is the case now, it comes at you so loud and clear you have no choice— not, at least, a rational one. Which is why I lost my way with this project. As it pertains to the problematic dynamics of "listening" the last four months have been both disturbing and revelatory, all in the still ongoing paroxysm of cultural crisis precipitated by the Floyd murder, not as a dramatic one-off, but more as the "straw that broke the camel's back," one too many names then on that long list that we

are being urged to “say” over and over on street art and in demonstration chants.

Not long after that catastrophe in Minneapolis, I was invited to Zoom with a graduate class at a nearby university. In the interim, I had, as I said, written a long, emotional poem about the Floyd murder, cast in the context of my lifelong witness to a militarized culture that inflicts violence on its citizens in streets all across America. I had a lot of ambivalence about making that poem public, understanding that it might justifiably be construed as just another white man’s co-optation of problems that are POC-specific. That is, a way to mute the racial aspect of the event by absorbing it into my autobiography. Such a critique might, I concede, be warranted. But what was the alternative for me, is what I thought? Silence? Just retreating to the sidelines to say nothing? Which is what the white culture does repeatedly in situations like this. Go quiet until the fires die down. Then go back to business as usual. I saw all those black squares on Facebook and Instagram pages, purportedly signs of comradery with the Black community. But that seemed too easy, seemed to lack courage, more a way to hide in the safety of silence than to risk saying something that might be perceived as impertinent; seemed, that is, like a way to cut the button off and walk away without listening to the speech. So I wrote my poem and shared it in the limited ways that my own venues make possible.

As our conversation in the graduate seminar proceeded that day, the issue of “silence”—which I write about in the book the class was reading, *Writing/Teaching*, one I wrote almost 30 years ago—came up in the discussion. I spoke fiercely about the importance of saying something back, extending a conversation I had started with my daughter just that week about the “Black Square” days for white-controlled digital platforms during the early days of

the unrest. She, too, felt an instinctive aversion to this kind of “silence,” which seemed more like a passive aggressive way for avoiding any risk while appearing to be empathetic. She kept her Instagram site active, for example, shifting its locus toward Black businesses in Olympia. I told the group that day that silence is all well and good if during that interim you are truly listening. But, for the other, the only evidence that you were in fact listening is not in your silence. It comes from what you say back to what you heard. And, as I said, everyone, and I mean everyone, knows within seconds what the quality of your listening was when they hear what comes back in return. We know either that it’s a real conversation, one we want to stay engaged in, or a fake one, for which we can turn off our inner engines of thought and follow along robotically. Or, if we’re lucky, just cut off the button.

I learned all of this from teaching, but it is even more true in everyday life. Because of that, I am an inveterate responder, to personal emails, texts, any missive, really, whether I have solicited the first sally or not, as well as to the requests from others to read and evaluate writing, or any made thing. I don’t need to like you or what you make. I want and need to say something back. And it must always be, to my ears, true. I know from experience that very few others operate on such an ethic. I send things out all the time to friends or acquaintances, often the dearest things I think or make, and the vast majority don’t respond at all, let alone robotically. So, from my point of view, they haven’t “listened” to anything I said. It’s possible they actually did. But absent a response, all I can imagine on the other side is a silence akin to Charles Lamb’s: He’s just not there anymore.

I followed up this Zoom meeting with two much longer emails to the group, my way of extending the conversation and answering some pre-formatted questions we didn’t

have time for that day. Here's an excerpt from the first, pertinent to listening:

Katie asked about the “rhetoric of listening” and how “the reflective practice of essaying fits into” “[t]he idea of simply ‘letting happen.’” And she is specifically concerned about the “danger of it becoming a more prescriptive part of the ‘writing process.’” The term that stands out to me there is prescriptive. The one aspect of the dialogical dynamic in a classroom that can’t (or at least shouldn’t) be pre-scripted is listening, which is always of the moment. There is no way to pre-script an authentic response to what someone else says, and, as I said yesterday, the authenticity of that response is what determines its efficacy, both immediately, as something “true” to the encounter, facilitating learning, but also over the longer run, as an index to the “safety” of speaking in a collective space like a classroom, where the authority-laden context (mostly vested in the teacher, sometimes in the group) can inflict penalties for speaking. Those penalties (e.g., your answer is wrong or inadequate or simply ignored, which for the more introverted students especially is a guaranteed shut-down) create a silence that is corruptive to collaborative enterprise in any group space, including the classroom. That’s why a listening that happens in the moment is so important. It is, of course, a good thing ethically, and as a simple matter of social etiquette. But it is also generative for a more enjoyable and productive professional experience for everyone there in that space. As to the process of essaying: I learned a lot from writing those little pieces for the Race and Gender course [the origin for my book *Writing/Teaching*, the object of attention that day,



referring here to the short essays I wrote to distribute to that class back in 1991], about how to write spontaneously, with no “pre-scripting,” just starting out and trusting the process. That is basically the only kind of writing I do now, quite expressly, i.e., having no idea where even a sentence I start is going to end up, let alone a whole piece. Writing of this sort is a way to “listen” to “yourself,” whatever that latter term might mean in the economy of your theoretical/ philosophical system. Writing like that allows what’s in there to come out, or what’s out there to come in, depending again on how you construe the dynamics of creative enterprise. It is a mode of self-care, in that one discovers things that might otherwise be inaccessible, sometimes things that precipitate changes of considerable consequence. This paragraph is a good example. I had no idea when I started it that I would be thinking about spontaneous writing as a mode of self-listening and self-care. I’m not even entirely sure that’s how I want to settle my thinking on that. But I will now think more about it. In any case, I find that attention in the moment is fundamental to the joy of being human in this world, and the classroom is one of the places I enjoyed being human for all of those years. Time slows down, people light up, thinking emerges. What could be better than that?

I connected this up with teaching in broader terms this way:

There is right below Katie’s question (maybe an extension of hers?), one that asks how to “cultivate student interest and desire in a first-year writing class that students are required to take.” That is, to

me, the most exciting challenge of teaching first year composition, the reason I loved it, the sense that if you can “make it there, you can make it anywhere,” so get to it. Part of the joy of teaching in general, for me, is in the risk of it, the fact that you can fail in so many ways, at almost any moment, the high-wire-act aspect of it, the need to be alert, attentive, working, confident, trusting, adaptive, able to keep or regain balance, all the time. I am not a person who takes life-threatening physical risks, but I love to take intellectual risks, to face into things that others say are impossible, like getting first year students to love their writing course, and then pulling it off. In fact, almost anything “of the mind” that someone says can’t be done, well, that just attracts me, a way of testing limits. I highly recommend it. The words that stand out to me here are “cultivate” and “desire.” I don’t think I’ve ever written about the process of teaching as a mode of “cultivation,” but it offers a very powerful metaphor for that process of bringing students to a point where they don’t just tolerate a required writing course, don’t just go through the motions to get a good grade, don’t just grind it out to get better, but actually enjoy the time they spend with the group in collaborative enterprise and with themselves as they compose, “grow” there. I did talk yesterday (and write in the book) about my own pre-formed fantasy of what college would be like, a place where I would be actively engaged in “intellectual work” with other people animated by the same passion, which it didn’t turn out to be. I never found such a world among my professional colleagues, either. The one place I felt authorized to try to foster such a universe was in the classroom. There are very specific social and ethical practices that help to cultivate such a space. They are simple

and foundational. The implication of the term “cultivate” is that there is work involved, that it needs to be work that applies specifically to the needs of whatever is being “grown,” that it takes place in a specific sequence over time, that is it animated by and requires ongoing “care,” that there is no guarantee it will always work, and that if/when it does, there will be an ample harvest. I guess my response to this question would be for each individual to think specifically about what cultivates their own desire. It may be something quite other from mine. But I guess ultimately I have a faith that any good-faith process of cultivation, if it is proper to the needs of whatever is being “grown,” will create a healthy, generative social space, which will foster a desire to spend time in it. My fantasy is surely not yours. So forget mine, and trust yours. Cultivate a space in your classroom that you “desire” to be in. I honestly believe that students will come to share that desire with you.

And the group did, I’m sure, listen to what I had to say, because they said things back, relayed to me through the professor in charge, quite piercing questions, questions that provoked deep thinking for me, helping me not just to vent about certain aspects of my personal encounters and engagement with what I ended up calling “the duplicity of the university culture,” R-1 style, but to come to terms with it, a very good example of the salutary effects of a listening that actually responds in a way that proves it was legitimate listening. I won’t include any of that subsequent material here. A big part of the reason is that what I wrote was of the most personal nature, things I had never told anyone, in some cases not even myself, at least expressly, until that moment, about how *Writing/Teaching*—the book they had read (which astonishingly to me won a national award in my field); its

rocky publication process; the volatile course that inspired it, all of it—affected me.

You might think it odd that I would open up so quickly and fully, in the most confidential way, to a group of people I had never even met in person and had spent only a couple of hours with online. But that is the magic of saying back. They asked, I answered, they spoke back, a trust emerged quickly, which gave permission for the flood of truth that followed. Had they not said something back, our interaction would have been over, not so much to their detriment I suppose, but certainly to mine. I got to say things I always knew I felt, kept close to my heart, in my own confidence, but had never thought through enough to reveal. And that process not only more fully revealed them to me, it helped me to resolve them.

The professor for the course asked the students to write end-of-term reactions, both to the course and to this culminating event, where I shared the platform with another still-active professor. She was kind enough to share them with me. Their responses to my contributions were, universally, both laudatory and moving. Which is to say again: If you want to hear the real truth, as much of the whole truth as is accessible at that moment from the one you listen to, say something back that says, by its nature, “I heard what you said and want to know more.” You will guide that second installment by the nature of your responses, and the questions they pose, either expressly or tacitly, as any good teacher does when she listens. And you will come to know a person, a real person, not a robotic function, switches all on autopilot, not because she has flipped them, but because *you* have, with your inattention, or, more sadly, your inability or unwillingness to simply say something back.

Charles Lamb may well have saved his day by cutting off that button and making it to his boring appointment. But he also may well have lost the possibility to be amazed, stunned into attention in the moment, drawn into his own reservoir of thinking (he was a very smart man in his own right), changed for the better, had he just stayed for a while and tried to say something back. Okay, maybe Coleridge by this point in his life was incapable of listening. I can't say. But you will never know that about anyone unless you check it out for yourself. Go silent for a while, open your ears to hear. Then for godssake say something back. It may terminate the conversation, yes, depending on your interlocuter, but it may also change your life, and the life of the other who took the time to listen to you.



## 8. Living Hidden

May 17

*Láthe Bíósas [Live hidden]*

Epicurus

There was something quite beautiful, serene, about the first COVID-19 closure, those few months of “self-isolation,” “quarantine,” and my favorite, “sheltering in place,” all of which sound, to me at least, to be more like self-imposed periods of peaceful reflection, or recovery, than penal sentences. This quietude was amplified by the fact that it took place in winter, the season that by its nature tends to keep us indoors, quieter. In the East, intense cold and snow amplify that, a heavy snow especially, one that shuts down schools and businesses, bringing a deep stillness with it, that seamless white an insulating blanket, absorbing noise until all you hear is a light whirring sound that could be a breeze or your own ears surprised by so much silence. Attention becomes focused on the small: making meals, clearing paths, the rhythms of life and movement. Even walking requires additional exertion and the fuller attention that tends to accompany it: the extra energy navigation takes, leg lifting amplified, the care needed to plan the next move forward, the crunch of snow underfoot, accenting each step aurally. Something about all of that makes one feel both more alert and calmer.

Here in the Northwest that effect is similarly induced by the liquid “snow” that defines winter, the smooth, consistent texture of the always-high skies, day after day unwaveringly gray, the light drizzle or moderate rain slowing traffic, enforcing a planning regimen for outdoor activity, everyone looking for little dry windows in the

daily weather patterns. It is all so soothing. I think this is one of the reasons people generally accepted and adapted to the disciplines this recent global emergency enforced, disciplines that began to waver, then vanish once the weather changed. By summer, it was back to normal, even if normal was stupid and self-destructive.

But not for me. That period of mandatory quietude was a joy, one I wanted to try to sustain going forward. To facilitate that I decided to read philosophical material that might translate my temporary mood into the fabric of my daily life. I chose the Stoics for that, as I said, mostly Seneca and Marcus Aurelius, first and second century CE Romans. Since Seneca derives much of his inspiration and material from Epicurus, a Greek philosopher from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE, most of whose works survive via fragments in other writers, like Seneca, I also read what I could find of his work. Seneca's style is epistolary, Aurelius and Epicurus aphoristic, but all are relatively plain speaking, preferring quick, pithy insights or assertions, memorable and therefore memorable, so are ideally suited to the sort of self-transformation I was in the midst of.

I used one of my typical reading practices to enhance the process: typing out passages that seemed of especial import to me in this current state of social disarray. Doing that not only provided me with a useful compendium later on, it actually enforced attention in the moment, slowing reading down, transforming ethereal text into physical movement, a form of instant embodiment that enhances the prospect of a thought becoming an active belief. So for this piece, my concluding essay, I will lay out a tapestry of some of those quotes, each with a commentary, a few sentences, a paragraph, even a few paragraphs, whatever comes to mind in my now retyping them for a second time, for you, including the you-in-me



who is the primary “you” I write for and want to teach, an existing tendency that was reinforced by these great thinkers, as you’ll see from the passages I ended up choosing to conserve.

The first of these is my epigraph, from Epicurus, which to me encompasses all the others under the imperative of its injunction. Epicurus is the Greek teacher/philosopher most notably ensconced eponymously for us in the term epicurean, which covers a range from those who enjoy fine things, especially food, to those who indulge bodily pleasures to excess. But the real Epicurus “taught” so much more than that in his Garden academy. One of his nuggets of wisdom is that above phrase, which has been translated variously as “live anonymously,” or “live in obscurity,” or most literally, and my preferred version, “live hidden.” It might seem odd for such a message to come from someone so durably famous, now over two millennia after he passed, certainly not hidden from history. And from someone who recommended and valued convivial relationships of all sorts, most especially with friends. But that, to me, is the beauty of that concept. You can be hidden in plain sight pretty much any time you want. It is in fact key to surviving the otherwise desultory effects of both friends and fame. And it might seem similarly odd to be coming from someone whose name now suggests sensuous pleasure, even excess. But it became clear to me, reading Seneca in particular who quotes him copiously, that while Epicureanism may not be identical with Stoicism, it is not even remotely its contrary. Maybe more like Stoicism-lite. And no one who advises us to “live hidden” could possibly be the inspiration for the sorts of grotesque and epic orgies of gustatory excess that characterized certain elements of Roman life a few centuries hence. There is something quite calm and soothing in Epicurus, which is what the Stoics borrowed from him.

I have been living “hidden,” at least in relation to my published work, for five years now, when I made initially, and then kept repeating, a decision to self-publish my work online for free or in print versions at cost. I did this, I have said repeatedly, in part because of my urgent anxiety about time, in that I felt viscerally, there in the shadow of someone else’s untimely death, my own vulnerability. Which is to say that I can’t afford to squander my time in the suspense of endless waiting, which is kind of the definition of publishing via the conventional venues: I knew from experience how slowly grind the wheels of the traditional press. I had been delivered, via the trauma of my loss, to a sort of eternal “now” that would brook no deference to a future, no matter how near or extended it might be. It’s not only that I wanted none of that repeated press-pause sequence of stages on the journey to print, stuttering haltingly along its way to the denouement; but also that I felt I couldn’t afford the constraints such interruptions imposed on my creative process, which was vivid, aflame, one of the lovelier expressions of my rage.

As to my productivity, it was a brilliant choice. I’ve now written and “published” 9 books, this will be the 10<sup>th</sup> if it makes it that far, almost evenly divided between poetry and prose, over the last five years. Had I paused to find a traditional publisher for the first of those books, *This Fall*, I would, if I were lucky, be on the verge now of seeing it in print. And the process would have pre-occupied so much of my attention that somewhere between most and all of the subsequent books would still be waiting silently in a queue in my head, or, more likely, would have simply withered away to eternal un-saidness in the meantime. That’s the good of it.

On the other hand, I have had to come to terms with the more perturbing implications of that decision, most of which I had no way of anticipating. Or more accurately, I should have anticipated them. They were utterly predictable. I was just too naïve or arrogant, take your pick, to do so. A major one pertains to my “identity” as a writer. Part of me I think—the remaining vestiges of my academic persona—sort of, kind of thought/hoped that my work would catch on somewhere, somehow, in the “viral” way that often happens in the digital universe these days. Not that I might end up on the NYT’s or Oprah’s list but that I would find a wider readership despite my nose-thumbing at the primary vehicle in our culture for finding a wider readership: the traditional press. That did not happen, not even remotely, and it won’t now, I’m sure of it, at least not in my own lifetime. My readership is, in fact, as minute as it could possibly be, unless I were my only reader. Family, friends, a few former colleagues, an occasional outlier who happens on my website, ten or twenty readers for each book, all of whom I know personally in some way. I experience that “hiddenness” still to some degree as a kind of loss, the wraith of the initial longing not yet having passed over to the next world. So I end up thinking and writing about it. And in doing so, more and more, I find myself not only accepting it, but embracing it, even being grateful for it, that blessed hiddenness. This essay, perhaps this book, if such a thing emerges from all the inchoate writing I’ve been doing this spring and summer, will take me further down the path away from the specter of a false hope to be noticed.

Something happened the other day that I think will encourage that specter to scat sooner rather than later. Or, if it doesn’t, will make me chuckle at it, this pathetic figment of profane desire, if I even pay attention to it at all. I was reading a passage somewhere in which a writer about my age was describing her schedule, all the

readings, events, symposia, conferences, openings, talks she was either attending or participating in. There was a tacit pride behind the litany, this aura of importance, the “fame” that came attendant to all those accoutrements. And my first reaction to this was not envy but nausea, the visceral, I mean actual-gut, feeling that if that were my universe right now, a constant stream of public inquiries, demands and appearances stretching many months ahead, travel thither and yon, I would hate it. I mean absolutely hate it. I would want to change my name and go underground, or fake my own death to escape, seek hiddenness in the extreme.

I was in fact around that time invited to participate in a multi-person poetry reading, just a ten-minute stint of poems, as part of a constellation of secondary local readers arrayed around a more “famous” centerpiece, an event that was cancelled very shortly thereafter because of a schedule conflict with the focal participant. Even an appearance of that relative insignificance made me feel overloaded, stressed. And I was delighted when the burden was lifted, a lucky break to me. I realized right then that I have now settled, by happenstance really, into exactly the state of being that suits me perfectly: I am hidden in plain sight.

It was just at this time that I was reading Seneca, and this passage says it all in relation to my settlement.

Retire into yourself as much as you can.  
Associate with people who are likely to improve you. Welcome those whom you are capable of improving. The process is a mutual one: men learn as they teach. And there is no reason why any pride in advertising your talents abroad should lure you forward into the public eye,

inducing you to give readings of your works or deliver lectures. (18)

Exactly! My opportunities for that kind of quiet, almost invisible, teaching and learning are more limited now that I'm retired, of course. I am as close to being fully out of the "public eye" as one can be and still be alive, I think. And I love it. I can't stand even the tiniest bit of publicity, with its attendant obligations. Why would I want to court more, or feel deprived that they have eluded me? It is almost insane to think that way, a way of thinking that keeps further receding, with my gratitude, especially this winter and spring. In my Covid-19 amplified days of isolation, I spend, literally (because I just calculated it as closely as I could) about 98% of my time alone, no human company either immediately present or in immediate aural/visual communication with me. My social experience is a brief weekly interaction with Bridget on my front porch when we exchange food we shopped for collaboratively, the phone calls/Zoom meetings I have with my kids, siblings, friends, former students, and a local poetry group, and maybe twice a month conversations with the owners of the house I rent, such kind and friendly people who stop in to see me when they work in the yard and gardens. All people who "improve" me. During almost all of my alone time I am silent (except for my routine swearing and muttering to myself). And I have never been happier, more at peace with myself. As Seneca says, quoting Epicurus:

The life of folly is empty of gratitude, full of anxiety: it is focused solely on the future. (44)

For me, in the aftermath of my loss, the future disappeared. And I have no interest in trying to resurrect it by littering obligations across my empty calendar.

As to the longer-term future, well it is possible, even if only remotely, that at some time after I pass someone will “discover” my late-life explosion of work and it will find a wider audience. Not “I” will, “it” will, as it properly should be. And I don’t simply mean because no “I” will be extant here after I die. I mean that even now, as I’ve explained elsewhere, I hardly feel as if an “I” is making all the stuff I make. My books write me; I don’t write them. So even that remote future is not “mine.” It will be a future with which I will have no personal connection. As Marcus Aurelius says:

Or is it your reputation that’s bothering you? But look at how soon we’re all forgotten. The abyss of endless time that swallows it all. The emptiness of those applauding hands. . . .

. . . so keep this refuge in mind: the back roads of your self. Above all, no strain or stress. (38)

The abyss of time on either side of our puny lives is, of course, endless by comparison. And it swallows everything. I knew this even when I was just a teenager staring out at the stars. But even in the seemingly grand context of our minute here, the applause inevitably fades, including for the most famous among us, and the hands creating it at its apex are, by definition, empty, as are the promises they make. Aurelius goes on:

Then what is to be prized?  
An audience clapping? No. No more than the clacking of their tongues. Which is all that public praise amounts to—a clacking of tongues. (72)

Verbal praise may seem more valuable and durable than applause, especially when it’s in print, the cash register that keeps tabs on the currency of celebrity in Western

culture. But that, too, is short-lived, leaving us short-changed in the end.

Along these same lines, one of the most stunning quotes I encountered is this one from Seneca:

Equally good is the answer given by the person, whoever it was (his identity is uncertain), who when asked what is the object of all the trouble he took over a piece of craftsmanship when it would never reach more than a few people, replied: 'A few is enough for me; so is one; so is none.' (19)

As I explain above, and have written about elsewhere, in one way or another, even when it might not be as obvious to others as it was to me, I have always struggled with my inability to find a sizable audience for my creative work, which was, when I was just starting out, certainly an aspiration. I tried hard to accomplish that for quite some time, with no success. I never for some reason had that problem with my scholarly work which is not as close to my heart. I have no idea why. I am a stubborn person, so I continued to peddle various book-length manuscripts of poetry to potential publishers for 20 years. Then one day I quit. Not just sending things out but writing poems altogether. That interim lasted another 20 years, ending with the cataclysm of my wife's passing, which has generated torrents of all kinds of creative work, including now four volumes of poems. All of that has, though, had an involuntary feel to it, outside of my control really, as if what I write is not being written by any "me" I know of in there. Where it comes from is a matter for speculation, and I have speculated about it in excruciating detail in what I've written along the way, as you know if you've read any of it.

I do now write voluminously, of course, way too much I often think. But I am at least smart enough now not to bother sending it out for review. I simply self-publish in the ways I describe above. WordPress and Amazon never say no. Which is not to say that I gave up easily and completely on my original ambitions. As I said, some part of me actually hoped my more recent work would find a wider audience even now without my trying. I am that selfish and foolish. Every time, and there were a few, when something like that seemed just about to happen, something extrinsic would intervene to subvert or upend it. What was initially frustrating to me, seemingly bad luck in that regard, became after a while quite funny, really, and then welcome, good luck as it turns out.

I have said repeatedly that my primary desire for what I write is that it will find at least one reader who really needs, really loves it, and that has happened more often than not. More lately, I have come to believe that the one reader who most needs and loves what I write is actually me, the part in there that just can't seem to learn what he needs to know on his own, requires all of this additional remedial help just to keep afloat, to change himself. For real, I mean. Which gets me back to the quote above. What, anyone including me might fairly ask, is the value of a text that only the writer reads? It seems pointless. The writer must already know what is being written, so why bother writing it for no one else to read? But I have written repeatedly, and believe, that such a characterization of the relationship between what one "knows" and what one writes is nonsense.

For me, unless I make the effort to write, I can't ever know what I end up writing. The process of composition, all this finger-flapping on the keys, is the vehicle for it to come into being. I have almost no idea what I'm about to write when I'm writing. I just start typing, and this is what



comes out. It might as well be, and may well be, someone or something else entirely that tells my fingers which words to pick, I feel that far removed, consciously at least, from the transaction. Then I get to read it, just like you do here, assuming anyone else but me ever reads this. And I learn what I need to know, having been taught by a version myself “living hidden,” or some other agency for which myself is the conveyance, also living hidden, what I need to know right now. That is the value of a text that “no one” ever reads.

My long winter of silence, and the Stoics, have helped me to come to terms with the invisibility, the hiddenness, the public unresponsiveness to my calls. Even if only I listen and answer, it is still of immense value. I am the “no one” whom my “nobody” writes for and with. And happily so. I am stunned to be able to say that. And that stunning quote, which I typed out in the same way I am typing this, in order to learn from it, says it all. Here is a further bit of wisdom from Seneca along these lines:

‘For whose benefit, then, did I learn it all?’ If it was for your own benefit that you learnt it you have no call to fear that your trouble may have been wasted.  
(18)

No, my trouble has not been wasted, not by a longshot. And if you happen to be reading this, here’s a message from Epicurus, the one I used as an epigraph for my preface:

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

May 28

Last night I had a dream that, I realized even before I woke up, had to do with the concept of “changes of state,” those sudden transformations that are improbably extreme. Water is the best common example. Heat it up enough, it disappears into thin air. Cool it down enough it becomes hard as a rock. Who could have “thunk up” a system so strange? The primary vehicle for this in the dream was the common “bait ball” of fish I’m sure everyone has seen in nature shows. A few million sardines, say, are swimming along in a loose collective, looking for food or sex or whatever, relatively relaxed, each one a relative individual pursuing relatively individual ends. Then, in the face of a threat, a school of hungry dolphins, say, they all at once come together into a single mass, the many becoming one, moving in unison, hoping by this means to survive at least as a species, enough left to start over, if not as individuals. Then comes the surge of dolphins plunging in and out, whamming around with their tails to stun fish, picking them off, the chaos often amplified by birds diving down from above, a maelstrom of feeding. All of a sudden, it’s over, the survivors scurrying off to look for a safer place to eat and have sex.

For some reason, in this dream, I thought of this transition from a congeries of little fish to a unitary organism, as a “change of state,” akin to what happens with water: it is one thing, then all of a sudden it is something else entirely. That took up most of the dream, but there were a few “afterthoughts” of other examples, most of which I don’t remember. One, though, was running on a slippery surface, like ice, say. You don’t gradually lose traction. You either have it, and keep running, or you don’t and fall down. The change is sudden and extreme. You’re a runner, then you’re not.

Another was falling in love. One second you aren't the next you are. Yes, I know, the process may appear gradual. But for me at least, even with a long buildup, the turn to "in love" is instant and complete. As the famous old song says: "There's no two ways about love." And the change of state this ushers in could not be more drastic. Same on the other end. A relationship fails, you need to get over it, you work and work at it, months, years even. Then one day, one minute, one second, you're not "in love" any longer. And that change of state is comparably drastic. This piece is an attempt to explore one such "change of state" I both invited and then experienced when I retired and moved cross country, the latter of which, the experience part, was nothing like what I had imagined it would be when I invited it in to start with.

About 30 years ago I wrote a poem called "The Other Side of the Light," its primary topic the death by suicide of my mother-in-law's former lover. Death is always challenging, as a reality and as a theme. That title became a template for various thought experiments in relation to problems of that sort: What is on the other side of something that in conventional terms has a standard binary partner when that partner is clearly not what's there? Life and death is a good pair to start with. If the opposite of life is death then what's on the other side of life? Death is of course a moment, and it may, as most atheists believe, be simply the end of one's existence, aside from the recycling of atoms, in which case there is absolutely nothing on the other side of life. Or, as many believe, death may be a portal to some other form of existence, the kinds we call routinely life-after-death, in which case the other side of life is life, death merely a momentary fulcrum. As I was writing this poem, I was thinking about light that way. Light's contrary may be dark, but dark is not what you find on light's other side. Either light ends completely, in which case dark does as

well. Or it takes another form, in which case dark is merely the fulcrum, less than an instant, that marks the boundary. Maybe I'll add that poem as an appendix to this piece, if it seems pertinent by the time I get there.

I've already talked about my process of change here as a kind of inverted parabola, the need to take the left fork of it down to zero before any ascent was possible. Now I am at that fulcrum, the boundary point, where a real change of state becomes possible. I have no idea what "the other side" of zero might be, when the liquid droplet of my life solidifies, turning to ice, or evaporates, floating off in a foggy steam. But whatever is there, it simply now beckons me, amicably, gently, bringing to mind one of my favorite William Carlos Williams poems, "The Descent," which appeared in Book Two of his life's work, *Paterson*, and was also published as a freestanding poem. It was written late in his life, his having to come to terms with a series of health crises and, even more poignantly, with his earlier profligacy, especially in relation to his wife, Flossie:

The descent beckons  
    as the ascent beckoned  
        Memory is a kind  
of accomplishment  
    a sort of renewal  
        even  
an initiation, since the spaces it opens are new  
places  
    inhabited by hordes  
        heretofore unrealized  
of new kinds—  
    since their movements  
        are toward new objectives  
(even though formerly they were abandoned)

No defeat is made up entirely of defeat—since  
the world it opens is always a place  
    formerly  
        unsuspected. A  
world lost  
    a world unsuspected  
        beckons to new places  
and no whiteness (lost) is so white as the memory  
of whiteness

With evening, love wakens  
    though its shadows  
        which are alive by reason  
of the sun shining—  
    grow sleepy now and drop away  
        from desire

Love without shadows stirs now  
    beginning to awaken  
        as night  
advances

The descent  
    made up of despairs  
        and without accomplishment  
realizes a new awakening;  
    which is a reversal  
of despair  
    For what we cannot accomplish, what  
is denied to love  
    what we have lost in the anticipation—  
        a descent follows  
endless and indestructible

As with Williams, who is writing this as an older man, the descent I have just completed, the one I describe as moving down the left side of a parabola toward zero, did

not look dark or scary to me. I actually spent much of that time using “memory [as] a kind of accomplishment,” on behalf of “a sort of renewal.” Mostly this took the form of a continuous scan of my now-completed professional life, looking back carefully, critically, and in some detail, at what I had accomplished, but more so the “despairs . . . without accomplishment,” where I had failed, let others down, misread situations, missed opportunities to effect significant change, not intentionally most often, or out of any malice, simply by being human. It was quite often a very painful process, filled me with angst. But I understood that it was part of the descent, no way up until I had delved all the way down, waiting patiently for the turn, which is here, “a sort of renewal . . . an initiation,” opening spaces “inhabited by hordes/heretofore unrealized/of new kinds—.”

Now that turn “beckons [me] to new places,” the way any beauty beckons, in exactly the same way that the descent beckoned, that path we take through late-life that leads us, if we’re lucky, to precisely this fulcrum, the roller coaster at the bottom of its loop, where

Love without shadows stirs now  
beginning to awaken  
as night  
advances

And like the roller coaster, that plunge is not necessarily the end of the ride. The energy that was accumulated in the ascent has not been fully expended, can go on for quite a while, depending on how it is managed, up and down, meandering, but every bit of the ride after that first plunge is inflected by the unforgettable, breathtaking descent into the heretofore unrealized world it introduced to us when we first looked down that steep decline. What you were at that first peak you will never be again, not at

least on this particular ride. Yet, there is at moments like this a sense of “renewal,” of “new objectives,” “new places,” “a new awakening;/ which is a reversal of despair.” For me, an ascent now beckons. I am poised to make the turn, but am in no hurry to do so.

The mantra I used to guide my journey here was, as I’ve said, “small,” so small, always small. Not small again, a return to some more idyllic or at least more manageable state, because in some ways even a newborn is not small in the world’s eyes. I had always been large. You have to be if you want to make the first big “ascent,” to grow up, get educated, teach, write, inhabit a professional world; to marry, have children, buy houses and cars, all of it. It’s why advertisers crave a younger demographic, not the elderly. That kind of large is vested in ego, and not necessarily in a negative sense. You make yourself larger and larger to survive and succeed in worldly terms. Part of it involves adding titles, like “doctor” and “professor” and “director” of course, but also things like “dad,” “dear,” and even “friend,” all requiring the creation of both an armature and a persona, neither of which is “me” in any “essential” sense. It is a long, hard climb to the precipice, where the descent beckons and cannot be waylaid. Looking down from there made me want to get small in some way I couldn’t even specify, some way I had never been and couldn’t be until then. Now, at this turning point, zero, which is not a nadir but the fulcrum between zero and the other side of the zero, I am finally there.

At what might seem to be the opposite extreme of this is Whitman’s grand gesture: “I am large. I contain multitudes.” Ironically, quite beautifully really, these two conditions, small and large, are not incommensurable. They are identical. As I hope I’ve made clear, you can’t contain or become all of your own intrinsic multitudes, experience them collegially and lovingly, unless the

Captain, the Key, is brought to terms and power is redistributed in an egalitarian way. Unless, that is, you are willing to take the descent all the way to its turning point, becoming so small, so hidden, that the change is not incidental or incremental, but a change of state.

So, as I indicated I might, let me end this piece, this book that is not yet a book, with the poem I mentioned:

### The Other Side of the Light

#### I

*My mother-in-law's former lover killed himself last Thursday.  
She just found out over the phone.*

*She and my wife talk about him in hushed tones in the  
living room.*

*I stare out the study window at an acre of new snow,  
a foot deep, maybe more.*

*The trees--apple, locust, maple, oak--  
hover above it, like dark shrouds  
disconnected from the ground.*

*Death is, I'm sure, self-evident in an exhaust-filled garage.*

*It is not a few bare trees in the back yard.*

*It is probably not even very frightening.*

*Someone looks at the bloated, blue face  
and says, for the record: "dead."*

*I wonder how long it is after the last breath  
before time evaporates?*

*The past, the future, all of it,  
just a ball of smoke caught in the throat:  
one small cough and it mingles with infinity.*



## II

*Allen Johnson wanted to be rich.  
He failed, chunks of his money sunk  
into one bad investment after another.  
His own doing, really, and undoing.  
Guesses. Bad news. Broke.  
No, not even anywhere near broke.  
Just not as rich as he needed to be  
by, say, last Thursday,  
when he must have sat down and said,  
for the record: dead.*

*His past, his future, didn't reconcile,  
even if the instant they surrounded  
could not, because of them, be different  
by one iota from what it was.*

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

## III

*My wife and mother-in-law are not talking any longer.  
Perhaps they have gone off for a walk.  
I try to get back to what I wanted to write about:  
the other side of the light,  
right before light starts.  
None of this seems quite right.*

*That white-haired man slumped over the steering wheel  
of a Jeep Eagle in a garage in New Jersey  
has nothing, for example, to do with*

*my daughter, who was out in the back yard  
stomping out the definition of alive  
in quick, bold strokes across the snow.*

*Now she is laughing and making a racket at the back door.  
My son is running out to meet her.  
This is what I would have been writing about,  
if only I had not looked out the window,  
if only no one had answered the phone,  
if only it had not snowed.*

I don't want this to be read as a depressing or foreboding conclusion. There is always a child stomping out the definition of alive in the snow. She is not just with me, but is me, now, always, as she is you, too. We spend a lifetime looking out the window, answering the phone, because we have to. It snows. But then there is also the turning, which is a re-turning, a racket at the back door, that little boy laughing, waiting for her, preparing for the change of state, as love binds them on the way back in, home again, together. The ascent beckoning. Both of them, there, with you, with me, always.



## August 14 Postscript: The Sugar Bowl

*Your merits should not be outward facing.*

Seneca

I have spent my life, and most especially the last five years, trying my best to “live hidden.” It started with my basic temperament, uncomfortable even being looked at let alone “known” in some deeper inner way. I rarely spoke when I was young, and only took to that medium in earnest when, in my early teens, I started frequenting the local hangout, the Sugar Bowl, and realized how much I could learn by talking and listening to the other people who also hung out there, all of them worthy, some wildly smart. I’d stop by there most afternoons after school, then return after dinner, to smoke, drink coffee, listen to juke box music, talk with whoever happened to be around, or just sit in silence, my legs up on one side of the red-vinyl-clad booths in the dim back half of the place, a counter with round, swiveling seats in the brighter front half, where I might wander up for a conversation with someone I knew who just came in. I owe whatever degree of normalcy I have achieved to that place and those people, whom I listened to and who listened to me, day after day, endlessly interesting. Even now, I have a longing for the sense of genuine community I felt there, so relaxed and comfortable, the low light a perfect ambience to forget the boundaries of my physical person, to become permeable, open, honest, relaxed, just to be, myself I guess, though a term like that has little meaning in such a context. It was a floating.

I spent all of the rest of my life in university cultures, undergraduate school, graduate school, professorial

positions, seeking, always seeking the sort of community I knew in the Sugar Bowl. Over the years, the prospect of finding that again gradually dimmed until, finally, during my last few professional years, it disappeared almost entirely. That may well be a sad commentary on me, my powers to animate social spaces with the materials at hand. But it is also a sad commentary on our culture, as it pertains to work, to the professions, and to aging, all of which seem expressly designed to heighten alienation in the service of control.

I'm not sure what impetus to take from the epigraph, from Seneca, that I chose to introduce this final testament: "Your merits should not be outward facing." If you have known me collegially, you may well be thinking how could such an apparently arrogant man imagine that he lived his life by that code? But, despite your possible protestations, I will insist that I did. The ones who would know that best are the students I served along the way, most especially those in entry-level, gen-ed classes, who inspired me, truly and deeply, right until the very last day I taught.

Here are a few of my favorite quotes and notes from students during my final term of teaching:

Dear Mr. Paul,

I am sorry for emailing you obtrusively. I heard from Thomas that you are going to retire after this semester and move to another city. It is such a shame to hear news like this because I was actually planning to take one more class of yours next semester. Among all the teachers I have met in this university, you are the one that I like and respect the most. You are knowledgeable in a way that you can unconsciously influence us, and each time after our

class was over, I always felt like I learned a lot from you. To be honest with you, my mind was opened after I took your class, and I learned to look at things from so many different perspectives. Sorry about all this nonsense. I just really want to tell you how grateful I am to be one of your students. I am really glad that I had the opportunity to take your class, and it was an honor to me. Thank you so much Mr. Paul.

. . .

The MOST amazing, genuine, caring professor I've had in my entire life. I don't normally like English classes, but I loved every second of this one. He is so open minded and made me love poetry. I cannot say enough about how much I love Paul and his class. I feel so fortunate to have had a class with him!

. . .

Paul is not only the best professor I ever had but the best person I have ever met. He casually and unconsciously imparts some wisdom every single class. So genuine and caring and helped me look at poetry in a new way.

I am, of course, none of these amazing things always and for real. But I was all of them, at least sometimes, when I stood up in front of a roomful of young faces, both eager and anxious, fully prepared to be disappointed, bored, through the weeks of work in such drab-sounding courses, but, I also knew, hoping against hope that this time, maybe just this once, it would be different. Many times, for many of them, I believe it was. As it was for me. The way I succeeded as a teacher was, in large part, by keeping

my own merits inward facing, so I could entice the merits of others out into the open air of these little, temporary, pop-up communities I inhabited, each for 15 week stints, for almost 50 years. And now, for the first time, in saying that, I suddenly see: My “career” was not a long slog away from that idyllic space of my adolescence, nor the gradual diminution of my connection to a community I loved and felt at home with. Every single one of those 15 week units was its own iteration of my time in the Sugar Bowl. I am, right now, deeply thrilled to be thinking of it that way, not just my career, but my life, what I was so fortunate to find along the way, all those opportunities, a rare gift; but also what I made of them.

You can read every book I ever wrote. Those, and this one, are among my “merits outward facing.” You will learn a lot about me and maybe about some other things that interest you. But the ones, I know now, who know me best are the ones I happened upon in the Sugar Bowl almost 60 years ago. And the ones I happened upon in all the other little Sugar Bowls I fostered along the way, hopefully instilling in them a memory of community, “a kind of accomplishment/ a sort of renewal,” that was equal to mine, by allowing their merits to be outward facing instead of mine, by living hidden. If you were a student of mine along the way and are reading this: I loved every minute of the time I got to spend together with you in our Sugar Bowl. Thank you.





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Paul is the author of numerous books of poetry, personal essays, and scholarship available in multiple formats at online booksellers and at paulkameen.com

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**Scholarship:**

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