



# The Offset Revolution

A Writer's Memoir

by Michael Finley

Thanks for downloading THE OFFSET REVOLUTION, my memoir  
about coming up as a writer.  
Note that this is and will be a work in progress until I am daid.

Thanks!

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## **Empty Places** **Remembering Paul Gruchow**

*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 Luinenburg, 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 Mikkel 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 Erlich, 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.

## The Governor in the Garden: May Sarton, More and More

She has lived a score of lives at least -- as actress, poet, novelist, teacher, writer of journals, scourge of critics, confidant of so many hundreds. At 70, sensing that the final act was being played out, she wrote a journal named just that, *At Seventy*.

Sometimes, with her vast amount of correspondence, the pilgrimages of people from all corners to her cottage in York, Maine, and her passionate mastery of detail, and of the edifices of art she has erected to stave off the chaos of the world, she seems almost like the governor of an invisible state or province -- a principality of flowers, friends and self.

Today, at 75, May Sarton is still a factor. Hampered late last winter by a stroke and "imprisoned" in bed for another nine months with a heart condition, she has been unable, for the first time in forty years, to begin her biennial novel. Fan letters continue to arrive in bales. The ability to answer each and every one is not to be relied upon as it once was. A year without the daily workout in the garden, or the walk down to the water. The wild fur-person (the Sartonian designation for actualized cat) Bramble has died, and been replaced by a woolly Himalayan.

"It's a nuisance, all right," says May Sarton. But she will go on tour in October, reading from her forty books of poetry (including *A Grain of Mustard Seed*, *A Durable Fire*, and *Halfway to Silence*), fiction (*Faithful Are the Wounds*, *Mrs. Stevens Hears the Mermaids Singing*, and *As We Are Now*) and nonfiction (*Plant Dreaming Deep*, *Recovering*, and *Journal of a Solitude*).

She will draw giant (for poetry) audiences, uplifting many and annoying several, for just as she has attracted friends so has she

suffered fools with a minimum of solicitude. And she suffers critics hardly at all, not even at the allegedly serene age of 75.

It was not always thus. Born in Ghent, Belgium, of an artistic British mother and French-Belgian father (George Sarton, author of the massive study *The History of Science*), Sarton hardly figured to spend the bulk of her life in rural New Hampshire and Maine as one of America's premier poets of fixed place.

She never went to college, choosing instead an apprenticeship in the midst of the Depression with Eva Le Gallienne's Civic Repertory Theatre, and tours abroad where she acquainted with the greats of the literary world, including friendship with Virginia Woolf. Her first book of poems, *Encounter in April* (1937), and first novel, *The Single Hound* (1938), were hailed critically as the stirrings of a major new voice in American letters, and Sarton's future as a sleek modernist seemed assured. But something in her swerved away from mere stylishness, and she commenced a more inward journey, far from the fashionable, bestselling path through solitude, personal revelation, and a loyalty to the more enduring spirits -- friendship, nature, and the perfectionist demands of a her art.

Hear what the critics were saying even thirty years ago: "When Miss Sarton talks to us we feel as though we were walking through a cultivated landscape in the early afternoon of a summer's day, with twilight far in the future."

She is: "serene-seeming despite her traumas"; "honest to the point of bluntness"; her work is "transparently about flowers and the seasons -- but these are simply the backdrops for the agony of fading love, sorrow at a friend's death, fatigue from creating and the need to be alone."

Her works are like those of Flemish painters "whose bold brushstrokes make clear the troubled humanity in a face..." Her

tastes and styles: "immaculate and orderly, traditional, austere with overtones of grace and charm."

Not much has changed, and yet everything has. Her style has transmogrified, from the profligate phraseology of youth to the biting clarity of one who knows the price of distraction. The critics, who were with her at the start, long ago gave up on her as unreformable. (They complain that she has been too upfront about her sexuality. That there is not enough sexuality in the books. She is too male. She is too female. She is too traditional. She is too radical. She is too intellectual. She is too emotional. Whatever you do, do not read a book by this vexatious person!)

She is not a girl any more -- she is, as she puts it, old. ("I don't mind that, though," she says.) And always, her writing has been about the driving need to be oneself. The book which has had perhaps the greatest impact, *Mrs. Stevens Hears the Mermaids Singing* (1965) is about a woman poet in her seventies -- an extrapolation of Sarton herself when she was 50. A startlingly fresh work both in language and structure, Mrs. Stevens probes the memories of outrageous novelist Hillary Stevens to learn where the irrefractable choices were made -- and relives the episodes of pain and love which were the seedbed of her witness.

The book was also Sarton's own tacit coming out as a lesbian -- "I was trying to say some radical things about sexuality in a gentle way so that they might penetrate without shock." For Sarton, the Muse is not a disembodied occasional presence -- the Muse is a friend, a lover, a special person who unlocks the cabinetry and lets light in on what has been stored away, unexpressed. There have been several.

She is an astonishing amalgam of contradictions -- an intellectual entranced by nature; a formalist whose object is freedom; a friend to thousands who espouses the virtues of solitude; an exile who has grown her own roots. Not surprisingly, she is also Unitarian.

"My parents were not connected with any church, but when I was about ten I went to the First Unitarian Church in Cambridge, and I absolutely loved Mr. Samuel McCord Carruthers, the minister there, at that time quite a famous man, a writer. A very wonderful preacher, and when I joined the Sunday School, I got a ribbon for perfect attendance! It was all my own idea, of course."

Sarton added that Unitarianism was not that far removed from the beliefs of her parents. "My father and mother believed that, though Jesus was not God, he was a mighty leader and the spirit of Jesus, the logos of him, is the worship of God and the spirit of man. We Unitarians, after all, 'unite' in the spirit of Jesus in the worship of God and the spirit of man.

"I'm awfully proud to be Unitarian. I think the Unitarian Service Committee is marvelous. We're humanists, you see -- the extreme right considers us devils, and that's something else in our favor."

Though there is no Unitarian Universalist church within driving distance of York -- the closest is in Portsmouth, NH twenty miles away, an *hejira* to downeasters -- Sarton worships in her own way, with her own skills, writing letters to the very old and very sick on Sunday mornings.

There are some who say that, despite the lack of tacitly theological matter in her books, Sarton's thrust in fact is a religious one. A group of Methodist pastors asked her recently to be one of three spiritual advisors at a recent retreat.

Last year Sarton delivered the Ware Lecture for Unitarian Universalists. She has taught at Thomas Starr King School of Religious Leadership in Berkeley. And when she travels to Indianapolis these days, she stays at the Carmelite monastery there -- "they are great admirers of *Journal of a Solitude*."

Nevertheless, she says, she is less interested in religion than in something she sees as broader, or at least vaguer. Spirit? "Yes, or perhaps just humanity," she says.

Sometimes surface objects in her journals, such as fritillaria or dragonfly nymphs, are exactly that; other times they are something very different, a key to another level of being, a way of talking about things which otherwise are undiscussable. "For instance, flowers -- I think very few people really look at Nature. I think I do, and I got that from my mother, a most remarkable woman.

"My last book, by the way, is not mine but hers -- letters to me, called Letters to May, published by Puckerbrush Press here in Maine.

It was the Unitarian Universalists who, somehow or other, got Sarton "over the hump" from respectable small poetry audiences to the kinds of mass engagements she holds sway over today.

"The first one I remember was at Roy Phillips' Unity Church in St. Paul -- a huge audience, the poor church was full to bursting. I heard it had never been filled before for any occasion. I really do not know why it happened as it did, when it did. But I have taken note."

Perhaps it is the sense of the individual as shrine that Sarton addresses, especially in her nonfiction, and particularly in her breakthrough book *A Journal of Solitude*. From her earlier sense that an artist's art is the reason for her existing (perhaps even for the rest of us existing, too), Sarton suggests a less exclusive explanation -- that the window to eternity is this moment, lived and felt honestly and with intensity.

"I try to live as if every day might be my last and yet, is eternal. You can only do this well in solitude," she writes. "Solitude is the salt of personality.... I could live alone indefinitely and feel no need for company.... Solitude can be very exciting."

Or perhaps it is the heroic combat she has maintained for so many decades against the chaos around her -- in the turbulence of her own life and the lives of friends, the violence of world wars, the friction of cold wars, the grimace of political and sexual

oppression, the growing sense of a mass culture seeking to obviate the inner quiet in the individual heart.

"My parents were both innocent and so am I, and this has perhaps been my undoing with the critics. I'm not a worldly person. I happen to be making a lot of money, for me, these days. But for years, until I was 65, I never did. That means that nature and animals and deep friendship are all extremely precious to me -- being asked out to cocktail parties is not."

Sarton suspects that this innocence, and her disdain for the desiderata of the marketplace, may have contributed to her inattention at the hands of the front line of critics (read, the New York Times).

"It's true, I cut my own throat," she says. "I haven't been able by nature to use others, I've never asked any of my high-powered friends for help, for blurbs."

The result has been a perceived snubbing from the critics. Not the trade reviews or the secondary outlets, where her reputation has been solid through the years, but at the holy mountaintop -- the New York Times. "After *Faithful Are the Wounds* (1955), I never got another positive review from them," she says. "And lately they've ceased reviewing my poetry altogether. I can't help feeling very bitterly about it."

One wonders about the bitterness of a woman in her seventies as honored as Sarton. Surely the books section of the Times is not one of those windows into eternity?

"No, it's not that," she insists of the war between York and New York. "It's bigger than pride. It's the fact that they have stood between me and the audience I have so wanted for my writing. And not for me, either -- my design has been that each of my books be usable in some way or other, usable truths that readers might apply to their way of seeing the world."

Sarton, while decrying her malfeasance, misfeasance, and nonfeasance at the hands of her critics, is still amazed at the audience she has managed to assemble, seemingly despite the sages of West 43rd Street. In addition to having sold at least a couple million books over the years, many of them read over and over again, she is at the point where today three of her novels are entertaining film options, one of them in Great Britain. She has not been the dominant mailing address in York by hiding her lamp under the bushel basket, or by being ignored by the reading public.

"It's true, I have what many regard as a fairly large audience, gathered over many years and mainly through word of mouth. And they are an enviable lot -- every day I get letters, sometimes from people who say I saved their lives. That I cherish.

"But then I ask myself what might that audience had I gotten the kinds of reviews Anne Tyler (whom I admire) has had? It's a maddening question, and I wish I could spare myself from asking it."

Bitterness may be a luxury that she cannot afford in the months ahead of her. Having suffered through a stroke in February, which she claims was "not so serious," it is a fibrillating heart, and the medicine she takes for that, which have laid her as low as she can remember being in her whole life -- worse than her breast cancer of six years ago, which she described in her journal *Recovering*.

"Eight days after the mastectomy I was driving again," she says. "This time I was unable to do anything for nine months. It was prison for me, and even though I'm 'better' now, the medicine still makes me ill. It's a difficult life, with no notion of making 'progress.' Still, I'm determined to make it like my real life."

This current recovery has been so slow that she has been unable to begin a longer work, content to write entries to a new journal

called *After the Stroke*. "People say I sound marvelous but they don't know how my poor head feels."

And of course, there are the poems. Sarton has never been one to play poetry against fiction against nonfiction. One is clearly superior in her mind, and that is the art of the poet.

"To me, if you're a poet you're a poet first. I've been writing poetry since I was twelve and getting published since seventeen. If you're a poet, it's a gift. Whereas you can start a novel on will alone, and intelligence and sensitivity -- you can't do a poem with just that equipment."

The other side is that the novel is so limited by its length, she said. "How can anything so long be perfect? When I knew Virginia Woolf, before I had published anything but poems, she used to tease me, saying, 'It's so much harder to write a novel, too many ways it can fail.' She was right of course, and I know that now, but on the other hand the poem has possibilities a novel can never have."

Which helps explain why, following the success of her first, lushly written books, she worked so hard to separate her poetic and fictional writing styles. "My first novels were poetic and got wonderful reviews, but I didn't want that. I don't want people to say, 'Oh, you've got such a wonderful style.' I want them to say, 'I can't forget that character.' Or, 'Your book changed my life.'"

In *As We are Now*, she pared her style down to the point where an especially obtuse critic claimed the writing was at the 9th grade level. The novel, a heartbreaking love story taking place in a nursing home, was made deliberately spare. "The book is a descent into hell, and the last rung on the ladder was when true love was made dirty, when Carol's feelings for Anna, which were not homosexual, but simply love, were made dirty by the awful women there." The story was strong enough to do the telling for her, Sarton said -- writing it "up" would have only muddled the issue.

"I also like that there's a minister in the book who is not a caricature or hypocritical or cardboard. Ministers are seldom given much respect in fiction, you know."

Some have suggested that, just as Sarton prefers formal poetry to free verse (though she claims to have enjoyed writing without form in *Gestalt at Sixty*), that explains her defense of the art in her fiction above the less formal craft required of her journal writing.

"I do enjoy free verse, but how do I know when I am done with it? There are no brakes, and the process of revision looms eternally.

"I love the freedom that comes from form, not just in art but in life as well. I know that, as an artist, the form my day takes, which is my routine, is terribly important -- you write for a certain number of hours every morning, not just when you feel like it. If you waited free-form for inspiration, you'd wait a long time."

A routine which looks confining is what actually refines one, she said. Sarton's view of writing is of an intellectual (novelist?) grappling with feeling (poet?) -- and in her mature works the two forces have come into balance.

"What is good about the journal, I think, is that it is so much more spontaneous -- it has no particular structure, but it requires an intensity of being. Therefore it is a very spiritual form of writing. People don't read journals for wise sayings but for the intensity of being that is approached, the life that is lived in them. When it is authentic it is very comforting, and very powerful, too."

In an address to students at Scripps College in 1957, Sarton laid down the rule she lived by, and expected other poets to live by as well. "Writing poetry is a life discipline maintained in order to perfect the instrument of experiencing -- the poet himself."

Thirty years later, one wants to ask how that process of perfectability, so innocent and impossible (so Unitarian?) has proceeded. Is the instrument, today, perfect?

May Sarton smiles. "I don't feel it is," she says, "but the process has remained remarkably intact and alive. And I truly do believe that a point can be reached, as in a poem, where nothing more can be changed, no paraphrase is possible. And that is a beautiful thing."

Looking back, would she wish to be a young writer just starting out, with the same brash head full of ideas, the same record (as at Sunday School) of perfect attendance, the same heart shining with passion?

"It's always hard, I think. There might be a few more grants and sponsors today, but I don't think I would make that switch. The truth is, I love being older, and I always knew I would. I dislike being sick -- that's the nuisance, right there -- but I would never want to go back. You pay a high price for emotional involvement, the love affairs and so on. I'm rather glad to be out of that.

"I know so much more, I'm more balanced. Things are less intense, but deeper."

## **A Farewell**

by May Sarton

*For a while I shall still be leaving,  
Looking back at you as you slip away  
Into the magic islands of the mind.  
But for a while now all alive, believing*

*That in a single poignant hour  
We did say all that we could ever say  
In a great flowing out of radiant power.  
It was like seeing and then going blind.  
After a while we shall be cut in two  
Between real islands where you live  
And a far shore where I'll no longer keep  
The haunting image of your eyes, and you,  
As pupils widen, widen to deep black  
And I able neither to love or grieve  
Between fulfillment and heartbreak.  
The time will come when I can go to sleep.  
But for a while still, centered at last,  
Contemplate a brief amazing union,  
Then watch you leave and then let you go.  
I must not go back to the murderous past  
Nor force a passage through to some safe landing,  
But float upon this moment of communion  
Entranced, astonished by pure understanding --  
Passionate love dissolved like summer snow.*

## **Dog Down the Well**

One of my deep dark conflicts is the fact that besides writing about technology and the future, I'm a poet.

I have been writing poems pretty seriously since I was about 15, when I had lots of spare time in Mr. Lyle's detention room after school, and began writing poems -- about Mr. Lyle, mainly.

Poemwriting was a very low-tech process involving pencil and unlined paper. I'd write down a few phrases, try to figure out where I wanted to go, and write a lot more, scratching out, drawing arrows showing what connected to what. Then I would go home - my debt to high school society paid in full, at least for that day - and type up a first draft.

Which would still be awful. But around the fifth or sixth typing, it would start to be something. Sometimes a poem would take five years before it began to take shape.

My heyday came in the 1970s. An offset revolution made publication on paper printing plates (Insty Prints) cheap and easy. Like a million other writers I started my own press, The Kraken, and put out several titles and magazines. I was crummy at distribution and promotion, and never sold anything, but I had wonderful fun.

Since acquiring my first computer, in 1983, however, I have written less and less poetry. I maybe write six a year now, in a good year. The technology's been great for every other kind of writing. But the poem still seems to cry out for something simple, portable, and transparent -- pencil and unlined paper.

I still write, and I use the computer to show people the work. But I cannot start a poem on a blank buzzing screen. Go figure.

Not everyone is so constrained. Few days pass that I don't get a poetry submission in e-mail. This troubles me because it's been twenty years since I published anyone else's poems on my Kraken imprint. What troubles me even more is that the people who send me their poems also send them, simultaneously, to many other "presses" whose e-mail addresses they stumbled onto.

Securing the right publisher is like finding the right marriage partner. You don't use spam to start an important relationship. Multiple simultaneous submission is closer to sex than marriage. And most of these poems are so bad, you wouldn't want to even have sex with them.

There are too many poets to reply individually. So I created the following "signature" file, which I append to a personal one-line note of regret/encouragement:

*Dear poet,*

*Thanks for writing. I'm sorry I can't critique your work. But I'm grateful to you for looking at my site. If it got you thinking about writing yourself, that's great. Writing poems is a wonderful way to learn to think and feel on paper.*

*But I don't know what to do with the work people send me. It is an easy thing to send a letter to 50 'zines in hopes some publisher out there is experiencing a verse shortage.*

*There is never a verse shortage. There are 20 writers of poetry for every reader of it. The reason is that there are quality standards for readers, and none for writers. May this not mean you.*

*Poets ask me, "How can I get published?" If I knew that, I wouldn't be self-publishing on my website. But here are some ideas.*

*Swap poems with other poets. Show them to thoughtful friends. Make your own e-mail 'zine and send new work to people who'll put up with you. Put up a web site and stop passing traffic. Or send poems to Usenet and WWW sites, like rec.arts.poetry and <http://www.pclink.com/naniset/poetry/index.htm>*

*Do these things and you'll enjoy 49% of the joy poetry can provide. Another 49% is in the writing. The remaining 2% is ineffable mystery.*

*A poetry press can give you nothing you can't give yourself. During a different, more economical era, I published in hundreds of places, and let me tell you, it's like throwing the family dog down a well. A yowl and a splash and it's over. The thing you loved is gone and you hardly ever hear about it again."*

*My best advice, my friend, is to attend to the inner voice, and treat people willing to listen to you really, really well. The rest is mostly crap.*

*Best wishes, Mike Finley*

## "The skin over a young girl's wrist ..."

I will be 50 in July, and my boyhood poet days are flown. But there was a time when it was my desire to crush the world in my poetic embrace. And I was so fortunate to have the American poet James Wright, if not as an outright mentor, then as an abiding example of what words could do, and as a personal friend.

You see, he was my uncle, sort of.

When my mother remarried in 1965 I acquired a stepfamily. Within that stepfamily my stepfather Richard had a stepmother, Elsie. Elsie had a sister named Elizabeth. And Elizabeth was James Wright's English teacher in high school, and for a brief period, his legal guardian.

Wright, of course, lived in southern Ohio, in Martin's Ferry. I lived in the north, 30 miles outside Cleveland. But when I visited my step-grandmother Elsie's house in the 60s, so full of weird bricabrac -- I especially remember a shelf of Herb Alpert records -- I was very taken by two of Wright's Wesleyan University Press titles, *Saint Judas* and *The Branch Will Not Break*. I was 15.

Elsie loaned me the books, and they proved to be a portal for me to a world that was both as real as the Hazel-Atlas Glass plant where Wright's father worked and as imaginative as the ghostly jungle shore along the Ohio River at midnight.

If you know this work, you know how intensely emotional Wright was. He was our Vallejo, a giant in the heart who could wring tears from grass. He was phenomenally gifted -- and vulnerable.

These early books of his, along with *Shall We Gather at the River*, my favorite, reveal him as a poet of heartbreak. His work was naturalistic and everyday. Yet certain moments had the power to suck you into a vortex of feelings, generally elegiac.

The poems had a profound impact on me. I was a teenager, which automatically made me susceptible, but I was also struggling with the death of my older sister Kathleen, who died of heart complications at age 15. Her passing devastated my family, me as much as anyone.

Wright's poems put me in touch with my own pain. There was so much sorrow in them, and so much hunger for love and reconnection. It was a good transition from the weepy mystical adolescent fiction I was reading at the time, like Herman Hesse's *Demian*.

But see for yourself. Listen to the gentleness of Wright's voice in a 1963 poem, "A Blessing," about two Indian ponies he stopped to touch, "just off the highway to Rochester, Minnesota." This is one of his best-known poems. If it does not send a sharp shaft of feeling through you, I wonder what is wrong with you.

I would like to hold the slenderer one in my arms,  
For she has walked over to me  
And nuzzled my left hand.  
She is black and white,  
Her mane falls wild on her forehead,  
And the light breeze moves me to caress her long ear  
That is delicate as the skin over a girl's wrist.  
Suddenly I realize  
That if I stepped out of my body I would break  
Into blossom.

This is poetry that makes one want to weep and pray. It soothed the wound that was still in me from my sister's death. I began to see the calamity that befell my family as itself a kind of blessing.

In my reading, the line about "the skin over a young girl's wrist" was always Kathy's wrist.

It surfaced a sense of the preciousness of the things we love, especially the fragile things that don't last long in the world. And it fired me to want to put my own stories, my own poems, down.

I showed some of my writing to Elsie, who picked up on the resemblance to Wright's work. So she arranged a car trip to New Concord, where Wright's parents lived. James and his wife Annie would be there, and I would have a chance to meet them. Elsie was doing in a small way for me what her sister Elizabeth had done for Wright.

Wright was there with his wife Annie. She was tall and strong and sympathetic. He was soft and sweet and genial, full of gentle quips and funny stories. He didn't put on a show for me. But he communicated to me in a respectful way that words could be part of a life.

What struck me immediately was his voice. It was incredibly soft and un-mean. And there was no fussing or high-faluting or show-offy about him. He knew I was a young dabbler, but he neither patronized me by offering to read my work, nor dissed me in any way. He treated me like a young colleague, a student perhaps. He respected me, and it rocked me.

After lunch we walked in his mother's vegetable garden, and he showed me the cabbages and zucchinis he helped put in. And he talked about the German poems he was translating, by Theodor Storm -- and surprisingly, by Herman Hesse -- that were knife-deep with the pangs of young wanting.

I bristled with pride that I already knew the name Theodor Storm. He was the heartsick poet Thomas Mann quoted in his novela *Tonio Kroger*, about the hapless lot of sensitive young poets. All I knew about him was the Mann connection, but I pressed it to Wright. Who was either impressed, or forgave me -- both great.

And he asked if I had seen the new movie 2001: A Space Odyssey. He and Annie had seen it the night before, on the big screen in Columbus.

"You really should see it," he said. "And listen to the voice of Hal, the computer on the Jupiter spacecraft. In all the loneliness of space, his is the only human voice. I don't know -- I found it very touching."

And he told me that the secret of cantaloupe is the sweet smell at the stem. "With watermelons, you go by sound. With muskmelon," he said, "it's all smell."

And that was my day with James Wright. I rode back to Cleveland with Elsie feeling I had had an important meeting in my life. I fantasized about hitchhiking to New York City and offering my meager skills as handyman to Annie, whose Montessori school in Morningside Heights needed painting. Anything to keep the fresh bond alive.

I didn't, praise god. Even I was catching on that my surprise visits were more of a burden than a gift. But I did go to see 2001, and I too was moved by the character of the computer. The voice, by the way, was identical to the soft tones of Wright's own voice, reaching out to the emotionally detached astronauts:

"Your drawing is definitely improving, Dave."

I don't think that was what Wright wanted me to notice. But there it was, unmistakably, the most human thing in the empty reaches of space -- an encouraging voice.

Truth is, I think I wrote him once, to tell him how much my afternoon with him, and his work generally, meant to me. But I did not want to be a pest. Or I did, but -- well, you know.

So it was with such regret, in 1980, that I snatched an AP report from the teletype machine at the newspaper I worked for, and read that James Wright had succumbed to cancer of the tongue in New York. God, what an ironic affliction for a poet as sweet-spirited as him.

I hoped -- and I think I was right -- that his life with Annie was a near-reversal of the difficult years he had spent before her, years of drunkenness, depression, and getting fired from the English faculty at the University I would eventually attend -- another minor coincidence -- in Minnesota. Healing came big time, and I understand he let it happen to him.

It may be what I liked best about him, that he could know the full meaning of sadness and still be on the lookout for joy.

Wright at his best legitimized something I hear many poet peers railing against -- self-pity. I often hear writers condemn another writer for obsessing about personal suffering. Writing about one's own hurting is suspect -- unmanly, and "stuck" in its own sorrow, not providing movement away from grief.

When I say he legitimized self-pity, I mean he found a way to love oneself in writing, to feel genuine sorrow for one's situation, not out of selfishness or self-absorption, but out of forgiveness. How can we have compassion for what is outside us if we can't have compassion for what we know best? Not that we wallow in this feeling, either -- this sorrow is a necessary interim stage, like "hitting bottom," to a return to living. Angry, but not bitter; sorrow, but not despair.

Wright was the sort of poet who could, with a false turn here or there, have wound up as one of our poet suicides. What an execrable fate (and awful example) that would have been. And how grateful I am that he did not.

Wright was part of the confessional school, but he was bigger than it. Though his estimate of himself was humble, he wound up being

important. He helped introduce us to great Latin and European writers. And he altered the poetic landscape, away from the owlish academicism of the 1950s and toward something much more personal and passionate and alive. And his books live on as testament to a life felt fully and appreciated.

But I will remember him as a man who looked on a confused up-and-comer as someone worth a kind word or two. Thank you, Uncle James ... or whatever.

## Years of Nerve

I had a literary career in the 70s that anyone in their twenties would have envied. I published five little books of poems in the space of three years. I met and hobnobbed with famous poets, and became a publisher and translator. I felt I attained a sort of short-list status, whereby if I sent poems to a magazine, and the magazine fell into the realm in which I was well regarded -- basically, a swath from beat to surrealist work -- the editor would have to stop and say, hey, he's someone I have to pay attention to. Which was pretty good for a young writer without a whole lot to say.

Let me round up the seminal events for you. Begin at college in 1968. William Stafford, the wonderful Oregon poet, was paying the College of Wooster a visit. I knew nothing about his work -- I was 17 and knew nothing, period. But because I styled myself as a poet, I was invited to meet Stafford, along with a handful of other campus bohemians, in a closed circuit TV interview. I went in without any questions, but determined to spot an opportunity. The other students asked academic questions about the meanings of this image and that, and about the use of form in his work.

When it was my time, I asked a question that made the other students cringe: "Do you have fun when you write?"

But Stafford -- I came to love him very quickly -- brightened at the question, smiled broadly and said, "Yes. Yes. Yes!" And went on lovingly about the joy writing gave him, how it was the best part of every day, how it lifted him up from the barely breathing to the noticing, and wondering, and self-amusing tasks of poetry.

That tore it for me. I wanted to be just like that, writing from passion and enjoyment, not "to be a poet" or some musty purpose described in T. S. Eliot's late letters.

I dropped out of Wooster, traveled to L.A., ran a storefront church commune, met Charles Manson, toured Alaska, got drafted, got undrafted, and did a lot of other crazy stuff before settling down in Minnesota, and editing the University of Minnesota's literary mag. The magazine was a dreary thing when I took it over, called Academy. Like Caesar crossing the Rubicon, I took this tired student rag and reshaped it into a 70s lit mag, renaming it Kedemi (the first e is actually a schwah, an upside-down a), an idea I got from Marcel Duchamps. First rule -- student work was strongly discouraged!

I was an editor so writers kowtowed to me. And I got invited to things. When Yevgeny Yevtushenko read at Macalaster Fieldhouse, I was in the front row. Beforehand a group of Ukrainian dissidents leafleted the audience, blasting the poet for the frustrations of a people. Yevtushenko was splendid in his Wranglers, drank occasionally from a crystal pitcher of milk. Suddenly a band of bearded Ukrainians stormed the stage, knocking the poet down and upsetting the dais. I and a few others instinctively rose to block the protesters' escape, and did manage to slow them down enough to let security people take them into custody, and prevent an international incident. Yevtushenko stood on the platform and blinked away milk, and the audience rose to applaud the shaken Russian poet.

A bigger event was the arrival by night of Russian dissident poet Andrej Voznesenski's. Well, dissident may not be right word -- he was a surrealist, so it was unclear whether he was really dissident. But he sure sounded dissident. The Soviet Union refused him a visa until 24 hours before his scheduled visa, so he arrived nervous and tired from his trip. But the energy returned when he took the huge stage. Northrop Auditorium was cordoned off so that 50 people dotted the 5,000 seats while Vosnesenki groaned like a swinging pendulum through readings of "Goya" and other poems in the only language he knew.

Afterward we poets got together at English professor Chester Anderson's to boast and jostle and drink, Voznesenski sitting alone on the couch, a slight frown on his face. Several beers later, I took to the bathroom, where Chester's collie lay, and stepped over him to pee. As soon as I started, Voznesenski entered, smiled politely at me, knelt by the dog and scratched his ears, not more than a foot from my pee stream. Confused, I turned to see the poet kneeling, eyes closed, his hands stroking the golden dog, his face held out to me, the dew like manna on his face, and a smile as if finally, finally free. When I left the party, Voznesenski stood by the door and pointed to me. "Yes, you," he said, and smiled coolly.

Then I met Robert Bly. I sent copies of *Kedemi* to all the good poets in the region, to attract contributions. He sent me a nice handwritten note -- hand-drawn would be a better description, as he wrote in those days in a kind of pictographic swirl, using butterflies and birds as punctuation. But what he said he liked wasn't the poetry, but the design! He liked a photo of a pretty girl standing under a bare tree. I thought it was kind of hackneyed, but I sent him the original print with my compliments.

The next few years saw a minor flourish of correspondence between us. Bly was fairly flattering, and I was very flattered. Remember that I was 20 when I met him, barely more than a boy, and one whose own father had abandoned him. The idea of being taken in by a major figure like Bly seemed a very acceptable trade-up. When he came to Minneapolis to read I would make sure and meet him and pledge my allegiance.

But Bly in person, wrapped in his Peruvian poncho and sweeping into a room to the sound of beads knocking together like a nun's rosary, was not as gracious as Bly on paper. Perhaps when he met me face to face he read the hurry and ambition that was written there. Or perhaps he saw I was younger than he supposed. In any event, he quickly took to teasing me with little jabs, calling me

"Irish" instead of Mike. I sensed the pullback -- he wasn't teasing me out of affection, but because something about me bugged him.

I went outstate with the poet Franklin Brainerd, who was dying of leukemia, for a poetry reading at a rural university. Franklin, a very kind, down-to-earth man, suggested I bring some poems of my own, in case the opportunity to read arose. So I did. Robert Bly and Thomas McGrath were also on hand for the poetry event. The three headliners took turns reading, and they were well received. Afterward, Tom and Franklin waved me upon stage for a kind of poetry improv -- audience members would shout out an image, and poets would scramble to produce and read a poem featuring that image or idea. It was just nutty and open-ended enough, that I shone. I remember very vividly that McGrath and Brainerd were very pleasant and hospitable to me -- and that Robert scowled when I beat him to the punch by quickly locating a poem about hibernation.

Afterward we all caroused in his motel room, drinking red wine from a varietal jug, and I noticed that besides me there were a half dozen other young men poets in attendance, mainly from Duluth. They all loved Robert, and waited on every word. It dawned on me, through the haze of red wine, that our role was that of acolytes.

At one point Bly wrote me a letter, asking me to do him a favor. There was a young poet he favored named Gregory Orr. He had the great fortune to be the protégés of two great men, Minnesota's Bly and New Hampshire's Donald Hall. Bly told me that he had some friendly disagreement with Hall about what to do with young Orr. They were playing some kind of game with one another, and Orr was a queen in the game, and I was to be a knight. Bly asked me if I would write a review of Orr's book *Gathering the Bones Together* for a local magazine. The fix was in -- I didn't need to contact the editor about this.

Now, Orr wrote very somber, dreamy, melancholy poems much like my own, so in my vanity, I imagined that Bly wanted me to

learn something from Orr for my own growth as an artist. I wrote a friendly review that nevertheless coaxed Orr to move beyond dreaminess to something more substantive. At the end, I quoted an image of James Wright to sell the idea to Orr: "What are you afraid of? Go out on the limb of your life. The branch won't break."

The review came out and I was very pleased with it. Until I got a cautiously worded letter from Bly. "Michael," he said, " a misunderstanding has occurred between Donald and myself. He thinks I coached your review, and you know I didn't. Further, he thinks your last paragraph suggests that Gregory take his life, and he is very upset about that." Bly asked me to take a moment and write a note to Hall assuring him that I was a free agent and that Robert had nothing to do with it, and that I in no way intended to suggest Gregory hang himself.

Which I did. But I made a serious mistake. Thinking it would simplify matters, I photocopied Robert's letter to me and forwarded that to Hall. A week passed, and I got a furious letter from Robert again, telling me I had violated his trust and that we were no longer friends. Aghast at what I had done -- I remain very bad at keeping other people's secrets, 30 years later -- I wrote letters to Bly and Hall, apologizing up and down.

Only afterward did I realize I had been played like a cheap violin. My job all along was to deliver Bly's message about Orr to Hall. I botched the assignment, and Bly blamed me.

I have two other stories about Bly. The first happens four years later, when I am a newspaper editor in a small town not far from that prairie university. Robert again came around to read his work, and I covered his visit as a journalist. Afterward he agreed to meet with several of us at a tavern. He was in good form, enjoying the attention, and playing the role of Sufi mystic, a person apart from the cares of the world, to the hilt.

To his dismay, however, his teenaged daughter sidled up to him and began begging him for money. "Come on, daddy, there are some cords for sale at The Gap, and they're only \$14.99." She forced him to open his wallet for us to see. None of us took this as unusual. Teenage girls need jeans. But I could tell from the look on his face that he felt she had blown his cover. He was just a man. Credit card, driver's license, a couple of twenties -- terrible.

Another two years pass. I've moved away from the prairie city, gone to live in New Haven while my girlfriend (now wife) Rachel went to nursing school. I'm still writing, but I'm much more beat up by literature. No editors want to see my work. But I attend a special Kalachakra installation rite of the Dalai Lama in Madison, Wisconsin, with my pal Barry Casselman. It's a very solemn event, with plenty of pomp and saffron robes. Suddenly, I look up, and who should be passing through the crowd but -- no, not the Dalai Lama -- Robert Bly.

I went up to him, delighted to see someone from my past, assuming he would at the least call me "Irish." Instead he stopped, looked coldly in my direction, took a sharp left and veered away from me.

Other stupid things happened. I submitted a book of poems to a local press called Vanilla Press. The name should have served as a warning, but I was ambitious, and wanted everyone to publish me. The publisher was a Finnish woman named Jean-Marie Fischer. She had taken her mother's property in Michigan and invested it in publishing bad poetry. Her problem was that the reading committee she named liked my work, but she didn't. Specifically, this being 1977, she wanted to never publish another book by another male poet, but she had not made that decision until my book was accepted.

"I'm sorry, Michael, but we're changing as an organization. I truly think we can best meet our mission by focusing on the work of

emerging women writers. There are so many books out by so many male poets."

I tried to make it into a joke. "Oh come one, what harm will one more do?" I pleaded. To no avail. Here in Minnesota we have an ethnic joke: Have you heard about the Finn who loved his wife so much he almost told her? Jean-Marie was that sort of Finn.

"I'll tell you what," she finally said to me. "I want you to prove yourself worthy of publication."

"But the committee voted to publish it."

"I'm overruling the committee," she said. "It's my money."

"OK, what do I have to do?"

"I want you to go to Meridel LeSueur, and get her permission."

Now, Meridel LeSueur is an icon of Minnesota letters. Vanilla Press had just published a selected poems edition of her work. She was about 85 at this point, and had a remarkable career as a Hollywood actress, labor organizer, blacklist fighter, women's rights advocate, and every other politically correct thing. She was smart, frisky, radical, and a little scary. She did not suffer fools gladly, and she was so revered throughout our region that she wielded considerable political power. There were no circumstances I could imagine in which she would want to even acknowledge the existence of a zany surrealist like myself.

"Well," I said, "what exactly do you want me to do with Meridel?"

"I want you to woo her," Jean-Marie said. "If she decides you're OK, then we'll take it from there."

I cannot tell you how awful I felt as I dialed Meridel LeSueur that night.

"Hello?" a froggy voice asked.

"Uh, hi, Meridel. This is Mike Finley. You may remember me, I'm the guy who edits Academy magazine? We met at the small press fair last spring? I was the one who --"

"I know who you are, Mike."

"Yes. Well. Jean-Marie Fischer and I were talking today, and she thought it might be a nice idea if the two of us, you and me., were to get together a little bit and maybe get to know one another. You know?"

"Why?"

I swallowed hard. "Well, there was a sense that if you and I didn't get along, that she would cancel publication of a book of mine."

Meridel started cackling on the other end. "Honest to God? She said that?"

"Uh huh. She wants to move the press in a more exclusively feminist direction. Which I understand, but I also want to see my own work, you know, get out there."

"Listen, Mike, I'm taking a nap. You go to Jean-Marie, and tell her if she ever wakes me up from another nap, I'll put a flaming curse on her."

"I will do that, Meridel."

"And the same goes for you." Click.

Jean-Marie got word that I passed muster with Meridel, and she went forward with the book, called *The Movie under the Blindfold*. Of all the things I wrote in the 70s, I like that book best. It's mysterious, but you can tell it's about relationships, and identity, and coming to terms with the particulars of one's life. It

combined two strengths -- the vividness of surrealism, with a down-to-earth quality my future work would go in.

Unfortunately, the book sold horribly. Maybe 30 copies of 2000 were sold. Another hundred or so were remaindered. The bulk of the books sat in boxes in Jean-Marie Fischer's garage. When heavy rains hit Minneapolis later the next year, every nonremaindered copy of my book was destroyed.

But years later, I did locate three of the remaindered copies, at a St. Paul bookstore, marked down from \$19.70 to \$.99 and snapped them all up. And I wrote perhaps my favorite poem, "Remainders," about the opportunity represented. The last few lines tell you just how intensely I saw the role of poet, and how intensely I felt the failure to find an audience:

Let us go now, you and I, to Odegards.  
For life has many sales but few true bargains.  
Let us take the silver coins and hand them to the person  
And remember to ask for the receipt, if you're a poet  
Your whole life is deductible.  
Oh daughters of Homer gather round his feet  
And hear him sing his saltstrong songs.  
There are myriad of you there,  
A speckled galaxy of brave little lights,  
Fresh washed garments tucked under your knees,  
Eager for instruction and keen for meaning,  
He cannot see you but he hears you breathing.

I took on the mantle of translator. I could speak no language, but I had studied Latin, French, Italian and Spanish in high school and college. I felt I had a good reading vocabulary. And anyway, translation in the 70s took a very strange turn. Suddenly there translators like A.J. Poulin and Bly himself, working not from the original texts but from previous English translations.

So I undertook to translate, for Red Hill Press in California, a book of sonnets by the mercurial shepherd poet of the Spanish Civil

War, Miguel Hernandez. Hernandez, like Lorca, was nabbed by the fascists in the war and died in captivity. He had not arrived at the lofty status of Lorca, but he was clearly cut from the same bolt -- fiery, imaginative, and free. Keats on acid would place him pretty accurately.

So I ploughed into his best-known book, *El Rayo Que No Cesa* -- Lightning that Never Ceases. At least that's how I translated it. In truth, the book posed many thorny problems for me. There were many times when he would revert to what I call Castilian kenning -- repeating a reference image like "heart of nacre," which does not easily yield to English. But I did my best, focusing on making good, readable poems.

But when I submitted the book for publication, Red Hill hired a local Chicano poet to go over my work. I never knew what the complaints were, but the poet nixed the entire effort, and I was out about four months of work.

But I had numerous other irons in the fire. My small press, The Kraken, had begun to put together a philosophy. I decided I would never go after grants or foundation gifts. Instead I would fund the entire enterprise out of my pocket, as an act of love. Furthermore, I would only publish strange projects by other writers who had run into problems such as I had run into with Vanilla Press and Red Hill Press -- like St. Jude, we would be the patron press of lost causes.

Thus, in the 1970s, we published five books. One was a book of very strange, elliptical anthemic poems by my buddy Barry Casselman, called *Equilibrium Fingers*. Barry was very gifted, but very proud and also very obscure. Since I was a fair publisher but a lousy promoter, his book went nowhere. Another title was a suspense novel by Helgi Michelson, an Estonian poet who relocated to Minneapolis after World War II. The story takes place in Hungary, about a fascist torturer who goes on to become a kind

of mystical saint. Honest to God, you feel you are reading Dostoyevsky when you read it -- it has that luminous, yet drab skin that some great works have.

But the big thing about Helgi was that she gave up on the book after her son died in a bicycle accident. I took her book, shepherded it through to distribution, and managed to get a few reviews of it. And I took the story of her son, and made it into a poem, which won the highest honor any poem of mine ever won, a Pushcart Prize in 1984. Best of all, you can see that I have figured out something very special -- how a poem can be about something:

"No, you've got this part all wrong,"  
Says Gise, swatting a poem about birds  
With the back of one hand.

"You have whippoorwills sobbing in the limbs  
Of poplars, but whippoorwills don't perch  
In poplars, whippoorwills don't perch anywhere,

Because their legs are just tiny twigs,  
They are gone into atrophy, no muscle left,  
So all they can do is plop themselves

Flat on the ground and make the best of it  
There on their haunches. And furthermore,  
What is this sobbing business? It's poetic

But hardly accurate. Their cry is more  
Like a cheer, it is a call my son Peter,  
Before he died, liked to imitate

On his walks home from school.  
Many times, late summer nights in our cabin,  
Hendrik and I would be feeling morose,

Only to hear out there in the darkness  
The cry of a creature pressed close  
And shouting from the cold of this earth

To all who might hear him:  
VIP-poor-VEE!"

And in the end, everything comes around. A year after Vanilla Press published and then lost my book, I was in her house for some party. I was headed upstairs, and who do I bump into on the landing but William Stafford, the guy who got all this started in the first place. I was a little drunk, and I had to laugh to see him so unexpectedly. He didn't know what I was laughing about, but he started laughing, too, and we decided to leave it at that, and he clapped me on the back. I never saw him again. He died in 1993.

Then, just a few months ago in April 2000, I was visiting San Francisco with my son and wife, and driving a rental car to the John Muir Woods north of the city, to see the giant redwood trees. En route we came upon the town of Fairfax, and San Rafael, and even, off by the roadside, Red Hill itself, the promontory named for the press that scorned my Spanish.

## My Literary Feud

By the time I was in my twenties it was important to me to be writing, and poetry, particularly surrealistic poetry, was the most natural path for me. It required no outside knowledge, and the rules within the form were certainly elastic. I reckon that during the years between 1969 and 1977, I wrote an average of five poems a day.

This was not unusual. There was an offset revolution going on in America at that time. Insty Prints and other paper-plate printing companies made printing something everyone could afford. It was nothing to type up a 24-page booklet, run it down to the shop, and run off 100 copies overnight. You collate and staple them yourself, and you were a published author for about \$50. Or you could put out a magazine. I did both. It was great. Every day was like a day of creation, and at the end, if you wanted to, you could ball up that day's creation and throw it away. You could do anything.

I was like most young writers, full of fire but without anything special or coherent to say. But I did not know that at the time. I loved the fact that I was able to create certain effects with language. That was my talent, in fact -- atmospherics. I knew how to end a poem so that you heard crickets afterward, or you felt like you, too, could weep for some unnamed loss. At least, I thought I could.

One day I noticed something odd about my writing -- I felt compelled to break rules. One rule of poetry in the 60s and 70s, at least in the prairie school of poetry I was tutored in, was that you had to stay very concrete and imagistic. You weren't allowed to get into generalities or name feelings -- you could only portray things. But I liked breaking that rule. In particular, I liked using the word love in poems. Love was a kind of harlequin character, you could meet it on the street, or pass it by, and never know what you'd missed. It was never far from the concept of sorrow.

I thought I was very close to becoming a major figure. I cut a flashy figure at readings and such, and my work was appearing in hundreds of magazines, including a big spread in John Gills's *New Poets of Canada and America*. My confidence grew. And I started picking fights with people I knew I could easily dispatch. I would tease a very dolorous confessional poet about cheering up.

The worst was a fellow named James Naiden. He was a big, boorish man who edited a local magazine, held readings, and wrote poetry reviews for the Sunday book section. He was really sort of the poetry czar of the Twin Cities for a few years -- no one saw print or found an audience except through him. He was exceptionally easy to dislike, and I quickly made him the villain in my life. He had a reputation for being a violent drunk, mean to women, and dismissive of women poets. So I rose intuitively to their defense -- though I didn't like many women poets' poems, either.

I signaled to Naiden that I was his archnemesis in a cheap shot essay in the *Minnesota Daily*. I wrote a "review" of the local poetry scene in which I characterized him as having "the personality of an axe murderer." It delighted me to think of him being galled by something I said in print. In my mind, he was so transparent -- so mean-spirited, so full of himself, and so unlikable -- that people reading the article would be helpless except to come over to my side, overthrow the czar, and who knows, install me as his benevolent replacement.

Of course, nothing of the sort happened. People put up with him, because at least he did the scutwork of holding the readings, and they did not want to jeopardize the bennies he distributed. To my horror, instead of taking my side, people saw our flare-up as two young male buffalo locking horns to establish dominance of the herd. Far from being his opposite, I was perceived as his twin.

Altogether, I made unflattering mention of Naiden three times in the paper. They were gruesome, taunting, insinuating mentions.

And then Naiden struck back. For the better part of a year, Naiden would mention me gratuitously in reviews of other poets' work in the Sunday Tribune. He did this eight or nine times. Example: "In Galway Kinnell's latest collection, he succumbs to the solipsist pretensions of poetaster Michael Finley, beating his chest to win the attention of his betters. Alas, it never worked for Finley, and it doesn't work for Kinnell."

At first I would find these mentions hilarious, and suppose them to backfire. I mean, I was nobody, and Kinnell was a major poet -- introducing me as a third party in order to pick on me was so -- transparent. He even wormed his way into a counter-culture magazine that I wrote for, in order to skewer me. This really pissed me off, because he wasn't counter-culture, I was. Alas, no one cared whether it was transparent. Instead my name just sat on the dungheap, ants clambering over it, dully informing people who I was and what my shortcomings were.

And it just kept getting worse. At one point, the two of us corresponded. He was rough and threatening, and I was nimble and clever, dancing around his hulking rage. And I did unethical things, cc'ing his letters to people whom I was sure would lose respect for him if they only read his own stupid words. Didn't happen -- or at least, no one gave me the satisfaction of saying so. I wrote to one of his sponsors, informing the group of his mismanagement of their money. It was really bad.

Finally, one day, I admitted to myself that this wrestling match was causing me a lot of pain. And shame. Even though I was the good one -- well, better than him, anyway -- I felt I had ruined my own reputation.

I was alone in Minnesota, with no family, no girlfriend, no money, and no prospects. My parents signed legal papers emancipating me, making me financially responsible for myself. I asked them to. I was very proud, and writing was the source of my pride. But the aloneness went on forever. Even though I was too much of a coward to really go after the topics that might have addressed this

anguish -- in writing, or in therapy -- I considered myself bold to toy with them, however elliptically, in verse.

When my first book *Lucky You* came out in 1976, I convinced myself that it was a book of laments for my dead sister -- despite the fact that I never once mention her in the book. I thought I was fighting the good fight, and that people who didn't appreciate me were indifferent to my pain, and to hers. They became the bullies that tormented her in grade school, and I turned on them in kind.

So I wrote him a letter, apologizing. I discovered, when I sat and thought about it, that while I had contempt for him, and thought him to be a total crumb, he was not the problem of my life. Foolishly, I allowed him to stand in for the real item of my grief -- the pain I still felt from my sister's life, and death. When I thought of it that way, I felt that I had let my own cause down, that I let a concern of the greatest seriousness devolve into a stupid pissing match.

"Dear James," I wrote him, "this is to tell you that I am sorry for my part in the scene we have been creating the past year. I really do dislike you, but I can see very clearly now that you have no idea why I dislike you -- and that is unfair of me. So I will tell you. When I was a boy I had a sister who was sick. Her skin was blue from poor circulation, and other kids made fun of her. And then she died of the thing they made fun of her for, and I transferred my grief for her life into anger at them for being so mean. And then, when I met you, you reminded me so much of them.

"I'm not saying I have misjudged you. I'm saying I should have only dealt with the actual complaints I have against you -- not this cosmic background thing, to which you have no real connection and no responsibility.

"Please accept my apologies, and my promise to never bother you again. I'm sorry for any pain I may have caused you. Sincerely,  
Mike Finley."

Of course, I continued to despise him, but distantly. This experience was very sordid and very embarrassing to me. But because of it something important happened to me. I realized that things are not always what they seem -- our reasons for the present often lie in the mysterious past. I learned that it is very hard to persuade people of things that run counter to their interests. And I sensed to my surprise that Naiden was actually right about surrealism and solipcism -- that it is a shortcut to expression. A better art, a better life, would be one that builds on reality, that is awake and thinking, not just dreaming.

These were good lessons. They made the whole fracas almost worthwhile.

Years later, word came to me that Naiden was dying of congestive heart failure, brought on by a life of hard drinking. People I trusted told me that while he was not especially nice, he wasn't as bad as I'd made him appear. He was a tough guy, who grew up in a Russian immigrant family where action counted and words didn't. His rebellion was to make a life of words, far from home.

No, I didn't make a deathbed visit to him and make up. For that matter, he didn't even die. But it softened things to know that he too, in his own zone, was learning.

## A Ghostwriter's Tale

I had a WFE (Weird Freelance Experience) about six years ago. A New York-based psychiatrist I'll call Ed approached me about ghostwriting a business book for him. Now, I like ghostwriting books, because you can charge a person who wants his name on a book cover much more than a book publisher will pay you for your own book. Since I like groceries, I said, "Sure, what's the book about?" And Ed said, "Authenticity."

For a psychiatrist, Ed had a pretty interesting story. He had been a successful bank CEO in the '80s, at the top of his profession. But one day it all came down around his ears. He dropped out of banking for a period of personal reconstruction. He spent about a year wallowing in depression, angry with his firm for blaming him for the bank's problems.

Then, in the rubble of his misery, it dawned on him that his failure was his own fault. He realized he was a phony, one of those Art of War, Winning Through Intimidation, Chainsaw Al guys who got what he wanted, took no prisoners, and had no idea who he was.

Ed became a student of his own demise. Like a prodigal son determined to earn his way back to grace, he went to graduate school, approaching psychiatry with a fascinating focus: the thinking of existential philosophers of the past couple of centuries -- Paul Tillich, Martin Buber, Søren Kierkegaard, and Jean Paul Sartre. Especially Paul Tillich, who said that the core reality of the human soul is the courage to be. This sense of self became Ed's touchstone: you're strong when you are who you are, and not when you're not. You gotta ... keep it ... real.

Ed's message for the rest of us is that we can't lead, or even communicate reliably with others, unless we do it from the truth that us in us -- our fears, hopes, and self-knowledge. Only when we are able and willing to suffer as ourselves, and let people who come in contact see who we really are, can we have credibility.

I liked Ed, and he seemed to like me. We talked up a storm on the phone, him summarizing key points and offering examples from literature and the cinema, and me as excited as a dog with its head out a car window, happy to be along for the ride.

I studied those same philosophers in college, and knew the gist of what they were saying. And the kernel of his idea -- honesty in the workplace, as opposed the phony-baloney climates we dwell and die in, appealed very much to me. It was like a great first date, and we were charming the crap out of each other (which you must do if you are to be authentic).

I was excited about the project even before Ed's assistant told me that they planned to pay me \$40,000 to do it. Let me be real for a moment and say I was authentically pleased at the idea of \$40,000. The most I ever made on a book until then was maybe \$17,000.

I couldn't see a downside. Eager to get going on a project that sounded meaningful and promised to be lucrative, I stayed up all night and wrote my take on a key chapter, and e-mailed it to Ed by the dawn's early light.

Then everything soured. Days passed, and no word from Ed. Finally I called his assistant. She hemmed and hawed, and finally said that Ed was put off by my writing style. My first drafts can be pretty feverish, and I suppose this was prime Finley, punctuated with lightning flashes and prophetic pronouncements about the self and the abyss. My ideal client understands that eventual quality requires initial emotion.

But Ed hadn't told me that he saw the project as nearly academic, footnoted, documented, and above all, respectable. After all, he had his reputation to consider. My style was a little too interesting.

I also learned from the assistant that Ed wanted the book to be 150,000 words long. Which was three times longer than anything I

had written to that point. And, he wanted it in four months -- my little short books tended to take 10 months!

The spell was broken. The wedding was off.

I was more than disappointed, I was mad. I wrote Ed a long letter telling him how unfair I thought his appraisal was. To no avail -- Ed has yet to respond.

Eventually, I had to stand up and walk away from all that money, and the cool idea. Only when I did, did I get the joke: that a guy had to hire a ghostwriter to write a book about authenticity. And fired me when I wrote, not like himself, but like me!

## Young Mike vs Current Mike

This report isn't to make you feel guilty about not coming to my reading Thursday night at the Black Dog Cafe in Saint Paul. Poetry readings never sound fun, and most aren't (though mine are). It's more of a diary entry for me, to mark the occasion for myself and for the few who attended. I hope you find it interesting.

I had been, not anxious, but certainly intense about the opportunity to read all week, thinking a lot about what to say and what to read. I wasn't very productive with my other work. The truth is, I don't read very often, maybe once every couple of years, so I have a lot of material I'd like to show people -- but I also never get beyond being "rusty"; you need to read frequently to get really comfortable doing it.

If I could share one thing with people, however, it would be the blessed-out feelings I had yesterday morning, walking the circumference of Pike Island, at the nexus of the Minnesota and Mississippi rivers, with my dog Beau. It was a spectacularly beautiful fall morning. The leaves had finally had it, and were descending in a steady stream. The sun was wonderfully warm. Beau was content just to trot alongside me, and not bite my hand every three steps of the three-mile walk as he usually does.

And my head was like a broadband Niagara of thoughts and ideas about how to link the poems together into a thematic talk.

Naturally, I didn't pause to jot the ideas down -- there were too many, and too rich to possibly forget. But I forgot 'em anyway.

Which underscores the ultimate challenge of writing, which is simply putting one's best thoughts into play. There is many a slip twixt inspiration and print. Final drafts typically chase away the excitement of the first.

In a way, it's the basic curse of being human -- we forget what is dearest to us, despite our best intentions. Memory is the enemy of enlightenment! Like saving bees in a jar -- with or without punching holes in the lid -- it's just not the same.

When I got home, I was unable to put my walking ideas together. So I came up with a cornier theme for the reading. Earlier in the week I was cleaning my basement, and unearthed about eight boxes of notebooks and "comps" -- copies of magazines I had poems in. I knew they were down there. I kept moving them from house to house, never unpacking them, because, well, who needs a bunch of poems from the 1970s.

But so much time had passed since I last saw these items that they were very dear to me. My middle-aged memory had cut bait on nearly everything in the boxes. All I remember anymore is what is officially on my hard disk -- which is substantial -- but this material predated hard disks. I estimate that I wrote 8,000 poems in the 1970s, my heyday (strange word) as an artist. As a consequence, it all seemed very new to me.

It was like discovering a younger brother who was raised away from you -- you sort of knew he existed, but you haven't seen him in years.

So my idea was to base the reading on these forgotten poems. In the 1970s I published four books, and they follow an interesting arc in development.

The very first was a book of neo-beat poems called *Lucky You*. They were very hot, chest-thumping, highly surrealistic poems in which I announced myself to the world. I truly believed I was the next big thing in American letters, and the confidence, and the craziness, of that conviction ring through in the poems. The main poem in the book is "This Poem Is a Public Service," a kind of tract I imagined handing out to people on street corners, telling them to shape up and stop being ninnies.

The next book was *The Movie under the Blindfold*. Twenty-five years later, it remains my high water mark as a poet. It is surrealistic like *Lucky You*, but it is much more disciplined, more in control. And it is more about relationships than myself. Some of the love poems in it are very lovely. I think this book stacks up nicely against great works of the flipped-out canon, like Rene Char and Cesar Vallejo.

Next came *Home Trees*, my "Minnesota" book. The surrealism is turned very low now, always in the service of describing some real problem -- connecting with family, with the past, with other people. It's one step away from a strictly reportorial poetics, which is where I was heading.

Finally, *Water Hills*, which was never distributed, but was nevertheless my best collection ever -- small, intimate, fine little poems about becoming a parent, getting a job, fitting into the world.

I loved reading these poems again, but I ran into a snag. I wasn't able, in 2000, to invest them with the same conviction or verve I had in 1975. I was a rapier wit in those days, undefeated and ablaze. Today, I'm just an old hack with a taste for the fuzzy. The poems remained young, but I had passed on, as it were. I tried reading them to myself, but I felt like a clown, insisting on my incisive genius and verbal wizardry in the present, where the truth of these things was locked away in the past. I was a preposterous imposter, an aging actress insisting on the part of the ingénue.

So ... what to do?

I decided I needed a gimmick. Taking my cue from today's headlines, I created a cue card for the reading. On the top it said: **CAST YOUR VOTE!** Campaign 2000: "The Lesser of Two Evils." **Vote Early! Vote Often!"**

The idea was to read some very old poems from Young Mike, and some more recent poems by Current Mike (I didn't call myself old, because I am actually hoping to become much older.)

Then I published, using my Clickbook program, two little chapbooks. The first was for Young Mike, and it was titled Young, Gifted and Obnoxious. The second, bearing my latter day visage, was titled Long in the Tooth and Tailing Off a Lot.. Each book was priced at \$1, and people could buy one, or both, or more.

The reading thus became a plebiscite on the two poets.

The audience was small, but not too small. I mean, I have read to as few as four people, because most people, hearing the phrase "poetry reading," conjure up images of a lengthy program of auteurs droning on about premenstrual heebie-jeebies or the problems in Honduras. But mine aren't lengthy. But people don't know that, and they stay away literally by the billions.

Long story short, Current Mike outpolled Young Mike, \$8 to \$6. I wouldn't go so far as to call it a fair election, as Current Mike was there to put himself in the best possible light, whereas Young Mike had only a gorgeous picture of himself. It was like those "empty chair" debates you see, where one of the candidates doesn't show up. As Current Mike put it, "Please vote for whomever you prefer. Don't let me sway your vote one way or the other. But know this. I know each one of you by name. I have your email address. I know where you live.

"And if you should all decide to cast your ballot for Young Mike, in a sentimental landslide vote, it won't change anything. Young Mike is gone, and he's not coming back."

I was a bully. I engaged in Mediscare. I made it impossible to lose.

But just between me and thee, I was rooting for him.

## How I Became Scots-Irish

I grew up in an industrial part of northern Ohio where Irish people were few and far between. As a result, my sense of being Irish was patched together from books. I imagined an Irishman like myself to be an amalgam of Oscar Wilde, Bernard Shaw, and Jonathan Swift – quick-witted and infuriating.

So that's what I set out to be. I attended a Scots college in Ohio, Wooster. Our cheerleaders wore tartans and the band played the pipes. I thought it was all highly risible.

It wasn't until Rachel was accepted to nursing school at Yale in 1980 that I learned about the working Irish of the east – "the scum of the earth" was how one Southie resident on 60 Minutes described them.

I remember driving through New Haven one winter's night and saw a figure in the road, half blanketed with snow. When I jumped down from my truck to investigate, I saw it was a girl of about 15. A very drunk girl.

I loaded her into the pickup to warm her up, and asked her where she lived. Half conscious, she dismissed me saying, "You know where I live."

I became very stern at this point. "Young lady, I do not know where you live, and I'm afraid it was a mistake picking you up off the street."

The girl, who could not have weighed 100 pounds, opened an eye, sized me up and said, "You know what you are?"

"No," I said, "what am I?"

"You're a fookin Mick," she said. "You know how I know?"

"No, how do you know?"

"Because," she hiccupped, "I'm a fookin Mick, too." And passed out.

I delivered my young guest to the constabulary, but I could not shake the feeling of having been told something true. Something ... disturbing.

So 20 years pass. I've resettled in the cozy Celtic city of St. Paul. My mom, a crack genealogist, has taught me much about my ancestors. It turns out that, tartan cheerleaders to the contrary notwithstanding, I am Scots Irish.

My mother explained to me how the Irish invaded Scotland and settled there, and the Scots, including the Finleys – a wonderful band of individuals, to hear the tales -- responded in kind to Ireland a bit later, resulting in a mixing of the two races. If I said I had a clear idea of it I'd be lying, but there's the gist of it.

At about this time, I start getting mail from the Clan Farquharson, a Scots genealogical newsletter. It turns out that if you are a Finley, then you belong to Clan Farquharson. In fact, you have bloody little choice in the matter. So one evening I bundle my suddenly Scotch family – my spouse plus the two wee bairns – and attend a splendid Scottish bonfire on a bluff overlooking the Mississippi.

There I chatted with a grand little Farquharson gentleman, about five foot two. Oh, he was wee, but he was extremely masculine about it. I told him I was told I was Scottish, but I never felt much kinship with the Scots, that I was raised thinking I was just Irish.

He eyed me keenly. "Well, laddie, do you like the pipes then?"

I allowed as how, when the mood was right, the droning of the pipes – say, around a campfire after a good bloody barenaked slaughter -- could put me in a certain mood. But at all other times I retained free will, able to take the pipes or leave them be.

He shook his head disgustedly. "Aye laddie, if ye don't like the pipes," he said, "then ye're not a Scot."

That unkind remark must have spurred something in me, because I have gone all out the past few years to become a better Irishman and a Scot. I joined Clan Farquharson. My family hosted a boy from Belfast one summer – although I am convinced he was more the cause of The Troubles than the victim of them.

And I became president of the Minnesota Folk Festival, which will put on a huge free show September 23, featuring a proportionate share of melodies of the British Isles, on the state capitol grounds in St. Paul.

And the funny part? What I liked best was the sorrowful, straining sound of the Irish pipes. Yep, they have them there, too.

Looking back on it all, I feel I was given the word by two supernatural visitors, the booze-breathed girl in the snow in New Haven, and the banty rooster gent by the blazing bonfire.

From the fire and the ice, I summon their spirits, and make my apologies to each. Because I understand now. I understand everything.

It's true, it's true. I am a fookin Mick.

But you should be knowing I'm a fookin Scot, to boot.

# Oddfathers

by Mike Finley

This is an essay about mentors -- how useful they are, mostly, but how difficult it has been for many of us to accept the idea of any father, any leader, any guide, and to submit to their guidance.

I suspect all generations struggle against the preceding one, because the space from father to son is supposed to be seeded with strife. As one decreases, the other increases -- never a formula for happiness. Except for a lucky few, it is unusual for one's own father to be one's teacher in life.

My own father never quite got that writing was what I was all about. To him, an industrial engineer, vocation was a means to an end -- making money, making a comfortable life for oneself. It took me years to realize there was humility in this thinking. My dad liked selling Fuller Brush door to door and wanted to pull me into the business. I totally hated it -- what was a poet doing pushing buzzers in apartment buildings in Redondo Beach?

The problem was that, writing aside, he was not an engaged father. Emotionally (and geographically) distant, unable to talk about much, and more concerned about his own prospects than those of his children. And he loved the TV more than he loved any of us. He wanted me to do well, but he was unable to walk the path with me.

So it was a problem for me when I got older and had opportunities to become disciples of older artists -- and found I could not bend the knee. Some stubborn part of me, still burned by my own dad's indifference, refused to take on new fathers -- it was too confusing for me.

None of these men volunteered to be "a father" to me, and I never asked them. And yet it was always in the air: What could we do that would be more valuable than sharing knowledge on how to do this stuff the right way. I think, because everyone was shy, we wound up stealing -- me stealing ideas from them about how to live, and think, and be, and them slipping ideas to me casually, as if they meant nothing at all, as if they were passing me the salt..

My first shot came when I was 16 years old, with the poet James Wright. Visiting my stepfather's stepmother's home, I came upon signed books of his poetry, the emotional drama of which I liked very much, and was astonished that Elsie had a connection with him. Indeed, she had known him as a young man, and was in a position to introduce me to him.

One day in 1967 we drove down from Cleveland to Martin's Ferry, Ohio -- John Glenn's home as well as Wright's. His parents lived in a small railroad house, with a melon patch in the back. Wright was very kind to me, which seems astonishing when I think back on what kind of young man I was -- murky, ambitious, and confused. We went for a walk, and he talked about the movie *2001: A Space Odyssey*, which we had both just seen.

As a prospective father Wright was gentle, thoughtful, and unobtrusive -- ideal, really. And he validated my own tendencies toward victimization and hyperemotionality. He did not ask to see my poems, and I did not shove the file folder in his direction -- though I had brought it with me. He was so nice, and I didn't want to be a beginner with him. Instead, I made plans in my head to go off, learn how to write, and then come back to him, and claim him as my true father -- after I had made myself worthy.

Which never happened. I think I wrote him a letter a year later, desperate to be remembered by him, suggesting that I come to New York and apprentice myself to him. I offered to paint his wife Annie's school. He wisely declined my offer.

When I went off to college at Wooster in 1967, we got a visit from the Oregon poet William Stafford. I knew nothing about his work. I was 17 and knew nothing, period. But because I styled myself as a poet, I was invited to interview Stafford, along with a handful of other self-styled bohemians, on closed-circuit TV.

I went in without any questions, half expecting Stafford to be "on the make" or just another dry old fuddy-duddy. He was anything but. In the midst of campus uprisings, be-ins and the other hysterical earmarks of the era, Stafford cut a calm, friendly, and modest figure. I liked him immediately. The other students rubbed their chins and asked academic questions about the meanings of this symbol and that, and about the use of classical form in his work.

But when my time came, I asked a question that made the other students cringe: "is it fun, writing?"

Stafford brightened at the question, smiled broadly and said, "Yes. Yes. Yes!" And went on lovingly about the joy writing gave him, how it was the best part of every day, how it lifted him up from the barely breathing to the noticing, and wondering, and self-amusing tasks of poetry.

Later, as a literature student at the University of Minnesota I got word of the arrival by night of Russian dissident poet Andrej Voznesenski. The Soviet Union had refused him a visa until 24 hours before his schedule visa, so he arrived nervous and tired from his trip. But the energy returned when he took the huge stage. Northrop Auditorium was cordoned off so that 50 people dotted the 5,000 seats while Voznesenski groaned like a swinging pendulum through readings of "Goya" and other poems in the only language he knew. Voznesenski was Byronic in his charisma and mystery. I yearned for the pummeling power of his words.

Afterward we poets got together at English professor Chester Anderson's to boast and jostle and drink, Voznesenski sitting alone on the couch, a slight frown on his face. Several beers later, I took to the bathroom, where Chester's collie lay, and stepped over him to pee. As soon as I started, Voznesenski entered, smiled politely at me, knelt by the dog and scratched his ears, not more than a foot from my pee stream.

Confused, I turned to see the poet kneeling, eyes closed, his hands stroking the golden dog, his face held out to me, the dew like manna on his face, and a smile as if finally, finally free. When I left the party, Voznesenski stood by the door and pointed to me. "You," he said, and smiled coolly. "Be great for me!"

That's all he said to me -- but it stuck in my head like a spear.

That same year I edited the school literary magazine and I wrote to Robert Bly, who lived in the west of the state, offering to publish poems of his choosing.

He sent me a handwritten note -- hand-drawn would be a better description, as he writes in a kind of pictographic swirl, using butterflies and birds as punctuation. But what he said he liked wasn't the poetry, but the design! He liked a photo of a pretty girl standing under a bare tree. I sent him the original print with my compliments.

The next few years saw a minor flourish of correspondence between us. Bly was flattering to me, and I was flattered. I was 20 when I met him, barely more than a boy. The idea of being taken in by a major figure like Bly was sweet.

Bly appeared at the university and I was enthralled with his cantankerous Norwegian self. He was rock and roll to me, grandiose as sky yet contemptuous of the complicated circles other people walked in and the big words they used. Bly snubbed the pretty and went straight for the spiritual fireworks. I dug that a lot.

But Bly in person was not as gracious as Bly on paper. Perhaps when he met me face to face after the reading he read the hurry and ambition that was written there. Or perhaps he saw I was younger than he supposed. In any event, he quickly took to teasing me with little jabs, nicknaming me "Irish." It was funny, but the joke was at my expense.

Doing a journalism gig I traveled outstate with regional poet Franklin Brainerd for a big prairie poetry reading at a rural university. Franklin, a very kind and down-to-earth man who liked young women poets very much, was then dying of leukemia, and I was writing a feature about him for the university paper. For several days we drank beer, talked, read poems and taped.

"A good poem is like a potato," Frank told me. "You have to dig it out of the dirt with your fingers. And it's as ugly and unpromising as you. And if it wasn't, what good would it be?"

Frank suggested I bring some poems of my own on the trip west, so I did. Bly and Thomas McGrath, the great and lovely chronicler of American radicalism, were also on hand for the poetry event. The three headliners took turns reading, and they were well received. Afterward, Tom and Franklin waved me upon stage for a kind of poetry improv -- audience members would shout out an image, and poets would scramble to produce and read a poem featuring that image or idea. It was just nutty and open-ended enough, that I shone.

McGrath and Brainerd were very kind to me, parachuting in on their reading the way I did. But Robert scowled when I beat him to the punch by quickly locating a poem about hibernation.

Afterward we all caroused in his motel room, drinking cheap red wine, along with a half dozen other young men poets who had driven out to attend to Robert.

“You young men should stop writing for three years, get away from all this,” he said, waving his hand toward the motel bed. “Move out to the Dakotas and live under the sky. Forget you met me, forget what made you so hungry and false -- then start writing again.”

We waited on every word of advice, but we were damned if we were going to leave that motel room. It dawned on me, through the haze of Chianti, that we were acolytes.

I have two other stories about Bly. The first happens four years later in 1979 when I am a newspaper editor in a small town in the same part of the state where lived. Robert again came around to read his work, and I covered his visit as a journalist. Afterward he agreed to meet with several of us at a tavern. He was in good form, enjoying the attention, and playing the role of Sufi mystic, a person apart from the cares of the world, to the hilt.

To his dismay, however, his teenaged daughter sidled up to him and began begging him for money. "Come on, daddy, there are some cords for sale at The Gap, and they're only \$14.99." She forced him to open his wallet for us to see. None of us took this as unusual. Teenage girls need jeans. But I could tell from the look

on his face that he felt she had blown his cover. Robert Bly was just a man, with credit cards, a driver's license, and a couple of twenties. It was terrible.

All along, I had access to fathers who knew things that could save me from living a stupid life, the way fathers are supposed to, but either the father drew back or I did.

When I was a newspaper editor I apprenticed myself to Paul Gruchow, naturalist and essayist. I followed him around from bog to ridge, listening to him rhapsodize about his childhood in the tall grass. I admired the hell out of him, but I don't think he ever figured that out.

Paul hired me not knowing I was somewhat the same kind of writer he was -- literary -- so we made each other miserable during my stay in Worthington. Paul was old school, and wanted us to trade book talk over cigarettes and sandwiches. He loved Henry James, whom I found hard to read. I was forever disappointing him.

One night, after an especially vexing day, which resulted in readers calling him to complain about an article I wrote, he stood at the side door of my house. "Do you want to come in?" I asked. He said nothing. "I've got a good idea, Paul," I sighed. "Why don't we become friends?"

In truth, he outdid me in every way, but his response was to become more jealous of me. Once, introducing me for a reading at the local library, he merely said, "This is Mike Finley. I really don't know what else to say."

When I quit and moved away to Connecticut, a midwestern magazine published some poems of mine and cited me in the biographical notes as having his job. It was a magazine that had rejected his work. "Congratulations," he wrote me in the shortest and bitterest note I have ever received, "on your big promotion."

The thing about fathers is, they tend to die before you do. All the lovely gentlemen I met over the years, with whom I shared an hour of light, eventually went away.

Frank Brainerd succumbed to leukemia in 1977. His disease was like an apotheosis for him. No one cares about a poet, until death comes knocking. Then everyone crowds around, and Frank delightedly met many women poets.

James Wright died in 1980 of cancer of the tongue. Working for the newspaper, I pulled the news of his death from the teletype machine and spun slowly in my swivel chair.

I ran into William Stafford on a stairway in 1978, at a publisher's party. It had been eleven years since I asked him my silly question on college television in the Amish country. Darned if he didn't recognize me. "Hello," he said, and smiled. "How are you?" Which still seems like a miracle to me.

Tom McGrath, who had always been in frail health, followed in 1990. About three years earlier, I invited him to a holiday open house, and he surprised me by showing up fifteen minutes early, and nursed a cup of hot cider, asking me questions

about my children. He had been through a lot in his life, but to the end he was a tender fellow.

Paul Gruchow, the friend who so disliked me, took his life in the early spring of 2004, after many years of suffering from depression -- but not before the two of us buried the axe on our misgivings.

I understand Voznesenski is still out there, an old Sovietnik in the new Russia, still sneaking up on young poets in toilets.

Sometimes, driving around Minneapolis, I see Robert Bly crossing a street or loading his car trunk with groceries. I was at a poetry reading against the Iraq War one Sunday afternoon in the winter, and for a brief moment, while I gave a brief lecture on the Mighty Republican Wurlitzer approach to propaganda, we shared the same stage.

Afterwards, I was milling about in the basement of the Macalester College chapel, and I looked up to see his hoary visage backlit by the winter sun. He was descending the steps and moving in my direction. This is it, I said, and straightened my posture for long-awaited fatherly reunion.

But Bly merely squinted at me and asked, "Is this where the men's can is?"

I should have made amends not only to my own father -- who, after all, counseled me to find a way to buy groceries, which is the *bête-noir* of all writers -- but to all my fathers.

How great if I had been able to suck it up and sit at the feet of these men, and really pay attention to what they were saying, instead of scanning them for the flaws that I knew were etched into all fathers.

I wish I had learned more about Brainerd's blunt honesty. Gruchow's passionate work ethic. Bly's genuine spirituality – his daughter's forays to The Gap notwithstanding. Stafford was like a holy man of poetry, unfailingly kind.

On the other hand, I know I was lucky to have known these guys at all.

So now I am the old one, and the grand gents are gone. My own dad, who stopped smoking thirty years ago, has been diagnosed with lung cancer, and he is pissed. I talk to him on the phone. I wrote him a letter of “amends,” apologizing for being a remote if dutiful son for so many years. At the eleventh hour I remember how much he suffered in our family, losing his firstborn child, being married to my mom, who was not an easy person.

I thanked him for his financial advice over the years. He always thought writing was an idiotic career choice, and urged me to take up an aspect of it that would net me some bucks. Which I did, drifting from poetry to fiction to journalism to business writing, which is how I fed my family in the lean years.

“You know, Mike,” my dad told me, “if anyone should be apologizing to anyone, I think it should be me apologizing to you.”

I waited a few minutes for him to clear his throat and deliver the actual apology, and then realized that his concession was all there would ever be. But it was good. It was all right.

Where so many artistic brothers are now smoldering wreckage alongside the highway, I soldier on, because my dad told me to be a hack. “What’re you going to do for money?” he used to ask me. I did not thank him for a long time for that, but I thank him now.

A few months after Paul Gruchow died, I got a call from Matthew Gruchow, his nephew. Matthew never met Paul, but he had read about him, and wanted to know more about the man he was related to. “I feel like we have a lot in common,” he told me. I agreed to meet him for lunch.

Matthew is in his twenties, and he too wants to write, and from what he has shown me, he will be a wonderful writer, full of truth and feeling. Books, adventures, essays -- I looked into his eyes and saw the desire, the heat-lines that once radiated from mine.

In a moment of exuberance I decided to throw in with young Matthew and blurted out everything the old guys had taught me. Never mind that I was not a great writer, that my talents had only taken me so far, and left me there. I had the goods, and it was time to give them away.

“Yes, definitely, write your ass off, Matthew” I told him. “If you want to do a thing get at it now. Do it while you are young. You won’t be ready, but unless you write you never will be.

“Write crazy, like a kid. And when you rewrite, Matthew, go over it like a parent, picking up toys and putting things right. And then wait a while, and make a final pass, and this time do it out of love, and out of the nutty joy of it.

“And don’t worry about who you are,” I said, “or if you have a right to write. It all comes out in the end. Don’t stop, and don’t apologize, and don’t expect much from other people. Don’t allow yourself to become discouraged.

“Grow in the doing, and between sentences, breathe.

“If you have a father, listen. Bite your tongue if you have to, but listen.

“Then go find more fathers – any age will do -- and listen to what they say. Because one is never enough.”