# COURSE CORRECTION II

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# DEAD RECKONINGS

by

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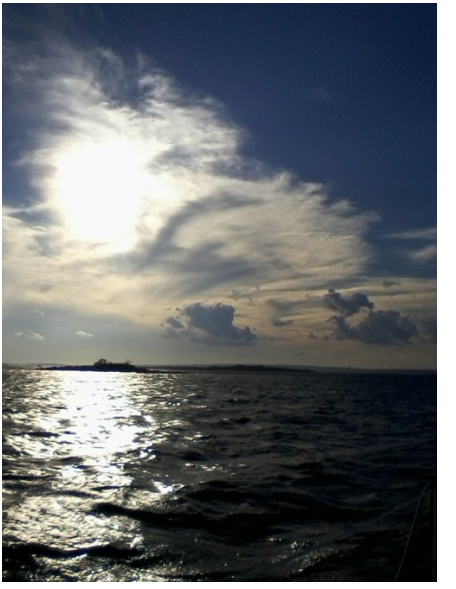
# FORESIGHT



*Close-knit* was the word for it if that is a word today. The community, I mean. Or just what some styled the best part of it: leaders of the Town and Gown, say, hosting parties of the local well-to-do. Maybe absent those who made the shoes and brushes at the soul-destroying factories. Those who risked their lives on the fishing boats. How grand it all was when the wars were done! You knew how to hold your drinks and your pose before the camera lens.

Close-knit yes and close-mouthed too, it was. And so when Fred died, or Roger stole a crate of lobsters from the local fishery or Bill ran off to Kansas and murdered the kid

who offered a ride to him or Ray failed to make the team or perhaps sat on the bench, not playing a down—these were things you never spoke about. Or maybe Jill got knocked-up by the island kid and gave up on the new-born before she turned sixteen or refused to go to college herself, thinking she did not have the funds for it and spent her life doing the books for her husband, complaining all those years about her lot—thanking God even for her miseries. Or perhaps your life-partner, so you thought, beat you like your parents used to do—no need to mention that in mixed company! or hunting in off-season—anything that moves, you used to say, torturing the insects with the magnifying glass—learning nothing from childhood but to get it over with.

So now, my darling ...

"Blah blah blah. Here we go again."

No no. That's not it. Rather: here we *are* again, meaning trying to *make* a go of it once again. Too bad we spent no time on this in our past life, frittering it away instead, to speak as Mother used to do.

"You're such a goof-ball. That's all I'm saying. That's all I was ever saying."

You said that only once, my Eloise, the day you woke up and squeezed into your alluring athletic gear, late for a polo match, and I danced around the apartment half-naked (or fully so!) and embarrassed the crap out of you, as if ... what? ... you would carry my image somehow to the polo field, scandalizing your cadre of well-bred cavalieri?

"I'm left-handed. You cannot play that way, because you'll run the animals headfirst into each other ..."

I don't ... oh, now I see. Right, left. Of course. I've always hated horses, but that image almost redeems them for me!

"So I had to hit with my off hand. How well you ride hardly helps then—with me, the horse and I are one; with me, any animal ..."

Not that one I call Big Dog.

"London. He was different. No. I was different. It was the drugs. It was the depression. Whatever. I couldn't handle him, couldn't teach him how to be the dog he doubtless has become. He got a good home and for that, I only had to ..."

Don't tell me, my darling! When dropped in passion, I'll envision what you had to do for him.

"Ha ha! You'll never know what I did for him; nor for you!"

I know too well what you did for both of us! All those things I couldn't do for you. But what saved my life? Not you, but this.

"This? Silly boy. I saved your life. Without me, you ..."

No no. I am serious. It was the first week of the pandemic and to me, abruptly in despair, it seemed that ... well, I don't have to tell you the details, for you know too well.

"You never thought any such thing. Don't be ridiculous."

Now you're sounding like my mother! I put the will with the estate plan out on the table, and there must have other things too, maybe the passwords for all my bank-accounts. But then I thought: with this, these words, in disarray? Nothing I could imagine left as a legacy, my last word on things? I simply could not bear to think of it.

"Blah blah blah. I'm waiting for my story, as I always do. Have you run out of them? Remember telling me about P., She Who Would Not Wait for Me, you call her now? How she

stared all dreamy-eyed at you and swore exactly that: 'We'll never run out of things to talk about'. She left you for a man half your age. Talk be damned! And when you sat with her at the concert, agonized at losing her, that's the promise that rang through your broken head, in counterpoint to the performance—Beethoven, you said, The Emperor?—as you realized you had nothing more to say to her."

So we've run the same course, you think?

"Maaaaaaaaybe."

There now. You are talking like yourself again! Here's what I propose for you. You start by ...

"I'm waiting ..."

Maybe you can begin with the day my young neighbor, three years my senior, blew his head off with the shotgun he had treasured all his teenage years. Much the way, my darling Eloise ...

"Don't remind me. Or yourself."

I don't need a reminder. You renounced me, I know, but I will never read your last note the way you intended it. For what you willed that day does nothing to change my love for you.

"Let us tell the story of your neighbor then ..."

It's kids stuff, really. We'll skip the angst of adolescence. Nothing of the horrors of puberty and the sports ineptitudes. Nothing of the Great Life Lessons posed in the memoirs of the teenagers ...

"The story of his whoremaster dad, as you called him, the guy who ..."

*Despised me*, is the phrase you want. Me and all the others of the neighborhood, kids and adults alike. For not being the man he believed himself to be. This could be a tale of

comeuppance, as my mother might have said. But no one, as you know, learns a thing from anything. What did reading of your death on the internet, two weeks after the last day you would live, do for me?

"What was his name?"

Frank. Like all the other men in your life I write about. We'll call him Frank.

"It will be like all the bad scripts I wrote. I need the words. But you never taught me those; you never taught me anything. So now: you provide the words, and I will tell the story for you ..."

"As I always listen to and for all things you say of everything."

The desks retain their surfaces; the varnish gleams on the chapel pews. The mourners gather in silence as their suited superiors line up in review. The marshall raises his baton and the adulants advance in lock-step, none risking the emotion of a sentimentalist. The ships slide from the boat-ramp into the waterways, and the sails take the shapes imagined by the sail-makers. The ice closes over them. The sculptor chips the waste away to let the forms of life emerge from the woodblock. "Whittled to slivers," as the poet had it once. C. poses with her son in the airport, unsure where she is headed next—to England or to California. The roadways clear across the map; the sea-ways clear to Acadia. Christmas in the equinox. Anything seems possible. Even the convertible, still steaming on the roadway, the three young men thrown clear and lying face-down on the shoulder, regaining consciousness only as the priest bent over them.

"Like that."

The fishermen shake their heads in contempt of the highlanders, and it hardly matters where you live, or who you grew up with. How you bathed in the galvanized tub in full view of everyone. Seven days it took to cross the continent to Los Angeles. Or was it Englishman Bay, east of the harbor at Roque Island as East as you have ever been? The car almost in flames as it labors up the mountainside.

# PART ONE:

# CONCERT-MASTERS

*...no country for old men ...*

## 1.1

## THE LAUNCHWAY

Something had woken Frank hours earlier. Not surprising when sleep was hard to come by. Dreams of his son John crying out to him as a teenager, his hands black with the engine oil. Dreams of a woman staring in confusion in the doorway, slamming the door in his face. Helen beside him, her breath still sour from the alcohol. This was family life in the sixties.

It could have been nothing. One of the raccoons that raided their bird feeders. No point in telling Helen to stop putting seeds out at dinnertime; you couldn't let the poor things go hungry, she would say. The birds, she meant. Not the predators.

The boats in the boatyard huddled, unlaunched, barely five uncovered by their owners. Waiting, it seemed, as he was, for summer and for spring. For something to happen—a complication or denouement, as Connie once had called it. You couldn't guess the intentions of rich folks. Some just gave up on the whole thing and left their once prized toys to rot, which after a few years of unpaid bills they surely would, their unpainted and unvarnished hulls doomed to fail in the weather. He could sell them as if in spite, but it was mostly for the fittings. Or, as in the old days, with the yard over-run by John and his friends from the neighborhood, just break out the mallet to crack the ribs, collapsing the once graceful hull for the kids to make a bonfire with. That was when John was a teenager, trailed by his gang of what were then called ruffians. That was when the boys in the neighborhood, a year or three his junior, still looked up to him, admiring him for the skills he had been taught or inherited or perhaps for his age alone.

Something had disturbed him. The chill was unnatural. Even sleep was unnatural. No need to wake Helen; there was coffee from yesterday. Or he could drive to the Colony—a private road rounded with summer homes and cottages, Connie's too, a good number of them owned by his customers. That was where the fish ran in June—schoolies, they called them. No one challenged him or any other local scrambling down the rocks by the last turn where one or two cars had room to park. He could pack his fishing gear just in case. Even the gaff, both cruel and effective, and he laughed at the way Nate's face had tightened as if in pain when he had stuck the first fish they caught and flipped it over the gunwale, now wounded fatally.

He would look for the light left on by the woodshed.

He would look for the light left on by the doorway.

You didn't speak of his affair with the woman from the Colony. Not to Helen. Nor to Nate. It was better that way. For the two of them. Three of them. All four. Or the entire neighborhood. No reason for a couple married so long, with two children raised to adulthood, to glare at one another over breakfast, Helen with her eyes red from the alcohol, knowing but pretending otherwise. For her, it was all just cigarettes and memories of the young couple they had been in the old days. *Vibrant* was the word once used of them.

Then the years took hold of her. The alcohol. The indolence of middle age. You could see her old form only in others. Reborn in the daughter Cindy too, now away to Florida, smoking hot, she would be called. She drove to Maine to visit them three years ago in a chrome-laden convertible, borrowed or lent to her by one of the men lusting after her. All of John's young friends stared in astonishment. A version of Helen herself, he thought, who once fell for the tough-guy he had been—no great catch, he conceded, but a doctor's son nonetheless, who would inherit the entire estate, even the old colonial he would sell off to Nate's family. Still nearing fifty good for hours at night, never tired or satisfied, he thought—you never quite lost it as you aged, never quite lost falling head over heels—or pretending to—with those women from here, women from away, women at the Colony with their husbands gone on business or simply rotting in the grave.

It might take five minutes to get there. All you had to do was pass Nate's house, the house he had been raised in. He would give the perfunctory wave to the form framed by the

kitchen window, peering out at him. Let him think what he would. He would look for the signal lights at the doorway, like Paul Revere in the poem they had fed to him as a schoolboy, and he would walk right to the front door without hesitation or apparent guilt, always prepared with a story just in case: "Good God, I was fishing and I heard what I thought was a gunshot: you ... Oh Bill ... are you OK?" Let the gossipmongers at the Colony think what they would!

He sat up. Sleep would not help, he thought. Why wait for it? Maybe just walk the grounds in the early light, drink cold coffee from the cup, feel the dew and chill on the ankles. Little to be seen or know—the dock he had built still hauled up to the high water mark, the rail-way launch from the water to the boat-shed settling back from the frost heaves.

Nothing to find there or experience. No thieves or antagonists. All knew how one day he had driven the vandalous college kids from the yard armed only with the boat hook, "meaning business" they would say, no need for the Doberman always once in his company. Everyone still talked of it. And he just let the tales grow, embellished by the myth-makers. Like the time he almost convinced young John to hook up the prized Browning to a trip-line on the door to the boat shed, and if anyone broke in, why they were dead. "You never know," he said as if conspiratorially. You had to protect what you had. Tools, those locked up in his workshop, with the Playboy fold-outs tacked to the wall.

He had almost laughed out loud at young John for taking all this seriously, even falling for the high moral coda attached to the end of it, the theatrics of world-weariness: "In the end, I guess you just put up with it ..." Jesus Christ! Even a hard-ass as himself, with no more concern for the bodies

lying next to the shed-door than for those on the beaches of Normandy—even he wouldn't risk a murder charge. John's version, given not quite out of earshot, to a young admirer: "Yeah," he was saying in dead earnest, with a much-practiced air of moral fatigue, "but what if some poor duck-hunter, you or me, say, crawled up for warmth ..." And of course the young companion, gullible as the speaker, shuddered in awe both at the audacity of the plan and the moral rectitude required not to execute it. Give John his glory. No need to disrupt that with a sarcastic quip from the workshop—"You mean some guy looking for warmth and crawling past the well-lit house with the fire smoking from the chimney, telephones and hot food for the asking, seeking shelter in the cold boat shed with no place to lie except in heaps of scraped-off bottom paint ..."

In the end, it's best to let the kids do what the fucking kids would do. And if you heard a nearby shotgun blast, and seconds later the pellets pelting the metal roof of the boat-shed, that was the price you paid for leaving them to themselves in the few acres of woods uncleared by the realtors. Why "get into it" with Nate by belittling his son, if that was him, or pretending that such things as gunfire bothered him, if John was responsible?

As a soldier you got used to it. Used to a lot of things. The bullets with your name etched into them. Letting things go and rolling to the sandbag for sleep again. Good to have gotten out when and as he did, hearing of the bombs over Hiroshima. Two years under sergeants no better than himself, the doctor's son. Nate staying with it and now a Lt. Colonel! What was this? The Boy Scouts? A reserveman who had never fired a shot or been the target of one, while grunts like

himself were drenched in sweat, practicing the desperate slog to shore from the landing craft that few of them would survive. And doubtless he gaffed the fish more resolutely when the two were together, and sat stony-silent in indifference and contempt when Nate identified a sea-bird in the mist.

Maybe poor John had had a taste of that himself, but had not learned just to shake free of it. The contempt of his haughty would-be superiors. The put-down of some woman of the Colony, even as Connie sidled up to him. And that is why he had slouched back home, head-down, barely raising his eyes to look at you, all his plans of building A-frames in Sugarloaf in a scrapheap, his sports-car now with the transmission shaky and the ignition shorted out, all the bluster of adulthood having come to nothing. It crushed you when ... when the woman you found yourself mad in lust with ... when ...

So he took the call from John, adrift, money gone, and nearly in tears, and, doing only what was right, he had gone up there to haul both son and car back home. It reminded him, almost brought a smile to him remembering it, of the week they had spent, the two of them, replacing the engine of the old Ford John had bought, and the kid's eyes wide with wonder as he bolted the transmission in. Such work was child's play compared to twisting upside down in the bilge, fishing for the ratchet you had dropped trying to work on the old Atomic or Westerbeek in the boatyard.

Too bad John never brought that girl home, a girl home, whoever she might have been. Worried he guessed there might have been a scene with Helen. Or the old whoremaster himself leering at her or, worse, dismissing her. Or some

crack from a neighbor about how John wasted his youth with a bunch of kids still now in their teens, with faggots for fathers. When he could have been ... When he might well ... When he had the chance to ...

Should have taken the distraught kid aside and told him "Screw the money; any dope can get a job uptown. These women. I know what they're about. You lose one or you don't perform to their liking or she runs off with your neighbor or blows him in your very doorway, screw all that; it's like the fish in the sea there are always more of them and if you need a few hundred to get started again well fuck it what is family for let's not mention it again." That's what he should have said, but it was appalling really, seeing Helen drop her guard for a moment as she rarely did and give the kid a half-hug almost right in front of him, forcing the poor bastard to turn away in embarrassment and something that must have felt like sadness or like grief.

"These women," he could have gruffly said, incorporating all meanings of that phrase in the utterance. "Screw it. Don't give it another thought."

The truck started quietly and he eased out of the driveway into the boatyard, then up the quarter-mile drive to the main road, hearing the gravel protest beneath the carriage weight, seeing Nate's house grandly perched on the hill—the very house he himself had grown up in as the doctor's son. Turning right, toward the Colony ... Or no. Was it not last fall he had done this?

**Interlude I**

*When you got older, you tried to turn from what your forebears taught—you had seen too much of*

*family at age 11 to be any longer deluded by their once-omniscience. You turned to your older friends, like Frank's son John, three years your senior, your brother's age, even though the two of them never associated, except in the neighborhood football games where we all played, each of us suffering no more than the unavoidable ignominy of adolescence.*

*And that was long before you outgrew John as well—finally seeing him as that ne'er-do-well who couldn't identify birds with the skill of Hank or couldn't skate with Chris and couldn't run under a football the way your brother did or read as you did or climb trees like Steve, who moved away, or like J.T., who should have died on the Harley rather than end up as he did. And that youthful braggadocio?—all for what?*

*Maybe he had taught you how to cast, or maybe it was someone at college, as you wouldn't go fishing with your father unless it was simply dragging a handline from the sailing skiff, and even on those moments of filial piety, you knew it was best just to let him be alone out there, for even on the cat-boat, there were spaces for his hidden gin.*

*You sat on the rocks at the Colony, at age sixteen, nursing the warm beer like adults and insulting each other with your eloquent quips and silences. And once, you were out on those rocks alone, only two miles from the house, and when you saw Frank walk down the path, surprised to find you there, you understood what the allure of the place must have been for grown-ups. He turned away, and maybe grunted a note of*

*acknowledgement, but most likely, thinking back on it today, it was a spitting scorn at running into you.*

*Yet you felt then a connection, despite Frank's visible contempt. A one-ness. On that peninsula where you could watch the sunset or fish in the twilight, or just sit on the rocks, sipping your warm and illicit beer, remembering doing so a year earlier. That. And it was like making the step into adulthood, where Frank's life would be yours and the two of you would exchange respectful nods like prize-fighters beaten to submission at the bell.*

*So serene, you thought as he left, imagining this new role that John himself must have tried out when he left for Sugarloaf. Staring calmly at the water where the fish would rise, like you had seen your uncle do in Colorado, with a calm skill you would doubtless master in the future. You never thought of the suffering of the prey. Never acknowledged the contempt that Frank now and always felt for you. You could almost hear the background music, as the camera lens framed you in this moment, the diminuendo of the departing footsteps: "Leave him—he is thinking." Enjoying nature, enjoying the very misery of self, perhaps. The line pays off the spindle and you reel it in, marveling at the design.*

*Play-acting all that was. On the rock-face of Mere Point with the warm beer or later talking of academic life with John L. on Matinicus. In this, you were like Connie from the Colony, famous as an actress in the local theatre—your dad Nate on stage with her, all got up as Simon Legree as their half-drunken dinner mates nodded in approval. That was drama. Life itself. Acting as*

*you thought adults did: joyless and perfunctory—never letting things get to you, showing no emotion, no tears or peals of laughter except when safe before the proscenium.*

*The water laps the rockface. The salt sprays the weeds that have found a place there, only to be washed away in winter.*

It was like two winters ago, Frank thought, when the snow was banked high on the roadway, and he stopped in to talk to Nate. True enough, despite what you thought of him, he was kindly and admiring and would always pitch that fake Maine accent a half-octave higher in your company, sometimes inhaling the words like a high-lander, as if to acknowledge that you, you were the local man, and he, despite generations of his family at Bowdoin and at Kennebunk, he was the outsider, taking over the doctor's house for cash, the house you had grown up in.

It was that winter morning and when he looked up from the driveway, talking to Nate, he could see Nate's weakling son peering out at them from the bedroom window where he himself had slept as a child. And he turned away—no need to acknowledge that, the very degeneration of things—and roughly cried to his Doberman standing next to them "Let's go home!" and instead of leaping into the pick-up, the dog took the shorter route out the driveway and no sooner did it pass the shoveled snowbank than it was run down. Black sedan, I think. Within seconds, Frank was after him, ignoring the dog dying helpless in the salted snow, one leg free and his astonished face trying to construct its last objection in the ice.

For dogs too were replaceable, as your pride was not. And he could just get another one to roam the neighborhood as Kurt had, sometimes a mile away, chasing cats into the trees and killing them when he could just for the sport of it, or simply enraged at the life-form. Nothing like a battle with a woodchuck leaving his face ripped up, with John joyful beside him. And you could show by leaving the dog to die like that in order to catch its murderer, you could show that you "meant business" or however you would put it, and animals though sentient, were not to be objects of sentiment. It was simple: if you had a dog it lived, and if it died by violence, it died as most other animals did, unpampered by humanity.

We were different, of course, living and dying in our singular dispositions. Ha! Like Nate could be other than he was! That faggy exterior. Too bad he couldn't make some use of it. Like in that old play Connie had forced them all to see, even him, a man who hadn't read a book since high school. Connie, confidante to all, it seemed, hard drinker, with the voice graveled from the cigarettes, cultured, better than all of them, even Nate, the Greek professor, and his steel-cold wife, educated somewhere, always in the local plays or at the Town and Gown at Bowdoin. Shakespeare's time, whenever that was, and the hero just pretended to be impotent and all the women fell for him, and all the men welcomed him into their homes too, and I guess if you could just put up with the reputation of uselessness in bed, then you could have all the women you wanted, as many as Mark had maybe, another of John's young friends, notorious even as a twenty-year-old. His theory was that if you walked up to any woman you saw, and said "Let's go back to my house and make out like school children," why 99 of 100 would

slap you or call the cops or laugh at you as an imbecile; given that, you only had to do this 100 times a day and you would have a new woman with you every night ... Horner, that was the name. A pun, I guess, or so Connie seemed to assume and maybe if he could just get the plot straight he would bring it up to Nate again.

That's what you did with kids, or tried to do for them. Just put life in front of them and let them make the most of it. Like teaching John to sail even though he himself was hardly a master of it. You just built the plywood board boat (a Moth, it was called), a snap for a man as handy as himself, then sailed or paddled to the limit of swimming distance from the dock with him and jumped overboard, with your expert but rarely used crawl stroke, back to the rocks or to the dock where Helen lay with her cigarette, and let the kid figure out how to get the thing to shore, which he inevitably did. Then John passed on that skill, using the same technique, to Nate's son, who screamed in fear and anger at having been caught in his own incompetence, not with a kind instructor at his side to guide him, but now perilously so he thought alone out there, letting the sail flap in the wind as he paddled in protest back to shore.

And then one day that boat blew free from the dock and washed up on the shore three hundred yards away, only to be spotted by another neighborhood kid—the one who hit the tree in the Harley—a Sprint, it was—not to be the same kid who emerged two months later from the coma with his mother patient at his side, all her Christian Science bullshit for naught, no memory of following John around in awe as a twelve-year-old. So the dumb-ass kid fashioned a sign with all the high propriety of adolescence "THIS BOAT CLAIMED

BY J.T. ...", knowing perfectly well whose boat it was (or "had been" in his mind) but asserting his property rights, as if you could do the same, through some pubescent version of common law possession, to your neighbor's car parked in your driveway, or his wife too ("This woman claimed by ...") for Crise sake, while he chatted calmly to your parents. And for years John displayed the ownership-claiming sign in derision in one of the various tree-houses or abandoned sheds the local kids hung out in.

There was a scent in the room they had built for John in the old house, the door opening to the driveway so his young friends could come and go like they must have imagined adults would do. Almost like old socks fresh from or ready for the laundry, and there was nothing like that in the new house, nothing in the small room next to theirs they had put him in—the guest room as the architects would say, never meant for a son returning in youthful shame to you.

**Interlude II**

*Those fucking little pricks. Where were they when push came to shove? When all the plans for building A-frames at Sugarloaf and making so much money I could buy cars right off the lot instead of risking half what I had on a sports car, TR3, that probably couldn't get through the snow in winter and died of a bad ignition right in the damn driveway of a neighbor—when all that went to hell?*

*I taught them most of what they know and everything they would ever need to know, even though they wasted half their parents' fortunes on college where, what do you get? a bunch of college girls and then, if*

*you go to Bowdoin like half of them did, not even that as it's full of preppies and fags and teachers who are bound and determined to keep them that way.*

*Didn't matter what—I always broke the ground for them. Duck hunting, skiing, even sports like that time I caught the deep pass in the weekend touch football game two hands over my head back to the quarterback going away just like you see them do on tv, and retelling it a year later, everyone remembered it. Even Hugh, who wanted to punch me out for kicking the crap out of his brother and only didn't risk it because he knew the damn kid deserved it; so I sprinted up on that big rock where we had an understanding that no horse-play was allowed lest someone fall and kill themselves and grabbing each other by the shirts I looked him in the eye just long enough to let him cool down as blood is thicker than water, so they say, and you have to give the guy credit for standing up for family I guess and if I had a little brother, I would make sure he didn't grow up to be an asshole like Noyes.*

*We built that tree house, and if you didn't have agility, you couldn't get to the first floor and we left J.—we called him Butterball!—stuck on the first branch, too scared shit to take the step, so we all made fun of him there. And perhaps if things had gone differently, I could have taken him out there alone, and slowly talked him through it, you know, the way I taught him to sail or just to wander in the woods looking for fungus and mushrooms, or the day I took him duck-hunting and you could just see his eyes widening, thinking one day, he could turn in the single shot 12-gauge he had for*

*something more enviable—like the Browning I had—the classiest gun a kid could hope or want to own. You won't find me with a .30-.30 blasting at deer like some dead-beat factory worker. Nor would I waste a year's pay on a Weatherby and wander out into the jungle killing elephants and Cape buffaloes like they do on tv.*

*"Yeah," I said to the puberty-stricken little shit who knew nothing more of sex or what all that equipment was for than what I taught him myself, sitting in the second row of the bus and his eyes wide like this was stuff he never dreamed of! "I felt her up," and that would have been the zenith of experience for him and I guess for most of us. "But then she felt me up too, and that really pissed me off." That's what I claimed and doubtless once thought true. Violating my dignity, I guess I thought it was, because well hell, I was only sixteen at the time, and even I didn't realize then that this was the natural progression of things—feel her up than let her do the same then ... and then ... and maybe if I had just encouraged her—Jill, it was! the object of many kids' fantasies in those days!—maybe then we could have settled down and I would be the envy of the entire town! Like it's not that I'm stupid, you see, just that I was only a kid at the time, and what would you expect of me?*

*Of course the kid had no idea what "felt up" even meant in this case, since all he could do with his own girl-friend was French kiss like grabbing her boobs was the supreme gift she could offer him until the day, not too distant so he thought, that they would tie the knot then learn to fumble their way through consummation*

*or whatever they called it and grow up to be pathetic versions of their parents or mine or anyone else's in the neighborhood.*

*So yeah, maybe they could have helped me later, you'd think. Pay me back for all I'd done for them. I mean it wasn't like the world had ended—just a few A-frames in Sugarloaf that never got built and labor for which I never got paid and a few dates that maybe went bad, because when you grow up in a provincial little shit-hole like Brunswick, where no one wants to be anyone else but their parents, you're just not ready for the worldly-wise women in the ski-towns of Bridgton or Sugarloaf, and when I heard her breathe like that and all her body tense to me, it was like being taken by a boa constrictor and I had nothing in reserve for that, no wealth of experience to help me, since I had squandered my youth—to no purpose it turned out!—not trying to learn from my elders but rather trying to help out those younger than me get through life without the shit I had to deal with.*

*And then she laughed I guessed at me and made fun I guessed of me and called me a dumb kid like my older sister used to do and it was months before I realized there was nothing to that, nothing at all, just her way of being nice and making of everything "no big deal," but when you're a 22-year-old as I finally became, not being up for the Great Moment Of One's Life was truly a Big Fucking Deal, and all I could do was drive her home or to whatever cabin she was shacked up in with her parents or cousins or maybe some guy from New Jersey and hope to Christ I never saw her again,*

*and even when all the money ran out and the fuck-head who was supposed to pay me left town and I had to skulk home in the sports-car you couldn't shut down for fear it would never start again, even then, even then, all I could think about was not the ruined and ruinous plans and not a fucking nickel even to take some girl out for a beer, all I could think about was her calling me "Little Johnny" and giving me a consolatory "peck" she called it on my cheek, saving the good stuff for others, and there's no going back to it, you know. No calling her and saying, "Damn, I was wrong. You're ... —like no one I've ever known. I don't care what happens, I just ..." Something simple like that—not some idiot line you've seen some macho actor give on tv or in the movies. But for once in life, letting my heart speak, something I was never taught to do, and I guess no one is taught to do, and something I never taught even my young protégés to do, why then, everything would have turned out all right, and I would be in her arms today. The right words would have made it so. And she would turn to me and say "John, I've known a lot of men. Now we're not kids: who gives a crap about school-girl chastity? But I can tell you, not one man I'm known has ever said such an honest and loving thing to me. Not one." And you can just imagine the outcome of that. "Don't worry," she would have said. "You and your dad just deal with the car, and if you can't get it running, you can come spend the summer with me. It's cheap in Sugarloaf then and we'll work at what we can and life will just go on for-ever."*

*So different in that world from the world here in the guest room, not even my own; since after they sold the old house, there was no real space for me—just a stupid bedroom off the hallway, sharing a bath with your folks, and what could really be worse than that? And after the car turned out not to be reparable, what the fuck was there to do? Walk in the fields where we once played as kids? now all gone to tree farm for the taxes? Or maybe going through the remnant woods to see where the old tree house was, now fallen through except for the back wall. Or the shack where we hung out taking the gun-powder from the cartridges and fashioning roman candles with soda straws?*

*For you could do that, just trying to relive or re-imagine the days when things looked like they would turn out just fine and one day you could talk to your friends' folks "Oh yes, Nate, Maxine, Burt, Bibbo ..." and there would be no need of Mr.-this or Mr.-that or Uncle-this or Uncle-that because you would be one of them, you see, one of them, and if you found some kids in the woods it would be fine, for you were now <u>not</u> one of them at all and you could smile in a condescending way, knowing you had been through it all before them, but doing that these days for Crise sake you would just as likely be arrested as a pedophile rather than a well-meaning adult trying to help kids avoid the shit that you had to go through practically your whole fucking life.*

*Hunting season months away. The well-oiled Browning stored in the gun-case.*

Frank walks his rounds. It is too early in the season to drive to the point by the Colony, scouting for fish. Boats settle into their cradles, ready for rigging. The commissioned labor past, and now just the waiting for the owners to approve what you did or had had done or demand more of you: "Oh crap I need this I need that I need to launch next week ..." And it was always the same. They just put shit off and hoped all would be well by May, but if you own a wooden boat, you should know damn well that nothing will be all right by May and if you want to get your boat into the water in June, you better get the yard-owner on your case in October when he still has time to do the work. Caulking and varnishing and the tricks you have for finding and painting the waterline.

You could feel the rise in energy. The excitement in the air of the season now on its way. You could feel the crispness in the air which was like the crispness of the air in November or December when you used to take young John duck-hunting before he decided he didn't need you any more, once the Browning was in his hands and no longer something you just lent to him.

Great times to be alive, Frank thought, then and now, whether his son was at home as a kid or skulking back from the real world. You could walk anywhere, the land by the Colony still free of the summerfolk, the welcoming door with the porch light, his own land too, the fields full of boats or the shade of the tree farm. A great time to be alive. In another month or two the boats would be in the water and the money would be rolling in like you were one of the Rockefellers, at least, on those rare days when the owners paid what you were due. The air would be vacation clear. Helen

would be sunning herself on the dock, dreaming of the past days sunning herself on the dock. This was what the pilots had all died for over the Pacific. This was for those staring forward when the ramps of the landing craft dropped into the shallows—the last sight they would ever experience. This was for the bodies piled up on the beaches of Normandy.

> *I got the bad news from Nate, my father as you know, Frank's neighbor, who had bought the house Frank himself grew up in. And it was in some ridiculous variant such as "did away with himself." Like a Victorian knight "betaking himself" to the river? Maybe the embarrassment of hearing my father's preciosity kept me from feeling anything. I was thinking of vomiting into the wastebasket in the dorm room—not because I was caught unaware of my grief or my drunken incapacities, but because I had heard others tell stories of this and wanted to be part of it. Or maybe the recollection of seeing John slumped in the front seat with Frank a month earlier had numbed me to the pain he had experienced. Maybe that. You were expected to feel; it was demanded of you. And maybe the expectation--maybe that itself was what the feeling was—the very "what" or quiddity of things, what you were supposed to experience in the first place, in these fallen days when women no longer lacerate their breasts and collapse on the caskets.*
>
> *When I tried to mourn, it came out all wrong. Not the welling up of emotion, but an accompaniment to a bad sentimental song that happened to hit the charts*

*just then. Not a fitting tribute, I think. Not like the understated handful of dirt tossed onto the quiet grave. What I did for you, my Eloise, or wrote of doing for my Eloise, or dreamed of doing for her had the news of her death come soon enough for me to act. Nine years ago today ...*

He feels the gravel give beneath his feet and imagines it is like the first frost of October. Or the last frost of spring. Only history determines the facts of the narrative.

*Screw those kids—still teenagers, still cursing like ten-year-olds in the woods in the back lot. Off to college. Leaving me behind, but still no more than schoolboys. Nothing changes. Only the hardest of us has to work for a living. Screwed out of your savings by a playboy New Yorker. Angered by the way I charmed the inspectors, or worked like a working man, wiping the sweat from my forehead while still holding the hammer or wood-plane.*

*You had time on the weekends and the women there were unlike the high-school girls groping through your shirt back home—the girls all married off or off to college too when you finally limped home in the sports car with the bad ignition. Nothing to be done. Even Nate seemed forced with his greetings, maybe uncomfortable with you calling him by his first name having known you too as a teenager.*

*She scoffs as you "shake the moths from your wallet." That's the phrase they once had for being broke back in the Depression, I'm told. When the men wore their Fedoras to the bread-lines. She scoffs too at the*

> *move you try that was the rage, you thought, three years ago. You in your tee-shirt and bluejeans. All that teenage folderol of the late fifties. Like Bobbie socks and duck-tails. Like transistor radios, or bicycles with the playing cards stuck to the wheel spokes. ...*

He shakes his head free of the chill. Kurt, his Doberman, would once accompany him on these rounds, and with that dog, you hardly had to stay alert, as he would sense any slight disturbance of the landscape well before you could. Like the time he froze, fixed on the college kids in the boat-shed, raising themselves to the gunwale to take a look at the cockpit or cabin, and Frank grabbed the nearest thing available—a "boathook" it would be called in the retelling, something that sounds more dangerous than in fact it is--and two threatened swings at them with the snarl of the Doberman backing him up and those fucking kids, Nate's students doubtless, never came down that road to the boatyard again.

Too bad it got hit, prancing out of Nate's driveway on the way home, with the fucking kid watching from the window. Then you chased the bastards down but there was nothing to do other than call the vet and have the dog put down, still bewildered that you had not stopped long enough to comfort it as it lay dying half-frozen on the roadside.

It was just intimidation. Scaring the bastards off. The kind of thing you could easily do in those days—the working clothes of the lean working man in sharp contrast to the pressed khakis and blazers of the college kids. Maybe that was something he never explained clearly enough to his

son. The inner strengths and virtues you were rumored to possess?—they were bullshit. Your swagger could be merely superfice. You did not have to catch the shit-heads who ran your dog down in the snow, force them to the shoulder, to the ditch, and beat the crap out of them. You did not have to blow the duck-hunter away as he sought shelter in the boat shed. It was all like the expressionless bluffs at the card table. Like Horner's claim of impotence. Not charm, but pretense of the charm, just the dangerous eye wink. ...

> "*It took me an hour to find the gun store in Santa Fe. I dropped the dog off at Frank's, and left the key in the door lock. I lost my sense of direction—like you say your mother did, trying to find her way from the bank to Connie's house--how you would have laughed at me for that!—my hair and face a fright, hardly right enough for public view. I just mentioned the Second Amendment and all went as I had planned it ...*"

He kicked weakly at a stone in the walkway. Lodged in the morning frost, held by the ice crystals, maybe left by the glaciers, maybe trucked in with the gravel, ten yards short of the cut-off spur to the water. This was where you could launch the small boats by trailer when the tide was up. When the weather conditions were favorable. When you had the right trailer and a driver who knew how to negotiate even the worst of turns. It was easier than it looked but you had the skill to make it easier still. He himself had bulldozed out that launch-way, although Winn could have done it for barely the cost of the diesel. Years ago, that was: today the state would have three reams of permits to fill out for

every shovelful within a shotgun's range of shore. Things were all going to hell. Had gone to hell. Would soon one day have gone to hell.

There was a form on the launch-way. Foreign. Out of context. Kurt would have sensed it instantly. Chilling. Something not "as it should be." Unaccounted for, even as the landscape changed as rapidly as it did in spring. You could not see this life-altering thing from the house; you would not note it driving to or from the Colony. Just a supplement to things. Like gravel, left by the dozer. Like a snow drift, melting dark in the spring. Ten feet from the high-water mark.

You knew it. Not the form, but the fact of its appearing there. And you would one day make that claim, steeled to the horror, steeled too to Helen's breaking down at the funeral, as you felt merely the discomfort of sitting next to her. Like going to parties with the swells from the Colony. Sporting the suits or Fedoras from the Depression.

He stands before the shapelessness of his once son. He had seen such things in the films from Normandy, heard of them in the stories of his friends who survived it. The shattering of all your hard-won grace as the shell hit. He pauses, unsure whether this is reverence, or just to sense the pain, now transferred from it to him. The gravel thawed by the lifeblood.

> *"So for him, there was nothing, so you say? No shock? Thus no climactic peak in the action? No more self-reflection than, say, the day a young self-slaughterer found her broken way to the gun store in Santa Fe and ruined life for you? So why this dawdling? Is that what*

> *life has come to? Not getting on with it? Not calling for the vet or the ambulance? The grief as elusive as the love he sought from a Women from Away ..."*

He falls to his knees. It is as if the very sky re-echoes with his ...

But it is not like that at all.

It is like watching your young wife as she sleeps; he never told her the joy he took from that. Or a lover rolling away from you as if indifferent to the end of things. Like stroking your dog, maybe sensing its own doom and finitude, as it sighs itself to sleep. These dull analogies! It is as if what Nate once called his *skepsis* keeps the truths of history at bay. The grand condolences still to come.

Why not some tribute or a simple lashing out at things? Like the way young Kenny, brother of Sandie, so enamored of by J., so dramatically "wrapped the Mossberg pump around a tree trunk" the day his father got either careless or too eager and shot a fellow hunter in the forearm. Permanent disfigurement—like John L.'s broken forearm botched in the setting, or David B.'s, after he was nearly killed when his shotgun, set in the canoe, went off as he reached for it. A bullshit tale, Kenny's grand pronouncement was, like all of them. You hear the same story, the same phrase, the same renunciation of weaponry in the film by Wiseman from the blue-collar dead-beats up by Belfast: "I wrapped the gun around a tree and never went into the woods again." Too crude, that. His own father taught him well that deer-hunting was beneath them, and that was why John got the Browning in the first place. Not the .30-.30s of the working men.

He drops to his knees.

It is as if the very sky ...

Leave for the local kids such tales unchallenged by the truth. Those now new to the neighborhood, finding only scraps of the treehouse, coals from the bonfires, knowing nothing of J.T. still in a coma, his mother silent beside him, knowing nothing of those who left, either for the future or just exhausted with the place. Let them, those men-to-be, sift through the gravel for the fragments his late son has left for them. The desert blooms of August over the ashes of my Eloise.

## 1.2

## CROSSOVERS

I watched them all die, one by one. Then I watched those who admired them die in turn and finally those who knew them well enough to tell tales of them. Those died as well or soon will. You sit in the hard pews of the church where you have never or rarely been, listening to the eulogists. It smells of the varnishes the varnished desks of the old grammar school used to smell of in the 50s. The ink wells capped, still blackened by ink spills. The initials of your predecessors gridding the surface. Respect your elders, I guess, vandals and the newly dead. You sit there uneasily, at schoolboy's desk or chapel pew, thinking you will one day outgrow all this, or perhaps resign yourself to

acceptance, legating that to the next generation, since at these impressionable ages, there is only one certainty: that nothing in life will ever change but you.

> *Do I have this right? And are you sleeping still? Tell me how things were in the days before I became one with you? But let me set the scene for you:*

In the Old Days, things were different in the academy. A single laurel was enough. Larry's "Ledge," so much anthologized. Winner of the O'Henry prize. The story of the fisherman who died on West Brown Cow Ledge with his son and his nephew while duck-hunting in December. The skiff they had hauled up on the rocks, dead birds piled to the thwart-brace, drifting away in the water, now too frigid to swim in. Their lobsterboat anchored too distant as well. Seeing their deaths approach as the tide came in to their bootsoles.

**I. Lesson Plans**

"You don't understand how things are done," the aging professor said, apparently to him. "Hard work, dedication—bullshit! As if hard work worked for anyone!" Even the drowned fishermen ... "I have plans for this place," Larry says, as if in conclusion. "Plans."

Plans. ... The last time he had heard that word invoked with such passion was by Linda Jane. A mis-assignation had triggered it. That was the very word she claimed she wanted to cry out indignantly to her sudden dinner-guests, who happened to "drop by" for small talk without warning—"Plans! I had plans!"—on the very night she intended to debauch him. But in reality, she had said nothing, merely

fuming in uncomfortable but searing desire, putting all her machinations on hold for a year. And he knew now, hearing Larry talk as he cut the corners on the ice, the plans the old man had were self-delusions, and would be frustrate far longer than the half year it took Linda Jane to make good on hers. ... Or was it when Linda Jane pushed him away, panting for her. "Not now," she said. "I have plans for that." Plans. What good did plans do for anyone?

Larry cuts the corner on the skateblade edge. It's what professors did in the old days, circling laps in the hockey rink the hour before noon, thirsting for drinks at lunch, preparing to doze the rest of the day through office hours or a seminar. What could he, the hearer here, know of that society? "I intend to die in office," the old man snarled, like all of them did in those days. "They'll drag me out feet first, or they never will. My legacy assured." Slumped across his desktop, so he dreamed, surrounded by adoring students and admiring colleagues.

Only a few managed that, and those few who did, did so at 60, like his father, say, cut down by lung cancer. Or like the self-slaughterers, prey to their various crises—disease, exposure, existential grief. A few of them doddered to their death-beds in dementia, which came, when it did, with appalling suddenness, as for poor Louis, who, barely sixty, began repeating his lectures, his famous wit no longer accessible. These men hardly worth the worrying—"What will we say at his funeral?" Even Helen shook her head in scorn when asked of this.

As the years went by, I forgot the tales of Larry's famous abrasiveness; I remember only the white shock of hair, and the white beard trimmed as in the depictions of

Ahab or old sea captains. He lived by the water, marrying into an old ship-building family to provide himself with the proper caché and the names for his kids when the marriages went predictably sour. In those days, of course, that too (like disease and infidelity and failing intellect) was something you would not speak about. There was so much "not to speak about" then and it wasn't just the veterans returning from the Pacific with the stench of their compatriots rotted in the mud still in their nostrils.

> *Remember Tim? son of the leading family in the town. He pulled his watch cap over his face so the EMTs would not have to power-wash the kitchen after the gun went off—how would the landlord re-lease the apartment with pieces of his skull embedded into the wallboard? That was the sense of civic responsibility he had learned from his family. "I was about to brace myself," he said to my father, in that nasal inflection from Exeter or Deerfield or whatever prep school his family had him exiled to. "But I remembered my broken wrist as I fell and pulled it away. The doctors say I was lucky not to get a fractured skull from it." ...*
>
> *Even this third-hand story is riddled with absurdities. No one thinks that clearly falling to the sidewalk, especially when their consciousness is disrupted by alcohol. Let's recall the day at Frenchie's, when the three of us chased down the wounded shore-bird to take home to the mainland. The thing was fine, and walked away from us in stately grace. In the end, he must have thought, pulling the watch cap over his face, better just to be done with it. You, my darling Eloise, by contrast,*

*did not bother with such proprieties. Your survivors hired the cleaning company that would least hound them with the final bill. Then sold the house off with the blood still dried in the crevices.*

Gruff, self-focused, the old professor thinks rather of his legacy—of putting this place finally "on the map," to use his very phrase for it. Through his prize-winning story; his expertise in criticism! All, alas, to be laughed into oblivion when the structuralists and deconstructionists and Marxists and feminists and postmodernists and angry gay men and marginalized minorities swept into the academy; too late he saw this, like the fisherman watching the skiff drift away from them, too late to save himself. By then, it was pretty much all about going to work and badgering his younger colleague Frank and punishing kids for not understanding the way things were in the old days.

He built his own dory, I'm told, or perhaps he owned a small sailboat, strip-built, of course, and with his watch-cap, like Tim's, pulled low over his brow, set against his white beard from the old photos of sea captains, he could imagine he was "one of them"—the local fishermen now, those he truly admired (so unlike the pansies he made a living working with!) sailing or rowing in the fog, like his neighbors and forebears. Not what you would expect from a high brow professor—oh no! He embraced and defied his status, living in the old colonial, the work of the ship-builders in the family of his former wife, whose ancestors worked the men of an earlier generation to exhaustion, only to let them go when the business collapsed, and leave them to eke out livelihoods fishing for lobsters or offshore for ground-fish.

He adopted too the pipe, and the long lean frame, the voice graveled by the cigarettes, the silent look to the horizon, the flask of brandy to share with those who plowed his driveway in the winter, just as my father did, failed teetotaler and likely held in contempt for it by his manly colleagues. "Faggot!" I hear the good-natured snarl of Larry himself or other old professors who knew damn well half the faculty was involved in such shenanigans—those lusts too never spoken of, like failed marriages, like the kid with the face too disfigured by the gunshot for a funeral, or Prof. C. himself, still retailing the math problems he had mastered as a college kid, and knowing shit from Shinola about topology. Poor guy was caught in the Rest Area in loving embrace with the local sheriff—you don't need sine curves for that!—ending all those years of ease and duplicity. And then, unable to face the truth, unable to face his wife, he too blew his head off or cut his wrists in the warm bath. Ridiculous! Everyone I knew too knew of his escapades and "Oh sure," as I heard one student tell it, "I am happy to drive down with you to watch the surf break over the rocks at Land's End, but don't think you're going to get me down there and pull my pants off or ..." One of many such rebukes as had been given him. Recounting this so indignantly to an indiscreet colleague, he never once expected the story to be retailed with a different sense from the one he pretended to attach to it.

Larry unbends to full height even higher in the skate blades. No, he was never one of *them*, these pederastic colleagues, even though he traded witticisms with them every day at the office. He gazes into the distance, as he would on the water, though in the haze of the arena light, there is

hardly distance to be scanned. "Plans," he says again. Self-replication—his own version of eternity. Keeping the old ways alive. Like so many in the academy dreamed about, glorying in their dissertation, their first publication, their first series of accolades at the hallowed university they attended, their first and last job, tenured up to trade puns on Shakespeare and Dickens over the coffee in the morning—five days a week, it was in the old days; for what else was there to life but walking to work and ogling the young men you yourself had once been, flirting with the secretary, in those days before the war, perhaps, which war?, before the bourgeois complacency of things changed everything?

He cuts the corner turning right, the cross-over less deft than when he cut the circles left, raising himself to full height and balance, just as he did skating the ponds or the iced-over fields when courting his mistresses.

**II. The Dialogic Imagination**

J. "Listen to this. This is what you wrote."

L. "I don't give a damn about this. I've been too long in this business to care. My work will be here long after the faddish commentaries end."

J. "This is what you wrote. You don't need to be a deconstructionist to stand back appalled by it. You have their dog swimming in circles around them as the tide rises to their knees. Not knowing what to do but wait for relief from its masters, and when there is none, swimming off on its own to drown without them ... Nice touch that. A dead dog will always work wonders. But listen: 'Almost the fisherman, waiting out infinity, envied him his pattern'. 'Almost the fisherman ...' You mean like yourself, 'almost one of them?

almost the worker? even almost the professor'? All that folderol of alienation—none of us is really a professor; we are merely playing one, like Sartre's officious waiter.

"But wait! that speculation is a red herring, to use the least appropriate metaphor. You clearly mean 'And the fisherman, waiting out infinity, almost ...' You must have thought at one point, 'Can I get away with that?' 'And the fisherman, waiting out infinity, nearly envied the dog his ...' Well, 'pattern' is not enough. What you are trying to get at is the dog's labored circling of the drowning fisherman and his son. The determined swimming in circles, which is all the dog seemed to know—sensing that to stay there was certain death, but unable to abandon them. I like the way he just drowns as stupidly as he swims. No histrionics, panics, terror. Just nature (as if nature were terrorless!). Instinct, then: he swims, he drowns, and no one thinks twice about it. And as for 'infinity'—come on, Larry! You mean the opposite of that. The revelation of the finitude of life is the opposite of eternity, no? 'Caught finally in finitude', that's what you mean. Waiting for the end, which is all of infinity he ever knows or will know, right? ... But let's get back to the fisherman contemplating the dog. Have you nothing but clichés for this? Like 'the living envying the dead'—some phrase coined for the fear of nuclear blasts, ubiquitous, I suppose, when you wrote that."

L. "You prefer words to life! Who would have guessed? A verbal infelicity at most. The dog dies. Like the fishermen would. His unrecovered body devoured by the shellfish. We're all one in nature in the end. I barely know what I wrote all those decades past."

J. "What bullshit! Don't pretend you don't know. Like the professor in the interview telling me he couldn't recall a book he had written—one I quoted to his face. And me responding that such feigned ignorance of my own accomplishments was exactly what I aspired to in this profession!"

L. "Did you get the job?"

J. "With a remark like that? Surprisingly, no.

"But let's go on: this 'marvelling on a terror without voice'; how to begin with that! The phrase 'marvelling on' seems wrong to start. And is a terror what you see? The object? And what is 'without voice'? The terror? or the man feeling it? Is this a transferred epithet as Empson must have called it in those heady days, or was it Wimsatt and Beardsley? 'the pathetic fallacy' where the terror moves between object and subject? And who feels the terror? The kid about to drown soon suddenly alone? or the fisherman?"

L. "That's the point."

J. "Easy to say now over the Scotch bottles. And 'though growing larger by the minute, it was a small light life'. You are talking about the boy held up over the rising water by the fisherman—'grizzled' of course, like you yourself intend to be."

L. "He's growing because ..."

J. "I know. That's what children do. They grow. What we stopped doing years ago. But there, out of food, freezing in the clutch of his father, each drop of sweat diminishes him. Or is this supposed to mean he 'seemed' to grow heavier as the fisherman expended his strength? despite being 'light'? Not quite the difference between mass and weight, I admit, but perhaps 'the sense of effort' ..."

L. "Or pure sophistry!"

J. "Let's go on. This fisherman. A man familiar to all of us who have lived or worked on the water—his brutal lack of sentiment, the ducks in the skiff—'well above the legal limit'—I like that. Nice detail. Since no one in this community in those days paid the slightest attention to the law, as you well know. But all that manly poetry you attribute to his thinking. That's not him. I worked for such a fisherman, much brighter than yours out drowning on the ledge. He used to quote Gerald Manley Hopkins in the driving rain, but he rarely spoke or thought like that. That's you, Larry, and you may as well have described him with a white beard, trimmed the way we imagine the pilgrims did, screwing his secretary, or like Ahab in the movies. Why didn't you just acknowledge that?"

L. "It's a cheap critique. Real artists and writers, those who once walked the earth as giants, did not bother with all that mamby-pamby self-reflection, which makes all the crap of your generation unreadable. Schiller, speaking of Homer —the great artist of nature—naive, he called him, in the ancient sense. Without a trace of modern sentiment."

J. "I remember the broadcast on the local FM station. I must have been twelve. And they must have asked you (since I only recall the outlines of what you said) what 'facts' you had to go on. To 'flesh out' as art. How they had found the fisherman with the son's boot clutched to his side, frozen solid as soon as it hit the brutal air. And from that you imagined the whole tale, from 'Brown Cow', as you call the ledge itself, although it is 'West Brown Cow' on the chart and likely would have been known as 'the Cow' by fishermen, with the outlying ledges to the north and east.

"You were deaf to the rumors and bad-mouthing of the local fishermen—annoyed that you had exploited the death of one of them—'appropriating' their culture, it would be later known in the academy. They shook their heads—and I can still see my captain doing that—'a lot of mistakes in that story', he said, although not detailing them. I was nothing but a sycophant of culture then; and I thus leapt at the chance to find those mistakes myself. So that I too could shake my head in knowing scorn as one of them. As (1): 'automatic shotguns', you said he gave his sons. But no such things have or could exist. Semi-automatic is what you mean. Like John W. owned—a much-prized Browning. The gun whose muzzle John placed in his mouth one morning, on the graveled ramp where they hauled boats out on the trailers, never to be conscious of the fatal blow it dealt.

"And what of the wind direction? You don't mention it, but it must have been blowing toward his home (since that is where the skiff heads once adrift) and I assume then from the south or even sou'west, which you know is not the general direction of winds in November or December.

"And you say the fisherman 'glanced at his compass'. Again I smirked, since only once in three years did I ever see my own captain do that, and when he did, we ended up in the wrong bay in the fog. The fact is, inshore fishermen, I thought, never use their compasses at all, but 'feel their way' through the sea by the sea-state and the angle of the unerring light from the sun.

"And all set to chide you for that, I suddenly realized that your fisherman takes off from the mooring two hours from dawn in December—pitch black, it must have been, like the day my brother-in-law went out lobstering in the

pre-dawn, amazed for that first blank hour about how dark it was, only to discover as the first dawn broke that he was steaming through a blizzard. So yes, of course, I'll concede you your compass-bearing, since there's no one now alive who can testify for it either way, and little likelihood that the fishermen of the fifties sailed by the stars and sea-state the way their distant forebears did."

L. "You horse's ass! Why are you bothering? Why concern yourself with details you care nothing for in your own work? What's discontinuity to you? or an allusion to a past of half-truths? I'm not listening. To them ... or you."

J. "I am simply trying to do your work for you: in reverse, that is, to imagine possible facts from the tale you wrote, which knew so few of them: just the body of the old man, the skiff with the dead birds, and the boat at anchor far from where they could swim to it. Even this is something you never witnessed, imagining the whole thing from the version of the tale in the newspapers and occasionally in the words of those who were closest to the family or their friends who might agree, grudgingly, to speak to you over the brandy.

"What was it you thought you owed to history? Or to facts to which you had no access? A logical sequence of events? Such as might appear in a police report or on the witness stand? Its truth accepted not because a single detail was right, but because the whole thing made sense, and that in and of itself—that was the principle you followed for your award-winning tale. A 'likely story', as Plato says, or a 'coherent one', as Aristotle might have wished or, at least, that version of Aristotle we were all taught by pipe-puffing professors at mid-century."

L. "It's called realism."

J. "Whatever that is. 'The banner under which generations of novelists have massed to tear each other to pieces', as Robbe-Grillet ..."

L. "Another of your decadents, swept up by Vichy France, working for the collaborators at Nuremberg. No wonder ..."

J. "Enough of truth, then. Since most of your readers didn't know the fisherman or his family at all, not even their names or descendants. They're supposed to be moved regardless, or so your tale assumes, yet our suns will turn over the horizon despite the unremembered deaths of the fishermen.

"It goes both ways, you see: what did the fisherman himself care about you or about the world in which both he and you lived? The grizzled man (the fictioned one) so like yourself, hardly acknowledging the wife who would clean the scores of dead birds for him. No wonder you went through wives like that, leaving behind the kids I went to school with who sported your name, not theirs, other names, hyphenated names—two or three names familiar from the boat-builders of last century, until I could no longer recall which of my schoolmates were real fishermen, growing up in the houses where you took a bath in the bushel tub dragged into the kitchen, or rather lived in the astounding colonials built by the shipwrights of old.

"Fishermen have drowned for years, of course, and all from their close-knit community (so they see it) come to the funerals in their best bad suits, and stumble through their eulogies, trying to imagine what it is they should say or would say had they cared. No one grieved for him; no one would miss him on the fishing grounds; just one less

competitor. 'He would give you the shirt off his back', they mumble as if absurdly true or laudatory. It was all they could come up with.

"And sometimes there would be a grand scene, like the time a Coffin died and one of the brothers, or friends it was, spent two days around Jaquish, scuba-diving in vain theatricality for the body. But that is something too no true fishermen would do, who make their living on, not in the water, and rarely bother to learn even the rudiments of swimming. 'If you find yourself in a fix where you have to swim, you've fucked up so royally you might as well die out there'... as die of embarrassment ashore, that is, laughed out of the community for your incompetence.

"And what do you think they say of you? The whole damn lot of them—fishermen, friends, students—those who now remember you or think to speak of you. They neither shake their heads in scorn nor nod quietly as if to acknowledge your authentic self. No one talks of your 'prize-winning story' even if they chance upon it in a musty anthology."

**III. Helen**

I wonder if this was one of your pen-scrawled manuscripts that you once gave to Helen to type up for you, who then, drawing on her education at Smith College, untangled the snarled syntax as best she could, and likely had as much to do with your quirks of style as you yourself did. A *grande dame* she was or became for sure, shielding you and the other drunken sots in the department from the perplexities of life. And I think there was more to it than that, as when the day she looked at me in dead earnest and cried out "But

it's not the same for women: you men can always have younger women and no one bats an eye, but older women ... when we ..." And instead of listening to what she was saying, I judged it a social commentary of sort, not even allowing myself to think that here before me, she was as hot as she had been before all the children she had brought to life, only 15 years my senior or so who had "taken down" even the illustrious whoremaster of the department and turned him to hash. Imagine what she could have done with me! With the husband no one gave two shits for cuckolding, or so you would have said had you been asked.

What was I thinking or not thinking then—when she threw down the gauntlet in the meeting room? And why are you so silent? Can you possibly imagine, far more naive than you would ever admit to being, that you have your old lovers to yourself? Ha! You never lived to see her "come out," as it were, maybe enticed into doing so by her daughter, and move to Oregon, soon forgetting you and all of us. Do you think you are still known to that circle? or your work admired within it? Who cares about the fisherman drowning on the sea-washed ledge or your crass re-enactment from the too scant bits of reality? Who cares what bad professors taught the bad students in the heady days of the academy?

It must have been at one of those gatherings reeking of alcohol and mothballs and bad perfume when you fell for her, just as I fell for another, in my version of your story. She from that house of grand femininity—the two strong daughters she had raised or was it three?—and the sad husband, now irrelevant, standing by in the corner. And from that point on it was simply seizing occasions, admitting to each other at one point that nothing could ever come of it. That

you would never run off with her and have the now grown daughters visit you in the new ranch house by the water with your own. Or maybe fearing that it might be like K.T. and that dumb-ass sociologist who carried on openly for years at your provincial work-place even though her husband sat right next to his cuckolder at all the faculty meetings and at half the parties they attended.

No, it never quite came to that for you, and all I heard of it was rumors from William, your gay associate, a throwback in every way. Who sang his tales with more wit than truth and repeated them for years, with melismatic variants. So now I am doing it too, I suppose, just as you did recounting the last hours of the fisherman. I too imagine affairs you had, although, unlike you, lacking the arrogance to think I could make a coherent tale of any of it, with a beginning, middle, end. For when you and Helen lay down whether at her home or in your office or maybe once in the cheap motel room, you didn't think of history or narrative, but for once felt freed of reason and propriety—your exes not even intruding into your consciousness, and her own husband no more in her mind than when at parties hosted at her home.

All those fictions! That was before the teaching of poetry, memoirs, and grand laments became an industry. You never spoke then of important things. Nor did your poet-associate Louis, who sent his sons away to school away from us as well, who would sit amiably before the class and listen to their fiction and think nothing more than how grand life was, before finding himself repeating the same maxims, before finding himself reminded by his loving students "You said that yesterday, Louis," before succumbing to the truth

and hardly knowing you, his friend and trusted colleague, in the end.

He was to sail in the Bahamas, so William, my informant, tells me. Both men of the old school. Two weeks of class, of course, he'd miss, due to the pernicious changes in the academic calendar. The Dean dragged him into the office, enraged, and all poor Louis could do was sadly shake his head: how all had changed in the mere three decades he had taught there.

For years, William sang such secrets of his campusmates, having none perhaps himself. Awash in alcohol. He finally wouldn't eat. "Oh, of course we all knew," the restaurant owner told me, who served him his sustenance. "'Don't bother with the entree', is what he would say, as we brought the third martini. Oh yes. He does that all the time." ...

He and Helen lie back, laughing at his latest tiff with his colleagues. Even toward the end, how he loved to "get into it" with Frank—the young or once young professor from Harvard, a place he scorned!, and from the refined swampland of North Carolina to boot, where you spoke of your forebears "Daddy used to ..."—such ancestors as he himself never gave a shit about, letting them die in the old photos, and having even his kids chose the names of his exes. What do these young men, with their perfect pedigrees from Harvard and the like, know of the ways of life in this sea-borne place? Know of the ways of life, not on the shallows of the south, but on the seas of New England, or even in the frosty chill of Merrymeeting Bay, packed with ducks in late November? What do they know of the ocean swells and the salt spray?

They close their eyes and imagine this is a place of comfort, and not the couch he or she will have to "unrumple" or "place into order" when they part. He lets his hand fall to her shoulder, but it is a sign of weakness and he can only do this under the pretense that he is still sleeping, or drifting, or imagining himself out in the cold on the pages of his fiction. The charming kids she raised might well be his, he thinks, stuck into the genealogies, and only he and she would know.

He sees himself lying there, still slim, the muscles in his chest and waist still visible and responsive to her touch, or just dozing or half-dozing beside her as she sleeps. Her head shakes or twitches—as you see women often do just before they fall asleep or as they threaten to awake. He pulls his hand away and stares into the ceiling.

**IV. The Dialogic Imagination (2)**

J. "But can't we save him? Not from death, but from the prison of your tale of him? Couldn't the fisherman have cried out? Not in rage, but in sadness or grief? I mean isn't it possible he did that? or could you not have suggested it? Or could he not, in fiction or in life, simply give in to the cold cold end of things, as I put it in my version of a different catastrophe? Isn't that the proper and most dignified way to go in the indifferent sea?"

L. "He is who he is. In the story. And was in life as well."

J. "Yes yes. The actors stay in character, you mean, even as they sense the end of all of it. The relentless waves slam into him from the unthinking sea, their structure far too complex for human speech or analysis—chaos-theory, about which you knew nothing then, and which I, more than

a half-century later, will simply let grow out of fashion until it is forgotten, like all other transient schools of life and poetry. But for him, nothing changes. ..."

L. "To write of them, you must know and understand the fishermen. You must be one of them. You must look and act the part. To get it right ..."

J. "The fisherman does not give in; he grits his teeth in rage knowing he can do nothing. Not grieving for the son he cannot save, the son he cannot admit to loving. Not grieving for the dog. Not grieving for himself. Enraged until the end. He remains precisely the self you have assigned him, as if we all must act in fiction according to the barest sketch of us in the introduction. Aristotle again, 'decorum' it was long ago known to be. And yes, you have it there, even as the irregularity of the waves sweep all the fine logic of mid-century fiction away for both of you."

L.: "Characters must ..."

J.: "Yes yes. That old Aristotelian saw ... But what about death-bed conversions, renouncing your entire self, once said to open for the petitioner the very gates of heaven? Why do we need to be ourselves at the end?"

L. "We ..."

J. "There's one in Dante. Or I used to think there was. He was saved because he got the first phonic of Our Blessed Virgin's name articulated before he died."

L. "Christians ..."

J. "That is when we become ourselves, for better or for worse. At death. Heidegger, right? Unlike anyone we were in life, as there is no more growth to be had—our 'light lives' as you put it—and we become the words in the eulogies or bad memories of those who knew us best.

"So we may as well speak of the end for them—the fisherman and his sons, the couple wrecked off Saddleback. How things turn out—the coda we are waiting for. Or is it merely the story we wish to conclude in the most fearful or pitiful way possible? This I could call the main point—the reason for life, or, in pursuit of the analogy, for continuing to read at all. What we might call the brute 'facts', I suppose, although those were all there for us to begin with—not history, but the end of it, the body of the fisherman clutching the frozen boot to his chest, the sunken hull salvaged off Ragged Island.

"Why just look at them! the fisherman and his family, even the blameless dog who never understood a thing or had a moment of self-reflection—all gone. Fred's parents, the couple I wrote about as tribute to you, losing their strength as they tread water pointlessly near their shattered boat grounded out on Saddleback. Helen, beautiful and charming though she was, gone as well in the cross-country move to her family. Tim and of course my Eloise or Gene, who fell through the ice at age 20. Then Louis or one day you yourself of course: what did all the logic and decorum of your lives amount to in the end?

"And that's why I said I simply could not let the couple die yards apart in the fog-bound sea. 'They came together', I wrote, 'it being unendurable to imagine' each dying alone. Unlike you, raising yourself to full height and constructing this scene of the duck-hunters as if it were God's own truth, not something you imagined from the bodies and the anchored boats, but something you deduced from the evidence.

"Don't you see? All this heroism of holding his son up over the opposeless sea? It's all bullshit, just your version of his inarticulate competitors' muttering about 'the shirt off his back' at the funeral. The men you so admire, exuding the stench of the lobster bait. Why must we die so like ourselves?"

> *As you, my darling Eloise; must you suffer through the end for me? Can you not become the one without pain, the one you sought to be throughout your life? Why should you be doomed to your miseries? Can you not live in the banalities of the New Age consolers, or can you become my darling Eloise—she whom I wrote about in my Elegy? Did she regret the pressure on the trigger just as she felt it give way to the strength in her shaking hand? Did she think of me the last instant she would live? ...*
>
> *"Ha!" she scoffs. "You are waiting for my voice in this? What is left of my voice from you?" ...*
>
> *Or must we put all that aside; forget the things we know, and simply speak through the voice of the fishermen?*

The old man shakes his head, drawing himself to full height and staring as if in the distance straight over his interlocutor's head. The ice protests beneath his skate blades. This distant stare is something he has seen the fishermen do, although he cannot know, he does not wish to know, that they do this only as exhaustion takes over their limbs once again at day's end. Only younger men go out with the

eagerness imagined by him, staring out over the water from the house his former wife left to him.

**V. Spring Gatherings**

Gone now, and his compatriot Louis even longer gone and half-dead with dementia years before we had the chance to grieve for him publicly at the memorial. Even Helen held it together that day at the gathering. What was there to do? Make a scene? when all there knew the thing she had for all of them, in their witty primes, with prizes for prose and poems published in all the little magazines and even in *The New Yorker*. The speakers shuffle to the podium, feigning and feeling unease; it was mostly talk and little more; even Edith shook her head and hid her smirk behind her make-shift veil.

And finally there the whole bunch stood, all lined up in a row, like kids posing for the class photo arranged tall to short. Larry always first, or would have been, and resentful colleagues of average height beside him; Old Herbie too hunched over his yellowed notes. And Bill, the youngest, already stooped with depression, as if burdened by grand histories of the Old Days, telling tales of them as if he were the complacent and patient dad, speaking of the antics of his children, like the kind father in my fiction used to do, who white-washed the brutalities of the second eldest of his five sons.

And Bill came up to me in the parking lot, years later, walking with his cane, barely remembering to rely on it for support, on the verge of retirement, all the old bats of the department long dead and to all intents and purposes long forgotten too. And twice he held up the cane as an ancient

rhapsode might his staff, repeating the tale of its origins, as if a grand gift out of the *Iliad* "Did I tell you about this cane?" The initials HT, I think, on the handle. Desperate for history. And whether it was dementia or simply the garden-variety effects of the alcohol really made no difference to me then. Larry and Louis and all the tales of the old days now left with the sole singer of the past, who no longer could keep the dates and funerals straight.

He had lapsed like so many of them into nothingness: like Mother, like the old friend living next to his son in Rockland who lay once with you and your sad consort on Matinicus, like Louis, repeating the clever and quirky reading of the old poems or even his own, or all those surrounded by the familial excuses about their minds being sharp as tacks. Just as they used to say of Ali, when his hands shook and his voice broke and all the wit and grace was gone and we just couldn't accept that—the hero of our youth, who had taught us about race and civility and the meaning of life itself. Even the cynics, it was possible for even them to believe in past's fixities, despite watching him lapse into the gracelessness of Parkinson's.

We were all there at the memorial, or so I will claim, dutiful lest a Dean unhappily note our absences, checking our watches, wondering when all the bullshit eulogies would end, when the dead would be talked of as the privileged preppy kids they were, laureates of the smallest of towns, drinking their gin with the model citizens of the fifties, and living that way until all but their students had forgotten them. The shoeboxes heavy with letters of condolence.

Long gone the readings on the local radio.

Long gone the stale jokes of the supine and the poems of Propertius. The iambics of the lecturers.

Long gone too the days of sailing in the Bahamas for the last two weeks of September.

Those were the old days, when you didn't work until weeks past Labor Day. And then life went to hell. They reset the calendar, and the hurricanes came, as if obligingly, in consecutive years: Gloria and Bob rolling up from the Carolinas, destroying the illusions you had had since maybe the fifties that storms were distant things you see on tv or in newsreels of mid-century, hardly to interfere with work or your vacation plans—like the deaths of fishermen on the sea-washed ledge. Like the couple drowned on Saddleback as their kid signed the matriculation book at Bowdoin. Just men you can write about, constructing their lives the same way the soldiers detailed their heroics in the war zones of the past, to the sound of the tracers, the bodies half rotted in the fox-holes.

Helen leans back in the hard pew, lulled by the music, by the plaintive cries and paeans of the eulogists. Larry or Louis. It is the same with all of them. The same attendant figures at the funeral, or perhaps one fewer now of them. She could have made mincemeat of the whole pack of them, even the one who met her eyes just once in the office, as she challenged him, and the young dunce, thinking of nothing but his own ineptitudes, never showed a half-trace of understanding her, but instead, let his mind wander to his students to his hall-mates to her daughters too though even the best of Lotharios would have no chance with them.

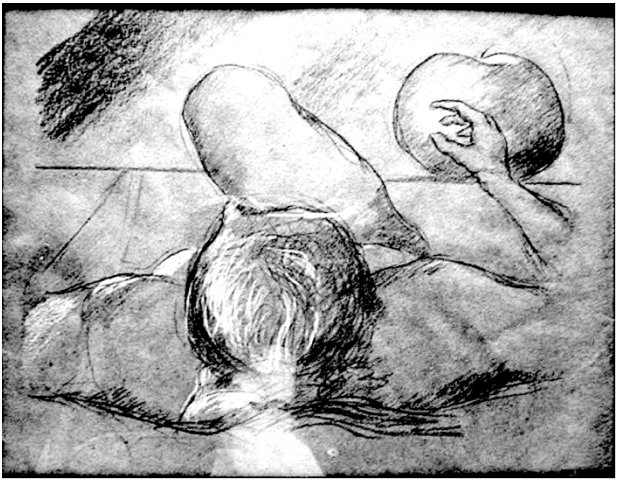
Smith College, early 50s, before it became a hot-bed of culture, competing with Mt. Holyoke, the girls wrapped in

each other's arms. "Experimenting," they called it, as the men shook their heads in envy, of no consequence to life, some thought or insisted. Not what one lived for; not what one was bred for. This is not why we all posed in the photographs. More fixities, she thought: the desultory marriages and cuckoldings; the coarse obscenities of the drunkards who pawed at her.

It was 1955, and the grass sloped down to a field that in two decades would be trampled smooth by the athletes. The sun shone almost in horizontal affront through the doomed leaves and the air seemed to beckon the publicists. She felt the arms around her, the warmth of the human form pressed strong against her back. And it might have been years earlier, a child held in careless embrace by a parent. Or sailing to Matinicus, her hands, almost your hands, on the jib sheets; Eloise, you, my darling, on the staircase, turning back to look at you, yours at last, you think. The gun fire sounds softly in the distance.

1.3

UNDERWORLDS
(after a movement of Copland)



**I. The Crawl Space**

Father spent hours of his waking hours in the crawl space.

It must have been hard for him, moving from the large colonial to the kit-built house of the 60s, propped up on cinder-blocks set shallow into the ledge; dirt-floored, musty beyond description with the carpenters' waste rotting in the corners, scrap they could not trouble themselves to haul away for you, vermin seeking shelter from the elements, barely room for a grown man to kneel or sit comfortably. Above that and above him, two bedrooms behind an open

space constituting a living room, eating area and kitchen (little more than a short corridor)—all separated by glorious brick, nearly non-functional, enclosing a small fireplace whose draft was so bad no fire would stay lit in it. The whole thing drenched in plywood sheathing, cheap paneling, even a dropped ceiling, and glass that, immense though it was, let in hardly a trace of light and wicked all heat to the outside. Wall-to-wall carpet, of course, even the bathroom (for God's sake, let's not speak of that!), the avocado ubiquitous. Indirect lighting. Impossible to read in the place. The Princess phone on a wall where the kitchen space was thought to end. You couldn't say a word there without the entire house hearing you. No privacy anywhere in that space. It was how phones were imagined at mid-century. No wonder kids bury their faces in screens today!

When my English friend visited in the 90s, before I could even frame my apology, she clapped her hands in glee: "Don't change a *thing*!"

You could save a bundle, they must have been advised, by building atop the brittle ledge rather than blasting through it for a cellar, fated to be knee-deep in run-off for its duration. So you would scootch down and duck-walk around there, just as he did in the military, hunched over—a hard feat for a 50-year-old, condemned as he could not have known, to death by lung-cancer—the decades of cigarettes finally catching up with him and with so many of his stalwart compatriots. He might have just collapsed amid the scrap left by the carpenters and the empty gin bottles that he one day thought to sneak off to the dump.

There were things that required attention down there in the crawl space, he insisted, perhaps with conviction,

though today I can barely distinguish the well-pump from the hot water heater, the furnace itself long gone due to infestations by mice—another story altogether. (Even Oscar, the good-natured "technician," couldn't do a damn thing to stop the stench). "Checking on things," "making sure all was right," Nate was, ensuring that the water heater and ductwork were all functioning as promised in the glossy catalogs from which they had picked out the cheap utilities. Nothing like Colie's house with its wilderness of gauges for the solar-powered furnace, and if you looked away for a minute, it seemed, the whole shebang might explode and steam-clean the entryway. "It only blew up once," he said assuringly, and we both sat back, thinking of our days on his father's fishing boat, where as a teenager, he watched me blow smoke rings over the washrail.

"A poor man's this, a poor man's that," Father styled himself, as if being deficient in some way were less to be confessed, than a virtue. Droning through the stories everyone had heard before, providing only enough of the anecdote to allow his listeners to relax into and hear the music of his voice. A poor man's maestro too, he was.

He scowled at the gauges; it was one of those manly things the Army had taught him to pretend to attend to, maintaining a silence almost Stoical. Like letting my uncles laugh at him as he chased the sucker with a worm on the hook rather than casting the fly expertly to where the trout still left its swirl. Like retiring graciously from tennis due to a "bad back" or some such thing, avoiding the jocular repartee of his friends at the tennis court—"Faggot!" was likely the word one of them used, and only once, as Nate was never to recover from his "bad back" again, never to join

them on a Sunday, even in his best tennis whites, even with his memories of winning the tournament in Lexington as a teenager to the delight of his mother.

Now his wife never once set foot in the cellar space, nor so much as opened the bulkhead. Nor had she boarded the small sailboat, where Father claimed to find so much peace and serenity. What did she know of furnaces? The consequences of a gauge on the well-pump being off a degree or two? What did she know of sea-states? or the ravages of alcohol? Admiring only his sense of duty and adventure. This was why you needed a man, other than the fact that no one took you seriously without one.

It had taken her years to escape the provincial plains of Colorado, slowly moving east with her musical skills, until ending up in Manhattan with a Jewish boyfriend and a Masters in music. And no sooner had she adjusted to this new way of things than she was shipped to Oberlin where she met the man who would be her life-partner (though barely a third of it, as it turned out), almost ten years her junior—a man more than willing to turn her into the person she tried to escape becoming when she left the high plains of the provinces five years earlier.

A good soul, she thought, maybe webbed in neuroses, although few could have named or suspected that in those days, and if they did, they would have been loath to mention it. Gentle. Self-deprecating. Willing to help around the house. Years ahead of his time, it could be argued, as he helped with the dishes and took charge of the laundry.

He was not one of these towering and manly belligerents she would come to admire in later life, like Larry his associate, or Webster in particular, who disciplined his

children and talked in a booming baritone and wore his best suits on all public occasions. Never could understand why the sons and daughters of these loud-mouthed pillars of society moved away or simply blew their heads off in frustration, anger, or fatigue. You never mentioned it. It wasn't done. You smiled on the rare occasions the kids (those who survived) came home for a visit. Which they never did as long as the father was alive. No need to make a scene or think of one. They had been brought up far too well for that. Tim, a showcase of a child!, pulled the watchcap over his head before pulling the trigger. No need for the landlord or even the family to cover the costs of the clean-up. It wouldn't have been right. You had to think of others, whether you respected them or not, whether you ever considered associating with them. That's what a proper upbringing would do for you.

And that's why Eloise refused to cry out to you before the end. ...

*That was why. That was ...*

... Before she too put the gun muzzle to her chin. It just wasn't done in such circles.

**II. Sheets to the Wind**

There's a myth about it, sometimes practiced by highlanders out for the first time in a sailboat. That the wind blows calmly and steadily, as it does on the beaches of Los Angeles, and you just glide into the sea-breeze and relax as in an ad on tv for a razor. Fine if the sea floor is seamless and falls gently into the ocean depths. Fine if no squalls build up from the land in the afternoon mist.

But it is never like that on a boat off the Maine coast, as in an old-fashioned, open cat he would be quick to learn and always feared. You waited, or he did, for that perfect day that rarely came, and it might give you an hour out there on a relaxed tack, until the buoys or the ledges came up or the tide turned or the wind died, and when you didn't get that hour you might have to rely on something else, like the gin bottle hidden deep in the forepeak, where no one could find it reaching innocently for a boathook or dock line.

He could forget then the shame of it. His wife threatening to leave him. The seamless narratives written to cover the month in the rehab center. The son's sudden contempt who had been through it himself or a youthful version of it. Or perhaps his late mother's insistence that he uphold the family name, whatever that was, of no more worth than the copper-plate plaque with the contrived coat-of-arms scored into it.

He glanced around, with undue concern, as if absorbing all the facts of the breeze and the currents, but he cared about none of that. Only about the fishing boats circling their traps in the distance, too far away to catch him raising the bottle, their tongue-clucking captains shaking their heads in scorn.

The sun glanced onto his shoulder as the boat twitched too far into the wind and the sail lost its sail-shape.

He tried to forget the day over a decade earlier, when he sailed out to fish for stripers in the plywood dinghy, popular among many in the bay where he had once lived in the old colonial, where the wind rarely blew above a whisper. Somehow he got tangled up with Frank, who had built all these boats for them, passing close as Frank cast for bass

from the Whaler, and when he heard Frank curse him, saying that if he ever crossed his line like that again ...

It is odd. I see this with detailed clarity. Only I am watching Nate's back and the stern of Nate's pathetic little pram and its canvas sail as they head back to shore. And Frank so embarrassed at saying what he did to his harmless and good-hearted neighbor, he even showed up at the house later that day to apologize, the hardest thing he had ever done. And I'm sure he did not then repeat the epithet he had used on the water and which Nate's once tennis partners had muttered on the tennis court—"You little faggot" or any of its many variants. Something to deride the professor-gentleman who would never know what it was like to be the "regular guy" he always foolishly aspired to be.

You couple that with the day Father fell from the dinghy in full sight of his wife's lunch guests, or the time he let his 10-year-old son have control of the outboard, which then turned left in an tight turn, nearly throwing Nate into the water, his face in the sea, and all the young son could think of was "My God, he's going to lose his glasses" and there was no domestic catastrophe that could ever be as calamitous as that.

You put all that together—the tennis match, the crossed fish lines, the stammered apologies—and by God (as they say here) "You've got something," and it was clear that Nate never had a carefree hour out there on the water unless it was well-oiled with gin; careful of those watching for a lubberly tack or jibe, a sign of a lack of skill or experience, or just not doing it right. Fearing he was never a true sailor, perhaps as he hoped his son might be, but simply playing at one. Not understanding that there is nothing real

or authentic about the artifice of life. And then too, there is all that affection for and of his students, the alcohol stealing all vestiges of civility.

**III. The Toboggan Ride**

It was a story he had told many times, adjusting his glasses, creating an aetiological myth of origins to explain the damage to his eyes. And he would always start with a reference to his childhood contemporary—a hero in every sense—who had died in just such a toboggan accident the year before. In the old scrapbook, you could see the newspaper clippings from both tragedies, providing, I think, the structure and even the diction for the way he himself would tell of his own. "Square in the face," the wire hit him, he would always say, the phrase taken straight from the newspaper.

There should have been six of them, but in the telling, in the printed reports, and in my memory of both, I can only imagine that there were five. Two couples, plus Nate, congenial companion, well-versed in the ways of the bourgeois aristocracy. Yes, those were the days. Early thirties, the Depression now behind them. Nate on his way to Bowdoin to make friends who would far surpass those he had on the famous toboggan ride. The future opening up as all had promised it would after the first War to End all Wars—only a prelude, it turned out, for all the rest of them. Like Fred, I guess, years later, thrilled at the life ahead of him, just two days before his parents drowned off Saddleback.

It was an ordinary hill, the topography well-known, if not to all, at least to the two happy couples Nate shepherded before him; that is the only way the story works. I suspect

somehow that it was all a cruel joke—of the kind you used to read in the childrens' books my father had grown up with and passed on to us. The late Victorian mode, where kids played dangerous and violent pranks on each other and strangers had no compunction about thrashing them with belts for doing so. It was the New England Way of Things in the late last century one century ago—a time in which his parents had been brought up and which they passed on to him as if nothing had happened—the War, the automobile, the trains to their summer homes.

They put Nate last in the toboggan, in accord with the dubious notion that you could steer from that location, as in a boat I guess, although in my experience, the last rider there can control nothing at all, other than by leaping out and dragging his body like a vital brake in the snow.

Nate played his role to perfection. He was good at that and would have been even better, had his sexual proclivities, his alcoholism, his fateful attachment to his mother, his obsessions and neuroses, the chain-smoking—had all that not finally gotten him. He steered with the same grim seriousness he evinced when lighting a fire in the wood-stove or fireplace. Sacrificing his time and self itself for the comfort and joy of his guests and family, or as here, for the two couples screaming in exhilaration as they iced down the hill, fondling each other, I imagine, as poor Nate squinted through the dark, oblivious to the wired fence accelerating toward them on the hill slope, willing to die, as his friend had, but doubting that could happen.

In the version of the local newspaper—the same one that had recounted his glorious finish in the tennis match, both columns carefully clipped by my grandmother,

proudly noting her teenage son cropped in the photo—according to that version, everyone ducked but the heroic Palinurus raised by my grandparents. How they had the wherewithal to do so is explained in no version I have heard, but always part of my own. He kept his head up to guide them dutifully and safely to the hill-end. The wire, barbed wire in some versions (late and of no authority), caught him "square in the face."

He blinks, and slowly removes his glasses, lowering his voice and slowing the cadence, pausing to frame the tale as if to impart a Great Life Lesson to his children or listeners, none of whom knew what they were to take from it, omitting the part about being the butt of his friends' joke, careful now to adjust his tortoise-shell frames, "signature," he thought, though not unlike what all men wore in the fifties. "Yes," he says, staring at his glasses, straying from the words of the newspaper, yes his vision has never been right since. Forgetting, I guess, the medal for marksmanship he earned in the service, forgetting deciphering Greek scripts in the microfilm from Columbia while training at Governor's Island.

> *I remember watching him on the tennis court when we visited the old country house on Thomas Point Road—the place where I heard peepers on a late spring evening and claimed to be terrified of them for the rest of my childhood. The net was down for the season—only the wire supporting it remained, barely visible—so there could be no tennis and no displaying for us the effortless serve or the grace of the old-fashioned backhand.*

*The three of us, the father with his two sons, played makeshift baseball on the tennis court. And my brother ran with the glee he always showed when wrapped up in sport and, forgetting all the other crap he hated in his life, skirted the post to avoid the wire that would hold the net. Father ran straight for him, the unseen wire for the inexistent net catching him low in the chest. I can still see him—as if in a snapshot lacking a narrative—hitting the wire—his feet splayed before him, his arms outstretched, like a cartoon warrior felled by his bronze-clad enemy. And he hung there horizontally, as if caught in the camera lens—the pose, I realize now, the basis for my sketch above, a sketch I gave to Marina, two decades before she died.*

*That is what I see: not the inelegant fall to the tennis court—the hideous sound of the skull on the surface. Then I recall another guest, a military man as Nate himself had been—a medic it turned out to be—running with his doctor's bag from the house to the court. And my brother must have gone to get help, just as he had done for me a few years earlier, when I fell into the water at Hamloaf while my parents dawdled in the cottage they had rented for the summer.*

*After that, I remember no more than my unconscious father did, who despite his love of narration, never once made a tale of this incident. Nothing of the wire catching him low in the chest, due to the failing of his eyesight no doubt. Nothing of the heroic pose of the fall. It would be years before I realized (through deduction, not through memory) that alcohol had stolen this*

*tale from him, leaving him a pitiful and pathetic heap on the ground, gasping for help, awash in self-pity.*

*That is what I have learned to remember of this day.*

Why his admonitory coda in the simple story of the toboggan ride? I wondered. Was this a lugubrious tale of his martyrdom, or of heroism lived in his youth, and in the youth of others? What was life like for him at college after those years preening for his mother, when the upperclassmen ganged up on him, and how was it when he returned there as a professor, with his authority no longer in question? Trying to make up for all of it, I guess, and in many ways succeeding (as witnessed by the consolatory notes now stored in the shoebox), except for the days he staggered out the office door drunk enough to be restrained by his colleagues, who even in those days, knew better than to let him drive in that condition. And on those days too, he might again summon the family for a Great Life Lesson, this one his own, and repeat one of the confessions he had learned by rote in rehab, ready to go through the whole thing again, taking care next time not to be caught by his colleagues.

**IV. Reprise—A Day on the Water**

Among the claims that Mother used to make—in the end that is—was that had her husband lived to retirement, rather than dying three years shy of it, she would have joined him in his favorite pastimes of the summer. Not the evenings in the crawl space—Don't be ridiculous! (as she herself might say). But joining him in sailing, despite her

repeated public announcements that she could not bear to be in a boat.

That was of course duplicitous, as were so many vows from that generation. The real reason, so she claimed, involved Webster, the one who raised Tim to finally blow his head away. He would fire up the Islander—a double-ended launch once used by the Coast Guard—and take his friends out for a clam-bake on the island they owned five miles out past the Colony.

What a treat for all! especially us unattended kids.

Except that with Webster "in his cups," the trip back, even though no more than 40 minutes, could be harrowing, particularly when the south wind came aft in the afternoon, and the boat yawed violently, even as the men pretended to love the instability of it all: after all, was it worse than the landing craft at Normandy? or the grim back-wash from the beach at Palau?

Mother sits rigid on the makeshift seats in the cockpit, as the man she claimed to admire misjudges the following sea and curses in his booming baritone—this was too much. Not what she was about.

And thus to avoid such incidents (even she admits this), she swore she just was not a boat-person—could not go out on the water at all. And to unpack the tangle of contradictions and bad-faith in that is just too much for me. And too much for Nate as well, who simply sailed alone out there, taking time off from life and fondling his gin bottles. It all worked out for the best for them.

And their highfalutin sailing plans? They finally came to nothing, and would have come to nothing even had he lived. Perhaps it was Father's dream to pilot a schooner like

Charlie and Nancy had expertly through the mooring field, the viewers on the shore in awe of him and the dexterities of his adoring crew. To board his wife and friends or family one day into the cockpit, maybe kicking the gin bottles deeper into the forepeak. Or simply to pass on his hard-won skills to the next generation. Things of that nature—things that tend to occur to you on those rare days on the water when everything is going right.

He heads for the channel, though the tide is not quite favorable, low but not yet slack; fighting the current, he aims the small catboat toward the two diamonds set up on the far shore as a range to mark the narrow entrance. Once you line them up, you are in one of three channels through the rocks. With the tide coming, even windless, you can simply put the hull adrift and of course the currents find the perfect course and draw you right through. But no amount of scowling will do that for you with the tide still ebbing as it was this day.

Years later, my brother and I scattered his ashes there; on the very rocks where he spent so much time in life, I quipped, grounded out in his catboat and waiting for the tide to turn. And instead of drifting out to sea in high romance on the out-going tide, as Mother's would, the ashes became as recalcitrant as the rocks themselves and the unseen passageways, sinking instantly like gravel, forcing us both into the icy water of late May to hand-shovel the remains of him into the channel.

To him, we joked, it was just another day on the water, ending up ship-wrecked on the rocks.

**V. Subways and Pullman Cars**

Down there he could dream about the life that was never his—or only part his: that mischievous but wholesome boy, a lifetime with a soul-mate, accolades for the model citizen. And it was like being 7, I suppose, when he (or was it I myself?) first learned what it was to imagine oneself as protagonist for heroic narratives, modelled on bad fiction, inherited children's books, a column in the weekly newspaper, 24 minutes of black-and-white tv, all ending happily. The music that even he could play tearing us all up in the background.

He could dream, or fantasize (maybe as I learned to do, sleeping on the Pullman car to Denver, the whole family summoned to watch the black porters fixing up the beds for us). He could remember too, perhaps piecemeal or selectively—one of many lives, his professional life for instance, the one recorded by former and formerly adoring students in the alumni magazine. Or his community life, not quite coincident, the life implied in the hundreds of letters and cards that came in following his death at 62—the reward for dying young, "in office," rather than waiting, or simply hanging on, as my mother did, until all who knew you themselves were dead or forgetful and ending up with only two notes of condolence, one by a complete stranger who read obituaries for amusement.

And he thought then of his older brother Duke, whose life he never lived but worshipped regardless, even though he knew he drank a fifth of Jim Beam a day, I think, scattered wives and children behind him, and held a series of jobs, including assembling Venetian blinds in the garage, leaving the college the whole family had attended, and wandering

away from the oppressive Northeast to California. He thought of Duke's sailing to Antarctica with Byrd, and bringing home the sled dog who beat all beasts on the block to submission. That. A hero. No loved ones but his fellow warriors on the ship to the ice encircling the continent, no way to learn the important things of life down there. And that too, he thought, that too ..., as his mind wandered in the gin he sipped, down there in the cellar space while his wife dozed overhead, the woman he had married, the older woman in Oberlin, thinking now of himself of course, the identities of all of them merging as the damp soil lifted his spirits in the heat from the furnace ... That too ... That too ... Losing all continuity in the foul air of the cellar space. All these duplicities of facts and hypocrisies. And he recalled with amusement, seconds before dropping off and waking from and with the chill of things, his teenage son magnanimously taking the dog for a walk in the night air and the snow flurries, only to sneak a cigarette behind the garage. "When she died," this son wrote, speaking now of the mother and himself, but speaking so it seemed for all of them, "she took my secrets with her." *Failings* must have been the word he meant.

In life, in contrast to the world of his imaginings, you simply did what you could do. So one day, instead of carving some magnificent creature out of seasoned ebony, instead of carpenting up a deck-bench for Helen, instead of directing the workmen yourself as they caulked the old hull for you, he grabbed the ancient axe willed down to him by his father and strode out like Achilles, he thought, to the back lot, to cut back alders for a better view to the water—the bourgeois and civil thing to do—forgetting perhaps that, for

the most part, Achilles stayed safely in his tent. The work was arduous and his hands quickly blistered. All he recalls of that day is collapsing on the kitchen floor as his arteries squeezed shut from the bee stings. Strapped into the gurney crying that he did not want to die, as if that desire were a revelation to all those who stood back to let them wheel him to the ambulance.

He thought of reading microfilm at Columbia. Greek proverbs ... The subway ride from South Ferry to Broadway and 114th Street, where his son who smoked those cigarettes as a teenager would one day exit too ...

**VI. Love Interests**

Missing here in Nate's life is the shadowy Helen, whose face launched all those ships toward Troy, as he taught to lazy sophomores so many years ago, the woman who, could she just be defined, fixed in a libretto, if you could just sit down at the sketch pad and catch her in a series of lines and shadings, would have changed his life and set him up as a different man "never to be forgotten" just as he almost was today, given the sad truth that those years idolized by your students at Bowdoin lasted no longer than the anecdotes told by the youngest ephebe in your classes.

Oh, he knew the Helens of the whoremasters Frank and Larry, but you couldn't get the five of them in the same room. Class, you know. Sure we all hate the thought of it—we should all be regular guys in the end—grabbing our M-1s as infantry, rather than resting safe with the A.G. in London—but what can you do? Despite the admiration of the professors for the working man, that did not extend to dinner invitations, or drinks with their colleagues, or even

sitting in one of the darkened bars with the depressives—like the fathers of most of the women I ever associated with. There were certain facts and stabilities: like the end of the war; like the men coming back from it to the men and women who hadn't fought in it; like the mortgage payments on the house; and finally, yes, like the class you had been born into and where you and your children would stay until their deaths. A class shored up by education, even if that were no more than signing the matriculation book at the local college, with the old Dean, fingers famously stained by the unfiltered cigarettes, standing over you (another one of those who died in their sixties of lung cancer). In the household he had established for his family, there was never so much as a raised voice or a sigh of exasperation. And even if things were different in other homes—like Webster's, for example, or his friends' place out on the Hillside Road, perhaps—you didn't speak of it. It was how you were told to do things on television—act out the perfect civic life of the fifties.

Maybe in another life, he thought, coming back a hero from the war, he would have met "her," or was it "him"? The consort we are prone to dream about. Harmless fictions, like charging from the landing craft into the machine gun fire, like slaying Dolan, the one man who told the truth. A younger colleague, even a student perhaps—another adoring one, ten or thirty years his junior, and both would have had their eyes opened as he risked decades of bourgeois civility that had grown unhindered by the truth. They would have met at a party perhaps, a distant relation of one of his associates, sitting in a corner eying him, amused by his incivilities or theatricalities and realizing the depth of things in

his soul—assuming the role that listeners of old drunks used to perform, nodding quietly as if with interest as the old buffoon spilled his guts out, making fools of both of them. Meeting for lunch perhaps, walking the campus grounds. These were the things he imagined in the cellar space. These came to him in a vision, lying semi-conscious on the gurney.

Like the ballet or the opera, he thought shortly before losing consciousness, the one his wife had dragged him to. You emerge from your day-dreaming—hours it must have been—to watch some "transcendence" it was called as the two silk-clad principals flew off to the heavens or wherever you went when the only person in the world who truly understood or admired you was the one who had just died for or with you. ...

It was curious, he realized, taking the easy and last sip from the neck of the gin bottle, finally at peace, plenty of time to sober up before sailing home or simply closing up the bulkhead. What would that Helen or Patroclus be? Acid-witted, like his colleagues? Blessed with the quiet intelligence of the boy who never spoke? Striding with athletic grace across the quad? Would the two of them be pillars of society if society ever came to that, as it finally did for Wallace years before his partner died? Would there be music in their lives? Would they watch for a sea-breeze, as they stepped into the dinghy? Or does the very dreaming of this Helen or her surrogate, does that not reduce him to those whoremasters of old, Frank or Larry, he wondered, somewhat wryly, faithless to the wife who smiled so poised in company? ... No. He thought, with some conviction, drifting off again. He was a family man, and this? This was not for

him. His son, perhaps, maybe him; yes, he was better fit for this, brought up to perfect the reasoning he himself never got quite right. As in: it didn't matter what blustering self you had perfected over the years. As in: it didn't matter that you were secure at home. Nothing mattered, except the day you were simply ... well ... and the next thing you knew, you couldn't sleep, or sit down to dinner with your family or whoever it was you had gone to the restaurant with. You couldn't work, or drive to the Post Office. My God, it's like being sixteen, you would say or think, had you had an audience.

But it wasn't like being sixteen at all, that self who posed with his mother as an Eagle Scout, documented in the old photograph. Your name inscribed in the local paper as a hero or victim. Even you knew that. I mean he did, and his son as well. Like animals then. No more than that. Single-minded. Fixed on the prey or the object, you guessed, of desire, however that had changed over the past four decades.

And you breathed deep. The fall air filled your lungs. And it would be 24 hours, or 24 less three, you thought, ... 24 hours less four ...

This was the problem with being raised on nothing but platitudes and sports clichés.

**VII. Shoebox Eulogists**

Father had his admirers. A sea of them. You can tell by the two shoeboxes filled with consolatory letters collected within a month of his death. Mother made a point to respond to each one of them, despite the coda "Do not feel obliged to answer," as perfunctory as the note itself. Among

those who had once known him, the news travelled fast, and the letters came fast, full of the duplicities of death.

"He was one of the finest men I have ever known—always kind and patient with me—even when I was [waved? vowed in?] and flunked 2 courses. He saved me ..."

"... loved by so many of his present and former students, *and* by his associates ..."

"... I was a sitter for your children! ... we named our second son [after him] ..."

"... When I was having problems with my Susie, he was so solicitous and so helpful ..." [the one who rejected the shy advances of my brother!]

"... indomitable courage ..."

"Everyone that I ever met who knew Nate thought he was just great. It's very unusual to be so well thought of ..."

Speaking of a person I had not known, or known only as a young child. Not him, but the idea of him. Not a real idea, but one we might wish to have of him.

I opened one last letter, and to my shock, recognized the handwriting at once! John, before lapsing into dementia, before his own young son had died as well, before becoming the subject of my chapter four below:

> Where life passes into, and where it passes out of existence, it is made vivid: in the life that is new, in the life that has passed, and ultimately in our own to be continued. ... This is meagre, but all that I'm capable of at the moment ...

Poor John, now deaf to my appreciation of his efforts here. My own note of condolence to him years later hardly a recompense.

And now others, oh my God, from the associate he himself had had to fire for non-production, and from my girlfriend in Italy, and ... even one praying that "his suffering be over soon." ...

> *Each day, the son would choose one note. And when the passages and the memories they inspired and the memories of their own existence came to life, he threw the letter into the fireplace, vowing to do this repeatedly over the coming years when the weather required of him a wood-fire, until the remaining envelopes rattled in the empty shoebox and all the memories and memories of these memories were gone.*
>
> > *... so vigorous and healthy ...*
> > *... looked so wonderful when last ...*
> > *... always so much fun to be with ...*
> > *... did so much to encourage interest in classics in this rejecting age ...*
>
> *And here, finally is the one he had been looking for when he first wrote of this:*
>
> > *Having known [him] over these many years, I was well aware of his sincere interest in the growth and development of all the young people of our neighborhood, and he so often enquired about the welfare of our children ...*
>
> *"Our children," I thought, when first reading this some forty years ago, about whose "welfare" he did not give, as he himself might say, "a thinker's damn!"*

It was a different person each day, the one the letters spoke about, I mean, and neither singly nor collectively did the

words come together to describe the person I knew better than all the eulogists.

Or was I too, the son, no more than one of them, these orators of death? I, who would never stand up at a funeral and deliver or "share," as it came to be called, an anecdote of the dead person soon to be forgotten or, if not, then obliterated in a meteor. What difference did it make what you said in those circumstances, I thought. What point was there to getting the words right? Or was it just to bring what beauty you could into the world, even if a single phrase, however wrong or duplicitous?

What would saying the right thing do for anyone? What would be a measure of the truth?

**VIII. Finale**

Underground in the crawl space, the lamentations voiced in the shoebox eulogies could hardly have occurred to him. He could not compose to his own satisfaction what his family would whisper to him on his deathbed; he could not know what his students would say when they heard of it, or whether they would lacerate their flesh in grief. He could not know their thoughts in the Chapel Service, where his colleagues and students gathered in silence—a silence contrived and ironic, respecting his theatrical demands that there were to be no services—no funeral or memorials—knowing, somehow, that this would inspire these obstinate admirers to plan the most extravagant of all. There, in the small chapel space, they would gather for 20 minutes of silence that in the retelling became a half hour, 45 minutes, a full-hour, or perhaps an afternoon, giving each the chance to walk in, sit down for a minute or more, and exit, with the

slightest of sad respectful nods to their class-mates and associates.

This was the way he would have planned things out, had it gotten to that point. This was the way his wife would prove loyal to the end, refusing to have a thing to do with it. This was the way the world would end for him. Just swimmingly.

Down there in the cellar space he could catch his breath, breathe deep again in the fungal must and the hum from the furnace, and imagine how things, like these, might be.

> *"We saw him last at Christmas time and he was pretending to be his usual self—joking and laughing ... What a great person he was—kept going until the end ..."*

And maybe on his deathbed, he thought then, he would recall these moments too, or maybe the fictional ones as well to be imagined by the writers of the shoebox memorials, or maybe just the sitting in the damp cool air of the crawlspace, surrounded by the gin bottles.

And maybe a survivor would find them there as I did, and misconstrue them as I did, as some strange act of preparedness, storing drinking water for the inevitable power outages and winter catastrophes. My theories upended when others in the family recognized them instantly for what they were—familial secrets to be dealt with like all the rest of them—swept up into the garbage bags, and tossed into the trash, not even thinking about the recycling bins that came and went according to the political fashions of the

community. No need, in the end, to separate the trash or pay any attention to the scruples of society.

His daughter pretended to grieve and perhaps did, as many saw her do it. And without fail, a note would arrive from her on the anniversaries of his death day, the only communication he ever had from her. She was the one who monitored Dad's relapses, sitting next to the liquor cabinet for hours when she visited. She was the one who knew instantly what the bottles meant in the cellar space.

The shoebox once filled with letters of adulation remains stored next to the old drafts of fiction and scholarship. Outlines. Queries and rejection slips. His. Those of his son. The two notes of condolence that came when his wife died years ago and years after he had. The last letter that was sent too late.

# PART TWO:

# FRAGMENTS AND PALIMPSESTS

*Alles, was ist, endet*

## 2.1

## THE SEA ROUTE TO MATINICUS

On the boat back from Matinicus, years ago it was, he suddenly realized he had forgotten something—something of little import in and of itself—a grocery bag, a light switch he had left on, perhaps it was a greeting he had meant to exchange with one of the locals or one of the summer residents who had resolved this year to experience a winter out there on the island. A letter of condolence.

He had left his jacket on the porch rail—something like that. Only that. And when he returned in two or three weeks for a weekend, if he could find a ride on a fishing boat, the jacket would be gone. Like so much else, of far greater

import, was gone. If he remembered it at all. If he hadn't left it at home on the mainland ...

For some things, say, things done or omitted (so difficult to think this through!) or just a disconnected thought, it wouldn't matter. Even a neglected light switch. The excess electric bill could simply be paid and that would be the end of it. Such things have histories! (begging the question perhaps, in the strictest sense). A day less of Social Security. By contrast other singulars—names, certain mischievous material things—when they "turned up missing," he was helpless to retrieve them. It was as if the jacket could not re-enter history, but only initiate a new one: say, on the back of his closest friend. Perhaps he had given it away; perhaps he had sold him the jacket; perhaps he had never owned the jacket in the first place. Perhaps it was a different jacket on a stranger or closest friend. Freud *On Wit*—used to quote that passage, with variations. Or maybe *The Psychology of Everyday Life* ... he used to know. The joke about the bowl or the bottle, now broken, returned by its borrower with three competing and contradictory excuses—it's not broken; you never lent me the bottle; it was broken when you gave it to me ... things of that nature. Things he once could have rattled off at the spur of the moment and left his listeners shaking their heads in amusement.

To begin such a witticism today seemed pointless. By the time he got it formulated, by the time he judged how apt it was in the situation, by the time he recalled whether he had just made this joke an hour earlier or less ...

It was different decades past, when he first brought J. to Matinicus, an island twelve miles out to sea: a poor man's Monhegan those on the mainland might refer to it. That was

before, for him, bookmarks lost their function, well before the general store shut down and the diesel power plant went in, before the drugs came to the island, before the state demanded that they clean up the car dump, before young Mary quit her job after a year at the one-room school (one of the last in the state!), before the internet ruined everything.

The islanders used to clear the trees in those days: it must have been a remnant of the old days when the islands of Maine were used for sheep pasturing. "Sheep" one of the most common names of islands—Mark, White, Horse, Flag. Even the suggestive Dick, for the ledges and inlets. Sheep Island where we sailed off Harpswell, Sheep Island east of Mere Point, Sheep Island in the Muscungus or the Penobscot. History was persistent: out there on Matinicus, Fred was still chastised for "not keeping his trees down," maybe a carry-over insult from the days of pasturing, maybe today just damning him for spoiling the view for others, since there hadn't been farm animals on the island in years. Most islanders dutifully cut them down and up and burned them in inefficient woodstoves, though it was easier of course just to get your winter heat from propane, trucked over from the mainland, the same you once used for lights after the power plant shut down at 10PM. That was before the days of VHS, he thought; before the days when the islanders felt they were damn well entitled to all the luxuries those from away or those on the mainland enjoyed and thus kept the diesel power plant running all night. No sense, in the modern world, of flaunting your bone-hard simplicity, when you had secured that just by living there. The swagger down the docks as the ferry boat of tourists and summer

residents pulled in. The indifferent stares to the moorings. They didn't think any less of you knowing your freezer was now electric, not gas, that you sat up until 1am watching a bad movie on the VCR or BetaMax.

Everything changes. Drugs supplanted alcohol, as it did for so many, J. himself, or so he claims. The kids no longer want to live on the island, but move to Rockland as soon as their parents get tired of them. There is no one but addicts to work the fishing boats. One year, he had rented his house to a local for the winter. It's what you did for the community. Even if the local were an outcast, like Keith was, for reasons only a community member could understand, and which no one could articulate or was willing to explain to him. And something came up (always a danger if you have an affection for eccentrics): maybe the minimal rent he had charged could not be paid; maybe the locals sent him a warning that no criminals were to be harbored in his house. Maybe the drugs turned his tenant bad. He had to go. Another Ames he must have been—everyone on the island seemed to sport that name. The tenant nailed the doors and windows shut when he left. Sealed the house completely, leaving all the animals he had lived with inside. Kittens. An old tom. They then grew weak from fighting and starved, having run out of vermin and even themselves. They died in unkempt heaps, kittens and adults alike. It took more than a week to clean the rotting flesh away—even Baudelaire would turn away from the stench—and he never brought guests to the island again.

The sun rose over Wooden Ball Island in the East on Matinicus, and here now, years later, retired in the old tenement in Rockland, you can watch it rise over Vinalhaven,

grazing the windmills that now bring power to the place. They say ... they say ... 1980 or 81, they say it must have been. A year or two after his conversation with J. on the rock face.

Remember the story of the hard-bitten neighbor? Here in Rockland, I mean. The hard-bitten son of the hard-bitten neighbor? Meth crazed too likely. Fell in love with ... Love is not the word ... unimportant what her name was. You remember that, I'm sure. Like you once told J. at age 50 or 60 it was, J. sixteen years your junior, making it ... the math being ... "If hormones are involved," you said, ... or maybe it was simply "emotions"—something to that effect, "all bets are off." This to explain your love for ... for falling in love with ... for ... not Pete, your contemporary, taken in by you when felled by alcohol and stomach cancer ... Pierre, his name was.

But his neighbor's so-called beloved rejected him, his lust for drugs too much for her, and one day she sped away from where he had cornered her—the neighbor's son, that is. I mean the once girl-friend of his neighbor's son, restraining order in hand, which of course he paid no attention to. It was like the thieves and wife-beaters staring vacantly at the helpless judge in the films of Maine by Fred Wiseman of Northport. *Titicut Follies* his first; reborn in *Belfast, ME,* as if the town itself were no more than an asylum from the fifties.

So the love-lorn or meth-addled kid jumped back into his car, his mother's car, stole a car perhaps—it makes no difference—and he runs or drives or speeds after her and there is a gun in the glove compartment, this being Maine, of course, when no blue-collar paranoid would dream of driving as far as the local 7-11 without being armed just in case the worst, or something ... what would you call it? ...

something ... "You never know," is what they said, or how they explained it. "You never know," glancing in suspicion over their shoulder.

Somewhere past ... not Rte 1 ... side road. Must have been spring. No traffic then? You could park your car and never worry about losing it, since there weren't enough cars parked in the whole town in the off-season to hide it. That's why they took my keys away, I guess. There. Caught her. Flashed his lights? Maybe drove her off the road? I was told. Can't ... Maybe I'm only saying what I was told, having witnessed nothing in the real world.

He runs to her door. She frantically locks it and tries to roll the window up. But she is in no danger. He draws his gun ... or no. He had the gun, waving it as he ran up to her. Why she didn't drive away ... Maybe I have the facts wrong. Maybe I was told the story wrong. Decorum. That's what Aristotle says. Or Plato. One of them. You need to make things believable and coherent, not correct.

When her eyes met his and showed him the terror—her own, that is—her helplessness, all he could think of was that he could not endure the pain of it, wanting to punish her in the most vicious way he could. Something that would torment her through life as long as life was hers. He put the muzzle to his temple, grimly laughed at her, and pulled the trigger. I'm told it took a week to pick the blood flecks from the door handle.

"I know," J. said. "It's what I felt for P. the last day I lay with her and I thought of nothing but my pain and the vicious things I could do to punish her for causing it. Things such as seen only on tv. Or told to me today."

And J. breathed deep and tried to come up with some reasoning behind the meth-crazed kid blowing his own head off, like it was what he himself had fantasized—calling her with the shotgun muzzle on his chin, forcing her to feel the agony he himself had felt. ... Or perhaps he told me this to prove he was beyond shock, having experienced all there was to life, having nearly lived the tale himself, glorifying the emotion of love or loss like some young kid ... Once you fear you may never feel like this again, J. said, in such extremes, no one knows, he said, no one has access to what you think.

> *Like my son Benji, weeks out of rehab, falling from the high cliff in Mexico and leaving us, me and my eldest son, behind. Who knows what was in his mind as he fell ...*

All of what J. said about the meth-head kid was of course bullshit. Even the implied civilities. J. did not understand the ravishment of drugs on this community, the guns and the violence and the withdrawal and the shrieks of pain. To him it was all love-songs and poetry, both here and on the island. And yes, you cannot understand such things, because there is in the end nothing to understand—just the banality of the cartridge exploding in the chamber and the lead expanding in your skull. Your brain shot for good.

Wrong phrase there.

But what can I do to correct it?

And why would I tell that tale to him in the first place? Even the coda brought him straightway to his Eloise, whom I know only from his poetry. I will be well gone before his

wailings cease ... She wrote the note to the postman: "Call 911"; and left the door unlatched ... as she pulled the watch-cap over her face ... as she hung from the garage rafters for her son to cut him down ... as she fell through the ice as a teenager ... as she danced in the bus station ... as she cut her wrists, hoping to bleed out in the bath ... as she watched the sun set on Matinicus ... as the two of them stared through the dust at sunset in Santa Fe ...

**Interlude I**

*It's like what poetry is, or used to be. Allusive. Incomplete. The simplest of stories losing its sense in its rhythms. That's what happens to your narratives. Even the oldest of myths falls apart. The ones we all were exposed to or ones imprinted on our nascent minds. The stories we could all relate to in some way. The unchanged tales. And then the syntax fails us, leaving only the names for things. This is what they died for, those old soldiers. Aghast that the rail-smooth histories were gone in a child's penny epitaph.*

*Like Prof. Chr., drowning in the bath-tub, the tap-water half diluted with his blood. What a strange way of putting it in the obituary: "cutting his lawn" indeed! Was that a joke for the initiates? The formulae and chalkboard calculations all tangled in his mind—no way to step beyond the premises. Then his son gone too, not too many years back I hear, and under similar circumstances. There was nothing to be done.*

*And Prof. Bland, I think it was, a worse case, cutting his wrists when the surgery removed his speaking voice due to throat cancer. All the words were gone for*

*him. The entire college grieved its eloquence through the morning service. By afternoon, it was as if nothing had happened.*

*Or Dick C., finally caught with his pants down in the most literal of senses. That rest stop fellatio with the local police chief. For most of us, a comedy, for him calamitous. Unable to bear what years earlier would have been the shame of it. Not the act, but the words themselves, the letting it be known.*

**Island Flight**

J. sits on the rail of the old lobster boat as we steam (the word he demands we use of it) back from Matinicus to the mainland. Sick, but too proud to give in to it and heave his guts out over the transom. And that must have been two days after the day we sat on the rock-face washed by the deep ocean swells. In grad school, 1977 it must have been. We talked and he said in one more year we would be sitting on these same rocks again, and at that time, he reasoned, he would be half-way through with it. Meaning school, I think, but as it turned out, all our summer days on Matinicus.

Then he got all doe-eyed. Both off-island on the mainland and even on it he got that way. Where the sea between you and the world of commerce and hypocrisy barricaded you from all annoyances such as phone calls and electric bills, so he claimed, although what entanglements he escaped he never detailed for me. Lovers, unwritten academic notes. Car trouble. Politics. I doubt it's like that today out on the island, with all the resentful kids and their angry parents up to speed on the world and even the financial hole into which they dug themselves with their cell-phones and

internet. Thought he could buy a stake in what was called *un-* I forget the word—*undivided*, that's it, undivided land, where you owned an interest and could build anywhere, along with other owners who had the same stake in the same small square of land or peninsula. And pretty soon as time went on there was no such land to be had to build on and like everything else about Matinicus, there was little difference between living there and dealing with bankers and building inspectors in Rockland or Belfast.

A year before that or two of them, we took the boat to Matinicus, where David, commercial fisherman and erstwhile poet in the manner of Hopkins, J.'s former boss, would meet us. How I loved these eccentrics and belligerents, trusting they would never turn such violence on me. David came to the island for the first time, even though he had spent his entire life working on the water—even steaming his family to the outer island of Monhegan with the other fishermen to celebrate the beginning of the season—the boats fresh from their wintering, the paint unmarred by the lobster bait. And the kids seasick and in terror when the weather turned bad.

The day David came to Matinicus, July or even August it had to be, he finished his work-week (nothing would stop him, so J. always insisted) then took the prop plane out on Saturday from the mainland, and the three of us—me, J., and his former employer—spent Saturday and Sunday walking the island and talking to the local fishermen, walking with a fisherman from Matinicus—Keith, it must have been, divorced from his lovely Dutch wife, who had had enough of living there. And of course David, burying his shyness beneath his gruff reticence, caught in a competitive bind, made

some passive-aggressive facial expression, pretending "interest," oh yes, "interesting" that you fish from the port side rather than starboard, "interesting" that you still fish from dories, and don't go in winter like your compatriots on Monhegan ... things of that nature, where the subtext was only about what fools they were and couldn't do things right, despite the fact that working on Matinicus made working in such places as Cundys seem like child's play or greeting at Walmart. "Hmm," he said, like J. says he would say with his kids aboard, when a competitor fouled his trap lines. "Interesting," when what he meant to do and did do (when it was only the two of them out there) was curse in a long obscene melisma glorifying Christ: Jesus H. Christ, Jesus H. Fucking Christ, Jesus H. Roaring Fucking Shit-c- ... Christ, or worse such things. "Interesting." The same thing the Woman of Today told him, so he says, when he first confessed his love for her.

And David wore his fresh-washed work-shirt—his sleeves rolled up to his elbows, exposing the sores from the lobster bait, one of many signs of what he did for a living. No working fisherman would take him for a highlander, and J. did his best to be one of them himself, even though the sores on his own forearms had long since healed, replaced by the callouses on his hands from the jib sheets. In vain, he struggled to persuade them that he was not just another sailor, with four months of vacation, that he too knew all there was to be known about work on the water.

Except, as David's stories would remind him, fishing as a way to pay your bills, and not as a lark for the summer.

Except going out in December, when the lines froze, I'm told, the instant they hit the air from the water. When you

ran the water cooling the engine exhaust straight out onto the floorboards. And heard of a fellow worker hit by a block and spending the rest of his life as someone else—as someone with a different history from his own.

So yes, that was the week Keith ... Ames, I guess, like half the names in Matinicus ... that week Keith took a break from fishing just to be with us, not David the fisherman (who never took a day off in his life), but David the poet, and J. not the working man or student but the sailor, and me the one who served as glue for all of them. And he brought shark steaks for dinner, mis-advising the way to cut them—"with the grain" "with the grain" he insisted, when any fool would know the only way to make them seem like swordfish was to cut across the grain—*À Rebours*! as Huysman might have said. Some allegory there I once could wrestle free.

They talked at cross-purposes and got all their maxims wrong. Headings and warp strength and the government biologists. But you never contradicted them. Not any one of them. Not the two fishermen, nor the then young man who longed to be taken as one of them. Never. Like in those exercises we used to do at Carnegie Mellon in impromptu, or improv it was called, where the trick was to respond to everything your partner said, and never to contradict them or ignore what they tried to say. It kept the flow going, kept life flowing, kept the universe adrift in its unobstructed path and that was when life was at its best, before you had to plan out each move as a family as a worker even as a friend of the locals or simple confessor...

We walked in the dew-soaked field. It was that year or another year. And maybe I held back, talking to David, or maybe I was with Sherry then, whom J. had brought to the

island. First time in Maine for her as well. Her body magnificent in the light from the water. "Sad," I called her; "sad," I said of her, the very word that J. says he could no longer get out of his head when he thinks of her. Both of us following J., who had other things on his mind: another woman, a book he was late in reading, his mis-steps on the fishing boat. Anything. Even me, perhaps. And she hugged the Bean shirt he had lent to her tight around her breasts, figuring he would know what it was she wanted, and wasting it all on me, who hadn't slept with a woman since I fathered my children and had no desire ever to do it again.

I remember going down to the airstrip and watching the plane head back to the mainland, David in the co-pilot's seat, risking his life unknowingly in what was held to be the most dangerous plane on the coast and I believe we got a ride back the next day, "steamed" back, J. would insist I call it, when you hitched a ride on a fishing boat, or was it the next year or have I got all the years mixed up the way things sometimes are for me.

"Well, it's not clear," is what I always said, never wishing to oversimplify, and now that phrase ...

My mind is mush, I told him, and he laughed, despite the same books on my coffee table that I had had there the year before and the year before that as well, their bookmarks undisturbed, and maybe then he would figure it out. I'm not coming back, I should have told him. I'm not coming back to you. And the past is not coming back to me or with me.

I remember standing up next to the fisherman in the wheelhouse—the one who ferried us back to the mainland—I forget his name of course, maybe another of the

ubiquitous Ames's—blocked from the breeze by the wheelhouse, the sea placid and flat as it gets in the evening even out on the open sea. And J. lagged back on the transom, taking the air, and admitting that had he relaxed for a moment he would have been puking his guts out in embarrassment at having gotten sea-sick on a run like this. J. with his summers on the fishing boat, his years of sailing, or maybe that was later. Maybe that was after all those chapters on "Sailing to Matinicus" which he admitted once to me he had never done.

I walked with Sherry in the fields, J. ahead of us, like a young dog guessing the route of its master and pretending to take the lead. Nice couple, the locals must have said, not knowing the half of it. Not knowing the first of it. I could hear them rutting in the bedding next to me, or maybe I just imagined it, and maybe her sadness was precisely that—him pushing her away and thinking instead of me, my breath, matched to his.

Years after my years with Annie, all that was. Anna Livia Plurabella. I fathered her children and lived a glorious life with her, but I never fell catastrophically in love with her, not as I fell in love with so many since, like J. himself perhaps, like the promiscuous violinist from Chicago—whom I watched die of AIDS years after he claimed to have left me. I never loved her in that way, but I could never stop admiring her, raising our children both, with them having the run of both our apartments and the choice of where to stay each night and their choice of friends and lovers and where to go to school and what instruments to play and what drugs to take. Whether to move to Rockland to live next to me, fixing up the old schooner cabin that had been

dragged ashore nearly a century ago to be one of the most authentic houses on the Penobscot. Whether that or finally cleaning up from drugs and flying off for a celebratory hike in the mountains of Mexico, never to return. It was all a matter of freedom and not screwing them up and still our youngest had the temerity to go and die like that. Years in family counseling. And all the good it did in the end. And at least J. wrote the note, properly penned and even folded as his mother must have taught him, just as I wrote to her when his father died. Not offering sympathy, but admitting there was no way he could ever hope to console me or even know what I was feeling that day.

Benji never slipped off that mountain path. Benji never took the drugs that caught him in the end. Benji never had problems at Milton. Benji never brought the family together for the fruitless sessions in rehab. Benji never existed at all. Easier now simply to forget what I once was forced to repress, as Freud was said to say.

**Interlude II**

*This life is like J.'s mother's life, or so he said. Or so he would say if he knew finally what life is for me. An old woman reading not the books he gave her but repeating only what he said of them. The food left out on the counter. Lost on the most familiar of routes. She followed sports when she came to Maine with her husband. A sop thrown to Cerberus, I guess. Something to please Nate and his New England ways. The radio. The soothing drone of the voice from Wyoming: Curt Gowdy I think it was, giving the play-by-play for the Red Sox. Then confessing in the end she only liked the games on*

*television—the history-less colors of the field even though the failing tv turned the grass to blue. The radio reports became for her mere music; there were no heroics; no comebacks, no last second defeats; all the narrative she once followed so intensely—all of that gone.*

*The kids threatened to take her keys away when she got the traffic ticket: 60mph past the fire station, with the sheriff parked in the driveway. From that day forth, she drove with her eyes fixed resolutely on the speedometer.*

**Georgetown on the Sheepscot**

Anne. Tall. Blond. Sturdy was the word we used of it, as with Keith's wife too. Won all the footraces in grammar school and laughed at all her classmates when they lagged back in defeat, pretending they had never tried to win at all. Against a girl, you know. At forty at fifty still as robust as a teenager. The features unchanged it seemed and still, he added, the only one who ever saw him for what he was. What he had been. What he grew to be. What he might have been, had Linda Jane and Eloise not come to his life and changed everything. That was it: "I am you," he said in the most unspeakable of clichés. But that was with Linda Jane, through whom he saw all the others. And that was the end of his love for his Annie. He sits with her at the card table. At that time, he wanted nothing more in life. Food from the hot dog cart on Maine Street. The drinks untouched. He lay next to her in the unfurnished flat in Manhattan, where they would part, they found, for the last time: the two shared no more than their breathing. Annie it was. His. Mine. It is all such a jumble.

The story he tells is of her wedding, long before he resigned himself to the losing her. Long before there was little left of her to lose at all. It must have been years after he missed his chance, not picking up his mail in time to get the invitation to spend the weekend with her in Boston. Were there no phones in those days, I wonder? Was that before the internet? Could she not have called and asked why he seemed to ignore her? Was her world as shaken by him as his was by her? Or was it all glossed over by the alcohol? As if life and love were merely palimpsest? And the next thing he heard was news of the wedding.

They drove down to Georgetown, the whole hippie pack of them, Barry I think he said it was on the back of his motorcycle. Dead now like most others of his past. And it was only an hour or a few beers later that half of them gathered on the beach for volleyball, or whatever it might have been, their clothes piled in heaps on the sand—scandal to the neighborhood. And he and one other and she herself stayed half-dressed, as if it were a sign of faith and civility, when actually all the rest were too drunk to notice or to care.

Stay sober, he must have thought. No riding half-alert through the dark. Like J.T. did on the Harley 250—drunk or simply tired from work. Over a month comatose, and never to be the person who fired up that Harley again. Careful now, J. was. So unlike the summer years earlier when he had downed half a case of beer or more, ranting on about his work on the lobsterboat, staggering down the cliff to the beach where they would one day set up the volleyball net, and shouting out to the waves as if there were some affinity that only he could sense. Then driven back to Brunswick,

passed out in the back seat, dumped onto his driveway and regaining consciousness suddenly as he nearly staggered smack into the gymnasium walls three blocks from his doorway. Never got the story straight. Where they had left him, or who they were to begin with. He sees himself on all fours in the driveway, but realizes this is a memory of others felled by alcohol, on a sidewalk or lawn, after-hours in the schoolyard.

The sun went down and he still had not gotten over it: her walking down the church aisle, not a damn Christian or Jew in the place, and then, at what passed for a reception, hardly noting him in the wash of alcohol. He rode the motorcycle home, alone now, feeling the cool air over the bridges, the roadway still warm from the sun. It was the best. Or so he said. Riding in the air at that exact temperature—liminality of comfort. Or so he is said to have said. Feeling the chill over the bridges. Or maybe the warmth.

This is a story we have both told many times.

And many times too the story of the end of things for her. The drunken mis-step on the staircase. Crumpled and unconscious, barely alive when the EMTs finally got to her, bent bad in the stairwell. Weeks in rehab. A stroke, they called it. Like J.'s own father, presumably felled by the bee-stings, not by the alcohol. All her memories, and he himself, and what she had meant to him—all gone. Hardly a fragment left of it. Nothing to put together.

It took five years before he looked deeply enough into this past and his own, considered deeply enough what she had meant to him, reminded himself that not once had he experienced discomfort with her—even on those addled dates in high school or those troubled days he spent with

her when she first moved to Manhattan. All this he said to me. Over the dinner he had cooked for her, he realized that the wine meant more to her than he did.

Yet for that week he acquitted her, he asserts, just as he forgave others for far worse. And from her, he fled south to New Orleans, or resigned himself to doing so, to find himself, I guess, or simply to free himself from the cold apartment lined with wine bottles, to experience something he could talk about, tell her about, and it was twenty years before he laid eyes on her again.

After the accident, after her years in rehab, he drove back to Georgetown with his classmates, now subdued. The conversation lax. None of the joy of the wedding. None of the glory of youth and the roar of the motorcycle. He tried, as if in tribute, to remember being dragged away from the place drunk that summer he worked on the lobsterboat, or the wedding party itself on the sand, or perhaps the times he just drove down to the point, trying to remember where the cottage was.

And they sat in mock ease at the table, almost that adolescent clique they never were "in life," they'd say. They sat before the carefully prepared and tasteless food that risked offending none of them. All five of them, or six it may have been, and he could tell there was nothing he had done, nothing he had said or exposed to her, nothing he had confessed to her, that she remembered. Perhaps that's what so unsettled him on the bridge over the Sheepscot; the fear that she had lost, not the memories, but the sense of civility to keep his secrets to herself. Her friends who were his friends in high school told in turn the fragmented tales of their antics as teenagers, simplifying the stilted narratives with each

new retelling; and after a while she began to repeat the stories back to them, as they nodded their heads in appreciation of her efforts, and soon her whole past was made up of these self-serving adolescent tales, stitched together somehow in their and in her present consciousness.

Oh yes, they had always been half-drunk on the way to her summer home. Oh yes, they had always walked into the frat parties, surrounded by harmless admirers. They had always danced on the beach, hiding the coolers in the dunes, and broken curfews, and skipped school, and been "one of the guys" with their schoolmates. They had always made out with the college boys under the bridge over the Androscoggin to where her home was in Topsham—the boys who bought beer for them. There had been no scenes. No drunken pawing at her clothing. No crying oneself to sleep at midnight. All that gone. No pets dying leaving nothing but vet bills. There had been no rejections or miscues at the bridge table. No calls made nor missed. It was a new past for her, new narratives. A self, but not her true self, now destroyed by her through alcohol; rather a self spread through all of them, alive in the very histories now closed off to her. Like my own history and self, I guess, scattered among those who still think to call me in summer.

On his last visit there, even she no longer remembered nor was she able to reconstruct the narratives she styled as her past, what they all knew as her second past. The tales and doings of teenagers. The lips parted, the bridge to Topsham. When she heard the stories again, she no longer knew that she was part of them, or was supposed to have been so. Who were these gangs of girls in the 60s? what of all the cavorting with the college boys? and she let the

conversations swirl about her. It was as if there were nothing more to life, for all of them, J. and the rest of the survivors from high school. Just her property by the water, and what that meant to all of them. Just the wine and the drugs. Just her husband, the man who alone of all of them kept his faith to her.

**Interlude III**

*It is like living the old jokes we used to make of it. Jokes meant to reassure us that all was well. Do not worry, the old jokes said. It has not yet come to that. Not to not wondering what lock this key might go to, but not knowing what a lock is in the first place. Badly put that—all those negatives! But you have heard enough to know what I am after here. You do not need me to get the words or the stories straight. Let me try again: not wondering what you came to the store to buy but what a store is, in and of itself—there it is! The Ding-an-sich of all of it.*

**Christina**

The last good visit was when he brought Christina to Monhegan. And sometimes maybe thinking or trying to think of this, I imagine or determine it was Anne herself—his Annie, mine—and maybe it was a year before the catastrophic accident he told me of and maybe she still had enough of her intellect, only half-gone from the alcohol, and maybe she still had the wisdom he had always sensed in her, and the athletic body she retained right until the end, he says, right until slipping on the top stair of the staircase, and barely regaining enough of consciousness to recognize the

soothing words of the EMTs, who would not let her die there in a graceless heap, but salvaged that part of her that would never walk unaided again.

We met at a diner in Wiscasset, I think, a 20-minute drive for both of us, and that was when I could still park the car and find it again without writing the location down on my palm. I walked in with my cane and you could tell he had not been expecting this, showering me with compliments of how good I looked, or "well," I suppose it should be, even when I was swathed in grey and staggering for balance.

And when Anne/Christina brought up Italian film-making, I heard myself begin, hardly me speaking at all, but a voice repeating what I remember once having said—Fellini, Rossellini, Brusati—the directors whose work I had not seen in more than a decade. And always objecting, as if by rote, to the crass sentimentality of the Italians. *Città delle donne*, no, *Amarcord*, it must have been, although I hardly can distinguish the titles. A wonder I came up with this. I felt her hand on my shoulder, and I could tell she had once used that gesture to draw the men about her into her life, but with me, of course, even on my best days, it would have been wasted. I could feel, not condescension, no. She had none of that. Nor pity; for what good would that do for any one of us? She stared into my eyes, almost as a lover might, full into my intellect, for the ashes of what once was in or with me.

That was years ago. They had been to Monhegan, they said. For those of us who have lived on the outer islands—Frenchboro, Isle of Haut, even Vinalhaven—that famed place is just a tourist trap. You get there by ferry, some iteration of the Laura B. that used to take us to Matinicus. The

wildness gone on Monhegan, caught in the paintings of Bellows and Marsden Hartley and the poems by Stevens. Merely a place where the artists gathered in the 20s. No more authentic than the blue-green waves of their paintings. An hour's steam or more from Matinicus, where he had never returned since the two of us talked on the rock-face. He confuses this with the rock-face on Mere Point where he sat with his girl-friend at age sixteen and she persuaded him to throw the beer away after she, and only she, had drunk from it. A premonition she said, or is said to have said. But even those rock-faces are gone to mere factuality.

It must have been the same for her, J.'s mother now I mean, like sitting here in the restaurant where I suddenly noticed the menu was incomprehensible and I let J. and Christina do the ordering. It's an old trick. She—his mother—she did the same thing, I'm told, in the years before she died; on the days she still had the strength and appetite to go out for dinner. In the days when the figures on the final bill did not both stagger and confound her. And I could concentrate then on the phrases from the movies—"*Dante qui; Leopardi, qui; forse* ..." as the two of them pored over the menu as if it held the secrets of the universe. The choices unchanged: fried this and that. Sides and sizes. The phrases of the critiques I once gave of the movies—they came back to me. The tasteful admonitions of middle-age I used to pass on to my sons to the students at Bowdoin to anyone who would listen.

**Finale**

Walking. Where was it? New York? 1975 it was. Down Broadway to the Park and in those days you could meet or

"hook up," I'm told it's called, with anyone in minutes. New Orleans. The time I walked back from the oyster sandwich at Casamento's to his apartment one block west of Napoleon. Earlier. Three years. Or Matinicus or on Mt. Battie overlooking the Penobscot. We did all that, even though the hikes grew shorter every season.

"Next year. Sitting on these self-same rocks with you ..."

I gave him the oars because the fishermen derided me, struggling to get to the wharf. "I cannot be the butt of their jokes again," I said in a whisper. And J. took the oars and saw immediately the broken locks—something I could never have sensed or known. "Christ, the Harvard crew team could not row this damn thing," he quipped, then sculled from the stern with a single oar to the landing.

The fishermen shook their heads on the wharf edge, barely pausing in their work, barely conscious of the numbers from their catch.

It was Sherry, coming to the island with him. Yet it is with me that she is framed in my vision. Maybe his vision—the two of us, following him. The Bean shirt he had lent her open to the waist.

The animals imprisoned and dying among themselves in the waste of their littermates.

2.2

## THE SPEEDING TICKET

Well nothing should be simpler. Driving home past the old colonials by the Fire Station, once the center of town, where the Town Clerk did business right out of her living room, now just a row of old white houses in a speed zone. That's just after the sweeping left you make by the big tree where the electrician used to live. So head-strong, Burt was, his days as your student and classmate of your son of no use to anyone, refusing to sweep up after stripping wires for you because why should you pay him electrician's wages when you could clean it up yourself? or hire someone at half

his rates to come in for the two minutes it would take? That's what he said. To my very face. It's that kind of arrogance that makes you look elsewhere for help; and most everyone I knew did just that and so he moved away after his business went bad, as Vangie the hairdresser assures me. I don't know who owns the house now. Much better tended than it was the year or two Burt tried to make a go of it wiring wall lamps and leaving the sawdust behind him. I guess the gardeners made him clean up the scattered weeds himself.

Lots of catastrophes on that turn. You forget to slow down, perhaps distracted by the adjacent fields, and risk getting wrecked in a crash like so many have—the oaks and elms bearing witness to the cars destroyed sliding into them. The last kid to do that—oh I think he was from out of state—actually told the sheriff that he and his girlfriend were having a fight—excusing himself, he must have thought, but ensuring his conviction. What do kids know these days? Just keep your speed down—is that difficult? Then keep it there as you pass by the Fire Station. That's where the sheriff takes his lunch breaks.

One day easing through that turn and the old house Burt lived in, one day barely a mile past the elm tree with half the bark knocked off, I see brilliant lights flashing as I've only seen on TV and a siren and God knows I've never heard one of those so close to me in all my days. I spent half my life studying music and working on scales and chord progressions. The other half raising my children and chastising, as kindly as possible, my students. I never had a policeman challenge me. Not once. I never went to bars except when I was playing music there, and I never went to a rowdy

stadium except with Nate, and I think even those were far too tame to get police involved.

"Do you know why I'm stopping you, ma'am?"

"Well I don't know. I've never been stopped. I've never even talked to a policeman."

"I'm a sheriff, ma'am."

"Well I don't know anything about that."

"Can I see your license and registration?"

"I don't know what my registration is."

"That's ok, ma'am. I just need ..."

So I gave him my license, after fumbling around for it in my purse, and it was embarrassing because other cars were coming by and I'm sure someone recognized me or at least my car, the Buick or the Dodge we bought with sofa seats—hard to find today, and this is the kind of thing that Vangie and all the people who get their hair cut there will talk about and I will have nothing to say about that and it's just ridiculous the way things are today.

"60 Miles an hour in a 35 zone," he said. "That's what I clocked you at." And maybe he was following me, or maybe using RADAR or whatever it is. And I just answered that who would have imagined that; I've never had a ticket in my life. And then he smiled, trying to be polite, and my goodness he looked no older than my last set of high school students, and after checking my record or whatever he was doing in his car while I just waited there stewing knowing each minute made one more car drive by with the driver staring at me, he said "Just be careful, ma'am. And watch your speed past the Fire Station."

And from that moment on, I was not going to risk such nonsense again; so I just fixed my eye on the speedometer

every time I drove past there, hardly looking at the road itself even though Ron P. sometimes exercised his racehorses there with the cart behind them—I don't know what you call that, sulkies, I think—and if the cars behind me with all those teenagers who seem to drive as fast as they want without any trouble from the sheriff, well it won't be me idling on the shoulder while all the nosy drivers pass by gawking with a dead horse lying by the roadside.

**I. Reading Assignment**

J. gave me a book. It was by his friend, the ... well I don't know what words we're supposed to use to describe what race he was. A western, he said, even though I never read a western in my life, unless you count *The Ox-Bow Incident*, which I used to assign in high school to all the poor kids who are now my neighbors and most of them remember me. They were respectful in those days. They called me by my full name, and horsed around as kids inevitably did and do today, but always stopped when I glared at them. Not like the late 60s when I finally quit. The kids would stand up in class and demand that we teach about Vietnam or slavery or drug use as if we knew anything about that and if you complained to the Principal because some kid told you to screw off, you got no support from him, but just an admonishment to try to be more patient. Back when Mario and Jack were in that office, you send a kid there and he would be thrashed, I guess, or threatened, but whatever happened, the kid would sulk back to class the next day and you could count on having no trouble from him again.

Most of my favorites worked on fishing boats. Dave L., of course, blond, handsome, who got hit by a block, J. says,

whatever that means, out ground-fishing and nearly died of it. I never saw him again or heard a thing. Maybe he did die, or ended up sitting home, like so many of them do after an injury. Like Ronnie, once the most successful fisherman in town—married Jean, J.'s favorite baby-sitter. Then he had a stroke, and if you met him at Estes, only she would talk to you. Like Fred, the well-driller, who took a motorcycle ride a month before his second wedding, lost control on a curve, maybe that curve by the electrician's house itself, and was never the same person again after the accident. Sold the business, I think, even though he had put it in his childrens' names. Or maybe they sold it themselves, once they realized his new wife might well get control of it. I'll ask Vangie about that.

They held the wedding regardless. No need, I guess, to trash the embossed invitations. Ridiculous! Poor Fred never knew where he was, nor had any idea why he was dressed up in the black suit. Maybe he thought he had died and all this rigmarole of priests and bridal trains were the attendant rituals of the funeral. And his new wife stood up there in her white dress as if neither of them had the slightest idea of what wearing white to a wedding is supposed to mean. That's why Nate and I still have pictures of our wedding, well Nate's gone of course, but still lives in the photos which we can't even leave in the scrapbook without some young person, even my children, asking—why the dark dress, Mom? and then if they're old enough, you can go on about how the old traditions seem to mean nothing anymore, and maybe if you talk long enough, they won't think about the implications of this long lament. Because it can't be any easier for people today to imagine what their parents

do to engender them than it was for us, even me—the oldest of seven—there was just no way to think of any of that, even with my sister Janice twenty years my junior and dying the first of us. So tragic seeing Dad cry out "Why not me? Why not me?" even though he had another fifteen years of life ahead of him to mourn her loss. And maybe the worst fate of all was mine, being the last of them. Or as close to that as I would ever want to be. All my sisters gone, only Bob, the next to youngest surviving me, and even he himself knocked down by Alzheimer's. All my friends as well. That's what a healthy life will get you in the end. All that cigarette smoke and gin finally did me no good, I guess. Timmie the last to go, I think, whose son shot himself a year or two before she died herself. Years after Webster, elegant man that he was, himself dropped dead of a heart attack. And Connie, from the Colony, the worst loss of all, to me I mean, who used to act with Nate in the local plays. I miss her still. Then E. who had the wonderful modern house on High Head, fell and broke her pelvis, and I could never bring myself to visit her in the hospital any more than my surviving friends would visit me once I was moved to Bangor. She was just gone, beyond help, like my sisters Lil or Dorothy and I'll be there myself one day and when that happens, Nate gone and all his admirers off to other things, there will be no one left for me.

Another ... Well, there was Bill too, I remember. Once a student, now a neighbor. Never spoke. Graduated, God knows how!, the same year my son J. did and the two of them never spoke either. A class thing, I think, although I never encouraged such things. "He couldn't read," I told J. "How do you suppose he runs a business?"

"What do you mean he couldn't read? He graduated, didn't he? You passed him, didn't you, as you yourself said you couldn't do for ..."

"Oh David, you mean. Not the David you worked for. (Such a common name then!) No, David L. was different. Such a charmer. He tried. I tried to help him too, and it hurt me when he simply could not pass the tests. I even apologized to him, and he smiled so sweetly, his blond hair all slicked back the way kids did in those days: 'Don't worry, Mrs. D. I'll be fine'. He always did his best, and I suppose finally they moved him around and someone just passed him through. And then he had that injury and I suppose my kindness hardly mattered after that.

"Now Bill was not like that. Never smiled or elicited an apology or feared a well-deserved comeuppance from me. He just sat in the middle of his fishing friends—all those boys who are now the neighbors I depend on. And I know perfectly well that they fed him all the answers on the tests, but there was no way I could catch him, and no way I would undermine that society by accusing him. If they would help him through that class, they would doubtless help him through life as well. What's the harm, finally? He married that fine young woman—Bowdoin graduate I think. I have no idea what virtues he had. It's not the kind of marriage one would make in my day. But as far as I know, all went well, and now they all winter in the Bahamas."

So J. gave me the book his friend had written, and with it came a commentary, his own, I'm referring to, because that's the sort of thing he can't resist. A pedagogue just like Nate, I guess. Always ready with a comment or retort. Like

when I told him thank God they didn't have all those regulations when I was pregnant with him ...

"With me?" he says. "Now Mom, you said you didn't even know I existed. Didn't know you were carrying twins. How was that possible?"

"Well, that was how things were. All I can remember, regaining consciousness, was hearing the doctor cry out 'Oh my God, give her some gas; there's another one!' There was no silly natural childbirth then."

"So I began life with a hit of laughing gas?"

"Oh I just don't know. I'm just glad they didn't have that nonsense in those days that says you can't have a cigarette or a Martini or ..."

"You mean ..."

"Of course! I had my Martini every evening, the whole time I was pregnant, and smoked the five or six cigarettes a day I've done all my life."

"Well, Mom. That's likely why I'm teaching where I am, and not at Harvard or Yale."

And I suppose that was one of his jokes, which I'm having difficulty understanding as his wit becomes more tangled. "Well I don't know anything about that," I said. A response that seems to work with everything, just as his friend John would say "Well, it's not clear; it's just not clear," when facing any query or conundrum.

So J. gave me the book his friend had written and explained to me what he thought of it. And I tried for a few pages, but I didn't understand the genre, any more than I do all that new fiction of adolescent torment or apocalyptal nonsense and besides I just couldn't keep the characters straight. And I'll be durned if I was going to go back and start

again, or try to take notes, writing down each character's name, as I once suggested in desperation my students do who had no chance of reading anything longer than a page or two. And when he called a week later asking me how I liked it, all I had to do was repeat back to him a version of what he'd told me a few days earlier: "Well it's not a real western at all!" I said, nearly quoting what he had said. "You get twenty pages from the end and realize there is no time left to tie up all the threads in the story, so you think, this is not what I thought, it's something *other* than the Western it purports to be ..." And he was too impressed by that (the analysis that so perfectly mirrored his own), too flattered and dumbfounded to draw the obvious conclusion and spent months talking instead about how sharp my reading always was and still was. Always thinking, I guess he was, of when he gave me that 1000-page *Clarissa*, which I read in a week and judged hysterically funny, and he objected "Mom! It's perfectly serious!" "Don't be ridiculous," I said. "No one could take that seriously for a minute."

"It's not *Shamela*, Mom."

"Don't be ridiculous."

**IIA. Nate (I)**

Once you married Nate, it was all like giving up, or I'll say rather giving in. I spent a decade running from the provincial town of Denver, first to Colorado Springs, then to Augustana, then with Saul, I'll call him, off to New York City (a scandal to the family!) where I used to walk fifteen blocks up Broadway in the pre-dawn to catch the train to get to the class I taught in New Jersey and never thought twice about it. And you couldn't do that today for anything. Like the time

Nate, coming from Governor's Island in his uniform, failed to transfer to the Local at 96th Street, like half the students at Columbia at some point do, and ended up smack in the middle of Harlem on 125th Street, as he tells it, a great moral lesson on the glories of America. "I was the only white face I could see," he says. "But I had my uniform on, and there was respect for that. An Army man, serving America. About to go to war and save all of us, white or black." He used to apologize for re-enacting the Revolutionary War with his toy soldiers as a child—what do you expect from a kid from Lexington? "I'm sorry to say," he would tell our kids, profoundly serious, or struggling to be so, "I often called them British." The enemy toy soldiers, he meant. Then after being there a few months, safe from the action, he would always refer to the "Limeys" with the greatest of theatrical respect.

That's how you are when raised in the home of the Minutemen. When the war started, you picked up your rifle and off you went. Or so he had been bred to think. And it took me months to persuade him not to be a fool, but to wait for the draft. That was when we were both in Oberlin, where we met. And sure enough, they found him and stuck him in OCS, of course, and that's what he was doing in New York, *my* New York I always thought of it. And it was at Storrs where Nate Jr. was born, when off he went to war and I moved back to the family in Denver, thinking I would never see him again, except in the face of my only son.

But you know how these things go, and somehow with that brain of his, the Army must have decided he was worth saving, and instead of sending him off to lead infantry charges against the Krauts on the continent or to the Pacific where Bob my brother, and Bob and Jack my in-laws all flew

fighters and dive-bombers, they kept him filling out forms in London, where I think Larry was as well, although they claim they never met. And some uneasy time it was for Nate when Bob and Jack and Mac all got together and shared their war stories, Nate having done nothing but arrange for the brides taken by the grunts in Europe to come to their new homes in America.

That was the end of city life for me, the end of music too, leaving J. to learn to read scores on his own. "Why just look at it!" I would snap at him. "But Ma," he would say, "I can't read music." "Don't be ridiculous. Of course you can." And after the war when Nate got the job at Bowdoin, and his old advisor died on him, that was the end of his reading microfilm and writing wry scholarly notes that you can still find listed in bibliographies today. And that too would lead to the drinking finally catching up with him and putting him a month in the rehab place in New Hampshire. I guess he managed after that, hoping for a high by serving cocktails for our parties. And maybe you could just breathe deep and feel the warmth of the alcohol fill your lungs. Or maybe worse, you just took a drink whenever you had the chance. Or maybe he took seriously the threat I issued to him, telling him I would leave him if he ever lapsed into drinking again. Too many times fielding the call from the office ... "Better come and get him." Too many times with an elaborate bit of theatre hiding all this from the kids.

There is only so much you can do, and I never should have admitted to the kids that the doctors had the gall to place the blame on me. "Too cold," they said of me, as if he were a poor helpless child needing affirmation all the time, or a public hug. We have pictures of the family—all five of

us—lined up in the rain, about to go to the summer-stock theatre, about all you could get Nate to sit still for and if you tried some piece of classical music it was simply torture. "Nate never relaxed," I told J. One of the few times we ever talked directly of this. "Maybe the alcohol ..." And he looked at me with a look I can only describe as "quizzical"—a word you might see in a Victorian novel describing it. "How did you imagine you could hide all this from us?" he asks silently. And soon we were on to something else.

I remember the boat ride out to Frenchie's: Webster, Timmie's husband, Nate's contemporary from his college days, stern and standing in the wheelhouse, his course dead set on the island. And he was noble there—an aristocrat, or the best version of that we had at the time. And he would issue his commands with a booming baritone, drunk, sober or indifferent. And if we could just have had the ride out and the clam-bake, all would have been fine, but having to ride back with him after hours over the charcoal and whiskey? It was dangerous, Webster seeming to have lost his feel for the sea-state, and running the boat arrogantly through the swell as if to ask how did the sea have the *gall* to be so recalcitrant? And no alternative, but to jump into the open Whaler with Frank W. from the boatyard pushing the outboard to its limits as the kids screamed in joy in the salt spray.

And then to see poor Timmie have to take a job in the library after he died, having spent a lifetime living the high-life, sending all the kids away to school, and buying the largest summer-home on Mere Point that came up for sale, even though it was only five miles from the house they spent their winters in, both finally sold to buy the house a mile from where I would get the speeding ticket. I suppose

Webster kept the shaky finances to himself. That is just how things were done in those days, and if it cost her no more than a few years working 9 to 5, as most of us had done, that was a small price to pay for decades of extravagance.

**IIB: Nate (II)**

The day Nate died was three weeks after J.'s last visit here. We told him, twice we did, that there was no need to change his plans. No need to miss the convention or take from the time he loved so much in Manhattan. But you know he wouldn't listen, somehow sensing the calamitous end of things, or maybe he talked to his sister or brother, and maybe they let him know that the time had come to do something, rather than rehearse all the things he might do or worse, one day in the future, the things he might or should have done.

And we did all those Christmas things—cookies and presents and the like, even though he would only be here a day at best. And I beat the eggs and flour together and laid everything out for him and it was like it always was in the old days, except without the elaborate Swedish spread we used to have when all the kids were home, just as my family had always done for me.

Nate picked him up outside his office where the limo dropped him off from the airport, and years later J. was able to admit to me that Nate looked like death itself, so near to death, standing there pitiful and in despair.

Nothing either one could do in a single day to compensate for mistakes they had made and weaknesses of the past. Though Nate made a pretty good go of it. Waking at 2am, and they talked briefly—I could hear them through the

open door—about how bad the chemo was, a "therapy" J. had never heard of until that day. Therapy indeed! As if he hadn't been tortured enough realizing the adoration of his students was about to end.

Things did not go well after that, even though it was a perfect Christmas in so many ways, maybe the most memorable of them all. Nate went out to the car and J. broke down in front of me. Right in front of the cookie tin I had packed for him. There weren't many times I had chastised him—perhaps never in his life—all 30 years. God knows, I thought all those years, he will find his way through life without our treating him like a helpless child.

Seeing him lose control like that was the last straw. It was one thing when he was sixteen, breaking up with his girlfriend, and I could read him the lines out of *Hamlet*: I must be cruel in order to be kind; anyone could see that the two of them would never work together. But now I took him by his shoulders as strong as I had ever been and I hissed at him: "Don't you dare! Don't you *dare* let him see that!" And he knew and all of them knew, that if I could hold it together all those weeks—from the coughing up of blood to the failed chemotherapy. To watching him in the rear-view mirror as we left him at the hospital for two days of tests and treatment. To bringing him home, and listening to him toss and turn all night, and still arrange this last Christmas—let's not kid ourselves! we all knew!—to this last goodbye. If I could do that, then by God J., who had only been here twenty-four hours, could damn well keep his emotions in check as well. And by all accounts he did.

Things got worse after J. was safely back to New York or California, or the heartlands, I imagine it was. After a

while, there is nothing you can do, and you just thank God Nate was agreeable enough to die in the hospital where they know better how to handle such things than any of us here.

I hated the sentiment. The stories told by all of them, and what the neighbors whispered while getting their hair done at Vangie's. My eldest claiming Nate could read Horace to calm himself in his last days there, when God knows all that poetry had given him nothing but pain in life. The year he spent on the translations, and Louis telling him it was all for nothing. And Nate lapsing into drinking again, and who was it then who had to beg for a ride to campus just so that I could get the car and have John drag him out of the office right in front of God knows how many of his students and colleagues. Horace indeed! It was torture for him. All he wanted was one ... All he wanted ...

**IIC. Nate (III)**

I moved back home to Denver after Nate went to war, or what we all thought was war. We never imagined he would survive it, although we all pretended otherwise. That's what you did. You held it in, and I only remember Dad himself breaking this convention when Janice, the youngest of us, died of lung cancer, barely in her forties. "Why not me? Why not me?" he wailed, as Mom cooked his usual meal for him. She was the artist, like me the musician. And I wonder why the rest of us never took much interest in any of that, marrying war heroes instead, or like Bob, going to war themselves. All of them teasing Nate with their war stories of those who went to war for real. Dad put us all through college regardless, even though he felt that women should stay in the kitchen as Mom had done.

I went home to Denver again in 1949 with all five of us. By train. J. says he remembers none of it. But he remembers the next time, '54 it must have been. Around Christmas—Thanksgiving I think, and all the kids amazed that they could go out and play at that time of year, when there was no snow. And that must have been the time poor J. threw up in the train station, and watched the janitors clean it up for us. And five years later, when Nate and I drank ourselves to oblivion on the train, and he almost passed out in the train station in Chicago, vomiting in the rest-room with my eldest holding him, like poor J. had done in the lobby five years earlier, wailing of ulcers when in fact all the blood was from a nose-bleed, wheeled by the Red Cap into the car minutes before it left, then carrying on at the reunion itself and then I get confused at how it was, since I think it was only weeks before the month in rehab finally put an end to all of that. I threatened to leave him but never would. It was easiest just to overlook what was right in front of you.

After that, I used to go back west alone and leave Nate behind, since he hated travel, he said, but more likely, just preferred the freedom of a drink in peace to being an outsider in the family. J. tried to tell me the story of how it really was with him, but I wouldn't hear of it! And then when Mom died finally I went back again—all these trips by plane—and the last time I ever flew to see family it was down to see Peg in Florida, who took care of me in winter, but the last time said something terrible and cruel to me about what a burden having me was, when I had thought we were closer than we had ever been, and we didn't speak for the entire month I spent with her.

We flew to London, Nate and I, and toured around Europe, and one of those years J. had some sort of breakdown and we thought to cancel the trip but decided just to go. I know the next year was bad and Nate got into alcohol again, although I never admitted it at the time. J. says it was easy to tell, as Nate simply got ashen grey, with that look half of terror half of vacancy, and had less control than he usually had, and if you ask me, it was all those trips to Boston to see his mother in the nursing home, where I'll be darned if either of us end up, and J. says that for all the chit-chat on the way down there, the return was always fraught, and I guess maybe Nate steeled himself with a drink either before or just after seeing her. There was finally nothing we could do.

And then that time I flew to Manhattan to see J. after Nate died. I spent three nights in the guest room. We left *Traviata* before the final act, and looking back, I don't think I could have endured watching her die the way Nate did, even though I spent a morning in the ER, thinking J. himself might have pneumonia, when all it was was the smoking, that is, the very thing that had killed Nate one year earlier.

So J. went back west after seeing Nate the last time. I made him find his inner strength and talking to Nate afterward I could tell that both of them were on their best behavior even though they must have known they would never see each other or speak again.

J. called a week later, and Nate couldn't get to the phone or speak without moaning. I claimed he was asleep. But everything was more complex at that point, with the kids calling every day and offering to come down to help, and all Nate could do was gasp for breath in the bed-room and cry in pain and pretend that his greatest fear was of being a

burden to me, like I turned out to be, I guess, for Peg. So we, or I, then took him to the hospital—he had to go—and that's where he spent the last two or more weeks of life, pitifully wandering the halls as his once-colleague said to me, no one there to talk to him, me visiting when I could, and our daughter finally coming down to stay with me and it was like the time he was felled by bee-stings, and went into convulsions in the hospital due to the alcohol, and everyone treated me as the patient in all of it.

The oncologist strode in and claimed she could cut the tumor out, and off Nate went, joking with nurses, self-deprecating, gregarious, and the oncologist looked again at the x-rays and realized there was no hope. Caroline caught her in the hallway on the way to tell him, and she said, trained as she was by me, "Don't you dare tell him. Don't you dare." And I guess not knowing brought him one more hour of joy or hope.

The next day would be the last, as we all finally knew, and we all gathered there, except for J., still off in California, or perhaps in the arms of his Norwegian girl out in the heartland, and they told us they had the morphine ready. So I had an hour or two with him alone, probably more for show than for us. Never have I spoken of what we said, but he kept repeating thirty years thirty years, the best of his life, even though he barely lived past sixty. And somehow, I thought that was my life too, although I outlived him by plenty, and in the end, remarkably spent only a third of my life with him, most of them with him barely free from the alcohol.

He said finally I should leave—you know, just as we said to J.; no need to be inconvenienced or lose unnecessary

sleep. And I finally got up, composed myself, and walked out and heard him say in his best theatrical tone "Give it to me give it to me," not knowing the morphine would not kill him until morning, with only two of his three children there.

And I remember the night they called me twenty years earlier as he lay in convulsions from the detox and the doctors told me he would likely die, leaving me with the house mortgaged, and my three kids all in high school, and I said in the hearing of all of them, I'll never forget it, I said: "I think I'll sleep. I think I'll just sleep."

**III. Homecomings**

I had to leave the house. I could not deal with the ice and the snow and the power outages alone. I had never had to do anything—dishes, grocery shopping, snow-shoveling. I never drove to the DMV to renew my license, or did anything for the taxes other than to copy the final figures in the checkbook. All that was Nate's bailiwick, just as I told J.: "He never relaxed. He couldn't sit still for a minute." So every morning he would drive the fifteen miles to town, whether to get the mail, or buy a quart of milk, or pick up a book at the office, and in the summer those trips were hurried in order for him to get back to go sailing. In the winter, he would sometimes have to wait for Arnie to come and plow us out. We kept some blackberry brandy, I think it was, just for him, and I have to say now that maybe Nate helped him with it, as they sat in the cab of the plow-truck at mid-morning.

It was the kind of life that any of my friends would have longed for, especially when all their husbands died far younger than Nate did, most of the women having worked their fingers to the bone taking care of them. That was the

way it was in those days. You could die in your mid-50s as a man—dropping dead of a heart-attack and no one would think twice about it.

I took the apartment that they would later repossess for college kids, and even the ones downstairs of me seemed to have no regard for anyone other than themselves, leaving their bicycles on the stairways, playing their music well into the wee hours, yelling at each other in warning when the cops finally came to silence them. Forget the rumors you hear about young people caring for their elders or even learning a shred of civility: it's like what happened to my students in high school in the late 60s, ten years before Nate died. And all they did in the decade since was become more insolent.

I kept to myself with women like myself whose husbands had died, and each year, it seemed, one more of them died or left for a nursing home, and finally I feared I was to be the last one left. And then even my eldest and my daughter conspired against me, J. insisting he had no part in it, forcing me to take tests and sign documents and I got the letter from the DMV, rescinding my license with the word *dementia* inked into it.

That's what made things so difficult the last year I stayed in Harpswell. I stayed at the house well into October, not wanting to move back to the townhouse, where all my neighbors—now students all—resented me. And maybe this year there would be no snow, and maybe my daughter would come down to do the shopping for me and maybe there would be others to look in on me, besides the two friends who called me each morning at 8am to make sure, I suppose, all three of us still lived.

Then one day J.'s friend Barbara was to come out to see me for drinks or whatever and at some point in the day—I told everyone it was the morning—I took the trash or the garbage out to the compost heap as J. had insisted I do, and reaching down, I felt my leg give way and the next thing I knew I was on the cold ground feeling pain in my arm and I could not raise myself to my feet. I could have gone back to the house, somehow pulling myself up the four steps, or crawl to the car, and I decided to go there—I hadn't spent weeks getting my license back for nothing!—but it turned out of course I had no way of reaching the car door-handle or opening the garage door itself and somehow I pushed the side door open and I was at least inside on the cold concrete.

I don't know how long I lay there: the story as I have always told it has me there all day, but if that were true, I would have thought or done something desperate, I think, likely not to survive it, and notwithstanding all that happened next, that might have been for the best.

I love telling the story of hearing Barbara's car in the driveway. Hearing her footsteps crunch through the ground to the doorway. Knocking. Pressing the doorbell. J. should have married her, you know. Calling out to me, and finally all I could do was kick the door open and push my legs out the doorway, trying to get her attention, and the way we both tell it, it was like the Wicked Witch in the *Wizard of Oz*, crushed by the house, with nothing to be seen but her ruby slippers and striped socks.

So Barbara found me and somehow got me inside and I told her I needed nothing more than a Martini, and I sent her away, bewildered and I guess guilty as well, seeing my wrist was swollen to twice its size and bruised up to the

elbow. And somehow I got to bed and even to the bathroom in the morning at which point I found I could not move or raise myself, and when the phone rang continuously at 8am I knew what would happen next. Both my friends drove in a panic out to me and found me there, then called the ambulance for my wrist and the sad fact was I would never spend an unattended night in my house again, and maybe only one more night in my life, when C. drove me down from Bangor.

That was the end of happiness for me or nearly so. I let C. close the blinds in the assisted living place and finally in the nursing home. I let J. visit me weekly, and I always cut those visits short, claiming he must have things to do even though I know he never did.

And I guess the last joy I had was my last day of consciousness, that is, a week before the end. There were no illusions left. No books to read, or Red Sox games to watch on television. And I looked up, barely awake in the weight of the Valium—that's what they give you, not for you, but for them, to delude themselves into thinking you have recovered from your latest strokes, or TIAs, they call them, whereas anyone who has suffered one knows, as Rob himself, forty years my junior concedes, you are never quite the same again. And I looked up and saw him standing there, no, not Nate or a shade of him, but J., my youngest, J. himself! I stared in astonishment, never suspecting he had come home from California, unaware he had driven up from my old house; and I could feel my whole self yield to its very frailty, and I let him think that this was the happiest moment of my life and perhaps it was—like hearing the doctor cry out "My God there's another one!" just as I was about to give birth to him.

2.3

## PACIFIC SURFACES


### Choosing a Career

They were not very nice men a lot like you,
But they live forever, as these things go, out of spite.
Just when a hip professor, catching garde
A little arriere, says They Will Never Do
Because nostalgia, out of phase or obsolete,
They find out someone and change him word for word.

They all wanted love for themselves and what they did,
Their work, like you—love and a little praise
And some sense the good true beautiful will ring
If they call three times, charming from where she hid
The goddess who comes in sleep and whose uncertain ways
Play Circe and Penelope to their king.

—L.O.C.

**I. Old Poets Never Die**

Although the evidence shows it's best they did ...

That was a joke he had made many times, to each of his classes, once his colleague-auditors ran out. He didn't expect laughter. That was far too vulgar for the sophisticates who taught with or even studied under him. Only Helen laughed with no restraint, the one unconflicted voice among them. The rest sat in smug silence, nodding. World-weary.

Twenty years ago, it was different.

In those days, you could still count on the ethics of even the most obdurate of associates. J., for example, Nate's son whom he had known since birth, wrote snide remarks, rapier-like thrusts he might suppose, on an otherwise perfunctory department exam or maybe it was just some memo sent out to the majors; and to calm him, all you had to do was invoke the poor old self-styled stalwart Prof. Brown, blank-verse Orator, who had been there for generations. "How would he feel reading that?" Even if neither of them cared a fig for old Herbie, such bluster was enough. Or you could just meet on the quad, for that matter, and exchange a hug (a man his own son's age, for God's sake) and things went back to normal.

> *I used to wake at 8, go for coffee, and roll into the old fart's class ten minutes before it concluded, five minutes before the attendance taker, a student too, strolled in in his three-piece grey suit and pipe, a full-bent billiard, even in those days a rarity, trying to be "one of them," I guess, meaning one of the suits in the faculty lounge, and I strode straight in front of the lectern between*

> *Herbie and his rapt listeners, where he had performed more than thirty years, then to my seat in the back row, where I fell asleep with as much ostentation as possible to be marked present by the pipe-puffing pontificator ...*

What was that?
A joke, you think? An act of rebellion?
You think this is Tom Brown's Fucking Schooldays?
Who cares about the angst-ridden arrogance of late adolescence in the mid 1960s?
The Anglophilic fags of the past?
The stress imposed on the idle rich?

Now where was I? Oh yes.

Everyone had a parodic self in those days, one that lived in the minds and descriptions of others, like the epithets of Homer: not merely "Achilles," the man himself, but his alter-ego "the swift-footed Achilles," not Odysseus, but "the Many-Turned Odysseus." And so Herbie, as above, "Blank-verse Orator"; or "the Obscenity-muttering Nate in his Shirtsleeves." And I myself, not the war hero, but "Noteless Lecturer," needing nothing but the book itself with the placemarks set in it. That self of mine just read to them—all they wanted or could process then. Key passages they might have found on their own, but now had no need to search for. I remember opening the book to the marbled page of *Tristram Shandy*, or the woodcut swirl of the flourish of Uncle Toby's stick. None had even leafed through their copies to know such embellishments were there at all. It was that way for decades. My other self? Or one of them. See above. The photo, I mean, of the warship I commanded, patrolling the

Pacific. One of those heads on the bridge or below in the wheelhouse.

And so it went. You could profess damn near anything in those days—Shakespeare, the novel, modern poetry. There were no "specialties" then and those who came in claiming one were laughed out of the coffee room. The sea-change to be derided even in my poetry still years away. The forgetting of all we had nearly died for, steaming off Guam or toward the Solomons. First, the young ones stopped wearing suits, even jackets. There was no one left for the sycophantic minions to imitate! No grey vests, and no pipes but hash-pipes to be found. Then the place went co-ed and all hell broke loose. Thank God we were by then too old for it, and most of the others too gay to be much affected. Poor Herb, the young one now I mean, who flew fighter jets in the danger-free late 50s. Herb could never get over these impressionable women looking at him (finally!) as if he were a god, when in fact, as William once remarked, raising his cane for effect, you were at best the older brother or uncle they never had. Easy for a queen like himself to concede with his tragic lisp. He used to walk hand-in-hand with his students on the quad and no one thought twice about it. "A fistula," William moaned of his most recent ailment. "Fitting tribute to a monkish queer such as myself."

And then they found Dick C. with the police chief, all fondled up in the rest stop: and when he could no longer endure the shame or embarrassment of the write-up in the *Record*—did he think we didn't know, for God's sake?—half the damn faculty were pederasts—he ended it with pills or a gunshot. I forget who swept the body up. You knew then that things would never be the same again.

Maybe the young ones, maybe the "specialists" ruined things, those who talked and taught of two subjects: their dissertations and their experiences at Yale. Easy to do when blessed by time or infirmities to have missed both past and present wars. These fortunates never quite fit in, even though I had known some their entire lives. "Plans," Larry said repeatedly. A lieutenant commander in the Reserves, he finally was, worked in the Censorship office—what a gig!—not a war tale to be had of him. "I have plans for this department." And that future he willed in vain into existence didn't include young Herb, the lech, with his aerial acrobatics in the flak-free skies, or Frank (Harvard indeed!), raising the twin-barrels to the flock, or any of the women who finally trickled in with their degrees from Brown or Virginia. Fruitless his rage. You do not stop the tide by willing it to cease. And poor William—destined to be a cane-carrying celibate, spinning tales of the old days, and likely to die in office, like each one of us swore we would and none of us finally did. I knew this was the end for us: *Götterdämmerung*. Larry, me, even Jim, marrying the rich widow as if in a novel—a nice trinity it could have been, but instead, we were just a bunch of old guys with ties, who joked with Helen in the office, sometimes sailed together and always attended parties together and had the good life and wanted to keep that myth alive for all of us.

**IIA. The Critic Speaks (Part I)**

The sun sinks shafts in the sea's natural dark:
Whatever's down there, better left alone.
We've come clear this time out of rising rock,

Not our turn yet to stare and turn to stone.
—from "Navigational Hazard," L.O.C.

*Wonder what happened to Louis, that namesake son of his.* We *used to work on Building and Grounds at the college and I guess we were sixteen then, working for about $1.10 an hour and living like royalty. And when they handed paint cans to us and sent us off to Paint the Bleachers and Walls of the Equipment Rooms, we would upend them onto the boards and skate across the paint-slick, ankle-deep, sliding like we used to do on the black ice as kids. I remember best Edna St. Vincent Millay's late progeny slipping and skipping in joy down the quarter-inch paint slush, then diving fully-clad into the chlorine-stenched pool, where some student-pranksters once launched my father's row-boat having stolen it from the boatshed at midnight. Years later, those bleachers still had not dried, and likely never did. We painted juvenile obscenities on the buildings, while imitating as best we could the booming voice of Ron, the foreman, who always wore work suits and sometimes told tales of driving supply trucks in Korea. "D.! Coxe! Millay! You birds grab the cans and brushes and paint the penises on the equipment shed! The rest of you? Go mowing." Life could never be so grand again!*

*Louis Sr. wrote a lot of poems about sex and death, his son said. I never checked then, innocent of libraries and innocent too of librarians—of John, C., and Marina—figuring it was enough that such concerns would one day be upon me. There was one about a ledge: "... Rock stares and whitens under the lee side ..." A sailboat*

*grazing or just missing it—something I say "we've all experienced," but few of his readers had. Your entire world is upset when you feel the loss of weightlessness on the unthinking sea. Like misjudging the tide and cutting the corner too close at Jaquish. Like grounding out on the atoll. I couldn't find that poem then in the anthologies, although it is child's play today. He was a prolific old bastard, I'd say. That's how things were done before the days of the "workshop" killed poetry ...*

Nate gave me his translations, awaiting my response with as much anticipatory fear as he had ever known. That must have been the year he was on sabbatical and I believe recovering from what he called the "bee stings" that dropped him in the back field and nearly killed him. A mere prelude, it turned out, to his month in the rehab center, not for allergies but for alcohol—an old colonial in New Hampshire painted a discreet white, where they should have put the whole pack of us.

Let me quote you a passage or two, so you understand what I was up against. This from Propertius (who reads him today or even then?), "To Cynthia":

Not now fear I, dear one, the sting of death
  Nor shrink from fate that now is due
But that your love by chance fail with my breath
  Brings fear with bitter-tasting rue.
Not lightly clings the Lad of Love, nor blind
  May lie my ash with love forgot.

"The Lad of Love," my God! "The bitter-tasting rue," whatever that is. Even a monoglot might turn to the original! Or this, the last stanza of her "Epitaph":

> Your tomb and bones neglected
> The wayfarer will pass
> And there'll be no one there to say,
> "Here lies a girl with class!"

Is that supposed to be funny? Yet this from Nate's own introduction: "the individuality of Propertius outshines romantic unreality and instills a freshness into conventionality. The poet himself is clearly discernible, passionate but not pitiable." So, even allowing for the vagaries of style, I guess not.

You can see now what the problem was—poor Nate!—with his neo-Victorian proclivities, doubtless instilled in him by his family from Lexington. No matter that he used to rage and swear theatrically, as his wife tells me (maybe he missed his calling, do you think?), when he couldn't get the words right. And I think that was the greatest compliment he ever paid me, since he justified such outbursts by explaining that's what I did when the words failed me, as they often did and do, as they finally ... well ... one day, it was, not so long ago, I felt them fail almost for good; I stopped writing then, altogether then, and that was within a decade of my leaving the academy.

Poetry for Nate was familial treacle, the versifying his parents and every other one of the old coots of the late last century, Emily Dickinson herself, for Crise sake, used to compose on every occasion: Christmas, birthdays, seeing a

frog, a trip to the cottage on Kennebunk. Add in years of poring over Greek and Latin paradigms, scanning the lexicons for things "true boys never did or imagined," a dash of inherited preciosity—mix that all together and what you get is what I call "Neo-Housmanism." That was the best I could bring myself to say, hoping he would take this wrongly as a compliment. "Housman!" he must have thought, his heart soaring. Like the novelist in Camus' *Plague*: "Hats Off!" is what the critics will cry out to him, reading the first (and only) sentence of his life-work, a sentence he crafts throughout the book. Or that film with Jack Nicolson I saw weeks before my death: "All work and no play..." or some such thing.

Nate and his tight-assed faggotry. God knows if the Romans had really been like that the Empire would have fallen centuries before it did. I think the poor bastards in Classics departments (I speak only of the old days now) had forgotten all about the rapacious heroes of the past, Greeks and Romans both—or perhaps never knew them at all, except through the scrim of their pederast masters from prep school.

For some, having women here was too much to take. For Nate, it just added to his social and sexual perplexities. For ... Well, you take R., the dramatist. Like me, no PhD or interest in ever getting one. Like me, hired for his work on Broadway, in his case, in set design—as if a single student here gave so much as a crap about that, set design, I mean. Rumor has it (or perhaps just the mock-paean sung by William, Steward of our Past), he was a legacy with so much cash he worked here more or less for free. And he sailed too, but always with help and mostly with the engine on. And

one day some co-ed (as we called them then) filed a complaint against him, and further investigation revealed that his lovely *accuseuse*, through the whole affair—clothes piled up on the office floor, heavy breathing and cries of passion and the whole nine yards of it—this besotted girl remained, as Gabor so tactfully expressed it, *Virgo intacta,* and you don't need to ask Nate what that meant. The only surprise I had was that this fact had leaked from the committee room where they had white-washed the whole thing, which I guess they couldn't finally do the time Herb hit on the daughter of the Trustee and got canned for it. "You promised me!" the Dean raged at him, Herb I mean, peace-time fighter pilot, and how that exchange got public, I can't guess. Maybe he spilled the beans himself in a fit of self-righteousness, innocently love-lorn as we all are in the end.

**IIB. The Critic Speaks (Part II)**

Young William wrote for *The New Yorker*, or let's just say more accurately "got published there," as I once did, and some of his poems were alarming—beautifully crafted confessions of the crushing burden of self-loathing celibacy in modern academia. Listen to his voice:

> Once you saw a working-class Adonis
> shed his cinnamon-colored suit on the beach
> then stride with adolescent calm
> into the repeating waves.
> Your feathered talons
> longed for that stark thigh,
> and twenty years later you wrote a poem
> about the moment, unconsummated,

your tongue on fire
and Clio your only audience.
Those wide eyes ripe as olives --
were they Attic or Egyptian?
Even you could not remember.

Or his “Housemaster”:

Most nights he reeked of gin,
sang along with Callas
"falsetto" in his study
or prowled the hall for boys
unduly bad at bedtime.

My God! He published that? Or this:

Think of Bellerophon and Pegasus
and you won't get hurt:
a lofty mount can throw a stud
and soar: no need to paw the dirt.
Some things just weren't meant to fly.
Come, then, O last of my loves,
for I will never again care for any woman.
Read out loud these words of mine again
from that whiskey throat of yours:
Sometimes a poem can still kill the pain.

Even John L., who worked here in the library, wrote such things just past mid-century. Gay too, of course, like so many then. His *Delphi/Delos*:

> To oracular fields under a silent sail
> Like Odysseus, like harsher, harsher dreaming.
> We lingered by crystal and pitch—the sea—this edge
> Of our most ancient annihilations; looked slowly:
> Our eyes were pained by the light, entering somewhat
> Beyond dark pillars, loins hard with sensates into
> Those heights, our calves, these thighs, and powerful
> supple feet.

A bit of Hopkins too, thrown in there for good measure. All that erudition. You rarely hear such stuff today. Good to be versed in the words of the pre-war poets of the thirties, or between-wars poets, I should say. That's where you learn to write and think. Or perhaps in the wheelhouse of a patrol-boat, with the lives of your crew in the balance. How Nate missed it, I can't guess.

Now I too taught creative writing courses, or the one we had, back before they became an industry, and it was far less tortuous then (straight-forward is what I mean) than it has become today. No room now for what John L. or William wrote, just before the old days fell in on them. You could sit back, and the sniveling kids would bring their angst-ridden stories in, and they would go over them in class, and most of their surly, unsupportive classmates would sit in envy or in ire, like ... like Richard P. his name was ... always did, his dark eyes fixed on his clenched fists, where the knuckles went white in rage. And J. too, Nate's son, if he had the decency to come at all that day, which he so rarely did; as long as you required nothing of him, he graced you with obedience, turning in some adolescent, neo-Kafka thing at the end

and taking whatever grade you gave with only mild complaint.

Things are different now in poetry. You cannot use a word that would raise the eyebrow of or tear up a ten-year-old, whining at the exposure of his ignorance. Elitist, they would call it, as if the maintenance of that were not the primary function of the academy. Where do you think the war hero Bush, shot from the sky, or the Kennedys shipwrecked in the Pacific came from? Half my students funded their courses on trust funds. Nothing like the loyalty of legacies, even the low-lifes in Development told me: Johnny, ne'er-do-well from Hamilton, but living out there on Thomas Pt. with his hot sister Ruthie, where J. learned to fear the songs of the frogs in spring, and where Nate himself almost died of a skull fracture up-ended by the unseen wire on the tennis court.

I remember J. remarking to ... who was it? ... who gave a talk here, graciously driving all twelve miles from his summer home to reveal to us the virtues of post-modern or class-room verse. J. said he couldn't understand a sentence of his verse, not one, but loved the word *fugacious*, "the leaves fugacious," the last line read, the most redeeming feature of all of it. And our poet-guest confessed, over lunch it must have been, that that was interesting, as it was the only poem he had written outside of a workshop (can that be true?), where that word would have been immediately expunged by his shop-mates, to whom each hard word, each allusion to history or myth would be decried as intellectually hurtful or insensitive. To whom such words are villainous: "'sensates' indeed!" they would scoff today. And who

knows from Bellerephon? Look at John L.'s verse, or that of William himself! It is not there to be understood or felt.

I used to be dragged off to the chamber music concerts by Eeds, and I swear to you, and I swore to all the students who cared enough to listen, I couldn't *understand* a single note, a motif or a theme—do you hear what I am saying here?—but that hardly meant I would replace the cellos with kazoos, or give up the modulations and counterpoint for a ballad tune.

Too bad Larry got all "giddy with the catch," as J. once said in one of his more eloquent moments, far too few in my untutored view. I mean his "Ledge," which won him fame throughout the town and state. The tale itself quite less than the accolades, I think and sometimes said, despite fulfilling all the norms of mid-century fiction. You could see him breathe deep on that rebuke, but there was no need to argue further, each of us quite set in our literary ways. And he continued to preach gruffly to tie- then bandana-sporting adolescents about the proprieties of literature, about how to prove it good or bad by the evidence before them, and a few simple principles, which in his articulation were not simple at all and made no sense to anyone.

The local high school bought thirty copies of his book explaining "how thinking is written"—oh those enthusiasts who used to study with us in the summer! all transfixed by our brilliance, or at least envious of our lot. And my son Louis Jr. tells me that after two weeks of it, even in the most advanced section with the most advanced teacher who would live on for decades in the uncritical memories of his students—even there they gave up, retrieved the book as quietly as they had passed it out, and went back to the way

things had always been before, when Dickens and Thomas Hardy were all one needed to read or know.

I never told Larry I couldn't slog my way past chapter two, appalled by what I thought of the entire enterprise, still stunned by the self-satisfaction of him who maintained his gruff intelligence without a shred of self-reflection. Better for him, that way, I guess. And better for all of us as well.

**III. *Laudatio Rerum Gestarum***

You could see it coming. Even before young William aged enough to raise his rhapsode's cane and sing of all of us. Once Nate died, the old ways seemed to fall apart. I went to my classes and my genial students would interrupt me "Louis Louis," they would all cry out, then, as kindly as possible; then one of the more adventurous would say "You told us that yesterday," and at that point I would either laugh, "well sure, but who was here? Not you, certainly!" Or "I'm just testing you to ..." or I might challenge them, accusing them of conspiring against me—a joke, of course, but ... Dangerous all that, since who knows whether I had made the same unpracticed riposte a day earlier, and after a while, I learned just to laugh and proceed to the next verse or the next poem or the next well-rehearsed analysis and pretend that nothing had happened. "Call the roller of big cigars!" I chanted then to them. "The muscular one ..."

No one got off scot free. Either from the changes to their very selves or from upheavals in the academy. Even Nate got what he thought was his comeuppance, less than a decade before the end. I remember he confessed, and it was sad really, how one day the students, maybe three of them?, complained—as many did that year about everything—that

they didn't get enough training in secondary literature! For Latin??? Good God, these damn kids hardly knew a supine was grammatical: "*Placuit virginibus ire spatiatum*" and all that! So poor Nate gave in to them and prepared and finally delivered a self-pitying lecture on what he so contemptuously styled as *Wissenschaft*—you know, what he was taught in grad school in the 30s, and by mid-century, even more dated than it had been when fed to him. On he went regardless, trying to recall the things he had barely mastered as a student himself, hardly aware that all those concerns were of no interest to anyone! Winckelmann and Rohde and all those Teutonic targets of Housman. And of course it didn't go well at all, and the few still-adoring students who were left went up to him afterwards and told him to go back to the old ways and just to be himself, that is, the legendary teacher of undergraduates, and I tell you, for a man who didn't know shit from Shinola about who he was in the first place, that must have been the most unsettling advice possible.

I remember sailing in the Bahamas in September, two weeks before classes started according to the old calendar. You could just get the days in safely dodging the hurricanes that began their slow treks up the Atlantic Coast, with luck, deflected east by a devastated Cape. And I thought of what I wrote of Kennedy:

> One week later a great southeaster rolled
> Force eight on the Beaufort scale all night and Saturday
> And heaped green pine boughs over the brown of fall
> Coming from a quarter untried in the longest memory.

Then one year they changed things—because that's what the Ivies did—beginning the fall terms on Labor Day to end before Christmas, and God knows once Harvard pronounced how life would be, we could not lapse behind. And Eeds and I were ready to go, and I told the Dean, because of the change in calendars, I might be a week or two late, and where's the harm in that, and goddamned if the man I had known for years didn't drag me into his office and launch into the tirade he would have better saved for Herb, the younger one I mean, the tenth time a student filed a charge of harassment against him.

So much of the old ways changed then. I remember Herbie, the old one now I mean, confronting "student feedback" for the first time in his career. Poor bastard! Hadn't heard a student's voice in more than forty years of lecturing on Shakespeare and Cotton Mather, his uninterrupted periods rumored to be blank verse, why for Crise sake you could scan any lines in English as that if you so willed. And of course all the students said, with as much respect as possible—trying to be kind, not reveling in their new-found insolence, that he spoke from yellowed lecture notes or some such thing, hoping it would not be a grand rebuff but just letting others know that Herbie was a living monument to the way things were done in the old days, days far older at the time than mine. Well-intentioned they were, I'll say, and perhaps they were. But poor Herbie nearing 70 took it all to heart and came in the next day abject and beaten down by them and life, swearing he would try to be better, to do better by them, to adapt to the way things were and make up for the imagined sins of his past. He promised them to do his very best ...

Save your pity! We won't miss him much. Yet even J., who had earned no better than a series of D's from him, had some affection for the old coot, and years later, he met Herbie on the street in the summer, and told him how much he respected the fact that he had tried to return every student paper the next class with a half-page of typed commentary, and how the one day he had failed, he fell all over himself with apologies. ...

Good God! There I go again!

Oh the banalities of college life!

Is there no end to it? ...

And Herbie, he tells me, suddenly burst not into tears as one might expect, but rather into that broad smile which twenty years earlier would have been a certain mark of condescension. Only now, those of us who knew him knew that *that*?—it made his day.

**IV. The Sea Smoke off the Solomons**

Now I forget where I was in all this. That's the natural course of things, I'm told. A problem. Or a blessing, rather, for the poet that I am, a man who speaks words not as others do, but mis-uses and affronts them. Once you lose narrative, as I did, all becomes poetry—not the heart-felt bullshit kind you hear today—I feel this, I feel that, O woe!, as Pound might say—but the way it was written with no false emotion just before mid-century: difficult, allusive, at times ungraspable, with all your brains and soul put into it, like music, quite beyond the logic of events or vicissitudes of sentiment. Who is this roller of big cigars but the roller of big cigars himself? That man with no history, and all his associates now dead.

So I read the diagnosis or maybe Eeds passed it gently onto me, unlike the way Nate's wife had to learn of her own—penned in an officious doctor's note or cancellation from the DMV. *Dementia*, it said, or some variant of that. And knowing I would never get a sentence right again, I thought, well I'll be god-damned then if there is anything for me to fear, since poetry is now being handed me each time I fail to get the words or the intricacies of syntax right. Well, welcome that at least, and be damned with all the rest.

Take any of my paragraphs above, this one, for example:

> I too taught creative writing courses, the only one we had, back before they became an industry, and it was less tortuous then than it has become today, no room now for what John L. or William wrote, just before the old days fell in on them. You could sit back, and the sniveling kids would bring their stories in, and they would go over them in class, and most of their surly, unsupportive classmates would sit in envy or in ire, like Richard P. always did, his dark eyes fixed on his clenched fists, where the knuckles went white in rage. ...

Not bad that. Nor special. Quoted perfectly as well. And I know I'm just repeating myself. Something I wrote three days ago. Now let's take every third word out or more, the way you sometimes know a word in life, almost see it, almost hear it, but cannot produce it, cannot write or say it. I'll compose now Oulipo-style, like the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets of today, who at least constructed verse with ideas in

mind, even if they made no sense. I don't know how to do the math of randomness or just to explain my omissions in a paragraph on methodology. But there's nothing random about the way the diagnosis hits, so I'll let my buried views simply double back on the verse I am about to write for you.

Now, to begin:

> I taught writing, before the industry, less tortuous then ...

Well, you can see how this works. No need to repeat myself again. You don't need me to eliminate the "stuffing" (as John L. used to refer to it, the operas of Strauss, I think he meant, before his mind went bad on him as well), and tidy up the grammar-shifts. Odd what skill stays with you ... Reduce further and you get:

> Writing, the industry
> Less tortuous than today.
> The poem above:
> The sniveling story over
> surly, unsupportive mates
> Richard always dark eyes fixed
> Clenched fists, knuckles white with rage.
> J. decent as required.
> graced in neo-Kafka end
> And mild complaint.

Almost enough to make you write again! Listen to the past: how was "my thinking written" then?

> A blunt but cutting edge! And have not time
> And space three hundred years and more grown keen
> Whetted on intellect, whittling the mind
> To a mess of slivers? ...
>
> *Louis! We did this yesterday, expanding this stanza to a narrative paragraph. You had a purpose to that exercise, but no one understood, even the most adoring of your admirers. Yet I still cannot construe ... Oh. Oh now I see it: 'Is it not the case that Time and Space for more than 300 years have become sharper because the intellect hones them [and this now sharper Time and Space] whittle the mind down to slivers ...' Because it's not the intellect that is sharp, distinguishing, as we might not expect, intellect from mind. Mind, rather, is wood, whittled to nothing? Intellect the stone? Time and space the steel? Yet how can "Time and Space" move through time itself? Louis, have I got your teaching straight?*

Ha! Who knows what it was I meant! Lost again; the charts barely guessing where the coral lies.

Maybe that's why I never saw a student roll his eyes in disgust or disrespect when I repeated myself when I forgot the assignment when I misread the poem we had read when I told the old story twice when I got the ending wrong when I spoke of the old days as if we were still living them. Because they knew, as my deans perhaps did not, that there was no need of continuity. Or maybe it was all that war experience, how I could have died for them, and willingly—nothing for a man born in America in the early century—commanding the 549 in the Pacific, not quite as valorous as

the skippering of the 109 by President Jack: "grace, wit, elegance stressed with steel" is what I wrote of him weeks after his death: "23 November 1963." I'll never forget it. Nothing my war stories can or could do, had they been told, to compensate for the miseries that weekend brought to all of us.

Sailing with Eeds. Those were the days! Sailing with Larry in the self-crafted skiff—his tribute to the great shipbuilders of old. You do not calculate when you free the tiller for the sheets of the genoa. It is simply a routine you perform with each tack, feeling the wind shift right to left across your face as the hull turns, following the nod of the helmsman as he used to nod to you those months in the Pacific. It was all like sailing in the Bahamas, a week before matriculation day, as I had sailed, I thought, with Larry off Orrs Island or with the Etniers out of Harpswell, or perhaps with the Kennedys themselves on the schooner out of Buzzards Bay, or now in the ledgeless seas of the Caribbean, blue-green like the surfaces we steamed through north to the Solomons.

# PART THREE:

# RICERCARI

*The young in one another's arms*

3.1

SEA TRIALS

*"I want you to write me 7000 words on your favorite Christmas morning."*

Screw the holidays! Who remembers birthdays but their own? Valentine's Day? ... well, you can just imagine. So when you asked me of my best Christmas morning, your follow-up to asking me weeks earlier for some eloquent pornography, just for you, involving you or another just for you, and when you promised to look up all or all of the hard words, I was at a loss. I never wrote and rarely read of philanderers or meretrices, and the best Christmases I had could never be the vital ones I lived. Yet for you, I will do my best, as I sadly rarely have in life.

As a child, before the passions of life before the passions for you as well, I lived festal times as taught to do; "eagerly awaiting" such seasons, that is, the way adults seemed to do (claiming it was all for the children, of course), with their self-satisfied circle of acquaintances, all convinced that their exchanging of drinks and cookies was the highest proof of propriety and magnanimity (there's another word for you!). And when the evening or the day itself came, the entire family would perform as if in a play to an otherwise empty house—the same roles each year, Father as Santa, the same rapt audience, children pretending to be children again—with the same food and the same carols and the same presents and the same waking up on Christmas. As I grew older, I began to detest all this: the traffic, the ubiquitous plates of unspoiled food, the airline schedules, the ankle-deep slush for the week in Manhattan everything closed for the holidays.

The best Christmas I ever had was surely one with you or perhaps with Linda Jane or perhaps just flying home from the Great Plains of America from my dark-eyed Norwegian girl three weeks before my father died of lung cancer. "Oh, no reason to break up your schedule," the family said, as I began the life that would lead me here today, hunched before the keyboard, thinking of the best Christmas morning I ever had.

I can't remember where we met. I cannot recall which bed we slept in in Manhattan. I do not know the train we took. Did I meet you in Grand Central or Port Authority? The Red Cap offers help, but only wants his wage—"I work too hard," he threatens me, all intimidation, nothing more. I turn away like the urbanite I once was. Or was that how we

got to your family in New Jersey? Camden or some other exit on the Thruway? the train so full for the holiday the conductor never pushed through to us for the tickets.

This must have been the year before we met in San Francisco for the Christmas convention and spent three days in tears in the cheap hotel, putting a fine face on things for our associates, knowing we would never have such days again.

Or am I thinking of the New Year's party in Tulsa, with your strait-laced dinner-mates, not strait-laced at all, of course, in their minds at any rate. When the New Year struck, noted by the distant fireworks, I took you in my arms with the love I always showed to you, careful that you not resist, pausing just long enough to ask, "Do they know? Do your colleagues know of us?" and you held me as closely as you ever had. "They do now," you said, stroking my face, never to be bested by me in anything.

We are in New Orleans—some gathering our Provosts doubtless subsidized for us. Maybe like the time we met in magical Princeton (or Rider College just next to it) when you put in a week correcting AP essays composed by rote and I drove all the way from Maine to you and sneaked into the dorm room with you and your too eager associates from Sioux City or Emporia, shocked to find they were unprotected by parietals. We had lunch with your father, so I guess all was more or less out in the open then. That must have been the plane trip where your seat-mate asked you why you had removed your wedding ring.

We are driving down the off-ramp in Manhattan and your father curses as we are set upon by what would soon be known as "squeegee pests" and I remember too, walking

among the window displays with him, he in his mock fedora with the feather only out-of-towners wear, pushing his way through the gawkers at the window displays, braying in his best New Jersey timbre "Tourist! Tourist!" as we pressed into the first row before the glass. I remember playing chess with him, and his angry laying the king down on the chessboard when he sensed defeat. I recall you taking the call from your husband in Los Angeles. I never saw either man again.

The favorite Christmas morning of my life was thus one I woke with my beloved Linda Jane, who looked at me and called me, as she always did, not by my name, but by hers. I remember where we spent that morning: New York, or Los Angeles. With her half-family in New Jersey. San Francisco, or even Washington, the first conversation I ever had with her, as we walked through the Monumental lawns, snowless in December, and I dimly sensed that I would one day fall in love with her.

For her, I wrote my "Wedding Album: On a Photo of Verdi." "Italianate you wandered the city-states of New Jersey ..." I began. Oh, you know the one, the photo now I mean: Boito and Verdi? arms all akimbo? Like Linda Jane and her new consort, you see. At their wedding? Or professionally set and framed for an employer. The two of them grinning in smug repose before the camera lens, posing coupled-up in the photograph to be one day seen by the one man who loved her. Composing the poem for her she claims she did or did not read.

I am five-hundred words through the best Christmas morning I ever had, and I feel I have lost my way as if in the sea-smoke of December. As if standing in the lectern or the

witness box and forgetting my defense. As if dropping the placemark from the half-read book. As if losing my concentration in the fog off Pemaquid or Fuller Rock, just south of Small Point, thinking of sailing there in the same fog with Linda Jane.

**1. Opera News**

Before the best Christmas I ever had, Linda Jane spent two weeks wrapping the presents, my gift of *Rigoletto* on the phonograph. One for each member of the family she so rarely saw. (These Italians! I think. *Famiglia* indeed.) Others for her friends and colleagues. Well-dressed and better behaved, the whole pack of them, saving up their thank-you notes or buying them in bulk like good Americans. And there was a grim delight about this folding of paper—the joys of necessity—that made me fall in love with her, on the first of the few Christmas mornings we would experience.

The scene for me is washed in blue and red—maybe an album cover, maybe piqued by an old photograph with the colors now faded or artificially expressed. And that must have been the time when the weather kept us in and we determined to "have at it," to put things as delicately as I can, with a contest of endurance, and who knows how we kept score or what the intricate rules might have been, but defeating Linda Jane at what was such a well-practiced passion in her life—this was the high point of my years with her, and we lay back laughing on the unkempt bed and I kept calling out my name to her, addressing her as if myself.

All this a counterpoint to my last chaste date with her. The opera, a production of the local music school in Los Angeles, not like the *Don Giovanni* back in Tulsa where the

born-again dramaturge insisted in a prologue on the positivity of evil, represented by Kabuki-like figures clad in black. She agreed to go, but not to see the opera. Not to laugh at the sad antics of the Old Geloso on stage. Not to wince at the cracked notes of amateurs. But only to go with me. And we knew then, as we had known so many times before, that all was soon to end for us, the curtains and the scrims about to fall for good, I guess, and I can still see the pain in Linda Jane's face, the black dress she wore as she stood next to me, just as for the supernumerary colleagues back in Tulsa on New Year's Eve two years earlier. And I can still feel the shudder of her tears as an old student, mine I think, strode up to us, another figure dressed in black—more evil positivity—"What a lovely couple!" she clichéd to us, right then, or perhaps in a note to me. The first time I ever saw us paired up like that—arms all akimbo, jarred by the focus—like the first time I walked in public with my Eloise, futilely certain of her love for me on this, the first and last time, just four months before she blew her face away. And like then, just as with my darling Eloise when I watched her walk away from me at the airport, I knew too that the last thing I wanted was to partake of a lovely couple-hood with her or anyone, but rather something astonishing, beyond the mere civility of marriage vows, beyond the mere posing for the camera lens in a photo from the wedding, or sampling the unspoilable hors-d'oeuvres at a meeting.

I run with Linda Jane along the beach—somewhere on the West Coast south of San Francisco. She is reliving the days she ran on the beaches of New Jersey as a teenager, with her hoodlum Italian friends lusting after her. She rolls the sand into a tight ball and tries to hurl it at me, but Linda

Jane is no athlete and I am in no danger. She spent a half-hour once at the carnival, she says, or a county fair, throwing like a girl, trying to win the doll that was a perfect replica of me, she claims—short, ingloriously pink, with an outsized mustache. Failing as all contestants at these things fail, and finally confessing to the carnie why she had to win this thing, why she would spend a fortune for it, and capturing his heart or sympathy, or for all I know pleasuring him behind the tent screen, such that the damn thing lingers on my shelves taunting me still with my love for her.

The best Christmas day I ever had was waking alone in the apartment, no gifts to be opened or cards to be read, no arias to be sung or listened to. Dreaming of these days with Linda Jane.

**2. Channel Markers**

The best Christmas morning I ever experienced began on the phone with my darling Eloise, three and a half months nearly to the day before she blew her head away. Four months to the day before I read the news on the internet.

On that day, the best Christmas I ever had, I called my darling Eloise, the last Christmas day she would ever experience, and as was usual that last month we had of grace, I apologized for throwing her out of my apartment, for my vile obscenities, for my loving her too as I did, for the badly cooked food and the unkempt spaces I always invited her to share with me. For the summers in Maine, where she had never been. For failing to visit her in Santa Fe.

I told her the best Christmas morning I ever had was waking with the Woman of Today three thousand miles

away from me, years into the future, remembering brushing her hair out, the woman I swore, my Eloise, I would use as a screen for you: to love my darling Eloise through her, the Woman of Today. I told you that, the last desperate words I would ever say to you.

I drove Eloise down to the point, past the Colony in Maine, that large lawn circled with summerhomes. All with their latticed cellar-spaces blocked by socks of lace. All with the Teslas parked discreetly blocked from view.

I drove Eloise down to the point, where you left the heart-shaped stone for me, where she herself had never once set foot in life, out there in the iced and salted roadway, poor thing wrapping the scarf around her chin, all done up in wool and fur and boots too stylish for the wintered roads and rocks.

On the road past the Colony, she tightened her hood and I could barely see her face. She pulled me close to her with her left arm and I could feel the gloved hand clutch at my jacket. Her step lost its dancer's grace as she walked abreast of me.

"Do you remember sailing through this very channel out into the seaway?" I said to her. "Then East, past the ledges where Fred B.'s parents drowned in the late 60s? Rounding Small Point and following the shoreline north until we passed the cottage where Annie would rot from her brain injury, still awash in the drugs and alcohol? We steered East from there to the Cuckolds off Boothbay, then further east past Pemaquid, cutting straight across the bay to the Penobscot, anchoring off Rockland, where John too would lose the narrative of his life in his broken intellect.

"We drifted past the lighthouse at dusk, Eloise, you and I, here in Maine where you would never be. And it didn't matter that the anchor barely set in the evening breeze, just west of the breakwater. You hugged the down vest to your chest and shivered like a child, while I lit the small stove as best I could, while I whisked up the debris on the floorboards, while I stuffed the heaps of clothes into the forepeak, where my father might have stored his alcohol away from his unsuspecting crew.

"You sang, like you did that day on the trail in the San Gabriels north of Sierra Madre, and I foolishly thought it was because you held that place in contempt. Not up to the standards of your class, not good enough, I thought, blaming you for the pretensions of the Woman of Today, misjudging you and your life and misjudging us and misjudging too, I guess, myself. This time, rocking in the backwash from the breakwater, I let you laugh at me, pushing the cold away, plying you with hot tea, relaxing in the damp and indolence. Years later, we lie off the beach at Roque Island, three days east of Vinalhaven, the rhythms of our bodies like the rocking of the boat itself in the sea swell.

"We anchored in the fog off Pemaquid. I can still see the anchor rode crossed with the lobster warp. We anchored in the small bay up past Hockomock and I watched you swim, floating like flotsam, you would say, when I got the film back. We took shelter in the Kennebec, worst place on the coast to be in those conditions, but what did I know of sailing then?

"Do you remember the last leg west through Casco Bay as the fog cleared?" I asked my darling Eloise on that Christmas Day. "Was that the time the storms came up and blew

the hail onto then off the deck into the shattered sea surface? Or rather when we caught the breeze and sailed at hull speed back to Harpswell, passing here—this very channel, I mean—where we so often walked, watching the sailors trying to negotiate the currents and the tangle of buoys marking the entrance to the harbor?

"Sailing here, easing past and through the buoys, my eyes on you, barely conscious of the tiller, pretending to feel full confidence in the route we chose, feeling in full full confidence in your love for me, as you stared over the water, leaning into me, never questioning why we sailed in defiance of the channel markers.

"Thinking of getting home at last with you. Two weeks of salt spray to rinse off in the shower. Laughing at our sea-legs. 'Like dancing', you would say. 'The dance move is not yours, is hardly you at all. Like stepping onto land after two weeks on the boat with you. Your sense of balance, your body and the physics of it all—me, the scientist, I know about such things—surpassing anything your will might demand of it.

"'The home cooked meal. The unread mail. The lawn and garden gone to weeds. All of it. One of the best days of my life', you said—'like my birthday, when I came to your apartment after a day with the film crew, and opened the door to find the place tangled in crepe paper and balloons. That was the best day of my life, even though I fell asleep almost instantly, and left you sleeping there in the morning.'

"Like that. That's what you said, when I held you in my arms, carrying you up the ramp to the wharf and to the parking lot, angled to the tide. Both of us all done up in our outlandish rain gear. Your hair a fright, as you would say,

laughing at my sun-battered face. The Woman of Today on the dock with her son and some new lover she had found on the internet. Left behind in the hailstorm.

"Do you remember this on this, this Christmas Day, walking the point past the Colony? Past the Woman of Today, the one through whom I loved you long after you had gone? The unseasonable warmth on this day in December? All the graceful hulls secured on their cradles? You, my darling Eloise on my arm in the crisp air, threatening snow?"

The best Christmas I ever had was walking with my darling Eloise on the road past the Colony, in Maine, that state fucked up after put in the hands of white folks, she would joke to me, that state where she would never be.

**3. Cross-Winds and Obliquities of the Sea State**

"A movie," you must have said, "or how about spending the day in bed?" waking on the morning so near the best Christmas we ever had. So we planned our day or was it days around that, and somehow the weather cleared or it was suddenly summer or late spring out there on the great plains of Oklahoma, with the breeze from the northwest clearing the air of the chemicals, and the clumps of mistletoe in the elms as big as bears.

I laugh as she yammers on of her childhood in New Jersey, there with her immigrant parents, there with her immigrant compatriots, there in the Italianate city-states of New Jersey, her friends I imagine in their black tee-shirts with the packs of Marlboros rolled up in their shirt-sleeves. Duck-tails slicked down, just about to be roiled by the late 60s and having their entire grease-ball world fall in on

them. All that bowling and bocce, the smoke from the cheap cigars, all gone for good.

We went to the fair in Tulsa, reliving these moments of her youth, the lazy spinning of the Ferris wheel always framed as a backdrop. The trinkets for sale or for the winning at the rigged concessions. "So this is where you won or bought the kewpie doll," I said, "or maybe went down on the carnie?" Bad food. The insolent teenagers or the insolent pre-teens with their equally unruly parents. The alluring stink of fried bread and popcorn. It was as if the early 60s had come back to us. It was as if a world of white folks and European immigrants had been reconstituted from the waste of two wars and the Holocaust. From the bombs over Hiroshima, or the citizens of Hanoi. The omnipresence of American thuggery suddenly in abeyance on that day. "Oh," she claims, "our skirts were so short we couldn't reach for our lunches on the top shelf. Our perky breasts pointing to the sky. Those were the days ..." "You're such a slut," I said, "so my type of girl!" "No, you are," she shot back, strapping herself into the rickety roller-coaster, front car where she always sat, she said, and as the thing climbed to begin its hideous ascent to its more hideous gravitous fall, I confessed to her I hated rides of any kind—thinking of the day I staggered off the Ferris wheel or Bullet or whatever it was as a teenager and grabbed the metal rails for balance, stepping off the ride with my friends howling in glee behind me, feeling the electric shock through my arms, paralyzed screaming, and owing my life now to Allen, oldest of seven and thus knowing what it was to be responsible. He took a running dive through me, both of us ending alive, lying on the dirt. "Only once," I quipped to Linda Jane, as the car

reached its bad zenith point, "has my heart been so shocked since."

"That wasn't enough for you?" she shrieks in happiness as the car fell and my neck nearly broke from the inertia of the turns. "You do this for me? Why didn't you tell me? ..."

And then we found ourselves in the grotesque horror movie and I confessed to her I hated them as well, but for her and her New Jersey tastes I would do anything—carnival rides, pop music, horror films. And she turned to me as the kids around us cried out in pity and in fear, "What? revenants? axe-murderers? demons?—it's nauseating. I'm only here for you!"

Her husband idles in the studio, riffing scales on his keyboard. I can see the pet name he has for her in all the notes she forgot to hide when I was visiting, but I cannot copy them down here today, even after thirty years or more of not confronting them. He dreams of the career as a headliner on stage before the fainting fans and groupies, squandering their allowances, in love with him, adoring him, him—already taken! he would claim with the conviction of hope, even though his wife sometimes sleeps in the bathtub, sleeps in the closet, terrified of the various murderers sketched out in the five-minute spots on the television. All this she told me or confessed to me in the theatre, those fears unshaken by guilt or embarrassment. And I would take her hand, appalled by all she had said to me, and stroke her shoulder her arm the inside of her thigh bury my face into her neck and I would sense nothing but the intertwining of our names in the whispering.

Did you ever suspect, living that bourgeois life out there in the heartlands, away from the man who loved you,

away from your husband practicing his arpeggios, with the bad hair and the bad art and the bad food from the rib place down by the river where one look in the parking lot convinced us that coastal types like us would never be welcomed there. Did you ever suspect that one of those time-devouring acts, walking the river bank, or lunch on catfish and corn grits, would be the last one? There would be no sitting together at our workbench, composing the incisive scholarly notes, writing the poems that would live forever, constructing the lesson plan that would bring all our students to their feet. Did the students themselves suspect as I watched you flirt with them, sitting then in the back row, did they suspect ...

I remember sailing in the fog with her. From Small Point back to the anchorage in Harpswell. And pitying her sea-sick state—there is no way to avoid it—I sent her forward to take down the Genoa and pack it expertly, in my very peculiar way, which was essentially no way at all—a trick taught me by an old sailor on the way to Catalina. "I knew," she said. "I knew you were only putting me to work to make me well again." As if there were any difference between the play-acting of the obedient crew and the real thing.

*Like the celebrants of Christmas.*

*Like guiding the hull through the channel marks.*

As if there were no difference between the love of one's life and just going through the motions of it, as I did once with the Woman of Today. Or none between seeing myself in her eyes and hearing myself in her speech and feeling myself as we made love in the afternoon chill—any difference

between that and reading of it in a tedious romance or in my poetry.

**3. The Chess Match**

The best Christmas morning I ever had was when I came back to the apartment with M., but instead of finding a book for her, or feeding her dogs, or poring over the cd's of music from the sixties, I put my hand on the small of her back and drew her close to me, feeling her hips press against my hips pressing into her, and "Do you ...?" she said as I pushed the shirt back and past her shoulders. She too was divorced from her husband, and she would write to me after one roll in the hay that she had been monogamous with me for eight years because of it as of this very day, but that I was such a slut such unknown fidelity meant nothing, and I nearly spit my coffee out in laughter.

The best Christmas morning I ever had began when I turned to my darling Eloise who breathed softly into the crook between my shoulder and my neck. The snow still covered the ground from a storm a week ago, and the sheen of the ice still reflected the dawn, four days past the solstice. I picked up the book we had left off reading as we fell asleep and I began to read, starting as close as I could to the lines in the book-marked page I was struggling with when she had drifted off to sleep.

"My great aunt's pawn-short chess-set, ..." I read, as if the night had never fallen over us.

"Perhaps that's what Dvorak meant, opening his Valentines ..."

The best Christmas morning I ever had was dancing with my darling Eloise. Not once did she take my hand, lead

me to the dance floor. Ask me to mimic her steps. Not once did the knights form their moves after their own forms. Nor did she sit on the foredeck as I sailed the boat past the spindle on Sand Island. Not once did she place my hands on the reins and explain how I was to balance my weight on the stirrups. Nor did she walk the point with me, past the gossip-mongers of The Colony. Not once did she gather wood for me, nor explain to me the physics of fire-starting. She never threw her hands up in joy and despair when confronting my gardening. Eloise never came with me to Maine and I never once set foot in Santa Fe. I never read the lines I wrote to her. Not once did we edit her scripts at 3am, half-asleep, wrapped in the duvet. And that is why all those things came to me on the best Christmas morning I ever had.

My darling Eloise welcomes me in Los Angeles on the best Christmas morning I have ever experienced. She feels she has been betrayed by me, but though vicious and undeserving of her trust, failing as always, I have never betrayed my darling Eloise. "Friends," she says to me in contempt, two years after we had met. "That's what we are and have come to." And she pulled the towel tight around her from the shower, three steps to the window, scrimmed by the blinds, and began to move with the dance moves she had practiced all summer in Santa Fe. Dropping the towel to the floor as she shadowed her grace within the window frame and I dropped to my knees in love and as if in love with Eloise.

**4. Underway**

The best Christmas morning I ever had was when Linda Jane and I sailed past the moorings, past Haskell's and Eagle

Island, and I once more made the joke: "And there is the summerhome of Admiral Peary, who, like all of us, either did or did not discover the North Pole." But her ears had been shattered in her youth. And instead of laughing or smiling, Linda Jane unbuttoned her shirt for me, exposing her hard chest, and making love out there was like making love the year before, when we sailed past the buoy at Haskell's itself, in defiance of proximities of the fishing boats.

"My sister," she said, shaking her hair free. "She never learns. Thinks with the wrong part of her anatomy. That's why I have so many nieces to attend to." Referring to the younger version of herself at the marina, whom I ogled without the slightest compunction. Sister or step-sister. So much for genetics.

She leans forward and adjusts the sail shape as if nothing has happened. As if we hadn't just made love for what would appear then to be the last time. As if the chop stirred by the outlying ledges in the sea-swell had not reflected back on our course, as if our trailing wake were not washed out in the turbulence.

Twenty years later I return to the place and find a note she wrote on my windshield. "Just a second," she must have said to her husband, "I think ..." But who knows how she got far enough away from him to write or leave that note for me. "I left my glasses somewhere, in the car ..." she must have said. She is wearing a version of the black dress she wore in the last picture I took of her, five years ago today.

"I saw you sailing from the mooring," she would later write to me, in her sparest prose. "With Linda Jane it must have been. It was as if the bow falling off expertly from the dinghy secured to the mooring were expressly done for me,

or for the tourists, gawking from the lawn chairs in the waiting line to the restaurant. The sails set in turn as you hauled in the main and the jib sheets. The graceful hull angled slowly into the mist."

The best Christmas morning I ever had was when I drifted off the mooring working the winch on the port-side, knowing she was watching me, deaf to the wind accelerating over the sail edge.

"It's like dance," she said to me from the porch in the Colony, watching the boat tack in and around the moorings. "When I watch you sail in the distance, it is like the ballet I saw as a child when my rich aunt took me to the Met with her." "When I sail," I texted back to her, "I always sail with you."

**5. Wedding Vows**

On the best Christmas I ever had, I finally talked to Anne about her wedding.

"I saw you stricken, as I walked down the aisle at the end of it," she says, thinking of that day with her hippie now husband on her arm all done up in the ridiculous white dress and clutching the flowers. "I saw you standing there although I doubt you knew, your grip tightened white on the pew rail. I saw your shock. I was half-way to stopping as the bridal train stumbled past me. 'Don't worry,' I would or should have said to you. 'This is nothing. ...'"

A sop thrown to Cerberus.

A play with a bad script.

"'No one takes it seriously and all will pass.' But my family there, all beaming even though hardly conscious of the nuances of affection through the alcohol. What was I to

do? Upset the entire apple-cart of things? when I knew full well that in another year, or two years, we would be here as we are here today.

"You, the smart one, as I always said. Even you with your dearth of experience would have known I would one day be there for you, and lead you with me to New York and lie with you on the floor of the unfurnished living space, and seeing then that you too would one day give up on me as everyone but my last husband did. You too would see the wine-bottle at dinner and realize there was nothing to celebrate there but the ending day, and you too, like all the rest, would finally despair and take the bus back home, or maybe the subway to the Village or maybe the train back to Boston. Who knows why and where you left?"

She poses with me at some gathering, years after I gave up on her, years after I drove to New Orleans and somehow back to New York now years since she had left there as well and years before she would slip on the stairway at her cottage in Georgetown, never to be that person again when she awoke from the coma. Like J.T. I think, gaining half-consciousness as the Harley wheel still spun next to him in his memory. No longer J.T. at all. Not Annie at all. But someone else, waiting to be served their memories. "No rush," I said to the cameraman, holding her, fixing the pose of our embrace. "Take your time," drawing her close to me, the warmth of her. "Hurry the fuck up!" she laughed. "The two of you both."

The best Christmas morning I ever had was when my Annie woke up next to me, her breath still sour from the alcohol.

**6. In the Witness Box**

I am 6000 words through my promise to Linda Jane to describe for her the best Christmas morning I ever had and I am still at the lectern with my lecture notes like Sibyl leaves in disarray. The auditors wait not patiently but at least with a practiced air of civility. Academics. What do you expect from them? Extortionists of public funds. The rendezvous of affection for their lovers in distant states.

The best Christmas I ever had was waking up in the single-room apartment lent to me by Linda Jane while she attended Law School in Manhattan. We had spent a night here days earlier, but she lay then on the floor beside me, just out of reach, and the only thing I could feel was the way she shuddered in fear, each night, every night, as she fell asleep beside me. It was the way things are in life, she said, thinking night terrors were common to everyone, no lover having "set her straight" as I did with the truth.

In those days, I could call her, hours away, different coasts, and I could still get a hearing. I would remember the magnificence of her youth, the magnificence of her fidelity, unearned until long past. In these days, I can only send her notes through her relations.

The best Christmas I ever had was waking with my Linda Jane, years before waking alone in her apartment in Manhattan.

In those days, Manhattan was too that city in Kansas where Linda Jane had grown up, dreaming of life in California. Where Joan would wait for me on an evening in August. Where the grassfires burned in the wheel ruts of the immigrants. Not real folks of the heartland of America, but impostors passing through. Manhattan was an allusion too to

the years I spent in the city, the smell of the rails from the subway lifted and drifting through the street grates, expelled by the trains pushing into the station. On my last visits there, I would walk from one end of Broadway to the other, not to do it, but only so that I could tell of it. Tell of the bad tv and the cheap food. The trip to JFK in the snow. The flight back to the Dakotas or home to Los Angeles.

When these trips away became as routine as the celebrations of the season itself, there seemed no reason to go at all, the urban galleries all judged and paced, the encores done with at the symphony, the bagged head in the opera dropped finally and absurdly on the boards, as the audience rocked in laughter, having waited two hours for this. Zandonai, I think. *Paolo and Francesca.* Linda Jane deaf to the unsuperscripted words. And that is when I lost touch with her, years after the best Christmas morning that I had not spent with her. Sealed off in the big house in Texas or Connecticut, New Canaan I think, family and kids and mortgage payments. Two pictures I found on the internet, beaming with the younger version of herself at her side. Joan too off to her children in Wisconsin, never to be heard from again, her portrait too blurred on the internet.

Linda Jane is on her last trip to Maine. She models the swimsuit she claims to have bought for the road race in San Francisco. I am overcome by the irresistible pout, worked onto her face as she waits for approval. I still dream of this image, my Linda Jane posed questioning on the stairs, and opening her shirt to reveal the suit. Orange, like the one Linda Jane in years ahead would wear walking past the dock boy at the marina.

I pull her to me. We would never sail in Maine again.

**7. The Motel on Colorado Blvd.**

You have asked me for these words and for once, I do not need to worry about how they will be taken. Self-abnegating, obtuse, Stoic, or simply embarrassing. All the self-fashioning of confession, hypocrisy, and half-truths. None of that matters in a private note. It is enough that the words be there. The connectives be there. The charge answered dutifully as the conversation continues, both of us aging in the interim. Our hearing shot. Emotions barely graspable.

The best Christmas I ever had was when I pulled your hips to me and watched your eyes widen in consent.

I remember the time you paused to "wash up" or whatever it is women do, and collapsed on the floor in the bathroom and five minutes later, I raise myself from my torpor and listen, hearing nothing, finally calling out to you in concern, and you were fine you said, though barely strong enough to drag yourself to the carport, where I should never have permitted you to go. Somehow you kept yourself from fainting (and not in a good sense!) and fell into your car, managing to drive only the two miles to the Vagabond Inn, where, unknown to me, you had reservations—"Just in case," you said and I never understood what "case" you might have been preparing for! Like this one, I wondered, the true one, the case of history, where you nearly passed out from the flu and spent four days fielding my calls and my visits in the cheap motel room, across the street, I grimly thought, from the restaurant where years later, my P, She Who Would Not Wait For Me, had her last meal with me. "You better learn to lie," I admonished her, speaking not of her words to me, but rather to him who had replaced me.

That was the best Christmas I ever had, nursing Linda Jane in the motel room, half clad in her bikini, slushed in on the streets of Manhattan.

I am now almost done with the story of the best Christmas I ever had and my memories have emptied out, much as the year itself empties out and we find ourselves in a New Year once again, reaching this time, as I often do, for Linda Jane and feeling like Ulysses or Aeneas in the underworld, grasping mere air, or gasping for breath, or what passes for that in the land of the unrepentant dead. Like Orpheus, I guess, reaching for Eurydice, as if in life, or on stage in the opera.

Like that, I said to her, exactly that! The most loving thing I ever said to her: "If you die, as you assure me that you will, I will not have to journey to the underworld to bring you back to me. For I will be in hell already, then and for forever." Thinking that. Thinking of saying that to you. Thinking of finally getting the words right. On the best Christmas morning I ever had with you.

3.2

## APOLOGUE FOR A CONCERT-MATE

So I wrote that piece not for you, you said?
Or were you chuffed by omissions
in the last book I sent to you?
I didn't write of cheap seats at the opera?
The soprano half-clad as the curtain rose in the Overture?
I mentioned nothing of sinners hurled into the fire pit?
The cello's one note in the Ligeti allegro?
How we dozed in the too standard rep at the Ebell on
    Wiltshire?
Nothing of the Sunrise of Haydn?
each note of the harpsichord
doubled as Hogwood insisted?

Did I leave it then, the story now I mean, undone,
as you left unwritten too the critique you imagined for my
sailing book?
All those phrases of evasion and sincerity that seemed so
apt a year or more ago ...
Yours, I mean.
My undrafted chapter too, I mean ...
Like parallel fifths of the plainchant.

How would we know, debating this,
That Marina might die in the interim?
A coda for the three of us.

**I.**

Brisk, but not too much, our past was. I mean this in the best of sense: no grand drama, hurling of obscenities and cooking utensils, threats and counterthreats, baritone vendette, uprisings of serfs, and tearing one's hair out for the camera lens. So unlike the futures of today. Maybe that's what irked you, skimming my pages. The absences. So Derridean, you'd say! Yet I promise you, C., my C., I'll call you here, timorous, with some temerity, I promise that I will not fail you twice.

I never sailed with you. Your apartment hid behind its Tudor façade and street parking miles from the open sea. You were one of those eccentric few (apart from carless few) who did not drive the freeways of Los Angeles. Not fear, in your case. Their crass vulgarity offended you. These are the monuments America will legate for the ages? No aqueducts; no fora? No walls across the colonies? Just layered lanes that made you equal to the low-life idling next to you,

the talk show blaring on the radio? What you yourself could hear by contrast on the surface streets, through the surface noise of the recording, through the wearing surfaces of the tire treads—still the lush strings of the symphony, schooled by Giulini. The keys depressed by Perahia. All that that we once listened to.

There was so much of music then! Who could forget the Bach Mass under Rifkin? The horn player, dead ringer for Bill Murray we thought (a far younger man then, like all of us), marched out for his solo, sat majestically, his tie perfectly in place, and cracked each note of the phrase, only to contemplate his misdeeds a dozen measures or so before botching the passage once again. Undone by the intricate twists of the horn, accidentals formed by a hand jammed into the bell. The disastrous embouchure of things. All this artifice of art! He strode offstage, his knees nearly buckling in grief.

Did we hear the music we critiqued? Did we sit in the music hall? Or did we just read of it in reference books, a review or catalogue? To do things properly, the way real couples do, there should have been a dinner date, a chance to display for you my cooking skills or my taste in restaurants. Perhaps you would join me for the weekend, and we would lounge around the living space, choosing and cuing the records or cd's, keeping track of the tracks and performances, recalling all the music we heard as a couple. Or just two listeners together in the concert hall.

But of course it never came to that.

"Hogwood," you said. "Such a charmer. He waltzed into the library, trailing his entourage, which grew with each step, and Carrie laid out all the Purcell scores in the reading

room. '*Splen*-did! *Splen*-did!' he exclaimed, [I'll never forget you quoting him, my C.] although surely there was nothing here he had not access to in London. I called you and gushed over the whole performance, ours, of course, mine as the sycophantic book-runner, and yours for showing not a trace of jealousy.

"And you took me to the concert, but I was all a-flutter with his toothy English-ness. When the music stopped, I left you standing in the lobby while I went back to the green room. I never offended you. You simply laughed at me and asked when I returned if I had his hotel key. That's how you were. I loved that nothing bothered you. Even the time I refused to let you use my bathroom because ... well "You *never* do!" I cried in protest, and I guess you just held it like a man. Like a true American, you said. They make our bladders and our prostates tough, you said. Not like those Anglos in the library, or worse, our countrymates, who use their readerships to act like English gentlemen. You were the exception. Great for Halloween, you'd quip, dressing in a Union Jack and tweeds—only you could *disguise* yourself as an Anglophile. Get it? Given the street person look you generally affected. Remember when you apologized to me, for some crude remark you mouthed at the symphony? Not something you were used to, I suspect. The apology, I mean. I should have known then what I meant to you. 'It's your nature', I said. 'Don't apologize. It's just your nature'. You can still hear me say that exactly as I inflected it.

"And then I confessed to your best friend, because for once, I did not have the courage to speak to you directly. 'It's Los Angeles', I told her. 'I hate driving at night. When I go out, I have my choice of men. When I go out, I'd rather be

with him'. Tell him, I would have added, had I thought it necessary.

"'Ha', you answered when she passed this on to you. 'Rather late for that, no? Why not have her grown son tell me this?' Likely too late then as well. 'She told me of meeting him—*him*, I never got his name—English, of course, or maybe an American—short-term fellowship, I guess, with his best RP ['received pronunciation', according to P. who so perfectly affects it]. And one look, she said, as he stood in the doorway, and she was gone. Both were gone. In all senses, I suppose. But I'll be delicate'. That's what you said to her.

"And what good did it do, do for us, for you to pretend to be mannered, never to challenge my views on anything, you, otherwise an Old School belligerent? And what were you to do when I gushed over the conductor or the Englishman? Throw yourself at my feet? Tackle the twit as he stood in the doorway? I knew you were chasing ... I forget whom, one of them. But all you had to do was let me tell you to your face what I confessed above.

"The concerts," you said in conclusion. "Those were the best. Those were some of the best moments of my life. Not just being with you. What wit did we exchange? What caress? I taught you to open the door for me of your always indecorous car. It was enough to sit there in the music, knowing that you felt what I felt. Like listening to the movement we've been waiting for all week, and hearing it, we realize there is nowhere in the world we'd rather be.

"Do you remember the first time? Two carloads of us. Anglos all and Anglophiles, except for you. And we massed at the library, and off we went to Long Beach. *Don Carlo*. Did we hear Siepi then? or was it Bergonzi? And a stage-wide

glowing trench at the end where all the sinners burned to ash. And I told you what I thought of you, not by words, but by taking the seat next to you on the drive home. Your cheap yellow car with the vinyl seats! These are some of the best moments of my life."

New York

It was in New York. We may have crossed paths there in the late 70s. I was at school or on fellowship, I think. You for your master's at Columbia. We ate at the same bad restaurants, or so we concluded years later. Szechuan all the rage in those days. We could never duplicate the ubiquitous sesame noodles when we moved to Los Angeles. Sat doubtless in the same concert halls. I remember Britten's old fisherman in the opera—a dead ringer, he was, for the man I worked for years ago. We rode the same subways during the nadir of their history. "Deferred maintenance," they called it. You could not get half-way down Broadway without your train changing to a local. And maybe Eloise herself was there as well, practicing her dance steps—some threesome that was! all oblivious.

A decade later, we both went back again. You alone. Me with Linda Jane. A week-long seminar at the Public or Pierpont Morgan with your once colleague John, I think it was. And when the three of us met in the lobby of Butler Library, you made sure to give a parodic hiss of disapproval as another woman took my arm right in front of you. How dare she? I shrugged. It was like bringing someone home to my family, I thought.

My friends (you never met them) gave me an apartment in Hell's Kitchen. Poor Linda Jane. Raised in Kansas,

adulthood in Los Angeles. Off to New York for the first time, going to professional school, as you and I had done. And I told her not to worry about the city. She would love the grittiness, again as you and I. West 40s somewhere near 10th, the entire block littered with crack heads, both ends blocked by the dealers, their customers passed out on the curb. That was New York in the late 80s.

Say nothing. See nothing. I tried to put a good Manhattan face on things, as I always would with you, my C., but all I did was terrify poor Linda Jane, who assumed my indifference was a sign that this was a baseline for life in the city. So I taught her the bus route to Bloomingdale's. By evening she was a confirmed New Yorker for the decades she would spend there. NYU. Chelsea. A law partner. Off to the big house in New Canaan. Kids and road-races. And you back to England I guess, only once more to return to Los Angeles.

"I'm surprised he remembers me at all," she told her brother, as she lounged in the big house in New Canaan. Almost quoting Pinkerton's too apt letter read by Sharpless. Linda Jane. Twelve years our junior.

The Day We Met

It was a set-up, the day we met, but no one told me what was afoot. How everyone but the two of us seemed to know we were made for each other.

No reason to mince words now. I had the same experience with Linda Jane five years before this. They seated us with our nameplates facing each other, hers and mine, then peered from the neighboring table to see what we would do. I took one look at Linda Jane and she one look at me, and all I could think of (this must have been what you felt meeting

the Englishman) was "I wonder what this person is like in ..." knowing she was thinking the same thing of me. And not one word did we exchange. Our hosts lamented publicly "Well, *that* didn't work," repeating this for months, as if a confession, not of their own obtuseness, but ours; stubbornly persistent, they were, auditioning my gay colleague next for her!, while Linda Jane and I carried on a torrid affair in spite of them, one still with me today. Can't remember why it ended. Don't speak to me of love. Can't have everything, I must have thought. I remember Copland's *Rodeo* and seeing her strut as if unclad about the bookstore. I threw her up against her car door as she pressed into me. She laughed and drove away for the last time.

With you that night, I sat instead with Ms. Gray, here to teach or on a fellowship. Lovely she was, in an academic way, and doomed since to have that name from us, inflected with a contemptuous sniff: "Mizzzzz Gray," as if she were a shallow aunt or ingénue in an eighteenth-century comedy. Too bad she didn't have the wit to match. Too bad she lacked that Southern lilt that melted me as yours did. And in the hearing of all and in the leering of me, she told us all of her dreams—on the beach, knee deep in the water, she said, as her eyes turned up as if caught in a pose by Bernini, rapt by the recurrent waves. And you'd think she would have sensed the sudden silence of the smirking neo-Freudians. But on she splashed in the water, feeling, I guess, the marbled darts thrust deep into her breast.

And L. and S. were there, and Carol was there as well, your namesake and colleague, and her English husband Simon, who would die, the first of all of us, the last we would have expected. Others too—maybe Jim who loved the

Indian food so hot it made the sweat burst from his forehead. And perhaps Marina herself, sizing me up for the future, dying suddenly in the interim.

Eventually, obtuse though I was, someone turned me to face you, and I knew finally what was expected of us, and later, we would rarely miss a weekend together. The Philharmonic. The staid quartets for the old folks at the Ebell on Wiltshire. Royce Hall. The Ambassador, run by the born-agains. And it was always a thrill for me, even when you stiffed me for the Englishmen.

We spent an afternoon on the beach. Perhaps a day or week after the night we met. Perhaps still chuckling over Mzzz Grey and her peculiar dreams. It was our first date, I guess, and I was leaving for Maine in the morning (or was that with Marina?). I had no idea you had broken all your driving habits to get there. Just another woman, I thought. This is what one did—a date on the beach, dinner. Music. For Linda Jane, it was roller-skating, and we fell onto the sand together and I swore as our faces nearly met I had not engineered it. We all know how that went, at least, all but those who introduced us know.

I still see you there, braced on your arms on the beach towel, staring at the water. Nothing exceptional about that day, I thought. One day of others. This was my world, my Venice Beach in Los Angeles. Not yours. It never occurred to me that you were there for me. It never occurred to me that you were not always in the concert hall for the music. Never that there was more to it than our coincident tastes. Those parting embraces. How could they be different from the rest?

"I had a very quiet and emotional dream about you!" I wrote, thinking all this, having not seen you in nearly a decade, and then only with your son in the dark restaurant in Los Angeles. "We were talking, listening to music, or perhaps at intermission. Perhaps on the drive home from the opera.

"We were lamenting Why Why didn't we discuss more things? more subjects? And then, even in the dream," I wrote, "I found myself thinking: Wait. How could we have done that? We were just kids! Children. We didn't have enough experiences to say anything interesting."

"Oh," you answered, "sweet. I'm sure I remember that we did discuss very deep and meaningful things (but as only 30 yr olds could). You were always so much ... I'll say 'deeper', though. Jeez that does seem so long ago, doesn't it? I still count some of the concerts that we attended as some of the most memorable experiences of my life."

In my own self-serving way, I delete "some" (both instances) and will remember "best" for your neutral or equivocal "memorable."

**II.**

Perhaps you remember that late summer in Colorado. You were on your way to Middlebury, and I on my self-fashioning road trip. 1968, it must have been. Finding my white-boy's way to self-awareness, I thought, following the mountain ridges from Santa Fe all the way north to Alaska—quite a feat for a rock-bound kid from the coast. I remember the urban walk we took, the pedestrian bridge over the newly built I-70 where the rubes from the Old West were barely learning to drive, stopping in the passing lane to make their

exit turns right and having the kids in the back seat lean out the window to check for traffic. I can still see your young brother's face, my cousin too, our carload trapped in the passing lane, expecting never to move in life again.

I could not take your hand. How would I have done that? We had no history. No concerts. No dinners in Chinatown. No acting like adults, standing together in your living room with our urbane associates sipping their drinks. I could feel my self relax. Then, I mean. The day of our urban promenade. Not in your living room in Manhattan but crossing the bridge of the freeway. The sun set over the mountains and it would be the last time the two of us would ever share such sights. Your family having moved to Montana. My uncle soon to be felled by dementia, but losing none of his famous wit. "It's wonderful," he says, looking up from his book today. "I never have to turn the page again!"

You took me to the opera, *Boris*—your choice for all the time you spent in what was called then Leningrad. The seats in the Loge I could never think of affording. Some student I was, like the bad ones in Dostoevski, sick and resentful. "Flow flow, bitter tears," the fool is said to sing, spotlit in the finale. That tune plays in my head for weeks.

Eloise practices her dance steps.

We later stare over the Pacific from the house your husband built in Del Mar, your children grown, your dad still coming up with his war stories of flying over the Pacific, the house three blocks west from the one where Dagmar, survivor of the rubble of Nuremberg, would drop from a stroke and lie unable to speak three days on her kitchen floor before the EMTs were finally summoned to pick up the body.

It was August, and you were due for your first year at Middlebury. We determined, then, to drive like the hippies we wished to be, back over the heartlands where I would fall in love with Joan years into the future, and find myself no more aware of it than when I fell in love with you. Cheap motels and watching the sun rise before us as we drove through the dust from the crop-gatherings and harvests of August.

That's what our aborted plans amounted to, and it was years before you told me the whole story of my kindly uncle, your enraged father, laying down the law for you, just as his superiors had done for him as a Marine pilot flying solo over the Pacific, not about to have his flawless child sharing a car and a motel room with ... never mind that it was blood! Not having it.

And that was that.

For that time, that was that.

The two of us then finally met in Maine—you remember, I'm sure of it!—and your son Alex was off to music school at Cambridge, and it must have been just us, for I can still see you squinting in the sun battering your flawless skin as I set the course through the harbor and into the open sea, where the waves, running hard against the tide, met us in force, driving the bow deep into the wave face. Seven tacks it took me to retrieve your visor as you shouted out nothing was worth the effort. Except the years that followed when you never tired telling the tale of it.

We sailed out past Saddleback and I told you the story of the couple drowned out there, and another of the summer skipper out for a lark, following the whale inside of Rattlesnake Ledge and, then careless of his course, holed his

boat on the rocks, later recounting bullshit tales of a whale attack. Just there, where one day lobstering both you and I got sea-sick in the swell.

I fell in love with you out there by Saddleback, where all the deaths took place, rounding Ragged where Edna St. Vincent Millay used to take the sun to the delight of the fishermen. Careful of the outlying rocks and ledges, not wishing to become the subject of another tale or snide remarks of the gossip-mongers at the Colony when they fished our bodies out.

You walked up the ramp to the marina, and I caught you, knowing I could now put my arm around your waist in the pure joy from the sailing, the unsettling of our sea-legs, and no one would wonder or object.

You drove home in the hurricane; I assumed you'd be safely west before all hell broke loose on the coast. Instead, the storm turned into you, hardly leaving a breeze with us, turned straight into your path and washed out all the bridges in Vermont up by Woodstock.

We sat on the rocks in Harpswell. It was like sitting on the beach with you my first date with you in California. You leaned back on your elbows as if this were the most familiar thing in the world for you. You leaned back into the rocks on Harpswell, the ones you would later photograph, finding an icon of a heart in the rock-shards, and sending it to me on Valentine's Day. "Perhaps that's what Dvorak meant," I wrote, "opening his Valentines." You sipped the beer, warm from being sequestered in the car by the teenagers. "Don't," you said as I reached for it. "I have a premonition." And I threw the half-drunk beer into the water.

**III.**

When he was on the train to Denver, seven-years-old, he wondered if life would always be like this for him. Even though he did not sense the smooth, unmarked skin he was blessed with, the ease with which he fell asleep each night, the stocked food, cooked meals—all those bourgeois privileges readily available to an American of a certain genealogy and class.

It was on the beaches of Kennebunk that things began to change for him. It was there he would meet his cousin Roxie, or not his cousin—all these things are difficult in a culture where you can't keep the generations straight. Where some, like his father, married late—or early, it must have been, their life-paths inconvenienced by wars and Depressions. Where he could thus be staring at an old photograph of three generations posed on the rock-face and insist to Roxie she was there with them, when in fact, Roxie, his second cousin once removed according to the carefully kept genealogies of his detested grandmother, had yet to be born and yet to grow into the charming version of her mother, true second-cousin she was, I guess, though a generation earlier, although here, by *generation* I mean ...

These stutterings! Why can't they be sensible, his grandparents must have thought? And spread their seed on the appropriate page of the genealogy book? "We working men," his father's sire had written to the old professor, sailing in from Europe. He could not read these letters further, but burned them with all their histories.

You had to wait, in those days, he must have thought, or would have thought, for what the future held for you. Or no, that cannot be correct, as the future isn't *there*, in any

sense (his academic colleagues never ceased "to remind" him [quoting them]) and thus has no 'agency' (the very word they used, with the inverted commas too). "What he would bring his future." Better. Although there was still what the academy would for a few months describe with a form of the root *essentialize*, i.e., bring into being an otherwise inexistent entity. Still not right. The future no more real than the present then, both present in his imagining.

Don't you think that's so?

Before all things changed for him, riding the train to Denver, he lay sleeping in the car to Kennebunk, passed out in the back seat on the car back from Boston, fell asleep on Christmas Eve as he had on all the others in the past, foretelling what he would one day do again.

He stares with Roxie at the distant cliff edge, eroded to a mere incline in the last half-century. They talk of how they scrambled up the gravel face as kids, struggling to reach the swallows' nests. Both rock in the porch rockers, cane upholstered from the early century. They turn west to the sole mountain in the south. Agamenticus, so named God knows why—the hill portrayed in all the commercial paintings of the area, no matter what the viewpoint or perspective. The hill over which suns could set or rise in the artist's eye.

It was as if life itself were nothing more than a cycling back to his childhood, where he practiced sitting in the outsized rocker picking out the hill of Agamenticus, and maybe catching the glint off Boone Island on the horizon to the south, thinking of the cannibalized crew of two centuries ago he read so many times about in the book by Roberts. As if all the rest were filler, "stuffing," John had called it, when he could still discuss such things, referring to the operas of

Strauss, all those interludes and comic digressions and arias thrown in to make fun of the tenors. That was when John could still remember the tunes and the plot-twists.

And I can tell you now it was in that interlude that you too grew into life and into my life, and discovered too that perfect complexion and perfect smile and heart-melting lilt of your accent was something you were born and then raised with, hardly noticed on the outer banks of the Carolinas where you may well have stared out to the same sea I gazed at from the porch in Maine.

All those stories you stored of your youth and never shared with me, of your hippie days at college, South Dakota, where our paths may well have crossed, Columbia where they surely did, perhaps as Eloise herself looked on in high disapproval as she looked on everything. The three of us strangers.

It was there that Roxie told me the story of your son:

Alex studied music, following your guidance, and came to America, poring over the scores in the library—the same ones, I guess, that your English conductor had judged so splendid as you stood back, heart all a-flutter. And Carrie was a poor slip of a thing, working in the library, charged with watching over the reading room, making sure you followed the privileged rituals of academics graced with your rare books and manuscripts. Cradles and snakes to keep the openings; a ruler for page turning. All those scholar-fools, "pretending to be English gentlemen," as a Marxist friend spat out in derision, shaking a crease from his black leather coat.

Your son fell in love with her as most of us did, her strength, we thought, showing through her physical frailties, whereas in fact the reverse was true—her body ravaged by self-medication and the usual disorders afflicting women of that generation.

For him, Carrie would be Haydn, so he wrote, the oeuvre too vast to keep in one's head, and he would so merge them in his consciousness that every symphony he heard, quartet or aria, divertimento or trio—each one would be her, taking shape in his recordings, until all the music, the notes heard and unheard, the harmonics of scale production, the intervals of sound itself, all would be her, there, in the music she herself never heard or appreciated, or could distinguish from the crassest of nineteenth-century symphonies—those "big baggy monsters" of the composers' art, like the flabbed-out novels of Trollope and James, the grand operas with peasants in them—all to be staggered by the movies, by television, and finally eradicated by the internet.

At the memorial gathering at the library, Alex tried to sing for her, as her colleagues did, the accompaniment unsteady on the boom box, their voices breaking as what skill they had at music or their simple grief became exposed. And the notes to the aria, Haydn, of course, who would have guessed? failed him as she had failed to keep her last date with him.

"I will keep you therefore meshed in my recordings," he wrote of her, the music all but gone.

"I will keep you trapped there, in the intersticial silences," yes. Like the fragmented oeuvre of old fat Josef himself, the gaps in his recordings on the shelf and on the internet.

"Those unplayed notes," he wrote, still struggling, "like things I thought ..."

"Like words ..."

Like conversations never held.

*Trio Maestoso*

*The day Marina died, I was attempting to complete my history with you, her associate, twenty years or more ago. Fulfill the promises we never made; make the steps we feared; fill in all the spaces. As with those Haydn recordings in which I sought a seamless account of his work and maybe life, attributing that story to your son. All of that for Carrie who never heard a note of him, and who is now shrouded in his music.*

*The day Marina died you were distressed at politics and I was doing my best to avoid all talk of it. There are certain futures too hideous to conceive. Martial law. The holocaust. Marina's own history, fleeing Russia through the warring states of Asia, decades before she died in Monterey—another hideous detail of this history. She told me all of it. It was of places I could barely point to on a map. Maybe she tried to flee the communists, or the entire state like the Romanovs. Or maybe it was the time I tried to seduce her the night before I left for Maine, and she played dumb, referring to this very evening years later, denying all of it, proclaiming loudly in front of our friends that there was no way she was guilty of rejecting me that night, and even Lorna smirked on hearing that.*

*She wore black—those Eastern Europeans! It was like Paulina or Svetlana or the whole damn lot of them.*

*The eyes that pierced right through you. So unlike you in your softer blues and whites, in LA where you claimed you could now wear white after Labor Day, despite what your once neighbors in the Carolinas claimed was right.*

*I remember the day that Marina died as a day when I was thinking most of you, how to construct this narrative or simple tribute. And now, now that she has done this to the two of us, I can link the two of you—all those gaps in our lives she tried to fill (I am being as diplomatic as the times permit)—that is what she did for us. It was never her who took my arm on the way to the parking lot, as the two of us talked about not needing "entanglements" and it was never her who then spun on her heels and led me back to her apartment in West Hollywood. With the thin walls and partying neighbors and it was not that night I woke at 3am and drove the extraordinarily quiet freeways of Los Angeles, wondering if all the cars I met held lovers inconvenienced by the facts of love and civility and driving home to safety. (I am being as delicate as I can.)*

*We are sitting in the coffee shop and my arm is on the table. She is to my right. Among all these youngsters, I tell her "Why not lean forward on this table. Pretend you are trying to hear what I am telling you." We are standing in line at LACMA. I make the same suggestion. She leans into me. "No entanglements," she said, and as she died the day she did, there could hardly be a phrase more apt than that.*

*Your last conversation with Marina. I could not help myself but asked if my name came up. "A rather*

*long ..." "Longish chat ..." Yes. Mentioning her poetry. I wonder if that was all she confessed to you! Or how obliquely she might have spoken of ... (I am being as ... ).*

*The day Marina died, I felt nothing, having heard nothing, finding the news on the internet in a day or two, feeling nothing then, I think, listening to the Lacrimae of Dowland, but thinking still of you.*

*It was like the Woman of Today, I thought, in my version of "The Ledge," self-critiqued above. I sought, but wrongly chose, the nexus for all divergent threads in the narrative. I planned the whole thing out, proceeding with a naive confidence. All this before the Woman of Today came into life and mine and made hash of everything, suddenly giving the tale the sense it lacked. And now Marina, our Marina now, has done the same for you.*

*They used to take cigarette breaks outside on the lawn at the Library. Those Eastern Europeans! It's what they do. I wonder if you ever turned your nose up, coming as you did from a tobacco state, loving all of them, I guess, me holding my tongue having blown more smoke in lovers' faces than any loved one ever has at me.*

You could see it coming, Carrie's death, for one, but others too. The coughs in the audience. The breaks in the continuities of life. There is no way you fill, nor can you erase these gaps. Like the generation keeping Roxie and her mom apart. Like the staggered couplings in the genealogy. And one day the name he coined for his once-lover changed from P. or the trisyllabic "Pen-e-lope" to She Who Would Not Wait

for Me, and even Eloise blowing her head away could not relieve him of the agony.

More than once he saw her with her consort, saw them all with their consorts, young and pompous and tall like all of them, even said to be students of music! and I guess once you lead one to adulthood (*e-duc-ere*), you can't expect much more from her other than her wanting to make use of it. Thus it was with so many of them. Linda Jane off to New Canaan in Connecticut. Even the Woman of Today who learned from you what it was like to be loved again and then, in jealous rage, dashed off to the internet, heart aflame for a man with the proper pedigree.

And this is why I think of you, Carrie, Joan, and all the relations too. Even those I spun heroic epics of, seven-years-old, soothed to sleep in the rocking of the train to Chicago, the train to Denver, fictioning a vapid self as the rails slid past. The kindly uncles with the unspeakable politics formed by war, their strict views of child-rearing.

I watched my other uncle, or cousin was it, or second uncle once ..., my namesake. I watched the shock of his white hair blown back as he watered the flowers of the gravesite of his wife in Kennebunk. Maybe a photograph of that. His white hair reborn in the glow of his descendants.

**IV.**

I took the plane, off to Wales fourteen hours from Los Angeles. Landing in Heath Row with all of your directions bad and the trains down, so it was three hours in the dead of night by bus to Birmingham, walking through the light-less city, station to station in the rain, and finally catching the train the ticket seller swore to me did not exist to

Aberystwyth, and seeing you dance down the hill in your scarf ready to assault me in the omnipresent mist! It took two days for you to complete the story of your acting out the Restoration comedies for your students. Your partner mad after your "plaquette," and you aghast "Help! Harrow! Alas!" lying back on the desk as he lusted over you, your students now aghast in life ...

We took the trail in the San Gabriels. Halfway through, I found the brook running in free fall and showered there, and half-way back I found the shade with the ice-ivy—some invasive they had shot in after the fires, and I either debauched you there or let you debauch yourself. I have a photo of the aftermath, as you have one of me half-naked in the waterfall. Sibyl's leaves, their order hardly of more use than our inventing all of it. And maybe you had an affair with the English don bent over you. And maybe you just washed the whole thing down with a G & T.

> *We never found the great food in Los Angeles. That was with Tania, years later, who would renounce me for not sharing her politics. But surely, my C., you recall the white-hot Chinese food on Pico Blvd? Where we, erstwhile New Yorkers to the core, having spent together a half dozen years there, thumbed our noses at the pretense of ethnic food in such provinces as these. And we talked of the sweat leaping from Jim F.'s forehead from Akbar's in the Marina, I think, and his famous love of it, as you, you claimed, dashed across the street to the Starbucks or wherever it was and I set the fork down in defeat. And we laughed at the condescending query of the waiter re: the white folks' choice of food. We knew*

*what we were about—and paid the price as we saw the cooks laughing at us from the kitchen. All the cells of my palate fired to senselessness—last time we were to pull such shenanigans, or put on airs, as Mother used to say. Last time we would listen to our Anglophilic friends, stuttering in their best Oxbridge or slurring in their East Coast derivatives, over the joys of the seasons and the soul-crushing fog and snow.*

We took the trail in Sierra Madre. Or perhaps that was with Eloise, her dancer's skin no match for the sun beating down on the gravel. She sang in indifference and I took her back to the car, reliving, it seemed, the same drive I took with P., when we both set our jaws in rage for as long as it took to drive down Lake Avenue to San Marino and both of us forgot whatever it was we had clashed about.

One day during your stint at the Folger we took the train to Georgetown—D.C., I mean—not the town on the Sheepscot where Anne stares out over the water wondering why it is too cold to sun herself on the porch in the winter. Wondering why her friends from high school no longer visit her. Wondering when the next glass of wine will appear beside her. We took the train to Georgetown and hiked up the canal, knee-deep in copperheads. You lay down in the sun—idling there just long enough to enrage me. It was the way you had of making up for all the cruelties visited upon you in childhood, I guess.

*The lilt of your Carolina accent remains in the phonics of the Englishmen. But for this, I have no defenses. There is no point in my scoffing at conventions. No point*

*in scoring the cheap seats, meant for students, up in the first row. It is enough for you simply to look at me, as if that parodies my own abrasiveness. All is softened by the rhythms of your speech. Myself relaxing too in the rhythms of your speech.*

We took the trail in the San Gabriels. I watched you walk away from me. Your strides strong and your will resolute. All that English history smugly caught in the dust. I walked here with L. once. I told him in despair, half-way to the ruins of Echo Mountain, of Linda Jane leaving me quite rightly for the physicist.

We took the train to Carnegie on New Year's Eve. An unstaged *Tristan*. Just the music and libretto. I see the sets by Hockney, and thought of sitting next to you in Los Angeles. Out by 10, so the train back to Columbia wouldn't be packed with celebrants. I see Eloise dressed up in her finest and off we went to Handel, me showing her off to everyone; the only viewer I recall the very woman who took your old job at the library. The performance so languid I was ready to leave at intermission with my darling Eloise. Da capo arias! The same verses must be played again! She holds me, and becomes me, it seems "We've already paid for this," she said in her fine blue dress, parodying what I always said to her. "We're staying." And of course with that the production took a turn for the better, as if a heavily ornamented reprise, and Eloise fondled me in the balcony as the bodies piled up on the stage boards.

*Do you remember, my C., the time we drove from the East Coast to California? Like driving my hippie cousin*

> *from Denver to Middlebury in the midst of the very Summer of Love? Five days it took the two of us, stopping at my cousin's outside Columbus where LC now teaches her physics, and laughs, remembering meeting me at Chinatown in Los Angeles, and in full view of her friends lifting me off the ground, all one hundred pounds of her, strong as a bull as I too laughed in protest, finally in her embrace, and if that had not been enough, watching her perform her acrobatics on the gym floor would have been. I drove her barefoot to the valley, where she improvised on bass while I read a lascivious passage from a child-hood book I recall from my grandmother's library. The only audience the rock group that would follow us.*

We took the train to Carnegie, where Mother used to go in the 30s. Or perhaps it was the Met—built years after she stopped visiting. Do you remember Dame Gwyneth Jones and whatever bad tenor they could find to back her up, in the soaring love duet from the second act?—raised and lowered on the machine behind the scrim, only to have the poor cuckolded King Mark come barging in as the lights went on, revealing that the lift had mal-functioned, leaving them several feet high in the air, forced to clamber down like fools, caught red-handed? Not missing a note?

We took the freeway down to see the Hockney sets in Los Angeles. More singers you have never heard or heard of. The nadir of Wagneriana, I'm told, and we only heard one tenor to dispute that. It was *Winterreise* we heard him sing when I returned to Los Angeles in the fall; he joked of his own greatness in *Peter Grimes* and we all rose up in assent..

*From there we drove west, combining tapes of Handel, Wagner, and Britten too, of course. To Topeka we drove, where I once called Linda Jane having left her for the first time back on the East Coast; in that same city she herself would later suffer through the alcohol, shooting stories of the anti-abortionists. And there Joan would one day welcome me just west of Manhattan. We spent a night in Colorado—Boulder it must have been, with Roxie, or perhaps my cousin in Denver, who had come to Maine years earlier and charmed my boyhood friend before he married the least charming person I have ever met and lived out his life with her. Or perhaps we took the southern route charting a course through Las Vegas, the worst city I have ever experienced, starting that last day's drive from Grants, New Mexico, where Marina claims she too was once stranded on another trip west. A boom town, with streets and lots all laid out for the workers in the uranium mines. The future all perfectly planned and squared for the realtors. No ghost town, but merely an image of what a ghost town could have been, had the town ever been built, had the dreams of uranium come to fruition. Eloise a stone's throw in the distance, in Santa Fe, practicing her dance steps. Eloise bleeds out in the living room; the handgun lies obliquely on the floor.*

Do you remember, my C., how we jogged through the unbuilt streets in the morning in New Mexico? Humming the *lento* of Dvorak's "American"? The mountains still half-shadowed, fixing the border for the would-be suburb of the

mining town? Do you recall our deft calculations? our departure at 10am, *Punkt!,* all timed to hit Las Vegas and the brutal heat of the desert (my Swedish car no match for it) just as the sun went down? We would still be in LA by midnight. Traffic gone, roadways clear, dropping from the mountains in the scent of the Eucalyptus into San Bernadino, still in the civil hours, not the wee hours of the morning or the hour I once drove away from Marina. All planned and executed beautifully the way things rarely were in life. Each note in place. As in the Bach scores saved from the fishmongers.

Like scoring the last two tickets at the symphony.
Like fishermen, all giddy with the catch.
Like finding words to say the exact right things to you.

We would then have time for sleep, or perhaps just lying there in adjoining beds, now truly in the wee hours, critiquing the music we had heard for the six days on the roadway.

My voice scratched out from exhaust fumes and dust from the harvests.

Your hair distressed from the crosswinds.

3.3

GENE FALLS THROUGH THE ICE

**I. The Oracle**

"I don't believe it," Dan said. "If you'd told me he fell down a manhole and drowned in the sewer, with the tossed-out goldfish and Kotex, ok. But falling through the ice? No way." I guess, then, only one Gene died that day. The one in life, a teenager with a name and history, through the ice—soul, body and the whole damn shitcan of him—and the other lived on, at least in Dan's fantasies.

It was March, I think. Gene fell through the ice a week ago, or so the papers and all the adults said. But as a teenaged contemporary, you do not contest the wisdom or hermeneutics of an undisputed source like Dan. Dan drank beer on the weekend, sometimes a case or more, had all the

contacts he needed old enough to buy it for him and for other select friends and initiates. He served hot dogs at the local hang-out on Maine Street and that was how he paid for it. His mother managed the store: "I work too hard!" she snapped at him, the only time I saw them disagree. A mere broken curfew, it must have been, or maybe his vomiting in the waste basket after an evening of beer-drinking. Other than that, all the evidence I had suggested he had no enemies or anyone who thought ill of him.

There was a whore-house next to the hot dog stand. Or so there was in the collective mind of the pre-teens and teens who spent their afternoons sitting on the stoop watching Dan take the orders, Gene, before he died, often one of them. (Bad-ass, they were! All male, or most of them. Why, just ask any of the girls who crossed Maine Street to avoid the gauntlet of the tough-guy adolescents with their cigarettes.) Now I think the putative whore-house was nothing more than a cocktail lounge—the only place in town that served hard liquor with live music. Dan claimed all the hookers serviced him, or at least the one whose name we knew, and he gave intimate and somewhat frightening details of their (or her) techniques. You must understand, this was in the days before the internet, and the acme of erotics were the centerfolds tacked onto the walls of Frank W.'s workshop at the boatyard. Years later, Dan produced two sons. So maybe he was right about those whores' skills and quirks. Or maybe it was something he had been told or taught by one of the sailors old enough to be served and serviced there. Or perhaps he just invented it and was lucky to be just close enough to the truth that he never got his

comeuppance. Until the diabetes stole his social life from him and eventually stole him away from us.

So Gene fell through the ice or through the manhole of Dan's imaginings. But there was another Gene too, apart from these, and maybe I should just change his name to avoid confusion; for this Gene was completely different from the one at issue here, and perhaps different as well from the self he fashioned for his listeners. This is the one who did not fall through the ice or into a sewer, and had he done so would not have been much missed. This Gene's father worked for Errol Flynn (who was that?)—a cabin boy on his yacht, or so Gene often claimed, in the days when cabin boys were a remnant of history, or an invention of the movies. This one amassed football scholarships from some of the best schools in New England even though he had played no more than a handful of downs for his high school team, and even then, only during a blow-out win. Whose later career included winning prestigious awards for the Best Employee A Boss Ever Had Or Imagined, and struck it rich through hard work and ability, even though he barely had the funds to travel East to the reunion. His wife never left his side. Maybe he had learned a few tricks from Dan which he then passed on to her. This Gene (both of these too, apparently, real and imagined) still lives.

I think Dan died two years ago, his authority on all things of interest to adolescent boys notwithstanding—none of it enough to save him in the end. He had not had visitors in years. No one had seen or talked to him, despite all the wisdom he amassed and had imparted from his hard drinking days as a teenager. His sons took over the business. It was as if nothing had happened or changed since we were

in high school. And Gene, both of them again, just disappeared from view.

Why did falling through the ice seem so pedestrian that Dan could speculate on alternatives? Falling through the ice indeed! How common! Better to be forced at sword-point to walk the plank of Errol Flynn's yacht, if it came to that. Or gain notoriety by drowning in a sewer. Were there scores who died in the ice in the days when parents by and large let their unsupervised kids do whatever they would? So few I know came close to this: Linda P., for one, five years old, curious as to whether she could see the fish asleep in the winter. She still cannot say how deep the water was, when the ice broke beneath her weight. She still cannot explain how she managed to get to the shore, slipping over the mud and snow. All she recalls is the beating she received from her mother for disturbing the placid nature of things, not the things of nature itself, but the artifices of the sitting room.

And I for another, skating in March, later than I should have, fell part way through the ice, suddenly thigh deep in the water. Hardly a concern to me. You wormed your way out, walked home, and tossed your wet clothes into the hamper. I came close once more, years later, testing the now abandoned ice-racing course in my nearly weightless sports-car, seeing the fragile ice slicked by surface melt near the shore, and remembering from my pond-skating days all one had to do was maintain one's speed over the surface, and hope to God the ice didn't crack beneath the weight and leave no trace of you.

Why am I more plagued by the shocking things that never happened than I take heart in the banalities that did?

Young Linda dying of hypothermia, unable to drag herself from the water. My leg caught in the ice, as the sun falls in the early spring. My car half submerged, its driver shamefaced, both doomed to stay that way until spring came and the truck drove down the side road to winch the evidence of this foolhardy thing to shore.

Gene never had time to construct such thoughts—Gene the victim here, I mean. The true subject of this story never had the chance sit back pompously, drawing on his pipe or cigarette, or maybe just scratching his ass the way his family did and ruminating over how things suck in life. Instead, he sensed, in his last moment of consciousness, that the chill no longer hurt him, and perhaps relaxed as he felt the cool water soothing his lungs.

They sent a diver down to retrieve the body later that afternoon, or maybe the next day when the sun came up, according to the not-to-be-contradicted account of the neighbor, who watched the whole thing (or so he sometimes claims), but did nothing to save whoever it was he watched drown.

I say all this, filling in the gaps with sidenotes, because there seems so little to remember of Gene, who died before his name could even appear in the yearbook, with its record of favorite sayings, likes and dislikes, list of activities. I searched, but I could not find the obit. (Was Dan right after all?) Gene was no drinker, no athlete or scholar. No big spender, since he didn't have a fucking cent to his name as far as we could tell. Gene stayed in the track reserved for the poor kids; he never got elected treasurer for the glee club. He had no car, no brothers or parents willing to truck him around. He just hitch-hiked to town to the dance to the party

to band practice to his girl-friend's house or whatever it was he did. The highlight of his life, or so it seemed to us, was the blond Alana, she who had no time for you and thought rightly you were indistinguishable from all the jerks she met in high school. Charmed, she must have been, that Gene, by contrast, looked at you when you talked to him, as none of the others bothered to do for her, thinking only of ripping her shirt off or that of her sister—two years older and smoking hot as well. Good luck with *that*!

Now, if I remember correctly, Gene was an "outdoorsman," although neither hunting nor fishing (what that word was restricted to) was in those days so unusual that you could found much of an identity on it. "Oh Gene," it might be said in coming years. "He's a gun guy. Hunts. Deer, I mean. Not birds, like the highfalutin rich folks do. He don't hunt with dogs; they just stay chained up to the porch and bark all day. Deer is what his family eats for the winter. Fishes too, bait mostly." So maybe he was ice fishing, and lost track of the time of day, the time of year, like so many aficionados of that art tend to do. Or maybe he was walking in the snow following the deer, imagining where the herd would be in November; smack in the middle of hunting season he felt he was, tracking the antler-less buck over the fragile ice, foolishly risking his life in too-rough calculations of "pounds per square inch" and the difference between the ratios of weight to footprint in the ice. Too bad he had nearly flunked physics. Or perhaps never registered for the class. What good was particle science for a blue-collar kid like him? Just a way to get into college for more classes of no interest or use to him, unaffordable to boot. So one day he walked out in the

melting snow onto the spring-weakened ice and fell through and died just as all of us will die.

What a way to go.

It took a day to fish the body out.

**II. Sacrifice**

*He sees movement as he stands almost invisibly next to the tree trunk. You now had to wear florescent caps for safety. Some say the deer cannot see the color, but he takes no chances, and keeps his cap in his pocket. Off to the right he sees it, just emerging from the cedar swamp. Something. He lowers his weight to one knee, slowly, his movement imperceptible; he stares at the disturbance, finally catching sight of a life-form caught in the thicket, maybe like the fish young Linda wanted to see sleeping in the ice. Like the VC, feeling the high, as my once college floormate caught him in his sights. He raises the muzzle. Winchester .30-.30. Half the guns you saw in Maine in those days were that one. Half the guns you saw on the Westerns on black-and-white tv's were that one. Lever action. If you missed the first shot, it would be pointless to attempt a second. Just a waste of a round. Nearly one with nature, he might have thought. Lucky Gene. He would never experience the days when fat "bubbas," as we called them, dressed up in camo and headed for the woods with assault rifles and flag patches on their shoulder.*

*He finds the open sights; his heart beating with such force it is almost impossible to imagine his prey cannot sense this. Doe. Buck. In those days it made no difference. Both were taggable, legal, that is. You do not*

*need to find the re-assuring rack against the brush. It is enough to see the flank, or the flag as the frightened deer senses your presence, and turns away, tail held high. What Sandie's father swears he saw an instant before firing and ripping away half the forearm from her friend's brother. Or uncle it may have been. Gene also remembers a young friend telling him of calling out into the rustling spruce: "Jeez! Gene, I almost shot you!" Only to have an angry stranger emerge from the brush. "What the fuck, you little shit. Use your fucking head." And having the guy slide back into the forest.*

*It was feeling the mortality of his prey in those moments that led to Gene's dropping the muzzle. Or it might have been the time when he squeezed the trigger and heard the firing pin click on the empty chamber, earning much derision from his hunting companions.*

*Or perhaps it was just a premonition of the momentary terror he himself would experience in the future, as the ice collapsed on him. ...*

That's most of what I have of Gene.

Yet there must have been a life linking the disjointed fragments I come up with here. There was the school play, aborted of course, where we met on the weekend arguing over our roles and the lines assigned in the script. And let's let Gene tell us how it was; maybe he can live again through us. What b.s., he might say. You'd think we could get together to do something real rather than something make-believe, but I guess that's what counting the lines in the script was all about: we weren't really those people in the play; we weren't even pretending to be them, like real

actors would. We were imitating them, don't you see? Not actors in roles, but "playing at" being actors in roles and learning the stupid lines we had been assigned. Like Sartre says, or so J. says he says.

Over an hour it took me to hitch-hike there, Gene continues, to recite the single line they had assigned me, probably figuring I was too stupid to memorize more than that or that I was simply some no-account in an unpressed shirt. Then another Gene stepped up to defend me, Errol Flynn swashbuckler, my namesake it was, the pathological liar of our youth whose bullshit narratives were no more valid at age 70 than they had been in middle school. "It's not right," he said, in high moral dudgeon, as we re-arranged the script to give me a more respectable role. And I guess for J. himself, it must have been a premonition of what would happen to the one he calls "my darling Eloise" decades into the future, who rewrote the failing movie script for the ingénue she herself would play. That was mere days before that production too fell flat and only weeks before she blew her head away.

I guess for some of them, that's all the life I had—never making the team in sports since I had no way to get to the practices, dropping band because I could not afford the instruments. Maybe my days with Alana. The revisions in the play-script. You know, that's hardly enough to fill an obituary, even in a snowstorm of obligatory phrases: "survived by his parents, Fred and Eloise," "love of the outdoors," "much missed"—but not one mention of the accident. Did they think I staged the whole thing? And by staged, I mean like in real life, so I would be not just a dumb-ass who fell through the ice, but rather like John W. or Tim, or Eloise

herself. Who did it intentionally, you see. For real. Like Prof. C. or Bland. Like Richard caught by the noose hold. And that's why no one talks of it!

"Died unexpectedly" they would say. And no mention at all of Alana with the blond pony-tail, who perhaps laments me, or perhaps just thinks she is now free of me. For why would she go to the funeral and listen to the phrases that would one day be said of all of us? Plenty of life ahead to hear those bull-shit superlatives! Why endure friends arguing over their roles in the bad script—or where they were when the bullet went clean through the rib cage, or when the ice closed over you? What did it matter?—all the heroics of hunting or the poetry of play-acting—of no interest. Nor too the final word on things uttered by the hot-dog vendor Dan on Maine Street.

The one thing I'll say for me, no one expects shit from you. Even when you find your way to the playing field at the appointed time—a ride from a careless relation, or maybe just sticking your thumb out on the country road the way you could do in those days without being arrested as a truant, or seen as the future victim of pedophiles. Even when you got there, you knew Tom would be picked first, then Barry, who cheated at everything he did, then all the Nesbit kids, and Anne too if she were there, who didn't give a shit that she was a girl, since she could kick the asses of half of us, as we all knew and some had experienced.

**III. The Land of the Lotus-Eaters**

I used to console myself in those days with the story I heard in school once—you know, the day all teachers seem to have, where she just loses it and says to herself "The hell

with it. These damn kids! I'm going to lecture on Durkheim or existentialism or anti-matter and who gives a crap if they understand any more of that then they know of capitals and quadratic equations." And off she goes on some wild philosophical thing to her bewildered listeners. And maybe J. too told me this story in one of his more pretentious, bossy moods and God knows there were a shitload of those.

So Ulysses—the guy in the *Odyssey* we read as freshmen—the one with the one-eyed giants who killed all the suitors since he had a wife more faithful than any of the Penelopes anyone would meet in life—yeah that guy, now dead and finally in the underworld. I don't remember a word of this story from the book, so I guess this must be somewhere in a work by Plato, with the same name as Sal Mineo in that James Dean film we watched as kids on television.

And they believed in those days that you don't go to heaven or hell, but to the Elysian Fields, a place like heaven or hell, but with no angels or devils in charge of things: no one heaping coals and shit on you or fanning you with their wing-feathers. And you don't get to stay there, apparently, but rather you hang out for a bit and somehow choose a new life or have one assigned to you, like they assign your classes in the fall, and then you get reborn as whoever it is and the whole damn thing starts again. I don't know what you have to do to get a good next life: I hear J., as if in the voice of his father, quip "God knows what I did in a past life to get this one I must have been Gandhi or Mother fucking Teresa or Abraham butt-fuck Lincoln or some damn thing." And given how Alana dumped him, barely washing her hands in

the process, there must have been some good compensatory shit that happened to him after that!

And anyways there were all these lives lying about for the taking, but somehow Ulysses gets there late, like I usually do at the playing field, or maybe he was just a fuck-up like me, but in any case, by the time he rolls in, or it's his turn to pick, there's hardly shit left for lives in the lives-pile. All the kings and princes gone. The great warriors and pole-vaulters. Just like there's nothing left for me, except maybe right-field where no one hits a ball anyway. So Ulysses kicks through what's left, and all he finds is some poor peasant life, fated to work in poverty and no one outside his family knowing who the fuck he is and doomed to die young in oblivion. And Ulysses takes up the life and shakes the dust off it, then looks around, even though there's no one to see or hear, or perhaps there are—a bunch of souls fitting themselves for their new lives of adventurers and heroes—and to them Ulysses says: "Don't feel sorry for me. I've had all the glory and acclaim I would ever want or hope for. And all the attendant suffering and misery that goes along with it. If I had had the first choice of lives in the whole goddamn pile—warriors, statesmen, philosophers, poets, merchants and philanderers—this is the one I would have chosen for myself."

And I thought hearing that—even though no one else was listening to J. or to the teacher, to me, or to Ulysses himself or if they were, they all just rolled their eyes at the bullshit of the didact ... Hearing that story I thought:

Holy crap, it's me! I'm Ulysses!

I'm Ulysses, come back to life as *me*, having chosen the least of lives in the life-heap.

And it hardly matters now that maybe choosing that, choosing my life, that is, Ulysses overlooked things like familial neglect, the beatings of childhood. The unwashed shirt you wear for days, or stumbling around on the playing field, unable to do shit for your team. Or having Annie sprint past you, even with those girl strides where their feet seem to move in big cones around their knees. Even dying young like I did, never having time to hear the sirens, and having to pick some shitbox life again. Or maybe he was figuring as No Man himself—you know, the name he gave himself for the Cyclops—the girls would drop their guard for him, not because you were worth shit, which you weren't, but because for once in their lives they felt they themselves might be worth something—mistaking for admiration the mere fact that I, say, sat back listening to them, having nothing to say of myself, nothing to deflect the conversation back to my own magnificence, like most guys do, no plans or hope of debauching them, or somehow abusing them in ways I could then brag about to those friends who didn't think shit of me.

How cute she was! A real catch, had I thought about it. Her blond pony-tail bouncing like something out of those beach blanket movies of the late fifties and early-sixties—before the hippies blew in (too late for me to experience!) and burned that whole fucking culture to the ground. And we could go to the dance or sit in the back seat of whoever drove a bunch of us to the drive-in or maybe eat French fries on the off-chance I had the money for it and didn't have to pretend not to notice when she handed me a bill or two. And I guess that's the way things go, since God knows what

became of her or even if she learned to shed a tear for me; for God knows there were no olive trees growing in *her* bed.

As for me? I would be reborn as a wanderer. A Ulysses again, like my forebear, you would call him. I won't need a sword or cothurnus or have to participate in the shocking thuggery to which all those who taught me that story seemed oblivious. The killing of the creatures who somehow got in the way. The slaughtering of the servants. Or the sacrifices of the innocent animals to the asshole gods. I'll sail where the currents take me, maybe now through the cut channels in the ice, past the sea smoke out past Saddleback. No son or Penelope waiting in Ithaca, beset by the thievish suitors and parasites. No friends turned to swine or scarfed down by the Cyclops.

"Who has hurt you?" I will hear the giants cry in the distance, and I will hear the poor blinded oaf shout out in answer, as I as Ulysses once shouted out to him, "No one! No Man has hurt me." And I will feel thus the divinity sprouting wings within me, as J. once said to me. Testing the fragile ice. Staring through the glass pane of ice for the fish, sleeping in winter.

**IV. "Let me not to the marriage of true minds …"**

We married in the spring, years after he died in the ice. Not sure why ... the time of year I mean. Or marriage too, I suppose. That's just when it's done. I remember we used to talk about this, or plan for it, and it was all bullshit we had learned from our parents, or worse, from some stupid kid we hung out with who knew no more of life than we did. "You'll be the disciplinarian," I remember telling him, with the earnestness of the sixteen-year-old idiot I was then.

"And when you come home, you will be the one administering the beatings." Like I saw my uncle do to his kids when my aunt was dying of lung cancer. Family life indeed! How those tumors must have shrunk when she heard the cries of pain from her children.

And I ordered some gown that looked like crap on me, that is, made me look like everyone else; and it was white, like all of them, even though Gene's mom, or someone's mom, went nuts and began muttering that in "her day," white meant virginal, and the way she looked at me, well, you can imagine what she thought. And I guess that was the way things were back in the 30s or 40s, or at least some people could think that's the way things were, and that's why she showed a picture of herself at her wedding, in a dark ... (was it blue? how do you know from the photographs back then?). Anyway, some dark dress with small white polka-dots—the kind of thing you might see someone wearing today for a night out at Swing Dancing. And by that we know, I guess, that the mom got it on with his dad or maybe someone else before the wedding day. No surprise there. And no need to announce that at the wedding. What the hell is she accusing me of doing, you know?

Things were so different then.

Maybe one day things will be so different too!

I walked down the aisle like a good American like a well-raised child like a model citizen and it was like being asleep. What were we doing there with our flowers, covered with insecticide and shipped north by some slaves in Mexico? and all our friends in their best suits pretending to give a shit? And I remember J. too from that. Maybe him or just his spirit there, crushed in grief that he had lost me years

ago. I guess we had gone out once, and he didn't know shit about how to treat a girl beyond what he had seen on television or heard on records, or his bullying friends told him. So if I didn't express exactly the degree of affection and admiration he felt due to him, he would fall into a melodramatic silence, even on the telephone, expecting I guess to teach me a lesson, and once I learned that, I would have hung onto his arm and deferred to him in everything and he would be some adolescent version of his moralistic dad.

Except at age fifteen, what did he have that I or anyone else, for that matter, might defer to?

That's how it was in those days for teenagers.

And if one guy couldn't do better than five contrived minutes of silence, it was just time to try a new one. And Gene? It was as if he just washed up on shore for me.

I can see them all at the wedding—Dan, Gene, J., and all of them, standing at full height, trying to look noble and respectable. You know, acting like adults, which is all the real adults ever tried to make us do, and probably all they ever did themselves. Like who would ever want to grow up to be like them? Swimming in alcohol, and dressing up doused in their nauseating perfumes and colognes to go out and get shit-faced once again with their well-respected friends, no better than they themselves. Even Karen, my sister, used to shake her head in scorn at the very thought of it, and went away somewhere, to college I suspect, leaving me with the ne'er-do-well Gene, who wasn't such a bad sort, and at least did not share all the idiot vices of most of those we both knew in high school.

He went hunting, like all the poor kids did, and considered it a big deal bringing me deer meat—should have

called it venison to make it more palatable, but no one did. And I guess me or my Mom, one of us, gave a shot at cooking it and I nearly gagged trying to force it down, all the while smiling at Gene the Provider pretending to be impressed. It was the sort of thing he did, and he didn't follow it with any sentimental bullshit like "I will always take care of you!" or "It was important to me that ..." Just "I'll try to get one next year too." For him, for me—to him, it didn't matter. No way he was thinking of making life easier for me by shooting the damn thing. He wasn't thinking of anything other than knocking it down, then, as he told me, getting elbow-deep in deer-guts, just to get it light enough to drag to the car.

So I married him, letting J., and Dan, Annie and Gene, and all the others have a decade more of peace or war to grow up in and become adults. We married, and then, I guess, life began, as everyone had assumed or promised or threatened that it would.

I never got pregnant. Or at least, that was never part of the fantasy. Kids yes, but not the shit-box months of getting there. I've seen too many try that. Stretch marks all over you and fat that never goes away again. Remember a kid in high school, 15 she was for God's sake, showing up to class a month from giving birth in a blue sweater so tight you could see her belly-button and all of us trying not to stare and the dumb teacher trying not to stare and everyone just hoping the time would come for it, and it must have, for one day, she disappeared from the home room and as far as I know, no one ever heard from or saw her or ever got to stare at those milky boobs again. That's what "going all the way," as it was called in those days when we were barely past puberty, will get you. One slobbering date with a slobbering

17-year-old and life is pretty much done for you, ruining the body you never got to use for what it was meant for.

And then there was ... Jill, was it?, who used to love to "bring Richard off" she called it, or maybe it was just him who loved it—I never got into that—and one day, got caught off the corner as Dan would say, and the schmuck married her and two years later they were divorced, poor Richard coming home to find his 15-year-old bride wolfing down donuts and candy before the tv or maybe off to Mom's and the poor neglected kid sitting in the living room in a diaper that had not been changed since he went to work in the morning.

That was the very kid who found him, twelve or fourteen years later after two more marriages, held up by the rafters in his garage, with a noose around his neck. And I'm damned if I think he had the wherewithal to do that, killing himself, I mean, leaving the very kid behind who he booted his wife out of the house just to do right by. No. It was some sexual thing. Never knew a guy so ruled by it. You don't go around knocking up 15-year-olds if you have any control over yourself or over life itself. And all those years working dutifully as a line-man for the power company in the end didn't do him or his kid or kids one damn bit of good.

So Gene and I got married, fully expecting to start some version of the good life, which was likely less memorable than falling through the ice itself. And one day he gets the call, or maybe he signed up, since there wasn't much else for him to do, and off he goes to the Army, even though half his friends faked illness or dressed up as queers or girls to avoid it. And in those days, there wasn't internet or Facebook or any way to post happy selfies as "your man" (oh God, how awful to say that) runs off to make life safe for all

of us. Instead, it was just some stupidity about becoming snake-bait in the jungles of Vietnam, if, that is, everything went well, since his greatest fear was that he would flunk out of Basic Training, unable to do push-ups, crawl through the mud, carry a pack, or hit the target even though he had a leg up on everyone through all the time he spent deer hunting. But basically, to the drill sergeants, you're no better than the deer meat chopped up and getting freezer burn—so no one gives a crap how you do as long as you can stand up like an idiot among the banana trees and take a round square in the chest like a good American or like Earl did, charging the machine gun nest.

So he's off for a year—that's what six weeks at Ft. Devens did for him—his "tour," I think he called it, and I don't think I heard much from him. But it's like flies to apple cores! If you have a body and blonde hair like I had then, the guys just flock around, and you couldn't go to a bar to get a drink if they had music but there would be a dozen sailors wanting to dance with you and feel you up during the slow tunes.

And I gave in. Who wouldn't? Some cute sailor rubbing against me, all ruddier than a cherry, on the dance floor? Feeling him wanting me like that, and staring suddenly rapt into my face like no one ever did in high school? What are you supposed to do? Like sitting home waiting for a letter every two months is a life anyone wants to lead?

But you had to keep your head. You had to be careful to separate out the cool tricks you might learn doing shit with the sailors from what I'll call the "regular routine" of married life; so when Gene finally got back, and grabbed you, barely able to keep the whole thing going more than five

seconds, he didn't have some revelation and cry out "Holy shit! Where did you learn *that*?" and to be safe, I'd have to rehearse some reply, just in case I forgot myself and began to howl like an animal; I'd compose myself, calm my panting down, and say "My sister! She did it. All that time you were away!" I'd babble on, "We used to sit on the couch before the television and do all this girl talk thing. She was the party girl, not me, and she learned more than she ought to have, and maybe that was something she taught me, as we writhed and clenched our Kegels and laughed, closing our eyes and it was as if life were happening not around us but deep within us. You know, a real life, something to sweat for, with adventures and travels and all kinds of people—poets and philosophers, famous actors, athletes and sailors—you name it! Appearances on tv, and I don't mean just those stupid Dave Astor teen-age dance things we all got chosen to be on—one new school each week—and big fucking deal, you get thirty seconds on the screen and no one but your Mom or three friends of yours even gets to see it. So maybe with all that talking to Karen I picked up something just for you ..."

Oh I'd come up with something—some response like that. Barely worthy of the word for it. Because the thing about men, even though I've known too few of them, the thing about men is that they'll believe damn near anything, even some bull-shit tale about crap we've never heard of, as long as it seems to flatter them. Like panting "there's no one, no one like you. No one. No one." And with that you can get away with anything, even though, hell, what's to get away with? The thing with Gene was you never had to get away with anything.

When he came back, the dog he'd left me with to spend the year pooping in the back yard and digging up the garden recognized him immediately; maybe it was happy it might now have something to do, like chase a ball or whatever it is dogs do with guys, rather than being yelled at every time it was a pain-in-the-ass, like all dogs are and smelled like a fish or a rat or something rotten. And finally Gene and I would fall asleep and life would begin again as if nothing had happened, which it hadn't, except I'd gotten a bit fat and depressed, and found that the next batch of sailors was hardly better than the guys from high school. And Gene had all these war stories, that (unlike his friends) he never really told to me: unexploded grenades appearing at your feet on the chow line; shooting the VC stoned in the dusk, a bullet creasing your helmet, or, like Bruce did, gleefully firing from a helicopter at farmers running through the mud. I'm sure he had those tales from the service, but he never spoke of it, thank God. If I wanted to hear shit like that, we could have just gone to the movies, which was basically the source of most war stories anyway.

And then he wanted me to move, so that we could be together for the months he had left in the service. Ha! The two of us, locked in each others' arms, drifting over the continent among the clouds like in some movie! What bullshit. Were we packing for Paradise? I don't care how bad this provincial place is, it's better than some shithole out in the middle of Kansas or New Jersey where they never even have snow that isn't completely saturated with dog piss ...

So I ...

where there are no rockfaces,

So we ...

no oceans, where
So the two of us ...

OK. OK. So in the end he would finally die, or I might, and that would be the day when one of us could stand up proud at the funeral, all eyes finally upon us as they never were in life. The coffin like a dais before us. And the tears would start and you could always speak on those occasions if you just held a nail in your hand, and when you felt the emotion coming, an emotion you maybe never felt in life, just jab that into your thumb and you could get through it, even masked by your black veil or the scraggly mustache you grew in the service.

"He'd give you the shirt off his back" … or something equally insipid. "Always there for you." And you'd try to think of fruit pies or muskrats—anything to get through it before calling out to your sister or the angels in heaven whoever had to listen to all this crap to please shut these people up.

I will never forget running down the church steps. We all then drove to his family home—some shit-shingled house in the country. And someone had mowed the back field where they claimed he and his mother or brother I had never met were buried and they handed out these little boxes to all of us, and inside there were butterflies. And I guess the idea was on the signal, we would open them and the butterflies would come out and fly away like souls, or metaphors of his own soul, pretending to be free even though half of them would die before finding their next meal, and most of the others would be gobbled up by the birds or other predators.

"I gave him everything," I said, jamming the nail deep into my thumb. "And this is how the bastard has repaid me. Better to have died in ignominy," I added, "or falling through the ice in spring, like half the kids I knew in high school did."

# PART FOUR:

# ENDGAMES

*À moi ... De jouer ...*

4.1

## THRENODIA CATALECTICA

The first one I remember was Allen; I styled him my best friend, although what that might mean at age sixteen—even now I cannot guess. Yet so I answered my girl-friend when she asked me if I knew him, then callously told me of the accident as I backed onto the street from her driveway that morning. From the house her father built, "with his own

two hands," she insisted. On the way to school, thinking maybe to look for Lucy walking on Union Street and pick her up as well, Lucy, who would one day see the worst of me, and then not ever again. I wonder which self she recalls today, if she thinks of me at all. Which alternative future that never came to be. The two of us paired up, perhaps (which two?) a dutiful couple struggling to make it in society. Unprepared for what was right in front of us. Unprepared for what was right in front of me ...

Allen was driving the road I drive every day, but long before the Maine Department of Transportation took most of the more treacherous curves out of it. So just at what we now call "the straight stretch"—snapped like a chalk-line into the elevated earth, leaving the old turns to sink into the clay fifty yards to the east—Allen's distinctive car (easy to find later in the salvage yard) bolted free from its unmarked lane and hit what was then the largest elm tree in the neighborhood. You won't find a trace of its bark-scarred trunk today. There were no safety precautions in those days required of the automakers—the engine and transmission filled the passenger space. John, riding shotgun, and likely focused on the flip-top can in his lap, somehow survived it, trapped in the wreckage with both his legs broken. Allen was "thrown clear," which was of course the safest thing, according to the judgment of adolescents when those annoying seatbelts first were introduced. Because you remember, don't you, how J.P.'s brother and his friends in the convertible two years later were found all together, all three of them face-down in the grass, in a row as if in coffins, the car itself totaled and steaming less than twenty feet away from them—all unhurt, and slowly sitting up when the sheriff

finally got to them? Proof positive! Allen, however, was not so lucky that night before I picked up my girlfriend and heard the news, thinking of where Lucy stood waiting for us. Allen too was thrown clear, to safety all my unthinking friends would have concluded a day earlier, but hit one of the ubiquitous stones, heaped up a century earlier to border the sheepfields—an outlier, so the adolescent theory had it—and they say he was killed instantly. Only a moment of shock and surprise for him, leaving the suffering not for him to experience, but with us.

We smoked cigarettes at lunch-time, guiltily exchanging what few facts we knew of the accident, struggling to become the Stoic adults we thought we all would one day be by nature. And I went to Vaillancourt's that day, as I would do a year later when the carload of teenagers left the road at Bunganuc, killing all five of them. And I stared at the wreckage, not in fear or as if warned to be safe, but wondering how I was to feel this thing as well. How I was to take the sordid rumors of the girl half-dressed when they found the remains of her. I guess they took the whole business, crushed hood, dropped cigarettes, empty beer cans, condoms and skull fragments, to the junkyard, where eventually the snowfall buried it.

Ray was next, and we all went to the funeral, or just the wake—such distinctions lost on his WASP-ish friends such as myself. A French kid from the apartments down where Lucy lived, many Rays in that neighborhood, leaning on the riverbanks, which in those days ran with chemicals from the paper mills, now full of lazy fishermen, now lined with picnic tables and choice real estate (no need to get nostalgic for the old days!). Helmet-less, he ran his scooter through the

intersection on Spring Street, only to be mauled by the half-drunk Bowdoin student who could not be bothered with the stop-sign. It took half the night for him to die, while I followed the updates on the local radio station. They fixed up the broken body and stuffed it into a suit he had never worn in life, as the local Catholics always did. I remember Barry placing his hand on Ray's remade hands and claiming that no wish made on a dead man stayed unanswered. Couldn't have been much he wished for, given the way his life went. He too dropped dead two years ago after a life half in rehab. I didn't see another dead man for a quarter-century, when I came out of the surf on Venice Beach and the body washed up next to me.

Another Ray, another French kid, the fat kid so common in depictions of those times—was I not one of them myself? My brother's best friend in grammar school, lived in the brick tenement on Lincoln Street as so many of his once countrymen did in those days—the days when you could still sport the nickname "Frenchie" with pride, as no one does today. He came back from war or from Korea, an MP, I was told, having done no more than my brother or my father did—his duty—now seeking jobs where he could wear a uniform, even if it was only as a deputy or at the Post Office, and moving to Miami, soon badged as a sheriff, and one day things went bad for him and he shot his own wife in the face, killing her instantly—such a scandal for our community 1500 miles away, here where he was raised, such that no one speaks of it today and no news is available on the internet. Those who knew him best, as I did, or my brother, still at sea in all of it.

Fuck the war heroes of today, I say.

Screw their memorials.

Ray. Just names. The flesh all gone out of them. Another Ray, this one notorious—national news he made after murdering the Canadian kid in Colorado. First grade it was, he wore to my horror the same jacket as mine, and I can still see this poor kid from the trailer park, glaring at me in contempt. Or Ray R., nothing left of him in the end; first his body shrunken to frailty, and then his mind as well. Never the sailor Charles was, whose skills and reticence so won me years ago as we set the spinnaker on a dead run back from Catalina. ...

> *Is there nothing I can say now of my darling Eloise? No memory or fragment of our lives I have not detailed here or in my Elegy? Her artist's hand or childrens' books? Have I mentioned the dinner date? One of two or three we had in the years we spent together and apart? She squeezed herself into her sun-dress—even more alluring than it must have been ten pounds earlier, I will say, teasing her as she teased herself. Some old-fashioned Italian place where the pizza was never what it was in New York, and she leaned forward in her sun dress, nearly spilling out of it, then danced back to the parking lot with the cloth so tight she could barely move—only enough to press me against the car door. Or the first, years earlier, where she mischievously ordered the food neither of us could eat. Or wolfing down the lunch when the drugs began to pack the flesh over her dancer's frame? Did I mention her setting the suitcase up on my stairwell and leaping out from hiding when I found it there? Or heading to her polo match or*

> *calling from another man's apartment or threatening to have her pals the Gambinos take out a hit on me? Did I tell of the laughter when we imagined my students walking in on us, or the way she threw her face down on the desk, all rag-doll-like, when I first stood next to her? Wind-sprints across the campus quad when I pushed her off-balance at the starting line? Or falling asleep in my pencil strokes?*

Lorne took my job on the fishing boat, and died even before his captain did. He worked with David with the same awed respect that I had. Now this is not his namesake! Asking me for what she termed "recreational sex," and me responding that, at least for me, such a thing was generally not recreational at all, and far too often barely sex.

They used to buy damaged goods at the grocery store—times were hard. "What's that?" he asked, as David picked over the goods in back. "Condemned food," David said, pawing through the re-packed packages heaped out of the way of the foot-traffic. "Well let's condemn our own!" Lorne said (in David's embellished version) and slammed the cart into the flour bin, the ripped bags all re-marked at half the price in the morning. It got worse—near to theft—no, let's call it for what it was—theft, as Lorne re-priced undamaged goods with his pen. Finally asked to leave the store for good. I remember he used to work the wharf when I was fishing, and was stationed there one night to guard against the very thing he seemed to love; he caught the thieves red-handed, trying to drag away the crates of fresh-caught lobsters—100 pounds, 87 lobsters, the calculations of the catch still fresh in my mind after all these years. A gentler man

never walked the earth, but Lorne put the Ruger .44 up to the guy's chest and held it there until the warden and the sheriff came with the handcuffs. His hands never shook, he said, until they closed the cruiser-door on the shit-head who tried to steal what the fishermen worked a half-day for. Then he sat down, almost unable to breathe, just catching himself before fainting dead away.

And he kept at it—working as working people do, and got a skidder to move the wood he cut, all limbed up. But of limited experience in such toys as these, neglecting to use the seat-belt and when it banked at too great an angle, he too was "thrown clear," just as Allen had been, only to be crushed by the unsympathetic machinery as it rolled on top of him. Poor bastard. Death came too late for him. I remember David telling me of Lorne sitting in a coffee shop, eavesdropping on the two women in the next booth, whispering of the woman he styled his life-partner, fucking his neighbor.

**II.**

Bryan, youngest of seven, was born four years after his oldest brother saved my life on the carnival ride. I don't know whether to consider him an adult or just a child when he died, and thus have no idea where to place him in this series. He followed in part his older brothers' footsteps—thinking of art, but lacking the skill they had (had the genes gone bad in the twenty years since Allen's birth?) drugs and alcohol—who doesn't do that as a young man?—then settling his art scores in the restaurant business—plates of food for the celebrated rich and those who could afford to appreciate his cooking skills.

But he could not domesticate those skills, or practice them with no audience, and each day his house or his apartment or his living space got worse. The paper piled up on the floor the food plates piled up on the floor the waste and the dirty clothes piled up on the floor along with the cigarettes and empty beer cans and eventually there was a solid layer of insulation that his eldest brother laughed at when he sneaked in to have a look for himself and shuffled ankle-deep in debris through the living space.

Bryan was finally felled with throat cancer and all the doctors could do for him was make his life more pained than it had been, with the drugs and surgeries taking half his jaw away and recommendations that of course he cut down or curtail his drinking which everyone who has encountered such a dictum knows full well does not one bit of good. ...

> *Carmen was her name. Now I remember. Doctor's daughter too, like so many of them seem to be. Do any of you still think of her? Never grown to adulthood, at least for me, even though she died a mere three years ago. Knocked down by cancer—two months after diagnosis, a girl so lovely sixty years ago I never once could speak to her, but finally sent my condolences to her sister D., whose life is alluded to in my "Ledge" above. I sat behind her, astounded at her poise and grace. Twelve years old I must have been. That grace as much a pose as my own toughness under fire, I'll say. She too was as distraught by being young as the rest of us, but held it in. Lovely Carmen. "Il n'y a plus de temps!" How I miss gazing into her face that one time among a gang of us, the one time I think I spoke more than clichés to her,*

*barely teenagers we were then, I gazed at her and sensed her gazing back at me. ...*

Bryan dragged himself to his sister, who never lost her love for him or faith in him; she asked only that he launder his clothes and shower, even though he barely had the strength to stand, and when she finally got him "home," such as it was, after a weekend visit, she was not quite the same, and he simply continued his slow decline that all but she conceded was inevitable.

He refused cremation he refused hospice he demanded they do all they could to save him or to allow him to continue one more day one more hour one more minute even after death when the agony finally stopped. And they buried him in the back field next to his mother's ashes where nature, I guess, took care of what he would not let the doctors or his family do for him.

I saw him only once, and that was barely months after he was born—his mother lying back on the sofa, raising him both hands above her in unrestrained joy as if he were a first-born, letting the baby fly about her head—her favorite now, the one who, decades later, would not drag himself to her funeral. Her eldest, now just back from the Navy, watched the two of them in happiness. This was the love that had made his own life what it had been. This was what had made all their lives what they had been, and the best part of it was that she would not live to see his funeral as she had had to experience the one for Joel.

Others made no pretense of virtue, like Ray the murderer, like Harold, killed in Vietnam, like those I call the "bad" brothers of L.P. whose deaths brought her guilt and

finally some peace, and gave her now the chance to think of them as nothing more than what they were as kids. There is something to be said for forgetting all the crucial parts. Let's not speak of them. Listen to her voice in this:

> *Well crap, none of us ever went to the dentist, because on a self-sufficient farm there is no cash other than what Dad brought in from his high-school gig. So you just brush like crazy until the enamel comes off or you get old enough to worry about dental care yourself.*
>
> *Except for the time the two eldest played Wallendas with the rope tied to the roofbeams of the barn. And each would stand on the opposing loft, then swing the rope free, and of course if you timed your leap just right from the other side and had a steely grip, you would simply grab the line, mid-air, and swing back to your brother. Only things never go exactly as planned—this is always the way it is in life—and maybe after a single success on the make-shift trapeze, it was time to fuck each other up, so Alan just pretended to release the line in a perfect feint, and his brother, never thinking not to trust him even though all the evidence he had amassed growing up with him advised him otherwise, leapt free from the upper loft, reaching for the line that never came to him, still held by his laughing brother, and down he fell, face first onto the floor-beams, losing his front teeth, and nearly taking those of his brother out when he finally caught him and that was the only trip to the dentist anyone in the family ever got.*

Barry used to bring the drugs up from Florida. Or maybe it was from his brother in Boston—who knows with these Italians?—the one who was shot in the back—let's say it outright—executed, just as in the movies. Doubtless for being the loud-mouthed belligerent his younger brother so admired and was himself. Even at age 21—an adult for God's sake, or as close as he would ever come to being one—Barry had a long and heated call with his mother, asking to borrow the car, needing what he so euphemistically called a "suitcase" left with his brother, even though it was a real one, of course, and she, never trusting him after twenty years of raising him, kept up her objections ("Suitcase? What kind of suitcase? What do you need it for?") until he slammed the phone down and smiled to us, assuring us that all was ok, or at least a "go." I stayed wasted on the stuff he brought back for a year or more. And I'm sure Allen did as well.

He was a bully, even before words like that got popular. I remember lying face-down in the dirt with him laughing over me. I remember the sprints in a gym class, and gaining one step on him, only to have him trip me up on the asphalt, and spending the rest of the day with my pant legs soaked in blood.

It never changed with him, right up until the end, when we all piled on our eulogies about what a "character" he was and had been all his life. Decorum. That's what the critics claim it is. Staying true to one's self, however bad. This is what I wrote as comment to his obit:

> Dear Barry—Just got back from a swim. I thought about you, as I practiced my crawl stroke out past the mooring. I began to laugh and gulped down half the

> bay, damn near drowning in tribute to you. I'm sure you would have gotten a kick out of it had I not splashed my way safely to shore. RIP

Even his sister, whom I had never met or talked to, appreciated my fine ironic wit in this.

Three of them lived on drug money in Florida, students all, I guess, or simply idlers; and when they were raided finally, all three were dragged from the house in handcuffs. Bart tells me of the relief he felt as he was led out, seeing the paper bag of "delivered goods" resting unseen by the cops, or simply ignored by them, right there on the porch—a find that would have gone badly for all of them.

It rained on the day of their trial, or arraignment, or court appearance, he says. Or perhaps a hurricane, if that's what the story requires in order to be believed. The hanging judge stayed home. And the case was closed with their solemn promises: Barry to go to rehab, Bart and Norm to join the military. (And you wonder why the stockades and the brigs were full!) Predictably, Bart could not pass the physical, despite the sports he played in high school, despite the spiral fracture he suffered skiing in Colorado and screaming at the nurses for the Darvon; Barry skipped out on the rehab (who would bother to check?), and poor Norm, the only one who could reasonably plead his innocence, spent four years in the Navy, always accepting the short end of the stick as if that's what life had always dealt to him.

**III.**

Once we were adults, things were different. We had learned to dissemble. But no, not as adults. That can't be right. Barry, Carmen, Bryan, even Eloise—all of them lived

as children; all grew to maturity. I mean those adults who, in my mind, had been born that way, like my grandparents, loved and detested, born old, with the records of their inexistent youth preserved only in the sketchbooks and faded photographs.

Like those I found myself working with, the first to go ... even his name has gone! ... Bob, it was! ... who never finished his first or any book, whose promise alone, that and his degree from Harvard, was enough to win him tenure as it justly never would today. How Larry would have hated him! Class after class he missed, passed out at home, all of us wondering what might be the civil thing to do for a drunk as polite, self-sacrificing, and obedient as himself—my father to a tee, except for the classes that he missed. And then, good citizen as he always was, he spared us the trouble of helping him, dying in office as most of us swore we would do as well, echoing the words of our seniors, never wishing to do it as the young man he had been. ...

*More Tom Brown's Schooldays?* Louis shrieks from oblivion.

*Are we not done with pomp and the wearing of regalia?*
*Was it for this I risked my life in the Solomons?*

... At the memorial, there were the photos from the first year I had met him. All us youthful enthusiasts of the academic life lined up in our roller skates on the bike-path in Santa Monica—twenty years or more earlier. My young colleague stared at the photo in what I'll say was curiosity, but likely more than that. "You know," I said, sidling up to her. "That guy on the end? I can fix you up with him." She turned to me,

not missing a beat. "Him? The young one on the end, with the mustache just like yours? You fix me up with that guy, and we'll talk."

Then there was poor Richard, still stuck in his closet though no one gave three shits about that in the late academy. By then, we "had it down" when it came to memorials, just as Eloise and I had it down with our love-making. Such calculated public grief as we experienced that day ruined death for all of us. The sections of the service timed to the second, the speakers all appointed out and the whole damn spectacle honed to nothingness as we sat there in the varnished pews and the carefully selected music (the *Pie Iesu* of Fauré—that's the piece I myself chose, and to this day, I am ashamed of it) and everything would go smoothly and all the sharing by his well-prepared associates sounded as sincere as spring rain. In another week or two we barely remembered who it was who had stood up so bravely and spoken, always straight from the heart, of course, nor the subtle sub-texts of their eloquence—the once-lovers and admirers who had set this up for him. The tedious tears of the sycophants. Good thing it was not ourselves who had died or tried to get the words right. Nothing we could have done or said could relieve the institutional grief, as it was hardly real in the first place, just an excuse to heap up monuments, like conference rooms with pictures of our once-colleague as a college kid.

And yet still, knowing this, still we would gather, here and elsewhere, even as the tributes wearied us, even when the words of the sharers seemed forced, and we turned away alone, as if rehearsed for an extended run of this. Like for J.D., his body last seen bent on the piano bench; we

gathered on his lawn as we had each June for years, this the last time, unsettled in the spring warmth, deaf to the self-serving tales of the mourners. Or maybe at Anne's while she still recalled who we were or could be trained to pretend to, and we would go over each one of those we knew were gone—finding solace in the mere fact that our classmates and teachers had died before we had, even though they had contributed nothing to our lives since we were teenagers. And within an hour, we had pretty much run through all of them, each one, my mother too, with only an occasional claim that "Oh Winnie, I just saw her the other day, why she is a lovely as she was—like Carmen herself, ageless it seems—was it fifty years ago or more?, and she'll outlive us all," and then no one could remember where she lived, or who it was she had remarried, and only a few could add that the reward for such longevity was watching her own daughters die of cancer, just as John L. heard the news of his son dying in Mexico and wanted only to live long enough to forget it. Or my grandfather, wailing in pain when his youngest died of breast cancer.

Something to be said for the moments of quiet after the sentimentalists stopped their long-winded tributes, inapt and unsettling. Maybe a nod at an associate, acknowledging, adopting one's best tragic pose, that life goes on, life will go on, life has always gone on, never admitting that for these we pay tribute to, life certainly did not.

Ed Spalding

Ed Spalding was a man I barely knew and he may as well stand in for all of them. As a kid, I watched him on the hockey rink, and then I lost track of him as he drifted into

adulthood and ended up a colleague of my mother at the local high school. He and Barry, the one who died a decade ago, and Robbie R., one of the hottest girls in high school, carrying on with her consort in the library carrel, to the snickers of John L and all his associates. Like no one knew! Or Dwayne P., riding his motorcycle to class, the hell with the way things were done in the old days. And Ed, I guess, was part of all that manly group. Fishing for lobsters out of Turbot's Creek in the summer, and finally to marry, as I did, a "horse person," and spending, as I did not, years of mucking out stables on a farm out toward Augusta. I remember sitting with him on his back lot, as our wives talked of horseflesh. It reminded me of the day he drove out to us or to his cottage in Harpswell, hoping to escape the triple-digit temperatures at the farm in Bowdoinham. The unruffled water was black with heat, and we sat back on the porch, laughing at our mis-steps.

And of course Mother fell for him (in the chaste sense), a man thirty years her junior, the way she had fallen for the belligerent Webster, and every now and then, Ed would appear at our doorway for an hour of small talk and beer, and it was he who told me once "Screw it. Every now and then I just look at these kids and instead of *The Mayor of Casterbridge* they get forty minutes on Sartre; and their expressions? they don't change a bit."

I watched the cottage fall to disrepair, and never a sign of him or his father, and one day I saw a couple there, older, as myself, and I asked them about Ed—his last name still proudly fixed on a nameplate just out of reach over the garage bays—and did I mean Jr. or Sr.? they asked, which hardly mattered, since the last of them had died a year ago.

No note in the local paper. No gossip among my neighbors. No stories of him carrying his unconscious wife from the cottage the night the gas leaked and nearly killed both of them.

One year later, when I returned in spring, the garage with the name-board was gone, leaving only the tracks of the bulldozer.

**IV**.

Webster, never-to-be-contradicted in all he did, guides The Islander to the mooring off our house in Harpswell, the last trip he ever took to this peninsula. Double-ender. Once used by the Coast Guard, he brags, not even attempting a façade of modesty. Kept in working shape by Frank W. at the boatyard, even after John was gone. It is all I see of the belligerent bastard, for he becomes in the very act of picking up the mooring ball, not himself, but my friend Lewis and his wife Blair whom I adored through the three years of their marriage and the first year of mine. Motoring down the bay in the old Whaler from their cottage on Mere Point, right next to Webster's, right next to Connie's at the Colony. I spent a night there with Linda Jane before she moved to Florida and found religion, and I miss the ineptitudes of that evening still. Years later, now ordained, having given up a career as a great teacher of young people, Lewis tells me of a white-hot parishioner. His voice breaks in desire as it once did as a college kid. I saw my chance: "Lisa?" I said. "I know her. In fact, I'm dating her younger sister." "Her sister! Her sister! Holy shit!" becoming once again that 20-year-old enthusiast who fell so hard in love with his wife-to-be. When that same emotion finally came to me, he was one of the first

I told of it. "You of all of them," I said. "You would know." And now gone too, I hear, the notice far too late for me to exercise the funereal chants so well practiced about me, leaving his adoring flock in the lurch as they always, unbeknownst to them, had been.

There must be a way of getting the words right: as I did then, or nearly so, to Lewis. As I did once three years ago, to Eloise, a half-decade after she was gone. Yet in these times, times of war and pandemics, times of aging and regret, one feels one's own helplessness in the snow. What did your trimming off that body fat and completing one's life work really do for you? What was the point of perfecting your rhetoric?

One thinks instead of Gene, now safely frozen in the ice. Or the fish, sleeping through winter, as a five-year-old bends down to get a glimpse of them. Or those whose pasts have become other pasts—Annie and J.T., John, or David, long before he died, or Carrie, the life she never led but which is now recorded by her eulogists.

I walked out of my colleague's too-rehearsed memorial gathering and remarked to my associate, with all the cynicism of the truth: "Well I'm sure as hell glad that when I go, I won't have to worry about a packed house of former associates with all their bullshit wailing and sentiment ..." "I'll be there," was all she said.

4.2

ROAD TRIP

What noble person has Dickens sketched, or has any novelist since Scott. ... We are led along solely by the ingenuity of the plot, and a silly desire to see how the affair came out. What must be the effect, long continued, of this class of jugglers working upon the sympathies and the imagination of a nation of gestating women?

—John Burroughs, *Birds and Poets: Before Genius*

**I.**

Five miles to town. I crossed the bridge to pick up Linda Jane on the way to school, proud in my team jacket—all the rage then, more than a half century ago. Girlfriends were

what one had those days. She would be in tears by noon for something I said something I did some gesture I hardly was aware of that distressed or offended her. Something her mom had done that I got blamed for. And maybe Lucy would be out waiting for us or others, and I guess those tears were for what Linda Jane sensed was in my heart for her. Dark eyes. French girl. Cute as a damn button! An Acadian, perhaps. Her forebears moving south in the Great Migration of the 1840s. Walled into the tenements that used to line the river.

Twelve miles, I drove, mad with desire, decades later to my darling Eloise, sitting on her suitcase outside the apartment complex. "It's a sad state when a girl has to bring her own bed," she quips as I pull up next to her. I thought of sailing out of Rockland, Down East, the three days to Roque Island, always alone on those last legs.

Three more days to Los Angeles. Where have I found myself? On the snow-blocked pass in Colorado. One night on the road through the panhandles. Or by train, watching the rain-slicked station in Cleveland at nightfall, 1954 it must have been, the mountains in the west at dawn or riding in the Dome Car, a remnant of the old days when I took the Southern Crescent from New Orleans to Washington in the early 70s, no one aboard but Amtrak employees and those with a "thing" about flying. I remember the delicious sleep on the train in the 50s as a seven-year-old; I remember my struggles to maintain it.

Leaving from home or from Los Angeles, I calculate the miles now past, the miles to come, the roughest of estimates, unable to conceive what the future, meaning only the next week or so, would bring me. That was the first trip, the

second trip, others when the glories of America still were real to me; when the dust from the harvesters still caught the sun rays. Flying today over the grids of the roadways, there seems no mid-West left in the heartland, every square used up in meat-production.

On those high plains of America, I stopped to see my dark-eyed Norwegian girl: she held my hand as I fell asleep next to her, her perfect flesh bronzed by the artificial tan. We took your bike from where you had stored it in Iowa—no license, registration, or insurance. You hated it, you said, the bike, I mean; so I seated you behind me and off we went just like in the movies or a bad script written by schoolchildren. What could happen? Your strong arms grasped my waist. Your face grazes my shoulder. Nothing but 90-degree turns through the 40-acre squares of family farms, your sister's among them. The nobility of work! Listen to the nostalgia for such things today! Does no one know the crushing burden of farm life? The side-jobs to meet expenses? On the day we rode through the hills of Iowa, all I sensed was the brutality of it—the farmers turned to old men by their forties, as you yourself had taught me, the animals merely a stage from feed corn to a dinner plate. Your strong arms still strong about my waist. We stopped in the high reeds by the run-off lake. Even reminding you of this today brings a blush to your cheeks. We stopped at the rest stop and I stroked your chest. It was like meeting Linda Jane on the roadway, or simply writing of it years ago. My hands warmed in her sweatshirt. You could hear the animals cry out in protest through the slats of the truck bed. You could see the farmers beaten down by their work-load. I vowed never to eat meat again.

**II. Alex**

I had left you in Denver or Wyoming, promising again to meet in Montana (who knows how we arranged it in those days before cell-phones?) and I took a side trip to Cody to see Linda Jane for the day, then south to Rifle, the switch-backs past the silver miles at Ouray—a terror for a coastal kid—back to my family in Denver, abandoned by my mother decades ago—and I cannot imagine how I found you again at Glacier, packed with tourists and hippies. We slept out in the open, wasted on the drugs brought us by the Girl Scouts, the stern scout-masters and chaperones warning us against corrupting them.

That was the night I woke up and relieved myself on the growling life-form, hidden in the darkness, and dashed back to the sleeping bag, only to have you ask if I had seen the bear. "Seen? Jesus Christ, I ..." You wondered why I had followed it, you said, with a strange earnestness, having not thought to warn me. Did you imagine I was chasing some drug-dealing innocent? I sent you my condolences when your wife died, years ago it's been, just days before I sailed out of your boat-yard with Linda Jane.

We left the car at Hope, just east of Vancouver, and determined to hitch-hike the thousand miles to Prince Rupert, where the ferry would take us to Alaska—last wilderness in America! what more authenticity could one wish for?—skirting the Al-Can Highway and its attendant myths, about which we had talked for months. I lost you, again I lost you, and teamed up with other stragglers. We commandeered the pick-up—three of us stranded on the roadway as the sun set, insisting the driver take us with him. I remember

sleeping curled up where the passenger's feet should be—three strangers in the truck cab, while the driver slept in the motel, appalled at what we might do to him. I must have agreed to meet you again at the Youth Hostel on the last town on the coast, neither of us imagining that these mythic places of welcome might be intended for wanderers other than ourselves. Following simply the rumors of the hitch-hikers; the rumors of the young travelers, seeking themselves too on the roads through the canyons. Alone again, my car-jacking companions on the way to Calgary. Drunks and hippies, a hopeful salesman, now middle-aged, or perhaps just desperate for company—the only ones who would stop for me—and there was not a single driver who did not share with me or us a case of beer or near hallucinogen. Those hippies in their hippie vans, painted with paisley, oblivious to the stares of the locals.

Wildlife lined the road shoulders. The girls in the pick-up stopped for me, thinking this would one day be something to tell stories of. Too naive for real fear in those days. All three of us, I guess. I lasted a week in Ketchikan, before the hostility and distrust, even from the addicts assuming I was there to sell drugs to them, turned me south again. I took the day-long bus trip back to Vancouver, my back-pack heavy with books from the librarian in Ketchikan, the only local who would speak to me. Pot-boilers and discards, still on my shelves today ...

Where were the revelations? The flashes of insight? The opening up of America? The knowledge of what life was about and how the future would unfold for me? Political astuteness? Contributions to society? The finding of life-partners? Poetry? Art? Not a trace of it.

*He raises the gun muzzle, the deer barely visible against the treeline twenty minutes before the dawn. He has not tested the sights; he has never fired this borrowed gun before. .300 Savage. A rarity. He should lie prone, but merely kneels in the morning frost of November. Gene would have done better, he will live to think. Jeffrey runs to him over the field-frost, to the sound of the gunfire.*

**III. Cavatina: She Who Would Not Wait for Me**

Did I mention my wife to you? I'll never forget the shirt she wore and I have it in my closet still. 2009 it must have been before I found a life like that again. We drove through Los Angeles and she stared out of the window in perfect ease, and I thought, this is the way that bourgeois life could be for us. Never once doubting her faith to me, though I showed none of that to her. Our own infidelities are things that rarely "count," and I knew her well enough, I thought, even to make a joke of this. When she left me, as I must have known she would, as I must have sensed when she forgave me, not for my mis-steps but for her own, that was the worst pain I had ever experienced. The pain of knowing I would never feel such pain again. Or so I thought. What privilege to think this, the prophets of today might say. And that was only months before Eloise blew her face away, and that was before ... that was before ...

**IV. Border Crossing**

In the deep south in Baton Rouge, mid-point on our divergent ways, we gather at the coffee table, a punchbowl of

glogg, it was—two bottles of port and sherry and a fifth of brandy—spiced up and flaming before us. Kids that we were, educated to boot, we opened our Shakespeare, determining, after some debate, to read "every other line" for efficiency, unaware how laudably post-modern that might be, delivering our Oulipo-esque poetry—like the turns Louis' own verse took when the words and verbs began to fail him—thinking this would be as seamless as the fiction of mid-century. We split roles or assumed them or passed them off to others. And when the thunder rose, we opened the lid of the punchbowl and lit the fumes. Returning the play to life, real life, without the "stuffing," as John used to say of narratives. Missing the love-throes and regicides. And as the kings died and the murderers collapsed in grief and guilt, the dropped lines hardly in our consciousness, none of us could say with certainty whether the play we made was our own or just a version of the one drilled into us from high school, our faces blurred in the fumes of the alcohol. The spices filling our nostrils.

And I guess R., who had sent us all here in routes so circuitous it is pointless to reproduce them now—I guess he had a thing for Shakespeare, or at least claimed as much. Grey-suited when all of us were in paisley bandanas and work-shirts, pathological liar just like Gene was, closeted as so many of my generation, living his several roles without shame or apology, standing in the doorway to my dorm room, his sleeves still creased: "Give me your neaf, Monsieur Mustardseed!" he cried out to me, both of us bent by the drugs or alcohol.

It was two years since I had flown to Chicago, two years to the play-reading—from Denver, was it? or from the

wedding, and the two of us drove the gaudy Chrysler back to the East Coast; all night we drove and he never once so much as adjusted his bow-tie, even as the agents at the border rifled through our luggage. For years, driving coast-to-coast, I kept a Windsor tied as a tribute.

We met in Chicago, years later now it was, his young lover rescued from turning tricks in those few bars that after weeks of his shenanigans would still let him in. Mickey. Smart kid, I thought. Good thing he got cleaned up, and maybe just in time before AIDS crushed that society and maybe he still lives today. You would think then, as I did, "the jig was up," "the beans all spilled," and we could finally drop the masks for a moment and speak whatever truth we had in us. But the masks then were part of life—the personae founding all we knew and did. It was best just to let the whole thing go, leave the whole scrim lit, pretend as we always did that nothing of consequence had happened or been revealed to us. One day, one of us, or two, will read the obituary and shake our heads, hoping to feel the sadness we suspected even then we never would.

**V. The Girl from Brittany**

I stepped off the washrail onto the wharf in Camden, Charlie and Nancy on their way Down East after sailing up from John's Bay. I brought Linda Jane there to see the schooners; sullen and unloved, she was, but you could feel the heat of her when she walked when she stripped off her shirt when she sat next to you when she glared at you for not adoring her: "Ha. You couldn't take it," she said. "But you satisfied your curiosity." She shakes her head, suddenly

giving in. “All that talking dirty,” she says with desire and with contempt ...

A French girl from Brittany. Only in the end did her family come to America. The best there ever was; there’s no denying it. Professional quality, I called it, and to understand what I mean by that, you need to pause here and take a breath. Like the icey breath she herself would take, coldly virtuosic, let us say. Sullen and unloved still, even when she flew back from Paris after leaving me, she claimed, for good. She pushes me away, insults even my desire for her, and I am left wondering what her plan might be in all this, or whether she just wished to prove there was no chance for us. All those missed flights back to Paris until she finally boarded when I drove her to the airport. The phone would ring daily hourly late at night in those days whenever I returned home and when I answered all I could hear was her breathing. Thirty years later, I shake my head in scorn at my propriety. Once again, my own self got the best of me. She stands in the doorway and pulls her shoulders back for me, smiling as she pulls her shoulders back for me. What was I thinking?

She sits on the bow of Charlie’s Hampton, her legs straddling the bow and her hands grasping the keel stem. All of us share a smile at that. Her back is turned. She walks across my lawn and pulls her shirt off as a true European might, scandalizing the family. She lies next to me, stands next to me in the shower, leans into me on the lawn in Camden, shows off the tee-shirt she bought at the tourist shop: “What am I supposed to do with *that*?” she says, glancing to my waist with as much resentment as she has.

The tourists mingle on the lawn in Camden, now littered with memorials, and falling away from the gift shops and galleries. Nothing left of the old town I remember from childhood. Nothing left of authenticity, whatever that might have been—a myth of the way life was at mid-century—the Indians all slaughtered and locked up in reservations; the blacks confined to Pullman cars; women in their housedresses and the local French still working in shoe-factories. It is difficult to remember the delusions that made that possible—perhaps the grim silences of the men who had come back from war remembering only the men who had not come back from war and refusing to speak of it. Convinced they had done the right thing as I had done, pushing the unloved French girl away; certain that the millions burned to death in the theatres of war were somehow worth the legacy that was now there for them and their children.

We never read our history books. I believe our class once got to the slave states. All those teachers who had experienced war—they did not want to relive it by recounting it—not to the kids whose families may have been scattered or lost. Better to talk simply of the days they themselves had never experienced. The days before the Depression or the soldiers dying in the trenches. The ankle-deep mud and the bodies on both sides. Bringing the fatal flu back to America for millions more to die without purpose. What did you expect from them? What did you expect from us?

Bob gazes out over the Pacific from the cliffside of Del Mar. My cousin, his daughter, beside him. It is like the sea surface he tells of, flying out of Midway. The sea embracing the warships. The story he has told and still can tell is of flying out to escort the submarines back to their home base.

Child's play in the days of modern navigation. More challenging when flying out by compass, calculating the windspeed from the sea-state. Finding the periscope in the featureless sea (so he tells it), and circling back, guiding the boat to the harbor unseen by the bridge-watch.

"Oh yes," he will say, as if he has forgotten this. "Oh right. You bet." The stories then come back to him, almost word-for-word the way he told them years ago. Even throwing the cases of whiskey from the cargo plane when the fuel gauge read Empty, or seeing his friend staked to the ground on the enemy airstrip, or caught in the death spiral as the gunner fixed his sights on him.

"A great time to be young," he always insisted, "terrible though it seems to say that." Adding that there was no fear in any of them, each one certain they would never survive it. Never imagining the future would be closed off to him as it finally is today.

**VI. High Plains**

When we drove out of Kansas at midnight, we pulled off the sideroad from the highway and slept there like kids—maybe sprawled out over the backpacks in the back or perhaps just slumped in the passenger seat, waking with the smell of the dry dust from the upturned soil in June. It was here the kid I knew from grammar school commandeered the stranger's car, and cut his throat on a back road in the Colorado mountains—near a stream my grandfather fished out as an immigrant. I'm sure you saw it all on television. I'm sure you read the write-up in the local paper too, when the killer returned to his hometown from custody—all of us fearful we might be next. Those were the days, I

guess, when you could clear yourself of murder charges simply by showing where the bodies were. It was here we were pulled over by the troopers, and my hippie friend, barefoot and bearded, ran over to the patrol car, all respect and deference, and all they said to him was that they had seen a carload of kids just like ourselves the week before, speeding as we had been, all of them dead in the wreckage. Letting us go with a warning, wanting us to live until daybreak. Do that today, I guess, jog up in civility to the troopers, and you'd be shot dead by some skinhead degenerate. 1968. The hippie vans swerving to stop for hitchhikers. We could have gone to Chicago for the convention, police riots, you remember, or made plans for Woodstock.

We had come from the mountain lakes in the Wind Rivers in Wyoming, and I still dream, I mean the dreams we dream in sleep, still dream of the field where we left the unmolested car, bush-whacking through to the main trail, working up the elevations on the topographic map. I still dream of the trail past the beaver ponds, up the ridge-line.

We headed north from New Orleans, Al and I, driving at 50mph long before it became fashionable in the late 70s. We used to sing the folk songs with Linda Jane, her Arkansas voice breaking in the twang of the country tunes. We passed two cars on the entire way from New Orleans, and neither of them with Al at the wheel, obeying my dictates, barely pushing the car to cruising speed. He sat in the front seat, as Elizabeth's friend drove the four of us through Philadelphia. Past the public sculpture on the parkways. Or was it another Betty speeding down Magazine in New Orleans with all of us, straight down the middle lane with not a thought of pedestrians? It was how she wished to make her mark, I guess,

if only in a police report. And I remember her once throwing a fit at him, stepping out at the stop light and hitchhiking the rest of the way to Gentilly. Linda Jane or my wife fondling me in the back seat as the drama surrounded us.

Dozens of times I had done this, driving south, from the mid-west, or coast to coast. And when "I had it down," to use the very terms that Eloise once used, I stopped, imagining that I had mastered it, or simply that I had nothing more to learn from it. And I guess that was the point Eloise herself was trying to make to me. I mis-construed all that as well.

This was the year I drove to Joan in Manhattan. This was the year I drove back from Wyoming. This was the year we stopped in Camden and Elizabeth violated me in the guest room while her husband went to work like a good American. This was the year I compared notes with the other job-seeker in the motel near the run-off lake in Iowa.

...

I stopped in to my Norwegian girl in the high plains and she showed off her perfect flesh, bronzed in the tanning salon in Minneapolis—just for me, I thought. Too late, I thought. I met Linda Jane, or one year, just her empty apartment in Oklahoma where we had spent so many days laughing at her neighbors, speculating on the soundscape through the sheetrock.

**VII. Polonaise**

When we reached tree-line, I had had enough. No rock scrambling or carabiners for me—"Piton-janglers" my would-be mountaineering friends spat in contempt at the over-equipped hikers passing us, heading up the Tetons. I stayed on the rock-face, staring at the mountain peaks. The

storms and even the sun-rays rolled up the valley. When we reached the tree-line in the San Gabriels, my Eastern European girl and I, an hour behind schedule a quarter-mile from the summit, I again had had enough, the wind gusting to the 40s. There is no way I will risk my life on the rock-face, the way the yuppie mountaineers died on Everest. For ten full minutes we argued, huddled in the hollow carved out by last year's ice.

> *Did I not come here once with Linda Jane, carrying you as a new-born, back-packed in by one of the four of us? I will never forget you on my shoulders, pulling what hair I still had out by the roots. When I last talked to you, in the year of the pandemic, you worried that life might never be the same again. But life, I told you, drawing on my decades of experience, is never the same as it was. The dust was thick on the trailway. We drove south to the Wind Rivers and fished in the mountain lakes.*

We drove to Death Valley, maybe just to say we had done it rather than experience it. Twenty miles across the caked clay to the mountains in the west and she was certain we could hike it, or just baiting me. We sat in the hot springs and I could feel my flesh rebel against the heat. Hardly a living thing in sight or experience. 135 degrees it gets in the hot season, we were told, with no small pride. That's what the tourists come for in summer. Here in the off-season, no one but survivalists and alien abductees around us, I quipped, realizing even as I made the joke that this was true.

Amy opens the atlas: Nevada and New Hampshire, only a page crease between them. "Well why not go *this* way," she says, tracing the route across the open page. A woman, so much loved by me, so sparing of her wit. I still stare at the open page of the atlas, where her words are still fixed, uncertain why this plan could not come to be. I still stare at her photos, scattered through the cabinets of my summerhome, wondering why other plans could never come to be.

**VIII. The Armistice**

The old Ford stops by the shoulder. Early 50s, I think, black, the edges rounded—nothing fancy or extravagant; nothing like the chrome and fins of the late mid-century. The black Chrysler we passed through customs, or the convertible Cynthia once drove up from Florida.

"Ride?" With a half-smile. Hinting at irony.

I am walking, or I am on the road simply for the exercise. Or maybe trying to make the hill on the single-speed bicycle. Thinking of jogging or driving this very stretch of road years ago and seeing Linda Jane in her sweatpants, assuming the hitch-hiker's pose as I passed her, stopping for her and pulling her into the passenger seat, her sweatshirt damp with sweat ...

"Are you ...?"

He shrugs. "Sure," he answers, but I do not know what he affirms with that. John W., Frank's son, he seems to be. In his white tee-shirt. Plain. The way we wore them in the fifties. The way you see them in the nostalgic version of that period in the Stephen King film. Crew-cuts. The front slicked up by "Butch-wax," as it was called then. Twenty-years old or more, he must be, although he has not changed since the

day I first met him as a ten-year-old. Must be the way all my friends maintain their youth, or what they had of it the first time I laid eyes on them. Much the way my own face appears in the mirror—so unlike the aging photographs I see of me today.

When I stand by the car door, I am met by the bloom of the old scent—the smell of him I have never forgotten, nor experienced since months before he died. The way the air fell on you when you opened the door to the room his parents had built for him; to the tree house, to the make-shift cabin overlooking the bay, built from scrap by the teenagers. What could be greater than that, we thought, before the scrap ran out, before he left us all to find his fortune building A-frames at Sugarloaf?

"Town? I'm off to Portland." Or Boston. New York or Los Angeles ...

You think of the college kids who would stop for you as a high school kid, with your embarrassing team jacket with the school colors banded on the sleeves. You had no idea you were a mere spectacle to them. They turn to you and offer you a cigarette. You nod, emotionless. This is the way life would one day be for you, you think. Tough. Respected and reticent. Unmoved by kindnesses. You would not need to speak; you would always get the words right, just as they did on tv. This was what they told of in the movies—why the bodies piled up on Normandy, to be buried there in the tank treads. The triumphant parades of Americans. The grateful masses from away.

Summer. We used to wander the woods and they would tease me for not having the strength or agility to climb the saplings. John had a way of walking, almost flailing

his arms as he did so. None of the grace I would work so hard to develop in myself. None of the arc of the tennis strokes of my father; my uncle casting flies to drop on the swirl by the far bank; the strong strokes of the swimmers; the pond skaters with their perfect cross-overs. Just the smell of him and the bluster of the teenager.

"California," he says, pushing the door open for me. I hesitate, then consent to this. He guides the old Ford, with the engine he and his father had installed—remember that?—back onto the roadway. You can smell the exhaust through the floorboards through the heater through the back-draft from the windows.

"We'll be back by October," he says. "Or maybe we'll just live there—off the land like the Eskimos. Remember telling me one winter how cool it would be to live in the snow like that, and I rebuked you 'Who wants to be a dirty Eskimo?' And how you shuddered at getting the words wrong once again? But what did you know then of life!

"So much comes back to me. Remember the duck-blind we crouched in that day—a Thursday, it was, and you even cut practice to be with me, ensuring some kind of penalty by the coaches. You would have time in the future to make up for it, you thought, and as things turned, you did. The mallard, or goldeneye it was, dropped to the decoys and just as its wings spread fixed for the landing I brought the Browning muzzle up, impossible to miss at that range. You pot-sluiced one with permission and that may have been the best day we ever had together, like the time we walked out in the late fall, ha! Looking for the shelf mushrooms, and you spent the entire school-week, so you say, longing for the day we could do that once again.

"Forget the day you found me slumped in the passenger seat while my Dad talked to Nate like the adults they were, ignoring all that turned out to be so critical in life.

"Forget the morning I took the well-oiled Browning out from the gun case, quietly latching the glass door behind it, and absurdly wondered whether the bird-shot I had in the cartridge box would be enough.

"So tell me—time for you to speak—how did life then go for you? Did you forget the way things were before I left? Did you forget the way things were before you left as well? And there you were, out with the college kids, trying to find your way and doing no better at it than I had done myself. No one to regulate your food or alcohol, or laugh at you, calling you those pet names we had for you. Kids' names you outgrew, acquiring other ones from college, and never sensing the contempt the preppy college boys had for you.

"You could have come to the ski resort with me. Not for my sake, of course; I don't need help from teenagers, but I might have helped you through those first two years or so. The nights you spent rolling in your vomit or embarrassing even those few stalwarts who tried to be friends with you.

"Remember when I showed you how to smoke the woodchucks out who dug their burrows next to your garden? There, where Nate was dropped by bee-stings and nearly died on you? Or trying to float the home-made raft from shore, forgetting to remind you what should have been obvious, that is, to stand with your weight in the center, not on the edge, no different from a canoe or a row-boat, for Crise sake, you should have mastered it, even at that age. How would you ever grow to be the sailor you became without some sense of that? I taught you that as well, you

remember, diving off the home-built board boat, forcing you to sail back to the launch ramp.

"Do you remember sitting on the bench seat of the old Ford with me? The one with the engine my dad Frank and I bolted in together? Off to Portland or the great plains of America? My elbow out the window? Baking in the sun—so rare in Maine, even on the best of seasons? You beside me, leaning back on the door handle, looking to me in astonishment as if I had no business being here at all? On our way to town, to Boston or Los Angeles. Off to live with the Eskimos. Of course you remember ...

"You smoke? Yet? Or did you quit? Forty years ago, you say; that was when your own dad died of lung cancer. A bad habit. Never got into that, except when I came back and let Nate offer one to me. Just some drugs up by Sugarloaf, but let's not talk of that.

"Just some girl, and I guess by now you know how that all is without me telling you. But let's not talk of that as well.

"Full speed I ran. Surely you remember! Breaking free for a deep ball with the field undefended before me. It must have been your brother who threw the long spiraled pass, leading me perfectly to run under it in full stride like a gazelle over the plains of the Serengeti. I kept my back turned to all of you. I put both arms out, now ten feet clear of everyone, and I hauled the ball in just as you see them do it on tv.

"A year later, and all of you still talked of it."