



EVERYBODY SAY

YEAH!

**poems by
Mike
Finley**

Everybody Say YEAH!

Meditations on Justice

by Mike Finley

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At Dunn Brothers

I'm at the coffee shop with Rich and I am
looking around

at the people reading and playing with their
phones,

and I say to him, you know, Rich, because I'm
sick,

I'm really aware that everyone around me is
dying, too.

We're all headed to a pretty sorry end.

These people here, they are dying but they act
like nothing's happening.

A part of me wants to go from table to table
and say to people,

Hi, do you know that death is coming for you?

What are you doing about that fact?

And Rich leans across the table and whispers to me,

“I don’t think they want you to tell them that.”

Fools Gold

I was out with my old roommate Walt getting beers at the Dubliner. Taking turns being honest. Saying things we might never say otherwise.

“I have never been friends with a black guy,” he said, setting down his drink.

“You mean friend friends, like on Facebook?” I asked.

“No, I’ve got black friends on Facebook. I mean friend friends -- where you share secrets, know what’s important to one another, loan them money.”

“Or they loan you money.”

“Or you share a foxhole.”

“And you die in their arms.”

Things trailed off -- my signature in conversations. Walt needed to think about it more. Did he have a black friend, or did he not? One answer is redeeming, because a true friend who happens to be black eliminates a line on a white man's bucket list. The other answer is just sad. A soul food free existence. One scarcely worth living.

When we were young, and the fever for justice ran high, white boys my age assumed we would have rich multiracial friendships. And it would be like nothing. Late night poker. B-ball at the Y. Budweiser and ribs. All that stuff would never happen. The blessing would never be given.

“For a white boy, you're OK.”

But if you had that friendship. We'd be always making jokes about it. You'd master the most complicated hand-slaps. You'd learn how to

walk without having a yardstick stuck up your ass. You'd learn the easy roll. You'd acquire the ancient art of cool.

I had a friend in LA named Quittman in '68 and we sure got along fine. He was boyfriend to a fellow dropout of mine. One day Quittman turned to me, riding shotgun, at an intersection on West Pico Boulevard and he let Susie -- who was not there in the panel truck to hear what he had to say -- he let her have it.

"You know the problem with blondes?" Quittman asked quizzically. "They think they don't have to fuck back!"

This was 1968, so I laughed as if I knew all about blonde girlfriends and the problems they posed. I definitely laughed louder than if a white friend had made the utterance.

I was always running to catch up with him, and he always waited for me.

A poem I wrote about Quittman:

Beggars Banquet on the knob,
Quittman and I, we were always high --
high up there in the hills of San Pedro
National Forest -- but not so high
we thought the gold was gold.
We knew there were pyrites in the world,
and we didn't want to be fools.
Still, the creek bed glittered
with flecks of gold.

There it was, scores of flakes of purest gold

glinting up from the sandy bed.

Later, I stumbled in from the path uphill.

"I'm not sure," I said, "but I think there's a bear nearby."

Everyone let that thought sink in, and the creek bed glittered with flecks of gold.

Pocketfuls of gold weighing us down,
us too slowed to make our escape,
the roaring rampaging animal hot behind,
all of us fallen, all of us bled to death,
just yards away from the red pickup, while
the creek bed glittered with flecks of gold.

"How do you know there's a bear?"

Quittman asked, being logical.

“Because I saw the biggest shit I ever saw,
I said, just up the hill by that big ponderosa.
And it had squashed berries in it,
still soft and steamy!” And that creek bed
glittered with flecks of gold.

“I don’t believe a bear left that,” Quittman
said.

“Oh, and you’re a wildlife biologist?”

Quittman threw a stone at the winking gold,
And stared at his rattlesnake boots.

“Just, please, Mike, take my word for it.”

Bought and sold, tried and told --

And the creek bed glittered with flecks of gold!

Oh, Quittman, the times we had. That record collection! David Axelrod, Sly Stone, Pharaoh Sanders, the Rotary Connection. The Rotary Connection? Really!

I could have learned more if, after driving back to my dad's apartment, getting high that last day, my stepmother hadn't attacked me with her tiny fists.

"I know where you were," she said, ripping at my sweater. Skinny woman tore my sweater right off me. "You were with that blankety-blank black man!" Only, different words.

She didn't like me driving her Camaro convertible to Quittman's pad in Echo Park and

holing up with him all day puffing on weed and laughing at what came out of one another's heads.

But the words still came across as racism, which was what they were.

So I stole away that night, and took a bus up Hawthorne to LAX, and emptied my Fuller Brush delivery checking account on a one-way red-eye ticket to Minneapolis, Minnesota.

I would go on to make a life for myself in that snowy, unlaughing land. Job, marriage, children, the works.

Quittman Claudell is the reason I moved here. Not because I wanted to but because I had to. Because I had fun with my friend.

Many times I wished I'd stayed back there with Quittman. Saying what we thought about things, and howling in our joy.

I'm Not Depressed

I don't know why.

I sure have reasons.

My frightened son,
my suicided daughter,
marriage in tension,
my zero income,
cancer setting up camp
in my bones.

But I'm not depressed.

Maybe it's the methylphenidate
or maybe it's wellbutrin

the hydrocodone or the
gabapentin lifts me up,
I don't know.

The only thing that depresses me
Is you can march and suffer
and be beaten down in every way
And no change happens,
And they tear down a neighborhood
People lived in for a century
to put up a Shopko in four weeks .

But one thing I know.
You are alive until you are not.

I walk four times a day with Lucy
And the sunshine feels good
On my face and everyone
I see may also be in pain but
I can see they are doing their best.
And I bless them in my heart
And try my best to do likewise.

'Tumor Talk'

with Mike Finley

You know, Tumor, I think I'd like to write about you.

Please don't.

Why not?

Because no one wants to know about me.

Yeah, but it's a human experience and I just thought --

Stop thinking. That's your problem in a nutshell.

But what if I gave some person somewhere hope!

Is that your actual intention?

No, not really. But wouldn't I seem heroic, dealing in a straightforward way with you?

What have you got against me? What have I ever done to you?

Well, I'm fighting you. You know, put 'em up!

If you want to slug yourself, have at it.

Well, a journal then, tracing my growth and insights during this challenging time.

Yeah, nobody's ever done that before.

But it would give me pleasure and comfort to be engaged in something creative.

Be honest. You only write about yourself.

Yes, but, I'm the thing I know best. I want to tell that unique story!

Listen, it's fun for you, but I have to listen to it the whole goddamn day.

Then let me say this to you. Having you grow inside me has led to some genuinely interesting thoughts!

Like what?

Like “Carrying a tumor inside oneself is like carrying a child!” It takes a certain amount of time, it obtains nourishment from you, and it keeps getting bigger and bigger.

You are aware that you are not creating life, right?

Tumor, don’t you think I know that! Give me credit for that much! And please explain to me why you must always be so negative?

Because I am not your stupid muse.

The Cynic Who Disassembled Himself

One by one, the man in the barrel excised his parts,

Starting with his pancreas.

“No one knows what this does anyway!”

Diogenes reasoned.

His left kidney was the next to go.

“What’s the need for two of them?” he asked rhetorically.

He scooped out his testicles and placed them in a fruit cup.

“I have no further use for those boys!” he declared.

He hollowed out his skull yet it continued to function

By and large. "I barely use that organ," he reminded. "Nobody does."

He commenced sawing on the bones of his legs.

"We don't understand," his friends protested.

"Why are you doing this to yourself?"

The philosopher explained: "A voice has been saying to me, 'Get back to basics.'"

My Friend Pete

I have a friend, Pete. We get along but we don't agree about everything. Differences sometimes flare up.

Among Pete's criticisms is this killer:

I need to be loved by everyone. I am always grasping for attention and hoping it will be positive. I am needy.

OK, I'll give Pete that one. My defense is to say that my neediness is really a virtue. "I don't mind being loved. I don't mind needing love. In fact, when did love get to be a bad thing?"

I even love Pete. He is funny, and intelligent, and well-read. And I know he loves me. If I have a flat tire in the rain, and wolves have gathered, the guy I call is Pete.

OK, here is another killer. Whenever it's my turn to drive, he reaches over and switches off my CD player. This past Saturday, the music was Rubber Soul. The song -- "I'm Looking Through You."

Anybody here not know Rubber Soul? Hands up. What's the matter with you?

"I hate that," Pete says.

""Not a big Beatles fan?"

"Well, they're not very good, objectively speaking."

This is where my entire body starts to turn inside out. All my organs are dangling on the outside of me. Heart pumping in full view. Lungs flapping. I was taken aback! Slowly, I re-acquire the gift of speech.

"They're ... not ... very good?" I struggle to repeat his words.

“Well, the only reason we listen,” he says, “is we heard that music when we were young, so we have nostalgia for them. Me, I never liked them in the first place, so abracadabra, no nostalgia.”

Now, I knew where he was coming from. He was saying they weren't good in a respectable way. Like the way that Mahler, or Dante, or Rembrandt were good. They were not high church.

And what Pete was saying -- that the music we love places an emotional smiley-face around our youths. It's sentimentalism.

I dropped Pete off at his dentist, and drove him home in silence. All the while, my brain is shuddering from the insult -- like Jell-O with carrot shreds in it.

He wasn't just erasing the Beatles -- they have been the tiniest bit over-played, would you say. He was snuffing out so many things I loved. Chuck Berry, The Stones, the Temptations, Sly, the Airplane, Marvin Gaye, the Who, Hendrix, Joni Mitchell, Santana, Captain Beefheart, the Kinks. The Velvet Underground. Bob Dylan, for Pete's sake.

Pete was committing this mental genocide of everyone I was devoted to ... so he could enjoy the lonely pose of being above it all.

Didn't he know how much these people suffered? Setting aside any hopes for the future. Trying this unpromising thing. Living on nickels and dimes. There's a reason they're all skinny on their record jackets. They're starving!

The losers were left with a lifetime of failure. For every act that made it through to stardom,

another hundred acts were broken like bundles of dry sticks.

The winners had little more. What they did involved enormous amounts of pain, family disapproval, risk, failure, bankruptcy, depression, creative lockup, self-hatred, and worse. They were cheated by everyone, driven mad by drugs and confusion. Then spit out to end their careers doing oldies shows in Branson.

Everyone died, one way or the other, just to put a few sweet tunes in our heads. Crashed in the corn fields. Stabbed in their bedrooms. Shot dead by their fathers. Left to bleed out on the sidewalk.

All this suffering to create a bit of beauty. And they did it for us. They rocked so we might roll.

They were sent to us to free our imprisoned selves.

I need to pause here and wipe the fleck off my lips.

I think of beautiful Little Anthony, who spoke to every breaking heart there was. I hear him singing inside me, right now:

I know you ... don't know what I'm going through,

Standing here ... looking at you.

Him and the Imperials never made a dime. But hear what they gave us.

"Tears on My Pillow" ... "Goin' Out of My Head" ... and sure, "Shimmy Shimmy Koko Bop."

Tell me Little Anthony did not put everything out there, everything he had in him ... so we would not feel so alone.

His songs encircled us in lassos of love, they were given to us and us only. They were our treasure, they were the passports we carried through our generation. They laminated us against the losses and failures we experienced in love. They bound us to one another in perpetuity. They were our insurance against despair.

We do want love. We need it like we need to breathe. And we'll take it where we can get it.

Oh, and were they good? They were VERY good.

Waiting for Her Ride

She sits at the taxi stand on West 7th,
Out front of the clinic,
shivering thin woman, wrapped
in white blanket, hair burned away,
puffing on a Kool.

"How you doing today?" I ask,
to be nice. In a gravelly voice
she replies "I been better."

Remission

I keep calling it Intermission

As I microwave more popcorn.

Stooping to Pick Up a Pill ...

that fell to the floor and skittered under my desk.

I try bending at the back but I don't bend so good.

I slide off the chair and get down on my bony knees

but then my shoulder still keeps me from ducking under

the table, and now my neck feels like it might go out.

I get on all fours and duck my head under, and the way is clear until

I start wheezing, and my eyes bug out, and my heart begins

to thump and that big vein pulses up top, I can
even
feel the stress in my hair. But then -- there it is,
my precious Zytiga,
the pill of the gods, \$260.20 apiece on the open
market,
the mud-colored pearl that keeps my cancer at
bay,
now bearded weird with bunny dust. I hold the
pill between two fingers
like a host held up to chiming bells and think
this magic stone
will keep me alive, unless I have to dive under
this desk again.

‘This Yeast Has Flown’ - 1968

I came to Minnesota and for two months I lived in the same house with Clare and Clete.

After being thrown out of my own parents' house, and after two stupid drop-in surprise visits from me, each of which ended in tears and silent drives to the bus station, the Reddings were so hospitable to me, so kind, taking me in as one takes in a wounded bird that keeps flying into the picture window, and nursing me back to strength.

In the weeks that I lived there, Clare began seeing me with fresh eyes. One night I walked her home from her boyfriend's pad and she turned and buried herself in my arms and her

tears soaked us both through, and she confided to me that I was the best friend she had ever had, and she was sorry to have hurt me.

I took this in stride, as if it was my due, as if it had been coming to me a long time, and now I collected it with no great satisfaction, a victory without celebration.

I was less boyfriend to her now than godfather, and I stroked her long hair and told her who she really was, what her true name was, and where her destiny lay, out on the star-lit plains of South Dakota, without a hint of me.

I remember our last kiss because I knew my life would never be the same. I felt clear-headed for a moment. I began to think I could reverse all the losing I had done in the previous year, that it could all go away, all be a learning experience.

But shit, what was that lesson? How was I any wiser? On the last day of the sixties, December 31, 1969, Clare got engaged to marry a high school friend who had been shot up in Vietnam and needed her more than I did.

It never happened, she never married the guy. But it was a signal to me to untie the ropes that held her down. I heard the scrape as we parted. And I let her go, and she floated away.

I took a job in a motor parts warehouse, stacking tailpipes for a hundred dollars a week. One day a Mopar tailpipe/exhaust pipe combo pipe way up on the highest shelf slid down and hit me in the forehead and knocked me off a ladder and onto the filthy hardwood floor.

Thirty years later, when I was diagnosed with a brain tumor in that same location, I could not help thinking of that as the moment the tumor formed inside me, like the touch of a magic

wand on my brow. And the word for the instrument of my brain-waylaying became the sound effect of my undoing – bong.

I moved out of the Redding house and rented a room in Minneapolis for fourteen dollars a week. The other boarders were truckers and day laborers. The landlord spied on me when I would toast bread in the common kitchen. If I left so much as a crumb on the counter, he would write me a note ringing with exclamation points and pin it on my door.

When I gave notice after a single week, the landlord refused to refund my deposit, and we had a shoving match on his porch, which he won, and I left the place, brushing the dirt from my feet.

I rented a room in a houseful of college students, curiously all ex-seminarians, close to the university. My parents disenfranchised me

at my request, so I could qualify for in-state tuition in Minnesota.

I made a \$45 down payment on a gravesite, so I could show the Board of Regents evidence I planned to reside permanently in the state.

I knew no one now, and my back ached, and my teeth ached, and the room was so hot and suffocating I could not sleep.

Since the house had a kitchen, I took up baking. It seemed to me that life could be empty but if you baked a loaf of cracked wheat bread every day with your own hands, you could stay centered and sane. A hippie remnant -- wholegrain bread.

Every day I rose at dawn and began a loaf. With the kneading and the rising and the punching and the kneading, a loaf of bread took about four hours. But when you pulled it from the

oven the roasted smell filled the house and made everything seem possible.

Then, one day, the bread wouldn't rise. I don't know why, perhaps the yeast, which is a living thing, had died. I let the dough sit on the radiator for two hours, but it remained a brick. I punched at it and punched at it to get it going, but it was no good.

I took the dough in my hands and walked out the back steps, and it was snowing, the kind of big, fluffy flakes when the weather is still warm, but the seasons have decided to change.

And I whirled that sucker around and around until it elongated and flew up in the snowy air, like a gaucho's bola spinning end over end, and it landed on the roof of the garage, where birds would peck at it through the winter.

And I went inside the house and cried for two days for the dreams of hippiedom that had died, for the people who died, and for the people I had let down, and for the love I was going to have to learn to live without.

Mostly I cried for myself, because just like in the song, I would be carrying the weight of this stupid year a long, long time.

You Feel Guilty About Your Cancer

from 1998

You felt shame when you were diagnosed.

There must have been something you could have done to keep this from happening to your family.

If you had eaten more vegetables and fewer orders of fries, more green tea and less red wine.

If you had meditated, cultivating a more positive attitude.

If you had paid more attention to your body.

If you had been a better man and lived a more giving life.

Waiting for a loved one to die steals your life and makes you hate yourself for wishing it were over.

You think of solutions that might simplify things, reduce the number of months of waiting, but they are terrible, too.

You wish you had saved more money and could afford a maid to sweep under the bed or a personal attendant to swab you clean, so the people you love are not put through that.

You wish you had not drawn attention to yourself so the people you love could blossom in their own time, because that is what you wished for them and they are really all you have and because it's not right that you should make them suffer.

I Call 911 On My Tumor

"I'm being abused by a tumor," I say.

"We'll send a squad car directly," the voice says.

Cop arrives, wants to know what the deal is.

Tumor and I both talk at the same time.

"It lives inside me and whispers terrible things," I say.

"He is the most awful, awful person," the tumor says.

"Well, I gotta take one of you in," says the cop.

"City policy," he adds.

"Well, take the tumor," I say. "It wants to kill me!"

"Any truth to that?" the cop wants to know.

Tumor leans forward and confidentially says,

"This man hasn't changed his underwear in three days."

Cop grabs me roughly, reads me my rights and

cuffs me.

“No, I’m the good one!” I cry. “This is my house!”

Cop lowers my head as I slide into the back seat.

“This is so messed up,” I complain.

“You’ll learn the meaning of messed up, if you don’t shut up right now,” the cop says.

“It’s not right,” I whisper, as we speed away.

Tumor waves *So Long* from the kitchen.

Dream of a Busy Oncologist

I asked a nurse how many patients Dr. Bloom has.

I had a feeling there were very many, and a good number of them were very serious.

I really like Dr. Bloom. Before he became a doctor he was a stand-up comedian, and you can still sense a whimsical, but also kind element in him.

The nurse arched her eyebrows.

"I don't have that kind of number available to me," she said. "But if I were to guess, I'd guess about 700."

The answer staggered me. All those lives, clutching at your white coat. How do you save, as many as can be saved?

I'm not the problem, I realized, but I'm part of the problem.

At what point do you let the falling fall, so you can attend to the living?

Questions People Should Ask

What does it feel like?

How did you find out you had it?

Do people invite you to parties?

Have you had spiritual discoveries?

Why don't they just cut it out?

What does Lucy think?

What does it keep you from doing?

When are you gonna die?

Can you still have sex?

You wanna go out for breakfast?

Addressing a Friend's Anxiety

You worry that everyone thinks
terrible thoughts about you.

It's worse than that, my dear.

They hardly think of you at all

Where Knowledge Goes

We know where you go,
down into the ground,
but what of all the things you know
that gave you such pleasure,
not just to beat other people over the head
with, but just the embracing satisfaction
of knowing a thing
and having it be yours.

Does it leave you all in a moment,
like a dynamited dam,
or more gently, like a sigh of information,

like wrens flying out of a bush,
thoughts inching from the ends of the hairs
on your head,
crawling out of your ears like soldiers
blinking in the bright dust that follows battle,
and wondering where to take up
residence next?

There go the answers to every test question,
the punch lines, state capitols, quotations
From books,
the names of birds, our high school Spanish,
multiplication tables,
the hard lessons one learns from experience
that can not be put into words,

plus the kinds of knowledge that we don't
even know,
the answers we are given at the last moment,
the last blink of an eye, the last breath,
that now must wait another lifetime.

Pluses and Minuses of the Suicide of a Child

The first thing is, you realize
you never have to worry about that one again.
The play is complete, the suspense has passed,
the book of horrors that lay likely ahead --
the crimes, disappointments, late-night calls,
tearful conversations, false optimism that one
more action plan will work --
you can close that book now.

It occurs to you that people who used to share
their problems with you,
Their momentary heartaches and worries,
Those folks are never going to bother you again,
or ask for your sympathy.
For a brief time that seems like a relief, too --
until you miss being useful that way.

Eventually you learn you are still quite attached
to the person in question and that you can't
help continuing the conversation that the two
of you were having, and then were untimely
interrupted.

You go to them for consultation, when you are
by yourself,

Driving, or shaving in the mirror,
because that person knows everything now,
that person has nothing better to do
than to go on being part of you.

Those you still love must look into your eyes
every day
and be silent about the cavity they see
that has opened up in you, the cars
and buildings and trunks of trees are sliding
into that ravenous, groaning, foothold-killing
thing.

And because you love these ones
you give them your best,
and reassure them the way you did
in the earliest, happiest days --
"Sweetest ones, I brought you in,
Now let me show the way out."

‘Let’s Play Celebrity Brain Tumors!’ - 1999

I was all excited: USA Today was interested in my brain tumor! Well, not the tumor so much, but they were looking at a piece I had written about it, and my first conversation with an editor there went great.

Finally, I hoped, my sort of tumor—a meningioma—would get the attention it so richly deserved.

Research grants would follow. Nobel prize winners would focus their whole brains on my half one. I’d not only be cured, but bathed in sympathetic lighting. I was one lucky guy.

I envisioned getting good seats at shows, like Ray Liotta in Goodfellows. “Yes, sir,” Mr. Finley,

the maitre d' would say, dropping 10 mg of Vicodins next to my water glass.

Then the email arrived. "We liked your essay," the editor wrote. "But we have to say no. There are so many people with different ailments, and they are all so convincing, that we have made the editorial decision to only feature first-hand accounts of people who are already in the public eye."

It took a few moments for the words to register. I have a brain tumor—have I mentioned that already?—so maybe I'm a little slow. But this was it in a nutshell:

The nation's newspaper only wants health stories if they're by or about celebrities. A story about the alien gnawing away at Mike Finley's brain wasn't news, no matter how bad the tumor or how good the writing. (And it was excellent!)

But if Nicole Kidman came down with a meningioma, the paper was saying, that would be hot as shit.

And this pissed me off. It was like approaching the velvet rope of public opinion and being stopped by a bouncer.

It was like trying to confide a life and death matter to a friend—and yes, I'd considered USA Today my friend, especially because of that dynamite sports section—and the friend replies, "Hey, I'd love to hear your story, only there's a problem: Nobody gives a flying Wallenda about you."

That's when I realized: If I hope for a cure, I'll need a celebrity endorsement for my brain tumor.

This quest actually began back in January 1999. I was doing situps in my upstairs office when I

felt something happen inside my head, from the exertion. It felt like my brain was melting—from contact with a blacksmith's poker jammed through my skull. Within a week I had my diagnosis: my meningioma was about the size of a croissant, curled behind my left ear.

This noncancerous but nonetheless unpleasant fellow had been residing there quietly for as long as a couple of decades, until it caused a major vein in my head to dry up and snap off (thrombose).

Hence the moment of mind-searing pain (the one before the email from USA Today). My tumor, doctors informed me, was inoperable – too close to the language center of the brain to risk going in. But, with any luck – cross fingers –it will just continue to sit there. With that, I gained a new hobby and lots of new friends.

I read up on brain tumors, and I talked to dozens of survivors, wanting to be one myself. And I began subscribing to online bulletin board where people like me, with benign croissants and other cancerous pastries tucked under their skulls, discuss their harrowing experiences, their surgeries, their outcomes -- and sometimes their impending deaths. Think it can't happen to you? Or Nicole? Well, every year, 350,000 Americans are diagnosed with brain tumors, so you may already be a winner and not know it.

It's not clear what causes them, and there are many varieties. My meningioma is the least horrible of a grisly lot. They'll kill 15,000 of us this year. But you never hear much about them.

May is a National Brain Tumor Month (May), which only the editors of *Men's Health* seem to be keenly aware of. But it hasn't caught on

elsewhere, perhaps because of the limited gift-giving options.

I'll see some celeb's face peering up at me from tabloids at the checkout line, and think: Maybe *she's* the one? Maybe *he'll* put us over the top!

I imagine all of them having things in their heads. And they don't know it! Paris Hilton. Kevin Costner, with one the size of a baseball. The guy from Creed.

But you wouldn't know it from those rueful, over-the-shoulder glances. Miley, Cardi, Taylor, K-Pop -- when you find out what's really inside you and you need a scribe, if I am still around, call me. I've got an in at *USA Today*.

Born on the Fourth of July

The Fourth of July was always a special holiday for me, because I was born on it, in 1950, in a teeny hospital in Flint, Michigan.

The standard remark they make is: "Well, you sure must have come in with a bang!" I let them live, but more important, I agree with what they say.

If you must be born on a holiday, you can't top the Fourth. Halloween? No one's coming to your party. Thanksgiving's no good; a day devoted to decency leaves little latitude for merriment. If you're born on Christmas, the holiday of a thousand presents, you either feel your birthday was stolen from you or that you are the promised one.

But the Fourth is celebratory and so public. It's Independence Day, the day everyone is born. Uncle Sam stands free on stilts, little kids freely mimic the fireflies with their sparklers, the muscle cars at the main intersection rev their engines waiting for the light to change.

Deep down, or not so deep down, America has always been a little crazy. And if today's your birthday, you're all the good things -- democracy, modernity, and rock and roll -- rolled into a big bionic firecracker.

How many nights I have sat on grass growing damp under the blanket, as the fire department readies the display.

You arrive at dusk, and it's another ninety minutes before the first fuse is lit. By the time it starts, your elbows and neck are already aching, and the mosquitoes have made you half crazy from biting. But then the rockets go up, and

they reach their apex, and for an instant time stands still, then -- kapow.

If you have not seen it already, catch the 1984 Godfrey Reggio film *Koyaanisqatsi*, subtitled *Life out of Balance*, and see it on the biggest TV screen available. It's a wordless documentary that pioneered many film techniques that have since become cliché today, like clouds racing across the city sky.

The movie contrasts the tacky vanity of human endeavors with the gorgeous panoramas of nature and time. But the last eleven minutes of the movie are heartbreaking.

While Philip Glass's melancholy organ fugue endlessly spirals and repeats, the camera follows a Titan rocket launch in slow-motion.

Somehow, despite the incredible speed of the launch, the camera stays focused on the rocket.

You feel you are right next to the doomed vessel. You know nothing about the rocket's contents or the plans for the launch. But you know that the technology is the work of the most talented humans on earth. And as it rises, and the music plays, you feel the hopes of our species rise with it into the stratosphere.

And then, something goes wrong, and the rocket wobbles off its proper trajectory, and it begins to fall, venting burning gas on its way down. Because it is slow-motion, the rocket seems to fall forever, to the sad triplets on the organ. You have been watching it so long at this point that you feel you are the rocket's parent.

Seeing your offspring, your highest aspirations, tumble helplessly back to earth, is strangely heartbreaking. That is what technology, and for that matter, all human endeavor does. It is our

glory that we get up every day and give it another shot. Until we die, we try.

As for the Fourth of July, we know that independence arises from the will. The will inside us is what no external tyrant can take from us. It defines all the hope and pathos there is in being human.

We are not guaranteed by our creator to achieve happiness, only that we have the right to pursue it. Every rocket falls to earth, and nobody lives forever, much less happily ever after.

Still, we keep pursuing -- ferociously, illogically, stubbornly. So when you are sitting out on that blanket Sunday night, with the explosions momentarily lighting up the brown cloud of gunpowder hanging in the air, consider what the ruckus is really about. We rise, we fall, and as long as we are able, we rise again.

Against the certainty of ultimate failure, we keep hurling ourselves at our hopes. The hero is you, no matter what day you were born.

Happy Fourth, everybody.

Asteroid Bearing the Name of Superstar Ted Nugent Makes Its Way Toward Earth

Suicide is still illegal in some states.

Life insurance companies will deny your claim.

Then there is the problem encountered in murder mysteries, what to do with the body.

If you have loved ones you do not want to leave a mess.

You don't want them to open the door and see you.

There must be a way.

You could step off the curb and dive
under a bus,
But that would be so mean to the driver,
To his wife and child.
They will never get over it.

There is the possibility of well-meaning
intervention.

A cop with a bullhorn might talk you out of it.

Or you attack a squad car like you are on angel
dust
and instead of shooting you down
the cop takes you home for meatloaf and pie.

Play golf in an electrical storm.
Teeing off on the eleventh hole
and lightning taps you on the shoulder to cut in.
Your friends would remark how you loved that
damn game.

You could change your mind about all this,
Then a suicide bomber steps into the store.

You T-bone a car at the mall and out steps
Death,
all bloody in his hoodie,
a 48-oz Big Gulp in one hand.
Death expires.

What happens then?

Time passes.

The predicament deepens.

You pay a killer to take you out, without saying
where or when.

Make it look like an accident, you say.

Years pass, and you see his name in the obits
And write a check to the charity he loved.

Remembering you are allergic to bee stings,
you wade into a honeysuckle bush,
But the bees that swarmed there last summer
are gone,

killed off by neonicotinoids.

You dream every night about relief.

A swooping roc from the Arabian Nights
snatches you in its talons
and carries you off to its nest beyond
mountains,

Where its hungry young are waiting.

In your misery you shake your fist at God
and lift a revolver to your temple.

A band of winged babies appear out of
nowhere, with sashes,
and assume you bodily into heaven.

You demand an explanation.

One baby explains, They are running a
promotion today,
And you're the lucky number.

You think today might be the day, and high in
the sky
you see a bright light bearing down on the
earth.

It is an asteroid named Ted Nugent by
whimsical astronomers.

Ted has been arcing across the galaxy for 4
million years

And on its face is etched your name.

The asteroid's purpose is to find you and put
you out of your pain,

Per your request.

But the asteroid won't just tag you --
The oceans will rise, the earth's crust
will cave in like an aluminum can,
Fire will rain down on every zipcode,
Everyone will perish, humans and beasts,
bodies crushed in closing fissures.
The world will be extinguished
And frantic crowds about to be swallowed up
nevertheless turn toward you and ask,
What did you do?
How did you make this happen?
Why are getting dragged down along with you?

The Olive Garden

We filed in to the place on County Rd C, me and the boys. We kidded the waitresses and mulled over the plasticized menu. So many choices!

We ordered numerous carafes of house red wine, some giant salads, and spaghetti and meatballs for thirteen. Plus infinity of breadsticks.

I ordered the spicy chicken alfredo.

The boys glugged down the wine and chowed down on the pasta. It was a major celebration for them. We felt on top of the world. I looked at their faces and loved them all.

And yet ...

Common sense tells you they had to know I was suffering. You didn't see me digging into my alfredo. Zero appetite for some reason.

Not from pain at the present moment, but from knowing it was headed my way. They wouldn't be paying the price. Just me. They were not displaying empathy. They wouldn't be paying the price. Just me.

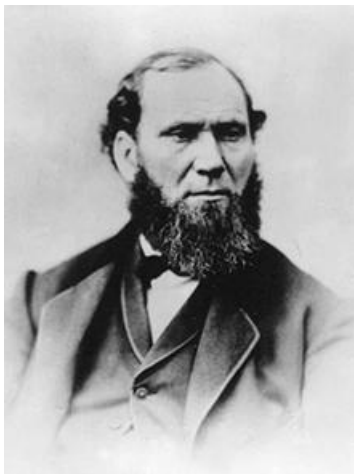
I thought entirely about myself. My skin. so fair, that all the girls loved, say goodbye to that. My face, the one they liked to kiss, that would be fucked up royally.

My whole nervous system would be set to SCREAM. I was counting on that medicine I got for my birthday, to bring a bit of relief.

But look at them, hogging the pasta. You can love your friends, you know, and still wish the boys weren't such self-absorbed douchebags.

If just one of you looked me in the eye right now and said, I see you, bud. I see you.

Jerks.



Pinkerton's Pink Tongue

Tough guy, Allan Pinkerton. Head of the Union Intelligence Service during the Civil War, the forerunner of the

Secret Service. Saved President Lincoln from an assassination plot. Spied on the other side in the Civil War under the alias Major E.J. Allen. Chased down bank robbers, including Jesse James.

Not an especially nice guy. Fought strikers at every turn. Helped put down an anti-slavery revolution in Cuba, while professing to be an abolitionist. He did not believe in God. Laughed when he said so.

So.

Allan Pinkerton was in Chicago working on a plan to centralize all criminal identification records, a database which was to be the basis for the FBI. On July 1, 1884, crossing State Street, he tripped on a curb. His face crashing into the granite caused him to bite his tongue nearly off. Over time the tongue became infected and gangrenous. He died of septicemia.

Chicago.

Chocolate Chip Sea Cucumber

The National Ocean Service web site explains that sea cucumbers are not actually cucumbers, nor are they vegetables or toll house cookies.

In fact they are animals, echinoderms, like starfish.

The misleading site features a picture of a delicious looking chocolate chip sea cucumber

with no warning that the chocolate chips are not really chocolate chips, rather they are some kind of brown protective camouflage markings --

and the name does them a Darwinian
disservice,
undermining the dignity they are entitled to
in the biosphere, and disappointing to people
hoping to enjoy the taste
of real chocolate chip cucumbers.



MLK, Jr., born 1929
-- same year as Anne
Frank.

Vern Triplett's Salad

April 4, 1968. I'm
waiting tables at my
folks' restaurant.

Vern Triplett, a frequent customer who owns a glass company down the road a mile, sits with his wife at their usual table.

Vern never needs to see the menu, just wants to know what the special is. Polish short ribs.

He's always been a snarling white wise guy. Everything he says comes out the side of his mouth, like that makes it ironic.

He looks like J. Jonah Jameson in Spiderman.

He smacks his lips drily. "I hear they shot Martin Luther Coon today."

I just stared at him.

"I'll have the Frenchman's steak. Extra onions. Bleu cheese dressing. Not blue, like everyone says -- bleu. It's French, like the steak. Mary'll have the ribs."

It'd been a tough year already. To Vern this was good news. A palate cleanser.

In the walk-in cooler I spit in his side salad, then spooned on the dressing, thick and creamy.

I didn't even know any black people, but I was shaking.

Jesse Jackson and My Uncle Jack

My uncle Jack Finley has been many things, in his time -- a beachcomber in Hawaii, a Beatnik in San Francisco, a newspaper photographer, US Army soldier, a kite-flier in Milwaukee, and many other things.

My dad, 13 years his senior, tried to fit him in at General Motors, where he himself was somewhat of a success, but that success was not transferable to his little brother. Jack could never be a settle-down-and-go-to-work-jerk.

Most notably, for me, Jack worked for Martin Luther King Jr. in the 60s as a sound man and photographer. Jack was at the March on



Washington and many historic events. He was also present at many nonhistoric events, as King did not just show up for photo-ops. Always working, meeting, marching, exhorting. I figured Jack knew a different MLK Jr than I did. He described him as kind, and having a better sense of humor than his public self.

King was the rarest of thing, a sincere, a humble leader. Jack has a fantastic collection of photos from those days, which hardly anyone has seen. He showed them to me. Wow, you know?

Jack sometimes refers to me as the only relative he can stand to be in the same room with -- to me, not to the whole family. Thanks, Jack. What he meant was, we're similar, always looking for the bend in the river. We do love one another.

Through Jack I met Jesse Jackson, and I even babysit Jackson's kids for about 20 minutes, at some event, while he and Mrs. Jackson gave a talk. I babysat the one who went to jail, the namesake, Jesse Jackson, Jr.

This story occurred during a hitchhiking trip I made to Chicago in 1968, to see him. It shows what a stupid young man I was. My ride let me

out in the Loop and I took the El down to about Comiskey Park, and I got out.

All I had was a paper map of Chicago to guide me. I just wanted to visit the place where King worked, and see Jack. I had to walk about 20 blocks down Drexel to get there.

I was 18 years old, wearing white Levis and a bright red zip-up jacket, plus a baseball hat. I was a freshman at a college way out in the Ohio countryside. I couldn't have looked whiter if I'd dipped myself in primer. Truth: I looked like I believed everyone was free to go wherever they wanted -- and that everyone agreed with that proposition. Peace, brother. It was

offensive. I immediately attracted attention. A band of four men intercepted me on Wells Street. I thought they looked ominous, but I pretended I was happy as a jay.



One guy did all the talking. “Hey man, do you know where you are?”

I stuck to my game plan, which was to act friendlier than anyone they had ever encountered before, ever.

“Hey fellas, nice to meet you. I’m trying to get to Jesse Jackson’s office. You know where that is?”

“Yeah, we know. Why you wanna go there?”

“My uncle [pictured] works there. I wanna surprise him.”

The guys look at one another. They weren’t too scary. The lead guy was big and had a faint mustache. He seemed more to be defending the principle of me walking down Wells Street. It just didn’t strike him as right. It occurred to me he thought I was looking to buy dope.

I was the sort of person sensible people would shake their head in disgust at, and look away.

Guy asks if I have any cash. That wasn’t good.

“I got about eight dollars. I’m hitching from Cleveland.”

“Well, you know, it costs money to get from here to Drexel Avenue. Don’t you know that?”

The young men stood shoulder to shoulder.

I got sad. “How much do you think?”

“Well, the toll is always in flux, depending on the individual and the mission they are on. Without consulting today’s tables, I’d say you owe about a fiver.”

Now, the problem was I had a bit more than eight. More like sixteen or seventeen. I tried to draw a bill from the pocket, hoping I didn’t pull the ten, or a one, which would mean I had to draw again, which might aggravate the gang.

I don’t mean they were gang members. But they might have been, I don’t know. I had no idea what gang members looked like. Except I supposed they were all black.

Anyway, it was a long way to Drexel and 46th, which was where Jesse Jackson's operations were. By that time I was broke.

I'm sure that was amusing to you. What follows is not amusing.

As soon as I arrived at the steps to Operation PUSH, a kid, maybe 8, came flying through the glass door. He must have been playing up top with another kid. The glass cut the boy seriously, across his neck and face and arm. He was bleeding on the sidewalk. Somebody call the ambulance. A cop pulled up in a squad car. The kid was rushed off to hospital. I took a roll of paper towels from the kitchen area and did my best to daub the steps blood free.

Then Jack arrived from an assignment and we went and got Chinese food, which he paid for because I was broke for some reason.

For the next couple of days, I accompanied Jack while he accompanied Jesse Jackson -- who was an incredible, narcissistic piece of work, and Jack didn't have much respect for him -- around the Chicago metro.

At one point, Jesse and his wife Jacqueline needed to be in different rooms at the same time, and I got to babysit their two young children -- including the eldest, Jesse Jackson, Jr. -- for about 20 minutes, like I said. Here I am bragging about the deed 50 years later, as if anybody gives a shit.

Great Clips Girl

Waiting area is not a social place --
people old and young flip through
old Glamours and Men's Healths,
waiting our turn for a haircut.

But this tiny girl, clinging to mom's finger,
is taking first steps on the linoleum floor.

Her father, of Indian descent, is rocking proudly
on his heels, his teeth so white,
and the child glances greedily at all the faces,
delighted to be at the bullseye of the room,
her starry eyes undeniable,
we stare with open mouths.

Mr. Carhart's Dog

In 1871 the first dog rode in an automobile, although some object to it being called an automobile,

as it was powered by steam, not gasoline.

But Ajax was unquestionably a dog, an Alsatian hound,

owned by Dr. J.W. Carhart, minister

At the Methodist Episcopal Church of Racine, Wisconsin, and unquestionably inventor of the steam wagon he called The Spark.

Ajax could not understand he was the first dog to exceed a ground speed of 25 miles per hour but the record is his nonetheless.

No dog had traveled faster up to that point
unless it was picked up by a tornado or chased
off a cliff.

There were no windows on the vehicle,
The master steered it using a lever,
but Ajax sat on the edge of the buckboard,
pink tongue hanging off to one side.
Neighbors cursed at the sound it made,
Or the soot it dispensed to clothing on the line,
But Ajax was quite pleased to be included.

Praise

I won an award once, for a book I wrote.

“Best Business Book, The Americas.”

I remember when my agent called with the good news.

I accepted it in a measured way.

I was to fly to London, receive the award in Whitehall Palace, where the overthrown King, Charles I, was separated from his head,

Under a fresco by Peter Paul Rubens, plus a check for \$15,000.

But here is the interesting part.

When I hung up on my agent informing me of winning the award, I went crazy with rage,

storming through the house, punching the walls.

How dare they give me an award for that silly thing when all that mattered was the other work?

I have a hard time accepting compliments.

I'm not sure why that is.

All you have to do is say Thank You.

When I was in college, I acted in plays.

You know, putting on a play involves about two months

of planning, preparation, memorizing, all the time worrying about what could go wrong.

Things can go terribly wrong in plays, you know.

The best part I ever got was in Fairy Tales in the Wilde(r), a send-up of himself by an older

student, Gary Houston, who had good parts later in Fargo and Watchmen.

In the play, I acted like Gary, who styled himself as Oscar Wilde, making fun of the airs he put on, his odd rhythms and preposterous claims.

Very over the top, lots of laughs, very fun.

I got a big ovation when it was over, which made me feel --

Uncomfortable. In the reception line, some poor fellow in an argyle vest said to me, "You sure did a good job up there!"

I nearly beheaded him. "What do you know?" I demanded to know.

"Tell me. Because I would like to know exactly what you understand!"

For some reason, I don't do well with praise.

I want it, but -- I hate it. As false. Or as missing the point.

Or it's the wrong praise.

I remember earlier, when I was 15, I took the Ohio Scholarship test for language and literature. My girlfriend Julie Miller encouraged me.

Julie scored #2 in the state. Because she was so goddamn brilliant.

And I, to my surprise, scored #17.

We celebrated together over Cokes at her house after school.

Then, walking home, hot tears came rolling down my cheeks.

I cried like I'd never cried before, where all the neighbors could see.

It was uncool in the extreme.

Because I knew, when I got home, my dad would not be there.

He had gone off to live in California, and he never wrote back.

And yet -- I wanted my dad to be proud of me, I wanted that awful man to shake my hand, and tell me I had done good more than anything in the world.

Ed Eubanks

"I would not alarm you said she,
but your mouth is as wide as can be."
Then that debauched creacha
cried, "I'm gonna eatcha!"
and lickety-split, oh, did he.

- from Ed Eubanks' "Little Red Riding Hood"

I had a friend for thirty years named Ed. We were both writers. But while I got to make a living all that time by writing, he wrote all of his writings on the side, and unpaid. Because no one would think of hiring a pitch-black ghetto man like Ed Eubanks to be their neighborhood reporter, ad writer, story pitcher or blog writer.

We were similar persons, only one was very white and one was very black. I was a poster child for white privilege. I proved myself as a

writer from an early age, and forever after was able to find work or earn profit by writing.

I was always “what the market wanted.” Ed was never what the market wanted. But the poems, stories, jokes and kids’ books poured out of him all his life. To put food on his table for his family he worked in a variety of roles, finally as property manager for a number of high-rise apartment complexes. He could sell, he could negotiate, and he could evict by means of a baseball bat.

Without ever taking a class, or being draped with a sash, Ed was a master writer. He had such a feeling for the sound of words as they galloped toward and off the cliff of his storytelling. The exhilarating wheel!s, the screams, finally the thuds on the canyon floor below.

I knew him for five years before I met him. Long before the Internet, he and I took part in a certain type of BBS that was popular here in flyover country, called Citadel. Citadel was a set of cheapo (BBS) bulletin board systems where people left messages for one another. The mark of Citadels was that they attracted more than their share of losers, psychos, grifters and Mensa members.

Ed was several characters online, but the one I remember best was Painkiller, known for fashioning exquisite hoaxes that took months to unravel. I was also several people online, including Anemone of the People, but most people knew me as Loveless -- after the poet/pioneer pioneer cyberneticist Ada Lovelace, daughter of Lord Byron and a compelling figure in the field of software engineering.

People said things like, “Geez, if only Painkiller was to meet Lovelace!” Like, Godzilla meeting King Kong. I’m not sure what was supposed to happen -- just that the earth would probably tremble.

In truth I was no match for Painkiller, who could inflict painful death in a short paragraph, or draw blood from you for weeks at a time without you knowing. He was a poet, a comedian, a commentator, a prophet -- and a painkiller, who could end your suffering the easy way or the hard way. The character of Painkiller was his revenge for the life Ed had to live.

One night at a Citadel gathering, I came face to face with the ‘Killer. As is often the case with offline personalities, the public personality did not match the real one.

Where Painkiller was an extinguisher of lives and a figure to be feared, Ed was just a guy trying to get by.

I became Ed's agent, holding the door open for magazines, readings and other events so he could join. It wasn't easy because he was so ambivalent about putting himself forward, saying No, no, no, no right up until the curtain rose.

Something had beaten the confidence, the hope out of him. For thirty years he had kidney disease, and never put himself on the organ donor list. Too pessimistic.

There was one love in Ed Eubanks' life, Val Cervenka. When they met, Ed locked eyes on her and never let go. No matter how she struggled to get free.

She was a forensic entomologist at the University, a bug professor/expert witness. She understood how insects help investigators understand crime scenes. Specifically, the presence and condition of maggots on a dead body told police how long the body had been lying in the dryer.

Ed and Val fought a lot. They were both so peculiar, and so unsuited to marriage, that it was remarkable they made a go of it at all.

Fate played a hand. The day they signed a divorce decree was the day they learned Val was pregnant with twins. That discovery put a damper on Val's plans to get as far from Ed as humanly possible. The divorced couple moved back in together, and tried to sort out their future.

This is Ed's very favorite story. One night he and Val were out. They instructed the sitter to keep

the twins, each four years old, out of the refrigerator. They did this for the usual reasons, but for another reason as well. Val had left a plastic container of maggots inside the refrigerator door, for a case she was to testify for the following morning.

Now you know how the story unravels. Babysitter falls asleep on the couch, twins break into the fridge, and made off with about six ounces of chilled, swollen maggots.

Many fathers, going through an experience like this, would keep that story a strict family secret until death overtook them. To protect the reputation of the children.

No Ed. He told me that story until tears ran down his cheeks. It summed up everything he had figured out about life. Redemption and horror, squeezed tightly together.

I kept telling Ed he couldn't be very sick, because I kept running into him and he always seemed about the same -- plodding and miserable, but still breathing.

Then one Sunday morning Val called me from Hennepin County Hospital.

"If you still want to see Ed, you better come now."

I dropped everything and drove to the hospital. By the time I got to Ed's room, they were already clearing it out. On one bed sat Val and their lovely daughter Emma, 13. In a medical chair sat Edward Eubanks, his incubator tube removed, and his mouth cracked open asymetrically. My beautiful friend looked like a zombie from the movies -- a touch which he would have appreciated.

I sat and talked with Emma and Val. I was not prepared for this. I could have talked to Ed, even dead, for quite some time. It was much harder making conversation with the living, who could not know how special Ed was to me, and how so little had come easily to him in life, as happened in mine.

At his funeral, I read a joke he wrote, or perhaps just perfected, in anticipation of his own passing. People were aghast at the brokenhearted rudeness of it. Only a few laughed. It was a funeral, after all -- the very one Ed had predicted.

But you have to admit, it is pretty funny:

An elderly man lay dying in his bed. Nearing the final curtain, he suddenly smelled the aroma of his favorite chocolate chip cookies wafting up the stairs. He gathered his

remaining strength, and lifted himself from the bed.

Leaning against the wall, he slowly made his way out of the bedroom, and with even greater effort forced himself down the stairs, gripping the railing with both hands. With labored breath, he leaned against the door-frame, gazing into the kitchen.

Were it not for death's agony, he would have thought himself already in heaven: there, spread out upon newspapers on the kitchen table were literally hundreds of his favorite chocolate chip cookies.

Was it heaven? Or, was it one final act of heroic love from his devoted wife, seeing to it that he left this world a happy man?

Mustering one great final effort, he threw himself toward the table, landing on his

knees in a rumpled posture. His parched lips parted; the wondrous taste of the cookie was already in his mouth; seemingly bringing him back to life.

The aged and withered hand, shakingly made its way to a cookie at the edge of the table, when it was suddenly smacked with a spatula by his wife. "Stay out of those!" she said, "They're for the funeral."

Black and Proud

When I got my census form last week, I dutifully filled it out. That is, until I came to the section on race. On an impulse, I said that our entire family was black. We aren't. We are white as sheets, off-white sheets anyway, all four of us. But I marked us black, perhaps committing a felony in the process. I can't tell you why exactly. But I had my reasons, and I will list them in no particular order:

1. First, the question bugged me. What do we say about ourselves when we check off a box like that? If you know nothing about me except that I'm white, or that I'm black, how does that help you understand me? In fact, doesn't it have the opposite effect -- painting me with

vague, sweeping generalities that may or may not be true?

2. I did it out of old-fashioned liberalism, a hard habit to break. My understanding is that the census exists primarily to count citizens so that congressional districts may be accurately apportioned. What our color has to do with congressional district apportionment is, again, a mystery. But minorities get undercounted in the census, and are thus underserved in government outlays. So I thought I'd counterbalance an uncounted black family with our family. Sure, this means fewer benefits for my race, but I figured, hey, white people had a good year.

3. I always wanted to be black, like in the Lou Reed song. And this seemed like a much easier and more socially acceptable way to go about it than wearing makeup like John Howard Griffin

in "Black Like Me." And less embarrassing than Al Jolson in "The Jazz Singer."

4. I thought it would do my family good. I told my family at supper we would be black from now on. Not that it would change anything in the way we go about our business. But somewhere, on a government mag-tape database somewhere, spinning around at a bazillion miles per second, we're black. My family didn't care.

5. I wanted to show solidarity with my extended family, which is diverse, including great people of numerous stripes and hues, including African-American. To my in-laws Kathy, Seantelle, Neechie, John and Marcus -- this is for you. And to my Uncle Jack, who used to do audiovisual work for Jesse Jackson, and now has a huge adoptive family of folks of color

-- I haven't met you all, but I can tell you're terrific.

6. Patriotism. If I have heard anything repeated over and over all my life until it makes me sick, it is that you can be anything you want to be in America. You can be president or an astronaut or a cowboy. Well, at the moment I want to be black. So by what right can my country bar me from this ambition? I know this sounds silly, but I mean it. Isn't this the place that isn't supposed to put a ceiling on your ambitions?

7. Because, scientifically speaking, I am African-American, and so are you. According to the Eve Theory, which is more than just a theory, the entire human race appears to have originated in the DNA of a single woman who lived on the Olduvai Plain 1.5 million years ago. Every living person has DNA that can be traced

to her. If that doesn't make us African, what could?



Craig Mulligan at 13

Craig on the Slag Heap

Uncle Craig and I went
for a walk by the gravel
pit.

“What I don’t get is
pussy licking,” he said.

“It’s in all the

magazines, how to get your
girlfriends off.

The entire concept is alien to me.”

He’s 50, I’m 25. My middle name is Craig.

My mom doted on him as a little brother,

Despite his racism, his alcoholism and his lead foot.

And now here he is, asking for my advice.

“Well, you don’t *have* to,” I say, picturing Aunt Shirley.

“You would only do it if you wanted to,

Or if you knew it would be a treat for your partner.

You wouldn’t do it every single time, I don’t think.

That would seem like you’re proving something,

Or there’s something out of balance in you.”

We walked down to the dropoff by the creek,

And watched a stone go plunk.

“Of course, women probably have their own attitude.”

Amputation

The nurse practitioner asked about my diabetes.

I told her my A1c wasn't too bad,
but I still had bad days, and it creeped me out
going to bed

With my feet tingling and burning.

I started to get that teary feeling and confessed
to a secret horror, having my feet cut off
Because that's what happened to my Uncle
Craig.

I wasn't with him, but family members told
How his feet hurt him so, and afterwards
He got around in a wheelchair, but only

For a few weeks before he died.

I think of those stumps, and the bloody bandages,

And I didn't want that to happen to me.

The NP said: "I don't think we do that any more."

Layoffs

When I was laid off in 2008, my company picked me first out of 60 workers. What did that mean?

And I was not cool with it. I knew it would hurt my family a lot. In a few months my daughter lost her job, and committed suicide that night.

My teammates were sorry to see me go, and they scheduled a going away/we love you sort of event. It was bittersweet. I thanked them for their friendship, and for all the good times.

My cubicle partner Vance drove me home, and I invited him in for a beer. We were pals.

You know, I said to him, I appreciate the farewell, but there's something more I would like.

What's that, Vance asked.

I would like for my team to acknowledge that I took the bullet for them. Because I took the bullet, they got to go on working and getting paid. I had given them a valuable gift. Their families would thrive, and mine would not.

He looked at me awkwardly, and I gave him a hug and sent him home.

Within a week, the next wave of layoffs swept several others away.

But not Vance. He was a valuable guy, a workhorse with lots of skills. He wound up taking everyone's jobs and doing them himself. No wonder he seemed awkward.

But here's the thing. He has never responded to any of my emails or calls. Let's get together. Do Subway like we used to do.

He hated the job that was handed to him. But he felt so ashamed.

Blackout

The city of London hid in its own darkness
knowing night was when the planes came,
and a single pinprick of light would give them
away.

Fires were doused so no sparks flew out of
chimneys.

Windows were painted or covered over with
black cloth,

Shops installed airlock entries so no light
escaped

when customers entered or left. Traffic lights
were blinkered

so light only deflected down. Policeman
patrolled the streets,

saying "Put out that light!" The lamps were dimmed,

the fuseboxes shut off, people anxious for a cigarette put off the urge.

Coastal cities turned out their lights, so towns would not give away ships in their harbors.

In Ipswich there was a panic because no one could figure out

how to switch off the huge illuminated clock.

The main problem was cars, which mowed down pedestrians at crosswalks,

or left their lights on and gave away everything.

It was not that the city was invisible to the squadrons humming overhead,

or that radar or maps did not exist. It was that,

without identifying lights, bombardiers did not know

what was where, they had no point of reference.

The first few moments outside were completely bewildering.

After a time you learned to grope forward in the dark,

hands outstretched, for early warning that something was there.

Letter to Uncle Jack

Unkajack -- I am writing a one-page memoir of my visit to you in S. Chicago in 1968. I think I hitchhiked, and took the El to Comiskey Park, and walked the rest of the distance to Operation Breadbasket headquarters. It was about a 20 or 30 block walk, as I recall. I was wearing a bright red jacket and white Levis, and I got stopped numerous times and asked for money, in a funny but threatening way. I had very little experience with black people, and I thought, "Summer of Love," let's all smile on one another. I remember one guy telling me, "Boy, you on the wrong side of town." I was nervous, and strove to be likable. I was broke, but I gave these guys all my money, in about five increments -- not quite nine dollars. I want to know the address where you worked. When i

got there, a child of 6 was pushed or tripped through the glass door, and severed an artery. It was chaotic. I helped mop up the blood with a paper towel. Later you introduced me to Ruby. At one point, maybe in Arlington, Jesse was to give a speech and he asked me to keep an eye on his eldest, Jesse, Jr., and the next child, a girl. It was an amazing trip for me. I was real proud to know you, and how you got on with people. What was the address of Operation Push, or Breadbasket, or SCLC? Not the number, but the street!

Uncle Jack responds:

It was at 47th. St. and Drexel Blvd. since renamed to Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd. I have some memories from that era from 1965 - 1921 but I don't remember that occasion ~ I would love to see what you write about that day and whatever we did while you were there so I can include it in my Memoir that I hope to finish

soon. Keep me informed with what's going on including what Jon and Rachel are doing in their lives. I would love to get to see you again someday soon as I have no idea how much time either of us have between this moment and when we both reach the dead end of our roads less traveled ~ It's been a great trudge at times but never getting bored. My wish bucket is getting near the bottom but my major one is still in progress. First, the U.S. Empire's Truth and Reconciliation Court followed by an International version. ~ Love and NAMASTE !

In the Oncology Waiting Room

I promised myself I wouldn't write about this topic, but fuck it.

A couple in their thirties look for two chairs together, waiting to be called for her infusion.

She is the one with the cancer -- you can tell by her brightly colored scarf.

Nobody but cancer victims and refugees wear scarves any more.

You can tell that, ten years earlier, they were a powerful pair.

She is strong, with strong legs, and she walks like a woman who knows who she is.

He is a tough guy in his motorcycle jacket, but wearing a beleaguered expression.

Being a tough guy isn't much use when you are dealing with a spouse who has cancer.

The cancer doesn't see you coming and ducks out the back way.

In fact, it's a two-fer. She has cancer, I'm guessing of the brain.

But he has cancer, too -- it is eating him alive, you can see it in his eyes

and all he can do is open doors for her, and fetch a cup of coffee in a styrofoam cup.

Shakespeare in Love

My last tumor panic, 1998.

It was the night before Valentines Day and Rachel and I went out for a rare dinner and movie date. Money was a bit scarce. I had just bought a print for us, by an artist friend, of two birch trees gently intertwining. It cost \$300, but I was in love. Wouldn't you know, I got an overdraft notice from the bank that very afternoon.

We choose an Indian restaurant in Minneapolis, figuring not many people will think of celebrating Valentine's Day Indian style. When the waiter, named Dinesh, stiffly presents us with our menus and leaves, Rachel whispers that he doesn't seem to have much of a sense

of humor. But I hold out for him. "He's all right," I say.

We order wine, my first drink since suffering a "cerebral event," a flaming thrombosis, two weeks earlier. What a difference it is, to be wearing clothes and drinking generic merlot in a nice restaurant, compared to that hospital robe and hospital bed.

We order our dinner, telling Dinesh to cook our food no spicier than mild-to-medium. "We are from St. Paul," I say slowly. No reaction.

So I tell Rachel her about my poetry reading earlier that morning. The downtown mall thought a reading about love would spur sales. When it was my time to read, people were passing before me like traffic at a major intersection. The sound system was loud and hollow. But this was what I told the shoppers:

Rachel listens to my monologue with eyes glistening. Dinesh brings our dinner, which is spectacular -- a dozen little dishes and sauces and chutneys and breads. I continue with my speech at the mall:

"The reason poets don't write love poems," I said, "is that they love their muses more -- their imaginations. It's one reason poetry seems flat today. It's not about love for others. It's not a gift we give readers. It's like masturbation -- fun, but unromantic.

"I have a special insight into this issue because I found out two weeks ago that I have a brain tumor. Inoperable!

"So I fret. What if I lose my IQ? Or my sense of humor? What if I lose my muse?

"And I'm asking myself, Which is more important to me, my muse or my wife? And the

answer is -- my wife. Poetry only wants you at the top of your game, when all your faculties are clicking in perfect sync. But even if I come out of the operation washed up as a poet, Rachel will still love me."

I'm telling Rachel all this over tandoori chicken and naan. I'm very pleased with my public proclamation. She just shakes her head.

"You're so full of it," she says. "If you love me more than your writing, why do you write all the time?"

I nod, and think about all the times I head upstairs to clatter on the computer rather than climb into bed with her.

"But," I say. "If I come out of the hospital a vegetable, you'll still love me, right? Whereas I'll probably never hear from my muse again."

"You're going to be OK, you know," she says.

"Sure. But if worse comes to worse, you have power of attorney. If I'm really bad you can pull the plug on me. If I'm just pretty bad, you can put me in a home. All I want is that you come visit me sometimes. I mean, I would want you to have a life, maybe get married again."

For a moment there is silence, as I push the basmati rice with a fork.

"You know," Rachel says, "if you vegged out, you could still live at home. Even if, worst case, I began dating again, there's no reason we couldn't still be together."

"Then it's settled," I say. I ask Dinesh for the bill. He gives it to me, and I give it to Rachel.

"Handle this, dear," I say. Dinesh cracks up.

"See," I tell Rachel, "I told you he had a sense of humor."

After dinner we go to a movie -- Shakespeare in Love. Rachel and I have a ball watching it, whispering excitedly, shoulder to shoulder, giggling.

A man sitting in front of me turns around not once, but twice, to insist we put a cap on it. I spin him back around with a twirl of my finger:

"Just enjoy the movie," I said to him, as if I was doing him a favor, as if it wasn't his fault he couldn't recognize true love -- "please."

My Dad's Shame

I know now that my dad felt shame abandoning the family.

He stole, and got caught, and had to leave Ohio.

I know now he felt he was a good guy who never got credit for meaning well.

It wasn't his fault his daughter was born sick and died young.

He wasn't the reason his wife was the way she was, despising everything he did.

Later in life he undertook to make amends helping tenants along I-15 in sorry straits, especially the young mothers, whose gratitude and

approval he sought.

He even went to court and gave depositions against bad fathers who did exactly what he did, abandoning their families when their luck turned sour.

He lent out money to these families to pay for heat and forgave the rent, month after month.

He came to be considered a man to turn to, a godfather of the Mojave, once his second wife had bled the evil out.

For her, he gave up drinking and smoking and rare sirloin.

He teed off from the hard fairways each morning before the dew burned off.

Eventually he stopped chasing the waitresses who had tempted him all of his life,

with their snug rayon uniforms, their lipstick,
and the arousing way they slipped him the
check.

So when a tumor sprouted around his lungs the
size of a pie-plate, he felt gypped again
and cursed his luck, and in his wretchedness
ratted out everyone he ever thought he loved,
including me, for remembering everything he
ever said and did.

Roy McBride

Roy was from Michigan, like me. Me from Flint, him from Muskegon. I met him because, in the early 70s, many of my writer friends were Macalester College graduates, and Roy was part of that group.

He always wore a dashiki in those days, and a beret with it. Though he was a big guy, Roy struck me as the gentlest human being I ever met.

His voice was breathy -- you could hear the air moving around inside him, before stepping out into the open as speech.

He typically nodded for a few seconds, and smiled, and only then would he say what he had to say. It was weird, but everyone hung on his proclamations.

He skipped certain consonants. I'm not sure whether to characterize it as a speech defect or something black. Like, he would say *axe* instead of *ask*, which is not unusual. But then he pronounced my name *Mockle*.

Rain or shine, we always got high together. And we would gossip. He loved his circle of friends very much, and he would quote recent conversations he had had with them.

Roy believed we were all stupendous artists. Not because we had technique or knew anything, but because in our hearts we were artists.

Looking backward, I was a pretty messed-up guy at that time, eager to impress but undermined by my anger and loneliness. But that's not who Roy saw. He saw this glowing angelic person, with wonderful gifts springing out of him at every pore. Me.

How could you not love a guy like that?

I edited the University's lit mag at the time, and it was my pleasure to take an epic poem of his, "Levi Strauss, You Have Left Your Mark on the Ass of America." It was beat, funny, observant, surrealistic, political, and angry but angry in the gentlest way. Like, injustice is bad, but we must still love one another -- even those doing the injustice.

To be free in America you must be brave
braver than Nathan Hale
braver than Daniel Boone or Davy Crockett
braver than Nat Turner
braver than Teddy Roosevelt
braver than Harry Truman
braver even than The Incredible Hulk
who fears nothing but himself
the man the American
deep inside his green skin

One time, I flew to LA to visit my dad, and Roy was visiting LA at the same time. I rang him up, and we drove to Huntington Beach, where he was staying, and we sat on a grassy hillock across the highway from the beach -- I'll bet that empty lot has a billion dollars worth of real estate on it now -- and we talked.

He had come to California to make a final plea to Margaret Faulk, his beloved Muggsie from Macalester.

"I told her my love for her is all-encompassing, that it reaches all the way around the world and back again," he said.

Still, she sent him away empty. My guess is that she moved to LA in part to get away from this giant-hearted, needy man. My further guess is that, as much fun as he was for me to get high with, he must have been a difficult person to

live with. Pennyless, prospect-free, more than a little moonstruck.

He cried, and I hugged him on the hillock. "You will get another chance at love," I said.

I was right. Years later, he asked me to write a commemorative poem for his wedding to the beautiful Lucinda. And I wrote a corker. But he was high when he asked me to do it, and he forgot, and had Kevin Fitzpatrick, who officiated over the ceremony on Nicollet Island on the Mississippi.

The incident repeated itself weirdly when Rachel and I got married, July 25, 1981 -- the same week Charles and Diana got wedded. I asked Roy to read a love poem of his that I also published first. It went, in part:

This man
and this woman

want to love
want to be loved
want to love

It is the simplest and most adorable poem I ever read.

Anyway, on the day of the wedding, I posted pictures of Charles and Diana on trees on the pathway into the Heloise Butler Wildflower Sanctuary, where the ceremony was to be held.

Roy never showed. Turns out, he wrote the date down wrong in his calendar. A week later he showed up, traveling from St. Paul by city bus, and made his way to an empty place in the woods.

Rachel and I moved to Worthington, then to Yale, then to Milwaukee, and made it back to Minneapolis seven years later. Somehow, Roy and I never reconnected the way we once did.

It might have been as well, because Rachel did not like me getting high. She had tamed my brain.

Roy was a big deal in jazz and poetry circles, performing long, off-the-cuff rants with a variety of musicians, Fela Kuti-style, but gentler. I ran into him a couple times, and we looked at each other, dumbfounded. "Mockle Finley," he said. Where to start? We hugged, promised to get together, and never did. I never went to see him perform.

Then he got sick with diabetes. He became demented. It was so bad that, days before he died, they sawed his feet off. My greatest personal fear.

Today he is remembered as one of the really good poets the Twin Cities ever had.

Stevie Wonder's Kidney

Parents are taking their seminarian sons home for the holidays, in our case from Bucks County to Lorain, Ohio.

The geographic center of the state of Pennsylvania is Mount Nittany. But not even that mighty mountain can block the power of the AM radio station. In fact, that's where the station is.

Bill Groomes worked a crossword puzzle beside me in the back seat. I was locked in to the music floating in from a Pittsburgh station.

Such songs. "Blue on Blue." "Downtown." "My Guy." "Love Me Do." "Surf City." "All Alone Am I."

Pretty good year to be thirteen, music-wise.

Then on comes “Fingertips Part 2.” Twelve years old, Little Stevie Wonder is led to the stage. Little kid with a harmonica backed by the biggest horn band you ever heard.

Song has no particular logic. Clap your hands just a little bit louder. Everybody say yeah -- yeah! And then the yeahs rise up like a tornado, with this chis muscular soul band screaming behind him. Yeah Yeah Yeah Yeah Yeah!

It was rumored, in the 70s, that Stevie insisted he always he booked in a Holiday Inn, because the rooms were all similar.

In the past year, we attended a concert with Robbie and Britt, in which all the tunes from *Songs in the Key of Life*, his masterpiece, were performed -- along with “Superstitious” as an encore.

I was glad to go, but Stevie looked kind of sick standing at the mic -- possibly hugely overweight. The sound was terrible where we were seated. Still, it was a joy to see this boy-no-longer-a-boy.

In the [YouTube video](#), Stevie is just a blind child, needing to be led onstage -- where Marvin Gaye has just finished a number. Stevie starts with the bongos. After a minute he is helped up from his chair and starts his harmonica playing.

Clap your hands just a little bit louder.

“If you want me to, I’m gonna play the song one more time.” He has to say this because the song has no logical ending. In practice, it could go on forever.

On the record, it just fades away.

Stevie's not a child any more. It was an adult Stevie who would campaign, successfully, starting in 1980, to make [Martin Luther King Jr.](#)'s birthday a national [holiday](#) in the United States.

Now people commemorate his life the way they commemorate Lincoln's and Washington's -- many by making the down payment on a new or used car, where the freeways meet, in Downey.

Happy birthday, Martin Luther King, Jr.

More recently, the news said that Wonder needed a kidney or he would die.

Just for a second I thought, "He could have mine."

That's how much he meant to me. Match or no match, what an honor it would be to make that donation. Who wouldn't make that gift to him?

Ebony and ivory, right?

But then I thought, my left kidney is not in the best shape, it's all banged up from my prostate cancer. He might not like the looks of it.

I realize, he is still blind.

I have a good remaining kidney, on the right side. But, selfishly speaking, I may need it down the road.

In any event, Stevie is so loved, he got a donor, like the day after he asked.

It's only right.

Daniele's Estate

We weren't very law-minded when we cleaned out our daughter's apartment.

We took everything there home with us, in black bags -- shoes, clothes, stereo, linen, and an apron with eighteen dollars in coins in one pocket.

A week later we remembered she had a school saving account at American Century for about \$3,500. She dropped out of school because of her depression, as our son would do later on. She has another educational account with Nicholas Fund, containing under \$5,000.

I called both funds and asked for the money to be remanded to us, as the money was deposited by me.

Legally, however, I was told that the money was part of her estate, and we would have to get it through her estate.

List the items, the \$3400 school fund at American Century, which she never touched, because she was too ashamed to use the gift she had been given to pay her rent.

Camino de Santiago

Mike and Richard make their way to the shrine of St. James the Apostle in the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela.

It is a journey on foot of over 160 miles.

Pilgrims before us, over centuries' time, in sandals, have hardened the path to the martyr.

We hike through noisy villages, past mountain passes and shepherds eating sandwiches by their flocks.

We don't talk much, but we nod, thrilled by the adventure we are sharing, legs strong even for old guys.

When we come across other pilgrims, we ignore them. They may have stories, but they don't exist.

At night we stay in inns and sleep well, owing to the rigors of the path we are on, the Manchega wine we purchase in unlabeled bottles, and the books we read ourselves to sleep by.

I am reading Cervantes. Every page is a sky spanked with stars. Three pages and I am gone.

This is the life, my friend. We left the dogs at home. They will be fine, we decided, and this is what we need -- the Spanish dirt, the rutted roads, the journey toward something bigger

than ourselves, bigger than the blisters we bandage every day.

Except -- I am not with you. I can't walk a mile per day, much less fifteen. Everything is impossible for now. I am home with Lucy, sitting in the den, writing you this letter.

But in my heart I am breathing that air with you, my brother. Something great will sanctify us at the end of the journey,

I will stand with you, on that mountain trail, forever.

Things I Told My Daughter; Maybe They Will Work for You

Do nice stuff for yourself. Go for walks, buy flowers, eat fresh fruit.

Do things you don't feel like doing. Remember, your intuitions suck, so don't fall in love with your comfort zone.

Dress nice. Don't wear sweat suits. Wear stuff you like, that make you feel good.

Brush your teeth. It's a good way to show yourself that you respect yourself.

Laugh every chance you get. It will sound strangled at first but it will come back.

Have someone you can bitch to, but try to balance it, so they don't head for the hills.

Don't write poems about your feelings. Write about stuff that is outside you, that strengthens your curiosity. Be a reporter, not an empath.

Admire people you see who are trying.

Get a dog. She will make you leave the house. Hug her a lot.

Also, be as good as you can be. Because wickedness will bite you on the ass.

For Robert Plant On My 66th Birthday

Found myself watching him on TV tonight.

He is old and wrinkly now, doesn't move too well.

But he is still kicking it, and the camera cut to young women --

Still thrilled by his reckless approach.

And I think, why didn't that happen to me?

I wanted, in my life, all the things he got – love, adulation, honeydripping passion.

But I wasn't able to go there, in my writing.

I have never even had a venereal disease.

I'm sure It helps to have a big bottom -- the drums and bass behind you, I mean.

With that big beat, you forget about making sense, you just go, man.

And your lyrics only need to be fairy tales about hedgerows and loveliness, but we know beneath the loveliness there is this rock star boner that expects to be served.

I could never bring myself to ask for that.

In my mind my lines, my words, went deeper than his and more thoughtful --

about love and loss and wondering and such.

At least I thought so. But it didn't work out for me.

I estimate Plant has made \$100+ million from his art over 50 years,

and I have made maybe \$1500 -- no comparison, really.

This may seem like not the greatest injustice ever perpetrated,

but tonight it is the one I wish to focus on.

What is he? He's just some white Englishman, who really has no claim to the blues --

and let me be the first to concede that I don't, either.

But I have never been sued by the blues, like he has, many, many times.

But there he is embodying the blues in some wild way.

How I hate him.

Not hate exactly -- I like his records, especially as he has gotten older, like me.

But the Robert Plant in my mind is truly awful,
comfortable touching himself in front of
people,

where I always pull back from that.

He knows he's a disgrace against all that is holy
and he just doesn't care,

he keeps going in for the curly permanent,
raking in the dough and the dope.

It's amazing all those blow jobs haven't made
his hair fall out, and that seems wrong to me.

Or maybe they have. His hair now resembles
the wigs the dancing Irish girls wear on St.
Patrick's,

As if Shirley temple stuck her finger in the light
socket --

Maybe Robert Plant buys his wigs at the same place.

I wonder what it is I'm doing wrong. I know I don't go all Full Plant at my little shows, moaning and grabbing myself and stunning -- truly stunning -- the eleven people in the folding chairs, most of them scheduled to read next.

But just now I will be honest and say, 50 years late,

I too wanted to be a disgrace, I too wanted to be loved, like Robert Plant,

despite never doing one kind thing, or shedding a single sincere tear.

But I was always held back by my shame ...

always held back by my shame ...

‘Slipping Away’

I ask Becky, what do you know about people dying from my kind of cancer.

Is it hard, is it terrible?

She gulps. Well, I’m not at people’s bedsides, she says to me, but what I hear from families is that patients mostly just slip away. They sleep, they dream, they slip away.

I liked that answer. They just slip away? That doesn’t sound bad at all. I thanked Becky.

But later I realized that answer didn’t give me much clarity at all. They just slipped away in the last hour, in the last three months? That would give me lots of time to say goodbye to folks.

But I realized Becky was not comfortable telling me much more. Everyone was different.

Timelines varied a lot. I could misuse any information she gave me, and deceive myself with it.

It was a high-risk moment. Truth is, for some people, it was excruciatingly difficult, and lasted for many months.

And some just slipped away.

Poor Becky, having to deal with so many bus customers headed in the direction I was headed in, with different stops. I know I could not do that. Only a special person could take responsible for that bus ride, and do it with peace and honesty.

Rosemary in the Snow

-18°, and in the alley off Selby Avenue

I see twigs poking out of the snow.

No footprints lead to this place.

The plants look familiar, and when I

Break off two skinny leaves,

I was right. An herb garden

grown in summer,

abandoned to the snow.

I sniff it, it is there, that scent,

I would know it anywhere, even here

in the cold, alive beyond death,

and still giving.

Flown

Toward winter's end Lucy begins making demands.

Pushing her nose into me, demanding a walk, or a scrambled egg.

Attend to me, she's saying. I've got to take a poop. I can practically feel it coming out!

The winter has been hard on me, too, and I tell her off in no uncertain terms.

You'll go out when I'm ready to go out. Give me a minute to let the pills kick in.

Whatever sense of humor we had in November has long since wasted away.

I am in a mood as I set off at 5 am, crossing the icy street ahead of her, walking penguin-style.

She is off-leash, as usual. She wears a blinking red collar but there's no traffic.

Lucy stands still on the sidewalk, seeing me round the corner and disappear.

Finally she catches up to me, and she has something in her mouth. Some little bauble she picked up to amuse her. I ignore her.

She keeps trying to decide which alley to turn into. I keep refusing -- just to assert control -- walking on in the darkness.

The dog really has gotten too big for her britches, I am thinking. And it's my fault. I give in to her every step of the way. I'm a very lazy man.

It is not until we get back to the house a half mile later that I see. She has a frozen robin in her mouth, with its pretty red breast. It returned too soon for spring.

Lucy is confused. She looks up at me asking,
What do I do now?

It's not her style to devour a bird or to abuse its
body. She is so removed from the wild. She
really doesn't know.

I take the bird in a plastic bag and set it in the
trash drawer. I close the drawer and Lucy stares,
at the drawer and then at me -- many questions,
unasked and unanswered.

She rests on the kitchen floor, chin upon paws. I
know she won't pry open the door. Such a
gentle creature.

I kneel beside her and stroke her coat. She
looks into my eyes. It's just part of life, I try to
explain. We all have to deal with the mystery.

My Genius

People greet us on the street, say, Hey, I hear those standard poodles are smart.

And I nod but joke that she made a hash of my taxes. Couldn't handle the Alternative Minimum Tax calculations at all, cost me thousands, plus penalties.

We laugh. Dog doing your taxes. As if.

Oh, she's smart, about streets and cars and telling us when she has to go.

But that's just the beginning. Her intelligence has made her articulate about her fears of living in a human house.

She knows the dangers of being stepped on, of slipping with furry feet on a polyurethane floor.

She's afraid of getting her tail docked again by a slamming car door.

She wakes me at precisely 1:30 every night, to be let out to pee in the yard. And then again at precisely 5 pm, to give me 20 minutes to pee, get dressed, gulp down my pills, sit for a moment, then take her out, to poop, two blocks from home.

I know that she has a primordial dog fear of having predators smell her scat, and come to our yard looking to eat her. Bears. Wolves. Alligators.

She is so bored. A basket of toys cannot entertain her. I take her to Petco, and she goes frantic at the wall of toys, all costing \$12.99. I buy her one, which cannot put a dent in her boredom.

She sleeps, because there is nothing else to do.

When I leave, she sits at the door for hours, upright like a cat. I wave at her from the sidewalk.

She's superstitious. When I throw a ball, she runs joyously to it -- then stands 5 seconds over it, assuring herself the ball does not pose her any danger. Then she picks it up and trots back to me.

I estimate her IQ at about 31, which isn't much, but it's a couple points over most dogs. She likes to chase and play, but I can tell she is looking for more besides. A hint, a glint of understanding.

At 10 she sits upright and stares at me. Finally I get it, and my genius races ahead of me up the stairs to bed.

Lucy and the Monkey Child

I want to close the door because it's cold
but Lucy rushes back into the house
for her stuffed Monkey.

It's her child, she carries it her mouth
around the neighborhood,
Proud as any mother.

She never had a litter but something
inside her says, This is what we do,
we move Monkey from place to place,
we keep it safe, we parade it past the
neighbors.

When she pees she sometimes drops it,
She forgets her baby and proceeds without it.
But I pick it up, and stuff in it my coat
Because I believe in Monkey, too.

Remembering Suzanne and Karima

My friend Brady, whom I knew
Before he was one year old, told me
about Suzanne Verdal,
the Suzanne of the famous Leonard Cohen
song,
who stayed at Brady's mom Val's hippy farm
summers in Trempealeau County.

Brady told of seeing the mystery woman
dance joyfully but enigmatically,
barefoot in a floral cotton print dress
by the cold iron stove on the worn floorboards
of the sitting room, the dust painting
her tiny feet and toes.

“I didn’t know Suzanne was the Suzanne from the song for many years,” Brady said. “I was only six or seven but she still stands out in my mind somehow. She was a person it would be hard to forget.”

Brady, being a boy, mostly had eyes for Suzanne’s young daughter Karima, who he went for walks with on the steep hill where the sheep grazed, poop stuck to their undocked tails, because hippies can’t bear the idea of chopping off lambs’ tails.

“Karima liked to boss me around,” Brady said. “One day she put her hands on my shoulders and told me, ‘Brady Hegberg, you and I are going to get married and have a baby.’ I was like, ‘OK.’”

"I carried her picture in my wallet for many years,
a reminder of the promise she made to me
and then, somehow, I lost it."

Miracle Ear

In 2003, I began a 7-year period in which I attended an Evangelical church. It began with me worrying about my two kids, a son who struggled with deep depression, and a daughter who suffered from powerful anxiety issues.

I was afraid one or both of them would commit suicide. One did. My Christian phase was me trying to invoke magic to keep them alive. I didn't know what else to do. But there's more to it than that -- I experienced a kind of miracle that completely confused me. Still does.

My son Jon was 14, and he liked hanging around with two kids on our block. Their father was a minister, and given to subtle acts of evangelism. I tolerated that, but only just barely.

One day this minister, Ned, knocked on the door.

“Every spring our church has a men’s retreat up north. I was thinking Jon would like to tag along. How would you feel about that?”

I said I was happy that Jon had friends, so yes, I approved. I did not imagine they would make him pray and stuff. Just basketball.

“How about you, Mike? Would you like to come, too? Keep track of Jon. Check us out?”

I said I would consider it. My consideration was basically, Where’s the harm? It might be very interesting. I could write about it. Crazy Zealots Camp Out By A Lake. I called Ned back an hour later.

“Yeah,” I said. “I’m in.”

Rather than describe the whole weekend, I will give you one bit of background, and then the weird story.

The background is, I was losing my hearing in my left ear. It started as ordinary tinnitus, like the noise old TVs made after they stopped broadcasting for the night -- a thin flatline hum. You probably have the same thing. You live with it.

But my tinnitus started to morph. Over the course of a year it went from a think flatline to something much lower, growlier, and pumping into a strange rhythm. I have described it as the sound of an engine room in a ship. It was very distracting. I had had to reconcile myself to this being the way things would be. I was 52, getting on.

That's the background. Now here's what happened.

The retreat was mostly sports and “fellowship,” which was made up of prayer, sermons, sharing, testifying.

I thought, Well, this is great. These guys have mostly been through the wringer -- alcohol, drugs, sex stuff -- and have found stability through religion.

They didn't seem like the sharpest pencils in the drawer. But that's OK. On average we're all average.

So I was inching toward sympathetic approval of the men.

Then they had something called an altar call.

The evening worship -- I had trouble with that word, still do -- was led by two Evangelical guys from Poland. They were extremely unironic. In their villages in the remote hill country in Poland's southwest, nearly everyone was an

alcoholic and/or a whore. According to their slideshow, they turned it all around.

The way they said Jesus seemed to take four syllables.

Anyway, their English was bad, but they seemed grave and sincere.

With them standing in the front of the room -- a camp cafeteria -- men started forming a line to go up to the “altar” -- a card table with a cloth on it. When their turn came, each man knelt down, and a team of friends surrounded him, laid hands on his head, shoulders, heart, arms, and they all started muttering prayers for him.

I was the only guy standing in the back of the room. I thought about it a minute. Wouldn't I be a great dad if I got in line, too, and let them do their thing on me?

So I did.

I arrived at the front of the line. One of the Polish guys asked me: “How may we pray for you, brother?”

I looked around, nervous but determined to do this. “My son suffers from depression. He's here tonight. My daughter suffers, too. I'm not a member of this group, but maybe you could pray for them.”

One of the deacons, suspecting something was peculiar about me, asked this: “Mike, have you accepted Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and savior?”

I know he meant it well, but I hated him for asking it. I mumbled in reply: “Probably not to your satisfaction.”

Then the crew descended on me. I felt them on my shoulders, on my head, on my upper arms.

One man took my hand in his. It was extremely sincere.

I kept my eyes closed and listened to all the simultaneous prayers Things like, "Heavenly father, watch over Michael and his son and daughter. Strengthen him to do the work he needs to do every day. Give him courage and clarity to be a good man, a good husband, a good father. Let him never doubt your love. Let your love for him be a firm foundation on which to build a life. Keep him healthy, and confident, and blah blah blah ...")

I myself did not pray. But I was truly touched by their humble mutterings. I would write about this emphasizing these down-to-earth qualities. "I learned something today."

When the praying ended I felt I needed to respond in some way. I began reaching for everyone's hands, like a politician, thanking

them. "Thank you. Thanks so much. Thank you. Thank you. You were all great."

They seemed perplexed by my handshaking, like I was trying to tip them. I was -- inauthentic.

Suddenly, I needed to get out of there. I worried that Jon had been watching from behind a pillar, and was either embarrassed by my being a jerk, or worse, embarrassed that I put up with all that.

So I bolted. I walked in long strides up the hill to the bunkhouse where my stuff was. At the door, I stopped in my tracks. The sun was setting over the lake, and a few loons could be heard paddling in the darkening reeds.

Did you hear what I just said? "Could be heard." I actually did hear loons. How could I hear loons paddling with my bum ear?

I whirled around, and heard the whoosh inside my ear. I put my hand to my ear and tugged on it. I took turns listening from each ear.

And this was the deal. I could hear again, as well as I ever could, both sides. This was no bullshit.

A terrible time awaited me. I had to figure out what happened, whether my healing was imagined, whether I had only convinced myself I was deaf in that ear, whether some trick had been played on me. Or whether I was just, you know, healed.

And remember: I had told nobody about my bad ear. No one knew about it.

It was so weird.

The next seven years I struggled with this mystery. What happened? Why did it happen?

What was the right response to it? What were the limits to that response?

If I were to actually pray, I'll tell you this much, it wouldn't be to hear loons paddling in a pond. It would be to save my daughter's life, which did not happen.

But that's God for you.

I have a lot to say about these years. The metaphor I keep falling back on is alien abduction. I didn't want this to happen to me. I didn't agree with what the fundamentalist people were saying. I hated the politics, the faintly submerged racism, their screwed-up take on women. Not everyone was super-terrible. One or two were enlightened. Most were somewhere in the middle, thinking they were doing the right thing while doing all the wrong things.

But the love and affection, their hands on me,
the prayers they prayed for me -- that was real.
Bummer!

I thought a cruel trick was being played on me
-- that I had to do this for the good of my kids.

When one of my kids committed suicide
anyway, the men all dried up and withdrew
from me. No one knew what to say.

I think it fucked them up as much as it did me.
How could somebody do such a thing -- take
the greatest gift of all gifts, and throw it away?
That's how they thought.

But this was how it began -- with the cries of
loon on a lake not far from St. Cloud.



This Is Why Some People Don't Like Me; A Reference to Hump Day

We're at the dog park.

One dog starts humping another.

Soon, a third joins in.

I say, "Well, it is Wednesday."

Suicidia

A nation in which people are encouraged to be unhappy, bombarded with advertisements pointing out their shortcomings, bombarded with ads and stock photos of those who have made it, the perfect ones, and mocking those who did not compete well, deepening their self-hatred for failing.

Some turn to drugs, some turn to violence, some pray to Jesus to turn them around, but Jesus is in on the game.

Suicide is woven into the economy, freeing up housing, a bonanza for therapists, a fresh source for the funeral industry, boosting the GDP, reducing the tax bill of those who have succeeded, those white people in the blurry stock photos, white hair and white cotton

clothing, barefoot on sunny beaches, the ocean breezes rippling their clothes.

The currency contains the nation's real motto:

"Some of you win, the rest of you are losers."

It is not considered an epidemic, though it is.

It is really just another way for the winners to feel good about themselves, they are the point of everything that happens.

They make a momentary sad face about the luckless ones who slip away, turn from the endless sadness and silence at other people's tables, because the system dismissed them and left them on their own, then return to their postcard of sunshine and sand.

My Mother's China Plate

Placing my mother's plate in the dishwasher,

I am aware how firmly I am holding on.

It was my mother's -- I ate off it as a child.

And it is pretty, with two bluebirds on a branch

Holding cherries in their beaks by the stem.

But if I bent it over my knee with both hands

until it broke in two, would anyone miss it?

Not my wife, who never got along with Mary.

Not my son, who doesn't care about these things.

I could toss it up like a clay pigeon, spinning,

and blast it into a hundred crumbs,

Falling to earth alongside all the other crumbs.
Even my mother, who loved this sort of thing,
would not care. I don't think.
Why then do I return it to the cupboard,
Sliding it gently to the back of the shelf,
Like something sacred to my life.

Notes from a PTA Meeting - 1993

I asked black parents at the gifted and talented school to make suggestions so white people like myself would understand their lives better.

"Why don't you put yourself out for a black person, from time to time?" one mom said. "If you see a problem, get involved. It isn't patronizing to be thoughtful."

"Just admit you see us," a black dad said.

"When I walk through the halls, people look away. What do they think I'm going to do?"

"On the street," the same man said, "I hear car doors lock when I approach. Can you imagine how that makes me feel? Just by being what I am, I'm a criminal to them."

"I have a friend who lives in the suburbs and owned a nice new BMW," a woman said. "Every day he got stopped by police on his way to work. He wound up selling the BMW and buying a Toyota, so the police would leave him the hell alone."

"I must have been pulled over by police, or stopped on the sidewalk, fifty times. I've been searched, frisked, pushed around, called names. I am an educated, experienced certified public accountant and father of four. Think about what that feels like, and how you'd like that."

One mom said that when a white boy misbehaves his parents are called in to school; when her son misbehaves, he gets sent to detention. Other parents get calls from teachers when their kids' grades go down. She didn't know her son would have to repeat a class until report card time. The assumption

evidently was that white parents care -- and black parents don't.

"When you're at the store and you see a cashier asking a black person for ID, insist that they ask for your ID, too. Why should you get a free pass, just because you're white? Notice when you are benefiting from a privilege based on color, and refuse it."

"You don't need to confront a nonwhite person about race," a Thai man said. "But talk to other white people about it. Get them to admit that it must hurt to not be white in a white world. White racism isn't our problem, you know -- it's yours. Only you can fix it."

"Just once, tell someone black that you agree that the system sucks, that the cards are institutionally stacked against black children and black adults. In my life, no white person

has ever indicated to me that they see that what is going on is just plain evil."

"Stop hesitating. White people, Jesus, they hesitate about everything. Just say what you're going to say. You think your words will offend us after all we put up with?"

Mike's brain thrombosis of 1999 proved to be a dud. He still thinks with that brain. His current problem is metastatic prostate cancer, which has morphed throughout his skeleton. His family in the wake of Daniele's suicide in 2009 consists of wife Rachel, son Jon, and poodle Lucy.





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