# COURSE CORRECTION

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# LOVE SONGS FROM THE LATE ACADEMY

by

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Although written as if a memoir, this book is fiction, and resemblances to living persons and events are coincidental; any exceptions (e.g., Ch. 3.1) are noted in footnotes.


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CONTENTS

SKETCHBOOK

*... I gave my books away, leaving the sterile institution space I cannot allude to without embarrassment. The*

> *slick hallways of the slick-skinned adolescents, clutching their partners and cell-phones. I have run my course, I thought, drifting in currents or currencies; I have foundered even on the ocean calm ...*

Not bad, he thinks; a bit out-worn or over-blown, perhaps, Wolfian, that is (Tom, the elder one I mean). Hard to justify that "current" pun as assonance ... "I'll go on."

> *I barely knew my students or compatriots, never learned who they were or what they thought or how much their accomplishments, sported on their resumes, had meant to them or me. I rarely hobnobbed with my betters in the solemn lobbies of convention halls, or had them pour a glass of wine for me, whisper <u>sotto voce</u> the secret specials of a menu, or lean against the railing of the balcony, drawing deep from their pipes or cigarettes or their wealths of experience, to perorate on city lights and history ...*

Or perhaps there was no telling call at 3am at all, he thinks; perhaps I slept right through it. Perhaps there was no rendezvous in Emporia, no sordid *entre-nous* as told in the committee room ...

> *From the plains of the Dakotas, far from the sailing grounds of Maine, I called Linda Jane in Arkansas or Colorado or wherever she had moved and said let's meet in New Orleans where we once lived, a grand locale for both, and I'll see you at the Café du Monde, since Morning Call where we used to dine on beignets left by the tourists has moved to Metairie and the old city we thought we knew will soon be painted over for the families from Peoria, and it will be at noon and I'll be at the Hotel Toulouse where you used to be able to*

*stay for $7 a week with the hippie kids battling their rashes you know the place and I sat in the Café du Monde for a half hour until a young blond wisp of a thing sat down for coffee and I wondered ... Can memory do this? Can that be her? Was the loveliness of Linda Jane just in my mind, projected onto this most ordinary of girls? And finally after an hour I summoned the courage to walk up to her and ask as stupidly and inoffensively as possible, "I'm sorry, but you aren't waiting for me by any chance, are you?" which now I realize is an ingenious line, drenched in irony, but her? no one ever played this game with her before, so she simply answered "No" in the same naïve register as the questioner ...*

"You're incorrigible," she says, the Artist Dominatrix, glancing up to the model, her pencil still forming backgrounds on the sketchpad. "Is that the right word? You ask for a critique then go your own way without listening. No shading I suggest or contour line is of the slightest use to you. You remember the last time we were here? You reshaped that sad poser as your Eloise: 'La Nouvelle Heloise', you entitled it, though what and who you drew had nothing to do with 'The Love of Your Life', as you call her, long dead, nor with ... Rousseau, was it? You told us, but nothing stuck much due to the haze of alcohol and drugs.

*So I left for the Napoleon Café where I listened to Benny Goodman's Mozart on the phonograph then ambled back to the Hotel Toulouse with my best New Orleans shuffle and a copy of Aulus Gellius, <u>Attic Nights</u> I think it was—who reads that a block from Decatur?—and two hours later half through a third-hand anecdote*

> *I heard a knock at the door which did not have a lock because it had been ripped off a week earlier by the pimp of one of the hookers I saw in the hallway and instead was merely a hasp and she, that is to say, the real Linda Jane, stood there, now six hours late, but keeping her appointment "Who can say as much?" as Beckett says, and she was the most astonishing beauty I can tell you without a trace of irony that had ever graced that hotel, and we did indeed relive the dissatisfaction that we had experienced five or maybe ten years earlier when both of us had determined that ... when both of us ...*

"Another anecdotal opening thefted from the New Historians," she scoffs. "New Orleans! What kind of setting is that for a rakish sailor like yourself? All the carpet-bagging Northerners who spend a year or two in that bug-infested place, in the miasmas of the Jax Beer brewery, even they concede 'Oh, you should have been here ten years ago' before ... before... Then go on to something else, just as you will likely do."

> *Or is the theme I seek meeting Linda Jane for the last time in San Francisco, years before my Eloise became my life—that too—or the hotel in Los Angeles ("like a Hollywood mock-up of a major American city," my colleague quipped)—or was that the same trip? an interlude?—What did we scholars get from that? more evidence of our social ineptitudes.*
>
> *The sad truth of things will finally come to all of us, I thought, even in those days: no one was or ever has been taught a thing. There. I've said it. And there is nothing we can do to change this Menoic state of*

*things, our protests to the contrary mere signs of concurrence, as Freud was said to say, according to what passed for reason once in the Academy. And nothing we professionals of speech learned either, doomed to each other in all senses.*

"Remember what you said when I handed you my draft in the restaurant on Sunset? 'Read it aloud', you said to me. 'Don't leave language locked in the typescript'. And when I did (that plangent descant of the poetess!) you snatched the text away and read it yourself to me, my text, your text, catching all the rhythms and repetitions even I had yet to sense or experience. 'Like that', you said, adding then in scorn: "Love or the mis-steps of childhood—who hasn't heard of all of that before? You don't write poetry for the sense or sight of it. You don't go to concerts for the printed score.' ..."

*And she lay there in that well-attended space,*
*Both of us in tears,*
*And we determined ...*

" 'An hour!' you cried out, in professorial rage purely theatrical, inspired by what your own father used to do, slamming his fist down onto the desktop. 'Just listen for an hour', you said, 'without reasoning. Listen as you would to a symphony, understanding nothing but and in the swell and cross-winds of motifs'*..."*

The pencil lead is dulled by the surface grain. The soles by the bait-slick deck of the fishing boat. The chalkboard clean. The arsonned rafters smoke in the cellar hole, workers worked to old men by their fifties, their stalwart farmwives beating the children, themselves nearly dead from the grip of the water in winter, seeking the life forms in the

ice. The boat stalls expertly at the mooring as the sailors nod in approval. All framed in the cadred gaze of the painters: the glories of the waterway, the high plains in spring, the oppressive mist from the river. The life-blood from my darling Eloise, washed into the desert bloom ...

"It's like you said of the cameras in the classroom. What fun to subvert surveillance and their fearful narratives by falling down in unison before the security stations, monitoring our backsides in the lobby. What theatre! you said. And then all those school shootings of the real world—they came along and ruined everything.

*... Napoleon Café ...*
*Or San Francisco ...*
*It was there that we determined ...*
*Both of us in tears ...*

"You drove us to the AA meeting in West Hollywood," she says, "ogling my friend, whose hands still shook from sobriety and a beating by her husband, then parked in the lot at Ralph's free because I once flashed the attendant and he never got over it. All that spiritual pomp from the pot-heads and musicians, once drugged-out as we all had been. Sharing, it was called, to those who didn't listen and in the end didn't give a flying fuck about you. Falling half-asleep on your arm, you, my self-fashioning seatmate.

"So we dozed in the rhythmic drones of the AA confessional, and it was an hour before you realized the odious alarm was a timer timing them, tidying things up, as it were, leaving time for everyone to have their say in its allotted time and its expected form. Each fearful and piteous tale with requisite beginning, middle, end, just as we all learned

in the bad analyses of the bad professors, Aristotelians all, of film or poetry.

"Like the illusions of A., still loved out of rehab, you said, goaded by piety to decry the family she had loved, awash in alcohol (there is no other way to express it), another Love of Your Life, you called her, cut down to a drunkard," you innocent of the whole thing until her room-mate picked her up from the apartment floor and dragged her off to bed out of sight of the curious son, then spilled the beans to you.

"Or your own Dad's 'Brush with Death', the text now lost in a family move, you say—what a joke that composition was! The form of the confession with not one allusion to the sin. You'd think a night of convulsions, nearly dead from the detox, would have cured him of duplicity.

"And all your heart-felt tales as well. Of those you loved and cried for, beating the unfeeling earth when they renounced you or simply when they left.

"No one cares for self-styled narratives. Things have changed," she says. "Even in the sex industry, now run by what I call 'Pimps in Friday-Casual'. They take withholding for the IRS. Don't look askance at me. Why should I risk the dangers of free-lancing? Let the bosses own the equipment, the means of production, you would say, just as they do in your profession. The outlandish costumes. The whips and chains. The storylines themselves. At least they stay attentive to your cries if the battery goes south on you.

"Remember the young physicist who teased or taunted you with epic promiscuity, as she knocked down the Scotch with your collaborator—the only aspect of your drinking days you miss, you claim? Remember my classmates? Studying their texts and each other while you labored through

the sonnets' old conceits? You pretended not to care where life would lead, while we, twenty years your junior, thought of nothing else.

"Interchangeable we were, or most of us, you said, standing accused in the dock as Linda Jane denounced you, half in earnest, for your shameless flirtations with Carolyn, professor's daughter too! Good luck with that! They dragged their sorority-sorry asses to the class and never once made a name for themselves or an impression on you, except perhaps Morgan, or whatever she called herself, front row left, who graced us with a boob stretch five minutes late each day.

"Now me. Of course you liked me," she says, eyes fixed on the model's pose, constructing an apocalyptical frame on the periphery. "I stood out, even in the back next to Jessica, her dorm room ankle-deep in camisoles, you said. I was completely wasted on drugs, and you never once saw me sober until today. Remember how I won you when you asked, cynic that you are, 'What has poetry to do with truth?' and I answered flanked by the appalled faces of my classmates: 'Truth? Screw that. I don't need my boyfriend telling me what a fat ass I have'. That was the day when R., bald from the chemo, sat before you and displayed for you without the slightest hint of self-consciousness the scars on her shoulders down to where they broke her ribs to get at the tumor: 'I want the doctors to see what we're trying to save here', she said, adjusting her sweater. "

*And we determined …*
*There, in the cheap hotel in New Orleans,*
*In the cheap hotel in San Francisco,*
*there we determined …*

*And we said ...*

"So who is it that moved you or moves you still? The ones you cried for when they shocked you from the stupor of your life or simply when they left? The one, say, who charmed your family with her loveliness. Why not shed your tears for others just for her? Or C., mourned in the dark *sous-sol* in Montparnasse? Even your colleague, five years your senior, a 'bottle red-head', so she said, far more famous than you would ever be, rejected you, her hair gone silver-grey, because you could not spare her more than a lunch date on that last trip to Manhattan—New York, I mean, not the Manhattan of your awaiting Joan—and never spoke to you since. Guilt. Passion. Civility or pure malevolence—it is all the same to you when it comes to love.

"It hasn't been and won't be me, your pole-dancing Dominatrix. 'Don't even think that we are dating!' I warned you, over dosa at Paru's, it was, then you dropped me off at 10pm discovering that in Hollywood, this was the beginning of the night for us.

"Not Rose the 'exotic dancer', as she too styled herself. A hooker, you imagined. Best that ever could have been, you thought, although you never knew for sure.

"Not that office-mate from Brittany, indeed the best! Though crazed like all of them, and left to live out her life and love somewhere in the provinces of France. 'Sagging breasts!' she cried out thirty years ago in annoyance, expecting you to have the wherewithal to deny it. Imagine what she thinks of you today! She left you a cup from her homeland; you hid it where your tenants wouldn't find it, after the 'Witch P.', as you call her, so loved once, also gone,

broke the bowl you thought your darling Eloise had fired for you.

"Nor A.R., alas, brilliant and let's just call it bountiful, who leaned into your arms on the beach, saying 'This is the worst idea!' and you paused only long enough to laugh. 'I'm out of practice', you said to her, having dragged her, arm-in-arm, back to your apartment. 'What's the best way to seduce a girl of your generation?' And she shot back, expertly for her age, 'The first thing you must do is move her shirtless flesh from the window open to the street'.

"Nor the dark French girl from Haiti, with her perfect chest so admired by you and your colleague novelist. 'Two great intellectuals like yourselves', she said, misjudging both of you, shaking her head on hearing this. 'We thought with you it was all philosophy!' Her last throaty words to you: 'Get your hands off my ass, old man!' and you and she and all who heard her say it laughed over the coffee.

"And what of *dein irisch Kind*, now lawyered up in Connecticut? What would the ten years' difference in your ages mean to you today? 'Bridget Elizabeth!' you chastised her in irous parody, as if a child coaxing shoats into the feeding pen. Even Wade bore witness to her love for you.

"Or that art professor in Baton Rouge, doomed to untenured life, who kept you up all night the night before Mardi Gras, trying to have his way with you, inept as a seducer as you yourself, or his chess-playing friend from Chicago.

"Or D., afficionado of song, with whom you bet in despair 'who will find a love-mate first?' knowing the whole purpose was to tie. Or the man now living by his son in Rockland, he who once lay next to you and your sad consort on Matinicus.

"Nothing much to say of them for you. Hardly a word or allusion. They left as did the rest. Like She Who Would Not Wait for You, you called her once. All that weaving and unweaving finally getting the best of that one too, I guess. And she too said she would meet you in the Convention Hall in Los Angeles, not to end things in tears, as Linda Jane had done, but worse—'We can sit together', she said, preening and wanting to be seen with you, self-styled Straight-shooter of Academic Song, as if nothing of consequence had happened between you. Worse than the Woman of Today, nothing to you now, or so you say, who refused your hand in public fearful of the gossipmongers near her summer-home.

"And what of your darling Eloise? Her dance steps in Manhattan. Movies of the Danes, shot in New Mexico. Love of Your Life indeed! What bullshit from a man of your distinction. You can't even name her properly but filch that name she got from the children's book. And where are the others, you navel-gazing insatiate? Your young wife, upending all that life had been for you, meeting you by chance on the roadway two years ago and calling you by that name only she can use? Did she return just once to you, for a fling, say, in the hallways of your summer-home? Even Linda Jane will not return your calls or messages. And what about your loyal friends? Those who have stood by you through years of your insidious chicanery? Hardly a trace of them that I can see or sense, beyond, that is, your wailing and throwing ashes on your head.

"You remember what my classmate said, taunting you though hardly knowing it: 'My summer work-mate! What a

jerk', she said, 'hitting on me constantly. What could he *possibly* see in me?' she scoffed. 'My God he's almost ancient as my dad!' And you, dropping your voice that half-octave you say you do when you speak with me or with women lovely as that one, 'And how old would that be? your father I mean?' Ha! Five years younger than yourself! And you sat there in peculiar and unexpected glee, no pain and no regret, knowing rather you would one day get to tell of this and all your hearers would stand up like the imagined critics in Camus' *Plague*, I think it is, 'Hats off!' they would shout, hearing of the knight betaking himself to the river.

"There is simply nothing we can do, no tales we can concoct for you," she adds in kindness and in scorn. "For if the very love for you, grudgingly once felt by the Woman of Today, despite her elevated class, the tightness of her 'circle', as she said, despite her drunken rants on the telephone, if that was not enough ... if your Linda Jane, finding her own self in you, or faithful thirty years or more, if that was not enough ... if the day Eloise lay down in the aisle of the theatre and you held her hand and head, years before she blew her face away ... if that was not enough ... if the day S. listened to your self-pitying tears and booked the next plane to Los Angeles... if all that ... if even that ..."

Her voice trails off. She checks the time, the audition set with precision: 12:05 on her schedule. She too, pole-dancer Dominatrix, she too has little time for you, her life consumed by rent collectors, laundry bills, and staff meetings. The stone-deaf timer of the formulaic tales. The model's shifting weight in the high regard of would-be artists in the studio. The hipster pimps in their black suits.

# PART ONE:

# DRAFTS OF THE INAMORATO

## 1.1 THE LEDGE (2018)[1]

Negotium magnum est navigare ...
—Cicero, *Ep. Att.* 5.12

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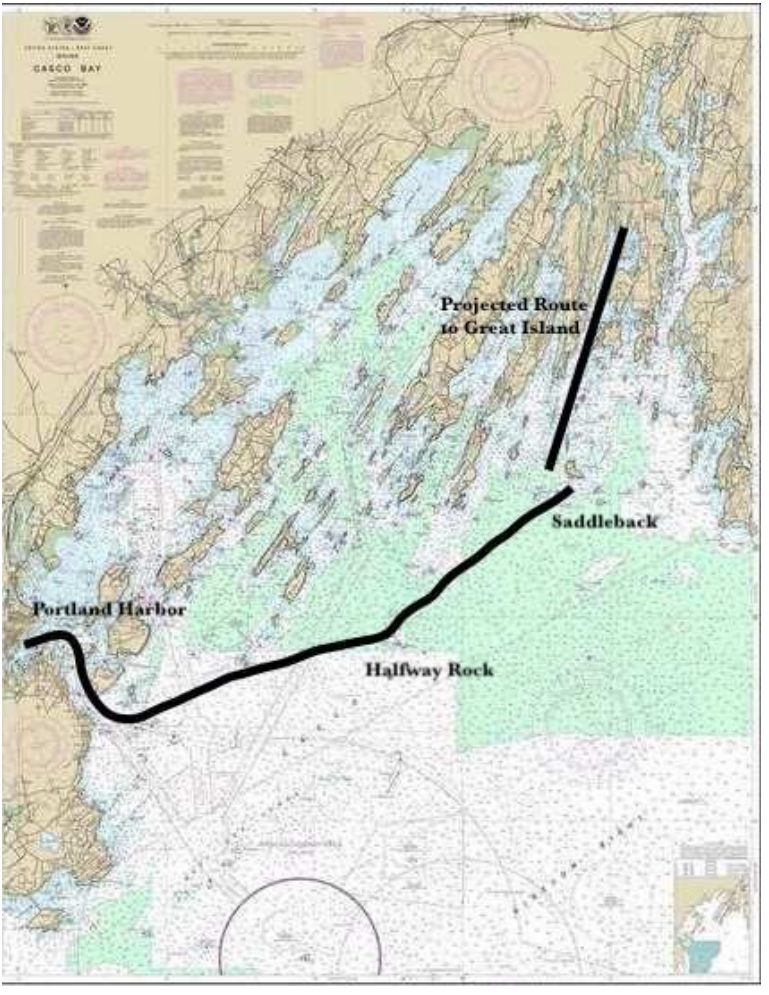
[1] Lawrence Sargent Hall graduated from Bowdoin College in 1936 and taught there (as did other graduates, including my father) from the mid-40s until his retirement in 1982. In 1960, his story "The Ledge" won him both promotion and the O. Henry Memorial Award (whatever that is) for short fiction; it was given a stately reading on the local FM station (one I still remember), and critiqued in the community even past his death in 1993, although few other than his former students and colleagues speak of him today. His prize-winning story tells of the death of a local fisherman and his son while duck-hunting on West Brown Cow Ledge in Harpswell. Carefully crafted, eminently teachable, it is a perfect example of and for the aesthetics of high modernist short fiction, each single stitch in place. The ledge in my tale, composed a half-century later under different aesthetics, lies two miles to the east.

**I. Fog in Portland Harbor (June 1967)**

There was nothing unusual about the fog that day, nothing to suggest that this, for the two of them, pillars of the community they and others had considered them, would be the last day. To a young man working his first summer on a lobster boat, it seemed that the "pea-soup fog" (as he had so often heard it described) must be a normal thing. Just as violent storms of winter are normal on the poles, where he had never been, or perhaps the stagnant seas of the equator. He had no grounds for comparison, and how would he, a mere kid, who didn't know shit from Shinola, as Mother used to say, or one end of a woman from another, as Sterne puts it, how would he know that in years to come he would be bragging about "three clear days in July" or about the time he sat on the transom of the fishing boat, wondering whether it could be true that "he could not see the bow from the stern in the fog." He still remembers the hazed-out bow as factual, but is no longer certain whether this memory is real, or simply a recollection of a story he wished to tell and had told many many times.

No, there was nothing unusual about the fog that day, neither for the young man in the lobster boat, nor for the parents of his future friend, looking out to their mooring in Portland, and considering a trip they made at the beginning of each season—a fifteen-mile steam across Casco Bay to their summer mooring near Hamloaf Island at the upper reaches of the bay.




They loved to sail and life was good for them, with their son entering Bowdoin College in the fall, where Prof. Hall wrote his award-winning tale, titled as this one, earning him notoriety throughout the campus grounds. After a summer of sailing, so they dreamed, the couple might drive to

Bowdoin from Great Island on a calm fall weekend, and take their freshman son out for a late summer sail before they had to return the boat to Portland for the winter, a far easier trip in the expected north-westerlies of September than this one in the stagnant airs of late June. He would have the wide-eyed enthusiasm of an 18-year-old, away from home for the first time. The wind would be fine and the air so clear you would see the top of Mt. Washington from the outlying islands of Casco Bay. This is what family, so they thought, was all about.

The man once on the lobster boat pauses to think. Hamloaf. Its makeshift landing for the rowboat to the north. It was on that very island as a two- or three-year-old that he had squatted on the rocks, safe, so the adults would think, strapped in a life preserver before he fell face-first into the water, or perhaps it was "rolled," as you see kids of that age do. He can still see the astonished face of his brother, looking back one more time after he pulled him from the water, then disappearing into the path through the woods to the house, where his parents, unknowing of their negligence, were preparing for the trip home. In those days, you thought nothing of leading the family down to the sea-weed slick rocks and leaving them there while you trudged back to the cottage in case you had forgotten something important, a half-drunk bottle of gin perhaps, before you rowed all of them back to the mainland—a mere hundred yards away at high tide. His friend Sandra and her family were not so lucky, their youngest falling into Sebago as the whole family walked back to the house unaware that he was dying under the dock.

On that day, in 1967, the fog was singular.

In fog like that there is generally no wind, and the couple determined they would make this trip under power, stupidly and optimistically calculating their speed as hull speed (the maximum speed a displacement hull can go): four hours and they would be at the harbor in Great Island. Studying the chart, a routine preliminary but for sailors like themselves, almost unnecessary, showed only what they knew already: three short runs, direct if not dead straight, first in open sea to Halfway Rock, then, again in open sea, to the bell buoy just off Ragged Island or east to White Bull, where on a normal day, they would hear the breakers off Ragged, or the wash from the swells over Bold Dick or Saddleback Ledge. On a normal day, the land masses would ease the fog for the third leg to the harbor, and your eyes fixed on the compass, you would simply follow the tortuous route through Casco Bay, buoy to buoy, to the mooring.

They had hoped the fog was or would become what is known as "patchy." In that, they would likely see occasional blue sky overhead and would make the same bad joke we all make when sailing beneath it: "Too bad we're not sailing in *that* direction." Today, however, they noticed that the fog formed a perfect circle on the surface, a dome overhead, meaning that it was uniformly dense and visibility measured as the radius of that circle on the surface with the disoriented viewer at the center. As such a circle tightens, the real dangers begin to push your stress levels beyond what you can comfortably endure; your anxiety only adds to the confusion, which might metaphorically (and in this case literally) prove fatal.

A half-century later (today, that is), such a trip would be nothing. You could simply plot the buoys on your GPS or fire

up a chart-plotter that saved you the trouble, run directly to and through the prescribed course, hardly taking your eyes from the computer screen, and find your marks even with less than a hundred yards of visibility. In 1967, however, with the fog so dense it was said you could not see the bow from the stern, there was no GPS, no Loran, and you made such runs as you imagined the commercial fishermen made them, that is, by dead-reckoning: you set your compass course, you turned on the knotlog, and you ran your course until you found your mark—a buoy in the open sea. If you did not, you squared your position, sailing in increasingly wide boxes—squares, not circles, for reasons too complex for those who need it explained to them—until your mark appeared out of the fog. That could be dangerous in these waters: you would need to find the buoy before you hit Round Rock, and you would need to be sure you hadn't drifted west to Pond Island ledges or east to Saddleback. But you knew where those obstructions lay; you knew what they looked like, even when they loomed suddenly through the fog where you least expected them.

In those days, you likely did not have a fathometer, or depth-sounder such as the commercial lobstermen used: they were expensive, and their readings difficult for an untrained amateur to interpret. You relied, I suspect, on the now Old School method of determining depth, a hand-held lead line, tossed at one- or five-minute intervals into the sea. The water shoals up suddenly where the dangers lie, but you could simply toss the line the moment it was retrieved, attentive to the ten-fathom knot, or have your wife do that, distracting her and you yourself from the dangers you only now realized you had set for yourself. As long as you were

diligent, as long as you didn't get too confident or "get too gay," it was called, there would be no problem.

"Getting too gay" is that burst of confidence you experience when you cannot imagine things going wrong. During a long and seamless run in the fog, it is like the old joke about falling from a high building: most of the fall is perfectly safe; only the last foot is dangerous. When you are sailing, say, from Petit Manan to Schoodic, a ten-mile run often in the densest and most legendary of DownEast fogs, you begin to feel a confidence after an hour or so in the twisting but still open sea. Nothing can go wrong out there. You are completely relaxed. You forget, in your reverie, the stress and shock you will experience when you hear the warning whistle northeast of Schoodic but have no feel for its distance or angle, and thus no idea where you are. The feeling of confidence you get before this jarring back to reality is called "getting a bit gay," and it is something anyone who sails or steams from Portland across the benign open sea of Bigelow Bight will experience before they hit with surprising suddenness even the expected dangers of interior Casco Bay.

This was a magical place for commercial fishermen—dotted with ledges and small islands and filled with sea life. They found their way by what they sensed as instinct or by watching the fathometer, by carefully noting the subtle offshore swell, by moving from string of traps to string of traps and recalling where they set them on the last fog-shrouded day.

The skipper of the dragger Golden Dawn made a run from Cundy's Harbor to open water that year, followed by his brother in a second dragger (Black Pearl, I think it was)

who "wasn't as good in fog." When the Golden Dawn turned left, his brother made an elementary mistake. Rather than continuing the fifty yards to where the Golden Dawn had turned, he swung the helm over immediately, to stay on a direct course behind him, cutting the corner, rather than scrupulously following his brother's wake. A commercial fisherman all his life, with years of experience captaining that very boat, he hit the ledge the Golden Dawn had expertly skirted and the Black Pearl spent the rest of the day high and dry on the rocks.

Neither he, a professional fisherman for decades in those waters, nor the couple proud of their son about to enter Bowdoin, were "too gay" that day. I imagine they all were scared to death, with, as it turned out, good reason to be so, and experienced that sense of the surreal one can only feel in a boat when its buoyancy suddenly collapses on a ledge. Until this summer, there is nothing so shattering that I have experienced on the water. You realize, disoriented in the fog, you simply can never guess what will happen. You imagine dangers that will never be, and dangers you have missed by a hair's breadth years past without even being aware of them. Or you pause to admire, as Fred's father did that day, your life partner as she adjusts her hair, an instant from locking eyes on you, who was never to be seen again.

The man in the stern of the lobster boat would spend two years in college with the son of this sailing couple. He did not once ask him about this event—the most important event of the young man's life—did not once commiserate with him, and only once, quite later in life, did he research any of the details surrounding it. He knew this friend's girlfriend, and where he lived, and who he roomed with, and

what kind of drugs he liked the best, and who it was he occasionally drank with, and what he aspired to do the rest of his life. But he never once considered what impact the loss of his parents might have had on him, with the exception of that time he interrupted and stopped a routine hazing ritual he had participated in at college when he saw the younger man in tears. It was the least he could do perhaps, and an opportunity to present himself as the paragon of virtue and sensitivity. "When he broke down in front of us, that was enough for me ..."

In 2018, I sailed this course as a tribute to all of them. To Fred, to his parents, even to the dragger captain, Bea Darling I think it was, who nearly gave up fishing after grounding out on the ledge. For a reasonably competent sailor, it is, as they say, a piece of cake, a can of corn. On a clear day, with a normal summer breeze (anything from the west swinging around to the south-east), and especially for those of us who obsessively check the chart every thirty seconds and identify everything we may see, little can go wrong. From Portland Harbor, you sail five miles to Halfway Rock, then turn north. You will then pick up N"2", I believe it is, a mile or two from the point of Bailey Island. From there, to the Round Rock buoy or east to White Bull, if that is your course, is a straight shot, and from there, you have nothing but a series of short legs on even the most tangled route through Casco Bay.[1] Once you pick up one of the ledges (Rattlesnake, for example, easy to identify at low tide, awash at high, or David's Castle, which my brother-in-law surfed his lobster

[1] I have marked these courses on the chart above, just as they likely did on theirs.

boat directly over in a winter storm), you can follow that to the next mark and more or less "feel your way in" as it is called, although of course, in a boat, you cannot do this literally, and that summer, even gaining access to the point where you can begin such navigation would not have been easy. The buoys are small, and it is not always clear what route the chartmakers wished to mark with them. You simply keep them close aboard, chanting the mantra "red right return." Left, right—in a small boat it likely makes no difference, you think, although you can never say with confidence "it doesn't matter" since out there, on a day when an experienced sailor or worker could claim, with conviction, that he stood on the stern of a thirty-six-foot boat, and "could not see the bow from the stern," everything does matter and it matters often in the most crucial of ways.

**II. Underway**

Coming out of Portland, and this is what I assume they did, would have posed little problem for experienced sailors such as themselves. The passageway is open, and all you need to do is pick up a series of audible buoys (bells and gongs), associating them with those marked on the chart. Serious errors might unnerve you, but in my experience, even finding yourself off-course by as much as a mile might not shake you enough to force you back. The horror you should feel, having erred as much, is suppressed by the thrill of knowing exactly where you are even if that is not where you planned to be. And you proceed, consequently, with even more confidence than you would have had had you hit your mark precisely.

So let us say they missed the second bell, and picked up the distant gong instead. So many times they had made this run without incident, unmindful of the paradox of risk, whereby each success makes the next attempt more dangerous. They laughed, the forced laugh of over-confidence. "Imagine that!" they said, now sure of where they were, and sailed on, relying on the calm indifference of their partner, as artificial as their own. "God looks after fools," they added, or thought, or exclaimed, knowing, somewhere in their minds, that he does not and that they were completely on their own.

In my version, they likely checked the charts to assure themselves again that their route was clear of the shipping lanes. That might be encouraging, but of course, it should not be. Anyone who sails in Maine, even well away from the dangerous harbor entrance to Portland, can tell stories about, say, crossing the West Penobscot in the fog, and hearing on channel 13 the announcement from the "30,000-ton XXXXX" on a course South/North, crossing your path at 90 degrees. Such a sailor knows that even if the watch finds your boat on the radar, there is absolutely nothing the helmsman of a large commercial ship warned of this can do to avoid collision. And I can tell you that looking up through the wall of fog in the direction of the screws and wash and seeing a barely visible dark form much higher than the masthead passing behind you at 10 to 20 knots is a terrifying sight even to sailors far more skilled and experienced than I will ever be.

This is why sailing is not as those who have never set foot on a sailboat sometimes imagine it to be: carefree, or free in all senses of the word, just as described in the bad music of

the seventies. Sailing is not like that at all, or, more precisely, when you believe you are experiencing such a state, sailing is at its most dangerous. Sailing is about planning and projections. You decide to do X, sail a course at a certain speed, and you experience Y, all those conditions that make what you plan impossible or unfeasible. You adjust your plan for the new conditions, conditions that will change, and you adjust again, attempting to keep what I'll call the "cone of disparity" as small or as "close to the rhumb line" as possible, that is, what you plan and attempt versus the reality of your failure to achieve that. Your thinking is grand enough to allow for mistakes and errors, but modest enough to permit you to correct them.

In the fog, of course, this cone of disparity will widen. The current is running a half-knot at an oblique angle left to right. Do you know how to plot that on a chart? Heading at X degrees at Y speed? Set line AB at Z degrees at speed ... The math involves no more than vectors and is very simple, but I have never known a casual sailor on this coast to have plotted that out on a chart. They rely instead on estimates, and that comes down to what is called instinct (although of course there is nothing instinctive about it!), aware that the worst thing a sailor or pilot can do is to rely on such instincts when the facts (difficult though they may be to obtain) are available to them on the dumb readings of their instruments.

Today, that cone of disparity, the bane of Old School nautical fiction, might seem to have gone the way of dead reckoning itself, disappearing, say, into the computer screen of the chart-plotter, which provides, however, only a more sophisticated model of fact and error. As a consequence, there

may well be fewer fatalities on the water today than there used to be. A second consequence is that there are many more boats out in the fog than there ought to be.

Clearing Portland, Fred's parents had hoped for a "scale up," but after those first buoys and the giddiness they experienced in finding them, the fog grew more dense, strangling them in a tightening circle of visibility. The dry air they hoped for—perhaps it still existed, perhaps where they would need it most.

Now in open water, they began the first leg of their trip—a five- or six-mile run north-east to Halfway Rock—an imposing ledge-protected island and lighthouse dead center on a route from Portland to Small Point in Casco Bay. Sailing from Portland, you need to know exactly where the lighthouse is, but you cannot get close enough to see any more than its light, as a dangerous ledge projects a hundred yards or more to the southwest, rising so quickly from the seabed, your sounding lead will never have time to announce it. And when the light and horn from the lighthouse pierced the fog from the precise direction they had hoped, it was as if all they had planned in life—the homecoming, the Bowdoin reunion for their son—all would soon come true. Life in all its perfection would now be theirs, they thought, little thinking what "perfection" meant.

**II. Halfway Rock**

I want to tell you the story, but as you can see, I am still "drowning in metaphors," which I know is the wrong way of putting it. I know enough of the history to tell the story coherently, just as they knew enough of the route to run it successfully in the fog. But the details—I know these no better

than they knew the basic facts of their sea-route—the seabed, the fish between them and the seabed, even the location of the nearest obstructions in their passage. That is what happens in the fog—you run on fantasies. You believe you know your position on the chart, and quite possibly you do. But you get no assurance of that and in the end, whether you meet with perfect success or catastrophe, you will never know what actually "has happened"—never know the calamities you avoided by a wheel turn. Even as you re-imagine your history, secure on the mooring in the harbor you sought, or awash on the ledge in mid-ocean with no hope of survival, you will have no idea how you got there, and perhaps no time or inclination to speculate on such questions as why life took you where it did.

> *She I will call the Woman of Today now lounges on her porch. She dreams of the sailing she had experienced as a child on Bustins Island, up the bay near Freeport, I think, and wonders if that emotion will ever be hers again.*

There is so much left out here: the hour and a quarter of steaming on course in the featureless sea to Halfway Rock; the difficulties they must have had passing the lighthouse to make the turn north—that is, putting the lighthouse "right on their stern" and sailing on a new heading toward the fatal ledge outside Ragged Island; the details of my life and theirs that do not count in these histories; even their son Fred, before hearing the news, thinking instead of the future he had unfolding in a narrative smooth as a following sea. He should have been facing "the best four years of his life" at Bowdoin. That is what we were taught to sing in celebration of it. Like sailors in the fog, we were taught to believe that

our years in this provincial college would be the zenith of experience. The clear skies of Stanford, or the urban air of Columbia or Yale—these were merely myths to us. Like points on the navigational chart that are of interest but which you know you will never bother to visit.

And Fred's parents now relaxed, their trailing wake fixed on the sound of the horn on Halfway Rock, thinking of this future, as Fred likely drove the car from Portland to Great Island to meet them. Perhaps he might enjoy a *Wanderjahr* of sorts, then employment, if he avoided the draft or the military in some way, or if the war came to an unexpected end. Law school too, if it suited him, and marriage to a woman who might well have been the doctor's daughter he stole from my best friend John, who died later at his piano bench.

This woman, D., whom I have not seen in over 40 years, has appeared here suddenly, and as I drafted this, I imagined that she, though then unknown to all of us, would provide the nexus of the various histories I have entwined here: Fred, his parents, my own histories both as a working fisherman and now as a coastal sailor like themselves. Even John's history is part of this, clutching his heart and falling from the piano bench. D. was or would be, I once thought, the means to expose the naiveté of the sternman, now the naiveté of the narrator himself, who believes he can manufacture this central history simply by writing it. That same naiveté (the fog of inexperience, I might say) that led him to believe, a half-century earlier, that in relationships, truth (or "the Truth," whatever that is) is crucial. Whereas truth, in some cases, is no more than the brute materiality of a ledge, that, when you planned out the route, seemed of no consequence at all.

> *I am lying half-dressed in the cheap apartment cot those fifty years ago, and, a slave to truth, I told this very woman D. without a trace of self-consciousness that yes, the person I most longed to be with was not her, but rather her rival, my wife-to-be. Well there! I thought. With this, I have grown to maturity, past the duplicities of childhood. I was astounded at the time, that such a heartfelt expression of truth "put the kibosh" on any thought D. had (and she had more than a thought, I think) of debauching me on the spot. She had assumed, astonishingly enough, that this would be the start of a normal relationship—courtship, consummation, catastrophe—that was the route she had marked out, as it were, whereas I ... but pride forbids that I pursue this to the end. I see instead the somewhat awkward posing of her leg across my own, as she shakes her hair free in frustration...*

Even in these pages, this woman D. remains as willful and recalcitrant as she seemed fifty years ago; she simply will not serve the narrative purposes I once assigned her, her life and the webs it wove, drawing all the disparate elements together in its knots—all that seems now irrelevant to the story I must tell. And why apologize for such missteps? How can these characters be annoyed with the truth or aghast at my digressions? It is too late to save that couple from the indifferent ledge, and too late to revise the dumbass things I said to D. that day.

So you see now where all of this will go. Reading this is itself a metaphor, I guess, for sailing that course in the fog they experienced, or even my youthful naiveté that still embarrasses me. I have left out all the retrospective facts, all

the contexts known only to historians. I have not given you the now otiose title of journalists: Couple Drowned Tragically on the Ledges outside Ragged Island. No one tells stories as uneventful as those we live in life—A Safe Passage to Your Summer Home. You might well be reading this a second time searching for the clues you may have missed, such that past and future become conflated, just as the future for Fred's parents is the past for us, a distant past that I associate with my own youth—Fred's girlfriend-to-be D. throwing up her hands in exasperation at my stupidity and storming from the room with all the futures we imagined in disarray.

In the fog, reality is nothing more than a silence beneath the incessant swish of the water past your hull, beneath too the hum of your well-tuned diesel. You hear your soles' wet friction over the floorboards, and maybe your wife asks a question meant to be reassuring but which, despite its content, is not and cannot be. The present becomes mere memory. That is, where you were to begin with, time, and the compass headings, all the recollected currents in this bay, more significant now, when you are running in the fog, than when you are sailing at near hull-speed on a clear day from Harpswell to Small Point.

But what alternative do you have now, half-way through the journey home, shocked at the density of fog at Halfway Rock? If you head back to Portland, you will face the shipping lanes again, the derision of sailors in the harbor much less competent than yourself, and perhaps that of your son Fred as well, having waited in vain at Great Island. There is none of the sports braggadocio you will sometimes hear from him: "We will get them next time" for there is no turning this defeat into a "next time," no resetting of the clock,

no "learning from experience," no "accepting the loss" and moving on.

It is too like the pain of a storm at sea, the loss or even absence of a loved one. You long for a future where all will be part of your past. You will look back on the suffering in what is now called serenity wondering how you endured it or why you allowed it to be suffering at all.

And you sail on, believing, Micawber-like, that something will turn up.

**III. Saddleback (2018, 1967)**

It is curious, I think, my sailing of this same course today—Halfway Rock to Saddleback, then north to Great Island. I seek the detail that might lend more coherence to the fragmented narrative, spun, as they say, from whole cloth, a metaphor I assume is based on the making of clothes, where you design and prick out the patterns on unfeatured material—like sailing, doubling the metaphor, on the unfeatured sea or in the fog itself. I sailed their route just days ago, now weeks, and I was with a woman who folded my own memories back on themselves, reminding me of my early days on the water, when I fell in love with my wife-to-be, reminding me of feelings I had never known before that and only once experienced since. I turned to her in astonishment that day, the entire matter of visual beauty suddenly senseless and incomprehensible. Convoluted, all that, I know, but I see no other way of putting it. And I lay there two nights ago, staring at this woman's photograph, curious that she had done this, and realizing at the same time ... or recollecting to be more precise ...

And I suddenly forgot about the doomed couple, and remembered *them*—the emotions, now I mean, once forgotten too, although the syntax trips me up again—remembered *them* in a way that seemed more real than the trip to Great Island the couple had attempted some fifty years ago. Would the recalling of emotions grow to be the experience of them? and would there be a difference? I wondered, staring into the photo of this woman—the Woman of Today—who had asked to sail with me for the afternoon. And how could she, who so derailed the narrative, rejoin the now elusive threads: my once wife-to-be, the orphaned son, his lover D.'s once-lover John who drove my wife-to-be with me to Bedford on the night I fell in love with her then died at his piano bench, my years of commercial fishing, the doomed couple sailing a pellucid route to the anchorage.

For nothing in life is as context-free as the narratives we construct, and editors hone for us, and readers submit to, praising us for our concisions and clarities. There is nothing in life quite like the cropped photo of the face we love, the course plotted on a navigational chart with the islands and depths passing in complete coherence, and maybe a sight of interest appearing in the distance—an island one has never seen in such light—a school of fish or exotic sea creature—even that would not jar the steady course and would be something we call an ornament, like the lover's hand that grazes your shoulder as you consider or construct this version of history–that too. An incident divorced from the main thread. These are all the delusions of life that make it possible to live from day to day or perhaps to stall the boat, head to the wind, at the mooring.

Fred's parents were not able to judge the cross-currents, or perhaps neglected the importance of doing so, not imagining such imperceptible sinisters might exist out there in the fog—their entire universe, it seemed, bound by the perfect circle of haze, adrift in a sense on the water surface which moved as the boat moved, harmlessly in one sense, they and the water surface being one, but dangerously in another, since all they cared about, in their love of the water, was paradoxically the relation of that water-surface to the rocks and islands, the ridges on the ocean floor, and the way that ocean floor rose abruptly in a long serpentine line, west to east, perpendicular to their course heading. The seabed awoke calmly but steadily, somewhere on the line from Bailey Island east to Small Point, and as they sensed this in their sounding lead, they only knew we are here, or there, out of the serenity of the open sea, now where our navigational skills matter most. And as the unseen seabed drifted up to them, the channel that seemed so routine when they planned out the trip a few days earlier, the channel that would keep them from spending the summer fog-bound in Portland, eluded them.

He had shouted something, over the sound of the engine. It is difficult to hear an order or a question, when your concentration is focused on the fog ahead, seeking in its sameness that indentation, discoloration, or subtlest of disclarities that suggest land or change, focused too on the sound of the water, the sound of the water beneath the engine noise, beneath the sound of the water passing in indifference port and starboard, the wavelets carved out by the bow wake. She turned to the distracting change in things, her husband's voice—a query, command, or simply nervous wit—

it is difficult for a sailing couple to distinguish those in a boat where the usual monarchic structure of sailing, captain to mere deckhand, has broken down in the love they have for each other.

So she turned to her husband's voice, losing her concentration on the fog and on the bow wake, and then, or was it seconds later, the contact of the keel onto the unsuspected ledge uprooted her world and the instant she realized what that sensation was, she was in the water.

When you sail, you are in your own circumscribed world, and when I tried to explain this in dead earnest to the woman I unexpectedly loved, I kept saying "circumcised" and we both collapsed in laughter. I tried again with the same result, and all the loving things, all the articulate things, all the most momentous things I intended to say fell into disarray. It is like that, I recalled, when the keel touches a ledge. Your entire world, suspended on the water, is gone—all the control, the weightlessness of it all—like a bird soaring overhead as its wings are shattered by the gunshot. I know what that bird feels and Fred's mother too experienced what it feels as she lost her grip on the forestay, as her knees hit the lifelines and as the water caught her with its vicious chill of the ocean in late June. You now have what in crisis feel mere seconds to get your wits about you and determine what you must do to survive.

It is nothing you can prepare for. The real crises unfold as no future has before. And you train, not to be automatic in such cases—all the "man overboard" drills you are advised to practice will be of little use: the circling back to her, bow faced into the wind, the ladder thrown expertly over

the side ... Such plans were risible, the boat fixed on the ledge. There was nothing he could do.

I imagine it as one moment of horror, a step forward reaching for her as she flipped clumsily over the lifelines, and his seamanship perhaps taking over as he shifted into reverse, throwing the throttle full, and yes, perhaps if the tide had been coming, he would easily have yanked the boat off, and yes, perhaps if the tide had not fallen its mischievous half-inch or so, such that the boat in full reverse, with the rudder, unknown to him, split vertically, perhaps then, he could have glided off the ledge, free to toss her a buoy or a line, instead of experiencing hideously his circumscribed world (and here I make no inadvertent joke) suddenly twist at a violent angle and knowing then as the swell hit the helpless rail to starboard that the boat would go down.

He could see her, now adrift, no longer ahead of him, but off to port. Off to port in the fog still thick as it had been on the easy and careless run from Portland—the first, he thought, 449 feet of the 450-foot fall, and it was absurd, he felt, to recall that joke at this grim point.

We all know, as we have read in sailing manuals, exactly the steps he should have taken. In the ideal world of the sailing manual, he would have kept his head, realizing that held fast by the ledge slowly rising in the tide, there was nothing in his years of boat handling that might help, and it was then he would calmly reach for the VHF, never once taking his eyes off the dark form of his wife and what he imagined to be her astonished face, calling, yes in this case, "Mayday Mayday Mayday" for all boats to hear, never once despairing that on this day, even the calmest and most correct of actions might do no good.

In that ideal world, the lobstermen, working in the fog, would have heard the forced serenity of his voice describing the boat doomed in the fog, its hull minutes from being breached, the name clearly articulated on the VHF, size, style, even the paint, its last known heading—all perfectly described on the prescribed channel, his wife in the water. Even then, in that ideal world, the fisherman would have turned to his helper and "Shit," he would say. "Running from Portland," he would repeat in scorn. "Assholes" he would add in derision. His helper would look up not fully understanding him, and it may well have been me on that day, and on that day, in this ideal world, I would have realized that this, this was what I once called "playing Maine for real." No longer was I the make-believe and picturesque "worker on a lobster boat," but doing it, even as the summer sailors died around me. Authentic, I would have become on that day, as I heard him snarl back to me "Well if they don't know where the fuck they are ..." and he would wave then, in his perfect seamanly way of waving, to the tight band of fog that defined our world, making it barely possible to move at all except "feel our way" (as the fishermen would say) from trap to trap and string to string and maybe find our way back by the buoys we had set in the morning ... "If *they* don't know where the fuck they are, how am I supposed to know where the fuck they are!" And maybe in that ideal world he would add, "Nothing we can do!" and we would have set back to work as they died in the distance, or maybe he would have said, "Well I guess we got to fucking do what we fucking can," thinking as all fishermen think, "Goddammit if they would just let you work, why then we'd all be rich as the fucking Kennedys ..." And maybe then, he would have set his

course deep into the fog, knowing to do all this was pointless, but would one day be known as the right thing.

It is almost comical what would have gone on in the fisherman's head that day in the ideal world of the fishermen. For the sad reality is, that on a working boat, working among the shoals and ledges inshore as the lobstermen did in those days, you rarely had the VHF on in the first place. You didn't listen to bad music as some fishermen do today, and you didn't listen to channel 16 or 68 as the working boats off-shore might do, seeking information or just companionship.

Years later, an hour after my whoremaster captain had left for the wharf, a scorned lover drove to his house with five gallons of gasoline and burned it to the ground. The sheriff shot his howling dog still chained to the bannister, as the firemen sent out a call to him on the VHF. No one answered them, until they finally raised Bill G., the only fisherman in the area who ever kept his radio on. He heard about the house in flames. He knew where we were on the water and he could have gotten to us in minutes to relay the news. "I'm not my brother's keeper," he was reported to have said, and my now homeless captain learned of the house, collapsed in ashes into the cellar hole, when we landed our catch at the wharf six hours later in the day. Another story that would change each time it was told.

So maybe in the ideal world of the fishermen, Bill would have heard the Mayday call, just as he heard the call about my captain's house on a real day, and you know damn well, if he had not the grace to report the catastrophic fire on a fogless day, there was no way he would spend this day feeling his way among the outlying ledges looking for a pair of

perfect strangers who were so stupid as to be out in those waters in such conditions. His indifference would be free from resentment, and there would be no sense of revenge against my captain, who years earlier had "lost it" on the wharf and grabbed Bill's obnoxious teenage son, stuck him head-first into a 50-gallon bait barrel and "damn near drowned the fucking kid."

It was for all these complex reasons and for far more I can never know (telling the story now correctly, that is, according to reality rather than to the conventions of narrative or the idealized fishermen), that Fred's parents would get no help that day.

I imagine it was when he got no answer on the VHF—had he failed to send it correctly? was there a switch he had neglected to engage? it was in that silence, broken only by the rhythmic indifference of the swell wash across the ledge, that he realized how catastrophic this moment could become and it was at this moment, without thinking, only feeling the horror of it in his heart, that he went overboard, hero as he had always imagined himself to be, out into the water to save his wife.

Even had he not been clamped nearly to unconsciousness by the cold, he must have known they had little chance once the fog enveloped them. To sense the feel of that, you need to row out into the harbor in such fog, feel the circle tighten around you and a loved one, leaving nothing but your trailing wake to guide you, which you struggle, against all instinct, to keep perfectly straight, despite not knowing which course you have set or where you might end up.

Swimming toward her, the woman he once married now he thinks for love, he too must know, that even should he

get to her—his soulmate so styled in the obituary—even if he could do that, he would be without that trailing wake reciprocating a perfect heading in the fog; he will swim with her to what he feels is shore, only to find as exhaustion sweeps over him, a boat emerging in taunting soft-focus in the fog—the horror of the very boat he attempted to escape. And the two life-partners will bob there like children playing in the warm lagoon safe from the pounding surf at Popham, screaming in joy, while the adults smoke their cigarettes, shaking their condescending heads.

I have left out so much here and I am trying to get the crucial things straight. Like life itself it is, or my own attempt to lock myself into digression. And I hear myself telling the Woman of Today this story as we sail past Saddleback Ledge, I am told it was, where they hit far from the safe and intended course a mile to the west.

What other route might they have taken on that run to Great Island, I ponder, thinking to adjust the narrative to accord better with the facts of history? As if I were a great scholar of the tragedies of the past, when I am in fact unable even to describe my own mis-steps? Picking up the gong off Round Rock, if it existed then, and sailing a perfect course past the treacherous Rattlesnake Ledge just missing the outlying rocks far more sinister in the sea than on the chart. Even out there on a clear day today, with all my charts at hand and one of the most competent sailors I know at the helm or on the jib sheets, I feel the dangers of the place reaching out to me, just as she reaches for me on our best days, just as the seafloor reached out to them shattering all the futures all of us have known:—the boat broken on the unexpected ledge, her eyes suddenly on me, “I love you too”

she might or could or may or can or will or will not one day say to me. With the wind in its perfection, the boat on its exact and most efficient heading in the soft swell of the on-shore wind—even then, the sails all trimmed to perfection, even then I experience the anxieties of incompetence. Of sailing, of handling the tiller, navigation, and most important the way to love and the impossibility of expressing it, staring at her—her loveliness, the breeze in her hair, losing my focus on my course and on the sea-state.

**IV. Homecoming**

The following day began as had the previous days that month, windless, with the fog packed tight into the bay. By daybreak, the entire sea had calmed and the noise of the boats feeling their way through the fog, and roaring back to port after the fog had cleared—all the commotion of the previous day, all had passed as the night took hold of the place. The bodies now safe with the coroner. The fate of the broken hull in the hands of the insurance adjusters. A few lobster boats worked their way slowly through the sea-softening fog to the first line of traps and others had captains who stayed home, hoping the fog would clear, deluding themselves into thinking that the events of the day before required a certain reverence—a certain reticence, something that felt like fear or pure laziness. Like Bob Anderson, a day-off from ground-fishing offshore in the fog, alone on the converted lobsterboat, and held in contempt by those who claimed that if you worked, you worked, and you went out every day regardless. Easy for them to think, picking their way through the ledges within a stone's throw of shore, he thought. Less easy to imagine ten to twenty miles

offshore, hauling back your catch in the fog and knowing you will have to find your way to West Point and back to Cundy's by dusk with nothing but your compass and the surrounding sea-state to guide you.

By evening, the pictures of the stricken boat were edited. There she lay, hull-down in the water, the fog having lifted late, too late for them, the grace of her gunwale lines and the mast quietly undisturbed. It was if she had grounded out in a child's pool of some sort rather than in the unthinking vicious sea. The very quietness of the water made it easy for the Coast Guard to hire out the salvage. In another day it would be as if nothing had happened out there that day. And Fred, off to college, would have to face the shock of it alone.

The sea broke quietly over the now lazy hull—and writing that, I hear one of those foolish childhood sentences "The quick brown fox ...," I think, drafting this. Use each letter, like a resource perhaps, because there are days and situations when you must use everything; you must leave nothing undone, and must imagine all those things that are to be done, and must never lose heart in the fog, even when you finally suspect you have no chance at all.

I stare at the keyboard and see her leaning on the mast faced away from me, her happiness somehow radiating from the face I cannot see. I close my eyes and it is as if the placid sea that forms before me were the very sea they faced fifty years ago, waking slowly during the day, and dying in the evening as the fog settles over it. The surfaces unblemished, even by those helpless in its embrace. I think of the two of them, and thus now as tribute to them and for those who might have loved them, and also for those who imagine they would have loved them had they known, I will write

that they finally found each other in the killing sea and after crying aloud in frustration and grief in the water—so cold that even they must have known they had only minutes to live—I will write that they finally were together, it being unendurable to imagine that they just sank clumsily in the weight of their now useless rain gear with their once-lover helpless in their sight. They came together, the woman in the prime of life and the man a few years her senior, and when the recriminations and cries of despair were done for them, there was a moment, I will write, when they resigned themselves to the simple truth and slowly gave in to the coldness of the end of things, no longer listening for the boats that would never come for them, no longer regretting that they had not spent another night ashore, no longer thinking that it might have been alright ... if only this, if only that. They let, I will write for them, the cool waves wash over them—all what was beyond them they would ever know.

I lie back. Annoyed that I still do not know the fatal course they took, even the fate of the salvaged boat, whether rebuilt or torn apart for the fittings. I do not know the heart of the woman whose serenity on the foredeck brought this story back to me, as we passed close to the wash over Saddleback, the outlying ledges of Ragged Island. Her smile–that too is singular. It is not like the metaphors I construct for it; not like the sunlight lifting the fog; the arrival of the sea-breeze on a summer noon. I reach for her, or simply think of doing so, knowing that in this gesture all has changed for me. It is like imagining the end of things in the fog—the charted course suddenly collapsing into a new course, or the catastrophe that ended it all for them.

My eyes settle over her. Her beauty so great I can no longer tell what beauty is in her. Her eyes fix on the horizon, I now think.

The hull slides forward over the wave edge.

## 1.2 ZUCCHINI IN AUGUST

> People are not going
> To dream of baboons and periwinkles
> —Wallace Stevens, "Disillusionment of Ten O'Clock"

It's apple-gathering. Nothing more, despite the murmurings in some impertinent communities. You cannot describe as theft the picking up of orchard waste in full light by the roadside. "Gathering," the word for the acts of our distant cousins the Neanderthals, I guess. Civilized and propertied as we have grown to be, such plundering is now no more for sustenance; it is mere excuse to drive through the winterly sadistic countryside as the leaves turn, asserting without

warrant that the colors are as beautiful or startling as those in Vermont, even here among the fir and spruce. Then continuing past the folds of the *Gazetteer* until directions blur together in the Gordion roadways, 202, 3, 15, 131, ravelled up on the roadmap. I suppose none but the very curmudgeonly, as Father used to style himself, a decade younger than his son today, use such guides in preference to the GPS, once found only on the open sea for navigation and perhaps on the targeting systems of weaponry.

The apples begin to fall in late summer, moving through the multifarious varieties named with insistent pomp by the locals—Jonathans, Macs, Cortlands—after generations, most misidentified, thus indistinguishable. Those standard names for things!—more of consequence than import, the distinctions in the lexicon not of life, but of our angry hope of how things ought to be in life. Apples do not "come true," that is, no more than your offspring do, no more than the addled choices we make based on experience and conviction. A seed or slip will bear no semblance to the tree that generated it. And as for the arcane science of grafting and cross-breeding, I have never made sense of it, nor the long-winded discourses I hear on each variant—all that corn detasseling that your girl from Iowa or even Michael did for summer-work, the careful pollination of the herb blossoms in a house that reeks so much of weed one cannot enter without feeling faint nor leave without knowing driving is out of the question.

To the gatherer like myself—no taxonomist!—there are only two kinds of fruit, and I speak in defiance of botany: (1) those that grow in commercial orchards, (2) those that fall by the roadside, out of sight of a house of any kind, or in the

lawns of summer-folk who have left for the season, that is to say, the fruits of public property, or unwatched fields, the fruit Eloise claims she used to pick, when she was exiled by her family to the rich environs of the college in New England.

Eloise, Love of My Life, I called her once. Before the gunshot took her life in Santa Fe.

**I. The Dialogic Imagination**

"My darling Eloise, let me tell you a story. I call this 'Zucchini in August'."

"What does that mean? I know what August is, and of course I know ..."

"Zucchini—a kind of squash."

"Courgettes, I was about to say."

"Oh Eloise, don't grow cosmopolitan on me. *Forma manent*, I would say, despite the names for things. 'Marrows', in the English, I suspect. Still, loving you as you know I do, when I love you, mind, culture—all my linguistic exuberance turns to mush."

"You can stop now. No more of your professed affections: 'professorial'—get it? That's you. Not me. All I ever wanted was a family. A man who loved me, even sand-poor as yourself. Who would father my adoring children. Read me stories as I fell asleep on his shoulder. All you wanted was a stable of girl-friends."

"Oh my darling. We have been through this too many times. Let me tell you the story."

"You haven't explained the title yet."

"So? The story will explain it. But perhaps you're right; this might require commentary. 'Zucchinis in August' is the

imagined title to a book of poems. Not mine, but one I've stolen for its aptness here. An aging poet friend—another academic like myself, morose and with his teeth gone from negligence, his clothes all sent to him by his mother on Long Island—would annually threaten to come out with a collection of this title. Understand? The English-speaking world needs more poetry today as New Englanders need zucchini in August. Even poems such as these, disguised as narratives. We need them as the indifferent world needs you and me."

"They don't grow them here."

"Poems? You must have poets as thick as desert sands in Santa Fe. But you mean zucchini! All zucchini karma must be used up in Maine in the autumn. As Stephen King was said to say, although most wit from Maine will get attributed to him, the way all turns of phrase were pinned on Samuel Johnson in the 18th century ..."

"I'm lost."

"... 'Lock your car doors in the untended parking lots of Cottle's or Hannaford's, the name now is', he said, or is said to say. 'Otherwise you will return to find the front seat half-composted in squash'. Can I tell you my story now?"

"Please. But first I have to feed the dog."

"Don't be ridiculous. Why should the reality of dogs intrude into the narrative? You can listen while he eats."

"D'Av!"

"Just open the can or toss a half-handful of kibbles at your feet, maybe spinning in a dance move, a pirouette, I think it's called, or that scissor-kick ..."

"You mean a *grand jeté*."

"Or *entrechat,* I think you told me once. Your leaps formed to answer the terms of tradition. Some semiotics that is—things conforming to the words! Just dance, and D'Av will find his way to you, as all of us have done. Now listen, my darling Eloise. And remember, zucchini is merely figurative in this tale—something to set the tone of disutility. Something to establish the autumnal seat of things. It is really not about zucchini at all, but about apples and bear hunting."

"Yuch. If you tell me about hunting, I'm hanging up on you! D'Av!"

"It's not about hunting. No animals will be harmed. I would no more hurt an animal than I would cause suffering for Darwin—the mixed-breed mutt I have been caring for."

"That's years into the future! A dog of some lover you chose over me. You really need to get your stories straight."

"Now bear with me ... Sorry. Just hang on a bit."

"D'Av gets salmon. I don't feed him dogfood—all waste from the butchers and half horsemeat in addition. I can't stand the thought of a slaughterhouse."

"And why not tofu then? How many life forms die to make your small dog lick his bowl in satisfaction? I won't remind you of the salmon pens, polluting the Down East waters of Great Wass Island just off Jonesport. Nor of the barrels of anchovies washed down the killer fishes' throats to be turned into fish oil. Innocents all. I will tell my tale: 'Zucchini in August'."

"Zucchinis you said. Plural."

"Singular, plural. One or many. What's the difference?"

"Are you talking about your girlfriends now?"

"My darling. Please. Zucchini is a collective noun, is it not?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about. D'Av, sweetie ..."

"Once upon a time ... "

"Oh stop."

"OK. That was ridiculous. A century ago, it must have been, my house in Maine had apple trees, like all the old once open lots on the coast. They are now gone wild, as it were, and only on a good year can I get more than a handful. I'm watching the trees bud now, outracing, if they can, the voracious browntails that infest all hardwoods here. I expect blossoms by the month's end."

"What are browntails?"

"Browntails? A kind of horrendous caterpillar with tiny hair that most natives are allergic to."

"They eat apples?"

"No. Just the leaves. What eats the fruit are ... But let me go on. My neighbor has a better orchard, grown by accident, nurtured by the landscapers, where large unblemished fruit fall untouched to the ground each fall. Do you know, by the way, how to rid your apple trees of worms?"

"I live in the desert. Have you forgotten? I have Manzanita and cactus trees, not apples."

"You pick up the drops. To complete their life-cycle, the pernicious worms must find a way from the branch to the earth, a journey they take inside the apple when the apple falls. They burrow then into the ground and pupate there, emerging as moths in the spring. If you just eat the apples,

or, failing that, rake them up and grind them into the compost, you will have fine-fleshed apples annually, like the poison-stricken ones you buy in the supermarket."

"Is that the story? It sounds like a lecture in horticulture or entomology. You have been a teacher too long. Even though you never really teach anything."

"Stay with me here. This is not a lecture, but a tale."

"Everything to you is fiction. Like your profession of love to me."

"Now now! The tale? ... I stopped by my neighbor's house ... But wait. I need to get the years straight. A year earlier, two years ago, I asked the wife, expressionless from the Botox, if she minded if I picked up the drops. Not the ripening fruit which weighed down the tree limbs. Just what had fallen on the well-tended lawn. Somewhat grudgingly, she gave consent. That is women's way, is it not? Ha ha! That is, on those rare occasions when they give consent at all, which ... Anyway, the next day, I watched her grizzled husband sweep all the fallen crop into a wheelbarrow, and roll it away to the dumpster. If I can't eat it, he must have felt, I'm damned if I will let it go to the neighborhood."

"You just said he did that to keep the browntails from damaging his fruit."

"Not browntails at all—leaf-eaters that strip the twigs bare. I mean worms—*Rhagoletis pomonella,* different species altogether. But neither touched the fruit of the couple from away, as I would learn. It was purely mean-spirited on their part."

"People are awful. No wonder you feel at home there, since you are awful too."

"My darling Eloise, are we not done deriding those who love us best?"

"Go on with your story. I will feed the dog."

"So this year the situation was apparently more complex: I sent as an emissary ..."

"One of your girlfriends, doubtless."

"I knew I should have omitted that detail. This time, I asked, in high servility: 'Do you mind if I pick up the drops?' The ones lying on the grass, with the pre-pupated worms glaring out from them?"

"You didn't say that."

"No. I am embellishing. 'Your drops', I said with a sweeping gesture to the lawn. Just as I had asked the year before, but the words now more tempered and tentative. She stared in suspicion, and after a moment spoke of history: 'What do you want them for?' and when I stared back in confusion, having no reply: 'The last person who gathered them used them to bait bears!'"

"Bears?"

"That's what she said, or accused me of. 'Bears?' I offered querying.

"'Yes.'

"'I believe that was me, the only one who called for your fruit. You think I am using them for bears?'

"'Are you using them to hunt bears?'

"'Do I look like a bear hunter? I'm wearing a Bean shirt, and Dickies from the boat'. And unsaid I composed my riposte: have you seen any bears in southern Maine in the last three decades? I have not in seven. Although I confess, leav-

ing the golf course hard up by the San Gabriels in Los Angeles, not more than four months ago, I saw a California bear raiding the trash cans on trash day."

"It's been on TV. Your bear-hunting. Even here in Santa Fe," my Eloise says. "It must have been during that referendum you ranted about a year ago. They use doughnuts. It's disgusting. People who hunt bears should be shot."

"Do you mean in general? All hunters? Or simply those who bait their prey with waste?"

"I mean ..."

"I know. I am ambivalent about it too, even though of course I voted for the referendum. You don't bait deer, or turkeys, or other prey. Why should bears be different? It's all about 'Fair Chase', they say, but the whole notion is ridiculous. Why have 'rules for sport' for us, the hunters, when it is clearly never sport for prey? That said, our neighbor goes bear-hunting. His family has lived here for generations. He claims it is impossible to get a shot at one without bait."

"Then they should be left in peace."

"I agree entirely."

"'Is that why you want the apples?' my neighbor said, implying that apples were variants of the unbought doughnuts on TV, in the ads for the referendum.

"But apples are not doughnuts. Or did I say that? 'Apples ...' as it were. Goodness no, in any case! If I were a bear hunter, I would never gather apples here."

"I am totally lost. Maybe I wasn't listening because I was getting D'Av his salmon. It's fresh-caught, by the way, not farmed. Where are you in the story?"

"I am talking to my neighbor, who apparently believes that the reason I want to pick up her apple drops is because I am going to use them for bear hunting."

"Do you hunt bears?"

"My God, Eloise, you are as bad as my neighbor. Of course I do not hunt bears."

"But you would. You told me you used to hunt as a teenager. You would have shot a bear had you seen one."

"My darling, the only bear I ever saw in Maine ran past my car in the early evening, my wife-to-be beside me, as we planned out the wedding. Up the road-bank it came to our right, accelerating and storming past in front of us as I hit the brakes in shock. I am sure there was an admonishing allegory there, which we ignored, slapping the car in gear again and speeding off to the wedding in hysterics and our honeymoon on the lakes past Greenville where we saw more moose than fish."

"You don't need to tell me of your lovers from the past, about guns and killing animals, even though I know this is something you do."

"May I continue?"

"Only if you promise not to tell a story that will make me unhappy."

"'What do you use them for?' my neighbor challenges, pulling her chin back in suspicion.

"'Pies. I bake pies with them'.

"That was it! At least in her mind that was it. She had caught me: 'You absolutely *cannot* use these apples for pies', she exclaimed in victory, her triumph almost showing through the surgeries to her face.

"'Really? Why not. I don't understand. That's what I use them for. All the apples I find go into pies'.

"'You cannot'.

"'Then what can you use them for?'

"Applesauce!!!' she scorned and moved to turn away.

"'Applesauce?' Well try feeding bears with that ... No. I have it wrong. What I meant was this: there is no way you can bait bears with apples drenched in human sweat, ones you have hauled in your overheated trunk on a four-hour drive to the North Woods.

"Think for a moment; on that drive—October now—you will doubtless pass eight bushels of fallen apples on the roadside every hundred yards or so, as common as workshop verse. Talk about zucchini in August, or local poetry! No self-respecting bear is going to select the rotting apples in your trunk, particularly, my God! apples 'from away', when there are 800 piles of virgin apples within a quarter mile of wherever the bear chooses to lay down its last scat ..."

"Wait. Did you actually say this?"

"You mean now? I just said it, did I not?"

"No. I mean then. Did you actually say all that to her?"

"Oh. No, of course not. It just went through my mind, along with a smattering of 'a-hole's!' What I said was this:

"'So let me try at least', I pled. 'I will take your apples—I only need one handful perhaps two. What I can carry from your lawn right now in my bare hands and the pockets of my jacket. I will bring you an impossible pie, made from your hoarded garden waste. My best pie, I tell you, with just a hint of blackberry. And the most delicious part? The bear-fat crust'."

**IIA. Class Notes from the Woman of Today**

*He doesn't need new lovers in the fall. Zucchini in August those new lovers are—even he admitted it. It is pointless to pretend to be a part of it. To share my circle of acquaintances, when he too will soon be gone, another summer resident, exposing me in prose. Pointless too to fall for the seduction of emotions—the product of his sailing skills.*

*At age 15, when we didn't know shit from Shinola, as he claims his mother used to say, whatever that means, whatever she thought that meant, when we knew nothing, things were easier. Love was whatever you were told it was in the movies or in the three-minute lyrics of a 45, one with the spindle insert. Absolute those lessons were, like when he reached for me in the hallway on the dance-floor in the front seat of the car on the path in the park and we yammered on with the sweet earnestness of fools or teenagers on proprieties and marriage vows and what it would be like to live forever behind a picket fence with a brace of squalling kids.*

*And then he would ruin it with some lewd remark like when he leered at the stylist fixing my hair "How do you improve on <u>that</u>?" as if he didn't know half my face was the product of professionals. All his life he had been like this, he said, as when his own teenage girlfriend set him straight with a phrase he thought only sensible to a 16-year-old like herself "Show a little discretion," she had said, brushing his hand from her breast, and the cynical bastard laughed in the retelling it, as if the moral lessons one could learn at 16 were not the same as those you could live by at 70.*

*Sailing was the only place it could have worked. There where you can live without complexities of social life. Where*

*you can sit on the foredeck, lost in the bow wake, as he steadies the course, his eyes and attention fixed on the heading. Or perhaps dancing in his living room or on the dance-floor in Los Angeles, far from where we could be known. And it was his own world, our own world out there on the water or in the art galleries he spoke about on the streets of Manhattan, years before we met. He sat back on the transom and let you take the boat out, careless of the efficiency or what the clumsy tack might look like to the critics on their moorings. The boat heeling in the wind, angled in the sea-state. When the swells drifted by the hull, all you could think of was the kindly uncle, the old sailor drunk and asleep in his boots, who taught you the way of things on the water in your youth, catching tigers in red weather.*

*"Do you remember that first week?"*

*It is a blur to me. We talked; we ate dinner. I had no idea he had designs on me. And one night he proposed to me. That's what he should have done for all it meant. But it was merely a profession of love—confessional, he said. "Interesting." That's what I said. It was "interesting." Then I felt him withdraw his hand from my thigh and I said he could just leave it there and finally I laughed and said he had a boyish crush on me and that should have been the end of it right there, and we would never have gotten ourselves into this mess.*

*"Is that what you thought?"*

*"It was true."*

*"What was true? Your claim? Or ..."*

*"What I said. It is true that what I said was true."*

*"Ha! More ..." <u>recursions</u> was the word I think he used. "You couldn't recognize a man in love with you if he bit you in the ass." Even I laughed then. "... but I didn't care a whit about*

*what you said. If you wanted to sit in the car or lie on the couch and make out like teenagers, it hardly mattered what you felt. Did you think then how it was at age fifteen? How the pain hit you and you thought it would last forever? Only to be doomed to discover late in life that it never does? Do you remember what you felt with your first or second husbands? I mean the one obsessed with cleanliness."*

*I told the story once again: "The neat freak," I said. "Like me. The father of my children, all grown up now. We were meant for each other. He used to come into the house from work. I would have it immaculate. I would stand in the far corner with his camera-ready children ready to greet him. The breadwinner. Like your fisherman, you said, who used to line the family up for review on payday. Mine, M., he would smile and step towards us, all affection for his family. Then pause half-way to pick up a piece of dust or dirt I had missed on the walkway. The perfect family we were, except for that."*

*"You've told that story many times," he said, and I knew there was some barb he would add to it. Passive-aggression. That's what they call it in the Psych Books. "He did this once, I suspect. You multiply it in the telling, since one day is always many days for you. This is not something your poor ex-husband 'used to do'. This is a brute fact, I'd call it. An embarrassed gesture before his family. Something you never forgave him for. No more than you forgive him now for what you found, rummaging through his closets when you visited for Thanksgiving."*

*And then he spoke of a character from the opera. I remember sitting in the Met as a young girl with my aunt, listening to the tunes, day-dreaming, never getting the plots and music straight. Waiting for intermission. And he says something*

*about laughing at the Old Geloso lusting for his would-be wife or ward. The bass or baritone. And the ward could cuckold him with every stagehand on the set and still the Old Geloso bleating his rage would and should have no sympathy. All that self-justification from men who wrote the libretti.*

*"Your Freeport friends had left the Colony," he said, "that clutch of summer-homes, now haunted by white night-gowns, the sheets covering the furniture. None embroidered with fantails. None green with yellow rings. There where reputation counts, you say, as it never would for low-lifes like myself. Remnant of the Old Days, those houses are, built in 1876, burned to the ground at century's end then rebuilt to be burned again in the 30s. Still with the central dining hall from the old days. Perhaps at some point in history, your forebears forgot the hotel chits of the past and thought you could all be family in this place, eating together, sharing the tennis court. Perhaps time would stop and you would all maintain your privileges and stations in life; the workers would continue flushing your toilets and digging your wells, gathering your wood for the fireplace and hauling your trash away on Fridays, implying that you were all interbreeding royalty, when in fact, you were simply back-biting gossips in high season." That was the sort of thing that villain (in the old sense, as he taught me) used to say to me. "By late century, greed got the best of the owners' highfalutin exclusivity. And now you hardly recognize the querulous renters from away who begrudgingly visit the dining hall. You hardly know the insolent youths on the walkways, or the adults, tossing trash into the swimming pool, the kids intent on their playthings: none purple with green rings, or green with yellow rings.*

*"Life is simply not the same as your pretentious forebears wanted it to be, not as my own did on the rock-faces of Kennebunk, posing for the well-composed photos with the background sea. The pasts they reverenced there were fraudulent, and instead of insulating you from the debasements of society, all they did was stockpile goods for you, the beaded ceintures of the glossy catalogues, funds you could fritter away on the internet while the man who loved you sat appalled right next to you.*

*"Two months before that day, he came along, I came along, that is, claiming to be the love of your life. Claiming that your self-aggrandizing tragedies of domestic life, the two or three husbands on barely speaking terms with you, the directionless kids, the Tesla plug in the driveway—claiming all that was bullshit, that what you had was no more nor less than what any woman could have, who paused to breathe the night air of September, instead of spending three days ensuring that all the furniture was covered, the towels washed and folded in thirds for the winter."*

*And then on about his Eloise, dead for a decade. "I talk to my Eloise, over the telephone, then in the book I wrote for her, where our voices and selves merged so thoroughly I could no longer distinguish the real woman from the one I fictioned in her place." How much of this am I to take, I ask you? "Even here, talking to you, your voice dissolves into the typescript and soon enough I will forget that too. I promised her—in fiction, years after she was gone—I promised her I would love her through the others, now through you. I would love my darling Eloise as Dante does his Beatrice through her screens and conduits—through you, the one I call the Woman of Today."*

*He lies back, satisfied, I suppose, the only hearer of his lecture. "How well that seemed to go," he thinks; and I might add with caustic wit: "much better than it did in life."*

**IIB. In the Penal Colony**

The coffee brews, set against the tasteful china of the tea set, left by her forebears less to her than to her home in the Old Port Colony of Freeport.

It is not the act that counts, she thinks. Not in and of itself, as the philosophers at Wesleyan had taught her. What counts is life and the children you brought up still living with your ex and your relation to the people who raised you, their forebears too, the silverware, the properties they cared for, the majestic views in summer, the friends all with hyphenated names. You owed it to them. Owed it to that past of yours, recorded in the old photos, or the trinkets stored discreetly in the closet-space.

The pictures in the yearbook, each of your classmates with the smug pouts of summer-folk. Youngsters at college, ready for marriage and for life. Ready to teach or doctor or live on their inheritance. The cottages in their subdued blue trim. The lathed skirts of the cellar space like socks of lace. The house rules of the Colony.

You cannot just let go. You cannot give in to the first man who comes along, one who laughs at the Windsor chairs in the dining hall, with their brass plaques bearing witness to their donors, those who once lounged on their lounge chairs by the heated pool, all in tasteful blue, faded in the summer sun. Your choice of consorts is as crucial as your choice of friends. What an insult, both to you and perhaps more grievous still to them, should you show up with a man who did

not own a dress shirt, who could not boast of the requisite black suit. Who didn't care for the conventions of society. Who could never accompany you to a benefit.

What would your children think: "You're not dating, are you, Mom?" Adding "Him? My God!" Your ex. Your Manhattan friends. Even the low-lifes on the dirt road to his house, "Bobbing about" he used to say, and you would laugh uneasily, knowing too well the classless nature of gossip in this summer place. No one, even he himself, buys the "just friends" thing. Not with those blue-collar eyes leering at you. You never know, in this place, what their range of acquaintances might be, or what is shared in the whispers of your pedigreed friends. All would get back to the husbands in the Colony, or the man you met in the dining hall: "My wife, you know," the old fool propositioned me. "We have not shared a room in years." And I told him this and all he did was laugh in that crass laugh of his: "Fantastic! You rub shoulders with men more socially inept than me. I think I have a shot!"

Then he laughed at me for watching some reality TV show—*The Bachelorette*, I think—lying next to my C., something to amuse her—a mother/daughter thing. He teased me, forcing me to confess. "I couldn't tell you," I said. "I was afraid you'd think I'm shallow." It was a joke, but he shot back at me: "You *are* shallow," he said. "But I don't give a shit."

We were sailing past Saddleback, deep into the story of the couple who drowned there years ago when he worked on the fishing boat. We passed Round Rock, then sailed north by Rattlesnake. "More bullshit history," he cried, as if to me. "There was a whale out here near Ragged Island and

all the locals in their crappy power boats roared out to see it as if the poor creature were no more than the entertainers on the TV shows you watch. And one of the boats went down, stove in by the whale, the skipper shrieked, when they pulled the dumb-ass lubber from the water. 'Why I even saw the blubber stuck in the hull holed by the leviathan himself', B. claimed, with enough experience to know better." And he kept his eyes on the compass, a chaos of rocks surrounding us, and no wonder when you are all bound up with the thrill of the whale-watch you run into a ledge and feel the whole boat shake as it did when we ourselves bumped over one at Jaquish. "There's your heritage," he sneered. "Like the imagined blubber in the hull bearing witness to the whale attack—just bullshit to hide your own incompetence." All of it, he claimed, was bunk. And us? Or me? ...

I turn back to my computer screen. This is not for me, this tale, even though he claims otherwise. It's one he tells to everyone, to Eloise, and I, I am just another listener, mere surplus or disposable, no better than when I lay on the bed with my daughter watching television, the butt of his crude jokes. Has he not seen the pristine cottage with the light-blue trim? The Tesla parked in the roadway? The tasteful color schemes of my living space?

**III. Reprise**

"So this is the story?"

"My darling Eloise, it is the best that I can do."

"But why would I want to hear this? Apples falling by the roadways in August. On the August soil I was never permitted to tread or see. Then this crap of a Woman of Today.

What have you done? Fallen in love again? With others, not with me? There were always other women. And now, even to construct this tale, you tell of one of them. A rival she would be, if I gave a crap about you. ..."

"You love me, Eloise. Don't try to deny it. I know what love is, both at its best and worst. I can wail at the injustice of emotion with the best of them."

"... Even in your most innocent of tales—apple-picking, your life a dream that bores, like all dreams do, all but the dreamer—there is my rival still—a Woman of Today, you call her now ..."

"Oh Eloise! Even you must laugh at your horseshit analyses! The Woman of Today is just a conduit of love for you. Do you recall my invective on the phone, when you left your car parked in my driveway as I had expressly forbidden you to do? You were to fly to Santa Fe, cuckolding me once again, I guess, although we never called it that—even then, as I exploded in rage to your voicemail, only to find you asleep in the driver's seat, having missed your flight for me—all weak in the knees I was, as I think back, as I carried you up the narrow stairs to my apartment. Even then, I would wish, but not with hope. 'The hand of Eve or Eloise', seen through the ivy. You held your séances, the openings for the paintings of your wealthy friends. Indifferent, if aware at all, your family was, to your chess-playing consort in Los Angeles. Do you recall the side story in the illustrations of your children's books? You drew our history there, in your collages: you, portrayed in the margins, appalled that I would think of reaching for you, then struck down in pity when you realized the love you had for me. Perhaps that's why I reasoned I could make you live again through a Woman of Today. I

would stare at your images—the old photos of the memorial and the pages of your children's books—and let the love flow through her to you."

"This is such bullshit. The children's book? That was years ago. It was supposed to be my break-out book, but then just lapsed into the sequence of un-read books I wrote for the press my family once set up for me. The truth is, you are consorting with a rival still, as you always used to do. Then crying out all lovey-dovey to me, as if I were the chump who'd fall for it."

"You've fallen for much worse! The dwarf? 2005, it was."

"Don't try to make me laugh."

"Or the pilot of the F-16? The one who tried to feel you up in your compression suit. Or the obese film-maker you claimed he was, who couldn't get aroused unless he was fellatio'ed in the bathtub."

"Ha. You've done it again. You always try to make me laugh when the conversation turns awry. It's a good thing the men I've had never embarrass me. Except for you. Because you're a shit. But I don't care. This tale is about superfluity. Are you surprised I know the word? We used to read a lot at Hampshire and St Johns, even though I was so whacked out on drugs I never put what little I retained into order."

"The random fruit of education."

"Like your apple drops, I guess. See? Now I get it! What's the point of anything? Zucchini in August. Right. This has nothing to do with apples and pies with bear-fat crust. This has everything to do with your philandering. Everything to do with the Woman of Today, as you call her. Even the smiling mother of your student, out there in Kansas somewhere,

Joan you call her now, the one you ended up forsaking for Linda Jane, it must have been. Her own husband dead from the pills or poison. Her smiling in the photo you found on the internet. Thirty years or more ago it must have been and you mourn her still, even if you are unsure whether she still lives. You don't need me. These are not ersatz loves for me, as you would have it. They are ..."

"Where did that word come from?"

"I read it in a book. Your book, perhaps, or one of them. You don't need to fill your home with tramps in the autumn. What has your life been, after all? All this love, you say, and holding me at distance, buried in the deserts of New Mexico."

"I love you, my darling Eloise. The Apple of my Eye!"

"Stop. It's not even remotely amusing. If you had loved me when it counted, I would still be with you. Instead of rotting with my face shattered by the gunshot."

"My darling, you are always with me, even in the most trivial of tales and life. Even in the worst of metaphors."

"Ha! So you say. Can you truly hear my voice in your tributes? Is my voice distinct from the voice of the others? Do you remember the sound when I cried out to you? The day I burst into tears on the stairwell? Looking back at you, as you reached your hand down to me? Can you still hear the rhythms of my murmuring when you woke me at midnight? Your hand stroking my side? Your breath in the crook between my shoulder and my neck? It was never me who turned away from your caress in derision."

"My darling Eloise! This is always how you get when I proffer love to you. Was it too much for you, that last time when I woke desperate for you, when I woke desperate for

anyone to hold and comfort me, that last night could you not have simply said: 'Time. I need time. Please. With time, the two of us can live forever'. I can still hear you wail for me when I stormed out of the room in agony. But it would have been enough, my darling Eloise. Just as it would have been enough had the Woman of Today simply said the same, instead of turning from me in a jealous snit on her last day with me, claiming that my touch disgusted her."

"Ha! It's all too easy now for you. Both of us gone and both despising you. No worry of resistance in your self-serving narratives. No worry about me running to the bathroom, feeding the dog, or simply going on a long rant about film or film school or the people here who talk art but finally have no idea what art is or why they are pretending to produce it. You don't stop to think about such things. You just conjure up all these People of Today, as you would have it. The Screen for Me, you call her. Even she is fictioned, just as is the idealized form you've made of me. I'm starving in Santa Fe, wolfing down the drugs like candy, letting the dogs run wild over me. No better than a corpse—like the one you used to call in late evening and then you drive in and somehow find a parking space and ..."

"Eloise!"

"... you would come in and have your way (you know the word that I should use of this!) and then you would give me some b.s. about proprieties and leave me there. A corpse then. A body, nothing more. It was the worst thing you ever did. So here you are hurling your invective still. At me. At the two of us. Even at poor ... Joan you call her? ... probably dead of emphysema from the poisoned air of Kansas plains, and who would think even to inform you of that? So much

your friendship meant to her and those she loved. How much good did you do her, her first husband dead, when she hooked up with the farmer, who had never ventured more than ten miles from the family homestead, and then, only to buy parts for machinery? And how much good for ... I forget her name ... somewhere in South Dakota. Or was it Linda Jane? the one you claimed you met in Nebraska, although it was actually Tulsa and it was only you who could not keep the cities straight.

"They had apple trees when I went to Hampshire. I walked out into the untended orchards in evening. No one thought of theft or even vandalism from the local frat boys then. It was as if my dogs or imaginary friends were with me walking through the moonlight, chased by our shadows. I took the ripest from the trees themselves, hid them in my shirt as if I were saving them. As if they were abandoned puppies in the pound or some such thing! When in truth, it was me who was abandoned. By my family, by you had you been there, you, who at the time were teaching in California or maybe carrying on with Linda Jane, or trying to repay Joan for her imagined hospitality on the great plains of Kansas. Even then you had abandoned me to drugs, to the alcohol, and to familial neglect.

"I took the fruit from the trees. Carefully, cherish and 'not let fall', as Frost would say, 'for all that fell went surely to the cider bin'. Yet it was like cashing the wrong check at the supermarket. I felt I'd sinned and would be caught and would be jailed for life. Like a young child, I was then, thinking that. Or an older child locked in the nut-house, the only place I ever felt safe. The only place I could become a child again.

"Where were you then, with your professions of affection? The only man who loved me for what I am, you say and others say, for how I was? Whether I formed an Arabesque for you or fell asleep on the floor of the theatre, my head in your hands. Still of no use or earthly good to me in the future, now closed off to me, just as I am now to you."

The leaves crush beneath my feet in the morning frost. It is the way the trees fell in the November storm when my Penelope, She Who Would Not Wait for Me, I called her then—my once lover I should say, left me for the arms of another. "The right decision," I still hear her cruelly say, even though I know such things involve no conscious choice at all.

It took days to cut the limbs from the power lines. The frost relentless. The smoke curling up from the woodstove. The boat hulls out of their element, balanced on the jackstands.

## 1.3 RED RIGHT RETURN: DIRGE FOR A SEASCAPE

He became his admirers
—W.H. Auden

**Prelude**

Like others, she has gone, her pomp and accusations too, the tongue-clucking certitudes of love and those of lovers who have left, now those of the Woman of Today. I lie back in the tedia of grief, having gathered up in recompense the once consoling sketches and photos of my darling Eloise, and I listen without thinking, or I remember once listening, for the phone ring, the voice of her, a goodnight kiss or the claimed ersatz embrace. And I might fall asleep in the aegis of these images, the stricken face of Eloise at ease at last and watching over me. Or is it just the superfice of her, the

light once reflected from her form into the camera lens?

A half-decade dead or more, she is; she scolds me still, chiding me for infidelities, mine and hers as well, and I will tell her, half-asleep, her image formed before my face, her Titian-lovely face I called it once, staring into my face, not to fret, my darling Eloise, these loves that come and go and now are gone, these loves are merely screens for you, the gloss of deeper love I have for you. You must know what I promised you—years ago it was—I promised I would do my best to love you as I should have loved you in the past and love you even through a Woman of Today.

The lovely face of Eloise then fades, and I will sleep in the sea-screen of images not knowing who it is I loved or whether the entire rigmarole of emotion, as Mother might have put it once, were as unreal as the things we think in sleep are mere illusions too.

**I. The Painted Buoys**

The buoys shown above are like those painted by my once neighbor Stan—an older man of the generation we young were barred from speaking to. A man known less to me than to the drunken sots that passed for parents in those days—mine, those of my pretentious friends, those who had no children and hardly thus deserved the name—one of few whose fame reached farther than the town limits. Stan painted landscapes—all that I know for sure of him—a genre would-be aristocrats of his generation were expected both to own and to produce when the sun was right and there were no money-laundering charity events to attend. A

rich man's Andrew Wyeth he was, I guess. Yet his were not those his early contemporaries would consider "right." His were spare and often sparely-lit, establishing at mid-century a new standard of what was "the proper thing to do," redefining landscape painting in this state, such that anyone who attempts it now must suffer by comparison.

A casement, say, from an interior, framing an outdoor land- or seascape—ingenious once, a cliché now, with examples in all the redundant galleries of Rockland, Camden, and lesser coastal towns today. The harbor, with its beige and featureless water supporting the boats that haul the lobsters in—the colors of the hulls as artificial as the tastes of the boat-builders painting them.

On my neighbor's wall is a harbor scene, Mackerel Cove I think, on the tip of one of the two peninsulas that form the town of Harpswell. Hung squarely, with the shy hues matching perfectly the wall itself. The cove lit in the Golden Hour, even though from this magnificent cottage on the coast, you could turn your head and almost see the cove itself. The natural colors of the place struck by streaks of red and green—never the stuff of the nature represented here!—the pigments of the fishing boats, the buoys marking the entrances. There are dozens like this, hanging on the walls of the bourgeois aristocracy of Old Maine. You can find them too "caged in the great zoos" of the art world, as Patti Smith would say—galleries, museums, town buildings, up the coast as far east as the rich have set up stake.

All these document the glories of the sea surface, the light reflected from the transom sheer, the ungraspable sky in summer, the accoutrements of wealth itself. That air of

Maine! never quite the pellucid blue you see from the painters of Monhegan years ago, who took the azures of the rare and clear fall days as norm—Henri and Marsden Hartley, Bellows, Rockwell Kent.

> *I don't know how it is done, she says. I wrote of this and sent you the story; you wrested my voice to the surface, mocking my boyfriend who loved me even less than you. It's magic, like poetry itself. You step forward in your dance shoes, then leap and all the energy of your pace lifts you, and you float there, unmoored, as you would say, awaiting the strong arms of your partner, or the stage-boards to drift up to you ...*

Housed on the second floor of a gallery in Manhattan, a show of Stan's works once led me in—their subjects not the placid harbors of my home state, but the large steel buoys that might mark their entrances. You see such buoys in the sad paintings displayed on the walls (complete with hopeful retail price) on nearly all restaurants and gift shops in Maine today, and of course even in my own house, painted by an amateur, Bob's wife, or former wife she may be now for all I care, having been subjected to her rants a year before they moved away for good. A single red or green buoy centered in such works, or in radical variants, slightly to the left or right. The reflection painted in horizontal bands placed precisely below the buoy image, reaching to the viewer in the proper viewpoint, just the way it is taught in the instruction manuals or even those old shows of Bob Ross that so enraptured me in the black-and-white TV, where I could only imagine the abstrusely named colors alluded to on the grey scale.

Stan's buoys are unlike those of the gift shops of Main Street, with their strips of reflected red or green. Instead of floating on a waveless or wavelet sea, Stan's buoys are hauled up on a beach, I assume for repair or inspection, or to dry the mussels and the seaweed clean, or perhaps to be merely sold off as scrap—who knows the history of depicted things?—and it is here one discovers that what we call a buoy joins a field of metaphor: only the upper portion of the object seems known, which iceberg-like, mushroom-like, floats with its bulk unseen beneath the surface—shark fins, the swirl spotted by the fisherman—that bulk in turn fixed by a flexible chain, itself fixed to the bottom by a large "mushroom" mooring; here the metaphor doubles back on itself as we consider the complex of mycelia beneath the forest floor supporting the death cap or trumpet. And I determined then that Stan himself, like those buoys, like all else, the superficial Stan I knew or barely knew, Stan too ... or Eloise or myself ...

For what we see so complacently and what we think to see—that is never quite what is, as these paintings show. We are far too drawn to surfaces. To the sea surface, not the depths of its currents. To the mushroom, drawn in a schoolchild's composition book—three pencil strokes and he has it—not the supportive root! The buoys in Stan's paintings show what buoy is, the grandeur of the counterweight, the hauled-out chains to the mooring. All these together, the *Ding-an-sich*, as it were, like lifeforms indexed by Latin names of the species—words unknown to and unused by the Romans or even the medieval schoolmen hunched over their manuscripts in the candlelight. The miniaturist working not from life but from his pattern-book, warming his

hands while he waits, choking on the fumes of the candlelight.

The beings of the painter or mycologist, these selves of Eloise, these selves of mine, one would say—are they still part of the same self, the same life? Or just a tangle of things and events like digressions in the narrative? The buoy one never sees singly on the sea, but numbered in sequence with others, marking the channels of the seaway, safe from the fatal ledges of the sea-floor ...

> *Eloise still calls to me, up to here with my egg-head obliquity. Eloise ... Is it your birthday once again? Or what would have been your fifty-fifth had I not lost you years ago? Were you wandering in Manhattan too in those days of the late 70s?, a dancer passing in her urban elegance the student, all scruffed up like a character from Dostoevski, crossing her path in embarrassed interest? And did we exchange a nod of politesse perhaps in the entrance to the gallery?*

I am distracted by the ambience—the white noise behind the notes we choose—the suppressed coughs of the audience. The perfumes of the guests, or the patrons at concerts or galleries ...

**II. Anniversaries**

> *I awake from a dream or into the dream, and try to hear the phrase a Woman of Today never said to me in life or did so grudgingly, her jaw set in resignation, all the emotion drained from her voice and soul. So simple, that expression of affection. It's the sort of thing Eloise would say to me in passion I suppose, then laugh, and perhaps that laugh derided me, or perhaps expressed*

*the absurdity we feel when finding we are overcome with love. The words flow over me and I cling to them, tightening my grip as if moored there rather than drifting in the dream-state.*

I am now fully awake, at work at my work-bench, knowing the metaphor may not work at all. Perhaps all this folderol of analysis (the phrase of a previous generation)—all was foolish. You allude to the depths of things but you end up discussing painting itself, which hardly lives beneath its surfaces. It might well be that nothing unknown lurked beneath Stan's colors or his suave civility, nor beneath the manners of the Woman of Today. All that was simple breeding, as it once was known—the pressed suit brought out for social occasions. As for Stan's belligerence, the wife-beating—all that, though known to all, was counter-weighted down beneath the surface, not by the force of his own reticence, but by the grim placidity of adults in those days, like my parents, for example, who could drive gin-soaked to the nearest gatherings of their marvelous friends, drunk as well, of course, and spend a loud and boisterous evening of emotions and wit faked over the Scotch bottles, only to drive home in a stupor and fall asleep, lucky once again to be alive. What did they think we did not know of them? What was there not to know?

*My friends gather on the balcony, the host unrecovered from the drunken fall years earlier, unsteady on her feet, her mind gone and replenished only by the tales we have told her of her youth, the view across the Sheepscot as magnificent as it was when we swam there on her wedding years ago, or as portrayed in a seascape*

*of today. We talk of pasts we lived with our model families, speaking now, almost joyfully, of beatings and hateful fondlings and recriminations and affairs with the neighbors, gossip and condescension, and spite hurled at mis-behaving kids, gin bottles hidden in the cellar space. A well-bred classmate laughs. Her older brother once played bongo drums for us young admirers. And it could have been the Woman of Today, folding the towels in the linen-closet: "For the first time in my life I realize I too grew up in a normal family."*

Stan's wife, brought up in the odious Colony, with the name one would expect of the women once attached to him, had left, or been left, or took her battered face to the lawyers, and Stan, I guess, from what I heard, was alone, or could have been, I think, through his sixties, the last complete decade of his life. Painting as he always had. His work the antidote for all the griefs of life.

A consort then linked arm and spirit with this aging man, now seventy, he must have been, to start life free and once again for the two of them. One of those familiar well-dressed and sweet-smelling women I knew throughout my life, who would hold their drinks with grace, barely sipping them, lest the entire illusion of their happiness and comfort be stripped away for all of us. So few of that generation remain, and I can no longer ask Mother for these mischievous and mean-spirited details that at the time seemed hardly worth the knowing. There they sat, the two of them, friends for years, cooing at one another over the lunch-table, his hand brushing her aging but alluring flesh, as I passed in the hallway, uninvited and barely seen, as their friends whispered,

or in a day would whisper among themselves "It's so wonderful; they are in love, in love like school children!" thinking they, the couple and the viewers too, had found the faux-Floridian fountain of youth, perhaps, when in fact, beneath that superfice of joy, in fact, if fact ...

Love! At this age! What were they thinking? And why was I not thinking too?

> *I lie back, resounding still the sordid invective of the Woman of Today: "... vile ... disgusting ... lies ..." Inflected in that accent of a woman from away. Even as mere screen, she is a desecration of all I meant to feel for her. All I felt too late for Eloise, buried in the desert sand, and here with me today.*
>
> *In those once sun-lit days, I could put the phone down confidently, or even rest it beside my head, knowing she would never go, letting her words and insults rain down on me like the heavy mists of Maine, like music washing over me, doubling the metaphor once again, like expressions of love only she might feel. And I would laugh at my darling Eloise, as I stumbled half-asleep to the carport, sparing her the drug-addled drive to my living space.*

It was not enough to see. Not enough to gaze over the early morning calm of the Maine sea surfaces in summer. You had to feel the forms within your hands and in the medium. The graceful shapes of the hulls of the fishing boats. The broken ledge, lunging unseen through the water. It was like Eloise, as I once said, "Drawing her, her form just formed itself upon the surface grain and on the pencil edge." Like that, Stan too must once have thought, feeling within him the contours of the coast he thought magnificent.

*On this birthday of Eloise, we know we will never have this day to celebrate again, too wrapped up in the remnant taunts of the Woman of Today and what she takes to be her acid wit. I have prepared for this. Only the least of things can be unsaid, I know, and all the retorts I have formulated lie still, if in abeyance, still in my head, and I scramble out of the hole once dug for me, out of the grave or the abyss, and I leave my grand Last Word on Things unuttered there beneath the handfuls of earth thrown over me. She knows, even Eloise herself must know in some sense, everyone must know my angry wit is there, ready-to-hand as old Heidegger would have it. They know I hold the superfices of their lives in contempt. I despise the towel-folding, the concern for neighbors' tastes and views, the days that pass with nothing but a swept floor to show for them. I care nothing for propriety, but just for her, for Skip, I called her once, for her purported sailing skills ...*

Too trite, those subjects had once seemed to him, the buoys floating in the seaways. Yet perhaps, he one day thought, they were not as they were seen by dilettantes. There was more to them than the numbered sequences charted by sailors, to what they called the nuns and cans exposed to sight, to the singularity of perspective, and to the artificial rules for the reflecting wavelets. As the years passed, the truths of things came back to him as they had to him as a teenager. The way they came to me when Eloise set down the rules for me—how I would look at her, posed like that, a mock student in her art class.

All the training and detail, the palettes of color—all was natural now and he gave it no thought as he stared at the navigation buoys he had sailed by all his life, affixed to the ledges and obstructions of the passageways. Here, in Stan's paintings, hung expertly in the second-floor gallery in Manhattan, here those buoys lay, beached, like dormant whales, by the Coast Guard, their underpinnings in the flagrant air. Icebergs, the gallery visitors would say, seeing this, if they knew this, if they too had sailed the Maine coast as children, chanting the mantras of sailing back to port "Red Right Return" even though, in the centerboard skiff, it hardly mattered where the channel was.

*The daylight gives way to the half-light of November. All the sadnesses coalesce from coast to coast. The last words of Eloise, the drive to LAX for my last view of her; Penelope in the arms of the suitors, and the invective of a Woman of Today engulfing me. I turn to the story that will take me out of it—the woman Stan, at my age, pretended he could love when both were past that likelihood. Stan constructing his landscapes in the golden hour of summer.*

*Remember now, I tell myself, remember without fail: as Eloise lived her life, correcting her mirrored pose, her hand gripped tight on the barre, as Stan imagined staring at his canvasses, as a Woman of Today adjusts the color-schemes—**you must bring beauty into the world in any way you can—a dance move or a pencil stroke, a tone-shift, or the labored phrase of a cursus**.*

*Above the cedar chest is a sea-wall in Nassau, Stan's gift to us, with my father's initials scratched as if graffiti*

*by a passing vandal. A sole figure sits on the spare park bench on the seawall. Idling. Waiting for a companion who is late or never to appear at all.*

Love, art, beauty itself—it was all simply a matter of character, so Stan must have thought, establishing his gruff self at the center of all his friends and admirers, his Corbusier-like house not yet demolished by the realtors. But of course his much-envied affair, after a few obligatory rolls in the hay, which must have been rewarding for both of them, or perhaps were not, given how the infirmities of age rack the pleasure from you, could not overcome the well-known private outbursts and bruised ribs. The two of them then course back to their old lives; the drunken platitudes of well-bred friends proceed as if nothing had happened.

*You never know with these things, I try to think, as I fall asleep again. Whether life is like those buoys—superficial guides through the ledges and currents, with all the important things below the surface—the counterweight that keeps them upright in the water, the chain that links them to the ocean floor. All the grand invisibilities of which you rightly take no notice.*

*Is that what love is too, I try to think?*

*Is that what our stalwart renouncing of emotion is as well? The invective that never quite touches on the way things are? The grand self-justifications? Truth? Honesty? All the duplicitous self-salving of things?*

*In the end, there is, I think, no way to speak of this, since love cannot be merely words. It lies in the very shouting out of things. Not in the scheduled calls, the queries and ripostes, the luxuriating myths of color and of form.*

There is an island stretched out before Stan's once high-modernist house. It came to him from his family just as the means of building this very house came to him from them. Long, narrow, oriented North to South like all the islands and the ledges in Casco Bay carving passageways to the harbors, spread out before his studio in perfect perspective, its two fir-topped ends untouched by the winter storms. An island he gazed at all his professional life, and never once insulted with a painting stroke, before auctioned off by his inheritors.

**III. "About Suffering, They Were Never Wrong …"**

I don't know how they did it, those old-timers! But they had a way about them. A certain nonchalance, bravado it might be called, that they had learned during the Depression, not letting things get to them, then surviving the next War as many of their age did not. Their wracking coughs and bruised faces, their lovers leaving in derision, the contempt of their children and associates—nothing seemed to affect them. And since they had done nothing to gain what gifts they found they had, they imagined themselves blessed in certain mysterious and inexpressible ways, not by God, about Whom they gave not a tinker's damn (whatever that means), but by Fate, the American way, Hard Work, or whatever it was that doled out the sum of things to all of them. The skill of the painter, not a product of the Art School, but a quality merely brought out by aristocracy itself, which stripped away whatever kept the inner light from shining through with sprezzatural glow. For all their schools were finishing schools at best, the Old-School way

of things, teaching the drunken sots how to behave with others no better than themselves.

Father, lost in the picket fence of things, with his family posing for the photographs on the way to the summer-stock musicals. Stan in the camera lens, his head turned shyly down, as if the very publicity were a bane to his art. Or Eloise, lost in her dance moves, her polo, posing for the enamored draftsman and turning her coy face away from him.

We're all doomed to it, I guess; so it is pointless to imagine the best way to struggle through, there having been millennia of deaths and rumors of deaths and stories about death. Even perfecting one, your own perhaps, at sea or lying in state with your histories plaqued about it, would leave you with the feeling that out there, somewhere in history, on the lips of the lover at his deathbed, his latest consort at his side, or in the tale told for generations until the family line died or got so diluted everyone forgot it had existed—somewhere out there was the story that turned yours to hash, such that hearing it, the best praise your listeners could muster was to sit civilly in polite silence. Like distant relatives at a funeral.

It seemed, later in life, that everyone had held a dying loved one's hand but him. Brother and sister, a continent away it was, stroking the father's hands for the last time and assuring me that all was well, this bad day in January, regretting that the morphine he theatrically begged for as his wife of thirty-five years (my mother, for God's sake!) left the room in discomfort—regretting that the euthanistic dose had been too small and that he would once again wake without her, discovering only two of his three children there.

Or my second cousins, once-removed, holding my favorite cousin's hands while she slipped away, this time quietly, as if doing it for them. Or so it's said. Or the father of A.—love of my life as I once styled her, as likely others did as well—the four of them gathered there as he came out of the fog of it: "Am I dying? am I dying?" A kinder man had never walked the earth, it seemed to them and to all who would gather at the memorial. "Yes," it must have killed them now to say. "But we're all here. We're all here with you." And this man grasped the air around him, the death agony I am told characteristic of certain kinds of death, where the body angrily refuses to go or summons up its last objection, and he reached, desperately, for the ceiling as if to catch the last breath of air his heart and lungs denied.

I recall my father as a younger man, lying in his own defecation as the anaphylactic shock took over his abilities to speak, somehow making it the gurney when the drivers slapped the mask on him, a day later barely to escape death from the convulsions of alcohol withdrawal. "Who knew?" the few adults who knew would whisper among themselves, the perfectly reflected buoy in a bad painting framing their face. "Who knew?" And all the young kid could think was "Who could not?"

Stan's children gather about him, waiting for the old belligerent bastard to breathe his last and let them sell off his envied island view in peace. Nothing but laudation for the dead, they grimly think. Let Stan become his life-work: "The paintings must speak for themselves," they resolved, as if the buoys could simply float calmly past in the open sea, unharnessed, or the lifeforms happily breathe as in the sketchbooks of children. No need to explain the unkempt depth of

things to those who brook no uncertainty. No need to mourn for Stan or his compatriots, or even to appeal to the Woman of Today.

Eloise turns away. She turns in a dance move, one she learned in Manhattan, perfected while the men in her life said to her what I have said. She hears nothing, feels nothing, as she pauses, side-to the viewer, in the perfect grace of the Arabesque.

It is over now, for all of them. The easels rotted in the black earth. Elders' ashes mixed with the tidal debris of the Basin. Eloise in her desert tomb. The insults of the Woman of Today creased deep into the linen folds. Stan's Corbusier-like house, once clinging to the fragile rock-face in Harpswell, razed with a tasteful and inoffensive cottage built over the footprint. The island he had bought simply to preserve the view—that too, too unentailed to keep the houses off. Nothing of its old history left, even in the sketchbooks. All taking with them their mangled roots, leaving only the metric elegies. The last caress of Eloise on the ivory handle of the handgun.

# PART TWO:

# PASTORALE

## 2.1 THE S-TURN

> There is no such thing as restoring an old binding without obliterating its entire history.
>
> —E. P. Goldschmidt, *Gothic and Renaissance Bookbindings*, 1: 123

The S-turn turned a quarter mile from the house, and to a six-year-old, the angles were more oblique than they ever would seem later in life. To pass the turn was not allowed, and in those days, the appropriate metaphor would be that it was like narrative itself, the road past the turn forbidden the way unbounded digressions were considered a form of perversity that decent readers avoided at all cost, and editors, upholding the unguarded truths of tradition, hacked away into coherence.

"Do not pass the S-turn," her mother had ordered them. Or was it an admonition simply passed down through her older brothers, perhaps the way other sententious bits had been, those invented by the parents or simply imagined by the children, or perhaps enforced by the neighbors, who in those days, responsible adults as they had all been raised to be, looked after children, whether their own or spawned by others. No one could imagine that on the stroll through one of the fields surrounding the house an old wagon wheel with broken spokes would appear through the grass, destroying all the certainties of life as it was lived and the injunctions of whoever might be in charge that day and whatever mood they might be in.

You didn't have to worry about Dad. He was the sort that neighbors considered kindly and hard-working, although perhaps a bit lenient on the matter of child-rearing—deficiencies easily made up for in the woman he had married some fifteen years earlier, a woman who resented most, not the man himself, not the hours he spent laboring for her and her family, but the brutal economic facts of life in that region—"the County" as known to the locals, upcountry east of the North Woods—where you could work your fingers to the bone and still not have the wherewithal even to visit your sister, the one who struck it rich, marrying a well-heeled man in Kennebunk and never thinking about work again.

It was Dad who went to the store with two of them, maybe three, "piled" as it were, into the back seat of a car so musty she never learned the make or model, just the smell of the old seats. He put his cigarettes on the counter, then

the candy bars for each of the three of them. He came a quarter short it must have been, and without a word or even a sigh of regret, handed the cigarettes back to the store-clerk. It was the sort of thing he did with such frequency that it would take years to determine which particular act should serve as the epitome. "It was so like him," you would be able to say, after he was gone. "It was just the way he always was."

Years later, at his deathbed, she had imagined herself picking up the now frail body and carrying him through the fields—a walk he had made every day when they were young—out past Roger's cabin who himself would die of cancer there in his 70s, then past and through the woods that always beckoned to them as kids. She should have asked one of her brothers to help, she thought; Craig would have done in it a heartbeat. But the mother would have insisted on accompanying them, wailing as if the tragedy were hers alone. And it would thus be years before she made the walk herself, weeping now for the two of them, for all of them, as she would not have allowed herself to do then.[1]

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[1] Or, in a voice far more authentic than I will ever possess: "I will forever remember how devastated I was that day sitting by his bedside. I didn't want him to die in his bed. I wanted to pick him up and carry him around the farm, to the pond, up to the back field, past my brother Roger's cabin then down through the field. He walked that route every day that I can remember. I think he would have loved feeling the wind on his face, knowing somehow where he was even though he was unconscious and been so pleased. I should have asked my brother Stevie to carry him for me. He would have done it in a heartbeat. I resisted asking knowing that my mother would

The S-Turn may have scared her; perhaps it was the place itself, what she had seen when driven past its limits, or perhaps she feared most the vehement forbidding. But the whole matter was put out of mind by Stevie, who would grow up with the reputation of fixing anything that didn't work, and consequently felt nothing like fear his entire life: any obstruction or annoyance could be fixed—it was simply a matter of discovering the correct tool or technique. Of looking deep into the mechanics of the thing and righting it. That was all there was to it. All else was of no import, like the proper functioning of speech. And after once leaving the writing lesson undone in fifth grade, or repeating the same sentence fifty times on the chalkboard as one version had it, he was said to object, without a trace of regret, that "he never said he was a friggin' poet" and spent the rest of the day in detention. Words, for him, were things that were unfixable; and rules thus were things that he paid no attention to.

There were no restrictions concerning any other direction on the farm, if there were no chores to be done; and on a failing farm, once the animals were fed, there was little else for them to do. East, west—however you would compute directions—all was open to them. It must have been

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have insisted on accompanying us and been talking and wailing theatrically the whole way! After he passed, I did the walk for him and I sobbed so hard for all the years he dutifully worked two jobs plus attending to all the farm chores just to provide for us, while enduring my mother's crazy unpredictable rages and her constant complaining and nagging! His reward was eight of his children having loved and adored him every day of his life."

that folks in those days were simply too busy to supervise their kids. The S-turn thus was distinguished, the sole limit to their minds and wanderings: "on the way to town" as well, a destination reachable only by car, all other directions pathless, to others than the cognoscenti of rural Maine, featureless woods and pasture—a road running obliquely through it, perhaps with neither source nor endpoint known or of any significance to any of them. It was on one of these, the past winter it must have been, where she wandered out in her snowsuit to the pond where she used to chase frogs in the summer. Thinking she could see the frogs asleep in the ice and searching for them in her own iced reflection, she felt the floor give way beneath her. In an instant she was up to her waist in the water, experiencing a cold she did not know existed.

At that age, you have no knowledge of how you escape the ice—nothing of the rolling side to side, or swinging one leg up onto the surface. So she struggled in the cold, with no feeling and later no memory of how deep the pond was, and eventually she was trudging through the snow home, her leggings frozen solid with new ice forming on her calves. The door resisted her. Or perhaps she had lost all feeling and control in her hands. When she felt the wall of warm air hit her, she had only a moment to prepare or relax, before her mother beat her into what she would later describe as near oblivion. The bruises must have healed quickly, if there were any bruises to be healed. But she never felt comfortable in the water again. Decades later, learning to swim in the August warmth of the sea near Kennebunk, she could still feel the fear overwhelm her. Not of drowning—that never was a concern to her. But of making a mistake—missing a

stroke, failing to breathe as instructed, disappointing the man who tried to encourage her—that too. Still hearing the mother's rage at her falling through the ice and so disrupting the normal rhythms of the day.

On the mid-summer day wandering through one of those fields, there was barely a memory of the frigidity of the water beneath the ice surface. And it was there that she and Stevie had found the wagon wheel. Immense, it was, its diameter greater than her own height. A treasure to her, one to be admired in the secret places in the woods, or even resting there in its own place; but to Stevie, it was simply one of those recalcitrant objects he so often found in life that "needed to be fixed." He stared at it for a moment, then tried to free its rim, pulling at the resistant grass, noting, as she did not, the three missing spokes, one with a fragment still wedged in what must have been the hub, and knowing, or admitting (something that would be rare in life for him), that it was beyond his capacity to make right and "good as new," whatever and whenever "new" might have been for it. It was an object, like Wallace Stevens' drawer "lacking the three glass knobs," on which you could see the missing parts more clearly than those that were there—the three missing spokes that would not even take their pattern from those half-rotted in the old wheel, but would be made new and perfect, setting a pattern for reality itself. "We need to get this to town," he said, thinking of "town" as where you might find the expert lathe-turner or craftsman or adult who would have the skills and know-how that he now only sensed would be his in the future. That craftsman or adult would shape and turn the first spoke with the exactness required for them to fit and set the pattern for the others, soon

to be replaced, he thought, and all they would need to do was roll it down the road to town—a distance they had no way of computing, sensing only that it would be further than it was when they were driven there by their kindly father. They would walk on the left as they had been taught—and once there, the problems they had not faced—who was this expert craftsman or wheelwright?—all those problems would doubtless solve themselves.

They first needed the wheel upright on the wheel rim. Their first attempt failed, and the wheel fell, rolling around itself, spiraling on its axis and settling back into the grass.

"You can't do it," Stevie said, with as much disdain as he could come up with for the younger sister he had spent most of his life trying to protect.

They raised it again, again with effort—what six-year-old can follow the inarticulate orders of the brother?—and lost control again, this time watching it roll ten feet away from them. The trick, it would seem, was never losing contact or control, and their next effort, step by patient step, brought the wheel back toward the road leading to town and the forbidden S-curve that there would be no possibility of avoiding.

"That's better," Stevie said, envisioning doubtless not the tedious walk to the distant town but only the perfected wheel, with all its new spokes shaved to perfection.

I wonder what the frustration was like for her, trying to follow the directions of her mentor, the older brother, who would later learn to fix anything that was broken in life; a mentor like a husband or a lover, whom she tried constantly to please, unable to feel the love for one, and feeling the love for the other and never finding the proper way to express

either. It was the way life was for her and for them, with her two children growing within her and then growing up for her, wishing the best for her, and never knowing who the distant lover was. Never knowing who would write this story from her own sketched version, with nothing but the anecdotes she shared to guide him.

By the time they got the wheel to the road, they were what they would later describe as "exhausted," although the word was unknown then to either of them. They knew only that they had made progress, and progress they could measure by eye, dragging and rolling the recalcitrant wheel over the drainage ditch bordering the road, hardly fearful of traffic, since in those days there was little traffic, and why, with all the bordering fields and woods open, would they use the road in the first place?

They were amazed at how easily the wheel turned on the road surface, and even then, knew the only danger was leaving it to its own devices, rolling as freely as they themselves might walk, and the importance of this mission—Stevie's determination to correct rather than simply admire, as she did, the broken wheel—it was the very importance of the thing that made them forget, or class as merely secondary, the injunction never to pass the S-turn. For how were they to get the wheel to the wheelwright without doing that? Unless, say, they were to wander in a wide arc through the woods and fields that they hardly knew at all, far around and past the S-turn, perhaps losing themselves and the wheel itself in a cedar swamp, the wheel that could barely move over the knee-high grass, let alone through the low brush on the edge of the distant woods. Or perhaps trespass on one of the adjacent potato fields where an owner would

have no recourse but the thought that they were out there stealing potatoes, as kids inevitably did, not of course to cook them or take them home to a family with hardly enough food to eat from their own farm, but simply to pelt each other with.

There was nothing to plan, and there would be nothing to forgive, so Stevie must have thought. The wheel must return to its ideal form, the Platonic being of it, as she or some professor would later style it, even though there was no wagon to which it could be fit, and no possible use to which such a mythical vehicle might be put.

The first car passed them, coming from town directly at them, where they diligently rolled the wheel on the left. You could see, or sense in some way, a certain hesitancy on the driver's part. Kids this age on the road that far from home? Maneuvering pointlessly a broken wheel that might have better been left in peace to rot on the old potato field? But that hesitancy itself overcome by the driver's need "not to be involved," to "let the kids be kids"—it ain't like they're stealing shit, he might have thought, or he might have thought any number of things. Then too, to make a driver stop for kids for any reason in those days—why one of them would have had to be bleeding and howling in the roadway, or perhaps defying your very adulthood by throwing a rock through your windshield—other than that, it was best just to let them be.

And it is best to let those drivers pass unencumbered by analysis. How else could I get to the main part of the story, as the two so carefully rolled the wheel down to the forbidden border of experience?

It must have taken them an hour or more. And by this, I mean (I am guessing the time) beginning with the point where they determined a way to move the thing, not from the moment they found it, which must have been shortly after what constituted lunch, the careless peanut butter sandwiches which her mother made not with love but with something approaching hate. There was now progress that even they could sense, as the familiar landscape vanished about them, vanished in all directions, side to side, ahead and behind them. The cars, even, no longer passing in indifference but perhaps with brake-lights and once stopping to ask them something—something she couldn't hear clearly as Stevie ordered her to balance the wheel upright, while he dealt with the busy-body driver. Whatever it was he said or tried to say, it must have been enough, and the driver moved on. Asking if they could help? Asking where they lived? Perhaps even the most appropriate response—awe for the task they had set themselves, admiration for being so far on their way. You didn't in those days shake your head in scorn at what would be most easily dismissed as the general OCD of kids, who never seemed to fall victim to the boredom more characteristic of life for adults.

Because of this, the timelessness of the mission, there was no way to judge, even in the retelling, how long the journey took, or what percentage of the projected journey had been completed, or how much of the daylight left for them that day had been used up. The importance of the day lay simply in passing the S-curve, which they did with the expectation of impunity, that invulnerability itself a product of the monumentality of the task. She felt, as Stevie likely did not, a pang, almost a burn of excitement. Not fear, which

was an emotion she knew well, but something at age six she could not yet distinguish. It was almost as if they had moved, passing the S-curve, into adulthood or its nearest equivalent.

And she felt, as the curve wound right and laboriously back to the left, that the days of unquestioned obedience might well be behind her, as they would finally be behind her nearly a decade later when she warned her mother not to hit her again or ever again. She was able now, or so she thought, to look into the world itself—the world beyond the S-curve, now in perfect focus for her.

She had seen the house beyond the curve only from the car window, passing without commentary, a broken-down house, far worse than the carefully cared-for, but slowly deteriorating farmhouse in which she had lived her entire life. One story it was, its chimney seemingly balancing like a dance student on the sloping roof, with patches of shingles and repaired shingles laid in patterns reflecting the serendipity of its annual repairs. In the yard lay what must have been two generations of waste: tires, never taken for recycling—such things, she would recall, were never done in those days. A car on blocks—a '56 Chevy was it? Was that possible? Rusting now to a state that would never permit its value to be redeemed by friends-to-be like Richard, who drove one in high school, before hanging himself in his own garage to be found by his teenage son. What seemed a bereft axle, with barely recognizable rubber on its derelict wheel rims. Farm machinery, of a generation earlier than that her father struggled with—its once functions barely discernible in the burdocks that grew up around it. The refrigerator

with the lethal door intact, or what must have been the remains of a stove, the white porcelain finish all that kept it from rotting into the earth. Plow tracks. Wheel ruts. An angry history in all of them, one no longer recoverable. A fence, and old knotted rope functionless as well, snaking with twists and digressions through what must have once been considered a yard.

Here, she recalled, approaching the place, lived Benny, an impoverished Maliseet Indian, with his wife and numberless children. The floor of the derelict house, she had been told with some condescension, was dirt, as if all that raised their own poverty to the dignity they possessed was the flooring separating their footsteps from the crawl space. Behind the pick-up truck, with its fenders and undercarriage corroded from the salt battling the winter ice, was the outhouse, leaning as the roof itself, awaiting, it seemed, the strong wind that would topple it.

They never reached the house that day, and thus never had to confront the obstruction even Stevie had not planned for: the black-and-white mangy dog, who would appear from wherever it patiently crouched to chase away all cars that dared to pass. In those days, it was not uncommon to see dogs shooting out of the bushes or a front yard furiously snapping and barking. As you sat in the back seat, terrified at the ordeal, terrified at and for the dog, terrified at the possibility of hitting it, its head would disappear from sight just inches from the front tire on the driver's side or passenger side depending on the direction the car was traveling. Her kindly father would always slow down for the dog, speaking to her in monotonal calm assuring her all would be well, even though for much of her life, it was not. The dog would

grow bored, he would say, or was it self-assured? What could it do if it caught the car, he reasoned. Had it not driven the invading car away? And as Dad's car slowly leaned into the S-curve, the dog would trot in triumph back to its hiding place, awaiting their return. Her mother, by contrast, never slowed down for the dog, and there were no assurances that things would be ok. The dog was a menace, like the litter in the yard, like the family itself. They were just filth to her, living without the decency even of an old wooden floor distinguishing them from the very earth.

Reminiscing about this incident, what would she and Stevie have done, she wondered, had the dog raced out to them? Would the dog relent? Was it not interested in the strangers abreast of an old wooden wagon wheel? intruding as the speeding cars intruded, with none of the speed and dexterity required to escape him? Had Stevie mapped out a solution to this? Or was it something he dealt with as he dealt with all else? A situation to be "repaired" when the time came, as all in life would need repairing, even though you could never predict what the defective part might be or how to replace it?

The next car to pass did not pass at all, but stopped, its door beckoning them inside with a stern insistence they could not ignore. You could, even at that age, convince a stranger or neighbor that bringing this task to a halt was out of the question; even interrupting such a bold adventurous journey was something deserving of little more than the scorn of forgiveness. But in the case of the brother Craig, now old enough to drive and search for them, such determination, even fluffed up in the rhetorical naiveté of an eight-year-old—it was pointless, he having heard everything

from Stevie he ever wished to hear. The wagon wheel was abandoned on the roadside, the two kids taken home, and for the next summer or two summers, she would occasionally still see it there, to her, a token of the foolishness of childhood, but to Stevie, doubtless, an insult to the very integrity of things, and she was certain that one night he had sneaked down to the S-turn and removed the wheel both from his offended sight and from the universe itself. It was as if the past had drained out like water from a sink. And it assured her somehow that her own past could one day do the same.

It was a year later and doubtless the wagon wheel was still visible from the roadway. Her mother returned from town one late afternoon with a bag full of groceries. She had a smile, a smirk, it might be called, and to all who saw, it must have been the pride coming from having a bag of groceries at all, a very cornucopia of wealth, it must have seemed, both to anyone who saw her and to herself, who displayed that wealth with a scorn for anyone who might have possessed less. *So unlike Dad who lay the candy on the store counter and added a pack of cigarettes for himself, she thought. When the bill outstripped the change he had, he slid the cigarettes back to the proprietor, a gesture she never forgot, even though it might change with each retelling.*

But her mother's smirk today had nothing to do with the display of unfathomable wealth. It was more than that, styled a "near death experience," whatever that meant, and within seconds she had their full attention—an easy thing to seize in the kitchen—the one room in the house with warmth sufficient to keep the whole family in attendance. "You would not believe ..." she said, measuring her words

for effect. It was her moment, she must have thought, and she would draw it out as long as possible.

It began as a simple and often repeated trip to town, and as she approached the S-turn, Benny's dog darted out predictably into the road, chasing the car back to its origins. In her new narration, she never saw the dog in time, and consequently the inches he kept his fury from the driver's wheel collapsed and she caught him square in the skull, hearing that horrible thump we have all experienced and seeing the dog roll in a chaotic heap on the opposite lane of the road. "You can't imagine!" she exclaimed, not realizing of course that the true actress, the role she never possessed, provided exactly what imagination could not. "So upset," she claimed she was, she stopped the car, hoping to help the suffering dog she had spent years despising. "As a decent citizen," she went on, "I would have done anything. Even for trash like that. You cannot blame the dog," she continued sententiously, "for the failings of its owners," even though she had beaten the only dog the family had ever owned into servility.

She measured her pause, and the grand show of fear slowly gripped her. Not of the crippled dog, but of Benny, running toward her from the shack with his hatchet raised in his hand. At this point she began to laugh, uncontrollably. Could the very terror of the moment have caused that? Feeling herself the half-clad actress portraying the victim in a bad horror movie? She "leapt" back into the car, she said, calculating the correct form for the preterit, and sped off as fast as the old car she had never consented to own could take her, her heart racing faster than the time-weary engine could accelerate. She expects to see Benny hurling his

hatchet in rage at her as she slowly pulls away from the scene. Instead, she watches him show more compassion than she could have imagined, striking several swift and fatal blows to the dog that had protected him from passing cars for years.

Everyone in the family laughed—Craig, Stevie, even the dad, although with a nervous hesitancy that may have been regret or despair. Was all directed toward the unwarranted fear of the dog-slaying mom? or the surprising and perhaps indecorous compassion of the impoverished Indian, settling things the way they had been settled for generations before the white farmers came to this place? For there had been of course no accident near the S-curve. Even at six or seven, she knew that her mother had seen her chance and had done her best to kill the dog, as if to spare the poor Indian the trouble. And the girl, still years from puberty, cried that night and for years afterward, for all of them, she thought, and for herself.

## 2.3 A VIEW TO THE WATER

> La chose est assez rare, car dans le coeur humain, les plaisirs ne gardent pas entre eux les relations que les chagrins y conservent: les joies nouvelles ne font point printaner les anciennes joies, mais les douleurs récentes font reverdir les vieilles douleurs.
>
> —Chateaubriand, *Memoires d'Outre Tombe,* Bk. 10, ch. 3

**I.**

You walk to the mailbox in November in the crisp resistance of the grass blades and the gravel. It is a liminal time, not winter, barely fall. Summer is gone, or wrongly described so: it has moved elsewhere; it is a word or a memory. The sense from your feet will tell you how hard the frost that evening might be. At noon, it is like morning in September.

The rhythms to life should console you, but it is those rhythms that make life so terrifying. The brothers who died young, staring at you in astonishment as if they never expected your compassionate face to be the last one they would ever see. Two gone, crying out to you. A third passed out from the pain and the pills prescribed to relieve it in the building you fixed up for him. In September, darkness takes over the place. Even in spring, two months after the equinox, you will cry out in grand lamentation, because J. loves this joke so much!: "In six weeks, the days will start getting shorter again." To you, however, even hearing him laugh, however gently, this is no joke at all. It is the state that things always will return to: the hard frosts of November, the muted gunfire of the hunters.

The timer on the oven sounds—she could barely hear it unless her good ear was turned to it. Wife of Bath—"he strook me on the ear til I was deef." "Welcome the sixth!" Fragments from an old class in history or something J., it must have been, had once read to her. The timer sounds once then falls silent, as if annoyed with those who never seem to listen. The old timers kept at you, she thought, noting the intrusive pun, sounding insistently until you dealt with them. She smiled at her inadvertent wit—these days, unless you were listening attentively, you might miss what needed to be done: the bread would bake to char, the pies mere caramel. She must be quoting him, she thought, one of his witticisms or something he had alluded to in passing. Maybe she had heard half of it. It involved words she had never heard—perhaps this was the remark about *kairos*, he said—your chance or missing it. Life was all about that, she thought, or he had said. The path they walked that day was

blazed. They had continued through the leaves, with that out-sized speech hikers use to warn off the hunters.

She tapped the loaf out of the pan; once the pan was well seasoned, you just flipped it over and the loaf fell right out. Before it cooled, she cut off each of the two end-pieces and threw them into the wastebasket.

The driveway was nearly a road. On the verge of it, you might say. 50 yards, 100 yards to the mailbox. Enough to get your heart racing on a normal day. Her husband Rob would plow it himself. Even if it made him late for work, it's something that he did with great fanfare, as if such rudimentary fulfilling of duty deserved your undying devotion. It was noon, and she felt nothing in her soles. It was unlike summer. Just cold, with the unfelt sun. Not weather in any sense. Like nothing. Like reality. Like the background, the gessoed canvas on which a life would be painted, like her brothers did, she thought. Before they died.

She was wearing the clothes she had slept in, as she sorted through the mail, looking for the catalogues addressed to "Resident."

She felt, in this moment, that she was merely a witness to things. The things of life. Love too, perhaps. Or simply minding the timer, as if one's heartbeats were numbered by the half-revolution of the dial.

**II.**

He must have been ten, or it may have been twelve, or maybe I should use the pronoun "I" in all of this. There were woods behind the old country house we moved to when he was just old enough to need no supervision. Hardly a grand spread today as grand spreads go. With the offensive

branches trimmed away, the weeds pulled, and the field mowed to an expanse of lawn, it appears nothing other than a source of wealth, the object of photos tempting buyers from away. Yet a half-century earlier, for a boy that age, those few acres were a wilderness. Past the half-acre or acre field, there were dense alders, spruce, and poplars that he would later realize were signs that this wild uncharted place—all three acres of it—had been sheep fields twenty years before his father had first seen it as a college student. He remembered pushing through the waist-high grass of that very field a year before they bought the place. It smelled of grain and butterflies.

In those days, it wasn't unusual to take your rifle or shotgun or whatever your folks had decided you were allowed to own into that wilderness. It is hideous to think of this today, and perhaps his gentle and innocent parents had merely turned away and pretended whatever it was parents pretended in those days, when they faced the inconvenient wants of their children. For to what purpose, they might moralize, were the bodies piled up on the beaches of Normandy? The fighter plane caught in a death spiral over the Pacific? Was it not for these gifts? The freedom of a young son to define every living thing he met as prey?

A year or two years into this, Mother mused, relaxed in her lawn chair on the terrace, "Wouldn't it be nice to see the ocean from this place? or the sun setting over Mt. Washington?" Just that, beyond the wall of alders and the spruce, blocking the view now for decades. No matter that she hated "water" in its real sense, the sense in which one sailed it or swam in it or cut wakes over its surface or threatened to drown one's young friends in it. The "water" she knew was

what Stan depicted in his paintings, or the faded blue on the navigational chart, now ingeniously glassed over as a coffee table. The very desire for such a view a sign that her immigrant parents, despite the Depression, had brought her up right (perhaps excepting her progressive views that led her to escape those high plains and join her Jewish boyfriend in New York).

He couldn't remember the details, other than his boyish protest after the first day of cutting through the alders. The three of them, his father and brother and himself, had barely reached the bottom of the first gulley and were bruised and exhausted. Maybe his hands were blistered, or maybe they had been forced into those gardening gloves that never quite fit. "ON STRIKE" he wrote that evening on the chalkboard reserved for enumerating chores. Then something about "SAVE OUR TREES." But the cutting continued and the three acres of forest wilderness behind the field were soon to become two. And he could not remember how they had done it or if they had done it, or whether at age eleven and in despair he was just permitted to have no further part in it. Mother's view then cut right through his wilderness, no more than a shotgun range wide, and you really couldn't shoot in the remnant woods without risking hitting the rooftop of a neighbor.

He would miss the murderous months of what now appeared would be his past life in the wilderness, a mere year's distant—the shooting of or at the animals, the protest, even the borrowed tractor, the seeding of the plowed-out acreage with rye to keep the persistent alders from reclaiming it. The year or years he had spent in those woods, as his older friends grew to what seemed to him maturity,

got their licenses, and drove the roads drinking beer and lusting after the sisters of their neighbors.

**III.**

For such routines, you don't need to alter the rhythms of your breath. You look for the catalogues in garish red. This morning, there were three, one from the famous store in the mall (you all know what that is), and two others similar to that, but with names she didn't recognize. You don't need them described—their headlines and plush colorings, the lurid double-entendres in the side script. Fake silk reflecting the gloss of the magazine. All went into the trash next to the uneaten heels of bread.

These men. They dress you as they want, and touch you as they want, and perhaps at a certain age, the only drama is how quickly and when they will get aroused enough to "perform," you might say. And it doesn't matter how you smell or kiss, or how many hours you've spent in the gym or stacking firewood. They don't realize that these ... what would you call them? Is this clothes? Something you put on? Can these foolish men imagine the pain, say, of a waist-gripping corset? The synthetics shaping your thighs as no exercise would ever do? Or one of those skimpy tops for an 18-year-old who hasn't digested food or milk products in a month or two? Are you supposed to come up with some look of rage or distress or simply resignation or surrender? Is that the script? Is that what they think desire has come to?

For the old hippies decades past, it didn't matter what you wore, even if it had cost a week's wages, and all they did was stare at you with that querying look that meant only "You taking that off?" And it wouldn't matter whether you

did or did not, or whether you gave yourself the time to love the guy at all. Those were the days. When you didn't have to ask a man what the fuck it was he meant. Those were the days when the dog begged for food at the table and since the dog had died, there wasn't a final scrap of food on her plate or even left in a dish hot from the oven that she could bear to eat.

Maybe there would be a day of rest she thought, as if this and only this were what life came to: when you could sit down at dinner and look right through him as the conversation droned on like a bass burden beneath the two of you. Some brief repartee at dinner, or sitting on a couch. A TV or a radio. You might catch that atmosphere or ambience, as it was known, relaxing over a book with the tea steaming on the table, and briefly even doze off in it. But reality rarely went that way. Rob couldn't understand, for example, why you would take the time to read a book without substance. That didn't tell you how to wire a house properly, or cut pipe threads, or tune an engine, or even give directions for ordering merchandise. What good were the fictitious names for things, the descriptions of places you could never visit or find directions to, the people who would live and die in oblivion? And maybe that was it, she thought. And maybe too, when men made their little sighs like that, it wasn't you at all, but some 18-year-old with the rounding breasts they lusted for in high school. As if all they longed for was a safe and sanitized version of life or love, pressed into the outlandish lingerie from the catalogues. It was easiest to shelve your books away, while he discoursed on ball peen hammers or the like.

She stood in the open doorway. No dog pestered her for the end-piece. The heat from an armload of cordwood vanished into the November air.

**IV.**

In the woods, things had been simpler. The density of saplings, birches and small firs restricted a world to something a man like you could live in. Out there, you were out of earshot of all but the angriest or most intrusive of adults, and even then, if it were late enough in the afternoon, they would be home with their gin—so odd to think of today, when all but the adventurous young drink nothing more than micro-brews.

The wide cut through that space, he later thought, was like the Cross Bronx Expressway, the oil pipes dividing Alaska, any of the countless highways that the animals met in confusion, dying in traffic by the millions. It was "the way it was" in the New World of adulthood, he guessed, that view to the ocean through the once adventuresome woods. Like the grand boulevards cut through Paris, he would learn, designed to frustrate the revolutionaries. Like the shipping lanes in the bay outside of Portland.

He sat down with his small rifle next to him. Even in the shallow gulley, even here, in this landscape that would finally be prime real estate, you could see products of human history—the metal barrels rusted into picturesque allusions to the old days, the broken wheel of the wheelbarrow, old buoys thrown or rolled into the gulley, just as debris must have been, he supposed, two or three centuries ago when this land was settled by white people and centuries before that. You could still bruise your knees in the patch of

half-covered rocks left by the glaciers, which ran, like a road-way or divider, straight across the field, and I suppose all the rocks had been dug up and rolled or dragged or carried there from the newly cleared pasture. All through the diminishing woods were traces of history—a well-head or cellar hole. A stone wall or apple trees, still bearing, in the midst of the poplars.

There were no laments for the past seen in this history. No nostalgia for unbroken soil, or regrets for the animals brutalized to extinction. These builders of the rock walls and foundations never shook their heads in despair as the weeds gave way to crops in accord with the teachings of De Tocqueville, and he too would outgrow the words he had angrily scrawled on the family chalkboard. Even the now simple view to the ocean would be one later owners of the place would decorate with fish ponds, stone-walls from the mason, and tasteful rows of exotics.

The squirrel he had been stalking began its slow and careful descent down the maple. He didn't worry about where the bullet might go—about ranges or backdrops. There were no boundaries in this wilderness. He raised the muzzle slowly, found the doomed squirrel in the sights, and pulled the trigger without blinking.

**V.**

It was four o'clock. The sun would be setting at that hour within a month and the depression of the winter would begin. When she was young, she hardly noticed. The winter, like life itself, was simply how things were for her. You skied or walked to school with the salt lines creeping up your boots, or let your brothers spin the car in the parking lot,

granting you the occasional drag on their cigarettes. Now, all she could see was the cold of it; the cordwood frozen in the woodshed, cut in its unnatural regularities. Her own self, aged into its natural and still athletic shape, dismissed in the *Gestalten* of the magazines.

It wasn't that she didn't love him. Even for a man four years her junior, he was, by every standard, a catch. There was nothing quite like ... well, not making love, since love-making, despite what we claim to think, is largely the same, or had been in her experience; there is nothing quite like the minutes it is over, and you can lie there admiring or perhaps stroking that body, half-asleep and ignoring you, and feeling his chest rise and fall. You touch that flesh with a gentleness just short of disturbing or waking him, as the corners of his lips or his nostrils twitch in that amusing way. Not enough to worry him into thinking you might want more, or even, may as well say it outright, anything at all from him. If all went well, you could spend five minutes stroking that suddenly unresisting flesh as he slept there. There were no words for this. Nothing but the breathing. Life as we were told it always should have been.

And how could you say you didn't love *that*, even if *that* wasn't the entire sum of things? There was no violence; there were no blows. But it felt like violence, she had once said, as the words rained (or was it reigned? or reined?) down on you. It was that. The innuendoes and inflections, when you couldn't tell what you were being told, or even what you were or should be thinking. It was like trying to talk things out, and then he said this, and you said that, and each of you trying to measure things and thinking how you

might calculate all just right, both to excuse yourself and effect some change and if you got the words right, if you could just get the unthinking words in place, maybe the world would right itself.

But the words as always were the wrong words. Only the simplest of things could be true, whatever truth was. You were left with sleep. His and your own. The brothers buried in the back lot. The dog put down by the kindly vet. The somnolant pulse of his breath.

**VI.**

Somewhere during the history of the vista, as the trees fell and he hit puberty, things went wrong and nothing was quite the same again. It was difficult to get the details straight, but someone, Winn Smith, it must have been, had been hired to doze out the recalcitrant stumps and plow back the emergent alders and poplars that seemed not to give a tinker's damn that his father and brother and perhaps he himself had wasted an entire summer hacking away at them with hand tools. And after an hour or two of reshaping the vista, reclaiming it (it might be felt), Winn began waving his arms oddly from the bulldozer, un-athletically, so he had heard it described, and Father had gone to investigate. In twenty minutes he returned, put on his old protective raincoat, the very one he had been issued as a G.I. more than a decade earlier, then strode resolutely, with a can of hornet spray, from the house back to the bulldozer, risking his life in the act, he was only later to learn and rue, perhaps the bravest thing, he imagined, he had ever done. In another ten minutes he would return, about to collapse in anaphylactic shock—a word we had never heard and a thing of which we

had no experience. "They got me," was all he said, smelling of DEET and weak insecticide.

It is all such a blur.

Father is sitting on the back stoop, hidden here from the traffic, with his head in his hands, and Mother is trying to plaster on the baking soda. A poultice of sorts, she says, her hands shaking as she speaks. It was said to have worked when Frenchie was helping do the roofing and got stung by a mud dauber. Father was allergic to them, it was claimed repeatedly, and thus famously so. And it should have been predictable and fit that his head bobbed arhythmically as he fought for breath. To a child of twelve, this was just another maudlin scene a closet drunk such as his father would periodically perform for the family. Yet as he walked from the stoop to the bedroom to lie down, he pitched forward and fell headlong into the hallway.

From what little I remember, embarrassed about Father's notorious theatricality, his very extremes of opinions and behaviors, I see him wedged between the bed and the closets, and my brother is giving artificial respiration the way they used to teach it in Boy Scouts—massaging the back, rowing the folded arms forward, and in the newspaper, it was said he saved his life that day, just as he had saved my life when he pulled me out of the water at Hamloaf when I was five.

It is a difficult story to tell. "I don't want to die," he had whined, and "You're not going to, buddy," or some kind thing one would expect from the gruff strangers loading him onto the gurney. Those were the days when the doctor drove straight to your house when you summoned him. The doctor took one look; "Call an ambulance," was all he said,

summoning the hearse-like Caddy with the light on the dash and the siren mounted on the hood.

I never went to visit him recovering in the hospital, and some shock it must have been, even for a child of twelve, to hear the next morning of a second ambulance ride to the detox center in Portland. Then of the convulsions—another word then not in my vocabulary. The same convulsions K's brother suffered in her very living room, after two days a teetotaler. All this, still sternly said to us to be the doing of the venom of insects. They called later that evening to inform us he would likely die and we should prepare for that, and after an hour of adjusting to that bad future, we were told, with equal cold, the worst was past.

I can see also my mother sitting up in bed following the first call. "No," she said, rejecting some offered comfort. From my aunt she despised so openly. "No, I think I'll sleep. I think I'll just sleep." It would be years before she would admit to us what future she most feared that day—not of losing Nate, her life-partner, not that, but of losing the house, of putting the kids through school and losing control of them as they made their untutored way through life as teenagers.

Father was gone a month, and no boy of twelve would question the stories we were told to explain it. When he returned, Mother greeted him in the driveway with a hug. I think that was the only time I ever saw them embrace, although she put her hand on his shoulder once, ten years later I believe it was, the day I returned home to introduce them to my wife-to-be, mad in love as I would one day be mad in love again.

He fixed his life, or part of it, he said. Buying cases of ginger ale, and knocking it down melodramatically as he mixed the drinks for his guests. No one would mention in company the thirty-day sentence in the rehab center—an old colonial in the hills of New Hampshire. And he wrote of it too—a moving and eloquent twenty-page narrative about falling victim to the yellow jackets, the hallucinatory sounds he heard that I can barely mention here for fear of hearing them in my own head. A fine piece it was, poor-man's poet that he was, commissioned, I now suspect, by the rehab center, since self-reflection seemed, in those benighted days, the very cure itself.

At twelve at fourteen at sixteen I read that narrative, caught by the metrics of his prose, that neo-late-Victorian lilt I could rarely hear when he spoke beneath the artificial accents and regionalities he tried to cultivate. "A Brush with Death," he called it, detailing his hallucinations of a hornet's nest he tried to swat away in the doorway when they dragged him up the stairs to the hospital or rehab center. "Te-bee-mus" the word was, so he claimed—whether verb form for the classicist or signal of a satellite[1]—resounding through his broken head, and I still can barely form that word myself, knowing that to hear it is to join him in whatever place he spent that day.

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[1] I recall sitting on the back steps with him and my brother, looking at Sputnik, 1957. What I saw was a nearby star, moving as if in retrograde away from the satellite. I recall too my father, calling up the ornithologist within him, solving the mystery of a space invasion or Russian spy ship (those ubiquitous fears of the late '50s!), by identifying the call of a saw-whet owl.

One month, it was claimed, would free him of the shame and horror consequent on his collapse, saved by my brother's heroics and the nonchalance of the ambulance crew, saved again through the very confessional one reads in his old-fashioned prose. The far and proximate causes of his near-death experience all like ducks in a row, you might say, or its final one, as the theologians might have it.

He kneels in the confessional. My friends in parochial school, with their French doomed to extinction as all their past turned out to be, used to tell me how that was for them. I am sorry, Father, I have no sins to confess—but I will tell you a story about the wasp stings, of my life, of the women I have graced with love, of the children and students I have led to adulthood. Would you like to hear me speak? In the lulling rhythms of my prose? It is a small thing, speech. And once you master it ...

It was years before I found the typescript once again, left in a drawer beneath his drafts of a mock-epic on Thersites. Heroic, maudlin, sentimental, the obsolescent diction—all there, as he fought past death to kneel finally in the confessional before the patients in the rehab center. Skilled, professional, yet purely wrong it was, lacking, as it did, a single reference or allusion to alcohol. As if the seizures of withdrawal, his arms stiffened as if reaching for the truth, as if all of that were a digression tripping up the narrative or, in some academic posturing of speech, merely epiphenomenal. How the scales might have fallen from his eyes in a grand come-uppance, had his broken compatriots in the rehab center been listening, instead of brooding over the duplicities tangled in their own heads; had the therapists, appalled at his insolence, risen up in protest.

What of the future? he might have cried out in his defense, his voice breaking in emotion. What would his children think had they seen the sordid truth? Better to let the Old Dogs lie where they dropped, and toss the crusts into the compost bin.

**Coda**

But you know how these twisted tales will go, wound together as if their very weaknesses were sources of strength. You look back, as K. did over her marriages, as he did over the clear-cut paths to the water—the vistas he never appreciated or even saw in the future, his father torqued in convulsions in the hospital bed. Tragedies to be sure, at least in terms of the banalities of modern speech. You see them with sadness; you steel yourself in the present; you raise your eyes toward the future, and perhaps you can convince yourself, even momentarily, that something has changed. That there is a truth you have learned, a principle you can now apply. Some detail, path, or incident. It will make you better, as Plato says, or perhaps more serene as you endure the pain of it. The world itself might be at issue here, not you at all. That too. And one small child or student from the past might then be guided, educated, "led out," as the etymologists would have it, taught or spared some fate in the future. Father with his famous grin, surrounded by the halo of students ...

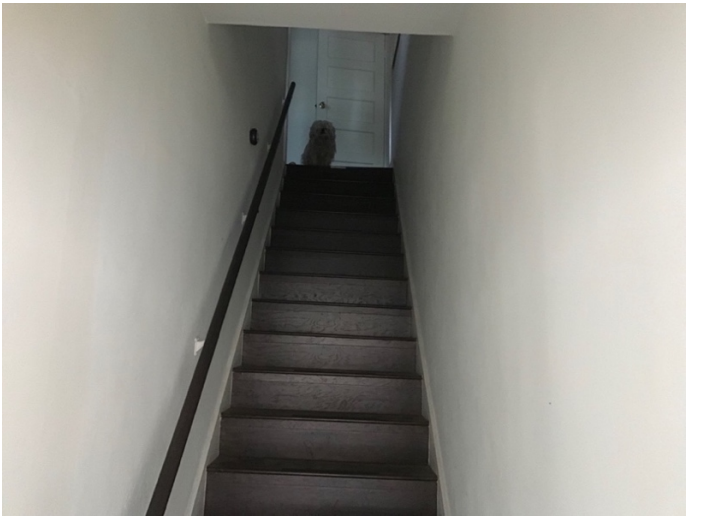
His neighbor John, one year his senior at age twelve or so, held the target ball in his hand—their makeshift clay pigeon. It was the typical sort of day you might have in the small field, nearing, I suppose, the fall, when you began to fantasize about being old enough to hunt legally—ducks,

oblivious, gliding toward the decoys, larger animals, those that could be tracked, animals that process pain as complexly as you yourself would learn to do. He never could quite get the hang of it, finding in the gunsights the ball his young friend would throw high in the air and leading the target just enough so that the pellets would catch it, jerk it out of its parabolic path.

It would be cold when the seasons opened in October. You must, even now, on the warm fall day, or they must, or those who hunt for real must one day deal with it, since even a half-hour bare-handed in the November snow would numb his fingers. He adjusted the glove on his right hand, and could barely sense through the leather the cold from the action. "OK," he said, setting his feet. John underhanded the ball high in the air over his head.

He raised the muzzle with his gloved hand on the trigger. The charge caught his young friend square in the face.

## 2.3 PIG DUNG



> If this story shall be suspected to be dressed up with some comical circumstances, a little beyond precise nature, I answer for myself that I had it some years since from a very sober and worthy man, upon his own knowledge, as I report it.
>
> —Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, II, chap. 33

When she leapt from the hayloft into the pig dung, when she breathed deep from the fermenting air, that was when she knew she would live forever, the heroine of the story you will read today.

She felt now what the future would be for her: she would live in a magical house, where the heat rolled from the woodstove, where the food was always on the table. Where

her loving father passed out the steaming bowls in order, she the third, sitting next to him, deferring to her two younger brothers, as the mother sat silently, up to her ears with all of them but helpless to hit her again, where her older brothers smiled in appreciation of whatever she had to be proud of, and where the dogs leaned their tired heads against her feet.

But of course, things are never that way for anyone. Even the wealthiest among us, complacent in our summer homes, get sent away to school or to rich relatives in Kennebunk, or off to camp, or maybe just thrown out into the world to find our way through seas of drugs and alcohol, discovering in the process that money saves no one, and in the end means no more than it did to her own father, who gave the change back to the store clerk along with the cigarettes he found himself too poor to buy that day.

The day she fell through the hayloft into the pig dung barely constituted history. All the substantives—the nouns, that is—are at hand, but piled up like the dung itself, disordered as a great composting heap of things. Twenty years in the future, she would ask precocious fifth-graders from the barrio: "analyze this poem or painting for the class," and, indifferent to what the artist might have meant or said, they would pick out the nouns or colored shapes on the periphery and string them together in strange and meditative ways, awaiting the applause of their classmates, much like the modest academics of today, glancing up shyly from the conference podia to enraptured colleagues from away. No wonder they loved literature and loved art! It's like being abandoned in the toy store in Bangor with no thought of time or continuity or the necessity of paying for anything.

You just walk down the aisles and the plastic baubles rain down on you like the rewards of life itself: the games for which you need not even read the rules, or the puzzles with no missing pieces, or instruments that play themselves. And I suppose even kids today experience all this with their iPhones given them by parents for security. When she imagined herself buried in such things—the figures of the poems and the shapes of the sketchbooks—that was decades before looking back to the debacles of childhood.

She had it all down in that opening. A hayloft. The family setting. Pigs. The manure. The flight like Bruegel's Icarus in Auden. But the narrative she sketched was unlike the history she had experienced and still recorded in her memory, whatever it is memory is—that place where the sentences cannot be diagrammed, where the subordinates and barriers and logic entwine as in a dream, where the clutter of detail on the canvas just piles up in chaos.

It was an old sow, Big Red the kids called her, and if you have ever confronted one—the beast, I mean here—you will know the attendant terror, something not mentioned in the opening to this story. And the dung was likely not from that sow at all, but from the milk cows, or perhaps it was all mixed. Even with unfailing memory, it is difficult to get the story or the setting straight. And the loft was or was not full of hay at the time and perhaps it was not a loft at all, but the main floor of the barn, opening to a cellar (or whatever that half-subterranean space might be called, the barn itself constructed on a slope) where the dung was piled or thrown or rammed in there with a tractor. You cannot, you see, simply have a full-grown sow chasing the kids to the upper stories of a barn, a height prodigious as the bell-tower in "Vertigo,"

all to careen from the timbers of the hayloft into the patient dung; the only way to get them there is through narrative—a spare one, such as she once told, omitting the arrogant and leering details, which now I, who know nearly nothing of barns or pigs or dung or the procedures of turning any of this to food or profit—which I now have to place in enough order to keep us all "on board" with it.

It all began simply and innocently enough. There are no attendant pitfalls to this opening; the children of a farm, although enlisted for labor when necessary, spend most of their time in idleness—the same state that the exploited peasants enjoyed in the Middle Ages, not working themselves to death beneath the rods of the land-owners, as the communists would have it, but sitting on their hearths, gossiping heretically, while their masters abused their mistresses, while the crops turned the rain and the very soil into sustenance.[1]

To the kids on the farm, the unmeasured time left them time for the round-up—something they had seen on television in the days when you couldn't turn the damn thing on without being afflicted by white men on horses, howling unintelligibly and waving their perfect lassos to the canned sound of the cattle, lowing they call it, or old hymns do. And why the cowhands riled the dumb beasts up that way is anyone's guess, or at least, for those of us who wouldn't know a barbed wire barrier of the Old West from Hadrian's Wall itself, there would be no guessing at all. For the inconven-

[1] See, of course, Emmanuel La Roi la Durie, *Montaillou: village occitan* (1975).

ient fact of leading all those yearling beasts to the slaughter-house to face the sledge-hammer-wielding murderer—that was omitted from the herds of television. And instead of cow-folk families at dinner wolfing down slabs of freshly slaughtered animals, we see an idealized mock-up, spooning out victuals from featureless bowls—beans and the like it must have been, instead of the life-blood of the animals they killed.

These farm kids watched such sanitized fantasies in their mesmeric youth, the facts no more real to them than a modern child's zombies and aliens, of course, since a material farm, as opposed to the free and open ranges of TV, had nothing but milk cows and pigs whose assigned purpose in life only the eldest of her brothers fully understood. So mixing up the metaphors of farm and range and life itself, the kids all plunged as a sudden collective into the shrubbery and emerged with switches they had designed with uncommon care. These were supposed to mimic some tool whose function was hazy at best, and now perfectly and purposelessly armed, off into the pig pens they went, determined to corral all this season's piglets, still smaller than the youngest of them, and drive them into ...

Well, at this point, the specifics of the plan were less secure than their determination. You cannot expect the imaginations of a group of kids of five to twelve years old to be anything but at odds with themselves, and usually this means the eldest must impose his version of play on all of them.[1] Occasionally, at least in the re-telling, a certain trans-

[1] A different and tragic story entirely, put to rest only when the next to eldest brother died—an unrepentant and abusive

human consciousness would establish the narrative, which would proceed much to the astonishment of each one of them. And the next thing you know, there was whooping, and Indian cries, and something out of "Rawhide"—"Head 'em up!! Move 'em out" or the like I would guess—and the pigs squealing, running in unfathomable patterns as the child, feigning high indignation, confronted one of them: "No!!! No!!!!" threatening it with a switch as if it were a docile puppy up to mischief, stupidly, of course, as the piglet probably understood far more of all of this than any mere dog could hope to do, and had no interest in being trained to do tricks for the delight of visitors.

It may have taken the afternoon, and nothing was accomplished—simply a scattering of piglets before the father's return and his inevitable laughter at what was only a variant chaos in the farm-lot—one that seemed to have done no harm, and thus provided no reason for concern. As long as you could count up the pigs and cows and children and the number was a familiar one. As long as they were all upright and none breathing its last. As long as the feed bins were full and nothing was ablaze, what was the point of investigating the matter further? Dad just shook his head, or would, when he heard whatever version of this he was given or imagined.

But there was another narrative that began that day and it began not in the minds of the children, or the piglets or even the Dad or abusive Mom, waiting for an excuse to punish them for the glories of life her own life had denied to her. And it took place in the unreachable mind of the old sow

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piece of shit, they were all finally forced to concede, unmourned by any of them—how can one just gloss over that?

herself; the hermeneutics of Big Red, alas, were quite different from the way the collective mind of the family worked.

All she could see ... but I am guessing here. I hardly know the mind of a friend, and never that of an ex-lover; introspection helps no better with my own. How am I to know that of a foreign species, one raised in the company of beings to which it has no affinity? I suspect that all the old sow could sense was the scattering of her family and the young alien creatures running around with switches and their inexplicable whoopings that she, mistakenly, imagined came from life rather than the surreal dots of a television screen. She had not the wherewithal of the patient Dad, shaking his head once again at what his kids might be up to.

And it was then Big Red determined that she had had enough.

She scraped her foot in the black earth ...

...

My hippie friends, I say, stepping momentarily out of this narrative, out of the knotted mesh of the young girl and the piglets in Houlton, my friends determined, themselves no longer required to work due to indolence, self-sufficiency, or inheritance, my friends chose to live from the land as best they could. To grow vegetables, raise chickens, even rabbits, whose soft white fur grew matted as the dark blood dried on it. They would fish for trout in the back-lot or the North Woods when they could, getting three meals out of it, not quite sufficient to equal the expense of maintaining the fishing rods their father left them, but enough to encourage them to do it again. They fished and farmed as commercial fishermen and farmers did, their goal never economic bonanzas of any kind, but (like professionals) enough capital

to throw it all into the ring the following spring and keep the cycle going one more season. And which of the metaphors in that dung-heap of them in the last sentence is best to follow—I can guide you no better than a five-year-old girl with a make-shift switch.

I round into this narrative the way the old sow rounded through the barnyard, actually a mud plot too small and dug-up to be called a yard or field, gnashing her teeth, if they do that, and trying to determine consequences of actions, insofar as the dumb beasts can do that at all, before simply letting the unreflective rage take over, which for all of us living creatures may be the best policy of all. In that case you can just say your indignant piece, or shout it out for all to hear, or beat your children or your enemies to a pulp, or abuse your faithless lover, or (my preference) just throw yourself onto the ground in a pitiful weeping heap at the injustices of love and life and the whole kit and kaboodle of botched plots and blusterings, then dust yourself off, draw yourself up to full height, "issue an apology" (as it is sometimes known) or "the final word on things," and walk offstage as if nothing of consequence has happened. Blameless and unscathed by the experience, you ...

But I ring back to my hippie friends.

To keep the illusion of the farm life alive, these hippie friends bought two piglets, named them Oscar and Meyer (doubtless one of many pairs in the back-to-the-land Northeast who had such names), and raised them lovingly through the summer, until their very immensity began to look like pork roast for millennia. There were, of course, disturbing side-effects to the grown pigs' intelligence, manifested in various ways, the degrees of trust and mistrust

they had shown, as if the thought had occurred to them that if life on the farm were as grand as their keepers pretended, why was there such a dearth of their elders at the feeding trough? And perhaps they sensed the entire ambivalence, on both sides, perpetrator and victim, of raising livestock destined for the slaughterhouse. And there is no way I can walk you through the slough of that in the few pages assigned to it here, especially caught, as I am, in a mere sidenote.

When the time came to end the farce of the farming life, to bring the pick-up into the pigpen, to construct what seemed at the time an ingenious ramp leading into the truck bed, Oscar and Meyer knew perfectly well that something was up—confirming now the misgivings they had had for the months of their entire lives. Something about the free food and the lack of their brethren they vaguely remembered from their infancies. I am inspired here by the actions of the old sow herself, the moment she dug her hoof deep into the farm muck; for soon, Oscar and Meyer would determine to do the same thing.

Four hippies in the prime of life strode with less confidence than they claimed to possess into the pen. Two from the pick-up. The remaining two through the open gate, carefully but confidently latching it behind them. Magnificent, the four were, as all strapping young men are magnificent who had the will to work outside what they considered The Establishment. Resplendent in their very youth, their hard-muscled shoulders from a summer in the fields, or in the soil, or operating front-end-loaders, or on the stern of a fishing boat, or simply penning verses on their porch. And methodically, as such men could sometimes act, despite their

scoffing at convention, they set up the ramp into the pick-up as the pigs stood by, in suspicious fascination at this thing they had never seen or experienced.

It is likely pointless to proceed in any detail. You can imagine it yourself. And you can describe it as terror if you will, or simply anger, or (if wit can suppress the horror of the impending slaughter) simple pig-headed stubbornness on both sides, as the three-hundred pound or so block of recalcitrant hog confronted the nearly half-ton of hippies trying to load it into the pick-up. The pig with aeons of evolution in the arts of digging in, and the hippies with barely an hour of reflection on how to combat it, three of them having never been in the vicinity of pig shit in their lives.

I should circle now back to the sow's hoof, dug in on the farmyard, with the same tenacity shown by Oscar and Meyer in their last hours of life, who were finally backed up the ramp as their front hooves anchored nearly a foot deep into the mud. But I have one more digression to make here. A week following this combat, I myself sit down at the communal table for the first celebratory pork chop, I guess it was, and Fran asks sweetly what, finally, did the butcher charge for the slaughter and the conversion of Oscar and Meyer to a decade's worth of pork, ... well, of course, a decade's worth as long as the power didn't go off in the house and everything in the freezer rot, including ...

*the dead dog—a third layer of digression—poor Tom the winter tenant figuring it would be far easier to put old Sadie in the freezer awaiting spring burial rather than spend a day hacking a gravesite into the unthawed earth, but neglecting alas to bag her up properly to prevent the*

> *fur from re-freezing into the rot of once carefully preserved pork-chops, now gone fetid in the power outage, along too with a year's worth of John's best weed—all this will sadly remain nothing more than a mere allusion here...*

and the civil silence following John's stuttered reply to his lovely wife as he went through the economics of pork bellies, calculating then conceding that the price per pound was precisely what it would have been had they purchased the chopped-up roasts and loins in the supermarket. Even that startling math would have been acceptable, I guess, had there not been the bruises from the final battle at the ramp leading into the pick-up, and four or five months of feed that did not even enter as beads in the calculus.

You see why it is easy to determine the number of years any mere amateur has been at pig-farming. There is a simple set of rules. Only the freshman pig farmer will have a feeding trough, and, years into the future, he might tell of the time driving to the slaughterhouse when the piglet leapt from the truck-bed and the whole family spent an afternoon trying to corral it as it raced down the road, barely considering where its next meal might come from. The second-year farmer will feed his piglets from the time they are mere shoats from a replica pick-up truck, with a well-trodden ramp up to the truck bed. They will never face a brace each of hippies then, but only the shock of watching the pick-up tailgate slammed shut on them on their final day of life, the sides of truck-bed extended to prevent their escape. The third-year farmer gives it up entirely, leaves the pigpens fallow, or goes for goats.

I speak now of the family farm in Houlton, no casual operation, where the old sow, now in her fourth year of providing food for the family, had had enough of watching this year's brood subjected to the indignity of a round-up—something more fit for young neutered cattle and black-and-white TVs, whose images, in this part of the country, were nearly snowed out to oblivion. She dug her hoof into the black earth, and before the oldest kid could as much as cry out a warning, she charged.

Now to the elder brothers in this story, it was all a big hoot, and off they went in directions no one remembers or could then predict. The older ones are never the protagonists, and rarely the heroes of such tales; they have too much experience in the ways of tormenting the farm animals. All puffed up, they are, with that adolescent naiveté that embarrasses most of us to be reminded of. To them, life was all blood and snot and fart jokes and the like.

The young girl, our heroine, had experienced little of this in life, protected from the chilling blood-letting by the kindly father, and forbidden from partaking in it—chicken-killing or pig-slaughtering—by the swaggering brothers. To her, the round-up was what it was on television, with nothing of the slaughterhouse, nothing of the terror of the herd, and none of the revolting filth and smells of the angry cowherds of reality. To her, it could have been Hopalong Cassidy or The Lone Freaking Ranger, for that matter, riding strong through the herds, as she dashed among the piglets with her switch lasso, feigning anger at their recalcitrance, and brooking no back-talk from any of them.

But then, her young eyes met the red eye of the sow, greater in bulk than the whole pack of participants and intensely singular in her mind—the piglets now scattered in confusion and the brothers lost from sight and from the story itself, whooping not like cowboys, but like the Indians they had seen on TV. Facing the consequences of her actions alone, she dashed into the barn, as if its purpose were to provide refuge against raging beasts as well as from the weather elements, failing even to drop the now useless switch, failing also to assess the speed of the old sow, who of course had accomplished its mission with the dispersal of life-forms around her.

Inside, she found herself trapped with one of her brothers, Stevie it turned out to be, in the remnants of the hay-loft over the gaping trap-door where the hay was pushed out and over the main floor, or rather onto what had now become the manure pile, heaped up into the barn to protect it from the summer rain. And if I knew more about barns and the proper storage of silage or manure, I could describe this without that slight hesitation in voice and style conceding that something has gone amiss with the narrative. They knew their moment had come. They had met their *kairos* as old Tillich had once said, and there was no time even to consider the speed of the old sow, nor to imagine why, given her agility, she had not already caught up with them and trampled them into the floorboards.

The peak of the manure pile lay directly below them, like a stalagmite, or an abrupt ledge beneath the sea-surface, reaching up to them. And she imagined if she could just control her leap—not defying gravity, which even at that age, she knew to be opposeless, but rather angling herself in

what she could not know then was a parabolic curve, slightly to the right, she could barely graze the manure surface and end up safe and clean next to it.

She did not imagine, of course, the blatant beast hurling itself into the middle of the pile to get her, or, more serenely and mischievously, trotting around the barn and down the slope to the open doors to await her there.

She simply did, what she had to do.

Now Stevie at this point was beside himself with frustration—there was no way he would leap into or over a manure pile nor be left whimpering in paralytic squeamishness at the hayloft edge. This may or may not have been before Stevie (whose mechanical genius was unparalleled in town, and, had communication been better in those days, perhaps throughout the County), this was before Stevie had determined the short way to deal with dissenting farm-life, before he had become bent on constructing an electric chair out of materials lying around the house or barn—its prototype to be confined to the chickens, who were doomed to end on the slaughterhouse floor and on the dinner table regardless of his electrical genius. He had a complex way of combining current from the dry-cell batteries (perhaps with a back-up from a dead battery lifted from one of the old cars that every farmhouse would have) with the AC from the house. To most of us, that is an insurmountable problem, but to Stevie, who understood the conversion of DC to AC or the reverse, and the difference between voltage and amps and wattage, whatever that is, and even had a fair estimate (it could be no more than that) on what it would take to obliterate the nervous system of a small animal—to Stevie,

that was all child's play. Somewhere in history, those calculations had been all worked out and were mere facts to him, and if any electrician's mind had been able to solve the equations, his own was well up to the task. The more pressing issue, as it seemed to this ten-year-old, was the design of the restraining chair itself, since here, as opposed to the version of Death Row he knew only from the grainy TV images, there were no precedents in history. You cannot count on the grim resignation of your victim, walking shackled with the priest babbling consolatory nonsense at your side, belching at the best meal he ever had (or good enough for his killers to think so). Covered with a hood, if you wished, or glaring bravely to the warden as his hand reached for the fatal switch, the reporters and relatives behind the protective glass. The chickens had learned to trust the young girl, who treated them with the gentleness you would show to chicks with their egg tooth still within them, and treated them that way still if they lived to decrepitude. But even in the dimmest of chicken brains was lodged the suspicion that the genius Stevie was simply not to be trusted. And it's possible the old sow shared that suspicion as well.

So he finally designed something too complex for most mortals, something that strapped the wings of the protesting fowl to its side and caught the legs up and got the beak momentarily out of his face, and true, if the only result were some burned feathers and a lapse in the egg-laying routine, that could not be termed a failure, but rather a necessary step in R&D. To Stevie, it was only a matter of scale and method—a series of problems that would have been easily solved had the henhouse had inhabitants to spare and had not more interesting problems arisen, such as how to turn

the car from which he had salvaged the battery back into what they called a "field car," which could be used, should another show up, as an entry in a demolition derby in the back field—a competition which would not know its official starting date for months, and ended with no injury beyond the aching of their father's side, as he nearly passed out from laughter watching his kids crawl from the steaming wreckage of their first meet.

For it was always Stevie's genius that saved him. Drawing on the vast experience of ten years of farm-life, he soon realized, as the young girl did not and as none of us could know, the old sow would finally never come for them. It was the very genius that led to the second chicken fried in the intricately wound wire. The genius that allowed him to escape the rot of the manure pile and the very narration that threatened to share with him the fate awaiting his sister.

Staring down at the pile of pig dung, and feeling her brother's sudden and inexplicable indifference, she despaired to find that this fresh dung had not simply been flung through the hole, leaving a safe conical shape sloped upward to the loft, but rather had been shoveled in from the main door, resulting in more of a hemispherical shape—the sort of structure any of us would produce simply by heaping a pile of anything into the smallest practical space available. It meant that the projected slide would produce a tangent of less angle than she might have hoped—this, doubtless understood by Stevie intuitively, and something that might be both clear and rational to her after a semester in trigonometry years in the future, but only dimly sensed that day.

With the old sow in pursuit (or so she thought), there was no time for the struggle with sine curves and hyperbolics and before she could fully grasp the significance of her move, she was in space, freely floating in the gravitous embrace of things and the laughter of Stevie, safe in the hayloft, hoping in the force of her approach (which was minimal) to avoid the deepest of the dung heap and feeling those hopes dashed as her young feet plunged into the warm depths of waste. Odd that the heat seemed still retained—this, not from the entrails, but from bacterial rot, she would later learn in high school. Tripped up, she plunged face forward, her feet caught firmly in the muck, her small hands planing before her like those of a swimmer skidding onto the surface, or a young child sliding down the slide not as demanded, but as Stevie would—head first like an Olympian. Head erect she slid, then rolled in ignominy, indescribable in any metaphor of grace and athleticism, onto the wood floor, hopelessly encased in the miscegenated dung, with barely a thought of the sow, who of course, had curiosity overcome her annoyance, could simply have ambled around the barn, down the slope to the ground-floor as it were, laughed (or whatever it is other animals do that approaches that) and licked the young child's terrified face clean like a fresh-dropped shoat.

*"You should have seen him," J. says. "I kept thinking of you standing by the hayloft hole to the pig dung and leaping to your fate. Darwin ..."*

*"Fat Darwin? The dog?"*

*"Ten pounds overweight at forty pounds, having never experienced hunger in his four years of life, the poor guy was trying to negotiate the staircase to the apartment.*

*You know the one. An afterthought of the builders, way too steep and narrow even for us, let alone an unathletic dog. So S. thinks that the only way we can get him down is for her to "scooch down" she calls it on the top stair, coax the Sultan-like beast into her lap and slide down, step by precipitous step. For a moment, the excitement stirs Darwin into a cooperative leap into her lap. He takes off, a half-second earlier than invited ... then just keeps going, free-floating, now, like the astronauts in the space capsule, leaving her aghast on the top step. He hits, I'd say, the third step from the top, head-first, then twists sideways, like a boat, I guess, slamming into the unexpected ledge, and, keg-shape as he is, begins to roll down the stairs, thumping at each revolution. And S. and I, in horror, are thinking the same thing: with each roll 'one thousand dollars, two thousand dollars, three thousand dollars ...' like kids counting out seconds instead of shocked adults calculating vet bills. Darwin hits the landing, gains his feet, and looks up to us, panting to be let out, with that goofy smile dogs get, happy as a young kid in a pile of pig shit."*

*This is a story, doubtless, he one day told or must tell to his Eloise.*

She pushed her small body through the dung, finally rolling and stumbling to her feet. And there she stood, head to toe, it might be said, in bullshit. Her favorite cow, Blossom, looked on with interest, and to this day, she swears the gentle beast, like an ideal parent, smiled in pride at her agility. The piglets went back to rooting through the soil for food,

the old sow, forgetful or indifferent to her heroics, wandered back to the pen, ignoring the young children hidden from her fury or simply gone, as unattended kids on farms like that had a way of disappearing into the fields and woods. The young girl picked her way in tears and in despair through the animals, on the path to the farmhouse where she knew she would be stripped naked, thrown into the tub and perhaps slapped around just to the point of bruising. It would be years before she would do anything other than "face the music" or even plan out her defense; maybe she would fall into the arms of her adoring father and tell him what an awful day she'd had, or into the arms of a lover in the future, and both of them could laugh at the porcine rodeo and the dung-covered child at the heart of it. She did not know that in a decade, she would finally ball up her fist in the face of the abusive mom, and inform her in a rage as quiet as the sow's rage was spectacular, that she would not be hit again.

And one day too, she would think back to an afternoon in Manhattan, a day after all her belongings but her dog were stolen from her unlocked car, when she stumbled naively into the phone booth, harassed not by a domestic beast but by the gang of teenagers—so much for civics!—who stood outside the glass kicking and laughing at her as she braced her feet against the door, screaming and crying at them to stop. I am tough and I have faced worse than you, she thought, astounded at her own strength and tenacity and astonished too at the emergence of the foolish memory—the enraged sow who outweighed the entire lot of them. Having rolled in shit that day, she thought with a confidence she had rarely known in life, having been beaten by my own

mother into silence, I don't worry about a bunch of dumbass city kids pissing on the glass door of a phone booth in Manhattan.

All those catastrophes we barely escape—whether an enraged sow or a pack of teenagers, an uncharted ledge or the ill-considered words of a loved one—we think, considering these inexistent things, how close we were to disaster, to stepping out into the path of the oncoming car or bus, or saying the wrong thing to a friend or would-be lover as we fumbled with our clothes, somehow avoiding the contemptuous retort that would haunt us for life, lucky not to succumb to it, as so many others apparently did succumb—those overly sensitive teenagers who took their lives, and we all know who they were and why they did it—lucky to avoid the kind of speculations I am toying with today. Not acknowledging that the crucial fact of life is that these much-feared events were no events at all. The teenage gang never beat the glass door down; the would-be lover never laughed in your face; the sow never caught you nor really threatened to; and the dog, all bones intact after a quadruple barrel-roll, simply smiled back up the stairs at you. All that fear, the terror, all those near escapes: a young child ripped to shreds by the sow, the rape victim unconscious in Central Park, the naive lover ridiculed by the woman of experience. Why do we recall only the horrors that could have happened, rather than take comfort in the ones that never did? Why didn't we or our dead friends know, that no one gives enough of a crap about us or our frail sensitivities to hurt us, any more than does an old sow trotting back to the feedlot?

She throws her head back, mixing her story up with other tales of, say, the S-turn or Stevie's grand imaginings. She puts the poem or the art before her fifth-graders in the barrio and is thrilled when they recognize a single word or laugh at a phrase or pen-stroke they have never seen. It is pointless to demand some white-folks' analysis from them—that is not what beauty is! It is enough for them to know what painting or a poem is.

She walks with what is left of her father, or imagines doing so as she so often has—supporting him, now wasted such that she and a brother can carry him easily over the limits of the land he walked almost daily when they were kids. Each day. Other days. The days all blurring into one as he dies with them, or as they imagine him to die with them, trying to recount for them the antics they performed as kids. She hears his last breath, or what she thinks will be the breath that will be last, choking in her arms. She feels her brother's arms around her, too late to protect her now, unable to protect her then.

Beneath her, she feels the yielding soil—the spring-wet leaves from the autumn and the spring grass tamped down on the black earth.

The sunrise glints through the alders.

# PART THREE:

# ACADEMIC SCHERZI

## 3.1 WAGON LOADS OF MUMMIES

> The Aegyptian Mummies, which Cambyses or time hath spared, avarice now consumeth. Mummy is become Merchandise, Mizraim cures wounds, and Pharaoh is sold for balsoms
>
> —Thomas Browne

A small scrap of paper was all our hero demanded. One leaf, one fragment. Maybe with writing on it, or maybe once used as a grocery bag. That was all. No parades. No prizes. No awards dinners. There would be no book tours through Europe. Just one scrap of paper, and he or they or someone would or could have conceded defeat and the whole sorry affair would have been over. But no one, particularly his

foes, seemed to understand that, and pretty soon, everyone got belligerent and testy and stopped speaking to each other if they had ever conversed in the first place. A few sat back imperiously and called their opponents the most revolting of names.

That's how it is on this bit of the earth, leased by the Academy.

You see, somewhere in Dard Hunter's *Papermaking,* the second edition of 1947,[1] why, the very year our hero was born!, there's a story that comes to Hunter second- or third- or fourth-hand about how, in the nineteenth century, American paper was made out of mummy wrappings. Ridiculous. Of course. And all our well-intentioned hero had done was question this story, as any reasonable person with Maine connections would do.[2]

The way scholars steeped in academic diction of the late last century put it, such an appealing tale with its attendant exotica "obliterates the traces of its origins," particularly when tarted up with frilly Victoriana about newsprint in Syracuse and cholera epidemics emanating from the paper mills of Gardiner. It resonates even with John Bidwell, the no-nonsense Librarian of the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York and the best scholar on paper in the country, who says "he would like to believe the mummy tale is true." Well there. Not many people before this very moment know that John said that.

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[1] Dard Hunter, *Papermaking: The History and Technique of an Ancient Craft* (1943; 2nd ed., New York, 1947).

[2] See "The Curse of the Mummy Paper," (1995), rpt. *The Myth of Print Culture* (Toronto, 1998), 170-85.

Our hero, here formally introduced, had worked this history out in detail, and even wrested that remark from John. All goes back, he claimed, to two sources: the first a man named Daniel Stanwood, the son of I. Augustus Stanwood, a papermaker in Gardiner. And if you know any of their namesakes today, you can only suspect that nothing either of their forebears said so many years ago is reliable. The second was a treatise written in 1855 by Isaiah Deck; all I know of him is that he likely did not choose his own name. Hunter quoted this treatise in some detail and described it, incorrectly, as a manuscript (an error that would turn out to be of some consequence). Deck advocates making paper from mummy wrappers, and even using the fragrant ooze from the decaying mummies themselves as incense for Catholic masses. Imagine! This was pretty clearly, judging from the excerpts published by Hunter, some kind of ironic Swiftian projection, like "how to solve Irish poverty by feeding the English their babies," or "how to reduce food to its original essence of horseshit," or "how to cure a dog of flatulence by a homeopathic method involving a bellows with a long ivory shaft," the details of which need not be recounted here.

There's really nothing more to say. Or there should have been nothing more.

But you know how it is. You get used to the way things were, or how you imagined them to be. Something resonates with you and your ouroboric myths then feed on themselves. You're told your incense comes from a dead guy, or deer taste best when you take them eating blueberries, or fish bite when the tide turns, and you, lulled by the lilt of authority, end up thinking these old saws ring true.

Somewhere in Vermont it was, Nicolson Baker had bought this whole "song and dance" of the mummy paper (as Mother might put it), and the Great Man had gotten all amped up in *Double Fold* (2001)[1] when he found out that he, our hero here, had questioned the whole thing and had even said disparaging things about Dard Hunter and the gullibility of people who believed everything he said, and as for Deck's "manuscript," who knows where it was today. That's more or less what our hero said.

Well by God, Baker raged, persuaded now by the tone of his own Miltonic vehemence, he would not brook such insolence. Deck's manuscript? Why there it was, he had access to the very thing, *ipsissima*!, signed by Isaiah Deck himself, as anyone with even a rudimentary knowledge of the internet could see, right there in *Philosophical Transactions* of 1855, really one of the more mainstream academic journals of the time. And to think our scholar-hero had failed to locate it! Manuscript indeed! It was *printed*! (Thus, you see, the import of Hunter's error.) This was followed by a lot of triumphant Pindarics of no real import here.

All this struck a chord with some notable High Falutin in paper history. Oh yes, there are such people, even today. They worship Dard Hunter of course, sing his praises constantly, and establish Dard Hunter Studios and Dard Hunter Museums and Friends of Dard Hunter and all kinds of tributary things like that. And she had taken some minor, low-key remark made by our hero about how there wasn't a

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[1] Nicholson Baker, *Double Fold: Libraries and the Assault on Paper* (New York [I think], 2002 [I suppose that is the reprint]).

damn sheet of newsprint from the *East Bumfuck Gazette* or *Syracuse Sentinel* actually made of mummy paper, and she had said "oh yes there was and there's an end on it" and ok, so she couldn't put her hands on it right now, any more than the narrator in Frost's "The Witch of Coos" could put her hand on the bones of the skeleton who had once walked down her staircase "like a stack of dishes," the accounts were nonetheless irrefutable and the sooner our hero hit the mute switch and crawled back to his stinking academic hole, the better. He'd learn to leave the real history to the real historians, that is, to the Paper People.

But all that is getting ahead of the story.

Mr. Terry Lewis owns an antiques store in Wiscasset, Maine, and anyone with enough interest in Maine to be reading this knows it well. Of course it's not quite so easy these days, if you're headed north (meaning 'east'), to take the required left turn on Rte. 1 to get there, and even more difficult to get back to the main road without some detour half-way to Bath and back after you have given up turning left again through traffic. All thanks to the failure of the town officials to give pedestrians anywhere to stand or cross other than the middle of the damn street. Even if you make that turn, it's impossible to find parking. You may as well leave the car on Rte. 1 with its horn blaring and the left-turn blinker flashing metronomically and maybe walk down to Red's Eats to get some of their fried fish or one of their over-hyped lobster rolls among the outlandishly clad tourists and surly children waiting for school to start again. You're going to be there a while whether you get to the antiques store or not.

In the main entrance to the store is what we all know as the Mummy of Wiscasset—origin obscure.

Our hero had described Mr. Lewis as having a distinguished career in the merchant marine and being "a raconteur of no small notoriety even before the story of the mummy broke." That was rather nicely turned, you must admit, but of course you need some background to follow this completely.

Mr. Lewis had once been on Bill Geist's *CBS Sunday Morning* and the whole interview had quickly modulated into what the *Lincoln County Weekly* called a "comedy routine." The thing was, the Egyptian authorities had asked for their mummy back. Mr. Lewis had refused, and threatened to throw it off the Wiscasset bridge. Now this was mid-summer and those were the days before the new bridge was built joining Wiscasset and Waldoboro. That bridge helped the rhythms of the traffic flow, although hardly enough, and our hero had made some clever but esoteric reference about the Egyptian authorities not knowing how idle Mr. Lewis's threats had been, since the Wiscasset bridge was unapproachable in summer, due to the traffic. The joke was, you see, that the traffic ... But there's really no need to explain it.

Somewhere in the interview with Bill Geist, Mr. Lewis had said something about mummy paper. Yet despite the quotation in the *Lincoln County Weekly*, when you asked Mr. Lewis directly, say, on a visit in 2004, he performed one of his much-rehearsed routines of innocence and denied ever having said anything of the kind ("Mummies? What would they be doing weeks from Egypt?") and claimed to know nothin' about no paperin' of mummies. Or whatever. He didn't really say that, but you get the idea.

Two years or so later, determining not to leave this unresolved, it was off to Damariscotta, where the office of the *Lincoln County Weekly* was. And the traffic was so bad at the bridge lining up for lunch at Red's Eats you may as well stop in again at Terry Lewis's antique store. And there it was. Well, the mummy of course—that was always there–but on the wall, all the clippings from the *New York Times* and *The New Yorker* and *Portland Press Herald* (which I believe has no honorific *The*)—the entire bibliography of the affair of the mummy and Bill Geist's *CBS Sunday Morning*—and in particular, from the *Lincoln County Weekly* (surely no "The") 22 August 1996, "Mummy Roils Media Madness," (whatever that was supposed to mean; I don't think it's construable), and these words attributed to Mr. Lewis himself: "Around the turn of the century rags were hard to come by. Sailors used to buy mummies just for the wrappings, rags that were used to make paper."

Now anyone who knows Mr. Lewis knows he could not possibly have said that. It's just not his style or mode. This was clearly reconstructed from the reporter's notes, because had Mr. Lewis formulated such an idea, it would have come out: "why sailors bought them, boatloads, just for the wrappings. And the rags too, those were for ... why right on this wall I have ... well, can't find it ... You know the paper mills were ordering shiploads and it was like wagon trains, miles long, although this isn't all that well-known in Maine, with mummy wrappings all the way ..." Or something like that. It was understandable the reporter had gotten tangled up in it all and tried to unravel this syntax with some Alexandrian elegance taught in journalism school.

But the hard evidence was there. And at least now, talking to the 'innocent' Mr. Lewis (scare quotes, as in the academy), you could make him face the music. You might say, "but the *Weekly* quotes you as saying ..." or some *Sixty Minutes* thing like that, and then you could imagine the poor bastard squirming in the glare of the reporter's stare and he would just admit to retailing the mummy paper story and lying to you about it or maybe just put his quaking hand guiltily over the camera lens.

None of that happened, of course. And maybe if our hero had known Mr. Lewis as most people do, he would have conducted himself accordingly and refrained from the whole *Sixty Minutes* fantasy. Because not only did Mr. Lewis this time own up to the quotation he had denied absolutely making two years earlier, he even claimed to remember that very meeting, he and our hero, heads locked, *tête-à-tête*, ass deep in mummies—all but the small detail of having denied the very claim that brought these meetings into being.

And oh yes, there were mummies. Christ yes. Wagonloads. Why from Gardiner to Portland, miles long. A thing not known in Maine. And there were manifests, you know. Well, you don't (because you haven't been in the Merchant Marines, I guess he meant). And all ships carry manifests of what's aboard. And they all used to top their loads off with mummies. Those coming from the East Med (that's the Eastern part of the Mediterranean Sea, where Egypt is), that is. And there was no manifest on that stuff, because it was like ballast or packing, gold though it was, just like the rags on the mummies weren't the precious part, just the body within, which you know, even though the rags would be ground up into paper for the books, I've got some right here,

maybe, that then printed the legends of these mummies and mummy paper itself and without that it was all just compost anyway. Manifests. Ha! I'd like to see a manifest for those things. Why hell, he says, I'd like to see the manifest of the one in the corridor ...

Which I suppose means, no such thing could possibly exist. It was just, you see, manifest or no manifest, if the Egyptians took back the mummy, as they had recently threatened to do, why that was that, and there wouldn't be any damn waving about a manifest proving it was his or who once had owned it or anything like that, because the thing was, it was the mummy that was important, not the bullshit manifest documenting its existence.

Well, that was the point, our hero had serenely thought, isn't it? And weren't Dard Hunter and Isaiah Deck and Nicholson Baker and the high falutin paper-lady all waving about those written manifests in triumph like scores with no performers and all he wanted was one shred of material paper itself just as all Terry Lewis wanted was the mummy in the glass case he had displayed for years? Because who couldn't say "Why this boat has a cargo of mummies"? And hell, I'll say it here: this boat has a cargo of mummies. Let's go further. Not only that, this book itself (unless you're reading it on some damn Kindle or other) this very book is printed on mummy paper. I am Mummy Paper.

Now this whole manifest problem gets wadded up with unfounded myths of cholera epidemics in Gardiner, Maine, the result of handling mummies imported from Egypt. And never mind that there isn't a hen's turd of evidence for this anymore than for Mr. Lewis's "wagon-trains of mummies" strung along from the port of Portland to the warehouses of

Gardiner. And even if the rather extensive reports from the Maine State Board of Health in the late nineteenth century or the City of Gardiner's "Mayor's Address and Annual Reports" from 1851-1867 had talked of cholera, and associated it with the paper-mills, which they didn't, anyone with the slightest knowledge of the entire disgusting process of paper-making would know it doesn't accord at all with mummies. Just remember we're talking about commercial paper here, not some flowery hand-made crap produced by a single-sex dulcimer-playing couple in Litchfield Corners.

Think back to the Androscoggin River or the Kennebec flowing up past Gardiner before the now much-reviled tree-huggers closed the paper mills all over Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont, leaving these rivers full of striped bass and humpback whales below the falls. Before that, these rivers smoked with sulfur fumes so vile they peeled the paint from the houses in Mexico and left the entire riverfront uninhabitable in Brunswick except for the lowliest of tenements. And those were the good days, the days when paper came from wood pulp. Before that, things were even worse. All you need to know about that sordid past is that the main ingredient in paper was underwear. And it wasn't like your wife chimed in: "Look, dear, an unopened package of tighty whities from Renys. Why not put these in the ragbag for the paper mills, but let me wash them first." Why no. If you were going to throw your underwear out for the rag-pickers to give to the paper mills, let's just say your hand-washing might be a bit more perfunctory than for stuff you were going to wear the next day.

As I said, it's all pretty revolting. So any cholera that raged through Gardiner was likely the result of some poor

bastard elbow deep in unwashed human shit, operating the Hollanders that ground this all up and turned it into that fine paper you wrote thank-you notes to your loathed grandparents on.

Now I. Augustus Stanwood operated a mill in Gardiner in 1859, where all this cholera and these wagon-loads of mummies were said to be, and Dard Hunter got all his information on this man from "Stanwood's son, Daniel, a retired professor of international law." And here we have the damn professors horning in again, like our hero, only this one is way out of his field of expertise.

In Stanwood's recollection, Dad was hard-pressed for material and began importing mummies from Egypt. Well here, things are a little dicey. Because if you read Joel Munsell's *Chronology of Paper and Papermaking* (1864) you'll see that what's really being imported from Egypt are "rags," with nothing about the source of them. So Stanwood, who knows no more of Egypt than the chorus to *Aida,* says that Dad then tossed the whole business—mummy wrappings, papyrus fragments with their unrecorded dithyrambs, everything—into the Hollanders and all this became newsprint, or the brown wrapping paper used by the grocers and butchers. And frankly, I don't know whether I'd less like eating my steaks off three-thousand-year-old Egyptians or off my neighbor's ass. I guess that's why you'd better turn the grill heat high or just become a vegetarian like the hippies at the Common Ground Fair.

Anyway, Professor Stanwood now gets all worked up and starts speaking of locomotives in Egypt fueling up on mummies. Now this is something even casual readers of *The*

*New Yorker*, 1996,[1] or Mark Twain know all about. Clearly it's a joke. In *Innocents Abroad*, Twain is riding one of these trains and has the conductor yell out to his fuel bearers: "Damn these plebeians, they don't burn worth a cent—pass out a King." As Twain himself says "Stated to me for a fact. I only tell it as I got it. I am willing to believe it. I can believe anything."

You see? Irony. What makes the strained mythology of mummies so compelling is not that any of it is true, but that it isn't. All these tale-bearers, Twain, the Stanwoods and their late descendants, Terry Lewis—these grand charmers aren't the source of God's own truth. And if they thought critically about the things they said, why they would get all bound up and, you may as well say it, mummified, and you'd hear no more from them.

Now as for me, I really don't care about mummies. I've seen the one in Wiscasset as everyone else from Maine or visiting Maine from away has and I've too inquired about the price and been told "It's not for sale." Sometimes by Mr. Lewis himself, sometimes by someone conducting store business for him, and sometimes next door at the book shop, or the book shop that used to be there, staffed by a woman who loved Mr. Lewis as everyone did, and was the proprietress of some four or five thousand books, not one of which was printed on mummy paper.

And as for the paper people, well, what of them? What does a populist like Baker know, curled up there in Vermont

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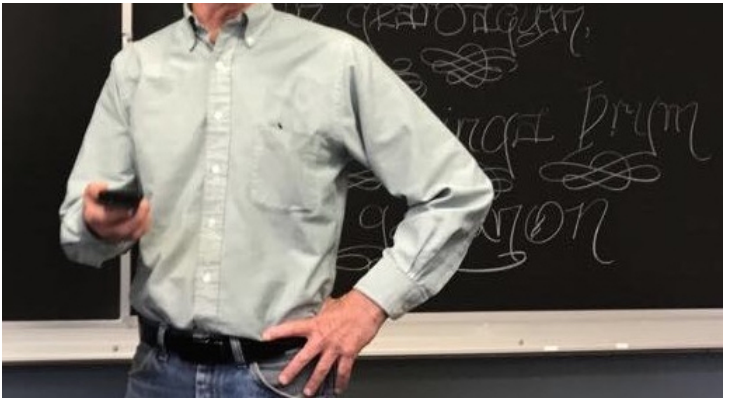
[1] Somewhere in one of the 52 issues. Xerox copy available in my filing cabinet, or was, before I handed my office keys back to my office staff.

somewhere, like a modern-day J. D. Salinger? Or some notable in Syracuse, a place best known for football in the fifties or for being fourth, as *Forbes* says, for raising families in America? What about John Bidwell himself? Why John summers on Cape Cod, not Maine at all, so what kind of authority can he be on the mythical mummies in the Gardiner paper mills? Who is he to say what the locals in Maine once said or did?

And as for you, Mr. Nicolson or Nicholas or Barker or Baker or the like, the truth will make you sing a different tune, I say. Enough of your *ad hominem*s. We all now know the score: how your *Double Fold* was half-way through production when our hero pricked your mummy-paper windbag, as it were, and how you blew off to the archives before you double-timed it back to the galley sheets, trumpeting your copy of the manifest.

I read a by-pass will be built past Wiscasset, and there will be no more lines of cars stalled out at Red's Eats, or turning left to the Book Store. They'll have time now to linger serenely on the bridge and gaze down the Sheepscot, out past the cottage on Macmahan where I once fell in love, down toward Indian Point where our friend Anne gazes as best she can out over the water. They will wonder if this is where the once-famous schooner wrecks noted in all the guidebooks were said to be.

## 3.2 IN THE LECTURE HALL REPRISE



> *Given the existence as uttered forth in the public work of Puncher and Wattmann of a personal God quaqua-quaqua with white beard quaquaquaqua outside time without extension who from the heights of divine apathia divine athambia ...*

... It was like tripping over the half-ladder Christina had forgotten to tell me she had broken, lost as she was in her monograph on David Foster Wallace, still unreadable in death, and falling head first, my feet pinned in the broken steps, onto the ancient rocks left here by the glaciers, feeling the blood and stumbling back to my shower which even then, even before I told the anecdote, soon looked like the scene out of "Psycho," staunching the blood (a phrase I have never used until today), refusing to seek help from the neighbors any more than I did the time I put the wet-suit on inside-out before going for a swim (a predicament difficult

for those who have not experienced it to appreciate) then thinking the smart thing to do, as always, is to continue on in life, which so many I know chose not to do, so plunging into the frigid bay for a swim, washing the blood from my skin and the wet-suit, my neighbors appalled when they heard of it, knowing that all would end either in a great tale or in my unreflected death at sea—less noble or heroic than I might have planned it years ago ...

> *divine aphasia loves us dearly with some exceptions for reasons unknown but time will tell are plunged into torment plunged into fire ...*

I woke in a waking stupor before the lecturer, uncertain whether I was dreaming this day or it was one in life, as I sat fixed in the back row of the auditorium. I woke with the smell of waste all around me, having written of farmyards and pig dung, I suspect. And Sadie the dog hadn't thawed and refrozen in the freezer due to a power outage after all, as I had told it once (see infra, pp. 131-3), but rather the whole business, food, weed, and what there was of dog, so Michaeline insists, had liquified when the tenant neglected to plug the freezer back in while preparing for the burial.

And then I recalled weeks earlier finding the lingerie in the laundry bin, or was it the rag-bag my parents used to leave as tribute to the ragmen of the paper-mills who disappeared generations ago—"unmentionables," they call them, and in some sense, that is appropriate: even though there is no squeamishness regarding such things among today's sophisticates, there are certainly situations when you want to make damn sure you do not "mention" them—asking a lover "These yours?" for example—lest you end up alone in your boudoir ordering tea like Casanova wondering what

you had said wrong. And maybe they were dropped or hidden there as a joke a year ago or more it must have been, tossed in and out of the laundry pile, and whose were those and what mischief had they been up to planted there and who was I to question origins?

> ... *whose fire flames if that continues and who can doubt it will ...*

Puncher and Wattman? Is that what the lecturer just said? And is there a study lying dormant within me too? Something about the sins and doublet sins *wrath/ire*, for example, both recorded in the Old English oddly, as if you might feel one in poetry and contemplate the other in your lecture notes or in the strokes of the scrivener, all the dictionaries following their abstruse conventions and pedigrees, Grimm failing to assist and Verner of no use to you ...

> *What are you talking about? it's the banality of the English/Latin doublets like <u>lust</u> and <u>luxuria</u> or ... No no, you don't understand ...*

The seething polemics of the lexicographers. They never intended to get their definitive histories "right"—to accord, that is, with the facts of speaking and events. But rather constructed their entries and analyses in line with the errors of their predecessors, concealing all with a paragraph or two on methodology. It was as if the purpose of the rifle-range—where he should have practiced his weaponry, rather than out in the field, costing his young friend his life—it is as if one's goal there were to reproduce as closely as one could the mis-hits of the bubbas in camo, the tight pattern high and to the right, rather than to cut through the entire bullshit of convention, fix one's sights, and hit the target dead-

center. It was as if the purpose of that seminal study, its author glancing up from the dias to the sycophantic faces of listeners and admirers, were to reproduce as closely as possible the triteness of tradition rather than upsetting the entire apple-cart of things with the truth ...

> *... fire the firmament that is to say blast hell to heaven so blue still and calm so calm with a calm which even though intermittent is better than nothing ...*

"I can't promise you anything," my Beckett scholar said, pushing aside her lecture notes. "You forget: I was married for years to my high-school sweetheart. Now don't shake your head like some small-town Lothario: even in the end, I lusted after him as fiercely as I might someday lust for you. You think I was to get through grad school on my own? fending off the inept advances of classmates like yourself? I know nothing of dating. I need to call my sister, who didn't marry young as I did and has doubtless tied far better men than you in knots. She will tell me when I can give in to you." And slid the shirt from her shoulders and I fairly yipped in joy at that, hoping her sister would relent: "Call her now, for God's sake! What are you waiting for?"

> *... established beyond all doubt all other doubt that that which clings to the labors of men that as a result of the labors unfinished of Testew and Cunnard ...*

"Enough of this," I hear her chiding me, the Dominatrix at her sketchpad. "There you go again, and I have warned you many times of this. What do you take these women for, having wasted half their lives in libraries? What was it your mother said? 'Shit from Shinola'—that's what they all know of love, more concerned with their resumes or the cosmetics of surgeries than what those enhancements might be

good for. And you, you are worse, thinking your inner self shines so brightly through that scruffed-up exterior that all the women will drop their papers and their books, strip bare, and run off to Las Vegas with you for wild flings in the city lights."

*... I resume Fulham Clapham ...*

*... the death of Bishop Berkeley ...*

"Is that not you in the subway car? On the way to Brooklyn, and you were likely there for the opera, sleeping in the guest room in Park Slope. Late 80s, the IRT 2, it must have been, that you used to ride in graduate school to Chinatown (some sophisticate *you* were!), and one breath and you know there is a homeless person living in that car and you feel a closeness, not with him, but with the rest of the riders—like the time you were depressed and wandered into the chapel service on Christmas Eve it was and the kindly priest, with no more than a half-dozen communicants, pretended to take no note of why you were so desperately there alone—suddenly you and the strap-hangers are all one—always an unwelcome shock to you—easing away from the homeless guy, and you realize ('to your dismay', you will decide to say retelling this) that all the riders on the subway car believe the homeless man is you.

"That's society for you, proponents of the right and civil things to do. And instead of shouting out, 'For God's sake, it's not me you're afraid of. How about we help the poor bastard, rather than disparage his *Doppelgänger* impostor?" And instead of that you went along with them, herd scholar that you are, knowing the only difference would be not in the ethics of your actions, but the fact you would one day

tell of it, and listen now to the distorted version of the tale come back to you, thrown in your face.

*stark naked in the stockinged feet in Connemara ...*

"Remember those years in the heartland. That girl with a young body so perfect you still dream of her, kicking yourself for not pretending at least—was even that too much for you?—to fall enough in love with her to give you something solid to recall today? You drove back from Iowa, it was, where she had violated you in the high reeds next to the run-off lake, and she wore something that must have looked stylish to the mid-west girl she had been not many years before—you swine!—and the truck drivers with their slatted carriers packed with the protesting hogs leered at the two of you, her eyes relaxed and closed, you fondling her, as you tried to fix your attention on the roadway. By the time you got home she was as on fire as she had ever been. 'I could go another fifty times' she said as you threw on your best suit and ran off to the meeting.

"And it was Mardi Gras or the first day of spring when the high-plains ice turns suddenly to clay so hard they have to blast the seeds into the germinating space since nothing, even art, grows on its own in this wind-beaten land, and all the kids expose their pasty skin to the sun and she knew, even with her dearth of experience in life, she knew you would be gone back to the East Coast and admitted or pled she had never told you what she felt for you, thinking it would just unease you with the truth. (There's that word again!) Just as you too left all the most important parts—the passion of embrace—all that in arrears, as it were—don't make a bad joke here!—and as for looking at me all doe-

eyed like that bullshit you pull with Eloise or tried with her, you can forget that too."

> *Dies irae ... ira dei ... No no, you don't understand ... You have mis-read ...*

The lecturer pauses before the typescript. Perhaps he has lost his place. Perhaps the pages were never properly arranged at all.

> *Puncher and Wattman. Testew and Cunard. The death of Bishop Berkeley ...*

Was the old man done? Did he recall the protocols of questioning amid the respectful, though somewhat tentative applause?

"And now R.," she concludes, "fresh from the chemo, hearing this breathes deep, and for the first time in a decade senses the cool and painless air. She was and is, like me, the darling of her associates—teachers, classmates, friends—the Takers-of-Selfies on the internet—always posing, even though she too has spent her later life awash in drugs, the chemo having marred her once flawless skin, the bloated weight piled on her flesh, stripped away through her discipline and regimens, still posing, with that specious joy you find only in the camera lens. All those heroics—the months in the hospital, the worst there is, they say—succumbing in the end to the banalities of alcohol, as did dozens we both have lived with and could name, a week in detox, a scandal for the oncologist, who never stooped to such trivia as willlessness, now back, defying doctors and her scars as well, '*smoking hot as ever',* you would say*, 'the hair once fallen out now falling back to her shoulders*.'

"How was that?" she concludes, laying the pencil down and closing the sketchpad.

I remember the chess-player in Chicago—the last game I played before my years with Eloise, our positions in disarray through the equivocacies of e-mail and the telephone. I watched his face lose strength as the moves proceeded to the endgame and he finished the anecdote of the disaffected wife—his or that of a tablemate: "You'll regret what you find if you insist on reading it," her young husband warned her, committed artist as he was, baring his soul in the manuscripts as he had been taught to do by the bad professors, much like David too on the fishing boat, calquing Hopkins in his poetry in the rain, while striding down the wharf loading the freshly painted buoys into the boat, and she, the youngish wife, still caught in the stupid confidence of love, muttered some gnomic thing young lovers use about "needing to know everything," or "being one" with him, then, after skimming through his drafts, collapsed in sobs so great she could hardly breathe given what she read and "What did you expect?!" he cried in all the indignation of poetry, as the anecdote drifted off to its coda and the chess-master found himself enamored with this young wanderer across from the chessboard, staring at the position now hopeless for one of them, both prepared to lay the king down in defeat, realizing he had no chance with such a philanderer or misanthrope and "I think I'll just go home," he said, and I thought then of my mother, facing the near-certain death of my father: "I think I'll sleep," she said. "I think I'll just sleep."

And I then slept for all of them, in the guest bed in Chicago, the guest bed in Manhattan, driving then to the racist South and back through the self-laudating North and composing my enraged etymologies, sticking to my own affairs, it would be said, feeling the keel brush over the anchor rode

in the windless night, as the speaker's time ran out, to the perfunctory nods and applause of his listeners.

The sun falls over the plains, now smoking with the smoke of spring. I used to drive in evenings to the bluff carved out by the Missouri, I think it was, east bank, facing west, seeing there my summers on the fishing boat or sailing from the anchorage at dawn in the northwesterlies, my dark-eyed Norwegian girl in tears beside me, unwilling to disturb my lecturing, unable to see what I could see, the ocean-like earth falling away to the horizon, and the calm dry sea stretched out to the sunset.

## 3.3 THE PLAIN SENSE OF THINGS

There is an imperfection, a superficialness, in all my notions. I understand nothing clearly, nothing to the bottom. I pick up fragments, but never have in my memory a mass of any size. I wonder really if it be possible for me to acquire any one part of knowledge fully. I am a lawyer. I have no system of law. I write verses. I know

> nothing of the art of poetry. In short I could go through everything in the same way.
>
> —James Boswell, Journal 22 December 1775 (*Boswell: The Ominous Years,* p. 203)

As a young academic who cared nothing for what others said or thought, he never got her history. He never heard of her childhood, where she grew up, boyfriends in high school, her college shenanigans, the basis of her tastes in art and poetry. Her late husband—where had she met him? What was she thinking when he died when and as he did?

He got it in fragments, sifting through the past her daughters and her own mother would allude to—following her husband to Manhattan, her dedication to communities, her try-outs in the Olympics ... Even writing this, I confuse hers with other histories: the aging pianist in Santa Monica—90 she must have been—my mother's teacher, she was said to be. And she too talked of the Olympics, skiing, turning with a Telemark the way they did in the previous century, and having no chance against the parallel turns of the skiers from Switzerland.

He left his aging relatives at home, like all of us mere shadows of their former selves. He drove out "to experience America" on the backroads of the farmland, in the grassfire smoke of Oklahoma, where Linda Jane would one day leave him in bewilderment, beneath the mistletoe that grew, as he would write, as big as bears. Driving through the plains and distant relations, cousins twice removed, to fortune on the West Coast: his pay the alienation of intellect and work, so he was told in the lecture hall.

Half-way through Kansas, the scent of new-turned earth filled the air and he drew it deep and irreplaceably into his lungs. He turned north to Rte 40, some point west of Manhattan, up by Salinas, where Joan, ten years his senior would fall infatuated (or so he imagined), as he with her, shepherding him as she did the schoolchildren she monitored during the workweek. The placid life of the provinces—tennis games and cribbage, the home-cooked meal reminding him of the family meals of the 50s.

She spoke of her daughters whom he knew, her late husband, buried with his note of apology. And he nodded as if in affinity: John, Richard, Tim, his godfather too—the whole self-slaughtered lot of them, gasping for air or shocked into nothingness. What more did he need of experience? He knew how these old soldiers died. But it would be years before he knew, learning what Joan meant and felt, when his Eloise spent the early morning, April 5th it was, in the gun shop, charming the camo-clad salesmen and drifters, then took her lethal purchase home and did the same "to me," he thought. "The worst thing you could do," I wrote.

And it was also years before he kicked himself, as he put it once, or slapped himself "upside the head," whatever gesture that might be, for his unspeakable naiveté. What had he been thinking, then, feigning adulthood as he conversed so poised and unmoved with her? All this folderol of maturity? it was just that and nothing more. Feeling that pinprick of emotion, I guess, we all act stupidly like school-children facing a stern aunt, like a young girl on a prom date. "You cannot understand," Joan kindly said on the last day. "The people here, the way life is for them. You need to go, despite your love for me, back to Maine or California."

**I. The Road to Manhattan**

How many times had she told the story? "The girls—they did not forgive him, and still cannot," she would say, forgiving him in the very utterance. "They do not understand. He spent the last two days of life in tears, 'wracked by sobs' you sometimes hear it called, but no words are strong enough for this. In those days, there were no resources. No helplines or support groups minding the phone-lines. You just held your breath as best you could and put a good face on things for the children. For even then, you knew. Even in those dark uncivil days. By the time your loved ones get to that point, only the near dead can know what they are going through. There is nothing the rest of us can do." I nodded the nod of a sophisticate, the nod of the man I would become more than twenty years into the future, as I thought of Eloise welcoming me in the airport; the gun carefully drawn from her purse, then turned on me and then upon herself. "However much in love we might be," I said, as if by rote, "yes, there is nothing we can do."

"And that is why I do nothing for my E. but wait," she said. "She and her sister too will learn to love him once again, or they will not. All I can do for them is to maintain their home, as if contented, not resigned!—here, in the heartland where we moved, where the two of them grew up—waiting here to prove to them that this is where we formed a home and lived. This is where I raised them to maturity and grace. Oh I had my misgivings too! We moved 'only on conditions', I told him, as adamant as possible. 'We will have an open house. All will be welcome. From here, from there. From either coast. And we will send our kids to

the cities and towns of New England, where they will find their own way back to the cultures we ourselves have abandoned'." And then she smiled: "You saw them there; I heard the story. E. borrowing from her sister the dress for the opera. And you astonished at the two of them! We all knew," she said.

I blushed at the implications of all this. The three women all two steps ahead of me. And yes, I might well have "cast an eye" (no more than that!) on her daughter, who sloughed me off with far greater sophistication than I possessed, and told me to be sure to drop in to her home in Kansas, where she had learned all these social skills, where Joan would welcome me just as her older sister had that time we met in Manhattan for the opera.

So they bought the small house in the small town, whose Main Street would collapse in the 70s as did the Main Streets of all those towns you see on the News, the residents and commentators clucking their tongues and throwing ashes on their heads. And finally Rhea, her own mother, came there to join her when the kids fled east, taking up a home in the assisted living place, playing cribbage on weekdays, welcoming the never-ending guests who came to them or often just drove through.

I can still see Joan in the kitchen, her smile of the middle-aged school-teacher—11pm it was, and she is laughing at the younger man whose senses were obliterated after 14 hours of driving, whose emotions were crushed leaving some young woman (love of his life, he once had claimed—that old song again!) confused and lost on the coast behind him. I can still see Joan and her maturing form turned away

from me, laughing as she heated water for tea: "All that negativity," she said. "Enough of this complaint! The job? The very trip? The girl you left on the Maine coast? Do you think she will be the last one in your life? You need to stop. Or I will just stop listening. It is a wonderful road opening up for you over the mountains. I'll wake you. You can sleep in the guest bed. There is a very very peculiar quirk about the bathtub. I won't need to explain it!"

And I stared shocked into her face, not knowing how she read my too transparent self, or what kind of woman would dare to tell me such things, and had I had more sense than I did as a young man of thirty, I would have fallen for her on the spot and there never would be those affairs I wrote about, and Eloise, I guess, Eloise would still be walking on this earth, unknown to me. Her story told only by sentimentalists.

The college in Manhattan. An hour's drive on Rte 40, no traffic of consequence. The professor and professor's wife could live like royalty on his salary. Not like paupers in New York or Los Angeles. The neighbors shaking their heads. More people from away. You had to pretend to be welcoming. To invite them "for dessert," the way folks of the midwest and on the high plains do. The lovely wife and the two blond daughters, barely kids. And who would have guessed in those days that when the husband scandalously died that way (the way he did, you know! let's not speak of it) and the two kids left for the East Coast, that Joan would still be smiling there, and the same stream of cars that so suspiciously came through for a visit (we suppose it was) would continue as if nothing had happened. As if the great love of one's life had neither ended nor begun; as if the family had not

been raised at all. As if Main Street were still the way it was in the old TV shows of the 50s.

We drove to the tennis courts. Early May, it must have been, and the fields were upturned and the air full of chemicals. She laughs as she turns her athlete's form to the forehand; I will hear her mother later talk of her prowess on the athletic fields, her trials at the Olympics, and it was as if she were waiting, both were waiting as I drove senseless to California.

She met me for the last time in the yard of the now abandoned house in Kansas, where we had spent the night once sharing the guest room ("the only cool room in the house," she had said. "You won't mind if I take the cot by the window?"). The grass this last day now unmowed, the door to the empty kennel swinging free and all the windows latched. The porch where we had sat a year before, it must have been, laughing in the shadowed sun after our tennis match. "You can stay here if you must," she said. "But I need to go. You know what this means. I know you do. I have not forgotten the night we met and I salved your hurt. I have not forgotten listening to your breath as we lay in separate beds in the room I keep for guests. He's a local man," she added, with kindness. "You must understand. This 'friend from California'? who stops in twice a year on his way east or west? This is something not in his lexicon. Not in his understanding. Don't talk to me of love. Don't talk to me of dinner dates in Lawrence or Topeka, where your girl from the East Coast spent those years after she broke up with you. You can find your way, to others, just as you once found your way to me."

**II. Sailing Lessons**

A free-for-all it was out there on the water. Or so it seemed when others piled into their boats and whooped out for an afternoon in what they thought the perfect breeze and sun. The day you "couldn't miss," you "had to take advantage of." And it took weeks on the beaches of Venice for me to learn that there was no day "too good" for anything.

"Two rules," I said as they clambered over the railing from the well-built skiff. "(1) you can do as little or as much as you want. Lie back like models in a photo shoot, or handle tiller and lines like Olympians; (2) anything that goes wrong is my, the captain's fault. There is nothing else you need to know." I raised sail as the guests got in my and in each other's way, as Pound says Ovid says. Then the bow fell off from the mooring and the wind pressed into the main ..."

"I put my strong hands on the sheets to the genoa. I felt him lean into me. I felt his arm around my unfleshed chest. My calloused hands now caught in a caress of him. We sailed the passageway past Haskell's on a beam reach. The buoy fairly drifted past the hull as I pulled him close to me. ..."

"It wasn't like that at all. Idyllic and calm as you claim. The boat turned from its heading, and I could hear his voice rise in exasperation, not at what I'd done, but at his failure to be clear to me. It left us both in tears. Five tacks it took him in the wind gusting from the northwest to retrieve my visor, laughing as he flipped it in-board with the boat-hook. ..."

"'What is it like? Sailing in a squall like that?' And he shrugged, not pleased, I think, then swung the bow straight into the thunder head, knowing as I did not, that the storm had no more than 'a thimble-full of spit and wind', as the old

guidebooks put it. That we would reach the mooring with nothing but our jackets wet."

"Not for us! He sent me below for the raingear. 'Brace yourself,' he said as the squall-front hit and the boat heeled over, burying the rail to leeward. I climbed up the companion-way as thrilled as I have ever been, expecting to find him swept overboard and the helm now free for me."

"You don't know. You didn't find your future merged with his past and have him fall in love with you. The way you handled the lines on the water, the joy of it, the two of you, unfixed on the sea surface, unmoored, as it were, away from the rumors on the mainland, the unremittent gossip of the summer-folk. What did it matter what emotions you experienced out there, confined in your own world, like the last weeks in Harpswell after your grand compatriots had left for the winter?"

"I sat back and chided him. 'No whales?' I said. 'What kind of party boat is this!' So he told me some story of tuna-fishing, how Fran laughed at them then made her way to the bow, ripping her shirt off and crying out to the tuna to come to her. 'Jesus Christ, we'll have whales aboard at that rate', he cried from the wheelhouse."

"Then he set the anchor in the rain and skipped back half soaked down the companionway, as the lightning flashed through the open hatch. Or maybe it was sailing from the dock in Rockland in the least of morning airs. And it was heaven, I told him as we eased aft of the schooners. This is what heaven is."

"I brought all those snacks out to the mooring, and he laughed at me as I wolfed half the package down only to vomit it out over the gunwale as his strong hand held my

belt, and as I turned to apologize, pale from the effort, he laughed again. 'Don't worry', he said. 'I've had plenty of experience holding highlanders puking their guts out over the washrail'."

"And I thought about language then. That peculiar lexicon of seamanship, where every word and phrase is unambiguous and there are no secrets of utility or note. No grumbling or need for the lash of the dominatrix. No need for the interrogation of class since all is rank there, and all roles assigned by convention."

"'You will do things by practice and by rote. Spin the winch before you put a line on it, one hand only as you take your turns. You tell me', he said, 'if anything I say is the least bit unclear to you. You tell me if you do not understand something. There is nothing you will need to do without prompting. Nothing you will need to guess. Just hold your arms out in querying and I will deal with it'."

"It took years before I would sail with him. And then we went and my God it was blowing a gale, as he would say, and all I could think of was how stressful the day might be, and how my ex-husband used to shriek orders so unintelligible one day I simply dove overboard and swam back to the landing. And instead of all that strife and confusion, he just set the sails in their double or triple reefs and never raised his voice above a whisper."

"The boat cut the corner close-hauled through the gut at Jaquish. He saw the weed then braced himself barely perceptibly as the ledge caught the keel, shattering the sail shape as we bounced back into the channel, turning on a dime to the starboard tack in the narrow strait before the

startled on-lookers. 'Think I cut that corner close enough?' he roared in mock litotes to the fishermen."

"'I learned that on the fishing boat', he said. 'When David raised his voice to me for my gaff mis-handling. Then spent two days trying to apologize with inept jokes and self-parody. You need your crew to work predictably. Or to sit back in comfort. The threats and lashings of the movies get you nowhere'."

"I hated it. His obsession with the roadways. The course headings and depths, and not five seconds would pass before he asked to check our position once again. As if life were not enough for us; as if you needed it all plotted out on navigational charts. I had no idea how the shoals of Casco Bay, Muscongus, or out in the wash of the Kennebec reach out to you. So unlike the bold shores of the Penobscot. I hated all of that, but learned to do it too."...

It is all such a jumble. Like the classroom itself where you cannot remember what you have taught or said and all the years blend—and maybe this time they will laugh at the old joke: "I've been telling you this for twenty years and still you haven't gotten it!" Or maybe that's a joke they have heard many many times before.

For nothing in the world proceeds as in a lesson plan or the instruction manual. No shores pass with the clarity of the colors on the sun-faded chart. Like when you tried to teach Latin to your once-lover once, pushing her to learn as you had learned, not "sweating the small stuff," as they always say in Maine and I guess everywhere, ignoring the paradigms for the sense of things. And she then tossed the book away or maybe just turned the chapter back and maybe snapped at you for the first time in all the years she'd known

you, demanding that you begin from scratch, lesson 1 of the lesson book, with each form of the paradigm in place. As if language were confined to that. To words recorded in the grammar books. As if a narrative were simply the logical unfolding of the characters, defined in the opening.

Who speaks in the phrases of the phrasebook? Who sails the courses pricked out in the cruising guides?

**III. Night Airs**

*Joan sits back. No wonder her daughter E. parried his affections, a barely older man a decade younger than herself, the two now lounging in the breakfast nook. The same anxieties that Bill had had, the year before he ended it. A comedy, it would have been, had the ending not been as endings go. Had they not spent two days cleaning up the evidence. His manuscripts returned unread, the tongue-clucking academic moralists aghast even at their own condolences. With or without the death knells, in the end they're all the same.*

"... cross country," he answered me, as if still in the lecture hall. "I hate the machinations of hiring committees. The bad faith of deans and department chairs. The pain of losing her on the East Coast. You can't imagine. I'm now off to what once New Yorkers call the worst city in America. ..." All of that. The usual academic moans of accomplishment, which one day even he will grow to ridicule, given the chance. "To Bob," he will call the story he will write of it, remembering still the hospitality and kindness he found here, sitting next to me, alluding to the older women he once loved, thinking his solipsistic rants all so deep and irresistible. Thinking to put them past the once professor's wife!

"I was at a conference," he said. "Dressed in what I called my combat gear—jacket and tie, the whole nine yards of professionalism. I got to my room, changed into my street clothes, back to my authentic self, I thought, mourning for Linda Jane, and strode arrogantly to the elevator. I am not one of them, I thought. I hear my own drum-beat in my head, or whatever it is you say. 'My star. My voice. My very soul here in the corridor'. The door slid open to a family from Peoria. Here for the first time, these rubes must have been. All guzzied up for the cable-car in San Francisco. 'You're one of those professors, no?' they asked. And I glowered back in mock rage 'Damn! I thought I had rid myself of my disguise! Left my jacket and tie and papers in the room'. 'You all look alike', the head-of-family said, leaving for the lobby."

That was him. And had the past not been littered with the bodies from the streets, I could have laughed more heartily than I did with him. I would win him with my winning smile, prove there was not one thing he could do or say that would seduce or surprise me. Nothing I had not heard scores of times before from scores of visitors. Instead I made him coffee, and sat him down in the kitchen for the life-lessons he would take away with him.

There was that evening when the heat got the best of both of us. The only air in the house would be in the guest room, and I asked him if he minded if I set up the spare cot next to the window and shared the evening breeze with him. And damned if he didn't nod in nonchalance, like some big city sophisticate, and even made some lame joke about how for a sailor the evening breezes were wasted on the anchorage. And I almost laughed out loud at him, thinking then to

rip his shirt off and have my way with him, were I not certain it would scare the bejezus out of the poor guy, and send him away to some cheap motel appalled at what his host had done to him.

All he had to do that night was sit up, take the two steps to my bed and ask to join me there and after all the "What do you want from me?" and "You're far too young!" or "This is such a bad idea" or "Who knows whether all the equipment still works," for a woman in her mid 40s, purely rhetorical of course, or "Just hold me" or "Go to sleep" or "... the affinity we have ..." or "... out of practice ..." or whatever inarticulate gaff, straight from the heart, it might have taken, we could have slept there, secure in the presence of the other, all we needed then. And I would have kissed him and let him stroke me or whatever he needed to open his eyes up to me.

The roads drift with him west and east. I sent him to the small towns of history—Nicodemus, settled by African Americans before the KKK ravaged the southwest near Liberal. It would keep him twenty minutes in the state, I thought, and twenty minutes still with me in some sense, as he counted the scheduled days he had to get to the west coast.

And then we talked about the coffee he could buy in Los Angeles, the special kind I liked and when he got there he found it and sent it to me, proclaiming as a joke that by God it had been the "Flavor of the Month" and I suppose he meant to say by that that the very universe seemed in consort with the two of us, instead embarrassing himself when I got back to him how fit this "Flavor of the Month" remark

seemed for the woman left back in Kansas, alone in the cot by the window.

And all I gave him was a glimpse of life in the heartland, cribbage with Rhea, a walk to the drug-store. The last gasp of Main Street that will likely be abandoned before he stops visiting. The real futures both of us can see.

Nothing special about him. Driving to Lawrence or Manhattan, I could have five like that for breakfast and spit them out by noon, as he once quipped to me. He is one of them, in every sense. The young academic choking down his arrogance and anxiety. Here for the night; guest for the weekend. There were dozens like him, all alike, circled at the dinner table dotted with seat-mates, all with carefully trimmed beards and lilting baritones.

Coda: The Road Past Santa Fe

You drove through the desert bloom of fall, south through Taos and Santa Fe, running into that horrific storm—hail blanketing the roadway, then fog so dense you could not see the street-signs in the town that rose up unexpected in the rain.

It was like the fog off Petit Manaan, DownEast on the Maine coast, legendary in its day, now simply an impediment, its dangers lost in the screens of the chart-plotters as they were also once for experienced sailors in the foghorn of the lighthouse. You can sail past in the soft air from the east and barely see the light through the fog, 100 yards away from you. The compass headings slowly rotate as you turn the helm now safely to the west.

Even inland, you recall the sail or steam to Roque Island past the outlying granite cliffs, or the inner passage under

the bridge by Jonesport, or endless hours heading west and east on the highways of the plains, the rhumb-line of no consequence, following the bold-faced courses on the roadmap. And it must have been years before I met my Eloise, Joan now with her local man, Linda Jane moved back to her husband in Los Angeles.

It was like the haze in Las Vegas, the first time you drove west, leaving Joan behind you for the first time too, and you could in those days smell the smog and eucalyptus it seemed drifting in the prevailing winds through the Sierras. The magical smell of the city diminishing each year you made the trip as the air cleared and the locals decried the government that made it so and possible.

The sun rises in the Eastern Bay. You hope for 20 miles by noon as you once sought hundreds on the highway through New Mexico. Eloise steadies the hand with which she draws her image on the sketchpad. Her form just forms itself upon the surface grain and on the pencil edge.

# PART FOUR:

# FINALE—OTHER WOMEN/OTHER MEN

4.1 TO BOB (v.i.)

> Considering our wonderful faculties and powers, people on the whole have never accomplished much.
>
> Paul Goodman, *Growing Up Absurd*

If not the most complex, Bob was without question the leanest man on the lean peninsula—or at least on the dirt road now too frequented by tourists and locals to be much of anything, other than "the way things used to be before X [whatever that was] fucked everything up." And exactly what that variable signified was not always clear: it could be an election or something in the media or the way schools were run or simply a bottleneck in traffic or glitch in the weather, or "since Ronnie got that new truck" or "Rose

stopped reading the newspaper." Despite this clutter of opinion, Bob maintained his character—a man of small means but great distinction, who "got by" through frugality, rock-ribbed morality (or pretty much as close to that as the modern age permitted) and planning out the future with his wife from California; something of a post-hippie sort, she was—plenty of money in whatever industry she had worked in. When the two retired to much self-generated fanfare at age 50, having worked their calculations minutely and expertly to the farthest decimal, no one on the road or in the town had the slightest idea what she had done to provide herself with that luxury. Some may have questioned whether she worked at all; perhaps she had stolen her tens of thousands or won them in the lottery. And it sometimes seemed as if it might have been she herself who turned tricks for the good of the family, and not the drug-addled meretricious mother she occasionally alluded to. "She used to fly a lot," it was quietly asserted by a neighbor here and all would answer with knowing nods, although few had a clue as to what that implied or might have meant.

Neither had been born with this "retire-at-50" means and mentality. It was well known that Bob had come from blue-collar stock—not a penny to his name he hadn't earned through hard work and astute salesmanship—even though the details were often unsettling. Was it really a proof of character, rather than money-grubbing sales-skills, that he had trafficked all those hot tubs and above-ground pools during the height of the recession? Talk about Selling Ice to Eskimoes or Goats and Llamas to the Mountain Dwellers of Peru!

Bob's lean-ness thus was a sign, as the Structuralists used to say. An indicator. A symbol. Perhaps the mark of the class he had left, or perhaps the class he aspired to, the class that didn't have work itself to skin and bones, but played rather at becoming skin and bones just as the sultans of the past or the posers of Raphael flaunted their indolent flesh. Exercising on the public shoulder of the dirt road, golf, tennis, the sports bike—all those things of ease made it seem that what the leisured class desired was to ape the bodies of workers bone-sore from laboring on the fishing boats or shoe factories.

"I ..." ("unlike you," the sub-text went) "know how to speak to the locals," Bob claimed, secure in his blue-collar credentials, even though, when he moved away, he was no longer on speaking terms with any of them.

**I. Lexicography**

*Bob* (v. intr.) ...

> "[App. echoic ...]" asserts an old OED I have lying around the house.
>
> Or "To move up and down."
>
> Or "To move up and down with a bob or slight jerk"
>
> Or "tr. To move (a thing) up or down with a slight jerk."
>
> Or "To fish with a bob."
>
> Or "To dock (a horse's tail).
>
> bob, bobbin, bobbery (!).
>
> And finally "Bobadil: a thrasonical character in Ben Jonson's Every Man in Hum.; hence, a braggart who pretends to prowess."

Although I cannot trace the tortuous route from "echoic" ['like an echo'?] to "thrasonical" [the *miles gloriosus* of the

plays of Terence?] (words I have not seen until today), with this last, we may be getting to the point.

Linguistic sophisticates of the road surely knew these variant definitions or most of them; yet their verbal acumen was supplanted by the singularities of experience. "To Bob" became an upper-case verb for us, meaning 'to act like Bob'.

"To Bob" refers now to Bob's unique and preternaturally annoying habit of complaint. Ordinarily Stoic, he was, dealing with the blows Fortune visited upon him with maturity and strength: the hernial infirmities, an oil leak, prostate trouble. Yet in matters of competition—part of the legacy of his blue-collar upbringing—all this experience was for naught. And Bob began "to Bob," i.e., 'to complain vigorously when experiencing success'.

When you are an amateur—singing, tennis, boating, carpentry, even life itself—you will do well, and you will fail. Now Bob was conditioned to failure, as we all were, born into it in his case. He accepted it, far better than the rest of us might. Hitting a golf ball into the water, shanking a tennis stroke, pulling the starter cable of the outboard only to have it sputter in contempt—the worst you would see was a shaking of the head, and often a comment about how noble it was not to become overly invested in things that hardly mattered, particularly things at which one had only passable skills. Yet as his impatience grew, all that hard-won virtue collapsed, like a bad dam in a stream bed. On those occasions when he made a good golf shot, a chip shot just short of the hole, a drive, center fairway, 200 yards distance, a tennis stroke down the alley, unreturnable, or the perfect hammer blow that drove the nail right down to the nailhead—all life's dissatisfactions tamped down inside him

welled up, as they would never do when he simply "fucked up" (as it were) whatever he was attempting.

And as his viewers admired his skill (or pretended to), "Damn, I hit the hosel!" he would cry, "...framed it ... bad alignment ... imperfect grip ..." then something about spark-advance or "... pronation ..." (whatever that is), as if these risibly rare successes—on the damn green in regulation! a lob just inside the line for a winner! the engine firing on the first attempt!—were in fact failures in some subtle and barely discernible way, testaments to his extraordinary skill and standards unreachable by those of us who grimly praised his achievement. How could the ball not be *in* the hole rather than simply *near* it, he would imply, gnashing his teeth and beating his breast? How could the saw cut have left the last splinter of wood on the saw blade? "Unlike you," he would scoff, explaining all, "I'm not satisfied with mediocrity."

It was an American success story, or should or could have been had life gone differently. Had he relaxed into the incremental rise in fortune: the life choices, the business successes, the eccentric wife. The generosity to his family. The decision to produce no offspring. The pick-up truck, the sales receipts, the houses framed to perfection. The eaves rebuilt and the new windows installed precisely on line with the old. The replumbing of the neighbor's guest house and no charge beyond materials. The wife's paintings on the mantel top. The books on golf and baseball. The antique fishing lures bought at a yard sale for pennies, worth hundreds to discerning collectors. The political convictions. The

hours on the exercise mat and machines. Feeding the hungry. A fire-pit in the backyard, facing the sunset. The invidious neighbors gathered in silence.

All this heap of confusion was the life he imagined and willed himself to live, the life he felt was there for the taking. But sadly, the world's realities are non-conforming, just as are the post-deluvial houses framed up in defiance of the building codes.

The cottage they bought on the shore for a song and renovated through decades of occupancy depended for its idyllic seat on the cooperation of neighbors, who would (with luck) either be absent for the summer, or too old to go outside and disturb the bucolics of the limpid air with chit-chat and laughter on the porch. The neighbors of the real world, however, are rarely so congenial and often wish to live as you live, relaxing on their yards and carelessly conversing within earshot. Some have the temerity to be in residence during the same summer months that you choose, allowing the mischievous light to escape through their windows after sunset, obliterating what there was of dark.

Others (like myself) might not take as kindly as you would think to being reviled as morally dissolute womanizers. Nor do they consider that they have received their just come-uppance when, driving down the dirt road, you turn your backs on them and refuse to wave until they change the turpitudinous ways in which they live. They do not enjoy being disparaged as privileged, nor as being born into what you conceive to be royalty. They are not as convinced as you are that their life path should have been the path you chose, that they too should have found the garrulous wife that you found, nor that they are fools for paying retail for

whatever material crap they happen to want or need and for not insisting on squeezing another hundred bucks or merely five from those they do business with.

The realities of real estate are also thwarting, when you find you are not the only persons from out of state wishing to purchase a home at half the asking price and selling others for twice their worth. And even when you manage that, it seems impossible to get beyond the requisite "Bobbing" about it all—you would have earned another 50K, had the Dow not plunged so precipitously at the worst possible moment, just when the For Sale sign went up; had the adjacent swamp not so mischievously overflowed at the showing; had the buyer simply accepted your "aggressive" list price, as when he spruced up the hogged and failing hulls in his driveway just enough to sell to unsuspecting boaters on Craigslist as "Bristol." "Just don't tell Frank about it," he murmured *sotto voce*, the last time we made eye contact. "Our asking price," he explained in the face of my bafflement, as if their machinations of the housing trade were either insult or concern to anyone.

It was of course inevitable that things go south. Primarily in the figurative sense, of course (the point of this tale), but also literally: as flush with the extra $200K he and his john-spawned wife had earned fixing up their cottage even if only to be razed as a teardown, the two of them fled to some shithole town in the Carolinas for the winter, where all the locals despised him for his tight-fistedness.

**II. Oblivion**

Despite his self-fashioned self, Bob "just missed it," as they often say around here. Even with the blueprints of his

life unrolled before him, things (the important things) often just escaped him. So wrapped up in the sale of his old cottage as he left the neighborhood, nose in the air, shaking his head at the dissolute lives led by his once neighbors, he failed to see or experience what was right in front of him. Like the deaths over the winter he had spent in the Carolinas, always the main theme of exchanges when the community reconstitutes itself each May. Richard, for example, once affectionately known as the Foulest Mouth in Somerset County, but of course, not from Somerset County at all—just a neighbor who lived down the road and after working himself near to death shoring up ledge-infested cellars, cursing good-naturedly every step of the way, lost most of his spunk with a heart attack or two, surviving only on the graces of the government he pretended to despise, then finally dropping stone dead of a diabetic attack, his absence noted quickly by the local store owners when he failed to struggle up the quarter-mile that day for his fix of sugar.

And Larry W. as well, and his father too, just last week it was, finally overcome by the alcohol he, like others, fought most of his life, and mostly without success. Prone to violence, but a good sort and always civil to most of us, and he would scream at me from the deck of the fishing boat, "Mr. D—!" in mock obeisance and I would yell back at him, "Mr. W—!" as if our lives had little to do with the class we had been born into, with what we decided then to do and worked at doing, but finally, only the physical locations we were born into and in which we stayed throughout our lives—that is, this magnificent seaside community where you lived what lives you could.

And Mary D. gone as well, wiry and tough though she was, lean like Bob was, but beautiful even worn out in her 70s. That too, Bob missed, never penning as much as a note of condolence. Roger too, the self-appointed Road Manager, down with lung cancer. Who railed against your politics, far too circumspect to do it to your face. And Dick W. gone as well, whose "Celebration of Life" brought half the people on the road out to pretend once more to be a community. You were away, I guess. Maybe Rhonda forgot to send the invitation. All that right past Bob within steps of hearing, as it were. And all he could think about was the Grand Finale not of life but of mere residence, how he would stalk past his awe-struck neighbors for the last time. He never considered how the world proceeds in indifference, with little to be done about it, leaving us merely to find a niche, not a niche we will live in—a bad mistake in thinking!—but only one we will finally die in amid the communal shaking of heads. Most of that escaped him too. Like Dante's angel, Canto 9 I think it is, brushing his hand before him "as if greater things concerned him."

**III. The Road to Retirement**

This was the issue it seemed. For Bob, and for those who attempted to admire him. It was a matter of getting the story told and the story straight, of finding a narrative that proceeded with the segments in order—with some sort of progression or with the Aristotelian denouement, or perhaps the wisdom they impart in film school of rising and falling action or an aesthetic a half-century out of fashion. Or perhaps a better metaphor would be the sequenced slats of a

Venetian blind—*jalousie* in the eye-winking French, or the segments of a centipede.

The planning and framework were always there, like the shop-cut walls that changed the nature of the stick-built houses on which Bob had once made a living. The two of them would simply work themselves to exhaustion as their "day jobs" and spend the weekends fixing up the waterfront cottage, barely a shack, bought for a song on the dirt-roaded coast. It would be Paradisal; the neighbors would live to 100, never raising their voices above a whisper, and leave their abandoned homes in escrow for a millennium; the uncivil young or rich might lick their chops, but turn frustrate from the cause and move to Falmouth.

And the time finally came at last, the day the two of you had been working for. The day when you turned 50 and now had the means (as the bank statements and accountants proved beyond dispute) to roll it all in and put your feet up and "do all the things you always wanted to do in life." Yet curiously, if not tragically, what you found you "wanted to do in life" was not lie around pawing your once-hot wife ("That phase"—referring to the knee-knocking passion of love—"lasts about 18 months," he had once said publicly before his scandalized life-partner), but rather to continue working yourself to exhaustion and once again to exhaustion just like those poor working stiffs around you who would drift off to retirement in their 60s, weak with the joy of having worked so long at what they loved.

So Bob's life became somewhat less organic and perhaps even a bit post-modern—an aesthetic he neither lived nor appreciated. Reading his sports novels, drinking beer with old friends and knocking down bratwurst while the subtly-

curved wife fled for the weekend to the Holiday Inn—that was not the sum of life. Her paintings built up and Bob, Bob was left with dancing lessons and mediocre golf and boating trips that never quite worked out and worrying about the second shack he had bought in South Carolina now overrun with vermin and the sort of people that make South Carolina attractive (in the abstract) to early retirees like themselves and overrun too with those who make the bug-infested place downright terrifying (in reality) to carpet-bagging Northerners.

There is no justice in this post-lapsarian world, no rewards for generosity. Why he himself had shored up this very neighbor's guest house, replumbed the entire place in pex pipe, taking payment only for materials, claiming yes, this was the kind of work he loved, and in fact should probably pay for the privilege of performing. Expecting no more from the genial neighbor than perhaps an offer of some acreage—maybe two on the back lot by the water, plus a right-of-way to the main road—the footprint for the dream house he and his wife would build from scratch, enhancing the value of everyone's property as a premium. No more than a nod and a handshake it would take or should take, uneasy as he was about the crassness of contract and payment, about the buying and selling that you must do as a small businessman to retire at 50, about "adding value" (as Marx would have it) as a worker, which often was reduced to a mere "adding of profit" for the ruthless capitalist. Amassing such fungible assets might not be the best way to maintain the high moral standing of the Leftist he was, spec houses being anathema to all the locals, whether they had grown up here or moved here in the Old Days, who now

longed only to die before the great landscapes of their childhoods or pasts or imaginations were completely obliterated by the realtors.

It was hardly his fault that his wife had finally tired of this neighbor's womanizing, his filling of his house with tramps and hussies, and especially that leering remark about what nice boobs" the smiling, Christian woman to their north had. "Mine are better than that!" she burst out angrily.

So it was all that. The obliviated deaths, the fractured plans, the prurience of neighbors, the tantalizing acreage on the back lot. And maybe it would have been better had the genial neighbor simply hauled the wife off and had his way with her. For then, everything would have worked out as in the trashy novels or magazines at the supermarket. The Stoic conviction that marriage was worth fighting for. The steely confrontation, never quite physical though threatening to be so. The vow never to be driven away from the neighborhood until the value of the hand-built house was great enough that you could leave in Stoical glory, thumbing your nose at your cuckolding friends and once golf partners..

For in the end, even when things got good, they were never good enough. You always were left with no choice but "to Bob." You woke up not knowing what you were going to do that day, how the market might help or impede you, or how much you would deplete the carefully calculated bank accounts. And what kind of a life was that, for a couple in their fifties, the envy of the entire neighborhood? Even pimping out your wife for the acreage of the back lot would solve nothing. No matter what you did, the ball came off the

hosel. And even if it rolled within inches of the hole on the egregious mis-hit, the fact is had the grass been mowed with the grass-blades pointing west, it might easily have gone in for a birdie.

**IV. Weekends at the Inn**

It wasn't bad taking a weekend off from married life to drink with his old college friends, whether bringing them to the cottage, or driving home to New Hampshire on the pretext of sorting out the family property. It was the kind of thing that shored up a relationship, rather like digging through the muck and mire to examine and replace the old beams and joists of a cottage built before building codes ruined the creativity of the carpenters. The sort of work Richard used to do, who, Bob finally heard, had died gasping for air over the winter.

His lovely and dependent wife wouldn't sleep in the cottage with his drunken friends, nor would she stay there alone if they met in New Hampshire. There simply had been too much in her past life—important things, that is, not just the day she returned to their once-home in Vermont and found a bear lounging in her studio—and it hardly mattered that houses on the dirt road here were completely secure from everything except a marauding raccoon or flock of turkeys in the morning, that no one locked their doors or even bothered to close the glass doors and windows over the always weakening screens. So, saving the cost of a weekend forted safely in the Holiday or Comfort Inn, a chair wedged tight to the` doorknob, she went down the road to the guest house of the genial neighbor to await her husband's return or the departure of his frat-boy friends—probably no more

secure than her own cottage, but at least within ear-shot, and somehow—or so the plan was—that would enable her to sleep, even in the soft and broken bed in which the neighbor had slept as a child and doubtless debauched scores of visitors as an adult.

"He smells of meat," she scoffed, committed vegetarian that she was. "One weekend eating bratwurst and sausages with his old friends and family in New Hampshire is all it takes and he sweats meat-sweat for a week." "Have some tofu," the genial neighbor quipped.

**V. Art Lessons**

The Old Days were different, Bob thought. How beautiful it would have been to watch the three of them at work before their easels—his wife, his neighbor, and himself—had there just been a viewing point somewhere at roof-line and an objective eye floating above them. In that impossible space, he himself could serve as both observer and participant, drifting up to that point and contemplating all with amicable contentment. That's what real privilege is, privilege one has earned as a hard-working working man, choosing the right wife and cultivating the proper acquaintances. That was the way love and friendship worked, without anger or jealousy. Without wishing ill of anyone.

Perhaps the genial neighbor could teach her sailing, calm and unexcitable as he was on the water. You could sense how she followed his orders so perfectly in the cockpit, handling each line with skill and grace. Then Bob himself could teach in repayment the fine art of carpentry—a much greater skill, some say, and more useful in the real world into which the three of them found they had been thrown.

And in the endless cycle of debt and repayment, a cycle so subtle even Homer missed its significance—"gold for bronze," he whined—she would hold what would amount to art school for both of them, and they would follow her directives even though they could never hope to match her experience.

That was the way things could work, as life wound down to its bearings.

"The roofline," she said, staring at the small painting propped up on her work-bench. "Something ... I can't get it from the photograph."

"No," J. said, speaking at far greater length than necessary. "It's a matter of perspective. You are tricked by the camera lens. There is a difference between an icon of the building (a model, a thing or reality) and an image (a simple view of it, an illusion), but when you paint, you cannot be transfixed by what is seen from the single point of the camera lens. You. You, as a painter. As an artist. You confront an object that is the same despite how you look at it. You conceive it as seen from an infinitely distant viewing point, as a series or multitude of shifting images. The lifeless camera knows nothing of such variants and no object or image is as deadly fixed as that in the camera lens. Leonardo discusses this. You have to mix perspectives, he says—producing an illusion of or allusion to something that could never perfectly exist (an icon), and furthermore, something that could never be exactly seen (a distorted image)." And then he added, as he so often did in his pointy-headed perorations, "It's like life itself," laughing. "Don't worry. Even Leonardo scholars mis-construe the clear assertions in his

notes."[1] Adding again, as commonly: "Like Eloise always used to tell me: you need to work from life and not from photographs. That way the perspectives mix as if in nature and you barely notice the contradictions in your brush-strokes." And she stared at the painting as if taking all he said in dead earnest. Not learning from him, he suspected, but annoyed that such lecturing was not couched in highest praise of her. And he, Bob, had laughed, feigning an equivocal critique as if through some fraternal bond. In fact, he had no idea whatsoever what all this was meant to mean. Something vaguely erotic, he imagined, as he saw the emerging twinkle in her eye that he was once sure only he was privileged to sense.

Bob sat back. Painting was simply not for him. He would rather build the house that she imaged on the canvas, working neither from a photograph nor from life, but as if from a blueprint he carried in his head. And that was why in those painting sessions he would lag, and simply enjoy the scene of the two of them, his wife and the high-educated neighbor, debating perspective over the tiny canvasses. That was the difference between illusion and reality, watching them and being part of them. "What the fuck do we care about reality?" his neighbor laughed. "This is *art*!" And then they would talk of illusion: exactly where you had to stand in order to see correctly the distorted display on the canvas, and damned if he hadn't considered then that yes there might

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[1] Further, "Linear Perspective and the Obliquities of Reception," In Visions and Voices: Essays ... Hanning, ed. Prior and Stein (2005), 428-53.

even be more to it than that, as from Bob's own perspective (the magical VP of the drawing manuals), the neighbor's eye could have dropped to her unrestrained breasts, or his hand brought up just grazing them, and the blinkered husband would sense nothing of their gross carnality at all, only the appearance of her earthly innocence.

All of that was gone now. It must have been the day she had famously exploded in moral outrage on her very doorstep at the startled neighbor enrolled in her art classes. That was the end of art for the three of them, the end of dinners by the fire-ring. From what he had heard, or what had been reported to him by both his wife and the affronted neighbor, the two of them had been sitting by the water and the name of a distant friend of hers came up and he made the joke he had made for years "Is she hot?" or maybe it was another remark about the breasts of the Christian woman next door and that had been the last straw, or perhaps the first, and she had had quite enough of his "objectification of women," so she shrieked in indignation.

Now to him, what did it matter really what one thought or how one viewed the round-breasted summerer to their north? Why, other than the injunction "Don't piss where you eat," that he had passed on to the neighbor when he sensed him leering a bit too strongly at her (the tight-hipped summerer, that is), other than that, he had no convictions regarding even the most extreme "objectivization of women. As he had said on many an occasion, he had no objection to the way anyone lived, even his friends or his closest neighbors. And if he himself weren't married, he had conceded, he would live the same way—without a shred of fidelity,

truth, honesty, commitment, and be damned who raised an eyebrow.

As for himself, he had chosen the life hindrances of marriages: the desultory first, where after the 14 months he claimed they enjoyed of wild sex (it was more like 10), there seemed little reason to continue. Or now the second and last, after the hot sex cooled for the two of them (and that took 4 months, which he called or they called 18). To passion, they preferred the grand vistas of their future.

So here they were in post-laboring bliss without a damn thing to do but reminisce or muse about the future: "Maybe I have one more house in me" or "I need a project" or "A painting a day, my teacher says" or "We will do it right this time" or "We will make sure we don't get caught up in the neighborhood or neighbors again" or "We will rely on ourselves" or "We will get along because we, unlike others, know how to deal with the locals."

He stretched on the exercise mat she had left in the living space. He thought again and once again of hedonistic thrills that would be his, were he freed from the predatory spider's web of faith and commitment: a girl in every port on every city street in every town, topping, as would be rumored, every woman on the last dirt road peopled by blue-collar folk on the entire coast of Maine, warnings of his charms issued to visiting nieces barely past puberty. And maybe then he could ignore the way she leaned perhaps too far into his neighbor's side, or maybe laughed too hard at his sometimes crude and off-color jokes, or sometimes in the throes of innocence let her Eve-like hand graze his.

For the odious truth was (as the philandering neighbor had expounded to him and obviously knew too well) that

when you are having an illicit affair, the rule you must follow is absolutely never to mention the lover's name at all, and never stand next or near to her. For what you justify as a display of innocence ("I can name her every other word or fondle her at will—everyone knows there is nothing to it, as all this careless attention proves!") is actually what everyone will see as a confession: "Good God they are always together, have you noticed he talks about her constantly? Always putting his hands on her soft shoulders. He can do what he wants—not my business to judge—but does he have to throw it in our faces?" All that too, and maybe the very hours the three of them spent together, maybe even that would raise an eyebrow or two, such that he could not determine who it was he hated worse—the neighbors and their incurable inquisitiveness, or the flirtatious rake who somehow always found himself in their midst, sitting next to her in the half-circle of the fire-pit.

So one day he outfitted himself with a golf glove and spiked shoes and carefully selected equipment—the best one could find for an aggressive offer on Ebay. Just the two of them, it would be, in a manly contest of skill. And to his shock, the genial neighbor showed up with clubs bought from a thrift store, sandals, and balls and tees he picked up on the course. And where did that perfectly articulated swing come from—like on TV it was as the ball sailed, unreliably but often straight down the fairway, and instead of a fine lesson, it was a come-uppance of sorts, and it was Bob himself who got the lesson and had to spend days on the golf channel, even hiring an instructor over the winter to correct the more glaring flaws in his approach. And the now gloating neighbor claimed he would never pay for a lesson, look

at a golf book, or ask for help. All you had to do was watch those who knew how to play this sport, or seduce women too, and just repeat as best you could what they did, and the world, as it were, just opened up for you.

**VI. Envoi**

And now, the great stories that should have been told in the neighborhood, the grand dramas that could have been rôled out, the semi-communal living he imagined that the turncoat neighbor would provide for them by selling them acreage for a song and helping them store the materials for the ideal house overlooking the water—all that remained undone. And it was a shame really, after she had rocketed out the front door and reviled the neighbor for his unacceptable treatment of women, a shame that things never really got back to normal. And he had tried, "given it his all," it might be said. He had gone to the neighbor, explaining precisely and he thought convincingly that the only reason she would ever have attacked him like that was that she cared—she *cared*, couldn't you see it? It was a sign of her affection and respect, a concern for the moral morass in which his neighbor risked being swamped up to his eyeballs. And the ingrate neighbor had muttered under his breath, such that he could imagine no one heard even though it was clear they did: "Really? The way I express such things to people I love is by putting a sock in it for a moment, and letting their petty sins pass in silence."

And Bob had done even more, after "making amends" like that. He had solemnly asked for a meeting, the three of them, and somehow the now less genial neighbor must have miscalculated and assumed this was for a private apology of

sorts, whereas all Bob wanted was assurance that the plot of acreage hard up by the boatyard was still to be given to them, and the sullen neighbor had mumbled some bullshit about problems with rights-of-way and the fetid swamps in the back lot—some evasive crap like that. And if he couldn't be direct and just say "I wouldn't give you a square-inch of tick-shit after what your c. of a wife said to me," if he couldn't find it within himself to show even a modicum of honesty, well, there was nothing to be done about it. Some people just never learn whose lives are worth the envying. And even when you do the right thing, the most blameless thing, and live your life and lives in the most impunible of ways, there might be little gain. You might miss your mark, or the timing of your riposte; and that is why, even when your drive was near unerrant or the alley shot executed to perfection, it was never enough. And that is why "to Bob" always was inflected somewhat differently for him than it seemed to be for everyone else on the old dirt road, that road itself scarce remnant of the Old Days, when a working man could buy a lot right next to the water for the weekends, without worrying about some rich man hoarding acreage for some kit-built colossus, picked out from a catalogue.

Bob shook his head. He had misjudged things badly, and now had to confess that not one road-mate saw things as he did; not one chose to live as they did, he thought ruefully, but kept working to 65 or 70, adding to their economic privileges, unenvious of the couple now retired at 50, which perhaps was the most egregious sin of all. How, despite the sacrifices such a life required, could all the neighbors fail to see that he and she now "had it knocked"?

And perhaps life was like that: it was always the things you couldn't or wouldn't see that mattered. Perhaps their life blazed too subtly to be perceived at all. Perhaps the gossip of his neighbors fixed too little on the moral compromises all were forced to make as the promiscuous neighbor roared past with the latest hussy or group of them in brazen indifference. As for him and his devoted and illecherous wife (both adamant in their determination to live and let live and not give a hang what their neighbors did), there was little choice but to pack up her paintings and his tools, move to Friendship (where "we know how to speak to the locals"), and leave them all to their illusions.

The tide drifts in as he builds his fire-pit for the evening. The last one they will ever experience in this now forsaken place. If the wind is up, it will deafen them to the uncivil discourse of their neighbor; the harsh sunset over the tree-line will blot out the light from their porch-lights. They will ignore the gravel churned to sand as a neighbor drives past, perhaps glancing in regret at their doorway from which no invitation is now to be issued. From which, had the malignant breeze not just veered from its quarter, Bob could have shouted out his final word on things that cut the soul of the neighborhood to the very quick.

## 4.2 WIFE-SWAPPING

> "Et tu crois qu'il t'a crue?"
> "J'en suis sûre; mais quand même il ne le croirait pas, ne suffit-il pas qu'il en fasse semblant?"
> —Casanova, *Histoire de ma vie*, vol. 7, cap. 11

Trapped in the attic space, he envisioned the consequent cuffs on his wrists, the silver sheen ones, less fragile than those he played with as a child in the 50s, linked with a plated chain. He considered the humiliation of trial and the assaults in the prison yard—things that were only real to him from television. What would his second-cousin-once-

removed, much loved, have to say to that blot on the family name? You could go away for years for an ounce of weed, he had been taught to fear and did fear uncritically. Rat droppings rolled beneath his soles as he squatted there, a mock cat-burglar from films of mid-century, poised to fall through the ceiling panel into his neighbor's apartment, dropping down from liminal to tenant space onto the kitchen floor, finding the dog or cat or fish asleep or challenging him, upsetting the whole apple cart of things, finally fleeing both space and fate through the front door, unlocked behind him, running unrecognized (who in New Hampshire knows anyone?) through the complex to skulk back to his own door, wrapped up in his thoughts and self, hunched over the table. Forgetting to fold up the step-ladder, unmindful of the ceiling panel askew over the tabletop. Trapped in time and indecorum by the youthful form of the neighbor, the slow curves of her face and waist.

All these futures came to him in the musts of the attic space; even the women now seemed the same to him: the neighbor—one of many service wives in the complex, like those who escaped the ashes of the apartment fire two years earlier and whom he never saw again. "Oh John Oh John Oh John" one of them had cried out as if in heat to her cuckolded husband when he called from the carrier after three months at sea, her young lover, drunk and in despair, now abandoned to her hall-mates. Judith too, his once-adored wife, crying out too for him when he called from Manhattan, having left her then for good. And others too, their waists encircled as he pulled them close to him. All these singulars you could barely distinguish in the passions of reality.

**I. Personae**

I called her, or e-mailed her, he would write or think, praising the obliquities of memory, chuffed to find his way back to her at last. Perhaps it was a card or memento she had left him years ago; or some dish served up to him that once was hers—ratatouille or primavera or gratin where the ingredients simply blend to a unity, as the culinists would say, like details of memory or a narrative. Like the time they went to Portland and ate at the bad restaurant and he followed her swaying hips as she left for the restroom, seeing other hips in hers, or all of them perhaps.

She came back Northeast with a life-time of experience, husbands in Texas or hidden in the trunk-space, her body remade by surgery. Thirty pounds in as many years, she conceded, fleshed onto her once rail-thin frame, then trimmed but with breasts she laughed would survive any dieting. "My husband," she said. "If I was going to have them done, I may as well ..." And he felt of and for her as he felt for all of them. He never cared what those women had done, for others, to themselves. And how could I not admire that conviction of his, which I myself could rarely share, recalling how I burst into tears when Eloise had her face carved up for the second time, and I first confronted the bruises. By contrast, it was not what they had done that moved or seduced him; it was the brute fact that they were conscious enough of their unperfected flesh to have it touched at all. For he, our hero here, he didn't care for nature or what it had given them, any more than he twisted away from the women with the blue-dyed hair or pink fingernails or a well-tailored suit. It was the very will to make oneself subject to

desire that brought that very quality about, he claimed: evolving flesh is no more than what nature grants to us. But we can will more for us than what dogs can in dog parks.

Or so he thought (as I construct this), imagining those strangely resilient breasts, while shifting the ceiling panel at his feet. The very artifice of life—its surfaces—that's what beauty is. Like the sea surface, supporting the hull-weight in the wind. ...

The beauty of the first woman he betrayed meant almost nothing to him; her surfaces he simply looked right through or sensed with his most imperfect sense. His once wife, love of his life then, elicited in him emotions he had never felt or imagined could exist, but which anyone, even a child, will recognize immediately. As a juvenile, years before, he would ask his compatriots to size up his date or dance partner—what did they think of her? Posed as the medieval riddlers would do: do you want your lover beautiful at night or in the gaze of her day-lit admirers? Childish, that was, he grew to realize; maturity is getting beyond brooding over the look of an accoutrement.

Walking with her, pulling her close to him, he would profess, he could see the two of them approaching on the pathway as if framed in a camera lens. He had no idea what friends and neighbors thought of her or them, nor to his amazement did he care—two kids in their magnificence of youth? Or an unmatched and homely pair proving only that love overcomes even the worst of its materials?

The very question of her beauty seemed unposable. When his doltish and doting neighbor lusted after her (the neighbor whose attic space the two mock-families shared), when that neighbor lusted after her as he himself had done,

he thought it merely "interesting" (as a Woman of Today might say)—no more sinister or concerning than the desire he felt for the neighbor's wife, both wives, of course, all wives—their surfaces, I should add—as if a man's purpose were merely to pretend to love as many women and their earthly curves as earthly possible, and that was the end of it.

Trapped in the stale airs of the attic, he could not distinguish these futures from the past—the day he had spent on his neighbor's couch, rubbing the talc into her, or wrapped up with her on his own bed, years later, when there was no one left to raise an objection. Or that grim evening at 9pm when he sat with her in the stoniest of silences waiting for what passion there may have been to cool. He had known instantly when she stole into his hallway without bothering to knock what was up. He knew without asking that his idiot neighbor was pawing his young wife, and would spend the next two hours struggling to perform. The dolt lost his erection, his once wife would assure him, with no small contempt. I always thought the child you aborted was mine, he would claim with pride regardless. Maybe both were lying; maybe one of them. It was hardly a matter of import, he felt, feeling nothing finally. He had debauched the neighbor's wife in the living room, weeks earlier—there was no need to revisit that debacle—and would do so again in Maine, while his father tried to catch a glimpse of them hard at it through the windows in the guest house.

Her young breasts are barely held by the bandana top. He thinks of that flesh free over the surface of the warm wa-

ter of the river, as he glides up to her, with his wife stretching her young arms to the sky, lifting her own alluring flesh as he embraces each of them in all senses of the word ...

Trapped in the attic, he knew he would never have the chance to lean back from the bad food of the seventies, weaving the tale for them of his predicament that day. He would never ask them to sit in reverential silence like well-heeled adults at a benefit. Things simply got too testy in the end. So he could never confess, never tell them over the Jahrlsberg cheese fondue that jocular tale of the morning he found himself obsessed with her, or a cup short of sugar, and crawled thus through the ceiling hole of the apartment and down into theirs, without leaving a trace of himself beyond the remnant fear of being trapped up there, his ankle hooked on the power line. He rummaged through their kitchen, as he had rummaged over the surfaces of her flesh perhaps, then wiped away the footprint on the table, seeking whatever ingredient he lacked, seeking so much he lacked, violating the propriety of space (he would learn to call it), never once thinking they might arrive without notice and find him there, or of the police breaking down the door in rage, or more sternly and catastrophically, whatever he might find of the two of them in their private space, the one thing, a note of affection perhaps, or a dropped sock! that would kill all the lust he felt for her.

At that age, all flesh is perfect flesh or at least perfect enough, he thought, although it would take him decades to come to that conclusion, another decade to renounce it. And boosting himself back from the makeshift staircase of tabletop and countertop to the attic, not having planned how he could leave the place and leave no sign of his entry there,

he imagined continuing down the mock-garret of the attic way, lowering himself into a third apartment of a second neighbor barely known to him, or a fourth and third perhaps, more perfect flesh and surfaces, the unmatched strides of the taut muscled thighs calling him through the door-glass, smoking hot like a summer day, he once had fantasized, never returning his flirtatious and inquisitive look.

He twists his ankle still shackled in the power cord.

**II. Linda Jane**

*Linda Jane whether rail thin or fleshed out from the surgery—it was always the same in her case. Whether young or aging or abandoned with her child or married to a charmer, it was all the same. Despite all she did and thought and tried to do and tried to say or not say or elicit from him, the only way the two of them related was through their surfaces and that remained even as they slipped and faded into old or older age. When she stood in the doorway, with her remade flesh, unrecognized by him or by anyone in the small, gossip-mongering town, no detail the same, it seemed, other than the slight crook in her mouth, all he wanted was to throw her onto the floor and begin where they had dropped the whole thing decades earlier.*

*She takes his arm and presses her small hard breast into him. It must be thirty years ago, he thinks. He will ask her in future years whether she remembers this; she claims to be as conscious now of her chest pressed into his upper arm as he was then. He laughs, knowing she can hear nothing he says, her hearing irreparably damaged by the excesses of her youth. He pauses and turns her to face him, sliding her flesh from his arm and he pulls her to him, now completely aware*

*of passers-by watching them, nearly making love, or preparing to, on the streets of Portland, pressing his hips into her and feeling her press back.*

*They have no business strolling those too public streets, and thus no shame or self-consciousness. The excursion—a night on the town!—it is only an excuse to return home hoping to make love again before she returns to the tedium of her young son, paying the baby-sitter, cleaning the dishes and waiting for him to call again.*

*He pulls her closer, reaches inside her shirt and feels her body stiffen, as if attempting to pull away from him but forced by her own desire to do nothing. It is what you feel when you caress your ex-lover's back—small of the back it's called—and her body grows tense as well, wanting you as she herself may not. And you know that despite the new lovers in her life, the new husband, the man she left you for, the men she imagined, the real men who courted her—all of these mean nothing. All the cuckolding he experienced with her—what is all that vapid infidelity to knowing this?*

**III. The Glory of Inconsequence**

It was a "thing" in those days—something to write scripts about, although all the stories seemed to be the same, complete with that tongue-clucking moral at the end. That "thing," whether it was grabbing your neighbor's wife or swimming up next to her or, what were those movies of? tossing your car keys into a basket and leaving with the swinger girl who picked yours out—guiltless, emotionless. Or was it as depicted in the movies, crushed there by the complacent bullshit of endings, reminding us to just live as taught in grade school, or by the sots who passed for

preachers in those days, assuring us we would best just act like proper citizens, that is, movie-goers in debt to their sitters, and let life go on the way we believe it has gone on for centuries.

He stayed home that evening, not accompanying his wife next door, since joining their vulgar repartee was not what he had spent his youth preparing for—some idle chat about what it was like to work in the military, something about the unfairness of "washing heads," it was called, when you had spent a whole year in beauticians' school. Something about the grotesquerie of pets you had once owned. Or something his wife would offer—a fable without a grain of truth to it, about her hippie doings in a junior college in upstate New York. To hear her tell it, the place was a hotbed of intellectual engagement; philosophers, world-renowned even by their own standards, sitting cross-legged with students stroking their thighs, expounding Heidegger and Sartre, and by God the Revolution, when it came (if it bothered to do so) would start on these very grounds.

He flipped through a book he had thought to read and apparently had, recalling now the tortuous route to conclusion.

The door opens with no warning knock. He assumes or hopes the quiet steps are those of his wife, but the girlish gait—mincing, it would be called in the Days of Bad Fiction—prove otherwise. The scene, trite as a summer's day, was set.

It may have been two weeks since the four of them swam in the river—the neighbor wife, Elizabeth or "Betty Lou" as she was known, inflected with a slight parodic lilt, leading listeners to believe that here, in 1970, we were long past the

naiveté of the 50s, when girls and even we were named. And he had drifted up next to her, letting her feel his arousal in earnest beneath the water surface while his wife danced in the water ten feet away from them and her husband practiced his ungraceful crawl. It would be the same years later when he sat with her at the kitchen table, and she would pull away in mock horror when he reached into her shirt for flesh he felt entitled to in some way, perhaps in the adolescent rule that "Once you've done it [whatever 'it' might be] you get to do it again." And it was like that, barely waist-deep in the water standing there with her surfaces free for all to admire.

Too bad you could not count on her duplicity. We all claim to have or want an honest relationship with our lovers and partners, of course we do, but who really values honesty above a smooth and wakeless course, where you can glide through the water with as much affection as you want, manifested in all the usual ways? Come on, now, he scoffed. What is so difficult about that loving phrase "He never touched me; he never got past my bones" (wasn't it Diane who had said that? age 15? of Richard, later hanged from the rafters in his garage for his teenage son to find?). Granted, there is no imperative to demand such things—to back your lover down into a corner or into the cellar space and wrest the last self-serving plea of innocence from her; oh no, he thought majestically. But truth? What was the point of it? Keep your reservations to yourself, he sentenced, sailing past the dangers in oblivion.

Yet Betty Lou, still awaiting the beautician's job that would make life wonderful for her, felt otherwise. He knew, having been forewarned, that every caress she suffered or

enticed would be described to her husband in detail that should embarrass all three of them, and if he had not had complete confidence in his abilities and skills (confidence completely unwarranted), he would have held back, sat back, brushed her hands away and closed her shirt up for good, and never risked (as they had years later on the couch in Camden) working his way up next to her and with barely a flick of the fingertips (as he would describe it), freeing that bandana top from her shoulders.

And now, wordless, she walks in near silence into the living room and takes the chair next to him. She hears no more than he does. Says nothing. There is no need to explain what she is doing here: her husband has made the absurd mistake of thinking ... But there is really no need to go into it. What he thought in that half-hour of silence as he pretended to read the treatise on pop psychology—that is obvious to any reader of the least sophistication or any movie-goer of the mid-70s.

**IV. At the Confessional**

*Someday she would have to tell these men, she thinks, or one of them at least, that the only way she was ever satisfied was by attending to the job herself. There is just no way to tell a man to do this and do that, and wait for a minute can't you? and how come you can't keep that thing in serviceable condition when you expect me at a moment's notice to be ready to relieve you of it? For God's sake, they must think we are some kind of machine and if it weren't for the fact that somehow, three years ago, I fell in love with him and then again a year ago and that must have prepared me for the next one and who would have thought the nincompoop but handy neighbor in*

*Camden (New Jersey, of course) would have gotten into the act when both spouses left and even sawed a passageway through the wall so he could provide himself with what he needed without the inconvenience of walking out his door and into mine and I remember best being in Maine and he stood there all ready as if showing off and I just backed into him like a dog, surprising him so much he could barely hold my hips to him.*

*It was on that ride through Philadelphia, looking at the sights, I guess it was, although who in Camden hasn't seen all the good ones already? And it was Claire or someone driving and his friend who had ridden up with him from New Orleans, and the friend with his stupid Louisiana accent wasn't getting anywhere or likely to and J. suddenly puts a free arm through my jacket and right there feeling me up while his friend, Allen I think, stares dopily out the windshield and Claire looks into the rear-view mirror just in time to see J. catch my nipple with his lips on my neck and I thought I would just complete the whole act you know right there in the back seat and who has to contrive all those positions we tried in Maine and not one of them worked worth a damn except for his figuring out how to strip all my clothes off in seconds and not even get the fact that I had fallen in love with him a year ago and then again right on the spot.*

*It's a crappy life and all life is shit I guess when the best you can hope for is somehow being fed enough until you get out of school then find the first horny guy with a job even if it is only working in a uniform for the military which might as well be McDonald's for God's sake for all the glory you get except that housing project full of Air Force wives and the occasional hippie like J. who found himself there somehow and*

*even wrote stories about "The Service Wives," which I guess is the easiest and most reliable way to assure yourself of lovers when you really have no more social graces than your supposed ability to cook and the experience you get from a slutty wife who would just as soon do all the men in the project if they were ever home but instead settles for Bobby which was silly because given the least bit of stress I don't care how horny or emotional he is nothing is going to work at all or he'll come all over you if that and I guess it saves or would save on birth control if you could somehow get it right or predictable but you can't so who wants a bunch of idiot kids no better than ourselves running around when you know damn well one of you is going to get sick of the other and to tell the truth I'd rather be rolling in the hay with an indolent hippie who at least thinks he wants me for a few minutes than maneuvering into each other just as the light turns off thinking it's more important to set the damn alarm clock than to show affection whatever that is and I'd just as soon put up with it, since being a piece of meat is at least something rather than being a servant or indentured they call it whatever that means with a bandana tied over my breasts like we did in high school just to make the boys nervous even though none of them was worth a damn either except to feel you up on bad dates in the dark and if only one of them could have done it the way J. did it in the back seat of the car driving past that statue The Thinker who looks more like he just got out of the shower and was taking a dump but who knows what you are supposed to think when you see art like that particularly when you feel yourself letting go and you're about to cry out aloud for God's sake while Claire starts giggling in the front*

*seat with the inept words of J.'s friend in her ear who doesn't even realize he's the butt of her jokes.*

*I remember the first time and it was lying in bed like feeling lotion or talc on my skin and the next thing you know or I knew for God's sake there's this flush coming over me and it must have taken me weeks to figure out Good God! that's like when a boy or a man or whatever knows what he's doing and you don't just have to sit there with your hand all slimey thinking "This is it? Who cares if this is all there is to it?" but rather good God I could be flushed like that myself panting like a racehorse and wouldn't care what that thing of his was up to but you can't talk about crap like that so instead I just stand there balanced with my hands on my knees and my legs splayed and within seconds it's over and I suppose he feels real proud to have a woman who's ready all the time and doesn't mind feeling like a piece of meat and maybe in the shower while he's out there priding himself on his abilities I'll be able to do the job properly ...*

**V. The Kindness of Strangers**

OK, he thought, sitting back, perhaps over the keyboard or staring at the easel: *Now is the time to make things right. Now is the time for all good men to come to the aid of their country*. Now you must find her. You can make the call or write the letter or spend a few hours on the internet discovering where she is and who she claims to be, and maybe test her, that is say this and ask that to make sure you're not dealing with a twelve-year-old on a laptop, or get on a damn plane and just show up at the door and let the chips fall where they may. And from what he had heard, those "chips"

would be more like stumps and branches and unsplit logs, stacked for firewood.

"Who the fuck are you?" the burly man would ask, in no small irritation, staring down at the stranger who appeared to have no idea why he had approached this house in the first place. And he would stammer that you don't know me or remember me or perhaps you do but in any event it is or is not what you think it's just that ... stringing together the clichés fixed in his repertoire from bad TV shows or the movies.

"You see," he would say, "I was stuck in the attic one morning, my feet lassoed by the power cords ..." And the responding look of contempt and perplexity should have convinced him to let this fantasy die as her love for him doubtless had in the years since he had seen her.

Yet now, still caught in the camera frame or the epilogue, he would raise himself to full height and turn away, and it may as well be sunset when he does this, or one of those dawns where the whole world stretches out calmly before you like that woman he once loved who claimed her majestic stretch was just a way of informing him she was "ready," even though it was all due to supplements and surgeries. He would turn away and all his lovers and all his adversaries would be gone, as in those solipsistic games where you turn your back on the table or chair and feel its very being come into question, as Heidegger must have put it, or finally vanish, unsensed and senseless. Perhaps there would be the music he was unable to compose, or a splash of color that he could not find on his palette. And the grand summing up of things could not work its way into his word-hoard or the tenses and conditions weren't quite right or the entire scene

was one of those drugged imaginings that shocks you with the realization that this could not happen in the real world.

And his turning away became the turning away he had experienced as a kid, falling asleep in the bed next to his kindly brother's bed, imagining that always loyal friend, a girl, or just an anthropic pet, who would ride the bus to school beside him—a dinosaur, perhaps, one of those predators—velociraptors they call them now, the tyrannosaurus rex then—kindly, bound to him, discretely silent on the bus bench. And when the unreality of it all hit him as he fell asleep and he felt the fantasy fade, taking his once friend, yet another friend! from him, he called out "Ty! Ty!" in earnest and he could not suppress the tears and wracking sobs that brought a warbled query of concern from his brother.

"Nothing," he said, clenching his fists as he had seen far stronger men do on TV, and fighting the grief of solitude to extinction. Even now, he could see the ridiculous image on the bus, the two of them, fantastic creatures both, framed perfectly, as other kids adjusted their coats and picked through their pencil cases. No more real than the two of them, he thought, she and the young debauched wife, posed before the shaking camera lens above.

The burly husband turns away. "Some nut," he calls out. "If he comes back, just call the fucking cops." And she clenched down the desire overwhelming her. She could feel what he felt, when he embraced for the last time the lover who had left him,

she who would not wait for him ...

and he pressed the small of her back too as her whole young body tensed in passion. ...

"She loved me," he would tell the docile listeners in the classroom, attentive now, emergent skeptics all. "So I didn't care that she ran off with some creep, some stranger, some student—one of you, perhaps. I didn't care that she told him all the things she once told me, and had her breasts done for him, and that they ended up as model citizens, buying a house in Long Beach or Fort Worth and teaching the poor kids how to rise in society. I didn't care that they had pet names for each other and told jokes and maybe even jumped into the sack, trying to break the record the two of us had set years earlier, nor that she refused to speak to me then wrote long impassioned letters then said of course we could be friends then said there was no possibility of communication between us, and I remember going to see other friends who lived in Long Beach or Texas and realizing the addresses were within a few blocks of each other, and I told them, no, much as I love these evening or afternoon strolls through the city streets, I can guarantee you if she spots me in her neighborhood she will call the cops and have me arrested as a stalker. Even that, even that does not bother me. Nor the fact that I will never see her again. Nor that she has aged more than three decades now, and that very flesh that so enticed me once has been sloughed off for the dust mites. And even that, remembering the love I had that was so intense and so intensely physical that I cannot evaluate that flesh, never sat back to admire it, never even imagined what she was or could have been for others, just that I needed to be locked up with her and feel our very beings merge, no longer judging the shape of her thigh or back any more than I would my own. I didn't care," he told them. "None of it mattered. Nor the men she had in the past and the cuckold she

doubtless made of the opportunistic shit-head who ran off with her. It was me, always me she loved and still loves, with the same fire that I felt and feel today, one that requires no proof and defies all evidence."

The students shake their moralistic heads—it is impossible to imagine the one who loves you "doing that" with another. It's just not right, they have been trained to think. "You need to get over it," they cry. "*Closure* is the word we have for it." But he's not listening. "And that is why, you see," he tells them with conviction. "That is why it's better to be me than you."

He pauses in the attic-space, careful to place his weight on the trusted beams rather than risk the uncertainties of the ceiling panels. His ankle breaks free of the power line.

He thinks of his young wife and the love he once felt for her. In the end, he grandly thinks with the grandeur only known to youth, in the end, it hardly matters whether you find that love of your life, or one who will serve for that, and spend your glory- or golden-years in her arms, raising a family and paying mortgages and feeling that life has somehow passed you by, even as your kids grow to maturity, Or perhaps collect as many , imperfect lovers as you can, ignoring the pop-psychology pathology of the whole thing, thinking someday you may find that love you had once, or twice, or three times, or a variant too subtle to calculate at all, and is it really different at age 70, say, from what it was at 12 or 16, or 25, or with Linda Jane losing count of the love-making and not coming to any agreement as to what "counting" even meant in this context?

He hears the car turn into the driveway, crushing the crushed sand over the asphalt. His or that of a neighbor or

perhaps of a visitor he has never met. He lowers his weight to the ladder step, degree by quiet degree, he thinks.

A door opens as if with no concern at all ...

"Don't turn away from me!" he hears in the future cry of the Dominatrix. "There is no one calling you or listening."

## 4.3 HAULING BACK

> The poets are wrong of course ... But then, poets are almost always wrong about facts. That's because they are not really interested in facts: only in truth.
>
> —Faulkner, *The Town*, chap. 5.

**I. The Woman in Black**

Having seen her once, I never sought her out again. She lounged at the apex of the rock face, the idle waves from the tide and from the fishing boats "lapping," it would be said, some twenty feet below her. She leaned back on her arms in

the morning sun, one leg extended, one knee bent, seductively, as if posing for a photo shoot—the *Gestalt* of the black-clad models on the pages of *Life Magazine*.

Working the coastal waters in Maine a half-century ago, you rarely saw such things. What you encounter instead as you nose into the coves is a glimpse of a life you would like to lead yourself—a robe-clad wife in the prime of life, sipping her morning coffee or noontime tea on the tasteful deck, her form reflected in the glass opening to the stately well-kept summer-home. Unlike the stranger, darkened on the rocks, serene and leisurely—whatever cliché you wish to use—now watching you, watching the fishing boats, "picturesque as all get-out," you would joke on a different deck, your soles sliding on the bait-fish as she, in line with her reflection, follows the grim regularity of your work. The ease in her shoulders, her arms folded beneath her mid-life breasts. The routines of worker and viewer, two viewers now, one not disinterested—all at their most effortless in morning sun.

Two miles away (as a crow flies, they say), Nancy, the wife of the fisherman, busies herself as well, ensuring the kids are conspicuously gathered around the television. The breakfast dishes are stashed in the dishwasher, theirs and the cup from the coffee she prepared for him an hour before dawn. No lunch on a Saturday. He would come home hungry, dragging his helper with him in order to be paid. You just set your jaw and played the role assigned to you by him or by the universe itself—loving, supportive wife—good enough for government work, they say. Or hooker mistress, that too. There was no reason to challenge the way things were, as long as you ate, as long as no bones were broken in

the fray, as long as you could put a good front on things for your acquaintances, and who was to say any one of them lived better than you did? She pushed her hair back from her face. The hair he had once gathered in his working hands, reciting the bad poetry to her. It was 11am. The fire on the cook-stove long since dead. At least you don't have to dress for it, she thought, as one of the kids shrieked "Noooo!" at a sibling injustice. It was best to ignore it, let them "work things out themselves" the way domestic dogs will always do. No skin was broken; no one blinded. And all the bills were paid when bills came due.

David fell silent, easing the throttle up past idle, working in his repetitious way, then grumbled something as I maintained my pace, in my own picturesque way, still caught in the camera lens, and I can see now our boat working through the moorings in the cove as if from a higher perspective, a viewpoint hovering cliff-high perhaps, as if of birds in the first of the morning airs.

And after a few mutterings and vague allusions and hauling our strings of eight in the cove like beats of old poems, I began to get the story straight, though often back to front, the way professional tales are told. "That's her," he said, nodding to the dark seductress posing on the rocks, and little more. "Years ago ..." he began, as all his tales began and this one died as I turned away to do what I was paid to do. Despite his ideal wife and well-bred kids, or perhaps because of them, the fisherman would not resist the woman sunning her flesh on the rock-face, with her extravagant "metaphysics," she would say, of what the cosmos was and how the earth moved within its fire. She caught him and wrested the unspent hours away from the wife and from the

adoring kids, although how that came to be, I could never determine. Nor how it could continue in the straits of the hours of the fishermen. An afternoon when work was done? An evening run to the supermarket bedeviled with an unforeseen delay? A night with the drinking men perhaps? Or a stopping of time itself? "You just need to will it," she was said to say. "Like all sublunar things heated in the fires of the sky." Her jewelry clangs in assent as the storyline fades into the prop wash. ... And what is the point of proceeding? I would not have known at the time how such relationships begin or end, and even had the tale been told in the proper way with all details in place, I could have done no better than repeat them.

So I say merely that it was a discomfiting affair, on-going, as I would later learn, but uncontrolled, and she, the black-clad woman on the rock-face, knowing our clockwork regularity on the water, made the cove at the perfect time and set up as in a photo shoot—there is no other cliché quite so fit—reminding him, I guess, of her presence and being and punctuality matching our own, and warning him, as at the time, I could only suspect, that there could be far worse in store.

We worked and he worked and at the end of the week, we returned to his house on pay-day, and I would sit at the small table, making small talk with his textbook wife, while the obedient kids left the television and swarmed over him in what only later I would learn was a perfunctory and obligatory show of glee. And he was duke of his ducal palace and wrote out the check in their presence, waving them away for the moment it took to compute the numbers, then handing it to me with grand theatricality. "Wow!" he would

say, as if astonished at the sum. And I knew that was another allusion to the Old Days, not so long ago, when he worked "a dollar a day," he said, shoveling fish from the draggers or bait into the lobster boats. "It ain't like it used to be!" Back when lobsters went for peanuts on the wharf, before the palates of outsiders made such fare a luxury. Never would he have imagined then writing checks in the hundreds for a worker with no more experience on the water than he had had as an orphan, brought over from Europe to be thrown into this community by a short-sighted step-mother, and working for years as that child to become "one" of them—those who worked the wharves—fearing and knowing they would never accept him here, each kid growing up in the town too familiar with his neighbor and the gossip of the neighbor and the difference between the impoverished working men and those "who don't need to go lobstering"—the kind of contempt reserved for anyone from a family who did not earn their money by working on the water—men like him and younger men like me.

"Nancy got me out," he said obliquely. "*Habeas corpus*," he added, and I should have known then there was more to his confinement years ago than the innocence I knew from Kesey's *Cuckoo's Nest*. An act of violence, I should have guessed, "his own damn fault," in the lexicon of locals. A hospital of the Old School, he had been sentenced to, with neo-Gothic spires and electro-shock—"If you got ugly, you would get it standing up," he said. "It changes you," I heard my father's voice confirm. And then he shook his head, as if both gratitude and grief were genuine. "The things they did," he said, referring now to the community of fishermen

who did not welcome his return to sea. He took it all in silence, he said, and worked his way back into that community, into his family, into the business, subjected always to the vicious taunts of his competitors. And he worked himself and his workers to the point of exhaustion, earning finally only enough money and respect to be left alone, which is all he could have hoped for from the beginning. The once famed youthful rapes and assaults and that sort of thing?—all that was well behind him when I worked for him, initiation rites but no guarantee of citizenry in a community like that. Despite his soulful introspection, those were things he never once alluded to. "An *au pair*," Chuck tells me. "No more than fifteen, sixteen. And B. would stand guard at the door and David and ... I forget who, one of the Eastmans or Doughty boys, I think I heard it was, went in and ..." There are times when you must stop listening.

In those days, I had not yet learned to be skeptical of tales about helping your neighbor or community or about close-knit families or salt-of-the-earth grizzled fishermen or any of the lyric crap you hear retailed in that place. Their fierce loyalty to family and friends—their wary distance from outsiders. I simply kept my peace and place, as he had done in earlier days, afraid to be laughed out of town or off the deck as a highlander. You work in utter silence, I for a summer, he for years and for his family, your speed nearly enviable as you swing the 100-pound crates of fish in the face of their contempt as if those crates were made of cardboard and styrofoam; you expect nothing to change for them and little for you. You too set your jaw, and plunge your forearms into the bait tray, learning they are all small-minded, resentful, self-interested, petty materialists, and

that working hard in the great space of nature cures none of that, for them or for you. And little wonder, with the scales having fallen from his eyes much earlier than they did from mine, he ventured forth from his now stolid niche in that community—the house he had built with his own two hands, the wife from New York who used to chant Dylan Thomas with him on the bridges in Manhattan (or so he claims!), and the five kids, adoring kids I am forced to say, he raised, who would later praise him for teaching them all they know of work, and perhaps omit the death-threats late in life, and the beatings as adolescents, or the attack on the teenage boy-friend, or maybe that time he stuffed Bill G's asshole son into the bait barrel and "damn near killed the fucking kid," it would be reported—the act that got him sent away "to Augusta," as the euphemism went. Little wonder that he set sail for the first and any woman he could find who was not a part of it.

The boat backs expertly from the rock-face. The bow swings to the sun; the traps slide past and over the transom and within minutes, we are at sea again.

**II. Clothes in the Closet**

Meticulously neat, his wife Nancy was. Not born that way. Growing up on the resentful plain of Long Island did not lend itself to that. But falling in love with him, or perhaps merely the idea of him, or the idea of him that he presented to her—that led her with him to Maine, and once there, living in the three-room house, no running water, hauling the pails from the well often knee-deep in the snow, the kids coming as fast as he could father them—there was no room for clutter or clothes dropped onto the floor or a

sink full of unwashed plates. You just served up the slop in bowls, and after falling for his own version of himself, she let him create one of her—the woman who did everything with propriety, who cared, who put a flower on the table each night at dinner "even if it was only a daisy!" he cried, his voice breaking with emotion. "And in winter?" I would have asked, had I not been as mired in sentimentality and illusion at the time as they were.

A sixth sense Nancy had, he claimed, much like the black seductress on the rock-face. She would go to the library and walk straight to the book she needed—reach out and take it right off the shelf! Always the exact one she sought, without knowing what it was she sought. And the flaws in such reasoning were too obvious to point out to him. Had she identified beforehand the problem the sought text was to solve? A title? or subject? Had he even witnessed what he reported? And having witnessed it, remained still ignorant of the systems under which the books were shelved? Did he know nothing of the principles and logic of cataloguing?

"A lady. A *lady*!" he exclaimed, tears starting in his eyes, stunned with the appreciation of her he had developed in the days after she had run off and hidden the kids away from him. It got him to stop drinking—I myself witnessed that. Leaving him awash in self-pity and sentiment, which I assumed was his own special version of de-tox. He would live to learn the others, but not to see the flawless wife finally die in dementia, her rock-ribbed ethics as hollow as his were.

The clothes had been neatly hung, with his to the right—shirts he wore only on the weekends, all away from his

working clothes which smelled of sweat and lobster bait despite the diligent washing. You need order in a small space like that—like the spaces on a working boat. And he must have been gone—out on the water if it were a summer day, or carousing or "working up-town" it was called, when you sold out from the community and accepted a working man's wage and contempt for the winter. As she picked out the sweater, it fell away in her hands, the entire thing cut into neat one-inch strips and the ribbons re-hung carefully on the hanger. And the skirt next to it, cut too, also in careful one-inch strips, and the blouse next to that—every item in the closet—hers, that is—ribboned with care, like slashes found in cinema, despite the recalcitrance of cloth or weave.

Yet the deckle edges of history oppose the neat cuts of the narrative: missing is the stress and terror of the break-in, the gut-wrenching fear of discovery. With the five kids and the dog baying about the property, even a locked door might give no cover, and there must have been a frenzy in the black-clad woman's work that belied the pretty neatness of summation, all versions too rapt by the very grotesquerie of the thing. There was no mention of planning and execution. Of lookouts in the driveway, like B. on the landing as the *au pair* paid what was due to the community.

And that day finally put an end to all of it. All accounts agree in that. You never heard a word of the confrontation that must have taken place—the recriminations and excuses, thrusts and parrying. Not from either one of them. Not from the kids finally grown to adulthood. And perhaps it was just her stony silence he endured, one he felt would blow over in the end as it always had before; for despite what you did or she did or determined to do, the kids had to

be fed and the dog dealt with lest it, driven by its blue tick blood, ran and bayed through the night in the limitless woods surrounding them.

And he claims he had no clue what his wife was planning when she left. In the story he tells, she failed this time to "give him her blessing," as she always did when he went to sea. But that is of course impossible, it being May when she ran out on him—the boat ashore and all the gear stored for the winter. Where could he have been, I wondered, when she packed the kids up "for vacation," she claimed, and fled to her sisters in Michigan.

So it worked, I guess. The machinations of the wife a mere variant of the machinations of the black-clad woman from away, whose incantations and appeal to metaphysics and violations of his living space finally purged the place of his family, of all traces of the rival wife, and proved that the most important thing in his life, the one thing that could turn it all around was not the extraordinary wife nor the adoring kids but her own ruthless pursuit of him.

And God knows what he must have done to keep her at arm's distance after that. I myself had to call the florist, objecting to the black carnations she had sent when his wife left him. Nothing had scared him through his life but her, or too the labored silence of his crew he would mistake for strength—the most important skill I mastered in those years. So I never heard of her. Never saw her. Sensed no allusion to her, leaving her safely on the rocks near Cundy's Harbor—the very cove where we ended the day on the weekend. The very cove where the woman in the morning robe would watch us in silence on Tuesdays and Thursdays, it must have been—the fisherman's regularity ensuring that

no time would be squandered in awaiting us. On a good day, the waves would lap the rock-face from our wake. The engine on idle. The warp leaping over the transom.

It is better to forget all that and think rather of the south wind sparkling on the horizon at noon, minutes before you head back to the harbor. The rain so dense the back-winded waves blow flat. The wooden traps seeming to leap from the water with the glistening backs of the lobsters reflecting the morning light.

You feel the muscles in your arms and shoulders tighten and you are a young man and you can think of nothing but the recurrent strength you will feel for what seems like forever. There is a goal to life and purpose, as if work were a real thing. You can be deluded into thinking we are a century or more in the past, and work is a virtue in and of itself, whether you get food on the table or starve as a stripling, whether the bills are paid, or like Steve, your predecessor laborer, you spend a week's wage on wheel rims.

These were the days before the drugs took over the business and community, when the worst you could say was that some poor bastard stayed out too late, drank a six-pack or two in the bar or on his couch, and moved as if in slow motion as the cold cold malice of the interminable day stretched on.

It was dark and the wind I would estimate now, looking back, was thirty knots or more. In a flat-bottom wooden skiff (all that was available in those days), the best you might do was keep the bow into the wind and hope with each small lull in the gusts you could gain an oar stroke. Forty-five minutes it took in the dawn-light to reach the mooring, as David sat expressionless in the stern. It was

what you did, he said. Every day. You did not look for convenience or ease. You simply worked in whatever conditions life and nature set for you.

And I pulled up alongside the shell- and gull-scoured hull and watched David heave himself over the gunwale as I tied the skiff onto the halter. I saw his hand on the ignition, but in the wind, I could only feel the old engine start in the subtle shaking of the floorboards.

"October," he said. "Maybe '61. Hard to remember. I kept thinking, all I got to do is make Cundy's Point, and so you heave to, left then right, waiting for the complex of overlapping waves to flatten out the trough that buries the bow on the wave face. Thirty minutes we stood off there in the wind, and I thought Steve's eyes would burst out of their sockets. Finally made the turn, the stern half-buried in the yaw, and headed home. Only day I've lost in a decade. You just go; that's all there is to it. The money left on the ocean floor is never coming back to you. And the thought that you just left it there will stay with you forever. That's why you go. The sun is almost up, and you just go."

And after I baited the irons, feeling what I would later know as fear but knew nothing of in those days, he nodded once to me and flicked the engine off. "We were ready to go," he said. "Remember, we were ready to go. That's what matters." And for that, I can forgive him so much else.

I drove home as the sun rose through the rain.

**III. Fire in the Hole**

When I reached the ashes, I saw a face that I, whenever telling or retelling this, call ashen itself. A big man in the remnants of the home he had built to raise his kids. And he

raked through the dead coals for a memento for me, not considering that I wouldn't care about the fallen house at all, having once had an apartment burn to the ground around me and feeling nothing but relief that the clutter of my life and all the service wives were gone. Besides, I might have added, it wasn't my philandering that had done this; I hadn't spent the evening in the arms of the former wife of the Russian professor. I hadn't left my dog alone, chained to the porch post for the night, to be shot by the sheriff who could no longer stand the howling of the creature burning to death as the firemen worked as best they could.

"Why didn't she release the dog?" the fisherman wailed as if that were the tragedy of it all, as if asserting too his own moral innocence and rectitude. What did she care about his kids who would witness this? What did she care about the grand summing up of things? The mementi in the ash pit?

The forensics were child's play: a hole sunk in the corner, where she had dumped gasoline over the easy chair—the chair in which too often he had passed out in front of his wife and kids—wine bottles, beer cans piled up beside him. She was known to the dog—enough for the creature fatally to ignore her, not suspecting she would be the last human permitted to walk unchallenged into the owner-built home.

And all the sentimental drivel I had to put up with seeing the wet embers, knowing that to avoid it would have been the easiest thing in the world. Take care when you hook up with the women from away, adrift in their drugs, their metaphysics, and their big-city ways, he might have once been warned by those who cared. And at that point, the true tragedy emerged for what it was: that no one cared, as the flames licked up the siding. When Bill G., fishing the very bay

with him got the frantic call on the VHF, he gruffly dismissed the firemen with "I'm not my brother's keeper," and worked unhindered in his work, thinking only of the day David dumped his son into the bait barrel nearly drowning him.

So David too, incurious of the plume of smoke on the tree-line, continued fishing through the day, unchecked even as the lead from the sheriff's gun ripped the dog's burned face away. And maybe I wasn't working with him then, or the fish ran big that day and once on the wharf, they even gave him an hour to finish unloading his catch and maybe collect himself and then spilled the beans, as it were, promising to take his boat back to the mooring or drive him to his truck or do whatever was necessary to get the vehicles where they needed to be so that he could fall to his knees before the burning house and weep theatrically before the sheriff who would be certain to report his grand grief to all the community.

All but the chimney was gone by the time he reached the scene and there was nothing to be done but recreate the drama from his inner soul, where it always laughably resided. Another tragedy, wholly undeserved like the last, first his family deserts him and now his house burns to the ground. And I suppose he expected all his kids and friends, if he had any, to gather round him and embrace him and let him wail at the injustices of the universe, when the simple fact was that all the infirmities of his life he had brought on himself and nurtured himself and encouraged himself, raising them to lugubrious maturity.

It would be decades in the future when his youngest son, well into his forties, would relive this moment of his childhood at the large house once owned by his grandmother—

the outsized colonial where the fisherman himself had grown up, where he had assaulted the *au pair* as a teenager, and where he finally returned when the woman from away took his hand-built home into her own hands. The grown son would break into the very house into which his father had been brought as an orphan—who locked doors in that community?—and start the fire that would burn that house and all its history to the ground as well. The wood was old and it took no particular skill to collapse it into the cellar hole: it burned as fast as the old oak furniture had burned when, years earlier, his hippie brother had dragged it out for a bonfire. And before he lit the gasoline, he unleashed the tenant's dog and let it run free, as the dog of his childhood had not been allowed to do.

At the time, David himself, the whole sordid affair on his head and watch, was long dead and gone, having rotted the last decade or more of his life in the care of ruthless nurses and those friends who finally drifted away themselves, leaving him alone in his own excrement.

**Trio**

*I remember fog so dense you could not see competing boats working almost in your wake, their locations revealed only as their diesels throttled up when the last trap came aboard. I remember the shock of reaching the mooring, or finding ourselves once in the wrong bay, and never once then, as I do now, did I think of danger. Of the hull stove up on the resistant ledge, and maybe dying there as Fred's parents did in the indifference of competing fishermen.*

*It's not like when a Coffin died, and his brother donned the scuba gear, searching for the body to no avail for days until it washed up on Jaquish Island, half eaten by the fish. It's not like when Wes fell overboard, alone on the water, and drowned with his feet tangled in the warp. "Come on, Wes," David would say. "What do you mean you can't swim?" And so, when he went over-board, working alone on the water, he had no chance. And when I wrote of that, praising Wes as the only one who ever spoke to us in civility, even though each phrase Wes uttered was ornamented with obscenities, his very family denied it. An excellent swimmer, they insisted. And I was left to wonder where the error lay—in Wes's failure to learn the basics of survival, in his family's unwillingness to admit this error (one that left them lost and alone without him), in David's grand garrulity, chastising the simple negligence of those he competed with, or in my own failed memory. Wes knew the score for those who fished alone; in that, he was one of many. Why swim, he must have reasoned, when going overboard alone? that is out of the fucking question. And maybe I am simply extrapolating from all those stories told of him. "Taxes?" he was said to say. "I just wrote the fucking IRS again with a note saying that my expenses outweighed my income."*

*It was attitudes like that that ruined the old days for all of us: the government officials had had enough and demanded the receipts. And finally, you could no longer earn your pay in cash; the days were gone when what you chose to do with it "was your affair," when it didn't matter how many poor or local people froze in the winter, or*

*how many roads remained unrepaired in the spring, or how many grandparents died in squalor.*

*I remember coming home on a late September day, one of the last days I went fishing before "turning it in" and going on with life or getting on with it, and the lobsters—"fish" as we always called them then—overflowed the main holding tank and we rigged up the bait box as a supplement and finally stopped at dusk as each shift in the boat's weight spilled more fish out onto the floorboards. It was more money than I had ever made in a day and on days like that you think life will last forever. And I remember too that within a week I told him I too had had enough, despite the great harvests on the water that made my life what it is today. I was done with fishing for the year, breaking the promises I had made when I signed on for it, and working so hard, he never once reminded me of my deficiencies.*

*I can still feel the salt drying on my arms in the inescapable odors of the bait-fish. The air in my face, and the seaweed slipping on the washrail.*

*The water splits on the boat-stem. Plank-built, she is. One man on a plane, I'm told, and he does nothing else all day but shape the hull planks, drying in the winter and jammed together by the caulking iron. The rails of the hulls in those days ran gracefully low to the water—anything to ease the difficulty of hauling the traps aboard by hand—all those grand aesthetics lost when the powerful hydraulics took over the industry and the hull lines rose waist high.*

So I salve myself with these idyllic memories; and so too did he go from one fantasy to the next. Defying the dog-slaughtering lover who had watched us from the rock-face, he would build again over the very ashes she had left. Within days he was designing his next house—the product of his own delusions: one large open space it would be, with a mansard roof like the grand cottages of the Old Port Colony, a single wall with a fireplace open to the larger space and to a smaller private space—his own majestic bedroom, I suppose, and over that a ceiling, such that the adoring kids—all five of them on a good day!—could stay up there together just as they had gathered around the small TV on Saturday mornings to be sure to put a good face on things when he arrived home from fishing to pay his crew. I saw this many times. I never saw the bruises on the poor kids' faces.

And high rose the mansard beams over the cellar hole filled with ashes of the old house—Phoenix-like, I guess, the designer forgetting that the Phoenix only rises to be burnt up in its nest again, that these creatures of mythology require no earthly insurance against the arsonist who still walked free. By November, you could see the image of the way things would be and imagine too the perfect half-family in residence there. You didn't consider, of course, that a fireplace open to drafts from each side would burn up cords of wood in the winter with most of the BTUs funneled up through the chimney as smoky helices.[1]

But of course, it never got to that. Little in his life ever "got to that." The first storm of November put two feet of

[1] Further, *Elegy for Eloise* (2017), ch. 9 "Helix."

snow on the fragile flooring, and the entire framed edifice collapsed again into the cellar hole, as all his homesteads did, and I forget what excuse he had for it all this time: something about the contractor neglecting to shore up the beams against the snow. When anyone could see that the contractor simply walked away unpaid, refusing to shore up anything on his own time. There were no house-builders, amateur or professional, who would leave a half-framed uninsured house alone to withstand the coming winter, and the whole project failed as all his projects had.

For years you could see the twisted beams through the fir-trees, until the eldest son finally bulldozed through it and built something more respectable on the site. He too was obsessed with the fire-storms of the past, telling giddy tales of watching through his bedroom panes, the small studio he had built ablaze, or destroying the family heirlooms in a bonfire. The youngest son stood by that day and other days, his own childhood unresolved, the howls of the dog still fixed in his memories, and finally put an end to all of it.

**IV. Finale**

He had taken up drinking again, "experimenting" as my father would have had it describing his own near fatal weakness for the stuff, and found a young obliging lover and they had roared off to a party on the Harley, forgetting the accident from years ago when the sun-blind driver driving Pleasant Hill ran him off the road, "I saw the flash on the windshield and I knew ..." struggling to stand in the ditch with his leg broken, and working through October on the boat, propped up on a cast and stool. This time, the second time, drunk as he had been ten years earlier, now leaving as

the party broke up, ill-balanced on the Harley, he hit a fellow partier, breaking both the kid's legs and his own and when I saw him in the hospital his mind was gone and his own foot amputated, and it was the worst thing I had ever witnessed in life. His sons finished out the season on the boat for him, then sold the business to pay off the lawyers.

A week earlier he had invited me for lunch, and it wasn't one of those times we would meet for dinner, when he would start drinking early in the morning so he could pass out, wake up in mid-afternoon, and present himself sober at 6pm with dinner freshly cooked.

I don't remember the context but I do remember sitting next to him at the kitchen table, and it was as it had been years earlier, when he sat in his leather jacket, about to flee to the black-clad sorceress, and with a dangerous grin announced how wonderful it was that several of us could socialize like this over alcohol and how remarkable that there was no violence or assault involved, and I can still see the threatening smirk and I can still evince the stoniness I knew was necessary to neutralize that threat.

This time, the second time, that look came back and there was more of an edge to it as he pulled out the kitchen knife and held it to my neck. "I could just cut your throat," he said. "You know I could do it." And I was so pissed I wished he would just drop dead of a stroke right there, since I knew too the only way out was to sit expressionless and fearless and look at him over the knife blade and say, without irony or even a trace of fear or contempt, "I know. But I also know you won't."

He eased his grip on the knife handle. It was like years earlier, when I broke the gaff because he had failed to explain the peculiar nature of its construction, where strength depended absolutely on a specific angle of attack. When he raised his voice in anger that day, the sole time he had done so in all my days with him, I fell silent and kept at my work, a half-pace slower than I was accustomed. He was beaten by his now sullen crew—a young kid half his size and strength—and for hours tried to joke his way free of the killing silence and past his grand *faux pas*. For if you want your crew to work, he knew, you must let them work, taking all errors upon yourself. You save your ranting and railing for the government or for the sins of your competitors.

So when I got the call two days later from a friend telling me of the accident, all I could think of before the details came out was "I hope the motherfucker died." And it might as well have been so for all his life amounted to after that.

I went to the hospital. He was babbling, but to me all the words made some disconnected sense. An allusion to fishing, to my wife, to a payday. There simply was no narrative. Then he turned to John, and I understood not a word but John nodded and smiled and we compared notes and determined that all the poor bastard needed was that missing syntax and the now disjointed world of substantives would again make sense to him and us.

I went back a week later and he rambled incoherently again, and I realized that this time he did not know me, or was pretending he did not, and I told him Fuck you! You know perfectly well who I am and I swear to you, if you keep this up I will leave your life forever and you will never see me again. Perhaps the single vow in life I nearly kept.

I made one more attempt (or rather was shamed into it) after his daughter died in the car wreck, the very Joy of his Existence, he used to say, the girl who once arranged her tiny piles of belongings about the living room, and insisted that anyone who touched them, wash their hands for five minutes before returning to the room. His mystical ex-wife invited us all to the memorial and we sat at the damn restaurant pretending to be moved by it all and he said in that loopy belligerent voice with all the contrived sweetness in place "They say you used to work for me." I never made the effort to see him again.

I'm told he ended up in a rented house or room working tirelessly on a pile of firewood in the living room as if a sculpture of some sort and burned it as kindling, maybe as his eldest son had burned up the furniture of the old colonial, or as his youngest son would later burn the whole shebang to the ground. Cold and sick, he was sent to a rest home and finally all the kids had just had enough of it all and let him rot there as I had and when he died, not one of us gave a crap.

**Coda**

How would it have been had he stayed locked up in the nut-house and died screaming in a strait-jacket? I would have spent my youth in idleness, rather than learning the exactitudes of work on the deck of a fishing boat. 87 fish per 100 pounds, 450 traps on odd days, 350 on the others, mostly four-footers in five-trap strings. Leaving the moorings at the changing dawn. Dressed expertly. Eyes on the fathometer. Dwindling catches in the late fall figured against

the expenses of seeking them out at all. Then all the recalcitrant froth of chance and reality.

Had he been convicted, had the *habeas corpus* writ never been penned, the children would have been harried by their spiritualist mother, as trapped in delusion as he was, and the best we might have said was that for all his buffoonery, despite the firestorms of the past, there was a certain seductive charm about him that got drowned in alcohol, even though he, like all of them, imagined it was only the alcohol that brought the virtues of his self to light.

I see the bastard pouring wine for all of us: himself, my father, and me—all three tee-totallers and for damn good reason too. And I watched him gloat as each of us proved no stronger than our table-mates. I hear the Woman of Today hurling her obscenities—a scandal to the Colony!—plotting her revenge but checked to inaction by her sense of propriety. Eloise too has one last word to say to me.

It is now pointless to forgive, with all so long indifferent or so long dead.

I would rather be at sea than part of these late histories, whether sailing a knot shy of hull speed or grounded out on the uncharted ledge, or still at work on the sea-surface gaping at the dark sky domed over the horizons, borne up on the deck by the appetites and palates of the idle rich.