



# Empty Places

**Remembering Paul Gruchow:  
a chronicle of a death foretold**

By Michael Finley

Be kind, for everyone you  
meet  
is fighting a great battle.  
—*Philo of Alexandria*

Once in a sycamore I was  
glad  
all at the top, and I sang.  
Hard on the land wears  
the strong sea  
and empty grows every  
bed.  
—*John Berryman*  
“*Dream Song 1*”

DULUTH—Paul  
Gruchow, who chronicled  
the prairie in his book *The  
Necessity of Empty  
Places*, died of a drug  
overdose Sunday at his  
home in Duluth. He was  
56.

Gruchow had been  
hospitalized several times  
in recent years in a battle  
with depression. His  
family said he had  
attempted suicide four  
times since August 2001.

He recently  
completed a first draft of  
a book about depression  
from the inside.

—*Associated Press*  
*February 24, 2004*

**ONE MORNING IN AUGUST OF 1978**, the phone rang, and a merry voice said to me, “Mike, Paul Gruchow here. How would you like to come to work for me?”

Every reporter knew Paul Gruchow. At 34, he was already a grand figure in Minnesota journalism. Every year his Worthington newspaper swept the small-circulation category for photography and writing awards. But he was bigger than just journalism—he was a guru of prairie lore, an agitator for sustainable agriculture, a defender of rural culture.

So I drove down to Worthington to meet the man. We hit it off right away. We were both small-town boys, ambitious to tell the real story of noncity living. Paul was tremendously bright and bursting with energy. He was cheerful, but you could tell he was deep. His smile was a sad smile. If you looked at him one way, he could be a baby-cheeked boy. From another angle, he was an old guy crouched under a bridge. He was ambiguous, and I liked that.

Paul had a vision, nearly implemented, of a newspaper that was literally a “prairie home companion,” a printed friend to the scattered populace. Every edition would contain the daily commodity prices and retail ads, but it would also point to the deeper truth of rural living. Paul needed an operational lieutenant, a news editor to guide each day’s paper through to completion, and he chose me. I felt very lucky.

When Jim and Bob Vance inherited the Worthington *Daily Globe* from their father, “V.M.,” they had a choice between milking the business for a few bucks or “having some fun with it.” Being outlaws in their bones, the brothers decided on the latter course. And they hired Paul (who’d previously been news director at then-fledgling Minnesota Public Radio in downtown St. Paul) to oversee the overhaul.

During Gruchow’s tenure, from 1975 to 1986, the *Daily Globe* enjoyed a golden era. It was one of the first papers nationally to “go computer,” installing a blinking Digital VAX monolith in a glass sarcophagus in our otherwise ancient paste-up room. Every reporter had a terminal and could edit his own stuff online—a revolutionary empowerment. We went to

four-color offset lithography a decade before *USA Today*, the better to showcase the work of world-class photographers Jim Brandenburg and Joe Rossi.

Another photographer, Mark Luinburg, says of that time: “I was just in high school, but Paul let me develop my prints in the *Daily Globe* darkroom. I got to work alongside legends Bill Kuykendall and Jim Brandenburg. It was a magical place, and Paul gave me the keys to it.”

While we had probably the best editorial writer and essayist of any daily in the venerable Ray Crippen, who had to be at least 40, the paper was mainly an incubator of younger talent. Paul brought in reporters like Jay Novak, Tom Mason, and Dick Meryhew from the *Minnesota Daily*, which Paul had edited as a student. Because Gruchow ran the show, talented people who otherwise would have gone to work at the Minneapolis *Tribune* or St. Paul *Dispatch* loaded U-Hauls and drove to southwest Minnesota.

## Rocket Launcher

**MY FIRST MONTHS WITH PAUL** were like a honeymoon. After getting an edition out, we would race off to the prairie in his rickety staff car—the paper had only two—and he would show me blue gentian in bloom (“bitter herbs, bearing bitter news” of winter drawing near) at Kilen Woods, or the buffalo cows lolling out along the Blue Mounds or the skeletal herons dancing on the edges of Round Lake. I looked; I listened; I said, “Gosh.”

Somehow Paul knew everything about everything. He knew Little Crow’s real Lakota name (Taoyateduta). He knew that Aztecs trekked all the way from Mexico to the quarry at Pipestone for the sacred red stone. He knew every Lutheran hymn, every Bach prelude, every Precambrian layer of the ledges along the Rock River. He was like an Eagle Scout, cubed. Being with him was like standing under a rushing waterfall.

Paul was never a “regular guy.” Though chronologically a baby boomer, he seemed pre-Woodstock by half a dozen generations. He had a plummy,

old-school way about him. He was drunk with Shakespeare and King James English, which made him partial to words like *fettered* and *madman*, a fustiness that perhaps explains why Annie Dillard and not he shot up the bestseller lists.

This academic bent was odd because Paul never got a college degree and was perversely proud of this shortcoming. He took the path less traveled, for sure. As a student at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis, he signed up for every class poet John Berryman taught—27 credits in all. Paul absorbed all of Berryman’s eccentricities, from his rhetorical flourishes down to his bright beard. They even held their omnipresent cigarettes in the same way, butt down on the thumb, like a rocket smoking on a pad.

They also took the same joy in performing. Berryman was startling in person, hyperemotional and grand. Paul was the same way when telling a story, pedal to the metal. His stories defined him, and he told them hungrily, leering as if *he* couldn’t wait to hear how they turned out, either. He told about how Nelson Rockefeller revealed his true nature as the keynote speaker at Worthington’s 1968 King Turkey Day festival, insisting on wearing a full-length topcoat during the parade, despite 90-degree temperatures. “Rockefeller couldn’t get it into his head that Minnesota wasn’t in the Arctic Circle.”

He could be highbrow. He quoted Charles Dickens, who, on one of his famous lecture tours of America, traveled the high prairies by smoking locomotive, describing the landscape as “oppressive in its barren monotony.” He regaled me with the latest studies of Henry James and Samuel Beckett. His take-away from the Beckett book, shared over a drippy beef sandwich at the Gobbler Cafe, was that Beckett was so prone to constipation that he frequently had to clear the blockage with a tongue depressor. The things serious writers must do.

Or he could go low. When he was a young man, he told me, he’d worked as a deseminator at a turkey farm near his home in Montevideo. “We didn’t have machines to extract the semen, so I had to do it by hand,” he said ruefully, miming the wrist action. “I will never forget the look in those birds’ eyes,” he added, with a peculiar look in his own.

His voice dropped to a dark whisper when he told me tales of “prairie patriarchs” who lived far from Worthington, men who dominated their families psychologically and sexually. This story got me into big trouble when I tried to document it in a *Daily Globe* story, and about 60 nonincestuous patriarchs called, demanding my head in an oat bag.

Paul told tales of growing up in Rosewood Township in Chippewa County, describing a childhood that was part *Giants in the Earth*, with its prairie privations, and part *Peter Pan*, for the escapist forays Paul made into the surrounding world. As a boy he slept outdoors over a hundred nights a year, roaming the nearby marshlands and woods, seeking solace in the lonely spaces. I remember wondering what he sought solace from.

He told, over a meringued wedge of lemon pie at the Gobbler, the Chekhovian story of a stringer in one of the *Daily Globe*’s outpost villages, 50 miles away. The stringer had been born out of wedlock and put up for adoption. Then the birth mother moved in nearby and was “the neighbor lady” while the girl grew up, babysitting, reading to her, helping her through school. For decades the neighbor showered motherly love on the daughter, never disclosing who she was. Eventually, the daughter learned the woman was her mother—but neither violated the contract between them. When the mother took sick, the daughter took her in and nursed her through her final months—each woman knowing the truth, but in true Minnesota fashion, not wishing to make a scene.

I put on 10 pounds in two years listening to such tales. Paul, because he smoked and talked through entire meals, probably lost 10. And when we were not talking, he took me home to hear him take turns with Bill Holm playing Lutheran hymns on his ancient pump organ, or to laugh in the kitchen with giant prairie novelist Fred Manfred, or to stand in a backyard holding a saggy plate of three-bean salad while a salon of rural savants like Carol Bly, Joe Amato, and Tom McGrath held forth on the issues of the day. It wasn’t fifth-century Athens, but it was something.

He loved gossip. He told about a big reception Worthington held for its National Book Award–winning favorite son, Tim O’Brien, author of *Going After Cacciato*. Before O’Brien could ascend to the stage, Paul saw

his parents grasping his arm and ominously warning their accomplished, adult son to behave. “Don’t you say anything up there to make us ashamed!” Parents, Paul said—you gotta love ’em.

Paul didn’t wow everybody. He played favorites in the newsroom, and he was a notorious needler. He was stupendous with groups, but less so one-to-one. He was riveting, but not warm. We were friendly, but never friends.

David Hawley of the St. Paul *Pioneer Press*, who worked alongside Paul in Worthington, found Paul’s intellectual persona grating. “You know, ‘Life is a filthy farce and men must have ironic hearts and perish laughing’—that sort of thing,” Hawley says. He adds, though, that Gruchow partially redeemed himself with big-heartedness and bug-eyed wonder at the beauty of nature.

Well, Paul was young and full of himself—we all were. No one wanted to seem soft or a sap, which Paul, underneath his grandiose disguise, plainly was. How do you tell a room of jaundiced reporters what it feels like to be out in the chill of November and see the clouds of dawn rising up off the river? The hard-boiled act was just that, a ruse to keep from being clubbed like a baby seal.

Neither was Gruchow much good at the things he loved. Arriving in Washington, D.C., to serve as a congressional aide to Don Fraser, he was mugged within three hours. As a farmer he once disked under an entire field of young beans. As a canoeist he was a splasher, as a hunter he was a lousy shot, and as a hiker he was a piker, once wandering 100 miles off-course across the Continental Divide before regaining his bearings. In later years, he broke an ankle while hiking the Superior Trail and had to crawl on his belly back to civilization and an ambulance.

He sometimes got the tone of a story wrong. It wasn’t really funny to get mugged, lost, or hobbled, but he told these tales of misery with an odd nonchalance. But then, Paul’s touch with nature was always surer than his touch with himself.

# The Necessity of Friction

**THE *DAILY GLOBE* HAD TO BE IN CIRCULATION** every day by 1 p.m., so I arrived early at the newspaper office, around 5:45 a.m., to begin planning the day's edition. Often, unlocking the door in that still sleeping town, I found Paul already at his terminal, sitting in a helix of smoke, working the last sentences of a piece. He wasn't a natural writer. He revised, and revised, and revised. And he kept vampiric hours.

When a reporter handed in a controversial story, I'd ask Paul for a second opinion. He'd scan the galleys, wince when he came to the dicey part, knock the table twice and slide it back to me. "Run it," he grinned evilly. "A little friction makes things interesting."

Paul used to tell us, "If everyone likes you, you're not doing your job." One day a farmer came in, upset that remarks he'd made about his past in the Ku Klux Klan were quoted in the paper. Although smaller than the farmer, Paul pronounced the man a bigot who needed to "get the hell out of my newspaper office." Farm reporter Mikkell Pates, who witnessed the ouster, says Paul helped the man up by his collar and literally marched him sputtering through the office and out the front door.

I left Worthington in 1980 to be with my wife at graduate school, grateful for the opportunity Paul had given me and equipped with skills that would feed my family and me over the coming years. He was the closest thing I ever had to a mentor. So I imagined that the *Daily Globe* would go on indefinitely, with its remarkable prairie editor riding the roost.

Gruchow hoped so, too. In 1984, he took his business partner, Owen Van Essen, aside and said to him, "I have never felt this fulfilled. I can imagine doing this till the end of my days." But he had one of his first really black periods that year. "I knew something was wrong with Paul," Van Essen says. "There was a six-month period when he didn't write a word." I thought of Beckett's tongue depressor.

Paul began to withdraw from the paper, setting up shop across the street in the old post office, polishing the essays that would form the basis for his books: *Journal of a Prairie Year*, *The Necessity of Empty Places*, and

*Grass Roots: The Universe of Home*. In 1985, he sold his share of the *Daily Globe*. A few years later he moved to Northfield; he and his wife, Nancy, bought a bookstore, and Paul taught English at St. Olaf.

“I felt very badly when he never wrote back,” says Florence Vance, widow of Jim, and Paul’s choir director at the First Lutheran Church in Worthington. “We thought Paul was beautiful. He must have known how much we loved him.”

The move to Northfield was supposed to be liberating for Paul. Every writer wants to go at it full-time. And Paul had special needs to be out and about, hiking and canoeing. The newspaper with its daily crises kept him from these things—but it also kept him connected to everyday people and concerns. Whereas the solitary life of writing and wilderness seems like a prescription for disconnection.

Outwardly, Paul was doing well. Though he was only an adjunct professor at St. Olaf, teaching introductory classes (he later held a similar job at Concordia College in Moorhead; in both cases his lack of a degree came back to bite him), it was still teaching, which he loved. He got to write, travel, and talk. Students gave him rave evaluations. His books, most of them published by Milkweed Editions of Minneapolis, won positive reviews; some were nominated for Minnesota Book Awards. People began to refer to Paul as the “Minnesota Thoreau,” albeit a Thoreau with a more melancholy outlook. He should have experienced satisfaction. But something was wrong.

In Northfield, Paul’s disease showed its face. He became depressed deeply and often, not speaking for days at a time, preferring to be alone in a dark room. It was there that he was diagnosed as bipolar. He hated the stigma and the stupidity of mental illness, and he set out to be his own shrink, to heal himself by force of will. He read and read. And he began to rage.

“It always irked Paul that he wasn’t more famous,” Nancy Gruchow reflects. It bothered him that the topics that mattered so much to him—the tallgrass prairie, birch-bark canoeing, low-tillage farming—weren’t topics a great many other people cared about. He felt he was leading the battle charge of our times, toward what mattered and was real, but no one was

following. He was envious of outdoors essayists like Dillard and Gretel Ehrlich, writers who were doing similar things more successfully. Over the years he complained to writer friends like Barton Sutter that his work wasn't generating the proper volume of critical essays. He wrote a novel, and when he couldn't sell it, he deleted it from his hard drive and burned the printouts.

Quitting Northfield in 1996, Paul and Nancy bought a house on the North Shore, in Two Harbors, hoping a change of scene would turn things around. It was an old frame house with a pole barn, situated on several hilly acres with three ponds—the perfect sanctuary for an ailing naturalist. But he didn't improve. He and Nancy argued, and Paul began burning bridges. “One day he insisted in therapy that we get separated,” she says. “He said being married was the source of his unhappiness. I agreed to it—I hoped it was something we could do and he would just snap out of it.”

Instead, things went further downhill. In August 2001, Paul made the first of four suicide attempts. Following his hospitalization, he was assigned to Bridge House, a Duluth shelter that provides temporary housing for people with mental health issues. On Christmas day he came home to Nancy, but 60 days later he surprised her by initiating divorce proceedings. He had become impulsive, irrational, and spiteful. He had been led away in handcuffs from his own home. That winter he stunned Nancy by selling the Two Harbors home without her consent.

Amid this turmoil Paul decided that his “beat” was no longer just wilderness, but mental illness, and he even wrote an essay bridging the two topics. He went to work as a staff aide at Harmony Club, a Duluth social center for the mentally ill. The job called for a four-hour day, but Paul was often there from dawn to dusk, greeting new arrivals, having private conversations, cooking meals, leading groups, even taking members for a wilderness outing that included a wonderful evening of him telling stories at the campfire, just as in the old days.

“He enjoyed it immensely,” says Lee Hemming, coordinator of the club. Hemming describes a Paul Gruchow who was willing to go to any length to reach out to people—even willing to go to war with the club's then-programming coordinator Jan Zita Grover about the proper approach to

dealing with the mentally ill. Grover, who was a friend of Paul's and a fellow writer, felt the club needed structure and rules in addition to caring and support; Paul yearned for an ethos of unabashed, unmitigated, unconditional love.

Indeed, after his ex-wife, his two children, and his two sisters, the people most affected by Paul's death were the members of Harmony Club, the people he had lavished his time on. He gave each one attention, encouragement, and hope—and then yanked his own plug. Months later, says Hemming, “Many members are still devastated about Paul.”

He still managed to pull himself together for personal appearances. Arvonne Fraser remembers Paul from his post-collegiate stint in husband Don's Washington office as “intelligent and insightful and sweet-natured.” During the Two Harbors period, Fraser took a writing course from him at the university in Minneapolis. During class, she says, he was his old self, “wonderful, engaging, and instructive. But when he finished his talk, he seemed to slide back into something else.”

After class one night, with a blizzard underway, Paul insisted on driving back to Duluth, though the highways were virtually impassable. “He said he had to work at the club,” Fraser says. “There was no other way. He clearly was not well.”

“I was struck by Paul's porousness,” says Grover, who has also struggled with depression. “It was what made him an exceptional writer. It also contributed to his illness, I believe, because he was willing to empty himself out for other people and keep very little in reserve for himself.” He was empathic and eloquent in relieving other people's aloneness, but unable or perhaps unwilling to relieve his own. It made Grover think of a maxim she'd heard from an old friend: “You have to want to be happy.”

According to Nancy Gruchow, Paul thought he knew as much about mental illness as any psychiatrist. This, she says, “was both good and bad. It made him a very difficult patient.” In Yahoo! chat rooms, he inveighed against wrong-headedness in the treatment of mental illness. “When you become mentally ill, you lose all your rights as a citizen. Indeed, your body is no longer yours. You are more of an animal than a human being.”

“How,” he asked in one post that is still online, “when you are in the midst of an emotional crisis, can the added stress of nicotine withdrawal possibly be helpful?” He devoured psychiatrists with attitudes divergent from his, luring them into dialogue, then rhetorically dicing them into cubes.

As his own advocate, he frequently undid himself. He caused problems by complaining (justly, at times) about mistreatment or misdiagnosis. But then he would ratchet these protests up until he had to be restrained. He presented people with a terrible challenge, because he was blazingly rational in his arguments, but blazingly crazy in his comportment.

Paul was genetically predisposed to depression. Nancy Gruchow counts 13 people in his immediate family, living or dead, who have had it. It was a vein that streaked through a great many of the Gruchows and formed its mother lode in Paul. Drugs like Depakote and Prozac would work for a time, then stop working. Paul would be okay for a while, then begin to slide again.

For a long time Paul denied that he was bipolar, that he had a manic side, but there is ample evidence of wild mood surges, some crazy, some ugly. The crazy included a sweater-buying binge in Grand Forks in 1999. “He filled all our closets with his stuff,” Nancy says. The ugly included volatile scenes with Nancy, whom he came to see as both best friend and worst enemy.

“Paul and I knew for many years he would probably take his life,” Nancy says. “We talked about it. That’s just how it was. It makes me sad, but you know, everybody has something. With some people it’s near-sightedness, with others it’s psychosis. None of us gets off free.”

Toward the end, unable to hike in his beloved woods anymore, his head sloshing with meds, Paul agreed to undergo electroconvulsive therapy (ECT), better known as electroshock: three courses of 12 sessions each, the maximum number he was allowed. ECT, an accepted option in the treatment of severe depression today, succeeds in “resetting” many patients. But Paul, who so valued control over himself, despised its effects

—depleted memory, scrambled rationality. It was the worst nightmare for a memoirist, to be unable to remember.

“I saw him just a few weeks before his death,” says Steve Potts, who once worked in the pressroom at the *Daily Globe* and now teaches writing at Hibbing Community College. “He seemed cheery. I guess he was a good actor. But at one point he turned to me and said, ‘Steve, we should never have left Worthington.’ I know what he meant. We were family there.”

Paul routinely told friends, on parting, that they would not see him again alive. One cold Sunday morning, the day before he was to testify against Nancy in a court case that would shine public light on an especially shameful episode, he took pills and shut his eyes.

## The Monk’s Dilemma

**“I WAS A VERY PIOUS YOUNG KID** in absolutely the worst sense of the word,” Paul once told David Hawley, in the same way he joked about rogue tractors and shattered ankles. He’d considered becoming a Lutheran minister, but changed career plans after contemplating weekly meetings with the Ladies’ Aid Society.

Paul was a lifelong and faithful Christian, who once pointed out to Ray Crippen the stained-glass image of Jesus in Gethsemane, the man of sorrows, in a window at Worthington’s First Lutheran Church. He confessed to Crippen that he drew the line at St. Paul’s post-Calvary theology. For him, Christ’s suffering and death was sufficient for his salvation. Torment was itself redemptive.

In his illuminating essay “Walking in Clouds,” Paul describes an event from early childhood, during a kindergarten game of musical chairs. In the story, he splits into two personalities, a Paul who is in his body, and another, more conscious Paul, who roams and thinks freely, like a ghost:

I heard everything: the needle scratching in its groove, the screams of the children, the teacher saying, “Paul, is something wrong?”... I heard myself answering, “No, I’m fine, really I am.” But I was lying. Because

there were two of us.... I was dizzy with fear that the two boys could never again be connected.... It was as if I had precipitously perished and had been granted one last look at the ghost of my former self before I was swept away into the void.

Paul never underwent psychoanalysis. But he read voluminously, searching for the existential key to this splitting in two. “Paul was intrigued by a notion that his psyche was formed by his mother’s abuse when he was a little kid,” says Nancy. He mentioned to several friends an interest in the theories of Swiss psychoanalyst Alice Miller, author of *The Drama of the Gifted Child: The Search for the True Self*. Miller’s thesis is that some children whose parents have narcissistic disorders are prevented from developing into healthy, self-accepting individuals. Instead of embracing and nurturing their true selves, such children create a safer, separate identity to please others. Miller writes:

[They] enter analysis in the belief, with which they grew up, that their childhood was happy and protected. Quite often we are faced with gifted patients who have been praised and admired for their talents and their achievements.... These people—the pride of their parents—should have had a strong and stable sense of self-assurance. But exactly the opposite is the case.... Behind all this lurks depression, the feeling of emptiness and self-alienation, and a sense that their life has no meaning.... They are plagued by anxiety or deep feelings of guilt and shame.

Paul was ever the good son in print; he wrote glowingly of his parents’ love and caring. But clues scattered throughout his writings indicate that not all was right. The family lived in poverty and isolation. According to Paul, Howard Gruchow was a reverent man who struggled to earn a living from the land and who donated at least half the family’s after-tax income to their church. During Paul’s early years, they lived in a dugout shelter with no electricity or plumbing. Paul’s descriptions of this upbringing were sometimes so sparse that he later, in his joking tone, denied that he “grew up with wolves.”

The father was decent but distant, according to Nancy, too busy with the work of the farm to participate in child-rearing. Paul’s mother, Mary Louise Gruchow, whom he called Mother, was more animated but also

more temperamental. She was depressive and had a rheumatic heart. In one childhood episode, his mother broke every dish in the house in a fit of frustration, causing the family to eat from plastic bowls for the next year. She blamed Paul and his twin sister, Paulette, for the family's economic woes and beat them, using wooden spoons or buckled overshoes. As an adult, Paul still bore the marks of beatings on his back.

One incident, detailed in *Grass Roots*, involved a wail for help that went unheeded. When he was 8, Paul dropped a lit match in the hay barn of the farm his family rented, and watched as the entire farmstead, except the house, burned to the ground. Even the livestock perished in the flames. The local newspaper and fire inspector colluded to declare the fire an accident, to spare the shaken boy.

I didn't know Paul well enough to say what made him the way he was. But this is what I imagine. I imagine a very bright little boy who felt unworthy to be alive and was unable to express his misgivings toward the people he loved most in the world. That was when he split in two—leaving behind the vulnerable little boy and living out life as a hero, an author, practically a saint in the eyes of some of his readers and students. A man of the wilderness, living out beyond people's ability to hurt him.

The problem with this solution is that it catches up with you. A fake saint knows he has clay feet. A worshipper of wilderness knows he is really a chicken. A believer in the highest principles is aghast that he is just another guy who wants affection and recognition—John Berryman titled a book after this quandary: *Love & Fame*. At the end of the rainbow, out across the prairie, is not wisdom and bliss but self-loathing and misery. I went to seminary as a young man, and we spoke there of “the monk's dilemma.” It's a bind you get into when you do all the right things, but pride and desire enter in, which turns doing the right things into sin. Is there a way around it? Not really.

Paul Gruchow loved the rural spaces of Minnesota as perhaps no other writer has, but it was a vision dipped in darkness. He noted that something sick and self-hating happens in the hearts of small-town people, the conviction that nothing fine can come from the countless Nazareths

sprinkled across the map. It's why the best and brightest pack up and leave.

Paul wanted to be the bright one who didn't leave, the one who kept the faith, who held the lantern high. Every cause he chose to defend was in some sense a lost one. The family farm. The prairie. The wetlands and canoe country. Traditional farming methods. The essay. A vision of people as souls, not as consumers. Of politics not steeped in lies and demagoguery. The plight of the marginalized. The hell of the mentally ill. There are no slam-dunks on the list.

Paul's draft of *Letters to a Young Madman*, uncompleted at the time of his death, and now part of a legal dispute over the validity of his will, has been described by those who have read it as Paul's attempt to do for mental illness what his earlier work did for the pathways and portages through nature. As Paul descended into darkness, it appears that he set about creating a guidebook through this wilderness as well.

## In the Humble Places

**I WAS DISTRAUGHT WHEN I HEARD**, at the reception following *Daily Globe* owner Jim Vance's funeral in May 2002, that Paul was ailing in Two Harbors, that he had already made several attempts on his life.

I wrote Paul a series of letters, proposing to interview him for an article. I wanted to write something about him and for him—to round up all the people like me whom he had taught, whose lives he had made a difference in, and present them to him as a garland. I suppose I wanted to save him.

Paul was unpersuaded. "Last year, I earned \$62.85 in royalties and gave one public talk, in Duluth, that drew a dozen listeners," went one of his replies. "Late in the year, I got a flurry of two letters from readers.... I got two Christmas cards, one from an aunt and one from my former landlady. Two or three times a week, the phone rings. Usually I don't answer it. There isn't a story, Mike."

“Well,” I said, “I’ll come visit you, then. I’ll buy you a carrot.” (We were both diabetic.)

“That would be nice,” he said. “I have more use for a friend than for an article.” He asked me to wait until last November, when he would have a place of his own again. But neither of us followed up, and the snow fell, and I never made it up to see him.

So here I am, trying to assemble the pieces that are strewn in his wake. When we think of legacy, we think of stewardship. What was Paul given, and what did he make of it? Paul had two fathers in life, and each entrusted him with a talent to make the most of. In *The Necessity of Empty Places*, Paul compares the styles of these two fathers. His biological father, in one tense scene, is unable to give him a sex talk even with his mother and sisters out of the room.

Finally my father cleared his throat. “Your mother wanted me to talk to you,” he said. He was staring into the darkened bedroom door at the opposite end of the room, beseechingly, as if an angel might appear there at any moment and absolve him of his awful responsibility. “About sex.”

Certainly Howard Gruchow, who wondered what kind of farmer his son could become, would have been impressed at the way Paul wrung a living from the land in ingenious fashion, by talking and writing about it. But compare the inarticulateness and stultifying influence of the biological father with the eloquence and ardor of Berryman, the spiritual father:

He read to us the scene in which Hector and Andromache say farewell to each other. Hector is destined to die and Andromache to be hauled away into slavery, and both knew this by premonition. When he came to the end of the scene, Berryman was weeping, and so, unexpectedly, were we.

Berryman died at 57, Gruchow at 56, both neither young nor old. Both men’s final books were journals of recovery. Berryman helped give Paul the talent of expression, an abstract voice with which to cry out in pain. Berryman was the greater rhetorician, but Paul’s writing splashes into the real world with a rubberized boot. His idea is nothing less than the

transcendence of pain through a spiritual vision of nature. This is not only bigger than Berryman; in its acknowledgement of the dark mystery of being human, it's bigger than Thoreau.

I remember one last conversation with Paul. It happened back in our newsroom days in Worthington, after getting an edition out. We were in his cubicle, talking about where literature went wrong. I said we were wrong to cluster around suicides like Sylvia Plath and Berryman and Anne Sexton, that modern readers have a sick attachment with death and loss.

“Well,” Paul said, exhaling smoke, “it’s probably what I’m going to do one day.”

I looked at him beseechingly. “Why?” I wanted him to take it back.

He smiled his wan smile, as if it was something he couldn’t help. “It’s in the blood,” was all he said. And I remember what Nancy Gruchow told me: “Everybody dies of something.”

But Paul was no Plath or Berryman, because his is not a literature of sickness. He was always about healing; he ventured thousands of miles on his own muscle power to find health, to become whole again. It is fitting that our last glimpse of him, when *Letters to a Young Madman* is finally published, will be of him reaching out to others who are afflicted.

I wish to suggest that Gruchow was the last in a line of Minnesota prophets that includes Thorstein Veblen, Ignatius Donnelly, Ole Rolvaag, Fred Manfred, and Sigurd Olson—classic tellers of truth whose best work arose from Minnesota soil.

The line is ended because they were all gentlemen scholars, and there do not seem to be any more of those. Their kind believed that language and knowledge, set in a boat and pushed from shore, had a chance to live in the next mind it found. They were unafraid of wisdom, and they did not sneer at the idea of faith.

Though Paul despaired of his efforts, we know that his was a pilgrimage to the humble places as well as the exalted, a journey across spirit as much as

across water and sod, and we are blessed to have these field guides in our satchels. Measured by book sales, his impact was slight, but he will have Plathlike legs in death. He is part of the canon now, the sort of thing he always loved.

As for me, I tell people, Yes! I worked alongside the great Gruchow. He was a hero of the prairie, a giant of the earth, a healer of the people. He wasn't perfect by a long shot, and he wasn't "tragic"—God, he hated that notion. But he taught and touched a great many. And though he could not save himself (who can?), he will be remembered after most of us are gone.

What do I believe? That the boy who split in two, who placed his faith in the wilderness, is one again. He is sitting up in an old rowboat beached in waving buffalo grass, golden tips beating against the prow. The boy is smiling radiantly, and the sadness is gone from him forever.

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