



FATHER DAYS

by Mike Finley

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Wednesday, May 6, 2001

Serpent

There was an unusual commotion in our house Tuesday morning. Daniele's 4-foot boa constrictor, named Crimson, was loose in her bedroom, and a search was underway to find her. She (Crimson) eventually turned up underneath the bed, and it was quite an armful to persuade her to return to her glass case.

Now, ordinarily, the idea of a large constricting snake going squirrely in my teenage daughter's bedroom might be cause for consternation. But not Tuesday. Because Crimson has been ill, and this sudden interest in escaping (combined with heating her first rat in almost six months) was cause for celebration.

Now, you will note my use of pronouns. I was not personally involved in the snake search. I am afraid of Crimson. I have helped Daniele with minor snake ablutions, and each time I have felt how alien the snake seems compared to the dog -- how beyond warmth and wagging and monkeyshines she is.

And when she grips me around the neck and chest and squeezes, as is her wont, I feel the air -- and the life -- going out of me.

It takes me back to my days as a zookeeper, in 1967. I was a high school senior working the summer at a mini-zoo in an amusement park, Jungle Larry's Safari Island at Cedar Point, in Sandusky, Ohio.

Jungle Larry was a kids' show Frank Buck -- I guess he actually knew Frank Buck -- who amassed about 1,000 animals, from lions and elephants to monkeys, at this roadside attraction. My job was to do whatever needed doing -- rake trails, tell visitors about the animals, clean out cages.

I had many odd adventures, but the most traumatic involved feeding our two large snakes, a rock python 20 foot in length and a reticulated python 27 foot in length. These snakes were so huge they spent their days collapsed in a pile of themselves in a glassed-in building we called the snakatorium. If one moved it was to lift a head and test the room temperature with its tongue.

It was clear to me that these creatures were severely depressed, which I could understand. Jungle Larry's zoo was a cross between an old-timey zoo with steel bars and slabs, and a fake jungle, with bamboo and Spanish moss everywhere. The visitors saw the foliage, but the animals were stuck behind bars. They -- the animals -- were all insane -- from boredom, alienation, ill health, or the scent of something nearby that they should either be eating or being eaten by. It was -- unnatural.

Larry made matters worse by playing the theme song from the movie Born Free 16 hours a day on the PA system. That dreadful song embedded itself in the nucleotides of all our

bodies' cells. I could not help automatically finish the first line each time: "Born free, and now they're in cages ..."

Anyway, these huge snakes were depressed, and wouldn't eat. Two months would pass between meals, and as they represented a considerable investment -- perhaps \$100,000 in 1967 dollars? -- it was imperative that they be fed. Against their will.

So one night, after the zoo shut down, Larry and his assistant B'wana Walt, and myself and some other guy, undertook to feed two piglets to the two snakes. The pigs came in a crate, and they were sensible enough to be alarmed, squealing and honking at the silent presence in the room.

The plan: cut the pigs' throats, pry open the snake's jaws, and coax the freshly killed bodies into the snakes' digestive channels.

It was my duty to hold the piggies while Walt cut their throats with a bread knife. The little pigs cried piteously as I held them. I will never, ever forget that sound, or the feeling of the warm blood washing over my hands and arms, onto my shirt, where it quickly cooled.

Walt did the dirty work, getting the snakes to unhinge their jaws, wiping the blood on their faces to arouse them, and shoehorning the pigs' heads into their gullets.

What struck me was how out of kilter it was, these \$50,000 snakes who had no zest for life, being force-fed these \$3 creatures who wept desperately to live.

But we did it, and the snakes thrived, after a fashion. A week after eating , they pooped out the pigs' flesh. Several days later they pooped out their mashed skeletons. Every now and then, one of them would move.

So when my daughter acquired Crimson, I had no appetite for it. We discouraged her. We knew nothing about snake health, and it was quite a responsibility. And expense.

Chances are Crimson would grow to be 16-18 feet long, and we would have to reenact the pig feeding ritual once every six weeks. Deep down, I dreaded re-feeling the feelings I felt in the snakatorium 34 years ago.

One time Crimson got loose and was somewhere in the house for an entire week. Rachel and I would go to bed never 100% certain we would wake up in the morning. Daniele mocked us for this, but she was unable to produce the snake. (It was in her underwear drawer.)

What we did not foresee was the snake getting sick. It grew a callus on its nose, a scab that covered its nostrils and infected its mouth and lips. It would not eat. Weeks went by like this, me denying it was in there, and Daniele sleeping in the same room as her, hearing it rasp through its strange mask, struggling to breathe.

We took her to a special vet, who did helpful things like excising the scab and force-feeding her with a tube. At one point I had to hold her while we gave her shots. Lord, you should have felt her coiling away from that needle, attempting to strike us to prevent the mortal stab, and the stung, stiff feeling in her muscle when the needle went in.

Then this past week, we coaxed Crimson to swallow her first food in almost six months - a thawed frozen rat.

So when Crimson started feeling frisky enough to hide under the bed, it represented a glorious comeback. As much as we were capable of, we celebrated her return to health.

She is a person to us now, who has struggled and prevailed.
How can you not love such a snake, just a little warm-blooded
bit?

NOTE: In 2006 Crimson began to fail, and she failed for an entire year. Daniele abandoned her to me to care for her. It was too painful to watch the thing die so slowly. Several times I thought was dead and carried her out to dispose of her – and she came to again in my arms, coiling to draw breath. Finally, one day, she was gone, and we laid Crimson to rest – as a friend.

Christmas 2000

The Blue Bicycle

The snowy woods at Hidden Falls echoed with the crunch of boots and the snapping of dry wood. "How much longer?" my 8-year old son Jon asked.

"Not long," I said, huffing frosted steam. "We're almost there."

My 12-year old daughter Daniele was impatient, too. "What did you say we were looking for?"

"Yes," Rachel said, "what is it exactly?"

"Something you'll never see again," I said. I was in heaven, luring my kids out into the cold to see if they could spot the remarkable thing. We finally came to a clearing overlooking a small ravine.

We just stood there for a moment, our breath frosting up before us. "It's right here," I announced.

There wasn't a sound except the subtle poof of huge snowflakes landing. Then Jon said, "I see it!"

He pointed up, into the lower reaches of a young cottonwood tree. There, about ten feet from the ground, was a rusted old bicycle. It was not sitting in a branch; rather, the branch had somehow grown around the bicycle. The main bar was entirely enclosed in swarming wood.

"Wow," Daniele said.

I had come across it a few days earlier, out walking the dog. I had actually passed that spot a hundred times and not noticed. But who ever looks up to see a tree embracing a bicycle? You need luck to see these things. And now I felt like Merlin, letting young Arthur peer into a peculiar mystery.

Based on the bike style, the amount of corrosion, and the absence of tire rubber, I guessed that the bicycle had been in the tree for over 40 years. It was entirely rusted except for a narrow path of etched blue enamel just below the handlebars, by the little plate that still said Western Automatic.

The four of us were suddenly giddy with the idea of a bicycle growing in a tree. How did it get there? Did someone lean it against the tree years ago, and the tree slowly reached out and lifted it up, an inch a year, up into the sky?

Or did someone just throw it up there, and the tree held onto it and grew around it?

Whose bike was it, and would its owner remember it?

Did the bike think it was flying? Did the tree think it was riding? Did the wind once blow the wheels around, whispering stories of locomotion to the stationery tree?

Everyone agreed, on the way back to the car, that it was a wonderful thing, and we should always keep our eyes keen for other anomalies. They must be everywhere, we reasoned. We just have to train ourselves to see them.

But the next time I came to the clearing, in spring, by myself, not only was the bicycle gone -- but the tree itself gone. A big wind blowing up the river has no trouble toppling trees rooted

in sand. A cottonwood lay on its side like that, head down in the ravine, its roots reaching up like imploring hands.

I looked around for the bicycle. I scouted the area, to no avail. The spring vegetation was already crowding the ground – thick enough to hide a jutting pedal or rusted rim.

Over the next couple of years I gently obsessed about finding the bicycle, returning to the spot numerous times, to see if I had merely misplaced it.

Occasionally I thought I glimpsed it. But it was just a curl of riverbank vine, pretending to be wheel, or the color of rot pretending to be rust.

My heart always quickened when I stood on that spot. A bicycle fashioned of iron from the dirt once roamed this city and raced up and down its hills. Its rider was thrilled to fly through our town. And then the bicycle took up residence, in some unexplained way, high in a tree overlooking the Mississippi, gazing out at the barges and crows. And now it had returned to the earth.

I felt like that archeologist, Schliemann, who found Troy seven cities down, only in reverse. What the earth lifted up, it then took back. Everything combined to make it so. Every falling leaf hid it. Each clump of snow buried it deeper. Every summer hiker's footfall sank it deeper in the wood.

It all goes. My children are grown. But I saw a bicycle ride through the sky, its wheels still turning in the breeze from the river.

February 2000

The View from the Bluffs

There's a certain place I go in my little town of Saint Paul, Minnesota. It's a park in one of the oldest parts of town, called Dayton's Bluff. It sits atop a stubby cliff formed a million years ago by the Mississippi River. For several years I have made a habit of stopping and eating my lunch under the little radio tower that stands on the peak, its red light blinking night and day as a warning to low-flying aircraft.

Let me describe what I see when I look down.

First, there is the river, which takes a big bend to the left as it snakes through Saint Paul. Though rivers flow downhill -- the result of legislation, I think -- I think of the river here as going up, because from my view on the bluff, everything seems to be heading up. I see barges tied up, or a lone tugboat pushing upriver, parting the silky water with its prow.

Beside the river are several lanes of train tracks, and the echoing rumble of freight cars connecting. You can see eight sets of track running side by side, and hear the whistle of an engine coming through.

Then, just next to the train tracks, is Highway 61, one of the grand old highways of America, sweeping all the way from up from New Orleans, and headed on further to revisit Bob Dylan's hometown, Hibbing.

But I'm not done yet. On the other side of the river is the newspaper printing plant, with delivery trucks coming and going. I used to write for that paper.

And beside the newspaper printing plant is a little airport called Holman Field. All day long you can see little one and two-engine planes touching down and taking off on the tiny runway, and people climbing down little ladders and crossing the tarmac, bags in hand.

Then, beyond the airport, are the mighty bridges crossing the Mississippi -- the Wabasha Bridge, the very picture of massive 1920s splendor, and the recently refitted Robert Street bridge, with its fancy new light posts and walkways.

And then there is the downtown buildings. Saint Paul is a sleepy downtown, with only two buildings that can pass for skyscrapers. But we have a couple of department stores, a new hockey arena, scores of nice old brick warehouses and office buildings, and then, skipping across the Interstate, the long green mall leading up to the Cass Gilbert-designed state capitol -- a passable replica of the Capitol Building in Washington, DC, only not so big, and adorned with an impressive statuary team of gold-plated horses.

It is not often you can stand in one place and see so much. You can see every kind of transportation, and make out people doing dozens of different jobs.

Only recently did I understand the charm of this place. I was with a friend and his two young children. It was night, and the city was lit up, and the radio tower blinked red against the stars, and the sound of an incoming Piper Cub buzzed in our ears. The youngest child pointed up at the plane's moving white light.

This scene was a replica of a certain kind of book that young children, especially boys two and three and four years old, love to peruse.

I remembered sitting with my son on my lap all those years ago, him pointing at the pictures in Richard Scarry's Busy, Busy World and naming the different kinds of trucks on the page. You could almost feel the hopes welling up in him at all the buttons there were to push in this world.

What a kind way to introduce children to technology and careers. And what a boyish way to encounter our busy, busy world.

Friday, May 18, 2001

Red Wheelbarrow

I was looking for my wheelbarrow when the phone rang. So much depends on a red wheelbarrow, when it's spring and all. And you would think you could not misplace something as obvious as a wheelbarrow the color of a stop sign.

I looked everywhere: front yard, back yard, garage, that little narrow corridor between the garage and the next property (there should be a word for that -- crawlway?). OK, that's not everywhere, but those places were the prime suspects. I was just coming to grips with the notion that the wheelbarrow was gone -- stolen -- when the phone rang inside the house.

"Hello, Mr. Finley, this is Judy from the bank. Are you aware that your checking account is overdrawn?"

"It is? Oh, dear." I overdraw three or four times a year. But they usually send me one of those awful thin letters with the cellophane window. A phone call seemed to be rubbing it in. And did I just say "Oh, dear"?

"I'm afraid so, Mr. Finley. Did you recently write a check for \$138,950.00? To Office Max?"

I thought back. I didn't recall writing a check in that amount.

"Ach -- someone forged my signature on a check," I cried into the receiver. "Someone bought \$138,950 worth of office supplies with my money!" I was beside myself, which was convenient.

"Possibly," said the bank office. "But it looks like your name is signed with a rubber stamp."

That wasn't good. I own a rubber stamp with my signature on it. For check-signing day, the 5th day of every month.

"Hold on," I said, booting up Quicken, my handy-dandy financial data tool. Scanning the check register, I saw recent checks written in the amounts of \$24.99 (newspaper), \$34.95 (bottled water), \$138,950 (office supplies), and \$12(class pictures for my kid).

Whoah, back up there. There it was. I had made out, and signed (or stamped) my signature on a check for \$138,950 to Office Max. The only notation I made on the check was: "Lexmark carts."

I had sent all that money to Office Max for four ink-jet cartridges (three black and white, one color).

"Um, I think that's a mistake," I said.

"Pretty big one," said the officer.

I asked her if it was possible to stop payment on the check.

"Well, we already paid it. That's why you're overdrawn by \$137,632.41."

"Well, what can I do about this?"

"What would you like to do?"

"I'd like to get my money back, so I don't have to explain this to my wife," I said.

"If I were you, I'd call Office Max."

Which is what I did. I got hold of someone in customer service, and poured out my whole stupid story, how I don't see things that are up close so good, a problem I compound when I don't proofread things as important as checks, and I evidently entered a comma (138,950) instead of a period (138.95) and

didn't stop to read the check, or glance at my check register. And could I have my money back?

No one at Office Max had flagged the check for \$138,950 as anything unusual. They're a Kmart subsidiary, you know.

But she said sure, all I had to do was write her a letter explaining the screw-up and including a new check, made out in the amount of \$138.95.

Well, I'm here to tell you I learned a big lesson that day about security and such. Rachel never did find out, either, which is just the way I like these things.

But I still had the matter of the wheelbarrow.

It was a bad wheelbarrow, with a tire that wouldn't stay inflated and handles wrapped in shredded duct tape in a failed effort to keep the wood from giving you splinters. The only identifying mark I had on it was the wear and tear of being left out in the cold eight winters in a row. The actual body of the thing was more or less immaculate; all it ever did was fill with rain.

But here's the deal. Someone was running a stolen wheelbarrow ring on Saint Paul's west side, sneaking up to the sides of garages in the dead of night and making off with lawn implements. Wheelbarrows, fertilizer spreaders, weedwhackers and god knows what all else.

You don't feel safe anymore. Worse, it makes you wonder about people.

December 16, 2000

For Instants

"Time flies like arrows.

Fruit flies like bananas".

-- Wittgenstein

One of the great intellectual controversies of our time is now swirling around an eccentric British physicist named Julian Barbour. Barbour, who neither teaches physics at a university nor does physics at a corporate think-tank, is a freelancer who has come up with a whole new notion of what time is.

His worldview, in a nutshell, is that there is no such thing as time, there are only instants that we record, and reconnect in our minds, like the frames of a movie, into a chain of instants that we give meaning to.

All our cultural values, all our hopes for the future, reflect our Newtonian desire to transform the chaotic order of being into stories that make sense to our still-arboreal brains. What we call the universe is not the same big fellow experiencing lots of changes, going backward to the Big Bang and forward to the Prospective Whimper -- but a lengthy series of configurations of a universe.

Barbour's goal is not to suck all the marrow from the chicken bones of culture, but to point out that science so far (odd phrase noted) hasn't been able to handle the idea of time, so maybe time is like the aether of the pre-Einsteinian era that underlies all reality -- a handy, maybe even a psychologically necessary concept, but a false one because it has no reality outside our heads.

I know what you are thinking -- if time doesn't exist, your boss won't mind if you are late tomorrow.

And I know what you are smoking, if you have already lapsed into a cross-eyed consideration of Salvador Dali's melting pocket-watches. Physics is hard enough when it's about falling objects, but it gets really slippery when it crosses over and becomes the dream police.

For me, I like that Julian Barbour is spending his time -- or whatever you want to call it -- pondering this matter. Other physicists have greeted his book *The End of Time: The Next Revolution in Physics* (Oxford University) as an occasion for physics to look tweedy, the universe's very own cottage industry. I see it as a stimulating possibility -- but not necessarily a relevancy.

We all come to this topic in different ways -- each one to his taste. The conventional view is that time is like an evolutionary arrow, shooting from the left, the past, to the right, the future. In this scheme, cavemen start at the left side dragging their knuckles, and mutate gradually into bubble-brained meta-humans on the right. Ptolemaically, we are smack dab in the middle of this arrow -- still lacking a few essentials to become truly superhuman, but we're a-gettin' there.

I have put forth what I call the dismalist position, that "reality" in the sense that physicists use is much less important than the meaning people assign to it anyway. Most people believe in evolution, but few of us have plaques on the mantle honoring our trilobite ancestors. Just as a practical matter, we go with our gut, and imagine ourselves forming from the warm spit of divinity.

I like the arrow idea, only instead of pointing rightward to progress, it should point downward, to death. Because death is

the one thing we absolutely know we are marching downhill toward in our future shoes, pulled by time's gravitational force. We are not rising like helium cake in the oven, we are dropping like ripe fruit into our graves.

When I state this at a party, you should see the smiles vanish from people's faces, leaving something smile-like in its place, only broken, like a bombed Colombian airfield.

But it's not only true, it's good news. Knowing we're going to die -- probably not today, but possibly today -- puts a wonderful onus on us to get our affairs in order, and to make that a constant priority. I'm not talking about insurance policies and annuities, I'm talking about speaking and working as if our lives mattered.

Which is what I think Barbour is doing -- against a host of academic physicists, he is uttering his odd yawp about a universe of fractured instants. He's going for the gusto, even if it ticks a few people off.

Likewise, let the next keys we type on our keyboards be our yawp. From this instant on, everything matters.

March 22, 2001

The Unnatural

It was the damndest career the game ever saw. Or didn't see. Or sort of saw, but never quite took note of.

Thad Flessum barreled in from the Midwest League in 66 with a fistful of write-ups and a grin on his face. Mention Thad Flessum to the folks back in Ohio, the people who saw him play the sandlots, and their mouths just dropped open.

He was so swift and so strong that ordinary words could not describe him. Instead people got this faraway look, and for a while you thought it was the awestruck expression of rapture, but it was sadder than that, a look that grasped at what might have been.

He was the original bonus baby, the fundamental phenom. But things kept happening, and he never got his look. His first week in Florida, playing against the Red Sox, he went deep on a well-hit line drive. People say they never saw an outfielder cover so much ground so quickly.

Back to the ball, he looked over his shoulder and lost it. By the time he hit the Robert Hall sign ("Hit Me and Win a New Suit!), he must have been clocking 28, 29 miles per hour. "That wasn't running," one scout said; "that was a rocket to hell."

Asked in the hospital what threw him off, he said he lost the ball in the white of the moon.

Hobbled until July, he took the field for the second game of a double header against Cleveland, and just before he could make a diving shoestring catch to his left, he stepped into a gopher hole and snapped his shin like a piece of barnwood, and

spent the remainder of that season in Ashtabula, clipping hedges by his mother's house on Lake Erie.

In the late innings of an exhibition game in Montreal the following spring, when Flessum was trying desperately to get noticed, he rapped a grounder to third base and headed for first. What he did not know was that the catcher had grabbed a stray thread from his uniform, which rapidly unraveled as he raced down the baseline. He would have been safe had his pants not collapsed around his ankles, crashing him jaw-first into the hard clay. A bit on the modest side for a modern athlete, Flessum draped himself in a few fistfuls of thread and dashed through the opponent's dugout to the locker room, and did not venture out again until the last sportswriter had retired for the bar.

A platinum screw connecting his leg to his ankle, Thad Flessum battled back, through Utica, through Providence, and back to the show. He had lost a step of his speed but he still had that amazing power to the opposite field. He set a record in the Carolina League that still stands for hitting the greatest number of foul tips (22) before tipping one into the catcher's mitt for an out.

In a June game against the Athletics, batting from the right side, he hit a ball so high that Euclidian mathematicians estimate its eventual trajectory would have exceeded 540 feet from home plate, had it not punctured a hole in the Goodyear blimp, causing 20,000 fans to run screaming down the ramps to their cars as the giant gray skin draped itself, deflating, along the upper mezzanine. The game was forfeited, and Flessum, branded a jinx and a misfit by his team and by the league, was shipped back to the minors.

He was once attacked in the outfield in Fort Worth by a swarm of Africanized bees, suffering stings on ninety percent of his

body. He swelled up so bad, and so fast, that the team physician had to read the number on his back to place him.

One lightly attended twinighter, late in the game, with the flags ripping in a left-to-right wind, Thad followed a hooking, streaking line drive into the dead part of the ballpark, a shadowy zone where no ball had ever been hit in a night game. The ball presumably landed in Flessum's glove, in a corner between the jutting stands and the outfield wall where no umpire or TV camera could make it out. Though Flessum emerged from the dark, lofting the ball proudly in the web of his glove, no one saw it, and the opposing manager fumed until the second base umpire ruled it a ground rule double.

In a single game in August of 1969, Flessum batted for the cycle in a game in Sioux City called on account of hailstones the size of ducks' eggs. During the Plains League championship series, he leaped five rows into the stands in the tenth inning to snag the winning home run ball -- only to stumble on the seats and experience a severe concussion when his head struck a lead pipe railing, with the ball rolling stillborn from his glove. Witnesses described the sound of Flessum's forehead striking the pipe as something out of "The Three Stooges."

Flessum lay in a coma until Thanksgiving of that year. It was not until he was awakened by the smell of frying bacon at the next bed that he was informed that his team had lost and he had passed waivers for good.

Arthritic and forgetful, Flessum spent the next two years out of organized ball, but worked the summer carnie circuit across Montana, Idaho, Wyoming and parts of the Dakotas, demonstrating a big league swing to youngsters who would pay twenty five cents to watch with fascination as the battered

ballplayer rolled up his pant leg and lowered his head to show them his scars.

But the thing was, Flessum appears on no team photograph published during the fourteen years he spent in professional baseball. Either he was stuck in traffic while the team picture was being taken, or the player in front of him lifted a glove just as the shutter snapped. Even the high school where a showcase of glittering championship trophies recalled the victories he led his team to burned to the ground one cold February night. As did the town's newspaper, later that May.

"I reckon I gave baseball as much as it gave me," Thad Flessum would tell visitors who stopped him on his riding mower on the big lawn overlooking the lake.

"But the hell of it is, I think I belonged, and there ain't no evidence I was even there."

Friday, April 8, 2001

Poodle Update

I have gotten some mail the past couple of years, although less than a metric ton, asking why I never write about my dog Beauregard any more. After all, I took a year to write a biography of him when he was only two years old, and his life was still largely ahead of him. Why did I stop?

Well, I thought I had worn out his welcome among you all, writing so much about a dog. Even I got tired of trying to see things through his eyes. Especially when it dawned on me that he was no longer a puppy, and what I saw was all I was going to get. Despite his coat going blue-gray with time, and the wisdom of the years supposedly attaching itself to him, Beau remained Beau. Imperious, impractical, intolerant of any male dog claiming to be his peer, and the passive victim of frequent, violent emotional hijackings.

If you were in the market for a new best friend, those would not be the characteristics you would seek out. Yet we are stuck with one another, like Laurel & Hardy, for the duration.

Beau doesn't really hate Bob the mailman. It's just a sudden whim that overtakes him. But that will be cold comfort to Bob's widow.

His problem is that he is hopelessly dominant with other male dogs. He goes into social situations with an immense chip on his shoulder, that he must make others aware of his natural status above them. There is no chit-chat or affable tail-wagging. He encounters them tail erect and unsmiling. Do you agree to my terms or not? If a dog is too young to sign on the line, he will get growled at, and maybe pinched.

I feel sorry for him. Imagine never feeling free to be a mensch, or whatever the canine equivalent of that is. You can never just say, Hi there. Say, you had soup for lunch, didn't you? Instead the heavy obligation to impose the proper hierarchy of things, with oneself as top turtle.

Everyone with a nice dog looks at Beau and me as if we were the distilled embodiment of evil, like I require my dog to be an asshole. It was worse back when he had the poodle hairdo. Once, sporting a full pompadour and cuffs, he threw two German shepherds on their backs and lingered with dripping fangs over their throats, their astonished owner asked why my dog did that. "He doesn't know what he looks like," was all I could come up with.

What none of them can know -- you have heard this about everyone who ever went crazy shooting -- is that he remains lovely company when we are alone. Besides scrambling the brains of interlopers, he lives to do but one thing, and that is to follow me from room to room, for as much of my life as he is permitted to live.

When I work, he sleeps on his plaid pillow. He is formidable at this, sleeping 15-17 hours every day. He can travel by car 400 miles without once whimpering to be let out. But he has to be in the caravan. If he sees me loading the car for a weekender, he finds a way to shoehorn himself into that car, even if I have loaded it with broken window glass. And when I start the key, and he knows he is included, he licks me in furious, passionate gratitude.

There is a sense which my marriage to Rachel is a sham. We are both so busy, we sometimes see one another only in passing, kissing at the curb. My real marriage is with Beauregard, who goes everywhere with me. For us to be closer we would have to be Thai twins. Today he is going to the

radiology lab for my six-month MRI. When they pull me out of the tube, he will be curled up in the rear of the station wagon. He will never have been anxious about my return. Beau is not just faithful to me, he has deep faith in me. This perfection can be a burden. But I do hate to let him down.

On those rare occasions when I do have to leave him for an hour or two, like a business meeting, the greeting I receive puts the lie to the poodle myth of detached intellect. This is the emotional hijacking. His joy at seeing me is so boundless, Rachel and I fear he will hurl himself through a door and be halved.

This past week, I took Beau down to the airport dog park, so he can work his magic on the other dogs. Lately, I have come up with a somewhat successful solution -- every time he acts beastlily, intimidating other dogs, I clap a leash on him for five full minutes, and hold him close. It sure beats reading passages from Dale Carnegie to him.

Today, unaccountably, he is sweetness and sunshine with the other dogs. He wags his tail in a stiff, tight arc. He even proffers a little grin from time to time. It is a Beau I would like to see more of. In the space of an hour, I haven't had to intervene to save another dog from 20 hours on the couch.

Then, suddenly, a young male Rottweiler shows up and ambles over to Beau. The new dog seems unreliable. My antennae are tingling, so I put Beau on the leash as a precaution. To no avail -- the big dog suddenly swings toward Beau and sinks a major crunch through his foreleg. The skin splits and blood starts seeping down Beau's skinny arm. Beau can't believe it. The other dog's owner -- it's his first visit to the dog park -- denies that it happened.

Maybe Beau's karma has returned to bite him in the arm. The next week will be rotten, as he gets stitched up, unstitched, and learns to walk anew on an unsteady limb. Maybe it will constitute a lesson: Bite not lest ye be bitten.

Who am I kidding. I see him sleeping on his pillow, so vain, so obdurate. He's an impossible dog, and I suffer the dismissive judgments other people make, even when they are unspoken.

But I also know Beauregard is fundamentally innocent. He has no plan in mind except to be with me, as long as he can.

I'll get you through this, old fellow. Stick with me, we'll walk it through together.

November 17, 2000

Invisible Angels

"Therefore the LORD God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from whence he was taken. So he drove out the man; and he placed at the east of the garden of Eden Cherubims, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to keep the way of the tree of life." - Genesis 3

As we lace up our future shoes and wade into the wetlands of the future, it might be wise to remember why we go forward -- why there even is a future. The origins of this notion are embedded in our most ancient stories.

Most cultures -- not all, but most -- conceive of there once having been an age of gods, followed by an age of heroes, followed by our age of ordinary men and women.

Evolution may be visible in the fossil record. But in the human imagination, we want the pattern to be devolution, a cosmic grace. Because that explains more than why we lack tails. It tells who we are, and what our world means.

In the monotheistic tradition, humankind was created to be like God -- immortal, intelligent, without sin (taking on the prerogatives of God) but with the free will to sin.

This golden age is a powerful preoccupation -- the good old days before pain and death. Our only hope of attaining anything like it again, we tell ourselves, is in the future. Dying and going to heaven is one way to get there, but few of us seem to be in a hurry to do that. By far the preferred method is leveraging technology to remake the fallen world into a new Eden.

When Adam and Eve were driven out of the garden, they knew nothing and had nothing. Imagine their desolation, having to overcome everything: Hunger. Ignorance. Disease. Powerlessness. Isolation.

To survive they fashioned a toolbox of ambitious technologies: Agriculture. Literacy. Medicine. Mechanics. Networks.

Oddly, our sin was overstepping, wanting to be like gods -- and our expiation for that sin was more overstepping, outfitting ourselves with godly technology.

A single human being today, fully networked and plugged in, has 10,000 times the power and reach of Adam the instant he crossed Eden's threshold and the lights dimmed.

So which is right, evolution or devolution? It's hard to doubt the fossil record, which suggests we descended less from angelic beings but from something analogous to e coli.

Or maybe scientists and creationists are both correct, and the clay comprising us is the residue of a universe bursting into being -- literal stardust -- a trillion millennia ago.

Maybe, with the Weekly World News reports sighting Noah's ark on Mount Ararat, or the broken tablets in a cave at Qurun, the Cherubim are still stationed at the gates of Eden, flames still jetting from their swords. We could go there now, by plane and bus, and verify their vigil.

But somehow -- because something about us makes paradise ring even truer than science -- we would be unable to see them.

September 20, 2000

Sometimes I Wonder

I don't know what it is. I should know by this point in my life what is important and what's not worth getting upset about. But I still get drawn in.

This past weekend we held the big folk festival I have been annoying everyone about for the past six months. It was a roaring success. We almost broke even, which exceeded our wildest expectations.

But when it was all over, instead of relief and delight, my main emotion was peevishness at the folks who told me they'd come but didn't. Like a pebble in my shoe, I hobbled around worrying that minor pain into something major.

This is an ancient theme with me. In college, I planned an elaborate anti-war protest for a visit to campus by national security adviser MacGeorge Bundy. I inserted a fake song ("Old MacBundy Had a Farm") in every chapel hymnal. When the moment came, I expected the 20 people I had coaxed into participating to join me in song. None did. I was left standing literally at the altar, singing, "With a boom-boom here, and a bang-bang there." Oh, how I hated my friends that day.

I suppose it means I'm a lousy leader. No argument there. I never saw myself as that; rather, as an enthusiast, an Ezra Pound, someone who gets other people excited about stuff. The folk festival was terrific fun, and I wanted these friends to join in.

It being a free country (there are even folk songs to that effect), they chose not to. Leaving me unfulfilled, like a dog at the window, whimpering pointlessly at a teasing squirrel.

Or you could compare it to sex; it's just more fun with other people.

So I've been thinking maybe I need therapy. (Whenever I have voiced this possibility in the past, whoever I have voiced it to has answered in the affirmative awfully quickly.) Find out what's wrong with me that I have to drag people around with me through life, like a green lieutenant calling out to his army to "Follow me! Follow!" but they can't be stirred from their pup tents.

But I'm afraid that wouldn't work, either. I can imagine looking up after my allotted 50 minutes and telling the shrink, "So you're not even going to ask me about my mother?" Always "pushing the river," which we are all plainly instructed not to do.

Writing itself is an extension of this principle. Every week I take this initiative, which I am helpless to resist, but which the world feels much less helpless about. Every time I hit a key, it's like standing in someone's yard and asking Billy's mom if Billy can come out and play. Only in real life Billy and his mom are the same person. I have to get past the parent to get to the child. And I never do.

When I was a kid I was so bored that one day I decided to start a college, using an old shed down by the monkeyball trees as our Old Main. My family had lots of books about nature and history, and I thought the gang and I could take turns looking at these books and making charts from them -- the phyla tree, a timeline from the Paleozoic to the current era, the life cycle of the Nile crocodile. We could all be professors --of geology, of biology, of the Civil War. Could anything be more fun?

Well, you can imagine how far that idea got.

So I am forced to conclude that I have spent 50 years of my life -- and doggone it, the best 50 years of my life - annoying people. And even though I consider myself an avatar of change, and have even written books about how to do it (books that, as you may have guessed, no one bought), I'm no good at it.

I once wrote an entire book (unpublished, naturally) about how expectant fathers lag behind their expectant partners during pregnancy because, not having a baby growing inside them, and not spending an hour every morning with their head in a toilet, they live in inevitable denial. After I showed the book to about 20 publishers, my agent took me aside laid the harsh news upon me. "Michael, people don't buy books about denial. Think about it."

So here's the killer. I know I can change because I know the secret of change. Just change the behavior, the symptoms, and forget the flawed underlying structure. This is how people lose weight, overcome bad habits, become presidential candidates.

But it's a chimera. Because what I really want is to make the fluttering die down, the excitement that, if we just do something interesting together, right now, things will be immediately less boring. Say something. Bite into a lemon. Pretend we're eggs frying. And 50 years on, it doesn't go away.

You can change everything about yourself, until you are pleasing and undemanding and a dullard to everyone who encounters you. But inside, you will still be who you are.

Follow me?

September 9, 2000

Monarchs & Viceroy

A friend called to me at our dog walk, near the airport. "I was thinking of you the other day," he said, "what with you being a poet and all. I was here in this stand of trees, and I noticed the branches were loaded with butterflies. I figured you'd appreciate something like that."

I wanted to tell him he'd done the right thing -- delegated high feeling and lofty expression to a trained professional. What kind of world would this be if people thought their own thoughts?

And I wondered what he thought I could do about the butterflies that he couldn't -- write an Ode on a Butterfly? ("Oh, ye flapping-hinged harbingers of autumn...")

"Oh," I said instead, "I know just what you mean. I was here a week ago, walking under these aspens, unaware they were there. Suddenly they all jumped out of the branches and were fluttering around me, above my head, everywhere."

"Your eye couldn't follow all of them at once, so you looked in a general way, at the shape of the swarm, until you got dizzy."

See, how poetic was that?

Truth is, poems are a lousy way to learn out about nature. The elevation of tone tends to kill the actualness, and the factualness, of what you are seeing. I have read dozens of poems about whippoorwills and nightingales, for instance. But I never "got" from the poems that a whippoorwill is this humble creature that plops itself on open ground to nest. Or

that the nightingale swoops down at night with a piercing cry that is really kind of scary.

To learn these things, you need nature books, or someone who can show you firsthand. Or you need to pay attention.

I learned on the WWW just now that monarchs occupy most of the northern U.S. and Canada. But when September comes along, they nearly all fly south to Mount Angangueo in the Mexican state of Michoacan, where they reproduce, and die, but their offspring fly back north in the spring.

Along the way they feed on swamp milkweed, which is poisonous to just about every species but them. Thus the word gets out not to eat a monarch.

And another species entirely, the viceroy butterfly, only a centimeter smaller than the monarch (viceroy means "under-monarch") but otherwise identical, benefits from this intimation of toxicity. Birds don't eat viceroys for fear they might be monarchs.

Digressing further, I always supposed the woolly bear caterpillar, being black and brown, was the larva for the monarch or viceroy. It is the only caterpillar I have ever wanted to rub noses with, inching funnily along my finger. But it isn't. It's its own bug, turning into the smaller tiger moth when it's finished caterpilling. The fur is what makes them so anthropomorphically sweet -- halve its bristles and the creature loses its mammalian aura and becomes just another writhing toothbrush head.

In the 70s, my brother Brian and I used to dream up bumper sticker ideas, thinking money could be made that way. Our ideas were inevitably flawed. My best idea was HONK IF YOU'RE WHITE, the flaw of which was that it struck unironic people as racist. His best was I BRAKE FOR WOOLY

BEARS, the flaw of which no one in the big city, where people buy these things, knew what a woolly bear was.

And so the mind goes, idly flapping from idea to idea. I relate tremendously to the charming, demented migration of these pretty creatures from Minnesota to Michoacan every September. Unlike us, they seem to belong in the shimmering aspen boughs, they are born to it, as befits their name.

And I think that if I put out my hand and one of these beautiful fellows were to light on my finger, and pose for me a moment, commoner to king, I would be as happy as Uncle Remus.

August 8, 2000

Gee Whiz

OK. Beau and I are visiting the dog park behind the airport in Minneapolis. It's a huge field owned by the airport commission, and they let dog owners use it as a place where dogs can run free.

My dog is mixing it up with the other dogs. It's a warm summer night, and all the dogs are grinning broadly. I'm stopping to pat a schnauzer on the head, when a big young Rottweiler circles round me, lifts a hind leg, and urinates all over my back and pantleg.

Time stops. Several other humans stop and point mutely. One person appears to laugh nervously, but no sound comes out. I look behind me. At first I doubt the dog has hit me -- he must be peeing on the grass behind me.

Then I feel the warmth seeping through my shirt. I feel the looping shape of the stream, like a signature hastily scribbled on my back. To paraphrase the epitaph on Keats' grave: "Here lies one whose name was writ in urine."

My smile freezes and fades. The warm feeling turns cold. The Rottweiler gives no sign that what he has done is anything out of the ordinary, or in need of forgiving, and shambles merrily away.

I feel less merry. The collegiality that marked the intra-species gathering only a minute before has dissipated, and I cast about, looking from face to face, seeking to know whose dog did this to me.

Someone informs me the dog's name is Cain, and he is a nice enough of a dog, about two years old.

I can feel my heartbeat, which informs me I am in a low level of panic. How does one handle a situation like this? Do I get accusatory? Do I demand an apology? Do I falsely laugh it all off, as if it were water off a duck's back? Or do I tuck tail and run, home to my agitator and spin cycle?

The owner, a young man who does not look like the type who trains dogs to pee on people, squints at me, and realizes something out of the ordinary has occurred. "You dog just peed all over me," I say dubiously.

"Oh wow," he says. "I'm really sorry." What else could he say?

I get to my feet, stretch and let my soaked shirt flop against me. "I think I'm going to go home and clean up," I say.

People nod like that was probably the most sensible thing to do. Even Beau goes along with the withdrawal, despite it cutting short his evening revelries.

So I'm standing in my basement, plopping my clothes into the washer, with Beau watching from the doorway, and me wondering what I did to bring that on myself, and what lessons I might learn for the future.

And I decide that by kneeling to pay the schnauzer, I had signaled that I was not a person of consequence. A person of no great consequence was of the same order as a lilac bush or a fire hydrant. In a way, by coming down to the dogs' level, I had asked for it.

I decided thenceforward to insist on slightly greater dignity for myself and greater distance between me and dogs. To be more animated, and less treelike. To speak frequently, and without ambiguity.

And to avoid in future insofar as possible the indelible mark of Cain.

Wednesday, July 12, 2000

Greatfull as the Worm

On the morning of my fiftieth birthday, I returned home from shopping to find a Compaq MV5220 monitor box on my doorstep. But there was no monitor inside. The box had been customized. The corrugated was plastered over with handwritten notes, inkjet splotches, and what seemed to be prehistoric cave drawings.

Inside, wrapped in loose sports pages, I found three objects.

The first was a kind of primitive club, an aluminum rod ending in a head, with a cloth hood pulled over the face, tied with a drawstring. When I undid the hood, I was staring at a weird, totemic face with flat screws going in one nostril and one ear, and a bushy head of bright green hair. The expression on the head was of defiance and possibly hostility -- but it also seemed to have a sad vulnerability, as if the defiance belied something mushier inside.

The next object was a paperback book: *Bad As I Want to Be*, the recent autobiography of Dennis Rodman.

That's when it occurred to me -- the face on the mallet-head, which looked plucked from an anthropology textbook, was Rodman's. On the book cover, Rodman sits completely naked on motorcycle, with two basketballs artfully lodged between his legs. On the book jacket his hair was blonde, not green. But who can keep up with such things?

On the flap is this quote: "If I die young, everybody's going to say they saw it coming."

OK, now I'm getting the drift. The third object brought it all together, a note from DRNERO13, aka my friend Dan. Dan is a very creative but down-to-earth guy who seems to infuse all that he does with kindness, humor, and inspiration. Example: on his Little League team, he assigns manly baseball names to all the tremulous 9-year-olds. If you tiptoe onto the team as a Michael or a Cullen or a Scoot, you stride forcefully out as a T-bone, an Axeman, or a Biff.

I coach Little League too, in a more bliss-oriented, twitchy-fingered way -- my fellow coaches call me the Deepak Chopra of baseball. But that's not quite right, and Dan's letter explains why.

Here's the note, with Dan's spellings intact:

Happy Birthday Bro --

I'm greatfull to be able to read your stuff -- I never go online until my family is in bed so I can enjoy your storys.

In my basement I have a couple million puppets I've made. It scares the hell out of Minnegasco [the gas company - Ed] when they come over to fix my furnace.

So I decided to make you the Worm puppet for your birthday -- I really beleave you two are alike -- you are as bad as you wanna be and that's why I dig you and your email ministry.

Thanks for the memories -- DRNERO13.

The Worm, of course, is Rodman. On the Compaq box I read the notes. They are all from Rodman naming his favorite writers -- I am in there among the top guys. And one statement: "Dennis Rodman is the Mike Finley of sports!" And I'm thinking how easily, how automatically, most people would invert that sentence, so that the famous guy is the archetype for the unfamous guy. But not DRNERO.

So the party starts. It was supposed to be held at a big town hall out in Marine on St. Croix, but not enough people RSVP'd so we moved it to our house in Saint Paul. And everyone who arrives has to look at my Worm-on-a-Stick and read Dan's letter. It's fairly weird, so some people just smile fondly and nod. Others get it, and are stunned, as I was, by the implications of being of the identical blood as Dennis Rodman -- indeed, being the prototype upon which the Worm bases his entire life. I imagine Rodman lying awake at night planning the next day's outrages: "I'm got to be more individualistic! What would Finley do in this position?"

Whether this is true or not, it's a lovely thing to hear on your fiftieth birthday, and even lovelier to believe.

And I know what you are thinking: this fellow has misspelled the word grateful, so let us therefore call his remaining worldview into question. But that is where you not possibly be wronger, because greatfull is better than grateful. For what is grateful, when you poke it with a stick, but something to do with a grate that is full of something? Whereas greatfull is not merely great but full of its greatness, and great for its fullness.

From this day forth, DRNERO, and for the next fifty years I will spell it greatfull, when that is the meaning I am meaning.

And that is the meaning I am meaning right now.

June 18, 2000

Conversation with a Father

This is a conversation that occurred last August. But it has stuck with me all this time, and I offer it to you now as a Father's Day remembrance.

It was a bright afternoon. My son Jon and I were visiting our favorite upgrade shop in Prospect Park, Minneapolis. Jon, 11, likes running computer errands with me. Between us, tech talk passes for bonding behavior.

We get lots of things done for our systems there -- memory, hard drives, motherboards, etc. The place is run entirely by guys from somewhere in the Middle East. They are extremely sharp about their business and business is accordingly brisk. There are always a half dozen people lugging PCs to the counter to be fixed.

Our task today was to replace a burned out modem. I tried to attract the attention of the man behind the counter. Finally, a man who was working his way through the throng noticed Jon, lost among all the hardware.

"Hello," he said, "who are you, and how may I help you?"

"Jon Finley," my son muttered.

"I'm sorry, what? How?"

"My name's Jon Finley," he blurted. "We need a new modem. We've got a 33 bps modem but we want to get a 56k."

"I see," said the man, stooping beside Jonathan, so they were on the same level. "Whose computer is it?"

"Mine," said Jon.

"Mine, what?" I asked him.

"Mine, sir," Jon corrected himself.

"What kind is it?" the man asked, unscrewing the case and peering inside.

Jon rattled off the specs in megahertzes and megabytes. He characteristically did not make eye contact while he spied off the acronyms.

The man smiled at him. "It's a powerful computer for one so young," said the man. "What do you do with it?"

"Play games, mostly."

"What kind of games?"

Jon looked at me miserably. He knows his mother and I despair of the hours he spends online shooting people. "I'm playing a lot of Rainbow Six these days," he said.

"That's a good game. I like to play that game. Yes, me! You know I have a son about your age. He is 10. He loves games, too."

Jon was a little interested, but did not want to appear to be too interested. "What games does he like?"

"He would like to play more shooting games. But I limit him. He is only allowed one hour per day. And only after he finishes his homework."

I was warming to this man. "How does he like being limited? And how do you actually limit him?"

The man looked up at me. "I have explained to Johar that a boy is like glass, innocent and fragile. Throw too much at a boy too

soon, he will break. And once he breaks, he can never be put together again. So I am very careful. I have only one son."

I looked at Jon. It was what I had been trying to tell him for the last couple of years -- only the man had said it much better. Jon frowned uncomfortably.

"So how do you limit him?" I asked. "Do you have a timer? Some sort of software controls?"

"No," the man said. "I tell him, from six o'clock until seven. And his homework must be completed first. He would not abuse the rule."

I wanted to ask, Why not? Isn't it a given that whatever restrictions you place on a child, it is their bounden duty to fudge the line? But I got the picture -- Johar didn't mess with his dad's rules.

"Here," he said. "I have replaced the modem, and you can download files at 53k. Have fun -- but be careful," he said, wagging a finger. "Only download good things."

I held out my hand to him. "Thank you, sir," I said. "And may I say I appreciated your insights into raising a son."

"My name is Aziz," he said, taking my hand. "You know, the world is a furious place." He rolled his eyes, taking in the hubbub of the upgrade shop, everyone scrambling for a place at the counter. "But when you have a good son, like Jon, things seem simpler."

And we loaded the PC into the trunk, and drove home. And Jon stared silently out the window, the boulevard trees reflecting against his face. And I reminded myself to spend more time watching him grow.

May 24, 2000

Memorial Day 2000

Just the other side of the airport, on a bluff overlooking the Minnesota River, is Fort Snelling National Cemetery. It's a classic military cemetery, with thousands of identical markers laid out like poppies in Flanders fields.

The cemetery abuts the area where I walk my dog, so I walk through there frequently. Few people buried there were killed in battle. If you served in the armed forces, it's your right to be interred here, and your spouse's.

I always pause a moment, when I see on the marker a death date between 1965 and 1972. And think: there but for the grace of God is me.

It takes me back to my experiences with the draft. I'm a little hazy on it. It was 1969, the haziest year of them all.

I was a hippie wannabee, full of contempt for LBJ and General Hershey. I had a dozen plans for my life, and none of them involved rice paddies. I remember toying with the idea of filing as a conscientious objector, but it didn't work for me. They asked you whether you'd attack Ho Chi Minh with a tire iron if you came upon him raping your Aunt Sally, and I had to admit I wasn't too hot on that idea.

When the Selective Service form asked if I wanted to overthrow the United States Government by force or violence, I wrote, "force."

I was what you'd call a nominal draft resister. I attended a few rallies and read everything disrespectful I could get my hands on. I read in Paul Krassner's magazine *The Realist* that your

draft board had to file everything you sent them. So I sent them a six-pound bonito, a handsome ocean fish I purchased at the Grand Central Market in downtown Los Angeles. The idea was that the draft board would be helpless except to live with the stench of a decaying fish in their file cabinet. Instead -- figure this -- they drafted me.

I was in the U.S. Army, technically, for a couple of weeks, classified as AWOL. I wasn't even aware I'd been drafted; I was hiking around in Alaska at the time, away without leave, without a thought in my head, and only found out about my induction later. Then I applied to the nearest college I could find -- Pepperdine University in Los Angeles, also known as Pat Boone University -- and hid there, cowering, under its ivied protection, until the lottery replaced the draft.

So I never went to Vietnam, and I never missed it. But the war was part of my life anyway. I took my childhood friend, Paul Plato, to his ship in San Pedro when he shipped out.

For a while I knew a couple of actual deserters in Los Angeles. They were a pair of goofy guys who claimed to have escaped from interment at The Presidio. I never believed their stories, but one night they were rousted from their beds and led off by MPs.

At my first high school reunion, I learned that our one fatality was Skeeter Barnes, a sweet kid from the wrong side of the tracks, who stepped on a land mine somewhere and was no more. We played Little League together when we were nine.

It is hard to say who was the coward and who was the hero. Poor Skeeter was no one's idea of a hero; he was just a poor dope who couldn't work the system like I did. I thought I was an intellectual hero, full of higher ideals than flag and

conscription, but I kept myself far from harm's way, didn't I? One more thing I have in common with George W. Bush.

When I think of 56,000 of my generation tossed out there to die defending our Laugh-In way of life, I get blue. Thirty years later, it still hurts.

But there is one thing I would like to set straight. When the war ended, an urban legend popped up, claiming that our returning soldiers were routinely spat on by those who didn't go, and called baby-killers. People who spread this awful story must have had an axe to grind: blame the defeat on the hippies and the liberals.

But I swear it never happened. Or if it happened on a couple of bizarre, sick occasions, they were anomalies. Vietnam vets suffered from a host of problems, from post-traumatic stress disorder and Agent Orange to unemployment in the stagflation of the 70s and early 80s. Many wondered where their reward was for the contribution they'd made. Where was their GI Bill?

What a terrible choice our country forced on a generation of boys: be good and die stupidly or be marked for life, or be smart and survive, but feel like a traitor to your own generation.

And I look at these graves at Fort Snelling, row on row on row on row, their gray faces from jet exhaust -- and I want to salute.

May, 2000

Seminary Days

After my sister died in 1961, my parents split up. Our family had never been too cohesive, but now we were in tatters. My mother was devastated, my father was gone, my older brother Patrick was visibly anxious, and my younger brother was looking about as if he wanted an explanation for what was going on, but no one could give him one. Forty years later, not much has changed.

So I decided to cash it all in and leave home. In 1963 I was an 8th grader, and even though I had never been especially religious -- I had never been, for instance, an altar boy at St. Joseph's, our parish -- I met with a vocational recruiter for a Marist seminary in Philadelphia and began toying with the idea of getting myself to a monastery to cool out. Not to become a priest, like the other boys in our parish, but to become a monk -- I truly wanted to be alone.

The hardest part was asking my mother. She was drenched in bullshit at this moment in her life, and did not need me to be coming up with a fresh batch of the stuff. I very tentatively broached the subject with her one night when she came home from her restaurant job. She took the news quietly -- she never tried to talk me out of it. Perhaps the idea of losing another child made sense to her. I know she loved me -- when the car taking me to Philadelphia pulled out of the driveway at around dawn a couple months later, I saw the look on her face, and it was a look of horror. It was happening again. I hated doing that to her, but I needed to be free. I was 13 years old and leaving home. In a sense I never have gone back.

I loved seminary life. St. Mary's Manor was an old girls finishing school in Bucks County, a stone's throw from the infamous Levittown suburb. The priests got us up at 5:30 every morning for mass, and we would all queue up by a 20-foot trough to brush our teeth and spit. Then we would form a single file and walk to chapel, across a high boardwalk looking out over a pond, and immense oak trees, to prayer. We knelt on bony hard kneelers and chanted in plainsong. And when matins was over, we ran downstairs to the refectory, where a team of French nuns had made pancakes, or army eggs, or coffee cake. All the boys at St. Mary's put on weight from the hearty meals.

The Marists were a second-tier religious order that did conventional things like run parishes and teach at college, but also had a strong missionary tradition. Their one saint was Peter Chanel, who was killed by South Seas islanders on Futuna in 1841. The priests at our seminary were an odd assemblage of academics and eccentrics. I remember we studied Latin as a foreign language, conversationally. World history, taught by an intense Lithuanian priest named Wallace, who found a Lithuanian connection to everything from the Spanish Armada to the Civil War, was as good a course as I ever attended in college. The English teacher, Fr. Foth, was very strong on T.S. Eliot. I remember him reading "Choruses from the Rock," and being struck by the image of "golf balls on the moon."

It was 1963. We would watch Catholic newsreels about the bishops in Rome meeting to usher an *aggiornamento* to the Church and to the faithful. I was playing soccer on the seminary field when Kennedy was shot. I was playing ping pong when I first heard the Beatles. So much happened, and my world grew so much, I think it was the most important year of my life, the year I became me.

What made the year special for me was my friendship with a boy named Robert Dubiel. Dubiel was a very effeminate but very brilliant child my age, much more worldly than I, but nevertheless very "good," too. Before I met him, for instance, I didn't know what liberal and conservative meant. He put me straight on that and a whole lot more.

He and I spent months walking around the pond together, making fun of the place (though we both loved it) and generally eschewing other company. At our high point we became collaborators, writing a set of six plays about seminary life, only transplanting the characters and goings-on to catacombs-era Rome. We would take turns writing scenes in study hall, then pass our notebooks surreptitiously to one another. I remember what an exquisite pleasure it was to see Robert at his desk, shaking with silent laughter over some pun or over-the-top nonsense I had included in that night's draft.

We would cast the rector as an early pope, the lady who helped raise money as a Roman empress, and Praxis, a Roman citizen elevated to the prefecture. A newsboy in one scene was hawking the Capitoline Blade, with the headline "Praxis Makes Prefect." It was silly, but we adored it.

Our relationship was a very gentle friendship in which we poked nasty fun at the world of squares and pietists. I must say I mostly followed Dubiel's lead. It was a nonsexual relationship -- I did not know anything about sex, and Dubiel, though I now realize he must have been gay, was chaste, especially compared to many of the towel snapping masturbators of the dormitory.

But now comes the sad part. As the school year wore on, we were informed in separate meetings with the rector, the top man at the school, that our relationship was sick. The word "concupiscent" was used -- a Catholic catchall for libidinous

sin. I did not understand much of it, but I understood that the school wanted Robert and me to stop seeing each other. In time, I figured out that they thought we were doing nasty things with one another, and I was mortified.

And I was just enough of a scared little shit that I let it stand. For the last two months of the spring semester, I spoke not a word to my dear friend.

And when the school year ended, I decided enough was enough. My older brother was due to go to college that fall. My mother and younger brother needed me. Thus concluded, I thought, my career in religion.

I registered for the public schools back in my Ohio hometown, and within a few months I was reassimilated back into lay society. Really reassimilated -- before the year was up I had lapsed into a juvenile delinquent, getting picked up twice by police, once for stealing an Iron Man comic book and another time for swiping a 45 of The Zombies' "She's Coming Home." I was like an angel fallen from heaven.

But do you know what -- for the rest of my life, not a week has passed that I did not dream of those days at the seminary, where the incense rose high to the Lord, and us boys dreamed of being really good men.

Years later, I wrote my first novel about my seminary adventure. It remains the single most powerful writing experience I have ever had. I even was able to rebuild some of our plays, and include them in the text. Once I made a pilgrimage back to St. Mary's, when Rachel and I were living in New Haven. The place had been sold to a group of Baptists, and all the beautiful things had been packed up and put away -- like the altar, with its beautiful mosaic of a pelican pecking blood from its breast.

Still later, around 1992, I used the Internet to find Dubiel. He lived in Chicago. We had a nice conversation, in which he told me that yes, he was gay, but no, he never did anything about it until after high school. Even then, the seminary gave him a pass, all the way up to the novitiate, where he took an extended leave, just short of ordination.

He makes his living now as a kind of new age/Catholic healer, doing a Shiatsu-like massage and treatment with its basis in scripture.

I enjoyed speaking with him, and I perhaps made the mistake of telling him about my book. I sent it to him, and then the calls tapered off. My story, I imagine, did not square with his version. Who wants to read a novel portraying you as a suicidal homosexual weirdo? (I added a few character defects to make it more interesting.)

But I am grateful to him anyway, for being my friend that most wonderful year of my life.

May, 2000

Years of Nerve

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A bigger event was the arrival by night of Russian dissident poet Andrej Voznesenski's. Well, dissident may not be right word -- he was a surrealist, so it was unclear whether he was really dissident. But he sure sounded dissident. The Soviet

Union refused him a visa until 24 hours before his schedule visa, so he arrived nervous and tired from his trip. But the energy returned when he took the huge stage. Northrop Auditorium was cordoned off so that 50 people dotted the 5,000 seats while Vosnesenki groaned like a swinging pendulum through readings of "Goya" and other poems in the only language he knew.

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

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

The next few years saw a minor flourish of correspondence between us. Bly was fairly flattering, and I was very flattered. Remember that I was 20 when I met him, barely more than a

boy, and one whose own father had abandoned him. The idea of being taken in by a major figure like Bly seemed a very acceptable trade-up. When he came to Minneapolis to read I would make sure and meet him and pledge my allegiance.

But Bly in person, wrapped in his Peruvian poncho and sweeping into a room to the sound of beads knocking together like a nun's rosary, was not as gracious as Bly on paper. Perhaps when he met me face to face he read the hurry and ambition that was written there. Or perhaps he saw I was younger than he supposed. In any event, he quickly took to teasing me with little jabs, calling me "Irish" instead of Mike. I sensed the pullback -- he wasn't teasing me out of affection, but because something about me bugged him.

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

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

It dawned on me, through the haze of red wine, that our role was that of acolytes.

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

Now, Orr wrote very somber, dreamy, melancholy poems much like my own, so in my vanity, I imagined that Bly wanted me to learn something from Orr for my own growth as an artist. I wrote a friendly review that nevertheless coaxed Orr to move beyond dreaminess to something more substantive. At the end, I quoted an image of James Wright to sell the idea to Orr: "What are you afraid of? Go out on the limb of your life. The branch won't break."

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

Which I did. But I made a serious mistake. Thinking it would simplify matters, I photocopied Robert's letter to me and forwarded that to Hall. A week passed, and I got a furious

letter from Robert again, telling me I had violated his trust and that we were no longer friends. Aghast at what I had done -- I remain very bad at keeping other people's secrets, 30 years later -- I wrote letters to Bly and Hall, apologizing up and down.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I'm sorry, Michael, but we're changing as an organization. I truly think we can best meet our mission by focusing on the work of emerging women writers. There are so many books out by so many male poets."

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

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

"But the committee voted to publish it."

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

"OK, what do I have to do?"

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

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

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

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

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

"Hello?" a froggy voice asked.

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

"I know who you are, Mike."

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

"Why?"

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

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

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

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

"I will do that, Meridel."

"And the same goes for you." Click.

Jean-Marie got word that I passed muster with Meridel, and she went forward with the book, called *The Movie under the Blindfold*. Of all the things I wrote in the 70s, I like that book best. It's mysterious, but you can tell it's about relationships, and identity, and coming to terms with the particulars of one's life. It combined two strengths -- the vividness of surrealism, with a down-to-earth quality my future work would go in.

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

But years later, I did locate three of the remaindered copies, at a St. Paul bookstore, marked down from \$3.50 to \$.99 and snapped them all up. And I wrote perhaps my favorite poem, "Remainders," about the opportunity represented. The last few

lines tell you just how intensely I saw the role of poet, and how intensely I felt the failure to find an audience:

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

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

So I undertook to translate, for Red Hill Press in California, a book of sonnets by the mercurial shepherd poet of the Spanish Civil War, Miguel Hernandez. Hernandez, like Lorca, was nabbed by the fascists in the war and died in captivity. He had not arrived at the lofty status of Lorca, but he was clearly cut from the same bolt -- fiery, imaginative, and free. Keats on acid would place him pretty accurately.

So I ploughed into his best-known book, *El Rayo Que No Cesa* -- Lightning that Never Ceases. At least that's how I translated it. In truth, the book posed many thorny problems for me. There were many times when he would revert to what I call

Castillian kenning -- repeating a reference image like "heart of nacre," which does not easily yield to English. But I did my best, focusing on making good, readable poems.

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

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

Thus, in the 1970s, we published five books. One was a book of very strange, elliptical anthemic poems by my buddy Barry Casselman, called *Equilibrium Fingers*. Barry was very gifted, but very proud and also very obscure. Since I was a fair publisher but a lousy promoter, his book went nowhere. Another title was a suspense novel by Helgi Michelson, an Estonian poet who relocated to Minneapolis after World War II. The story takes place in Hungary, about a fascist torturer who goes on to become a kind of mystical saint. Honest to God, you feel you are reading Dostoyevsky when you read it -- it has that luminous, yet drab skin that some great works have.

But the big thing about Helgi was that she gave up on the book after her son died in a bicycle accident. I took her book, shepherded it through to distribution, and managed to get a few reviews of it. And I took the story of her son, and made it into

a poem, which won the highest honor any poem of mine ever won, a Pushcart Prize in 1984. Best of all. you can see that I have figured out something very special -- how a poem can be about something:

*"No, you've got this part all wrong,"
Says Gise, swatting a poem about birds
With the back of one hand.
"You have whippoorwills sobbing in the limbs
Of poplars, but whippoorwills don't perch
In poplars, whippoorwills don't perch anywhere,
Because their legs are just tiny twigs,
They are gone into atrophy, no muscle left,
So all they can do is plop themselves
Flat on the ground and make the best of it
There on their haunches. And furthermore,
What is this sobbing business? It's poetic
But hardly accurate. Their cry is more
Like a cheer, it is a call my son Peter,
Before he died, liked to imitate
On his walks home from school.
Many times, late summer nights in our cabin,
Hendrik and I would be feeling morose,
Only to hear out there in the darkness
The cry of a creature pressed close
And shouting from the cold of this earth
To all who might hear him:
VIP-poor-VEE!"*

And in the end, everything comes around. A year after Vanilla Press published and then lost my book, I was in her house for some party. I was headed upstairs, and who do I bump into on

the landing but William Stafford, the guy who got all this started in the first place. I was a little drunk, and I had to laugh to see him so unexpectedly. He didn't know what I was laughing about, but he started laughing, too, and we decided to leave it at that, and he clapped me on the back. I never saw him again. He died in 1993.

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

May, 2000

My Literary Feud

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

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

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

One day I noticed something odd about my writing -- I felt compelled to break rules. One rule of poetry in the 60s and 70s, at least in the prairie school of poetry I was tutored in, was that you had to stay very concrete and imagistic. You weren't allowed to get into generalities or name feelings -- you could

only portray things. But I liked breaking that rule. In particular, I liked using the word love in poems. Love was a kind of harlequin character, you could meet it on the street, or pass it by, and never know what you'd missed. It was never far from the concept of sorrow.

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

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

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

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

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

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

And it just kept getting worse. At one point, the two of us corresponded. He was rough and threatening, and I was nimble and clever, dancing around his hulking rage. And I did unethical things, cc'ing his letters to people whom I was sure would lose respect for him if they only read his own stupid

words. Didn't happen -- or at least, no one gave me the satisfaction of saying so. I wrote to one of his sponsors, informing the group of his mismanagement of their money. It was really bad.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Years later, word came to me that Naiden was dying of congestive heart failure, brought on by a life of hard drinking.

People I trusted told me that while he was not especially nice, he wasn't as bad as I'd made him appear. He was a tough guy, who grew up in a Russian immigrant family where action counted and words didn't. His rebellion was to make a life of words, far from home.

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

April 7, 2000

Inside the Canine Head

Every dog owner has wondered what it is like to be inside a dog's head. But I, and I almost alone among our species, have actually had that experience.

Over the holidays, my son's school held a fundraiser at a local bakery. All profits from that day's sales went to the school. To lure traffic in, human volunteers were asked to dress up in semi-realistic animal costumes and parade around outside the bakery.

You know how it is, when you see someone dressed up in an animal suit, and you just want to whip out your checkbook. The last thing you would do is cross the street to avoid the person/animal.

Anyway, I was volunteered for this operation ("We thought you would be perfect for public humiliation," one of the moms told me), and the suit I was given was of a husky dog, or possibly a Samoyed.

It was a very good suit. The fur looked real, and the head, though oversized, was naturalistic. No sooner did I slip the enormous outer head over my inner one, and peered out the gauze eye-windows, than I felt different. And I don't just mean unable to breathe. No, I began to feel like the creature I looked like.

It was a slushy day, and it had begun to snow when I slunk out to my appointed post along Summit Avenue. Altogether I spent two hours on the corner, and in that period I went through a series of transformations.

First, I was: the man in a dog suit. New to the concept, I imagined myself as a cartoon dog. When cars would go by I would wave my hand in a friendly way, like the girl in the Mickey Mouse suit at Disneyland. But after a minute or two of that, that seemed mind-numbingly insipid, so I began to experiment with other modes of behavior. Like lifting a leg at the stop sign to make my mark.

Some people, passing by, made me want to look away -- they were cold and distant -- cat people. Others filled me with alarm -- I wanted to shout at them, repeatedly and insistently, as if there were some point to my bellowing.

Other people seemed sympathetic. I whined when they passed me on the sidewalk, hoping they would pity me and take me home. I zeroed in on a family with only one child, a little boy about six. I sensed a vacancy in their hearts, and I yearned to fill it. But they, unsure about a six foot, one inch, bipedal malamute, walked right on by.

But I grew tired of that and became: the man who did not know he was a dog. Now I was just an ordinary man, but one wearing a dog suit. The fact that I was in a dog suit was of no consequence to me. I pretended I was waiting for a bus, glancing at my paw-watch to check the time. I rocked on my heels, and whistled a tune. When a car drove by too quickly and splashed slush onto my feet, I made the Italian fungoo sign at them as they sped away, laughing.

Then I became: the man who awoke to find himself changed into a dog. Like Gregor Samsa in the Franz Kafka story, trapped in a large cockroach's body, only I was a dog. I paced around frantically, pretending to pull my head off, only to discover it was my real head. It was a horror story, but no one showed the slightest sympathy. I waved at passersby signaling that I needed help in the most urgent way. I even stepped into

traffic a bit, as if I might stand in front of a car to get it to stop. You should have seen people's expression, delight fading into something unnerving.

But the metamorphosis deepened, and I became the most frightening apparition of all: the man who really was a dog. All human perspective was gone now. I was a tall dog standing on its hind legs, teetering close to traffic. This was serious. I could bolt into an oncoming car, or nip a passerby in my confusion. I looked around me at the world of people, orderly for them but incomprehensible to me.

Soon, my coat blanketed with wet snow, but my mask wet inside from perspiration, I trudged lock back to the bakery, undid the dog's head, and felt the cool human air rush to my slick face. Things began making sense again. Business was booming; we wound up raising \$7,000 from sales of bread for the school.

But I felt changed for having been a dog. It made me realize dogs in human society feel almost constant fear. I remembered my last thoughts on the boulevard:

If I was a real dog, then I wasn't on a leash, and what did that mean? That I was lost, or somehow emancipated. If so, I was in deep trouble -- alone in the city, confused by traffic, stimulated by my freedom but unsure what to do with it. I appeared to be grinning, as dogs in danger do. But I was at my wits' end.

I controlled nothing in this environment. I understood nothing. Everyone else seemed to have a direction to their behavior, whereas I was simply improvising from moment to moment. One wrong move and I was a dead dog.

My only defense against all this confusion was to latch onto a human who could make sense of it and ingratiate myself to him. But who -- who?

I put my head back and I howled into the falling snow.

March 27, 2000

Why We Are Black

There must be something wrong with me, because when I got my census form last week, I dutifully filled it out. That is, until I came to the section marked race. On an impulse, I said that our entire family was black.

We aren't ostensibly black. One look in the mirror confirms that. We are white as sheets, the four of us.

But I did it anyway, probably committing a felony in the process. I can't tell you what the #1 reason was. But I had my reasons, and I will list them here.

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 probabilities that may or may not be true?

2. I did it out of plantation liberalism, a hard habit to break. What good it will do is unclear to me. My understanding is that the census exists primarily to count citizens so that congressional districts may be accurately apportioned. But what our color has to do with congressional district apportionment is, again, a mystery. Also, minorities get undercounted in the census, and are thus underserved in government outlays. So I thought I'd counterbalance an uncouned 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 -- it's more fun, would be the sanitized reductio. 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* (1962). And less embarrassing than Al Jolson in *The Jazz Singer* (1929).

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, Neecie, 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, we are 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?

April 7, 2000

"The Skin Over a Young Girl's Wrist ..."

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

You see, he was my uncle, sort of.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*I would like to hold the slenderer one in my arms,
For she has walked over to me
And nuzzled my left hand.
She is black and white,
Her mane falls wild on her forehead,
And the light breeze moves me to caress her long ear*

That is delicate as the skin over a girl's wrist.

Suddenly I realize

That if I stepped out of my body I would break

Into blossom.

This is poetry that makes one want to weep and pray. It soothed the wound that was still in me from my sister's death. I began to see the calamity that befell my family as itself a kind of blessing. In my reading, the line about "the skin over a young girl's wrist" was always Kathy's wrist.

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

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

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

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

me in any way. He treated me like a young colleague, a student perhaps. He respected me, and it rocked me.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Your drawing is definitely improving, Dave."

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

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

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

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

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

Wright at his best legitimized something I hear many poet peers railing against -- self-pity. I often hear writers condemn another writer for obsessing about personal suffering. Writing

about one's own hurting is suspect -- unmanly, and "stuck" in its own sorrow, not providing movement away from grief.

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

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

Wright was part of the confessional school, but he was bigger than it. Though his estimate of himself was humble, he wound up being important. He helped introduce us to great Latin and European writers. And he altered the poetic landscape, away from the owlsh academicism of the 1950s and toward something much more personal and passionate and alive. And his books live on as testament to a life felt fully and appreciated.

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

March 12, 2000

Lessons of The Mikado

I have never been a natural fan of British films like the Merchant-Ivory series, or *Brideshead Revisited*. My Irish self has always bridled at the genteel touch.

So I was surprised to find myself in a sort of movie-going rapture watching Mike Leigh's *Topsy Turvy*, about the making of Gilbert and Sullivan's opera *The Mikado*.

It's a movie about the Victorian era, focusing on a late-career squabble between troubled librettist William Gilbert and untroubled composer Arthur Sullivan.

Sullivan wants to quit the partnership because his muse is calling him to purer work than HMS Pinafore -- symphonies and such. He is a lover of life, determined to try something new, and modernly in touch with all his feelings.

Gilbert, by contrast, is a mess -- stuffily proud of his story lines, which Sullivan points out always seem to involve a magic wand or ampule or potion, but unable to express himself beyond the autocratic confines of his writings.

He is especially furious that a reviewer of his last play mocked him for the "topsy-turvyness" -- his tendency to go Alice-in-Wonderland silly in his plots.

Their partnership is on the brink of shipwreck when Gilbert attends an exhibition of Japanese arts. Intrigued, he witnesses samurai fighting, tea ceremonies, and the face-making stylistics of Noh theater.

The key moment in the movie for me happens that night. Home from the exposition, challenged by his producers to give

Sullivan a story with greater depth, he sees -- and the audiences sees him see -- the possibilities of a perfectly British adaptation of Japanese culture.

The camera approaches him from below chin level, then looks up to see, like a lover, the idea jazzing in his eyes. I was writhing in my seat at this glorious picture of creativity.

That shot is like an umbrella that the rest of the picture scurries around under. You are shown how the prospects of technological change were delighting the forward thinking Britons.

There is a hilarious scene of Gilbert talking to his booking agent on a very early telephone, shouting polite, unnecessary messages, "I AM SPEAKING TO YOU ON THE TELEPHONE!" into the wires.

At another point, a businessman hands Sullivan his first fountain pen. "It's a new kind of pen that contains its own reservoir," he explains. Sullivan puts nib to paper and smiles with pleasure as his signature glides into existence. The ink was inside the pen!

Not everyone benefits from newness. Gilbert's aged father endures an evening in the London damp because he is afraid he will die if he pushes the electric doorbell button to be let in.

It is a movie about learning, in which every character has a luminous moment. Two jingoistic actors decry the uncivilized killing of the hero general George Gordon in Ethiopia by the Great Mahdi. A Scots actor asks them if they feel the same about the report of the killings of Irish families by their own civilized troops.

This same Scotsman bristles later, as he is tailored in Japanese garments, and his own innate Britishism won't allow him to

show the contour of his calves onstage. Obscene, declares the man who on any given Sunday wears a kilt and nothing under.

At another point a rotund actor, playing the Mikado himself, has his big song excised the eve of performance. Going against all theatrical tradition, and against the imperious Gilbert's will, the actors meet with him in a stairwell and plead their fellow's case. To their surprise, Gilbert, who has by now overcome his own insufferable British certitude, relents and restores the aria. And a thing unheard of, floret of democracy, sprouts at the Savoy Theater.

It is a splendid story of a pair of geniuses who had made a great career of satirizing British ways, hitting a tired patch and summoning the inspiration to start over.

Sullivan is certain the listening public is anxious not for more fun and frolic and the most wonderful, most joyous trilling this side of Mozart, but for a staid symphony. (Think: Lloyd Webber's stilted classical forays, or worse, Sir Paul McCartney's.)

And poor Gilbert. He is horrified by the demise of his father, beaten down by the hatefulness of his mother ("Never have a baby with a sense of humor!"), unable to express even the simplest direct emotion to a sweet and affecting wife, and now threatened by a partner who wants to pack up and leave.

Poor, constricted, flightless William Gilbert in his moment of woe reaches down and fetches forth the most wonderful story yet -- of Nankypoo, and the Grand Poobah, and the three tittering schoolgirls. Japanese on the surface, but scratch it, and it's a more familiar island empire.

Lessons for us all. As Sullivan's mistress says of the endless possibilities, rolling her eyes and smiling, "After all, it's 1895."

Shakespeare in Love

It was the night before last year's 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 that afternoon from the bank.

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 stroke 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:

"You know, it's funny to be reading here. In all my experience, this is the first time a store has tried to make money off free verse. [Wait for laughs, none come.]

"Our topic today is the decline of the love poem. Today's poets write very few poems about the love we feel for our chosen ones. This failure began, oddly enough, in the Romantic era, when poets redirected their attention from what was around them, to what was going on inside their heads."

I'm going great guns, and Rachel lists 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 seldom seems to matter any more. 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. They say it's not cancerous, but it may have to come out. I'm afraid of the tumor, and I'm afraid of the operation. I'm forgetting a lot. I have lots to lose besides my life."

"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 synch. 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 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'll probably 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."

Cold Wind, Mad Dog

My mother came to visit from Ohio, despite being in low-level heart failure and various other ailments. The first few days were fine, but on the fifth night, her blood sugar plummeted to 12, and she fell out of bed, breaking perhaps three vertebrae. This triggered a health meltdown - for a couple of days nothing inside her seemed to work -- requiring hospitalization in what was for her a strange place, far from home.

My mom is pretty old-fashioned. Though equipped this past year with a computer for genealogy and email, she remained one of those who wrote everything in beautiful longhand, who preferred reading a book to watching the tube. She would forget little things in the present; but her memory of things she read or experienced in the past was canonical. It occurs to me that she lived in the books she was always reading. And maybe that is why I became a writer.

As a toddler I was Freudianly, Oedipally in thrall to her. I can remember us bathing, way, way back, when I was three. I remember ... Ivory Soap.

I burned to marry her the moment I was old enough, and we would drive off on our honeymoon in her 1956 red and white two-tone Chevy Bel Aire, the pretty young woman from Michigan and her five year old swain. Maybe we could stop on the way out of town and buy me a pretzel rod from the see-though Dan-Dee canister at Nickles' Grocery.

Now I'm sitting beside her in the intensive care ward, wondering. How did she get so old?

It is odd that this traditional woman became a medical miracle. She has so many things wrong with her, mostly caused by 30-plus years of Type 1 diabetes - heart failure, blood clots,

kidney failure, eye and ear problems and neuropathies here, there, and everywhere -- that in the eras that she loves reading about she would surely be dead.

Medicines and machines, and the meticulous application of them by her doctors, have stretched a classical life into the realm of science fiction.

I tried to be a good son and visit her often at the hospital. On the third day of her hospitalization, however, I had a medical date of my own. I had to have my brain scanned, for the third time, to see if a tumor that was detected last winter, and that caused me to experience a fair-sized stroke, had grown.

And it was at about this time that the winter of 1999, which had been bland and snowless and warm up to that point, began to snarl. I remember as I dressed for the radiology exam that I couldn't wear anything metallic - no zippers, snaps, or belt buckles. So I slipped into sweat clothes, fleecy pants and top that feel like pajamas, and headed out into the cold.

In the past I tried all sorts of visualization and meditation schemes, to keep the tumor from growing. But lately, I was just too busy and preoccupied to do all that self-talk. So now, as I entered the MRI tube head-first and ears-plugged for the fourth time, I fretted that I had dropped the ball on my own health. Bad luck, I was thinking. I thought of my children, and the news they wanted to hear. Bad luck all around.

I slept through the banging and sounding, and dreamed about my mom and stepfather Dick visiting. Dick was in great form, laughing till tears formed, and regaling us with tales of the Coho Group, a mystery cult of northern Ohio that worships a kind of lake salmon. It was very funny, and very convincing, and very odd, because Dick had died in 1991 - of a brain

tumor. I looked at Rachel in my dream and mouthed my confusion to her. Isn't Dick dead? I asked. She shrugged. I woke.

I stopped off at the hospital and sat with my mom a few more minutes. The doctors had turned everything around somehow. She was sitting up and poking at a plate of macaroni. Her back hurt but she still made a little joke.

I drove home over packed snow, to rescue my dog Beau from a day of internment. He flew into the back seat and we drove, tires crunching, to Newell Park, where I released him to gallop across the fresh tundra. He ran in frantic circles, snow spraying behind him like a speedboat's wake.

And when that was not enough, he began to attack me. Leap after leap, he threw his 64 pounds against my parka, pounding me with his paws, frantically nipping and pulling with his long white teeth.

Those teeth, they were the same color as the moon hanging high above us, a bright smirk commenting on the night.

God it was cold. I was still wearing fleeces. My toes ached. But I let Beau tear into me for another five minutes before heading back to the car. My scan was going to come back OK, and I had to fix up a bedroom for my mom.

Thanks, Mom.

"A Burlington Coat Factory Christmas"

Butch's boot nudged me from my nap. I was on my cot at the Ramsey County Workhouse in Saint Paul. Butch, a check-kiter and my cellmate, was finishing the O Henry! bar the jail gave every trustee as a Christmas treat.

"Hey," I said, "that's my O Henry!"

Butch eyed me hungrily. "That all you got?"

So OK, it wasn't the best Christmas, thanks to Burlington Coat Factory. It all began in early December, when I bought my son and me new winter coats at their Robert Street store in West Saint Paul. His, marked down from \$129 to \$49, was black. Mine, marked down from \$239 to \$79 was green. Problem was, when I put it on at home, a button sprang from its proper place and rolled across my kitchen floor.

So I returned with receipt, coat, and detached button.

"I'd like to return this coat," I told the woman at the counter.

"Just pick out one you like," she said, "and I'll ring it up."

"But I want to return it for a refund," I said. "I don't want another coat whose buttons will pop off."

"We don't issue refunds," the woman said. "Only exchanges."

I asked to meet the manager and in a moment he shuffled over. Though he was not old, he walked with a bent-over, trollish gait. "And how can I help you," he said, with an odd smile, as if he knew what was coming, and was looking forward to it.

His name badge said Mr. Krause. And I noticed something else, something very odd. When he spoke to me, he looked at

the clerk behind the counter, as if they had a bet on the conversation's outcome.

"I bought this coat, and the button flew off. I want to return it for a refund."

Mr. Krause smiled a slow, pleasurable smile. "We don't issue refunds," he said.

I was nonplussed. "Why didn't you inform me of that when I bought it?"

He pointed behind me. Sure enough, a sign on the wall explained the store's no-refunds policy.

"But that sign is posted after the cash register," I said. "For it to be helpful to customers, you should post it on the door leading into the store. I had no idea you had this policy."

"And it's an awful policy," I added. "Everyone refunds money - Sam's Club, Kmart, the scum of the retail earth. Even they know you can't mess with customers and retain them."

"You are saying, in effect, 'Once we have your money, there's no way you can get it back.' It's a form of entrapment. How can you 'satisfy customers' when you deliberately force them over a barrel?"

"It's how we provide top quality apparel at low-cost," said Krause, his eyes jiggling with mirth.

"Baloney," I said. "You just mark up the price tags and then charge what you would have charged anyway. And what's so top quality about this button?" I asked, holding it up.

A small group of customers gathered to see what the commotion was. I turned to them. "Do you folks understand that if you don't like what you buy here, they won't give you a

refund?" A few of them turned away from me, as if I was unclean, to be publicly protesting mistreatment.

"Sir," Krause said, "if you persist in bothering customers, I will call the police and have you removed. Is that what you want?"

Well, I was P-O'ed. "Yes, call the police," I said. "Have them resolve this. I'd love them to hear my side of the story, and show the shoppers here how you treat paying customers. You take their money, then you have them arrested. Class!"

"Very well," he said, and I knew I was in trouble when he called the dispatcher by his first name, "Eddy."

By the time the policeman, Officer Dale, a reasonable person, arrived, I had calmed down. But I was still screwed.

"Your complaint with the store is a civil case," Officer Dale explained. "But your being here without permission is trespassing, a criminal case. So you have to leave peacefully, or I have to take you in."

And that was how I wound up here, in the Ramsey County Workhouse on Christmas Day, with Butch, and the O Henry! Bars.

Just then the jailer came by, bobbing oddly, keys jangling. I recognized that bob.

"Hey, you," I called out, and he whirled round and revealed himself. Not just as Krause, store manager of the West Sant Paul Burlington Coat factory, but as the red-faced Lord of Darkness himself, flames licking the air around him, the smell of sulfur filling the corridor, and his devil's eyes lolling in that weird, pleased way.

"Spirit!" I cried - "say it isn't so!" And I threw myself on my bunk, and the room began to spun. I was tumbling headlong into some sort of spiraling vortex.

I heard a voice say, "So what's your decision?"

And when I looked up, it was Officer Dale. I was back in the Burlington Coat Factory, in West Saint Paul. It was all a dream, or something. I wasn't Butch's bitch any more!

"I'll take an exchange!" I said, and shook the policeman's hand. I could have hugged him. "I'll get this huge orange parka! And I'll get these argyle socks. And some underwear. Lots and lots of underwear!"

I took out my checkbook and wrote the woman at the counter an even larger one than before.

The other shoppers looked at me as if I were mad. And who's to say I wasn't?

"Merry Christmas, Mr. Krause!" I cried, and saw him turn away and scowl. "Merry Christmas everybody!"

All Souls Story

There is an area in south Minneapolis, along the Mississippi down by Fort Snelling, where I take my dog for hikes. The two of us like to bushwhack there, seeking out the less-used pathways and following where they lead.

This morning I took a footpath I had never seen before. It led along a river inlet, then cut back into the woods. Soon I was clambering up rock cliffs, shinnying down the other side, and fording several mighty 2-foot spans of a splintered body of water called Coldwater Creek.

At the base of one little ravine, I came upon a kind of broken brick pedestal. On it was some kind of document shielded in one of those cheap plastic sheaths you get at office supply stores, and weighted down by a brick.

The document was a computer-generated letter on light blue paper, the toner ink bled from the moisture of several months outdoors. But it was still legible. It was addressed "To whom it may concern."

Although I wasn't supposed to, I pocketed the letter and took it home. There I scanned it and retyped the sections where the ink smeared. I was even able to replicate the typeface (Comic Sans MS), and upload the document to my website.

I offer it to you now, for your edification:

To whom it may concern;

Last spring I was walking with my friend, Bill. He and I came down here a lot because he said that it helped clear his head. Bill has always complained about the government rerouting roads and waterways and just plain spoiling nature.

"All of these streams obviously flowed freely at one time," he'd say. "But look at them now!"

So last spring, as a surprise for Bill, I cleared a whole bunch of smelly, rotting logs away. The logs had been cut by a chain saw and carelessly thrown to the bottom of the falls, blocking up the creek. The water was very high and bitterly cold, but I cleared the logs away anyway.

I wanted to surprise Bill. He didn't get to come down to see it right away. But later in the spring he did. And he sat and watched the falls all morning.

Bill always mentioned this little stream. He wondered just how many thousands, even millions of rocks lined the bed. He again said he wished it would flow like it did before construction crews changed Mother Nature's plan.

This summer, I got very busy with a work project and didn't have much time to come down here. But Bill's request haunted me. I thought, "Maybe it will rain again (a lot) and the water will flow." But it was late summer, and it remained quite dry.

Then one night as I was drifting off to sleep, I saw clearly how to make Bill's dream come true. By digging out the rock bed where it was blocked, I might be able to restore the rush of flowing water. At least a part of Bill's wish could come true.

So, a couple of months ago, I set out on this project for Bill. It was hard work, but within a couple of days, I got the water flowing again.

Native history says that these waterways are one of seven spirits meant to flow into the Mississippi and purify its waters. My hope was that my efforts helped free these spirits as well.

Last week, Bill died. He'd been fighting cancer for 2 years. I'd wished somehow that he'd been able to see his stream flow

before he went. I knew in my mind and heart that he was already too weak.

I remember him sitting there all morning looking at the little trickle. I'm not exactly sure what he saw, but I knew it was important to him. All I wanted to do was let the water splash over the rocks of this tiny creek for him. I know his heart is still here.

Then I thought I'd place this letter where only Bill and I used to go.

I don't know if this is too much to ask, for the little creek to flow once again. I sincerely hope that I didn't affect the environment adversely. The water seems fresh and positive. And I know Bill's spirit lives here, now.

Bless you for taking the time to read this....

That's the letter. It strikes me it might be propaganda for the group that is trying to protect the area from a highway construction project. If so, it's very good propaganda. I don't think it is propaganda, though.

And it was wrong of me to take the letter home. My plan is to make a fresh copy, and have it laminated with a double coat -- so it lasts through the winter. Then I'm going to bushwhack my way back to that brick pedestal, where the spring waters of Coldwater Creek come rushing down, and put it back where it belongs.

October 17, 1999

The Silken Thread

You all know the old riddle: Does a tree falling in the wilderness make a sound?

I'm less Zen than that -- I wonder why it is that, after all the thousands of miles I have spent wandering around in the woods, I have never heard a tree fall. Not a one. Not even a limb of one.

Do they wait until I'm gone, and then as soon as I'm out of the woods and turn my car radio on they let fall whatever was going to fall?

That's what I wondered last week. Another question I had was, what are those single strands of spiderweb you walk into in the woods? You just barely feel them brush your lip or on your nose. And you still feel them even after you brush them away.

I know it's spider silk. It's the same material a web is made of, only it is a single strand stretched across the path, horizontally, at about chest level.

Whenever I walk into one of these strands, I wonder two things. First, I wonder what the web's point is. If it's to catch some sort of living animal, large or small, wouldn't a conventional web be better than a single sticky strand? What kind of creature do you trap on a single strand? Maybe it's like those old westerns, where the director strung piano wire across a field to trip horses. The SPCA made them stop doing that.

Second, how the heck does a spider string a strand of web across a path, four feet high on both ends? I can only imagine it as a cartoon:

One cartoon has the spider plastering one end of the line on Trunk A, then hitching down the tree, hiking across the path on foot, climbing up Trunk B and then pulling all the slack out of the line until the line is taut, and plucking it -- toing!

The other has the spider on Trunk A very intensely crouching, crouching, crouching, then leaping like a uncoiled spring -- sproing! -- across the path, landing just slightly lower on Trunk B, panting like a Marathon winner.

Having these questions about webs, I looked for an answer in the most logical place -- the World Wide Web. I looked up spiderwebs on various search engines. I asked Alta Vista, my favorite search engine, a simple plain-language question: "What's with those spiderwebs you walk into in the forest?"

Alta Vista, you didn't have a clue.

And that's the funny thing about the net. It's loaded with information. Somewhere, someone out there has information on spiders that live in trees and build web tightropes between them. But how do you index that kind of information? What keywords do you use? Spider, web, and woods don't get you very far.

And it bugged me mightily, because I walk a lot, and I walk through scores of these webs every day.

This past weekend I got my chance. I was at an open house at a state park interpretive center. I asked a woman serving coffee and cookies if there was a naturalist in the building. I was going to find answers the old fashioned way -- by asking other human beings point blank.

"I'm a naturalist," she said. She didn't look like a naturalist, but she seemed to think she was one. So I asked her.

"Oh, those are spiderwebs," she said.

"What kind of spider?" I asked.

She frowned. "Tree spiders?"

I was going to ask her why these "tree spiders" made the webs, but I thought better of it. I wandered around the center for a few minutes, then ducked into the men's room.

I stepped up to the urinal, and there was an older man next to me. I noticed little bugs flying around the porcelain.

"Wow," I said -- "urinal gnats!"

The old man peered over to see. "That's OK," I said. "You don't need to look."

"I couldn't help overhearing you out there," the old man said, staring forward now. "Those are little spiders, and they use their web strands to swing from tree to tree. They let out a little line, catch a breeze, and there they go."

"Like Tarzan," I said. He nodded. "If Tarzan could grow vines on command out of his bellybutton," he said.

"So it's transportation," I said, "not entrapment." He nodded again.

"That's good, because I was wondering how many of those strands I would have to walk through before I was all trussed up and ready to serve."

"Quite a few, I'd say," the old man snickered. "Quite a few."

"So what kind of spiders would you say these are?"

"Tree spiders," the old man said, squinting."

But wait, it gets better. I leave the interpretative center, and I'm out in the woods, and I'm crashing through the spiderwebs, getting them in my eyes and nose but not caring anymore. In

fact I'm sort of appreciating them, which I never did before.
Then I hear it, about fifty yards behind me --

a half of a giant cottonwood tree -- must've weighed two tons
-- splitting off and sliding like an iceberg into the brush!

August 29, 1999

A Camera in My Head

I remember the first photograph I ever took. It was a black and white snap of a ham baking in our oven, through the grease-caked Pyrex oven window. The cloves in the glaze looked like worrying flies.

I was 10. I don't know what I was thinking. A still life? A Good Housekeeping cover?

I got the camera, an aqua-plastic Kodak Brownie, as a giveaway for families of General Motors employees. This was in Finney Chapel, Oberlin College, 1960.

In the intervening years, photography has been an on-again, off-again part of my life. But the ham in the oven window may have been the high point.

I like the way our immediate ancestors took pictures. Over the course of three generations they would accumulate maybe eight, mostly formal portraits.

Today we seem to undergo experience in order to photograph it, so that we will have a memory of that which we experienced. We crowd out the present with the business of setting up, focusing, shooting, and reloading, in order to ensure that the future is full of the past. We forget who we're working for.

Imagine that when we die we are greeted at the hereafter by a team of darkroom technicians who judge us not by our deeds and failings but by the number of slide carousels we have carted from the other life.

Rachel is the opposite. She dearly loves bringing them home alive, and cheerfully packs two camera bags when we vacation, one for 35mm stills and one for 8mm video. Most of our pictures are of us lugging the camera bags from one site to the next, where we can be photographed holding our camera bags.

Here's a snap of the "Observatory" at Chichen Itza in the Yucatan. The building in the distance is a Mayan ceremonial center. The large fuzzy pink object in the foreground is my thumb.

She thinks I'm anti-picture because I communicate in words, and that I'm jealous of the directness and completeness and honesty of the photographic experience, which I have no hope of replicating in my writing. Preposterous - although I do prefer humble gear, like ten dollar throwaway cameras and digital cameras whose output is more suitable for journaling than framing.

One time, in a village on Guatemala's Caribbean coast, we wanted to paddle a dugout canoe provided by the owner of our pension. The owner told us it would be perfectly safe. The moment we sat, however, the boat sank like an anvil, soaking our cameras and all the film we had taken in the Peten jungle. The owner, standing at the dock said, "Oh, you wanted to get into it."

Photography can be embarrassing. Once, in a market in the mountain city of Chichicastenango, Rachel snapped a stall containing over a hundred remarkable masks, made of feather, beads, coconut shell and paint. They were the faces of spirits. The woman operating the stall immediately cried out, in Spanish: "You have stolen my faces!"

It was true. In a fraction of a second, we expropriated two years worth of work.

It's easy to get exasperated. Rachel will say, "Darn, I'm out of film," and we'll spend our half hour on the volcano's rim looking for a film shop. Or, if I have succeeded in getting her to leave the cameras in our cabin or car trunk just once, she'll say "Wouldn't this have made a great picture?" Note the verb tense.

But I will tap the side of my head and say "Click." Meaning I was taking a picture of everything with my infallible and indestructible memory.

It's a mean thing to say. And it's not even true. No memory is that good, particularly mine, and especially about the appearance of things. I believe that when we remember something, we merely remember our most recent memory of it. Each time we remember it the memory becomes a bit simpler, stupider, and uglier - a memory ten times removed. Our minds make shortcuts - shortening distances, crayonizing palettes, cartoonifying faces.

Whereas a picture retains its depth of field across years. Sometimes one of us will be moving boxes and come across a series of photos from long ago, and the pictures will take us far beyond memory's poor power.

Here's a print from the water-soaked roll of film. Note the main Temple at Tikal rising up above the other monuments. The fuzz on the margins is water damage.

Those pictures of the Peten jungle that were drowned did not drown completely. I took the film in anyway, and the strange, blurred images still speak to me about another civilization, glimpsed by strangers, underwater. Temples rising up through

the salt water. Monkeys screeching from the tops of dissolving trees.

When I think of all the camera bags, chemical baths, and blank albums waiting to be filled, I groan. Does the future really need all this baggage from the past?

But then I spent an hour wading into the sea of images Rachel has walled away -- images of our children, of our travels, of the small rich life that has been ours. And so many prompt a smile, or an exclamation, or a sigh.

That ham will be forever warm.

July 25, 1999

"Once More for Spider John"

Some readers were perplexed to hear that I, a "master of the wired world" according to the Financial Times of London, have backslid to helping put on a not-for-profit folk music festival in my home town of St. Paul. It was the first annual Midway Folk Festival, featuring 20 wonderful acts by local folk musicians.

It's true, and it has been a culture shock for me. I am so used to pushing buttons and getting what I want right away, or a facsimile of what I want. With a folk festival, you can push buttons till the cows come home, and all you get is cows.

There really is no technological shortcut to all the work of setting up a stage, alerting the media, raising funds, and herding people into ear-range of the loudspeakers. You have to actually do it. And actually doing things -- well, I'd sooner delegate.

My friends, it's harder putting on a show than those Andy Hardy movies let on. A week before showtime, our funding melted away, and without the confidence of a generous friend who co-signed a loan we would not have been able to set up the stage.

Some media, like the local public radio station, were happy to help us get the word out. Others sneered at the idea of a homegrown folk festival. We were perceived by certain of the hippoisie as a knot of bearded local mainstays from the 1970s. The thing we were proudest of was the thing they most derided us for -- unsellability.

As a first-time event, we knew certain aspects of the show would be raggedy. The venue was a minor league baseball stadium squeezed between two rail lines. When trains rumble through on one, it's like sustained thunder. When they load on the other they're like, well, boxcars banging into each other.

Then there was the weather. Reports on the weekend vacillated from clear to cloudy to look out below. Saturday turned out to be a honey of a day, and the music rang out from the stage like an affirmation. Only a few hundred ticketed patrons found us, but the show made up for it. Several performers said it was the best set they'd ever done. Ever.

Sunday began as a quiet mist, but deteriorated by late afternoon into a gulleywasher. Everyone -- vendors, festival-goers, stage hands, dancers and musicians alike -- was drenched. Where have all the flowers gone? Down the storm sewer, that's where.

And we who had planned the festival all year long, and poured our hopes for the year into this single uninsured, underfunded, disrespected and underattended event, looked up from our spattered plastic ponchos and gulped at the additional verdict being rendered from above.

At least, that was my reaction. I felt awful for everyone, and frustrated, and tired. Had a dry towel been handy, I would have thrown it in.

But something remarkable happend. The next performer was Spider John Koerner. I had records of his going back to 1962, with Tony Glover and Dave Ray.

I always liked Spider John -- so named because his legs are real skinny. But he is not to everyone's taste. He mostly sings

ancient folksongs about 49ers and froggy gone a-courtin'. Even when he writes a song himself, it manages to come out pre-antiquated.

And unlike most entertainers, John never sweetens a note or sustains a sentimental moment. He sings things his way, which is a punkier and less materially rewarding road than Frank Sinatra ever trod. There is not a synthetic millisecond in his entire life's work.

I used to see him in saloons along Lake Street and the West Bank, this fellow who loved the songs so much he'd tend the bar all night in order to jump up on it later and perform a few.

I never met the man, but he looked up from his playing once while I was buying a beer, and he winked at me. A big, broad, howdy sort of wink. You could tell it must be hell to love him.

And love him you must. Because here he was, giving the music everything he had in him, and asking precious little in return. And though the rain had muddied everything and shrunk a tiny crowd in half again, Spider John Koerner was squawking away and pumping that skinny right leg, that ended in a miner's boot, up and down with an unapologetic beat.

And the people who had stayed, who'd suffered through that dreadful day, were grinning. And dancing.

And it took me to the brink of tears to think of the things people get through. You can hear it in the songs, the lost love and missed chances and busted deals and cosmic comeuppances, and all that secret history that's so heartbreaking and abominable.

But we survive. Optimism is infectious, like that crazy pumping foot, joy outracing gloom to the punch.

And this jaded technocrat vowed to do it again. One more year,
folks, for Spider John.

October, 1999

The Three Strikes of Life

The Organic Produce Little League team was taking pre-game batting practice. The stars were smacking the ball hard. Everyone else was missing. After a bit, an old man in brown suit pants put his fingers through the chain links of the backstop. He looked eighty, though his shoes looked only half that.

"You kids want to hit the ball better?" he asked. The better players laughed. What did an old man know about hitting? But a handful of the lesser players tentatively put their hands up. They were willing to try anything.

"Listen up," the old man said. His hands trembled until they fastened around an aluminum bat. Then they seemed strong. His eyes were red, and complexion was mottled, with a stubble of white whisker.

"You get three strikes," he said. "Each one's different. Each strike, you change who you are."

The kids squinted.

"The first pitch is your rookie pitch. The pitcher doesn't know you. Anything can happen. Maybe you close your eyes, you get lucky, and beat one back up the middle.

"But usually you don't. You miss, and all the weaknesses of the rookie come down on you. You're thinking about failing, and getting ready to fail. You're scared of the pitcher, scared of the ball. You get revved up. You forget what your coaches say and

swing crazy, hoping to get lucky. Or you stand like a statue while the umpire calls a strike.

"Most young hitters give up now. They swing at the next two just to get it over. They don't grow in the at-bat. The bat's a white flag, and they're waving it to surrender.

"To have a good rookie pitch, you have to be good inside. Good rookies go up to the plate respecting the pitcher, and humble about their odds. They respect the ball, and shut out everything else.

"You need courage on the first strike pitch, because you're a stranger in a strange land. You put yourself in harm's way, close to the ball, close to the plate.

"Maybe you'll get drilled. It'll hurt. But only a bit. You stand close anyway, because you good things happen when you put yourself in a little danger.

"You need faith that if you do it in the right spirit, things will work out.

"That's the rookie pitch.

"By the second pitch, you're in your prime. Now you know what the at-bat is about. You've seen the pitch. You know what you have to do to turn on it. The first strike filled you with adrenaline. Now you're strong. You feel electrified. You feel good. You grip the bat tight.

"The prime pitch is when good things usually happen. You're ahead of the pitcher, even with the first strike. Because you know what he's got, and you feel good. If you fail on the prime pitch, it's maybe you felt too good. People in their prime get overconfident. They swing too hard. They miss.

"That's the prime pitch." The old man spat, and the spit dripped out at about five points, and he had to wipe some off his lip.

"Third pitch. Now you're a veteran. You're at the end of your rope. If you fail now, there won't be another pitch. It's life or death. You're like an old prizefighter, and you stand almost perfectly still, waiting for your moment. The bat's loose and tight at the same time.

"You're not relying on luck, like the first pitch. Or talent, like the second pitch. Now you're calling on your guts, and everything you've learned.

"You mess up on the veteran pitch when you're angry at the pitcher for making you miss the other two pitches. The bad veteran is always making excuses. He's making up excuses for missing before he misses.

"But the good veteran welcomes the battle. It's serious, but it gives him joy, too. He knows that baseball means pain, and he welcomes the suffering. He may go down, but he's grateful he ever got up. If he goes down, it will be swinging."

"Sir, what if you strike out?" asked one kid, shielding the sun from his eyes with his glove.

"You just hope there's another game, and you're in it." The old man scanned the horizon to the western. "I gotta go, kids. Good luck out there." And he turned and was gone.

The kids mumbled as they got their equipment together. Did anyone know who that guy was? Maybe a retired sportswriter, someone suggested. Or an ex-player. Maybe even a Hall of Famer, one wishful thinker said.

"No, it's just my dad," said a slender infielder. "He was in the Sixties."

The players nodded sagely and they took the field. In the game, the Organic Produce team skunked the Subway Sandwich team 14-3. And every one of the kids who listened got a hit.

Mothers Day, May 9, 1999

The Greatest Arcade Hero of All

The man stands behind the boy, observing him stalking down yet another corridor, laser gun in hand, intent on finding and meting out justice to alien malefactors.

This is all on the computer, of course. The boy has been doing this for about five years. But today the man decides enough is enough.

"I've got an idea," he says. "Let's come up with an arcade hero of our own. One that's better than these guys."

The boy turns to him and blinks, adjusting to the light of the room.

"How do you mean?" the boy asks.

"Well, let's think it through. To create something different, first you identify what's normal. What do most online heroes do now?"

"Mostly, they fight and kill things."

"OK," the father says. "Then our hero will do the exact opposite. Instead of taking away life, our hero will give life, create life, cause life to flourish."

"Like ET?" the boy asks. "You know, ET touches the dead flowers, and they come back to life. Or like the Genesis Project in Star Trek. One blast from the Genesis Bomb and life sprouts everywhere. It's got the power of making life out of nothing."

"Excellent. This hero will have super powers of inspiration to restore life, to bring things back that are discouraged, or defeated, or feeling low. That's an excellent idea, by the way. ET made a ton of money. So what else would be different?"

"Well, most heroes are always off on faraway adventures. That kind of hero is a visitor, a stranger."

"I see where you're going," the man says. "Our hero will be the opposite -- a hero who stays home, and does heroic things right there."

"Right. Here's something else. Most heroes in these games, I've noticed, are not much better than the villains. Everybody just shoots everybody else."

"So," the father says -- "our hero could be someone who interacts, and talks to people, maybe even brings out the best in them. Instead of blasting away, our hero could negotiate things. Find out what the bad guys really need, and see if there's a way to get them to stop being bad."

"Wow."

"In fact, the main thing about this hero is really caring, and having a gigantic heart, full of sympathy and understanding. A hero that could not just make you cheer, but could make you cry."

"Oh, dad, that's really good. How about a something like in the Terminator, where the hero is totally dedicated to protecting others. Like, a hero that would die rather than let harm come to people."

"Where loyalty becomes a superpower," the man says. "More powerful than a speeding locomotive. Leaps over tall builds with a single bound! Now here's the next thing. Lots of superheroes are invulnerable. Bullets bounce right off them."

But how heroic is it if nothing hurts you? How about if we make our hero capable of being hurt?"

"Yeah, that means our hero takes greater risks. And that takes courage." The boy nodded solemnly.

The two jot ideas down right and left. To get more ideas, they think of movies they liked. "What's the scariest movie you ever saw?" the man asked the boy.

He frowned. "Alien, he says. "Where the creature grows inside the person's body, and when it's ready, it bursts out and kills the person."

"Gross," the father says. "Well, let's do the opposite again. Let's let our hero be the host, that the creature grows inside. But instead of being a completely evil creature, make it a nasty creature that will grow and change and one day save the world. And the hero has to put up with the pain of this parasite, because the creature, who is very selfish and tyrannical now, will be really important one day. That's another superpower -- the willingness to suffer. The hero tolerates pain no ordinary person ever could tolerate. Because the hero's love is so great."

The son puts his hand to his forehead and arches his eyes. "Dad, this would make such a sweet game," he says.

"It is a sweet game," the man tell him. "Because everything we decided to call heroic is already happening right here in our house."

The boy frowns. "Huh?"

"You think about it," the father says. "Now go set the table for breakfast. Put out the good silverware. And when you get a chance, wish your hero Happy Mothers Day."

December 6, 1998

A Rose in December

Sometimes the future and the past switch places in our lives. What went before foretells what is to come. And the future smiles back, and explains the past.

My family experienced a tragedy when I was 11 -- my sister Kathy, who was born with a leaky heart valve, passed away. Her life had been tough in many ways. She could never exercise, her baby teeth never fell out, and her skin was grayish from poor circulation -- she was called a "bluebaby," and kids made fun of her for that.

It's a condition that medicine found a simple cure for, to be administered at birth -- a few months after she was born.

Kathy was a girl of great gentleness and sweetness. She was a painter and drawer, and a lover of horses. All my childhood, my job, and my brother Pat's, was to run and fetch things for her, because she did not have the strength.

She was a sophomore in high school when she went into a coma and died. Her death made for a stormy adolescence for me. I stopped going to church, I got into trouble with the law, I became a bit of a hard case.

Now fast-forward into the future, to my 15th high school reunion, in 1982. I returned to my small town with a bad attitude, determined to show people how far I had come -- not financially (I was broke) but in daring and worldliness. I drank with old girlfriends, I kissed my old prom date on the lips. I pissed off their husbands, on purpose.

I had too much to drink, and I saw, at the bar, a big kid I remembered from grade school, Jack Mussina. He was the class psycho, built like an adult even as a kid, with a brutal jawline and a dead look in his eyes.

In sixth, seventh, and eight grades, Mussina made my life miserable, chasing me on the playground, throwing me up against walls, and slapping and pummeling me. He hated me for some reason I didn't understand, and saw me as an appropriate victim. That's what bothered me the most -- I did not want to be a victim of anything.

Taking courage from the liquor, I challenged him. "Mussina, what made you hate me so much in grade school? I wasn't a bad kid. What did I ever do to you?"

Mussina winced. "Hey, man, I'm sorry. I was so crazy in those days. I had all kinds of problems."

But I wouldn't let him off so easy. "OK, but why me? Why did you choose me to pick on?"

He looked at me levelly, and I could tell something still bothered him. "Because you laughed at your sister's funeral."

I flashed backward. I was excruciatingly self-conscious the day of the funeral. I was upset about Kathy, and I didn't want people peering in on our problems. But the funeral was a big event in the town. My whole school, St. Joseph's, was taking time off to attend.

I remember glancing about during the service, looking for reassurance from my classmates that they wouldn't always know me by this moment. That this wouldn't mark me forever. I'm sure I tried to smile.

It was a terrible day.

Back to 1982. "Jack," I told him. "I wasn't laughing. I loved my sister, but it was no one's business but mine. I must have smirked, but you have to know I was dying inside. "

"I know, Mike. I loved her, too."

So that's what it was. When all the other kids called Kathy bluebaby, or warned her about the purple people eater, Mussina was her avenger. He beat up a dozen kids, and some of them must have said something. He showed his devotion the only way he could -- with his fists. When she died, he transferred his enmity to me. Out of love.

Mussina went to Vietnam and was a behavior problem there, spending time in the brig. Now he was better, and counseled other vets with emotional disorders.

And me, after what seemed like a lifetime of being alone, I met and married my best friend Rachel. Rachel, too, went through the mill, losing her father at 16.

It's been an interesting marriage, because we are so gentle with one another, so aware of the old pain. Sometimes it seems like we are brother and sister.

Now fast-forward to the present. My daughter Daniele, whose face so resembles my sister, is now her age, when she died. When I think of my sister's terror at that age, I can't help crying. I have a good one about once a month.

And as I try to prepare Daniele for the long future ahead of her, I am so grateful for her health.

You can not believe how rosy her complexion is, on a crisp December day like today. Or how embarrassed her brilliant color sometimes makes her.

Or how beautiful it looks to me.

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The Pregnant Policeman

I have told this story about a crime before, but I omitted details that have a definite bearing on the case. With this telling, I hope to set the record straight.

It happened a year ago, on the first of September. We live in a college neighborhood, and the duplex next to us is a rental, usually occupied by students. This year a group of suburban girls moved into the left half, and boys from Chicago into the right.

Rachel and I met the boys' parents and explained the bad experiences with loud afterhours partying we'd had with the house in the past. One of the dads gave us his home phone number back in Chicago, and told us to call him if the boys ever disturb us.

That night, the boys met the girls, and a small, but loud party, spontaneously broke out. Around 1 PM, I woke the father in Skokie and told him the good news.

The next afternoon was gorgeous. Our house was full of kids, our own plus neighbors. Our family TV, a brand new Magnavox screen-within-a screen model, was beaming Star Trek reruns from the living room. My trusted dog Beauregard lay sleeping in the sun on the front porch.

In the midst of this, someone entered our house from the back door, unplugged the Magnavox, and made off with it. I went to turn it on, and all I found was a warm spot on the TV stand.

I called the police, and within ten minutes I saw a figure in blue slowly approaching the house. It was a woman officer, but she walked in a policemanlike way, flatfooted, and with her head tilted back and at a fatigued angle.

She introduced herself as Officer Bennett as I told her the incredible story of the bold burglary -- right under our noses. Without blinking she eyed the house and adjoining properties. I showed her the TV stand, now cold.

"Do you suspect anyone?" she asked. And I told her I was wondering if the new neighbors had retaliated for calling their dad the night before. She nodded, and made her way to the backporch, and looked at the students next door, having a back yard barbecue.

"I'm just going to stare at them for a few minutes," she murmured. "You see, I have a psychic gift for surfacing emotional discomfort. If any of those kids feels guilty, I'll know."

While she stared, she spoke to me. "I think I know what kind of man you are," she said. "You're a nice guy, right? Leaves his doors unlocked? Has a hard time saying no to people?"

Yes, I agreed to all that.

"Don't feel bad," she said. "Those are good qualities, they just make you a victim in this world. You're weak on the outside, but inside, you're strong."

She turned to face me. "I wish my LeRoy was more like you," she said. "I know he loves me, but he won't say it."

She pulled at her holster-belt until the leather squeaked. "And I'll let you in on a secret," she said. "This belt isn't getting any looser, if you know what I mean."

"You're going to have a baby?"

She clenched her jaw and nodded. "And he and I are too much alike. I seem strong, but inside, I'm scared." She stared at the grass.

I swallowed. "So -- do you think any of those kids took my TV?"

She nodded. "The kid on the steps, smoking a cigarette. He won't make eye contact. He took it."

"What should we do about it?"

She shook her head and smiled dryly. "Nothing we can do. I may be psychic, but I'm not about to lose my job for it."

She wrote down some notes, and I grasped at straws. I didn't care about the TV any more. "You know," I said, "chances are, LeRoy is exactly where you are at -- full of feeling but unsure what to say. Maybe you have to trust his love until he's ready. And hope he's ready soon."

She folded her notebook up and packed it away. "That's the best advice I've got all day," she said. "And here's some for you. Don't replace the TV. It's a waste. Get your kids a computer."

And she ambled away. It was like the last scenes of *The Lone Ranger*, where the masked man gets away before anyone thinks to thank him. I wanted to tell her we had a computer. I wanted to wish her luck with LeRoy. And with the baby. And to get a case number in case the TV showed up.

But she was gone. And one of the most remarkable conversations of my life was over.

July 27, 1998

The Boys and Dads of Summer

My 10-year-old son Jonathan has been vacillating all summer between his two great loves, baseball and computer games. One day he's digging out ground balls for his team the Comets, and the next he's locked in interstellar combat in a long-ago galaxy far, far away. He's lucky, because he can switch back and forth.

Last week he couldn't switch back and forth, because he spent it bunking in Centennial Hall at the University of Minnesota, as part of the Minnesota Baseball Instructional League. The kids spent five days at Siebert Field and one evening in the Metrodome refining their fielding and hitting techniques, videotaping and critiquing their playing.

The heat was horrible. I remembered from my college days what a Dutch oven a dorm could be in warm weather. This was also the week that the Brazilians lost the World Cup finals to France, so Jonathan was treated not only to the 100-degree heat of the dorm room, but the 100-degree anguish of the 300 Brazilian preteen soccer players also staying in the dorm. The wails in Portuguese lasted long into the night.

The first night, arriving late to deliver an oscillating fan, I opened his dorm room door to see two shiny-faced boys who hardly knew one another, with no TV and no computer games -- nothing to do, really, but inhale, exhale, and perspire.

His roommate Jacob was lonesome for Louisiana, and Jon was half-afraid Jacob would leave him alone in that awful room, but half-willing to quit college himself. He begged me to take

him home, talking earnestly about home cooked meals -- the scrambled eggs at the U leaked water -- and the loving embrace of his mother.

After a couple of blistering days I started bringing him home for short stints. We were hot there, too, but he benefited visibly from being around his stuff, especially his Star Wars games.

And I took him out the last night to play for the team I help coach, the Comets of the Highland Groveland Recreation Association. Jon was hoping to light up the neighborhood sky with his sophisticated new baseball skills. We won the game with a score something like 20-12, but Jon felt he didn't do his best. He threw a ball to Casey, our first baseman, too hard to catch, and you could see the error haunted him. He wants so bad to be good.

Now he's home again. Thursday is his last game of the baseball season. With a few timely hits, his Comets could end the season unbeaten, something to remember all their lives. I know it is something I will remember. I've coached four other teams, and this team is special. We practiced or played eight hours every week this summer. In this age of competing activities, that is unusual. The Comets are a throwback team -- kids who love to play ball.

Saturday Jon asked if he could get a new game with the allowance we always forget to give him, and I was surprised to hear he did not want a Star Wars title this time. He wanted EA Baseball 99, a 3D baseball action game that sells for about \$50. We drove to CompUSA, picked up a copy, took it home, and were unable to get it to perform in 3D -- the program is so new that our video card manufacturer has not released drivers for it yet.

The killer was when I mentioned to him that stores don't like to take opened software back.

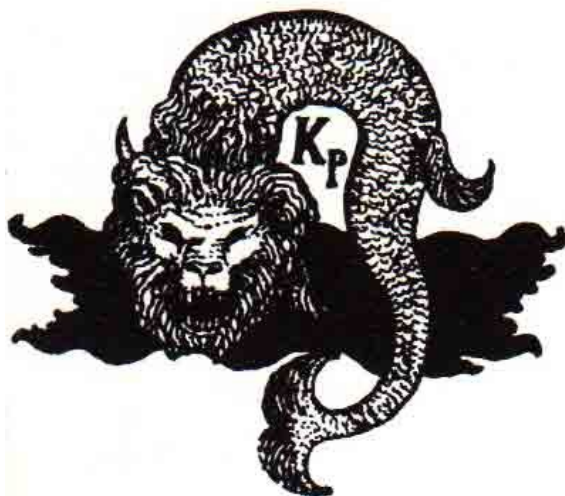
Jon was bereft. Fifty dollars is a chunk of money, and he felt he was being punished by the gods of baseball yet again. Rachel told me that while I napped in the afternoon heat, he sobbed quietly at the keyboard.

So she had him call CompUSA and ask what his options were. The store guy said bring the program in and he could exchange it for another -- a glimmer of hope in a devastated world.

When I awoke, he apprised me of the opportunity. I could tell he wanted quick closure, so we drove back to the store just before it closed and made the switch, to a slightly less-new baseball title, Hardball 6 (from Accolade, also about \$50). Wonder of wonders, back home it installed perfectly, and soon Jon was smacking the virtual ball around the imaginary stadium. The 3D, Jon assures me, is sensational.

What's it all mean? It was just a warm week with a growing boy. When I nap on the couch now, and Jonnie is in the next room, and I overhear the Bob Costa-like voice of the Hardball 6 announcer doing the play-by-play, it could almost be another time, my time.

And I think how sweet it is to be ten, in the heat of the summer, and the tender moments that are going, going, gone.



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