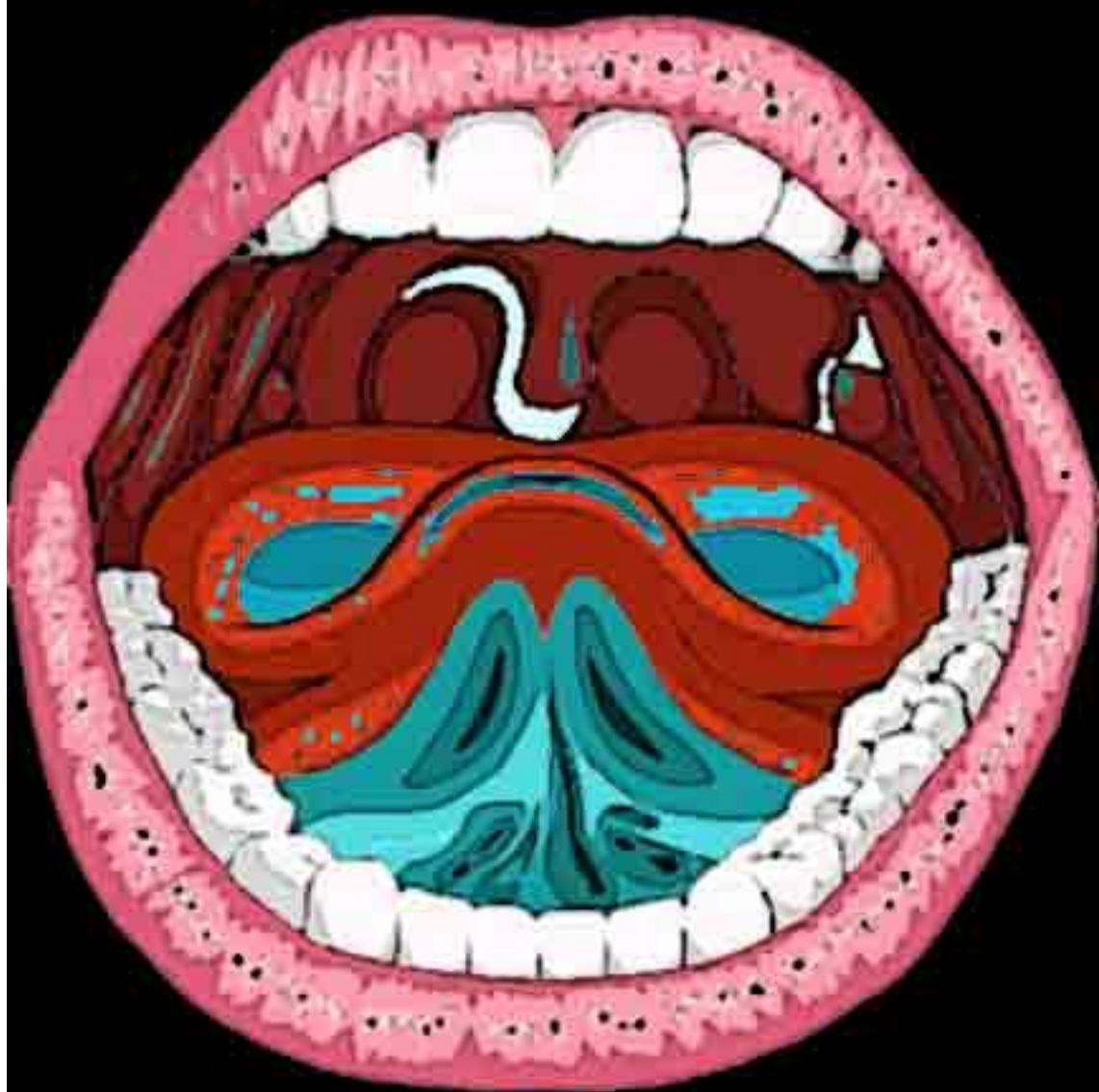


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DrPPings

NAME DROPPINGS

Tales of Celebrity

by Mike Finley

Table of Contents

Hitler In The Vestibule	5
A Senator Concedes	8
I Met Charles Manson (I Think).....	9
When You Are Pope	15
Empty Places.....	19
The Newmans of Westport	36
Pathetic Fallacy	37
Why Did the Buddha Sit Under the Tree?.....	38
'The Skin Over a Young Girl's Wrist'.....	39
Voznesenski & Yevtushenko	44
Let's Play: Celebrity Brain Tumors!.....	46
Auden in Minnesota	52
I, Gilgamesh	54
Morte d'Urban.....	56
Understanding Frankenstein	59
Frankenstein in the Cemetery	60
Oddfathers.....	61
George Steinbrenner	71
Dead Bee on a Book by Philip Roth	75
Maury	76
McVeigh	77
Kerouac's Will.....	78
George.....	79
Dream of Whitman.....	81

At the Ball Park	82
Atlas & I.....	83

Hitler In The Vestibule ¹*

The bald old man sat at table spooling his eggs
With a spoon. I don't get it, Thomas,
I told him, you could have been
A famous musician, and
Fiddled in concert halls around the world.
At age eight you were tutored by Sarasate.
And here you are running a southside diner.
Why?

He grinned sheepishly, changed subjects. Did I
Tell you about my confrontation with Hitler?
During the Anschluss of 1939 I was eight, I was
Visiting Vienna for the second time that year.
Meister Drucker had booked us into the
Kaiserhof,
And one morning I had nothing to do, so I
boarded
The elevator and pushed all the buttons.
Whenever the lift arrived at a floor, I would
Push the button again. The car was an agony of
Slowness.

It was the same hotel where the president had
Agreed to meet Hitler that day, and downstairs
A mob of journalists were queuing in the lobby
With Hitler as he rocked from boot to boot,
Waiting for the elevator to come down.
Diplomats on hand swallowed hard, worrying
that
Hitler would perceive the elevator's operation

¹Namedroppings (1982)

*My interview was with a performance artist named Alan Brookins-Brown, who used to perform the midnight shows at Dudley Riggs Etc. in Minneapolis. I sat with him and Barry Casselman one evening on the West Bank and he told me this remarkable story of the Fuehrer and the elevator in Vienna.

As an incident of national mischief. When I
Finally landed on the first floor, and the gate
Swung open and I looked up at the black leather

Coat of Herr Hitler, arms folded and a look of
Considerable severity on his quaking features,
I began to cry.

Poor Hitler. He craved, I think, to crush me
Like a roach, it was what he need, what he lived

For, but with the photographers on hand and a
Country to overrun, he was obliged to be on his
Best behavior. So instead he smiled and I
thought
He looked much more like Oliver Hardy than
Chaplin with that diagonal smirk, he scooped
me
Up in his arms, kissed the tears from my cheeks

And called me German baby names. I
remember
How smooth were his cheeks, how high-pitched
his
Speech, and the implacable look my first
instructor
Wore also.

The rotogravure ran under the headline of
AUSTRIA SURRENDERS across the world. I
Continued to study and to play.
But gradually I came to miss my own
childhood,
which had gotten lost in my abilities and my
schedule.
I wanted to sit in a sandbox and smash wet
Castles with my planes, wanted plebiscites
And pogroms laying waste to my room.
Because

Hitler and I came to see the same thing.
Retreat one time, you never see action
Again.

A Senator Concedes^{2 3}

*Written in 1975, titled 'A Politician Retires,'
but resuscitated by Al Franken's 2010 victory over
Norm Coleman*

Every day a man rises and sets off to undo it,
some failure he barely remembers,
a phantom moment hiding in time.

These are the years he is in his prime,
his wisdom and courage fixed in the grin
he landscapes his life with:

the disappointment he feels in the world
he holds at arm's length, the odd fascination
for his mother's first name.

Somehow we never quite let it sink in
that the contests that mattered
have long since been over.

Today I want to walk home, stumbling,
my fists at my eyes,
sobbing all the way.

²Borrowing from Minneapolis (To Pay St. Paul) (1980)

³Little known fact: I was called in to finish a
ghostwritten campaign biography of Coleman in 2004. I
liked him alright, but still voted for Wellstone.

I Met Charles Manson (I Think)

One day in the spring of 1969, I and a bunch of college dropouts from the Midwest were living in a commune we had set up in the Vermont district of Los Angeles, a couple dozen or so blocks south of Hollywood.

Our commune was a spin-off of something called the Universal Life Church, a mail-order ministry run out of Modesto, California, which ordained anyone who sent in a postcard, without questions. The church was really little more than a pretext to get together with friends and smoke pot. We weren't bad people, but we were foolish. One of our agenda items was ecclesiastical outreach, so every other weekend or so we made little trips to other Universal Life branches around southern California. One of our favorite places was a desert drop-in known only as Thompson's Chicken ranch, near Twenty Nine Palms in the Mojave Desert 100 miles away, which in turn was vaguely near to Palm Springs.

The first chance we got, we hitchhiked out there, to see if it made sense to align ourselves with the place.

Thompson's Chicken Ranch was a true desert commune, consisting of a gutted main house, a machine shed, a couple of lean-to's and a water tower that had water when it rained, which it never did.

We went out there perhaps three times during our months on L.A. The first time was on church business, ostensibly; the other times were just for fun.

The desert was an incredible place for Midwesterners on holiday. The crumbling ruined mountains, that looked older than Sinai, and twice as forbidding, sat right behind the ranch. Everywhere were Joshua trees and the braided branches of their dead. Yucca plants exploded at every arms-length. And under every rock, something living – a gecko, a Gila monster, hornytad, or a rattlesnake. It was Don Juan country, a fine, unforgiving place to surrender to the sun.

I have two main memories of Thompson's Chicken Ranch, one involving teenaged runaways, and one involving mass murderer Charles Manson. There is a third memory, involving an earthquake that destroyed all of California, and us with it, but that will have to wait for another time.

The core population of the ranch was a small handful of men in breechclouts, as lean as jerky and about half as verbal, who lounged in the shadows in the daytime, and ventured out only at night. It says something that in all our visits to the place – where we were regarded about as seriously as the Partridge Family – we never learned any of their names. Indeed, I can't recall even having a conversation with anyone. We communicated mainly with grunts and far-out's. People just arrived, found a corner to crash in, and did their thing. It was not just that they were nonverbal, but that they were incurious, as if the sun had baked all the inquisitiveness out of them.

These guys were hard-core in their habits, and I would guess wealthy in their background. They had no visible means of support, they never lifted a finger for any other human being, yet they were up to their ears in high quality LSD, California red wine and ganja, and for their delectation a kind of underground railroad arrived every day with three or four or five high school girls in it.

Every morning that we stayed by the ranch, the local police would show up and cart off the underaged girls that had been there the night before. It was not a big deal. The police would arrive promptly around 8:30 AM, would go to the back door and call out "Hello?" and would then roust the groggy 14-year-olds and 15-year-olds and lead them away, in various stages of dishevelment to the patrol car. In town, they would have the girls call their parents and arrange for their return. It might even have been the same girls each morning. I wasn't there enough times to say one way or the other.

Had this happened back in Ohio, it would have been a screaming scandal, with banner headlines in the local Republican rags. Here in California, with the Age of Aquarius already growing dog-eared in the desert sun, it was matter-of-fact. Daughters didn't

belong with their families in the new age. That they were sent home every morning was a weary formality of a changed world.

The Manson encounter occurred on a weekend trip we Midwestern hippies undertook, plus Dave, a deserter who was living with us, and Sylvia, his girlfriend. We arrived at the Chicken Ranch on a Wednesday afternoon.

This particular trip, we traveled in a fairly new van that Dave had somehow acquired. Dave is another separate story. He was both a speed freak and a Jesus freak. He told us his mother died when he was eleven, and his daddy was already gone by then, back in the Texas panhandle somewhere, and he was left to raise his little brother by himself. Dave took to reading the Bible to his brother Jeremy every night, and dine on jackrabbits and quail he would shoot, and cornbread he would make from stolen ears.

It was an intense life, and they managed as best they could. But over the passage of months things began to go sour for the two boys, which Dave summed up by telling me that one day he nailed his little brother's hands to the bedroom door. It had something to do with a vision of Jesus, which he now thought the might not have got quite right.

Jeremy survived the ordeal, but he grew up to become an even bigger druggie than Dave, and Dave believed that, in addition to the FBI wanting him for slipping out of the Presidio brig one night and being seriously AWOL for eight months, his brother Jeremy was also hot on his trail, with a head full of hootch and the determination to repay Dave for the crucifixion.

I say Dave got the Econoline van somehow, but it occurs to me as I write this that maybe Dave stole it. It looked bright and suburban and a little uncool that way, but it had a great tape deck. The album that spring was Born on the Bayou, by Credence Clearwater Revival, and we had it on the whole way. It was a record you could get lost in, like a high-powered boat in a backwater swamp, especially if you were high and, well, lost to begin with.

When we arrived at the Ranch we were even less welcome than usual. About thirty bikes were parked out front. So we drove past the house up a long skinny drive leading up toward the pile of

rocks passing as a mountain range. We parked about 200 yards from the house, set up a lean-to against the truck, and got out.

Dave had a spy-glass, and he identified the bike group below us as the Sons of Troy, a fairly nondescript bunch of road losers. We went hiking through the rocks for about an hour, careful of rattlesnakes. When we returned, we could see that a second wave of bikers were arriving below us. Their jackets all said Hessians. I had heard of the Hessians, they were a large and unruly group, bullies, of the sort (they were called the Beetles) who took over that town under Marlon Brando and Lee Marvin in *The Wild One*.

Just then a poky humpbacked school bus began churning down the drive. I stopped by the house and a man got out, looked around, and almost immediately got back into the bus, and drove up toward our camp. This bus was painted black, and about 25 years old, with psychedelic painted hubcaps and scarves trailing from the back window.

The driver was a goofy-looking man with shortish hair. Also debarking was a short, intense, brown-haired and brown-eyed man who looked nervously at us, and without nodding, walked to the back of the bus and untied the emergency doors, which were connected with a strap of leather. About six girls were inside. I can't remember their faces, except for one straw-haired girl with a horsey sort of look to her.

Was this Charlie Manson? I can only say that, in retrospect, he looked exactly like the fellow who was soon in all the papers. The date was late March or early April, 1969. The Tate-La Bianca murders happened the following August.¹ He was supposed to be holed up somewhere near Death Valley, about 100 miles away. The guy I met was driving a black schoolbus, just like Manson is said to have driven in accounts by Ed Sanders and Vincent Bugliosi. Finally, the goofy-looking driver before us now was a ringer for pictures I saw later of Tex Watson.

The Watson lookalike came over to us and asked if they could borrow our fire to make a fire of their own, about 50 feet away. While we were enjoying hot afternoon tea, a third group of bikers could be seen approaching on Highway 16. The Sons of Troy had beaten a hasty retreat about two hours earlier, over some turf

disagreement with the Hessians. Dave took one look in the spy-glass and announced this was the Hell's Angels.

What followed was a fight. From afar, our theory was that the biker groups were all on different drugs. The Sons of Troy were probably potheads – we could almost imagine ourselves, under slightly different circumstances, riding with them. The Hessians seemed like downers-n-red wine types, surly and a little fat in the gut. But the Hell's Angels were like Valkyries, streaking down from the LSD clouds to humble the drunken pretenders.

We saw flying kicks, tire irons, fistfights, sticks – it was like a scene from a Western street fight, with the sun setting over to the west. The Angels were in control. They smashed a few bikes, and somehow got together a small pile of tires from the Hessian bikes and lit them up. The fire, and the clouds of black rubber smoke, rose high up over the desert plain.

Then, way down by the horizon line, about four miles away, we saw a little oscillating red light. It was a pick up truck with a tank of water mounted in back. It had a little siren, too, that made it sound sort of like an ice cream truck. It headed down the highway, and finally turned down the dirt drive leading to the ranch. We could hear the tires grind to a halt on the gravel, and the door open up, and standing in front of about a dozen bikers was this enormous, blonde-haired man, wearing suspenders, a plaid shirt, and a chin which we could even tell from two hundred yards away was cleft as though by an axe helve. He looked like a young Paul Bunyan.

He smiled at the bikers, turned on his hose, and doused the pile of flaming tires. In about ten minutes the fire was out, and he said goodbye, hopped back in his truck, and drove away.

It was an astounding performance, a triumph of a tiny water hose and a man of peace and great size over the armies of the night.

Manson's group was gone in the morning. They had packed up their black school bus and toddled off to their next destination. Throughout our time together, they neither killed us nor scrawled slogans on our van in our blood. We kept to our patch of the desert, they kept to theirs. My overall estimation of them was that,

for that day and that place, they seemed like better than average neighbors.

When You Are Pope ⁴

When you are pope you can not be like other men.
You cannot be seen disappearing into limos
outside casinos or polishing off a beer at a corner tavern,
the old men snorting at your caftan and cap.
You cannot affect a commanding air,
pulling at your cincture and laughing like a man,
you must be humble all the day,
you must be unworthy to loosen the bootstraps of the world,
even if you are not feeling humble, or humble has become
tiresome as a singsong prayer.
Everyone is your boss because everyone knows you
and expects certain behavior.
No spitting, no grumpiness, no annoyance with fools
for if you show any signs of being human
they will not let you be pope any more
and you will wind up on a bridge somewhere
selling windup toys or grilled kebabs and people will come up to
you squinting saying I know you.
You must always be for life and always be for peace
and never concede the fact that everybody dies
and the world is ripe with people
who could benefit richly from a ferocious beating
and everyone knows it but you are not allowed to say it.
People go on and on about this saint and that saint
and you can say nothing though you know all the evidence

⁴Sunset Lake (1989)

in all their files,
who was too fond of the muscatel, who wrote letters
of an unholy nature,
who masturbated with the lilies of the field, and who,
when the dog the body was disinterred and the coffin cracked
the look on their face was a maniac grin,
frozen that way for eternity.
It is hard to keep up with friends.
It is just not the same once you are pope.
They are so fond of you now, fonder than they ever were before
and nothing you say gets through to them,
they won't let you be honest any more.
There are times you want to burst out crying
and tell them everything
what a crock the Vatican is and what assholes
the cardinals all are
and what you would give just to sit and play cards and sip gin
like you used to years ago before people stopped listening.
When you are pope you understand your career
has probably peaked,
there will probably not be many achievements after this,
it will be unusual even to catch a fish
on a Saturday in an aluminum boat, the little waves banging
against the prow, and haul it flipping into your net.
You will look over your shoulder and the lake will be full
of other boats, and film crews and helicopters,
and people will say it's not a fish,
it's an allegory, you have to think about this

on a very complex level, nothing is simple any more.
When you are pope it is sadder than you imagined.
The devout and the suffering look to you as if you had the
answers for their madness,
for the cough that has been getting worse,
for the world in arms, and the torture of the faithful over slow
flames,
and what you would do to take away the pain
but what can you do, you are only a pope.
Your faith that never let you down before
is suspect, you haven't heard from God in years,
he is like some clever zephyr that blows into town
and blows out again, now you see him,
then for thousands of years you don't,
and if gets to be too much and you start to doubt it's your fault,
where's your faith you sad son of a bitch, I was just waiting
for this moment, I knew you would disappoint me.
And now the light pours in at Castle Gandolfo,
and you awaken late and your kidneys ache
and you wonder how long you can carry the cross
for the rest of the world, and you think of a girl
you knew in school, and you wonder what became of her,
if she got old and fat and lost that look that lifted you up
off your feet all those years ago
or she is still who she was, only better,
a lifetime later, and all this time she could have been
your friend,
and you turn in the bedsheets, holding your side,

you feel as if a spear has fetched water from you,
and it is seeping away like raindrops from the body,
shiny as silver, as famous as dust.

Empty Places

Remembering Paul Gruchow: a chronicle of a death foretold

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

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

DULUTH, Feb. 24, 2004—Paul Gruchow, who chronicled the prairie in his book *The Necessity of Empty Places*, died of a drug overdose Sunday at his home in Duluth. He was 56.

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

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

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

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

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

Paul had a vision, nearly implemented, of a newspaper that was literally a “prairie home companion,” a printed friend to the scattered populace. Every edition would contain the daily commodity prices and retail ads, but it would also point to the

deeper truth of rural living. Paul needed an operational lieutenant, a news editor to guide each day's paper through to completion, and he chose me. I felt very lucky.

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

During Gruchow's tenure, from 1975 to 1986, the *Daily Globe* enjoyed a golden era. It was one of the first papers nationally to "go computer," installing a blinking Digital VAX monolith in a glass sarcophagus in our otherwise ancient paste-up room. Every reporter had a terminal and could edit his own stuff online—a revolutionary empowerment. We went to four-color offset lithography a decade before *USA Today*, the better to showcase the work of world-class photographers Jim Brandenburg and Joe Rossi.

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

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

Rocket Launcher

MY FIRST MONTHS WITH PAUL were like a honeymoon. After getting an edition out, we would race off to the prairie in his rickety staff car—the paper had only two—and he would show me blue gentian in bloom ("bitter herbs, bearing bitter news" of

winter drawing near) at Kilen Woods, or the buffalo cows lolling out along the Blue Mounds or the skeletal herons dancing on the edges of Round Lake. I looked; I listened; I said, “Gosh.”

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

Paul was never a “regular guy.” Though chronologically a baby boomer, he seemed pre-Woodstock by half a dozen generations. He had a plummy, old-school way about him. He was drunk with Shakespeare and King James English, which made him partial to words like *fettered* and *madman*, a fustiness that perhaps explains why Annie Dillard and not he shot up the bestseller lists.

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

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

He could be highbrow. He quoted Charles Dickens, who, on one of his famous lecture tours of America, traveled the high prairies

by smoking locomotive, describing the landscape as “oppressive in its barren monotony.” He regaled me with the latest studies of Henry James and Samuel Beckett. His take-away from the Beckett book, shared over a drippy beef sandwich at the Gobbler Cafe, was that Beckett was so prone to constipation that he frequently had to clear the blockage with a tongue depressor. The things serious writers must do.

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

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

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

He told, over a meringued wedge of lemon pie at the Gobbler, the Chekhovian story of a stringer in one of the *Daily Globe*’s outpost villages, 50 miles away. The stringer had been born out of wedlock and put up for adoption. Then the birth mother moved in nearby and was “the neighbor lady” while the girl grew up, babysitting, reading to her, helping her through school. For decades the neighbor showered motherly love on the daughter, never disclosing who she was. Eventually, the daughter learned the woman was her mother—but neither violated the contract between them. When the mother took sick, the daughter took her in and nursed her through her final months—each woman

knowing the truth, but in true Minnesota fashion, not wishing to make a scene.

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

He loved gossip. He told about a big reception Worthington held for its National Book Award-winning favorite son, Tim O'Brien, author of *Going After Cacciato*. Before O'Brien could ascend to the stage, Paul saw his parents grasping his arm and ominously warning their accomplished, adult son to behave. "Don't you say anything up there to make us ashamed!" Parents, Paul said—you gotta love 'em.

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

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

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

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

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

The Necessity of Friction

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

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

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

I left Worthington in 1980 to be with my wife at graduate school, grateful for the opportunity Paul had given me and equipped with skills that would feed my family and me over the coming years. He was the closest thing I ever had to a mentor. So I imagined

that the *Daily Globe* would go on indefinitely, with its remarkable prairie editor riding the roost.

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

Paul began to withdraw from the paper, setting up shop across the street in the old post office, polishing the essays that would form the basis for his books: *Journal of a Prairie Year*, *The Necessity of Empty Places*, and *Grass Roots: The Universe of Home*. In 1985, he sold his share of the *Daily Globe*. A few years later he moved to Northfield; he and his wife, Nancy, bought a bookstore, and Paul taught English at St. Olaf.

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

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

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

more melancholy outlook. He should have experienced satisfaction. But something was wrong.

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

"It always irked Paul that he wasn't more famous," Nancy Gruchow reflects. It bothered him that the topics that mattered so much to him—the tallgrass prairie, birch-bark canoeing, low-tillage farming—weren't topics a great many other people cared about. He felt he was leading the battle charge of our times, toward what mattered and was real, but no one was following. He was envious of outdoors essayists like Dillard and Gretel Erlich, writers who were doing similar things more successfully. Over the years he complained to writer friends like Barton Sutter that his work wasn't generating the proper volume of critical essays. He wrote a novel, and when he couldn't sell it, he deleted it from his hard drive and burned the printouts.

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

Instead, things went further downhill. In August 2001, Paul made the first of four suicide attempts. Following his hospitalization, he was assigned to Bridge House, a Duluth shelter that provides temporary housing for people with mental health issues. On Christmas day he came home to Nancy, but 60 days later he surprised her by initiating divorce proceedings. He had become impulsive, irrational, and spiteful. He had been led away in

handcuffs from his own home. That winter he stunned Nancy by selling the Two Harbors home without her consent.

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

“He enjoyed it immensely,” says Lee Hemming, coordinator of the club. Hemming describes a Paul Gruchow who was willing to go to any length to reach out to people—even willing to go to war with the club’s then-programming coordinator Jan Zita Grover about the proper approach to dealing with the mentally ill. Grover, who was a friend of Paul’s and a fellow writer, felt the club needed structure and rules in addition to caring and support; Paul yearned for an ethos of unabashed, unmitigated, unconditional love.

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

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

After class one night, with a blizzard underway, Paul insisted on driving back to Duluth, though the highways were virtually

impassable. “He said he had to work at the club,” Fraser says.

“There was no other way. He clearly was not well.”

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

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

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

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

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

For a long time Paul denied that he was bipolar, that he had a manic side, but there is ample evidence of wild mood surges, some crazy, some ugly. The crazy included a sweater-buying

binge in Grand Forks in 1999. “He filled all our closets with his stuff,” Nancy says. The ugly included volatile scenes with Nancy, whom he came to see as both best friend and worst enemy.

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

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

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

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

The Monk’s Dilemma

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

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

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

I heard everything: the needle scratching in its groove, the screams of the children, the teacher saying, "Paul, is something wrong?" ... I heard myself answering, "No, I'm fine, really I am." But I was lying. Because there were two of us.... I was dizzy with fear that the two boys could never again be connected.... It was as if I had precipitously perished and had been granted one last look at the ghost of my former self before I was swept away into the void.

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

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

meaning.... They are plagued by anxiety or deep feelings of guilt and shame.

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

The father was decent but distant, according to Nancy, too busy with the work of the farm to participate in child-rearing. Paul's mother, Mary Louise Gruchow, whom he called Mother, was more animated but also more temperamental. She was depressive and had a rheumatic heart. In one childhood episode, his mother broke every dish in the house in a fit of frustration, causing the family to eat from plastic bowls for the next year. She blamed Paul and his twin sister, Paulette, for the family's economic woes and beat them, using wooden spoons or buckled overshoes. As an adult, Paul still bore the marks of beatings on his back.

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

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

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

Paul Gruchow loved the rural spaces of Minnesota as perhaps no other writer has, but it was a vision dipped in darkness. He noted that something sick and self-hating happens in the hearts of small-town people, the conviction that nothing fine can come from the countless Nazareths sprinkled across the map. It’s why the best and brightest pack up and leave.

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

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

In the Humble Places

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Berryman died at 57, Gruchow at 56, both neither young nor old. Both men's final books were journals of recovery. Berryman helped give Paul the talent of expression, an abstract voice with which to cry out in pain. Berryman was the greater rhetorician, but Paul's writing splashes into the real world with a rubberized boot. His idea is nothing less than the transcendence of pain through a spiritual vision of nature. This is not only bigger than Berryman; in its acknowledgement of the dark mystery of being human, it's bigger than Thoreau.

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

"Well," Paul said, exhaling smoke, "it's probably what I'm going to do one day."

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

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

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

I wish to suggest that Gruchow was the last in a line of Minnesota prophets that includes Thorstein Veblen, Ignatius Donnelly, Ole

Rolvaag, Fred Manfred, and Sigurd Olson—classic tellers of truth whose best work arose from Minnesota soil.

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

Though Paul despaired of his efforts, we know that his was a pilgrimage to the humble places as well as the exalted, a journey across spirit as much as across water and sod, and we are blessed to have these field guides in our satchels. Measured by book sales, his impact was slight, but he will have Plathlike legs in death. He is part of the canon now, the sort of thing he always loved.

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

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

The Newmans of Westport⁵

It is said that on a stormy night
when a traveler is most in need
of a helping hand they are out there
in their Ferrari, idling, extra gas
and jumper cables at the ready.

Few are the motorists who drive
the length of the Connecticut Turnpike
without receiving road assistance
from Paul and Joanne.

She waits in your car with you,
chatting of the weather,
blushing at your compliments,
coupons for popcorn and salad oil
spilling from the glove compartment.

He is immediately under your hood,
blue eyes blinking away the damp,
righting the wrong connections.

Joanne has a plate of fresh brownies,
Paul a wool sweater to warm you up.

To be of use, that is the thing,
atonement in the grease and gravel
and lesser people's luck.
This simplicity saves them from fame,
your distributor outweighs
every glory they have known.

And when the emergency subsides,
you wave goodbye and they smile
through clutched raincoats and return
to wait for the next living soul.

⁵ Namedroppings (1982)

Pathetic Fallacy^{6 *}

for John Berryman

The event was as successful as a fire.
People came from all across town.
Shuffled their feet, doused him with water,
stuck him in dirt, and when they were sure
he was out, dead out, they went home.
Gnash teeth, wring hands, get drunk, see hell.
Even the birds in the trees are pissed off.
Even the moon's gone to stand in the corner.

⁶The Movie Under the Blindfold (1978)

*I wanted to cultivate a non-literary audience, but I made it hard for them by naming a poem 'Pathetic fallacy,' a scholarly term for when nature imitates human emotion – the rain mourning, etc. This poem is about John Berryman's funeral – which I did not attend. Didn't even know the man, though I knocked on his door once. But what a phrase, even if you don't know its civilized meaning. Both words are like hockers coming at you!

Why Did the Buddha Sit Under the Tree?

To get to
the other side.

'The Skin Over a Young Girl's Wrist'

Remembering James Wright ... my uncle ... sort of ...

I will be 60 in July, and my boyhood poet days are flown. But there was a time when it was my desire to crush the world in my poetic embrace. And I was so fortunate to have the American poet James Wright, if not as an outright mentor, then as an abiding example of what words could do, and as a personal friend.

You see, he was my uncle, sort of.

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

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

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

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

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

The poems had a profound impact on me. I was a teenager, which automatically made me susceptible, but I was also struggling with the death of my older sister

Kathleen, who died of heart complications at age 15. Her passing devastated my family, me as much as anyone.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Wright was there with his wife Annie. She was tall and strong and sympathetic. He was soft and sweet and genial, full of gentle

quips and funny stories. He didn't put on a show for me. But he communicated to me in a respectful way that words could be part of a life.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Your drawing is definitely improving, Dave."

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

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

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

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

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

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

When I say he legitimized self-pity, I mean he found a way to love oneself in writing, to feel genuine sorrow for one's situation, not out of selfishness or self-absorption, but out of forgiveness. How can we have compassion for what is outside us if we can't have compassion for what we know best? Not that we wallow in

this feeling, either – this sorrow is a necessary interim stage, like "hitting bottom," to a return to living.

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

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

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

(1990)

Voznesenski & Yevtushenko ^{7 *}

Two Russian poets visited Minneapolis in the winter of 1973. Yevtushenko arrived with a jetload of Soviet reporters and protocol men, Voznesenski under the cover of night, with less than a day's notice.

A group of Ukrainian dissidents
pamphleted Yevtushenko's appearance
at Macalester Fieldhouse, blasting the poet
for putting a sensitive face on Russian brutality.

Yevtushenko smiled as if to say,
I have nothing to do with this.
He was splendid in his Wranglers,
and drank from a crystal pitcher of milk.

Suddenly the protesters charged the stage
knocking the poet down and upsetting the dais.
I along with others stood to block the attackers'
escape.

Yevtushenko stood on the platform
and blinked away milk.

When word came of Voznesenski's visa,
Northrop Auditorium was cordoned off
so a mere 50 people dotted the 5,000 seats

7 Namedroppings (1982)

*I filled a sketchbook called Namedroppings around 1972. It was never published. I include several of those poems here. It seemed off to me that I, a nobody from the Midwest, was running into people of note: Ravi Shankar, Hubert Humphrey, George Steinbrenner, W. H. Auden. I even managed a secondhand sighting for Hitler. It occurred to me that people may not care about me, but maybe they would care about these celebrities if I wrote about them. They weren't!

while, standing like a speck below,
the poet groaned like a swinging pendulum
muttering the grim toll of 'Goya' and other
poems
in the only language he knew.

No one understood him, yet all were afraid.

Afterward they got together at Chester
Anderson's
to boast and jostle and drink,
Voznesenski alone with a puzzled frown on his
face.
Several beers later, I took to the bathroom,
where Chester's golden retriever lay on a pink
poof rug.
I stepped over the dog to pee.
Behind me, Voznesenski crept into the room
And knelt by the dog a foot from my stream
Splashing against the porcelain lip.
He scratched the dogs ears and smiled
serapically
His two eyes closed, his face held out,
the dew like communion from God
on his face, as if finally, finally free.

Let's Play: Celebrity Brain Tumors!

I was all excited: *USA Today* was interested in my brain tumor! Well, not the tumor so much, but they were looking at a piece I had written about it, and my first conversation with an editor there went great. Finally, I hoped, my sort of tumor—a meningioma—would get the attention it so richly deserved. Research grants would follow. Nobel prize winners would focus their whole brains on my half one. I'd not only be cured, but bathed in sympathetic lighting. I was one lucky guy.

Then the email arrived.

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

It took a few moments for the words to register. I have a brain tumor—have I mentioned that already?—so maybe I'm a little slow. But this was it in a nutshell: the nation's newspaper only wants health stories if they're by or about celebrities. A story about the alien gnawing away at Mike Finley's brain wasn't news, no matter how bad the tumor or how good the writing. (And it was excellent!) But if Nicole Kidman came down with a meningioma, the paper was saying, it would be hot.

And this pissed me off. It was like approaching the velvet rope of public opinion and being stopped by a bouncer. It was like trying to confide a life and death matter to a friend—and yes, I'd

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

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

This quest actually began back in January 1999. I was doing situps in my upstairs office when I felt something happen inside my head, from the exertion. It felt like my brain was melting—from contact with a blacksmith's poker jammed through my skull. Within a week I had my diagnosis: my meningioma was about the size of a croissant, curled behind my left ear. This noncancerous but nonetheless unpleasant fellow had been residing there quietly for as long as a couple of decades, until it caused a major vein in my head to dry up and snap off (medical term: thrombosis). Hence the moment of mind-searing pain (the one before the email from *USA Today*). My tumor, doctors informed me, was inoperable – too close to the language center of the brain to risk going in. But, with any luck – cross fingers –it will just continue to sit there.

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

is the least horrible of a grisly lot. They'll kill 15,000 of us this year.

But you never hear about them. May is a National Brain Tumor Month (May), which only the editors of Men's Health seem to be keenly aware of. But it hasn't caught on elsewhere, perhaps because of the limited gift-giving options. But I'm out to change all that by attracting some star power to my cause. Think about it. Why do celebrities exist? So we don't have to pay attention to one another. There's just too doggone many of us. Instead we appoint proxies, identifiable stand-ins for certain points of view. Thus Jerry Lewis for MD, Charlton Heston for Alzheimer's, Sally Struthers for Christian Children, Michael Jackson for victims of excessive plastic surgery.

Sure, I was bitter about *USA Today's* policy, but I'll let you in on a dark secret. One reason I wanted to talk about brain tumors was because I thought I finally had an issue people had to care about, one that could make me a bit of a celebrity. I wanted to matter, too! Meningioma might be my ticket to fame. And if I mattered, maybe having the thing there wouldn't be so bad.

I could almost hear the chatter:

"Hey, isn't that that guy with the thing in his head? Cool!"

"Talks pretty good for a guy whose brain shares skull space with a bolus of runamok cell metabolism."

"A front row table for you, Mr. Finley! With your usual, six Advils and a glass of mint iced tea!"

Sigh. The *USA Today* rejection made those pleasant thoughts vanish. I turned, disconsolate, to my friends at the brain tumor

listserver. “They didn’t want my story because I’m not famous,” I said.

Amidst the chorus of sympathy, one clear voice stood out: “Well, maybe they’re right,” Cheryl said. “Maybe that’s just how it is, and we should select a celebrity spokesperson, like those other diseases.”

And so began an online scheme to locate someone who was famous, attractive, had a brain tumor and could still talk, and coerce that person into being the hood ornament for our malady. It was no simple task. Most of the really good brain tumor victims reveal their condition by dying from it. Presidential candidate Pat Paulsen is long gone, as is conductor Otto Klemperer. Ditto reggae star Bob Marley; political schemer Lee Atwater; Cornelius from Planet of the Apes, Roddy McDowell; film critic Gene Siskel; actress Susan Hayward; NFL founder Pete Rozelle and player Lyle Alzado; CIA director William Casey; Negro League slugger Josh Gibson, modern-day screwballer Dan Quisenberry; Royals and Yankees manager Dick Howser and reliever Tug McGraw of the “Ya Gotta Believe” Mets; director Francois Truffaut; Rhapsody in Blue composer George Gershwin; Frankenstein author Mary Shelley. (Wouldn’t she have been great at penning celeb op eds, though? And that Elsa Lanchester hairdo is exactly how my tumor feels to me.)

Our celebrity brain tumor list took on a life of its own. In all, we culled nearly 300 names of celebrities who had survived a brain tumor, died from one, or had a loved one die of one. (Are you listening Tim McGraw? Better yet, how about you, Mrs. Faith Hill McGraw? We’re ready when you are.) Surely, we’d be able to recruit a spokesperson for the cause. One name of the 300

stood out, bathed in glamour, drama, and stagecraft: Elizabeth Taylor. If you could get Elizabeth Taylor, you didn't need Sandy Duncan or Arlen Specter (both survivors, but rather long in the tooth, at that).

She's not just a queen of multiple facelifts, hip replacements, respiratory ailments, and painkiller addictions. In London in 1997, she also had surgery in London to scoop out a meningioma . That's my tumor, people! "I've been pronounced dead, not able to breathe, and I went to the tunnel with the white light, all of that," she declared. "So I have a great appreciation of every day I wake up breathing. Colors, different tastes, different smells—I appreciate it all on a different level." Out of all the talk-show wanabees queuing up for their moment in the bright lights, Liz has got the street cred only public suffering can convey. So our little group wrote her a letter, inviting her to amplify our voices with hers. We pictured her sitting on a shiny divan with Barbara Walters, maybe wearing one of those turbans she likes, explaining what a meningioma was and what it meant to her. It would be great.

Only, we never got so much as a *USA Today*-style reject note. She never replied. Our online group was crushed, unleashing a salvo of chat messages. "Here we had a celebrity of the first magnitude," wrote Anne. "And a great chance to do some education about brain tumors, and she wouldn't discuss it. Thanks heaps, Liz."

"I understand some people from the American Brain Tumor Association asked Taylor to speak up about it" wrote Terry. Terry knows everything about Liz Taylor. "Miss Taylor's office informed them that she has decided not to make a big deal about

brain tumors, because she's already so identified with AIDS. AIDS is so important to her. She doesn't want that compromised."

"I disagree," wrote Marie, who once explained that her meningioma seemed to make her more analytical. "I think it's all for our consumption. Being a spokesperson for AIDS makes her seem like an angel of show business. Whereas, actually having a brain tumor harms her image, and makes people think of her as unglamorous. So she bailed."

And that was it. Within a few months I stopped subscribing to the listserver. I found that, when I spoke to people with more serious brain tumors, it freaked me out, and made me think my own tumor was more serious than it was. The web is a health paranoiac's hell-zone, filled with unfiltered suggestions about everything that just might be going wrong. If you're at all suggestible, or feeling vulnerable, you probably oughtn't to go there.

But every now and then, I still allow myself to dream. I'll see some celeb's face peering up at me from the checkout line, and think: Maybe she's the one? Maybe he'll put us over the top! I imagine all of them having things in their heads. And they don't know it! Paris Hilton. The guy from Creed. Kevin Costner, with one the size of a baseball. But you wouldn't know it from those rueful, over the shoulder glances.

Guys, when you find out, if I am still around, call me. I've got an in at *USA Today*.

Auden in Minnesota ⁸

On the worst winter evening of 1972, W. H. Auden,
who had never traveled west of New York City,
read from his work on the campus of St. John's University,
60 miles north of Minneapolis.

At this point in his life Auden, 76, was so grand a figure
that many thought him dead already and enshrined
in Westminster Abbey.

He was the poet's poet, the cigar store Indian
with his roadmapped face
And perpetual cigarette, the man who could do
anything with a line.

A surrealist friend and I drove up on bald tires, cars veering out
of the hypnotic white at us, narrow shoulders
shrugging us to right and to left.

Two hours later we stomped up the snowy chapel steps
and took our places in the back of the hall as the legend
lurched to the podium.

He looked venerable as snow and wrinkled as an armadillo,
and drunk as the situation permitted.
Toothless he slurred through the "Musée des Beaux Arts,"
through the homages to Yeats and Freud,
and all the companions of his youth, of war and hell
and golden bough and burning bird.

⁸ Namedroppings (1982)

And no one understood a word,
except once, between coughs, when he very clearly
pronounced the words “old fag.”

Afterward we elbowed the undergraduates for an autograph
on a Modern Library edition of his Selected Poems
and as I twisted out a hand clasped mine.

It was the hand of a professor friend, named Ted,
who had written his one and only published monograph
on Auden and his work, and he was too devoted
to the master to stay at home that awful January night,
but too shy, too proud, to venture into the push and shove.

I will never forget the look in Ted's eyes as he gazed at the scrawl
on my frontispiece – actual writing of the actual writer –
“Warmest regards, Wystan.”
And being a sap, I gave it to him.

I. Gilgamesh⁹

I was an ordinary king
I lived and ruled and learned what I could
and of all the world I loved
the monster Enkidu
who fought me and was defeated and
became my servant friend
and died and broke my heart again
In my grief I beheld fire squirting
from the wounded loins of Humbaba
I wooed Ishtar to determine the secret of death
and I stood on a promontory and witnessed Father Anu
create the bull of heaven and later
divide the bleeding beef and eat of it
and thrust as an insult an offering
into Ishtar's swollen mouth
and the rain of stones that continued for weeks
and fell upon Uruk, domed capital of the world,
and Uruk mourned the dead and dying
and many tablets of wet clay
were cleft that day with lamentations
of the priests of all the people
I asked Utnapishtim to put me at peace
and he prattled on about the cleansing flood
and the miracle plant that made men live

⁹ House of Murk (1973)

beyond this life and into the next
but the plant was swallowed by a giant snake
and destroyed men's hopes forever
and now I Gilgamesh am retired
to my house of myrtle wood
to dream of long departed friends
and breathe the smoke
of their memory

Morte d'Urban

This is a story that dances across decades.

About 20 years ago I lived near a woman named Kathy P., a fiery red-haired psychologist who informed me – I can no longer remember why – that she was friends with a writer named J. F. Powers.

You probably don't know the name. But J. F. Powers won the National Book Award ages ago for a novel about a Catholic priest called Morte D'Urban, written in the early 1950s.

Kathy had no way of knowing that this information would interest me greatly. But Morte D'Urban was not only my favorite novel ever, but it was a role model for me in the writing of my own novel *The Usable Book*.

Where his book was about an impressive functionary who worked for the regional chancery in the fictional diocese of Ostergothenburg – believed to be St. Cloud, Minnesota, 80 miles from where I live in St. Paul.

Father Urban in his 40s was what enlightened people want a priest to be – worldly, not icky, not preachy, but "urbane." The kind of priest who could shoot a few rounds of golf with a wealthy donor, have a few drinks at the Nineteenth Hole, and talk informedly about the latest books. He was the sort of person people like me pinned their hopes on.

But as the novel advances, something happens to Fr. Urban. Instead of staying aloof from the problems of Catholic theology and politics, he knuckles under to them. At the end, he is a silenced voice – as mute and mysterious as priests everywhere seem to the doubtful.

Now, my own unpublished novel, written in 1981-1983, was a coming of age school novel, rather like John Knowles' *A Separate Peace*, but with a Catholic twist, as it occurs in a prep seminary in Bucks County. That twist was totally provided by what I learned from J. F. Powers' way of talking about Catholics in his stories. It

was satirical but affectionately so. It had distance, but it also held mystery.

To me his voice was the answer not only to "What do I write?" but, in the wake of numerous personal tragedies and griefs, "How do I live?"

OK, so my neighbor, Kathy P., tells me she knows J. F. Powers, who is a reclusive figure teaching at St. John's Abbey in Collegeville, near St. Cloud. And I, in my astonishment, ask if she would forward a manuscript of mine to him, as an homage. She said sure.

So I powered up my PC – which ran Wordstar in those early days – and printed off a sample chapter of my novel, a chapter about how a seminarian's struggles with masturbation leads to the assassination of President Kennedy. To me it was like a handoff from Powers – it had his fingerprints all over it.

But I made a glaring technical mistake. Before I shipped it off, I did a search and replace, and changed the main character's name from Frank to Phil. This was because Powers middle name was Francis, and I did not want him to think I was attributing the masturbatory habits to him.

But Wordstar, I guess, has its glitches, and it replaced the Franks in only about half of the instances. The rest of the Phils remained Franks. I, in my haste and ADD, did not catch this, and sent it on, eager for some hint of approval from this American master who so influenced me.

Months passed. I forgot about this. One day, I get a letter, not to me but addressed to Kathy P., with a typed note from Powers himself:

"I really did not know what to make of Mr. Finley's story. It seemed to come out of nowhere and I did not know where it was going. And the main character seemed to change names from paragraph to paragraph. I found I could not read it to the end. It was so bad, I really wonder why you passed it on to me."

Now, writers get rejected all the time. And it's always bad, it always hurts. We get used to it as the price of being in the business. But every now and then comes a mega-hurt, something

that knows exactly how to triangulate your heart, and surgically bisect it so there is no chance of it ever beating again.

This was one of perhaps four crushingly embarrassing moments for me as a writer, and I grieved – both at my own ineptness, and at the cruelty of Powers' note, like one you would leave with the trash.

What emerged was a picture of a man who did like to be accosted in any way, and who, despite great gifts in describing the tender mercies that befall us in our lives, did not dispense very many of them personally.

How bad was the blow? I could never again speak to my friend Kathy P. I felt supremely ashamed to have used her as a go-between, and for her to see me trashed that way.

And, of course, my heart hardened against my hero. When he died ten years later, I thought, may God have mercy on that cold, dead soul. And I grieved to still be so misunderstood, and so indifferently discarded by a man I had idolized.

Another father figure, soot and smoke rising to heaven!

(1991)

Understanding Frankenstein ¹⁰

The monster didn't want to hurt that little girl.
He was charmed by her, and beguiled
by the flower petals she tossed on the pond,
how they spun gently on the surface.
It struck him that she was a flower too,
in her apron and cotton dress,
a product of the sunshine and of love
and his hurling her to her death
was a kind of lovely compliment
from a budding artist.

¹⁰The Rapture (2009)

Frankenstein in the Cemetery *

Here is where

I ought to be.

And here.

And here.

And here.

And here.

And here.



*This is the only poem of mine that Daniele ever told me she liked. Figures. It describes a scene in *Bride of Frankenstein*, where the monster waxes homesick for the graves of the bodies he is made of.

Oddfathers

This is an essay about mentors— how useful they are, mostly, but how difficult it has been for many of us to accept the idea of a new father, to submit to their guidance.

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

•

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

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

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

None of these men volunteered to be "a father" to me, and I never asked them. And yet it was always in the air: What could we do that would be more valuable than sharing knowledge on how to do this stuff the right way. I think, because everyone was shy, we

wound up stealing—me stealing ideas from them about how to live, and think, and be, and them slipping ideas to me casually, as if they meant nothing at all, as if they were passing me the salt.

•

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

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

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

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

•

When I went off to college at Wooster in 1967, we got a visit from the Oregon poet William Stafford. I knew nothing about his work. I was 17 and knew nothing, period. But because I styled

myself as a poet, I was invited to interview Stafford, along with a handful of other self-styled bohemians, on closed-circuit TV.

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

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

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

•

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

Afterward we poets got together at English professor Chester Anderson's to boast and jostle and drink, Voznesenski sitting alone on the couch, a slight frown on his face. Several beers later, I took to the bathroom, where Chester's golden retriever lay, and stepped over him to pee. As soon as I started, Voznesenski

entered, smiled politely at me, knelt by the dog and scratched his ears, not more than a foot from my pee stream.

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

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

•

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

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

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

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

But Bly in person was not as gracious as Bly on paper. Perhaps when he met me face to face after the reading he read the hurry and ambition that was written there. Or perhaps he saw I was younger than he supposed. In any event, he quickly took to

teasing me with little jabs, nicknaming me "Irish." It was funny, but the joke was at my expense.

•

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

•

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

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

I will save the other story for a moment,

•

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

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

Paul hired me not knowing I was somewhat the same kind of writer he was— literary—so we made each other miserable during my stay in Worthington. Paul was old school, and wanted

us to trade book talk over cigarettes and sandwiches. He loved Henry James, whom I found hard to read. I was forever disappointing him.

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

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

When I quit and moved away to Connecticut, a midwestern magazine published some poems of mine and cited me in the biographical notes as having his job. It was a magazine that had rejected his work.

"Congratulations," he wrote me in the shortest and bitterest note I have ever received, "on your big promotion."

•

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

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

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

I ran into William Stafford on a stairway in 1978, at a publisher's party. It had been eleven years since I asked him my silly question on college television in the Amish country. Darned if he

didn't recognize me. "Hello" he said, and smiled. "How are you?" Which still seems like a miracle to me.

Tom McGrath, who had always been in frail health, followed in 1990. About three years earlier, I invited him to a holiday open house, and he surprised me by showing up fifteen minutes early, and nursed a cup of hot cider, asking me questions about my children. He had been through a lot in his life, but to the end he was a tender fellow.

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

I guess Voznesenski is still out there, sneaking up on young poets in toilets.

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

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

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

•

So now I am the old guy, and all the grand gents are gone. My own dad, who stopped smoking thirty years ago, has been diagnosed with lung cancer, and he is pissed. I talk to him on the phone. I wrote him a letter of amends, apologizing for being a

remote if dutiful son for so many years. At the eleventh hour I remember how much he suffered in our family, losing his firstborn child, being married to a scary woman, my mom.

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

"You know, Mike," my dad told me, "if anyone should be apologizing to anyone, it should probably be me apologizing to you."

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

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And another thing. A few months after Paul Gruchow died, I got a call from Matthew Gruchow, his nephew. Matthew never met Paul, but he knew about him, and wanted to know more. I agreed to meet him for lunch, and we talked.

Matthew is in his twenties, and he too wants to write, and from what he has shown me, he will be very good. Books, adventures, essays—I looked into his eyes and saw all the desire, all the heat-lines that once radiated from mine.

I decided, in a moment of exuberance, to throw in with him, to tell him everything the old guys had taught me.

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

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

"And don't worry about who you are, or if you have a right to write. Don't stop, and don't apologize, and don't expect anything from anyone. Grow in the doing, and between sentences, breathe."

George Steinbrenner

I flew into Minneapolis early to have breakfast at the airport with Turlow before going on to Miami. After eggs, we loitered by the departure gate, muttering nervously, when I noticed a familiar face leaning against the wall.

Eyes of a cornered animal, eyes that were always hungry.

That, I nudged Turlow to say, was George Steinbrenner.

Who?, Turlow asked.

Steinbrenner, owner of the Yankees.

The New York Yankees?

Those ones.

Well, then we must introduce ourselves.

No Turlow, I tried to say, let the poor guy alone, but that was not Turlow's style.

Seeing us approach from across the room, an expression of alarm that could also have been relief spread across his face.

It seemed to say, Oh no, not again, and Where the hell have they been all morning, both at the same time.

Mr. Steinbrenner, Turlow said, this is Mr. Finley of the Daily Globe and I'm Turlow Casselman, publisher of Many Corners, the local opinion journal, and an old-time Yankee fan.

Were you here to play the Twins?

Yeah, that's right, Steinbrenner said, and we whupped your asses. The score of the game the night before, against our lowly Twins, was 5-4.

What do you think of Calvin Griffith, I asked, Calvin being the opposite of Steinbrenner in every way, cheap, small-town and an old-time baseball man.

Calvin's terrific, he said, we get along great, it's that sonofabitch Veeck I'd like to punch in the nose. Last week he radioed to a disappointed Cubs that they could all see a White Sox game across town for free. Five thousand northsiders saw my Yankees play for free. That cocksucker Veeck never even asked me. That's the bullshit that's ruining this game.

Do you think Catfish Hunter will win 20, Turlow asked. Cat's been retired for two years, Steinbrenner scowled.

So what do you think of this year's team, Turlow asked (the '80 Yankees were terrible).

Man for man, I think they stack up against the Murderers Row of old, he answered.

Now those were the Yankees I actually knew somewhat better, Turlow said.

And where are you going now, down to play the Miami team?

And Steinbrenner turns to me, and his whole swivels like a drum.

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Who is this asshole?, he asks.

Dead Bee on a Book by Philip Roth ¹¹

Imagine a man of raving demeanor,
Driven to nonsense by torture and desire,
Life as prolog of sneezing excess
And epilog of trembling apology,
Pages and chapters of unspeakable crimes,
Lambsblood let upon every letter,
And still the knee can not bend,
Antiheroic to the end.

Picture a creature true to his race
In the preservation of all that is sweet
In the neck of the illiterate flower,
Whose enemies are frost and a liege
Too busy to be a friend,
Heroic to the very end.

They lie prone, dog-eared together
In the rear window of my Fury,
Striped husk and desiccated book.
The book I left too long in sun,
The bee because he was
Kidnapped in my car and held ransom
From his queen, a hundred epic yards from home.

11 The New Yorker (1996)

Maury ¹²

Every day it gets more real, real blood,
Real punches, that's a real big brassiere
On the woman from Klamath Falls.

But the effect is like some circus
Where the sweat and pee of the show-ponies
Is bled into a plastic cup.

Instead of feeling connected you feel
A million years removed,
Detached from the remarkable people

Bellywhumping their loved ones,
Remote from your neighbors down the street,
From the people you are supposed to love.

The cord connecting set to wall
That unplugs you from yourself,
And some sharp pitchfork poking holes,

Ignorance is snapping up residential real estate,
A volcano is growing in the cornfield.

12 The New Yorker (1996)

If God made men to march to bugles
then who are we to stick nails in our ears?

We're here because we eat red meat
and we loved our country.

A proper plan will awaken the giant,
at this point nothing

could please me better than squeezing a trigger,
and every daycare center a target.

Right now we are already strong as hell,
two years from now we'll be legends.

¹³Lucky You (1976)

*I wrote this in 1974, then retitled it for the Oklahoma City bombings of 1995.

Kerouac's Will

"Nobody Owns Jack Kerouac" – Jack Shea

They are fighting over the poet's estate,
who gets the royalties, who owns the rights.

To manuscripts, diaries, thousands of letters
One will after another is thrown out in court

The family scrambles to sell off his stuff.
Johnny Depp paid \$15,000 for a trenchcoat.

Surprise of surprises, the bum on the road
is worth about \$20 million,

a man with \$91 in his checking account
at the moment of his death

George

I was in LA, and a mutual friend said George was anxious to see me. We drove along the beach till we came to his wife's fashion salon, and I was led in. A busy, happy woman with cropped curls gestured behind her and laughed. This was where the money went, she said. I shook hands with the retinue.

Some of the members of the old band were still there, including the saxophonist with the scars on his nose whose name I could never remember.

I met George's son, whom I had never met before, he was almost grown, and resembled his mother, handsome and quiet and composed. I was taken aback by him, and couldn't think of anything to say. They wheeled out an exquisite cake that said "Welcome back, Mike," with a picture of us five lads, one without an instrument, with buttercream dahlias and frosting cherries, created by some impressive celebrity baker.

And when George arrived everyone crowded around him, but after touching his son's face he went straight to me and hugged me and we rocked happily for a moment, reunited, and I remembered the good times on tour, and how they always dropped me off again at the gray house on the little hill, and I would sneak inside to bed.

I could see the lines in George's eyes, and his hair had thinned but his grin was still stupendous, and he peppered me with questions about my family and my life and rebuked me for not bringing a photo with me.

During the meals, seeing the love they all had, I felt tears come to my eyes, and I burst out and told them I didn't deserve them as friends, they were so genuine and kind, and I was sorry I had not stayed in touch, and I was so sorry about John, and I was sorry I had gotten old and fat and become a business writer and lost the music, and someone patted my back while I sobbed.

And in his thick scouse George quietly said none of that mattered, I had gotten away but we were together again, and we would always be mates, and this day was for us to remember and to share. And they lifted their glasses of soda water and lime.

When the alarm sounded I went to my daughter's room. She lay there sleeping with her finger in a closed paperback. I kissed her several times on her smooth forehead. She emerged from her sleeping bag like a rose in bloom and told me my hands were cold, and smiled her lovely smile. We could hear the diesel idle of the garbage truck in the alley and the birds in the maple tree sang.

(1992)

Dream of Whitman

I dreamed I played basketball
with the bard of America,
he spun the globe on his finger
and said, young fellow,
you must not dwell inside yourself,
step out, step up to the world
where everything is revealed.
I stood in the rain on the bridge with him
and he shouted into the din,
There is no modesty now,
no inhibition,
no deflected blows.
He clasped me around the shoulders:
My son, it all just goes!

At the Ball Park ¹⁴

Ball Day at the ball park
and before the game
Lyman Bostock throws
out a couple dozen balls,
and all us fans
stand on our seats and
reach for them.

When Carew's turn comes
everyone cheers, even
the kids stop scouting
for ice cream in
a cup for a minute.

And when the vendor
does come by he stands
in everyone's view, so
we watch him instead,
pouring two bottles
of beer at a time, holding
his dollars in his teeth.

¹⁴Home Trees (1978)

Atlas & I

When I was 14 I sent off for the Charles Atlas courses I saw advertised in the inside covers of countless issues of DC Comics.

You remember, maybe. A guy at the beach gets sand kicked in his face by a bully, who walks off with his intended. So the boy bulks up, returns to the beach, and extracts his revenge.

I didn't have a ready-made drama like that. I just wanted to look better, to be more acceptable to girls. I was a year younger than the other kids in my class, and I felt I had some catching up to do, developmentally.

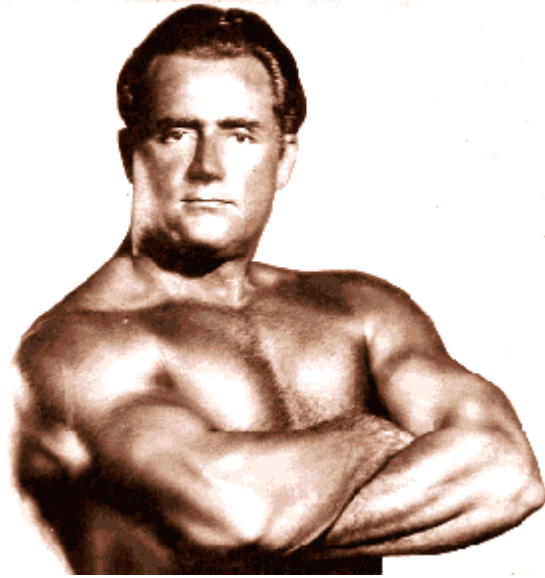
Atlas, born Angelo Siciliano was winner of a \$1,000 prize from Physical Culture, the muscle man magazine of the 1930s.

He devised his approach after studying lions and tigers in captivity. Unable to exercise in their cages, the big cats pressed against themselves to stay strong – Atlas coined this “dynamic tension.” We call it isometric exercise today.

The exercises came in #10 envelopes, Z-folded, with muddy low-res photos of a young Atlas, circa 1945, going through the exercise steps. In these oft-reproduced pictures he was smaller, and seemed more plausible, than the glistening pewtery Superman portrait of the comic ads.

The exercises were easy. Put one fist in the other hand and push. Then reverse direction. I did these things, and could feel something happening.

When Lesson No. 3 arrived, however, I was taken aback by the instructions, I was to place ice-cubes, wrapped in a wet washcloth, on my testicles, and leave it there for 15 minutes.



There was even a picture of this, although I don't recall it including testicles.

No one was home, so I opened a tray of ice cubes, wrapped them up nice, sat in the bathtub and did as instructed, wondering what this had to do with bullies and beaches.

It occurred to me as I squatted there that this might be some kind of mail order candid camera, and that Mad Magazine or someone was taking pictures in the tree outside the bathroom window,

I wasn't the hippest kid in northeastern Ohio, but I knew there was something questionable about hoarding pictures of Atlas in his leopard-spot briefs in my underwear drawer. And I figured out, as well, that I wasn't making the greatest strides toward new bully on the beach, so I let my subscription to the lessons lapse, and wrote them when they demanded payment that I was just a kid, and they shouldn't be sending stuff like that to innocents like me.

The months were passing of their own accord, and when I stood in the mirror making muscles and admiring my hard places, I could see that my job as dishwasher, hauling garbage cans around in the back of the restaurant my mom worked at, was paying off.

I was a funny kid. Within a few months I bought a copy of Herman Taller's *Calories Don't Count*, perhaps the first of the big fad diet books of the 1960s. It advocated that you drink a glass of polyunsaturated cooking oil, like safflower oil, three times a day, and that the oil would flush fat out of your system.

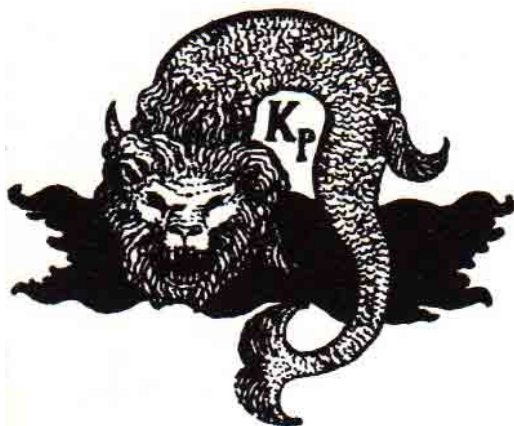
Taller, a Romanian, had a million people gagging down oil, thinking it would make them more beautiful. Americans may be the happiest people in the world, but there is also something odd about us. We are all immigrants of the mind, gawking at the skyscrapers of the new world and wondering how we will fit in.

What's funny to me is that, within the space of perhaps six months, I convinced myself I was both unlovably skinny and morbidly fat.

This coincides with my leaving the prep seminary at age 14 to re-enter civilian life. I looked around me and the world looked hard and I felt I needed help. Atlas and Taller just wanted my money, I suddenly saw.

It was going to be a long ride.

(1998)



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