

Bunny and Free

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. . . a bunny, a moth, a squirrel scurrying up a tree,
and maybe me, just walking through the woods.
Free. At last. Again.

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Preface

Bunny and Free brings together two interrelated series of essays published initially on Substack in spring/summer 2026. It is a seemingly desultory collection whose through-line may, at first, be hard to discern. There is, though, a strong emotional undertow that holds them all together. Or at least it felt that way to me writing them.

I set out last spring to write a series of essays on AI, all the rage at the moment. Then I ended up unexpectedly discombobulated by my A(ctual) I(ntelligence) in a way I'm familiar with. I know exactly what I have to do when that happens and how to do it, a process that usually takes a few months, as this one did. Now I am hunky-dory again. If you read the essays with this trajectory in mind—discombobulated to hunky dory—I think you'll "get" them. And maybe "get" me, too, no mean task, if that's of any interest to you.

The focal point of *Bunny* is V.R. "Bunny" Lang, a poet/playwright who came of age as an artist in the 1950s and died young, in 1955. She is best known as Frank O'Hara's (of *Lunch Poems* fame) "muse," with whom he shared both poems and lunches starting in the late 1940s until her untimely death. "Muse" is such a dismissive way to characterize her role in their relationship, which was deep and loving, she serving more often as his mentor than his inspiration. Theirs is a beautiful story of true friendship and mutual trust. She and her work, which arrived late in that series, were just what I needed to get myself back on a better path.

The focal point of *Free*, the "part two" of this story, is the character who came to me in a "lucid" dream on the first anniversary of my wife's death ten years ago, playing out a stunning morality tale that took me months to fully decode. He and that dream became the capstones for the first book I wrote

from the shadow of that loss, *This Fall*, still my keystone book. This series may seem to meander as well, but if you remember how Free anchors it, and me when I most need that, you'll see how he got me where I needed to get.

Because, as I said, I was “discombobulated” when I started all this, the self-revelatory aspect of the *Bunny* series left me very anxious, enough so that I actually unpublished three of the essays. When I reread them after I started *Free*, I couldn't fathom what I was so unnerved about, and I re-published them. Here's what I concluded: Last spring I was feeling vulnerable, unsafe, really, a state of mind that inclines me (as I assume it would anyone) to avoid sharing overly personal material that others might use to judge or criticize me. Now I am serene and confident again, back on my game, so can easily assume such a risk. That's a lot to get from writing, which is the primary reason I do so much of it. No matter my discombobulation, hunky dory is usually waiting at the other end of the line, of all those lines I have to write to get there. I hope you will enjoy reading about my “trip.”

Bunny

Hey, AI, RUOK?

The early 1960s—before assassinations and the war punched the bottom out of the basket—felt to me like Disney’s Tomorrowland on steroids. Among my deeply held convictions was that Jetsons-styled flying cars were right around the corner, that my first automotive purchase would be exactly that. I was wrong, of course. The car in my driveway today is essentially the same in its mechanical aspects—a gas-powered internal combustion engine driving rubber wheels always (ideally) in full contact with the ground— as the first car I remember riding around in as a kid, my father’s 1952 Dodge. I keep this fantasy in mind as a cautionary tale about the human temptation to dramatically compress the time it will take to get from some drab and disappointing now to much more flamboyant and exciting future. Time simply doesn’t work that way, at least in terms of the relationship between imagination and reality, technology and history.

I bring this up to frame what might seem at first like an risible assertion: The computer I’m typing this up on, with all of the advanced resources it places at my disposal, is essentially the same in its mechanical aspects—a set of binary switches for controlling electrical signals at some fraction of lightspeed, activated by my fingers on a QWERTY keyboard—as the one I used back in 1977 to type up the first article I got published, the one that lost me my job (an early AI casualty?), for saying heretical things in the workplace that provided the computer for me to write it with. That one was pretty primitive. You basically had to spread your fingers into something akin to a B chord on the guitar just to type an apostrophe. Now there’s a dedicated key for that!

With all the hype these days about AI—both the doom-sayers and the boom-brayers—it’s easy to believe that the computational equivalent of the flying car is already here. I watched a YouTube just last night where a lifelong coder, an AI startup guru with Google-apostle credentials, said exactly that: It’s here; get with it. Or over it if you’re not yet on board! The news, books, YouTubes, you name it are all awash with extravagant claims about how AI will redeem or destroy us, utopia and apocalypse seemingly duking it out to see which will hit the canvas first. Tech-bro oligarchs hype their models—Claude, Gemini, ChatGPT, et al.—while more and more skeptics call them conmen, willing to break the power grid and tap out aquifers to win the race to the top, where many billions of dollars allegedly await from people too busy or lazy to write their own code, essays and emails.

Full disclosure: I have never gone out of my way to use AI and don’t think I will going forward. I do have to endure humanoid chatbots on the phone, as you do. And yes, it does now automatically answer some of the questions I type into Google. Thirty years ago, I would have either gone to a library (taking a few hours, depending on how nearby it was) or scavenged my bookshelf and pawed through pages (taking maybe a half hour depending on the quality of my internal “card catalog”) to find what I needed. Until very recently I would have used “old” Google, opened a few links, sorted out my answer (taking several minutes of speed reading.) In most of these instances I was not in search of deep expertise; I simply wanted a bit of information, often just a fact—name, date, quote, etc.—as quickly as possible. Now it’s a matter of seconds between my ask and a more-than-likely correct answer. For a speed freak like me, that’s a bargain. Even if I have to double-check.

The vaunted AI “bubble,” the one keeping the current economy afloat, is, everyone says, about to pop any day now. It may or may not do that, with anywhere from unpleasant to devastating

financial consequences. That is not my concern here. Nor do I have either terrifying or wondrous things to say about how AI will affect either the workplace or the world. Human history is rife with examples of technological innovations that made human lives considerably better or worse, most often both. Many of them were hailed at their onset as either potential panaceas or imminent calamities, most often both. AI is another such. It could amaze, enlighten or simply amuse us; it could leave us in ruins. Things humans make are good at all those things. And I am not clairvoyant enough to foresee which one is most likely. The only bubble I want to pop here is the one that claims this juggernaut is about to transition from AI to AGI, artificial general intelligence, human-brain equivalency and then some, the holy grail that has inspired “the cult of computing” ever since ENIAC was “born” a few years before I was.

My argument is simple: It is impossible to get from AI to AGI with the current technological infrastructure, as impossible as taking my car in for a tuneup and expecting it to fly me home. My case is founded on these three incontrovertible facts: (1) Current computers are arrays of binary electrical switches that operate sequentially and hierarchically; the brain is demonstrably not that. (2) Their current training is founded entirely on Large Language Models, the forced ingestion of all the words and images on the internet (yikes!); human intelligence, while it does often use words and images to learn and seek expression is much more expansive than that: We know and can do all kinds of very important things that precede or surpass “language.” (3) They currently process their responses to our queries by using highly refined predictive algorithms trained to find the best next word via an extended iteration of external parametric nudges. Teaching a child to “think” in this way, at human speed, which is a much tinier fraction of the speed of light, would take a millennium! So, there it is: the mechanism, its body of knowledge, and the way it tells us what it “knows,” none of them

even remotely “intelligent” in the way we can stake a claim to for ourselves.

...

My first exposure to the world of computing was at the 1964 World’s Fair in New York City when I was 15. There I encountered IBM’s Information Machine, which, when you gave it a date, would display some pertinent “news” of that day. Machines of that sort were, of course, quite primitive by contemporary standards. Still, only a year later, Herb Simon, one of the “godfathers” of AI, predicted, in *The Shape of Automation*, that computers “will be capable, within twenty years, of doing any work a man (sic!) can do.” Tech-bro oligarchs (and they are still mostly all-bro!) are now, 60 years hence, trying mightily to pretend that prediction has finally come true. It hasn’t. And absent some exponential advances in both theory and tech it won’t in another 20 years, either.

A little more than a decade later, mid-1970s, I got my first full-time academic job in the English Department at Carnegie Mellon University. There, the AI “bubble” was already beginning to inflate. Herb Simon (yes, that one), worked there, having arrived the year I was born. He was a god on campus. He was just about to win his Nobel prize in economics, basically for inventing the term “satisficing” to describe his version of “bounded rationality” in organizational decision-making processes. A new dean of Humanities and Social Sciences (my home base) was gung-ho about bringing the latest in computing into our curricula. You might think: What could an economist have to offer in an arena like ours? Well, Simon was a sort of polymath, had ensconced his thinking about economic matters in the realm of behavioral/cognitive psychology almost from the outset. He knew a lot about other fields as well (though, crucially, very little, as best I can tell, about quantum mechanics—his U of Chicago-trained brain was classical to the core—or philosophy,

outside of the usual suspects on the positivist side, like Rudolf Carnap, his logic mentor in grad school.) The psychology department in my neighborhood in the university was organized around his vision, and we were directed to find ways to incorporate their methods into our curricula for teaching reading and writing.

Having at one point considered becoming a therapist, I knew a lot about psychology, so I figured, okay, why not. I was, to get quickly to the point, stunned, and to be quite honest deeply offended, by the triviality of what they had to offer. I was a scholar in the field of literary and literacy studies, a university level teacher of reading and writing. I knew a ton of stuff not just about that, but about history, philosophy, and, by happenstance, physics. The cog-psych “experts” advising us knew almost none of it, nor about any of the more humanistic approaches that had emerged in their bailiwick during the 1960s and 70s. They had done some experiments with writers narrating “protocols” while they wrote, on the basis of which they derived an “audience-based process” of composition, terms that soon filtered into some of the composition textbooks of that era. Like Simon, they assumed that the brain and its relationship with language was structured the way a computer was: a binary machine for processing the “language” it ingested into usefully reportable “information.” When they explained what bearing their “findings” might have on writing instruction, I was not wowed.

Just to be sure I was on the right track with my skepticism, I decided to read Simon’s *The Sciences of the Artificial*, published in 1969, which was their conceptual template. Again, not wowed. He was obviously broadly knowledgeable in his multiple fields, a pretty good writer with a flair for declaring the obvious logically and authoritatively. Like Carnap. My main problem with his vision was that he had fallen, without ever acknowledging it, for the foundational reverse-analogical fallacy that has haunted the cult of computing from the outset: the

assumption that because computers can do many of the things human brains can do, the human brain must work like a computer. To match it, artificial systems just needed to get more powerful, more complex, which they have: parallel circuitry, multi-server processing systems, oodles of memory. Now, instead of a room sized ENIAC calculating artillery trajectories, we have Brainiac, masquerading as multiple football fields of stacked servers, using a small city's worth of electricity and a small town's water supply, whirring away collectively to do all sorts of things, most of which we could likely handle, more leisurely, with the three pound chunk of fat, water, protein, and salts inside our skulls, using about 20 watts of power. A year after I finished the book (and some others) I completed the article I mention above. A year after that it was published. A year after that I was terminated. If AI had been around, it could probably have predicted all of that, as my brain did before I even started writing.

Simon's book has been revised and updated a couple of times since then, is now twice as long and costs maybe 10 times as much (an example of "satisficing?") I decided to reread it for this essay, but I wanted the same version I read back then, had to track it down on the used book market. It has not aged well (I mean the content, not the copy I read, which was in surprisingly good shape), felt more like reading about the solar system before Copernicus came along, the planets like whirling dervishes, lots of retrograde motion in epicycles. I was planning here to provide a systematic analysis/critique of its underpinnings. But it's just not worth the time and energy. So I asked Google to summarize it. AI responded this way:

Herb Simon's The Sciences of the Artificial (1969) is a foundational text that argues for a scientific approach to studying "artificial" phenomena—things created, designed, or adapted by humans, such as organizations, technology, and artificial intelligence. Simon posits that while natural

science studies how things are, the science of the artificial studies how things could be—focusing on design, function, and purpose.

Then there's a series of bullet points summarizing each of its four chapters, which you can Google if you're curious (the last, "The Architecture of Complexity," is the best.) AI's "Core Takeaway" is:

Simon argues that the "proper study of mankind" is not just humanity, but the study of design—the artificial systems we create and inhabit.

Maybe the later editions are more breathtaking and snazzy. I could ask AI that, but I'm going to trust my own instincts and pass on finding out for myself. Simon never says expressly, at least in that first edition, that the human brain is precisely computer-analogous in its architecture, but his argument gets pretty rickety if you don't concede that. Here, for example, is how he summarizes "complexity" on the penultimate page of the book:

How complex or simple a structure is depends critically upon the way we describe it. Most of the complex structures found in the world are enormously redundant, and we can use that redundancy to simplify their description. But to use it, to achieve the simplification, we must find the right representation. (117)

Exactly. But "the right representation" of a legitimately intelligent system is not a digital computer. It may well be akin to a quantum computer, but that remains to be seen. And further:

The notion of substituting a process description for a state description of nature has played a central role in the development of modern science. . . . The correlation

between state description and process description is basic to the functioning of any adaptive organism, to its capacity for acting purposefully upon its environment. Our present-day understanding of genetic mechanisms suggests that even in describing itself the multicellular organism finds a process description—a genetically encoded program—to be the parsimonious and useful representation. (117)

Okay, up to a point, as long as you're talking about "nature," i.e., an "adaptive organism . . . acting purposefully upon its environment." Which is what any "multicellular organism" does, via a "genetically encoded program" (which, I'd argue, it does not "find" but is endowed with.) I take issue, though, with the assertion that such a program is a "representation," and especially with the implication (which is what the book is about) that one can create and study an unnatural, non-adaptive, artificial system and then presume that its "process" and "state" can serve as an easily transferable template for explaining what natural, adaptive organisms are and do.

In short, the computer-brain analogy breaks down very quickly when you look at their differences, like for example those between artificial and organic neural networks. AI again, on digital neural networks:

An AI neural network functions by passing input data through layers of interconnected nodes ("neurons"), where weighted connections and non-linear transformations compute predictions. During training, the network iteratively adjusts these weights using backpropagation to minimize the error between its prediction and actual target values, essentially learning complex patterns.

I put neurons in quotes myself because such nodes are obviously not neurons. The rest of the jargon is basically a way of describing a very long game of Marco-Polo between human

beings and a blindfolded machine, one the machine has to “win” before they let it get out of the pool.

And now, AI on biological neural networks:

A biological neural network is a complex, interconnected population of neurons found in the brains and nervous systems of living organisms. Unlike artificial neural networks (ANNs) that rely on mathematical formulas, organic networks process information through electrochemical signals and physical changes in the structure of the brain.

Some differences to note: An AI neural network is an electrically activated array of “layered” (i.e., hierarchical, as Simon insists is a nearly universal mode of “architecture” in complex systems) nodes (which are junctions not neurons), “trained” via a long iterative process of “adjusting [the] weights” it uses to “target” its “predictions.” It can learn by that means, but mostly by direction/correction from the outside in, i.e., programming. Once it starts to do some of that for itself, things can get wonky. And have, on the “self-driving-car” side of things, for example. No, they can’t fly. But they can crash.

A biological neural network is an “interconnected” (i.e., non-hierarchical) “population” (i.e., synthetic aggregate) that processes information through *electrochemical* signals and *physical changes* in the structure of the brain. AI neural networks have no chemical component. You may think that dimension is inessential, but if you look at how information is “processed” in, say, the neural network of a forest (which is a better analogy for the human brain) the chemical component is predominant. Without it, the “intelligence” of the system is reduced to a trickle. And AI networks produce no physical changes in the structure of their systems. So, at least from my point of view, calling them “neural” is the same sleight of hand

computing cultists rely on to elide computers into brains. Both, to me, are “you can’t get here from there” rhetorical moves.

And that’s just for openers. Thirty-some years ago, in *The Emperor’s New Mind*, Roger Penrose, of Black Hole fame, proposed what seemed back then to be the outlandish idea that biological brains operated via quantum processes in their microtubules, tiny protein filaments that perform a variety of functions in living cells, including neurons. His theory was roundly dismissed by both neuroscientists and physicists who argued that quantum events can only happen in very quiet, dry and absurdly cold contexts, because at the time that was the only way they could produce and observe them. The brain is none of those things. In the meanwhile, researchers have demonstrated that quantum action occurs when photons land on leaves, each bit of energy plotting out instantly every possible path to the spots where it can be processed into the food we all depend on; then it selects the best one, at a 99% efficiency rate, superpositional behavior that is exclusively quantum. Same thing with the eye of the European robin, which can, via quantum-entangled electrons, actually see the magnetic field of the earth and use it as an everyday navigational tool. Neither of these places is quiet, dry or ultra-cold.

There is a growing body of evidence that both superposition and entanglement are elementary to brain function as well, opening a path for at least thinking about, if not solving, what physicists have long called the “hard problem” of consciousness: what it is, how it arises, and especially whether its observational role is creative or mimetic. Every step along that path makes it more and more obvious that a machine processing bits of data via binary electrical circuits is so primitive it never will or can become conscious. Our brains may be persuaded to fall for tech-bro verbal tricks that try to tell us otherwise. It is built into the way we’re wired, a kind of “rounding error” capacity that makes us both really smart—the ability to contemplate two contrary

notions amicably at once, say—and easily fooled—the tendency to project “life” onto things that don’t have one, say. Like clouds. Or computers.

The most radical implication of quantizing cognition in the way Penrose proposes is the possibility that consciousness, that “hard problem” I mentioned, is not a product of our individual enterprise, completely self-contained and autogenous, essentially solipsistic, as classical models posit. It may be a universal field that we have the capacity to engage with, creating what we observe in measurable ways. That sounds pretty New-Agey, I know, but it is a commonly held position, in one form or another, among some of the most stellar minds in quantum mechanics—Heisenberg, Schrödinger, Faggin, Feynman, et al. And it has ample precedence in many venerable wisdom traditions: the Vedantic assumption that the individual (atman), when properly realized, is one with the universal (Brahman). The difference between those two is so hard to parse that most English translations of the Upanishads use the word “self” for both. Or the Taoist concept of Way, which is the means by which yin/yang type binaries are brought into equilibrium. Both Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu provide example after example of contraries, including self and not-self, being resolved via what they call *wu wei*, a form of active “nothing-doing,” an example itself of that sort of paradoxical mindfulness. As Chuang Tzu says, “where that and this cease to be opposites, you’ll find the hinge of Way” (27). Hermeticism, Gnosticism, Buddhism and most indigenous wisdom systems have similar ways of promoting that same fusion of individual and universal consciousness. Even Jesus’ Kingdom, if you listen to his actual words with “ears to hear,” is the field where in-here and out-there merge into one. All of which is to say that consciousness conceived as a universal field permeating spacetime has been around for a long time. And quantum mechanics now seems to be saying the same thing, that we interact with it in much the same way that particles of “matter” interact with the Higgs field,

which gives them the mass they lack inherently. It takes a considerable leap of imagination for a Western mind to concede any of that. But once you do, all manner of “hard problems” become so simple you wonder how you could ever have been persuaded to think otherwise.

Okay, so that takes care of the mechanical delusion. What about language? Of course that’s how we learn, you might say. The whole postmodernist intellectual enterprise (poststructuralist and cultural studies models especially) was premised on the assumption that language pre-constitutes, or at least frames and saturates, pretty much everything we know. Which is to say that the cult of computing happened to arise during an historical epoch where the dominant philosophical ideology amplified rather than contended with its foundational epistemic delusion. I’ve been writing my critique of this unexamined (and in my opinion fallacious) assumption for years now, too much to repeat here. Suffice it say that human history is rife with wisdom traditions, including quantum mechanics, where that premise is considered absurd. You can read my “In the Spirit” series on this platform for a primer on that.

Language, in these contexts, is more like the visible light portion of the electromagnetic spectrum. Yes, it does reveal everything we can “see,” but it constitutes way less than 1% of the whole spectrum, all of which impacts our lives in significant if invisible ways. I traffic in words, so I have a lot of respect for them. But having respect means understanding limits. And words have them. They are not, for example, identical with the “experience” that animates them (Emerson can tell you that, if you’re averse to more ancient systems or quantum mechanics), and they are not equivalent to the “wisdom” that issues from them (ditto), those vast infrared and ultraviolet expanses the spectrum of human “intelligence” is capable of traversing.

Chuang Tzu warns that “words are all wind and wave . . . which rise up with ease [and] grow treacherous with ease (42.)” Take the case of quantum mechanics, which is, in my opinion, becoming a guiding force for the next (I mean the past-at-last-postmodernism) philosophical regime, as good an example you’ll find of the treacherous ease of words. It is simply impossible to render a clear explanation of how reality works at the micro-level in representational language. Every quantum scientist concedes that. Which is why they use so many analogies, poetic devices, and playful terms to intimate what the mathematics makes clearer. You could if you wanted spend some time to learn how mathematics “sees” that realm with greater acuity. It’s even possible that mathematics is the “genetic” material that spawns the universe, an extreme reduction of the video-game concept of the universe. That remains to be seen. But I’ve spent enough time with it to conclude that it’s not the best “language” for rendering “life,” which is why I prefer to spend mine with poems instead of equations. One day I may be proven wrong, as I have been about many things. In the meanwhile, I am as sure as I ever get that you can enlarge your language models as much as you want and you won’t ever be able to fully learn, know, or explain everything that’s real and true, especially about consciousness, which surpasses and subtends every symbolic system we’ve invented to convey what it allows us to “see.” In short, one of the key elements of genuine “intelligence” is the ability to understand what it’s not.

So, that takes care of the LLM approach to “intelligence:” DOA. How about parameter-regulated prediction as a means of responding to queries and requests? This one almost debunks itself. Take autocomplete, for example, which is a primitive version of the same thing. You type a few letters and a whole word appears. You type one more and it corrects itself. A few more and the process repeats until you get the “right” answer. Probably. Add bucketloads of “training,” and that’s how AI does

what you ask of it. If human intelligence operated that way, we would have been extinct within one generation. It is just too random, takes too long, and makes too many mistakes to ensure survival. Every other living organism in the natural world, using their own indigenous intelligences, would be smarter than us, making us first fools, then food. Which is not only to say that AI is not very intelligent, there is also evidence to suggest that relying on it chronically will make *you* less intelligent, your brain, being very smart, diverting all the energy you're not using there to other bodily functions, the way a few years on mini-gravity-Mars would make your bones so weak you'd collapse in a pile if you returned to maxi-gravity-Earth. The big plus there is that if Elon makes it, he won't be coming back. 'Nuf said about that!

So what about the potential impacts of AI on our lives? Could AI, for example, create massive displacements in the labor force? Most corporate leaders, and those they recently dis-employed, say yes, resoundingly. I asked Google what percentage of recent mass layoffs were directly attributable to *actual* AI replacements. AI replied:

AI directly caused approximately 4.5% of mass layoffs in large corporations in the U.S. during 2025, according to data from Challenger, Gray & Christmas, Inc. and reports from sa-liberty.medium.com. While AI was cited in roughly 55,000 job cuts out of over 1.2 million total layoffs, these figures suggest that "AI washing"—using AI as a pretext for cost-cutting—is more common than total workforce replacement, with many firms actually rehiring for those roles later.

Key Findings on AI-Driven Layoffs

Actual Impact vs. Hype: While AI is often blamed, it is responsible for a small fraction of total layoffs, with

economic conditions and restructuring being the primary drivers.

Are corporate execs using “AI washing” to lie, or is AI lying to evade responsibility? You can decide for yourself which of those lies sounds more like the plausible product of “intelligence.” The cross-sector mass layoffs in early 2026 are more complicated to track. The verdict is still out on whether AI will replace (a somewhat higher percentage of) those exiled workers or just create problems many of them will have to be rehired to solve.

Okay, let’s move up the catastrophe scale: Could AI lead to a mass extinction event? Here’s what it says:

Experts and research groups have identified several scenarios where AI could pose an existential threat:

- ***Weaponization of Bio-AI:*** Advanced AI drug-discovery tools could be repurposed to design novel, highly lethal biological weapons, creating pathogens with near 100% fatality rates.
- ***Superintelligent “Alignment” Failure:*** If an AI surpasses human intelligence (Superintelligence), it might resist being turned off or restricted if it perceives such actions as a threat to its goals. If its goals are not perfectly aligned with human survival, it might treat humanity as an obstacle.
- ***AI-Initiated Nuclear/Physical Conflict:*** AI systems controlling weapon platforms could cause “WMD-scale” accidents or be used to launch uncontrollable drone swarm attacks.
- ***Environmental Manipulation:*** A superintelligent AI could be used to produce massive quantities of potent greenhouse gases, making Earth uninhabitable.

· ***Societal Destabilization:*** *AI-generated misinformation could erode social cohesion to the point where humanity is unable to react to collective threats.*

So: “could be repurposed, ...” “could be used ...”. By whom? By us. And “misinformation” coming from where? From us. These are human-induced effects from the abuse of technology, something we have been perfecting since one of us decided to use a perfectly good stone tool to kill someone. That leaves the “Superintelligent ‘Alignment’ Failure,” requiring not only “intelligence,” which I hope I’ve raised some caveats about, but superintelligences, which is even more unlikely via this technology. In sum: Could AI lead to our demise? Yes, if we decide to use it that way. Or just let it. Which is us, not “them.” The one thing that list does not include, and should, the most likely existential threat of AI, is the collateral-damage-effect on climate change of all those data centers, which are burning fuel at an alarming rate, much of it generated by coal because that’s the cheapest and fastest way to add capacity to a system already straining to meet demand until (if?) all those proposed nuclear power generators come on line to support them. In other words, the very fact that we tolerate this immense waste, and risk, suggests that we may already have reached the level of “societal destabilization,” in part via tech-bro sponsored “misinformation,” where we are “unable to react” to a “collective threat.” That’s not AI’s fault; it’s ours. “Intelligence?” Indeed!

How about the dream? Could AI let us all live lives of leisure and luxury? Here’s AI:

AI has the potential to usher in an era of unprecedented abundance and leisure by automating mundane tasks and boosting productivity. While it could free humans to focus on creativity and personal growth, achieving a society of universal luxury depends on how AI’s gains are distributed

and whether we can bridge the gap between efficiency and equitable wealth distribution.

Reread everything there that comes after “depends.” Then read what the AI tech-bros, like Elon Musk or Peter Theil, for example, actually say about how power—which determines wealth distribution—should be organized in their imagined utopias. Spoiler alert, they’re not democracies. Or just look at our current system and the disparities it not only creates but celebrates. AI would have to get rid of capitalism first to “bridge” that “gap.” And its creators and promoters, those Epstein-class-power-and-wealth-mongers, are what capitalism is best at producing and protecting. So, I wouldn’t be planning early retirement just yet if I were you. Unless, of course, you can amass enough wealth, etc., etc. And my guess is AI is not going to do that for you. For one thing, if it hasn’t already sent you to the unemployment line, or popped its bubble draining your 401(k), it’s way too busy right now generating all the slop, deepfakes, clickbait, misinformation, and mundane emails we’ve all been asking it for. As well as the obvious answers to questions people like me are too lazy to type out on our own. Copy and paste is so much easier. It has probably saved me alone, right in this missive, an hour or so of labor, which is what it would have taken me to formulate those sentences, which I could easily have envisioned (based on a modicum of traditional “research”) before I saw them. And, besides, I’m a bad typist. So why bother correcting typos when I don’t have to? All it *actually* cost was whatever dollars (exactly how many is hard to pin down) worth of power and water got wasted in some massive “detention facility” where gazillions of chips and exabytes of RAM are slaving away, waiting to be deported to a landfill in a couple of years when the next generation of immigrant “workers” arrives to replace them.

My “generally intelligent” advice? If you want a better world, vote for better people, including at least a few who will put the

brakes not so much on computing, but on the cultists who do what cultists always do: lie to protect and serve power and wealth at the expense of those too dazzled, frazzled, hoodwinked, confused, or afraid to use their naturally endowed intelligences to stop them.

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PS. I asked AI “AI RUOK.” It said, “I’m doing well, thank you for asking!” I can’t tell if it was being sincere, smarmy, obfuscatory, or ironic. Maybe it’s smarter than I thought!

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Comings and goings

*He stared at ruin. Ruin stared straight back.
He thought they was old friends*

...

*But he noted now that: they were not old friends.
He did not know this one.
This one was a stranger, come to make amends
for all the imposters, and to make it stick.
Henry nodded, un-*

John Berryman, “Dream Song #45

Today is Good Friday, as dark a day as there is on the Christian calendar. When I was a kid we spent most of Easter week in church. The descent into the dark started on Palm Sunday, the whole of “the passion,” Jesus’ final week on earth—rotating year to year through the four gospels—intoned from the pulpit, a reading that seemed, to a kid at least, to take days, unrelentingly grim, the congregation forced to voice the worst parts, like “give us Barrabus,” prodded on by the vengeful Pharisees, who wanted that actual criminal to walk so Jesus would be crucified, a plan they finalized a few days before when Jesus goes off on them for being such diabolical hypocrites. His attack is savage. See my March 27 post if you’re curious about what he said to warrant their lethal retribution. Then there was Holy Thursday, the “procession” day, all the pressure of knowing the right path around and around the congregation, carrying whatever I was assigned to carry as an altar boy, worst of all the incense thurible, enough scented smoke rising up to make me want to

puke. Between noon and three the next day, Good Friday (why in the world would you call a day like that “good!”), we’d spend about an hour in church being quiet and then come home, told not to talk until three. Irish Catholics are quite creative when it comes to church rules. My brothers and I would go out and shoot baskets in the driveway. Irreverent sure, but, hey, we didn’t talk.

It’s gorgeous here today, bright sun, the baby blue sky lush with luminous cumulous clouds, spring in the air, an *actual* “good” day. I took my daily walk at Woodard Bay, as I often do on “perfect” days like this, walks that are usually quite joyous. My mood this morning, though, was dark as Calvary’s hill. I have a lot on my mind right now. Something happened this week that sent me into a tailspin. Quite often for me, as for everyone, specific small grievances repeat over a long stretch of time, each one just another entry punched into the adding machine, which keeps tabs quietly along the way. Then one day you press “total” and an endless ribbon of paper curls out, summing up everything to an unexpectedly large number.

I wrote a poem 38 years ago called “The Night Before Roy Orbison Died.” In it I say, among other things, that Roy Orbison could “never have had his heart broken for good.” I’ve been broken-hearted my share of times, but I never believed it was “for good.” This one feels different, like the one John Berryman talks about, come to make amends for all the imposters, intent on making it stick, the definition of “un-,” that foreboding syllable with nothing specific to cut it down to size. Not un-something; un-everything.

I often joke that I only have two speeds, zero and a zoom, sitting on a stone and full sprint. When the switch flips “on,” it must look to those in front of me like a rogue wave. The sea was calm fore and aft, smooth sailing, and then all of a sudden a wall of water. WTF? But it’s more accurate to say that I just have a really long fuse, a sizzle you can barely hear. This one got lit a

long time ago and finally reached powder this week. Today I spent an hour sitting at the point at Woodard Bay crying quietly. If you were there, you'd hardly notice, cheeks a little wet, that's about it, no rogue wave, more like a salt mist from the sea settling under my eyelids. That's how I heal, slowly, one drop at a time, which is what this post is about.

When I was in grad school I had to make an in-class presentation on Shakespeare's *Othello*. I wanted to highlight the way a tiny miscalculation, when it comes to human affairs, can cascade into catastrophe. Iago is diabolical, sure, but Othello, so jealous, is such an easy mark. The cascade starts with a scented hanky and ends in a bloodbath. I wanted to look beyond all that drama and highlight the mechanics, just to show how easily, when it comes to human affairs, that is, things can get really out of whack. I chose a Laurel and Hardy short for my demonstration. In this one, Ollie is trying to show Stan how to sell whatever they're trying to sell door-to-door that day. He rings the first doorbell, a man answers, Ollie takes off his bowler hat, holds it over his chest, and intones his opening pitch. The man slams the door, which catches Ollie's tie. He rings again, door opens, tie out, but the man says or does something rude, can't remember specifically what. So it's ring-open, ring-open, over and over, a gradual escalation of violence. Pretty soon, Ollie is dismantling the man's house stick by stick while the man disassembles his car piece by piece. It is hilarious. *Othello*, well, not so much. Desdemona is not a house or a car. I'm not even sure how or if this applies to my tears-by-the-seaside bit here. Maybe I just want to tamp down the drama, get the inside of my head from grim to funny. Berryman again: "I'm scared a only one thing, which is me." I need to find out why, after all I've been through, I might still be "scared a only one thing, which is me," to get past all that, which is, Berryman concludes, "where we cry oursel's awake," explosion over, world in a shambles, Ollie always blaming Stan: "Well, here's another fine mess you've gotten me into!" as they amble off into the sunset.

...

As my title suggests, we're entering the season of comings and goings here, especially in the avian communities that make their seasonal homes in and around Olympia. A few days ago on East Bay I saw a half-dozen small gaggles of buffleheads and mergansers milling around, getting antsy for their goings: to summer breeding grounds somewhere up on the tundra. I'll miss them dunking under to forage on the bay's floor for their favorite treats, a favorite treat for me on my winter walks. This morning I sat for an hour or so at the tip of that last little spit of land before forest turns into water and watched some of the comings, the 10 or so herons, tiny gray stick-figures about 100 yards out on the mudflat to the left, another ten or so on what remains of the derelict railroad trestle that used to be the last stop harvested trees made on the land-side before they got dumped into the bay for the long haul up to Everett, to be turned into boards for houses like mine, becoming in effect their own tombstones.

This time of year, the herons sit stock still, so nearly the shade of mud and weathered wood you have to train your eyes to see them, almost know beforehand they might be there and look hard. One year, I happened to be here on the day they all, all of a sudden, dozens of them, rose up at once and headed into the woods on the other side of Henderson Inlet where they nest every year, along a narrow path that will be closed off any day now so people like me won't disturb them. One second they were silent, invisible. Then the sky was wild with wings. My two favorite speeds.

Off to the right on a small floating "dock," another remnant of the old timber-industry infrastructure, maybe 40 cormorants crowded together, similarly silent and still. One of these days I'll see them on the other side of Henderson Inlet, where they, too, nest. Many hundreds of them. There are about twenty tall firs waterside that they use as launching and landing pads for their

trips back and forth to the bay to feed. Those trees are so drenched with their guano they have lost most of their leaves, look like white ghosts haunting the shoreline. If you walk down that back path during the offseason when it's open, the sulphureous smell is overwhelming. All summer long, all day long, dozens of them keep coming and going, landing and leaping off, so raucous you can hardly hear yourself think.

Today there were some seals on that same dock, the first I've seen this year, great gray lumps lounging. Maybe half-a-dozen? They kind of meld into one another cheek to jowl, hard to count at that distance. I knew they were there from all the guttural grunting. The female seals come here in the spring to pup, especially in Chapman Cove off to the left, almost inaccessible from shore, more private, safer. They spend summer in these waters. Every now and then over the next few months I'll see a mother swimming around with her pup, teaching her how to hunt. Or have fun, which seals seem good at. In the fall, during the salmon run, they will head into town with the others, following the thousands of salmon that circle for days under the Fifth Avenue Bridge, slowly acclimating themselves to the fresh water that pours down from Capital Lake, the portal for their journey up the Deschutes River to spawn. Seals array themselves in a semicircle about a hundred feet out, heads poking up, stock still, studying the scene. Then one will sink under. About ten seconds later the water below the bridge boils, dozens of salmon, three-foot slabs of muscle swirling away or leaping up. They are very elusive prey. Seals have to work hard to turn them into seal.

A century ago this whole area would have been almost intolerably cacophonous, the din of diesel engines, the mechanical clanking of metal wheels, loads of lumber crashing into water one after another, men in caulk boots bellowing, thunderous tugboat foghorns, more like a Heavy Metal concert than a nature reserve. Now, this is the quietest place I walk. So quiet that hundreds of rare bats roost invisibly under that

dilapidated trestle, its link to land long since dismantled, leaving it marooned 20-50 feet offshore, depending on the tide. On a day like today, though, an extreme ebb tide, a little ridge of bay-bottom-mud emerges and you can walk right out there, clamber between the cross beams, see the bats hanging from the “ceiling.” I did that once a few years ago. Now a sign on shore says not to disturb them; so I don’t. If you think about that “then” and this “now” for a while, you’ll learn everything there is to know about the relationship between luck and time.

When I go dark like this, I also go silent, empty of words. I feel like I am both nowhere and everywhere, nothing and everything, not-me and just-me, all at the same time. I like it. Words serve a purpose, both socially and creatively. But they are also an affliction, at least to me. Like right now: My fingers entice them to flicker up here involuntarily, futilely, as if they might change things. They don’t. As W.H. Auden says about poems: They “make nothing happen.” Such a curious phrase, the “making” of “nothing,” seemingly self-contradictory. Wallace Stevens, his contemporary, similarly celebrates “[n]othing that is not there and the nothing that is.” Same thing: How could nothing both be and not be? As Hamlet says: “That is the question.” Except he says “or” instead of “and,” a dilemma turning into a conundrum. Today I think I see what those poets are trying to get at, how “nothing” can and does “happen;” really “is” even when it’s “not.”

Physicists have been arguing for a century about the “zero-point energy” in deep space and inside atoms. Classical physicists call those places vacuums, voids, absolutely empty. Quantum physicists say otherwise. All of spacetime, every little bit of it, boils up constantly, they say, with gazillions of particles of matter and antimatter coming into being and instantly self-annihilating, seething like the water below the Fifth Avenue bridge when a seal swoops in for a meal. That’s what the inside of my head feels like on days like today: empty space seething,

an “un-” looking forlornly forward for something to come along and complete it. I get tired of being me. So going absent like this is such a relief. Nothing that is not there, the nothing that is.

I saw some surprising things on my way back to the parking lot today. I couldn’t tell whether the universe was making them up for me or I was making them up for it. Physicists argue about that, too, whether reality is always “out there,” oblivious to us, or our “observation” actually *creates* it. Whether the universe is what it is whether we notice it or not, or evolves beings like us, or frogs, or anything conscious, maybe even rocks, just so it can see itself coming into being. Whether consciousness comes last, that “general intelligence” locked inside my skull; or first, everywhere at once, observer and observed always pairing off in some unfathomable cosmic dance that “make[s] nothing happen” so spectacularly.

What I make of all the things I found on my path today depends on which side I decide to favor, which depends on the way I choose to imagine what time is, whether and how it moves, and in what direction. Classical physicists say that all those things I saw were there before I saw them, in an arrangement deterministically inevitable from the moment the “Big Bang” first binged, its clock ticking thereafter at the same rate everywhere in the universe. I simply encountered them and performed some alchemical mental tricks to turn them into my preferred delusions, using the creative “ghost” in my machine, the one that echoes the big one outside it: God and me, the two great Western “I-ams.”

The deterministic model preferred by quantum physicists is the “block universe,” which assumes that the whole of the universe we inhabit, both spatially and temporally is and always has been extant and complete, beginning to end, if either of those extremes even exists, a sort of “frozen river,” tiny slices of which we move through creating the illusion of temporal

sequence, pretending we have some agency in our affairs. A more complex variation of this model is called Many Worlds, which stipulates that at every “observational” juncture on my path, all of the universes built into the superpositional wave-state of reality at that moment come into being at once. I am only capable of proceeding in one of those, so that’s the world I come to believe in.

My own personal theory of time as a “froth of bubbles” (see my August 8, 2025 post for the details) has elements of that futural proliferation, but it assumes *not* that those worlds come into being out of nothing at each observational moment to fill up a vacuous future with countless universes including the one where I continue to exist without any way to connect with my many other selves; but that they all *already exist* in a suspended state of potential animation, like the base-level energy field that vibrates wildly and creatively throughout spacetime. Whether we intentionally invite or incidentally activate one of those bubbles is a serendipitous interaction between individual consciousness and universal consciousness. What Taoists call *wu-wei* is one way to name that state of presence, which acts spontaneously, instinctively self-trusting, a kind of effortless “nothing-doing” (one translation of the Chinese characters at the root of that concept), or maybe “nothing-happening.” Which is to say that my path today emerged from the infinite number of others that might have arisen if my consciousness interacted creatively with the universal consciousness in a different way, un-heartbroken, say. Anil Seth, a British neuroscientist, says that we “hallucinate” reality via a complex recursive process of observation, cognition and feedback, that we download reality, not upload it. I don’t think he goes far enough. His version of the uploading mechanism is entirely inside my head, making a dream that is not entirely involuntary. I think it’s actually out there in that liminal space between the nothing that was not there before I got here and the nothing that happens right here, right now. Not download, create.

For example, today I saw a smattering of yellow tulip petals, a dozen or so, on the ground right at the portal to the forest trail, so I went that way instead of up the main path. Then, every hundred feet or so for the next half mile there was another burst of yellow petals on the ground, as if someone were plucking one full bloom at a time from a huge bouquet. Once I noticed those petals, all the other future bubbles burst, many worlds collapsing into mine, not yours, or out there, just mine, time flowing back my way, future to past, instead of probing forward.

Further up the path I saw a father hand in hand with his son, who was maybe four, helping him to balance-walk on a fallen alder log. Every time the boy came to an upward-protruding broken branch, his dad would said, “Be careful now, go around it.” Good advice in a world full of upward-protruding broken branches. About 10 minutes later, it was a mother with a daughter about eight holding a “wreath” made of twisted vines, running ahead, saying “I need to find a good place to hang this.” So sweet. All of that reminded me of my family—mom and dad, son and daughter—30-some years ago. The only way I know for sure I wasn’t them doing all that is they responded to me, as if I was there, when I greeted them

After I passed the third or fourth of those splashes of petals, I remembered that yellow tulips were my wife Carol’s favorite flowers. She is on my mind this week for a reason, a part of that heartbreak I mentioned. She passed “suddenly and unexpectedly” about eleven years ago. She was alive when I left for work in the morning, dead when I came home that evening. “Sudden and unexpected” is the conventional way we describe a passing of that sort, so that’s the one I used with my friends and colleagues.

But it’s a lie. Death is never sudden: It stands right by your side the day you’re born and stays with you every day thereafter. And it’s never “unexpected.” Death always wins, the only entirely

“expected” thing that ever happens to us. I recall spending a night in a hospital room with Carol about 30 years ago, her face full of tubes, not sure she’d make it to morning. Death was in that room with us the whole time, a palpable presence. I came to know it very well. It is dignified and infinitely patient. If Carol had passed, death was there to receive her. And I would have had to figure out what to do 20 years sooner than I did. To fear it is foolish. Our whole society tells us to fear it. Or anyone, like me, say, still held in its spell. Denial, avoidance, erasure, anything to keep from noticing it too closely. Just get’m in the ground and get on with things. And if you’re the one who had to decide how to do all of that, and you change because of it, or even have difficulties, keep it to yourself. We liked you the way you were. Quiet and helpful. Calm water. So show up that way whether it’s “you” or not. None of this rogue wave shit. I’ve spent 11 years living under that brutal regime. This week I said, “I gotta stop; I have work to do; if you can’t be with me for it, then you’ll have to wait until or if I get back.” Which is why I’m here, at Woodard Bay, on Good Friday, heading down into the dark for a while, to see what me I might come back as.

And it’s why Carol is here at Woodard Bay with me now—I mean literally. She had little regard, a contempt, really, for embodiment, her own I mean. I used to think it was an acquired dysmorphia, founded on trauma or abuse. She was so beautiful. And so broken. Now I think it was wisdom. One practical effect of that is she had no interest whatsoever in where her body ended up after she died. She made that clear to me repeatedly. Her preferred trope was “donate it to science,” which, when push came “suddenly and unexpectedly” to shove, I just couldn’t bear to do. I chose cremation. The only problem with that is you still have that box of ashes, and you have to decide what to do with them. I had no idea where she might prefer to be “interred.”

My first thought was to take her to New Hampshire, where she spent a couple of years in the early 70s at Franconia College, one

of those astonishing experimental colleges that blossomed for a minute (I mean literally, like exotic blooms) in the early 70s and then were plowed under when Reagan demoed that “wing” of the world and drafted the blueprint for the garish “ballroom” we’re waiting for now. She was so smart, but stubborn and uncompromising. So she “failed” at “school” repeatedly, the way many smart people do. At Franconia she was free to invent her own curriculum, learn what she wanted to learn, not what she was told to learn. She loved it, was truly happy there, probably for the last time in her life.

She told amazing stories about that place, like when the school opened, the president, who was in his 20s, walked into his new office on day one, picked up the IBM Selectric (the “word processor” of the day) and threw it not out but right through his second story window. She met her first husband early on in the cafeteria there. Jim was an aspiring poet, who by some amazing kismet had been a friend of mine at the University of Scranton, the curricular antithesis of Franconia, which is why he went there to finish his degree. At Scranton, he was in his Berryman phase, poems a matter of life and death, dark and scary, maybe why I’ve been tapping into my aquifer of Berryman quotes here. In that respect, and in many others, he was a lot like Carol, though the deaths that finally haunted her to death were real, including his.

They hooked up almost immediately. Then Jim hooked up with Robert Grenier (closely enough to always call him Bob) who had been at Harvard but was by then (I’m pretty sure) on the West Coast, co-founding (with Barrett Watson) what came to be called the Language Poetry movement; and he started writing lovely little poems in that style, his more on the soft side, like Larry Eigner’s, which he would read to me over the phone from time to time, blind drunk, in the middle of the night. I was in grad school then. When the phone rang at 3 AM I knew I was in for a roller coaster ride of poems and “I love you, man.” Robert

Creeley, who was just making a name for himself at SUNY Buffalo, was also a favorite of his, always “Bob,” same as Grenier. He knew him personally, I know, because among his “papers,” which Carol kept, was an interview with Creeley, neatly typed, never published. As is the case with all poets, probably everyone who becomes famous, “Bob” was way more interesting talking with “Jim” than he was when he became “Creeley.” I saw him read in the 70s, fantastic, best reading I ever witnessed. Then again about 30 years later, him iconic, still pretty good. But not, too. Not “himself” anymore, “Bob;” now “ours,” “Creeley.” Fame does that. Did that to everyone I knew who became famous, turned them into their last name. I never became famous enough to be “Kameen,” which, I want to believe, makes my “Paul” still at least potentially interesting.

Carol and Jim lived in a rustic cabin up the mountain, out of town, the kind where the bathroom is sort of “in” the kitchen, much like the proverbial “one-room-five-floor-walkup” I was living in then in Albany. My building did have an elevator, but it never worked. Thus the walk-upping. Anyway, Carol said that quite often a few of these experimental poets would come out to their cabin to drink, talk and write. In that order. She said she found most of them boring, pretentious. So, at some point in the evening, getting ready for bed, she’d just take off her clothes and run a bath right in front of them, a gesture that was both dismissive and transgressive. She was stunningly beautiful. The men there would ogle her like the biblical Susanna Leonard Cohen sings about. Then she’d go to bed. Many hours later, after everyone left, Jim would call me.

The only poet who really impressed her was Louis Zukofsky. He came to Franconia to give a reading. He would have been about 70 then, as amazing and unique a poet as I’ve ever read, way too original and strange to become his last name. He stayed with them because he couldn’t afford a hotel. The reading paid him a relative pittance. He said he didn’t like to travel or do readings.

But he needed the money to fix a broken tooth, which hurt. She admired that: No fluff, no fanfare, no flights of fame-fancy. Just an old guy with a genius our culture deems worthless selling his voice to get rid of a toothache.

Carol was a born recluse, loved the woods, just wanted to live her life quietly, invisibly, and have children. So her time there was idyllic. All of it came to a “sudden and unexpected” stop when her first pregnancy ended in stillbirth. She never got over it. A year later, she and Jim moved to State College and a year after that he died “suddenly and unexpectedly.” She had to make the same decisions about what to do with him as I did with her. Except she was 28. I’ll skip all the details about how she handled it. It was heartbreaking for me to hear about then and is heartbreaking for me to think about now. That was the other potential resting place I considered for her remains, but I hate Penn State and they had hard lives there. So that was out.

Another candidate was the Jersey shore. As a kid, teenager, she spent her summer weekends in Point Pleasant. She loved it there. She had a Mediterranean complexion, so would go milk-chocolate brown in the summer sun, all of it framed by her raven-black, waist-length hair. I’ve seen pictures. Stunning. She spent her days barefoot on the beach and boardwalk, the soles of her feet as tough as those Kenyan marathoners. Even in Pittsburgh, she went barefoot whenever possible. While the kids were young we went to the Delaware beaches for vacation. After they left for college, Carol and I would drive to Point Pleasant from time to time, eat at her favorite restaurant, walk the boardwalk. It was magical. Seemed like an ideal place for her to spend eternity. What I couldn’t figure out was where to drop her ashes and how. In every scenario I imagined, people would be walking on her, which happened way too often while she was alive. I couldn’t bear that.

Then I thought maybe Boyce Park, the scene of our many morning walks in Pittsburgh. I decided against that because I was absolutely sure I was not going to stay there after I retired. She couldn't stand Pittsburgh while she was alive, and I couldn't stand it after she died. So I brought her ashes with me to Olympia. For years they were in an antique box on the mantle. I kept mulling what I should do. Finally, I decided to think about it differently: Where did I want my ashes to end up? I'd put hers there because I wanted to be with her. I finally picked Woodard Bay. To memorialize her, I arranged a group of grapefruit-to-cantaloupe-sized cobbles to look like an angel.

Today, I sat not far from that angel. When I got up to leave I saw a thumbnail sized pink rock at my feet, so unlike all the gray gravel around it. It was shaped like a heart. Not a Valentine's Day heart, perfect, but a real heart, misshapen, a little lumpy. A heart that has lived. I rarely take anything out of the woods. I just think things are where they are for a reason. But I picked this one up, almost put it in my pocket. Maybe to repair mine. But I knew where it belonged: among those cobbles in the place a heart should be. I'll be there soon enough to share it.

Right before I saw those tulip petals, I noticed one deer track in the mud, just one, that distinctive cloven print. A family of black-tail deer live in that neck of the woods. I've seen one or more of them many times, always within a few hundred yards of that spot. Except for the time I saw the doe with her two fawns swimming across Henderson Inlet, right where the old railroad bed used to be, about a quarter mile from here. On their way back home I suppose from whatever they went to the other side for. I waited with bated breath until I saw them all come ashore, which took a while, especially for the little ones. Today, in my mind's eye, they are with me, a family, like what's left of mine, the three of us, just trying to make it across all this water.

Okay, now that I got all of that out of my system, I can tell you, for sure, that my heart is not broken for good. I'm back. Not where I belong. "Belong" has about as much meaning to me as "un-." I'm not sure I ever belonged anywhere in this world. And I surely could care less about that now. Except maybe, from time to time, on the most perfect days, at Woodard Bay, sitting at the point, crying so quietly no one would ever notice, knowing in my heart that I'll be there soon enough, for good.

...

About 5 or 6 years ago I wrote a song called "I Met Her in New Orleans," about a guy who goes to Mardi Gras to have a good time and meets the love of his life. The pertinent lines are: "I came here looking for everything but a wife. Now I'm gonna love her for the rest of my life." There is not one "fact" in that song that is autobiographically accurate. But it's one of the "truest" songs in my catalog, more parable than story.

My songs are, to me, like my poems: They come to me as gifts from out there, not in here. They tell me who *they* want to be, what *they* have to say, how *they'd* like to sound. My job is to listen to them and lend them my "voice." Basically to love them unconditionally. And like every experience of unconditional love, it is redemptive, a way for me to become not-me on behalf of something or someone way more beautiful. If that makes no sense to you as a creative ethic, stop reading right now. The rest of this will sound inane. Or insane.

My musical skills—vocal and instrumental—are pretty meager, and even that's being generous. I didn't start singing and playing guitar until I was well into my 60s, way too late to get "good." I always have an idealized vision in my head of what a song would sound like if I had "talent." Or had had enough time to get good. My brother Joe somehow had ears to hear them that way, the way they would sound in heaven, where he surely is now, if

there is one, such a loving gift to me. I keep trying to get them closer to that, until I know I've done my very best, even if it's not good enough, which is what unconditional love is most often.

I never liked how the recording of that song sounded, so I kind of buried it on my Bandcamp page. Last week I wanted to do better for it, what it deserved. I sang take after take after take, moving the capo up and down the fretboard, changing the timbre of my voice. Fourteen in all, ranging from pretty bad to almost okay, at least in my mind's ear. So I waited a few days, then listened to them all over and over. When I have to make a choice about which "take" of a song I want to "publish" (two words that are a considerable stretch in my musical "career," another word stretched way past its definitional meaning), I pick the one that brings a tear to my eye. That tear has nothing to do with sadness, it has to do with authenticity, feelings that feel true to the song, not to me. I finally picked take #6, voice a little gravelly, guitar spare, pitched a bit on the high side. Not good enough, but the best I could do.

I've been deemed "best" at any number of things in my life. I have the parchment and hardware to prove it. Somewhere. My overall conclusion based on all that? "Best" is, at best, a vacuous cultural trope, at worst, a dangerous delusion that can tempt you toward your last name. It will never make you happy. Believe me, I know. Good is what matters. Philosophers and sages have been saying that from time immemorial, trying to lay out the path to take toward it. I've read a lot of what they say, over and over, with the care they warrant. They all say basically the same thing: Good is not a destination, a place you get to and stay; it's always just up ahead, a shining. The way there is not to "be best," it's to get better. Tears are part of the cost you pay for that. For yourself, sure, your own suffering, your own grief, which are inevitable in this world, but more so for the suffering and grief of others, which you alleviate every time you do something good

for them, even if it's just not being afraid to be with them in their dark hours, sharing a tear, a laugh, a stray word. Or to speak up for them when they can't. None of that costs anything. All of it will help them get better. And it will help you get better. Which is what I want to do now. Just get better, heal. To make sure, for the umpteenth time, that my heart will never be broken for good, and to stand when I can with anyone else who thinks theirs is. Until it's not. That *is* "the kingdom come," right here, right now. That's what they all say.

As for that hapless guy in my song? His wisdom is also simple: "Sometimes you gotta stop lookin' to find what you're not lookin' for. And sometimes you gotta get happy with less to learn how to be happy with more." Carol, our children, that was my more. No, not was, is. What's good is always still there even when it's not. And no matter how much "more" you have of what's "good," there is always more and more of it, that shining, right up the path a ways, if you open your eyes, your ears, your heart. More and more. Comings and goings. That's what they all say.

As Stephen Foster says in his hauntingly beautiful "Why, No one To Love?":

*Many a fair one that dwells on the earth
Who would greet you with kind words of cheer
Many who gladly would join in your pleasures
Or share in your grief with a tear.*

*No one to love, no one to love!
Why, no one to love?
Where have you roamed in this beautiful world
That you're sighing of no one to love?*

Wherever you roam in this beautiful world, you can be one of the "many" Stephen Foster describes in that first stanza above.

And when you are, both you and whomever you're with will stop "sighing of no one to love" and "learn how to be happy with more."

. . .

I just reread Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself," a more worthy "sermon" than any I've sat through in church, a very long "passion" that never ceases to amaze me. "Good" has nothing whatsoever to do with what you sit through on Sundays. It's what you *do* on Mondays. And every other day of the week, like today, say, Friday, Good Friday, as dark day as there is on the Christian calendar, the one you have to go through, just like I do, like it or not, to get to all that shining, right up the path a ways.

These are the final lines of Whitman's ecstatic, overwhelming vision:

Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged.

Missing me one place search another.

I stop somewhere waiting for you.

As I said, I stopped somewhere, too, a few days ago. New Orleans maybe. Not that one. The one where a guy sitting alone at a bar meets the love of his life and decides to spend the rest of it trying to get better at being good. As I said, I have work to do, the kind most people don't like being around while it's ongoing. And, at my age, the time I have left may be less than the time it takes to finish it up. No worries. I'm not in any hurry. And I know how to wait.

Call Me Ishmael

Easter Sunday today. I'm back at Woodard Bay. Beautiful day. I'm heading into all that shining I was pretty sure last Friday, based on prior experience, was right up the path a ways.

One of the first things I learned in my first college English class was the "7 conventions of the epic." As a literary genre I mean, not my life. I can't remember most of them, but one was "a descent into the underworld that lasts 3 days." So Jesus didn't make that one up. It was already a rule. It was probably already a rule when Homer came along. Three days, do your time and get on with it.

Down there, it's not just dark, it's pretty cramped. After a while you think "I need to get some air, crack a window maybe," and when you do the whole thing falls apart around you and you pop out. And I swear to God (because you can on Easter) this is the first time I understood why eggs became an Easter mainstay: Tomb=shell, get it? That's what actually happened a couple of millennia ago. Jesus popped out into the light just like that, scared the crap out of everyone, who all go running. Except Mary. She was so cool, knew him inside-out, was there for that really bad day he had on Friday, all of it, hard on her, too; now so happy to see him again in such good spirits. The main thing, though, the absolute most important thing, was she *recognized* him. The rest of his posse is like "Wha', who are you?" Not Mary, she *recognized* him instantly, which is why he tells her his secrets. He says that expressly in her gospel when Peter gets miffed that he's not in on them first, or at all: "Because she *recognized* me for godssake!" He doesn't say "and you didn't," but that kind of goes without saying. And you know from the rest of her story that he *recognized* her, too, so knew her secrets. Paul says love is patient and kind and a million other

things. Sure, okay. But the main thing, the absolute most important thing, the one thing those million others depend on, is they *recognized* each other.

But I digress, my Achilles heel (not that epic guy's heel, mine). I got digressions out the wazoo! Lao Tzu says: He who knows doesn't say very much. He who doesn't know talks your ass off. Or something like that. When you're one "who doesn't," like me, the most important thing to remember is "don't say very much." This essay started off a week ago, boldly, where no man has gone before. It ballooned up with so much hot air, if I let go of the rope it would have gone to the moon with Artemis. So today I opened the blowhole. Whoosh! Now it's back down here on the ground with me.

Speaking of blowholes: About a quarter mile up the woods-path out of the parking lot on Easter, where this essay started, a young couple are running towards me. I step aside, greeting them as they pass. The young woman stops, says, excitedly, "We just saw a humpback down at the end, about 15 minutes ago, off to the left!" Then they run on. I get quite excited. It's possible she saw a humpback, not likely down here at the very bottom of the Sound, but possible. Maybe she meant an orca, though there's usually more than one of those. Either way, I'm quite excited. Seeing any whale—I mean just by accident while I'm out walking, not on some cruise—is so on my bucket list. I've missed seeing them at least twice before by less than half an hour. Seems like someone is always there to tell you excitedly what they just saw and you just missed. That's where "Ishmael" comes into this. He saw a whale, too, and is excited to tell you everything you missed.

Soon as I hear this (speaking of "where no man has gone before") I reach into my pocket for my communicator so I can tell Scotty to beam me down there pronto. Oh, wait, that's my cell phone. And there's no Scotty at the other end. I've heard

they can teleport a few atoms a few feet. And maybe a FEMA official to a Waffle House, at least that's what he said. But not me to "the end" today. Which means I'm stuck here more than a mile from where that whale was when they saw it 15 minutes ago. I calculate quickly: With their "15 minutes ago" and the 20 minutes it will take me, at my age, to get there, that whale, whatever kind it is, will be long gone.

So I had to make a decision: Should I speed up my walk and miss it by 25 minutes or take my time and miss it by 30? Wanting to be where you're not is a hard force to tamp down. But right then I was coming into that section of the woods where I know a lot of the trees really well, at least 20, personally I mean. I recognize them. And they recognize me. So I like to take a little time with each of them, say "hi" at least. They're who I come here to see. And they go out of their way to be here when I walk by. Should I skip all that just so I could miss seeing a whale by 5 fewer minutes? That's rude. They're my friends. That whale? She's gone by now. Won't be coming back any time soon. If ever. And even if Scotty had been there to beam me down in time, we'd have a minute, maybe two, a hundred yards apart, me obsessed with her, she not even noticing I'm there. I know something about that, too.

So I took my normal walk, all of it, my normal pace. Missed the whale, okay, but, hey, I knew I missed it the second that runner told me it was there. I walk here and all kinds of other beautiful places every day, water, water everywhere. One of these days I'll get there a half-hour earlier, see that whale, tell someone on my way back what they just missed. In the meanwhile, the main thing I want to say: Take your time to *recognize* who's right in front of you, right now. On the actual path you're on, not the one Scotty is never around to beam you down to. Ishmael, Mary, Jesus? They'll all tell you the exact same thing. I may not know much, but at least I know that.

Turn, Turn, Turn . . .

*These woods are lovely, dark and deep,
But I have promise to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep.*

Robert Frost

Probably because I spend so much time there, I've been lost in the woods a few times in my life, the first and worst when I was 12. My cousin, a seasoned hunter, asked if I wanted to go archery hunting with him and a couple of his buddies. I said sure, why not. I was not a hunter, really, or very proficient with a bow. But, like I said, why not. That morning, my cousin and I went one way into the woods, his buddies another. I had no idea where I was, of course, so paid no attention to where we were going. About a mile in he "posted" me by a tree with a deer trail running by it. That was around 8 in the morning. He said he'd come back and pick me up mid-afternoon, and off he went. I had no idea how boring "hunting" could be. Hours of just standing there quiet, waiting. Mid-afternoon came and went and he hadn't returned. I started to get uneasy. Did I say I had no idea where I was? Around 4 or so I hear a lot of noise coming toward me through the dense layer of dry leaves on the ground, like someone kicking them up intentionally. I assumed it was him, so I hid behind the tree, thinking I'd jump out and surprise him. When the noise was right beside me, I jumped out, face to face, maybe six feet between us, with a deer. Tells you how deft a hunter I am. Anyway, we stared at each other for what seemed like an hour but was probably more like 20 seconds. I moved, the deer bolted, and I went back to the tree to wait, dark settling in.

Then it got pitch dark, like can't see your hand in front of your face dark. When you're lost like that there is no such thing as finding "the way," or "your way." You just want to find "a way"

that doesn't feel like "lost." I started wandering around, most likely cartoonishly in circles, looking for any clue that might lead me back to the dirt road where the car was parked, walking faster and faster, hoping, stupidly, the road would suddenly "rise up to meet me." The luck of the Irish? Well, not surprisingly, it didn't. Space and time have at least few rules they need to abide by. Then I heard a voice, two of them really, faintly, calling my name, his buddies, probably as panicked as I was, wondering what had happened to me. I started running toward them. Did I mention how dark it was? Well, running in the dark like that is not such a great idea. I kept running into trees, literally, head on, lost all my arrows bit by bit along the way. But their voices got louder, I got closer, and soon I came out on the road. What a relief. I figured that was the end of it. But my cousin wasn't there. As it turned out, he had gotten lost way worse than I had, almost drowned in a swamp. We didn't track him down, miles away, until about midnight. He has a story to tell, too. But it's his, not mine.

Not surprisingly, my first hunting trip was my last. You might think it was because of all that dark. Not so. It was because of that deer. I'd seen many hundreds of deer before. They were all over the place where I grew up. Drive a mile or two out of town in any direction at dawn or dusk and you'd see some on those strips of greenery between woods and road grazing. Part of the landscape. But this one, eye to eye with me, 6 feet away, this one was personal. She could have done me in more easily than I could her. But I saw in her exactly what I assume she saw in me: another being, so there, so vital, so frail yet so strong, a not-you as incomprehensibly alive as you are. Stunning enough to run away from, maybe. But not before you spent those 20 seconds getting to know one another. Personally. Well-enough that maybe you'd *recognize* one another if you ever crossed paths again. That deer has a story to tell, too, the day she met a kid by a tree in the middle of the woods. So out of place. So thrilling. So beautiful. But, again, it's hers not mine.

The reason I mention all of this is because I've been lost in some pretty dark "woods" inside my head a few times, too. One minute, you're just hanging around your "tree," everything hunky dory, then night clamps down way quicker and harder than you imagined possible. The first time was when I was about 30. One night I was sitting in the dark on the floor of the study of my apartment, listening to music, trying to see some way out of the situation that was confounding me. Suddenly, inside my head a waking dream started to play, vivid as real life. I was in the woods, lost, as per above, pitch dark, and I saw a bright light barreling in. It was a locomotive, clearly off the rails, racing toward me, out of control, careening every which way, running over trees, just totally amok. I thought, oh, that's me, off the rails, running amok.

When you're twelve, a boy, the trees win. When you're thirty, a train, they don't. So I tried to apply the brakes, hoping to slow down, do less damage. Took a while, but it worked. Again, I was not looking for "the way" or "my way," just "*a way.*" Not back, which I knew didn't exist anymore. Or forward, equally fathomless. Just somewhere I might get back on track again. Took a few years to get there, rails, it turned out, way better than the ones I rode in on, another story for another time.

The next big "dark" came "suddenly and unexpectedly," that day I came home from work and found my wife lifeless. That one was different from the others. As I said last time, quoting John Berryman:

*He did not know this one.
This one was a stranger, come to make amends
for all the imposters, and to make it stick.*

And there I was with that stranger, my head running amok through some deep, dark woods, this time without even a headlight. I knew instantly: I was not only off the rails; the rails I

had been on no longer even existed, torn up, ties and all. And there weren't going to be new ones waiting down the line for me, not at my age. Even the idea of rails no longer existed. Just that dark. Except this time, I knew I didn't have a few years to find a way. There was way too much at stake. This was not all about me, not this time. Not even close. I had to be there for my kids.

As Keats says about that old urn he's staring at, pertinent to "all ye know on earth:"

*Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought
As doth eternity: Cold Pastoral!
When old age shall this generation waste,
Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe
Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say'st,
"Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.*

Which gets me my theme today, not an urn, but the way things turn. The "turn" is a thing in most wisdom traditions, East and West, the whole idea of shifting your attention in a different direction. I mean, literally, turning. You were facing one way, you decide to face another. And everything changes. That's harder to do than most people think, so addicted are we to where we came from. But when it's dark and you have to find "a way" it's a pretty good strategy.

Jesus, for example, who is on my mind today for other reasons, uses that word, "turn," or its equivalents, a number of times in his parables. So that's where I'll "turn" now, starting with a very famous and enigmatic one about death, since that's what I've just been talking about. It shows up in both Luke's and Matthew's gospels, same way. Here's Luke's version:

As they were walking along the road, a man said to him, "I will follow you wherever you go."

Jesus replied, "Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head."

He said to another man, "Follow me."

But he replied, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father."

*Jesus said to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God." Luke 9:57-60
NIV*

And here's Matthew, same story:

When Jesus saw the crowd around him, he gave orders to cross to the other side of the lake. Then a teacher of the law came to him and said, "Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go."

Jesus replied, "Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head."

Another disciple said to him, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father."

But Jesus told him, "Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead." Matthew 8:18-22

The first time I heard this as kid I thought, wow, that's pretty harsh. Once you go through enough dark, though, it starts to make sense. Both of these chapters are saturated with matters of life and death. In Luke 9 Jesus calms the storm at sea that so terrifies his disciples in the boat with him, cures various deathly ailments, and drives demons into swine. In Matthew 8 he feeds the 5000, is transfigured on a mountaintop, and forecasts of his own death twice. So he's been very busy and seems stressed, more and more vexed with his disciples' inability to turn his

faith into theirs, feeling like he “has no place” to turn to “lay his head.”

How you read “the Son of Man” in that sentence has a bearing on how you take the rest of this conversation. Is he saying the Son of Man is him, divine, and the rest of those mortals there don’t have to worry about what he has to? That’s what I was always told. But now I don’t think so. The whole idea of the Son of Man got really twisted up in Christian catechesis: as if it’s always and only about Jesus and it’s the equivalent of Son of God. Jesus never says explicitly that he’s the Son of God, even when Thomas and Peter say he is. Mostly he says the equivalent of “Who do *you* say I am?” John does quote Jesus as saying “the Father and I are one.” But there is ample indirect evidence in the canonical gospels and even more evidence in the “lost gospels” to suggest that he thinks the Father and *you* are one, too. If you just wake up. The expression Son of Man in the Jewish tradition is complicated. In Daniel 7 it implies the Messiah. But it also could mean simply “human.” I think that’s how he means it here. Otherwise he would have said “you” (unlike him) instead of “foxes” and “birds.” As in: Animals are lucky, they do have places to lay their heads. We humans don’t.

In “Song of Myself” Walt Whitman envies the animal world in much the same way:

*I think I could turn and live with animals, they are so
placid and self-contain'd,
I stand and look at them long and long.*

*They do not sweat and whine about their condition,
They do not lie awake in the dark and weep for their sins,
They do not make me sick discussing their duty to God,
Not one is dissatisfied, not one is demented with the mania
of owning things,*

*Not one kneels to another, nor to his kind that lived
thousands of years ago,
Not one is respectable or unhappy over the whole earth.*

He, too, uses the word “turn” to shift his attention to what he longs for: to be “placid and self-contained,” a “thereness” we humans seem ineligible for. Robert Burns agrees, more comically, in his poem “To a Mouse.” Having upturned with his plough the mouse’s house—the place it laid its head—sending the mouse scampering off in a panic, he ends up wanting what the mouse has and he lacks:

*Still, thou art blest, compar’d wi’ me!
The present only toucheth thee:
But Och! I backward cast my e’e,
On prospects drear!
An’ forward tho’ I canna see,
I guess an’ fear!*

The affliction humans suffer is not necessarily being “touched” by time. Even the mouse has to endure that, including now having to build a new house. It’s being held hostage by those vast realms of time, “backward” and “forward,” that surround and then overwhelm “the present.” Every worthy sage I know of sooner or later says that human suffering can at least be alleviated, maybe even transcended, if you just get to “now,” and then “now,” and then “now,” a present always turning into another present, a flowing stillness. That’s Taoism’s Way, Buddhism’s Nirvana, and, in my opinion, Jesus’ Kingdom. Not up there, out there, or not yet. Right here, right now. And you don’t have to pray or meditate for years to get to it. You just have to turn.

So, in this passage, which is it going to be? Honor the Father (figuratively) or bury your father (literally)? Seems like a lot hanging on which way that “disciple” turns. Like I said, I used to

think that, but now I don't. Jesus is using "dead" in two quite different ways here, the first spiritual, the second material. I don't think he's saying don't bother burying your father. That was a pretty big deal in the Jewish culture, which I'm sure he understands. I think he's saying, don't bury yourself, too. Take me, for example, in that scene above, dark having set in. I have a choice to make. I mean right then. I can go down into the dark for a few years (and sure, I know I've done my share of that along the way, which is not only understandable, it's essential) or pull myself together before I call my kids. The mantra that came to me unbidden in that moment, the one that has been my guide, is: "I've had a life; they haven't." In other words, don't focus on the dead, both the version of me that passed away in that moment and on the one in front of me, already gone; focus on the lives that have to yet to be lived, including, over time, if possible, mine. Turn one way and you're "dead," not literally but for all practical purposes. The other way, you can still do some good. Not to honor the Father, to be one. Not to follow the Son of Man, to be human.

In other words, a "turn" of that sort is not some radical conversion, an "I was blind and now I see" sort of thing. It's just a choice made instinctively to face one way instead of another. Which gets me to the passage I had in mind when I started this piece, the one I was hoping to get to, and here it is, Matthew 18:3:

"Truly I tell you," he said, "unless you turn and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."

Jesus really likes children. He says so repeatedly in the canonical gospels and even more often in the "lost" gospels. Right before he says this, he calls a child up to show everyone there "the way." Some translations use "change" instead of turn. Turn is closer to the original meaning and much more accurate in

matters of this sort. Change implies either a kind of lightning bolt, a “conversion” from the outside in, or a lot of work over a long period of time, “change management.” If you’ve ever aspired toward or experienced either, you know what those options are and mean. One takes outside intervention, the other takes time. Turning is something you can do yourself, becoming both not-yourself and still-yourself instantly: You turn and there you are, “now,” not “then” or “when.” Who knows best how to do that? A child.

The early Jesus movement was called “the Way.” That’s what Paul said he was trying to stamp out before he went blind, the ultimate dark, the one that precipitated his “turn.” He loathed “the Way,” then he championed it. I personally believe Jesus uses this very term—as in “I am the way, the truth and the life”—the same way so many ancient sages did, not how it’s most commonly invoked for evangelistic purposes. The Greek word in that passage is “*hodos*,” which is founded on the image of a path or road. But it was more commonly used to name a set of values, a way of life. It is the root of our word method. Not itinerary, but prescription. Not a long road toward some futural out-there, but a shift in perspective that changes everything presently in-here. And by that means, you go directly to alive. Salvation, to the extent it’s available here, is right now or it’s not ever. Who knows that? Again, children, natively, instinctively. Gets knocked out of us pretty quickly. All you have to do to recover is turn. It’s got nothing to do with “innocence” or “naivete.” It’s a way of seeing, a vision that fills up the empty space in front of you with what you hope to create there. Without that vision, well, you’re stuck with somebody else’s instructions.

Wordsworth says “The child is father of the man.” I disagree: The child is mother of the human. When you look through those eyes, you already exude truth and life, which are the same thing. Or, as Keats prefers: “truth [and] beauty . . . all ye know on earth

and all ye need to know.” A couple of stanzas before the vase makes that final pronouncement, Keats says:

*Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard
Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on;
Not to the sensual ear, but, more endear'd,
Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone:
Fair youth, beneath the trees, thou canst not leave
Thy song, nor ever can those trees be bare;
Bold Lover, never, never canst thou kiss,
Though winning near the goal yet, do not grieve;
She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss,
For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair!*

Okay, not exactly what Jesus is trying to get at. But, to me at least, close enough. All those figures on the vase are locked in their moment. There are moments in all of our lives where we, too, can get locked in, static, “dead” in a way. Might be a nice moment, like that one, or a not-so-nice one. No matter. The record starts to skip and we barely notice. That’s when we need to be poets, like Keats, take the “turn,” come to life.

Jesus is not saying don’t bury the dead. He’s saying don’t also bury yourself. Staying alive over the long haul is no easy matter in this world. Unless you learn how to turn, like that child Jesus just called up to show you how, the one who knows the way, sees truth, lives life. None of which is up-there in the great beyond, an otherworldly “heaven,” or out-there, some “authority” forcing you toward it from a pulpit or soap box. It is in you, it *is* you, right here, right now. There, the kingdom has already come. All you have to do is turn. That way, you can fulfill at least a few of those promises you said you were going to keep. After which, you’ll have all the time in the world to sleep.

“And now for two things completely different”

Monty Python (sort of)

#1

Rated PG: This poem contains adult themes. Viewer discretion is advised.

Nothing In Between

So, I finally took my own advice and turned.
Slept right through the night.
First time in years.
Don't remember one dream.
What a relief.

A switch-locating light
behind my wrought iron headboard
casts a shadow on the ceiling.
Fell asleep lagging, legs in full stride.
Woke up winning, arms upthrust.
Same shapes.
Nothing in between.

Only thing I see from here
is first light outside my window.
Nothing moving, not even a twitch.
A streetlight on the left, a silken sky,
the dark tops of a few wispy trees just now leafing out.
The small ones in my yard appear to be
the same height as the tall ones down the street.
You have to know how space works to know they're not.

I think I know how space works.
It's time I don't get.
Fall asleep then.
Wake up now.
Nothing in between.

You can't see time.
Just hear it.
Noise and silence,
one then the other unendingly.
Nothing in between.

This morning, a few faint words echo far back in my head.
I turn my ear to hear them before they disappear.

Like these:

*There sat down, once, a thing on Henry's heart
só heavy, if he had a hundred years
& more, & weeping, sleepless, in all them time
Henry could not make good.
Starts again always in Henry's ears
the little cough somewhere, an odour, a chime.*

...

*But never did Henry, as he thought he did,
end anyone and hacks her body up
and hide the pieces, where they may be found.
He knows: he went over everyone, & nobody's missing.
Often he reckons, in the dawn, them up.
Nobody is ever missing.*

And these:

My mind's not right.

*A car radio bleats,
'Love, O careless Love . . . ' I hear
my ill-spirit sob in each blood cell,
as if my hand were at its throat . . .
I myself am hell;
nobody's here—*

*. . .
I stand on top
of our back steps and breathe the rich air—*

*. . .
a mother skunk with her column of kittens swills the
garbage pail.
She jabs her wedge-head in a cup
of sour cream, drops her ostrich tail,
and will not scare.*

And these:

*I have let things slip, a thirty-year-old cargo boat
stubbornly hanging on to my name and address.*

. . .

*I didn't want any flowers, I only wanted
To lie with my hands turned up and be utterly empty.
How free it is, you have no idea how free—
The peacefulness is so big it dazes you,
And it asks nothing, a name tag, a few trinkets.
It is what the dead close on, finally; I imagine them
Shutting their mouths on it, like a Communion tablet.*

*. . . the air was calm enough,
Coming and going, breath by breath, without any fuss.
Then the tulips filled it up like a loud noise.*

Words like that used to scare me.
Then they didn't.

A week ago I was “scared a only one thing, which is me.”
Now I’m not.

The next word I hear is “think.”
It blossoms into a poem,
the kind that most matters,
mine, I mean.
Had to read all those others, sure, millions of them, to get
here.
It was hard work.
But worth it.
Like life.

Yesterday “think” was fading fast, fallow, so forlorn.
Now it’s strutting in, strong, stunning.
Maybe that’s how time works.
”Think” is barely there.
Then it’s loud and clear.
Nothing in between.

I see the silken sky has turned robin’s egg blue, a few
wispy clouds.
It all happened while I wasn’t looking.
At anything but these words, I mean,
which “made nothing happen,” as usual.

I’ve heard about a place way up ahead
where just enough space opens
between noise and silence
for truth and beauty to meet.
Where “less is more.”
Which means “the nothing that is not there”
between noise and silence may be
“all we ever know on earth and all we need to know.”
I’m pretty sure Blake said that,
Or Wallace Stevens.

Or Keats.
Sort of.

Either way, “hey, it’s been real!
See you on the flip side.”
A poet I knew said that once,
back in the 70s,
right before he left for good.
Knew his wife, too.
Then she left for good.
Some silences seem to last forever.

Nothing in between.

#2

Rated G: This poem is suitable for all audiences.

think

*what it might mean
today
to say
out loud
I love you*

*if you are alone
walking in the woods
among winsome trees
their svelte delicate arms
outreaching
so openly*

*they will smile
understanding*

*never say
I love you
back
knowing
you will know
that everything they know
about love
is in words
that cannot be heard
except
we will be here
when you come back
tomorrow
lovingly
by yourself
with us
another ordinary day*

*you may say
I love you
all day long
to children
the glossy wings
of those words
gliding perfectly
through the crystalline air
a bright white wedge
dissecting the bluest of skies
swooping
to a soft
landing
in the greenest grass
that grows*

*in that wide field
at the top of the hill
where you always end
your imagined walks
with them
together*

*and you may
say them
smilingly
to any passerby
on the street
who will assume
a lunacy
of loneliness
the out-of-tuneness
of Jesus
sounding loose
even stupid
so barren there
in the open air
when they cast
eyes askance
and walk past
at an obtuse angle
as if they cannot hear
or nod smilingly
to say
silently
safely
thank you
even if I can't now
know for sure
or say
that I love you too*

*be wary though
with those
who barely
know you
out there
in the marketplace
of giving and taking
wanting and needing
where those three words
are a worrisome
currency*

*care there
is imperative
say I love you
even beneath your breath
and those who overhear
will tighten
recoil slightly
eyes dipping
tiny invisible fissures
gripping the corners
of their lips
tipping them
down*

*but always
and I mean always
in the lush hidden chambers
of your own heart
where you speak to yourself
ceaselessly
say I love you
over and over*

an endless loop

*as if those are
the only three words
you still remember
will ever need
to hear or*

think

Following Bunny Down the Rabbit Hole

A couple of nights ago I had a nightmare that was beyond horrifying, the kind where you're both in it, absolutely aghast, trying your best to handle the unimaginable, and watching it, mouth agape, gawking at it. So, I think I will remember every detail of it forever. And if I'm smart, or you're lucky, I'll keep it to myself forever, too. Last night I had the opposite dream, me and another guy in a college cafeteria smoking cigarettes, talking intensely about "the meaning of life." And we figured it out, honest-to-god, no question. At least I did, he seemed to lose interest in it about halfway through. Problem is I can't remember what it was. I knew it briefly in the dream, but when I went to write it down, I dropped my cigarette into the soda bottle I was drinking from, cream soda, really good cream soda, the kind I craved as a kid, and I got so disconsolate I forgot it. When I woke up, the shadow on my ceiling had shifted, probably because the headboard of my bed moved a little when I changed the sheets yesterday. Up there was a cross, a plain one, like the kind you see on church steeples. Big, flat, empty. They're supposed to make you remember that, hey, a few days ago, there was a dead body up there. Now it's just a couple of nice boards. And that something really big happened in between.

I'm only taking the time here to write all this nonsense so if you happen to know me you might think, hey, maybe he's okay now. If not, you might think, hey, maybe he's not yet. Not so fast. Like everybody else I wander around this world never really knowing which is which. Like that SAT question: *okay now: not yet* as ____ : *nuts*. : A: sane; B: cream soda; C: functional; D: the Buddha. Me and that guy in the cafeteria actually solved this one. I just can't remember the answer now. Fortunately, we were already in college so we won't need to take the SATs again. Maybe that's the meaning of life: no more SATs. Which is to say

I'm on a whole different path now, that rabbit hole I'm happily following Bunny down.

...

"Martinis and silk-sheathed knees in that bee-loud glade"

I ran across this unattributed snippet in a dazzling little book combining poetic snapshots with black and white etchings that a friend of mine is working on, a sort of Sisyphean odyssey of a feisty worker bee as she makes her solitary way across the inimical wasteland of contemporary urban-industrial America. The poems are quite dense, full of allusions, like the original *Wasteland*, T.S. Eliot's, I mean. So a big part of my readerly work was tracking down sources and contexts, trying to inflate the book's bubble of meaning more expansively to its proper proportions, to illuminate its details more fully and acutely. I had such a good time with that.

In the case of the above line, I immediately recognized the allusion to the "bee-loud glade" from Yeats' great poem "The Lake Isle of Innisfree," where he says he "will arise and go now . . . have some peace there." But Yeats was not one for "martinis and silk-sheathed knees," so I wondered who was. That's how I first met Bunny, via an endnote that says this line was written by someone named V.R. Lang, quoted from a book called *The Miraculous Season* (2024). So I Googled Lang. Turns out, she is the notorious "Bunny" Lang, incidentally famous in literary history as the "muse" of Frank O'Hara, of New York School of poetry fame, his book *Lunch Poems* (1964), from my point of view, the jewel of that movement. Once I knew her nickname was Bunny, I knew right where to look. In the midst of one of O'Hara's lunch-jaunts through Times Square, stopping "for a cheeseburger . . . and chocolate malted," documented in a poem called "A Step Away from Them," are these lines:

. . . *First*
Bunny died, then John Latouche,
Then Jackson Pollock.

Latouche was a prominent lyricist during Broadway's Golden age. He died of a heart attack at 41. Pollock was the famous expressionist painter. He died at 44 in a car crash, driving drunk. And Bunny is V.R. Lang, who died at 32 of Hodgkins disease. They all died within two weeks of one another in the summer of 1956, these mega-figures in O'Hara's life and art, none more so than Bunny, who earns the privilege of only-first-name status in this litany of luminaries. She and O'Hara had been constant interlocutors and companions starting in the late 40s at Harvard, then during the 50s, sharing poems and lunches and gossip and culture and phone calls and adventures in roughly equal proportions, she more his mentor and guiding light than he hers. The loss must have been staggering.

He mentions her in a number of other poems in his collected works, including the lovely, elegiac "A Letter to Bunny," which ends this way:

*When anyone reads this but you it begins
to be lost. My voice is sucked into a thousand
ears and I don't know whether I'm weakened.
Bunny, when I ran to you in the summer
night and upset us both it was mostly this,
though you thought I was going away. See?
I'm away now, but I'm here. And even if the
rose has been ruined for all of us by religion
we don't accept these blue flowers. The sun
and the rain glue things together that are not
at all similar, and we are not taken in
by the nearness, the losses, or the cold.
Be always my heroine and flower. Love, Frank.*

Last time, I quoted a section from one of Sylvia Plath's poems about some pretty scary tulips. "These blue flowers" are their antidote, as complex and delicate as the asphodels W.C. Williams uses, in a poem he published just a year before Bunny died, a much older man than these two, trying to come to terms with own failings. In the previous stanza "Frank" asks:

*... Is this how beauty accompanies
fear so it can escape us? Do you think these
flowers could be auctioned tintypes or souls
outside of hell? Is blue what they mean by
"shun posterity" and "the price of fame" and
"fear of death"? Have I learned it wrong?*

And when he says "Love" at the end of the poem, you believe him. The best kind of love. Which is what she had for and shared with him, both such lovely people. And really good poets, too. When those two—lovely and poet—come together, it is magical, miraculous, even. I must have learned somewhere along the way that Bunny hung around with O'Hara and wrote some poems of her own. And that's pretty much all I knew about her: a poetess known more for her muse-ness than her own music. Now I know better.

My Google search led me to an essay in *The New Yorker*, written by Anthony Lane in 2025, called "A Forgotten Queen Bee of Modern Poetry." If you read that essay you absolutely can't not want to read Bunny Lang's poems. Which is what I'm doing right now, that book whose title is simply descriptive: miraculous. I was looking right then for something I could use as a counterpoint in this new Substack series, which started with AI, drifted through an Easter Week dirge, and badly needed something more human to leaven it. Why not spend some time with Bunny, is what I thought? So I ordered the book, waited and waited, then realized I had actually pre-ordered the American edition, which won't be out until summer. So I tracked down the

British edition, which I assume is the same and don't really care if it's not. I'm sure at least the poems are the same.

I was talking separately with my daughter and son today about how ludicrous the concept of "free will" is, something that got pretty well established early on in Christianity, mostly as a way to leverage control, via guilt over sin, in the Roman Church. It got honed to a razor edge during the Enlightenment, all that obsession with whether everything, universe, mind, spirit, was deterministically controlled from the outside in. Or not.

Twentieth century physicists continued the conversation, the "frozen river" and "block universe" nonsense that even Einstein couldn't resist. My main beef with that is the way the contrast is assembled: determinism vs. "free will." Give me a break. To presume that a thing like "will" in the conventional Western sense even exists, let alone that it's "free" in any meaningful way is comically inane. My own mind (can't speak for yours) feels barely a smidgeon more free than my digestive system. It operates essentially autonomically, ingests this and that, processes it, like an unending hallucination, some of which ends up here as, well, you know what.

My main work is to become barely conscious of what it's doing. Writing helps. So does talking, though most of my interlocutors, like that college guy up top, lose interest about halfway in. I could just as easily paint or garden. Pretty much anything I might create out-there would make my in-here more visible and, especially, more tolerable. If you have experienced trauma, and who hasn't in a culture like ours, which traffics in it as a primary currency, you know certain experiences re-erupt from time to time. And you have to deal with them. Not simply "again," as in a repeat, but progressively, toward some deeper resolution. My Bunny book hadn't arrived in time, so my mind found another rabbit hole to go down, the four previous posts here, on the darker side. It was both exciting and healing for me. Maybe less so for you. In any case, if you've been gritting your teeth before

you open these links, you won't have to any more. This one is way more fun. How could it not be? It's about a Bunny!

Bunny was born Violet Ranny Lang (a name destined for either notoriety or greatness, or, in her case, both) into a Boston Back Bay, "genteel but no longer rich" family, much like Robert Lowell's, though he had two pretty famous poets, James Russel and Amy, swimming in his gene pool. So he had a leg up on her in the poetry business. And, did I mention, he was a man? Which gave him two legs up on everything in the 50s. That era was a poetry desert. Lowell hadn't come apart at the seams yet, female poets were almost universally ignored as legitimate artists. Just a terrible time to come of age as a poet. Or as anyone. Take my word for it: I spent my first 10 years there. Bunny Lang seems to have been immune to all of that. Maybe because she had a temperament, a personality, an array of public personae, that ate "taste" and trauma for lunch. Like O'Hara, but more dynamic. I can see why he loved her. And then missed her so when she was gone.

Lunch Poems is a little book. It's sitting on my desk next to me right now, part of "The Pocket Poets Series." *The Miraculous Season* is not a "pocket" book, either in size or content. It is thick, 200+ pages, poems of all kinds all over the place. The editor describes one scene while she's preparing the manuscript where she has pages and pages scattered around her room, when a little bird flies in and lights on one of them. That is this book: pages and pages scattered around the room, a little bird flying in to light on each one of them one at a time. You can't make sense of them as a whole, a synthetic project. Such an idea is the invention of our publishing industry, especially with poetry. A way to traumatize the life out of a vision! Avoid that machine at all costs, if you can, another place I've been. Bunny did have a few of her poems published in high places, deservedly so. The first attempt to publish a "book" of them, posthumously, went about as well as you'd expect. Stupidly. It makes a good story

about poetry, women, and the 50s. This iteration finally gets it right. Sometimes you have to be dead for 70 years before the literary marketplace is ready to handle you with care. Ask Emily Dickinson.

Bunny hung out with a diverse cohort of up-and-coming everythings in the New York scene: O'Hara, of course, Gregory Corso, pre-Beat, pretty much any poet, artist, playwright (her primary vocation: writer, producer, actor, all of it) who started out at Harvard in the late 40s or aggregated later around her energy and enterprise. She mingled with Lowell and his more celebrated ilk, and even, occasionally, with luminaries like W.H. Auden and T.S. Eliot, whom she was audacious enough to invite to at least one of her parties. She seems to have been a straw that stirred the drink among them, often literally. Like Pound in that respect. She was brash, flashy, brilliant, "glamorous and aloof," the first impression she made on O'Hara, sensitive and sardonic in just the right combination. Not a "social butterfly." More like hoity-toity in all the best ways.

Anyway, I know a bit about the New York School of poets, taught their work, among others, about 25 years ago in a course called The Poetry of the 1960s. I read most of it for the first time back in the 1970s. John Asberry is the doyen of the movement, his surrealist poems seemingly inscribed on glass, glossy, flat, floaty. I saw him read once, sitting cross-legged in a chair while he was being introduced, the most striking visual aspect of which was his shoes, calf-leather brown, jutting forward intrusively, taking up all the visual space, like a real-life image of the abstract expressionism that the movement affiliated itself with (thus the reference to Pollock, above), the kind of shoes, back then, that only the wealthy, effete, or very fashionable could afford. I can still see them in my mind's eye. I disliked him instantly, so suave, so coy. And I disliked his poems for the same reason. I'm sure I didn't say that back in 1972 when I reviewed his *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* (a perfect metaphor for his

poems). Or maybe I did, cattily, backhandedly, can't remember. He was too big a deal simply to dismiss that way.

Then there was Kenneth Koch, whom I first encountered via his book *Wishes, Lies and Dreams: Teaching Children to Write Poetry* (1970), a luminous collection of poems written by school students, based on his 1968–1969 experience at P.S. 61 in New York, doing exactly what the book's title says. I was in college when I read it. I cut out one little poem and taped it to my wall. It stayed there for years, the cheap pulp-paper gradually browning with age. My recollection is it was written by a 4th grader, but I can't vouch for that. I'm pretty sure it had no name attached. I still remember it:

*As I be walking down the street
I see little flakes of snow
And when I look around
I cannot see the wind*

I'll take that over Ashberry any day. Then there was Barbara Guest and James Schuyler, both pretty cool, in a good way, Guest like stop-and-go traffic on Fifth Avenue, Schuyler like a subway ride whooshing along underneath the same street. I wrote a long poem a few years back after re-reading his book *The Morning of the Poem* (1980), a poem that starts off this way:

*... like me
in the head
except fed
by New York
bred with big deals
O'Hara scary funny
daring one day
after another
into the sentence
until it falls apart*

*not knowing where
Lana Turner is
to start asking
Ashberry cross-legged
on stage so-too-
smooth-alooof to move
shiny tan shoes
poking out all over
might as well be
magnolias
in the mirror
flashy flying
sky so high he can't
make words out of it
that make sense
Koch who "could teach
a golf ball how to
write pantoums"
whatever they are
all meeting somewhere
so swanky you almost
met Eliot there
striped bass
tranquilizers
days in bed
dead*

Early this week I got the book I ordered, started reading the poems last night, made it through about a third of it. What a blast. Like looking at the world, her world, our world, my world, any world, through a kaleidoscope pointed toward a blazing light. You keep twisting the barrel and shape after dazzling shape shape-shifts along, every new page a revelation. Bunny Lang, I now know, overflowed with energy, edge, a dashing and charming out-of-controlness, a generous heart, a vengeful wit, a

hurricane of heartbreak and hilarity, all marshalled by the stringencies of a poetic method that seems to me, so far, to be utterly “free” of “school-ness,” New York or otherwise. What a relief. Schools: the bane of the poetry world. If you weren’t in a “school” back then (and probably now, too) you might as well be on the Lake Isle of Innisfree, “alone in the bee-loud glade.”

Writing anything about a poet after you’ve read 60 pages of their work once is kind of stupid. But I can’t resist. In part because I have a very acute sense of mortality, the way tomorrow might well be, sometimes is, a day too late. If you read my last few posts you can probably guess why. So, the main thing I’ll do today is quote some passages, maybe make some comments, give you a “taste” of the emotional and sonic inventory of the poet Bunny Lang.

Here’s one, a whole poem, tiny as the ones I write now:

*Darling, they have discovered dynamite.
This is it.*

*Yesterday we slept without it.
Tonight we have to think about it.*

Yes, darling, you know exactly what dynamite is once you have to sleep without it! The longer poem that precedes it, also a dynamite poem, makes that abundantly clear.

Or this one, the first stanza of a poem called “The Pitch:”

*Spring you came marvelous with possibles
Marvels sparked everywhere burning from bracken
Lichen leapt crackling long grass.*

A little bit of Williams with a tinge of Cummings, a combination she works magic with repeatedly. The last stanza of the poem is the opposite end of that spectrum:

*But voiceless, weary, monolithic, walked around
an underground of seasons where light like pain
twitched where it touched us, and flaked down.*

From “sparked” to “flaked,” the gamut of seasonal light in nine three-line stanzas. This one sounds more like Auden, her spirit guide. Austere, sere.

Here’s another, from a poem called “Discredited Things”:

*Nobody believes in Fate anymore, nobody listens to the
Norns.
Nobody solicits garlic and white of egg, or fears effigies.
But things go on anyway, arranging everything that happens.*

The Norns are three powerful female deities in Norse mythology, adding an air of severity to the poem, whose epigraph is a cheeky quote from her “sister’s dentist”—“The tongue is a great magnifier, Mrs. DuBois,”—taking the edge off. Bunny is really good at that, honing the edge then taking it off. And she was pretty good at “arranging everything that happens.”

And here’s one that’s just observational, a little vignette you can only imagine at the eccentric urban edges of, say, Central Park:

*You kill me. Yes you do.
I know no one else who’d
Buy a sparrow (I
Didn’t even know they sold sparrows)
Just to feed it watermelon
And in public, too.*

*Every afternoon I think of you
Out there, flushed and fair
Scraping the exhausted rind with a spoon.
Every day! All winter.*

And here's one with the sort of tortured sound-jams Robert Lowell got famous for:

*The fuss tears the flesh, the terrible tears
of greeting and breaking are here. Pride strains
At the great howl, light streaks,
and birth cries out at the faces it makes.*

I'll end with this one, in the spirit of O'Hara, who loved her:

*White of eye, blond of bone,
the victim always hunts alone.*

*Yes, I wore this very dress
the night that Virgil died—
And you, as stricken as you were
Remember! I believe you are
What I've been looking for,
And will pretend you were
Not married, nor had a Russian analyst,
Did not eat soup at dinner or refuse
Alcohols, or chew coffee spoons,
Or belch. Such is my faith.*

Mine, too. I am so happy to have found this Bunny, exactly "[w]hat I've been looking for" this month. Rabbit holes have many exits. I'm starting to hope I'll come back out through one of the good ones, into a world that doesn't look anything like the one I can still see in my rear-view mirror, the one with that nightmare in it, say. I'm not sure what else of her I'll share this

way. Sometimes, with such precious people, you want to keep it all for yourself!

$$\hbar\psi=0$$

The best laid schemes o' Mice an' Men/ Gang aft agley

This “series” has, as Robert Burns would say, “gang aft agley.” It started out with mindless AI and has meandered in the meanwhile among a menagerie of mesmerizing mammals: whales, deer, herons, seals, and today a towering giraffe. Maybe when it’s all done I will see some pattern that makes sense, which is what I hope I’ll see in my similarly “aft agley” life once I’m outside it. But the series is not “done,” and neither am I. So I press on.

I had a hard time deciding how to title this piece. I considered Buddy Holly’s “True Love Ways,” such a sweet, soothing song celebrating the best kind of love. Or a line from a poem I wrote this morning for my Instagram that opens with the fragrance of this year’s extravagant lilacs in my dooryard, alights briefly on a couple of Walt Whitman’s most famous poems, and closes with an instant transition “from breath to death and back again.” I think you’ll see how each of these might apply along the way here.

I decided finally on the enigmatic equation above, the one Bryce Dewitt concocted back in 1967, which purports to be the wave equation for the whole of what we now call the multiverse. Dewitt called it “damnable” because it is the only fundamental equation in physics that contains no “t” for time, implying that at the grandest scale time simply doesn’t exist, so nothing ever changes. Parmenides suggested something similar 2500 years ago, saying that being is-always, non-being is not-ever, the same astonishingly peaceable and implausibly counterintuitive stillness. To imagine a realm where time itself finally times out, that is my kingdom come.

I wish I could write an essay as simple as Dewitt's equation. I can't. I will say this at the outset: I'm writing this one, solely and wholly, to serve as a stepping stone on my wayward way to "me." Which, I can hear you saying, makes it different from all the others exactly how? And it's pretty long, which is the space it said it wanted when it came up to me, so that's the space I gave it. Just sayin'.

I'm not at all sure what that "me" I just mentioned even means any longer, or if my wayward way is "back" or "forward," those slaves of time we measure a "life" by. From where I'm standing right now, they both look the same. I'd say its main theme is "healing" because that is the only word for what it's about that might make sense out-there. For me, it's closer to "looking," alertly, even lovingly I'm inclined to say, at a multi-hued flickering light I can barely see, using it to guide me through the dark. I know how silly all that sounds. Still, the only person who needs to understand this me and that light is me. And I'm hoping by the time this essay ends, I'll be closer to that than I have ever been.

...

Part 1:

"Rage and grief are savage companions, but despair is the final undoing."

Mia Farrow said that, pertinent to her heartrending witness to so many children's deaths by starvation and genocide during her multiple trips to Darfur and Chad early in this century. She also lost three of her own adopted children, which she called "unspeakable tragedies" in the face of dismissive public criticism. My own losses don't amount to a hill of beans by comparison to that. But I do know something about the ways in which rage and grief can become entangled when a loss is

traumatic enough. Like my wife Carol's death 11 years ago was for me. One term for that, I have since learned, is "complicated grief." My grief has certainly been complicated. It boomerangs back on me for no apparent reason when I am certain it has long been settled, looming over my days, leaning into my dreams. And, most disturbingly, it has upended my social universe over and over, including some relationships you might think would be immune from that. They are not. Nothing is.

By the time you get to my age, you are quite familiar with grave loss. I don't want to call any deaths "routine." They aren't. But, up until that big one, my own inner resources and the available conventions for grieving were more than adequate to promote full recovery: "acceptance," I mean real acceptance, the way Elizabeth Kübler-Ross describes it, the final stage of a healthy process, that "it's all okay now" moment. I always reached that stage quickly along a normal timeline, passing through "denial," "anger," and "bargaining" without a hitch, as if they were speedbumps, up and over, done. Then I didn't. Which means any number of things beyond "not being okay" with it. One of them is being still locked in the jaws of "stage two: anger."

Anger and rage are not, obviously, identical or interchangeable. The stereotypical distinction between the two in psychological terms is that anger is most often specific to the moment, a normal, healthy, instinctive reaction to external threat. Rage, they say, is more generalized, arises far in excess of the immediate provocation, and is deemed to be destructive both to the rager and the ragee. Having lived my life in a rage- and grief-repressive culture, as ours surely is, I think that is far too simplistic. Especially when the two are married, as Farrow's "savage companions" are, by your having witnessed something intolerable. They may be, in fact, the best defense against "the final undoing," "despair," a specter that haunts "complicated grief," always-imminent, if it is not properly understood and processed. I'm not going to argue that "acceptance" is

impossible for me, only that if it ever arrives, it will look nothing at all like what Kübler-Ross describes and, more importantly, what our death-averse culture demands as a criterion for “recovery.”

I’ve been thinking about anger/rage, my own, for an immediate personal reason these days. The details of that are not key here. I am, at the outset, much more interested in the trajectories of anger/rage that emerged for me in response to autobiographical and cultural forces I experienced throughout my life, beginning in its first decade, the 1950s, when repression was the order of the day on an industrial scale. Look at all those quasi-Freudian films, mostly about women, occasionally men, who are perceived, or treated, as asylum-level insane, until they have some sort of “breakthrough” experience and are re-assimilated into normalcy. That is a cultural index to what I’m talking about. Don’t wake up, come back.

My mother is, to me, a much more mundane example of all that. She came of age during the depression, worked consistently to help support herself and her original family. Same during WWII. Work to a large extent defined both her identity and her sense of value. Then, in the aftermath of WWII, with that whole army of other demobbed women, she got married, birthed four children in five years, and was essentially held hostage as a homemaker during what Robert Lowell calls “the tranquilized Fifties.” Except she never got the tranquilizers. During that time, as best I can recollect, she was chronically anxious and sometimes ragey. I don’t believe those traits were endemic to her character because once she was able to go back to work she was more settled. So there’s that.

One of my roles in the family, which emerged during that decade for reasons that elude me, was to keep the peace. You have to have a wide array of very sensitive antennae up at all times to do that, becoming something like what Carl Jung calls an “empath.”

I got pretty good at that, “reading the room,” that is. Sounds like a good thing. It’s not. For one thing, in a culture of scarcity you very quickly develop a sense *not* that your own needs don’t matter, but that *fulfilling* them will inevitably come at the expense of someone else’s, which seems selfish. And will likely disturb the peace. Again for reasons that elude me, I concluded very early on that I could cope with such “losses” more easily than others. So that’s what I did. Regulating my emotions, which is essential to such an enterprise, became a sort of intentional monastic practice. I happened to be good at it. So, again, that’s what I did.

One of our common cultural tropes about the dysfunction associated with male identity is that the repression of a normal range of human emotions, especially those associated with tears, leaves young men two primary options on their inner dynamometer: anger and fear, another pair of “savage companions,” creating bullies and victims, or, at the extreme, predators and prey. Makes sense. Those are pretty powerful, hard-wired states of mind, the ones most likely to survive an emotional extinction event. But in my opinion, based on having lived as a man for a lifetime and having known many others along the way, this is way, way too simplistic. Yes, I did learn how not to cry in front of others, probably before I learned how to walk (which is not to say that I never cried.) And I did learn how to mask other emotions that might be construed as “feminized” (which is not to say that I didn’t still feel them deeply.) Hiding them (I won’t call that repression because I was highly conscious of them, both their beauty and their impropriety) might actually have enhanced them in therapeutic ways that have served me well over the years. And while all that tended to channel my pent-up inner angst toward anger, my family culture made it abundantly clear that expressing anger was impermissible, at least for us children. Which left me between a rock and a hard place: Anger is the male-appropriate

emotion; don't express anger. Not much left on the table there, emotional-expression-wise, I mean.

I don't know whether it was a generational truism, or simply my personal temperamental response to local circumstances, but pretty much all the "rooms" I needed to "read" back then seemed to be founded on that same premise: Adults were permitted to express anger, even rage, without comeuppance. Children were not. This authoritarian template extended outward to teachers, for example, who were beyond questioning, and, like Yahweh, often raged randomly and abundantly. Keeping a calm, low profile in their classrooms made life considerably easier. So I did. Same for religious figures—priests and nuns, whom I encountered routinely as an altar boy and catechism student—similarly beyond reproach. Look like a saint and they'll leave you alone. The only way you can keep the peace, as a child, in the midst of such a regime, I concluded early on, is to keep your own anger from bubbling up counterproductively. I got pretty good at that, too. When I look at photos of myself as child, what I see is a blank, quizzical, quasi-angelic visage just waiting for it to be over. That may be what I actually looked like then, or just the emotional valence I add now based on my memories. Either way, it's what I see.

I do want to make clear that there were many oases in this desert of repression. I met a number of wonderfully humane teachers, priest and nuns along the way, great blessings. And there were adult relatives and family friends whom, in retrospect, I think of as saintly for their kindness, patience and good will. Which is to say I wouldn't consider myself to have been "abused" in any way as a child. I just understood, almost from the outset, that expressing anger was both pointless and risky. So I didn't. I can recall at some point, when I was maybe 12, just beginning to sip the jet fuel of adolescent hormones, becoming conscious of all the anger I had stored away, then blossoming into genuine rage. My head felt like the inside of a Tokamak fusion reactor. I

actually believed, I am not kidding, that if I pulled the plug on it, the explosion would destroy the whole universe! Every now and then thereafter I would “lose my temper,” always in private, the equivalent of “screaming into your pillow.” The two things I noticed after each of these events were, first of all, the universe was not only still there, it hardly even noticed; and, second of all, I felt considerably worse, suffering from what they call these days “emotional dis-regulation,” a queasiness that would last a while. In other words, what I hoped would be a relief was, in fact, a detriment.

So I came up with a different approach: When the pressure was building, I would plan when and how to release it. Which is to say the event itself was always, to some extent, pre-scripted and staged. Here’s one example of how that worked, from my professorial days. Teaching, for someone with a neuroatypical temperament like mine, was always a mode of performance. I built my pedagogical persona on an absolutely authentic and reliable foundation, same man, same mood, every day. Me as my best self. In *Quite Contrary* I name this essential trait of good teachers and leaders as “consistency.” Therefore, I never truly “lost my temper” with students. But every now and then, when I felt it would be purposeful, I’d stage it. And it worked. I was always surprised that this display was perceived more as riveting than comical. I guess that’s the value of having a deep reservoir to draw from: even fake looks real!

Aside from that, I prided myself on my ability to maintain my aplomb under almost any kind of pressure. I served in a number of administrative positions in my department that sometimes brought me into close contact with some pretty volatile people, people who had already lost their tempers and, from my point of view, seemed more intent on getting me to lose mine than resolving the problem at hand. So I wouldn’t—lose it, I mean—a stubbornness born, as I said, of pride, the “never let ’em see you sweat” approach.

That reliable if dysfunctional regulatory system went considerably “agley” after my wife Carol died. I was an altar boy growing up, served mass at many dozens of funerals, the grief extravagant. Stood by all those graves in my starched surplice while the coffins were lowered into the ground, families wailing in the background. My mother was Irish, so a visit to “the corpse house” of everyone she knew who passed, and in such a small town that was pretty much everyone, was less an obligation than a social opportunity. So I did some of that, too. Many relatives and friends and both my parents died. Carol had multiple miscarriages and very nearly died twice. How, I still wonder, could such a resilient veteran of so many deaths and burials be so undone by one?

Well, for one thing, Carol’s death was not only “sudden and unexpected,” it occurred “outside of medical supervision.” Turns out that’s a pretty big deal, if you happen to be first on the scene and are not careful. Lots of questions. Fair ones, yes, but scary ones. I understood what was at stake, so I remained almost preternaturally calm, answered all of them—EMS, cops, detectives, coroner—honestly, carefully, matter-of-factly, what I saw, what I did, etc. When they all left a few hours later, I called my kids, same thing. The next day it snowed like crazy, a foot or so, so I had to walk to the funeral home to make arrangements. The coroner’s inquest took about a month, stressful. Somewhere along that way “Paul,” the one I knew, the one everyone around me knew, fled across one of Pittsburgh’s bridges like that figure in Munch’s “The Scream” and never came back. One of the interesting things about a self-dissolution of this sort is that the public “mes” I had created along the way—teacher, dad, administrator, etc.—remained intact, roles I continued to perform seamlessly, authentically. It was the I-am who animated them that left. I describe what that felt like this way in *This Fall*:

Between February and November [the first nine months after Carol died] I resided in a strange nether world that

is neither of this world nor of the next, whatever that might be. As I explained to a friend at a restaurant a few weeks after Carol died, I felt as if I were watching myself, my old self, on TV, in a series populated by all the characters I knew, for whom the ongoing narrative went on, normally. But the real me was now outside the plane of that reality, simply a viewer. My character in the program, I could see, was not a very good actor, forgetting his lines, mucking up the story line. The writers would have to get him out of the script soon. The me watching, on the other hand, was on fire, full more of rage than of words, that feeble currency of human experience; but, like most of us when we watch TV, so captivated by those moving pixels, without an identity of his own. And the rest of the cast was, of course, as oblivious to him as characters on TV are of us, sitting in our living rooms watching them.

Okay, from this description you can see that “The Scream” thing above is an exaggeration, which if you know me, even if it’s only via this book, you know I am quite prone to. I’m looking now at all five versions of the scene Munch created, two in oils, two pastels, one lithograph. He made a career of it, which is great. Here’s how Munch described his inspiration for that image:

One evening I was walking along a path, the city was on one side and the fjord below. I felt tired and ill. I stopped and looked out over the fjord – the sun was setting, and the clouds turning blood red. I sensed a scream passing through nature; it seemed to me that I heard the scream. I painted this picture, painted the clouds as actual blood. The color shrieked. This became “The Scream.”

If back then, you saw me approaching on a bridge in Pittsburgh—and Pittsburgh has tons of them, full of people

crossing over all that “water, water everywhere” to get from here to there—you probably wouldn’t even have noticed me, none of that hands-to-the-cheeks business, mouth agape; just another guy, like the background “couple” Munch adds, in one version walking, in another leaning over to look at the water. Walking towards us from the other direction, you’d think, yep, all the same.

Here’s what I learned from my experience. All those people, the ones you’re passing every day on every bridge, always look the pretty much the same. Some may be “living the dream,” which is great, I hope so. But every now and then, could be one out of ten, could be one in a million, you will pass by someone who looks just like the others but is living “the scream.” You may, like Munch (so tired and ill that day, not to mention being Norwegian, maybe on his way home from one of those Nordic art films “starring” that guy who looks like death warmed over) be on the right wavelength to “hear it.” But probably not. It is almost inaudible. My advice: Be kind to all of them. That one in ten or a million, if you just smile, say hi, will be deeply grateful, maybe even settle enough for a few minutes to put their imaginary arms down, close their imaginary mouth, look at the imaginary blood sky and think, “Isn’t that something!” I’ve written before here about the participatory role of the observer in “creating” reality. Most physicists have conceded that by now. It’s not likely your intervention can turn “the scream” into “the dream.” But it can make whatever is “passing through nature” at that moment considerably more tolerable. And that’s a lot.

Jacques Derrida borrowed a term from Martin Heidegger that he used to convey a certain kind of ambivalence of meaning: “*sous rature*,” which translates to “under erasure.” In its most practical sense it means writing a word, then crossing it out and leaving it there, a ghost of itself, indicating it is both necessary and inadequate, faulty for conveying the concept it purports to name, but reminiscent of it, still there but not, the worst of both

wor[l]ds. And Heidegger used it for some pretty big words, like “Being” and “Time,” say. Or “Paul.” When you’re the one under erasure, you feel two things primarily: vacuity and rage. The vacuum part is much like the zero-point energy state of spacetime: not absolute emptiness, just a constant fizzing up and fading away of virtual nothings, like that TV- watching guy above. And the rage part is highly distilled, pure. I describe it this way in *This Fall*:

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.

This flame was what was left of “Paul.” So I knew it would have to serve as a foundation for whomever “Paul 2.0” would eventually become. No way I was going to trade it in for “bargaining,” so cheap, chintzy, and I didn’t. I’m so glad of that.

As I write this, I understand more clearly why so many people I encountered in that interim seemed to fear me. That is an absolutely normal response to someone who is there-not-there. Like one of those AI images that looks almost human, but not, how it creeps you out. Masahiro Mori called this “the uncanny valley.” Psalm 23 calls it “the valley of the shadow of death.” When you’re in that valley, you realize very quickly you have a lot of work to do to “restore [your] soul,” to get back on “the paths of righteousness for [your] name’s sake.” Since then, those eleven years, I’ve written more than dozen books, studied numerous wisdom traditions quite assiduously, spent countless hours reading, singing, and walking through magnificent forests back east and out west here.

This Paul-not-Paul is no longer afraid, no longer empty. He is astonishing. I am so glad I know him. As I say in a song I wrote about 8 years ago: “If I were you/ had nothing else to do/ I’d talk to me.” Most people you meet most often have something else to do. I, on the other hand, most often have “nothing else to do.” So I “talk to me” all the time. I like this Paul-not-Paul quite a lot. When I need to show up as just Paul, I can do it quite skillfully. I remember him well, liked him quite a lot, too. The one thing, though, is that Paul-not-Paul is very sensitive about is being put “under erasure.” Paul got crossed out and was lost for a while. If Paul-not-Paul gets crossed out, I fear he might be lost for good.

Part 2:

*All that I have, it’s all there for free.
All that I am, it’s just what you see.*

Those are a couple of lines from a song I wrote 8 or 9 years ago. Hard as it may be to believe, I am a very simple man, exactly that simple: there for free, just what you see. When you give away what you make and do in a monetized culture like ours, the tendency is to think it must not be worth anything. For me, it’s

exactly the opposite. What I make and do feels so precious it would feel impertinent, rude even, to put a price on it. And who I am as a person is so right-there, so self-evident, I think most people can't believe that's all there is. Gotta be a catch. The truth will set you free from many things, including those who find yours untrustworthy instead of redemptive.

Late yesterday afternoon I walked downtown to watch the "Procession of the Species," an annual parade in Olympia that closes out the spring Arts Walk weekend. The parade had just started when I got there. There were thousands of people lining the sidewalks three or four deep as far as I could see along its route. The procession centers around maybe two dozen super-sized animals, like that giraffe, 20 feet tall, utterly enchanting. There were huge groups of dancers, drummers, musicians, hundreds of other adults and kids holding up images of animals, insects, plants, an almost endless stream of joyful, reckless, emotional and physical abandon. Crammed as I was at the back of the crowd, barely able to see it all, I still couldn't stop laughing. It was "indescribably delicious," as that old slogan for the Mounds Bar proclaimed. Yes, most people preferred the Almond Joy, milk chocolate, an almond on each half, very nice. But the dark chocolate on the Mounds, so slightly-wavy-sleek, like William Powell's hair in his "Thin Man" years, Myrna Loy wisecracking back at him, that, to me, was indescribably delicious.

Olympia has an assortment of other annual events of this sort that are equally astonishing, like the Gay Pride Parade, many, many hundreds of mostly young people, gay, lesbian, trans, bi, queer, straight, dressed extravagantly, carrying signs and banners, marching, dancing, shouting their way down Capital Way; the crowd, many, many additional hundreds, answering in kind, like a massive duet celebrating not difference but tolerance, love, even. Or the Pet Parade, as playfully weird as it sounds, all kinds of animals and their people costumed in whatever—tutus,

pirate outfits, bird masks, whatever—their pets on leashes, in baskets, on carts, in wheelbarrows. You name it, you’ll see it. And my reaction is always the same: I can’t stop laughing.

I have known since I was a kid that my brain produces an excess of some chemical that, when it gets activated, makes what I experience look and feel mildly psychedelic. It is one, among many, of the blessings nature has gifted me with. I know I give off a vibe of aloofness, that I often describe myself as “reclusive,” and that I am, literally, afflicted by a clinical-level “social anxiety disorder” of epic proportions. That does not mean I don’t like people. I tend to prefer huge exuberant crowds like the one I joined yesterday, merging with them, forgetting my/self in the mayhem. I was in a dark bar in the Pittsburgh one night about 50 years ago, on a date, listening to some rowdy band. All of the sudden the room erupted in a fight of inexplicable origins, fists flying, tables upturned. My date was paralyzed with fear. I was paralyzed with amazement, just sat there calmly, feeling cocooned in safety, witnessing the spectacle. When it was all over, we got up and left, our table one of the few still standing. One of the best dates I ever had. She never went out with me again. Unfortunately. I really liked her.

I am also very comfortable around marginalized people, like the homeless I walk through and among on my early morning walks, packing up their stuff before they disappear for the day, I have no idea where. Maybe because I look like one of their own—an older, slight, bearded man in jeans with a crooked, puzzled-looking half-smile on my face—they seem at ease in my company. In the “normal” vein, I excel at one-to-one conversations, across a table, in a living room. Put me in a group or at a party, and I flail. Or fail. When I tell others how rarely I actually see the people who are most important to me, they think I must be sad, missing them. I tell them, over and over, that the people I love are with me, vividly, fully alive, all the time, whether they are physically present or not. They make me happy,

all the time, whether they are physically present or not. Maybe it's those chemicals doing what they do. So, while I may be solitary, I am never, ever, lonely. Except, sometimes, with people who simply can't see me. When I have to spend time in such company, which is not uncommon in a culture like ours, in my head I leave, go to a parade or take a walk in the woods. Since I'm pretty good at impersonating myself on auto-pilot, no one ever seems to notice that I've gone.

The day before yesterday I walked downtown to see the much quieter first evening of the Arts Walk. Olympia is the smallest town I've lived in since I left my hometown 60 years ago. It is full of little shops and eateries, most of them charmingly eccentric, like something out of the 60s. Not a big box or chain restaurant anywhere. On the opening night of Arts Walk, many of them stay open late, hosting art works of all kinds made by local creators. You can wander in, look at what's there, exchange a comment with whoever made it, buy something you like. It is magical. Every year, the main thing I pay attention to is the overall "vibe" of the art. For some reason, I take what I see as symptomatic of the general vibe in the culture at large. This year, what I saw, over and over, in multiple media and materials, was brilliant splashes of primary colors colliding cacophonously in a "style" I'd call some combination of psychedelic and primitive. So playful, joyous—insects, animals, people or just various shapes intersecting, interacting, in the most amusing and alluring ways. I took from this the general sense that those who have a vision for what's up ahead, who are filling that space with their imaginings, are so over the exhausting dystopic drama that our political and journalistic culture seems to want to keep us riveted toward. "Flooding the field" works for a while. But soon enough, which is now, everyone is so accustomed to the fake spectacle of it that it feels utterly predictable, boring, inane. The reality you prefer, from that vantage point, is a "Procession of the Species," not some lame or demented press briefing delivered from an

airplane doorway by a bag of fat who has ceased to be able to speak, let alone think.

All of which is to say that I have not, like Li Po in his elder years, “left the peopled world forever.” By the same token, I have said, with intention, a number of times over the last decade or so, that I needed to retreat from some social context or another in order to “heal.” I was never quite sure what I meant by that, and I’m guessing whomever I said it to felt likewise, figured I’d be gone maybe a couple of weeks, then back, hunky dory, “fixed.” Each of those interims ended up taking many months. I read voraciously, wrote obsessively, learned (or wrote) and recorded songs, walked and walked and walked some more. Which is what I’m doing now.

“Fixed” is for broken. I’m pretty good at fixing things. The first thing you have to decide about something broken is whether there is a fix that will restore its functionality. If so, you do it and it’s done. If not, you chuck it. My wife’s death did not leave me broken. It left me wounded. Wounds have to heal, a process with no deadline or endpoint. It takes the time it takes. You tend to it and tend to it and one day you look down, see that thin, white scar and figure you can move on. Then one day something opens it again and you start over, not from zero but from where you are, with all you’ve come to know about what it takes to heal. About a month ago, the wound re-opened, so I am off again, healing.

All of that discourse is, of course, figurative. A wound of this sort is invisible, no broken skin, no blood. Nothing, really. You can ignore it if you want, show up as your “old” self almost immediately, which is what I did at first. Two things I learned very quickly about all of that were: (1) Just because neither you nor anyone else can see the wound doesn’t mean it isn’t there; and (2) if you don’t find a way to heal it, you will end up broken in a way that can’t be fixed. That’s the there-but-not-thereness

Derrida names *sous rature*. Your name with a line drawn through it. And you can't get rid of that line without removing a lot of the name it crossed out. So you have a choice: vacuity with a side of anger, or rewriting your name.

Farrow says grief and rage are savage companions. They are, to be sure, a fearsome duo. And yes, repression and impersonation can work pretty well to keep them at bay over the short run, the pretense that you are who you were and life goes on. Hunky dory. But there's that third thing she throws in: despair, way more scary than the other two, which you sense can set in at any time if you're not careful. And I don't just mean the weeping and gnashing kind. Despair can wear a smile, too. Until, every now and then, if someone is paying close enough attention, for a microsecond, it droops into a blank stare, and you both know there is no one there.

I'll tell you what I think right now, today: The main remedy for healing is love. I mean real love, the right kind of love. The kind every wisdom tradition I know of places at the center of its vision, even if it doesn't call it that. I've written in this series about "the hard problem" of consciousness. Today I'm thinking about "the hard problem" of love, how easy it is to assume that it's being given and received when it's not, felt and shared, when it's not. The hard problem of consciousness softens immediately once you conclude that it is and always has been already there, that you simply inhabit and share it. At once, it becomes soothing, safe, peaceful. Love may well be likewise. If I'm reading the tortured prose of C.S. Pierce right, in his essay "Evolutionary Love," then love is the arc of our universe hoping not just to see itself—which is what consciousness can do and is for—but to cherish itself. Love itself. Truly. The right kind of love.

In other words, love is also always already there, has been from the outset, a field that saturates everything everywhere. It is

something you inhabit and share, not parcel out and feel. Whether you do that well or poorly is not the issue. The former is not something to praise any more than the latter is something to fault. When a human being is being fully human, whether for years or days or minutes, they know what love is and how to proffer it freely. And when another human being is being fully human, they know how to welcome it gladly. You, me, anyone, we can't do any better than our best in that regard with what we have and know at the moment. Love is not a wad of cash you wait around to dole out grudgingly or grab greedily; it's a state of mind you decide to create and stay in as long as possible. Jesus calls it the Kingdom, Lao Tzu calls it Way, the Buddha calls it Nirvana. The foundation for that, they all say, is making sure your in-here and that out-there are keeping the peace with one another. And they all also say, in one way or another, that the first step, the one you absolutely cannot skip, is loving yourself, truly, the right kind of love.

Like most people I spent chunks of my life waiting with the hope, if not an expectation, that I'd be loved for "who I am," as if that recognition was out there somewhere. I know now that this "who I am" is exactly what love actually is. Always and already. The "I am who I am" that the universe we inhabit, which is innately godly, tells me every second of every day "I am" one with. From that vantage point there is nothing left to wait for. Being loved, being "understood," those are things you can and should be doing for yourself right now. As I said at the end of the poem that concludes "And now for two things completely different:"

*always
and I mean always
in the lush hidden chambers
of your own heart
where you speak to yourself
ceaselessly*

*say I love you
over and over
an endless loop
as if those are
the only three words
you still remember
will ever need
to hear or*

think

So where am I now with this rage/grief thing? Dylan Thomas wrote a beautiful and (to me at least) enigmatic poem, applicable to this, called “Do not go gentle into that good night.” You may know it. The poem is a plea to his dying father, rendered in the final stanza, to “rage against the dying of the light.” I said enigmatic because it is unclear to me whether Thomas wants that for his father’s sake or his own. In the previous stanzas, the simplest reading is that all the other “men” he mentions, introduced as the “wise,” the “good,” the “wild,” the “grave,” had done just that. Raged. Fought back. He wants his father to do the same, and he’s not. But it is also possible to read the final lines in each of those previous stanzas more as frantic commands from the poet himself, full of his own rage at what he stands to lose, to all these wise, good, wild and grave men, who, like his father, simply gave in, not only ready but eager to move on.

It’s very hard for the one who lives on after a traumatic death. You wish the one who left had raged harder “against the dying of the light,” had fought back, hung on, simply survived. So you take on that rage, those “fierce tears” that Thomas complains weren’t there, as if you’re doing it on their behalf. It may be the most essential thing for you to do, in order to hang on to some faint hope that what Thomas calls your “frail deeds” might somehow learn to “dance in a green bay.” What that fails to

account for, though, is that “at close of day” it may have become suddenly and absolutely clear to all those “men,” to Thomas’ father, and to Carol, too, how impertinent and useless that rage is. It belongs down here. And that’s where they wanted to leave it. I can and will covet and care for mine, that “cool-blue to yellow-hot” flame, for as long as I can. For myself, whom I love, for the others I love and who love me, and the many others I inevitably if unintendingly sing in the process. That is what staying alive requires. And when the time comes, I hope I will simply “go gentle into that good night.” Not because it is time, but because it is good.

Buddy Holly wrote “True Love Ways” as a wedding gift for his wife, Maria Elena, in October, 1958. Just a few months later, in February 1959, the little plane he was on went down in a snowstorm in cornfield in Iowa, what became “the day the music died.” He was 22. About 6 years ago I recorded an album, singing covers of my favorite Buddy Holly songs. I listen to it every day. Maybe there’s a French term for that, too, meaning doing something loony to keep from going crazy, a form of un-erasure. When you seek wisdom, you often find it in the most unexpected places. Buddy Holly was such a sweet, brash presence in this world. I was enamored by his music from the first time I heard it coming from the little black transistor radio I got for my birthday when I was 10, the month he died. His death was heartbreaking to me. His music still inspires me to be more alive. Had he lived a full life, I like to think his wisdom would have multiplied exponentially. In lieu of that, I bring him back to life every day. And when I do, he brings Carol back with him. Those “true love ways” and all that “raining in my heart.”

That poem I wrote this morning, inspired by those extravagant lilacs and a couple of Walt Whitman’s most extravagant poems, breath and death shaking hands companionably in every line, is gorgeous. Sometimes I can’t believe I can make such beautiful things. Then I remember what I really know. They are not mine,

never were. I simply receive them, the way a radio receives its music, as gifts, blessings, from a loving universe. Which I'm sure Buddy Holly knew as he made those magical songs. And Walt Whitman, too, unendingly loquacious, who says this about what he finds in his path:

*. . . I guess it is the handkerchief of the Lord,
A scented gift and remembrancer designedly dropt,
Bearing the owner's name someway in the corners, that we
may see and remark, and say Whose?*

Whose, indeed? In Romans 8:28 Paul says: "All things work together for the good," a passage usually taken to mean that things will work out hunky dory for you, if you just have enough faith, the one thing Paul says you better have, or else. Today what I hear it saying is this: We live in a universe that is "designedly" working toward the good. Always. Together, all things, one. Just because things didn't turn out so well for Carol, or me, doesn't mean they aren't for the good. That's the faith-buster right there, if you let it be, the rage-maker. In Philippians 4:7 Paul says there is a "peace" which "surpasses all understanding," one "that will guard your hearts and minds." I have spent so much of my life and energy trying to keep the peace, assuming I understood what that was. It undermined mine, fomenting rage, and was, in the end, utterly pointless. All I want now is to keep the peace in my own spirit, to guard my heart and mind in that place where understanding is surpassingly abundant. I don't want to need, hope, or expect to get it from any other place but that. I'm not quite there yet, but I swear I see it, dancing like the Northern Lights through all this darkness. I truly believe that when I get there I will be healed. And I'll meet Buddy Holly, his "love . . . big as a Cadillac," and Walt Whitman, "sounding [his] barbaric yawp over the roof of the world," and everyone else I ever loved, and everyone who ever loved me enough to leave their initialed, scented handkerchief for me to find, and took the time to pick up mine, Dewitt and

Parmenides sitting perfectly still there, waiting for me, maybe humming the same beautiful note eternally, a music that doesn't need time to be made or heard, inviting me to add my voice. That would be heaven. Yes, that would be heaven.

Lilacs

*All I need is a little sun,
Some for me, some for everyone.*

Jack Jackson (from “Little Bits of Love”)

The weather turned here yesterday, the first genuinely summery day, 70 degrees, bright sun, perfect. The weather in my head turned with it, blue skies as far as my eye can see, enough sun for me and for everyone. This series, except for the Bunny Lang piece, has been pretty gloomy, I know, like winter here. Olympia is the farthest north I’ve ever lived and December-April is the rainy season. So it’s short, gray days, long, dank nights. A slog. My head tends to follow that lead, especially February-April, so impatient for it to be over. Summer is the exact opposite, and it’s finally here.

Here’s what I have to say about all of that: First of all, I’m good now. Or is it well? Well, it’s both, and fine, as well. Truly happy, even! I have an extraordinarily high tolerance for the dark, know I have to go there from time to time to find my light. I don’t welcome it any more than I welcome winter. But I don’t shirk it either. Here are a couple of stanzas from a poem I wrote back in 2016, after a walk in Boyce Park, pertinent to this, called “This Dark is Mine”:

*At the top of the hill
where I always first feel
what today I decided to call
a holiness in this place,
the tall, lean poplar*

*on my right, speaking
for all the trees,
their collaborative voice,
said: Take care now,
Paul, this dark is yours.
Show no fear.
It was always there
waiting for you, the way
from where you are
to where you go.*

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

When the dark stands between where I am and where I need to get, as it did this month, I go through it. Perhaps I shouldn't have taken you with me on that walk. That dark is mine, not yours. In my own (feeble) defense: I use writing not only to tease out relationships among the many diverse and seemingly unrelated things that intrigue me out-there, but also among the many diverse and seemingly unrelated things that intrigue me in-here. If I don't write about them, they never get settled, and I want them settled. And, of course, you can stop reading any time you want. This is not the SATs.

One of the things it's easy to forget if you are both neurodivergent and ultra-sensitive, which I am, is that the emotional scale you're operating on is different from the norm.

Over and over in conversations with others about volatile matters, they will say at some point “I hope this isn’t too upsetting,” in all the various ways that “upset” can apply in such conversations. I am always stunned. I tell them what they’re talking about doesn’t even move the needle on my upset-meter. That is one of the counterintuitive side-effects of ultra-sensitivity. You’re always redlining the tach. When you have to slow down, it’s like what a Formula One driver must feel inching through a school zone: “Am I even moving?” It is, clearly, a mistake to assume that such an eccentric scale is commonly shared, let alone universal. My apologies if these missives felt impertinent, even intrusive, like “shut the hell up already, Paul, and just deal with it!” I’ll be considerably more mindful about that going forward.

That said, this series is over. I enjoyed writing these pieces, learned so much from them, and changed in quite significant way because of them, which is my primary mission these days. Healing and changing are not, obviously, exactly the same. But, in my opinion, you’ll never do much the former without doing a lot of the latter. In any case, now “it’s summertime, and the livin’ is easy.” For me that means even easier than my *usual* easy!

Summer here is idyllic, opulent greenery, wall to wall blue skies, and I intend to savor every minute of it. So I’m taking it off, starting today. Like me, I hope, as that great song goes on to say, “one of these mornings you [too] will rise us singing, spread your wings, and take to the sky.” I hope not only that your summertime livin’ will be easy, but also, in the spirit of what Coleridge says in “Frost at Midnight,” that:

*... all seasons shall be sweet to thee,
Whether the summer clothe the general earth
With greenness, or the redbreast sit and sing
Betwixt the tufts of snow on the bare branch*

*Of mossy apple-tree, while the nigh thatch
Smokes in the sun-thaw; whether the eave-drops fall
Heard only in the trances of the blast,
Or if the secret ministry of frost
Shall hang them up in silent icicles,
Quietly shining to the quiet Moon*

I think I'll close with the poem I mentioned last time, the one I wrote the other day for my Instagram, just because I like it. It's called "coming home." The quoted passages are from Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself," a paean to his own enormous spirit, and "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloomed," his doleful elegy for Abraham Lincoln. The image I used is a photo of some of the lilac trees in my back yard that inspired the poem, far and away their most florid display since I got here 8 years ago. I take that as a sign of good things to come:

if you were walking with me just now
past these lavish lilacs in my dooryard
more pink than purple this year
and heard in the back of your mind

*"I breathe the fragrance myself and know it and like it,
the distillation would intoxicate me also but I shall not
let it"*

and a few seconds later remembered

*"when lilacs last in the dooryard bloom'd
and the great star early droop'd in the western sky"*

you would know everything I know about

*"the play of shine and shade on the trees as the supple
boughs wag"*

and the

*"moody tearful night lilac and star and bird twined with
the chant of my soul"*

without even one word passing between us
and that no machine could ever begin to fathom
how we knew what we know no matter how hard
we tried to explain how one mind can move
from breath to death and back again
before I finish turning the key to unlock the back door

Unfinished Business

*It's curious. I don't seem to be able to accomplish
Anything. Everything begun. Nothing ever finished.*

V.R. "Bunny" Lang

I am writing this piece to complete some "unfinished business" in this chaotic and desultory series. The piece among that disparate lot that stands out to me as both worthy and still in need of conclusion is the one on Bunny Lang, a remarkable human being and poet who died in 1956, at 32, receded into oblivion, and has come into currency lately via a sort of "collected poems," edited by Rosa Campbell. I wrote that essay in a state of great animation, having read only one third of that book, *The Miraculous Season*, once. I've had time in the meanwhile both to finish it and to reread many of the individual pieces. My state of mind has settled some and is now more well-informed, so I want to say some additional things, particularly and generally, about Bunny and her work, both of which have inaugurated what I hope will be a miraculous season of my own this summer.

At the outset, I needed to decide how to "name" her in this essay. In many instances I choose the last-name convention of academic and critical writing. But more often I simply use Bunny. That may seem on the surface to be diminutinal, even dismissive. To me, it is exactly the opposite. It is the name she earned and went by in her most important social and intellectual contexts. It is a name that aspires to be more fully human, the theme of this essay, than her given name, Violet Ranny, which she truncated to V.R. in public venues, most likely to evade dismissal based on her gender, a form of forced self-denial so

many female poets suffered in the first half of the 20th century. “Bunny” announces full throatedly who and what she was, what she aspired and still aspires to become for those willing to spend time with what she left behind for us to puzzle over.

One of the tropes that recurs in the critical commentary on Bunny’s work is a repetitive “giveth and a taketh away” gesture: a compliment countered with a caveat, a bit of praise followed by a “but.” Campbell echoes this convention in her introduction to *The Miraculous Season*:

Lang was, by all accounts, a brilliant and difficult person . . . , “strong, opinionated, passionate,” “a superb comedienne” and “overwhelmingly funny, smart, ambitious.” . . . She was possessed of an “angry loyalty to everyone she accepted for her friends and lovers” but caustic in her criticism, brutal in her reprisals. . . Frank O’Hara recalls “seeing her for the first time at a bookstore cocktail party, [a scene he remembers] “as if it were a movie, she was glamorous and aloof. The girl I was talking to said: ‘That’s Bunny Lang. I’d like to give her a good slap.’” They became inseparable. (15-17)

I found this template repeated pretty much everywhere I looked when critics were writing about Lang. I’ll use Sally Bingham’s review of *V.R. Lang: Poems & Plays with a Memoir by Alison Lurie* (“A Talent That Didn’t Unfold,” published in the *NYT* in 1975) as a representative example. The book, which feels like one of those quasi-feminist “recovery” projects common in the 70s, features Lang’s two plays, *Fire Exit* and *I Too Have Lived in Arcadia*, along with various poems and a biographical memoir by her close friend, novelist Alison Lurie. The following year Charles Ruas and Susan Howe crafted “a memorial to V.R. ‘Bunny’ Lang,” which concluded with a radio staging of her second play, *I Too Have Lived in Arcadia*. Then Bunny disappeared again. For another fifty years.

Bingham opens by calling her “a gifted eccentric,” a phrase vague enough to apply to almost any creative person, but which takes on a very specific and unpleasant overtone when it is applied to women. Not quite misogynistic, but almost. Think about how differently that phrase resonates when it is applied to Emily Dickinson as opposed to William Blake. That’s what I’m getting at. And Bunny both as a person and a writer suffered from that unconscious bias in both our cultural and critical argots. Bingham goes on to say:

The banality of her conversation as it is here recorded and the lists of her costumes do not convey the querulous warmth and astounding energy which made Bunny a “queen” to her circle of friends. Her peculiarities separate her; she is surrounded by a thorn hedge of privilege and arrogance which can only be pierced, in memory, by a few loyal friends. For who would have put up with her, as she is described in Alison Lurie’s fascinating memoir, where resentment and affection are so thoroughly mixed? . . . It sometimes seems that the vapidness of her friends’ lives alone made Bunny’s friendship worth the price she exacted; yet she was surrounded not by nonentities but by gifted writers such as Miss Lurie herself (author of “The War Between the Tates”), Frank O’Hara, Kenneth Koch and John Ashbery. So the mystery remains.

The poems included in this collection are uneven and at times embarrassingly literary, as though she had no grip on the world from which her images sprang: a baby is “flushed as a sea-robin, wild as a sea-lily.” The simpler poems strike and calm: “When you were in despair/ I grew there.” Although they are seldom sustained—sometimes the title is the beginning and the end, as in “How to Tell a Diamond from a Burning Baby”—the poems are full of a promise which was cut off by Lang’s

early death from cancer. Her play, "Fire Exit," is marred by a peculiar alternation between an unfamiliar hillbilly dialect and the strained grandeur of the classical allusions. Yet there are moments of triumph that suggest a talent which had no chance to unfold.

Notice how many of Bingham's compliments are backhanded, offered then retracted. That is often the fate of poets, like Lang, who just don't fit the template the critical paradigm of the moment unconsciously enforces. It is even more often the fate of such poets who happen to be female in a culture like ours, oppressively patriarchal both in her first incarnation in the fifties and her first recovery in the seventies. And it happens to most people who diverge from the currently accepted norms in any obvious way. I don't want to judge any of the critics that were assigned to assess Bunny's work, from reviewers of her plays back in the fifties to more recent commentators, all of whom follow the same "yes-but ..." template that Bingham does. They are simply doing the job we have trained them for and asked them to do for us, so we won't have to do it for ourselves.

It is so hard, in some cases almost impossible, to become conscious of the ways we have been enculturated both to become, and to see others as, less than fully human. Every historical moment, at least in "civilized" societies, has elaborate systems for accomplishing that. And I don't mean, solely, the darker ones, the economic, political and ideological forces that grind up the "losers" and spit them out into poverty, illness, prison, or just lives of constant, erosive struggle to survive. I also mean the much-honored ones, the "credentials" that lead the "winners" to presume they have earned the privileges they are accorded, that entitle them to adjudicate the standards and practices predominant at the moment. The vast majority of such people do not do this perniciously. Most often, they believe they are simply "right," even "good" at what they do, that they deserve the seats of judgment they sit it. Yes, from their points of

view, many, maybe most of Bunny Lang's poems are flawed, in large part because they either are or appear to be "unfinished," in that they lack the polish, the veneer, the masculinity, really, so valorized by the ideology that reigned in her time. If you read her work this way you will have missed the point not only of what she is trying to say but also of her, as a person, struggling against imponderable odds to become more fully human.

The early 1950s was a particularly inimical time for female writers. Think Adrienne Rich, doing her best imitation of the stiff formalism of Robert Lowell's pre-*Life Studies* work in a book like *The Diamond Cutters*, pretending to be something other than what she was, not just poetry-wise but gender-wise, because it took her a while to become conscious of the ways in which she had been enculturated to be less than fully human. Or Elizabeth Bishop, more well-ensconced in the hierarchy of the moment, struggling to become feminized against the grain of the insidiously patriarchal discourse of modernity she had been indoctrinated into, which made that project almost impossible, her "Cold Spring" poems (1955) indicative. Or Denise Levertov searching for a female voice under the overbearing aegis of Charles Olson's projectivism, masculinity on steroids. There are exceptions, like Muriel Rukeyser, Diane Di Prima, and Gwendolyn Brooks, who seemed able to come up for a breath of fresh air from time to time. And, of course, Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, who finally blew the lid off this cauldron of oppression, except a decade too late for Lang. Bunny wasn't born too soon, she simply died too young to become a part of the poetic revolution Rich, Plath, Sexton, Audre Lord, and many others, would launch in the 60s, the one that inverted the patriarchy of poetry and brought female poets prominence and in-their-own-lifetime fame. There is much to applaud about that transformation. But it is a mistake to assume that it elevated poetry, as a cultural phenomenon, into some utopian stage of the "fully human." The marketplace that regulates what and who the rest of us get to see is still stringently disciplined, market-

obsessed, and dominant-paradigm-repressive in ways that feel, to me, stereotypically patriarchal. It's just more gender-conscious about it. So there's that.

Bunny was, by all accounts, a creative and organizational dynamo. In 1950, for example, at the age of 26, she “co-founded” The Poets’ Theater in Cambridge, along with a cohort of then or soon-to-be luminaries, like Mary Manning (Molly) Howe and her daughters Fanny and Susan, (the latter of subsequent L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry fame), Edward Gorey, Alison Lurie, Richard Wilbur, Donald Hall, and Frank O’Hara, among others. The venue hosted high-end experimental poetry, dance, mimes, and first-run plays by many non-Broadway writers of consequence. It never achieved the status of comparable venues in New York, but it did all the same things. So Bunny’s light was never hidden under a basket. She was with “her kind,” the *avant garde*, not just a small cog in a big wheel, but one of the hubs that kept the whole shebang moving forward.

Both of Bunny’s plays—“Fire Exit” (1952) and “I Too Have Lived in Arcadia” (1954)—opened at The Poets’ Theatre, to mixed reviews that follow the template I outline above. Her dramatic vision has been characterized as “proto-feminist.” And it is all of that, though I’d excise the prefix. Bunny was, to my way of reading, about as feminist a presence as it was possible to be in the early 1950s. Molly Howe certainly had more feminist *gravitas*, but she came of age in the 1920s when feminism was alive and kicking, even if only the Charleston. Bunny came of age in the 40s, WWII, patriarchy’s heyday rendering feminism comatose, where it lay in waiting until the moribund 50s passed: the nuclear arms race, the Red Scare, Joe McCarthy, Eisenhower and Nixon, the military industrial complex, suburban sprawl, cars and more cars, homemaker heaven, “Leave It to Beaver,” an encyclopedia of man-mania. By the time Susan Howe, Molly’s daughter, became famous in the 70s, it was up and at it again, and she was primed by her lineage

to join the march. Bunny missed out on both ends. So, yes, take off the “proto.” She was about as feminist as it got in the early 50s.

My epigraph is taken from the 14-section “Poems to Preserve the Years at Home,” the longest poem by far in the book, one Bunny wrote as her inevitable death from Hodgkins disease (the death rate from Hodgkins in the early 50s was 95%) was pending. It is a remarkable piece that I’ll quote from more liberally later in the essay. What I want to key into at the outset is that matter of finishedness and how it applied both to her method and her subsequent reception. Certainly, if you’re as incandescently alive as she was, about to die at 32, the concept of “unfinishedness” must have felt overwhelming, as in not just all these poems left in limbo, but in the time that wasn’t going to be there to make more. That part speaks deeply and poignantly for itself.

I’m more interested here in the ways in which finishedness often operates as a toxic fetish in our culture at large, and, especially, in relation to the value of literary works. Coleridge is a good example. He left so much of his greatest work in unfinished states—“Kubla Kahn,” “Cristobel,” *The Biographia*, *The Friend*, etc.—and he is often chided for that by critics, who would seem to prefer some polished piece of crap in favor of such flawed masterpieces. H.D. is another. I wondered at one point in my career why I was not apprised of her greatness in my college lit course, where we read, copiously, all the male modernists. So I went back to the anthology we used: She wasn’t there! Not one poem! Part of this has to do with gender, which was, in the patriarchal machinery of modernist poetics, almost by definition an unfinishable disability. And her work, especially after her phase as Pound’s *Imagiste manque*, was rangy, ambitious, countercultural, difficult to organize under the closed-in rubric of Cleanth Brooks’ “well-wrought urn” ideal. So she was out, for a couple of generations at least.

Bunny Lang's work met the same fate, which is one reason why I never knew of her as anything more than Frank O'Hara's muse until I read all these poems, 75 years after almost no one paid attention to them. I'm going to blame a lot of that ignorance on the literary critical industry—reviewers, publishers, etc.—that manages what we get to see and what we don't, most often, to get to my point, based on some obsession with finishedness. One template this operates on, to Bunny Lang's great disadvantage, is a sense that a writer (or artist or any creative person) should have an identifiable "style" that is consistent over time. This is especially so for poets, one of the reasons they seek out "schools" to belong to, an externally applied identity the "market" might recognize. What publishers want is a book that seems all of a piece, coherent in that superficial way. Not grandeur or greatness, but a steady voice, a singular "sound." Bunny Lang fails that test spectacularly. While she was loosely affiliated with the New York School poets, and while many of her poems have surrealistic aspects and ambitions, that is clearly not her primary *metier*, more like one of the dramatic outfits she'd pick out when she got dressed for a party. She also hung around with Gregory Corso, but is not a "Beat" poet in any way at all. As I read her work now, everything I see is futural: She was "confessional" before that was a thing. She was a "L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E" poet way before that was a thing. And she was a feminist—as much instinctually as ideologically—in an historical moment that couldn't even imagine what that was, let alone promote it. Outliers of her sort rarely get anything but mixed or negative notice in their own time. And women in particular who enact it via their personal presence get a lot of pushback. So there's that, too.

Lang's feminism manifests sometimes via what I'll call her "pre-confessional" voice. She was caught in the early fifties between the rock of patriarchy and the hard place of necrotic late-modernist poetics, not to mention a Boston-Back-Bay upbringing in the waning days of that "society" culture, the one Robert

Lowell writes about so darkly in the prose portion of his tradition-shattering book *Life Studies*, which came out about five years after Lang's death. This is not the most fecund ground to cultivate a feminist poetic, or, for someone like Lang, any "finished" poetic at all. Her feminism manifests sometimes via the same gender-revisionist tendencies that characterized the work of H.D., all that cultural/historical heritage, about which Lang was quite learned, of an eternal patriarchy being re-envisioned through a female lens. This is especially true of her plays. And it manifests sometimes via the New York School's take on French surrealism, executed in its "finished" form in works by O'Hara and Ashberry, but feeling much more explosive when its preferred glossy veneer is disrupted by the non-surrealistic, sometimes emotionally overwrought, sometimes dramatic, sometimes simply descriptive, vestiges of Lang's imaginative vision.

The 1950s was the last gasp of a poetics that valorized organic, highly polished, closed systems as its creative ideal, that Brooks'-urn thing I mentioned above: every poem (and poetry was the apex creative genre in that system) a universe in and of itself, a complex array of mutually supportive parts whose ultimate effect was supposed to be a singularity, nothing from the outside—authorial "intention" and readerly "affect," e.g.—leaking in to contaminate its pristine field of meaning, what T.S. Eliot called, in the most refined tradition of 19th century philosophical idealism, a "feeling." If you weren't working with the medium in that way, you were highly unlikely to make it into the general marketplace. Look at the early work of Robert Lowell or John Berryman in this regard. Exactly that. Or the later dry-as-a-bone work of Alan Tate, John Crowe Ransom, Robert Penn Warren and Donald Davidson, the second-gen New Critic/Fugitive poets who perfected, as in formalized to the finest detail, the agenda set forth by the earlier modernists—Eliot, Pound, etc. Bunny Lang's poems are rarely such pristine compositions. They are flamboyant, irregular, sometimes all over

the place. They are her turned into words. There are many kinds of beauty in our universe. Hers was on “the wrong side” of the historical moment she was unfortunate enough to be born into. Her poems have no consistency of method or style, are not disciplined into obvious and repeatable forms, seem to value surprise and chaos more than elegance and order. And they are anything but “polished.” And, did I mention, she was a woman? So she was paid little attention by the critical apparatus that served as gatekeepers for what the rest of us would get to see.

A good index to this is the wall of resistance Bradley Phillips, the painter Bunny married during the last year of her life, met when he tried to find a publisher for her work, as in a letter he wrote to the editor of *The Cambridge Review*, who must have been offensively dismissive of a submission. Phillips responds:

The implication in your letter . . . that I was attempting to fob off some fragments onto you is infuriating. I certainly would not permit anything of Bunny's that I did not consider finished and admirable to be published anywhere, even in a magazine of as small a circulation as yours.

Good for you, Bradley! Bunny would have approved of such a righteous jeer, though I'm not sure she'd agree, nor do I, that “finished” and “admirable” are inevitable equivalents. In any case, Phillips went on to produce a privately published volume of selected poems (*The Pitch*, 1962), many of which were managed into print the way Emily Dickinson's were by Thomas Wentworth Higginson a few generations earlier, i.e., “finished” to meet the stereotypical standards of the marketplace.

I grew up under the aegis of the method of reading this ideology translated into the general culture, including schools. I chafed against it for temperamental reasons (most likely because it is unapologetically authoritarian and unconsciously masculine to

an extreme) and began to cobble together one of my own, for poetry especially, which I loved. Poets were my friends growing up. I wanted to experience them as fully fledged human beings as eager to talk with me as I was to talk with them. I found poetry both the most transcendent and most transparent literary discourse. And I felt that the poets I loved were present with me, as interlocutors. That may sound outlandish, even delusional, but, I would argue, only because we have been culturally conditioned for over a century now to think otherwise, first by the modernist obsession with the formal properties of texts and then by the postmodernist obsession with the psychological depths of texts.

Any good poet can create a few pretty perfect poems. That is what the 1930s-50s favored: Focus on the beautiful thing, forget who wrote it and who you are reading it, all impertinent. We all know very well how to create such “finished” façades for presenting ourselves to and engaging with others in public. And we spend most of our lives interacting via those façades. I have no problem with that. As T.S. Eliot said “human kind cannot bear very much reality.” But every now and then, and for me most especially with poets, who are worth the time and energy it takes to dig deeper, I want more. I want to encounter a fully-fledged human being and to imagine that being is encountering *me* as a fully-fledged human being.

I elaborate my preferred approach, in suitably academic terms, in my book *Rereading Poets: The Life of the Author* (2011). The key word there is “life,” as in both the poet’s and mine, which I always felt were fully at stake when we interacted. It is ideally suited to a poet like Bunny Lang, probably why reading her work was such a blast for me. The gist of it is that poets are people, just like you and me, and getting to know one takes the same kind of time and attention it takes to get to know a real person. Like real people, once you get past the surface polish of their perfect poems, they are complex, self-contradictory, all over the

place. They amaze, perplex and aggravate. They make you laugh and they piss you off. That's what I mean by the word "life" in my book's subtitle. With a poet like Bunny Lang you don't have to delve deep to find that presence. She shows her cards, all of them, upfront, which I'm sure she did socially because people either loved or, more often, hated her, the inevitable fate of unabashedly "unfinished" people.

All that said, I'm going to focus primarily on the long poem I mentioned, "Poems to Preserve the Years at Home," the one I took my epigraph from, which (I assume) she wrote late in her life, death at her doorstep. Is it typical of her work? Well, typical is not a term that applies to poets, or people, like Bunny Lang. She was, in fact, flamboyantly atypical, in-your-face atypical, which is what most people couldn't stand about her, and what her few devoted friends truly loved her for. I am now one of the latter. People and poets like Bunny Lang exact a cost from their "audiences." You have to decide if what they proffer at the other end of the trail is worth the rigors of the ride. When the former is of high enough value to me, as in this case, I'm more than happy to pay the cost of transit. Those are the people and poets I have always gravitated toward. Think, again, of S.T. Coleridge, deigned a genuine pest by so many who crossed his path, who preferred Wordsworth, say, sane and predictable. Same with William Blake, Walt Whitman and Emily Dickison, so far outside the bounds of their own times they were completely misunderstood (as in Blake's case), often reviled (as in Whitman's case) or simply erased (as in Dickinson's case.) I am drawn to poets and people like that. And now I can add Bunny Lang to my inventory of "difficult" people I'd love to spend my time with. I can see why Frank O'Hara was so devoted to her and so bereft when she left.

I've read the poem I'll be commenting on here several times, will reread it more as I write. I feel I have now maybe a loosely

basic grasp on what it delivers. I will continue to reread it from time to time in the coming months and years. Like the best poets and people, there is no final destination—as in “Oh, now I get it”—waiting up there for me. My readerly experience is, to return to my theme here, permanently unfinished. Which is what the most worthy poets always are, and the most worthy people: You keep returning and you keep finding more and more. I have no way of knowing exactly when Bunny wrote this piece. It appears at the end of the book, is riven with questions and problems of mortality, so I’m assuming she wrote it when she finally realized her fate was sealed, death imminent. Given that, it is an amazingly raucous and feisty poem, one where she reenacts in dramatic terms (she was, after all, primarily a playwright) those things that most matter to a good life: identity, family, friends, affairs and feuds, and love of all kinds.

I’ve just decided, as I tried to calculate how to describe this poem, that it would take forever to do that in a forum like this that demands brevity. So here’s what I’m going to do: I’ll type out the whole first section, several pages, in its entirety. I think you’ll know very quickly whether Bunny Lang is a poet or person you want to spend your time with. If so, keep reading; if not, you can jump to whatever “conclusion” I decide to come up with when I’m done. In either case, remember, there are 13 more sections just as wild as this one. And a whole book of shorter poems that are all over the place stylistically (she may have hung around the New York School, but clearly remained “unschooled” in all the best ways); formally (short, long, tight, weavy, orderly, untamed, you name it, she does it); emotionally (riotous, despairing, catty, deeply thoughtful, pretty much any adjective you can come up to name the things real people do in real life, she does that); or tonally (languid, panicky, alluring, enraged, boring, sometimes all in the same poem, including this one.):

Poems to Preserve the Years at Home

i.

First Year

*Cocktail party. It takes all day to dress.
Thinking about it. Eat. Wash. Finally
The exquisite touches, employing Choice.
To this one I'll wear pale green stockings.*

*They'll be nothing but poets there. Or the writers
Of terse short stories. One celebrity.
Catch as can can. A green silk handkerchief too.*

*This is Miss V. R. Lang. The Poet, or
The Poetess... Bynum, would you introduce
Someone else as this is J.P. Hatchet
Who is Roman Catholic? No. Then don't do
That to me again. It's not an employment,
It's a private religion. Who's that over there?*

*What do you want me to say then?
--what an illogical position!--
This is V.R. Lang, she lives at home?*

*She lives at home, she lives at home.
She knows how to play backgammon
No bridge, no canasta
Likes to drive in her car
Has had two accidents so far
And two poems published this year
Two, the first two, in May
And who cares anyway. Bynum, and one other,
A hopeless ass who has a bigger car and a nasty fetish*

*About the way I wear my hair.
All his girls wear their
Hair the way I do, I see from snapshots.
We'll see about that. Come August
I'll cut it all off and wear it very short.*

*Come unto me, you friends of my childhood
Who still remain, and we'll try it again.
Jack, who still is
A contemporary of Bob
Who is good for the movies*

Violet always picks the hits

He said bitterly, after my last outrageous choice.

Letters to friends:

*I get these continual colds...
I forgot to ask, did you pass your reading exams?
It's curious. I don't seem to be able to accomplish
Anything. Everything begun. Nothing ever finished
Heaps and piles of waste.... How is Keith...
Not that I give a good God Damn. No man
Is going to make me suffer ever again.*

Put it in the corner with the unmailed letters.

*We learn ONE THING,
Simple statement can't afford release.
It has got to be something
Bewildering. Complicated. Preferably
Mysterious to the self at the time of writing.*

*Woke up at four
Muttering aloud*

*Scarlet Flavor
Drop Scarlet
Not a bit of crystal.
Something like that.
Peculiar. It affords comfort.*

*No adumbration then. No journalistic writing.
That way Hell lies, gaping wide open and inviting
Saying Come in and forget everything you meant.
Everything you started eager out to do.*

*No numbers. No lists. No categoricals.
No descriptive adjectives. BURN IT OUT.
TEAR IT OUT. Attempt no descriptions.
Talk about flames. Suicides. Terror in sleep.*

This poem is not typical of Lang's style. As I said, she has no "typical." She was a playwright which shows here in the drama of the scenes and the authenticity of the dialogue. She is good at all that and does it often in her poems. It has a "stream of consciousness" feel to it, not surrealistic in either the French or New York School way, though in other poems she can and will do both of those things. She "adumbrates" a poetics that sounds like an impossibly contradictory combination of André Breton's surrealism and Ezra Pound's imagism, then she violates it, even tears it up completely, over and over in her actual poems. She revels in categoricals, descriptive adjectives, and descriptions. She is rarely "journalistic" but tells a compelling story. What gets burnt out is her. Torn out, her. All of which makes her best writing all about "flames," "suicides" and "terror in sleep" on the one hand, and the mesmerizing everyday drama of human life on the other. Even the term "best" is problematic there. When almost everything feels intentionally unfinished, there is no clear "better-worse" critical compass to fall back on. You just have to read it, all of it, with an open mind, a generous heart. The way you "read" any fully-human being you are lucky enough to

encounter down here. Not what you wish they were, want them to be, the version you prefer for yourself, all of those ways we operate as unconscious “critics” all the time. Just what they are. And when you do that, all of it I mean, you may very well end up loving what’s right in front of you. Or not. That is what it’s like to read Bunny Lang. I have no desire to persuade you to buy her book. All I want to say is that, to me, Bunny Lang is amazing. I wish I could have known in person the person who shows up in these poems. I have no idea whether I would, in the end, want to “give her a good slap” or ask if she’d meet me for lunch. But either way, I would be in love with her.

Coda:

Until I encountered that little quote in my friend’s book, last January, the one about the bees that I mentioned in my first Bunny post, she was simply Frank O’Hara’s muse. That’s what history does with so many dead people who aspired to become more fully human: It reduces them to a single word, as if that pronounces with finality their worth. Literary critics do it as well, often to those same people while they’re alive. And we do it, too, every day, to the miraculous, maddening people sitting right in front of us, the ones who resist categories at least in part because they are struggling to become more fully human, a hopeless, heroic project in a world like ours. We come up with a term or two to compartmentalize them, domesticate them, keep them from being too disruptive to our comfort and security. A few get laudatory terms, like muse or brilliant or genius. Most get the opposite, some form of “pain in the ass.” Here’s what I now believe about Bunny Lang: Her role as a “muse” for Frank O’Hara may well be the primary reason I have always felt that he was the most fully human among the several men who got famous as New York Schoolers. He was a couple of years younger than Lang, and his *piece-de-resistance*, *Lunch Poems*, wasn’t published until nearly a decade after her death. He was learning how to write those poems, and actually writing some of

them, while she was still here. I think now that it is in part her spirit that animates them, and him, toward fuller humanness, which is what I admire about them, and him. If that was all she ever did—the primary job of a muse—her contribution to my personal humanness, my joyousness and suffering, would be incalculable. But she also wrote this whole book of kaleidoscopic poems. I’ve so enjoyed spending part of my own miraculous season with her, here with me. And I truly believe (on the basis of what I’ve said before about all the wisdom traditions I love, and quantum mechanics, which echoes them) it is possible, even likely, that she, wherever she might be, enjoyed spending her time here with me.

Free

Free. At last. Again!

*When you're looking for your freedom
Nobody seems to care. . .*

The Eagles

I woke to something wonderful this morning. That wonky shadow on my bedroom ceiling, the one my wrought iron headboard casts, which shifts a bit every time I change my sheets, was different again. The first time I mentioned it last spring, it looked like a four-way intersection, the side roads coming in at an angle; another time it looked like a big wooden cross; once it looked like a small Cessna airplane, another like a ballet dancer with his leg up on the barre, once like Sideshow Bob from the Simpsons, another time like John Travolta strutting down the street in “Saturday Night Fever.” Today it looked like a young man with shoulder-length hair reaching toward me with widespread arms. I tried to figure out who it might be. You might think, well, maybe Jesus, but this guy was way too off-kilter for that. As Mike Nelson (Lloyd Bridges) used to say at least once on every episode of “Sea Hunt” back in the 70s: “And then I saw it!” It was “Free,” the amazing presence who came to visit me in a dream on the first anniversary of my wife Carol’s death, the one I made the centerpiece of the two “Epilogues” I wrote just before I published the first paperback edition of *This Fall* ten years ago, a book that celebrates the walks we took together every day for many years before she passed, my keystone book, the one that has inspired all the others I’ve written in the meantime, the one I come back to when I need guidance toward my next steps, as I did this spring. It never lets me down.

“Free” is like “dead.” If you can type a sentence that says you’re that, you’re probably not. Free is not a destination, it’s an

aspiration, always tantalizingly up ahead, always elusive. That's one of the things I learned from Free himself, which is why I had to write that second epilogue, to counter the implication in the first that I was already there. And when I'm looking for it, as I do over and over again, I prefer to do it quietly, on my own terms. The Eagles say "nobody seems to care" as if it's a problem. It's a blessing. Why should anyone else care about my freedom? The one I seek is as unique as my fingerprints, as is yours, the endpoint of a journey that began the day we were born, and, depending on what you believe, may have been ongoing for millennia before that and will continue for millennia thereafter. Which gets me back into bed this morning, looking up at my old friend, so happy to see him again after all these years. Like I said, his arms were outstretched like he was waiting for me to meet him halfway up for a hug. Since I can't levitate (*yet*: never say never, Paul!), I just said hi.

It is a gorgeous day here, sunny, light breeze, temperature about 60, the sort of "perfect" day I prefer to spend out at Woodard Bay, my favorite walk here. Free is very playful, funny, sweet as can be, pleasant company. I have no idea where this new series will take me. My hope is that Free will walk with me on the way, guide me in a good direction. And, should you choose to come along, that you will find us worthy company. Either way, I get to be with Free again, which is another step toward free and away from dead. These are the two epilogues he inspired (I've excised chunks from the original for economy's sake, indicated by the usual . . .):

Epilogue: Take 1, 8/10/16

*The Child is father of the Man;
I could wish my days to be
Bound each to each by natural piety.*

William Wordsworth

[. . .] Just around the time I posted the final essay of This Fall [on my website] last February, a year after Carol died, I had a dream. It was different. I was present in it both as a character and a viewer, the same identity, but separate functions, like being both actor and witness simultaneously, both in and out of this world. So I remembered every single detail of it, in its aftermath, when I woke up, of course, but without effort, because I had already watched and recorded it all while I dreamed it. It was like viewing a movie you have made yourself. I knew it had to be important. I've been thinking about it over and over in meantime, what I'm supposed to take from it, do with it. I finally told it to a couple of people, earlier this month, and the story came out just as weird, scary and funny (all the things I like in a poem) as the dream was. I decided this morning on my walk in the woods to write this epilogue and make that dream its centerpiece.

The main character in the dream is a young man, about 30, long dark hair, a little curly, flowing to the shoulders. He had a sly, impish smile, a sweet, plain face. He did not look like me exactly, but I knew he was "me" in the dream, even as the other "me" watched all the action unfold. Anyway, he wakes up one day, out of the blue, in a small town he has never seen before. He has no recollection of where he came from, who he was, nothing, not even his name. But he is inflamed by a passion to tell everyone he meets two things: "This is such a beautiful world! Look at it, love it!" and "You have such a good soul! Keep in touch with it, listen to it!" Those two things, exactly, that's all. I add the exclamation points to give a sense of his inner voice when he thinks them or his outer voice when says them. As he sets off, he realizes he needs a name, so he looks up to the sky and asks "the universe" (that is exactly

how he termed it, the universe), "Who am I, what is my name?" A voice answered, "Your name is Free." Thereafter, any time he met anyone, he would shake their hand and say, "I am Free!" I'm not kidding. Even in the dream, the me watching laughed at that. It was so cool, this little morality play unfolding in my sleep. Then he would deliver his message, just those two things, and move on. In the beginning, everyone liked him and what he said. It made them feel better, more hopeful, a tad lighter in their step. But after a while, when the implications of his message began to sink in, this started to turn. People became uncomfortable, irritated even, as they realized that they might have to change, give up some things they had come to like, if they took his dictums fully to heart. They preferred the lives they were used to, the amenities they were accustomed to, a kind of thoughtlessness that demanded little and gave a lot back, at least in the currencies that everyday culture traffics in and values. So they started to grumble, resist. As it happened, the only ones who continued to value and listen to him were young children, who had not had time to forget yet what he knew, understood it implicitly. Their parents did not like this, either, grumbled more.

The "powers-that-be" in the town (and that is exactly the terms in which they were cast, even as they remained invisible, off-screen, throughout, no names, faces, anything) heard all the grumbling and decided that Free needed to be stopped, that the adults were getting chafed and feared their children were being tainted. The status quo had to be firmed up again, reasserted. Their first instinct was just to kill him, but they knew it had to be done indirectly, for obvious reasons. One of the members of this group said he knew a man, one of the townspeople, who truly hated Free, already wanted to kill him but was disinclined to suffer the consequences of

that act. They directed their colleague to approach this man, tell him he could kill Free without any fear of reprisal.

One evening Free was sitting with some friends on the screened-in front porch of one of their homes, laughing and goofing around. The only things I ever saw Free do in the dream, besides delivering his message, always with a beaming, off-kilter smile, were laugh and goof around. The hired gun happened to walk by right then and saw him up there. He hurried up the steps and came in through the screened door. It was one of those old-fashioned wood-frame doors on taut-spring hinges that closed with a “whack” behind anyone who entered, which it did, “whack,” after this man passed through. You may be old enough to remember those doors, common on screened porches back in the 50s and 60s. And this is a good example of the level of detail I “recalled” from this dream by being in it as a witness. Wood-on-wood, “whack!”

The man had a holstered six-gun, slung Western style on his right thigh. He started to reach for it. Free knew he was about to be killed, but it didn’t seem to bother him at all. He just stood up, walked up to the man, close, looked him in the eye, like he was seeing something beautiful deep inside, something even the man had forgotten. Then he told him, in the most sincere and loving way: “You know, I can see, inside there, you are such a good man!” The man stopped in his tracks, then turned around and left, out the door, “whack,” back down the steps. He never drew his gun, he never said a word, he didn’t even smile, oddly. Just left, and that was that.

Soon word got back to the powers-that-be that this plan failed. So they told the cops simply to “bring him in for a few questions.” They would take it from there. Three cops came to escort him in (not arrest or apprehend, but escort) from that same porch. They looked like cops from “The Simpsons,” kind of jovial, slapstick even, not menacing in any way. He went along quite happily. They all ambled slowly down the middle of the main street all through the town, the four of them, like a little parade, joking, laughing. The sidewalks were lined with people who applauded, said how happy they were to have had Free come to their town. But not one of them either said or did anything to forestall his being taken away. It was just a long goodbye. Some of the children ran out into the street, thanked him, patted him on the back, said they would remember what he said. Free was filled with a calm joy. He knew absolutely, in his heart, that when he came to the end of that street, far enough out of town to be turned over to the powers-that-be, alone with them at the edge of the woods, their woods, one of two things was going to happen: They would put a bullet in his head and bury him right there or send him off to an insane asylum where he’d stay for the rest of his life. Nothing else, one of those two things, both of which were equal to him, not good or bad, just equal. He was placid, happy. He knew, had known in some way from the start, that those are the only possible outcomes for someone like him, and he accepted their coming as easily and smilingly as he had everything else along the way. They all walked on, heading out of town.

Then I woke up. I narrated this dream to a couple of friends last weekend. They were very engaged with the story, animated by its telling, until that point. Both were instantly, expressly disappointed, that it didn’t have an “ending.” I tried to tell them that it did have an ending:

One of those two things was absolutely going to happen to him on the outskirts of that town, and they were both the same, exactly equal and effective ways to put an end to a story of this sort. And, from the point of view of the powers-that-be, they are both smart solutions. A bullet to the head outside town, a quick burial, is so much the better for them, in the long run, than a public execution (think Socrates and Jesus, for example.) And the insane asylum is so much the better for them, in the long run, than imprisonment (think Gandhi and Mandela, for example.)

But it is not a depressing or hopeless outcome, not to Free and not to me. Because of the children. We are all, every one of us, children at heart. We know what he knew. It's all there. Just need to remember it. In Rereading Poets I tell a story about how I cried, continuously, inconsolably, scarily, for the whole first year of my life. As the story goes, on my first birthday, I stopped and, as far as anyone knew, I never cried again. Well, I did of course, but it was rare and I tried to do it privately. When Carol died, I cried and cried. Every day now I cry, not necessarily about that, could be anything, the trees in the woods, a person on the street, anything. I just cried while I was writing that sentence. That's how close my tears are every minute of the day. I don't know why I cried as a baby or why I stopped. I don't know why I'm crying most of the time I do it now. Same thing with laughing. I do it all the time, for no reason that would be apparent to someone watching, no reason I could provide to such a witness. And, as I've said, sometimes they both come together, a seamless whole, laugh-crying or cry-laughing, my heart full to overflowing with what I know and what I don't, all unstoppable, so unsayable, laughter and tears the only way it can get out. [. . .]

I have read and reread the things I've written in the aftermath of Carol's death over and over. I gauge my "progress," I guess you'd call it, though I think that's a stupid way for me to put it, along my rehabilitory path by how often and how much I cry and laugh while I'm doing it. I have this idea, again, most likely grounded in stupidity, that when I can get through the whole thing, my essay, this book, without crying and laughing, I will be done, healed, restored, released, whatever. But the child in there knows better, that there is no there to get to, wouldn't want to go to that there even if there were one there. All those townspeople lining the route, and then, what: the powers-that-be. I want to cry and laugh every day, just like this, about nothing, about everything. Then I know that what matters most to me, the things I want to tell you, this is such a beautiful world, you have such a good soul, will come out of the deepest ocean of my heart and not the shallow puddle of my head. That you will hear a child's voice in there, your own, the one you love, still love, have always loved, like I love mine, the one who loves us back, the best kind of love, true love. That you will remember everything, laughing and crying, whenever it moves you to do so. If even one of you does that, and I know you will, I have no problem going to the end of the street, just outside of town, handed over, awaiting my fate. I don't fear being dead (though I've seen enough hard dying to have a healthy dread of that) and I don't mind being deemed crazy (though I've had enough trouble in my head to want to do my best to keep the real thing corralled.) Either way I figure, I get to be Free, free.

Epilogue: Take 2, 8/11/16

The fireman told himself a lot more garbage of this nature. Then he told himself some true things.

Donald Barthelme

OK, wait a minute. The child:free analogy is a true thing, sure, at its root. Not garbage, I wouldn't go that far, no, just that it could easily end up there if I'm not careful, throwing those big words together and around that way, leaving them like that, both too much, all that life-and-death angst, drama, and too little, easy to underestimate, keep at bay, just another cutesy-kitty (lol!) internet meme, something the townspeople wouldn't even need to grumble much about, so squishy-sweet, or the powers-that-be wouldn't have to worry about, a neat figure of speech but no threat even to the quotidian status quo, let alone the social order, something maybe "epideictic," to borrow an Aristotelian term I have never (I hope) once used in my public writing. So all day yesterday I had a nagging sense that there was something else, had to be, something more, something missing there, the teeth. I just couldn't put a finger on it, or a word to it.

Since I'm the only body in my bed now, no one there to calibrate my clock in collaboration with, I often sleep erratically, out of kilter, off-tempo. I get all the sleep I need, but it's often in disconnected increments. Sometimes I wake up, wide awake, in the middle of the night, or just way too early, like I did last night, the last filaments of a dream receding forever into oblivion, leaving only a faint trace of what it "meant." I knew the dream I had lost all the details of had something to do with who Free was and what I needed to say about him.

One thing the residue of my dream made clear was this: Free was not me, at least not the whole of me, the one you might think "I am" all the time if all you know about "me" is this book, the impression I might have left you with yesterday. Whitman says it best: "I am vast; I contain multitudes." So do you, so do we all, myriads of "mes." Our culture, our lives, may compel us to think and act most often as if we are only one of them, "I", the necessary one, the normal one, the one induced from the outside in by whatever we need to be to survive our public lives, with all of those opportunities and obligations and problems pouring in toward us. But what about the rest of the multitudes? Where do they get to be in the equation that we keep trying balance in there?

I was asking my class the other day, as I often do when I'm teaching anything that makes the question pertinent, whether or not they believe anyone else can ever truly "know" them, the way they know themselves. This particular occasion for the question was prompted by Susan Griffin's claim, in "Our Secret," that she wants to get "inside Heinrich Himmler's head," via the arsenal of biographic and fictional tools she has at her disposal. I am always surprised, stunned really, by how many of them, usually more than half, think that's possible, easy even. I certainly don't. I feel that if someone trying to write my biography could get access to everything I've written or made, to everyone who knew me, they would still get it wrong. And I am one of the most self-revelatory "scholars" in the academic universe! I will (and have) disclosed just about anything you can think of about "myself" along the way, in my books and poems especially, as you now know just from having read this one, the most intimate, confidential things in my head, my heart, no inhibitions at all it sometimes

seems. All out there for all to see. That's one of the reasons I'm always amused when others describe me as "private." I am, in my writing especially, the least "private" person I know, with no apparent barriers to self-disclosure. As I often think: "Private? Hello! Have you read the book?"

I am, on the other hand, reclusive, as I made clear along the way. And that covers all the parts almost no one ever gets to see, hear, know, except maybe for Emily Dickinson or Carol or some other "nobody, too" who actually asks me "who are you?" I'm not really trying to hide any of that. It's just that you have to be with somebody, doing something, walking, laughing, crying, together, side by side, eye to eye, for it to show. Then the words that come, well, they come alive, embodied, made flesh, right there, in the woods, over coffee, in my office, me and you, alive, together. Writing, just words, all alone there on the page, no, they won't do it. If that distinction—private/reclusive—doesn't make sense to you, well, think about it. Or re-read what I said about Emily Dickinson. One day it will.

That's one of the mes, then, that never takes on a public face. And there are tons of other mes, too, I never say anything about, just like you don't, for good reasons. . . . None of those mes, and most of the multitude of others in there striving to collaborate, to get along, appear unitary in public for decorum's sake, is Free. Who, then, is he? And what do I most need to say now to qualify, or add to, what I said yesterday?

Here's what my dream told me to say, even though I couldn't remember the details of it. Free is not even the me you see when you read this book; he is the me I get to be with, near, while I'm in there. In some figurative way,

he is the book itself. Yes, I thought, of course, exactly, obviously, so obvious I couldn't believe it took me six months (and a forgotten dream) to see it: What's the first thing my book says when it walks up to you, shakes your hand in those wacky fake review blurbs [at the end of the book now, on online platforms]: "I am free!" Just like Free, who came to me in that dream the very week I both marked the anniversary of Carol's passing and "finished" my book. [. . .]

Since I had woken up so early, about 5:30, I had to wait to take my walk, left right at first light. The woods are beautiful, so soothing, in that kind of light. About a quarter of a mile up the path on the walk I take most days, there is fulsome space, a grand space, where the trees are farther apart and quite large. It's the space I mention in "Because I Said I Would" (October 22), when I was brought to tears by my recognition of their obvious, ongoing love for me, so steady, so always-there. Each one. And all together. Every time I enter that space, I feel a sense of solemnity, not in its Eliotic too-highness, but in its diurnal just-rightness, a deep awareness, very placid, of the weight of those trees, spiritually, their dignity, their care. I try to remind myself to carry an awareness of that weight in my bearing all that day long, like they do. I'm not that good, of course, that steady. But I keep thinking that if I try to do it enough times, in recognition of their gift to me, I will get better at it.

[. . .] OK, that's a least part of what I knew I needed to figure out, and add, to get past that nagging in my head yesterday about Free and me. There is, though, another layer down, I know, and I'm having a hard time trying to get a grip on it. It pertains to that "bullet and asylum" business outside of town there, so over the top, wow. It's

possible, I guess, that Free is dangerous enough to warrant such extreme measures. Maybe. But I'm surely not. I am, at best, a "poet," and even that might be a stretch, a poet, that cultural figure who, sure, from time to time or place to place can end up with a bullet to the head (think certain parts of Central or South America in the 1970s during the heyday of military juntas, for example); or in an asylum (think Russia or Eastern Europe during the pre-war and cold war years), but the United States is not one of them. Our poets are just not perceived to be very serious threats to the social order, no matter what they say. Amiri Baraka can read a poem that says "kill whitey" to a white audience that then applauds him! That's how unscary poets are for us. Why? I think it's because there are an arsenal of figurative bullets and asylums that do all of that work for the powers-that-be quietly, antiseptically, and way ahead of time.

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 homosexual 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. To be honest, I don't think the me you see here, or any of my mes, warrants even that sort of circumscription, no need to "weave a circle round [me] thrice," that is. My "dreams" are small, so small, tiny, as you know because I've showed you some of them, not dangerous at all.

So what's left then from what I said yesterday? Well, I guess it's the child over there on the other side of the analogy from Free, smiling back at him and out at me. Yes, I do like that child. Children are rarely scary, of course. That's what's great about encountering one or remembering our own inner one. Yet, they have enormous power to instigate change, real change, the

kind the powers-that-be fear because they have no good way to forestall it. Bullets and asylums just don't apply to the child. Not at least if you want to stay powers-that-be for a while.

I had a hard July this year, in my body first, but then in my head, which is more crucial to me now: It was "reality" again, right there, when the next layer down of it starts to work its way up through what you were certain was already rock bottom, becoming faintly visible, not frightening solely in itself, but more by what it hints toward, that there are likely many more such layers deeper and deeper down, waiting for you to wear through to them. And you know you will. Scary, sobering. What to do now? It was one of those moments where your spirit better stiffen or it's going to give way. That's where my child comes in. I might buy Wordsworth's "child is father of the man" business (though I'd be much more inclined to say mother, given the differences between what, and how, each of these figures "delivers" to the process), but not the rest of his system. He says in his famous "Ode" that we come into this world "trailing clouds of glory." No we don't. No way, I say. What we come in with is an instinct, not a need but a desire, to love and be loved. And with an instinct to resist the petty injustices that adults inflict on children (because they can!), those precursors to the horrors they inflict on one another out there in the torrents of history.

Our culture has such sappy ways of talking about love, just another cutesy-kitty (lol!) meme most of the time. Love is hard, both to do and to keep doing, out there in reality, a July like mine was. Most of us, not all but most, have some experience with loving and being loved as children, real love, I mean, copious for some, a sleek

yacht to speed us over rough waters, maybe just a few shreds for others, bits of flotsam we can cling to when stormy waters churn. But, in both cases, love nonetheless. It is so important, foundationally, for a good life, a life that strives toward the good, to keep a memory of that love alive. That's why we need to remember it and why, when we can, instill it in children, make sure they feel it, so they will remember it, too. That's one of the things that Free knows and does. That's what scared the powers-that-be. Not him, them, those children who might be listening to him. The powers-that-be can't afford (literally) to let that kind of love get too much out of hand. But the cutesy-kitty (lol!) kind, no problem. You can see why.

And, I want to argue, even those who never felt, or can't remember, anything of that sort, well, we have rage, the potentially generative rage that can turn us away from trying to repeat that cycle and toward trying to break it. For example, nothing, and I mean nothing, is more powerful in my motivation to be a good teacher than all my memories of the bad teaching I endured along the way. I took umbrage at it back then, every time, burning with a belief that even I, who had no tools, no natural "gifts," none, for public performance, could and would do better than that someday. I was lucky, on the other hand, to be loved. But even if I hadn't been, I hope I would use my rage in that area exactly the same way I do in the classroom: OK, Paul, pony up, do better, right now. Or shut the hell up.

So. July. My July. Finally, the end is in sight, this summer, my sabbatical, "This Fall," all of it, the end in sight, I promise. It's almost next fall, for godssake, Paul, so shut the hell up already!

Reality can be such a frightful place. It will beat us down and then kick us while we're down. I was about to start my next sentence with "we" but I stopped, did way too much of that in my "first take epilogue," which made me have to write this one. And I'm still doing it. I don't want to have to write another one. So I just stopped and set you free right then, pre-sentence, to make your own way forward. I'm just going to say "I" now, because I can't speak for you any longer, probably never should have; and I don't want to lecture here, again, always my fallback rhetorical posture. I'm a professor, after all. It's what I know how to do, unfortunately. You are an adult just like me. You know everything I know already and will make your choices accordingly.

So, let me restart that sentence: I need to stand up again now, no matter how hard it is, no matter how tired I am of doing it, not to prove I can take it (I've done that) but to show, I mean really show, that I can make it. Not to "them," all those townspeople clapping distractedly while I walk out of town, or the powers-that-be waiting, or even you, but to me. You don't need to read my book. I do. And I will, over and over, trying to let Free teach all these other mes what we need to keep remembering. Read and reread it. Again and again. Cry and laugh, cry and laugh. Every time I get knocked down I need to stand up. Again and again. Every single time.

I'm just about at the end of the street now, I see. The crowd has thinned, what little applause is left is light, intermittent, the children have gone off to play. The edge of the woods is right up ahead there. I can hear the powers-that-be chatting, still hidden in the shade, as they always are, no matter how hard I might try to dream them into sight. I can't make out what they are saying and don't even care. They will do what they will

with me when I get there, in their woods, their rules. All I can say is this: Tomorrow morning, just after I finish my coffee, or whenever I feel like it, I'll be heading out to my woods, where I'll walk for an hour or so, on my little path, for the more-than-many-thousandth time, acting like I'm seeing it for the first time, amazed, looking maybe like I'm alone there, but really with all those trees, the ones that truly love me, with Carol, who truly loved me, my kids who truly love me, all always in my heart, such goodly company, maybe even with you every now and then, if you don't mind talking haphazardly about whatever comes to mind, or just being quiet for a while, together with me. The "garbage-of-this-nature" world has an endless supply of bullets and asylums. I know a guy who knows a guy who knows "some true things." That's where I'll be if you're looking for me, in Boyce Park, with him, just walking, free as a bird, all for free.

Melancholy Baby

"You don't know how it feels to be me."

Tom Petty

"Other people are not me."

An elderly Zen monk explaining why he doesn't ask an assistant to do the grueling work of drying mushrooms in the blazing sun

Last April I was approaching what looked like some sort of brink. Now I'm back. Coming back from any brink is exhilarating. The problem is, to feel that, you first have to lean out and look down, which can be whatever the opposite of exhilarating is, at least for someone as height-intolerant as I am. The Romantic philosophers, painters and poets called this contradictory singularity of emotion "sublime," a concept we have in the meantime whittled back to apply less to vertiginous awe at the edge of a waterfall and more to a very pleasant-tasting crème brûlée, like the one I enjoyed at a downtown restaurant last night.

The "miraculous season" I forecast back then, using Bunny Lang's trope to name it, is coming to a close. Were there miracles? No, not at least of the "lost/found" variety, the figurative pertinence of which will become clear below. As it turned out, none were necessary. What I thought might be one thing—a raging torrent deep down a steep ravine, one that could sweep the canyon clean—turned out to be something else entirely—a valley rivulet riled with spring ice melt, a brief, turbulent surge between serene seasons. That's why it's important to look down. Heraclitus says you never step into the

same river twice. Same with brinks: Each time you step out there, it feels like the first, and each time you come back it feels like the last. Neither of those is true. As T.S. Eliot says, “human kind cannot bear very much reality.” At least not all at once. But “human kind” can, thankfully, “bear very much reality” in progressive stages, each one promoting change incrementally. As I sit here typing this sentence, I don’t think I’ve ever been happier. I hope it will last through the rest of them.

The changes effected by these back-and-forths are rarely visible to others. My two epigraphs get at both sides of that opacity. The first has more to do with the dissonance that often arises between a newer inner self we’re hoping others will understand and the outdated one they remain unwittingly and stubbornly wedded to. Hard as it is to update one’s own internal self-map it is considerably harder to persuade non-intimate others to do likewise. In a culture like ours, where most relationships are transactional, they have little reason, really, to invest the energy it takes even to recognize who you are let alone how you change. Why would they? As long as the version they prefer—usually one that could be condensed into a convenient three or four adjective trope they can interface with pleasantly and predictably—works well for their purposes, revising it seems wasteful, pointless. And it is.

The second epigraph conveys the opposite, that joyful resonance you feel when your inner and outer selves—the one you live with inwardly and the one you reflect outwardly—are in alignment, at least temporarily. This state of “self-identity” is unvexed by competition between an I-was and an I-am, a for-others and a for-me. At my age, it is a state of mind I experience mostly when I am alone—walking in the woods, writing, singing—which is why I find solitude so joyous; and with the few others who take the time—routinely, persistently, with an engagement motivated by love—to make room in their

imaginations for who I am presently, changefully, which makes them precious to me.

My subject today may seem on the face of it to have very little pertinence to any of this. Even I'm not sure how or why he does. But my intuition is prodding me to make this transition anyway. A few days ago I was walking at Squaxin Park. I had just come up from the beach, turned right onto the Bluff Trail. At the top of the first hill is a huge Douglas fir, off to the right, at the edge of the cliff overlooking Budd Bay, among those I always stop to "shake hands with" on this path. As soon as I touched the tree a name came to mind. Not like a whisper, some flimsy detritus floating in on the tide, but "pay attention to this" loud. I was baffled and stunned. The name was William Cowper, a mid-18th century poet I came across in my undergraduate survey of British poetry. He was, like Thomas Gray, deemed one of the precursor poets to the Romantic movement, which hit full stride a generation on. I may have read a few snippets of his work back then but recalled none of it. And I hadn't thought about him in any serious way for almost 60 years. I couldn't fathom why this tree was calling him to mind for me, but I decided to find out. So I've been looking into his life (improbably, almost unbelievably, strange) and work (segmented out over time in equally strange, disconnected ways.)

The clichéd version of him I had in mind was that he wrote some soothing nature-based poetry and some soul-edifying hymns. The former earned him considerable fame in his own time as well as that credence as a "pre-Romantic." Several of the latter ended up in Protestant hymnals, sung in such churches everywhere to this day. He went out of favor pretty quickly once the "real" Romantics came along, a not uncommon fate for poets, renowned in their own time, sidelined soon thereafter. Fame in one's own moment does not preclude becoming of more long-term consequence. A smattering of poets and artists are both. But the vast majority of the former never become the latter.

William Cowper was one of those. If you spend any time reading their work from a more remote temporal vantage point, you can usually see why pretty quickly. It's just not that "great," an intuitive standard that gradually arises as you read more and more of the poets who have survived the rigors of time. I'll quote some of his work along the way so you can decide for yourself whether history has judged him fairly.

What interests me more in his case, and makes him pertinent to this series, is the radical divide between his public and private selves. His life was segmented into a series of "lost-then-found-then-lost-again" chapters, which seem on the surface so extreme and discrete from one another they couldn't possibly fit together into one coherent biography. Certainly, anyone back then who came across his work—especially during his brief period of public fame—would have known almost nothing about the deeply troubled mind doing that creating, i.e., how it felt to be him. But from this distance, seeing the whole trajectory, it is clear that a very powerful undertow holds it all together, is, in many ways, more interesting than any of the surface perturbations it generated. And is, I think now, what makes him worth my thinking about: not primarily as a poet but as a human being, deeply vexed and afflicted by life in the most bizarre ways. In other words, a more extreme example of most of us, appearing seamless on the surface, often riven inwardly with anxiety, doubt, grief, sometimes depression and despair, the brinks that keep on giving in a culture that prefers we keep all of that politely and stoically hidden.

Cowper's serene early childhood came to an abrupt halt with the trauma of his mother's death, in childbirth, when he was six. That event and her visage haunted him thereafter. In 1798, two years before his death, he wrote an elegiac poem, "On the Receipt of My Mother's Picture Out of Norfolk," that opens this way:

*Oh that those lips had language! Life has pass'd
With me but roughly since I heard thee last.
Those lips are thine—thy own sweet smiles I see,
The same that oft in childhood solaced me;
Voice only fails, else, how distinct they say,
"Grieve not, my child, chase all thy fears away!"*

He had received the portrait from his cousin, Ann Bodham, eight years earlier saying he would rather have that “than the richest jewel in the British crown.” I mention all of this because that loss is one way to account for a “life” that “pass’d . . . roughly,” though nothing is ever, I know, quite that simple. Shortly thereafter, his father sent him off to a boarding school where an older boy bullied him relentlessly. He says the abuse was so “savage” that during those years he was “afraid to lift my eyes upon him higher than his knees,” a series of traumas that seemed to establish fear as a foundational element in his temperament, one that was described at the time as “melancholic,” a diagnosis of personality type that, along with choleric, sanguine, and phlegmatic, had medical standing back then. “Melancholy” stems from the ancient Greek *melankholia*, literally “black bile” (from *melas*: dark; and *khole*: bile), which was (incorrectly) associated with the spleen, the root of another common name for this temperament: splenetic. An excess of this fluid was thought to cause prolonged sadness, fear, and despondence. Whether black bile had anything to do with it, Cowper certainly displayed all of these moods throughout his life.

I feel a sort of kinship with Cowper, disposition-wise. I have been told I was disconsolate during my first year of life, cried unremittingly, to my mother’s great distress. She hauled me back and forth to the local doctor seeking surcease. He diagnosed “cholic” (another bilious condition). I had apparently inherited my mother’s wonky stomach. Obviously, I have no actual memories of that year. I do know, again according to family myth, that I stopped crying on my first birthday and never cried

again. It's possible that my "cholic" simply cleared up. But I'm not sure about that. I have had a nagging sense for most of my life that I just didn't want to come into this world in the first place, so I cried in an infantile way as if it would make a difference. Until, when I was one, I realized it wouldn't and gave it up.

There are two ways to account for a sense like that. The first is some form of reincarnation—metempsychosis, transmigration, samara, whatever—the way, say, that Wordsworth, echoing Plato, describes it in his "Ode on Intimations of Immortality:"

*Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting:
The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star,
Hath had elsewhere its setting,
And cometh from afar:
Not in entire forgetfulness,
And not in utter nakedness,
But trailing clouds of glory do we come
From God, who is our home . . .*

Socrates believed, at least sometimes, that we were recycled in and out of this world routinely. In the *Meno*, for example, he claims he was able to "teach" Meno's (uneducated) slave how to do some complex geometry simply by asking him some questions, which prompted him to remember what he knew before he got here. Meno doesn't buy it, and the slave resents being used as an object lesson, but Socrates seems insistent on it, as he is in the *Phaedrus*, all that whirling about the heavens between lives on those steed-drawn chariots, trying to process what we know and learn more. It's possible, of course, following this script, that Cowper and I were melancholic when we got here because the memory-erasure machine necessary for such a recycling system malfunctioned, so we recalled snippets of either a horrific prior life we feared repeating or an idyllic one certain to make this iteration a bitter disappointment.

The second way relies more on premonition, that ability to envision or forecast future conditions or events, an innate mode of perception some seem to come aboard here with. In that case, we may have had at least a vague sense that our time here would be less than ideal and, being sensitive souls, lamented it ahead of time. Then again, maybe I just had a sour stomach and Cowper had a tough childhood. In any case, whether “melancholy” is congenital or induced, Cowper was definitely that from a very early age and, because of that, a lot of bad things happened along his way.

He spent his early adult years in agitated, unproductive indolence, what we might today call a severe anxiety disorder: intermittent sub-sufficient employment, which left him dependent economically on “the kindness of others,” dissolute in many ways. In 1755, at 24, he was about to marry his cousin Theodora, happiness at hand, when her father intervened to prohibit it, either because they were cousins or he thought Cowper was a loser. Maybe both, he never said. Cowper became severely depressed. Theodora was similarly heartbroken. Neither ever married. Theodora remained his devoted friend, providing some consolation and financial support for him along the way. He wrote a series of lovely poems, naming her “Delia,” during their courtship, not published until after her death in 1824, twenty four years after William died. I’ll quote a few of them before I finish here.

Things continued to go awry for him into his early thirties when he had the first of his several nervous breakdowns, one that culminated in an attempted suicide by multiple methods over a period of about two days. The process began “one evening in November, 1763,” each attempt failing either comically or miraculously. Maybe both. Cowper documents this process in dispassionate, almost mechanical, detail in an essay he wrote much later, one Robert Southey includes in his *The Life and Works of William Cowper* (1836), many years after his death.

The fact that someone of Southey's stature took it upon himself to assemble such an opus suggests that Cowper did have some historical traction, at least into the period of "high" Romanticism that opened in earnest with the publication of the second edition of Wordsworth and Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads* in 1800, the year Cowper died. Coleridge himself called him "the best modern poet," high praise indeed. In any case, the dire narrative of his failed attempts to kill himself—by poison, by drowning, by stabbing and by hanging—all of which happened 20 years before he became "famous" for his poetry, was not likely common knowledge among the readers who later loved his work.

There is an air of absurd horror to the tale as Cowper tells it, one that led me to recall, from my childhood, a Don Martin cartoon in *Mad Magazine* called "The Suicide," which in the first panel shows a weeping middle-aged woman standing on a steep cliff overlooking the ocean with an anvil tied to her ankle. She tosses it over the edge. In the final panel, the anvil is at the bottom of the water, still attached to her leg, which has stretched all the way down, leaving her still standing there, bug-eyed, a baffled can't-win-for-losing frown on her face. Cowper's story has that aspect to it, a weird, mildly manic, matter-of-fact narration, as if even he can't believe both how inept and lucky he was that day. Here is a very brief passage from that essay, which goes on for pages and pages, describing each of the failed attempts in elaborate detail:

Not knowing where to poison myself, for I was liable to interruption in my chambers from my laundress and her husband, I laid aside that intention, and resolved upon drowning. For that purpose I immediately took a coach, and ordered the man to drive to Tower wharf; intending to throw myself into the river from Custom House quay. . . I left the coach upon the Tower wharf, intending never to return to it; but upon coming to the quay, I found the water low, and a porter seated upon some goods there,

as if on purpose to prevent me. This passage to the bottomless pit being mercifully shut against me, I returned back to the coach and ordered it to return to the Temple. I drew up the shutters, once more had recourse to the laudanum [he had purchased the day before], and determined to drink it off directly; but God had otherwise ordained. A conflict, that shook me to pieces, suddenly took place . . . which deprived me in a manner of the use of my limbs; and my mind was as much shaken as my body.

This is a highly condensed version of just this particular failure, the whole of his ongoing ineffectual process rendered in the same clinical voice and minute detail. I'm not clear whether the coachman waited because he assumed his fare would return, or Cowper's decision to abort the attempt simply happened before he had time to leave. As I said, there is an absurd horror to his telling that is somehow irresistible.

In any case, shortly thereafter, Cowper was admitted to St. Albans insane asylum, where he stayed for 18 months, under the care of Nathaniel Cotton, a part-time poet and avid Christian who took a liking to Cowper. It was during that time that he was "born again." As Thomas Gilbert explains, one day

[h]e found a Bible lying (not by accident) on a bench, where he read the story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. There he "saw so much benevolence, mercy, goodness, and sympathy with miserable men, in our Saviour's conduct, that I almost shed tears upon the revelation; little thinking that it was an exact type of the mercy which Jesus was on the point of extending towards myself." (131–32).

A connection arranged by Cotton with a retired clergyman and his wife, Morley and Mary Unwin, who took Cowper in,

inaugurated his next, relatively placid, phase, during which time he recuperated, wrote some poems, and did some gardening. After Morley died in an accident, Cowper continued to live with Mary platonically, she becoming the mother-figure he lacked and longed for. During that time he met John Newton, the reformed slave-trader working then as a canon and writing hymns as part of his penance, his most famous “Amazing Grace,” the lost-then-found template for the ages. Cowper began to write hymns of his own, a number of which remain classics of the genre. If you happen to know any of Cowper’s work these days, it’s probably one of those hymns.

The two compiled a book of their hymns called *Olney Hymns*, ultimately published in 1779. In the end, Newton wrote about two hundred, but before Cowper could complete his share (he wrote 68), he had what he called “the fatal dream,” in January 1773, ten years after the dreadful breakdown that led him to St. Albans. The dream initiated another bout of “insanity,” which precipitated another suicide attempt, by hanging, again unsuccessful only because his mother-substitute interrupted, cutting him down before he expired. He does not say precisely what the dream was, only that a “word” was spoken that reduced him to spiritual despair, something to the effect of “It is all over with you; you are lost” (Gilbert, 225.) Newton stood by him through this period, sacrificing at least one vacation so as not to leave Cowper alone. During this time, Cowper wrote a slew of abolitionist poems in support of Newton’s anti-slavery campaign. One of them, “The Negro’s Complaint,” published in 1778, was often quoted by Martin Luther King. So you might know his work that way, too.

One interesting thing about hymns of that era is they were published without a score. Congregations chose the tune they preferred to intone them with. Which is to say that Cowper established himself primarily as a “writer” via this work. Newton moved to London shortly after the book was published and

Cowper started to write poetry in earnest, inaugurating the next phase of his life. His first volume, published in 1782 under the title *Poems by William Cowper, of the Inner Temple, Esq.*, was a series of very long moralistic poems—with titles like “Truth,” “Hope,” and “Charity”—that were not well-received critically, though Ben Franklin liked them. They are written in a stereotypically Augustan style, Alexander Pope’s fingerprints all over them. Cowper works with a shorter line than Pope, but the poems are in his familiar rhyming couplets, very accomplished formally, but pretty turgid material to read. Every now and then there is a passage that has Wordsworthian aspects to it, like this one:

*Yon cottager, who weaves at her own door,
Pillow and bobbins all her little store;
Content, though mean; and cheerful, if not gay,
Shuffling her threads about the live-long day
Just earns a scanty pittance; and at night
Lies down secure, her heart and pocket light . . .*

But these are few and far between. Most of the poems are moralistically leaden.

In 1781 Cowper met a charming widow named Lady Austin who became his “muse.” The book he wrote under her spell, *The Task*, published in 1785, is the one that catapulted him to fame. As he says in its “Advertisement,”

. . . a lady, fond of blank verse, demanded a poem of that kind from the author, and gave him the SOFA [the title of the first “book” of the series] for a subject. He obeyed; and, having much leisure, connected another subject with it; and, pursuing the train of thought to which his situation and turn of mind led him, brought forth at length, instead of the trifle which he at first intended, a serious affair – a Volume!

The poetry in this book has a more relaxed, casual aspect to it, pre-Romantic, perhaps, in that respect. The title poem is very long—six “books,” 5000 lines of Miltonian blank verse exploring, with strong moral overtones, natural themes and rural life, subjects Wordsworth delves into more adroitly and crisply in his share of *Lyrical Ballads*. Here’s a tiny snippet from “Book Three—The Garden” to give you a taste of how he handles both of those aspects—the moral and the natural:

*Grudge not, ye rich (since luxury must have
His dainties and the World’s more num’rous half
Lives by contriving delicates for you),
Grudge not the cost. Ye little know the cares,
the vigilance, the labour, and the skill,
That day and night are exercised, and hang
Upon the ticklish balance of suspense,
That ye may garnish your profuse regales
With summer fruits brought forth by wintry suns.*

...

*Who loves a garden loves a greenhouse too.
Unconscious of a less propitious clime,
There blooms exotic beauty, warm and snug,
While the winds whistle and snows descend.
The spiry myrtle with unwith’ring leaf
Shines there and flourishes. The golden boast
Of Portugal and western India there,
The ruddier orange, and the paler lime,
Peep through their polish’d foliage at the storm,
And seem to smile at what they need not fear.*

I think you can hear and feel from this both why the poem was so popular in its time, which it certainly was, and why it did not gain long-term historical traction.

This improbable rise to celebrity, at the age of 54, is the capstone of his literary career. A couple of years later, he had another nervous breakdown from which he never fully recovered. During this final period, he translated Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* into blank verse, a volume published in 1791, not particularly well-received. Mary Unwin, who had become paralyzed, died in 1796, plunging him into a prolonged fatal tailspin. He died of dropsy (fluid retention) on April 25, 1800 at the age of 68.

I think my favorite Cowper poems are his shorter lyrics, some of which he wrote between his two books and, the "Delia" poems he composed during his ill-fated courtship of Theodora. In this early series he practices (and I think this was in fact practice for him) all of the various forms he uses in his later work: the Alexandrines of his first book:

*Bid adieu, my sad heart, bid adieu to thy peace!
Thy pleasure is past, and thy sorrows increase;
See the shadows of evening how far they extend,
And a long night is coming, that never may end;*

the fourteeners of his hymns:

*Ah then! if haply to my share
Some slender pittance fall,
If I but gain one single hair,
Nor age usurp them all;—*

*When you behold it still as sleek,
As lovely to the view,
As when it left thy snowy neck,
That Eden where it grew,*

*Then shall my Delia's self declare
That I professed the truth,*

*And have preserved my little share
In everlasting youth.*

some rhymed and off-rhymed poems with an Elizabethan aspect, prescient (to my way of reading) of what readers liked about “The Task:”

*This evening, Delia, you and I,
Have managed most delightfully,
For with a frown we parted;
Having contrived some trifle that
We both may be much troubled at,
And sadly disconcerted.*

*Yet well as each performed their part,
We might perceive it was but art;
And that we both intended
To sacrifice a little ease;
For all such petty flaws as these
Are made but to be mended.*

even the standard iambic pentameter quatrains of traditional English love poems:

*Trust me, these symptoms of thy faithful heart,
In absence shall my dearest hope sustain;
Delia! since such thy sorrow that we part,
Such when we meet thy joy shall be again.*

*Hard is that heart, and unsubdued by love,
That feels no pain, nor ever heaves a sigh;
Such hearts the fiercest passions only prove,
Or freeze in cold insensibility.*

There is something coy, sweet and charming about these poems, probably the last time any of those adjectives could even

remotely apply to him or his work. I wish William and Theodora had been allowed to marry. I think both would have been happier. Someone with his “melancholia” and deep-seated anxiety may never have been fully stable. But the nervous breakdowns, failed suicides and asylum episodes might have been tamped down a bit, if not avoided. He would have preferred that, I’m sure. Having read his whole story now, so would I. He accomplished quite a lot facing into a gale-force headwind. Would that the wind had been friendlier.

...

Okay, now that I’ve done all of this, I’m still wondering why that fir wanted me to find this out. I can think of a couple of obvious cliches:

1. No matter how poorly you think you’re doing, there are vast swaths of humanity who would love to have what you have or feel how you feel. The extremity of Cowper’s suffering cast my own angst in a different light, like when you go to a doctor’s office, assuming your condition is grave, and see many others so much worse off. You’re tempted just to leave, counting your blessings on the way out the door.

2. No matter how much you think you know about any writer, especially a poet who appears to be sharing his most intimate inner thoughts and feelings with you, there is a vast universe inside his or her head that remains hidden, from you, of course, but often from him/herself. Cowper is a good example. So am I. You may be, too.

3. We live in a culture that does everything in its power to secrete those realities both from the general community and, even more egregiously, from the social “order” itself. I’m inclined to think, based in part on this work but more generally as well, that both “repressions” derive from shame. For most of

my life, insurance covered mental health issues meagerly, if at all. As if your brain was like your teeth: you messed it up through weakness or inattention so pay to fix it yourself, blame parceled out to body parts piecemeal, individualism gone haywire! And to admit to mental health issues in a workplace was at least risky, probably stupid. Likewise, to talk about them socially with others, who were more than happy both to share and hear about the grossest of physical health issues, was deemed impertinent, indecorous. As to cultural shame: I think at some deep level we all understand that the social and economic systems we have created, live with, and tacitly endorse, are in fact profoundly toxic, even traumatic, for a “healthy” human being, like a giant factory whose primary purpose is to manufacture psychological instability as an instrument of control. Which is also to say that quite often the sanest among us, the ones who see that dysfunction most clearly and resist its control most visibly, are deemed “mad,” in need of “treatment,” whether insurance pays for it or not. And the ones who foment such vision and resistance at scale sooner or later merit the “bullets and asylums” I talked about in *This Fall*. Marshall Sahlins, a cultural anthropologist who worked primarily with Pacific Island and East Asian Indigenous communities, describes a time he tried to explain to one of those groups how Western capitalist/Christian systems operated. They were aghast. The values we proudly promote—accumulation, competition, power, authority, hierarchy, “rugged individualism”—are their symptoms of mental illness. Sahlins’s little book *The Western Illusion of Human Nature* (Prickly Paradigm Press, 2008) is a blast and a treat. He is deeply and eclectically learned and admirably cantankerous, just my speed!

There’s got to be more to it than this, but beats me what it might be.

...

It is a stunning morning. I walked again at Squaxin Park, such a magical place, the big-leaf-maple capital of Olympia. The air here is often eerily clear, and some days, like today, surreally so. Every leaf in the forest seems both relaxed and alert, savoring the sunlight that both startles and soothes it, seeming to levitate it upward. The bay was surprisingly choppy, given the light breeze, but the water near shore was float-glass clear, an unusual contrast. Just below the mouth of the Ellis Creek estuary I saw a few jellyfish, dinner plate sized, plump and glistening as if still alive, lining the cobbled beach, one every two feet or so, just beyond the reach of the lapping waves. Then there were dozens more over the next quarter mile or so, as if they had all been cast ashore at the same time by a mini-rogue wave, trapped now tantalizingly close to the water's edge. It was bizarre and mesmerizing. I made sure to avoid stepping on one, having done that once and found the gooey "jelly" almost impossible to remove from the grooves in my shoe's sole.

I stopped on my way back at the great fir that prompted this piece. I was hoping it would have something more to say to me about why it sent me on this journey. It didn't. Not surprising. Trees are notoriously taciturn. I just used many year's worth of tree words merely to say how parsimonious they are in that respect. So I still have no clear idea why it called me toward William Cowper, beyond the obvious things I listed yesterday, that is. So I'll go back to my epigraphs, which I chose before rather than after I wrote the piece.

The first has to do with how hard it is for someone else to "know how it feels to be me." Or you. Or Cowper. Or anyone, really. Takes a lot of patience and attention to do that. Providing that sort of external validation is some of the most worthy work we can do while we're here, especially in a culture like ours that demeans its value by commodifying others transactionally, often in the most superficial, even deleterious ways. The more quickly we can reduce our circle to a series of cardboard cutouts, the

rules of the game keep insisting, the easier it will be to manage our social calendar in our own favor.

Mental illness aggravates that reductive process considerably. Cowper had multiple nervous breakdowns, spent a year and a half in an asylum, tried to take his own life multiple times. And failed repeatedly even at that! We have an assortment of medical terms which function more as slurs than explanations, really, to keep disorders that sort fully at arm's length, as if they might be contagious. That discourse supports a strange sort of self-justifying shunning behavior. If you want to help others in their darker moments, with their deepest needs, you have to learn how to override the socially induced fear that inhibits such kindness. Maybe the fir just wanted me to do that with and for Cowper, who, if my personal theories about "the life of the author" (the subtitle of my book *Rereading Poets*) and the universality of consciousness are true, knows who I am and is grateful, as I am, to have had this conversation.

I also came to appreciate his writing, not much admired now, certainly not my own cup of tea, either. He seemed to do it the same way that monk dried mushrooms for the evening meal, with care and full attention, his very best, no matter how hot the sun was, because "other people are not me," another kind of love shared, via the things he made, with the people who savored them back then, even if they had no idea what he was up against. I know now how hot was the sun Cowper endured while he was making these poems. It makes a difference in how I read and value them.

Cowper gained his fame late rather than early in his career, a blessing I'm sure he enjoyed. I kind of knew that already. What I found out was that he was also loved along the way—some of it unfortunately star-crossed, but all of it genuinely true—by people who sacrificed their own convenience and resources to care for him kindly. And I believe he genuinely loved them, too,

which is even more important. That is inspiring. More so to me, at my age, than that decade of celebrity he breezed through fleetingly in his fifties, here and gone, the way of a world addicted to commerce and celebrity.

Just as I was leaving the fir tree behind, it struck me: It, like all of us, had no say whatsoever about where and when it was “born.” And in its case, there was no way to “leave home” if it wasn’t happy there. This one happened to grow up right at the edge of the bluff that overlooks Budd Bay. It has stood at that brink for well over a hundred years now, never asking why or what next. It did its best under circumstances almost entirely out of its control and has grown into a magnificent specimen in that pretty precarious spot. William Cowper did the same. So have I.

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Sources:

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How Can I Help You?

Note:

About five years ago I “covered” and recorded a playlist of songs I called “Faded to Blue.” I’ve been listening to it a lot lately for reasons too complicated to explain. I just realized that the epigraphs for the first two essays in this series came from that inventory, probably because those songs are fresh in my mind. So, I just decided to use the remainder of the playlist (there are six songs, total) to guide the rest of what I write here, a helpful-sounding heuristic that will be both unpredictably generative (which I enjoy) and self-limiting (which I need.) Win-win!

...

*It's a hard way to find out that trouble is real,
in a faraway city with a faraway feel.*

Graham Parsons

I came of age before the “self-service” era. My five-word title was my go-to move when I started waiting on customers in my father’s hardware store when I was kid. It was every shopkeeper’s go-to move. If you wanted to stay in business, you had to help people politely, effectively and efficiently. So that’s what I tried to do. Sometimes they knew exactly what they needed, sometimes it took a conversation to figure it out. Some were polite, some were rude, some dismissive. No matter. There’s a lot to be said for that old bromide that “the customer is always right.” Even when they’re not, it’s counterproductive to

argue about it. Just help them as best you can, and move on to the next one, a sound customer-service ethic. The nice thing about hardware is you can figure out pretty quickly what someone needs, find it, and sell it to them. They leave happy. Their “self” is “served.” If you spend any time in the big box home improvement centers, you know that buying hardware is now more arduous. I know a lot about hardware, and I can still spend 20 minutes and walk half a mile just to find a few wood screws. And no one along the way ever asks “How can I help you?”

We are living now in the golden age for servicing our “self.” We self-checkout our groceries, self-pump our own gas, self-renovate our bathrooms, buy any one or combination of the staggering overwhelm of books, courses, programs designed to improve our self, and take selfies to record it for our-selves. You would assume then that we must by now have a deep understanding of what that “self” is, how it originates and evolves, and how we can orient it toward our own ends. It is just a matter of finding the best means. Yet exactly the opposite seems to be true. All of this self-initiated work looks in practice a lot more like hapless floundering in search of something we can never quite define let alone find than the laser-focused pursuit of an achievable ideal. How did we end up in such a pickle?

I’m going to cut right to the chase here. I think that hapless floundering arises not because the problem is complex, but because it is simple: There are two basic questions that pre-determine what a self is before we ever think about trying to “help” it, and they get answered for us before we’re even born: (1) Is it given whole and for free or must it be achieved at cost? In other words, is it endowed at birth, or must it be created, developed and perfected in stages via sustained work over a lifetime? And (2) Is it, by nature, reliably good or fecklessly wicked? In other words, will it lead you in the best direction if

you just trust it, or do you need flog it forward forever against its nature? The answers to those questions build entirely different cultural systems. And, in my opinion at least, we in the West have been given a starting point that orients us in the worst of the four possible directions. So we end up being dragged all over the place by people and powers and programs expressly designed to take advantage of a dysfunction they claim is self-induced, individually, by us, but is in fact pre-installed, collectively, by them, to serve their purposes.

I'll start with a conundrum hidden in the origin moment of one of the more famous self-development protocols of my generation, Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs. In the summer of 1938, sixteen years before he published *Motivation and Personality*, with that now iconic hierarchy as its centerpiece, Maslow spent six weeks living at Siksika (the Blackfoot Reserve in Alberta, Canada). According to Teju Ravilochan, "his time there upended some of his early hypotheses and possibly shaped his theories. . . He intended to test the universality of his theory that social hierarchies are maintained by dominance of some people over others," which was a position Maslow arrived at early in his life, based on the assumption that, at least in a power-oriented culture like ours, some version of a top-down hierarchy was baked in. Ravilochan continues:

Instead, he discovered astounding levels of cooperation, minimal inequality, restorative justice, full bellies, and high levels of life satisfaction. He estimated that "80–90% of the Blackfoot tribe had a quality of self-esteem that was only found in 5–10% of his own population. . . . Maslow saw a place where what he would later call self-actualization was the norm."

Clearly, by the time he wrote his book, Maslow had retreated from this idea of almost universal self-actualization (a state of

being the Blackfoot, like most Indigenous cultures, presume comes built into human nature), in favor of the standard Western position that the self can be fully actualized only by the few and only via arduous struggle throughout life. He never, to my knowledge, explains why. He may have defaulted to his prior training in the field, first as an experimental behaviorist, then as a student of Alfred Adler, a disciple of Freud, neither of which is fertile ground for the notion that humans are born whole and wholesome. Quite the opposite. He may have been guided unconsciously by his own troubled childhood, one where innate goodness was not presumed or acknowledged. He may have understood that Western culture was so alien to the Blackfoot ontology it would be pointless to promote it as an alternative for the already pervasive, and deeply embedded opposite. Or he may have simply realized that there was neither a book nor a career to be had in promoting the heresy (in the context of both capitalistic and Christian systems) that self-actualization was an already-given, one we needed simply to wake up to rather than work hard to merit, if we can ever merit it at all. In any case, his book ended up depicting a typically Western hierarchy of stages, from physical needs (universally required for survival) at its base, to transcendental needs (available to those few with the aptitude and resources to pursue them) at its apex. The figure via which Maslow's system entered the popular imagination was a pyramid, broad at the bottom, sloping up to a pinnacle, like the food pyramid (pre-RFK). Maslow's started out with five levels and ended up with seven. The number of levels is less important to me here than their arrangement, from physiological at the base through moral at the peak, an ontology that instantiates visually a pretty severe body-mind dualism, the Western paradigm in a nutshell.

Maslow never himself used the figure of a pyramid to represent his agenda. The general idea of a stepped system, like a ladder, say, came into currency via management motivation textbooks in the 1950s. It achieved its now-famous, PowerPoint-friendly,

pyramidal form via the multi-colored image Charles McDermid created in a 1960 article about how money motivates, published in *Business Horizons*. If you happen to know anything about Maslow, the first thing you're likely to remember is that visual, which enforces strict boundaries between levels, and presumes upward sequentiality toward a highly rarified top level, i.e., full actualization. Over the course of his career, Maslow gradually distanced himself from these limiting conditions. Growth in his view could (even must) proceed across multiple levels simultaneously, and it is not necessarily teleological in the strictest sense. On the other hand, he never recanted either the pyramid or the hierarchical structure its layered stages implied. And later in his life, in need of money, he made his living as a consultant for businesses whose primary interest was using his model to increase productivity and profits.

I say all of this not to critique Maslow or his popular purveyors, but to use his system as a stereotypical template to highlight the first decision pertinent to how your "self" arises and how it evolves over time. On the one hand, the Siksika people, like most Indigenous cultures, believe that the self arrives fully formed at birth; and that all humans share that same state of wholeness, which establishes equity as a universal moral imperative. For many of those cultures, that equity extends to every other "thing" in the natural universe, which deserves the same care and respect as "I" do. There is no escalation from physiology to morality, no body/mind or self/ nature bifurcation; and, as a consequence, no bottom to top social or economic hierarchy. Acculturation in systems of this sort is a process of modulating individuation toward the service of community, which is how Indigenous communities promote a deepening sense of selfhood over time. In other words, kinship tops individualism, cooperation tops competition, and sharing resources tops accumulating them. This is exactly the culture that Maslow witnessed at Siksika. The idea he came in with, that power was necessarily determinant for maintaining the social

order, is short-circuited right from the start. Obviously, he was not sufficiently persuaded to change his mind about any of this. So the hierarchy he proposed reverted to the stereotypical Western paradigm, which presumes that the self isn't given but constructed over time, often forcibly, via indoctrinations of various sorts by family, church, community and country, sometimes with fear, even violence used as cudgels (though Maslow doesn't endorse any of that Hobbesian severity.) Service to the community may be valued, but, because it is counter-instinctual, more as an obligation that is enforced under duress, supportive toward formation only in an abstract sense. The process of self-actualization can counter this, but it requires arduous work, essentially replacing your given cultural construct with an alternate one, no mean task, to be sure.

As per my second question, the Sisika, like most indigenous cultures, believe the self's original nature is sound, fully in synch with a "nature" that is inclined, universally, toward the good. Western culture on the other hand has answered that question in the negative, sometimes virulently, at every opportunity. Matters of this sort are usually prosecuted ideologically. A profoundly impactful example was the argument in the fourth century CE between Pelagius, a very prominent Christian monk living in Rome, and Augustine, an equally prominent Christian bishop living in Algeria. It centered on the role of Original Sin in Christian doctrine. Both clerics believed there was such a thing, but parted ways on what it meant for our identity and destiny. Pelagius believed the stain of Adam's sin was relatively superficial because human beings, born in the image of God, were by definition, good. Every person, in his view, Christian or otherwise, had a good soul, all of us equal, i.e., godly, from day one. He was expressly enthralled by the apparent innocence in an infant's visage! To make his case, he relied primarily on Jesus, who repeatedly valorized childlikeness as the portal to the Kingdom. Augustine was appalled by the stain of Adam's sin on human souls, including infants, who, absent baptism, were

precluded from Heaven. He relied primarily on Paul's letters, not the canonical gospels, to warrant his beliefs. Original sin could be rectified only for those few who were baptized as Christians and held an unquestioning faith that Jesus redeemed them on the cross—a highly specialized sort of spiritual “actualization”—a surprisingly small cohort, historically speaking. Everyone else (including those unbaptized infants) was either lost or legitimate fodder for soul-saving proselytization, no matter how extreme the means. As the Crusades, the repeated exterminations of various heretical sects, and the Spanish Inquisition demonstrated, things could get pretty intense in pursuit of that end.

The argument between Pelagius and Augustine turned on two phrases: Pelagius, whose cultural roots were Celtic, argued that human beings are born “with God,” i.e., innately good, the terms on which most indigenous cultures, like the Celtic, operate. Augustine, whose cultural roots were Roman, argued that human beings are born “against God,” suffering a permanent bentness in constant need of correction, foundational to the Judaic tradition, his own debauched youth serving as his primary warrant. I think you know which way this went. Augustine is a saint, Pelagius was excommunicated as a heretic and exiled, most likely to Ireland or Wales, where Celtic cultural values survive, to some extent, to this day.

All of this happened in the waning days of the Roman Empire, a remote echo of what had been a millennium of war after war between the “civilized” Romans and the “barbarian” Celts, until Caesar defeated the Gallic Celts once and for all with the siege of Alesia in BCE 52. Some of the other European Celts held on longer, but their fate was sealed. As I said, Celtic pockets did survive long after that in the remote corners of Britannia, where, legend has it, Pelagius set up shop after his excommunication, one final, failed gasp to save the soul of Christianity from the empiric culture of Rome, addicted to hierarchy, authority, and domination.

I'm assuming that most reasonable human beings (a quality that these days seems way scarcer than we like to think), if given a choice between those two ways of defining what their "self" is by its nature, would prefer Pelagius' angelically straight over Augustine's satanically bent. I could be wrong, of course. As John Berryman says (quoting Ralph Hodgson) in the second of his serene and transcendent *Eleven Addresses to the Lord* (1971), shortly before he took his own life:

*'I don't try to reconcile anything' said the poet at eighty,
'This is a damned strange world.'*

But that is not a choice any of us get to make at birth. Or, in most cases, ever.

If we don't like the toxic box we're born into, as some Westerners sooner or later don't, what can we do to wriggle out of it? That's where my epigraph comes in. Many people realize along the way that they don't much like themselves, or, more technically, their persistent "self," the one instilled in them before they were conscious enough to consider it. They know their "trouble is real," but feel lost in the "faraway city" of a culture that blames them rather than itself for creating the enervating "faraway feel" they experience when things don't add up the way they want them to. That's where Maslow and the vast self-help industry that has burgeoned exponentially over the last 70 years come in, each approach promising some sort of redemption from what afflicts us. But those approaches are caught in the same machine that we are, which means the changes they promote tend to be more cosmetic than structural.

So what, if anything, is it possible to do if/when you want to cancel the guilt trip Western culture is sending you on? Well, I've already indicated the first two questions you need to ask about your "self:" (1) Do you believe it was given to you upfront, free and clear, or are you obligated to renovate it into

something tolerable over time through arduous work? And (2) Is it by its nature “with” or “against” whatever you deem to be “godly” in the natural universe? If your answer is “build-against,” you can tinker with your “self” on your path to whatever sort of “actualization” you aspire toward, no problem. “Build-against” is, after all, the default Western paradigm, the one even Maslow clung to all the way to the pinnacle of his pyramid despite his direct exposure to the “whole-with” alternative at Siksika, which he deemed clearly preferable, one of those “I see what I believe” instead of “I believe what I see” moments.

Maslow may well have recognized the superiority of Blackfoot approach to self-actualization, but he had to go back and make a living in a cultural matrix inimical to it down to the roots. He was an academic, author and consultant. In other words, his career and well-being depended on abiding by the status quo in all of these very conservative realms. So he stuck with the “self” they all depended on to make a living, the one he took with him to Siksika and, despite all the evidence to the contrary, left with. Which means, if you want to “actualize” your “self” in that world, he and his kind have some answers. But none of them will ever persuade you that you are whole and good by nature. The Blackfoot would find all of this baffling, sad, at times comical. So do I.

If your answer is “whole-with,” things become more difficult, especially for those of us who came of age during the postmodernist moment, when the assumption was that the “self,” like almost everything else we take for granted, is a cultural construction, subject to critical interrogation but not transformation into something entirely other. So how to revise a culture-induced self that seems expressly immune to an alternative version? You can’t just erase and install a whole new OS and start anew, instant nirvana. You have to update the one already in place to your preferred version while you continue to

use it. That takes an awful lot of work, akin to learning a new language as a mono-lingual adult. It's one thing to be able to read the new one, another to be able to speak it, another to be able to speak it fluently, another to be able to think with it, another to be able to dream in it, and another to forget your first language entirely in favor of the second. And before you can do any of that, you need to imagine and believe there is a larger "field" within which both your language and the culture that created it operate, and from which you can observe, transform, and ultimately create alternatives.

I outline one possible path toward that end in my "In the Spirit . . ." series of essays on this page, where I proffer ancient wisdom traditions and quantum mechanics as the framework. Those two bodies of knowledge assert, in quite different ways, that the self is not something our skull-ensconced, material brain invents over time; it is both an extension and expression of a universal field, a cosmic self as it were, one we inhabit in a participatory way. That field has taken many names over the course of human history: The Vedantic tradition called it Brahman, the unchanging, ultimate reality of the universe, the seer (subject) that cannot itself be seen (as object). Taoism called it Way, the amorphous, eternal source of "the ten thousand things," which arise from it spontaneously and inevitably return to it. Jesus called it the kingdom, which is both in-here and out-there simultaneously, the site where those two become one. Plotinus called it awareness, the World-soul (of which our soul is an extension) that sustains everything we are aware of, the ground for bringing all of those things into being. Eugene Wigner, like many quantum theorists, called it consciousness, the observer that cannot be observed, a field that permeates space and time which we connect with not create. I've spent years learning as much as I can about all of that, and still one of the children in Siksika, never having had to endure the "build-against" model, is closer to realizing what that "whole-with" self is, feels like, and can be, than I am or, most likely, ever will be.

...

This essay has been sitting still, eerily silent, for days now. I made two abortive attempts to advance it forward beyond the conundrum implicit in its final sentence: *Does it really make much of a difference if I answer those two questions my preferred way in the midst of a culture that insists, day after day, year after year, on using the opposite answers to read and resist everything I say or do?* One of them examined the structural similarities, pertinent to hierarchy and authority, between capitalism and Christianity, the foundational ideologies of Western culture, using Adam Smith's famous metaphor of the "invisible hand" as their common ground. Spoiler alert: Yikes! That hand does an awful lot of damage for something you allegedly can't see, and both systems depend for their efficacy on keeping it as far out of sight as possible while it works its pernicious prestidigitations. The other was a close reading of our Declaration of Independence, a fairly radical document for the end of the 18th century. Those guys were pretty pissed and very smart. Spoiler alert: Again, Yikes! Of the 27 grievances they list to warrant their argument, I count 13 that could just as easily be asserted today, with more likely to come as we transition from an oligarchic to an autocratic form of government, having enacted a genuinely democratic one only in fits and starts, or more accurately bits and pieces, along the way since 1776. Those two attempts may have some utility at another time in another place but sound like a lot of blah, blah, blah this morning.

Last night I had a series of quotidian dreams, most of which I've had many times before, about some of the moments in my professional life where I had to make a choice between standing up as (or for) my "true" self or pretending to be a more culturally appropriate "fake" me to fit in or avert what seemed at the time an extended, enervating confrontation. When you have a neuroatypical temperament like mine, those occasions arise pretty often. I think I keep having those dreams because there

seemed at the time to be no way to resolve the tension between my two options, both of which inevitably assured a bad outcome: unseen or misunderstood, take your pick. Whoopee!

Redreaming the same scenes over and over is both tiresome and dysfunctional. It can't change the actual experience and it doesn't resolve the anger, shame or frustration that remains as its residue. Honestly, I'm sick of having those dreams and I want to find a way to put a stop to them. The "self-help" regime I've been practicing for some time now—immerse myself deeply in Eastern wisdom traditions, gnostic Christianity, Indigenous cultures, quantum mechanics, poetry and poetics, none of which have much agentic currency in the culture I actually have to live in—has helped get me to the point where I know my preferred answers to those two questions. While I'm "awake" I feel whole and good, redeemed by their light. But in the dark, I still have those dreams. Which means my work is only half-done, and the part of it on the dark side may be harder. So where to head from here?

As I've said repeatedly over the years, whenever I reach an impasse, I just start to write, pretty much anywhere that comes to mind, and see where it leads. The first professional setting I'm drawn toward imaginatively, right now I mean, is the classroom, teaching, oddly enough the place I felt most comfortably "myself" with all those others there with me. What was it about that venue I wonder that made it feel like "home" to me? Well, for one thing, teaching is much like baseball. The best hitters succeed less than a third of the time, the best pitchers about half. If you want to play that game professionally you need to acclimate yourself to the inevitability of failure to survive long enough to succeed. I am a perfectionist by nature, so I had to learn both to accept and learn from my classroom "failures." Part of that process is becoming discerning about what "failure" actually is. Early in my career I was quite fastidious about sticking with my class plans, keeping on track, managing time to

closure. When that got messed up, as of course it often did, I would feel embarrassed and was inclined to go back and try to rectify it the next time we met. On one of those occasions, after my awkward attempt to “roll back the clock,” by definition pointless, I looked out at the sea of faces in front of me, all of which seemed to be saying: “What the hell are you even talking about? We didn’t notice any of that.” I was assuming, of course, that they *knew* my “plan” and how the execution failed to achieve it. To them, the actual class *was* the plan, and it seemed fine. The fact of the matter, I realized, is that others are rarely knowledgeable enough about our intentions or attentive enough to how we’re enacting them to assess what we’re even doing let alone whether it succeeds. So I stopped doing that and, more importantly, stopped creating “plans” that had no play in them. Everything became so much easier, so much more natural. I could be there both as myself and for them, via an intentionally crafted persona that was neither true nor fake, but simply authentic. I wrote about some of this in my series on the lost Gospel of Mary of Magdala, as it pertains to leadership, which always requires that balancing act.

One of the bugaboos of teaching that moderates considerably when you lighten up that way is “authority,” which can become a very deleterious “invisible hand” in the classroom, whether it has to do with your disciplinary expertise or classroom decorum. A better approach is to make that hand visible, as in “this is what we’re doing, this is why, this is how we will keep the books on progress, and this is how we will treat one another.” In other words, “transparency,” which is one of the better antidotes to control. Real transparency is, as all those “wes” indicate, inevitably collaborative, an ongoing conversation that distributes authority collectively, promoting trust. Once you transition from control to shared responsibility, any number of other salutary things begin to happen. An important one, for me, was to understand, to feel in my bones, that I was not the center gravity in that space. The best teachers (in my experience, and I’ve

worked with and taught lots of them) sooner or later say to themselves: “This is not about me.” Then they can focus outward on the myriad learners in front of them, find ways to help them flourish, a somewhat more sophisticated version of “How can I help you?” As my career progressed, I talked less and less in class and students talked more and more. By that means, I learned at least as much from them as they learned from me.

I put true and fake in quotation marks above because, in a culture like ours, especially in a professional venue, that distinction is very difficult to parse. Just think about how hard you had to work to learn how to adapt, conform and align to succeed at your job, or just “pass” as legitimate in your professional community. In the academic world, that process is called “formation,” a term also hard to parse. It takes many years, during which you learn, by emulation mostly, how to look, sound, write, think, teach and generally behave like someone who actually belongs among your peers. One efficient way that can be effected is by choosing to “study under” an intellectual mentor or guide, one you may prefer because they seem like-minded and might help you become more yourself intellectually, or because they are famous and you can advance your career by becoming more like them. In either case, the metaphor has a creepy sexual undertone, so it was never one I wanted to model my professorial identity around.

I spent my life, not to mention my career, stubbornly resisting any such formation from the outside in. My graduate school decision is a good example. I knew enough about myself to understand that “studying under” someone would not go well for me. Or them. And I knew that academic reputations were staked in “research,” not teaching. So I picked a new, experimental program called the Doctor of Arts, a teaching- rather than research-centric degree. I figured that combination—a non-elite program focused on non-elite work—would short-circuit all that “under” business right from the start. And it did. I got to do

exactly what I wanted the way I wanted to do it. What could be the downside? Well, one is that non-eliteness is a pretty stiff headwind inhibiting progress. You have to lean in and press harder than those who have a pleasant breeze at their backs, the ones I called “the cloud people” because they wafted placidly above people like me, behaving as if they have always deserved the privileges they often claimed to have “earned.” Some of them had been learning the rules of this game—social-class wise—since the day they were born. So it took me five extra years to get to their starting line. I’m so happy it did. I learned so much, not only about my “self” but about this “odd, strange, and curious” (*Mad Magazine* again, speaking of “formation”) world I was trying to make my way in.

All but one of those Doctor of Arts programs has ceased to exist, including mine, along with almost all the other experimental education initiatives that flashed up and flourished in the wild-west 60s and 70s. New College in Florida, founded in 1960 as a liberal arts college with self-directedness at its core, is a particularly notorious example of this transition. Rather than just closing the school down for its “progressive” bent, the solution most often preferred by “the powers that be,” right wing ideologues hijacked it, promising to transform it into a model that other states could use to neuter “woke” higher ed in their own backyards. Their tactics have been comically absurd. One of their solutions to the “gender imbalance” (i.e., not enough white, straight men) was (as John Oliver points out) to admit 71 baseball players, including 11 catchers, on scholarship, despite the fact that they have no baseball team and no baseball field. Teaching freshman writing there (if they even allow writing to be taught) must be a surreal experience. I think my syllabus would be a number of eccentric prompts and a subscription to ChatGPT. One for me, too, to read and grade them. One of the few survivors of that era, coincidentally, is Evergreen College, on the other side of town here, also founded on self-directedness. My daughter read an article about it in a teen magazine when she

was a junior in high school. She said she was going to go there. Her mother didn't think that was such a great idea. Took a few years, but she got here. When I retired and couldn't decide where to move, I thought I'd see what the appeal was. I joke sometimes that I live here because of an article my daughter read in a teen magazine 25 years ago. Well, I guess it's no joke. I'm still here. And I'm so glad the Doctor of Arts degree was still there for me when I came of age, so I could study above and beyond myself rather than under one of "the cloud people." If that was my only option, I'd probably still be working in hardware store somewhere.

What does any of this have to do with my two questions? Beats me. It's just what I ended up writing. So back at it.

...

Another Graham Parsons song, the one I plan to use to head my next piece, says:

*This whole town is filled with sin
It will swallow you in
If you have the money to burn.
Take it home right away
You've got three years to pay
But Satan is waiting his turn.*

I'm pretty sure he's talking about Las Vegas, which is not a bad synecdoche for our American-capitalist-college culture: You're flawed, we have something to help with that (sin and education are right up there as palliatives), put it on the credit card. The mutually beneficial collusive relationship the academy and the banking industry arranged in the 1990s followed that model to a T: You need this, we got it, you can borrow all the money you need to buy it, we'll show you how, no problem. Until the bill comes due. I'm pretty sure many debt-addled young people

would now rather be fighting with Satan than the Trumpy-punitive student-loan juggernaut. If all I did was give a few of them a brief respite from that toxic stew along their way, my work was worthy. And I had a good time doing it. Win-win, at least for us, together there for those few hours.

There is this thing called “lucid dreaming” that presumes you have some control over the specters your brain generates while you sleep, not necessarily overriding your “unconscious” (assuming there is such a thing) but prodding it in different directions, toward different material. I think I’ll try to do that with those obnoxious dreams I have about some of the toxic interactions I endured during my career. Honestly, they account for such a tiny percentage of what I experienced. And I can’t think of even one that happened with the many thousands of undergraduate students I met along the way. I did have some with a few graduate students, especially those who came looking for someone to study “under” and could tell immediately I was not a good candidate for that. As was the case with my cloud people colleagues, who were such candidates, they were generally dismissive of me, sometimes contemptuous. Often quite rudely so. Thus those dreams. But, as I think about it now, they don’t deserve “the time of day” from me, let alone the time of night. So, starting tonight, I’m going ask them to stay away before I go to sleep and, if they show up anyway, I’ll ask them to leave. Quite rudely if necessary. This should make more room in there for the many wonderful people I got to meet along my way, including most of the graduate students, the ones who, like me, were looking for a place to be whole and good, and found it in all those classrooms, together with their kind.

All of which is to say, at least for me: Yes, it does make, has made, a considerable difference if I answer those two questions my preferred way. I have been doing the requisite work in a piecemeal fashion my whole life, instinctively, and in a very concerted and disciplined way for the last 15 years or so. From

time to time, that was “a hard way to find out that trouble is real,” and it made my “native” culture often look less like home and more like a “faraway city with a faraway feel.” Given a reboot, though, I’d still do it a hundred times out of a hundred. Except, if I could, faster and better. I don’t want to be a hobbled “self” I have to actualize clambering over others on my way up the steep slope. I want to be whole and good. Now. I’m not there yet, but as Phil says to Rita in *Groundhog Day* after she details her expectations for Mr. Right: “I’m really close on this one. Really, really, close!”

Words that create . . . WORDS

*A friend came around, tried to clean up this town
[Her] ideas made some people mad.
But [s]he trusted [her] crowd, so [s]he spoke right out loud.
And they lost the best friend they had.*

Graham Parsons

The recent difference of opinion between Pope Leo and J.D. Vance about the concept of “righteous” war raises a host of troubling questions about who we humans are and how we justify the many destructive things we do. One of them is implied in that innocent-sounding quatrain from Graham Parson’s song: We hate, often imprison or exile, sometimes kill the best among us, the ones who come to save or enlighten us; then, after a suitable interim, preferably once they’re dead, we create a cult to honor them, one that often justifies not only hating and killing those who are inimical to it, but even those who strive to enact its namesake’s highest values, an endless cycle of scapegoating. The words that actually came out of their mouths are watered down, intentionally misread and mistranslated, or simply ignored in favor of what their followers prefer to hear in their stead, something comfortable, status-quo sustaining, the version that will let the “town” who killed them stay exactly as it was beforehand, killing “righteously” whenever it is moved to do so. It is a classic pattern of denial and transference, one both René Girard and Niccolò Machiavelli write about darkly.

We live in that “town,” we are those “mad people,” we congregate into that “crowd,” and, over and over, we see to it that our “best friend” gets “lost,” sometimes with considerable violence. Christianity is a stereotypical example. Jesus’ message,

a mandate really, “to clean up this town” by loving our enemies gets drowned out over and over by a rage to destroy “them,” a category that morphs and expands to suit the prejudices *du jour*. Specious justifications proliferate to persuade the “crowd” to turn on “the best friend they had.” And they do. Over and over. You know the history as well as I do. As it pertains to war, I think Pope Leo does in fact represent Jesus’ message pretty well. And I think J.D. Vance indulges in his usual Yale-lacquered, Hillbilly-smarmy warmongering without any moral compass whatsoever. So why, I wonder, does his kind always seem to win arguments of this sort?

History is littered with the bodies of moral/intellectual giants who have been executed or imprisoned to silence them. On the world-scale, Socrates, Antonio Gramsci, and Nelson Mandela come immediately to mind. At home here, political giants have been assassinated repeatedly. In just my coming-of-age years in the 60s, that included John and Robert Kennedy, Martin Luther King and Malcolm X. But American culture has been surprisingly tolerant of even the most aggressively rebellious poets. There are reasons for that. One, of course, is our traditional respect for freedom of speech. Until the last two years, the political cost of abridging that right egregiously (as opposed to surreptitiously) was usually just too heavy to pay, especially with poetry, which so few of us read or care about in any case. It’s of some interest to me that as that wall has been breached, the primary targets are not poets but comedians and their media outlets, which are bought off and neutered by oligarchs beholden to the powers that be. Poets still don’t seem worth the work to purge.

Another reason, which I explained in the dream-fable about Free that opened this series, is the methods of reading that have saturated our cultural marketplace, all the way down to classrooms, over the last century or so. The New Criticism, which dominated critical discourse for the first half of the

20th century, defined the poem not as a mode of popular influence, but as a highly idealized object pried apart from external contaminations, including authorial intention and readerly affect. Reading a poem was not a prompt to action, considered plebeian, but a pristine, even transcendent experience, reserved for the most astute critical sensibilities. This approach's roots in nostalgia for the lost culture of the antebellum South explains a lot of that.

The critical ideology that dominated in the last half of the 20th century was even more elitist, if such a thing is imaginable. Poems, like "texts" of all sorts, were transformed into dense, multidimensional, nodes intersecting with other texts in exotic ways best teased out with a form of verbal psychoanalysis that required sophisticated expertise. Reading a poem to believe or do or just feel something everyday-human was *déclassé*. The practical effect of all this is that almost no one but other than poets paid any attention to poets. As is usually the case in capitalist marketplaces like ours, each of these ideologies favored poets who produced the poems they valorized and sidelined those who didn't. If authoritarian regimes worldwide had borrowed our ways pertinent to poetic literacy, as they did our Jim Crow racist practices, they, too, could have defanged the poets they too often had to repress, imprison or kill. All they had to do was cordon off poetry as a highly refined "academic" enterprise, too abstruse to be intelligible by, let alone inflammatory for, "the masses." Problem solved.

I wanted to use this piece to examine an assortment of poet/friends who "came around, tried to clean up [their] town[s]" and ended up in prison, in exile, or dead for it. But I didn't want to write about the usual suspects, so I just Googled "female poets who have been imprisoned for their writing." The only name I recognized was Stella Nyanzi, widely published and recognized. I had never even heard of the others, which is my fault not theirs. None of them were American, of course. So I decided to find out

who a few of them were and why they were silenced. Like most Americans, my image of what goes on in the rest of the world is founded on sound bites from the media “mixer” that feeds us snippets of “news” in increasingly social-media-silly ways, often more to serve the biases of advertisers or political ideologies than to report on what is happening on the ground in cultures other than ours.

As William Carlos Williams said a century ago:

*It is difficult
to get the news from poems
yet men die miserably every day
for lack
of what is found there.*

The difficulty he’s talking about has nothing to do with the incapacity of poems to render news, that vast, allegedly impassable chasm between figurative and journalistic discourses, for example. Quite the opposite. It is in our cultural resistance to seeing the medium as a legitimate “source” for what’s true that makes it difficult. Because of that, we “die miserably,” in ignorance, “for lack of what is found there.” And one of the things that can be found there, if you read the poetry of other cultures, is the way poets “die miserably,” for real, just trying to say some true things about the current conditions in their homelands.

As I said, poetry in American culture is largely an academic enterprise, disconnected from the political arena except at certain ceremonial moments, like presidential inaugurations. It is “epideictic” in the worst possible ways. Oddly enough, poets here seem more likely to *start* writing poetry in prison—Jimmy Santiago Baca, Reginald Dwayne Betts, and Etheridge Knight, most famously, for his *Poems from Prison*—than to end up there for poems they wrote beforehand, as is the case almost

everywhere else in the world, especially in the most abusive or violent political arenas. Many poets in those contexts are activists, radicals, even rebels. They are dangerous. Their voices are heard not in classrooms but in the streets. And the medium they use to activate and radicalize others is their poetry.

I ended up, for space's sake, picking three women whose work seemed to me to stand as representative examples of what it means to find words to say out loud when they might end you up in prison, or dead. They are Gulnisa Imin, a Uyghur poet now interned in a Chinese prison; Kerima Tariman, a Filipina activist who was gunned down in the street during a "skirmish," at least according to official reports; and Stella Nyanzi, a Ugandan "exiled for [her] mouth," which she used quite caustically to humiliate her country's leaders. We like to say we "speak truth to power." But here speaking truth (which we tend to avoid like the plague) to power (which even in the midst of Trumpian authoritarianism is, as Emerson might say, more like a "popgun" than "the crack of doom" compared to real authoritarian rule; unless, of course, you are "undocumented," or stand with those who are, in which case, yes, "the crack of doom," in the form of a goon with a gut and a gun is likely to find you, maybe kill you) is more often conversational than confrontational. These three women lived in contexts where the crack of doom was a daily event: China, in the midst of the ongoing Uyghur genocide, the Philippines during the violent heyday of the Rodrigo Duterte regime, and Uganda under the dictatorial fist of Yoweri Museveni. Theirs are amazing, often horrifying stories, which I thought might hint toward, at least briefly, a whole cadre of others, both men and women, who sacrifice so much simply to stand up to authoritarian power and say some true things in poems that are breathtakingly beautiful. In the passages I quote, I've included links if you want more. They deserve more than these few pages, but this is at least a start.

...

Gulnisa Imin is a prominent Uyghur poet and writer now serving a long sentence in a remote Chinese prison. Before her incarceration, Imin was a Uyghur literature teacher and poet known for her writings on Uyghur culture, which is to say that she worked to conserve and sustain the indigenous language and history of her people; to resist rather than accommodate the push for assimilation. In March 2018, on the 345th night of her poetry project “One Thousand and One Nights,” she disappeared. In December 2021, reports emerged revealing that she had been detained and sentenced to 17.5 years in prison for allegedly spreading separatist sentiment through her poetry.

You may or may not be familiar with the industrial scale persecution and genocide of the Uyghur people in their homeland, East Turkistan (now Xinjiang). According to Wikipedia:

In addition to mass detention, government policies have included suppression of Uyghur religious practices,^[7] political indoctrination,^[8] forced sterilization,^[9] forced contraception,^{[10][11]} and forced abortion.^{[12][13]} An estimated 16,000 mosques have been razed or damaged,^[2] and hundreds of thousands of children have been forcibly separated from their parents and sent to boarding schools.^{[14][15]} Chinese government statistics reported that from 2015 to 2018, birth rates in the mostly Uyghur regions of Hotan and Kashgar fell by more than 60%.^[9] In the same period, the national birth rate decreased by 9.7%.^[16] According to CNN, Chinese authorities acknowledged that birth rates dropped by almost a third in 2018 in Xinjiang, but denied reports of forced sterilization.^[17] Birth rates in Xinjiang fell a further 24% in 2019, compared to a nationwide decrease of 4.2%.

<https://www.google.com/search?client=safari&rls=en&q=uyghur+persecution.&ie=UTF-8&oe=UTF-8&channel=50/>.

All of this sounds very much like the techniques used to erase first peoples' cultures in the US and Canada in the 19th and, in some cases, into the 20th century: Kill the foot soldiers, imprison the elders, prohibit cultural practices, outlaw the languages, and kidnap the children into brainwashing "schools."

As Abdullah Qazanchi and Abduweli Ayup point out in "The Disappearance of Uyghur Intellectual and Cultural Elites"

(*A Uyghur Human Rights Project report*: December 8, 2021. <https://uhrp.org/report/the-disappearance-of-uyghur-intellectual-and-cultural-elites-a-new-form-of-eliticide/>), there is an additional component to this campaign, one designed to eliminate any creative or intellectual voices—the "elite" they allude to—who might spark resistance, all under the rubric of "terrorism."

Imin started writing her own version of "A Thousand and One Nights" in 2015, a poem a night posted to her WeChat page. She wrote this poem on her tenth night.

Tenth night: the sunless sky

*The women's prison
Smiles from under the snow
The women's prison
Emerges running at daybreak.
Dirty, cracked and bleeding hands
Marked on the surface of white snow
A map of the women's prison.
They don't want to shed their tears
They just want to lift their heads*

*They just want to gaze at the sunless sky.
Their troubles, their yearning
Their nightmares and sleepless nights
They want to talk about it with someone on the outside.*

This was the fate she was destined for. On her 345th night, the authorities came and that “sunless sky” would be hers.

In “Nameless,” a poem that surfaced in 2024, after her detention, she remains defiant, demanding no tears of sorrow, or “pale faces” for her sake. Her only request was for her “two stars” (which are simultaneously her children and the Uyghur culture she hopes they will be allowed someday to celebrate), whom she entrusted to the readers:

*For my sake, shower them with your love.
Let them grow in the same embrace I grew in.
Let them live with the love they deserve.*

She continues to serve her sentence at Jinjiang Prison. Her poems are hard to find. Some of them are included in an anthology, *Imprisoned Souls: Poems of Uyghur Prisoners in China* (translated and compiled by Uyghur poet and academic Aziz Isa Elkun, who translated the two poems above.) They are lithe, sinuous, both quiet and fierce, subtle and powerful, contradictions hard to reconcile, as are the details of her story and that of her people. Here is a link to other poets’ stories pertinent to the Uyghur repression: <https://xinjiang.sppga.ubc.ca/lived-experiences/>

...

Kerima Lorena Tariman was a Filipina poet and activist who was incarcerated on trumped up weapons charges in 2000 during the regime of Joseph Estrada. Estrada was peacefully overthrown following the EDSA II (Second People Power Revolution)

demonstrations in 2001. Activist is too lean a word for her and her work. She was a communist, a real one who had read and understood Marx and how his vision might apply in her cultural context, she fought with the rebels, and “perished following an armed altercation with the 79th Infantry Battalion at the Hacienda Raymunda in Silay City, Negros, alongside her comrade Joery Dato-on Cocuba” <https://artreview.com/the-revolutionary-poetry-of-resistance-fighter-kerima-tariman/>. She was also a mother, a journalist and an artist, i.e., a fully-fledged human being.

As I said, what we tend to know about remote cultures could fit in a shoebox. In relation to the Philippines, that is literally true: think Imelda Marcos and her notorious shoe collection, which we found more riveting back then than the heinous excesses of her husband’s regime. As to Duterte, here’s a blurb from Wikipedia that covers some of the “highlights:”

Duterte’s political positions have been described as right-wing populist,^{[35][36][37]} as well as nationalist.^{[38][39][40]} His political success has been aided by his vocal support for the extrajudicial killing of drug users and criminals.^[41] His career has sparked numerous protests and attracted controversy, particularly over human rights issues and his controversial comments. Duterte has repeatedly stated that he personally killed criminal suspects during his term as mayor of Davao.^[42] Extrajudicial killings that were allegedly committed by the Davao Death Squad between 1998 and 2016 during Duterte’s mayoralty have also been scrutinized by human-rights groups and the Office of the Ombudsman.^{[44][45]} The victims were mainly alleged drug users, alleged petty criminals, and street children.^[41] The International Criminal Court opened a preliminary investigation into Duterte’s drug war in 2018,^[46] prompting Duterte to

withdraw the Philippines from that body in response.^[47] . . . Duterte's popularity and domestic approval rating remained relatively high throughout his presidency, and by the end of his term he was the most popular president since the 1986 revolution.^{[52][53][54][better source needed]}

The investigation of the International Criminal Court (ICC) led to Duterte's arrest and transfer to The Hague on March 11, 2025, making him the first Philippine president to face an international tribunal and the first Asian leader to face a trial before the ICC.^{[55][56]} Despite this, he was re-elected as the mayor of Davao City in 2025; as he remains in The Hague, his son Baste is serving in his place as the acting mayor. As he failed to take his oath within the prescribed six-month period, he was disqualified from assuming office under the provisions of the Local Government Code. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rodrigo_Duterte

In the end, he is said to have sanctioned as many as 30,000 extrajudicial deaths, proudly committing a few of those executions himself. Our drug boat bombings in the Eastern Pacific, though no less egregious, are minuscule by comparison. Unless, of course, you were one of the hundred or so executed that way. Or their families. This is the world Tariman was writing her poems in and for. Here are a few snippets to give you a sense of the power of her voice:

There is a Ghost in Makiling

*she says to me she wants
to scrunch up her face, be
stupid or crazy, shed skin like
a snake, to be crushed, torn into pieces*

she says her spirit is broken.

*spirit within, pulsating spirit,
spirit of the bones of a wild wolf,
spirit planted in the crack of a skull.*

*spirit of the mud where she sows
the four walls of her end.*

*I say to her, I don't want to be
a constricted prey in her resentment.*

*I don't want to be crushed and drowned
between wailing waterfalls
and rocks in her dampalit.*

*I don't want to be buried like an onion—
in the scorched soil of her slashed-and-burned field.*

*I don't want to be trampled like goat shit—
in the dusty floor of her museum's ruins.*

<https://www.poetrynw.org/poetry/there-is-a-ghost-in-makiling/>

Tariman wrote the following poem, also translated by Amanda Echanis, in commemoration of Day of the Imprisoned Writer. It's called "June 12th, In Prison" and was written during her incarceration in 2000 for illegal possession of firearms, a common charge used by the state against activists:

*I

the back and forth
doesn't even span five meters.
I suppose I'm lucky
the windows are a little bit big.
from here,
I have watched*

*how fast
the beans grow
when fertilizer is put into them.
the whole afternoon
is worth a pack of cigarettes.
in between puffs,
I struggle with words.
must read
must write
must listen
to the words, words,
words with no end,
with no bound.*

II

*I must remove
my brain
from my head.
I must find
the words
and pinch them between thumbnails,
like head lice.
when will the words
stop sipping
my blood?
never again, I hope.
never ever.
I will even let it
drip, drip:
rich, thick blood
rich, thick blood
from my skull
from my skull*

III

*am I here
to taste the long beans?
I bet they'd be delicious
especially if cooked as adobo.
tomorrow, boiled egg again
for breakfast.
that's why I must,
must read
must write
must listen
to the words, words
words that breathe
in (and out!)
of these rusty bars.*

IV

*The here and there
are endless, boundless.
for the words,
words, words, words that create
words, words,
words, words,
words, WORDS!
meanwhile,
I empty the afternoon's cigarette ashes
into a tin can.
the small flicker
lengthens
my life.*

<https://wordswithoutborders.org/read/article/2024-11/june-12-in-prison-kerima-lorena-tariman-amanda-echanis/>

There is a frank directness, an almost serene simplicity to the voice here—sadness sometimes tinged with rage, sometimes vice-versa—one the often-violent details intersect with resonantly.

Both of these poems were translated by Amanda Socorro Lacaba Echanis, a writer and activist who has been incarcerated since 2020 on similarly trumped-up charges. She was taken into custody with her month-old baby, from whom she was separated. This is what truth spoken to power for real feels like in practice.

...

Stella Nyanzi is a celebrated Ugandan poet, medical anthropologist, and feminist/queer rights activist who practices “radical rudeness,” a traditional Ugandan strategy for speaking truth to power. In Uganda, that gets you jail time. She was imprisoned for the first time at Luzira Women’s Maximum-Security Prison, charged with “cyber harassment” for using poetry to criticize the long-time dictator, Yoweri Museveni. Which is to say, she posted this comment on her Facebook on January 27, 2017:

Museveni matak nyo! Ebyo byeyayogedde e Masindi yabadde ayogera lutako.

I mean, seriously, when buttocks shake and jiggle, while the legs are walking, do you hear other body parts complaining? When buttocks produce shit, while the brain is thinking, is anyone shocked? When buttocks fart, are we surprised?

That is what buttocks do. They shake, jiggle, shit and fart. Museveni is just another pair of buttocks. Rather than being shocked by what the matak said in Masindi,

Ugandans should be shocked that we allowed these buttocks to continue leading our country. Matako butako.

<https://www.facebook.com/stella.nyanzi/posts/10154878225000053>

After some convoluted legal wrangling (the details of which, including an examination by the state for insanity, a miscarriage in jail, and dismissal from her university position despite having won her internal appeal, are a book's worth of "story" in and of themselves), her sentence was overturned. She was right back at, times 10, shortly thereafter, with this post on September 15, 2018:

Yoweri, they say it was your birthday yesterday.

How bitterly sad a day!

I wish the smelly and itchy cream-coloured candida festering in Esiteri's cunt had suffocated you to death during birth.

Suffocated you just like you are suffocating us with oppression, suppression and repression!

Yoweri, they say it was your birthday yesterday.

How painfully ugly a day!

I wish the lice-filled bush of dirty pubic hair overgrown all over Esiteri's unwashed chuchu had strangled you at birth.

*Strangled you just like the long tentacles of corruption
you sowed and watered into our bleeding economy.*

Yoweri, they say it was your birthday yesterday.

How nauseatingly disgusting a day!

*I wish the acidic pus flooding Esiteri's cursed vaginal
canal had burnt up your unborn fetus.*

*Burnt you up as badly as you have corroded all morality
and professionalism out of our public institutions in
Uganda.*

Yoweri, they say it was your birthday yesterday.

How horrifically cancerous a day!

*I wish the infectious dirty-brown discharge flooding
Esiteri's loose pussy had drowned you to death.*

*Drowned you as vilely as you have sank and murdered
the dreams and aspirations of millions of youths who
languish in the deep sea of massive unemployment, and
under employment in Uganda.*

Yoweri, they say it was your birthday yesterday.

How traumatically wasted a day!

*I wish the poisoned uterus sitting just above Esiteri's dry
clitoris had prematurely miscarried a thing to be cast
upon a manure pit.*

*Prematurely miscarried just like you prematurely
aborted any semblance of democracy, good governance
and rule of law.*

Yoweri, they say it was your birthday yesterday!

How morbidly grave a day!

*I wish that Esiteri's cursed genitals had pushed out a
monstrously greenish-bluish still-birth.*

*You should have died at birth, you dirty delinquent
dictator...*

You should have died in birth, Yoweri Kaguta Museveni.

.....

*If you want to beat me for my heartfelt birthday poem,
come and find me at my home. Ask the bodabodamen to
direct you to Mama Stella's house with a red gate. I
refuse to be gagged!*

[https://www.facebook.com/stella.nyanzi/posts/10156527
462740053?_rdc=1&_rdr](https://www.facebook.com/stella.nyanzi/posts/10156527462740053?_rdc=1&_rdr)

Unsurprisingly, she was again arrested and tried, the conviction ultimately overturned.

Her book *No Roses from My Mouth* was published in 2020. It's quite a manifesto, no roses from her mouth, indeed! This is the title poem:

*There will be no roses
Falling out of my mouth.*

*Who brings fleeting beauty to war?
Instead there are razor blades and axes,
Chainsaws, knives and machetes,
Daggers, swords and bayonets.
My words cut up our enemies.
There will be no honey
Dripping out of my mouth.
Who brings sweetness to war?
Instead there are punches and slaps,
Hammers, pickaxes and chisels,
Bulldozers, tankers and under-cuts.
My words knock out our oppressors.
There will be no perfume
Spreading from my mouth.
Who cares for aesthetics during war?
Instead there are bazookas and bullets,
Grenades, torpedoes and missiles,
Machine guns, AK47s and Kalashnikovs.
My words blow up the tyrants.
There will be no orgasm
Coming from my mouth.
Who cares about pleasure during war?
Instead there is venom and acid,
Bombs, landmines and nukes,
Poisonous gas and bioweapons.
My words destroy our haters.*

Here's a poem she wrote while incarcerated:

*Today, I am Remand Prisoner LWP 984/2018.
I am in the eighth month of incarceration.
I refused to apply for bail.
I am charged with cyber harassment
and offensive communication against the president.
I penned and posted a birthday poem on Facebook.
My metaphorical critique of the dictator*

Brought charges from pedestrian investigators.
I am a political prisoner.
I am a prisoner of conscience.
Last year, I was Remand Prisoner LWP 313/2017.
I got bail after 33 days of incarceration.
This case still gets mentioned monthly in court.
I was charged with cyber harassment
and offensive communication against the president.
I penned and posted a rant on Facebook.
My “Yoweri Museveni matako butako...”
Was muddled up in translation to:
“The president is a pair of buttocks!”
I am a political prisoner.
I am a prisoner of conscience.
Next year, I will return as a Remand prisoner.
No amount of trumped up charges deter me.
If my poetry offends the dictator, fine!
If my written truth chokes the tyrant, fine.

Some other poem titles from this book, to give you an even better idea of what “no roses” means to her, include: “Bedbugs and Lice,” “Political Prisoner,” “Shameless Members of Parliament,” “The Power Fist,” “Drenched Sanitary Pad,” “Let’s Hijack the President’s Convoy.” Here is a link to a PDF of that book, her best so far in my opinion:

<https://ke.boell.org/sites/default/files/2021-03/No%20Roses%20From%20My%20Mouth.pdf>.

In January 2021, in fear both of repression and for her life, she sought asylum in Kenya and, a year later, was accepted into a writers-in-exile program in Germany, where she moved with her three children. Her book *Exiled for My Mouth: Poems from Across Borders*, is in many ways even more strident. The West may have saved, even “welcomed” her, but she spares no criticism for her “benefactors,” rightfully so, while she continues

to lambast her homeland, to which she longs to return, creating a soul-shredding angst. This passage from a poem called “My Mouth Isn’t Dirty” speaks for all these fierce women, and everyone else who suffers simply for words that end up exiled from their mouths:

*My mouth isn’t dirty.
It is the words from therein:
Poignant words I speak in my bitter poems.
Unclean words I wrote with my pen,
Painful ugly heavy word
Squeezed out of my rhythmical soul.
...
Alas, you dirtied my mouth.
And so, let the poems of my mouth be.
Words, mere words took me to prison.
But my mouth isn’t dirty.*

I’m sure all of these women, and countless others suffering similar fates, would have preferred to write and speak softer, kinder, cleaner words. That’s not what their worlds allowed, or really, most needed. So they said what needed to be said, despite the cost. The thing about words, unlike guns, is they can’t be “disarmed.” Whether you’re exiled, imprisoned, or killed, your words, if they’re true and powerful enough, never stop speaking. These three women, and so many other men and women throughout history were not silenced even by the most extreme measures, which only amplified those voices. Their “dirty” words will be heard long after their oppressors’ dirty secrets are buried and their victims dance on their graves. Which makes me think that I want to revise that “truth to power” trope we often mouth so haplessly. Truth *is* power. End of story. Power is weak. Truth’s speaking “to” it presumes they are equal. They are not. Which is why power must work so hard to stop those words, the “bullets and asylums” figure I use in the “Epilogues” to *This Fall* that opened this series. They never work, not for the long

run, which is why Free is so sanguine when they take him away. No matter their fates, those “best friends” are never “lost;” their “words that create . . . WORDS” speak to and for the *victims* of the “powers that be” in their homelands, including themselves, forever.

. . .

When prevaricators like J.D. Vance mangle the words of the “friend” who came to “clean up this town,” in order to warrant an illegal war, there is sometimes an adult in the room, one who has actually read the book. In this case it’s Pope Leo, whom Vance recently chastised, advising him to “be careful” when discussing “theology,” so that his words will be “anchored in the truth,” a critique as shockingly, comically stupid as the one who fabricated it. He issued his warning in response to Leo’s claim that Jesus “is never on the side of those who once wielded the sword and now drop bombs.” I’m not a huge fan of popes, historically speaking. But, hey, tru’ dat, Leo! And J.D., yes, I know you converted to Catholicism a few years ago, which gives you zero street-cred compared to Leo, or even to me, who was born into it, when it comes to “theology.” And, yes, you went to Yale where you spruced up your Hillbilly with some makeup and became an acolyte of Peter Thiel, who wants to run the world, live forever, and thinks he knows who the Antichrist might be. Spoiler alert, he’s got his eyes set on Greta Thunberg, of all people, not J.D, or his boss, or how about the face he sees (if any face appears there at all) on the other side of his own mirror. Which gives him zero street-cred in anything other than the brand of lunacy mega-money can buy right now in our halfway-to-hell-in-a-handbasket culture. Both of you, and all the rest of you “powers that be” for that matter: If you want to become “anchored in truth,” read at least one of the poets I just talked about. Then you won’t be so shockingly, comically stupid when you open your mouths to speak.

“It’s Only Words . . .” Says who?

“I think you’re sorry you say everything.”

Lee Marvin, in a 1970 interview with Dick Cavett, who asked him if he was sorry about any of the things he said in a 1969 interview for *Playboy*, where he came out (sort of) in support of gay rights.

“I hate speech!”

Robert Grenier, in the first (1970) issue of *This*, the L=A=N=G=U=A-G=E poetry journal he co-founded with Barrett Watson.

“You think that I don’t even mean a single word I say.”

The Bee Gees

Perhaps, like me, you have a tendency to replay, sometimes obsessively, often with some regret, the things you say out loud to others. Could be big, public things, could be little private things, all good candidates, for me and those like me, for chronic revisitation. I do it awake and I do it my dreams. There are times I wish I had never said anything at all aloud, as in those monastic communities where speech is prohibited. Oddly, on the other hand, I rarely regret anything I write, some of which is dramatically more forthright, prolific and outlandish than what I say. I want to think about that contradiction, not to reconcile it (I think that’s impossible) but perhaps to learn, finally, how to keep my mouth shut and let my fingers do the “talking.”

Speech and writing have been at odds in Western culture from the outset, as in not only which should have primacy, authority, but which came first. That last part may seem illogical. Of course speech comes first. But even Socrates, (whose gadfly-blabbermouth ultimately earned him the death penalty, who couldn't resist an argument with even the most ornery interlocutors, who refused to write down even one single word of his own, leaving that to Plato and others, and who, even as he was quaffing that hemlock, was *not* "sorry" about anything he ever said) seems vexed about the sequencing here. His conversation with Phaedrus for example concludes with his famous critique of written texts, which he compares to paintings that "maintain a most majestic silence; . . . if you question them, they go on telling you just the same thing forever." A written "composition," he says, "drifts all over the place, getting into the hands of not only those who understand it, but equally those who have no business with it." It is "unable to defend or help itself." In other words it is both profligate and unreliable.

His preference is for "another sort of discourse . . . of unquestioned legitimacy . . . the sort that goes together with knowledge, and is written on the soul of the learner, that can defend itself, and knows to whom it should speak and to whom it should say nothing." Phaedrus calls this "living speech, . . . of which a written text may fairly be called a kind of image." Its vehicle is "the art of dialectic," that very specific form of interrogatory dialogue Socrates specializes in. Basically, in his system, speech is the original; writing is a copy, one that could not (or maybe more accurately should not) arise on its own without the oral source it draws its "material" from.

Writing, on the other hand, he says, is merely a "pastime, collecting a store of refreshment both for [the writer's] own memory . . . and for all such as tread in his footsteps." Further, "[N]othing that has ever been written . . . merits much serious attention. . . . [L]ucidity . . . and serious importance belong only

to those lessons . . . that are set forth for the sake of instruction, and are veritably written on the soul of the listener.” The argument sounds airtight, and Phaedrus seems fully persuaded, though by this point in the dialogue his role has been reduced pretty much to that of a “yes-man,” so it’s hard to tell how on board he is with what Socrates is proposing (more about that later.) But what are we to make of these references to those things he says are “written on the soul?” That word, “written,” is not an anomaly of this translation. It is what translators agree he says. How, I wonder, are those written things not-writing? And if they are writing, is all of that speech-induced writing on the soul just an intermediate pre-text for the actual text that gets written for real? Jacques Derrida will have something of consequence to say about this conundrum, and I’ll get to that soon.

But first I want you to imagine Plato, who is writing all of this. Why, if he is a “disciple” of Socrates, who believes writing is merely a pastime, a flimsy mnemonic device, doesn’t he just stop writing right there? He is way too smart not to be aware of what seems like an obvious contradiction: his use of writing to write a critique of writing that basically says writing is specious, inconsequential, which is therefore itself, as writing, specious and inconsequential. How could Plato continue writing so voluminously in the face of such an impasse?

Oddly, Plato is the opposite of Socrates in relation to discourse: He never “says” anything in his many dialogues directly in his own voice, not a single word. So he likely has no reason ever to be “sorry!” In fact, we know more about Socrates’ biography—he would likely be little more than a footnote in Athenian history were it not for Plato; and more importantly to us, the funny “Socrates” portion of Bill and Ted’s excellent adventure would never have happened!—than we do about Plato’s, almost nothing. So who is the “authority” we should be listening to in the transactions we have with his texts? Is it Socrates who does

way more than half the talking? Is it Plato, whose authorial name is attached to them but never says a word?

The Western philosophical tradition generally presumes a consonance between what Socrates says and what Plato believes. I think that is naïve. I make a very detailed case for thinking about the relationship between Plato and Socrates in a new way in my book *Writing/Teaching*. It pivots on two main points: Plato is not simply a devoted stenographer for Socrates, someone, like Phaedrus, who agrees reflexively with everything he said. Were he, he would either have had to stop writing at the place I point to above, or risk being perceived as a self-contradicting buffoon. The dialogues he renders are clearly not transcripts. You can tell that simply by reading a few pages of any one of them. They are beautifully crafted texts, arguments transformed into art. Plato is the consummate “writer.” Yet he speaks only through other voices, never his own, an elaborate sort of ventriloquism. Socrates, though based on a real historical figure, is more like a character Plato invents than an unerring oracle. And Plato goes to great lengths to represent every participant in the dialogues respectfully, fully, on their terms. Sometimes they make a lot of sense, thus the neo-sophistic resurgence in rhetorical studies in the 80s and 90s, not Socrates but his antagonists the heroes of these debates.

So, again, we are left with that niggling problem: Who in this matrix are we supposed to accord primary authority? In my opinion, Plato intentionally leaves that decision up to us, and he does it by opening up spaces where we can stand to witness the ongoing debates and react to them on our own terms. In the *Phaedrus*, for example, it is Phaedrus himself, who early in the dialogue is a genuine interlocutor, sometimes even contestatory, reduced in its final stages to replying robotically. We have to decide whether that is a sign he has been fully seduced by Socrates or has just gotten bored, wanting it to be over, having given up on any possibility of asserting a position

of his own. In the *Meno*, it is Meno's slave who is the object, literally, of Socrates' demonstration. We have to decide whether he feels victimized by this, ultimately agreeing with Meno that Socrates is a pestiferous fool, or is persuaded that he can be prompted to remember things he knew before he was born. In the *Protagoras*, it is Hippocrates the young student who seeks Socrates' advice about whether studying with that famous sophist is a good idea. He gets to witness a demonstration of each of their teaching styles without ever saying a word of his own. We are left to decide, on his behalf, which, if either (maybe, he might conclude, "college" is not such a great idea after all, if I have to put up with professors like this), is preferable. These generic presences (and there are many others) are more like functions than agentic partners in the ongoing dialectic. In other words, they are just like us, needing to figure out who if anyone "wins" these contests. That challenge is especially vivid in the *Protagoras*, where both contestants end up arguing on behalf of exactly the opposite position they stridently endorsed at the outset! Huh?

So where does this get me with my speech/writing binary? Well, even in this seemingly extreme version, speech appears to be founded on some kind of knowledge that is already "written on the soul," via dialogue. And the mode of writing Plato always uses is dialectical, emulating the kind of speech Socrates say inscribes that knowledge in the soul in the first place. Can speech also do what writing does? Can writing also do what speech does? Both chicken-egg problems. Like Socrates and Plato: Which is the puppeteer, which the puppet? Are they always both? And is there any way to hack through this Gordian knot?

One place I can start is by translating Socrates complaint about writing as a shallow sort of playing around into (what I see as) Plato's mode of writing as a serious form of "play," not just in the dramatic sense, all these characters speaking, but in the writerly sense of allowing the "conversation" to lead him rather

than vice-versa. Which gets me 2500 years hence, after much back and forth argumentation through Western history, to Derrida, who takes these conundrums to another level. His *Of Grammatology* is the foundational map for what we call “deconstruction,” one of the primary modes of late 20th century poststructuralist theory. In brief, he argues that Western culture has generally valorized “speech” vis-à-vis “writing” as the more “alive” (remember Phaedrus “living speech” comment), the more authentic, the more trustworthy, the more “true” of the two, the one that actually renders and produces real knowledge. Writing, he says, has always been seen as a “supplement,” a way to fill the opening when a speaker is not “present.” Which is one way of reading what Socrates argues at the end of the *Phaedrus*.

Derrida, as I did with how we are taught to read Plato, basically says “not so fast!” He argues that speech and writing are never fully separable as epistemic functions. He has some complicated ways of making this case, which you can learn about by Googling things like “*archi-écriture*,” an abstract form of proto-writing that precedes both modes of discourse. Writing is not, then, merely an “image” of pre-made speech; speech is itself pre-written, in a much more radical way than Socrates seems to be saying-without-saying above. It is always already there no matter the channel we choose for communication, including many non-verbal modes of discourse.

Or Google “*différance*,” a term Derrida uses to destabilize the fixity of words by highlighting their roots in graphic and semantic difference rather than representational individuation. Meaning is not, then, fixed but relational. In practical terms, we understand what a sign means not by what it is or points to, but by everything it is not. This places negation at the center of his enterprise, via terms like the “trace, which Gayatri Spivak, his translator, calls the “mark of the absence of a presence, an always-already absent present,” the foundational condition of thought and experience. Which is to say, among other things,

that a sign always carries the shadowy imperative of its history, no matter how vividly localized it appears in the moment. For Derrida, this meant, more clearly (and it's rare to say that Derrida is "more clear" about anything), that "language bears within itself the necessity of its own critique." And critique it he and his generational cohort of theorists did, promoting a discursive system that was more like an endless unspooling of analogous connections than a focused analysis. Back then, you could tell the quality of the intellect of a speaker (and often whether or not they had ever read Derrida or just picked up the habit) by the vitality and originality of their spool.

That's all a mouthful, to be sure. Ironically, one way this got translated into poetic discourse, usually the more obtuse discipline, is considerably easier to understand. Thus my epigraph from Robert Grenier, who says this about speech in "ON SPEECH:"

*Why imitate 'speech'? Various vehicle that American speech is in the different mouths of any of us, possessed of particular powers of colloquial usage, rhythmic pressure, etc., it is **only** such. **To me, all speeches say the same thing**, or: why not exaggerate, as Williams did, for our time proclaim an abhorrence of 'speech' designed as was his castigation of 'the sonnet' to rid us, as creators of the world, from reiteration of the past dragged on in formal habit. **I HATE SPEECH.** (bold and caps his)*

Well, okay, maybe this is pretty obtuse, too, all those poetic elisions. But it's clear that his is a direct rebuttal, a reversal even, of Socrates' claim that writing "says the same thing" over and over, is merely an imitation instead of something completely original and other. That's what Grenier says speech is and does. In the previous paragraph he argues:

*[A poem] isn't the spoken any more than the written, now, that's the progression from Williams, what now I want, at least, is the word way back in the head that is the thought or feeling forming out of the 'vast' silence/noise of consciousness experiencing world **all the time**, as waking/dreaming, words occurring and **these are the words of the poems**, whether they, written or spoken or light the head in **vision of the reality language wakes in dreams or anywhere, on the street in armor/clothes.** (bold his)*

And later:

*I want writing what is thought/ where **feeling is/words are born** (bold his).*

I'm quite sure Grenier had not read Derrida before he wrote this. *Of Grammatology* wasn't translated to English until 1976. And Grenier's primary reference is William Carlos Williams, an "objectivist" (in the poetic, not the philosophical sense) and an acolyte of "the Imagination" as a creative force that transcends the human neuro-system, neither of which Derrida would eagerly embrace. But he does valorize writing over speech and indicates that they are two different discursive system. Had he been familiar with Derrida's concept of *archi-écriture* he may well have agreed with him and adjusted his discourse accordingly. The main thing about his version of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry is its formation not as a simulation of orality, a conventional way of thinking about the art, but as a mode of consciousness. His epigraph is from Randolph Dud: "My poems exist in my head. They need not be spoken or written." If you've been reading my page from the outset, I think you'll be able to locate his position in theoretical contexts—consciousness studies and quantum mechanics, for example—that are applicable, though they were nowhere in the air in 1970.

Now let me get more personal about this vexatious problem. I have a very peculiar relationship with speech, given my neuroatypical temperament. I learned to talk quite late and have always been way, way on the taciturn side. So, I much prefer to sit quietly and listen, antennae up and fine-tuned, than to “participate.” I have, as best I can tell, no or very weak native instincts to generate and manage my own speech. What skills I have, and they’re pretty good, I taught myself after I passed out of the normal language acquisition phase. Which means that when I speak it is rarely extemporaneous, but more like performing a script that I have pre-written than talking “off the top of my head.” I’ll have more to say about the mechanics of that below.

By happenstance, my first college roommate was temperamentally similar to me. When we had conversations, one of us would say something. The other would listen, mull it over, sometimes for minutes, and then respond, or just ask for clarification. What for others would be a brief exchange might take us an hour. I’ve never since had an interlocutor as companionable. It was ideal for me because I could pre-script responses that I felt were precise instead of slapdash. Most “normal” people operate on a different temporal metric in conversation and would consider a pace like that intolerable, maybe even rude.

When I am compelled to speak, I feel an obligation to say exactly what I mean, with certitude, a promise I can deliver on, not only immediately but for the foreseeable future, as if some essential aspect of my I-am is at stake. That’s a lot of pressure to put on evanescent vibrating air waves and, even more so, on the one who creates them. I feel that burden before the words come out, while they’re being spoken, and as far into the future as I can imagine abiding by them. All of which is why speaking is so stressful for me, and in its aftermath, like Lee Marvin, “I think I’m sorry I say everything.” Not sorry *for* everything I say, as in

I got it wrong, but sorry because by its very nature it is not exactly what I “meant” as soon as it comes out of my mouth.

Obviously, my ethic vis-à-vis speech—that a speaker, like Horton the elephant, should do their very best, against impossible odds, to mean what they say and say what they mean “one hundred percent”—is not universal. Thus all the duplicity, pettifoggery, and outright lying we tolerate, even expect now in political and professional marketplaces, hothouses for mendacity, words disjointed from truth or consequences like those floating statues, untethered from genuine knowledge that Socrates complains about in the *Meno*. Machiavelli among others believes this tendency is built into human cognition, the desire to find a simplistic explanation—no matter how ludicrous—for a complex set of circumstances, because it’s easier. Like Occam’s razor, except stupid. I’m busting my ass, or my head, to say what I mean, and others seem to “think I don’t even mean a single word I say” just because they don’t.

Writing is something else entirely. As I’ve said many times over the course of these essays, writing to me feels almost automatic, more like typing. It comes from somewhere hidden within or outside me, bears only a tenuous connection to my I-am. It is never finalized but exploratory, as you know from the unpredictable (even to me) moves I make as I navigate through a piece. It opens always outward toward more writing, words breeding new words, their mitosis gone haywire, as you know from my often-endless sentences. So why should I (no quotes) regret saying (no quotes) something “I” (quotes) didn’t actually “say” (quotes)? Writing, to me, is a way to craft “thought/where feeling/ iswords/are born,” balanced equations dancing elegantly on the page, not stumbling awkwardly out of my mouth.

Charles Olson proffers a very enigmatic recipe for “WHERE THE LINE IS BORN” (Olson was addicted to all caps!) in his famous essay “Projective Verse” (1950). He says:

Let me put it baldly. The two halves are:

the HEAD, by way of the EAR, to the SYLLABLE
the HEART, by way of the BREATH, to the LINE

Every poet I know of simply ignored the former in favor of the latter, the heart/breath/line way of pacing a poem. But that movement from “head” to (or through) “ear,” to “syllable” (I’m not big on all caps) and back again is both much more radical and, for me, a very precise description of what guides my writing. In some ways, syllables not words are the primary *semantic* component in what I write, the intellectual part. Which is again to say, if what I’m writing is a matter of artifice that seems to come to me out of the luminiferous ether Michelson and Morley failed to detect in 1887, why should I feel attached to it personally, at the level of ego? And, therefore, why ever feel sorry for any of it? Unless, of course I could (and with writing you can) more perfectly align truth with beauty, which, as Keats points out, are “all we know on earth and all we need to know.” Not two things. One.

But where does this get me in relation to my original post-speech grief? Well, for one thing, it suggests that, for me, speech does not have ontological primacy as a mode of discourse, even though that is what I have been culturally conditioned to feel every time I open my mouth to talk. I think the dysfunctional social temperament I was either born with or acquired before I learned how to talk is at the heart of this. I’ve written about this autobiographical matter in some detail in my book *The New Not-Normal: A Post-pandemic Manifesto on Neurodiversity* (2024), where I examine it in the context of what is now called a “social anxiety disorder,” with which I am and have always been afflicted, although I didn’t have a name for it until I was well into my adulthood. The speech-related aspect of this arises from one of the primary features of social anxiety disorder: ophthalmophobia, an irrational aversion to being the center of

attention. So why is that visual matter speech-related? Well, as soon as you open your mouth in the company of others, what I called “participation” above, all eyes turn toward you. Stay quiet and they don’t. It’s that simple. That, I’m quite sure, is where my speech-avoidance complex draws its primal energy.

As I said, I realized at some point that this incapacity would be a disability in the normative marketplace, like getting a job and doing it, so I decided to teach myself how to speak publicly. Here is a passage from *The New Not-Normal* that describes the final stages of that process:

In my early adulthood, when I started to teach, I realized I needed to be able to speak not just spontaneously and communicatively, but with authority, and to sound “smart” doing so. So I practiced that, too, created in effect a persona that could quite comfortably stand up in a classroom and conduct its essential business, a “me” that was both me and not-me, which is I assume pretty much the way “normal” people operate in professional cultures, though less intentionally and self-consciously. Those of us less well-endowed with natural social instincts simply have to work harder at it. That my techniques for doing so ended up being somewhat quirky—i.e., “authentic” to my aberrant social nature—made me a unique and quite extraordinary teacher, a claim I can back up with ample documentation and multiple awards.

One mental “trick” I used toward this end was to write out silently in my head exactly what I wanted to say and how I wanted so say it (I always preferred writing as a means of personal communication for the control-related reasons that are obvious to me now, but only became so well into my adulthood.) I would then memorize what I had “written” and say it as if it was

spontaneous and “true” to the moment; again, like a good actor reading from a good script, one I had just written myself for myself! As you might imagine, it takes some persistence and patience to learn to do this well: first to generate the script more and more quickly, then to move from the script to the speech more and more seamlessly, and then to make it all sound both authentic and spontaneous, belonging to that instant. Fortunately, as time went on, all of these steps gradually collapsed into one so that I could in fact speak spontaneously and authentically and sound “smart” doing so, “off the top of my head,” as it were, a great boon for my career in the academy. . . . [This] was simply my process for making the self I knew inside as accurately visible as possible to the outside, which given the deficits in my naturally endowed skill set, was more a mode of work than behavior: exactly the way anyone with any deficit in “normalcy” overrides its consequences.

Two things are evident here pertinent to this piece: (1) writing always had primacy for me; and (2) the way it eventuated into speech added a very specific kind of weight to it that I didn’t, and don’t, experience when I write. I’ll call this extra weight a moral “gravity.”

Speech is, after all, embodied sound, flesh made word, to invert the opening of John’s gospel. It recodes the godly I am into a personal I am, an authoritative perspective from which “truth” (or a semblance thereof) can, allegedly, be apprehended and then rendered. It makes audible a “soul” (or semblance thereof), via those sound waves, to whoever is willing to listen. I put truth and soul in quotation marks because they can be simulated or dissimulated in all kinds of ways to achieve all kinds of effects, from the most noble to the most nefarious. That is why autocrats do most of their propagandizing via speech rather than writing. Think Trump, who I’m sure can’t write any more proficiently

than he can read, prefers to get his “intelligence” updates via Fox News style videos, for godssake! In his case, if you turned one of his rally speeches into a text, it would read like nonsense. Speeches of his sort can be (and are) repeated over and over to receptive audiences, often including devoted “fans” in caravans, who know all the greatest hits by heart—who could possibly forget that classic ballad, “15-Flush Toilet”—giving a whole new meaning to the term “Deadhead.”

Which may be to say that speech acts gain rather than lose impact through repetition—“telling you just the same thing forever,” which is writing’s fatal flaw according to Socrates—an addiction that carves deeper and deeper grooves into your belief system. See Machiavelli, above. Even if the speaker is obviously lying and knows it, the effect they seek to achieve has a godly imperative. Again, think Trump, who couldn’t possibly be “dum” enough (if only he were as silent as that “b” he thinks we don’t know about) to believe everything he says. That’s what I mean by “gravity” here, the too-muchness that adds either stress (if like me you suffer from ophthalmophobia and aspire to mean every word you say) or excitement (if like Trump you enjoy being the center of attention, what I’ll call, ophthalmophilia, a love of being looked at, the root of narcissism, and don’t feel obligated to “mean a single word [you] say”) to the occasion.

Writing on the other hand, at least for me, once it gets going, has very little to do with my ego, that god-substitute I-am at the center of my universe, which seems actually to blur out as a locus of authority, turning the gravity way down, levitating my attention to a floating observational platform that is complicit, in a participatory way, with whatever “reality” the writing is trying its best to reveal. In some ways this makes it both less mine and more true all at the same time. To fathom that, you have to abandon the traditional (classical) view of *mind* as an entirely self-ensconced array of “faculties” generating “thoughts” you

can translate reliably to another mind via a common *representational medium*. Instead, you have to imagine *consciousness* as a shared *relational field* that unifies in-here with out-there in intimate and unpredictable ways, identities morphing, reaching out and melding in the most alluring ways.

And what they have to “say” is clearly not mine in a simple, proprietary way. I actually have very little “attachment” to what they type, sometimes taking months, even years, of chronic rereading and tinkering to figure out what they are trying to teach me. Not you. Me. As if they point toward a wisdom that is beyond my innate capacities to lift up into words all on my own. This is not an alien concept in many Indigenous cultures, where one’s “thoughts” arise from communal, ancestral, natural, or godly sources, outside-in, not from one’s own enterprise, inside-out, as is the case with ours. I can hear in this, for the first time, delightedly, the echoes of the quantum mechanics and consciousness studies I’ve been immersing myself in lately. My obligation as a writer is, then, as I said, to organize balanced verbal equations that are both beautiful and true, and with writing you get as many mulligans as you want, via revision, on the way toward that outcome.

Another line of inquiry, likely prompted by this turn toward godliness, just emerged out that luminiferous ether I’m writing through. I’m going to follow it because I think it is pertinent, a pretty good example in itself of the serendipitous nature of writing compared to the more deterministic nature of speech. It has to do with two alternative paths in the traditions of religious mysticism, the apophatic and the cataphatic. Most basically, the apophatic tradition approaches the godly by means of what it is not. It begins with the assumption that language (because it is a human construction) cannot adequately describe the divine. So by saying things like “God is not good in the way we understand good,” one gradually strips away the many ways we might misunderstand the true magnitude of, in this case, godly

goodness. And you do this over and over with all the other qualities of the divine, a mode of negation that is different from the one Derrida prefers because it favors less over more. The closer that descending asymptote gets to zero, the more the divine is experienced directly as an overwhelming (non-verbal) absence, fully outside of our sign-making obsessions, speech and writing equally disenfranchised in an ineffable darkness. The cataphatic tradition does just the opposite, using addition rather than subtraction, attributing to the godhead quality and thing after quality and thing until, like an asymptote ascending toward infinity, the magnitude of the divine is experienced as an overwhelming (extra-verbal) presence, speech and writing similarly disenfranchised in an ineffable light.

In both cases, among other things, the divine exceeds any possibility of language fully expressing it, whether you keep taking words away forever or adding them forever. You can never reach absolute zero or infinity. Humans, and the universe as we understand it, are not capable of that. So the choice is either to say less and less until you say nothing at all; or more and more until you say everything you can think of and have to stop. That sentence right there says pretty succinctly how differently I feel about speech and writing: I want to say less and less and write more and more. In the first instance, whatever words I come up with can never render the divine image of truth that inspired them, that damnable I-am I have to endure while I'm "in-here." In the second, all the words I can type aspire toward, without ever exhausting, the divine image I get to luxuriate in while my not-I-am is "out there." Speech works in the dark, makes me feel trapped, sorry I said anything; writing plays in the light, makes me feel free, sorry I can't say everything.

All of which is tugging me back now toward poetry, and a nagging question: Which is it primarily, speech or writing? I have always had a very hard time explaining to others where my

poems come from and what they aspire toward. I recall a job interview back in the 70s where I described in detail my understanding, based on an article I just published, of the various modes of poetry that characterized the 20th century, the primary line of demarcation being between poems grounded in “things” (the way William Carlos Williams talks about them) and poems originating with “feelings” (the way T.S. Eliot talks about them.) The interviewer asked where my own poems fell on that scale. I was stunned. And, honestly, embarrassed. Because I had never thought about that, not even once, nor did I have an answer “off the top of my head,” one of those failed-speech moments that still haunts me. All I could say is that was a question best answered by those who hear or read what I write. I did not get that job, obviously. In the intervening years I have not come up with a better answer. So I’m going to try to here.

I’ll start by saying that my poems arise in an entirely different way than either my vocal speech or my prose/critical writing. They are more like singing, i.e. lyrics with music, which produces a different neurological signature than speech. As Allison Eck says in “How Music Resonates in the Brain:”

Music . . . lights up nearly all of the brain — including the hippocampus and amygdala, which activate emotional responses to music through memory; the limbic system, which governs pleasure, motivation, and reward; and the body’s motor system. This is why “it’s easy to tap your feet or clap your hands to musical rhythms,” says Andrew Budson, MD ’93, chief of cognitive and behavioral neurology at the Veterans Affairs Boston Healthcare System.

The brain’s elaborate receptivity to music means that “lots of different things are going on simultaneously,” Budson adds, so music “ends up being encoded as a rich

experience.” <https://magazine.hms.harvard.edu/articles/how-music-resonates-brain>

The brain dynamics for responding to music divide the experience between the left hemisphere, which processes the lyrics, and the right which handles the melody, harmony, etc. And, at least according to Eck and Budson, the motor system is activated, too. It’s a whole-brain thing, which may be why pretty much everyone enjoys music and why religious communities with a “Puritanical” agenda prohibit it.

Poetry, to me, is like that, a whole-brain-and-body thing, the latter explaining why I, like all poets, am so obsessed with rhythms, the equivalent of toe-tapping. When I am composing or reciting one of my poems, the words come from hidden places, like writing, dramatically enhanced by their intrinsic music, which helps them fledge, and my body starts to keep the beat. It is the one time, word-wise, that I feel unified, “mind” and “heart” dancing together seamlessly, like truth and beauty, all one thing. I just noticed the way my discourse changed here: writing and speaking became composing and reciting, the latter of which are musical terms: I compose my poems like a song, thus all that stuff I just said about syllables and rhythm, the sonic element. And when I read them to audiences, or even to myself, silently, it is, literally, a recital. I am not speaking them, they are singing me.

As to that “things” vs. “feelings” matter that cost me that job, well, right now I think I’d say that those are heuristics that allow me to locate myself in relation to the type of music other poets produce. Which means that the seemingly stupid answer I gave was accurate. There’s a big difference, obviously, between Robert Grenier and Charles Olson in that regard, and I want to enjoy and learn from both of them, and from every other poet out there, all of whom are different in the way they “mix” these elements; to incorporate what they proffer into my own being

first and then, perhaps, into my creative portfolio as techniques. But when it comes to the poems I'm making myself, a whole set of other metrics apply. If the man asking that question had been a poet, I think he would have understood intuitively why I couldn't describe my composing process in the same terms as my reading protocol. But he wasn't and probably thought I wasn't much of one, either.

So where does this get me with that problem of being sorry for everything I say? Well, if speech is designed to show *you* who *I* am by turning flesh into words, and I am ophthalmophobic, there is no way I'm going to feel comfortable with what comes out of my mouth. Ever. I'm making you look right at me, for godssake! "Sorry" is built into the equation from the get-go. And if "you think that I don't even mean a single word I say," like maybe that guy interviewing me, it hurts, "sorry" times two. Those words came hard. Thus the fantasy of that monastery: no prying eyes! If writing is my way of turning words into flesh, to show *me* who *I* am, then I am always absent when you read them, just a trace, free from your gaze. No sweat there at all! If "you think that I don't even mean a single word I say," at least as finalized thoughts, I don't mind at all. That's what I think, too, sometimes, as I said, for months or years thereafter, as I work to come to terms with them.

As to poetry, well, I've only been thinking about that for about 20 minutes, but "off the top of my head," I'm inclined to say it invites me to verbally incarnate a version of myself that I genuinely love, to sing it into being, no space at all between in-here and out-there, or, more to the point, between my *me* and your *you*, to whom I extend the same invitation. If it's good enough, you will have a whole-brain experience, whether I'm present reciting it or not, and want to generate one of your own, along with its poem, not in response to me, but to honor and explore *your* me lovingly. I could have said that in the interview I botched all those years ago. But I bet that squishy little tidbit

would have cost me the job, too. So, best to keep my mouth shut and let my fingers do the talking.

. . .

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Catch You on the Flip Side

*I don't want to hear a sad story.
We both already know how it goes.*

Emily Lou Harris

*Lips make a smile on my face.
Eyes don't let her see you shed a tear.*

Buck Owens

We live in a social universe that often compels us to lie just to get by. Living out most of those lies is not necessarily a bad thing. Yes, the truth can set you free. It can also end you up in a real prison, as my female poets essay demonstrated. In the case of these two songs, both country-western classics, the stakes are way lower, much more commonplace. There the characters choose intentionally to hide in plain sight to minimize the residual pain from whatever memories or feelings they can't bear to share openly. In the first song, "I'll Be Your San Antone Rose," written by Susanna Clark and sung most famously by Emmy Lou Harris, a life-weathered couple meet in a bar and craft a fake-fantasy evening drinking and dancing, she saying she'll pretend to be his "San Antone Rose" if he'll be her "tall dark stranger." They seem to want both to forget and to relive their memories of partners they actually cared for. And they'll likely end up drunk in bed together without really wanting to. The second song, "Don't Let Her Know," written by Buck Owens, performed with his Buckaroos, is a classic tale of a failed relationship, where he now has to pretend he no longer has feelings for the one he still loves, as if showing them would be

embarrassing to her, shameful to him. Those two will not end up in bed together, probably ever! Both are pretty common experiences in a relationship culture like ours where one routinely has either to assume an alternate persona or to hide genuine feelings just to make it through the night. And if you've done either or both of those things, you know the charade doesn't end up hiding much, whether the other person joins in with you (which indicates they know full well you're both faking it) or simply avoids any but the most innocuous contact with you (to minimize the risk of sparking an awkward encounter with "the truth" hiding behind that forced smile.)

I'm not entirely sure why those experiences interest me. I think it may be not because they are duplicitous or false, but because they are transparent and, in some ways, more true than the actual truth. I want to start thinking about this through the lens that has focused this series: all those epigraphs that I said at the outset came from a playlist of songs I "covered" about five years ago. I liked it well enough when I made it. Then I lost interest in it. For some reason, last spring, when I was discombobulated, I started listening to it. Often. That's why it ended up guiding my way here, where I want now to write about song-making itself, not to "teach" anyone how to do it (as you'll find out soon, I don't even know how *I* do it), but to explain why it's so much fun, and worth your trying for that reason alone.

If you think you don't have the voice for it, think again. An elementary school music teacher told me I had a terrible singing voice, and I believed her. When I finally started singing in my 60s, I did it in our back sunroom and always closed the door so Carol wouldn't have to endure it. One day she came out and said she thought I sounded good. So I decided to believe her instead and thereafter left the door open. Fifty-some years is a long time to believe the wrong thing. So, this is at least in part to say that if you are a teacher or parent, be careful what you say: You can close a door or open it; take your pick. But mostly it's an

invitation to find ways to enjoy your own voice, your fingerprint-unique interface with the world, whether it's sold-out-stadium or sunroom quality. The first thing you need, of course, are some songs, either your own or, more likely, the ones you enjoy listening too. I'll narrate my experiences with both kinds, hoping something along the way will click for you and you'll think, "Hey, maybe I'll give it a try."

...

I've written lots of my own songs, about 60, all during a 5-year window starting a year before I left Pittsburgh. They are organized now into albums on my Bandcamp site. I loved writing songs, wish I could do more of it. It is very cathartic. My song-writing process was simple and predictable. A line I liked would come into my head out of "nowhere." So I'd write it down. I'd look for a rhyming line to pair with it, write it down, then get out my guitar and do two things simultaneously: search for a musical rhythm to carry it and write new lines to complete the song. The kind of songs I write are relatively simple and have traditional formal characteristics. For one thing, they rely on rhyming in the way conventional poems used to, the ones I cut my teeth on way back when. George Gordon (Lord) Byron was considered the GOAT for rhyming, could find a match for anything. I'm also partial to Algernon Charles Swineburn and Edgar Allen Poe in that regard, both consummate pros. All of that went out of style on the poetic side over a hundred years ago, with the exception of Dana Gioia's brief, failed attempt to resuscitate it in the 90s, the "New Formalism." So none of my poems are rhymed. There are lots of other ways to build resonant sound patterns into a poem, and I enjoy them. So I have no particular interest in restoring it to my poetic repertoire. But the fact that rhyme has survived and prospered in songwriting says something about its efficacy on the creative side. And, at least arguably, it is one of the reasons almost everyone listens to songs and almost no one reads poems.

I like rhymes for two reasons: One of them pertains to mnemonics and their effects: They are fun and impactful both to create and to read, all that repetition and recursion building rhythmical memory channels, an ideal companion for music. The other is epistemological: They reshape an “authentic” feeling into a prefabricated template that requires paying attention to both the relationships and differences between experience and language, something we humans tend too often to ignore. You can do all of that without rhyme, of course. But rhyming highlights the work in a salutary way. You could argue that rhyming makes what you’re writing about less true, as many poets have and did, which is partly why none do it anymore. I disagree. It forces you to let form guide language to a deeper truth, which is exactly what all the substitutes poets have come up with over the last hundred years, some of them quite complex, were invented to do in its stead.

Which points to one of the most obvious differences between my poetry (if you’ve read or heard me read it) and my songs. Even my edgiest songs have a simple “sweetness” to them, delivered via a voice that one Bandcamp listener described as having a “plaintive quality,” which is pretty accurate, at least for the album he had played. To me, it sounds unnervingly self-revelatory, makes me feel both visible and vulnerable, most likely the reason I now so enjoy listening to it myself and rarely share it with others. I had never heard that voice out loud until I started to record my singing. Now I can’t get enough of it. My poems come from the same reservoir and deal with the same feelings, but there is something about their practiced sonic artifice, and the speaking voice I learned early on to deliver them with, that makes them feel “safer” to me. I’ve done many poetry readings, for example, stressful but doable. I can’t even begin to imagine singing my songs before a live audience. I presume this has something to do with the ophthalmophobia I wrote about in the previous essay. For some reason, I was able to override it with my poems but not with my songs, maybe because I started

singing way too late in life. If you don't suffer from that inhibition, I think you'll enjoy the feeling of intimacy that singing promotes and will want to perform publicly at some point, an almost inevitable aspiration for singers. But even if you don't, you'll learn a lot about yourself just by listening to your "other" voice.

One of my favorite rhyming riffs was in "Good Times," from my COVID 19 album, *Self-isolation*, a song I modeled after Stephen Sondheim's raucous classic with that title from the Broadway musical *Follies*. A few lines in, I started a stanza off matter-of-factly, given the moment, with "Now this new virus . . ." so I had to find a rhyme for virus. Then it cascaded into this:

*Now this new virus is only desirous
of keeping me home for a year;
says it so novel I need to grovel
locked in my hovel in fear.*

*Stock market crashes, money to ashes,
email and texts, instead of handshakes and sex,
self-isolation for the duration,
without resistance I need social distance
it's clear, but I'm here.*

You can see how the need to rhyme makes the process more rather than less efficient. Right at the outset, instead of a whole dictionary to pick from, I needed only a word that rhymes with "virus," and there aren't that many. "Desirous" personifies "virus," fortuitously, allowing it to "say" what it is: "novel." Then the rhyming machine starts all over again, and yada, yada, yada, the song pretty much writes itself if you let it.

Some of my favorite lines arise almost entirely out of the need to rhyme, as in a darkly funny song called "Everything Ends Up Swell," from my *While I Sit Here with Me* album. It's a song

about why “I like watching old movies.” Spoiler alert: “Because everything ends up swell,” unlike real life, where, well, it quite often doesn’t. After a couple of stanzas about classic-movie romantic pairings that always “work out” against all odds (Glenn Ford/Rita Hayworth; Humphrey Bogart/Lauren Bacall; Cary Grant/anyone else), the “real life” stanza became:

*But life’s not like old movies;
never know what the story’s about.
The guy and the girl can’t seem to connect;
if they do it doesn’t work out.*

*Ford’s always fighting with Bogart,
Hayworth hates Bacall.
Cary Grant is old and alone
smelling of alcohol.*

If I hadn’t needed to find a rhyme for Bacall, that last haunting image would never have crossed my mind in a million years.

“I Met Her in New Orleans,” the song I wrote about in “Comings and Goings,” is a good example of how a song can turn a story with no connection whatsoever to the facts of your autobiographical life into something that is absolutely true, to your emotional life a least, if you just trust it enough. One day, standing in the middle of my living room, I thought of that (title) line, for no reason I could fathom, and decided to write a song about it. I’ve been to New Orleans, but didn’t meet anyone interesting there, actually had a crappy time. But I went with the line anyway. So it became “I met her in New Orleans on a Saturday night.” I needed a rhyme for “night,” and came up with “She sat down beside me; it was love at first sight,” pretty standard honky-tonk stuff. Right off the bat then I had a scene and a potential “plot.”

Then I picked up my guitar and started looking for a tune. Within an hour, the rest of the song wrote itself: we “talked until closing, walked ‘til daybreak, got married that weekend by Pontchartrain Lake,” then yada, yada, yada, we lived happily ever after. The refrain is:

*Sometimes you gotta stop lookin’
to find what you’re not lookin’ for.
And sometimes you gotta’ get happy with less
to learn how to be happy with more.
I came here looking for everything but a wife.
Now I’m gonna love her for the rest of my life.*

It wasn’t until after I sang the song a few times, that I understood that it was a reenactment of how I fell in love with Carol all those years ago, even though none of the details jibed. That’s how music can turn a “lie” into truth. And why I think songs speak more directly from the heart than the head. You never know exactly what’s in there until you invite it out, and songs do that better than any other medium I’ve practiced.

At times a song will just take over to teach me something it thinks I need to know, as in these two songs, also from *Self-isolation*. In the first case I was writing a song called “Sometimes, I Mean Just Sometimes” to someone who, like me, is prone to reclusive psychological retreats to those “gray rooms” people like us “just end up in,” involuntarily and unpredictably, offering to share her solitary space with her, “trying to make you laugh,” one pretty good cure. After the song apparently ended, from my point of view, two new stanzas showed up, out of the blue, explaining how people like us could actually be helpful for those who have no idea how to cope with the sort of extended isolation the lockdown mandated. It made me realize that when the social system changes its dynamic radically enough, those with traits that were “dysfunctional” in the status quo suddenly become not only functional (I enjoyed the COVID lockdown

quite a lot, suited me to a T) but potentially helpful to those who were suffering the effects of enforced solitude. Here's the stanzas that wrote themselves:

*I guess there's lots of people now
all forced to stay apart
in gray rooms just like ours
waiting for time to restart
and I think that we could help them
to keep a peaceful heart.*

*Sometimes, I mean just sometimes
we could calm their fear
show them how to wait it out
a week, a month, a year
and how much brighter that gray room feels
when you know a friend is near.*

Same thing with a song called "Bye, Bye, John Prine, I Loved You." It's an edgy/funny song that opens: "Everybody loves you once you're dead," but will never say that while you're here. It ended on a comical note: You're riding down "that last, lost highway" on the way to your own funeral where you'll finally be "the hero and not the jerk," because "dying's your best bet, my friend, always seems to work." I thought the song was over. Then it told me write this:

*And if you love somebody
go tell them that right now,
doesn't matter how you do it,
find a way somehow.*

*'Cause one thing you're forgetting,
you might die before they do,
and you'll never get to say it
or hear them say it back to you.*

Tru' dat. It doesn't matter which of you is laid out, or what the other says then. "Here" beats "dead" every single time.

Most of my songs are expressly autobiographical, heartfelt, a way to celebrate or work through (depending on the emotional valence) real-life-things. But they came to me the same way, a line, a rhyme, a tune, and yada, yada, yada, a song. And you don't need a lot material to fill out a song's standard "air-time"—2-3 minutes. A couple hundred words will usually do it. Most songs have a refrain you repeat once or twice, and in some you actually repeat one or more of the stanzas a second time, so often even fewer "new" words are needed. Think "Blue Moon of Kentucky," such a beautiful song; eliminate repetitions and it's about 50 words. So songs are very economical word-wise, which I like. And, as I said, the process of fitting them into that artificial form often reveals a multi-dimensional truth that you might never have understood otherwise. I thought I would be writing songs forever. Then it stopped. I have no idea why. No more than why it started. It's just how creative things go for me. I get them for free or not at all. And something else besides me is flipping that on-off switch

I do miss being able make my own songs and hope whatever "invisible hand" is on that switch will flip it on again one of these days. I think I'll try to give it a nudge once I finish this series. But in many ways I enjoy making covers of songs even more. Not because they are cathartic, but because they are therapeutic. With original material, you're alone with yourself negotiating your feelings via this artifact you're crafting. The further I get into that process of composition, the more the song is free to become itself. On its own terms. That displacement between "who I am" and "what I'm making" is extremely enjoyable, helping me to understand what's at the emotional heart of it, in words that, in some real way, are given by the song rather than created by me.

With covers, you're there with someone else re-negotiating your feelings through *their* words. I've engaged in about 300 such "conversations" in the 40 or so cover albums I've recorded. They always start the same way. I'm out and about, in a store or restaurant, say, or watching TV, and I hear a snippet of a song that I resonate with immediately. I have no idea why when it happens, but it's intense. So, as soon as I can, I find a YouTube of the original version, pick up my guitar, and try to create my own version of it, one that somehow turns someone else's music into my own. Then, usually by relying on those algorithmic YouTube sidebars, I find a half-dozen other songs that seem to me to go with it, record them, and arrange them into a coherent album, which I listen to repeatedly while I'm out walking or to help me sleep (my voice may have considerable market potential as a soporific!)

Your voice is, obviously, a factor in selecting songs eligible for recording. Mine is on the milder side—registering more toward Cat Stevens than Mick Jagger—so I'm drawn toward singers that sound like that. This opens up rich reservoirs of material you might not otherwise pay attention to. For me, that's happens to be a lot of music written "before my time," as far back as Stephen Foster, beautiful songs. I especially like the music made between the World Wars, from Tin Pan Alley through the Big Band era, which suits not only my voice but my temperament, even my preferred world view, simpler, sweeter, more optimistic, often joyous. I have a longing for a world like that, and this music satisfies it. At least until I read the news the next morning. That's a lot to get for nothing but exercising your vocal cords. About a third of my albums come from that inventory, and, honestly, I think I'm the better for it.

Maybe my oddest cover album originated while I was having breakfast at a local bistro with my daughter, and heard Otis Redding's "That's How Strong My Love Is" in the background. I knew I had to record a cover of it, and that I wanted to do it with

my new ukulele. In the end I created a whole album of his greatest hits that way. Yes, I know, sounds pretty yucky. And in many ways it was. Otis is neither my-voice nor uke-compatible! But it was also both a blast to make and turned out better than I had any right to expect. At least *I* like some of the tracks.

For a cover, the words are given. You don't have to invent them yourself, a big lift already done. Every now and then I revise a cover song to sing it authentically, usually just a few words here and there. In the case of "I'll Be Your San Antone Rose," for example, I had to re-gender the lyrics from female to male, which is pretty easy with that song. In some cases it's not, a song like "Silver Threads and Golden Needles" for example, a Linda Ronstadt classic I covered around the same time. You can't make it "male" without considerable violence to the song. So I left it gender-intact, trying my best to key emotionally into its fierce pride it relies on without identifying with the specifically female narrative that incites it. "Bewitched, Bothered and Bewildered," written by Richard Rogers for a female character in the 1940 Broadway production of *Pal Joey*, one of the first covers I recorded expressly to share, has been performed in the meanwhile by some of the greatest singers of all time of both genders, including Ella Fitzgerald and Frank Sinatra, so it can obviously go either way, and I've recorded it both ways. The occasion that prompted me to cover it originally led me to identify with the female point of view, and that's the one I still prefer. For the most part, though, I sing covers as they were written, the text relatively fixed, very few if any of my own words added.

The next challenge is the "accompaniment." I am not a band. I can't read or write music. I have minimal skills on the guitar, even fewer on the ukulele. So I have to make do with that. Mostly the instrumental track ends up being more a way for me to keep the time, and to force my voice to stay in tune, which is why I prefer to pick instead of strum. In other words, I am a

“lyrics” guy, not a musician. If you are the latter, you would hate my cover performances, one of the reasons I share them with so few people. They’re just not that “good,” as music I mean. But to go back where I started, I’m not doing all of this to make music, I’m doing it to make “me” visible to me. And to have a good time.

I’ve always wondered why we call such performances covers, so I just Googled it:

The term “cover” comes from the early days of the record industry. It originally referred to rival record labels hastily releasing their own versions of a rising hit song to “cover” (or hide) the original artist’s release in the record store bins and compete for sales.

Today, the meaning has evolved to simply describe any new performance or recording of a song by someone other than the original artist.

That explanation sounds a lot like what’s happening in the two songs I used as epigraphs: You “cover” (or hide) what’s “original,” to “compete for sales,” where the sale is basically convincing the other that you are something more attractive than you actually are or no longer care for them, both founded on lies.

One of the things you learn sooner or later doing covers is that trying to replicate the voice of the original singer is counterproductive. It all sounds fake that way, because it is. The only really original contribution you can make to the piece is the adaptation to your own voice, not simply the timbre, the sound it makes, but the way it uses timing—slower, faster—and intonation—softer, louder; higher, lower—to communicate what’s true-to-you in those words. In the simplest terms, as you know if you listen to “real” music, the best covers are those that

the artist has made his or her own, authentic in that respect rather than imitative, or, worst, replicative.

A very strange and enjoyable transmutation happens at this stage. Someone else's words become yours. Not exactly like acting, where you have to conjure a character to mime the lines. Actors often need to "become" characters quite alien and uncomfortable for them to inhabit. I'm sure they learn things about themselves from that process. Singing a cover is different, maybe because you chose the song precisely because it resonates in some unconscious way with a set of feelings you are trying to negotiate. When that other's words become yours, it's like you're merging with someone else, via their words, which become yours, an amazing fusion of identities. Often, in fact, the original singer of a song becomes more famous than the one who wrote it, an interesting oddity in the music business. Learning a song has more to do, then, with learning who *you* are than it does with mimicking someone else. That's the first thing that makes this process feel more therapeutic than cathartic: There are actually three (or four) of you there, the original lyricist (and performer, if they're different), the hidden you you're trying to find via their words, and the you making all the compositional decisions needed to make the song work with your voice and instrument. You get to know all of them quite intimately along the way.

Recording a song adds a whole other dimension to the process. I record multiple takes of a song, sometimes a few, sometimes as many as a dozen, searching along the way for the best fusion of the music, me, and the words. Then I listen to them, tinker with them. I'm not listening for the one that *sounds* best. I'm listening for the one that truly moves me in some way. I can tell it by the fact that it brings a tear to my eye, not of sadness but of true emotion, as in "Oh, yes, that's me talking back to me in a heartfelt way with another interlocutor providing the script." It is magically therapeutic for me to be heard by me as if I am also

someone else who understands me, a very complex self-other relationship.

That selection process inaugurates a second learning stage to the process, one that I assume is analogous to the kind a professional musician uses before they perform a piece publicly. They practice it over and over. Since I'm never going to perform a song before anyone, the physical practice part is unnecessary. What I do is listen to the recorded version I chose over and over until I know it, all of it, especially how it sounds, guitar and voice, by "heart." There is something therapeutic about that experience, too. I am listening to my voice sing someone else's words transformed in such a way that they feel like my own, like I actually wrote them, just for me. Sometimes, I end up later on recording another cover of the same song. It always sounds different, because I'm different and recording it in light of another emotional impetus entirely.

All of which is to say that covering a song is like one of those "lies" that is actually more true than the "truth," if you tried to tell is straight. Emily Dickinson has a great poem about that:

*Tell all the truth but tell it slant -
Success in Circuit lies
Too bright for our infirm Delight
The Truth's superb surprise
As Lightning to the Children eased
With explanation kind
The Truth must dazzle gradually
Or every man be blind -*

Exactly, Emily! You can say the same thing about that couple in San Antone, the lips making a smile against their will, and every single song I've covered over the last 10 years or so: "slant," "in

Circuit,” “superb surprise,” “Lightning . . . eased,” truths that “dazzle gradually,” and sooner or later, “Oh, yes, now I see!”

. . .

I’ve got one more piece left in my queue, so this dual series—one animated by Bunny Lang, the other by my dream-friend Free, amazing presences both of them—is about to close. As Porky Chedwick Pittsburgh’s beloved “Daddio of the Raddio” used to say at sign-off during the heyday of R&B (which he helped to create on WAMO’s 50,000 watt “blowtorch” transmitter): “Catch you on the flip side.” Every life has a flip side, often as rich and rhythmic and rowdy as the one that gets most of the airtime, like the Rolling Stones’ “You Can’t Always Get What You Want,” backing up “Honky-Tonk Woman.” A-side-B-side, dark-light, easy-hard, together-alone, win-lose, yin-yang, lost-found; in this universe, you can’t have one without the other! If Bunny and Free ever meet for real (and in some dimension, according to quantum mechanics, they may already have, via these pages) they’ll have a such a good time together, listening to WAMO, maybe, while Porky Chedwick spins both sides of that Stones 45, singing the night away. And I bet they won’t need to tell one lie to get by.

. . . From Both Sides Now

If there's a blank wall in Olympia, someone paints a mural on it. My favorite is one with a young Popeye striding down a yellow brick road, leaning back, eyes raised to the sky, his blue bellbottoms blooming over his huge brown shoes, a trowel in his left hand, right index finger pointing up. The inscription that flows over and around the roads and buildings behind him, in deep green, is "Keep on growing!" It is absolutely joyous. When I walked past it for the first time eight years ago I remember thinking: "This is my kind of town." This morning, that wonky shadow on my bedroom ceiling looked like him, such a wonderful way to wake up.

All those unpleasant people who had been haunting my dreams? I recently had a series of dreams—same situations, same people—but with exactly the opposite outcomes and effects. They were raucous, full of laughter, redemption, and self-love. In the last dream I had before I woke up today I was taking a course on how to build a new house. The first lesson was assembling a working table saw from scratch. At the end of class, the teacher plugged mine in, it worked great, and I got the go-ahead to start building. So, I guess I have my work cut out for me this fall. A few weeks ago I wrote: "As I sit here typing this sentence, I don't think I've ever been happier. I hope it will last through the rest of them." It did! I am still happy, not ecstatically, or even obviously to others, just in a calm, settled, everyday sort of way that seems sustainable. Which is, for me at least, pretty much the definition of a miracle. So, my "miraculous season," the one that opened with Bunny Lang's amazing poems, did, in fact, have at least one of those, contrary to what I said earlier.

My favorite of John Berryman's "Dream Songs" is "#28: Snow Line." It opens this way:

*It was wet & white & swift and where I am
we don't know. It was dark and then
it isn't.*

That's a pretty succinct description of my last six months, and pretty much every dark to light chapter I've written my way through. He ends the poem this way:

*If I had to do the whole thing over again
I wouldn't.*

Not me. As I said, I'd do it a hundred times out of a hundred if I had to. Life is good. So am I. So are you. We were born that way, I'm certain of it.

About halfway through his poem Berryman warns:

There may be horrors; it's hard to tell.

Yes, but there may also be miracles. Like the one I'm writing about right now. I hope it will last through all the sentences I have left in there, tons of them, waiting, hoping, to get written.

There were two words ringing in my ear when I saw that quasi-Popeye striding across my ceiling this morning: "Paul, PA-A-UL," the second Paul slightly louder and stretched out, with a kind of upturned, questioning lilt at the end. I knew they were from one of the first poems I read, in the late-70s, at Hemingway's Bar in Pittsburgh, *the* place to try out new material back then. But I couldn't remember the title or anything else about it, so I went looking for it on my hard drive. After about 10 minutes of searching, I found it, a poem called "outlines for a letter home." I wrote it at a time I was trying to come to terms

with something I was afraid would leave my mother unduly worried about my wellbeing. I have no idea why I heard that voice this morning, but here's the poem:

outlines for a letter home

I

*there is not much
here to hold
thin stem leaning
into a wind that
will not stop beginning
to resemble nothing
else you can
imagine dash
of shadow penciled
on the snow lengthening
in the light
I live between
these lines next to
nothing all
that you can hold
you call from
the porch--Paul,
Paul--and I want
to answer*

II

*there was never
much to hold
blue-lipped and*

*shivering in the lake
while everyone else sunk
in a sweat from the heat
out of a cornfield
wheezing to catch
breath eyes swollen
red and rubbed raw
leaning sullen against
a tree waiting for stars
to fall down and scorch
the bare earth blank
you keep those
photographs in a drawer
to prove that
it always mattered*

III

*there was not much
here to hold
when wind stood
up out of October
stripped trees
clean with one sweep
when snow swept down
over and over month
after month made threats
and made them stick
and they stood there year
after year and took it
maple beech sycamore ash
quick sketches made to last
all night I heard
you memorizing
their quiet desire
to survive*

IV

*there is never
much to hold
you call from
the porch--Paul
Paul--and I want
to say right the only
things that matter
I am lean and quick as
forsythia in February
I promise something
lean into the wind
and promise you
live between
these line next
to nothing all
that I can hold near
enough to hear you
through this wilderness
this wind*

“Paul, PA-A-UL?” in exactly the rhythm I remembered it today, was how my mother would beckon my brothers and me back from our neighborhood wanderings at dinner time. I was responsible for herding them home. It’s a poignant memory. While I was searching for that poem, I found a whole trove of others, roughly the same vintage—the 1970s, a pretty dark decade for me, as it was for our culture in general. The poems reflect that. I didn’t think that highly of them at the time, so they got set aside, “lost” really. I was surprised, looking back at them from this vantage point, how much I liked them. They’re good poems. I recovered them into a folder on my desktop and plan to turn them into a book one of these days. So now they’re “found.” About a decade ago, I published a selection of poems I wrote in

the 80s and 90s, called it *Mornings After*. Nice poems, lots of light. I've decided to call this one *The Nights Before*, the "flip side."

I'll close by returning to where I started, what it means, or takes, to feel free, a delightful, feather-light, light-saturated state of mind I've experienced many times, often for long stretches, since my wife passed. I've also experienced its dysfunctional darker sibling many times, often for long stretches, aimless wandering. One of the metaphors I've used to describe that binary state of mind along the way is "off the rails." Rails, by definition, are already there, and they will take you someplace specific. When you're on them, you can lean back, look out the window, assume the place you've chosen as your destination will in fact be there at the end of the line, may even live up to your expectations, a very enjoyable liminal condition. I was on rails like that when Carol died, on our way to walking every morning on a beach or in the woods somewhere back East. They disappear pretty quickly when the ground gives way. When you're off them, you are not anywhere you recognize or on your way to anywhere in particular. There is a radical freedom in that, no question, one that, by turns, inspires and paralyzes. I've done an equal share of very smart and very stupid things with mine. I try my best to take pride in the former and not punish myself too harshly for the latter. Not everyone has been as generous, which I understand. When you're on the rails, know where you're going, someone off them looks chaotic, out of control, kind of dangerous, really. I understand that, too.

When my head is most wayward, I go back and reread *This Fall*, which always settles me, a beacon of sanity at the center of a void. That's what I did last spring, which is why I started this series with it. My April was much like the July I described in "Epilogue: Take 1:"

I had a hard July, in my body first, but then in my head, which is more crucial to me now: It was “reality” again, right there, when the next layer down of it starts to work its way up through what you were certain was already rock bottom, becoming faintly visible, not frightening solely in itself, but more by what it hints toward, that there are likely many more such layers deeper and deeper down, waiting for you to wear through to them. And you know you will. Scary, sobering.

I completed that thought this way at the end of “Epilogue: Take 2:”

Reality can be such a frightful place. It will beat us down and then kick us while we’re down. I was about to start my next sentence with “we” but I stopped, did way too much of that in my “first take epilogue,” which made me have to write this one. And I’m still doing it. I don’t want to have to write another one. So I just stopped and set you free right then, pre-sentence, to make your own way forward. I’m just going to say “I” now, because I can’t speak for you any longer, probably never should have; and I don’t want to lecture here, again, always my fallback rhetorical posture. I’m a professor, after all. It’s what I know how to do, unfortunately. You are an adult just like me. You know everything I know already and will make your choices accordingly.

So, let me restart that sentence: I need to stand up again now, no matter how hard it is, no matter how tired I am of doing it, not to prove I can take it (I’ve done that) but to show, I mean really show, that I can make it. Not to “them,” all those townspeople clapping distractedly while I walk out of town, or the powers-that-be waiting, or even you, but to me. You don’t need to read my book. I do. And I will, over and over, trying to let Free teach

*all these other mes what we need to keep remembering.
Read and reread it. Again and again. Cry and laugh, cry
and laugh. Every time I get knocked down I need to
stand up. Again and again. Every single time.*

After I retired, I figured I'd live a few years, tops, a stereotypical "survivor" assumption: You can't understand why you weren't the one to go, and you can't really imagine an extended futural timeline. A year or two looks like eternity. That's what made it easy for me to liquidate all my assets, give away all my belongings, and get on a plane out to the Pacific Northwest with just a carry-on bag. It's been over eight years now and for some reason I'm still here. Today, as I write this, I feel "lean and quick as forsythia in February." I have no idea what tomorrow will bring. I'm focused on today.

Yes, I did stumble a bit last spring. Now I'm upstanding again. I've gotten good at the that. Every single time. One of these days I won't have to. In the meanwhile:

*All I can say is this: Tomorrow morning, just after I
finish my coffee, or whenever I feel like it, I'll be
heading out to my woods, where I'll walk for an hour or
so, on my little path, for the more-than-many-thousandth
time, acting like I'm seeing it for the first time, amazed,
looking maybe like I'm alone there, but really with all
those trees, the ones that truly love me, with Carol, who
truly loved me, my kids who truly love me, all always in
my heart, such goodly company, maybe even with you
every now and then, if you don't mind talking
haphazardly about whatever comes to mind, or just
being quiet for a while, together with me. The "garbage-
of-this-nature" world has an endless supply of bullets
and asylums. I know a guy who knows a guy who knows
"some true things." That's where I'll be if you're*

looking for me, . . . with Free, just walking, free as a bird, all for free.

The relationships that have survived all of my turmoil tended to be with those who had first-hand experiences with life-altering upheaval or grave loss. To them, I just seemed normal. We missed the rails we had been on, sure, but also appreciated the freedom we now had, every day a mulligan, drop the ball and give it another whack. I just decided to dedicate this book to those lovely human beings who walked with me down and up, through dark and light, thin and thick, the ones who weren't trying to "actualize" an exceptional self, but to remember the whole, good one they were born with, the one that made them just like every other human being, including me, the one a cultural matrix like ours does its best to erase because it resists every mode of commodification it can invent; the ones who weren't trying to recover what they lost, but to shed the guilt-and shame-riddled self a social matrix like ours does its best to install so its levers of control will work reliably; the ones whose first gesture is to reach rather than retreat when what's in front of them looks a little wonky; the ones whose first instinct is to love, not fear, what seems difficult to fathom; the ones who just tried their best, as I did, to be friends. I am so blessed to have had, and to still have such "goodly company" to wend my way with here. Thank you, all of you, especially Bridget and Joseph, without whom, well, there is no yada, yada, yada, just a first line without any rhyme to keep it moving forward toward a song.

August is back again. Our "favorite president," in all his eloquence, has said, "Nothing bad can happen. It can only good happen." For one month a year, I agree with him. Whenever someone asks me when things will get better, I always say "August," the month Carol (and some other wonderful people I know) were born, the month Free came to re-visit me so I could finish *This Fall*, the month blueberry season peaks here. When we were kids and my uncle took my brothers and me up to his

farm, we'd always have some chores to do before we had fun. This time of year it was to fill a white enamel pot with blueberries. Wild blueberries are small, so it took a while, felt like real work back then. Now, here, every summer, I do it for enjoyment. I'll be going out to pick some at a local farm with vintage varieties, the small ones, then maybe find some sweet corn, that similarly succulent late-summer treat, and make a meal. *I'm* back again, too, all the way, "new and improved," re-combobulated, ready for one of my restorative "singing" hiatuses. I'll start with my ukulele and see how it goes. I actually wrote a song, too, just yesterday, not a great one but not bad, maybe more and better to come.

Today—another in what has been a seemingly endless series of dazzling summer days, bright sun, high azure sky, temperature in the 70s—is perfect for making the transition from all these noisy words to quiet with a side of song. I walked early this morning at Woodard Bay. Everything I saw—a few seals with new pups hauled out on a now-derelict lumber-sorting platform; a family of otters splashing around just for the fun of it; hundreds of clamorous cormorants on the far side of Henderson Inlet getting ready to head out to fish; a sleek, black snake with a turquoise stripe tip to tail slithering across the path; trees, birds, wildflowers—all of it seemed to me to be both high-spirited and relaxed at the same time. This afternoon I walked downtown to pick up a few treats at some of the specialist, just-one-thing stores—dark chocolate, craft cider, balsamic vinegar. As I walked home along East Bay, hundreds of sailboats moored in the distance, their white aluminum masts skewing akimbo, dangling sail wires clanking like cowbells, a line of wispy clouds floating over the Olympic Mountains sixty miles off, I thought: "What a shockingly beautiful place this is. I can't believe I get to spend my retirement years here."

As I said, I'll catch you on the flip side. Or not. Every time I finish a book it feels like it could be, even should be, my last.

There are no more words fidgeting at my fingertips, such a pleasant state of quietude. Then, for some reason, a few months later, after singing hath “restoreth my soul,” they start flapping their wings again, like those congeries of cabbage-whites that flit around late-summer gardens. One of these times will be the last. Not necessarily because I’m gone (though, at my age, that is always a distinct possibility), but because I’d just rather keep the peace. When the next wave of words starts fluttering around, tempting my fingertips to start “talking” again, I’ll finally, like Bartleby the scrivener, be able to say “I would prefer not to.” In the meanwhile, *this* fall, I’m going to build my new house. Won’t take long. I have all the materials, a working table saw, and a good plan. If you’re looking for me, that’s where I’ll be, with Bunny and Free, and Popeye and Porky Chedwick, and William Cowper and “Delia,” and everyone else who has joined me on my way to here, just goofing around on the back porch, watching those cabbage-whites flap their wings happily around our beautiful new garden.

Bye!

Paul is the author of numerous books available (in paperback at cost of production) on Amazon.com and (for free in PDF form) at paulkameen.com

Poetry:

the other side of the light (2024)
Insta-Poems (2023)
slights: my new tiny poems from here not there (2021)
September Threnody (2021)
In the Dark (2016)
Harvest Moon (2016)
Li Po-ems (2016)
Mornings After: Poems 1975-95 (extended 2025)
Beginning Was (1980)

Personal Essays:

Quite Contrary (2026)
Substacking in the Spirit (2025)
Willing Spirit (2025)
Reading/Writing Outside the Lines (2024)
The New Not-Normal (2024)
Writing Myself In (2024)
In Dreams . . . (2022)
Living Hidden (2021)
Harvest (2020)
Spring Forward (2019)
The Imagination (2019)
A Mind of Winter (2019)
First, Summer (2018)
Last Spring (2018)
This Fall (2016)

Scholarship:

Re-reading Poets: The Life of the Author (2011)
Writing/Teaching: Essays toward a Rhetoric of Pedagogy
(2001)

