

PASSING FIGURES

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By

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The undersigned, appointed by the dean of Graduate school, have examined the

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PASSING FIGURES

Presented by Gregory J. Dunne,

A candidate for the degree of doctor of philosophy, and hereby certify that, in
their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the *poetry immortals* of my life – the poets, friends, teachers, and family members who have shown me a way into poetry, especially my father, Jeremiah Dunne (1927- 2009), my mother, Ann Flaherty Dunne, my wife, Kikuchi Kae, and to our children Emi, Jyoji, Airi, and Arisa.

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Critical Introduction
To
Passing Figures

Shards Glinting in the Dust

"True memoir is written, like all literature, in an attempt to find not only a self but a world."

Patricia Hampl

Passing Figures is a memoir written in both prose and verse. It is a contemporary memoir and as such it strives to take an idea of the self and to examine it by exploring memory imaginatively.

The contemporary memoir traces its origins back to earlier forms of nonfiction writing: the autobiography, the slave narrative, and the confession. All of these traditional forms share certain defining characteristics, namely, an author writing about his/her own past and telling a truthful story. Characterizing these forerunners further, we might say that they contain a sustained effort to provide a truthful record of an individual's life through first-person narration.

Contemporary memoir, while including the above characteristics, differs from these earlier forms in the manner in which it engages with experience and memory, in order to shape a new understanding of the self in the world. Vivian Gornick gives us perhaps the most fruitful definition of contemporary memoir, calling it, "a work of sustained narrative prose controlled by an idea of the self under obligation to lift from the raw material of life a tale that will shape

experience, transform event, deliver wisdom (Gornick, SS 91).

Among other things, Gornick's definition works to disabuse the reader of the fallacious notion that the self is *the* major concern of memoir. The "self" found in memoir, as she defines it, is importantly referred to as an "idea." This understanding of the self in memoir accurately reflects our inability to fully apprehend the term, or agree on a definition of the term as it is used in memoir. It is a contested term, a term that is unclear, and as such inviting of exploration – for the "idea of the self" to be explored through the act of writing.

Contemporary memoir does not assume that the life being examined need necessarily be an established public one. In a sense, anyone's life can be the stuff of memoir, provided that life is sufficiently examined. To quote from Gornick again: "Modern memoir posits that the shaped presentation of one's own life is of value to the disinterested reader only if it dramatizes and reflects sufficiently on the experience of 'becoming': undertakes to trace the internal movement away from the murk of being told who you are by the accident of circumstance toward the clarity that identifies accurately the impulses of the self . . ." (SS 93). Memoir, as defined here, is a form that is open and inviting to all regardless of age, background, history, race, or gender. In modern times, it is perhaps our most democratic literary form. That is to say, it is not requisite for the writer to be a person of public status, or of wealth or power – a person of influence. It doesn't matter *who* writes the memoir, what matters is that the writer is able to dramatize and reflect sufficiently on the experience of becoming.

When we understand contemporary memoir in this way, we come to appreciate how the form has become so popular. Anyone, in theory, can try to

write it, and more importantly, any reader can go to memoir and find something of wisdom within it, a rewarding story of the writer's journey into becoming.

We are, by some accounts, now living in the age of the memoir. Some commentators lament this, finding in it confirmation that we are living in what Christopher Lasch has called a "culture of narcissism," a self-absorbed culture. Such people bemoan literature's turn towards what they perceive to be solipsistic concerns. If Gornick's definition of memoir is fully considered, however, it is hard to find such critical concerns convincing when applied to the memoir, *per se*.

Gornick understands the significance of memoir's popularity in a positive light. She sees contemporary memoir as having evolved into a more inclusive form and away from exclusivity, a form that celebrates the plurality of voices within literature today: "Everywhere in the world women and men are rising up to tell their stories out of the now commonly held belief that one's own life signifies. And everywhere, civil rights movements and the therapeutic culture at large have been hugely influential in feeding the belief. In this country alone forty years of liberationist politics have produced an outpouring of testament from women, blacks, and gays that is truly astonishing" (Gornick, SS 91).

Thus, although contemporary memoir shares many characteristics with traditional forms of autobiographical writing – an author writing about their own past and telling a truthful story through first person narration – there is a significant difference in the manner in which contemporary memoir utilizes experience and the idea of the self to shape a story.

Gornick understands the idea of self in memoir to be "under [an] obligation to

lift from the raw materials of life a tale that will shape experience.” I want to stress that Gornick sees *the tale itself*, which is lifted from the raw materials of life, to be what *shapes* experience in memoir. In other words, according to Gornick, the memoirist comes to understand something of her life, and perhaps a very provisional understanding at that, through the story, the tale, that she is bringing forward. I understand the act of *lifting* and the act of *shaping*, that Gornick refers to, as acts that involve the imagination: the memoirist making something of experience, of memory.

It is important to attend to the manner in which Gornick speaks to the issue of truth in memoir and the role she sees the imagination playing in it for in doing so we are able to distinguish memoir from other forms of autobiographical prose – to understand how it actually works: “Truth in a memoir is achieved not through a recital of actual events: it is achieved when the reader comes to believe that the writer is working hard to engage with the experience at hand. What happened to the writer is not what matters: what matters is the large sense that the writer is able to make of what happened” (Gornick, FG 135). This statement registers a critical distinction that sets the contemporary memoir apart from the earlier forms of autobiographical writing, which *did* tend to emphasize, “what happened to the writer.” In the past, autobiographies tended to be written by well-known individuals in positions of power and influence. In work such as this, what happened to the writer was naturally considered of great importance. In a similar sense, the significance of slave narratives, aside from their social value of providing firsthand accounts of the brutality of slavery, rested squarely

upon the fact that writers were recounting the actual details and conditions of their lives. Thus people read slave narratives, autobiographies, and even confessions expressly to find out what happened to the writer: how he developed – what shaped his life. And the writer, as consequence was engaged, for the most part, in recounting the historical record of his life.

Gornick, on the other hand, argues that it is the memoirist's job to make something "of what happened," something wise, something deliverable, something that is both of the self and transcendent beyond the self. And it is in this making that the memoirist must rely upon her imagination for success.

Unlike autobiography, which is largely involved in rendering from memory literal factual details, the contemporary memoir has a different relationship with memory. As the poet and memoirist Patricia Hampl has said, "Memory is not a warehouse of finished stories . . . a gallery of framed pictures." It is a place where stored images interact with the imagination, where images are *pressed* for meaning. "The real job of memoir," according to Hampl involves "Stalking the relationship, seeking the congruence between stored image and hidden emotion" (Hampl 30). Hampl believes memoir is seeking a permanent home for "feeling and image, a habitation where they can live together." Whatever meaning the memory has – whatever meaning the stored image has – it must be gotten at through the work of the imagination. It does not come ready-made. "*Meaning,*" Hampl further notes, "is not 'attached' to the detail by the memoirist; meaning is revealed . . . We find in our details and broken, obscured images, the language of symbol. Here memory impulsively reaches out and embraces imagination. That is the resort to invention. It isn't a lie, but an act of necessity, as the innate urge to

locate truth always is" (31).

And interestingly, and to my point here, as well as to my project in writing a mixed-form memoir of verse and prose, Hampl finds the deepest impulses of memoir to be those most readily associated with poetry, specifically lyric poetry, rather than with fiction and autobiography:

Strangely enough, contemporary memoir, . . . has its roots not in fiction which it appears to mimic and tease, but in poetry. The chaotic lyric impulse, not the smooth drive of plot, is the engine of memory. Flashes of half-forgotten moments flare up from their recesses: the ember-red tip of a Marlboro at night on a dock, summer of '54, the lake still as soup, or a patch of a remembered song unhinged from its narrative moorings – "Glow little glow worm, glimmer, glimmer," and don't forget the skinned knuckle – Dad's! – turning a dead ignition on a 20 below winter day. Shards glinting in the dust.

These are the materials of memoir, details that refuse to stay buried, that demand habitation. Their spark of meaning spreads into a wildfire of narrative. They may be domesticated into a story, but the passion that begot them as images belongs to the wild night of poetry. It is the humble detail, as the arch memoirist Nabokov understood, which commands memory to speak: "Caress the detail," he advised, "the divine detail." And in so doing, he implicitly suggested, the world – the one lost forever – comes

streaming back. Alive, ghostly real. (Hampl 224)

Memory then, as associated with images, with broken details, details that refuse to stay buried, is the spark that lights the fire of memoir. Inasmuch, as memoir is fed most directly by and through the wild images of memory, Hampl asserts that the impulse that powers the form owes more to lyric poetry than to fiction. The memory comes first, and then the narrative to hold “the wild night of poetry” in the net of story, a “world” come “streaming back. Alive, ghostly real.”

In their theorizing on memoir, Gornick and Hampl help us to appreciate the close affinity between poetry and memoir: Gornick by emphasizing the importance of the imagination, the ability of the writer to “shape experience, transform event, [and] deliver wisdom”; Hampl by positing that both memoir and lyric poetry share a similar reliance upon memory to seek “congruence between stored image and hidden emotion.”

Considering the fact that the some of the lyric poetry’s deepest impulses are shared with those of memoir, perhaps it is not surprising that poetry would be incorporated along with prose in many memoiresque writings of the past. We see works of such mixed-form in many cultures and languages throughout the historical record, as Joseph Harris demonstrates in *Prosimetrum: Crosscultural Perspectives on Narrative in Prose and Verse*. Harris and other writers refer to works that combine elements of prose and verse as prosemitrum. In *Verse with Prose, From Petronius to Dante, The Art and Scope of the Mixed Form*, Peter Dronke gives an overview of the prosimetrum from ancient times through the medieval period and traces the use of mixed-forms as far back as the third century B.C.E. in the

work of Minippus. In addition to discussing Boethius and Dante, he focuses on “masterpieces of the later thirteenth century that narrate and analyze diverse experiences of love:” Machthild of Magdeburg’s *Fliessendes Licht der Gottheit* and Marguerite Porete’s *Mirouer des Simples Ames*. He highlights these works in particular because they provide a clear sense of “an individualized life” (Dronke 83). I understand these works to be works of memoir for each contains an individualized self looking back through memory and attempting, pace Vivian Gornick, to “lift from the raw materials of life a tale that will shape experience, transform event, deliver wisdom.”

Similarly, the Japanese 17th century mixed-form travel diaries of Masuo Basho can be understood as memoir. In his recent book, *The Lost Origins of the Essay*, John D’Agata examines the etymology of the word “memoir” in order to uncover its most characteristic qualities:

Embedded in Latin’s *memoria* is the ancient Greet *mermeros*, an offshoot of the Avestic Persian *mermara*, itself a derivative of the Indo-European for that which we think about but cannot grasp: *mer-mer*, “to vividly wonder,” “to be anxious,” “to exhaustingly ponder.” In this darker light of human language, the term suggests a literary form that is much less confident than the effortlessly relayed experiences in today’s novelistic memoirs. Instead, according to its roots, a memoir is an instinctual essaying of ideas, images, and feelings. It is, in its best sense, an impulsive exploration. It is not storytelling. It is not moralizing. It is not

theorizing, learning, or knowing. Etymologically speaking, at the core of this form is a world of emotional doubt. (D'Agata 219-220)

D'Agata's examination of the word memoir appears in his introduction to Basho's travel dairy, *Oku-no-Hosomichi*. D'Agata claims, quite explicitly, that Basho's work exemplifies the defining characteristics of contemporary memoir: memoir is "an instinctual essaying of ideas, images, and feelings . . . an impulsive exploration."

Passing Figures, is a mixed-form memoir that includes prose and verse. I have written a mixed-form memoir in order to take advantage of the imaginative possibilities of memoir -- imaginative possibility that I understand to be dependent upon a poetic sensibility that makes use of memory, and seeks to find congruence between memory and emotion. *Passing Figures* should be read as an "impulsive exploration" that avoids "the smooth drive of plot" in order to respond to memoir's "chaotic lyric impulse."

I believe that all the essays and the poems in the book are loosely connected through time, theme, and/or event. The disjunctive quality that exists between the prose and verse should open the memoir out into wider speculative spaces, wherein verse is used to assay ideas, images, and feelings *and* to resist ultimate conclusions and understandings — which would be reductions, diminishments.

As *Passing Figures* explores a journey into the vocation of poetry, the inclusion of verse poetry alongside the prose allowed me to thread a persistent thematic element throughout the breadth of the book. I believe my life can best be

explored in relation to my attraction to poetry – how that attraction has caused decisions to be made that have affected the course of my life. Focusing primarily on my aspirations to become a poet allowed me to limit the scope of the memoir and prevent the memoir from becoming too overly large and diffuse – a memoir about everything and consequently about nothing in particular.

A further consideration in choosing to write the memoir in mixed-form relates to my life experience. As I have lived about half my life in Japan and half of it in the United States, I felt that the mixed-form provided a resonant corollary to my life's experience. I am, in a sense, *mixed*. I continue to spend significant amounts of time in both countries. I am married to a Japanese woman, and the father of four bilingual/bicultural children. I would hope that the mixed-form would evoke and reflect upon some of the fused and yet dichotomous nature of my life. "Form *is* content," as the experimental filmmaker Barbara Hammer has asserted in her essay "Tender Fictions" (210). With this in mind, I feel that the mixed-form, in addition to all else, provides a visible representation of what the memoir itself seeks to explore: the journey of a man traveling across and between cultures, languages, and national borders while trying to live and understand a singular life.

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*When you trek toward this mind country,
the borders you sense seem impenetrable but
nonetheless visible. You see clearly
that the linear is a hoax and the last thing
the tectonics of consciousness follow
is our world of letters and numbers.*

Jim Harrison
From *Off to the Side*

*Moon and sun are passing figures
of countless generations,
and years coming or going wanderers too.
Drifting life away on a boat
or meeting age leading a horse by the mouth,
each day is a journey and the journey itself home.*

Basho, *Oku-no-Hosomichi*

*It is the capacity of the arts . . . to make us
if not at home, at least alertly, answerably
peregrine in the unhousedness of our human
condition.*

George Steiner, *Real Presences*

Chapter One / Setting Out

All acts of communication are acts of translation.

George Steiner, *After Babel*

The house was built in 1640, by Ishikawa Jozan, an eccentric poet cum calligrapher of the early Edo era (1603-1867). Ishikawa was a samurai expelled from Edo by the Tokugawa government, a government credited with unifying Japan, moving the capital from Kyoto to Tokyo (Edo), and effectively cutting Japan off from the outside world. According to my guidebook, Ishikawa's house "was constructed in the humble style of a thatched hut. The building and its adjacent garden served as the poet's refuge for studying philosophy, tea, and garden design." The historical record is not clear as to why Ishikawa was exiled – was it voluntary or forced? Whatever the case, it looks as though he thrived, creating a home that has lasted hundreds of years, a home that has become both temple and shrine: a temple administered by the Soto sect of Zen Buddhism, and a shrine to the man, and to the arts of poetry, calligraphy, and garden design.

Shisendo (詩仙堂), as the home is called, sits at the outskirts of Kyoto in the eastern mountains. The word *Shisendo* translates as "The Hall of the Immortals", or "The Place of Poetry's Immortals:" "Shi" (詩) stands for "poetry" or "poem," "sen" (仙) stands for "immortals," and "do" (堂) stands for "place," or "hall." The house blends into the environment – the wooden exterior has weathered into

a grey and silver that matches the color of bark on the ancient cedars. When I first saw it, after walking through the forest and up the worn stone stairway, I felt a sense of stillness, a quieting. The sound of Kyoto with all of its noisy traffic had given way to the sound of wind and birds. Robert Frost called poetry “a momentary stay against confusion.” And in that sense, Shisendo stands as a kind of poem.

I walk into the darkening entrance – take my shoes off and place them on the rack. Four other pairs of shoes rest neatly beside mine. I step into the house, a two-foot lift, and feel the cool slate floor beneath my feet. It’s dark, and it takes time for my eyes to adjust, but it’s comforting here, soothing.

It’s ninety-four degrees outside – not a cloud in the August sky. And the humidity is punishing. My T-shirt drips with perspiration. It’s *mushi-atsui* (虫暑い), as the Japanese say – insect hot – the time of year when insects come out in droves. The loudest insect of the Japanese summer is the cicada, or *semi* (蟬), as the Japanese call them. The “*sem*” of *semi* is pronounced “sem,” as in “semester.” The “*mi*” of *Semi* is pronounced “me,” as in the English pronoun. The *semi* cluster in the trees and make their noise all day. Their loud cry is deafening. If you’re having a conversation and they go off, you’ll have to stop until they are finished. They blast out their chirr like a chorus on cue and run it higher and higher, louder and louder. The Japanese name for the insect is onomatopoeic – the “*mi*” of *semi* is exactly where they are going with their cry, an open vowel sound, an unstopped sound – e e e e e e e e e e. When they hit the loudest, highest, shrillest note, they hold it steady for about twenty seconds before they pulling it down, gradually. Slowly the pitch of their cry descends into a quieting.

After thirty seconds, they are silent. They rest in the pool of that silence, as do I. Ten seconds, thirty seconds, and then they start again. Chirring slowly, they gradually raise the pitch and the intensity of the chirr towards that open “e” – towards that scream. This goes on and on throughout the day, all through August. Only evening quiets them. Japanese poetry is replete with poems about semi. Here is one by Matsuo Basho (松尾 芭蕉, 1644–1694),

閑かさや	<i>shizukasa ya</i>
岩にしみ入る	<i>iwa ni shimi iru</i>
蟬の声	<i>semi no koe</i>

silence itself is
in the rock absorbing
cicada sounds

(Translated by Cid Corman)

Passing through the entrance, there are two rooms to the left and one to the right: a reading room, a living room, and a kitchen. There is also a narrow staircase that leads to a small tower, built for moon watching. The walls are

made from mud and painted in a faded white color that makes them look almost soiled and sooty, as if charcoal were burned in the house during those many winters. Going into the largest room, the fragrant aroma of green *tatami* (畳) permeates the air. It smells something like a freshly mowed lawn. But that scent, the scent of just cut grass would be too strong, too pungent. There is something faint about the aroma. I think of lemon grass. And that *sounds* right – “Lemon grass.” It sounds thin enough to carry a scent as faintly green as this.

The rooms do not have any electric lights, appliances, or furniture to speak of. There is a felt openness here, a lack of decoration. The only piece of furniture is a low-lying table in the living room that ten people could easily sit around. It’s long and irregularly shaped. It’s been cut horizontally right down the length of the tree. The table is five-inches thick and left unpainted so the waving grain of wood is seen. The grain turns and twists across the surface like a living thing and yet remains frozen in time, not unlike the paintings of beautiful red, orange and white carp, one sees in gallery windows downtown – carp captured swimming under water, moving in their stillness.

In the reading room, there are thirty-six portraits of poets: nine poets on each wall. They hang from the highest point on the wall just where the wall touches the seven-foot ceiling. I lift my eyes to see the portraits well. The portraits are three hundred and sixty years old. Some of the paint is gone – faded and flecked away. Still, I am able to make out the faces of these ancient poets, to see their eyes, alive and drunk with time. Three hundred and sixty years of light falling across their faces through the soft filtering of light through paper doors and windows. Bright as some of the colors remain, the reds and greens, and blues,

much of the color, as well as entire portions of the paintings, are faded away, the side of face here, the gowns of poet there. And yet, the beauty one finds in the fading seems strangely to compensate for what is lost. In their aging and weathering, the paintings become a different kind of beautiful – the wood behind the paintings comes up beneath the paint to show what persists, the flowing grain.

The paintings are stylized – lots of flowing lines which seem in harmony with the lines one sees in the clothing they are wearing, kimonos – loose fabric following over the bodies in waves. We only see their faces, and a bit of their necks and chest. There are no straight lines, everything turning and bending, giving a sense of movement. Thirty-six portraits of poets in the home of this exiled poet, a samurai warrior who distinguished himself at one of the most famous battles in Japanese history: the battle of *Sekigahara* (関ヶ原, October 21, 1600) in which the Tokugawa clan prevailed over the Toyotomi clan and initiated the Edo Period (江戸時代, 1603 -1868): a period marked by three hundred years of relative peace, though also a period in which the Japanese government severely restricted contact with the outside world. Ishikawa was 51 years old.

Today, the outer walls at the back of the house are open to show the garden. There are no screens to keep the bugs out. The summer breeze lifts through the house and touches the *fuurin* (風鈴), the wind-bell. I hear its cooling sound, one chime echoing through the air. The walls have been opened during the day like this for centuries. “Walls” is a misnomer. Actually, these are more shutters than walls. They are slid back during the day on runners in the floor and hidden away

in closets at the side of the house. The house is thus opened so that the air can come in and circulate. The entire back of the house opens onto the garden, which is a couple of hundred feet deep and ends where the mountain lifts up. It also runs several hundred feet across, extending beyond the house on both sides.

As I walk through the house and towards the garden, the damp afternoon breezes find me, and I reflect again on how unprotected the paintings behind me are. They are protected only by the shade of the home – no climate control or humidity-protection. And if I were to mention this to the Japanese people in charge of protecting this home, a home that has a sophisticated fire alarm system, they would probably shake their head thinking an explanation unnecessary. The weathering of the paintings *in nature* is part of the beauty they admire. The fading away of the beautiful – like the beauty of cherry blossoms – right before our eyes – into our eyes.



I'm in Kyoto visiting friends. I have come down from Niigata Prefecture, a prefecture 400 kilometers north of Kyoto and located in what the Japanese call "snow country," a place where three to four meters of snow on the ground is normal in winter, the setting for Kawabata Yasunori novel *Snow Country* (雪国). The opening sentence of his novel is well known to the Japanese people because it captures the sudden shock the narrator feels in seeing the brightness of snow after he passes through a long tunnel, leaving a snow-less area behind and

emerging on the other side to deep snow spread wide across a valley, brilliant under the sun. I have had the experience of coming through the tunnel on the train many times when I taught in Tokyo and returned to Niigata on the *shinkansen*, the bullet train. The train ride was about two and a half hours. Just prior to entering snow country, the trains entered a long ten-kilometer tunnel. The train became quiet, hushed, the world outside black. I relaxed in my comfortably reclined seat for five or six minutes as the train moved through the tunnel, lulled into a relatively sleepy world until the train broke out into the light. There was a “poof” as the sound waves of the train bounced off the two meters of snow close beside it. The cabin of the train was suddenly lit with an intensity of light that made every metal surface shine.

Kawabata’s first sentence reads: “国境の長いトンネルを抜けると、雪国であった。” The renowned translator Edward Sidenstricker translates this sentence as: “The train came out of the long tunnel into the snow country.” It is a nice sentence – straight and true. And it *does* set up the story in a dramatic way. But I can’t help but notice how it fails too – how it fails to convey the shock and surprise of Kawabata’s sentence. This translation comes off as somewhat flat and dull, which I would expect Sidenstricker to make up for as he translates further into the page – to recover some of the feeling of surprise we find in the original. In the original, the sentence reads, “雪国であった” which might be translated more literally in English as, “snow country – here!” or simply “snow country!” But this, I concede, sounds forced and unnatural. Sidenstricker wins. In translation, always the struggle and to domesticate – make natural – in one’s

own language what is hopelessly alien to it in a strict sense.

Twenty years ago, I came here to Shisendo – now I am back. The first time I came I was with my wife, Kae, before she became my wife. We met as students at the University of Washington in 1985, and I ended up coming to visit her six months after her return to Kyoto in 1986. The first time I set foot on Japanese soil was April 14th, 1986. After that, I never really left Japan in any permanent way. I returned to the States in 1990 for several years of graduate school but returned again in the spring of 1992 after Kae and I married in Spokane, Washington. After returning to Japan, I found work teaching at the Berlitz School of Languages in Kyoto, and later began teaching at universities in Kyoto. In the four years that Kae and I were together in Kyoto, prior to my returning for graduate school, we spent many weekends getting out and about, visiting countless temples and shrines. It is commonly said in Japan that there are so many temples and shrines in Kyoto that if a person visited one each day, it would take ten years to see them all.

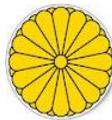
Nearly all the temples and shrines have gardens designed to be seen at different times of the day and night, at different times of year – different seasons – under different weather conditions. I'd like to see this garden under an autumn moon – to sit in the tower with friends and a cool bottle of sake. I'd like to feel the air pass through the open window – the moon rise as clouds drift by – how slow the passing of time might feel then, how elegant and graceful – quite and peaceful too.

Ishikawa designed this garden himself – a “dry garden” that incorporates white sand in the front rather than water, a pond. The sand is designed to suggest water – laid out in the shape of a pond. Towards the back there are azalea bushes that stand four to five feet off the ground. There are no flowers today – too late in the season. We see only the green bushes rounded into shape. Farther back, against the mountain is a large grove of bamboo, which Ishikawa planted. The bamboo still flourishes. There are Japanese maple trees interspersed throughout the garden but they are hard to see – hard to distinguish from the many trees that fill the garden. But I do spot a few of their leaves on the white sand in front of me – hard to miss – small five-pointed stars already beginning to shade towards the reddish color of autumn. By mid-October the garden will shiver in a river of crimson leaves.

Kae and I have returned to the same temples and gardens many times, not just to see the gardens under changing conditions, but to see the other forms of art the temples put on display. The temples display their “treasures” at regular times throughout the year: sculptures, paintings, calligraphy, and ceramics. If a person wants to see great works of Japanese art, she has to go to the temples. The idea of a museum is a relatively new throughout the world but especially so in Japan. Japan gets the idea from the west. But Japan didn’t make significant contact with the west until 1867 so much of the older work of art remains with the temples. In retrospect, it’s fortunate the temples housed the majority of the art and not the museums. If the art had been housed in one or two central museums during the Second World War, when nearly every major city in Japan was fire-bombed, we would have little left of it. As is, much was lost, but as the

temples were scattered throughout the nation, many in the countryside, a significant amount of the art survived. Fortunately, Kyoto was not bombed. The United States military recognized its historic and artistic significance. One of the few large cities spared.

My interest in Japan goes back to early childhood. My first memory of the country came when my father showed me a Japanese rifle and bayonet he picked up off the beach in the South Pacific. What intrigued me was not the physical heft and shape of the rifle but the obvious questions – who did it belong to? What happened to him? What was done with the rifle? When I held it in my hands, I could feel the wood below the barrel was not securely fitted into the metal fastener. The metal clips that once held a canvas strap were rusted hard against the stock. This gun was nothing like the Browning shotguns I saw in sporting goods stores, shotguns with their beautifully polished walnut stocks. The wood here was stained with a dull finish. It was made from a lightweight wood – Philippine mahogany? My father showed me the chrysanthemum (菊: kiku) embossed on the barrel – the symbol of the Japanese army and the imperial family. It was located at the top of the barrel where a soldier would lay his cheek to take aim – pull the trigger. It was embossed perfectly – small and round, the diameter about the size of a pencil's – a flower in full bloom:



I was five years old. I held the bayonet – heavy and shiny – polished nickel. The blade thick and sharp – a long groove cut along the top. My father kept it in

an oiled cloth to protect it from rusting. It had a handle too, just like a knife – only the blade was much bigger, much bigger. I watched my father slide the bayonet into position under the barrel – it clicked and snapped into place. The rifle and bayonet together were too heavy for me to hold.

Growing up in the mid sixties, World War II seemed close, part of the recent collective memory of the nation. So much of popular culture referred back to the war: the books we read in school, like Kennedy's *Profiles in Courage*; The TV programs we watched, like "Combat" and "Hogan's Heroes;" even the conversations with teachers and relatives. Although Kennedy's book was not strictly about the war, we understood the war figured in its genesis. On August 2, 1943 the small boat that Kennedy was commanding, the PT-109 was rammed by a Japanese destroyer, the *Amagiri*, (fog heaven: 天霧), and exploded into flames. Two crewmembers were killed, and one was burned so badly that he couldn't swim. Kennedy got the wounded man to the nearest island three miles away by clutching the strap of the life jacket in his teeth and swimming to the nearest island. The crew was stranded on the island for six days with little food or water. Each evening, for the next six nights, Kennedy swam out through shark-infested waters to look for help while trying to avoid being seen by the Japanese. Eventually, he was spotted by some Solomon islanders who helped him by having him write a message on a coconut shell that they would deliver to the Australian coast guard who thereafter rescued them. In performing such arduous task, Kennedy badly injured his back. In 1954-55 he required surgery. Two years earlier he was elected senator of New York. Wanting to understand

political courage more deeply and having plenty of time to do the research during his convalescence, he decided to write the book. That is the story I remember hearing. When I picked the book up, I already knew the story behind the book. I heard it from my father.

My father enlisted in the Navy in the summer of 1944 and retired after twenty years of active duty as a Senior Chief Petty Officer in 1964. He was proud of having progressed through the ranks and spoke of his love of the Navy. But he didn't talk much of the war, though he was actively deployed in the Pacific and saw a good deal of action in the remaining year of the war. The only story I remember him speaking of in any detail was his preparation in Hawaii for a ground force invasion of Japan. In retrospect, I think he spoke of this as a way of emphasizing his belief that the dropping of the atom bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki was necessary. He was preparing in earnest for the invasion in 1944 and fully expected to storm the beaches of Japan in an invasion. He also knew that such an invasion would be a nearly suicidal mission for the navy to land troops on the mainland. One can imagine his relief when he heard unexpectedly that the bomb had been dropped and that there would be no ground invasion.

For most of my childhood, I never heard him refer to the Japanese as anything but "Japs." It was a casual slur, one he seemed to make in the belief that everyone around him agreed with the use of the term, which was, for the most part, probably true. If we were watching a war movie like *The Bridge Over the River Kwai*, it would cause him to reflect on the Japanese Imperial Army's treatment of Allied prisoners. "The issue wasn't dealt with," he'd say. "The Japs never gave the full truth about their torturing prisoners."

My father visited Japan shortly after the war and walked down the streets in Sasebo city, Japan on the island of Kyushu, an island located next door to Kae's home island of Shikoku. He took pictures of the people going about their daily routines: a mother carrying an infant on her back, a young woman in a grey kimono squatting beside the road to wash clothes in a shallow metal container. There was a picture of a crowd of men in sweaty T-shirts slurping noodles at a portable noodle shop. They stood beneath under a canvas cover, their bowls lifted to their mouths, chopsticks crossed between their fingers as they tilted the bowl up to drain the noodles and soup. One picture that my father took of his navy buddies shows six guys sitting on the floor in uniform, shirts unbuttoned at the top, loose and comfortable. They are sitting on the floor around a table, looking into the camera, cigarettes in their hands, and glasses of beer pitched high. They're drinking at a Japanese restaurant/bar – an *izakaya* (居酒屋). Earlier on that day in November 1945, when his ship had arrived and he set foot on the streets of the city, he didn't know what to expect from the Japanese. Would he and his friends be attacked? Would insults be hurled at them? The streets were eerily quiet. No traffic except for the traffic of U.S. military vehicles. The Japanese didn't speak, but they bowed, and then moved quickly out of the way. "If we were walking on one side of the street and they saw us coming they would bow far ahead of us and move to the other side. I don't know if it was respect they were showing or fear – maybe both." My father reflected. Did he feel like a conquering invader? Or did he feel pity to see a people brought so low. After Pearl Harbor – during the war – his *hatred* for the Japanese, and that is what he'd call it, hatred, was more than could understand or explain.

Shattered Jewel

玉碎

On June 15th, 1944, U.S. Marines landed on the island of Saipan, and spent more than three weeks fighting the Battle of Saipan. Casualties included 5,000 Japanese suicides, gyokusai (玉碎), literally "shattered jewel."

He kept the rifle propped against the wall
Within a closet large enough to play
A hiding game where running down the hall
We ran ourselves into another day.

Within a closet large enough to play,
We bumped the rifle accidentally
And ran ourselves into another day
To get away from trouble we had seen.

We bumped the rifle accidentally
And saw the bayonet come slicing down.
To get away from trouble we had seen
We ran outside and lay upon the ground.

We saw the bayonet come slicing down
And open up the sleeve of his new suit.
We ran outside and lay upon the ground
And thought with dread of his returning soon.

It opened up the sleeve of his new suit —
The sharpened blade of his old bayonet.
We thought with dread of his returning soon
And thought ahead and saw the story's end.

The sharpened blade of his old bayonet
Was once-upon-a-time the tool a man
Who thought ahead and saw the story's end
Would use upon himself in that far land.

This tool that once-upon-a-time a man
Not old enough to need a razor yet
Would use upon himself in that far land
Where he was found beside his bayonet.

Not old enough to need a razor yet . . .
A hiding game where running down the hall . . .
My father found a man, the bayonet,
And kept the rifle propped against the wall.



The soft steps of a tourist are behind me. A few children run out in bare feet across the planking of the porch. I sit on the porch that is not a porch – more an extension of the house. It's three feet off the ground, a ledge. The house is not a museum despite the way it is visited today. This is a home Ishikawa's built three hundred and sixty eight years ago.

"Ishikawa" (石川) means, "stone river" – *Ishi* (石) means "stone" and *kawa* (川) – "river." I like the way the name evokes both stillness and movement – the stillness of stone, the movement of water, a river of stone. And doesn't this home capture that? That trickle of water over moss above the garden, filling the pond below – the way the water overflows the pond and drains behind the fence through bamboo.

When my mixed race daughter first went to school some years ago – first day, first grade – with her clean uniform and brown hair done up in a pony tail, one boy followed her all day – her arrival, her walk through the hallway, her time outside at recess. He noticed her different appearance, and teased her with words like "*gaijin*" (外人) repeating it over and over as he walked beside her. *Gai* (外) means "outside," and *jin* (人) "person." So the word means "outside person," foreigner – at a deeper, more cutting level, it can be used to imply that "one who does not belong." When Ishikawa arrived to build his home, he was in exile –

pushed *out* of Edo, and still he managed to build a home as beautiful and lasting as this. I am not in *exile* in Japan, not least ways in the sense that Ishikawa was. I chose to live in Japan. But feel, in sense, exiled in so far as I live outside my native land. I promised Kae when we got married to live five years in Japan – twenty years have passed.

I do not have a home, not in the sense I see in others around me – a place that gives a sense of rooted-ness, a sense that I belong to the place and that the place belongs to me in a natural way. I feel anxious not to have a physical home but more than that I feel anxious not to feel native to the place I live. I've been in Japan twenty years but I don't feel I can say that I "fit." The children step around me carefully. They do not make eye contact. They look a bit skittish and scared. They behave as if I were unusual or strange—as, of course, I am to them. I am a foreigner.

First Day

Bigger than most, she's sitting pretty,
looking alert – her hair done up
in a pony tail. She's wearing her uniform
and stretching the skirt beneath herself
the way a lady might. Younger kids,
two and three years-old, march
past outside the window. Now,
from out behind her calm countenance
come the welling tears, tears she quickly
brushes aside with her fingers.
I want to go to her but know
I must stand away. All I can do
is give her my supporting smile
from the back of the room, this room
I am beginning to take the measurement of —
call it *fatherhood* from here on out. But already
I have her tears in my eyes too,
it works like that and she sees *this* and chokes
into a sobbing that seems to rush between us
like a river we can neither get across
nor meet in the middle of – at least not until
she turns to face the teacher, and I,
on my side, turn to face this dearest song
I think I've ever heard, lifting into my heart
light and airy as the blossoms streaming
from the trees in the yard and pouring
into the afternoon heat their small sweetness.

Chapter Two / Steps Along the Way

When I pick my daughter up at school, I'm surrounded by first-graders. They heave their red leather bags to their shoulders, slip their arms through the straps and make final adjustments. Their loads are heavy. When everything is settled, they look up at me. Their eyes are lit with excitement – delighted to be going home. They gather around now, ten to fifteen children; they ask, "Where are you from?" "Why are you here?"

I'm probably the first foreigner many of them have ever seen. I tell them what I usually tell people when I'm asked this question. "I'm from America." I say. I say it slowly in Japanese and pronounce the word "America" as they do, in four syllables: "A-MAY-RI-KA." My Canadian friends would chide me for saying this, I know. They'd tell me I should say I'm from the "United States." But the United States is *not* what the Japanese say. Why – they want to know — am I here? Why did I come to Japan? I've answered the question so many times I feel I've run out of energy to say more. Usually, with adults, I tell them I was interested in Japan's literature and culture. But for the children, I feel I need to tell them something simpler, and maybe truer. I take my daughter's hand and lean into their faces. I open my eyes real big and tell them, "I came because I loved someone." They giggle and laugh. It wouldn't have mattered what I said, I realize now, they'd still laugh. Something about a foreigner speaking Japanese is enough to set them

off. I repeat my answer to their delight. This time I draw the syllable out long and pronounce the word in English “love.” By the time I say this, I’ve had the chance to look them all in the eyes. They understand better what I am saying this time, but they still giggle. I feel my daughter’s hand melting away in mine. I’ve embarrassed her, but still she smiles. Things will be OK.

Walking home, I’m thinking of the children’s simple questions – they could be *koans* (公案), asked to students of Zen by their teachers: “Where do you come from?” “Why have you come?” I wish I could answer as deliberately as Henry David Thoreau when he spoke of his reasoning for going out Walden Pond. “I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.” I came to Japan largely because of love. I wanted to see and understand if the Japanese woman I’d met in the United States could really be someone with whom I could spend the demands and challenges that such a marriage would entail – one or the other of us giving up their homeland for long stretches of time in order to be with the other. Could we live and thrive in one or the other’s culture? Would we find it oppressive? Would it release us into discovering new and exciting possibilities? I didn’t want to come to the end of my life and discover that fear had turned me away from pressing to discover at least these answers.

I bring my daughter, Emi (恵美), into the house where Kae (恵愛) greets her and begins to unload her books and read the daily messages arriving from teachers and school administrators. The Japanese schools send many

announcements home with the children each day. The children give the papers to the parents to read, sign, and return with the children in the morning. Most of the messages are of a routine nature – small alerts concerning diet, weather, school trips. Other messages can be more ominous – unusual strangers luring about the school, possible cases of molestation, etc.

With Emi home, I slip away to a small building outside the house. This is my “atelier” – my study. The landlord stores seeds and tractors on the first floor. But the upstairs is all mine. It is a large room – twenty feet by twenty feet. It has twelve *tatami* mats on the floor and large windows that face east and west. The view from here is spectacular on clear days. It looks out on the richest rice-growing fields in Japan, the area known as *Uonuma* (魚沼) in central Niigata prefecture. In the near distance, mountains lift off of the plain in dramatic relief, reminding me of the Grand Tetons of Wyoming, or the Sawtooth range in eastern Idaho. Mt. Hakaisan (八海山), the most prominent mountain, rises 1,778 meters into the blue autumn sky.

There is snow on top of the mountain already and it's only early September. The rice hasn't been harvested. I watch it blowing in the wind – miles and miles of nothing but rice – fields thick with bounty. Whatever rows the rice seedlings were planted into, once upon a time, they are all apiece now. The tops of the plants so heavy with seed you can't see any rows in the fields at all – everything is awash – the plants sawing back and forth in a down-drafting wind.

Barley Field, Late Summer

The lengthening summer sun
Bears down upon the long
Fields of ripening grain
High school girls ride through
In beautiful blue uniforms
That lift and float away
Around the darkening of their legs,
Pumping towards the earth a song
That lifts into the sweetest
Flower of autumn opening.



I came to Japan on April the 14th, 1986. I arrived in the evening, met at Osaka Itami airport (大阪国際空港) by Kae. We had met at the Univ. of Washington and dated for six months before her return to Japan – with her studies completed and her visa nearly expired. After Kae returned, I felt a nagging emptiness. So I was thinking the obvious: “Why not go and find out what there is to this feeling – this relationship? I had no intention of staying more than a year or two – tops. I was twenty-six.

The night I arrived, we took a bus from Osaka (大阪) to Kyoto (京都) and then the subway from Kyoto station a few stops north. After getting out of the subway, we grabbed a cab; and got out several blocks from Kae’s apartment in the center of Kyoto. The air was heavy with humidity and sweet with the scent of the cherry blossoms, many of them already blown and littering the street. We walked fifteen or twenty minutes through a maze of streets – narrow streets. There were signs everywhere, bright flashing neon and quietly lit menu boards set in front of small restaurants; I couldn’t read a thing despite my brief studies of Japanese at the university. How easy, I thought, fearfully, to get lost in these streets and not be able to find a way out – who could I ask for help? Who would understand my English?

The streets in central Kyoto allowed for two-way traffic but were essentially one-lane wide. In order for two cars to drive past each other in opposite directions, both had to slow down and carefully negotiate past each other with only inches between them. Though it was dark, many small stalls and family stores were open. I was particularly interested in the traditional Japanese confectionary shops because of the colorful way their sweets were displayed under glass counters along the street, no sidewalks. The air was thick with the soft scent of sugar and *mochi* (餅). We stopped to buy some *mochi*, several pieces of *sakura mochi*. *Sakura* (桜) means “cherry” in Japanese; *mochi* is the confection that is made by taking cooked rice and pulverizing it into a gooey substance that can be balled up in the hand the as rice is shaped in the hand when making sushi. Sugar is added to the *mochi*. If it is *sakura mochi*, color and flavor are added to give the mochi a delicate cherry taste and a pinkish color, the color of cherry blossoms. The inside of this palm-sized ball is filled with a sweet *azuki* (小豆), bean paste. To finish the whole thing off, the *mochi* is half wrapped inside a softened, but very real, cherry leaf. There is wholeness to this art – and this confection is a kind of art. In *sakura mochi*, we taste the pink mochi as blossom, the green leaf as tree, and the dark inner sweetness – perhaps the joy of spring.

I came to Japan because I loved a woman – because I thought I might love a woman. I came to investigate that love – to try to find the truth of it. But I also came I think in response to something further back, something that disposed me toward travel – towards an interest in other cultures and people. When I said

“konnichiwa” (こんにちは) to Kae in the University of Washington cafeteria, I had already been interested in Japan and its literature. I had already been working with Japanese on fishing boats in the Bering Sea. I had already been studying Japanese. And I had already heard my father’s stories of having been in Japan – and his fighting with the Japanese during the war.

In a sense, I recognized that my interest in Kae that day in Seattle had already been set in motion years before. My father told me stories of other places and cultures – my grandparents too.

My maternal great grandfather came to the United States and settled in Des Moines, Iowa for several years before returning to Ireland. The reasons for his return vary. One story has it that he couldn’t take the cold. The other, which seems more attractive to me, was that his fiancée couldn’t, or wouldn’t, leave Ireland to join him. She had a change of heart, or something back home made it impossible for her to travel, and thus he returned to Ireland. It was his son, John Flaherty, my mother’s father, who eventually came to the States in 1921 and stayed. If his father had stayed in America, and given up his fiancée, I guess I wouldn’t be writing this.

My grandparents – all four of them – came to the United States from Ireland at about the same time in the early 1920s. My paternal grandfather grew up in a family of saddlers in Birr, Ireland. When he was eighteen, he joined the British Army and traveled to India and South Africa. He fought in the Second Boer War (1899-1902) and became an excellent marksman. After completing ten years or so of service in the British Army, he immigrated to the States where he found work, initially, as a leather expert, buying leather for the U.S. Army, and later, as a

policeman with the Chicago Police Department where he competed in marksmanship contests and was awarded first prize three years in a row.

I never met this grandfather – he died of cancer when my father was only eleven years old. There were many stories passed down about this grandfather. We learned he was thrifty – that when he bought a chicken he slaughtered it himself and kept the blood for blood pudding. We learned he had a terrible temper – that he once famously threw a breadboard at my uncle’s head – missed, and put a hole in the wall. We learned that he loved to cook exotic foods that he had tasted in India and Africa. He made a mean curry. When I came back from Japan and was talking of Japanese curry, my father asked if I could make some for him. I did that, and saw him transported back in time to some early memory he had of his father’s curry.

I met my father’s mother, “*nana*,” only a few times. She passed away when I was eight. I remember her coming down from Chicago to visit us in Virginia where my father was stationed at Norfolk. I remember the strange habit she had of going out at sunset to the beach – several blocks from our home – to collect seaweed and bring it home for the evening bath. She was delighted to be near the sea again. She had grown up with the ocean close to her door in Ireland. “Seaweed is good for the skin,” she’d say. “It softens it. And it also relaxes you.” Still, the sight of it in the morning, and the salty, fetid smell of it! My parents couldn’t stand it but they endured it for the duration of her weeklong visit.

My father was on active duty in the U.S. Navy for twenty years and on reserve for another ten. He traveled throughout the United States and the world. He was full of stories about exotic countries and cultures, not too mention stories of

storms in the North Atlantic. He enjoyed both being aboard ship and getting off the ship when they made port calls. He especially enjoyed visiting European countries that he was familiar with. He loved Rome, Oslo, and Vatican City. Other countries and cultures challenge him, particularly the Islamic Nations of North Africa and the Gulf. Those cultures struck him as impenetrable and alien. He admired the people's devotion to faith but could not accept, or understand, how strictly the governing Islamic laws were enforced. "If you steal a loaf of bread," he'd say in astonishment, "they cut your hand off." The image of women in *burkas* was also a disturbing one for him – something repressive and restrictive of freedom.

I first met my maternal grandparents when I was six years old. My family and I had driven up to Stickney, Illinois, a suburb just outside of Chicago. We had driven a long way: parents, six young children, and our German Shepard puppy, Donna. My two-year old sister Jean, who was the youngest child, sat in front with my parents. The puppy slept under the back window. Somehow – though it is hard to imagine how – it worked. Still, as one can easily imagine, when we arrived in Stickney, we were all more than ready to get out.

My grandmother is six feet tall and walks with a bit of a pitch to her upper torso that has her always leaning slightly forward at the waist. She meets us at the door, hugs each of us as we come through – gives us all a kiss on the cheek. She's sixty-seven, which seems ancient. She has brown hair with some graying,

but not much – she'll never go completely grey. She wears no make up. Her hair has a slight curl to it and is cut relatively short. It's pulled back off the face and set neatly with bobby pins. She is quiet – but hers is a quiet that doesn't come from peace and ease, rather from a life of hardship. She doesn't say much or smile much. There is something, rigid and fixed about her demeanor – not in a mean way so much as in a determined and gritty way – like someone who had long learned how to clamp their jaw shut and take the hardship that comes – hardship she knows is coming – like a person walking into a storm. Later today, she will sit at the kitchen table and eat Irish soda bread – bread that she has made. After eating, she will survey the table in front of her and check for crumbs. If she sees a crumb on the tablecloth, she'll press her finger into it, lift it to her mouth, and eat.

She shows us through the house until we reach the back porch. My grandfather is in the backyard, lying on his back – legs apart, his arms spread at his sides, a late June afternoon. We stand in an enclosed back porch and look out through windows in silence. We don't know what to do or say as my grandmother explains he's been drinking.

I see my mother pursing her lips and looking disappointed. Is he sleeping? We don't know from here. His eyes are closed and we can see his large stomach lifting with each breath – the blue plaid shirt tugging at the area around the buttons. His longish white hair is lifting in the breeze. There is a small grey dog – a little bigger than a Chihuahua. It's jumping back and forth over his stomach. Suddenly he opens his eyes and tries catching the yapping dog. He was playing with the dog.

We go down to visit and he stands to greet us when he hears us coming. He stands slowly, brushes grass from his khaki pants, and turns the radio down – he’s been listening to a Cubs game. The radio sits on a small white table under an apple tree. He comes toward us with a broad smile and an outstretched hand – his face is flush, his breath smells of beer. He shakes my hand hard and lifts it up wildly – he’s having fun. He’s unshaven – has a rough two-days stubble of white whiskers on his face. There are several quart-sized bottles of Pabst Blue Ribbon on the table. He will go in soon to get a few more. He asks our ages and names and teases us, puts his hand on our heads, pats us affectionately. His eyes are grayish and bloodshot. We stay with him for a while, play a bit with the dog, and drift back to the house.

We are planning to stay with my grandparents until my father finds a job. My grandparents haven’t seen any of us in the six years. They are, in fact, meeting my two younger brothers and little sister for the first time. It is difficult for them to house the eight of us in their small home but somehow they managed – and for *six* weeks!

My father and grandfather were opposites in many ways. The Navy had given my father a respect for discipline, which my grandfather didn’t share. My father went to bed at the same time every evening – ten o’clock. He rose early too – six or seven – seldom drank: I never saw him drunk. My grandfather, on the other hand, lived his own schedule, enjoying to full advantage, I think, his retirement. He would go for walks and return when it suited him. He would go off to the

pub three or four nights a week and return early in the morning – sleep until noon.

I suppose it was hard for my father to leave us each day and go off in search of work, even though my mother was at home. He would have thought my grandfather “a negative influence,” just as he would later speak of some of my friends. He had seen negative influences in the Navy – one sailor given to drinking, leading the others astray. I remember him telling me of a sailor so desperate for alcohol, he drank *Aqua Velva* cologne on board the ship and that this act put him into emergency care in the ship’s infirmary.

Eventually, my father and grandfather would argue. The argument I remember involved trimming a willow tree. My grandfather was drunk when he climbed a ladder to get to the roof. My brother and I stood in the driveway in a state of wonder when we noticed how hard it was for him to get the ladder, carry it out of the garage, and prop it up against the wall, ready for his ascent. He climbed the ladder unsteadily, clutching a cigarette between his fingers in one hand and the pruning shears in the other. When he got to the top of the eight-foot ladder his dog dashed beneath the ladder and distracted his attention. The dog began to bark wildly at the neighbor’s dachshund, which had been let into the yard behind on the other side of the fence. When he looked away from the tree and down towards the dog he, lost his balance and fell backwards – his legs caught in the ladder, making the fall on his back a hard one. The wooden ladder crashed down on top of him and the shears flew from his hands towards us. He was dazed and angry, but otherwise unhurt. He rolled over, caught his breath, and stood up. We ran to him and stood around in wonder and fright for a few

moments until we were sure he was OK. He put the ladder back into that cluttered old garage with the sagging roof.

When my father came home, he noticed the bruises on my grandfather's arm and inquired. My grandfather was sitting in his chair, drinking beer, reading a newspaper, and smoking. He explained what happened and began to blame my father for *not* trimming the willow trees. "Don't you notice how the leaves are hanging low over the driveway? Why don't you help with things like that around here?" My father knew my grandfather was drunk when he fell from the ladder, so he began scolding him for doing something as stupid and reckless as climbing a ladder with pruning shears when drunk. They both raised their voices and began tearing away at each other.

Now, about the dog. The dog was ugly – there was just no getting around it. My grandfather had brought him home from his local tavern a few nights before we arrived. He named it "Lassie." He had the habit of picking up stray dogs, or dogs no one wanted, and adopting them. This was the sixth dog that he had adopted, and this one, like all the others, was named Lassie. This was not, let me repeat, a cute dog. It was, in fact, a hideous looking creature. It had a face like a Chihuahua, but not cute like a Chihuahua – it was too big for that. It was Chihuahua in the eyes – watery black eyes that bulged from its head, looking as if they might explode at any moment - intense. It was a shorthaired creature, maybe six months old – a mixed-breed but hard to guess which breeds it was composed of.

My father, on the other hand, raised beautiful German Shepard dogs.

Raising shepherds was a serious interest, one that required considerable effort and expense. He admired the beauty of the animals and could talk at length about them. He bred them and attempted to produce a “quality show animal.” He entered the dogs in shows where they competed with other dogs. The dogs needed to move elegantly over the ground and be true in their motions. This trueness related to the original purpose for which they were bred – to herd sheep. They also were bred for endurance. Their gate needed to appear effortless – like they could run all day long. One measure of this ability was the degree to which their movement minimized wasted energy – their back, or top-line, should move as little as possible as their back legs drove forward beneath them. They needed to cover a lot of ground as efficiently as possible. Judges would watch the dogs and award points to the degree they were able to do this.

In addition to movement, the dogs were judged on overall appearance and confirmation – they needed to have all the proper dentition – which was no given, considering the extent to which the dogs had been bred and in-bred. Temperament was also important. The dogs had to display a soundness, which was evaluated by judges when they examine the dogs, especially when they pried open the dogs’ mouths with their hands to check dentition. If a dog was un-sound, it might bark, or shy away from the judge. Such behavior would cause the judge to expel the dog from competition or subtract points from the dog’s overall score.

Everyone in the family knew how my father felt about dogs, and so when we first saw him lay eyes on grandpa’s dog, we expected him to wince in pain. But he said nothing. My brother and I looked at him for signs, but saw nothing

forthcoming, not for a while anyway. And then, when he couldn't stand it any longer, my father began to shake his head and smile in a disbelieving sort of way. His quiet chuckle began to sound from above our heads, and then he was leaning down to us, whispering, "Man that is an ugly dog." And then, we busted up — my brother and I. It really *was* an ugly dog.

But at the same time, I had to appreciate my grandfather who felt sorry for the ugly creature and gave it a home – that is something I knew my father could never do. It wasn't that he *didn't* have a soft spot within himself for a homeless dog. He had that. He just knew in black and white terms what he was able to put up with and what he wasn't. He wasn't able to put up with a dog that he didn't think was, in one way or another, paying its own way. He made a clear distinction in his mind between pets and show animals. He was *not* raising pets, as he would say. He was raising show dogs. Owing to this clearness of thought, I think, on his part, he felt he had to be "disciplined" in how attached he became to dogs. He needed to be professional and business-like in raising dogs. If the dog wasn't serving some kind of purpose, he didn't have much use for it. He wouldn't allow himself to keep it.

For my father, raising dogs was both an avocation and a business. As a small breeder, he usually kept only two or three dogs at a time, at most a few females and a male. Long before one of the females came in heat, he would be studying the bloodlines of possible mates for her. He was looking for the right combination of characteristics and traits that he felt would produce the best dogs. Near as I could tell, this process was both a science and an art. It was also a roll of the genetic dice. No one was quite sure what ultimate combination would

produce the results they were seeking. When the dog was ready for breeding he would have her bred, paying considerable money for stud service, and sometimes having the dog shipped out of state in order to accomplish the breeding.

After sixty days, or so, a litter of between four and ten puppies would be born. My father would then carefully attend to the puppies to insure their survival. It was a lot of work, especially in winter when Chicago temperatures could fall well below freezing and kerosene heaters would have to be employed in the garage to keep the puppies reasonably warm. The puppies grew quickly and by six weeks, they could be sold. My father was looking for a few promising puppies out of the bunch. Usually, by ten weeks, all the puppies would have been sold except for one or two. If those puppies continued to develop well, my father would enter them in puppy matches to see how they performed. If they didn't do well and if he didn't see the promise in them that he had hoped for, he would sell them off. If they did do well, he would continue showing them, trying to make champions of them – to have them “finish.”

A dog becomes a champion after winning enough points, enough shows, to merit it. Some dogs finish in a few years – some take much longer. The time it takes for a dog to finish as a champion depends on the number of shows they compete in and how well they do in those shows. Some dogs looked promising early on only to break down later: ears fail to rise, teeth don't come in, or testicles don't descend. There are many things that can go wrong. On some occasions, dogs have to be “put to sleep,” usually owing to issues of temperament or hip

dysplasia, a condition in which the hip doesn't fit properly into the socket. My father had animals put down on a number of occasions. It was something we grew used to as children. In thirty years of raising Shepherds, my father produced several male champions and one female champion. The female went on to win Best of Breed at the Nationals, thus becoming the 1985 American Kennel Club German Shepard Grand Victorix – the best female show German Shepard in the U.S. and Canada.

When I met my grandparents that first day and walked into their house, I became aware that they were different from the grandparents of my friends. My grandparents spoke with an the Irish brogue, and when my grandmother walked us through the house, pointing out where we would sleep and where our luggage would go, I noticed pictures of Christ on the walls, at least one in every room. The pictures that most interested me were the Sacred Heart of Jesus pictures: pictures that showed Christ with a halo around his head and a heart floating out toward me, radiating light. In these pictures, Christ points to the crown of thorns that encircle his heart and pierce it; blood drips from around the side and the front.

I had never seen anything like this in our home in Virginia, nor in the homes of my friends. Behind the framed pictures were palm leaves, real palm leaves gathered from Palm Sunday Mass – palm leaves blessed by the parish priest. There were pictures of the Holy Father, the Pope. There were pictures of priests and nuns – all family – my mother's elder sister, a nun – her cousin, a priest.

There was holy water by the front door, blessed by the parish priest. There were porcelain figurines on the dressers – the Virgin Mary, and there was a large tapestry of JFK. He was standing beside an American flag. His arms akimbo and a slight smile on his face, he was staring straight ahead. The tapestry was two-feet wide and three-feet tall and hung in the hallway just off of the living room. This was June 1964 – and JFK had been dead for six months.

My maternal grandparents were immigrants from Galway, Ireland. Everything around me in their home spoke of their original home in Ireland: their Catholic faith was more graphic than anything we had practiced in our home, their Irish brogue was different from any kind of English I heard at school, or on the playgrounds. Their drinking tea at regular times throughout the day seemed different too. My parents drank coffee, seldom tea. And yes, they ate corned beef, cabbage, and the inevitable potatoes – fish on Fridays.

John Flaherty, my maternal grandfather, had a farm in Ireland before coming to the United States. It wasn't much of a farm – a small amount of land that he shared with his two elder brothers – but a farm nonetheless. The land would not support all three of the brothers so he sold his land to his brothers and came to the United States. He planned to farm in the States when he was able to afford to buy land. His timing in coming to the United States could not have been worse. As soon as he arrived, the great depression hit. Soon, he was living in a Chicago tenement with his wife and three children. This was 1929. He shared a bathroom and toilet with neighbors – ate oatmeal three times a day for long stretches of time until he found steady work. "Lucky," he'd say, "To find work at the

Greyhound Bus Company cleaning buses and changing tires.” He had that job nearly all his life. Somewhere, somehow, even with five children, he saved enough money to purchase a home.

My grandparent’s home, the physical part of it, was nothing special – a row house among many similar looking houses on the block. The house was probably built right after the depression – maybe during it. It was a classically affordable-looking home. It had a small front yard with a picket fence – and it was separated from the neighbor’s house by only a few feet. If my grandparents and their neighbors opened their windows at the same time, they could reach their hands across and shake hands. What the house *did* have was a large back yard. And this is where my grandfather planted his extensive garden. His garden ran along three sides of the backyard and was fifteen feet deep. In the center of the yard there was an apple tree that he planted when he arrived twenty-five years earlier. He made the most of the yard, of his place. He loved gardening and gardened here for years, growing tomatoes, cabbages, lettuce, carrots, parsnips, peppers, strawberries, rhubarb, cucumbers, asparagus, and green beans.

The house too, like the yard outside, spoke of my grandfather’s interest in gardening and plants. The back porch was like a nursery, or a green house. He has all sorts of plants in various stages of growth here. Some were simply germinating in small starter trays, others were well on their way and ready for transplanting out in the garden, and still others were going nowhere – ancient old jades plants flouring in large blue ceramic pots on the floor.

He got most of his garden going here and then transplanted the young plants

into the yard. The house was old, and the furniture and carpet worn, but it's was filled with the aroma of green plants and soil – soil spilled from pots – soil that found its way into the crack in the wood planking of the floor. I liked the earthy smell of that soil and the way it mixed with the sweet and comforting aroma of pipe tobacco – the heavy scent of tobacco smoke hanging in the air – no doubt because of the many hours he had sitting there and smoking in his easy chair.

More nights than not, however, he wasn't in his chair on the porch. Usually, he was down at the tavern. He didn't call it a "tavern." That's what my mother called it. He called it a "pub," a carry over from Ireland, I guess. Usually, when he went to the pub, he came home late, after we had all gone to bed. We wouldn't see him until noon the next day.

He could be abusive when he came home late and drunk. I remember his angry voice one night. He was arguing with my grandmother – midnight or one a.m. After fifteen minutes or so, he would slog up the stairs and collapse in the bed beside me. I was sleeping in the attic in the bed beside him. He had given up his bed downstairs when my family moved in. Night after night he collapsed heavily into that bed beside me and rest quietly for a few moments before beginning his prayers, which were always the same: "Jesus Mary and Joseph pray for me now and at the hour of my death. Jesus, Mary, and Joseph pray for me now and at the hour of death. Jesus, Mary, and Joseph pray for me now and at my hour of death."

My grandfather was not physical in his abuse. He didn't hit people. It was verbal with an occasional slamming of a door, or the breaking of a glass. And of course, I don't think anyone thought of it as "abuse" at the time really. We

thought it was normal behavior, part of the rough and tumble of getting on in life, of living. Mostly, he was abusive to my grandmother. But sometimes it was directed at us, my mother, or even the dog, Lassie. He didn't explode in anger – it came slowly – more like a growling than anything else. Once, I found him sitting on the toilet with the door open. It was about noon and he appeared collapsed on the throne – his face buried deep in his hands. I was staring at him, partly out of concern and partly out of disbelief – never having seen anyone leave the door open like that – when suddenly, he lifted his head yelled in a snarling voice “What are you staring at?”

It seemed to me that some unnamed disappointment might have hung over him and prevented from knowing more happiness and joy in his life. I had no idea what his disappointment might be, nor did I think to ask him or to consider much at the time. I wondered at the dusty piano in the basement, the violins in their cases. I thought of my mother telling me he was good musician – that he used to play. The times he seemed happiest were when he was in the yard gardening or playing with the dog, a beer, of course, near at hand.

In the afternoon, when he felt better, my grandfather would sometimes take my brothers, sisters, and I out for walks with the dog. We'd walk out into the alley behind the house, an alley which led to other alleys, alleys that seemed to go on forever, a maze of alleys running through Chicago. We could look up out of the maze and see the Chicago skyline in the distance. He liked to walk through the allies on garbage days because people would throw away some interesting junk. He didn't always collect things but he was always interested in looking. Once, he pulled a genuine Tiffany stained-glass lampshade from a pile. I had no

idea what a “Tiffany” was, but I learned that day.

On many afternoons, he would work in his garden, spending hours trimming and cutting, planning and harvesting, weeding and watering. Towards the end of summer, he would bring rhubarb into the house in great bunches. He would also bring buckets full of tomatoes, radishes, cucumbers and peppers. My grandmother, Winifred, would take the rhubarb and make pies and sauces. She’d mix the rhubarb with strawberries and honey. In the fall, it would be the apples from the tree in back.

After six weeks with my grandparents, we moved out. It was autumn and I was seven-years old and ready to begin second grade in Wood Dale at the Holy Ghost Catholic Elementary School sixteen miles out of Chicago. For seven years, my family remained in Wood Dale. I progressed through school and graduated from the 8th grade. And then, my father, who was working for the Hanes Corporation received word of a transfer, and we were heading for Winton-Salem, North Carolina.

My mother was *not* happy about the move. She had moved many times with my father – more than I had memory of – she was a “Navy wife.” She was now concerned about her father who had been recently diagnosed with cirrhosis of liver, and equally concerned about what such a move entailed – upheaval and packing – the relocating of six children into new schools in an area of the country she didn’t know. She broke down while packing one day – began to break dishes in the sink rather than boxing them up. She lost it – began to cry and to slam

dishes into the sink, one after another. "I'm tired of moving!" She screamed in a broken voice. After shattering four or five dishes, she walked into the living room and sat down, rested quietly, and stared blankly at the revolving ceiling fan.

I understood her feelings of frustration. I didn't want to move either. I just finished eighth grade and was getting ready for high school. I had good friends and those friendships were beginning to deepen into something richer than I had known friendship to be when younger. I even had a girlfriend. I definitely didn't want to move. And my older brother and older sister, already in high school, were even more upset about the move. Regardless, move we did.

Ferris Wheel

O Belinda, we were just kids
Saying goodbye,
Trying to imagine what it'd be like
Never to see each other again.
And we felt that
Deeply, and sought a way
To say goodbye – so went
To the carnival, enjoyed rides
And later walked into a prairie
Where we could exhaust every last word and fall
Into each other's arms for what
We were learning was all
That could be said finally, kisses,
And more kisses, then rolling
Over the ground until
The carnival was nothing but a few
Lights flickering on and off
Like the last embers of a fire
We might have called childhood
For when we stood and walked away
From that field, that night,
Our lives were opening out
Past the light's flooding
Broken over puddles, past
The quieting of the rain into
The dark and glistening
Streets leading us home.

My grandfather didn't stop drinking. Six months after we arrived in North Carolina, we received word of his death. My mother, having come down with pneumonia was too ill to travel back for his funeral. I remember how desperately she wanted to go. How she packed everything and bought a plane ticket and finally collapsed on the living room sofa in a coughing attack that told her she had to stop. That winter opened into a long, slow story of confusion. The family seemed in a state of collective depression. We were missing friends and family and not adjusting at all to our life in the south.

In North Carolina the winters were mild, with no ice for hockey. The rains came – cold and dark, long drizzly days. And there was time, plenty of good brooding time to think things through. I didn't have friends now to be with and I didn't have family to visit on the weekends. I would think of my grandparents leaving Ireland long ago. I wondered how they left family and friends – aware they would never see them again? My mother talked of missing her father, and I thought of how he too must have missed *his* parents, his friends, his country. Did his leaving all he had known have anything to do with his drinking – with the cloud of disappointment that seemed hang about him and to define him in my eyes and memory? How hard was it after all to do what he did? One spring day in 1926, he boarded a train in Galway and left for Dublin. From Dublin, he sailed to London. From London, he sailed he took the ship across the ocean to the States. I think of him on that train platform in Galway with his wife, Winifred, and together they say goodbye to the world they knew. They kissed their friends and family – all of them – and their country – goodbye.

In Winston-Salem, in 1972, I was bussed, “integrated,” into an African-American school downtown. With forced integration, the White student population at school rose to twenty percent. The White population was supposed to reach forty percent after integration, but many parents refused to honor the federal court order. They kept their kids in the suburban White schools, or pulled their children out of public schools altogether and put them into private schools. The federal government did not enforce the court orders, nor did the local government. In a few years, the entire project of integration was dropped. It couldn’t be made to work.

The experience of being bussed into a school an hour away from home was confusing and frightening, though also rich and rewarding. The first adults we saw each morning were the police. They set up a small table in the hallway, four or five of them, and had the students line up for the morning ritual – the checking for concealed weapons. In addition to this security check, the police conducted occasional surprise pat-downs as we walk through the hallways between classes. Usually, everything was OK – occasionally, the police found knives.

One afternoon, during the first few weeks of classes, a brick shattered the bus window a few seats ahead of me. Someone on the sidewalk had thrown it. I didn’t see who threw it, but every day, as we pulled away from school and snaked our way through the impoverished neighborhoods surrounding the school – the run-down houses, the abandoned cars, the overgrown lawns – we saw small groups of young men looking up at us with interest; sometimes they’d

yell at us: we'd hear the racial slurs. We understood that we were hated, even if it was an abstract kind of hate: they didn't hate us personally, we thought. They hated what we represented. Nonetheless, we felt their hatred. We could feel it in our bones as a quietness descended – suddenly, no one on the bus was speaking.

Many of our school's classroom windows were busted out – gone. Bars remained outside the windows. I guess the bars were originally put up to protect the school from break-ins – obviously though, the bars didn't protect the glass. Nothing could protect the windows if someone wanted to throw a stone from the street. And it wasn't like the windows were broken yesterday. They had been broken long ago and never repaired. No one expected them to be repaired, certainly not White math teacher, who arrived late to class and disheveled – probably drunk. He told me, "There's no use repairing the windows. If we repair them, *they'll* just be broken again. If you are cold, just sit over by the radiator, away from the windows."

With my first year of high school came the idea, the suggestion, or the opportunity, to join a team, of one sort or another. Some acquaintances in my neighborhood talked excitedly about joining the wrestling team or the basketball team. And I listened. I had never played basketball so that was out. Wrestling, on the other hand, sounded like something I could do. After all, I reasoned, I grew up wrestling and fighting with three brothers. The school administrators encouraged us to join something. My father thought it good "to be involved, to

be active, to be a part of something.”

I joined the wrestling team. I thought I'd at least learn some useful skills. When I walked down into the basement of the school that first day, I knew little of what to expect. Some of the older students knew well what to expect. They had been wrestling for several years, and they had studied with this coach. I was a freshman.

The coach was a short, lean man with a dry and drained expression on his taut face – humorless. Arms akimbo, whistle around his neck, he had us line up around the square mat as he stood in the center with his greeting.

“Practice three days a week – two hours after school. For some of you it will be too tough. You can quit. It's OK. We will exercise a lot and wrestle every practice session. OK? Let's go!”

He began by calling us out – two at a time – to come to the center of the mat and wrestle. When he blew the whistle we began. When he blew the whistle again, we stopped. He wanted to see what we could do. So off we went – pair after pair. When all twenty of us had finished our five to ten minute sparring sessions, he had us do it again with different opponents. Weight differences and difference in experience didn't matter to him. He called your name, blew the whistle, and off you went. Sitting at the edge of the mat, you waited as others wrestled and wondered when your name would be called? And who you'd be matched up against? Many of the team members were big and mean looking. I waited in fear until the whistle released me and then I flung myself with abandon into battle.

Sometimes I prevailed. Other times, I was bent by the stronger boy into something like a pretzel and then pressed to the mat so hard I could hardly breathe. The coach's whistle at that time was my only salvation.

It didn't take me long to realize I wasn't having fun wrestling like this. Maybe if the coach encouraged me – maybe if he smiled from time to time – maybe if I could see some reason to pursue an intensely competitive sport like this, I would have stayed with it. But it wasn't enjoyable, my fear crowded out any possible joy I suppose. Perhaps I lacked the fighting spirit – even when I did succeed in pinning my opponent to the mat or learned to execute a new technique well in the heat of battle it didn't excite me – it didn't satisfy. I was learning that competing with an opponent in this way was not something that appealed to me.

The coach's talks didn't jive with what I learned in church, or Catholic grade school. I knew it was just a game – a sport – and that maybe I was wrong to think that his teaching should comport to some of my early education, but I couldn't shake the notion – couldn't shake being bothered by his attitude, his screaming and yelling – his idea that somehow this was all about growing up – that fighting like this made you grow up stronger. He spoke of killer instincts: "Once your opponent is down, you gotta finish him off. You're an assassin – you've gotta have that instinct – *never* let go until you hear the whistle."

What was not explained to me, but could have been, was that in wrestling I was really fighting against myself – that the opponent was simply helping me test my skills, giving me a chance to reach my potential – that wrestling really was a sport and that enjoyment could be found in "playing" it – that the play

came when the opponent resisted my attempts to pin him and forced me to be creative enough to find other moves that would succeed.

After a few months, I knew I did not want to continue with wrestling. I don't recall whether or not I spoke to my father before I quit the team – whether I explained to him that I was having trouble staying with it – that my interest was waning – but I do remember his disappointment when I told him I quit. He was home from work and talking off his tie, hanging it in the closet. He was surprised to see me home early and wanted to know why I was there? I told him I quit the team. He turned and looked at me with disappointment and surprise and said, “You’ve just become a quitter – congratulations.” It never occurred to me until that moment that my leaving the team would have consequences like this, that I would become this permanent thing, a “quitter.”

I thought my decision was based on pretty sound reasoning: I had given this thing a try and it wasn't working out. How could quitting be such a bad thing? Had I really made a terrible mistake, a permanent mistake? Did my quitting the team really reveal some kind of moral failure in my character?

I was old enough – a freshman in high school – to think my father's words were simply over the top, an exaggeration – the result of an over reaction on his part. I knew he was having trouble with his new job – with adjusting the work culture in the south. I wondered if he had ever thought about quitting the job? But still the words stung – they lodged deep inside my mind – and heart. I wouldn't quit anything ever again without searching my character first for telltale signs of weaknesses and flaws.

After quitting the wrestling team, I joined the track team. I ran long-distance

and I pole-vaulted. Unlike wrestling, these activities allowed me to test myself more directly without the physical contact that wrestling entailed. Here, I could run, and see how long, and how far I could go? And in the pole vault, I could test myself and see how high I could jump – which, as it turned out, wasn't very high because I didn't have the upper body strength to lift myself far into the air. Although I stopped pole vaulting in time, I continue with the running – I didn't quit.

My experience with the track team had something more to teach me beyond the mere lesson of individual endurance and teamwork. I also learned about the inequality of American public high school education: the fact that local tax revenues supported local high schools. On the first day that I went out to the track to practice, I found our track was just a worn path in a grassy field. After sixty yards, it thinned into nothing but grass. The path became so narrow it disappeared. At first I didn't think much about the condition of the track. I thought it was the normal situation in the south. "They don't fix broken windows, and they don't know how to make a track." I reasoned.

I believed this, until we traveled across town to compete at the White school – the school in the suburbs, the school I should have been attending if I were not forced to attend the inner-city school as a result of a U.S. Federal court decision calling for integration. At the White school, I found myself competing on a beautiful all-weather track and an immaculate field that looked like something out of the Olympics – gorgeous. At Hanes high school, for all practical purposes we had neither a track nor a field. At Hanes, we pole-vaulted with inexpensive plastic poles – hard to get much lift or bend from them. The competition, the kids

at the White school, had carbon fiber poles, very light in the hand and full of spring so an athlete could fly high into air easily when the pole sprung open out of the plant. At Hanes, we practiced our falls into piles of hay. After their vaults, the White kids had blue blocks of soft padding to fall into.

How could we compete with these kids? Their beautifully strong and flexible poles gave them an edge, as did the many coaches that they had around them. Our one coach, coach Rigby, seldom came to practice. He was a coach who didn't coach at all. He stood in front of his office after school, and he told us how many practice vaults to do, or how many laps to run, and then disappeared back into his office. The older students said he drank. In retrospect, it seems likely. At the end of practice one day when I paid him a rare visit to inquire about our uniforms and the condition of the track, he was agitated that I should knock on the door and bother him. He looked drunk and annoyed – oblivious to the concerns of the team.

My shock and surprise concerning the state of the track, and our lack of equipment, was not shared by my Black teammates. When I asked how we could be expected to compete with students at the White schools, they shook their heads knowingly, and said, "We just do." As our high school was located in an impoverished neighborhood, the people in the neighborhood could not support the school. We didn't have diddly when it came to resources, and I am talking about tracks and fields only, I'm talking about glass in the windows, and books in the library. I am talking about teachers who show up to teach.

In this school, I learned to understand that part of what defined me was the

fact that I was White, Irish American, and Catholic. Other students called me a “Yankee,” and “Cracker.” I had never thought of myself in these terms. Chicago people don’t think of themselves as “Yankees.” We are too far west, but to the White students in the South, I was just as much a Yankee as General Ulysses S. Grant. “Wasn’t he from Illinois?” The students wanted to talk about the Civil War, about particular battles, which I knew nothing about. They wanted to debate that Lee was a better general than Grant. Grant was a drunk.

The “Yankee thing” came only in part from the fact that I came from Chicago. The other thing that defined me as a Yankee to my classmates was the way I spoke. I couldn’t hide from this. To them, I spoke like a Yankee. When I opened my mouth to answer a question in class, I saw the whole class turn to look – Black and White students both. Later, when I got my nerve to ask my classmates why they stared at me when I spoke, they told me it was interesting. I sounded *strange*: the language thing. Like my grandparents in Chicago, I spoke differently from the people around me. My faith too was strange in the South – the nearest Catholic Church was a forty-minute drive away.

Eventually, I found myself with African-American friends, and White southern friends, even white Southern Baptist friends. I was learning about America, something about inequality, about the lack of educational resources afforded to students living in impoverished areas. We, the students at Hanes, *knew* what was going on. We saw it bright as day when we competed in sports across town. We saw it in the busted windows; we saw it in the neighborhoods we passed through; we saw it in the faces of the policemen searching through

our bags each morning; we saw it in the eyes of Mr. Wallace, our home room teacher, a fifty-five year-old African American teacher, my first Black teacher. We saw it in his determination – one solid teacher we had at school. I can see him still – his short graying hair, his large black-framed *Ray-Ban* glasses. I see him putting his hand over his heart there each morning and leading us on in the Pledge of Allegiance.

And just in front of me, all that year, was Rachael, the fifteen-year-old African American girl I was falling for. I saw her each morning show up in a dress. The dress I remember best is the powder blue dress. She'd wear that dress and white stockings that come up above the ankle and the folded over. She'd wear a pair of polished black penny loafers and stand for the Pledge alertly, She'd stand proudly with a serious determination I couldn't match. She wouldn't turn her head to look at me in the third row no matter what I said, and I learned to say a lot of things to her. I teased her and tried to get her attention, to get her to turn, so I could see her pierced earrings. She looked best with her birthstone: the red ruby for July. I told her that once in the hallway when she had her books stack up under her chin and couldn't turn away and she smiled.

I loved the way her hair smelled in the mornings – the way it glistened and gleamed. Was *this* on account of the *Afro-sheen* I saw advertised in *Ebony* Magazine, a magazine that seemed to be forever left out on the table in the library? One year earlier, I wouldn't have known what *Afro Sheen* was; I wouldn't have known what *Ebony* magazine was; I would not have known how some Black people fix their hair with a hair picks. Those mornings, when I sat behind Rachael and smelled her hair, those morning when I admired the way she

rounded and sculpted it so it sat few inches off around her head, I knew I was in the presences of a richness that reminded me of nothing so much as the sweet thick taste of honey.

Fifteen

For Rachael

Bars in front of broken windows
Was our school, and your room
Was not much different –
A broken window and snow
Falling across a pillow.

You wanted to touch my hair,
Which was enough for me
Who waited for your eyes
To say the color of my skin
Just didn't matter this time.

Boxcars outside your window
Were belly deep in snow
When you lifted your arms
Around my shoulders
To point me towards the mirror
Just before it shattered . . .

And he was not going away, not
Until he took the brick
From his jacket & held it
Before our eyes – the wound
Opening his hand – the blood
Beginning to flow.

Tonight when I open my window,
Miles & years away,
I like to think I kept the brink
For just the purpose of holding
My window open this way –
For you –
And for your brother too – for us.

And no matter what happened that night
I tell myself
It was always more like *this*
Than any other kind of thing – an opening
Through which we learned to sing
The simple song of our seeing
Each other alone together.

Hanes High School, Winston Salem, N.C., 1972

After one year in the North Carolina, my parents decided to move back to Chicago. My father had trouble adjusting to the corporate culture in the south. My mother was concerned about her recently widowed mother, and the children, all of us, especially the elder ones, were missing friends and the culture we knew in the north. We wanted pizza. We wanted snow in winter, oak trees and maple trees. We wanted delicatessens. Though these were small things, admittedly, they told us *who* we were. They told us *where* we belonged – gave us a sense of identity at an age when being secure in oneself mattered – most of us were in our teens. We identified ourselves as Irish-American, Catholic, and from Chicago, even if our roots in the U.S. were only a one-generation deep.

The journey to North Carolina was hardest on my sister who moved just as she began her senior year in high school. And to compound the issue, she had been dating for several years prior to our leaving. My older brother had been freshmen in high school when we moved. In N.C. he started as a sophomore. Now, moving north again, he would be a junior – three years and three schools.

Once again, we moved into my grandparent's home – this time without the presence of my grandfather. When we arrived, my grandmother was still in mourning, still wearing black dresses to Mass every Sunday. She would mourn like this for a year. After some weeks with my grandmother, we moved out to Elmhurst, Illinois, a suburb eight miles outside Chicago. I began my second year of high school. It was a good school, well funded. I took my first class in creative writing and was introduced to Matsuo Basho and his haiku and travel journal,

the *Oku No Hosomichi, Far Roads to Back Towns*. At the same time, I had an American Literature class that introduced me to a “Yankee” writer – Henry David Thoreau. This was 1973. The Vietnam War was beginning to wind down, but it was not over.

These writers, Basho and Thoreau, were voices that I heard singing out and through the wilderness of my own dislocation, voices that touched on movement, change, and culture. Thoreau left his home in town and went to the woods. He built a home that gave him a chance to stop and listen to what was going on around him and within him – a chance to explore what it meant to be alive. That was something that sounded appealing to me, something healing and nurturing – to find a place to stop and sort things out, to build a place that stood in time: in the seasons, open to them, but also a place that stood outside of time to the extent the writers themselves seemed, while in their respective places, to focus much of their attention on the eternal present. Thoreau’s place was a cabin in the woods beside Walden Pond. Basho’s place – his home – was found while traveling along the road: “the journey itself home.”

Like Thoreau, Basho too dispensed with comforts and stripped his life down to barest means. Unlike Thoreau, however, he took to traveling as a means of fronting the world and entering more deeply into the spirit of his art. I felt pulled in both directions. On one level, I enjoyed travel – the long drive down to North Carolina out of Chicago and the long drives back. At some level, I enjoyed moving into new neighborhoods, meeting new friends, and finding new things to do. I understood that movement and travel could open up a life. I heard my father’s words – “its good to be flexible” — taking root. On the other side, I was

aware of an increasing desire to find a place I could call “home” and stay put. I didn’t want to be the new kid in school again and again. I didn’t want to be saying goodbye to friends and forced into the awkwardness of making new ones, especially not in high school.

I moved eight times in the first fourteen years of my life. When my father dismissed my concerns about losing friends as something I needed to understand as simply a part of life, I found myself refusing to accept this. My father seemed to think it was a waste of time and energy to think about loss too much. He thought it was better to consider “the positives to come” – meeting new friends. I don’t know if he truly believed this – but I had no doubt that he saw it as a useful philosophy. And I can understand how such a philosophy would have served him well in his own experience of losing a father at the age of eleven, or his joining the Navy and leaving home at seventeen. It wasn’t that I *didn’t* believe there was some truth in what he was saying – there *were* “positives.” I knew that. What I hated was the suggestion that one’s older friends could be forgotten, tossed aside, and forgotten without one’s being affected by the loss. What I was feeling called out to be recognized and understood. I wanted to steel myself against an attitude of not thinking about loss. I wanted there to be a way of honoring and remembering what was lost – maybe even a way of carrying it forward into the ongoing life. I thought of my father and his dogs – the way he put dogs down and then justified it as if it didn’t pain him at all, saying he couldn’t keep pets, as if it didn’t hurt him to do this – to destroy the animals he had raised carefully for months, and, in many cases, years – animals he loved.

Of course it hurt, and of course, he couldn't afford to keep dogs that were ill, but why not own up to the pain?

"I'll never do this to my children," I remember saying during those days my family was moving from one town to another. "I'll have a place for them, a home they won't have to pick up and leave." As I picked up my daughter at school, as I saw the inquisitive children surrounding me and asking me their questions— Why did I come to Japan? Where am I from? — I know it is a question I should think on and try to answer honestly.

I understand now that some of what I felt when younger about not forcing my children to relocate was naïve—but not all. It is hard to promise one's children that you will never relocate or move, impossible maybe. Still, you can build a home for them, a stable emotional home for them. This morning, before coming to school to pick my daughter up, I was reading of the Jesuit priest, Father Paul Le Jeune (1591-1664), who came to New France in the 17th century, present day Quebec, Canada. He was forty years old when he came to spread the word of the Gospel among the Native people. I was reading about his decision while living in New France, a decision that seemed impulsive – perhaps intuitive, to travel with the Huron tribe as they began their winter hunt. Did he realize suddenly that this was a way to understand who the people were – that to get to know them, he needed to live the life they lived – that traveling with them would allow him to reach them with his message of God's love?

Le Jeune had little idea of what he was in for. The hunting trip lasted from early November until late April in the year of 1634. He wrote of how arduous the journey was: "To paint for you the hardships of the journey, I have neither pen nor brush equal to the task. You would have to see them to understand, as this is a meal that must be tasted to be appreciated. We did nothing but go up and go down. Frequently we had to bend over double to pass under partly fallen trees, and step over others lying upon the ground whose branches sometimes knocked us over, gently enough to be sure, but always coldly, for we fell upon the snow . . . Oh God what suffering! It seemed to me I was walking over a road of glass that broke under my feet at every step."

There was little chance to rest. During the hunt, Le Jeune and the Huron only managed to camp twenty three times, the rest of the time they are on the move, always looking for food. One thing drove them to continue hunting: their appetite, the constancy of their hunger. Sometimes they went for two or three days without food. Nothing unusual in this, Le Jeune reports.

As children searched my face for an answer to their questions, I was thinking of Father Le Jeune. Maybe I thought of him because the children looked so hungry – hungry for an answer. Maybe I thought of Le Jeune because I felt hungry for an answer myself – Why *did* I come? Maybe I was thinking of love and faith and what people do in the name of them? Or maybe I was seeing love as a deep hunger driving me more than I knew how to explain.

Earl's Sauna

He never talked about wanting anything.
He talked about his garden, his bees.
But if you sat in his sauna
On a wintry afternoon,
A whole world would open up,
And you would see his words
Spin into desire as snow
Fell past the window. You'd learn
To say the fire's name was yours; learn
To take the heat into the lungs
Past words and dream
Trees rooting down, bending above.
You'd learn to open your mouth wide
As a baby bird crying its first song;
You'd take the song and live
A long time. It would open your life
The way fire opens the tongue inside a log.
Listen, and you hear it still, the breathing
And all the hunger going up with it.

Chapter Three / West

There is the hidden presence of others in us, even those we have known briefly. We contain them for the rest of our lives, at every border we cross.

–Michael Ondaatje

Six Years

There was a six-year period between my leaving home at the age of twenty and my arriving in Japan at twenty-six. Looking back, it's hard to believe it was only six years. During this time, I lived in: Moscow, Idaho; Grace, Idaho; Cambridge, Idaho, Donnelly, Idaho; Spokane, Washington; Seattle, Washington; Seward, Alaska; and Dutch Harbor, Alaska. During this period, I attended the University of Idaho and majored in Biology. I worked for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in southeast Idaho, the U.S. Forest Service in Alaska, and for NOAA (The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration) in the Bering Sea. I returned to school and studied at the University of Washington.

My parents saw me off at O'Hare airport on a cold January day in 1977. I was wearing a blue U.S. Air Force surplus wool dress overcoat and packing a beautiful Guild D-25 cherry wood acoustic guitar. The image of myself with my parents in the airport seems strangely haunting today – all of us aware of a break about to occur. I was chasing a dream. I was heading for Idaho, a state with less than a million people in 1977 and the state with more wilderness area than any

other state in the country except Alaska. I was hoping to become a wildlife biologist.

When I arrived in Spokane airport, I could smell the pine trees, even in January. The weather was warmer than Chicago – a balmy fifty-five degrees. I was alone on an adventure, more alone than I had ever been – two thousand miles from home – no friends, no family. I was a bit scared but equally excited. From the airport, I took a twenty-minute bus ride to the Greyhound bus station downtown, a drafty run-down place on the western edge of town. Homeless men slept on the wooden benches. The smell of wet newspapers and cigarettes permeated the air. It was three p.m., and I went to the window and bought my ticket. I was heading for Moscow, two and half hours south.

As the bus moved out, the sun slid over the horizon to the west and rain began to fall – and then sleet. The darker it became, the more I saw of mountains in the distance to the east.

Moscow was everything I had hoped it to be. I was distinctly *not* disappointed. As a child, I remember being excited about one prospect or another, only to be let down by the actual fact of it, as when my family took a week-long vacation to Wisconsin and the glossy brochures advertising the location promised so much paradise without bothering too mention the drawbacks, particularly the deer flies — big as hornets and ravenous. But this location was different. This was more like seeing the ocean for the first time – it was impossible for a description to do justice to the place. When I was a child and my father told me he was going to take me swimming in the Atlantic Ocean near our home in Virginia Beach, I

thought I understood what to expect, but when I arrived and experienced the miles and miles of beach, the smell of salt water, and the sound of seagulls and crashing waves, I realized I couldn't have known what to expect, not really.

In 1977, Moscow was a small college town with a population of around 15,000 yearlong residents. It sat in the middle of the Palouse prairie, a hilly wheat-growing region that stretched out around the city for miles – to the east were richly forested mountains. The night I arrived, the smell of wood smoke filled the air – the scent of cedar, tamarack, and pine. Homes were heated by wood burning stoves. The air was cooler here than in Spokane. There was half a foot of snow on the ground. I saw patches of open sky above the clouds and brilliant stars beyond.

The hills of the Palouse Prairie surrounded the downtown area. Further off was Moscow Mountain – a forested mountain that stood alone above the Prairie. Beyond Moscow Mountain were more mountains – mountain ranges that stretched to Montana. It was easy to imagine the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness out there, all 1.3 million acres of it. It was easy to imagine the tribes of Native people who once lived and thrived in the area that surrounded Moscow: the Nez Perce, the Crow, the Spokane and the Palouse.

I had come to Idaho to study, but I also came because I wanted a different kind of life than I saw my parents living in the suburbs of Chicago. I had come

because I that grand Thoreauvian idea of living true to my imagined life, a life I imagine would make me happy, an imagined life that excited me completely. I believed one could be fulfilled in one's life and work – that it was possible to have a “righteous livelihood” as Saint Augustine spoke of in his *Confessions*.

I had taken my environment studies classes in high school seriously. I was aware of what was happening to the natural environment – battles all around. Lake Erie on fire, more and more evidence of DDT's pernicious effects in the ecosystem. The more I learned, the more alarmed I became. I wanted to get involved. At the same time, I began to notice more and more how I did not want to end-up working in-doors in Chicago, as my father had done. I wanted out – out of Chicago, out of a lifestyle that seemed empty of soul in some fundamental way: so few of the neighbors knew each other in any significant way; so few of the people I came into contact with in the Chicago area seemed to enjoy their working lives. It appeared to me that there was a great deal of resignation—or quiet desperation—in the air. What were people really living for? Was it simply money? More security? Wasn't there something more to live for? I was an idealist, of course, a hopeless romantic.

Security is an illusion according to Allan Watts. I was reading his essay collection, *Cloud Hidden, Where Abounds Unknown*, and I was enjoying the essay “The Wisdom of Insecurity.” Wisdom, he suggested came from learning how to understand and to accept, at a basic level, the fact that our lives can never be completely secure. Illness can strike at any moment, an earthquake, a tsunami, a volcano, etc. We can drive ourselves crazy trying to secure our lives against

every eventuality – trying to become more and more secure. It is a fool’s errand. It can never be completely successful. Better, Watts would say, to learn day by day to accept our lives as they – to understand how insecure our lives are and in so doing open up more fully to life. A similar sentiment as Thomas Merton’s thought when he spoke of spiritual practice as being mostly a learning better how to die. Both expressions seem to echo Christ’s teaching in the sermon on the mount: “Therefore I say unto you, Take no thought for your life, what you shall eat, or what you shall drink; nor yet for your body, what you shall put on. Is not the life more than food, and the body than clothing?”

I was, as I said, an idealist and a romantic, no doubt. I wanted to live simply, and I wanted to live in a rural or wild place. The books I read made me – encouraged me to — believe that the voice I heard within was a voice worth listening to.

Job Hunting

After my family arrived back in Illinois, and back to my grandmother's home, we stayed through the summer. My father would go out and look for work, and I too would go out and look for work. My father coached me on finding a job. I was fifteen and not legally eligible to work. I suppose my father felt it was a good experience anyway – good for me to get out and look. I walked down Harlem Avenue in Berwyn at the edge of Chicago, a busy, congested urban thoroughfare. There were fast food restaurants along the road for miles. There were car dealerships, taverns, auto supply shops, and small businesses of every sort. My legs would give out before I could exhaust the number of shops I could inquire at. I walked into shop after shop and said, "Hello, I was wondering if you might need any part-time work?" Sometimes, the clerks behind the counter, if they weren't too busy, would tear off an application form from a thick pad, and hand it over the counter to me in a disinterested way and say, "You can fill it out, if something comes up, we'll have your name." I wasn't sure which was better – the quick "No, we don't have work," or the "Would you like to fill out an application?" If given a form, I'd have to sit and begin the task of filling it out – all those dates, names, addresses, and references.

Looking for work became my *job*, as it was for my father. I went out for five days in a row and spent five hours each day searching. At last, I walked into the right place – a Kentucky Friend Chicken franchise on Harlem Avenue. When I

walked in and asked if they needed help, I found I was talking to the owner, a thin, dark haired man in his early thirties with a serious hawkish look about him – a thin, large, hooked nose - a look that kept his eyes staring straight ahead into the distance when he spoke to me – no smile, no welcome – just cool matter of fact tone, “Yes, I’m looking for some help.” When he reached down with his right hand for an application form, I noticed that his left arm was a prosthetic. The arm was wooden from the elbow down. The hand was a metal hook.

“Are you sixteen?” This owner wanted to know as he looked over my application. “Yes,” Was my response. I couldn’t loose the job now. I was desperate and this was as close as I had come to landing anything. I stared up at him and waited for his next question.

I had run this scenario by my father before ever embarking on the search, “What if they ask me if I am sixteen?” I asked him and he replied, “Don’t worry – cross that bridge when you get to it.” Perhaps my father didn’t expect I would ever get to this bridge, or he thought whatever job I got wouldn’t require me to tell my age. Or else he just thought it wasn’t a significant concern. – no one is gong to car about that.

“How long will you work?” The owner wanted to know. “I want someone who will work past the summer into the fall?” He went on. “I’ll keep working into the fall. I am looking for something long term,” I told him, even though I knew it was unlikely, that I would work into the fall. If my father found a job, we would move to wherever the job was. Our life in Stickney was temporary.

At last, the owner announced he’d hire me and explained the job he wanted

me to do. He wanted me to start tomorrow. "Great! I was set," I thought, until he finished off by revisiting the question of my age. Asking me, to bring proof when I came in the next day.

Despite my anxiety about the following day, I was elated to have gotten a job. I couldn't wait to get home and tell my family. It felt as though I had caught that elusive fish I had been after for so long, even if I'd only been job-hunting for a week. This was it! For the first time, I had a real job, a job I'd punch-in for everyday. I could already begin counting the money I'd make in a given week. The punching-in made the job seem real, a bona fide job – a distinct improvement over my newspaper delivery work in the past.

I announced the news to my father and he shared my happiness for a few moments. And then, I broached the subject that I had been agonizing about: how am I going to show up tomorrow if I can't prove I'm sixteen? I told my father of the problem of age and asked for his advice. I couldn't find an answer to the problem – couldn't imagine a way out. I had thought about it considerably, but couldn't come up a workable solution. What would I tell him?

The boss wanted to see a birth certificate. How was I going to find my way around that? To my surprise, my father had an answer readily available. "Tell him the birth certificate is still on its way up from Virginia. Tell him you'll bring it to him in a few weeks. By that time, he'll probably forget about the matter."

What a plausible story, I thought, and it sounds so true and convincing: our things really were in transit, and even when they arrived, they would be held in storage until my father found a job and we moved to a new home. But I was, in truth, fifteen. I had just turned fifteen. My father's words made me realize that

the world of men was more clever than I had imagined – it had a dimension to it I hadn't seen before – I could see now how a lie could be bent to resemble a truth – like looking into the swimming pool and seeing how the light bends there at the bottom giving one a better sense of the water's true depth. Men weren't as honest as they instructed their children to be – or my father wasn't as honest as he seemed when I was a child. Perhaps he was teaching me survival skills – how to survive in the world as it is and not as he would have it. No doubt, in his ongoing job search, in his rounds of daily interviews, he too was learning how to present himself to secure a job and feed himself and family: what to say and what to avoid saying. "If someone asks you if you can do a job," I remember him telling me during this time, "Say, 'yes' and then figure out how to do it."

My boss, who was also the owner and manager of the restaurant, continued to ask me for the birth certificate. He hadn't forgotten. For several weeks running, I used the excuse my father had given me. I'd say it hadn't arrived yet. By the third week, I knew I had to change my story to "It had arrived but I haven't been able to locate it. There are so many boxes for us to go through."

In retrospect, I suppose he knew I was under age but allowed me to work anyway, but not out of the kindness or generosity. There wasn't anything that I would associate with kindness in the man unless it was his initial offering of the job to me. He was business, all the time. There was an aura of cold, distant, calculation about him, especially when he looked me in the eye and asked for the birth certificate. The only time I interacted with him, besides the times he would catch me on the way out and ask about my birth certificate, was when he would come back into the kitchen and yell at us for being too slow. My job was strictly

in the kitchen. I was not allowed to mix with customers or stand behind the counter or cash register.

I was hired at \$1.30 an hour – thirty cents below the minimum wage in 1972. Slowly, it dawned on me. He didn't have to pay the minimum wage if I didn't have documentation proving my age. My job entailed picking up three-gallon pots (pressure cookers) of boiling chicken and emptying them onto a straining table, which separated the chicken from the oil. At peak times, we had as many as twenty pots of chicken going. When the timer rang, I took the cover off, picked the pot up, and walked to the straining table to empty it. The oil was near four hundred degrees Fahrenheit. I was careful not to get seriously burned, but small burns were unavoidable, especially given the fact that there were always treacherous areas on the floor where drops of oil had fallen – places where I would slip and the oil might run out of the pot and onto my hands, arms, or legs.

On days off that summer, I'd often go to the library, a few blocks away. I was beginning to appreciate the deep quiet of the place – a quiet I could not find at home with five siblings, my mother and grandmother, Lassie the ugly dog. My job was noisy too, of course, the kitchen especially. The restaurant was located on one of the busiest streets in the Chicago area. This was my respite, the library. The magazines I picked up and began to page through were magazines that offered everything Chicago could not: mountains and rivers, forests and prairies, wildlife. I was looking at *Field and Stream* and *Outdoor Life*. I was beginning to dream a life beyond Stickney before I realized what I was doing.

In Wood Dale, Illinois and in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, I had had

opportunities to experience something like a rural childhood. Wood Dale was far enough away from Chicago to offer tracts of open forest and swamplands. In the winter, I played ice hockey all day long on the pond. In the evening, under moonlight, I'd skate and weave my way around the many muskrat homes humped above the ice. In North Carolina, I traveled with friends as they hunted along the edge of forests for quail. I began to enjoy the hush of stepping into a frozen field at dawn with expectation – senses tuned to receive what nature would deliver.

Pheasant

Those frozen fields of corn offering
The beautiful wings of a pheasant leaping
Into thunder out of the blue
Half-dawn of morning somewhere far
From farmers slipping away
Into their long winter slumbers
Fed my early years growing up
In Illinois country. I walked alone
Into the cold and through snow
That held me up for the awakening world
Forever mine if I wanted it and trusted
The turns and shapes of events unfolding
Into landscapes of sky where shot would fly
To take a bird I would carry home and place
Down before the breakfast awaiting me
And my blood stained hands, warming
To everything alive around the taste
And touch of that cold cold spoon.

At last, my father got a job and word came that we'd be moving. We'd be gone in a few weeks, tops. I had to let my boss know. I had to let him know I wouldn't be staying on. This day had been coming I knew, but still I was unprepared to break the news to him. I feared the angry recriminations, "Where's the birth certificate?" "You lied about your age!" "You strung me along and now you are quitting after only a few months!" A week went by and I still had not managed to give him my two-week notice. I delayed as long as I could. I delayed until finishing up one evening and heading out the restaurant door. My father was in the parking lot. The car was running. I would not be walking home tonight. I went to the car and sat down beside him. He wanted to know if I had broken the news yet? I confided that I had not. "You need to do that," My father urged, "In a week we'll be gone." "Go on, get it over with, over and done." He encouraged me. So I waited with my father in the car until the boss himself, the last one out of the restaurant came out and began locking up the place.

I probably could not have picked a worse time to walk up to him and ask to have a word. He didn't like to show how difficult it was at times for him to work with his prosthetic. He had a mass of keys in the palm of his good hand and was picking through them with his prosthetic, looking for the correct key. The lights above his head made both the hook and keys shine. It was difficult for him. It took time. He squinted down into his palm struggling to pick through the keys in the dark. And then I stood before him and he looked up into my eyes in surprise before quickly setting his eyes down towards the keys again. I waited.

“He lost the arm below the shoulder.” An eighteen year-old cook told me a few days after I had begun work. He told me this as we cleaned the grease trap just before closing. The fetid fumes of the trap were overpowering and nauseating. “Blown off in Viet-Nam. Damn. Not me. You ain’t going to see me in no Goddamn Viet-Fucking-Nam!”

When I gave the boss my news his face turned mean and he began to yell, “People don’t just move suddenly! You’ve known for a long time. You lied!” “I’m sorry,” I mumbled under my breath, looking away, past the hook of his prosthetic glinting in the night like some twisted smile. His thin black hair fell across his face as his voice grew louder. He brushed it off his forehead in rapid swipes. There were things he wanted to say and he was going to say them, I thought. I’m going to have to stand and listen.

He felt “betrayed” – cheated in some fundamental way: “You didn’t tell me the truth!” He continued to repeat, wanting me to acknowledge, I guess, that fact and then to agree with him. I was too scared to say anything at this point. Noticing the situation was not moving in a promising direction, my father turned the car lights. I saw the manager take note, his eyes moving away from me into the night – his disheveled hair lifting in the wind.

He held his prosthetic up in the air with his good right hand wrapped round in front it. He was cradling it as if suddenly it began to ache. He fell quiet now, staring off into the parking lot, and then beyond it at all the cars on Harlem Avenue – the red of their brake lights flashing on and off for as long as we could see – cars heading into Chicago

He was right. I knew that. I had “betrayed” him. And I had done it in a season when betrayal seemed everywhere around us. Who could think of the Viet Nam War without thinking about betrayal of sort? Was Viet Nam truly a matter of critical national interest? I justified my dishonesty, and maybe not so unlike our national leaders whose justifications for the war resulted in so many American men dying or being maimed for life, not to mention the millions of Vietnamese maimed and killed. I thought of this now – of my own justifications - my own culpability – how easy it was to find myself here with nothing to say, quiet in the night. I thought of how my boss’ cold and distant behavior made it easier for me to justify my actions. He was using me as much as I was using him, I reasoned. After all, he was paying *under* the minimum wage.

But the reasoning felt hollow and empty now. I could feel it in my chest – each breath a heaving sign of knowing. This had been wrong. Yes a small thing, but a small thing that led to this confrontation. It was good of him to hire me. He trusted me. I betrayed the trust. I knew that. He knew that. And my father too, I am sure knew that, even as he welcomed me into the car and said it was, “Over and done – good – you did what you had to do.”

My father got a job as a warehouse manager. After retiring from the Navy, this sort of position became his specialty. His experience as an officer in the Navy gave him management credentials. And as Chicago was a major transportation

and storage hub, there seemed to be a lot of jobs in warehousing. For a few years, he had worked as a warehouse manager for a small company in Wood Dale. Following this, he had moved on to work for Hanes. Now, he would work for 3M, the Scotch Tape maker and the maker of 50,000 other products.

We moved out of Berwyn into a small, four-bedroom house in Elmhurst – eight miles west of Chicago. The house had a sidewalk out front as my mother had always wanted. She was not *ever* going to follow my father’s wishes again and live in some semi-rural area that did not have sidewalks. Sidewalks meant sophistication to her, it meant class, and it meant good schools in the neighborhood.

We had not had sidewalks in our earlier homes in Wood Dale, nor in Winston-Salem. We were living in nice homes but they were located in semi-rural areas, which my father preferred for raising his dogs. Now we would have sidewalks, my mother insisted, sidewalks that ran along tree-lined streets – elm trees of Elmhurst.

The trip south was viewed as a failure in the family. It had been instigated by my father’s ambition to move up the corporate ladder – larger salary, more security. It turned out a bust in my mother’s eyes, but not in my father’s. He would remind us all of what we learned from the experience – how it “enriched” our lives and made us more “flexible.” He liked to use that word “flexible.” We had all become more “flexible.” He didn’t have personal regrets. He felt he was right to try the move. He wanted to challenge himself and try to do better for the family. But he couldn’t sell this to my mother who maintained none of these “romantic” views. She saw the whole “extravaganza” as a diversion and a

distraction with real costs and damage. For one, she felt it forced her eldest daughter into a too-early marriage. Had the family not left the Chicago area, the reasoning went, my sister would not have married at eighteen. She would have taken her time and gotten to know her boyfriend at a more normal and leisurely pace. The sudden move separated them and forced them to consider the option of marrying earlier. My sister was seventeen when we moved. All she could think to do was to return to Chicago as soon as she was legally permitted to do so – to return to Chicago and marry – begin her life there.

My sister's decision to get married in July precipitated my parents needing to consider whether we would remain south in the future or whether it was better for the entire family to relocate north over the summer. I don't know who made the final decision, but I suspect it was my father whose employment was supporting the family. He quit the job at Hanes and moved the family of eight back North in the early summer. He was in his late forties. My sister was married on July 8, 1972. We all gathered for the wedding in Wood Dale. She was setting out for a new life with her husband. And in a way, so were we. We were getting ready to move into a new home in a new town. My mother, having been through all this — especially seeing her daughter marrying sooner than she had hoped — wanted those sidewalks; my father, feeling a certain responsibility for the adventure in North Carolina, seemed more than willing to accommodate my mother's wishes. He settled for a smaller back yard in which to raise his dogs.

My father was a warehouse manager. The title "senior warehouse manager" had a ring to it – it was a defined position – sounded official. "I will be a senior

warehouse manager for 3M” he announced after he got the job. He was proud of the title and the company he would be working for. Perhaps the title reminded him of the Navy: “Senior Chief Petty Officer.” He was a manager and responsible for a large facility, and the company was well known – the makers of Scotch tape and “50,000 other products.” He had been working in warehouse management since leaving the Navy, starting out in small warehouses and now reaching the big leagues.

One Saturday morning, while we were still living in Berwyn, he needed to go out to the warehouse and asked if I wanted to go along with him. The warehouse was located in a sprawling industrial park in Elk Grove Village, some twenty miles away. The “village” was located next to O’Hare airport, directly below the flight path of airplanes. The warehouse was colossal. The roof stood a hundred feet off the ground. It was cool inside – the temperature kept at a constant sixty-five degrees. Stock was shelved on racks that rose high towards the ceiling – rows and rows of stock. Giant incandescent bulbs hung from the ceiling high overhead beneath shiny red circular steel umbrella-like covers. The rows of stock stretched hundreds of yards into the distance, and the concrete floors shown like brown ice.

The size of the warehouse impressed me, and so did the efficiency with which the workers located “product” – small golf carts and larger forklifts hurrying around inside the building at serious speeds. But the place was cavernous and one couldn’t help but feel strangely empty inside a place like this – saddened almost, wondering of how a person could spend years of their lives working inside a darkened building like this. What could be less pleasing than a huge

windowless structure – a place of product, a place of echoing silences? I knew it was a *job*. And I knew my father was glad to *have* a job, but was this really the job he wanted? It wasn't a job I'd want.

My father enjoyed teaching when he was in the Navy. He thought he should have pursued the interest – he didn't. After getting out of the Navy the first time, he enrolled in accounting classes at DePaul University on the G.I. Bill. He only lasted a year. He didn't know why he chose to study accounting, he later confessed to me. He just sort of "fell into it." It sounded "practical" and he wasn't sure about the other disciplines. Had he chosen a subject more to his liking, he would later say, he would have stayed in school. As it was, he left and re-enlisted in the Navy and served another seventeen years active duty. He was not bitter about any of this – just thinking he missed his big chance and regretful. He loved the Navy, and it had been good to him. He simply reasoned he lacked "guidance," in choosing what to study at the university. He had no one to talk to about the matter. The Navy wasn't helpful. I gathered, though he never said this, that if he had a father he could turn to at critical moments in his life, he would have benefited from that guidance. There was no one in the family to give him *any* guidance. His ill-educated mother from Ireland was simply not capable of advising him on colleges in the United States. She was a quiet, gentle person who had all she could handle surviving in America as a widow with five children. And as my father was the second youngest in the family, his mother was already quite old by the time he was in his teens. In the Navy, at seventeen, he was self-supporting and sending money to his mother for her support. As a father now, he was determined offer his children the benefit of his "guidance."

There were tensions at home between my father and me that contributed to my leaving home and going away to school in Idaho. It's a mixed bag. In some ways, it is *because* of my father that I dared to dream of leaving home and going to study out west – to live in a place I had never been before, and to study something quite different from any of my friends or family. My father appreciated dreamers, and encouraged me to do what I felt compelled to do. "Most people don't know what they want," he'd say. "If you know what you want, you're half-way there." His guidance.

As supportive as his guidance was, I remember many battles between my father and me as I grew into adolescence. Gradually, our fights got worse, pushing us to the limits of our ability to tolerate each other. Neither of us wanted to live under the same roof with the other. I remember him standing at the door after one of our shouting matches. I had shouted something like, "I can't wait to leave this house!" And he obliged by running to the door and pulling it open – standing there with the cold January wind blowing in and screaming near the top of his voice, "Go, go, go – get out, get out!" Screaming with the door open, his face reddening with anger, veins leaping under the skin around his neck.

We fought over religion and politics. I was beginning to question the Church on many things: can there be just one "true" faith? Should those divorced couples I saw in church each Sunday really be kept out of the Church? Did the prohibition on birth control make any sense in a world with an exploding human population? And what about our relation to the earth itself? Were we going to

continue to focus so much attention on the world-to-come and so little on the earth below our feet? It seemed to me that *was* what many Catholics were doing – that earth was simply the battleground upon which their great moral struggle was enacted.

We were passing over the earth with so much of our attention, it seemed to me then, focused somewhere else than upon the natural environment upon which we depended for life. And, of course, I felt that there were consequences to this attitude. Thoreau was right, “Talk of heaven! ye disgrace earth” (Thoreau 166). And “disgrace” was precisely the right word. The commonplace attitude towards the environment seemed excessively utilitarian, and we seemed to have absolved ourselves of responsibility for stewardship. To the extent the environment was despoiled and polluted with reckless disregard, it was disgraced. Catholics, I felt, like many other Christians, were taking scripture too literally. We read the scripture “multiply . . . fill the earth and subdue it,” and adopted an adversarial relationship towards the earth – “subdue it.” The attitude also allowed for complacency in the face of environmental degradation: no need to worry about the degradation of the earth. It’s God’s will that we increase our numbers and subdue the earth.

Maybe I was misunderstanding the manner in which the Catholic Church and its followers were looking upon the earth during these years in the 70s. Much has changed since then, no doubt. I was young and reactionary, full of what I was learning in school about environmental destruction, but I was sincere in my concern for the environment and my understanding that the way in which humankind related to the earth and understood its relationship with it mattered.

My father shared my concerns but differed from me in the amount of patience and faith he possessed. He believed the issues and concerns I had would be worked out in time.

He too admired the beauty of the natural world, and saw what he called “God’s grace” ever present within it. He saw it in the breathtaking and large, the Grand Canyon, or he could be talking about something smaller: the movement, the gate, of a German Shepard dog. Perhaps the best measure of his appreciation for the natural world can be understood in the way he painted landscapes in both oil and tempura. If he saw a photograph in a magazine or book that moved him, he would become interested in painting it. If he saw a landscape he admired he’d take a picture of it and then paint it – remarkable the way he took a small 4-inch by 5-inch photo and painted a copy of it three feet square and accurate in all proportions to the original.

Charged with impulse —feeling holier-than-thou and sanctimonious — I walked out of Mass one day when people began to sing “America the Beautiful.” What had gotten into me? I just bolted; left my father standing in the pew with the songbook in his hands. I couldn’t stand it anymore. All the singing about the beauty of the county by people oblivious to how their desires and habits of consumption contributed to the destruction of the planet, the kind of reckless consumption that resulted in the loss of habitat for many animals creating the need for something like The Endangered Species Act passed through Congress the year before. And in the giant parking lot, in one of the richest of counties in the United States, the luxurious, gas-guzzling automobiles awaited the parishioner’s return to comfort and speed as soon as the song was sung.

My leaving church early was not something my father could tolerate easily. He wanted to know what happened. I told him how I felt and why I left. He listened to me with a surprising amount of patience. I think he was angry. But for some reason, on this day, he didn't want to mix it up. He let it go. Perhaps he realized it was pointless – that I needed to work through issues like this for myself. I needed to be more forgiving of human nature – of my brothers and sisters. I had to take a step back and realize, with a humbler heart, just how complex the problems were and how involved and complicit I was already in this economy. He was right in the quiet way he shook his head and continued making our breakfasts: it was something I'd have to work through. He served up fresh coffee and two eggs over easy – pork sausage, the eggs done to perfection, as ever.

My father and I learned that there were some issues that we could not discuss; birth control and abortion – a woman's right "to choose" – were among them. I had been reading Paul Ehrlich's *The Population Explosion*, and understood that human population growth left unchecked would bring catastrophic consequences to the planet: environmental degradation, extensive habitat loss, and species destruction, to mention but a few. Given this scenario, birth control, and arguably abortion, seemed justifiable in my opinion. My father was sympathetic, I think, towards the use of birth control. In the first ten years of his marriage, he had fathered six children. He was only 36. He knew firsthand the demands that a family of that size put upon my mother and him.

Abortion was a different matter. He understood life to begin at the moment of

conception, the Catholic understanding. Therefore, abortion, it followed, was the taking of a "life," and equivalent to murder. I tried to voice the fact that the Supreme Court in *Roe vs. Wade* – a recent ruling at the time, in January of 1973 – held a differing viewpoint as to when life began, arguing that the scientific and religious communities maintained differing views on the subject and that it, the court, was in no position to resolve the matter. The court based its ruling on the question of viability – could the fetus survive outside of the mother or not? In the early stages of pregnancy, it was judged that the fetus could not survive and therefore, it was not to be considered a viable life – in this case, the mother's individual's rights superseded the State's right to protect the potential life. My father's view was based entirely on his Catholic faith. The belief that life begins at conception. There was no arguing him away from his faith. What he would do is to try to argue me around to his faith – the belief that this realm of existence, the realm of the unborn, was sacred and not a place where mankind's law should apply.

The one time I remember getting through to my father about issues related to religion was when I spoke of my opposition to the way in which the sacrament of Confirmation was being conducted in the Church: boys and girls – usually in the seventh or eighth grade – being asked to confirm their faith as Catholics in a formal ceremony without their being able allowed, effectively, to decline. The richness of the sacrament to me centered on the individual exercising free will in "confirming" herself as Catholic – choosing the faith. What child could stand up to the Church and his parents and say "No" I'm not ready to be confirmed in the faith. I revealed to my father my sense of feeling cheated of freely choosing the

faith when I made my confirmation years earlier.

We were in the kitchen and he stood at the sink washing a few dishes after his morning coffee. I was preparing to leave for Idaho for the first time. I don't remember how we got into the argument on Confirmation, but I remember arguing that a child should be able to say, "No, I will not accept it. I will not be confirmed into the faith. I am not ready to be confirmed. If it's ever going to be mine, if it's going to be a vital thing for me, I need to be able to embrace it wholeheartedly by myself, not forced to do so." I remember my father going silent in the kitchen then. I remember his hands still in the soapy water, not moving. He was looking at me and considering what I said. He nodded a little bit – seemed to understand.

Studies

I settled down to my studies at the University of Idaho, living first in a dormitory for a semester and then moving out to share a house with several new friends for the following two years. I took elective courses in literature, never having abandoned the subject since experiencing those great classes in my high school: creative writing and American literature. The class in creative writing introduced me to the writing of poetry and turned me on to contemporary American poetry by way of Hayden Carruth's comprehensive anthology *The Voice that is Great within Us*.

Fortunately, the University of Idaho routinely sponsored a number of poets to come to campus, lead workshops, and offer readings. Gary Snyder showed up

for a week and gave readings and lectures. Like many others, I was impressed with Snyder. I was impressed by the way he bridged his interests in anthropology, the environment, and poetry. Not only that, he was also a writer who had been to Japan, who had lived and studied in Japan for ten years, and a practicing Buddhist. I was intrigued. When he stood at the podium that October afternoon in 1978 in front of a relatively small gathering of a hundred people or so, he beamed a broad smile and graciously thanked everyone for coming out. He then went to check the microphone, counting out “one, two, three,” in Japanese: “*ichi, ni, san* (一、二、三).” Looking up and smiling, he began, teasing us about his use of Japanese. Everyone knew of his background following the introduction. He seemed to want to play on that by counting off in Japanese. His voice was resonant and full of vigor. He was reading from *Turtle Island*, which had come out from New Directions press in 1974 and had been awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1975. One could tell from the way he read that he savored the taste and feel of words, each syllable. He read at normal speed but each syllable was fully articulated. One saw the joy he felt in using language. He introduced a poem that made use of the word “pine” as a verb. He had wanted to do this for a long time, he reported, smiling. And then, a few poems on, and he was chanting in a deep voice. Snyder seemed balanced – calm and joyful. He was alert, energetic, creative, fun, and intelligent.

I began reading much more poetry after that, especially contemporary poetry. Snyder confirmed what I had already sensed. I was more interested in poetry than I had let myself believe. I hadn’t trusted my earlier responses to poetry. Sure, I took a creative writing class when I was a sophomore in high school. Sure,

I wrote poetry, enjoyed writing it despite the difficulty I had in doing so. But I didn't think early on that my interest was any different, any stronger, than that of my classmates. They too were studying poetry, It was simply a class in the curriculum, I reasoned. And the comments I received from the instructor on some of my work – "trite" and "banal" – didn't seem to signal an aptitude for poetry, much less any sort of a calling. And who spoke of poetry as "a calling" in high school anyway? No one seemed to think of it as such. I knew the priesthood was a calling, because that was talked about in church – but this was surely different. And yet, Snyder looked like he had been called. He looked comfortable in his skin. He believed in poetry with a confidence I admired.

Reading poetry became more a part of my life after seeing Snyder and other poets at the university. I think it was the intimacy that drew me – the way a poem on the page could instantly begin a conversation with the reader. In this way, the poem seemed to have a quality of magic about it. I was drawn to that and to the surprising way language could sound and present a variety of images – the way a poem could make your spine tingle when the words fell just right, or the way emotions would suddenly be called up into the open air like a fish being pulled from the deep and desperately now alive in front of your eyes undeniably. I was reading a lot of American poetry now, and becoming aware of West coast poets, especially contemporary poets of the Northwest: Theodore Roethke, James Wright, Richard Hugo, David Wagoner, Carolyn Kizer, and William Stafford.

In the summer of 1978, I had the opportunity to go to Alaska and work for the

U.S. Forest Service at the Kenai National Forest. I volunteered to work on a research project studying the effects of fire on the winter habitat of Dall sheep. The Forest Service wanted to increase the number of Dall sheep and thought that burning would improve the quality and quantity of vegetation the sheep depended on. The Forest Service wasn't sure that burning would produce the results they were after. They needed research. My job was to assist an older biologist who had been a Vietnam veteran and Army Ranger. We would collect data on top of a number of mountains where the sheep wintered. Our first mission was to get to the top of those mountains. This was slow work, bushwhacking up steep slopes. The areas were road-less. We carried radios, topographical maps, and camping gear. We were armed with powerful rifles, Winchester .300 magnums, in case we ran into a grizzly bear, which we did on occasion. Fortunately, at those times we were able to avoid being detected by the bears. During the weeklong training session at the start of the job, I learned that it was always safer *not* to use the rifle against a bear than to use it – better to lie down and play dead rather than fire a round. Those who had used the gun, I was told, usually came out the worse for it: they missed the bear or wounded it, which only made the bear angrier. The best thing to do was to lie down and play dead – hope the bear didn't open you up.

We spent many nights camping out on top of mountains. We also spent many days hiking up and down mountains. We worked ten days on and took four days off. When we weren't up in the mountains, we were at our station, which was located off highway 104, the main road running through the peninsula, from Seward in the south to Anchorage in the north. Our station sat along a gravel

road – nothing but a set of six camper-trailers ten miles from the nearest town of Moose Creek. It housed six biologists for the summer.

When I flew to Alaska out of Seattle, I traveled light – took a guitar, some clothing, and a few books of poetry. Unfortunately, books were very heavy, as I was learning. I could only bring a few. I took an anthology, James Wright's *Collected Poems*, Dick Hugo's *Lady at Kicking Horse Reservoir*, and John Haines' *Twenty Poems*. Haines' work was particularly on my mind because I knew he was an Alaskan poet who wrote beautifully austere poetry that seemed to capture something of the spirit and soul of Alaska. His work and his life intrigued me. He was a former art student at the America University in Washington D.C. who headed up to Alaska in 1948 to set up a homestead near Fairbanks. His poems are haunting in their isolation and quiet – elegant too.

A Winter Light

We still go about our lives
In shadow, pouring the white cup full
With a hand half in darkness.

Paring potatoes, or heads
Bent over a dream
Glazed window through which
The long, yellow sundown looks.

By candle or firelight
Your face still holds
A mystery that once
Filled caves with the color
Of unforgettable beasts.

John Haines

I spent two summers working in Alaska on the research project, and during that time I began to notice more and more that it was the poetry that seemed to be getting the better of me. After stomping through moss bogs, walking up and down mountains, through streams, and under heavy rain (for ten days at a stretch), I needed those down-days of rest to stay at home. On weekends I noticed, I was no longer interested in hiking or fishing. Nor was I interested in reading monographs on bears, sheep, or moose. I was leaning into poetry – books of poetry as well as poetry magazines. By the end of my second summer, I knew my heart was not into biology – or not completely, not enough.

At the University of Idaho, the year before, I was introduced to Plato. When I got to that tract in his writing where he encouraged readers to learn to see beauty in one form and then to go on and learn to see beauty in more forms, I felt as though he were giving me a way to understand the changes I was sensing in myself. I could say now I had learned to see beauty in nature, in the wild, in the deer and the forest, the mountains and prairies, and that now, I was learning to see the beauty of the poem. But not just the poem, I was learning to see beauty in humanity – its complexities, contradictions, and passions. Plato said that if we were to see all the beauty that was present in the world at one time it would be like seeing the face of God – it would be too much for a person to survive. I wanted to see more forms of beauty, and poetry seemed a way to begin seeing more.

During my second summer at the Moose Creek, an emaciated three-month-

old lab-setter puppy showed up at camp. None of us understood how he got there, but we understood why he stayed. He was starved. He was skittish, afraid to be touched and yet hungry for our affection too. He'd come up to us with this tail wagging and yet when our hands went to him he would dive under them and scamper away. I suppose a previous owner had abused him. He was wild, in a sense, and he smelled wild – musky and fetid – the smell of mud and garbage lifting from his sleek black coat. I knew it was bad to feed a stray dog, having heard my father on the subject, so I stayed clear of doing that. If we turned our backs on him I figured, he'd drift off and find a better place to scavenge, find home, or a more promising home than our camp. We were all short-timers after all. We'd be gone by fall, and then what would he do? My mates, however, graduates students in biology, began to feed him – at first it was just a scrap of this or that, but eventually, a collection was taken up for food and a bowl put out beneath the trailer everyday for his expected arrival.

When we would call him for food, he'd never come right away. He was either out in the woods running around or he was hiding nearby. Whatever the case, he'd wait until no one was around and then sneak in to eat, often late at night.

Collectively now, we pledged to try and find a home for him. We had six weeks to accomplish this. If we failed, we could bring him to the pound, or so we reasoned. We didn't know, as things worked out, that there wasn't a pound in the area – nowhere to take the dog when the time came.

When the camp closed in mid-August and the dog was still with us, a deal was struck: we drew straws. The person who drew the shortest straw would take responsibility for the dog – find a home for him in the “lower forty-eight” when

they returned to “civilization.” And that is how I got the dog. I named him after Jackson Brown – called him Jack. Considering Jackson Browne’s many road songs, the name seemed appropriate for an animal like this. And besides, I liked the simplicity of the name: “Jack.” I flew to Seattle with Jack and hitchhiked to Moscow, Idaho for school.

With Jack in tow, it was difficult to find a place to live in Moscow. I could not keep a dog at the home where I used to live. I’d have to look for a new place – and I would have to look fast because school was due to start. I moved out to a small house in Palouse, Washington – about sixteen miles northeast of Moscow. The house was affordable but far away from school, in poor condition, and old. The floors were uneven, and the house teemed with mice. I once trapped sixteen in a single day, my record. It was laughable. I could hardly empty and bait the traps fast enough. I felt as though I were in a Tom and Jerry cartoon as traps popped off around me all day.

The only heat in the house came from the oil stove in the living room. The house was set upon a swale in the middle of a small farming community; the swale was one of countless swales that comprise the Palouse prairie

When Mount Saint Helens blew on May 18, 1980, I had to race back to see about Jack who had been left outside while I was at school in Moscow. He had been left on a long chain, which allowed him quite a bit of room to wander while still allowing him to get up onto the back porch for protection from the elements. Jack had never lost his appetite to roam. If he slipped the chain, he’d be gone for days.

The volcanic ash started falling in Moscow at about eleven a.m. The sky

clouded over and darkened gradually – birds began singing as if it were evening. I had finished classes and was walking downtown for lunch when the ash stopped any immediate concerns about lunch. The more pressing issue now was what to do about the ash raining down – what to do about the sudden darkness and the fits of coughing I began to experience? I had to get out of the ash and find out what it was about – how dangerous was it? How long would it last?

I walked into The Garden Lounge at the old Moscow Hotel, the local watering hole. The Garden Lounge had an old West charm about it. It was situated at the front of the historic Moscow Hotel, one of the oldest buildings in Latah County, a five story red brick building that could hold hundreds of guests. In its prime, it was one of the premier hotels in the area. Recently, it had been renovated. Inside the lounge now were crowds of people taking shelter. Many wore cowboy hats with bandanas wrapped over the lower part of their faces to keep from breathing the ash. Already, we were covered in the ash.

The hotel manager rolled a television into the lounge and turned on the news. I ordered a beer as many others were doing. It was two in the afternoon and pitch black outside – the smell of burnt rubber and glass was everywhere.

The news was not good. No one knew how long the ash would fall. The newscaster on television reports that there could be a second or third eruption. “In Pompeii,” he went on, “the ash fell everyday for weeks. It buried the city thirty feet deep.”

We had about four or five inches of ash on the ground and were learning how dangerous the ash was. It was actually “pyroclastic” – or glass, the newscaster reported and continued, “ when inhaled the ash will agitate the linings of the

lungs, cutting into the tissue. We don't know what longterm health affects it will have. In short, do not go outside. Close all windows. And if you have to go out, wear a mask."

Of course, my home was sixteen miles away and Jack was outside and on the porch. Bad as the ash was, I knew I needed to get home and get him inside. I also knew I'd rather be at my home than stranded in the lounge. It seemed decision time was upon me. The longer I waited the harder it would be to get home – the ash continued falling. There were several other people in the lounge that lived in Palouse. They too wanted to get home despite "the weather," and I had the transportation – a near antique, red '64 Ford "Country Squire" station wagon named "Lucy." If I was going, they were going with me.

I told them of the missing driver's vent window and that my concern that ash might pour in through it. They were undaunted. "We can just jam some cardboard in there and carry on," Lisa quickly replied.

Lisa was my age, a fellow biology student: tall, dark, attractive and determined. She was a real Yankee – from all the way out in Connecticut — but she was used to roughing it, used to camping and hiking in the mountains. She looked at this as though it were just another adventure.

We left the lounge at about three p.m. and headed north out of Moscow. We'd go straight up highway 95 and head west over the Palouse wheat fields just past the town of Viola. First, we would have to get up the steep grade just north of town.

We ran into a road block just outside of town – several construction horses set across the road with yellow flashing lights. There were no police in sight, only a

sign that spoke of the road being closed because of the volcanic eruption. We paused and discussed it. I asked, "How bad could it be up there?" "Not bad enough to turn back," Diamond said. Lisa nodded her ascent and away we went.

Diamond, whose real name was Jeffrey Western, looked something like a cherub. He was smallish and heavysset. He possessed a broad smile and wickedly funny wit. I had driven in and out of Moscow with him on many occasions before. He was an older student, maybe twenty-seven, an army veteran who studied geology at the University. He was used to adventures. We had about eight miles to go before we'd hit the cut off west to Palouse. We drove around the roadblock and over onto the shoulder and then back onto the highway and away.

The road ahead was unclear. It looked like a silver sheet of lead. The headlights shone into a blizzard of falling ash. I followed that sheet of lead as best I could. The cardboard in the vent window was not working well – the ash particles were so fine they flew easily into the car. We covered our faces with bandanas and pushed on. When we hit the grade, the elevated rise in the road, I lost control of the car, and it spun left and right, fishtailing up the mountain. The tires were gliding over glass particles – the road was slick as ice. I had no idea the ash would do this to the road. I steadied the car as best I could. I dropped it into low gear and pushed down on the accelerator gently – still the car was slipping, the tires spinning. But slowly, we progressed, a little at a time, swinging back and forth as we progressed up the grade.

I had the windshield wipers on. It helped with visibility but now the wipers

were stuck – the ash clogged them. They wouldn't move – frozen. I took the cardboard out of the vent window and cleared the window with my hand as I drove.

We are scared, very scared, more scared than we'd probably ever been. We wondered aloud if we would make it to Palouse? We wondered if the eruptions would stop or whether this was merely the beginning? The car was laboring and there was essentially no visibility. It was pitch black and the ash was falling heavily. To get stuck in this kind of storm – well, we didn't want to think about it. If that were to happen, we knew we would have to walk for miles. There were no houses out this way, only wheat fields and forests. We didn't talk much about these scenarios. We understood them as possibilities. Some kind of survival instinct seemed to click alive within each of us. We focused on immediate concerns, though fear was in our voices and in the deliberate way we tried to stay positive. We were working hard to see the thing through – Lisa passed her scarf to me. I cleared the window – Diamond peered ahead and helped me navigate the road.

At last, we crested the hill and felt ourselves gliding towards Viola and the cutoff to Palouse. The worst of it was behind us, we thought. Only six miles to Palouse – heading along a road that cut through the wheat fields.

There was absolutely no one on the road but us, and this road was thinner than the previous highway. We drove ahead at a slow but steady speed, counting every mile. And then, suddenly, Lucy began to wheeze and labor. Soon, she quit – the engine died.

We were miles from any shelter – stranded. The ash kept falling. It even

seemed to pick up in speed. I had heard on the television in the lounge that the ash particles were so small that they can easily clog engines. I was guessing that was what the problem was. I'd been warned.

I got out of the car to look at the carburetor. We all got out. It was like walking on the moon. Each time we stepped onto the six inches of ash, we saw a puff of smoke lift up into the air, a plume of dust so light it kept rising off the ground around our feet as though gravity did not exist to send it back again – it was that fine. Out in front of Lucy, I sprung the hood and gazed into the black world of tubes and metal. I opened the air filter and dug around to the carburetor. All I could think to do was to try and clean the carburetor and see if the car would start. Lisa gave me the scarf again – silk, and red, and sweet with the perfume of life – I hoped right there and then it would save us – even gave it a kiss before I leaned over the carburetor and began to swab the ash away as Diamond held the flashlight. It worked. When I reassembled the carburetor, climbed into the car and turned the key, the old car slowly came to life again. Still, she sounded weak.

We got into town with Lucy choking again in fits and starts, and then she died again, just as we arrived. I put her in neutral and coasted down the hill into town with just enough inertia to glide into a parking space that seemed readymade and waiting to receive us. Now, it was only a four-block walk to our homes. When I got to Jack he was covered in ash and very upset, pulling on the chain, jumping high in the air. He too had been scared, no doubt.

I finished my degree in Biology in December and took a temporary position with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in Southeast, Idaho. I took Jack with me.

It wasn't ideal for him – not much of yard to play in. I had an apartment in a small duplex. Jack could stay there but would need to be kept outside most of time. I'd needed to build a house for him. In the meantime, I told myself I'd continue to see if I could find a home for him with a new owner. Someone out there would be willing to take a dog like this, I thought. He had grown into a good looking lab/setter mix, a long wavy black coat like a setter with the noble head of Labrador retriever – piercing intelligent brown eyes.

I was now living in Grace, Idaho. A community founded in 1889 by Mormon settlers from West Jordan, Utah. I could now tell my father, I thought with amusement, "Dad you won't believe this, but I am, after all these years, actually living *in Grace*." He'd appreciate that.

I worked with a team of biologists, and built computer models that allowed for land reclamation to be carried out in Southwest Idaho where the Monsanto Corporation had been strip mining for phosphate. Monsanto was mining large tracks of public land. And in the future, they would mine more. Recently, they had agreed to reclaim future mining sites. Our job was to look at these future sites and quantify the characteristic quality of the land prior to mining. Specifically, we were asking questions, such as: What is PH level of the soil? What plants grow on the land? What is the composition of the vegetation? What kind of wildlife, and in what numbers, does the land support? What is the water quality like?

Not only did we have to build computer models to do this, we had to collect

the data in the field and enter it into the programs. In the end, it was an extremely labor intensive activity that found me in front of a computer more often than in the field.

Unfortunately, for my fellow biologist and myself, Ronald Reagan had become president in January of 1981, and our project was discontinued as a result of his cutbacks – a hard pill to swallow because we believed in the value and importance of what we were doing. If we *weren't* allowed to document the health and vitality of these ecosystems before they were mined, how would Monsanto *reclaim* the land to something like its original state after the mining operations were concluded? I had flown over this area in Southwestern, Idaho, a wild area not far from Yellowstone National Park, and seen the mountains tops destined to be taken down in the years to come. There were many mountains. Monsanto had a twenty-five year lease on the land and a plan to match it. In the time that I was in this region, I saw and counted large herds of elk from the air. I also occasionally spotted moose and moose calves in the willows along the Bear River. I knew how rich the land was, and I knew what a strip-mined mountain looked like. It was painful to realize that my job, and the fate of what we were trying to accomplish, depended on an election. We were given a two-month notice. I had to start looking for another job.

I also had to let Jack go. I knew that. I had been trying to find him a home for several years now, albeit half-heartedly. I had come to enjoy him – had become attached to him – difficult as he could be with is running away when he got off the leash and disappearing for days.

My trying to find Jack a new home consisted mostly in my asking friends if they knew of any one who would take him. My life was too unsettled, I thought. I didn't have a home in which to raise a dog. I didn't know where or when I was going to settle. I was twenty-four and I expected to be on the move in the years ahead. How could I manage a dog? This whole thing had gone on too long. I had reluctantly helped with the rescue in Alaska but jeez was I going to have to take care of him forever? Sometimes, I would put adds in the newspaper, and run them for a week or so – no responses came. I couldn't put him in a pound. I figured that'd make him as good as dead. I wanted to act responsibly and putting Jack in a pound seemed like a dodge – making Jack somebody else's problem. That didn't seem responsible to me.

I found a job in New Mexico, got a phone call one day. It'd begin in June and last into the fall. I'd be a fire fighter in the Gila Wilderness for the U.S. Forest Service. And "dogs were not allowed."

Putting Jack to sleep was always an option. My father put dogs to sleep when he had to. He didn't make a big deal about it, and he knew some of his dogs a lot longer than I knew Jack. "Sometimes it just had to be done," I'd hear myself saying, repeating my father's words. Still, I couldn't bring myself to act as decisively as that. I had thought bout sure – for several years. Still I took no action. Perhaps I had a bit of that maternal grandfather in me – the man who brought dogs home from the tavern, and saved them. Yes, it would be nice to think I had some of that in me, but I knew what ever I had of him in me it wasn't going to be enough.

I saw I was like my father: I was practical in the end. I remember his turning to me and speaking strongly one day when he came home on a Saturday afternoon. He told my younger brother and me that he had put one of our dogs down because of a flaw in its temperament. It was too timid. My younger brother was seven years old. He ran from the room – crushed. My father turned to me – five years older than my brother and explained: “A dog is a dog, an animal. It’s not a person – no one wants to put a dog to sleep, but you can’t torture yourself about it.”

When I brought Jack into the vet that day, the vet put him up on the table and asked me one more time if I was *sure* I wanted to do this? I was just nodding my ascent now, thinking, “It is *not* something I *want* to do. But I have reached the end of the road and feel it is my responsibility, the responsibility that I am left with.” But I didn’t say anything; I just nodded, “Yes.”

Jack stood on the table with all the innocent excitement of a child at some special event. His tail wagging, not the least concerned. He was waiting to see what would happen next – what excitement awaited him. The vet shaved his paw and the black fur peeled up around the electric shaver, exposing Jack’s tender white skin below. He was shaving the area just above the paw – the wrist area of a man, if he were a man.

I didn’t know what to expect really. I had been around the fact of dogs being put to sleep all my life, but I had never *seen* it. I had never seen poison run up the leg of a dog I cared about. But here it was. And within seconds, Jack was in my arms shuddering and then collapsing hard, so hard and sudden, onto the table

with its clean stainless white paper stretched upon it. I guided his fall as best I could, careful, absurdly, not to let him hurt himself in the fall.

It was horrible – one of the worst things in my life. I felt bad for Jack ending like this. I had betrayed his trust – I had become a killer – there was no absolution I could find. The vet doubled-up a couple of large plastic bags, garbage bags, from under the counter and together we slid Jack into them. I carried him from the room with the acrid smell of poison lifting off his body and mixing with the faint trace of mud, the way he smelled two years earlier when he first showed up, a puppy in Alaska.

The following day a friend and I took Jack's body onto Ninety Percent Range of the Wasatch Mountains and buried him among the sage he liked to run through. We marked his grave with a mule deer antler and some rocks. I didn't pray over his grave but I should have. For years since then, I have had a recurring nightmare in which I kill a *man* and bury him secretly. The dream has never left me completely.

In late May, a few days after burying Jack, I left Lucy behind in Grace with friends and hitchhiked to Silver City, New Mexico to assume my job with the Forest Service. Lucy wasn't strong enough to make the trip, and I was seized with desire to be gone. I wanted to see the country and take my time getting there. How freeing it felt to grab a bag and head out onto the highway and be on my way. And what an edge it gave to the day to *not know* how things were going to turn out. I was ready for this. I called myself Ishmael.

I got all kinds of rides – met all kinds of people – on the journey south. I also got waylaid for long stretches of time where rides didn't come. A silver miner in his late 50s picked me up as I was heading out of Idaho. He was traveling alone, coming down from the Wallace-Kellogg silver mining area of northern Idaho where he lost his job when silver prices collapsed in October of 1980 and the mines closed. He was now on his way south in his beat-up red pick-up truck – depressed and forlorn in search of work in Colorado. I got a rides from young couples and from groups of young people – three or four of them in the car. Sometimes they were drunk, sometimes stoned. I was careful what car I got into and occasionally declined offers to ride. If things didn't look safe, I didn't get in. A man who bragged of being a former CIA operative picked me up. A gay man who wanted to take me to a bodybuilding contest picked me up. An older construction worker driving a pickup truck with a little trailer out back to ask me if I would take the wheel while he went back to the trailer on back picked me up and drove me twenty miles before turning to me and asking me if I would take the wheel while he went back into the trailer and drank some whiskey. When I refused to do that, he got angry – couldn't understand why I'd refuse such a sensible deal. He "needed" that drink. He stopped the truck and let me out into the cool Colorado night. I didn't have to walk far to find a place to roll out my bag for sleep in that high desert.

I picked up my most interesting and frightening ride just south of Farmington, New Mexico. I was heading to Gallup along highway 491 when a blue pick-up truck pulled off the road, its tires rolling noisily over the gravel on the shoulder on that hot desolate stretch. The weather beaten truck had lost its shine to the

desert sun – the dull finish looked soothing in a way – easy on the eyes – no glaring reflection. A heavysset older Navajo woman looked out her open window from the passenger side. She asked if I wanted a ride? I could tell by the way she addressed me in a tired voice, and by the way her husband leaned forward and looked out the window at me eagerly that he was more interested in my riding with them than she was. This ride looked safe. “This was just an older couple on their way home from shopping,” I concluded. I threw my guitar in the bed of the truck and climbed in. The woman kindly squished over and allowed me to get in next to her beside the window.

The man introduced himself and his wife, “I am Chief Joseph and this is my wife, Mary. Would you like some whisky?” I saw now that the Chief was drinking. He had a bottle of Jim Beam in his left hand; his right hand was on the steering wheel with a Marlboro cigarette pinched between his fingers. He would bring his left hand up and take a swig, and then return his hand to the side as he drove. He was taking a swig every few minutes. After he did that, he’d hold the bottle out in front of his wife towards me, shaking it and encouraging me to drink, “Here, have a drink, have a drink?” I waved it off, declining. How could I have gotten myself into this mess: a drunk driver, who was getting drunker? I had a long way to travel. If I started drinking now, how would I manage?

Chief Joseph was a small handsome man in his early forties. His jet-black hair was cut short and his face was clean-shaven. His straw Stetson was lying up against the widow in front of him. It was well worn, bent down at the front and back. His complexion was dark – his eyes penetrating and focused when he’d turn to look at me. With his pick-up truck, his hat, and his cotton blue checked

western shirt with pearl snap buttons, he looked like other western men I'd met coming down from Idaho. His difference was in the way he spoke about the land passing outside the window and in the way he wanted to educate me about it.

"All of this is Navaho land," he said, "and I am a Chief." He wanted me to understand that. "It is dangerous for you to be hitch-hiking across Navaho land but I can protect you," he went on. I knew I was on a reservation. I had seen the signs coming in, but I didn't think much about the fact: the road, U.S. 491, looked like any other road. I expected I was as safe here as anywhere else. Perhaps I was wrong. If he was lying about the dangers here, or about his being a Chief, his wife did not give him away. She said nothing – sat stone still, arms crossed, looking out the window. She was a heavy and had a handsome proud face. Her complexion was lighter than his, fairer, less damaged by the sun. She looked to be about the same age as her husband, maybe fifty. She looked determined and strong. Her long hair was kept in two thick braids that were kept in front of her. I sensed she didn't approve of his drinking or his picking me up – but I also sensed she was resigned to it, and was not going to say anything to opposed it.

"I don't want to live like this – driving around in a truck upon this land – Living in a little house in the suburbs. I want to be free to go and hunt and use a horse. But I cannot, *you* have taken that away from me and given me this reservation – it is too small a place to live." Was he just drunk? I wondered to myself. Was he playing up on some stereotype he thought I had about what contemporary Native Americans wanted? I didn't know how to answer him, but his voice was rising in anger and he wanted a response. He threw the bottle back at my face – "Here, drink!" he demanded.

We had a long stretch of highway to cover, and the Chief began explaining that he'd be stopping every ten miles or so at bars to check on his concessions. "Are you kidding me?" is all I could mutter under my breath to comfort myself. He had "concessions, in bars?" Almost immediately after that, we pulled off into a dusty parking lot in front a small red building with neon Budweiser signs in the windows. This was stop number one.

The Chief insisted I come in with him and help him carry the many cartons of cigarettes inside. His wife stayed in the car. I don't know why I decided to listen to the Chief and go with the flow, but it just struck me that whatever I had thought was going to happen today was *not* happening. I was into something here for good or for ill, and I had better act. He was giving me a lift, I reasoned; I needed to oblige and do something with him, for him.

Once inside the bar, at two o'clock in the afternoon, the Chief introduced me to the bartender and to the men and few women drinking at the bar. It was the first time I had ever heard Navaho spoken. The patrons were all Native American. The men wore their hair long, the women too. In the darkness of the bar, their faces looked weathered and hard. They looked to be in their early thirties – no old men. They stared at me. They looked amused at my showing up but I also felt some some vague sense of hostility. Some had braids that came down in front over their shoulders. Some wore red bandanas around their necks or around their heads. They looked almost stereotypically Native with bead necklaces and bracelets – bracelets and necklaces of silver and turquoise too. Nearly all of them wore jeans and cowboy boots.

The chief checked the jukebox and drained it of its coins. The half dozen or so

people at the bar exchanged quiet words between themselves as the Chief worked. They were not speaking English. The jukebox cleaned, the Chief proceeded to the cigarette machine – drained it of money too and refilled it. I had nothing to do but take the scene in – to look – careful not to stare. With the stock work done, the inebriated Chief walked to the bar and motioned for me to come to. He bought a round of whiskey for everyone, including us. I was obliged to drink now more than ever, and I felt ready to drink, especially after the Chief leaned over and warned if I didn't he'd leave me there.

When we got out of the bar ten minutes later, Mary was behind the wheel waiting. The chief opened the passenger door and slid in next to her. There was no argument. They'd been through this before. She would drive now. We stopped another seven or eight times on the way to Gallup. Each time we stopped we drank. I was learning from the Chief that the Navaho reservation was the largest Native American reservation in the country – that the reservation was located in McKinley county – that 60,000 people lived in McKinley county – that seventy-five percent of them were Navaho – that McKinley County was one of only three counties in the country where the principal spoken language “was *not* English, *not* Spanish but Navaho.”

I was thinking how good it was to know that the Navaho language was being spoken – that it had not disappeared. And then, the Chief began again to talk in a drunk and angry way. He wanted “to live like a Navaho.” The white man had “robbed” him of this chance.” I could feel now, as he leaned forward and stared hard into my eyes, that he was blaming me directly and personally for what had happened to his people. Drunk myself, I tried to assuage his anger and defend

myself at the same time. I told him, "My grandparents didn't arrive in America until the twenties." I was trying to excuse myself from shouldering responsibility for what happened to his people. I wanted to show him that I was not the cause, to protest, and so I said, "I didn't do it! All this happened before my people even arrived!"

There was silence in the cab. My words had fallen flat. They had also fallen on deaf ears. I regretted saying the words as soon as I had finished speaking. I didn't even have confidence in them myself – did that simple fact that my family arrived in the country so late really absolved me of bearing any responsibility for what had happened – is happening – to his people? I knew I should listen to him – hear him out. He had something to say. And he wanted to say it "face to face to a white man." He needed to get it said.

He turned angrier, raised his voice and said, "You're guilty as hell!" He brought his head around and turned his neck so that his face was facing directly into mine in a twisted and contorted way. I saw his very dark eyes screwing down and focus as they fought to resist the blurring pull of alcohol. He saw me as complicit to the extent I had bought into the culture that was damaging him and his people. He held up his package of Marlboro and screamed at me, "This, this, this, this!" He held up his bottle of whiskey and screamed something about the Irish making whiskey. He went on talking in a drunken accusatory way. I wasn't listening to what he was saying anymore – the logic was gone. It was just a rage, a wave of emotion unleashed. I felt that much, and understood that. I could say nothing in response. I felt that what he was saying was true: I was involved in the same system that hobbled him. I drew benefits from it. And I

knew the system couldn't have developed and thrived without the appropriation of Native lands. There was truth in what he was trying to say.

In the drunken fog of my thought, I wondered how I could *not* be a part of it. And if I couldn't or wouldn't escape, I should at least accept my portion of blame. But I don't think the Chief expected me to offer an apology. What good would that do? He wanted me to listen. And somewhere in the midst of his speaking, I came to understand that that is what he wanted. My mind changed and I began to see things differently. I had the great honor of staring directly into the face of a Native American. Considering the fact that so many of them have been exterminated – erased from our history – shouldn't I count myself lucky to have this audience? The Chief wanted to speak to a white person face to face, to drink with him and talk with him – to share a particular song with him. Why not then, I thought, hear the song? Why not appreciate it. Why not try to understand that beneath the landscape I had blithely traveling over was a this deep rooted song – this American song that could still be heard – was still alive?

Chief and I stopped speaking to each other; five minutes later, he slumped against my shoulder, passed out, sound asleep. Mary continued driving towards Gallup and then a little east so that I could have a good running start for Albuquerque.

I jumped from the truck in a hurry. I had spent all afternoon with "Mary" and "Joseph." Strange to say, I thought – strange the way it was strange to say; I was

living “in Grace” when I was in Idaho. I was more than ready to get out and on my way.

Mary pulled the truck to the side of the road, and I said a quick goodbye and thanked her. She nodded and made a U-turn off the shoulder and across the highway – headed home with the Chief. It was just about sunset and I had the night ahead to worry about. I was drunk, but alert, could feel the adrenaline waking me – I had to find a place to sleep before too long. Suddenly, with a fright, I realized I had left my guitar – my beautiful Guild D-25 – in the bed of the pick-up truck. There was nothing to do. I was stranded out along this highway, a mile or two from a telephone, and I didn’t know the Chief’s number anyway. I thought I’d wait – let the sun sink further – hope Mary would notice the guitar in time. And then, I saw her coming; the pick up truck came racing towards me. Somehow, Mary spotted the guitar in the bed and hurried back with the Chief still asleep in the car. I got a ride soon after that and made it straight into Albuquerque and found a place to sleep in a new building just under construction.

When I got to Silver City, I had to make my way into the mountains where the Gila National Forest’s Visitor Center was located. I would meet the Fire Chief there. I caught a ride from “bare-foot Bob,” as he as he liked to call himself. He had just bought a six-pack of beer in Silver City and was heading north to Pines Altos on his small motorcycle – the beer strapped to the seat behind him with bungee cord. He took the beer off the seat, and I climbed on, held it in my lap,

and away we went. Like many of the men I met in those days, Barefoot Bob was a Viet Nam vet – about forty years old. His longish brown hair was graying and thinning. I could see his right leg had been injured some years ago. The foot was mangled and there was scarring at the bottom of his shorts around the knee. Some of the scarring must have come from burns. It was late in the afternoon when he picked me up and offered to let me stay the night. He also invited me to buy another six-pack so we would be well supplied. I obliged, and we headed back into Silver City for beer.

I didn't know what to make of his asking me to buy another six-pack other than suspect he was hard up financially and a bit of drinker. As things turned out, he *was* a bit hard up financially, living on disability from the war. He didn't need to work if he could live frugally enough, which he seemed determined to do.

His house was located up the mountain just off the road. The area was sparsely populated with few homes. Bob's home was a small, green, one-floor, modest home. It was set on five acres of wooded land. He was married to a Mexican woman who spoke English with difficulty, and they had two small children – daughters, five and three years old. The family kept goats and chickens in the yard – both had the run of the place. And true to his name, Barefoot Bob never wore shoes. In fact, he rather insisted on *my* experiencing bare-footedness for myself. Late in the afternoon when a sudden lightning storm came in, he pleaded with me to go outside and dig my bare feet into the ground and *feel* the lightning. He had this idea that the lightning had regenerative power – something about electricity finding its way into the body – it made you

stronger, more alert. “We need more contact with the earth,” He kept telling me. He liked the word, “contact.” According to Barefoot Bob, we all suffered from a lack of contact with the earth: “We need to touch the earth with our skin . . . feel the wind on our faces, taste the quality of simple food.”

On the side of a mountain, beneath the protection of pinyon pines, I buried my feet into the loose soil and waited for lightning to flash across the sky and bury its charge into the ground. “I need some healing power,” I was telling Bob. I saw lightning crack across the sky, and heard the rolling peels of thunder reverberate above, but I didn’t feel anything beneath me. Even so, Bob could. Every time lightning slammed down, he screamed in ecstatic joy and the children followed suit – it was call and response. Either Bob was mildly touched or he believed what he was telling me. I didn’t know what to believe. And for some reason, this didn’t bother me.

That night we sat down to a simple meal of pinto beans, goat cheese, tortillas, salad, salsa, and beer – everything but the beer came from their home. In the morning, I woke to the sound of a bell clanking from a goat’s neck, and the scent of pinyon pine wafting through the screen-less windows. The sun was up but the surrounding mountains kept us in the cool shade for a while. In that quietness and stillness, I felt myself rejuvenated, rested, and ready for a big day. Maybe Barefoot Bob was right about the lightening. I was ten miles from my destination. From here, I’d travel straight up into the mountains.



The last ride I caught, I caught standing right out in front of Barefoot Bob's place. I got a ride from another Bob: Buffalo Bob. He drove a utility van with the head of a white buffalo painted on the side – the name of the business arching around the top of the painting in the form of a rope, a lariat: "Buffalo Bob's Plumbing." The huge white buffalo head took up half the panel. In the background were green pasturelands, mountains and rivers. This was a mural shaped like a large cloud. The painting was repeated on both sides of the van in surprising detail. When I stepped into the van and told Bob where I was heading, he told me to relax. He'd "take me all the way to the station," then he put his hand out and introduced himself, "I'm Buffalo Bob."

At first, I thought Bob was in the circus – channeling Buffalo Bill Cody or something. I figured he had this van so he could travel about to various events or such. I figured the plumbing must come in as a side job. I just couldn't believe someone would actually call themselves Buffalo Bob and be serious about it. But it wasn't like that. He was serious. He had had a "vision," he was telling me. "After I came back from Viet Nam, I fell in with a motorcycle gang in L.A." He hunched over the steering wheel, and looked straight ahead. His long graying hair poured down around his sun-darkened face. He looked more like a Native American than I had thought at first, but he wasn't a Native American. He was as white as I. He didn't look at me when he spoke. He just continued talking,

“Something happened in Viet Nam, and then in L.A., I am not going to talk about Nam. I was simply lost after the war. I came home to L.A. – got into a gang and got caught up in drugs and violence. One day I woke up in a hospital busted up worse than ever. I wrecked my bike on the Santa Ana Freeway. I must have been going seventy miles an hour. I passed out, I think – too many drugs – I don’t even know what drug or drugs did it – just fell over – skidded a hundred feet or so.

I was in a coma for weeks. When I woke up I had two broken legs, broken ribs, concussion, and all kinds of burns, rips, and tears. I could barely see out of my eyes because my head was so busted up. It took months to heal – half a year to walk – but while there, while in the hospital looking up at the ceiling so many days, I had a vision. I dreamed a white buffalo came to rescue me and lead me out of L.A. Do you know what a white buffalo means to Native Americans?” He broke off to ask me. “No,” I said, “I didn’t.” “Well,” he continued, “It’s a holy animal, and if you’re lucky enough to see one in your life, or in your dreams, you need to pay attention to it – get your notebook out and try to discern what it’s telling you. The buffalo showed me this valley,” he said, as he moved his head to the left and right, his eyes scanning the countryside before turning his eyes back my way, and continuing, “Do you understand? It showed me these mountains – this place – I saw it in a dream before I ever came here. I saw the name of the town – that sign there! I saw that in my dream.” He pointed out the window to the road sign for the town of Pinos Altos and continued again, “It shown me a way out of L.A., a way out of that lost world of decay and death. It showed me how to make a clean break, and I decided, right there and then, that as soon as I

could walk straight, I'd leave that place, and make it to this place I saw in my dreams. I did that. I came; I changed my name, legally. And I never looked back. I became Buffalo Bob."

All of this sounded New Age to me. Perhaps he had read too many Carlos Castaneda books – perhaps drugs supplied by the hospital induced the vision. At the same time, I had to admit, it was pretty amazing – a man like this listened to a dream, a vision, and change his life accordingly – went from gang member to plumber and relocated to a quiet valley in New Mexico. Whatever *it* was that made him do it, he did it and it made a great difference in his life.

As we drove up the mountain, acquaintances and neighbors waved to him and honked their horns in greeting. In the bright morning sun, he looked to be thriving: clear sober blue eyes, a bright smile, and a joyful peaceful composure about him. He told me again, "I'll take you all the way to the ranger station. I got a stop near there. You can just relax."

Buffalo Bob knew lot about this country we were driving through. He loved the place – this spot in the world that he called home and from which he drew so much nourishment. Every few minutes he would blurt out something to notice or to be aware of about the land, "The tallest mountain is over 10,000 feet and holds snow nearly all year. These mountains are great to hike through because there is little under story. The pinyon pine – 'pinyon' means pine nut in Spanish – sheds oils that make it difficult for under story to grow. You can walk easily beneath these trees for miles. Just watch out for Copperheads."

I saw packhorses out the window as we climbed higher and mentioned

this to Bob. Bob corrected me, "They're actually probably mules." We saw a man leading three of them upwards along a river. They looked weighed down with packs. They were heading into the wilderness – the road less area. Bob commented further, "In addition to pinyon pine, we have aspens, and Douglas firs, and juniper. We also have oak and cactus at lower elevations. In fact, this whole area – the Gila National Forest and the wilderness area are unusual for having a great variety of ecosystems. We have black bears here and mountain lions. The wilderness was designated The Gila Wilderness on June 3, 1924, the first designated wilderness area in the world!" June 3rd? My birthday. It was good to know that the first wilderness area in the world was established on my birthday. Whenever I celebrate my birthday, I'll lift my glass to the Gila.

And so why did you come down here anyway?" Bob wanted to know.

I told him about the Forest Service job and the plan to fight fires. I told him I came down from Idaho. I confessed I wasn't I wanted to work for the Forest Service – not sure I wanted to share living quarters anymore – wasn't sure government work was something that I wanted to do in the future.

I told him about Jack. I told him that I made the journey despite my doubts. I wanted to bust out. I thought the trip would help me decide whether or not to stay with the government or whether to change my life, like he suddenly did in L.A. Maybe I was on the wrong road with biology and the Forest Service. I knew I wanted to write, to try and write. I'd love to do something like the poet John Haines did – go off and homesteaded in the wilds of Alaska – have time to read in the evenings and write. I wasn't tough enough as that though – or brave

enough – I knew that. I couldn't face a life as insecure as Haines did, making a living without some regular income, a paycheck. One needed money after all, I thought. And further, as much as I was drawn to writing, I also lacked confidence that I *could* actually do it.

Bob was sympathetic. He offered to take me to the Fire Chief at the ranger station and wait for me as I went in to talk with him. He said, "You go in and meet with him. Drop your things off. I only have a few jobs today. I'll show you more of these mountains. I know some hot springs you should try, and I want to show you the Anasazi ruins."

I wasn't sure what the Anasazi ruins were, but the itinerary sounded like what I needed. When we arrived at the fire station, I got out of the van and went in. The Forest Service station smelled like the other stations I had experienced in Idaho and Alaska – the smell of disinfectant and linoleum – a profoundly institutional smell. I saw one smiling photograph of Ronald Reagan over the shoulder of the receptionist. On the bulletin board was Smokey the Bear beside a trash can warning about cigarettes and forest: "Remember only YOU can prevent forest fires."

When the Fire Chief came out to greet me, I was already having doubts, from simply smelling the place, about whether I wanted to spend the summer here. He was gruff and to the point. There was nothing personable, warm, or charming about the man. He stood before me in his green Forest Service uniform, shirt unbuttoned at the top. He was in his late thirties, tall, strong and straight. His brown hair was cropped short and his suntanned face glowed in the morning

sunlight that cascaded through the window beside him. After taking my name and checking it off the list on a clipboard, he began warning me of the *dangers* I had gotten myself into by accepting the job. I could see what I had gotten myself into, and what kind of man I would be expected to answer to throughout the summer. He was staring over my head and reciting a litany of instructions in a bored and mechanical fashion, as if he had delivered this talk countless times, “You can unload your bags across the road at the fire station. Your bunk will be in another building. It is important for you to report to work on time. You’ll be on a ten-day shift – ten days on and four days off. You are expected to remain in the barracks throughout the summer, and when we have fires you’re going to have work like hell. Is that clear?” “Yes,” I replied. And then he began again to explain further, “Fire fighting is serious business – people die. Rules have to be respected...”

Somewhere in the middle of his second explanatory talk, I knew I didn’t want to accept the job. I wanted to accept what some other persistent, yet vague, voice was offering – the voice of intuition that I could sense was turning me back towards Idaho and a different life. Smoky the Bear was on the wall. His could be pointing that furry paw at me, I thought with a laugh. He’s saying, “Only YOU *can prevent* this fire. Only you can prevent yourself from being led astray!”

My convictions grew as I listened to the Fire Chief. Finally, to my own astonishment, I interrupted him to say I had decided against the job – I’d not be accepting it. He was dumbfounded at first, then angry. Suddenly, he had the look of someone who wanted to begin shouting, but then, just as suddenly, it was gone out of him. He seemed to know it would have been of no use. He just

threw his hands up in the air, turned his head from side to side and walked out of the room and back to his office at the end of the hall. I stood there alone in the quiet with pictures of President Ronald Reagan and Smokey the Bear on the wall. And I remembered, standing there, that long ago night when I told the boss at Kentucky Fried Chicken that I would be leaving. But unlike then, I was calm now, and happy. I could feel a wave of excitement lifting my spirits. I had made a decision - a crazy wild sort of intuitive decision. In doing this, I had faced my fears of the unknown. I had no idea what I would do now - or more importantly how I would survive the summer and beyond, but my fears concerning that did not prevent me from responding to a deeper urging within myself that seemed true. I was proud of myself, not in a vain sort of way, but proud of having mustered some kind of courage for once - to have mustered courage and done what I felt in my gut was the right thing to do. I felt I was beginning to turn my life in the direction it wanted to go.

Out in the van, Buffalo Bob wanted to know what had happened. He laughed when I told him about the incident. He told me I could stay with him until I sorted things out. He would find work for me to do, and I could earn some money before heading back to Idaho.

We drove higher into the mountains. When we got to the crest, about four or five thousand feet in elevation, he pulled the van over into a flat area. I saw a forested valley below and mountains lifting high across it on either side. "Whenever I get this high along this road," he told me, "I like to stop and pray."

“Well, that’s interesting, and kind of understandable as this is an awe-inspiring spot,” I was thinking to myself. But before I had time to comment, he was out the door and walking away. He went alone while I waited. He walked over to a red granite rock that jutted fifty feet out over the valley. It looked like a shard – a spear – thrown into the side of the mountain. It rested at about a thirty-degree angle and was about ten feet thick. I saw flecks of light glittering off its surface in the sun. He walked down under it and disappeared.

I waited for about ten minutes before he climbed back into the van. He apologized. Whatever he was doing – however he was praying – he didn’t tell me. And I didn’t feel I needed to know.

We drove to the hot springs now. There were many hot springs sprinkled throughout the forest, and many more, he said, in the wilderness area. The springs that we went to were not in the wilderness area but they were remote enough. They sat in a high mountain valley near a glittering stream ran closely by the steaming pools of water. We undressed and got separate pools about ten feet in diameter. These springs were natural – undeveloped, unless you could say that the rocks placed around them by past visitors was some kind of development.

There was no one there but us. We heard nothing but the gusting wind, the sound of water, and the occasional cry of a red-tailed hawk. The heat soaked into our bodies and took the day’s tension away. It took the week’s tension away – the months’ of tension. I could feel the muscles in my legs relaxing as the tiredness slipped away from them, the tiredness brought on by many miles of

walking – a week of hitchhiking. The sky was blue and there were butterflies in the air – the wild flowers bloomed around us. Bob pointed into the distance far above the valley into the mountains. “That’s where we’re going next. You can just see the front of their homes there.”

After our soak, we drove up to visit those homes of the Anasazi. We were literally walking inside the rooms they once inhabited. Bob talked of the Anasazi, of how they abandoned these homes between 1130 and 1180 AD and drifted down into the valleys below to eventually become known as the “Pueblos” – named by the Spanish because they lived in villages. “Pueblo meant ‘village’ in Spanish, He told me.

During the next week, I drove through this beautiful country and worked with Bob on plumbing jobs. We worked on new homes and old. We unstopped toilets; we installed new toilets. We worked part of everyday and make time to hike through the mountains that Geronimo and his Apache band knew in the Gila Mountains. We looked at more Indian ruins and soaked in more hot springs. We checked out local art museums to see the pottery of the ancient Mimbres Indians whose culture may have evolved from Anasazi. The Mimbres occupied the area about a thousand years ago. They remain an enigma to archeologists because they seemed to have simply disappeared without a trace.

I enjoyed quiet meals at Bob’s trailer – dinners prepared with fresh corn, hot peppers, and tomatoes pulled from the garden. The evening before I was to leave, at just about sunset, Bob sent me out to the garden to pick a few ears of corn. As I stood in front of the corn and was about ready to move through the

half acre of it, I notice a young woman in the garden adjacent to Bob's. She too was out in the early evening to pick corn. She was stunningly beautiful, slim and dark and wearing a white summer dress. She wore her jet-black hair long and loose. Her eyes were a clear piercing brown. They were full of sparkle and light. Her complexion was smooth and clear, radiating strength, grace, and peace.

There was an ideal to her that seemed visionary in quality – dreamlike – that remains so today. If I close my eyes, I remember her saying “good evening” as we stood before our respective gardens, waiting to go in and harvest. If I close my eyes, I remember her introducing herself and her infant son, who rested quietly in her arms under blue blankets. She was nineteen, and a Native American.

If I close my eyes, I remember her bare feet on the cool earth, and I see again her smile, the way her teeth lit up the smile lines around her lips. I see her rocking her child; I hear her humming a song as she steps into the corn. I hear the rustling of corn as she brushes against the stalks, the tearing sound – ears of corn being ripped opened, inspected, and dropped into the basket she placed on the ground.

We were harvesting corn, she and I. We were harvesting our dinners. In the morning, I left for the north, rested and well fed – and happy.

Idaho

“ . . . when it comes down to the nitty gritty, ‘Idaho’ is a word that originally didn't mean a thing. ‘Idaho’ is somewhat akin to “Oregon,” a name whose origin and meaning . . . are shrouded by the often dense fog of history.”

The Oregonian, March 27, 2010

Back in Idaho, I picked up Lucy and drove west across the state and north towards Moscow. I knew plenty of people in Moscow; I figured I could sort things out work-wise. I wanted to stop working for the government. I wanted to turn away from a career in biology, and begin to explore this desire to write – to find a place, a space, where I could do that.

Lucy was still an undependable ride. The worse thing about her was the way she lost oil. I had to keep an eye on the oil gauge and make sure I put a quart in whenever the needle edged toward empty. I never bother filling her up with oil completely. I figured the weight of the oil and gravity would just force the oil out that much faster. I thought I would just keep enough oil inside to prevent the engine from seizing up.

By the time, I got to Cascade, Idaho – about halfway between Boise and Moscow – I was running low on money. I counted thirty bucks in my wallet – maybe enough to get to Moscow, maybe not.

My friend Dave lived just north of Cascade in the small town of Donnelly. He was a good friend, a few years older than me. When I got close to Donnelly, I pulled over and called him from a small pay phone outside a diner. It was 7 p.m. the light of day was beginning to fade and a steady rain was falling. Large clouds

of fog were lifting up through the valley and up the forested mountains east and west. There was a hush in the valley, a quietness that seemed to settle upon me as I stood on the phone waiting for Dave to answer. When Dave answered the phone, I began to explain to him where I was, and he began to give me directions to his home, but then suddenly gave up on the idea. He would come and get me. I waited for him to show up in his red Datsun pick-up, an old, rusted, and beat-up truck.

Dave's house was located in the middle of Long Valley – a flat open pastureland that runs five miles north and south near the Oregon – Idaho border. It was the only visible house in the valley; I could see the porch light – a star in a sea of darkness – as I followed along behind him in my car. He lived in a small red house that appeared to have been dropped out of the sky – no other buildings around but a barn. He lived here with his dog, Sadie, a St. Bernard mix. She was an awkward looking, lumbering, giant beast, but gentle and affectionate too.

When Dave first met me at the diner, Sadie leapt from the bed of the truck and hit the pavement with such force she nearly toppled over. And when it was time for us to leave and Dave slapped the bed of the truck to signal her to jump in, she jumped up and stalled – her front legs up, but her back legs rooted to the ground. She turned to Dave, as she usually did I supposed, with a droopy pleading look, her tongue out and wagging, as if say, "This is as far as I go buster. Give me a lift. I can't make it on my own."

And Dave obliged: he lifted her hindquarters into the truck.

Dave was twenty-six year old. He was a politically left-leaning, socially engaged, activist-oriented, music-appreciating, counter-cultural type ranch hand. Of course, he wasn't the stereotypical idea of a ranch hand. He generally went unshaven and managed to grow a scraggly red beard every two weeks or so. This red beard contrasted with his thick brown hair, which he parted to the side. He had a large, beak-shaped, nose, which made him look intense, which in fact, he was. If you picture Vincent Van Gogh in his self-portraits, you would get a pretty good idea of what Dave looked like. What he believed in, he believed passionately in. To repeat, he was not anyone's idea of a ranch hand – too short, too thin – too smart, too inquisitive – a great reader on social justice and environmental issues. The night I arrived, I saw the *Utne Reader*, *The Whole Earth Catalogue*, *Star-News* (the local newspaper) and *Sierra* strewn across the kitchen table. And right beside these were an oil smudged Datsun truck manual, a carburetor, a bag of tortilla chips, and a bowl of fresh homemade salsa. No television.

Dave was a ranch hand without a horse, a ranch hand that got to wherever he was going with Datsun truck. He frequently took the truck off-road, up hills, and through pasturelands. He worked on the Loomis ranch, a cattle and sheep operation that dated back to the 1870s. Dave was originally from San Francisco and had come to meet the Loomis family when he came to Idaho as a troubled teenager to take part in an evangelical Christian summer camp. The Loomis family sponsored the camp and took some interest in Dave, whose alcoholic father had abandoned the family when Dave was a child. When Dave dropped

out of his studies at the University of Idaho a year earlier, the Loomis family offered him work on the ranch. He jumped at it because he wanted to remain in Idaho rather than return to California. He wanted to do physical work and he wanted to do it out here in this beautiful valley.

Sitting inside his sparsely furnished ranch house that evening, Dave began to explain to me that he was *not* a Christian. He said, "I'm not a Christian, at least not a Christian in the way that Mrs. Loomis would understand herself to be a Christian, a fundamentalist. If she dies and goes to heaven – heaven ain't the place I want to be." He quipped and smiled.

Dave wanted to return to his studies at the University of Idaho eventually and complete his degree. He had taken general study courses and progressed as far as he could go with them before declaring a major. Not knowing what to declare, he decided to give himself a little time to think about it and so he came down here to work.

He hoped one day to join the Peace Corp, he told me. But for now, he was content to check fences, make repairs, and sometimes build new fences. He moved sheep and cattle around from range to range – loading them into trucks and transporting them from one pasture to another – some pasture lands were five miles apart – mostly Loomis land, on occasion Federal land. Sometimes he tagged cattle. He stapled yellow tags into their ears. The tags provided information on the animal's age, vaccination history, and other information. This stapling was dangerous business because it involved herding cattle, one by one, in single file, into a manually operated squeeze-chute that the operator had to

clamp down around when the animal was inside of it. Dave had to squeeze the chute tight around the animal's body in order to keep it from moving while he tried to staple a tag to its ear. One day, after having squeezed a couple of hundred steers into the chute – while another man pinned the tags into the animals' ears, Dave got careless. He didn't lock a steer down in the chute, and the steer kicked so hard it threw the heavy iron gates back against his hand and shattered the bone in his forefinger so badly it never healed correctly.

As things turned out, on this particular evening while I was visiting with Dave, he announced that he was in sore need of help on the ranch and asked me to stay for a few months and work. He didn't expect Loomis to pay much – but there were endless jobs to do and he felt he could easily talk Loomis into hiring me. He put it this way, "If you want a little place to hole up, make a little money, and have some quiet time to work, this could be a start?" With thirty bucks in my pocket, and a car falling to pieces, Dave's idea certainly had merit.

The ranch house sat completely isolated in the middle of a wide valley that ran two miles wide and five miles long. Mountains sat to the east and to the west. It was a small red house with three bedrooms. Like Dorothy's house in the film *The Wizard of Oz*, the house looked as though it had been lifted off the ground from some other place and dropped here in new, and I hoped, magical location. There were no sidewalks, no trees. The house sat a mile from the nearest highway along a gravel road at the outskirts of the town of Donnelly, population 114.

This was not a house that anyone lavished attention upon – nothing beautified the place – no shutters, no flower, no new paint. It was decidedly unkempt – the grass in front and all around grew wild – the pathway to the front door was a dirt path. A couple of wood stumps out front functioned as lawn chairs. Across the road, a fenced pasture held a hundred sheep or so – behind the house – fifty cows and their calves in a pasture. Dave showed me one of the bedrooms. It had a small desk and a view facing east. “What do you think? Do you think you could live here, work here, write a little bit?” He asked.

I didn't *know* if I could write anywhere, to tell the truth. There was little in my experience that gave me confidence in writing. I had not received any special praise or encouragement. I had not won awards. Writing was difficult – had always been. There was no reason that I should believe I had the least bit of talent for it, whatever talent was. What I knew – and I knew in the bone – was that I wanted to be *able* to write – that I wanted to be *able* to express myself in writing. I was excited by the potential writing offered – what writing could do – how worlds could be shaped and made through it. Schools couldn't help, or didn't seem to help. I had fallen behind many of my classmates in writing ability. Perhaps this was on account of my moving between schools during my early education. Perhaps, it was because of the poor quality of instruction I received during my first year of high school in North Carolina. Perhaps I was deficient in the requisite skills. The reasons didn't matter that much. It was more about response. I could control that much – how I would respond to what I felt within myself.

Prior to studying at the University of Idaho, I studied for several years at a junior college in Illinois. I found Peter Elbow's book, *Writing Without Teachers*, in the college bookstore. I read the book with interest and was heartened to realize there was much I could do to improve my writing on my own. At the University of Idaho, I bucked at being required to take a freshman composition class again. I didn't mind the taking of the class so much as the way the class was being taught: we were taught over the course of fifteen weeks how to write a quick essay – five paragraphs in fifty minutes. The class was graded on a pass/fail basis. Either you could do it or you couldn't. I was stubborn in a very sophomoric way. I wanted an essay to be more than that. I thought it could be.

I ask the instructor if I could work on my own and write the kind of essays that I was interested in writing and submit those. I didn't see why we were being asked to write the essays so quickly and no one provided an adequate explanation to me on that. I wanted to spend more time on them. I had been reading the great essays of Wendell Berry. I was aware of what a great essay could do. I was anxious to begin in that direction even if I did lack the requisite skills and understanding. The essay seemed like a glorious form to me. I couldn't get my heads out of the clouds.

My instructor agreed to let me do this. I like to think she was swayed by my sincere passion to have a go at it. I did not have to attend class. I gave my essays to her as I completed them. We discussed them in her office after I had written them. I was having many problems with the writing I am sure. But I enjoyed the problems and felt I could learn from them and continue to progress. I wrote my required five essays during the course and handed them in. I felt satisfied that I

had fulfilled the requirement. But there was a problem.

I was not aware of the fact that I was required to show up to write an “exit essay” in the official blue book, the small paper notebook of some five pages, that all the students were required to write the exit essay in. And a few days after classes finished, my instructor gave me a call to tell me this and report that she could not give me a grade, and that I would have to come in and talk with the Dean.

I went in to see the Dean with trepidation, not only was he a professor of English and the Dean, but his doctorate was from Harvard. He was a large heavy-set man in his mid forties. The secretary called my name, and I went into the wood-paneled office. I was instructed to sit down. He did not sit down but paced about the room, taking it in turns to look out the window and back at me. He read the notes the teacher had left for him. He read them out loud to me, “Doesn’t want to be in class . . . self motivated . . . wants to write longer essays outside of class.” And then he turned to me, and said, “Hmm,” in a questioning and somewhat mocking way, suggesting he didn’t believe what the note said, or the aspirations conveyed.

The Dean’s voice was loud and clear. There was a theatrical quality to the voice – a deeply resonant voice in which many of the “r” sounds were dropped, a characteristic of the Boston accent. He held the notes the instructor had written about me behind his back; he held some of my essays there too. He turned to me and said, “I have spoken with your instructor about you and the arrangements she made with you. First, you should understand that she had no right to make such arrangements, and secondly, you should know that she won’t be teaching

here anymore.” The Dean sounded sure and certain. I felt bad for the instructor. Her husband was a Professor of English at nearby Washington State University. I knew she’d probably be all right financially, but to dismiss her for working with a student in this way seemed unjust. The tenor of his voice, the curt way he cut to the issue and informed me of his actions, signaled our meeting would be brief. We were *not* going to have a discussion.

“Can you write a five-paragraph essay in 50 minutes?” He wanted to know. “Can you write under the pressure of time and do the writing in a classroom where the instructor can be *sure* you’re the author?” He asked. “After all,” he continued, “anyone could have written these essay! How do *we* know *you* wrote them?” He held the essays and notes between us and lifted them into the air. He was fifteen feet away and still standing. “I want you to come in tomorrow, sit down outside the office, and write an essay in fifty minutes. I will assess it pass/fail. If you *don’t* want to do that, you can register for the course again and take it the way everyone else does.”

I felt the sting of humiliation and condescension. I felt indignant. On another level, I felt proud, sure, and confident. I was glad I acted on impulse and asked the instructor if I could work in the way I did. I was confident that what the instructor and I had arranged was more productive in the long run than the experience of sitting in the composition class would have been. Fifteen weeks of writing on my own with guidance and weekly tutoring sessions was rewarding. The young teacher shared my enthusiasm for writing. She treated me with respect and believed in my intentions and interests. She encouraged me and helped me believe in myself. For all of that, I was grateful. And I knew the Dean

would not be taking that away from me.

I was not going sit outside his office and write an essay to demonstrate my ability. I would take the class in composition “like everyone else.” I was satisfied now and strangely confident. I had become surer of my interest in writing. I would be OK to take another class in writing, even a composition class.

At the house in Donnelley, I began exploring writing in earnest. Dave and I had considerable downtime on the ranch. If it rained, there was little work for us to do. I was free to write. I made good use of the library and the local bookstore in McCall about twelve miles away. By “earnest” I mean I allowed myself time to write. I was deliberate about it. I was trying to write poems mostly, and I was reading American contemporary poetry.

I was also taking time to do the kinds of things I couldn’t do when I was in school or working. I was hiking in the nearby mountains, alone. In October, I hiked into the River of No Return wilderness for a week, managing to get thirty miles back beyond any roads. I was awakened in the middle of the night by mating call of elk in rut, their “bugling” and crashing of antlers as they fought within meters of my tent. It was the wildest sound I have ever heard – a dance between opposing forces in the night, fighting for the right to procreate.

To be alone in the wilderness was a bit frightening. I had to stay alert, be careful. This was especially true when sudden overnight snows swept in and covered the hiking trails. I could not afford to lose track of those trails, especially

high in the alpine areas where it was often cold and windy. When I would lose the trail, my training in Alaska kicked in. I studied the topographical maps as my U.S. Army Ranger friend, Lee Culberson, had taught me to do. Carefully, I found my way out. Camping high in the mountains alone – lost and then found – I enjoyed the brilliant stars packing the sky, and the great blessing there of silence.

Some years earlier, a friend and I had come down from Moscow in January to ski up into the mountains around McCall. There were hot springs twenty miles north, and we wanted to find them. We had the fine idea of taking our cross-country skis and heading in along an abandoned logging road to see if we could locate the springs. The springs had been developed fifty years earlier and then abandoned. They were still operational but they were not really a going concern. One could rent a cabin near the springs from an individual who lived next to the springs for almost nothing. My friend, Tom, had made arrangements for us to stay in one of those small cabins. The trick was to get there.

We rose at four a.m. in Moscow and began packing. Tom pulled the Turkey he had been cooking overnight from the oven and began to “debone” it so that it would be lighter to carry. He spoke about deboning the bird with great passion, as if he had done it all before. Early in the morning with the bird pulled from the oven and splayed out on the kitchen table, I knew we were in trouble. With time running out for our departure, he had to slice off as much meat as he could, as best he could and get it packed away. He was in over his head, hacking here and hacking there, but he had enthusiasm. He put several large plastic bags of turkey into his rucksack, a couple of bottles of red wine, a plastic pouch of Drum tobacco, and rolling papers, and we were off. We drove three hours south and

began skiing up at eleven a.m.

Skiing up a mountain in tough sledding, to say the least, but when the blizzard set in, four hours later, we began to really struggle. It was hard to see the road in front, hard to stay to the side, and hard to lift our eyes into the wind and snow blowing sideways into our faces. I remember it being about four o'clock. We knew we were closing in on the springs but had little idea how much farther we needed to go. And then, ahead, two yellow fog lights above the front bumper cut through the early darkness of evening. We saw a Toyota Land Cruiser emerging from out of the blinding snow. It pulled up along side us like the Polar Express in the movie by the same name. The Land Cruiser was sky blue and shining. It had little snow on the hood as though it had just left the garage. We waited for the driver's window to come down. Slowly the window came down and a woman in her early fifties with short, brown curly hair, and striking blue eyes, leaned her head out into the cold to ask if we were all right. To our astonishment, we were talking to Carole King, the famous musician and songwriter. We knew this immediately because we had seen her face for so many years on so many album covers and magazines. We had heard rumors that she lived up in the area but we weren't giving it any thought. We were more concerned with skiing and arriving at the hot springs safely.

Carole now proceeded to give us instructions to the hot springs. She knew where we were going – knew the place because, as things turned out, she lived next door to them. When she stopped to check on us, she was on her way into town for groceries. Now she promised to check in on us on the way back, "I'll look out for you on the way back. But you shouldn't have any problem. Just

continue on for fifteen minutes or so and then turn left at the first road you see. That road will lead you to the cabins and the springs after about five minutes.

Visibility was difficult and getting worse, but we felt reassured. We just needed to remain vigilant, and we'd make it. If Carole noticed we'd missed the turn, she'd come looking for us.

Carole didn't tell us who she was, and we didn't ask about her identity. She was back in these mountains because she wanted peace and solitude. We respected that, understood it, and appreciated it. It was good of her to stop and check on us, and we weren't going to violate her trust in anyway.

We arrived at the hot springs about an hour and half later and checked into a small very rustic cabin. There were only three cabins, basically one-room cabins with bunk beds. "This is never going to be a thriving resort area," I mentioned to Tom as we step in upon the uneven wood planked floor and began working to get the wood stove fired up. The cabin was freezing.

With the fire beginning to crackle alive, we began to unpack our dinner and get the bottles of wine out. We were going to head to the springs just as quickly as we could. Staring out the window to assess how far the springs were from our cabin, we noticed Carole's truck returning and driving up to a large cabin not more than a hundred yards away. She was home. It was too dark for us to see her clearly or for her to see us, but the light in our cabin would have signaled to her that we made it. The lights were already on in her home as she began unloading groceries from the car.

Soon after that, we went into the hot springs for what we considered our long deserved soak. The springs were fifty yards from the cabin. We sat down in the

deep pools and felt the heat soaking into our bodies as big fluffy flakes of snow fell slowly down upon us. The winds picked up and howled, sweeping steam off the water. We talked about the luck we had in receiving directions when we needed them, and in arriving before dark. We talked about how fortunate we were to meet Carole King in just this way – not as fans but as people in need of help – and wondered why Carole King had to come so far to find a home where she could be at peace?

The hot springs were developed in the 1920s but seem to have quickly fallen into disrepair. Of the three hot springs we saw, only one was safe enough for us to enter. The walls of the spring that we sat in seemed to have been built by placing large, fifteen inch square, center-cut pieces of cedar into the ground and lining them up vertically all the way around the spring. The floor too seemed to be made of cedar. The water was four feet deep and the springs measured about forty feet long and twenty feet across.

After fifteen minutes in the spring, a young woman joined us. We didn't exchange many words, and she didn't stay long, but we learned from her that she was Carole King's eighteen year-old daughter.

Tom and I soaked and floated for hours, drinking wine and nibbling turkey. We made crazy haiku poems. One of which I still remember – from Tom:

Water baby
Floating in his own element
Does not perceive it

From Carole's house, half way up a small rise and tucked behind a few large cedar trees, we heard the faint sound of piano music and laughter. The yellow light of her living room cast its warmth over the snow and into the night.

Back Home – Back Out

In December there was little work in Idaho. The weather was getting colder and our wood framed house wasn't really doing the job despite the wood we shoved into the stove – no insulation. I was going to head back to Elmhurst for Christmas. I didn't have much of a plan beyond that. I thought I might stay awhile in Illinois. It had been some time since I had left my family and moved west.

In returning to Elmhurst, I didn't believe I was returning to live in the area again. I went home to see family, to sort things out – temporize, perhaps. I knew I did not want to pursue a career in biology. But how would I transition away from that, how could I accomplish that? Chicago interested me now for the arts and cultural vitality I saw there. When I was younger, I couldn't wait to get away from the congestion and noise, from the mass of people I associated with Chicago. Now, I realized how rich a place Chicago was precisely because it did contain a large population. It had good newspapers, live music, bookstores, museums and theaters. I was discovering all this anew.

By the time the Christmas holidays finished, I had decided to look for work in the area and live at home with my parents until spring. My parents were happy to have me back for a while, and no doubt they knew I needed to be back in some ways. They wished that I'd consider returning to the area permanently, but I was in considerable doubt about that.

I found a job at a grocery store that was walking distance from my home. I had worked in such a store in high school and junior college. I worked in the

produce section, my specialty. Although, it felt good to be back in Elmhurst with old friends and the whole of Chicago to explore, I couldn't help but wonder if I hadn't missed a turn in my life – how else explain living at home once again and doing a job that I had done many years earlier before I had ever begun college? I would especially felt pangs of disquiet when old high school acquaintances would come into the store and see me. They were settled in their lives. They had graduated from college and were living in the area. They spoke of others who had graduated and moved out of the area – how so and so had found her true calling and was now studying law in Texas. Had I found my way – my true calling?

My father and I still argued about politics and religion, but he was more patient with me and I was more secure in myself, less inclined to take offense. There was a growing mutual respect between us. I enjoyed being with the family more now than I did when I was younger, and I enjoyed Chicago more. But in the midst of this, I also recognized that I was not really *at home* here either. I couldn't forget the open spaces of the West – couldn't visualize myself living in an urban area like this for the long term. In the West the land figured in peoples' lives, in their daily habits, in the local culture. In Chicago, I saw little of that. The land, nature, the environment seemed an abstraction to most people – something *out there* but not something they were paying attention to and appreciating. I missed the West, its openness, its people, and its animals.

I applied for a job with the Forest Service once more – a job in Idaho. If I were able to get a job, I'd move in the early summer. This would be my transitioning plan. I'd go back to the Forest Service and work my way into a new life in the

west.

In late Spring, I got word that I had a job with the Forest Service in Weiser, Idaho, about sixty miles south of Donnelley, the town where Dave and I worked on the ranch. I suspect my parents and siblings, five of them, understood that my leaving this time signaled a more permanent move than my original venture out. The move weighed on me. I had been through this before. I knew what it was like to move – to uproot myself and go.

I felt a certain pressure to prove myself, I suppose – that I could live alone and support myself – that I had planned for the future and I was embarking upon it. Still, when my family gathered at my parents home to see me off, I was struck with a sadness that I had not felt since putting Jack to sleep. An unexpected and sudden shedding of tears as my older brother continued to ask me questions about the trip – where would I be working? What would I be doing? How long would I be gone?

Brownlee Creek Guard Station

*. . .what is
a poet---if any
exists?*

*a man
whose words will
bite
their way
home---being actual
having the form
of motion*

From "
W.C. Williams

When I arrived in the town of Weiser, Idaho it was eleven o'clock at night. The town was dead and still, and I was the only person stepping off the bus. The bus thundered off towards Portland, Oregon. I walked over to the nearby park and took my sleeping bag from the backpack. No use looking for a hotel – too tired. And this was enough anyway. The sky was clear – the air dry. I took my sleeping bag and found a place to sleep in the park. Weiser was a small town with a population of about two thousand. I could see the Forest Service offices from where I slept. In the morning, I walked a few hundred yards to the Forest Service offices.

After the preliminaries of introducing myself and speaking with the ranger, I was driven up to my digs at Brownlee Creek Guard station. I realized now I would be here alone for the summer. The ranger wanted to know if that would be OK? I wasn't sure if it would be – I had never spent a long time alone – but I felt I was ready to try. The guard station was in a remote location near the Snake

River, twenty miles from Weiser, ten miles east of Cambridge, Idaho. It was a dry and arid region. For the most part, the land in the higher elevations was used for cattle grazing and logging – too dry for agriculture. At the lower elevations, where irrigation was possible, there were groves of fruit trees, especially plum, peach, and apricot.

My job was to build fences, check on stock, open and close fences all through the forest in order to control the movement of livestock on rangelands. The summer passed quickly. It felt good to be back in Idaho and to be stationed in the mountains in a spacious cabin where the dry summer air, rich with the scent of pine and cedar could find me – good to look out the windows at Snake River Canyon Mountains in the distance and see Forest Service mules leisurely grazing along the slopes.

The summer moved on slowly into fall. It was a more gradual transition than I was used to. There was not waking up suddenly and realizing we were into fall and out of the summer. At Brownlee Creek life was a slow. I had time to notice the way the leaves on the cottonwood trees along the creek went from green to yellow by degree and shade.

Brownlee creek was a fast moving creek some thirty feet from the front porch. It wasn't much to look at; just a thin ribbon of water stretching ten feet across, but it was clean and sounded great as it splashed along heading downhill to join the Snake River. In the old days, salmon would have filled the creek in the late summer on their way to spawn. There was none of that now – too many dams along the Snake. The fish could never get past them. Fortunately, we still had

some trout in the creek, and occasionally, I would see one glimmering beneath the water.

During the weekdays, I drove through the mountains and attended to my chores. On weekends I usually stayed put, except for occasional runs into nearby Cambridge, about eight miles away, for groceries. I had time to take walks into the mountains, to sit on the porch, to read, and simply enjoy the evening coming on.

The Wind, Increased

After W.C. Williams

The feral green apples bumped
 against the glass of my bunk
window
 At Brownlee Creek Guard Station
for weeks
 until last night's wind
 finely distinguished them
 to this falling
which consequently brought
 our five uncatchably-wise
 Forest Service mules
hoofing
 down
 off the dried grass flanks
 of the surrounding
 Snake River Canyon Mountains
 and crowding
into the yard
 to
 have
 at
 them
 in a commotion that tore
 the seeded heart of morning open
 a bite at a time
 actually.



Calligraphy by Shunryu Suzuki

When summer ended, and the Forest Service began laying people off for the season, I was surprised to be asked to stay on into November. The Forest Service wanted me, however, to move down to Weiser – out of the Guard Station. I argue to be allowed to stay at the station, and eventually, my pleas prevailed and I was allowed to stay. When the tourists, loggers, fishermen, and Forest Service workers pulled out, the mountains became even quieter.

One day, a firefighter, done for the season and coming down off a mountain lookout, dropped by to see me. He had a thin paperback book with him that he thought I would like. “Here” he said, “Do you want this? A friend gave it to me, but I have no use for it – can’t make any sense out of it. Maybe you can. Your welcome to it?” He tossed the book to me. I looked at the book: *Beginner’s Mind* by Shunryu Suzuki. It had calligraphy below the title – Chinese characters written with a brush in flowing script – black ink. Inside the jacket cover I read that the calligraphy read “*nyorai*,” a Japanese name for Buddha “that reflects the quality of Zen mind.” The back of the book was the picture of a smiling bald Japanese monk. Below the picture, I read:

“Shunryu Suzuki (1904-1971) was one of the most influential spiritual teachers of the twentieth century and is truly a founding father of Zen in America. A Japanese priest of the Soto lineage, he taught in the United States from 1959 until his death. He was the founder of the San Francisco Zen Center and the Tassajara Zen Mountain Center.”

Further down the page on the back cover I read an excerpt from the book: “The purpose of studying Buddhism is not to study Buddhism but to study ourselves. It is impossible to study ourselves without some teaching . . . We need some teaching, but just by studying the teaching alone, it is impossible to know what ‘I’ in myself am. Through the teaching we may understand our human nature. But the teaching is not we ourselves: it is one explanation of ourselves. So if you are attached to the teaching, or to the teacher, you should leave the teacher, and you should be independent. You need a teacher, and you should be independent. You need a teacher so that you can become independent. If you are not attached to him, the teacher will show you the way to yourself.”

“Yes. I’ll take the book,” I told the fire fighter, “Thank you.” I began to read the book on the front porch that evening in an old wooden rocker. I had difficulty with it at first but stayed with it. It was difficult mostly I think because I knew nothing about Buddhism and because I lacked any practical experience in sitting meditation. The book was *not* a how-to book, how to meditate. It was a collection of transcribed talks that Suzuki had given to his students after their sessions of sitting practice – *zazen*. I stayed with the book despite its

incomprehensibility. The brief essays had a way of capturing my attention and imagination – could I really discover my “true self” in this way? And what is “true self” anyway?

Over the next few weeks, whenever I had available time, I dipped into the book and I began to try to meditate. I put a few pillows on the porch and sat down upon them in a cross-legged fashion – no one around but the wind and trees, a few butterflies and birds. After I finished the book, I started reading it again – one essay a day after sitting in meditation. It took me several months, all the way to November. I continue to re-read the talks.

With the season over, it was time to board-up the ranch house and move out. This time, I would not return to Chicago but head north to Spokane, Washington. I had enough savings to last, and figured I’d rent a small studio apartment and continue my reading and writing while applying for jobs.

While in Spokane, I heard from biologist friends about jobs at sea as a U.S. Fisheries Observer. The way I understood the job, I would work aboard foreign fishing vessels that were fishing in U.S. territorial waters. The observers collect biological information on the fish that are caught, and they also monitor the catch to insure that the foreign fishermen are not taking more fish than their quota allows them to take. The observer makes sure that the foreign fishing companies do not take species of fish that their licenses do not permit them to take, such as salmon. I would try for this job, and try to work aboard Japanese fishing vessels. In the meantime, I’ll settle into city life in Spokane.

I found a studio apartment on the top floor of a large brick building in the

Brown's Additions section of Spokane. The building I moved into looked like a Swiss chalet. It had a peaked roof, many gables, and iron lattice framed windows. It was one of the oldest buildings in the area. It was built as a hotel over a hundred years ago and contained a hundred rooms. My studio had two windows and a Murphy bed. Both windows faced south: one in the kitchen and one in the living room/bedroom.

In downtown Spokane, just a mile away, stood the grand Davenport hotel where the poet Vachel Lindsey came to live in 1924. He checked into room 1129 and settled down to write. He lodged at the hotel for five years. Maybe that's the way one goes about becoming a poet, I thought to myself: you check in, begin and persist.

When poets came to town to read, I made sure I got out to hear them. One January evening Gary Snyder was reading a short distance from my apartment at the Northwest Museum of Arts. As I walked along the sidewalk towards the museum in this residential part of town, I was surprised to see so many vehicles parked along the curb – and so many from out-of town: there were old pick-up trucks from the 1950's, old Volkswagen vans, and old school buses converted into campers. People had come from far away – driven down from northwestern Washington State – the area around Colville near the Indian reservation where Chief Joseph was resettled after his return from Oklahoma in 1885.

I made my way to the auditorium, passing through a crowd of people and children. These adults were between twenty and forty years old. They looked

like Native Americans. They wore their hair long, had beads around their necks.

In the auditorium, Snyder was getting ready to read. It is so crowded that people were being ushered to the front where they could sit on the floor. The portable folding chairs were moved back to allow more people in the front. I stood at the back and marveled at the spectacle. Now, Snyder picked up the lectern itself and put it in the corner of the room behind him. He was not going to have it standing between himself and the audience. He wanted the reading to be more intimate I thought. He wanted to be able to talk with the audience. He encouraged people to come down and sit on the floor around him. The the auditorium continued to fill with people. It was packed. When he finally began to read, a hundred people were sitting on the floor around him – sitting cross-legged, as if in meditation. He held his book and adjusted his reading glasses and peered out at the audience with a smile. That night he read, chanted, and sang in turns and the audience stayed attentive and appreciative throughout.

Seattle

I was hired as a fisheries observer and went to work with NOAA (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration). In late spring I traveled to Seattle for two weeks of training before being deployed. I drove a new car now, a twelve-year-old (1970) Volvo four-door 144e. I christened her "Emma –" a great road car, roomy and comfortable inside – a smooth ride. Once upon a time, Emma must have been a shiny beautiful powder blue. Now, she was a sickly, faded, flat green color. The California sun must have oxidized the blue away and left like this. After buying the car I threw away the sunny California plates. I was heading for rain-soaked Seattle.

I drove over the mountains on I-90 on a late spring afternoon. I cruised in Emma through the scablands outside of Spokane and then up into the mountains with ease – no more stopping every fifty miles to put oil into a leaky engine, as I had done with Lucy. Snoqualmie pass – about halfway between Spokane at Seattle – still held snow. I saw a few skiers coming down towards the highway towards the chairlift as I drove past. I crested the pass and began the long descent down toward the sea. As I drove, the land became greener and greener, thick with forests and open farmland. The breezes were softer on this side of the mountain, warmer too. Windows down, I could smell the green wetness of the place – the aroma of rhododendron, cedar, fir, and a trace of salt. It smelled of life, promise, and hope.

While I received training at a building on the pier near Eastlake, I stayed at the YMCA downtown for two weeks. Despite its large size, Seattle was an easy city

to get around in, and it felt safe compared to Chicago. I enjoyed walking up and down its hilly streets – seeing views of Elliot Bay, and the Olympic mountains to the west.

Elliot Bay Bookstore located downtown in Pioneer Square had a vast collection of poetry books. I had never seen anything like it. Many of the books were from local presses and local poets. When I traveled to the University District, I saw a similarly vast collection of poetry books in the University bookstore. It was easy to sit in their comfortable chairs and spend whole afternoons reading.

After a few weeks training, I flew to Anchorage and then out to the Aleutian Islands. At Dutch Harbor, on the island of Unalaska, I boarded the Japanese fishing vessel, the *Dai Ichi Maru*. All Japanese fishing vessels end with the name “*Maru*.” “*Maru*” signifies “circle” – the hope that the ship will complete its journey and return to port.

Looking up from the fifteen-foot aluminum motorboat and into the smiling faces of the Japanese crew, I knew I was in for an adventure. I had to grab hold of the rope ladder, which dangled precariously in the gusty wind, and then climb fifty feet up the side of the ship to the deck. The grizzled old pilot in the aluminum boat was wishing me luck. He was an eighty year-old ex-fisherman who had fished salmon in this remote, barren region for thirty years until he became too old, too weak, to continue with it. Now, he simply ran observers like me out to foreign ships like this. He sat back at the end of the boat and steadied the engine as I stood up and balanced and made my way out. He looked like an old pirate – a dusty blue baseball cap on his head, a smile full of missing teeth,

and a white scraggly beard. As I said goodbye to him and looked into his laughing brown eyes, I thought to myself, that I would live as long as he had lived one day. Then, I turned from him and began to climb the rope ladder that the Japanese had thrown down for me to climb up on. I was going to climb about a hundred feet up. As I climbed, I was hoping above all else to get safely aboard. I was hoping that in two-months time I'd see this old pirate of a man motor out into the harbor to retrieve me from the ship.

Beyond the hope of return, I don't know what made me put my foot on the ladder and begin the climb unless it was simple curiosity, to know about the Japanese, and the simple desire to have money enough at the end to enroll in classes at the University of Washington. I had never been to sea before, nor could I speak Japanese, but here I was about to board a vessel of twenty-five Japanese fishermen, who spoke no English, and stay with them for two months.

The Japanese were given a quota of fish that they were allowed to catch, primarily pollock. They were not allowed to catch salmon or king crab. It was my job to report their catch of Pollock, and to estimate the size of the catch independently. Once a week, I radioed that information to Seattle. After two months at Sea, the ship brought me back to Dutch Harbor, where I would climb down the rope ladder into the motorboat once again. My training had made me aware of the fact that if I fell into the water, I would have five minutes, even with the safety suit on, before I would succumb to hypothermia, causing cardiac arrest.

I worked on and off at sea for the next three years – always on Japanese ships.

Eventually, my tours became longer – stretching to three and four months. Sometimes, I would work on two or three different ships during a tour at sea. I might receive a message asking me to transfer at a convenient location in the Bering Sea from one ship to another. When the weather was good enough to make a transfer, the Japanese ships would align parallel to one another, and I would climb down the ladder into a rubber dingy, usually accompanied by several Japanese fisherman, and cast off – float – over to the other vessel. I couldn't help but wonder sometimes what might happen if a sudden wave came up and pushed us off course? Or, what would happen if the men on one of the ships failed to get the rope line tossed into the water close enough for us to grasp and secure? Would we float out into that vast stretches of empty sea? The rubber dingy, something like a large tractor tire inner-tube with a rubber floor to it, seemed ridiculously fragile in a seemingly immense and open, cold sea.

Sometimes I'd come in from a ship after two months and stay in Dutch Harbor for a week before being sent out again. During such times, I had little to do but wait, read, and walk around the small treeless island of Unalaska. In the evenings, I sometimes headed to the Elbow Room. The Elbow Room was a notorious bar. It was ranked "the most violent bar in North America," by *Playboy* magazine. During my training in Seattle, I was encouraged *not* to go here. It was hard for me, at first, to believe that a small building like this – a building that was made of wood and looked like a house, a purple building a hundred feet square could really be the most dangerous bar in America. Who would care about a

place like this – a place in the middle of nowhere, located on an island with a population of thirteen hundred year-long residents, most of them Native Americans, Unangan.

Opening the door and walking into the bar that first night, I was greeted by two large men – bouncers, as they are called. Each man weighed around two hundred and twenty pounds. They stood there looking serious and stern and wearing what looked like the uniforms that football referees wear.

In the fall of 1983, when I visited, the place was packed and standing room only. I saw three fights break out: two between Coast Guard sailors and crabbers, and one between a couple of young fishermen. The fights were quickly broken up by the “referees,” but not until punches were landed and blood was spilling from wounds in the mouth and nose. The fishermen were escorted outside and left to fight in the street, which was really no street, no paved street, just a well-worn gravel road.

The violence in the bar probably came from many sources. For one, there was a lot of drinking going on and there was a lot of use of illicit drugs among the fishermen: amphetamines to stay awake and cocaine for relaxation and pleasure. Money too was a problem. Some of the people were flush and buying rounds for the house. Others were busted – done for the season and massively in debt because of failed equipment or other reasons. Some folks coming into port were jubilant; others shipping out – depressed.

The Elbow Room was for many fishermen the first place of call when they returned to port, and the last place they visited before setting out. It was a place at the end of the world where people of a similar enthusiasms gathered to share

time, companionship and stories. Their livelihoods were dangerous. The sea was dangerous – nearly all of the fishermen and crabbers knew someone who had been lost at sea, one way or another.

Beneath the rowdiness of the bar there was a quality of genuineness in the air. It wasn't pretty, but the people seemed alive in a large way. Most of them, loved what they were doing. Most of them were kind, generous, hard working, and courageous. The air crackled with intensity – every dance, every song, every laugh – and sometimes too, the punching.

When I return from my first two months at sea, I set about looking for a place to live in Seattle. I checked the “room mates wanted” adds on the add boards at Seattle area co-ops. I reasoned that this might be a reliable way to find a room in a house with like-minded people. At the Phinney Ridge co-op, I saw an advertisement for a room: “One large bedroom for rent in Ballard.” Ballard was a neighborhood in northwestern Seattle. I responded and found myself moving in with four other people – a group of artisans as it turned out. Tragically, one member of the household, Trevor, a young doctor of naturopathy, who had just completed his studies, had just past away after a six months battle with brain cancer. I was, I gathered, taking his room in the house.

When I met Boyd, Tucker, Maria, and Jocelyna that first day I was interview for a room in the house, I was told of Trevor's passing. He had been in the hospital for some months prior his death. Jocelyna, a French Canadian from Quebec was Trevor's wife of several years. She was eight months pregnant with their child. Maria wanted to know what I was going to do in Seattle? I told her,

“I’m going to study poetry at the University of Washington.” She smiled at me quietly and said, “We could use some poetry around here.”

Maria was from Oswego, New York. Boyd was from a small town in Wisconsin. And Trucker was from Boulder, Colorado. They were all in their early thirties. Maria and Joycelna both wore their brown hair long, had strong clear brown eyes, and wore little make-up, colorful bracelets and rings adorned their wrists, fingers, and ears. They were jewelry makers – artisans. They sold their work downtown at Pike Place Market.

Boyd and Tucker were musicians working with different bands in Seattle, Boyd was a guitarist; Tucker a jazz pianist. They were intelligent men and energetic. Both seemed to be on the move towards something they hadn’t completely found yet. Tucker had been married to Maria. The marriage ended but they remained close. Boyd had been Tucker’s best friend – now he was with Maria. That seemed to be fine with all of them – Tucker and Boyd remained close. Tucker was a graduate of a prestigious music school back east, but he wasn’t finding his way into a settled life. Often he’d leave the house for days at a time and head to an old school bus he had parked in the mountains outside of Seattle. It was his way of going on “retreat,” he’d say. Boyd was moving closer to Maria but he wasn’t sure where things were going – even after three years — Would they marry? Would they not? Would he keep playing music for a living? If they married would he do something else? What? The household had questions – and my own had needed company.

Boyd and Tucker treated me like a younger brother. They gave me poetry books and encouraged me with my studies – made sure the house was quiet if I

needed to study. They had empathy for my journey and search to find a life I could believe in. I knew that in many respects I was a vagabond, especially in comparison with my brothers and sisters, and nearly all my friends in the Chicago, who were already settled into regular jobs and marriages. Here I was at twenty-four, just landed from two months at sea, and getting ready to go back to school. I knew, that despite what might appear as confusion to others, I had always been able to hear something inside that read true to me. I knew I was following some scent on the ground and that the way I was following it was probably the only way it could be followed. Still, I feared it might go on endlessly and lead nowhere. It was my father's letters from home that sometimes staid me – his sense that things would work out. That life was becoming rich in ways I might not see yet, or be able to measure, but that I should follow in the belief I will know one day. He wrote to me: "Most people don't know what they want – your learning what you want – follow and trust it." This was part of the richness I was finding – this household in Seattle to be a part of.

Tahoma was born a few weeks after I moved in. Jocelyna named him after the Indian name for Mt. Rainier –*Tahoma* –white snowy peak. None of us could watch Jocelyna struggling with her emotions of grief and joy and not feel our hearts breaking. What encouragement we offered her often felt ineffectual. For some months after Tahoma's birth, we seemed to exist in the *between time* of beginnings and ends – between the birth of Tahoma and death of his father. Each day our emotions swung like the pendulum beneath the grandfather clock in the living room – each day marked with the weight of time – its constant shuttling back and forth, a whispered reminder of time's passing, as the baby slept – the

rhythm of our days shot through with the light of loss.

One of my major reasons for wanting to work with NOAA was so I could return to school at the University of Washington and study English, particularly creative writing, poetry. I knew I would only have to work part of the year as an observer, and I would then be free to attend school when I was not at sea. The university had a great poetry program dating back to the arrival of Theodore Roethke.

In Seattle, I had the opportunity to see numerous readings at the University, and at Elliot Bay Book Store downtown: Carolyn Kizer, Stephen Dunn, and Wendell Berry, to mention a few. I had the opportunity to study with fine professors. I took an American literature course from a young professor just out of Princeton. His idea was to look at American literature through the lens of travel and movement. "Perfect," I thought. America did seem restless. And that was my experience in America – my family's experience. What might I learn by looking at this literature carefully? Might I learn something that would help me understand my own restlessness – something that might help me understand America itself, better? We were going to read Hawthorne's *The Celestial Railroad*, Whitman's poetry, especially "Song of the Open Road," Henry David Thoreau's *Cape Cod*, Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* and Kerouac's *On the Road*.

I attended my first poetry workshop with the poet, and former student of W.H. Auden, Nelson Bentley. Nelson was a grandfather-like figure – amiable,

kind, and supportive. His disposition was welcoming and encouraging. He liked formal poetry and encouraged us all to try writing some of it – recommending Louis Turco’s *Book of Forms*. He had a great sense of humor and appreciated limericks and nonsense poetry. He also knew northwestern poetry well – had known Roethke and was familiar with his poetry and his poetics.

Nelson had a way of passing down this knowledge at various occasions throughout the semester, emphasizing how important sound and music were to poetry and how the entire canon had something to teach us. He wanted us to read it – all of it – if we could.

In the end, we were free to write in any form we chose. We gave him our work when we thought it was ready, and he scheduled our poem for the workshop. We would read the poem twice in the workshop, and then, he’d open up the discussion. He led discussion from the front of the class where he stood in a relaxed fashion at the podium, usually wearing a casual shirt with the sleeves rolled up and the neck unbuttoned. These were evening workshops. They lasted several hours and were held once a week. Walking home after my first workshop that fall I felt, for the first time in my life, a thrill in the blood that spoke of poetry’s call being right. Next quarter, I’d study with the poet David Wagoner, a former student of Roethke’s and the long-time editor of the prestigious poetry magazine *Poetry Northwest*.

Dream and Shore

For Nelson Bentley, In Memoriam

Splashing through surf
To arrive along a beach
And face a dying fire . . .
I'm getting close
Enough to feel the heat –
To get the read
A breath will do.
And then the dream
Is vanishing like a flame
Blown out and washing
Into sailboats
Along a pier – June
And lifting curtains
Unmoor memory – drafts
Handed back with words
Scribbled across the top
Something about *fire*
And *kindling* – his words
A lifejacket I strapped on
And plunged
Overboard –
Night after night
Arms slashing through surf –
This shore.

Elliot Bay, Seattle

Zen

After finishing the ten-week quarter in the fall, I went to sea in the winter and returned again for classes in March. In addition to resuming classes, I resumed my Zen studies by reading Robert Aiken's book, *Taking the Path of Zen*, which was recommended by a friend who had studied in Snyder's poetry workshops at the University of Idaho. Apparently, Snyder recommended this simple introductory text. Robert Aiken, or Aiken *Roshi*, was Snyder's mentor, a man who first encountered Zen when he was picked up by the Japanese in Guam during the Second World War and interned at a prison camp in Kobe, Japan, where he had the good fortune to meet a fellow civilian prisoner Reginald Horace Blyth. Blyth was Aiken's elder, a British writer/scholar who lived and taught at a university in Japan when the war broke out. Despite his sympathy for Japan, and his actively seeking citizenship in Japan, Blyth was arrested and interned as a prisoner in Kobe. Blyth had been a student of Zen for some twenty years before meeting Aiken. He had also produced masterful translations of the Japanese haiku that are still read today. His four-volume *The History of Haiku* (Hokuseido Press) published in 1950 became a classic. Following the war, Blyth was instrumental in working with the authorities, both Japanese and American, to bring on the transition to peace. He acted as liaison to the Japanese Imperial Household on behalf of the U.S. government.

Blyth's enthusiasm for Zen and Japanese literature rubbed off on Aiken. After the war, Aiken returned to Hawaii and enrolled at the University of Hawaii where he obtained a B.A. in English literature and a M.A. in Japanese. His book

on Zen and the poetry of Matsuo Basho, *A Zen Wave: Basho's Haiku and Zen* (Weatherhill, 1974) has been an influential contribution to the study in English of Basho's poetry. In addition to his academic studies, Aiken continued his study of Zen, returning to Japan from time to time for further practice and training. In 1959, he and his wife Anne began a meditation group in Honolulu at their home. The group of lay practitioners grew over the years and eventually became known as the Diamond Sangha, one of the early lay Zen communities in the U.S.

Aiken's instructions in how to get started in Zen were straightforward. The opening two chapters called "Fundamentals, and Method," respectively, explained how to sit and breathe. Posture was important – the back should be straight, the chin lowered and brought to the chest. The eyes should remain slightly opened. The hands should be placed in the mudra position – one hand on top of the other. With regard to breathing, he gives the following instructions:

. . . take a deep silent breath and hold it. Then exhale slowly and silently, all the way out, and hold it. Breathe in deeply again and hold it, and all the way out once more. You may do this through the mouth, but note that at all other times you should breath through the nose. These two deep inhalations and exhalations help to cut the continuity of your mental activity and to quiet the mind for zazen.

Now rock from side to side, widely at first, then in decreasing arc. Lean forward and back in the same way, and you will find that you are well

settled and ready to begin your breath counting . . . Count 'one' for the inhalation, and 'two' for the exhalation, and so on up to 'ten,' and repeat.

(Aiken 23-24)

I did this for twenty minutes as he instructed. I realized pretty quickly after I had begun, that I was not counting very well. I started with every intention of counting my breaths until ten and repeating that. But I failed to stop at "ten" – my mind wandering off to think about dinner, or the coming exam, or any number of things. Before I realized it, my count was up to "twenty one." I stopped, let my thoughts go, and returned to counting from "one." I tried again to see if I could manage to stay attentive to the count of "ten." I realized how active my mind was – how in a large sense, it controlled me, and not the other way around. I returned to Aiken's book and found the following comment:

"Many people can count to 'ten' successfully the first few times they try, but no one who has not practiced can maintain the sequence for long. Though one needs a disciplined mind even for quite ordinary purposes, such as conducting business or teaching, few of us have the faculty of extended attention. I have had people tell me after trying zazen for twenty – five minutes, "You know, I never even got to 'one'!" Counting the breaths shows us that indeed, as a Chinese proverb says, the mind is a wild horse (Aiken 11)."

Part of the simple practice of Zen then was to learn, or train the mind through

experience, in letting go of thoughts, learning how not to get attached to thinking. I was learning to let thoughts go by returning to the counting of my breaths. It was, in a mechanical sense, about seeing how busy the mind was, about seeing the myriad of thoughts forever flowing into the mind and understanding how often I was at their mercy – caught up by them and in them, believing they were real and substantial rather than mere thought – the airy stuff of thought. Through practice of this sort I began to experience – to see – the way in which the mind worked. I practiced letting thoughts come and go again, and again, and again. Over and over again I returned to the simple awareness of the moment I was alive in. Aiken’s understanding of the difficulties a beginner faces encouraged me. Those difficulties accorded well with my own experiences:

. . . as a beginner, you will be conscious of each step in the procedure, but eventually you will become the procedure itself. The practice will do the practice. It takes time, and for months, perhaps, you will seem to spend your time dreaming rather than counting. This is normal. Your brain secretes thoughts as your stomach secretes pepsin. Don’t condemn yourself for this normal condition.” (Aiken 25)

When I sat in meditation in my room alone, when I practiced *zazen* like this, I recalled the peace I once felt sitting in church early in the morning in Catholic grade school. I remembered looking up at stain glass windows – those gorgeous and varied colors of blue and red. I remembered the hushed sounds inside the church – the smells of incense and candles – the rows of flicking offertory candles

in their purple glass cups. Those morning too, sitting in a pew, brought awareness and peace. I believed the red light above the alter was more than a symbol of God's presence. It was true – God was in the church. Sitting on my cushion, I realized a peace like that had been missing for a long time.

I couldn't believe in the Catholicism of my youth any longer, or at least I felt I couldn't believe the way I used to believe in it. The dualism of the faith seemed a fatal flaw – “you are with us or you are against us.” Wasn't the faith premised on the idea that there was only one true faith? And thus, necessarily, wasn't everything else that was not *of it* specious and suspect?

Dualistic conceptions such this seemed to me to be part of the problem that people, as well as nations, faced in finding ways to peacefully coexist with each other in the world. The Catholic Church did not seem to offer a solution to the problem.

When I looked out at the world in 1982, I saw a world prepared to blow itself apart over ideas as to which economic system was better – capitalism or communism? Of course, I know I over simplify what was at stake or what was the cause of the disagreements were. But the fact of the matter remains The Soviet Union and the United States had built an arsenal of nuclear weapons that could destroy the world several times over what were appeared to be ideas as to which form of governance was better – which should be preserved.

In such a world, I was looking for a faith – or a wisdom tradition – that could accept differences – understand them and appreciate them. For me, Catholicism failed to do that, failed to offer me a way to live peacefully in the world. How

could it bring peace to a person when it was fundamentally dualistic – a *fight* between good and evil? Catholic faith, like other Christian faiths, was premised on the fact that there was evil in the world and that it must be fought against? Was there “evil” in the world, really? Catholics believed “in one holy Catholic apostolic church” not in two or three of them. In short, the Catholic Church taught that what was *not* Catholic was *not* true. This understanding set other faiths in opposition to the Catholic faith. Wasn’t the Church, in this way, disrespecting other traditions and theologies? Wasn’t a theology, such as this, created an antagonistic relationship between the Catholics and the non-Catholics? How could this faith, so caught up in making distinctions, persuade anyone it was the road toward peace in the twentieth century? Was it ever the road to peace? Was this really the faith of Christ who refused to condemn the adulteress in the Gospels – the Christ who drew pictures in the sand while others around him called for the women to be stoned? Christ did not judge her. He seemed in this instant to call upon the mob to think from a different place in their minds/hearts – a place removed from simple questions of right and wrong. Obviously he was aware of what the law called for, what was written in the old books, but he demonstrated a non-attachment to those proscriptions. In this instance, he wasn’t thinking in simplistic dualistic terms. He was acting out of love and compassion. I understood from my disquiet concerning the Catholic faith that I had questions and doubts concerning it that I needed to explore.

At the co-op, I saw an advertisement for *zazen* practice at a home in my

neighborhood. The home offered morning and evening sittings and was run by a group of lay practitioners associated with the Kwan Um Zen School of Providence, Rhode Island, a school founded by the Korean Zen teacher Seung Sahn Soen-sa in 1976. I had never heard of him. Six young men and women lived in this house: several were students at the University of Washington; one was a young assistant professor of zoology at the university; one was a mathematician working at the university; one a nurse, and one worked in a tree nursery.

It was a “dharma house,” which meant it was run and operated by lay men and women, but, in some ways, it functioned like a monastery: ongoing daily and evening practices, regular retreats, the observation of silent periods, and the sharing of chores. It was known as the Seattle Dharma House. People in the house rose at five in the morning and began sitting at five a.m. They sat fifty-minute sessions with ten minutes in between for silent walking meditation. At the conclusion of silent meditation there was a twenty-minute session of chanting. This was followed by a short reading of a passage from one of Sung Shan Sense’s books: *Dropping Ashes on the Buddha* or *Only Don’t Know*.

The Dharma House held periodic three-day weekend retreats – twelve to fourteen hours of daily meditation broken up with cleaning/weeding activities, and interviews with a visiting teacher. A few of the people living in the home had already taken vows and were on their way to becoming ordained as lay monks. I began sitting two or three mornings a week with this group.

What is Love?

One evening, after a Dharma talk at the Cambridge Zen Center, a student asked Seung Sahn Soen-sa, "What is love?"

Soen-sa said, "I ask you: what is love?"

The student was silent.

Soen-sa said, "This is love."

The student was still silent.

Soen-sa said, "You ask me: I ask you. This is love."

(Seung Sahn DAB 232)

Kae

Home from sea and at the university again, I noticed a Japanese exchange student and several other female international students, Peruvian and Indian, talking as they waited in line before the cafeteria food counter. They had trays in front of them and were moving slowly down the line ahead of me. They were talking and laughing, generally enjoying themselves as they decided which dishes under the warming lights to take. The face of the Japanese woman was dark – the skin was clear and smooth. She wore no make-up. Her cheeks had a reddish tinge to them. Her eyes were coal black with a watery shine in them that caught the light when she laughed. Her hair was black – jet black and thick. It was swept off her face and held to the side with pins to reveal a small widow’s peak above her forehead. Her nose was small and sharp – straight, reminded me of a bird’s beak. When she turned to reach for a napkin, I said, “*Konnichi-wa*” (こんにちは) “Good Afternoon” in Japanese. I don’t know what prompted me to say that other than the fact that I had been studying Japanese for sometime and thought it nice to use the language to welcome this student.

After paying for my lunch and moving off, I met the women again at the condiment area. The Japanese woman wanted to know how I knew Japanese and I began to explain. Soon we were introducing ourselves to each other. I learned the Japanese woman’s name was Kae (美恵). Later, I would learn that the kanji of her name translated as “beautiful blessing.” Lucy, the Peruvian woman, invited me to join the three of them for lunch, which I did.

Kae was not normally the type of woman that I would fall for. And I didn’t

fall for her there. She was attractive, but I wasn't smitten. I wasn't, in speaking to her, thinking of her as some potential girlfriend that would be too complicated. I knew she was only going to be in the States for the short term, and I had no intention of moving to Japan, or any such thing. Perhaps all of this made it easier for me to approach her and talk to her. I could relax with her. I was unselfconscious about speaking with her.

Kae wore a conservative light blue Polo shirt beneath a darker blue cardigan sweater with white stripes on the upper left arm. The letter "C" was sewn onto the chest. This was complemented with a knee-length pleated brown skirt and dark socks that ran to just under her knees. To top this off, she wore white and black saddle shoes that she picked up in a second-hand store. They looked like something out of the fifties. I was used to women who dressed entirely differently, much less conservatively. My women friends during this period – late 70s and early 80s – were punk-rockers who cropped their hair short, dyed it pink, and hung earrings through their noses. And I liked that.

Kae was shy and reticent. I suppose she was self-conscious about her English. – used it sparingly. The other women did the majority of the talking that day. Beyond my speaking of my work on the Japanese ships, and my interest in Japanese literature, and Zen Buddhism, I didn't say much. The talk was mostly of vacation travel plans – where the women intended to go over spring break. I gave them my opinions of Washington D.C., New York, and the Grand Canyon. After forty minutes or so, we were done, and we walked away from each other, off upon our separate ways.

I wasn't thinking much about the meeting over the following days. I had met

some international colleagues in a sense – people on the road – displaced from their native lands. I felt a kinship toward them as my own life had turned international in a sense ever since I started working a few years back at sea with the Japanese. I had sympathy to what they might be going through in the way of cultural adjustment in America.

I may not have seen Kae again if, a few weeks later, the other women had not invited me to a gathering – a dinner party – in which many of the International students at the University of Washington prepared foods from their homelands and got together to share them in a great feast. Kae was there and we met again. She had prepared many delicious foods: *gyoza*, a kind of dumpling made of pork and cabbage and seasoned with sesame seed oil; *inari shushi*, rice seasoned with a small amount of vinegar and stuff inside a soft wrapping made from sweetened soybean dough that is deep fried prior to filling with rice; fermented soybeans – *nato* – wrapped inside of fresh lettuce leaves.

During those early months of our knowing each other, Kae and I only seemed to meet each other in the company of others. Still, when we did meet, our interests seemed to converge in a way that kept us talking. We were both interested in culture and the arts. We were both interested in finding spiritual sustenance in our lives. Kae had majored in cultural studies at college in Japan, with a special interest in Christianity. She wasn't "a Christian," she was quick to point out, but she was interested in the teachings and history of the faith. Her own faith was something different. She believed in God and was devoted to continual prayer. The prayer consisted entirely of two words: "Arigatou

Gozaimasu,” (ありがとう ございます) or “Thank You” in English. The idea here, near as I could understand, was that one should maintain a thankful mind always. The original meaning of the words connotes the meaning that life is rare and precious – that the experience of being alive is one that a person should remain ever thankful for. I began to understand it, in a Christian sense, as an opening into grace, as an opening of an individual towards accepting what has been given in life without discriminating between what is good or ill: “Our Father who art in Heaven, Hallowed be thy name; Thy kingdom come Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven . . .” It suggested that one should not be anxious; that one should be careful about trying to hard to impose one’s will upon the world at the price of being closed to what is actually happening, what is actually being given freely. Kae would recite these words even when something bad occurred – maybe even more at those times. When she heard of a killing in Seattle, for example, she’d whisper the words under her breath.

Kae appreciated my interest in Buddhism, but Buddhism itself held little interest for her. After the war, many in Japan were suspicious of both the ancient religion of Japan – Shinto – and the religion that came to Japan in the eighth century from China and Korea – Buddhism. They saw both religions as complicit – used as instruments of militarism – in the fateful turn towards the Second World War.

Kae and I met as friends for about eight months before we became romantic involved. After discovering that we both enjoyed cooking, we began to take turns cooking meals for each other. I would invite her over to my house for a

pasta dinner. I introduced her to the family: Boyd, Maria, Tucker, Jocelyna, and Tahoma. I tried my best to impress her with my pasta sauces and my desserts. I achieved notable success with banana nut bread. Slowly, we became more attracted to each other and began to understand that maybe it was a possible to officially date. Still, long term, things looked doubtful at best, and the fact that her student visa was running out in a few months time made things all the more that way. She had been studying at the University of Washington for nearly a year.

When Seung Sahn Soen-sa, who I will refer to simply as Seung Sahn, the Korean Zen teacher who founded the Kwan Um Zen School in Providence Rhode Island, came to Seattle to lead a meditation retreat for residents of Dharma House and any other interested people, he also scheduled a free public talk on Thursday ahead of the weekend retreat. I asked Kae if she would be interested in hearing him speak and she enthusiastically said, "Yes."

Seung Sahn cut quite a figure coming into the small cleared out area at the back of the East West bookshop on Roosevelt Ave. that April evening. He was fifty-eight years old, the same age as my father. He was chubby and stood about five feet-four inches tall. His baldhead gleamed under the fluorescent lights as he stepped gracefully from the back of the room to the front where a dais had been set up for him. His long grey robes flowed around him and rustled as he walked. In his right hand he carried a heavily lacquered, knotted, and twisted stick that was about a yard long and three inches in diameter. One could read in his smile

and graceful movement that he was comfortable in this skin – comfortable in being a monk. He wore a pair of round, gold-framed glasses with thick lenses. When he got to the front, he bowed, hitched-up his robes a bit, and sat comfortably down upon the *zafu*. He sat in full lotus position and beamed a smile out to the audience.

What would he talk about? What would he do with that stick?

He began by saying, “Good Evening” and thanking everyone for coming, and then he asked if there were any questions – “anything at all?” He spoke with a heavy Korean accent that made it a bit difficult to comprehend him completely. He wasn’t going to give “a talk,” I realized. He was simply going to try and answer people’s questions. Hands went up – and questions came. The first question came from a man in front, “What is Zen?” Seung Sahn held his stick above his head, paused, and looked at the student with his stick still in the air. “Do you understand?” Seung Sahn asked. The questioner replied, “I don’t know.” Seung Sahn replied, “This don’t-know mind is you. Zen is understanding yourself.” The exchange went on as the questioner asked follow up questions. Seung Sahn wanted to stress this “don’t-know mind” and said, “If you are not thinking and have no attachment to name and form, then all substance is one. Your don’t-know mind cuts off all thinking. This is your substance. The substance of this Zen stick and your own substance are the same. You are this stick: this stick is you.” Striking his stick on the wooden floor, he asked the questioner, “This stick and you, are they the same or different?” And before the questioner could answer, Seung Sahn raised the stick again and warned him with a loud voice, “If you say ‘Yes,’ I’ll hit you thirty times – if you say ‘No,’ I’ll

hit you thirty times. What can you do? Only don't know!"

For two hours, questions were asked and answered. Towards the end of the evening, a male student asked Seung Sahn to talk about reincarnation – Seung Sahn asked him what he had for lunch? The questioner responded, "I had a tuna fish sandwich." "And what did you have for dinner?" Seung Sahn went on. "Pizza," the student replied. "That's reincarnation," Seung Sahn said. The exchange drew laughter from both the student and Seung Sahn, as well as from the crowd. Seung Sahn rocked slowing forward and then backward, letting his laughter go.

When the retreat was over on Sunday afternoon, I had a chance to meet privately with Seung Sahn. It would be the first time, and the only time, I would meet him. The meeting was informal. Seung Sahn wanted to speak with everyone who participated in the retreat for just a few moments. He would fly back to Rhode Island the following day. We were encouraged to speak with him about anything we wanted. Our questions did not need to be restricted to Zen practice. They could be of a personal nature.

Seung Sahn was sitting behind the retreat center on Vashon Island. He sat out on the lawn in the shade beside a giant fir tree. A carpet was put down along with a *zafuton* and *zafu* for him to sit upon. I stepped out onto the grass and saw him about fifty yards ahead of me. To my right, were the blue waters of Elliot Bay and the skyline of Seattle – to the left, a forest of tall pines.

I wanted to talk with him about livelihood; "right livelihood," as the Buddhist

refer to it. I wanted to know how to find a righteous livelihood? I had been struggling for some time to come to a decision as to what to do with my life – what occupation to choose, what direction to go off in. I had started my adult life with the dream of being a biologist but that was gone now. How does one become a poet exactly? Was there a practical way to apply this interest I had in poetry – this calling I felt towards it? A way ahead by which one could develop without having to sell one’s soul in the market place. I was now back in school studying literature and writing. I was twenty-four years old. I didn’t see myself becoming a high school teacher of English, even though I knew that to be a sensible turn. I had gone out to a Seattle high school for one week to observe classes as part of my course at the University of Washington and knew now, more than ever, that that occupation wasn’t for me. What occupation would suit, and at the same time be fulfilling? I did not want to live “a life of desperation,” indeed I might *feared* I would end up that way – doing a job I cared little about – a job that simply paid the bills – a means to an end.

I feared a question on a subject such as this was self-centered and mundane – not worthy of a Zen Master to be prevailed upon to answer. At the same time, I trusted that in some visceral way this question underscored all my concerns and anxieties about my life. I was going to ask my question: “I am struggling to find a livelihood I can believe in – what occupation or career should I choose – what would be right for me? What would a righteous livelihood look like? Can you give me advise on this?”

As I stepped off the porch and began to walk over the lawn toward Seung Sahn, the world grew quiet – the voices of fellow retreat participants fell away

and soon there was only the sound of wind and waves. Seung Sahn greeted me when I arrived. I bowed, sat down on the kitchen chair set out in the field, and asked my question. It took me a few minutes to get the question out with the requisite background information. I could now breathe a sign of relief and await his answer. I didn't wait long. He immediately responded. He looked at me in a clear determined way and said, in a firm voice, "Don't check! Only go straight! Don't know!" And that was it.

He didn't give me any advice that I could immediately act upon, I thought, and was disappointed. He did however, in the strong and confident manner in which he spoke, and in the words he spoke, suggest to me that there was more to my question that I realized. That his frequently spoken words, words he spoke the night I saw him with Kae, "Don't check! Only go straight! Don't know!" did, after all, apply to my own interior struggle. So what did those words mean? Or how did he mean them. I wanted to find that out.

In the months ahead, as I practiced zazen, and read more on Zen, his words became more understandable to me. I began to understand "don't check" to mean I shouldn't be concerned with whether something, a particular job, for example, was OK or not OK? This type of thinking activity – this type of checking in with myself mentally – stopped my mind – caused me to become preoccupied with thought. In zazen, we practice letting thoughts come and go. We practice returning to a stillness that is, in a sense, before thinking. In reading Seung Sahn's books, I was finding a further elaboration on this:

Don't worry – just try. Trying is better than a Zen Master, better than

Buddha, better than God. It is already great love, great compassion, and the great bodhisattva way. Don't check your mind; don't check your understanding, don't check outside. Then there is no inside, no outside, no I, no you, no they: you are one with your situation. That is very Important. (Seung Sahn ODK 15)

And then, I found this discussion on livelihood and work that echoed some of my earlier concerns. In this letter, Seung Sahn responds to a student who had written him a letter:

April 10, 1977

Dear John,

You asked me about your job. I have asked you before: What is most important? Practicing every day. If you practice every day, then any kind of job is no problem.

When I was in Korea, a famous carpenter was my student. Though he was very renowned, he did not like his job 100 percent. So one day he visited me and said, "My job is not good, not bad. Many people like my work. Sometimes I like it, but sometimes I don't like it. Sometimes I want to change my job." So he asked me, "What shall I do? Please teach me."

I asked him, "What is your original job?"

He said, "I am a carpenter."

So I said, "Carpentry is your body's job. What is your *true* job?"

"True job? What does this mean?"

"Your *mind* job," I said.

He said, "Mind job? My mind job is to keep Kwan Seum Bosal.*"

I said, "Do you *know* Kwan Seum Bosal?"

He said, "Don't know."

"You say, 'Don't know.' You have a question – What *is* Kwan Seum Bosal? So only go straight – Kwan Seum Bosal, and keep this question. This is your correct job.

"If you keep this original job, then you will get enough mind. If you keep enough mind, then any body job will be no problem. Also your body job, moment to moment, is the truth, and will save all people."

An eminent teacher said, "Mind is complete, then everything is complete." So if your mind is complete, then you will have no problem with any job, any action.

I think you have too much understanding. You must lose this too-much-understanding mind. Then our mind will be very simple. Then changing your job is OK; not changing is OK.

So the most important thing is, don't lose your original job. Then not only music not only other jobs, but each step you take, each swing of you arm is already the true Dharma and saves people.

I hope you are always keeping a mind which is clear like space, soon find your original job, get enlightenment, and save all people from suffering.

Yours in the Dharma,

S.S.

* **Kwan Seum Bosal** (Korean); [Avalokitesvara (Sanskrit): Kwan (Shih) Yin (Chinese): Kwan Um (Korean): Kannon, Kanzeon (Japanese)]: Literally, “One who perceives the Cries of the World” and responds with compassionate aid, the bodhisattva of compassion.

(Seung Sahn ODK 58-59)

Any number of jobs could be righteous. I understood that now. I understood that what mattered was *not* really the job itself, the title, the occupation so much as it was the *mind* that I brought to the job. I would never have to lead a life of desperation because of the job I did if I understood what my “original job” was. Seung Sahn repaired laundry machines when he first came to the United States in 1972 and taught Zen in the evenings when he had time. One of his first students, as it turned out, Lincoln Rhodes, first met his Seung Sahn in 1976 when Seung Sahn came to his home to repair a washing machine. Lincoln Rhodes was a twenty-eight-year-old professor of biochemistry at Brown University at the time. Whatever conversation they shared changed Lincoln’s life immensely. He left teaching and began practicing Zen in earnest. He continues teaching in the Kwan Um Zen School that Seung Sahn founded in 1976.

Kae enjoyed Seung Sahn’s talk that evening. She liked his playful humor, his childlike smile, and the way he communicated through his presence, using his strong voice, speaking from the *hara* – the stomach area. She liked the way, at the end of the talk, he drove that stick down on the floor with “bang” and asked in

faulty grammar, “This stick, this sound, are they the same or different. If you say ‘same,’ I hit you thirty times. If you say ‘different’ I hit you thirty times?”

Kae thought I should move into the Dharma House if they had room for me – I wasn’t sure. The schedule seemed grueling – up at five in the morning. She must have seen something in me that evening – the way I responded to the presence of Seung Sahn, or perhaps the way I spoke about the retreat when it was completed. When I told her the story of my meeting Seung Sahn, she laughed and thought it hilarious, which of course it was, if one pictured it: the earnest student going up to the great Zen master and expecting to get some grist-for-the-mill advice but getting instead a measly six words. Kae saw the Dharma House as an opportunity to do something different – something that would bring good into my life. She kept encouraging me to try it. Eventually, I listened to her and moved in.

Kae had only a few more months to live in Seattle before she would return to Japan. We were both unsure where things were going with the relationship. But I would certainly experience times when I felt myself drawn to her. One such evening came, a few weeks after meeting Seung Sahn. Kae and I were at her apartment with her friends. We were sitting around the kitchen table with people from a host of countries – Argentina, Peru, Italy, and China. Somehow each person began to talk about what they wanted most in the world – what do they wanted their lives to be about? The woman from China, Sherry, wanted to open her own dental clinic in Beijing, her young, blond-haired American friend from

Florida, Scott, was fascinated by China and wanted to go to there and learn Chinese. Around we went, each taking their turn, expressing their greatest hopes and ambitions. I suppose I talked about wanting to be a poet, but I don't remember now; I remember what Kae said. It was simple and unselfconscious. It came across as authentic, without premeditation. She said simply, "I want to find truth."

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a fistful of lotus

soaking in a vase – ready

to open any moment now

Chapter Four / The Journey Itself: Basho & Thoreau

A traveler. I love this title. A traveler is to be revered as such. His profession is the best symbol of our life. Going from _____ to _____ ; it is the history of every one of us.

–Thoreau

. . . a taste for the beautiful is most cultivated out of doors, where there is no house and no housekeeper.

–Thoreau

The year: 1694. The place: Edo, Japan – present day Tokyo; the man, the elderly, somewhat infirm, Japanese poet Matsuo Basho. He is setting off on a journey into the interior of Japan, walking away from the coastal city and going deliberately into the mountainous and infrequently traveled regions of north central Honshu, the main island of Japan.

In the opening paragraph of his travel journal, *Oku-No-Hosomichi* (おくのほそ道), which was composed, in part, while he was on the journey; in part, after his return, Basho suggests something of the aesthetic logic that informs his decision to undertake the trip:

Moon & sun are passing figures of countless generations, and years coming or going wanderers too. Drifting life away on a boat or meeting age leading a horse by the mouth, each day is a journey and the journey itself home. (Basho 15)

The first sentence registers the obvious: the sun and moon are in constant motion around the earth. They are “passing figures.” (Today, of course, we realize that it is the earth that passes around the sun and the moon that circles

the earth, but this fact does not deflect from Basho's overall observation: we are surrounded by movement.) Basho compares time itself to these heavenly bodies and refers to "years" as "wanderers too," coming or going." Basho implies that physical movement and the movement of time – change – are fundamental to our experience of life. His logic argues that if such seemingly permanent and fundamental elements as the sun and moon can be said to be "wanderers" then we too are, in a similar sense, wanderers too. After all, we depend upon the earth and move with it. The very measure of time is dependent upon the speed at which the earth orbits the sun – the measurement of years. Just standing on the earth, it is helpful to remember, a person moves through space at half a kilometer per second.

If Basho introduces the notion of movement and change as the natural state of existence in the opening sentence, the second sentence extends the analogy by providing images suggestive of movement and by providing commentary upon those images: "Drifting life away on a boat or meeting age leading a horse by the mouth, each day is a journey and the journey itself home."

The image of the drifting boat renders a sense of fluidity and motion while suggesting that the person "meeting age" by "drifting life away on a boat" is a person who is at rest with this condition, a person unperturbed by ambition – the inner compunction and desire to set one's life to a particular goal and purpose, a direction. In contrast to this, we are immediately given the image of a person who meets old age "leading a horse by the mouth." The second image suggests a determined traveler, a person who knows where she is bound – a person who is so determined that she is actually pulling the horse, leading it by the mouth.

The first image alludes to the great Tang Dynasty Chinese poet Li Po (701 - 772 C.E.) who reputedly lived out his final days on a boat, drifting life away, a man of the Toa. The second image alludes to the long poetic tradition in Japan of traveling poets, particularly to the poet Saigyō (1118 -1190 C.E.), the poet whom Bashō most admired – the poet who Bashō can be seen, figuratively, following in the footsteps of for Saigyō too traveled widely into remote locations and composed poems in the process. Bashō's poetic allusions to the poetry of Li Po and Saigyō indicates the extent to which he sees his own journey as being in correspondence with the older poets. As much as Bashō is aware of movement and change, he is also deeply aware of writing out of tradition, connection, and continuity.

Bashō's book is a work of creative non-fiction that includes both prose and verse. One way to appreciate Bashō's journey is to understand it as pilgrimage, as an attempt to put his Zen practice into action – to test and strengthen it through travel. According to Buddhist thought, the perception of reality as stable and unchanging is a form of ignorance – a form of illusion – a failure of perception. How does one, from a Buddhist perspective, graciously accept change, particular the kind of change that insists on loss, the kind of loss that Bashō speaks of when he writes of his own physical weakening and aging? This is one of the implicit questions the book explores.

To the Japanese mind, the title of the book, *Oku no Hosomichi*, while literally translated *Narrow Road to the North*, has the Dantean *Selva Oscura* feel to it,

suggesting the deep and difficult way through life (Basho 66). Basho chooses to confront the insecure and changeable nature of existence by going out on the road and directly experiencing what it offers. His desire to do so is rooted not only in his Buddhist practice but in his poetic vocation:

Amongst those of old were many that perished upon the journey.

So – when was it – I, drawn like blown cloud, couldn't stop dreaming of
roaming, roving the coast up and down, back at the hut last fall by the
river side, sweeping cobwebs off, a year gone and misty skies of spring
returning, yearning to go over the Shirakawa Barrier, possessed by the
wanderlust, at wits' end, beckoned by Dosojin, hardly able to keep my
hand to anything, mending a rip in my momohiki, replacing the cords in
my kasa, shins no sooner burnt with moxa than the moon at Matsushima
rose to mind and how, my former dwelling passed on to someone else on
moving to Sampu's summer house,

the grass door also

turning and turning into

a doll's household

set on a post of the hut. (Basho 15)

Basho's longs to travel despite the danger, and he speaks in terms of being

“drawn” to wander, suggesting vocation, a calling. He then launches into one long serpentine sentence that felicitously mirrors the action it describes – his “roaming” and “roving.” The sentence is full of switchbacks and turns and associative leaps between different images of movement and change before concluding, appropriately enough, with a poem. And what image could be more striking and suggestive of change and impermanence than the final one – Basho speaking of leaving his poem on “a post” in front of a hut where, presumably, it lifts and flutters in the wind until it’s blown away.

As far as Basho is concerned, the poet must be willing to confront the impermanent and ephemeral nature of existence directly. On the journey into the mountains, these qualities of the natural world are more readily and immediately apprehended for here a traveler is more exposed to those changes – one thinks of the changes in temperature and weather to name but a few. Traveling in this way, affords Basho an opportunity to more directly apprehend the immediate requirements of life – the need for food, clothing, rest, water, and shelter – for while traveling, his ability to *control* his environment is restricted in a way that it would not be if he were safely at home where such requirements would be more readily accessible. The life Basho lives on the road is insecure, and, importantly, one that he hungers for.

The insecurity of his situation helps Basho to practice his Zen. He must embrace the insecurity and live there moment to moment and resist becoming concerned about the past or the future. Zen meditation, which can be practiced while sitting or walking requires the practitioner to be mindful in not allowing the mind to get stuck on thinking, to get stuck in thought. The practitioner allows

thoughts to come and go while mindfully returning his attention to the present, over and over again. In becoming aware of just this moment, the practitioner becomes aware of all that is already *given* — what is supporting and sustaining their lives. In traveling on a pilgrimage like this, unsure of what will happen next, Basho is called to trust in the Dharma and allow himself to be supported by it, Dharma is defined as “law, religious, secular, or natural; the law of Karma, phenomenon; Tao or way, teaching; pure emptiness (Aiken 139).” In doing this, in putting himself on the road as a pilgrim, taking refuge in the Dharma, and practicing Zen meditation, Basho immerses himself in Zen Buddhist practice.

As Basho travels on physically, he keeps moving mentally too. He works against becoming stuck in thought or physically stopped on his journey— he moves on. In this way, the physical journey is corollary to his Zen practice: the way in which a practitioner works to keep the mind from getting stuck or stopped by thought, the way in which she lets her thoughts go, returning over and over again to the firm ground of present being. “Don’t check! Go straight! Only don’t know!” as the late Korean Zen master Seung Sahn (1927-2004) would say.

The journey has its attendant difficulties, and Basho struggles with them. It is interesting to observe the way in which he mentally wrestles with his thoughts – the way in which difficult moments along the journey wake him into awareness – into an awareness that has him struggling toward presence:

Spent night at Iizuka. Bathed at hot-springs there,
found lodgings but only thin mats over bare earth, ramshackle

sort of place. No lamp, bedded down by shadowy light of
fireplace and tried getting some rest. All night, thunder, pouring
buckets, roof leaking, fleas mosquitoes in droves; no sleep
To cap it off the usual trouble cropped up, almost passed out.
The short night sky at last broke, and again picked up and
went on. But the night's traces dragged, mind balked. Hired
horses, got to post town of Ko-ori. Future seemed further off
than ever, and recurring illness nagged, but what a pilgrimage
to far places calls for: willingness to let world go, its momen-
tariness, to die on the road, human destiny, which lifted spirit
a little, finding foot again here and there, crossing the Okido
Barrier in Date.

(Basho 29)

Basho is suffering from a lack of sleep and from illness. His sleeping quarters are miserable and there is little time for rest before he must “pick-up” and hurry on. We see Basho acknowledging his discomforts. They come in such a flood they almost overpower him. What we also see is his Buddhist practice in action – how he handles this flood of depressing thoughts by acknowledging the discomforts, and then turning to let them go, seeing them in the context of “pilgrimage:” “what a pilgrimage to far places calls for.” He speaks now of the “future” seeming “farther off than ever.” His thoughts return him to the present and a willingness “to let the world go, its momentariness —,” the momentary complaints that have stopped him in his tracks.

I want to argue that this awareness of the present is what “lifts” his spirits — allows him to act and find his footing — to cross “the barrier.” What he understands here, or to put it more precisely, what he experiences here, is an awareness of the present, a realization that the present is real, that the thoughts of doom and discomfort he has had are “traces” of last night’s complaints. The “recurring illness,” probably dysentery, is dismissed now as something to be expected on a journey like this. He realizes he may die on the road – others have – but even this does not stop him. He sees dying on the road as human destiny. If life is a journey, and “the journey home,” then we are all destined to die while living our lives – while being in the midst of our journeys. He is not going to die *now*.

In this way, the journey, while it is dangerous and threatening, gives Basho something to push against, a resistance, that helps him stand literally and figuratively: it aids his Buddhist practice. When Suzuki Roshi gave his small talk at San Francisco Zen Century in 1970, and spoke to his students about how each day contains innumerable opportunities for them to practice and to find enlightenment, he was speaking of moments such as this, moments in which a person becomes aware of their thoughts running away with them, and releases the thoughts, lets them go, in order to return to the moment at hand – an awakening into the present. The present, after all, is the only time we’ll ever be alive (Suzuki xii).

This “pilgrimage,” which calls for direct contact with the insecure world of travel into remote areas of the country, is designed to help Basho develop his Zen Buddhist practice – to help him make that spiritual progress that is no

progress. In the prose passage cited above, we see how direct that contact can be when Basho recounts his sleeping overnight in a “ramshackle sort of place” on “thin mats over bare earth.” The experience causes discomfort, and it aggravates his recurring illness. But, as noted, Basho understands the discomfort as part of “what a pilgrimage to far places calls for” – it is part of the pilgrimage experience. This understanding is central because it allows him to see the aggravations, to understand them, in the context of practice, which is to say, he sees his consuming thoughts of discomfort as an attachment to condition, an attachment that is stopping him from practicing: letting the thoughts go and returning to the present. His concerns do not stop him physically or mentally. He thinks about them for a time, and then releases them, finding “[his] foot again here and there . . .” He awakens again to the present moment.

If the prose provides the context and the background of Basho discomforts, the poetry echoes it with greater emphasis, clarity, and beauty:

walking on and on
though feeling painfully sick
through fields of *hagi*

(*Basho 55*)

In this poem, Basho gives us a condensed version of what I have tried to explicate above regarding the prose: the hardships of the pilgrimage provides him a resistance to work against, to practice against. Basho’s poem enacts the journey of body and mind. The poem gives us the physical movement of the

body: “walking.” And then it gives us the movement of the mind: his thoughts of “feeling painfully sick.” Following this, Basho comes “through,” both body and mind into an awareness of the present: “through fields of *hagi*.” Rather than be consumed by thoughts of pain, Basho lets thoughts go and returns to an awareness of the present: he sees the *hagi*, or bush clover, the flowering plant that grows wild throughout Japan with tiny pink and white blossoms.

Approximately three hundred years later, and at a geographic remove of some ten thousand miles, Henry David Thoreau was completing his volume, *Walden*, published in 1854 in Boston. He opens the book with the following paragraph:

When I wrote the following pages, or rather the bulk of them, I lived alone, in the woods, a mile from any neighbor, in a house which I had built myself, on the shore of Walden Pond, in Concord, Massachusetts, and earned my living by the labor of my hands only. I lived there two years and two months. At present I am a sojourner in civilized life again.

(Thoreau 3)

In returning to a civilized life, Thoreau refers to himself as “sojourner,” a traveler. He uses the phrase figuratively, of course, and yet the reader senses an implication in the metaphor: if he’s a sojourner in a *civilized* life now, he was as a sojourner at Walden Pond too – a sojourner in a life that was other than civilized.

In fact, Walden is replete with metaphors of travel, of journey. It is also replete with images of movement – one thinks of Thoreau speaking of his daily walks, the movement of trains, ants, the loon, and the seasons. Thoreau understood his “experiment” at Walden Pond as a journey of inquiry, a journey of discovery; that he set out to understand more clearly what it *meant* to be alive and then to publish an account of that to the world. (Thoreau 75) Although Thoreau is not as explicit as Basho in stating that “life is a journey and the journey itself home, “I feel that Thoreau would have been in sympathy with Basho. Thoreau made his journey home.

I came to the writings of Thoreau in high school at the same time that I came to the writings of Basho. From the start, both writers spoke to me and the works of both have stayed with me. Nearly forty years on, I still go back to them.

One of the things that I’ve always been struck by in reading them is how similar they sometimes sound despite their great remove from one another in time and place.

Both writers deliberately set out to “front” the natural world, as Thoreau would have it. They move away from secure, settled, and populated areas of their respective countries and travel into less populated locations in order to respond to interior promptings in their lives. For Thoreau, the questions, the rationale, are explicitly stated: “to front . . . the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach.” For Basho, the questions are less explicated stated. He speaks of suffering from an irrepressible longing for travel and intuits a fundamental linkage between poetry and travel. Thus, he feels compelled to

travel in order to respond to his vocation as poet.

As change is all around him and within him, Basho wants to be answerably afoot and responsive to it: "So – when was it – I, drawn like blown cloud, couldn't stop dreaming of roaming, roving the coast up and down, back at the hut last fall by the river side, sweeping cobwebs off, a year gone and misty skies of spring returning, yearning to go over the Shirakawa Barrier." Basho is a "blown cloud." When the misty skies of spring return, he yearns to go up and over the mountains – over the Shirakawa Barrier – as easily as clouds do. He wants to move gracefully – at one with the natural order.

The coming and going-ness of existence is fundamental to Buddhist awareness and thought. To understand Basho's informing aesthetic it is helpful to think of the symbolism of the cherry blossom in Japanese art – the ephemeral quality that they represent. The cherry blossom symbolizes the beautiful as centered in change, in becoming and loss. Although Basho very much wants to write poetry on his journey, his journey is also a pilgrimage and, as such, the journey is consonant with his Buddhist practice. As a Buddhist he seeks *satori*. But not a *satori* as it is often portrayed in the west as a one and forever achieved outcome but more in line with what the Heart Sutra, a central Zen Buddhist text speaks to when it says "not attainment and nothing to attain." Thus, he seeks a *satori* that is not attained and with "nothing to attain." His art, his travel, and his sitting meditation are all expressions of his way-seeking mind. The vocation of poetry for Basho is a form of spiritual practice, at least in part.

In addition to both writers heading out from populated areas and into the natural world in a deliberate fashion, both writers seem intent on using the

contact with the natural world as a means of developing awareness. Basho would develop awareness, or mindfulness as the Buddhist would call it, through his meditation practice, which must be understood as ongoing, whether he is walking or sitting. Thoreau's method seemed to be one based on perception and observation. He put himself in contact with the world and carefully observed what he saw and felt. Despite their different approaches both writers seemed keenly aware of their surroundings. And their constant vigils, if you will, seemed to heighten their appreciation for the immediate moment – for the present.

As a young man, I was attracted to what these writers were saying about the potential that a human being possessed to wake-up to the world, as well as to one's own life. I felt both writers were important – one voice echoing the other – two voices from different times and cultures, but both concerned with awakening and learning to live fully in the present moment. In their work, I saw a way beyond what I understood to be the too simplistic and limiting ideas of the Catholic Church. I envisioned a more gracious life, a life that drew from a multitude of traditions, cultures, and religions.

The road toward awareness for both writers drives them to insist on the present as the most fertile ground for awakening: "I have been anxious to improve the nick of time," Thoreau writes in *Walden*, ". . . to stand on the meeting of two eternities, the past and the future, which is precisely the present moment (Thoreau 14)." As we have seen, Basho too is ever attentive to the immediate moment in both his prose and poetry:

the autumn coolness
hand and hand paring away
eggplants cucumbers

(Basho 52)

The autumn coolness is *felt* — hands on eggplant and cucumber — hands doing the work of paring vegetables. The poem drives the reader's attention to one spot in time, suggesting to my mind, that an awaking into a moment is significant. That is to say, to simply realize what is before one's eyes at any given moment — to see it, or feel it, clearly is a kind of revelation, a form of wisdom. Thoreau too wanted to feel contact with the world and hungered for the bracing tonic of it, for the blessing of it: "We should be blessed," he writes in *Walden*, if we lived in the present always, and took advantage of every accident that befell us, like the grass which confesses the influence of the slightest dew that falls on it: and not spend our time in atoning for the neglect of past opportunities, which we call doing our duty (Thoreau 259)."

Both Thoreau and Basho want to make contact with the world and are willing to accept a certain amount of discomfort to achieve that end. Both understand the danger of making our lives too safe, too secure: it comes at the price of losing contact with the more elemental "facts of life," to use Thoreau's words, and this in turn may lead to a dulling of the senses, taking things for granted, inattentiveness. In the opening paragraphs of *Walden*, we learn that Thoreau made his living while in the woods by the labor of his own hands. This is not an

easy way to make a living. The crops could fail, as indeed his bean harvest did one year. Despite the risks, or maybe because of them, such a life *does* guarantee an up-close and personal relationship with one's food supply. And, it should lead – at least Thoreau hopes it does – to a keener awareness of what it actually takes to sustain life: When must the seeds be planted? How must they be cared for? When should they be harvested?

Interestingly, when Thoreau speculates on the lives of “primitive people” and the “advantages” their lifestyles afforded them, it is precisely this rough life of contact that he sees as aiding them in being more alive to the world around them:

“The very simplicity and nakedness of man's life in the primitive ages imply this advantage, at least, that they left him still but a sojourner in nature. When he was refreshed with food and sleep he contemplated his journey again. He dwelt, as it were, in a tent in this world, and was either threading the valleys, or crossing the plains, or climbing the mountain-tops We now no longer camp as for a night, but have settled down on earth and forgotten heaven.” (Thoreau 30)

Thoreau reportedly spent considerable time at the Harvard library some years prior to the publication of *Walden* pouring over travel journals. The travel journal was one of his favorite literary genres. He was perhaps the only American writer during these years to spend time with the journals of the French Jesuit priests who wrote of their travels and relations with the native inhabitants of North America in New France: *The Jesuit Relations* (Channing 252). Thoreau read the

journals in French and translated them into English in his notebooks (The journals were not translated into English until 1919.) He had a life-long interest in the native inhabitants of North America and favored first-hand accounts as opposed to the writings by historians. He favored these for their feel of a lived life – of actual first-hand contact between the author and the inhabitants. As we all know, it is hard to beat first-hand accounts for their vividness of detail and for their genuine sense of authority. There is something alive in them. When we read, for example, Father Paul LeJeune’s account of 1634 in *The Jesuit Relations*, as Thoreau may have done – it’s some of the most compelling writing in the collection – we experience this quality of a living history. Father LeJeune had joined a Huron hunting party in the area of present day Ontario and traveled with them from November to April. He spoke of his travel in the following way:

“To paint for you the hardships of the journey, I have neither pen nor brush equal to the task. You would have to see them to understand, as this is a meal that must be tasted to be appreciated. We did nothing but go up and go down. Frequently we had to bend over double to pass under partly fallen trees, and step over others lying upon the ground whose branches sometimes knocked us over, gently enough to be sure, but always coldly, for we fell upon the snow. . Oh God what suffering! It seemed to me I was walking over a road of glass that broke under my feet at every step.” (Greer 25)

What could be any more authentic than this – more convincing? It conveys

reality and veracity – a living testament. Travel accounts such as this would have given Thoreau a sense of what direct contact offered the traveler. They would have given him a window into that world in a way that the more distantly observed historical accounts would not be able to do as convincingly. One can see, or imagine, what would have attracted Thoreau to these accounts: they provided vivid renderings of contact that awaken the traveler – contact that helped them, in the vernacular of our day, to realize they were not in Kansas anymore.

In his book-length examination of the workings of memory and perception in the work of Thoreau, H. Daniel Peck maintains that the Indians had “a special place in Thoreau’s historical imagination because, as America’s original inhabitants, they offer *an ideal of simplicity* [my emphasis] against which all of civilization’s destructive complexities can be measured (Peck 18).” No doubt, LeJeanue’s account gives us a picture of that “simplicity” – a palpable encounter with the natural world: “It seemed...I was walking over a road of glass at every step.” It also illustrates the movement Thoreau spoke of when speaking of the advantages of living in the “primitive ages” when one’s home was less fixed – when one had to be more accepting and open to change and insecurity – to the journey being a kind of home, where one’s lodging might simply be a tent: “He dwelt, as it were, in a tent in this world . . . We . . . no longer camp as for a night, but have settled down on earth and forgotten heaven (Thoreau 30).”

In “settling down,” we have more than forgotten about heaven, according to Thoreau: we have forgotten how to live upon the earth in a more integral way. Thoreau would have us wake up. One of his principal projects, in going to

Walden Pond was to deepen his awareness of life — to awaken into a fuller relation with it. In the epigraph on the first page of the original version of *Walden*, he states his intention to awaken his neighbors: “I do not propose to write an ode to dejection, but to brag as lustily as Chanticleer in the morning, standing on his roost, if only to wake my neighbors.” And periodically throughout the book thereafter, Thoreau continues to explore the theme of wakefulness. Just one paragraph before announcing why he went to the woods, he criticizes the mental stupor he finds too many neighbors in: “. . . only one in a million is awake for effective intellectual exertion, only one in a hundred millions to a poetic or divine life. To be awake is to be alive . . . We must learn to reawaken and keep ourselves awake . . . (74).”

Like Basho, Thoreau understands that a simply lifestyle, a willingness to accept insecurity, and a life that allows for direct contact with the natural world affords one a potentially fuller more integrated living experience, an experience that can lead towards awareness and awakening. And like Basho, with his Zen practice, Thoreau understands that individual effort, the interior journey, is complement to the outward journey. If we are to awaken, as Thoreau would have it, we must willingly travel into own natures, our own minds. “Direct your eye right inward,” Thoreau encourages the reader, “and you’ll find a thousand regions in your mind yet undiscovered. Travel them, and be expert in home-cosmography (264).” Thoreau suggests that interior travel can lead to undiscovered regions and that this discovery, or realization, of “a thousand regions” in the mind undiscovered, might in turn lead to an understanding of

home as a kind of cosmos – a “home-cosmology.” The study of “home-cosmology,” if we extend the metaphor, suggests a new science: the science of home-cosmology, a term suggesting, etymologically, a limitless and unbounded conception of home, and yet a unified space: a universe, a cosmos.

As a student of the Soto sect of Zen Buddhism, Basho would have believed in the need for interior travel too. He would have called it meditation – *zazen*. He would also have been familiar with the teachings of the Soto’s founder Dogen Zenji (1200-1253) who spoke of Zen practice as largely the study of the self, a self understood as limitless and unbounded: “To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be actualized by myriad things.”

Thoreau’s intention to be aware and present – to be awake – in his life at Walden Pond is a sustained and central one. In the first essay in the book, “Economy,” Thoreau speaks of intending to publish the result of his “experiment,” whether it proved “mean” or “sublime:” “If it proved . . . mean why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or if it were sublime to *know it by experience* [my emphasis], and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion.” (75) As *Walden* is not a book detailing the “meanness” of his “excursion,” we take it at face value that it is the sublime account he offers. And one central characterizing element of that account resides in Thoreau’s sustain insistence on his own intention to be awake and alertly present for the experiment. *Walden* is replete with Thoreau’s commenting on his intention in this regard. He goes to some considerable lengths to press the point home. He does not want the reader to doubt: “It is true,

I never assisted the sun materially in his rising, but, *doubt not*, [my emphasis] it was of the *last importance* [my emphasis] only to be present at it (14)."

It is my contention that Thoreau has learned, over the course of his experiment at Walden Pond, to be more *present* in the world, and that the publication of *Walden*, can be understood, at least in part, as Thoreau's attempt to demonstrate his *presence* at Walden Pond and to insist throughout the book – from front to last – his belief that waking into the present is a key requirement of a person's learning to live a fuller life: "All *change* [my emphasis] is a miracle to contemplate; but it is a miracle which is taking place every instant (10)."

The first edition of *Walden* begins with an epigraph on awakening: "I do not propose to write an ode to dejection, but to brag as lustily as Chanticleer in the morning, standing on his roost, if only to wake my neighbors up (1)." The book will also close on the topic:

I do not say that John or Jonathan will realize all this: but such is the character of that morrow that mere lapse of time can never make to dawn. The light which puts out our eyes is darkness to us. Only that day dawns to which we are awake. There is more day to dawn. The sun is but a morning star. (275)

Not everyone will hear his call: "I do not say that John or Jonathan will realize all this." Thoreau goes on to distinguish between physical waking, and the more intellectual, spiritual waking, that concerns him: it is ". . . in the character of that morrow which mere lapse of time can never make to dawn."

Which is to say, the mere passing of time, the passing of a night, does not necessarily bring a person into the light of day, into a “dawn.” It requires *more* of the person to behold the dawn – “to be *present* [my emphasis] at it,” as Thoreau earlier remarked when speaking of his own intention.

Thoreau suggests that the person must change if she is to be present at dawn, to be awake for it. Many of “us,” including by implication Thoreau, have become blinded to the light of day: “The light that put out *our* [my emphasis] eyes is darkness to us.” We don’t see the dawn – not really, not the way Thoreau insists we are capable of seeing. We have become blinded by routine and concerns; by thoughts of future and past; by the pressures of getting on in the world. We have as such become effectively blind to the dawning day, to the moment — to what is before our eyes now.

And yet despite this, despite the blindness we suffer under, a nudging encouragement from Thoreau, which reads as a conditionally hopeful statement: “Only that day dawns to which we are awake. There is more day to dawn. The sun is but a morning star.” If we are to see, and live in the *day*, we must awaken first, awaken to the day, and come into the presence of it. And as there is “more day to dawn” — “more” in the sense that day continues to dawn, continues to unfold, moment-by-moment — Thoreau implies that we are continuously presented with innumerable opportunities to awaken into day, into the present.

This awareness of the present moment as fertile ground for being is where both writers find root and where both sustain their creative life and flourish, a place opening into the lived life. Home is the *now* before our eyes — deeper than that our memories of the past or hopes for the future. It is where we live, or fail

to live. It makes little difference whether a person is leading a horse by the mouth or moving back into Concord – lives are journeys; the journey home. Both writers state, more or less explicitly then, that we are travelers and our home is to be found in the present adventure. Home, then, is not merely a static location but more a felt, potent, and ongoing event of discovering place, an event that calls for attentiveness, mindfulness, and ultimately, reverence.

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Drifting

For John Keeble

To wake with a kind of grace
And not feel harried – how easy
To be swept off into the current
Of life's demands . . .
I'd rather be more able
To drift into seasons,
To attend projects and chores
With eyes ready for the least
Disturbance any blade of grass
Turning in the wind can make –
To be a hunter who realizes
The fullness an instant offers – to accept
Here and now the unexpected
Gift of learning how it is
To let disturbance enter you
And turn you out towards its life
Then might I be more able
To be the man I wan to be –
The father lifting children free
From fear of disturbing his day
Or breaking his holy train
Of concentration. Here, I am.
I'm pounding down the stairs.

I'm running through the kitchen
To see what's happening *this time*
And there they are – the children
Too scared to say a word
Of how the vase was broken –
Only their tears
And open arms
To guide me past this shattering
Into the station of this attentiveness.

Chapter Five / Getting the Secret Out of Cid Corman

. . . I, on my side, require of every writer, first or last, a simple and sincere account of his own life, and not merely what he has heard of other men's lives: some such account he would send to his kindred from a distant land; for if he has lived sincerely, it must have been in a distant land to me.

– Thoreau, *Walden*

I.

I walked by many times before I finally walked in on a rainy day in November. I needed a place to write a letter, and the shop looked convenient. Kae lived nearby and had been trying to get me to go into the shop since I arrived in Kyoto two years before. She thought I'd like the atmosphere and the homemade American ice cream and cake. I wasn't so sure. A small shop wedged in between many other shops lining Marutamachi Street, it looked worn and dusty. What attracted me was the name, painted in white letters on a faded blue awning in a flowing script resembling a Japanese brush painting. The letters formed a face, each "C" an eye with periods tucked into them, the "s" a nose.



The coffee shop was dark and quiet, as Kae had described it. I had just read Tanizaki Jun'ichiro's book, *In Praise Of Shadows*, and was interested in the aesthetics he spoke of: "When we gaze into the darkness that gathers behind the

crossbeam, around the flower vase, beneath the shelves, though we know perfectly well it is mere shadow, we are overcome with the feeling that in this small corner of the atmosphere there reigns complete and utter silence, that here in the darkness immutable tranquility holds sway." Tanizaki would have loved this shop. Inside, a round paper shade softly diffused the room's only light; the floor was made of stone, large uneven slabs of various sizes and shapes. The walls were covered with brown, finely textured cloth. The furniture was of rough-cut wood. Nothing shined. Even the silverware was worn to a dull finish.

I sat down and ordered coffee and a slice of double chocolate cheesecake. I noticed a few poems, poster-sized broadsides, along the wall and rose to take a closer look. I found three poems, two in English, the other in Japanese. The English poems were from the "On the Bus" series that the San Francisco city government had sponsored some years earlier - poems were put up inside the city's buses throughout the year. The poems were by Cid Corman and George Evans. As I was standing there, the baker came out to stand beside the register. "Do you know Cid Corman?" He inquired with a thick Japanese accent. "Yes," I replied, slowly, surprised by the question.

I knew Corman was an American poet. I'd seen his poems around; I liked them and had bought two of his books of essays in a second-hand store in Seattle the year before. "He lives nearby and comes in often," the baker continued, and handed me a slip of paper with Corman's number on it. "You should give him a call; he'd like that."

II.

I first heard of Cid Corman when I was in high school; we were using Hayden Carruth's anthology, *The Voice that is Great Within Us*. I found a few of his poems there; one poem in particular struck me:

There are things to be said. No doubt.
And in one way or another
they will be said. But to whom tell.

The silences? With whom share them
now? For a moment the sky is
empty and then there was a bird.

This was in 1972, the end of U.S. involvement in Vietnam, Watergate on the horizon. We had witnessed the assassinations of John F. Kennedy, Robert Kennedy, and Martin Luther King Jr. It was a time of confusion and distrust. People argued and fought in the streets, in the courts, at home, and on campuses. The National Guard at Kent State University gunned down four students while protesting the war. Out of a decade of confusion and violence, this voice comforted me: "There are things to be said. No doubt." The poem acknowledged the use of language and its limitations at once. It went on to urge something more: the need to "share" our lives, the need to see clearly what was before our

eyes. By the time I finished reading the poem, I was standing in a new land with empty sky above me. I trusted the poem, and felt that if I listened to it hard enough I could clarify important questions in my life. It worked on me like a Zen koan. I didn't understand it, but I liked it. I puzzled over it. I remembered it – lived with it for years. I recited it to friends at odd moments when I felt particularly lost for words, and they enjoyed it too, began reciting it back to me. The words rang and echoed.

I left the coffee shop thrilled to have Cid Corman's phone number. I mentioned the encounter to a poet friend of mine, and he called Cid. We arranged to meet at my friend's home. In that first meeting, we introduced ourselves, told each other where we came from, our histories, and what interests we had in poetry. I learned that Cid was from Boston, that his father and mother came from Russia, and that he had attended Boston Latin School, Tufts University, and the University of Michigan where he received the prestigious Hopwood Award in poetry in 1947. I learned details about his life, the kind of details that allow one person to get to know another, details that bring ease and friendship into a relationship.

Cid was candid. When he was in his mid-twenties, he started a poetry program on a Boston radio station, *This is Poetry*. The program ran for over three years and consisted of fifteen-minute readings of modern verse on Saturday evenings at seven-thirty. The program featured such writers as John Crowe Ransom, Archibald Macleish, Stephen Spender, John Ciardi, Theodore Roethke, Pierre Emmanuel, Allan Curnow, Richard Wilbur, Richard Eberhart, Katherine Hoskins, and Vincent Ferrini. A number of the programs were bilingual, in

English and French, Spanish, German, or Italian. *This is Poetry* led to some important meetings and contacts. For example, this is how Corman met Robert Creeley. Robert Creeley was in his twenties, and his work had not yet come into prominence. He heard the program and responded as many other listeners did: he wrote a letter. Cid wrote back immediately to invite Creeley to read on the program. Their meeting was fortunate for it would help bring a wave of new poetry into American letters. In 1951, partly to ensure that new poets, such as Robert Creeley could be read as well as heard, Cid founded *Origin* magazine. Robert Creeley would be a contributing force in getting the magazine off the ground, so too would be another influential early contact, Charles Olson. Today Olson is thought by many to have been a grand American genius, in the spirit of Melville, Whitman, and Pound. A pioneer in American poetry, he pushed it into new territory, opening new ground. His seminal essay, "Projective Verse," published in *Poetry New York* in 1951, detailed those intentions:

A poem is energy transferred from where the poet got it (he will have some several causations), by way of the poem itself to, all the way over to, the reader . . . the poem itself must, at all points, be a high energy-construct and, at all points, an energy-discharge. So: how is the poet to accomplish same energy, how is he, what is the process by which a poet gets in, at all points energy at least the equivalent of the energy which propelled him in the first place, yet an energy which is peculiar to verse alone and which will be, obviously, also different from the energy which the reader, because

he is a third term, will take away? This is the problem, which any poet who departs from closed form is specially confronted by. And it involves a whole series of new recognitions. From the moment he ventures into FIELD COMPOSITION – puts himself in the open – he can go by no track other than the one the poem under hand declares, for itself. Thus he has to behave, and be instant by instant, aware . . . (Olson 239)

Cid invited Olson to be a contributing editor for *Origin*. It is hard to know whether or not Olson welcomed the idea of being part of a magazine that could introduce the kind of poetry he wanted to see published in the United States. Being an outsider, unassociated with any magazine or university, gave Olson certain freedoms he feared losing. Not knowing Corman well, Olson was suspicious of his intentions. He fired a letter back to Corman to clarify his position. Tom Clark, in his biography of Olson, *The Allegory of a Poet's Life* (Norton, 1991), gives an lively account of this reply: “Olson wasted no time on preliminary courtesies, snowing the would-be editor under with an extended set of directives thrust forward with a mixture of dictatorial bluff and generous conjecture. To start with, Corman was put on notice he would have some adjusting to do. When he reported attempts to negotiate subsidy for the magazine from Brandeis University, it was suggested by Olson that he was dangerously soft on academia. And when Corman confessed to harboring certain residual sympathies for the middle-of-the-road poets of the day, Olson sniffed at the idea of colluding in the creation of just another predictable forum for the

"well-made poems" of such "decidedly impressive" contemporaries as "o, say Harvey Shapiro, or Richard Wilbur... or, Stephen Spender (intimate) or who [ever] else . . . you think of publishing" (Clark 230).

Olson knew what he wanted the magazine to be, but did it jive with what Corman wanted it to be? Corman and Olson corresponded for years. Both dialogic and dialectic, their letters were passionate, argumentative and tough. [*Charles Olson and Cid Corman: Complete Correspondence 1950-1964, Vol. I*, ed. George Evans (Orono: National Poetry Foundation, University of Maine, 1987)]. They detail the emergence of a "new push," to use Olson's epithet, in American poetry, a push that *Origin* and Corman would help bring into existence and further. The poems of Charles Olson and Robert Creeley were featured in *Origin* Vol. 1 and Vol. 2. Wallace Stevens was featured in Vol. 3, with one of the first detailed essays on Steven's work to appear in any literary magazine in the United States.

Cid edited and published *Origin* for the next thirty years, a difficult task for he had little, if any, financial backing. Despite many hardships, the magazine succeeded in publishing some of the best new poets, writing in English, from around the world, poets such as Charles Olson, Robert Creeley, Louis Zukofsky, Larry Eigner, William Bronk, Lorine Niedecker, George Oppen, and Gary Snyder, to name but a few. I was thrilled to be in the presence of someone who knew so much about poetry, a linking figure in post-modern American poetry. Here was a poet who could tell stories of visiting William Carlos Williams' house at 9 Rutherford Street and having Williams ask him to read *Asphodel, that Greeny Flower* in draft – a man who could tell stories about Zukofsky, Oppen, and

Goodman from first hand experience, from years of correspondence and friendship. What Corman had to say was unobtainable in books; it was a private storehouse. I marveled at his wealth of his experience, and wondered why I hadn't heard more of him when I was in the U.S. Why hadn't I heard anything of him in the universities where I studied literature and creative writing?

In the late fifties, Cid was awarded a Fulbright scholarship, recommended by Marianne Moore, and set off for France. He lived in France for seven years and began translating Celan, Char, and Ponge. He was the first to translate Celan into English, begging Celan to allow him to do so. Celan did not want his work translated and refused to consent. Corman went ahead anyway, even under threat of litigation, and began to publish his translations in *Origin*. To hear Cid tell the story, Celan's work was simply too strong to be ignored – "it had to be shared."

After his stay in France, Cid went to Italy where he was promised an English teaching job that would allow him time to write, working for the U.S. Foreign Service in a small mining town called Matera. It was an impoverished community, but a community with vitality, rich in culture and history. The poetry of Corman's *Sun Rock Man* (*Origin*, 1962) is infused with the spirit and life of this place:

The labors

Men work. Usually
hardly at all. In the hills
they lazy around in gangs,
let machines grind rock to
gravel. In tandem, but freely,
they shovel buckets full and
heave them up to the shoulder
and up into the truck
beside. Slowly rock is eaten
away. Slowly the men eat
up the day. Slowly the day
dies. The truck pulls out. Rock
remains. On a ridge above them
a shepherd crowding some grass
lets his flock browse corralled by
only a barking bounding dog
Beyond them clouds go on
covering sky. Somewhere the
sky descends. And dog sheep men
rock hills collect between them night.

In 1963, Cid arrived in Japan almost by accident. He had applied for twenty-seven teaching jobs in Asia, twenty-six of them outside Japan. As luck, or fate, would have it, he was offered the job in Japan. Since then, excepting a short stay in the U.S. in the eighties, Cid has remained in Japan, returning to the U.S. only rarely for visits and readings. He married Shizumi Konishi in 1963, and together they founded C.C.'s, the coffee shop I walked into that rainy day in November. After running the shop for over twenty years, Cid and Shizumi sold it to Shizumi's brother.

What has Cid been doing in Japan thirty-plus years? He has worked as editor, translator, and critic. He has published over a hundred books, and seen *Origin* through five series, one series comprising twenty issues. His translations of Japanese poetry, notably Basho's *Oku-no-Hosomichi (Back Roads To Far Towns, Tokyo, Mushinsha, 1968)*, Kusano Shimpei's, *Frogs and Others: Poems, (Tokyo, Mushinsha, 1968; New York, Grossman, 1969)*, and more recently Taneda Santoka's haiku, *Walking Into the Wind, (San Francisco, Cadmus, 1990)* benefit from Cid's first-hand knowledge of Japan: its culture and its language. Both Sam Hamill and Donald Keene, exceptional translators of Japanese literature, have recommended Corman's translation of Basho, Hamill calling it "essential reading."

I met with Cid every other Sunday for the next few years. The meetings lasted five to six hours. The group grew to four, sometimes five members. Cid came to the house with a satchel full of books – the zipper broken. He began by reading poetry, a short story, an essay, or a letter. This sparked conversations that could go anywhere. Once, he began by reading “The Wreck of the Deutschland” and

had us discussing Hopkins, Rilke, Holderlin, Goethe, Catholicism, Picasso, Zukofsky, the history of both World Wars, and sumo wrestling, all in one afternoon. The meetings were thrilling, and Corman's breadth of knowledge daunting.

When I gave him one of my poems to look at, he screwed his eyes down and leaned into it. He warned me he would tell the truth. He told me that when it came to poetry and talking about it he had been told he had bad manners. I welcomed his seriousness. He cut into the poem with intense honesty, intense passion. The soft-spoken poet disappeared; he became the editor. He wanted every word to function fully, with the language worked hard. "Your whole life has got to be on the line, and it's got to be a hot line."

When looking over a poem or speaking about poetry, Cid has opinions and holds to them, remaining open to others' opinions, provided they speak when he is finished. On more than a few occasions, I wanted to crawl away after a session and not show another thing to him until I was sure it was as good as it could be. Cid doesn't see himself as a teacher and no one sharing his or her poetry with him should be confused on that point. Cid is an editor, and he has experience. He tells you the way he sees it, bad manners and all. No doubt, sometimes he may be wrong. More often though, you know he's right.

For me, Cid has been a source of moral support – the seventy-year-old poet telling me it's worth it, telling me it's tough, telling me it's rewarded him beyond measure. And none of this told directly, but all of it by example, through the life he lives – the passion exhibits for life, the poetry he writes. And yet, for all his labor – writing, editing, and translating – he has little money or recognition to

show for it, and still undaunted, indefatigable, he rises early each morning ready “to work.” He has been the elder who has responded to every postcard, letter, or phone call – the man never too busy to listen and offer help. The excerpts below, typical of his generous spirit, are from his letters to me:

Talent? Every one has unique talent/s. BUT I have had long experience with wdbe poets and have seen to my surprise and chagrin early on that talent alone accomplishes little and often – badly used – deteriorates into slick shitOn the other hand, I have seen quite a few people – men and women – with very modest gift by sheer persistence find their way into poetry – quite incredibly.

You have to be painfully ruthlessly honest with yourself (even more than with others - where tact has some place - tho as you will have long since noticed - I have little of it).

Life is the music - Greg - and your life your music. No one can take it from you - or give it to you (beyond those who did) - but you may need time to hear it or let it come through. It happens when you are moved beyond yourself into the open. It requires an honesty with oneself that is always rare - and often when you think your ARE being honest - you are deceiving (kidding) yourself most. It needs a terrible ruthlessness.

It isn't a matter of sounding good but of being good – living each word in its fullness as they OCCUR. Not to get ahead of yourself, but not to fall behind either. It WILL come, if you have the staying power. And even if you fail – it may still feed richly into your life. Ego – despite all the accent put upon it – isn't the issue. But how to share life with others

and in a way that makes it even yet (in the face of what we all face) possible. Given what it is – for any of us – there’s nothing to get hoity-toity about.

We’re all small potatoes - Nobelists and Presidents, Kings/Queens and Champions.

Why should what you feel or have felt be of any interest or concern to ANYONE ELSE?

And how can it be unless you open to others to core? This is hard to do. We hide from ourselves as well as others.

The poem you want to write maybe will not come clear to you till within moments of your death. That’s the way it goes.

There’s no sense praying that I suffer no more sorrows. It comes with the territory. There is nothing to pray for – as my poems try to make clear. If life means anything to anyone it means precisely life and living this very moment aware of it and how it is shared – generously – magnanimously – tenderly.

You’re a good guy – unmistakably, but you will have to suffer for it and from the suffering (without looking for it) you will find such depth of joy that every single moment offers.

III

Presently, Cid is writing and putting together a large book entitled *of*. Lapis Press published the first two volumes in 1992, a beautiful boxed edition with jacket art by the American painter Sam Francis. Three volumes remain to be published. When it is completed, it will be, "in 5 vols. – each about 750 pp." It will be "ONE book, very carefully edited (7 years in editing) (decades in writing), not a collected or selected job." When the first two volumes were published, they received little critical attention, two reviews: one in a small mimeo magazine and the other in Arts Magazine (New York), a magazine one would expect to be more concerned with the book's design than with the poetry. The review did, however, praise the poetry, calling Corman "the best kept secret in American poetry." I puzzled over that comment, intrigued by it. How could a man so involved in shaping American poetry over the last 50 years be a "kept secret?" The comment raised questions about his life, work, and poetry. I wrote to Cid to inquire:

Your book, *of* received only two reviews in the United States, and in one of those reviews, you were said to be one of American poetry's best-kept secrets. How do you feel about being referred to in this way? Is there anything you would do to change that? Do you mind being viewed as a secret?

There are plenty of people who know of my work. The work is there - over 100 books - over a period of 40 years! And most libraries have something. Sadness is that I believe the work speaks more clearly to ALL than any other poetry of our time. And speaks to root

matter. Most of my books have never had ANY notice. Fact.

Does this make you bitter? Does it disappoint you?

What I say above is simple truth but there is not bitterness here – only sadness. Since the work is not done for fame or money – but only for others.

I have no bitterness (have gone out of my way and lost friends sometimes because of it) to avoid publicity. Not because I have anything to hide – the most shameful things in my life are openly found in my work. Simply: the work is my life – my life the poetry. If you turn to them you have all of me that anyone cd want – I trust it will be of some kind use in the difficulty of being anyone – or all.

Could you say more about "All" and "root matter," how do you mean the work speaks to them?

My poems invariably address themselves to people of all ages, creeds, countries, and times (even the dead) & invariably probe human nature to the root (to the ground of being it comes from).

You've said it is important to be heard as a writer. How do you balance that need, desire, with writing itself? How important is it to be heard in comparison with the writing itself?

Writing and being heard go together. I'm not writing for myself: all work meant to bring others to face the fact/act of being.

How patient should a young writer be about being heard, published?

As patient as his or her feeling for the word of living/dying being offers.

How much self-promotion of one's work should one do? What dangers should one be aware of, careful of?

Self-promotion? The work has to speak for itself, always, and you send it where you think it may be heard.

You have said that you wouldn't give an interview unless it dealt specifically with your work. Do you still feel that way? Why?

Interviews I dislike. They make one too important. Let the work speak for itself and in quiet moment/scale.

Though you dislike interviews, you are always receptive to people who are interested in poetry. You invite them to your home and give generously of your time. How would you say such an interaction differs from the interview? What interests you in it, about it?

An interview is a publicity deal. Always has been. Part of journalism. It has nothing to do with poetry. Where are the interviews with Homer, Sappho, Tu Fu, Li Po, Shakespeare, or Blake? Who needs them? In the early 50's when WCW and Floss took me into their house like one of their sons - I learned decisively to want to share such cordiality in my own life - to the extent I could. To share life is what life is all about.

You receive letters from around the world. Younger poets find your work, are drawn to it, and contact you. What do you think it is that draws these young writers to you?

Some youngsters find me somehow – often by accident. My work is clear and tends, I think, to make an immediate impression or none at all. Too direct for some, perhaps.

Do you respond to all the letters you receive?

Invariably. And at once. As long as they clearly want response.

What is the most surprising thing that has happened to you through your correspondence in letters? Is there anything that stands out as remarkable?

Everything. Every letter is my news. Is poetry.

You've been working through the mail this way for years – this exchange of

postcards for example, this interview. What role does correspondence play in the world of your poetry?

As you know - I live at a distance, as it happens, from most of my poetry coevals. Any mail becomes a life-line.

Why have you remained in Japan all these years? What attracts you? How has the experience of being in Japan affected your work?

Above all - Shizumi wants to live here. Does that make any sense to you? And I have lived in Kyoto over 30 years: have you ever lived that long in any one place? Try it - Then you will find my answer for me. Japan is home: how does home affect anyone?

Could you say something about what aspects of Japanese culture you have felt yourself attracted to and why?

All cultures (peoples/histories) stories interest me. Kyoto is a good city for a poet to work in. Relatively quiet - the largest village in the world. The Japanese have a deep interest in poetry - even if they don't read it much. It is a natural (now) part of their lives. This may not remain so - but during my lifetime it will.

One last question: you have sometimes said that it is very hard to write poetry these days because there are so many temptations leading the other way. Could you explain more what you mean by temptations, what you see them as?

Temptations? The life of poetry is - as it happens - reliably ascetic (unless like James Merrill or Robert Duncan etc. you happen to be born or brought into money / ease). You can answer this better than I can. Money, family needs, nice things, health problems, etc. All these can and do deflect / And there are no guarantees of "success" (whatever that means).

IV.

Cid Corman is probably the most precise and clear poet alive. His clarity is what makes him so mysteriously alive. . . Further experience in the rhythm of the language and also in the real precision of diction, and in the precision of rhythm were being carried on by people like Cid Corman, wonderful poet, very neglected.

– James Wright, *Collected Prose*

Cid Corman's work is familiar to some in the U. S., but is not well, or widely, known: a kept secret. American poetry cannot afford to allow Corman to remain a kept secret. If that sounds overly dramatic, an inflated claim, I'm among a long list of poets and critics who have spoken for the quality and interest of Corman's work over many years, among them: William Carlos Williams, Denise Levertov, Hayden Carruth, Robert Creeley, Hugh Kenner, Louis Zukofsky, George Oppen, Gary Snyder, Carl Rakosi, William Bronk, Basil Bunting, John Ciardi, Clayton Eshelman, Robert Hass, and the list could go on. This said, one wonders why the work has not received wider attention, at least enough to prevent him from being referred to as a "kept secret?"

Several years ago, I met Cid in the coffee shop after visiting a Zen temple in the mountains outside of Kyoto. I'd been up at the temple for a week, participating in a retreat, a *sesshin*. While there, I saw a brush painting that I thought Cid would have liked. In translation, it read, "Gain is Illusion, Loss is Enlightenment." When I mentioned it to Cid, he showed little interest, and told me in a tired voice, "Of course, you know, but the thing is, it's got to be lived, the thing has got to be lived."

Riding home on the bus, going over that afternoon's conversation in my mind, I hit upon the similarities between that sign and the first poem I'd seen of Cid's when I was a sophomore in high school:

There are things to be said. No doubt.
And in one way or another
they will be said. But to whom tell.

The silences? With whom share them
now? For a moment the sky is
empty and then there was a bird.

Both painting and poem speak to loss: the sign directly, the poem less so. In the poem, the speaker addresses the question of what can be said, knowing life is lived in the distance between "is" and "was:" . . . For a moment the sky is / empty and then there was a bird. In other words, life is coming and going, and we know it, feel it. We want to say something to the condition, but what can be said? What

will we say? "There are things to be said. No doubt. / And in one way or another / they will be said. But to whom tell / the silences? . . ."

The moments in our lives when we come to see the reality of this condition of loss, are to be taken, I believe, as "the silences." They come casually as when we look at blossoms falling from a tree, or tragically as when we lose a loved one. Whatever the case, we are rendered silent by the experience in so far as we are unable to offer any explanation for it. Who can explain why there is loss, why there is dying, any more readily than they can explain why there is life, why there is living? The explanation remains out of bounds, unspeakable, of silence. The poem presses into that question: How are we to live, knowing loss is the central condition of our lives? This poem, as do Corman's poetics in general, speak to the phrase "*Gain is Illusion, Loss is Enlightenment.*" The bird comes and the bird goes, and in the interval between something has been experienced. Rather than saying something definitive, the poem directs us away from words to no words, to silence. It invites us to pause and linger here. It leaves us looking at an empty sky where a bird had flown once; the poem brings us into a moment of awareness and presence. We encounter loss and the awareness of being alive within loss. Similarly, we see Corman pressing on the question of gain and loss in the poem below:

Did I have to come
to Iowa to
meet the world – greet all

of human being
in the name of the word?
We speak in the night

cicadas deafen
and crickets work through
making as much of

what they are as we
to keep going. Come
to Iowa too nameless

to nameless
of no account and
perfectly attuned.

In their namelessness, the cicadas, crickets, and Cid are "perfectly attuned:"
They are all animals, they live a short time, they sing a brief song – they pass on:
". . . nameless / to nameless / of no account . . ." The "Iowa" in the poem refers
to The Iowa Writing Program, the premier graduate writing program in the
United States where Cid had been invited to teach. While presumably honored to

have been so invited, the poem indicates a characteristic tendency on Cid's part: his working to maintain a considered appreciation for the poet and his work in relation to life. Cid sees the work of the poet, the writing of poems, as simply what the poet does "to keep going" – a response to the given conditions of life. The work of the poet is natural. It springs from the conditions of life, what Cid has termed "Livingdying" – living in the awareness of death. The Crickets and cicadas are likened to the work of the poet: they simply do what they must do. They make "as much of/ what they are as we/ to keep going. . ."

Rather than allowing the honor of reading and teaching at Iowa to inflate his sense of self worth, Cid questions it, as if to ask, "What is the fuss about? Why did I come to Iowa to read? Why do we treat this as such a big deal?" The questions lead him to a "namelessness –" they lead him back to earth, down to earth. For Corman, "livingdying" is the nourishing ground of poetry, the ground out of which poetry springs. To appreciate our eventual namelessness on earth is to appreciate the condition of loss in our lives – how loss, death and dying, enrich our experience of life? He holds that knowledge dear – understands it as the generative impulse behind poetry.

In the another poem, Cid speaks even more directly to what he sees as the given condition of our lives and how poetry responds to that condition – how the poet does. And one sees in this, how Corman again moves the discussion off the poet and towards what he reckons primary and central, the condition the poet speaks out of, which I maintain is one steeped in an awareness of loss – one that sees "gain" as an illusion, see loss as a form of enlightenment. One should note also here again Corman's characteristic tendency to move the poet,

himself or herself, to the side. It is not about the poet:

The point is
not ourselves
not me – nor –
as it turns
out – you. Then –
we ask – Who?
No who, no
what, no known,
and nothing
to be known.
No point. And
none in this.
And never
the less, this.
Speak to man.

The poem proceeds by shedding layers – the possible explanations to an implied question: what makes one person speak to another – what makes a poet “speak to man?” Cid dispenses with possible explanations until he arrives at essentially nothing, but a *nothing* pregnant with implication: “And never / the less, this. Speak to man.” The point is “this,” that is, *this* condition that finds us alive and aware of our dying – this condition that finds us unable to say where

we come from or where we will go – this condition that says we’re bound for namelessness on the earth – a condition we share with each other – a condition that affords us a place to stand and speak to each other:

Up against it
at the very edge,
knowing it
will give or has
been given on
no other terms
than this. Not a
matter of life
or death. But of
life and death. In –
stead of a gun
I reach for you.

Thus, on the bus that day, heading home after my talk with Cid, I gradually came to realize Cid had been living the life I spoke about earlier: *Gain is Illusion, Loss is Enlightenment*. He did not go out of his way to seek publicity for his poetry. His poetics set him to the side of that. He would not pursue it. In an age in which poets are asked to promote their books, in an age and literary prizes and awards, Cid headed off in a different direction – far off – to a different

country – to the place that poetry called him to stay, and live, and flourish.

If Cid does not live in poverty, he lives in the neighborhood. “Poetry,” as he has told me with his wry smile, “is reliably ascetic.” But the life that comes to him through poetry, he lives, nothing more and nothing less. He accepts the difficult condition of his life – not having money to buy new glasses, fix his teeth, or fly home to see a dying brother. “It must be lived.” Tough as his life is in material terms, Corman has shown me more than anyone else the joy of poetry.

The Task

For Cid Corman, in memoriam

The questioning is test to see
Which way you'll jump, or if
You'll jump at all
Away from heart. The dawn will come
But what dawn upon?
Will it find you holding fast?
Or losing grip? *This*
Could be a distraction, or *that* –
Something giving you cause
To look away from truest life. Temptations
Carry us around the block
Before we even notice
We've left our homes. Listen,
And I'll give you a clue –
Stay with the desire opening
Your heart each day. Look
For patterns in the weather –
Make yourself familiar
With local geography –
Become the salmon
That knows the river by smell alone.
Then, one day the story I am telling you
Shall fall to history – the disbelieving side
Responsible for sending you out
On one empty errand after another,
In search of every other green pasture

(No Stanza Break)

It caught wind of, will be here
In front of you – no pasture at all
But forest, burning and collapsing down
Into a showering
That leaves you on the path,
Illuminated
In the confident belief of your own task.

Chapter Six /Graces

A boundary is not that at which something stops but, as the Greeks recognized, the boundary is that from which something begins its presencing.

– Heidegger

What Summer Proposes

“What summer proposes is simply pleasure.” The soft syllables in this line of poetry by Robert Hass evoke the comfort of a summer day, probably a summer day in dry and sunny California where Hass resides. I try to remember that line, and its optimistic view of the summer, when things begin to get seriously hot in Japan, which is about now, mid-May. In about two weeks, the month-long rainy season will begin in Japan – *tsuyu*. A time in which dark clouds mass for hours and then suddenly let go torrential and pummeling rain. If you try out-smarting the rain, dare to sneak out under dark clouds expecting to avoid the fall say, as I have just done, you deserve to be reminded of your foolish behavior. I am that fool. I cannot count the times I’ve been caught, or the times I’ve watched others get caught in a deluge. In seconds, the rains have you drenched head to toe. There is little you can do to resist it – the rains fall too fast and too hard. The high school girls on bicycles outside the window are my example. They stop at the traffic light, but before it turns green, the rain falls and within seconds their white blouses are soaked so thoroughly that the darkness of their skin lights up through their wet cotton. Their black hair is swept back off their faces – slick and

shining, as if they had just climbed from the sea.

And no sooner does the rainy season end than the humidity and heat of summer begins to rise in earnest – sunrise at five a.m. There is no daylight-savings time in Japan. At six or seven a.m., the heat is already uncomfortable enough to drive you from bed. My neighbors will greet me now with that often used phrase, “*mushi atsui, ne?*” – a phrase that means, “steamy hot, isn't it?” The sweltering heat brings the insects out, namely the *semi* (“cicada” in English.) The semi hang in trees, or anywhere else they can get a foothold. First, they climb out of the earth, and then out of their shells, and then, as if to get back at the world for having kept them quiet for one long year, they go crazy with their loud shrill cries, hours and hours of it – daylong.

What summer proposes in Japan is *not* “simply pleasure,” at least not at first acquaintance. It proposes heat, and lots of it. It proposes sweltering humidity. It proposes rain, and more rain. And it proposes the racket of bugs that in the United States would have the patience to endure. Still, there *is* pleasure to be found in the summer in Japan but not, I would argue, of a simple sort. It's an acquired taste, one that comes from appreciating what the Japanese do to make summer pleasurable.

After spending many summers in Japan, I've grown to enjoy the season, even the rains in June. And maybe that is something the film director Akira Kurosawa was telling us in his great film *The Seven Samurai* when he turned the camera on a bamboo forest and simply filmed the drenching rain pouring down for some thirty seconds or so, rendering the drenching sight and sound memorable, and beautiful, something to be enjoyed, as well as suggesting that the rainy season

itself must be understood as a part of the life of the Japanese.

The Japanese have found ways, created ways, to enjoy the summer, or at least to make the best of it. And if one opens up to that, a very pleasurable summer experience can indeed be had. Kae and I like, for example, to go to a small restaurant outside Kyoto during the rainy season. The restaurant is located at a slightly higher elevation than Kyoto and set within a cedar forest. Here we sit on the cool *tatami* floor and eat *zaru soba*, cold buckwheat noodles with a cold cup of dipping sauce served on the side. The dipping sauce is pitch black. We mix the freshly cut green onions and the small spot of *wasabi* into the sauce and then lift the cold buckwheat noodles from one plate, dip them into the sauce, and eat – a simple, delicious, and nutritious meal. We enjoy this refreshing fare in the company of summers' drenching rain for the exterior walls of our room within the restaurant are slid back to expose the garden outside.

The popular British musician, Van Morrison, has a lovely song entitled, "Gardens All Wet with Rain" in which he sings of seeing a garden shortly after a rainfall. Well, indeed, in this restaurant, and many others just like it all over Japan, one can enjoy a garden wet with rain – enjoy the sound of rain falling on leaves, stones, and moss – enjoy the view of green, wet and shimmering, leaves of a *tsubaki* (椿) bush (camellia) and a cooling breeze reaching you through a bamboo forest. All of this, as you sit on the floor and eat your noodles.

As summer progresses into the hotter days of July and August, there is a slow transformation of customs and habits that keep pace with the rising temperatures. Summer foods and summer drinks, especially teas, continue to

appear in abundant variety. Clothing gets lighter, and sandals are worn by almost all, going barefoot in the house is the custom now. Different kinds of reed shades, *sudare* and *yoshizu*, come out and are put over windows to block the intense sunlight.

July and August is the season of festivals, the season of color. You see it in the sky, and you see it in the street. Every town, no matter the size, has its own festival and its own fireworks display. Where I live, in the rural Shiga Prefecture, the surrounding towns have their festivals on different days, so the evening sky seems lit with fireworks nearly every weekend – pleasant to see the sky lit up with fireworks, often silently because they are held many kilometers away. Individuals, couples, and families enjoy lighting fireworks throughout the summer as well. They head to the riverside, or to the park, or to the street in front of their homes to light off sparklers and other forms of fireworks, *hanabi* (花火), which translates literally to *flower fire*. It is pleasant to walk out in the evening a bath and gaze up and see fireworks. They have a way of making one feel slightly cooler, slightly refreshed.

Perhaps one of the brightest things seen during the summer – and one the Japanese associate closely with summer – is the *yukata* (浴衣), a kimono-like garment that is made of light cotton. Young women wear yukatas decorated with summer flowers, such as the *asagao* (アサガオ), the morning glory; children often wear yukatas featuring Disney characters, or other animation characters, such as *Pokemon*. Men, on the other hand, wear elegant, darkly colored yukatas made of solid colors: blue, grey, or brown.

The yukata can be worn on any summer evening, but they are usually worn

when people attend the summer festivals. It is worn with an *Obi*, a large cloth belt that is wrapped around the waist and tied in the front or back. When one wears the *yukata*, one must also wear Japanese traditional wooden sandal – *geta* (下駄). One does not wear shoes. You slip your bare feet into the *geta* that lift you several inches off the ground and make a distinctly *clak-clak* sound as you lean forward and walk with them. Needless to say having your bare feet resting on a sandal made of wood does not leave much room for flexibility but it is cool and refreshing, and they are easy to shed when you step into one of the many restaurants in Kyoto that overlook the river where you can eat and drink outside under the stars and catch some of the cooling breezes of evening.

I doubt that any visitor to Japan would quickly forget the sight of Japanese people on their way to a festival and dressed in *yukatas* and *getas*. The *yukata* is a beautiful garment. It is both elegant and comfortable. The cotton is thin enough to allow the body to cool itself, and it is designed to adjust easily to allow for extra room when needed, when sitting for example.

I could go on extolling the pleasures one can find in the hot Japanese summer and the way the Japanese have made it a time to enjoy and celebrate. I have yet to mention the beaches, or the beer gardens on top of buildings in many Japanese cities. I have not mentioned the cold green tea, the chilled *somen*, the *rei-shabu*, the eating of eel, or many other delights to be had in the summer. Suffice it to say, that the Japanese have made an art of living in the summer. Over the course of their long history on these islands, they have applied their genius to the question of how best to enjoy the hot and humid summer and have come away with ideas that can be tested, felt, and tasted. Let the tiny wind-bell that hangs from so

many windows during the summer months indicate the mindful attention they have paid to what possibilities of pleasure the season offers. The tiny *fuurin* (風鈴), as it is called, will catch the slightest wind and ring with a cool and refreshing sound.

In Praise of the Hot Japanese Summer

I love it when the women take off their clothes
In the hot, hot *mushi-atsui* heat of summer
And show you some of the more sumptuous
Flesh the sun has gotten to early. Look
At this lady standing here
At the bottom of the escalator.
She's wearing a cotton dress
And yellow *zori's* with flowers.
The dress's thin straps drip so tantalizingly loosely
All your eyes can do is go on
To the darker skin around her shoulders,
And then plunge
To the perfectly pedicured feet,
The sizzling shock of red
Toenail polish gleaming
Into the subway's hazy light.

She's ready for something, Lord knows
And when she catches your eye
This is the thought that registers:
Among the throngs of grey-suited businessmen
Hurrying to work, you are the one
Most taken by her, most
Appreciative, most ready
To go to your knees and count your blessings
Right there on pavement,
At the alter her feet present.

To be so graced with the sight of her
In the early a.m. rush of traffic. O
Let this be the portent of things to come:
The hot Japanese summer unfolding
Into one of those holy fans
Designed to bring bountiful blessings,
Good crops, and
A healthy head of steam-driven desire.

Though luck indeed it will take today
To make anything more happen.
She's on her way, eyes darting
This way and that as she steps
Onto the train and there
At the window looks to you
And then to the tissue she dabs
The glistening beads of sweat away with
Sweat that could be tears
To send you on your way,
That, and her smile, enough
Radiant heat in these alone
To fire the cockles of any ageing man's heart,
Say nothing of the city outside already ablaze.

Leaving Kyoto, Saying Goodbye

One more sparkler
Is not going to make a difference.
Put the bag away
And lie on the grass awhile.

Talk of the comets you love,
Rushing into the black
Infinitude of space.

Let's feel their chill again
Informing us our fate
Pushes us beyond each other
Away from what we love.

Lie on the grass awhile
And let me see clearly
Your tears, how they glitter.

Deeper

Autumn comes suddenly. One September day, and the final typhoon of the season (台風) blows through and lifts the last of summer's heat and humidity away. It's cool and dry now and your greatest temptation is to stay out all day in the cedar scented air.

It is early yet – still time – the Japanese Autumn can last into mid-December but eventually it turns, veers suddenly and becomes bitterly cold, wet and windy. Today is November twenty second. Perhaps autumn is done and winter is arriving. I hear the pelting rain against the thin mud and straw walls of my living room in this too-old farmhouse – built at the start of the *Taisho jidai* (1912 – 1926). The wind is finding its way through every nook and cranny, asserting itself – its presence.

Outside my window, two monks clatter off upon their getas, running fast over the hard asphalt road uphill, ducking under their broad straw hats. They are trying to get under the eaves of the community center. They cradle their begging bowls against their chests as their black robes fly out in the wind making them appear ghost-like in the dark, or like Taneda Santoku (種田 山頭火, 1882-1940), the modern, traveling haiku poet I've seen pictures of. I think of one of his lovely and haunting poem:

Having no house
the Autumn has
grown deeper

(Translated by Cid Corman)

Santoka was homeless most of his adult life, a wandering poet. His poem today makes me thankful to have a home when the weather turns cold. But the poem also speaks to me of something quite different and unexpected: a homelessness that has him feeling the autumn “deeper.” This deepening of autumn can be understood in a negative way, of course. Homeless has many negative connotations, and “autumn” suggests darkness, coldness, and loneliness. Yes, that is part of the poem. And, in consideration of this, we might read the poem as self-pitying, a poem that suggest the author’s feeling of despair.

But, Santoka complicates and frustrates this reading with the use of “has/grown,” which suggests richness, a richness of life, living, potential – something *has grown*. When we read the poem in this way, we hear Santoka saying quietly that “having no house” has allowed for him to have an experience of autumn that is deep – intimate contact. This contact, in turn, allows him to experience something profound and moving, which I understand to be an awareness of homelessness as a human condition: we are all wayfarers, we are all without a house, in a certain sense; on journeys from here to there, we come into the world naked, and we go out of the world naked. A “house” as

something permanent and lasting is an illusion. Whatever house we own or occupy can be taken from us in a moment, as indeed our lives can be – one thinks of earthquakes, tsunamis, fires, and other natural disasters that can, in an instant, deprive one of their home.

What Santoka is getting at is similar to what Sawaki Roshi (1835-1965), otherwise known as Homeless Kodo meant when he said, “Everyone is homeless – it is a mistake if you think you have a fixed home. The person who has left home must create his own life.” He was not bothered by his itinerant vocation or the nickname “Homeless Kodo.” In fact, Sawaki Roshi was rather proud of the name. He acquired the name of “Homeless Kodo” because he never had his own temple to look after or administer to. He entered the monastery at the age of sixteen; within a year, he was ordained a monk and given the name, Kodo (興道). At the age of twenty, he was drafted into the Army. Returning to Japan, he then spent the next sixty years traveling from one temple to another and to give talks and lead meditation practice.

For Sawaki Roshi, the name “Homeless Kodo” was indicative of a truth he was eager to address and embody through his Zen. There are two aspects of Sawaki Roshi’s idea of homelessness to consider, according to the American Zen teacher Val Szymanski. One side would include the attachment to place, the “caring for objects and people.” We should regard this form of attachment to place, objects, and people with caution for it represents a “grasping to self” in a way that makes for “duality. . . creating links of suffering.” But in addition to this understanding of “home” as something to be held and possessed, we have an additional understanding of the word to be considered in the light of Zen

Buddhist teaching and that would be “homelessness in the sense of the non-abiding self,” a self that is not fixed and stable, but every changing. Szymanski puts it this way: “In looking for the “I”, we find that the “I” does not exist. This happens when we turn around the light to shine within the experience the place of calm. Here there is no self to be found. Our symbols, words, feelings dissolve in emptiness. Sawaki Roshi said, ‘The true “I” is not the “I” that is the product of thought. That’s it.’”

Having no house
the autumn has
grown deeper

In this poem, Santoka hits upon the ideas expressed by Homeless Kodo and Zen. When “house” is understood in both its senses, that is, “house” in its literal sense, and “house” as an expression of the “non-abiding I,” one gets a richer reading of the poem: a poem that implies spiritual liberation – a freedom that is more fully realized, “grown deeper.”

The house that I live in was built in 1913 during the Taisho period (大正時代)、the period of great righteousness (1913 – 1927). It is situated halfway up a mountain, overlooking the Koto plain, a fertile rice and fruit growing region along lake Biwa, the largest freshwater lake in Japan, and one of the world’s oldest. It dates back four million years and has a depth of a hundred and three meters at its deepest point.

In 609, while traveling with a Korean Buddhist friend and teacher, Shotoku Taishi (聖徳太子), the first Buddhist emperor of Japan, traveled near my house. As the story goes, he saw a bright light shining down from the cedar forest as he passed below on the road. He took the bright light as a sign, as divine indication, that he should have a temple built here. The temple was called *Hyakusaiji* (百濟寺). It is the oldest in Shiga Prefecture and one of the oldest in Japan. During this time in Japanese history there was a considerable amount of cultural exchange between Korean and Japan. Most notably Korean artisans and Buddhist teachers were present and significantly influencing the culture as this small story suggest. Shotoku Taishi was the first emperor to embrace Buddhism and to actively begin to build temples throughout Japan as a means of propagating Buddhism throughout the country. The Korean Buddhist teachers were largely responsible for bringing Buddhism to Japan.

Hyakusaiji temple grew and flourished over the years as an area for Zen Buddhist teaching. At its height, 300 sub temples, mainly monasteries were located upon the mountain. Today, the Japanese government is excavating large areas of the mountain to examine the site. The sub temples are gone, but the Main temples and its attendant buildings remain.

When that first cool wind of autumn arrives, it's time to begin preparing for winter. I dust off the red fuel containers outside the house. They are made of plastic, light weight, and hold twenty liters of kerosene. I put them in the car and take them down to the local service station for filling. I then locate the kerosene

heaters stored in the attic or in the barn. I usually forget where I have put them. When I succeed in finding the heaters, I bring them in and deploy them at strategic locations: one in the kitchen, one in the living room, one in the bathroom, one in the kids' room. I get the electric carpets down, and the electric blankets out. Finally, I fix the *kotatsu* (コタツ), the final touch.

The *kotatsu* is a square low-lying table that stands two feet off the ground. It has an electric heater beneath the top of the table. The tabletop can be removed – it sits upon a square supporting board, about an inch thick. In summer months, the *kotatsu* is unplugged. In the fall, it's plugged in, the top is removed, and a large blanket is draped over the top. This done, the wooden top is placed over the blanket. Now, when people sit on the floor, they have a warm place to tuck their legs – surprising how warm you feel when your legs are warm.

In the U.S., none of these autumn preparations were necessary. Autumn arrived and my furnace kicked on – central heat. The temperature in all rooms held constant. In Japan, I tire of waking to a cold house. I recall how convenient life used to be – to wake to a toasty home, to laze comfortably in a bath robe, drink the morning coffee slow and easy, turn the crisp pages of the freshly delivered newspaper.

Nowadays however, I don't usually think about the old days for long. I get up and rush through the house, throwing switches here and there, trying to get the house to warm. Some switches take more time than others. Sometimes, I have to bend over and hold the button down on the kerosene heater for fifteen seconds before the battery generates enough heat to fire the stove. I watch the coil get red and then redder until at last it is hot enough to ignite the vapor rising off the

kerosene soaked wick. Then, I stand back and enjoy the sound – the rumbling metal stove.

I miss some of those conveniences back home – say nothing of the complete absence of insulation in these older Japanese homes, and then of course, the toilet outside – no heater there.

Granted, I live in rural Japan. But my lifestyle is similar to many Japanese – many do not have flush toilets, and none that I know of have central heating – fuel costs are too high. Of course, it is also fair to say that Japanese winters are not as severe as they are in other parts of the world, so central heating is not a necessity, as it would be, for example, in Chicago. But I wonder, even if fuel costs were low, would the Japanese opt for central heating? I don't think they would. They can manage the discomfort of the cold to a certain degree. They don't think in terms of ridding their homes completely of the cold in the fall and winter.

Today, from where I sit in late November, I see large tourist buses, one after another, piling up the mountainside in the rain to bring visitors to *Hyakusaiji* Temple. The tourists are coming to view the autumn foliage, to see the temple, and to pray. Thousands have been visiting the temple, in a fairly constant stream, for the past month now. They come to look at the red maple trees, the *momiji*, (もみじ). But it is more than that. You see them out in the cold and driving rain huddled beneath black umbrellas. They are coming to be with autumn, to experience it, to be with the cold, the wind, the rain as well as to be with the *momiji*. They take time out from busy lives to be here – to see the leaves in autumn and to pray. They come in buses, cars, and on foot – pilgrims all.

The Japanese invite seasons into their lives in a way that we do not.

Americans also enjoy the autumn foliage. I know that we enjoy the seasons in a physical way by placing ourselves in contact with them – doing things outdoors. But I see in the Japanese a willingness to actually make room for the seasons in their lives – a way of inviting the coldness of autumn and winter into their homes in a way that I think most Americans would find unacceptable. When I ask Kae if she would like central heat she tells me emphatically, “No.” She prefers going to bed in a cold house and waking to a cold house: “Its not healthy to sleep with the heat on.” In the summer, she would prefer to live without air-conditioning – air-conditioning too, she reasons, is unhealthy. That Japanese are one of the very few countries in the world that do not mess with their clocks, setting them forward in the spring and setting them back in the fall. They don’t mess with nature’s clock. They leave the clocks unchanged to reflect the short days of winter and the short nights of summer, accurately – let the body feel it.

Maybe then a little bite of cold in the fall is to be enjoyed and appreciated. These cold rains, these dark skies – *momiji* in the distance burning bright and red through the late afternoon shadows and rising mist. Maybe it is a learned thing – a way of appreciating change, a way of remaining open to what comes forward rather than being too concerned with blocking out all discomfort. I expect to be cold when I move from this room into the unheated hallway. I expect to be cold when I enter the unheated toilet. But I also learn to derive pleasure from the *kotatsu*, the small space heaters, and the hot carpets. I like the Japanese bath – the way the deep water, and the intense heat, bring a particularly pleasure and comfort on cold nights.

To complement the cold of autumn, the Japanese prepare a distinct menu of

foods; chief among them is *Nabemono* (鍋物), translated literally as “pot food.”

Nabemono is food cooked in a large pot and shared. Usually, it consists of soup into which an assortment of fresh vegetables are added, along with, mushrooms, noodles, tofu, and fish or meat.

This evening my family and I will sit at the kotatsu with the nabemono. We will cook on a portable stove placed upon it. We'll sit down around the kotatsu and take turns putting food into the pot – we'll cook together and talk, tipping ingredients in from time to time and checking progress. When the food is cooked, usually ten to fifteen minutes, we'll begin drawing ladles of soup and placing them into our bowls. We will eat the nabemono with some steamed rice and pickled plums. We'll continue boiling the soup at low temperature and adding more ingredients, replacing those we've eaten. In this way, we'll enjoy dinner together, sitting in the slightly chilled room, warmed only by the kerosene heater and the kotatsu. I'll watch the steam rise from the pot in the center of the table and think of how delicious it tastes. I will think it taste better in this chilled room than it would in a warm and cozy room. I will think that there is something about our huddling down around the food together that is almost primitive. It will make me believe that the dinner complements the season, the food, and our lives in autumn.

Walking Home

Susuki grass so tall it conceals the huge
Harvest moon.

What I see is the fluffy heads of seed
Blowing into the cool
Pool of night air.

How splendid to see the stems sway
And feel the breeze move
Down around the mountains soft
As my daughter's breath stirring
Loose from dreams.

This is not a road I ever imagined
I'd walk, road behind my house,
Road through a mountain in Japan
Strung with paper lanterns.

Years slip through holes
We wear in our pockets,
Falling like coins & jangling
Their passing preciousness.

There are stars on the other side
Where I've come
To see the moon hold sway
& my questions fall
Into an ocean of grass
Fireflies burn and fade under.

Ten years in Japan and I'm homesick.
I hear my parents singing
My name through the pine trees,
And I'm lost in a forest,
Looking for the source
Of my heart. I'm calling
Out to them – hearing
Only the echoing sorrow
My confusion tries to name.

Japan has risen over my life like a moon.
Home can never be one place.
But these stars too,
These mountains,
These children whose eyes
Are full of Japan, my children,
Who reach through night and day?
To hold me in the soft
Enclosure of their illuminating love.

A Room of Our Own

It is customary in Japan for a young family to sleep together on the floor in one room. Kae and I continue this tradition along with our five-year-old daughter, Emi, and our two-year-old son, Jyoji.

Sleeping with children in one room did not come naturally to me. My parents would never think to attempt something like this. And it was obvious to my brothers and sisters, even at an early age that our parents wanted privacy in the evening –they depended on it – longed for a quiet time without children. No, this would not have happened. American children, after all, are encouraged, to sleep alone – at first in a crib, and then later down the hall in their own rooms. If a child wakes in the night and cries, a parent gets up and attends to the child. Attending to the child might mean a walk down the hall, but who wouldn't prefer that to having a child erupt beside them, crying in the middle of the night.

So why do the Japanese do it? Is it just a custom that developed long ago, a custom that people blindly follow out of tradition and habit? What purpose does it serve? Was space in the home a problem – not enough rooms for everyone to have a room of their own? I struggled with this question when my infant son awakens me with his cries at night. I lay awake for hours, unable to fall back to sleep afterwards, and dreading the alarm clock at 6 a.m.

No one in Japan – least of all Kae – has been able to answer my question. Maybe, after all, I was about ready to conclude, it is a problem of space. Mountains cover Seventy percent of Japan. Thus, only thirty percent is available for housing. This limited amount of land makes land quite dear, pushing prices up and requiring homes to be built small. But then, I thought again, this doesn't

stand to reason either. After all, the homes in the countryside are not small, but large and roomy. Our farmhouse is huge. It has more rooms than we can use. No, there must be other reasons.

“Why not put the baby in one of the rooms down the hall?” I asked Kae. To which she replied curtly, “No. It’s unnatural.” For Kae, nothing in the world seemed more “normal” and “natural” than for her to sleep with the baby. It made perfect sense to her: “When the baby wakes and needs to be nursed, I want to be here. I don’t want to walk down the hall in the middle of the night. If I get up and walk down the hall, it is harder for me to fall back to sleep. With the baby here, I hardly wake up at all. I nurse the baby and sleep at the same time. Besides, it’s safer for the baby. What if there is a fire or something?” “Great,” I argued “But what about me? I’m a light sleeper. I hear the baby wake and then I can’t fall back to sleep for hours. And then, when I *do* drift back to sleep, I hardly sleep an hour before the baby cries again and the cycle repeats.”

Kae and I went round and round this way, arguing, for a few months. Finally, I began to make headway. “She was beginning to listen,” I told myself, “Or, at least she’s considering my tired eyes in the morning.” I recommended we sleep upstairs and leave the baby in the room down stairs. “We can use a baby monitor,” I suggested. “That would be very safe. No need for you to worry about the baby’s safety. If the baby cries, we’ll hear it right away. Only now, we can control the volume.”

At last, Kae agreed. We fixed a place for the baby to sleep downstairs, and we moved into a separate room up stairs. O heavenly nights of rest how I enjoyed

you – how I enjoyed each and every one of you during that two-week stretch before you ended so abruptly at 5:16 a.m. one January 16th morning when the Great Hanshin Earthquake struck. I recall the jolt of that morning as something like a sucker punch to the jaw – totally unexpected but undeniably strong and forceful. I knew immediately we had been hit and hit hard. But as I strove to awaken to what it meant, I felt the house shaking back and forth, and then the rattling and rumbling, the lifting of that sound into a crescendo that had glass breaking and dishes crashing to the floor downstairs.

Kae was nearer to the door. She was up and running down the stairs. I was right behind her – all instinct and adrenalin now. We knew we had to reach the baby. She threw open the door and dashed in ahead of me. When she got close, she flung herself into the air and dove towards the baby like an NFL wide receiver laying herself out for a long pass. She smothered the baby in her embrace, covering her from falling objects. I flew in too – late, and held them tight until the shaking ended. From then on, we were all back together sleeping in the one room.

My daughter, Emi is now five years old. I have weathered five years of interrupted sleep. My son has proven a more severe test than my daughter – more difficult than his sister. Unlike Emi, Jyoji never sleeps through the night. He sleeps fitfully, a light sleeper, always up by seven a.m. “But he’s two years old already, the worst will soon be behind us,” I am thinking as I envisioned the fitful sleeping of two-year old giving way to the quieter sleeping habits of a four or five year-old. Or so I was thinking, until this evening, when Kae informs me

our third child is on the way.

Young families sleep together because they find it good, and good for a number of reasons. For one, as I learned first hand, in a country prone to natural disasters, it's probably safer for the mother and infant to stay close together during those early years. Secondly, as Kae has maintained, it's easier, more natural, for her to be at-the-ready for nursing when the child is waking every few hours or so. It would be exhausting to continually hike down the hall just to nurse the baby. Thirdly, the custom emphasizes the unity of the family, which the Japanese value greatly. The custom has a way of physically and emotionally connecting the family at an early stage in its development.

What has surprised me is not that I have grown used to the custom over the years – for after all, people can grow used to almost anything – but how I have grown to appreciate the custom. When Emi comes running into the room all smiles, book in hand, and long hair wet and fragrant from the bath and crawls into her small futon between Kae and I and readies herself for the reading, I know it is a treat, to settle into my futon, to prop my head up, and begin reading the English book to her. Kae is nursing Jyoji and dosing off. It is Emi and I for now, sharing this book and her many questions about the world.

When Kae and the children are asleep and I am alone in the night, I feel something palpable filling the room – the evening conversations, the kisses goodnight, the reading of books. These small interactions bring comfort that speaks of love – the sharing of life – the giving up of some privacy for a richness I feel is nourishing all of us and guiding our hearts to rest.

We won't always sleep with our children – they are growing up fast. Soon, they'll be off to grade school and will want their own rooms. But for now, I enjoy the way we spend our nights together extravagantly and without regret.

Skylight

Because she prays one way
And her husband prays a different way,
A different faith, *it follows*,
The doctor on CNN is telling the world,
Their children will be confused.
When I turn the television off,
It's early morning in Japan.
I'm walking through the dark bumping
First into the table and then the chair
Before reaching the door and sliding it open
To find my family on the floor
Asleep beneath futons
That lifts around their breathing
And stretch away under the moon like waves.
We differ in our faith and race –
We differ in our nationality and *yes*
I could remain awake for hours
To toss and turn around the news
Of what awaits our children
But thankfully I have these stars
And children sleeping soundly
Their faces turned towards the light
That travels through the universe
To be with us so perfectly confused.

Chapter Seven / Father

Art enables us to find ourselves and lose ourselves at the same time.

Thomas Merton

“Well, I hope it’s worth it?” my father says over the phone.

It’s 11 a.m. on a Christmas morning in Japan. It’s 8 p.m. in Chicago, Christmas Eve. “You’re missing a lot.” He continues.

He’s at my sister house for a holiday gathering – Jean’s house – my youngest sister. He’s very happy – ebullient. This is what he enjoys most – getting together with “immediate family,” which means my mother and himself getting together with my three brothers and their spouses, my two sisters and their spouses, and all the eleven grandchildren – “the immediates.” He tells me about the party, explains how my brother-in-law, Jim, is dressed up in a Santa Claus outfit and is handing out gifts to the children. “The wonder in their eyes!” he tells me. “You should see this!” My youngest brother’s son, Justin, is just two months old. He rests quietly in my brother’s arms. My father tells me. In the background, I hear the voices of family, the distant peels of laughter, the unwrapping of gifts.

I am standing outside the main house as I speak to my father, alone in “my atelier,” my place of retreat and quiet. The atelier is situated above a storage area where the landlord keeps his seed supply and tractors. From here – twenty feet above the ground, I survey the countryside on two fronts, east and west. To the east, I see the harvested rice fields – the base of the plants left in the earth to hold the soil in place through winter. I see forested mountains in the distance and fog lifting up through them. To the west, I see into the neighboring farmer’s yard. I

see out past the dried orange-colored persimmons that still hang from the trees before my window like Christmas ornaments. I see past that tree into the yard where the stooped grandmother comes away from the chicken coop still wearing the simple dark kimono (着物) that farmer-folk have worn for ages, though younger generations now are abandoning – too impractical a garment to slip in and out of each day. She wears a brown *hanten* (半纏) over the kimono, a jacket made for wearing in and out of house, and carries a blue bucket of eggs towards the house.

It is cold in Shiga Prefecture. Not as bad, or as severe, as we'd have in Chicago but definitely cold. A small kerosene heater warms the atelier. The room is cozy – a small wooden desk faces the east window, a Mac sits on top. There are four large bookcases filled with books and a black *zafu* (座) resting on a *zabuton* (座布団).

Most mornings I come here early. I fire up a stick of lavender incense, pull it sharply down to kill the flame and place it straight down into the green ceramic bowl filled with *ko*, the fine white powder that holds the stick straight and extinguishes it when the burning top of the stick burns low enough to touch it. I sit upon the *zafu*, I settle into *zazen* posture and reach forward to ring the small bell, which Kae gave me, the small bowl-shaped bell that sits upon an embroidered red silk pillow, embroidered with gold thread. I ring the bell slowly three times – it signals the start of meditation period. I like the clear piercing sound of the bell. It goes right through me. I sit for forty or fifty minutes.

I like to sit first and then go to writing. The meditation seems to help with writing. In meditation, I practice letting go of thoughts – non-attachment – returning over and over again to the present. I breathe and count my breaths. I count to ten as Aiken Roshi taught. Or, I practice as Seung Sahn taught – when I inhale, I say under my breath, “Clear mind, clear mind, clear mind.” And when I exhale, I say in one breath, “Only don’t know.” I keep in mind what Suzuki Roshi taught – the exhalation is more important than the inhalation: “To take care of the exhalation is very important. To die is more important than trying to be alive. When we always try to be alive, we have trouble. Rather than trying to be alive or active, if we can be calm and die or fade away into emptiness, then naturally we will be all right.” Suzuki was speaking of “*trying* [my emphasis] to be alive” as a self-conscious activity and dying as a spiritual dying, a dying away from self-centeredness and attachment, perhaps not unlike the Catholic Thomas Merton speaking of spiritual practice as being mostly “a learning better how to die –” a movement away – a dying away – from what he termed the “false self,” the egocentric self, into something larger and transcendent: “The only true joy on earth is to escape from the prison of our own false self and enter by love into union with the Life Who Dwells within the essence of every creature and in the core of our own souls.”

Meditation helps prepare me to approach my writing with a mind that is less dictatorial and more open to what happens as I proceed. When I sit down to write after meditation, I am less concerned with finishing a poem or a piece of writing. I don’t feel I have to force things. That anxious energy has been somewhat quieted. I can more readily see now, and understand, my desire to

write the perfect poem is potentially another form of attachment, a way of seeking gain. It can cause suffering. Now, I understand writing more as vocation, a calling, and less as enterprise. I am not worried about proving myself or justifying myself. I realize the call wants response and I need not worry where that leads and to what end. I am able to work calmly, attentively, and with a sense of play. I let thoughts drift in and out without too expecting too much. Writing becomes Zen practice. I sit at the desk as I do on the zafu – listen, and see what happens, return again to presence – mindfulness. And Thomas Merton put it similarly when he wrote about living a life: “You do not need to know precisely what is happening, or exactly where it is all going. What you need is to recognize the possibilities and challenges of offered by the present moment, and to embrace them with courage, faith, and hope.”

I am standing and listening to my father this morning. I am walking on tatami in my stocking feet with a portable phone and gazing out the windows. It is a cold and dark – there is a drizzling rain. I see the once tall and fluffy heads of summer grass bend to the ground by the weight of last night’s snow. I see the blood-red berries on the still green bushes in front of the house – The Lily of China (*Rohdea japonica*). And off behind the glass sliding glass doors and further into the house past the paper shoji doors, I see the soft flickering lights of our Christmas tree. The reds, blues, and greens, seep through the paper doors – blurring – like ink splattered on canvas, the colors bleed through and go their imperfect way – beautiful in the cold and dark mist of morning. “You are

missing a lot," My father repeats on the phone.

"Well, I hope it's worth it," he says in closing, and then, "Merry Christmas!"

How do I take a message like that? On one level, I know my father didn't think much of it. He said it casually, unthinkingly. Perhaps, he had a child in his arms and he was busy trying to get the child safely to the ground or something. I develop plausible explanations: it was just a few quick words said in passing. But after wishing him "Merry Christmas," thanking him for the call, and hanging up, I feel angry, hurt, and frustrated all at once, and it floods through me.

I wish I could answer the question – tell him without equivocation or doubt, "Of course, *It's* worth it." But I didn't do that on the phone. And I can't do it now, or I wouldn't want to, won't. Can I be *sure* it is worth it? Can I measure it – take a tally – of what I am missing and weigh it against what I'm gaining by living in Japan? Will that give me the answer? How measure such things – how know? We must give up one thing to have another. Life is full of choices for good and/or ill. We do what we can. I hear my thoughts – my justifications. Are they coming to my rescue?

Why the anger? Well, in part, I think it comes because I want my father to believe in the decision I've made to marry Kae and live in Japan. I want him to accept the *life* I've made – am making. I'm not waiting to return to America for my life to begin. *This* is my life now. His comment insinuates that what I have done is not worth it – that I have made a mistake. The tone angers me, the tone in his voice when he said, "Well, I hope it is worth it." I didn't hear the sincere tone

of someone wishing me the best, someone saying, "I hope your dreams come true." His tone was one more of exasperation – one that said, "I have been over this with you before Greg – one that said, "there is nothing more to say:" "Well, I hope its worth it!"

When I was younger, I might have started arguing with him right there on the phone – I wouldn't tell him the comment was hurtful, which I should. I would just start arguing, telling him "Of course it was worth it. How could he suggest otherwise?" I'd be defensive. But now, I don't go there. Maybe, I'm older and wiser or just exhausted. He's enjoying Christmas, and I've been up most of the night preparing for Christmas here. Beyond his words and tone, there is a sense of grievance in his voice, a sense of loss. Still, as I hang up the phone and look outside, it's his words I feel bearing down upon my small house of confidence.

Kae has come out of the house and is unwrapping something small from a white towel and planting it inside the potted bay leaf tree we have in front of the house, one of the first plants we bought after marriage. It stands five feet tall and has strong green leaves that last throughout the year. She has a trowel and digs down into the earth beneath the plant and slips something in carefully, perhaps a tulip bulb. Where did she get a tulip bulb at this time of year and why plant it now on Christmas morning with the children inside the house? She puts the trowel down, pats the earth, lifts from off her knees and slaps the dirt from her

hands. She bows in *gassho* (合掌) and walks back into the house, sliding the glass doors quietly closed behind her.

Christmas is not celebrated as a holiday in Japan, but we have made a custom of celebrating it amongst ourselves. The children are young enough to stay with us all day – no school yet. But in the future, which is not too far off, they will have to go off to school on Christmas morning. Today however, we all stay home and celebrate – forget about the busy world for a day.

Emi is six years old and will start school in April – Jyoji's three. Though they opened presents hours ago, they are wide-eyed and full of energy. It's Kae and I who drag as we assemble toys and search for batteries, as we clean and make the morning meal. Fatherhood, however blessed, is exhausting on days like this.

I was up until four this morning – kept awake by Christmas preparations – the wrapping of gifts, which I had left too long, to the last minute, in fact. And then there was the bringing in of gifts from the atelier – no easy chore when I have to step down into the *genkan* (玄関) the recessed area situated two feet lower than the main flooring of the house. The *genkan* is effectively the entry way into a Japanese home. Then, there is the putting-on of shoes, for of course, the Japanese do not wear shoes in the house. With shoes on, I can step out into the cold and walk a hundred feet to the out-building where the atelier is located. I can open the door, take off my shoes, again climb the narrow stairway to enter the atelier, where the gifts lay on the floor, having been brought down from the high closets overhead where they were prior to being wrapped. Now, I carry them downstairs, slip into my shoes once more, and bring the gifts into the house

through the genkan, where I will need to take off my shoes again before stepping up into the house and walking through the kitchen into the living room to lay the gifts down quietly – careful not to disturb the children who are sleeping in their futons just the other side of the sliding doors that the tree sits so near to.

I do this about ten times between three and four in the morning, and, at last, I can stand and enjoy the beauty of the lit tree and the gifts below – I can wonder at what force within has compelled me to put myself through such an ordeal in an effort to create a Christmas the kids will enjoy and remember, as my parents did for my siblings and I when we were kids.

And this falls on me rather than on Kae for Kae has no memory of celebrating Christmas at home when she was a child, nor does she care much now about celebrating it. She recalls hearing of Santa Claus when she was a child, but she never seriously thought about believing in him. She never had the experience of meeting him, sitting on his knee, and explaining what she wanted for Christmas, nor did any of her friends for that matter. She tells me her parents might give her a gift on Christmas, or take her to a department store and let her pick out a gift.

Still, Christmas has been a part of popular culture in Japan for a hundred years, in some parts of the country even longer. The first missionaries arrived on Kyushu Island in 1593. They were the Catholic Jesuits led by Saint Francis Xavier, coming to Japan by way of the Philippines where they had done earlier missionary work. Despite the fact that Christianity has been in Japan for over three hundred years the number of Japanese who would call themselves Christian remains scant – about one percent. With numbers so small, it is little wonder that Christmas is not widely celebrated in Japan and that when it is

celebrated the celebrations tend to be largely of a secular type. With greater American influence and customs finding their way into Japan after The Second World War Christmas celebrations have become more and more popular over the years. Though Kae saw little of it when she was a child, most Japanese children today would have some understanding of Christmas and particularly Santa Claus. Each year the Japanese spend more on Christmas – more and more gifts are exchanged and the holiday takes stronger root, at least in a secular way – more money is spent on Christmas and department store displays get larger and brighter. Today, Christmas in Japan means gift giving to children. It means a time of romance for young couples, many of who go out on dinner dates. A few younger families will put small Christmas trees up in their homes.

In addition to celebrating Christmas in ways similar to the West, the Japanese have developed a few customs of their own. Perhaps the most popular and widespread custom is the Christmas cake custom. On Christmas Eve, Japanese all over the country buy “Christmas cake” (クリスマスケーキ) usually a very non-descript two layer white frosting cake with strawberries on top. They will get these cakes at department stores, bakery shops, and even convenience stores like Seven-Eleven.

Despite what Kae believes, I don’t see myself going crazy with my preparation for Christmas. I buy the kids a few gifts, I put up a tree; I decorate it. I don’t hang lights all over the house or anything. My lights go inside. They go on the tree.

I like lights. I like making the world sparkle. I want Christmas for the children to be as good as my parents made it for my siblings and I when we were children. I think this is what fuels my working until four in the morning: a desire

to make a day for them they'll not forget, a day filled with wonder and joy. And as I work, I wonder about my parents – what they must have gone through to bring such joy to us – six of us.

And yet, what am I doing with this? Is my Christmas celebration merely secular too? I think of all the energy I put into the shopping for gifts, the setting up of a tree, the wrapping of gifts, and the cooking. Where is the Christmas spirit in this? Where is the Jesus story? How do I get *that* said to these young children? Should I get it said? How? Am I a “phony” even to try to make a Christmas for them if I am not a Christian any longer, not a Catholic – if I don't attend Mass? What kind of impulse am I operating out of, actually?

“There are *few* churches nearby,” I reason to myself. “Otherwise, I would take the family there today, though Kae would not be inclined to attend.” The closest Catholic Church is in Hikone, about a forty-minute drive over a dangerous mountain road. Several weeks back, I did stop into that small church on my way back from an errand with the children. I decided to look for the church and show it to them. I reasoned that being so close to Christmas I might find a nativity scene in the church. It would be good for the children to see that – help them understand more about Christmas – to walk into a church – see the glow of the flickering purple and red offertory candles, see stained glass windows – how beautifully the light looked falling through. I wanted to tell them that this was God's house – the spirit of God was here and they might feel it. I wanted to tell them that God was with them always – words I remember being told once – words that once awed me.

Everything was here in this small white church at the end of a gravel lane in Hikone: the Catholic iconography that I remembered from childhood. There were paintings on the wall, detailing Christ's long walk to the crucifixion: The Stations of the Cross. There were rows of wooden pews and racks of offertory candles. The candle flames flickered inside the red glass cups. Fifty feet above our heads to the right we saw the stain glass windows – afternoon light poured through the Virgin Mary's blue cape. On the left we saw light streaming through the green field behind Christ. Was this depicting a scene from Christ's Sermon on the Mount? A large crucifix with a life-sized sculpture of Christ hung above the cloth-draped alter. Emi said two words with a long pause between them. At first she said "*kowai*," (怖い) meaning "frightening" – "scary," and then she said "*kawai-so*," (かわいそう) meaning "pitiful."

The church was empty. We walked to the front to see if we might find the nativity scene. We found it: a small baby Jesus resting in a crib below the watchful eye of Mary. I began explaining the scene to Emi: Who the family members were? Who the shepherds were? Who the Wise Men were? I tried to explain how everything fit into the story, but she was impatient to get going, as was Jyoji. The whole experience was unusual for them – walking into a quiet building like this – holy water by the door, baptismal fount, rows of empty pews a wounded bleeding Christ hanging from the cross above. They were very patient and a little scared.

As we walk from the church, a few young Pilipino women come in to light offertory candles. We exchange quiet greetings. They ask about Emi and Jyoji – their ages and "can they speak English?" They kneel before the children and ask

them if they saw the nativity scene? And, are they “ready for Christmas?” The kids are shy, moving close to me and back behind me. The women are in their twenties – their dark skin is smooth and luminous under the thin light that streams down. Their eyes are caramel brown; they shine. They wear dresses, blue and red, and white lace veils upon their heads. They are praying for their families back home. They’ll light candles; kneel before them. I wonder, what brought them to Japan? Economic immigrants? Are they nurses, “entertainers?” We are foreigners in a foreign land brought together for a few moments by what stands familiar between us – this Catholic faith.

I didn’t always put such an effort into Christmas. When I was on my own and single, or when Kae and I were first married and we lived without children for three years, we didn’t bother with a Christmas tree and decorations. I am surprised now to remember this: the fact that I started to celebrate Christmas in a more traditional way once the children arrived and had grown old enough to enjoy it. So, my celebration of Christmas then, at least in this secular sense, seems related to my becoming a parent, becoming a father. I wanted to do something *for* the children, and I wanted to *share* something with them. I wanted to tell them, “here, I was a child once too, a child full of wonder once – I could believe in anything – I could look at the night sky and believe a man in a sleigh was on his way. I could feel the electric shock of excitement shoot through my body. I remember sitting in the car and heading to the ocean for the first time. My father tried to explain what to expect at the ocean – what it smelled like, what it

sounded like. I couldn't sit still. I shook with excitement trying to imagine what it would be like. This is what I wanted tell my children. I wanted them to know this kind of excitement and joy.

When I became a father I started experiencing a whole new emotional range of fear and concern – how protective of my children I became – how worried about them. At the park with Emi when she was four years old, I scared a group of ten-year-old boys when they raced down a towering slide above Emi. They were all sitting bunched-up and racing down without a concern in the world for Emi, who was at the bottom, still sliding. The boys were moving fast; Emi was slowing down. The boys had their legs pointed forward – the boy in front had his legs pointed directly towards Emi's spine. I jumped from the grass and raced fifty feet to rescue her. I looked up towards the top of the fifteen-meter slide and yelled for the boys to "stop," but they couldn't hear me, or paid no mind. They were closer to me than Emi was, so I ran to them. I continued yelling up at them as they raced on. Finally, when they had descended low enough for me to get my arms on them, I lunged and grabbed the lead boy. I stopped him in his tracks, and the four boys behind him too. It required surprisingly little effort. I was yelling at the boys, screaming. I was telling them that they should be more careful and watch out for others. And when I finished, I could see that my yelling had frightened the Japanese parents sitting upon the ground around the slide, enjoying their picnics. They stared at me blankly, as though shocked by my behavior, as if I had over reacted. I didn't care, and I wasn't embarrassed. Emi finished the slide, jumped off, and turned to me. She saw I was holding those

boys back – their faces shocked and stilled.

The fear and concern I associate with fatherhood started soon after Kae and I heard of her pregnancy. When the baby was just three or four months old, the doctor warned her that the baby would surely have to be delivered by cesarean section – the head was “too big.” The doctor attributed this anatomical feature to the fact that the baby’s father was *not* Japanese. Needless to say, Kae was anxious about the delivery after that and preferred to have a natural delivery, if possible. Fortunately, on the day that the baby was ready, the doctor who had told her to prepare for a caesarian was not on-duty was not on duty. Instead of that humorless, older, and seemingly arrogant doctor, who had foretold the baby’s needing to be delivered by cesarean section six months ahead of its delivery date, Kae was greeted by a middle-aged male doctor, who, with a broad smile and easy going manner, reassured her by saying, “If you want to have the baby naturally, let’s see if we can do that for you.”

We were off to a good start, I thought. “We have met the doctor, and he is good,” I teased Kae. Although Kae was contracting, the contractions were not yet strong enough to bring the baby along, so Kae was placed into a special holding area alongside the birthing room. In this room, Kae and the baby would be monitored as we all waited for stronger contractions. But the stronger contractions were slow, terribly slow, in coming. For twelve hours Kae endured contractions. She was beginning to weaken. The nursing staff was hooking her up to IV drips to boost her energy level. The baby’s heart was monitored on the screen. The nursing staff was concerned with the baby’s strength as well as Kae’s. Once in a while, the doctor would come in and ask Kae if she wanted to forgo the

natural birth and opt for a cesarean section. The doctor said she had time – that we could give it more time, if she could bear it. She nodded her assent.

Sometimes, Kae would fall asleep, a kind of passing out from exhaustion, only to wake ten minutes later with her face twisted in pain. I sat with her in the room. Her mother was sitting across the bed on the other side. She had traveled up from Shikoku Island to be with us for a few weeks to help Kae with everything post birth – a Japanese custom. She was very concerned and would purse her lips tightly when Kae contracted. Sometimes, she would get up and go out of the room to talk to nurses and doctors. She was a quiet woman from a small town – married at eighteen and a mother at twenty. She had had problems with bearing children. In fact, after giving birth to Kae, her doctors warned her against having any other children – advice she heeded for sixteen years until she became pregnant with Kae's brother.

The two of us sat quietly now at Kae's bedside. We couldn't really communicate verbally with each other due to the language difference. We simply waited with each other – bound by our love for the two lives in front of us. In the background, we heard the routine noises of a busy maternity clinic: beds being wheeled about, the clean sound of syringes dropped into a metal tray, curtains drawn, the concerned voices of nurses and doctors, and, above it all, the sound of two heart monitors – Kae's and the baby's – steadily beating away. We wondered if things would be OK. We had been waiting since six in the morning it was now six at night. The first contraction occurred at four in the morning.

At seven-thirty, Kae felt the contractions intensifying. Her mother called the nurse. By eight o'clock, Kae was ready to be wheeled in the delivery room. The

doctor asked if I wanted to come. I nodded my assent and was given a white gown on. Kae's mother stayed behind and paced the hall.

Emi came with great difficulty right up to the end. Kae pushed and pushed. Nurses and doctors encouraging her, knowing how long she had already been in labor, knowing how weak and tired she had become. She had to give it everything now, anything short of that would be an emergency cesarean section. I was to the right of Kae where I could whisper in her ear the two words she wanted to hear from me "Arigatou Gozaimasu" (ありがとう ございます) – thank you. I tried to stay calm and whisper quietly, but inside, my heart was a fish pulled from the depths of an ocean, thrown into the air, and left flapping on board a ship's deck. Kae screamed in pain, gasped for air. Perspiration poured from her face, wetting her hair at the temples. She leaned forward off the table; she leaned back. Her bare feet dug into the metal stirrups – she cried.

Finally the baby began to emerge – a little, a little more. But something was wrong. I could see from where I stood that the feet came first, not the head. Was the head too big, after all? Is that what was happening these twelve hours – the baby trying to figure a way out. There was a flurry of activity. The doctor holding the baby's legs gently and looking at Kae over his mask, encouraging her with urgency to "Push! Push! Push!" The nurses began arranging large and frightening instruments in a tray. And then the baby was born – slipped into the slick and glistening like a seal. But, the umbilical cord, I could see, was wrapped around her neck – twice, three times, four times? It was hard to see how much, but the doctor worked quickly unwrapping it like a scarf – the limp heavy cord of it falling off around her neck like a snake and then she cried – her first cry.

Immediately, the baby was being tended to – its mouth and airway cleaned, drops of medicine placed into her eyes. And then she was shown to Kae – held in front of Kae’s bloodshot and wounded eyes like the treasure she was. Kae began to cry louder, her chest heaving as she choked and sobbed.

Outside, Kae mother waited to hear the news. She was still in the hallway pacing. Still shaken myself, I gave her the whole story, spared nothing. I watched her melt down into relaxation, relief, and joy.

When I saw Emi for the first time, I thought that I should feel some kind of immediate love for her, but that is not really what I felt. I saw how vulnerable and helpless she was, and I felt an immediate sense of wanting to protect her – but I wasn’t feeling a love that I was familiar with. And, in a way, I felt guilty about this – I thought I should feel this – it should be immediate the way it seemed for Kae when she looked at the baby and wept in the delivery room. If it was love I was feeling, this love had a quality all its own – a quality I was unfamiliar with.

I looked at Emi through the glass of the maternity window. She was crying loudly I could see from the strain in her face and in her small body that she was in an agony all her own, and I could do nothing for her. I stood behind thick glass – so thick I could only faintly hear her cries. She was curled up in the fresh diaper – legs and arms raised in the air – small fists clenched. She had a white I.D. strap around her right wrist. Her name and weight were written at the front the basket she rested in. And her mouth was huge in proportion to her body. It was wide open as she wailed. I wanted to go and comfort her – to hold her. I

wanted to pick her up and take care for her – the felt and ache and longing. Was this fatherhood?

I don't think I have given up on Christianity, or on being a Catholic. Perhaps Christ won't let me give up, or maybe my father, and his many prayers, have worked to keep me from giving up. When I was twenty-four, I started living in a Zen community in Seattle. At about the same time, my father was retiring from work and giving greater attention to his faith. He was joining prayer circles, and scripture reading circles. He was volunteering to act as a lectern and a Eucharistic Minister. He was also filling his small reading room with books on the early church fathers and the history of the church. He was reading volumes on Jerome and volumes on the Desert Fathers. He was reading the writings of Pope John Paul II. He was spending time with Charismatic groups members learning about their traditions and ways of prayer. After five years of this intense sort of study and prayer, he had a transformative religious experience during Mass one morning where he broke down weeping during the blessing of the Eucharist. From then on, he did seem to be transformed. He became noticeably more patient, reluctant to raise his voice in anger.

When I came home to visit, my father liked to speak of religion, of spiritual practice. He knew of my Zen practice and wanted to know how I could "leave Christ" for Zen. "How could someone who *knows* Christ give that up for something like Zen?" And then, as if to answer his own question, he'd posit an answer "Of course, as your brother says, you don't really *know* Christ." I'd explain that I didn't see the two as mutually exclusive – a person could both

practice Zen and remain a Christian. But he couldn't see that. I mentioned the names of Catholic priests who were also Zen Masters. He discounted this as anomalous and says, "There are always a few priests who are unconventional. In general, it is one or the other – you're a Zen Buddhist or you're a Catholic."

I didn't expect this from my father – from his generation of Catholics. But I reasoned it was OK – we were talking about something important to the both of us, and he was speaking with sincerity. I could feel that. This Zen stuff wasn't easy for him to understand. But he was interested in the conversation. He was leaning into it.

I remember years earlier a discussion on Thomas Merton at his older sister's home. This was 1973; I was a sophomore in high school. I knew a bit about Merton because I found his poems in the Anthology we were reading in school, Hayden Carruth's *The Voice that is Great Within Us*. I had read his poems, alongside Cid Corman's and Wendell Berry's, and many others. I knew Merton was a Catholic monk who had died in 1968 while traveling in Thailand. What I didn't know at this time was that he was a controversial figure among many Catholics. My aunt was not a fan. She saw his ecumenical approach towards the acknowledgement and appreciation of other religions, particularly Eastern religions, as dangerous. If there could be something beyond the "one truth faith, her reasoning seemed to imply," then there must be something inadequate about the Catholic faith. Her children were much older than me, some in college and some out of college. They spoke of their regard for Merton. They appreciated his questioning of the Viet Nam War, his pacifism, and his call for peace. They appreciated his reaching out to other religious in an attitude, gesture, of

reconciliation and love. My father said nothing. His mind not made-up, I guess.

I gave my father Merton's book *New Seeds of Contemplation* as a Christmas gift in 1973. He tried to read it but found it a bit dull and went instead for Merton autobiography, *Seven Story Mountain*, which he loved. I began reading my father's abandoned copy of *New Seeds of Contemplation* and was stunned and excited to find Merton talking about God as "itness." I loved that he admitted to not knowing what God was in detail and cultivated this larger, and to my mind, liberating notion of God. It was an opening – it pulled away from the hard and fast, fixed notions, of what God was and moved into a place of wonder and not knowing? Even Merton didn't know, I thought to myself, and here he was a Trappist monk, dedicating his entire being to prayer.

Merton became the place for our meeting – my father and I. I began reading more and more of Merton – continued all through high school and then into college. Merton was a guiding light: a poet, a man who meditated, a man who stressed poverty and simplicity, a man who remained open to other spiritual traditions while being true to his own. Merton was planning to visit Japan in 1968 after completing his stay in Thailand. He had planned to visit his fellow poet and correspondent Cid Corman in Kyoto. Unfortunately, the two never met as Merton died of a freak accident when his electric fan fell into his bath and electrocuted him.

Once a year, I make this journey home from Japan to visit with my family. At this time, my father and I make time to go out for coffee and talk. He is reading

on other religions now – reading on Hindu, Buddhism and Islam. None of them appeal. “At the moment of death,” he asks, as he drives his comfortable Navy blue Ford 500 along York avenue towards Starbucks, “who are you going to pray to?” I am looking out the window. I’m thinking of the two of us flying through space and time – the car at forty miles an hour, the planet spinning at seven hundred miles an hour and us upon it, heading out into orbit at sixty-seven thousand miles per hour. And that is just the beginning, according to the Discovery program on television last night: our Solar System sits within the Milky Way Galaxy. The Milky Way Galaxy is rotating, and we rotate around the center of it at 490,000 miles per hour! Then, the Milky Way galaxy is only part of a cluster of other galaxies. These galaxies are known as “the local group” and they cruise through space at an astounding 620 miles per second. We are in a hurry to get somewhere but where are we going?

My father wants to know whom I’ll pray to at the moment of my death. I see his aging face. I know death and dying are on his mind. He is 78 years old now. He hasn’t shaved today. The white stubble on his face catches the sun. I remember saying goodnight to him as child after prayers – the sharp touch of the stubble on when I kissed his cheeks. He’s been losing weight for some time now and the doctors cannot tell why. How much time does he have left to live? He has been a diabetic for forty years. He suffers from many age-related illnesses. How much longer will he be my father? I think such thoughts as I search for my answer to his question. When we drive by cemeteries now, he makes the sign of the cross and prays for the dead and then comments on how sobering a sight it is to see those stones. He tells me “to think about it none of us will be remembered

on this earth past a few generations.”

I answer his questions; tell him, “I pray to God.” But he wants to know more, and asks, “But do you *pray* to Jesus? I pray to Jesus. I can *see* Jesus, imagine Jesus. God is too big for me” he says.

In the coffee shop, he’s asking about meditation, “When you meditate what do you think about? What do you meditate on?” Before I can answer he explains more, “In the Christian tradition, we meditate on scripture, or on a few words of a passage.” I explain that in Zen we just sit. I say, “Just sitting is called *shinkantaza* in Japanese. We don’t think about anything in particular. One way to think about it is to say we just sit in the presence of God. Thoughts come and thoughts go, and we just try to let the thoughts go – we try not to cling to them – we just return to sitting, maybe counting our breaths, and sometimes when things get still, we just settled down into our bones, wide awake. We are mindful of our lives and our existence in this moment.” “But isn’t Buddhism atheistic? He asks. “Yes,” I try to tell him, “in a sense it is *a-theistic*, but primarily, at least for me, it’s a-theistic in the sense that it doesn’t dwell on an idea of God. It’s deliberately careful not to attach to an idea of God.” I explain. In the silence that follows I mention the words of homeless Kodo, “Zen is good for nothing.”

My father is not really getting the conversation – I know. The “not dwelling on god” runs counter to everything he believes – everything, one might say, he holds to – attaches to. But I know we are talking now. And being separated by so many miles throughout the year, we know our time together is precious. I talk about Merton, about Merton’s notion of non-attachment – that in some ways it seems similar to the impulse behind non-attachment in Zen. Merton too speaks

in terms of not attaching to God, I tell my father and quote the following: “We do not detach ourselves from things in order to attach ourselves to God, but rather we become detached from ourselves in order to see and use all things in and for God.”

“Why is so important to be mindful?” My father asks now; as we sit with our coffee – latte for me, drip for him. I’m tempted to say, “I don’t know,” recalling the words of Seung Sahn, but I don’t say this. It’s a hard question and I try to answer it as best I can. “When I sit in meditation,” I tell him, “I notice how busy my mind is – how thoughts come and go continually – I notice how many times I’m swept away with those thoughts and not fully present in the moment. And those thoughts can cause suffering, as I fret about something that happened yesterday or may happen tomorrow. It is important to be attentive and aware, mindful, in the moment because it’s the only place/time we will ever be alive. We want to be awake for that and to be able to act responsibly in this time.”

My father takes all this in, stirs another pack of *Sweet and Low* into his coffee, and patiently waits for me to go on. I tell him, “Practicing mindfulness is meditation. Meditation has shown me how I am often controlled by my thoughts rather than being in control of them. It is hard to sit and count my breaths without finding myself caught up thinking about one thing or another. Many of my thoughts, if I look at them honestly, are about gain, about getting something, about being richer, or better, or smarter, etc. The Buddhist refer to this as the small I. Thomas Merton spoke similarly of the ‘false self’, the self that seeks self aggrandizement, validation, and justification. I realize in meditation that few of my thoughts are about opening up to what has already been given, the immense

blessing of life. In meditation then – through it – I learn to let the thoughts come and go. I learn to return to silence where, for a few moments, I only breathe. After those few moments, no doubt, a new thought will arise, which I will again see, acknowledge, and practicing letting go of in order to return again to silence. In doing this over and over again, I realize through experience, that thoughts are illusions of a sort. They are not real or substantial. I realize how often I hold to them and anguish over them, as if they were real. Thomas Merton would recognize this tendency of the mind to have thoughts of gain the false self and would also warn against it.”

“But still,” my father continues, “I don’t see why Buddhists see mindfulness as a good thing. Why is it central to them, or for them?” A Buddhist would say that before thinking, your mind and my mind are the same, one – that when a person is fully present in the moment – mindful – and not attached to thoughts, opinions, and judgments – they are more able to see the other as themselves. This view or understanding compels them to act compassionately towards another. In other words, if a person were to be one with another person, she would be more able to love that neighbor as herself. Thomas Merton, to my mind, speaks in similar terms of entering “by love” into union with what he terms the ‘Life Who Dwells’ when he speaks of escaping ‘the prison of the false self:’ “The only true joy on earth is to escape from the prison of our own false self, and enter by love into union with the Life Who Dwells and sings within the essence of every creature an in the core of our own souls.”

My father and I are outside walking towards the car. It is cold in Elmhurst. I

also seem to return in winter – the Christmas season. I know I haven't made all my thoughts of Zen clear to him. He doesn't argue but he doesn't respond either. Maybe, he's just mulling it over, I think. Maybe he stopped listening a long time before I finished. Inside his comfortable tan *Mercury Sable* with the luxurious leather seats heating up beneath us, I try again to say something to this idea of mindfulness, nonattachment and compassion. After all, much of this is still a working project for me too. I am thinking out loud sort of.

I think of one example from the Gospels that seems to teach something both a Buddhist and a Christian could understand, a story about mindfulness, nonattachment and compassion. I tell my father I love the adulteress story in the Gospels. "It is Zen-like in a sense," I tell him. He throws the ignition and looks behind him and he backs out. He puts his hand over the seat behind me. He's looking backward and nodding his head saying, "Really?" And then I embark on my explanation. "The townspeople are attached to their ideas of good and bad, they are attached to what is written in the book. Christ on the other hand seems to be coming from a different place – a place of compassion. He knows what the book says – the prescribed penalty for adultery, but he is not holding to that now, which displeases the crowd, who have gathered around with stones in their hands. Christ shows himself mindfully present in this scene I think. He sees what is before him and gives us an example of love in action – loving his neighbor as himself, despite her 'sin.' He turns the crowd's accusations of the woman back on them. In doing this, he helps them discover their oneness with the woman. He challenges them to think of their own lives. 'Who among you is without sin? Let the person who is without sin cast the first stone.' In that moment, the crowd

would seem to realize themselves in this woman – they become *one* with her. They drop their stones and go home. To me, this is one of the most stunning moments in the Gospels.”

I go to Mass with my father when I am home. He goes every day at 8 a.m. I can't quite make the schedule everyday, but, while I am home for these few weeks, I manage to go quite a lot. It is just the two of us walking into church during these weekdays. My mother stays at home, and there are few parishioners attending the service. We nod to a few of his friends sitting in the pews at the back of church as we walk in. They are veterans of World War II Navy buddies.

I think Zen may have made me a better Christian, as Aiken Roshi once said it could do, in speaking about the different paths of Zen Buddhism and Christianity. He felt they did lead to different mountains, so to speak – that they were separate distinct pathways – but he still felt they could be mutually informing. When I go to church with my father, I can sing like I never used to sing in church before. I am less self-conscious. I say “Oh we are doing this now OK, and I sing the songs as fully as I can, as I learned to chant the chants, fully and completely, in the Zen halls. When the priest gives his sermon, I don't fault-pick it anymore. I have learned to be more accepting of the priest's effort to communicate. My job in listening is to just listen – to listen and pay attention as well as I can. I understand it is difficult to communicate things of the spirit in words. Zen continually emphasizes the inadequacy of words to really get at the

heart of the matter. I try to accept the priest's attempts graciously. I listen and practice being mindful. I am grateful that there is a place like this church where I can come with my father today, side by side in prayer. We say nothing to each other during the Mass except for the words "May peace be with you" towards the end. Other than this, we sink into the silence of the Mass.

I have learned too that there is a mystical tradition in the church that in many ways embraces something akin to the "don't know mind" of Seung Sahn. I think back to Merton's referring to God as "itness" and then to the Desert Fathers that he loved – the way they spoke of the immensity of God and cautioned against our assuming we know more than we do. I appreciate the Catholic Church's understanding of the Holy Spirit as this kind of unknown, unseen, actor. The way the church stresses that the words of the bible must be understood through the aegis of the Holy Spirit – the understanding that we can't say in obsolete terms what the words always mean, which leaves the words, to my mind, alive and flourishing. And there is a call for *presence* in the church too that I hear, especially when the Eucharist is being consecrated, when the priest holds it above his head and a bell rung to call attention to the moment the spirit of Christ is believed to enter the host.

I have not closed the door on Christianity. I walk in an open field where the grass grows green and lush around me, and the door to the church remains open. The dualism I saw in the church when I was younger, I see in less striking and absolute terms now. I think of Christ in action, as I mention above with the adulteress, or I can think of Pope John Paul II in India and see in their example a different Church than I remember in my youth. When Pope John Paul II was

asked by Muslim religious leaders if he saw Moslems as damn because they were not Christians, Pope John Paul II responded, something to the effect of "No I don't see it that way at all. I don't understand it like that. I believe that we are all responsible for what we know. We must be as good a Muslim as we can be, or as good a Christians as we can be." I too then, am responsible for what I know. I am struggling to be re-sponsible.

When you really want to know who you are
Or what the real significance of human life, human suffering is,
Very naturally you come back to silence,
Even though you don't want to,
You return to an area of no-sound.
It cannot be explained, but in this silence
You can realize, even if only dimly,
What the real point is that you want to know.
Whatever kind of question you ask
Or whatever you think, finally
You have to return to silence.
This silence is vast; you don't know what it is.

Katagiri Roshi, From *Returning to Silence*

“Is it worth it?” I return to the question my father left me with this morning. Despite all our talk and exchanging of views over the years the question still stings and angers me. How assign a value to this life spent largely away from family, country, and to some degree, the Catholic Church I was raised in? How sit quietly with my father’s question – or is it a question I am meant to sit with? A question I can return to over and over again in practice like a Zen Koan, “What is the sound of one hand clapping?”

I was planning to return to the States after five years in Japan. Kae and I had agreed to this when we married in Spokane in 1992. I thought the U.S. would be better for us – more job opportunities for both of us – and if we had children – better to raised them in a multi-cultural society like the U.S. than in a basically mono-cultural society such as Japan’s.

My father knows this. He knows that in many ways I ache to return. He knows that various events here have delayed my return – children being chief among them. Kae understandably has preferred to give birth here where she is familiar with everything. Money too would also be a part of it. I tell myself I need to save enough to transition once we return – to be able to go several months or without work if needs be as my father did when he returned north out of North Carolina. And wouldn’t it be best anyway if I could set up a job in the U.S. before moving? I have been searching but have been unable to secure anything. In the meantime, Japan becomes a little more comfortable, a little more like home, with a family and all. And time passes – five years slipping on towards ten.

For my father America is the only place to live – the only place where I should live too. He can't understand how I can "give up living in the United States for a life in Japan." He tells me this again and again. It completely escapes him. I can tell him that things aren't so bad here – that there is little crime to worry about, the streets are safe, no illicit drugs on the streets, the schools are good, we have national health and dental care. But it doesn't persuade. And in truth, I don't think it persuades me completely either. I want to live in the States again. I want to raise my children there. I want to share a share a Chicago Baseball game with children, take them hiking in the mountains of Idaho. I want to go back to the Midwest and hug an oak tree. I want to be less foreign – walk into a coffee shop and be – well, less obvious. I want to go to a park with my children without other children running up to us and pointing fingers at us and talking about are being foreigners and wondering if the children can speak Japanese. Of course, they can. Their mother is Japanese.

"Is it worth it?" Well here is what I think. In a sense, I am lost here, I'm an adjunct teacher of English and I am writing poetry. I am trying to find my way into a full-time job and I am trying to publish my work and get a book of poems together. I have an MFA degree in creative writing – poetry and would go to the States in a flash if I could get a job there. I feel a calling to write poetry – it is the one activity that I feel genuinely excited about doing, but of course, I realize that there is no money in it, and few jobs. It is a wild thing to be doing this with one's life – an act of faith. Who knows if I am right to be doing such a thing? What justifies it? What confirms that I have any business attempting such a venture? I

have published some poems, I've gotten my degree, but it is very difficult to find work in the field. I apply for jobs in the United States and hear back that the school has had over two hundred and fifty applications for the teaching position.

And the teaching of English in Japanese college classroom often leaves much to be desired – thirty students in the classroom, half of them without books – Forgotten at home. The classes run ninety minutes and are held only once a week. How help the students make progress in English with a schedule like that? Sometimes, I feel lost. I question how I got so far off the mark as to be here in Japan on a Christmas morning, looking through the window to the farmhouse where Kae and the children are celebrating?

I don't think the question can be "IS the life in Japan worth it?" *Is* the life here worth giving up so much there? I read the question as a challenge I must respond to. I hear my father telling me that *if* I choose to be away then I should make sure that the life I am living is good and full in every way. So I turn to that thought and it helps take some of the sting and bite out of his words. As a father myself now, I feel I can understand some of what composes his concern for me. I know his love is something that he cannot still. I know he wants to protect me – he wants me to enjoy my life fully. On my part, I know I must strive to *make* my life a worthy one, a life I recognize as full and rich in every way, even if he cannot. I hear the pain in his voice as love this morning. I hear him reminding me to make my life a worthy one – his gift on Christmas morning.

My father is retired now and gives full attention to his painting. He's always been talented with art, his handwriting is exquisite, a form of calligraphy – self-taught. Since retirement at sixty he has been painting in oils and watercolors. He takes classes at the local college. Mostly he paints landscapes and portraits. He has painted portraits of all the family members – strange and eerie it is to come home and see my face on the wall – a portrait drawn from a photo. My portrait “is the only one of the portraits remaining at home,” My father tells me the last time I was at home and we stood before the portrait. “I am waiting for you to settle down some where so I can give this to you for your home.” It is a very good portrait, actually. And my father is justifiably proud about it. “It catches your smirk,” he tells me, and I have to admit it does. And what diligent attention and care it must require to paint a portrait from a photo – to look at the photo and try to capture every likeness – to meditate on the image of another.

His landscapes too are beautiful – paintings of mountains and forests – seascapes too. My favorite hangs above the fireplace at home – a picture of ducks coming in to land upon a river in the cold of winter. It is a deciduous hardwood forest we see, much like the oak and maple forest of Illinois. There is snow on the ground along the icy river. We have mallards and pintails coming in. We see the iridescent green upon the wings of the mallards – the reddish color of pintails. They all descend upon the welcoming, slow-flowing river.

My father goes upstairs and works for hours in the studio he has cobbled together. The house is small and the upstairs room lacks good light – only one window – but if he picks his time of day carefully, he can get enough light to

work with. His easel and chair are set there before the window. There are other things in the room too: boxes of stored groceries, a seldom-used treadmill, and storage chests. Still, he manages to work here, and little by little, the room seems to turn into a studio – fresh canvases, of various sizes, lean against the wall. Finished paintings – ten to twenty in number – lean against the wall also. The room is redolent with smell of paint.

As it happens, Kae's mother too paints and has recommended my father try some very fine Japanese paintbrushes for detailed work. I have brought these him and he has fallen in love with them. Now, I regularly have to bring paintbrushes back to him from Japan.

He talks about losing himself up there for hours and hours when he paints, losing track of time. But what does he find? I think of how similar his painting experience is to my experience in writing – how I too lose sense of time when I am at work on a poem, or a piece of writing – and how exciting and fun it is to lose oneself in that way. How when I am really in that space I find I am losing a sense of time, but I am losing a sense of self and finding a version of self that is also valid. My father and I seem to spend our days in similar pursuits now – he with his painting and me up here in my atelier with my writing.

I look around my room this morning and see in it something of him. I know I am happiest when I am here and at work. And from what I gather from him, he is finding something similar in his work. I am working to embrace this life and to follow it where it will lead as Cid Corman my friend and mentor in Kyoto has done for the majority of his life. There is something deeply gratifying about

making art and in a way it reminds me much of the spiritual experience of Zen practice – the mindfulness of it, the way it exacts attention. It is as though one can become oneself through the practice of art – or one can come to a kind of rest and peace in the world, one loses oneself into the art, and finds oneself, as Merton said: “Art enables us to find ourselves and lose ourselves at the same time.”

My father once wrote a poem for my sister when she was sixteen. It was given to her as a birthday present. I was struck by the act of his giving her a poem. I didn't see that in him. I didn't see that he would be the type of man to write a poem for his daughter. By my late teen years, I gathered that the writing of poetry was thought by most men to be effeminate. Sure, some could write it, some very talented and rare individuals, but I had gathered that the common man was not encouraged to write poetry, nor was he thought capable of doing so. And then, here my father just put a poem together to express the ineffable love he felt for his youngest daughter.

I should have seen my father capable of that. Although, he wasn't painting in a serious way the, he was clearly interested in art and literature. He read poetry on occasionally, appreciated the poetry of Robert Frost and thought it great that JFK invited Robert Frost to read at his inauguration.

My sister loved the poem and put it in a frame on the wall. I read the poem and could see that although it was not a great poem it had a charm to it that was undeniable. It worked. To see my father do that, all those years ago when I was

just finishing high school and after I had already taken my first creative writing class meant I could do this too – I had permission to write poetry. In a quiet and subtle way then, I felt my father was pointing a way ahead:

Sweet Sixteen

When one is older and is reminiscing of the birthdays that have come and gone,
Memories fly back to the sweet sixteenth as swift as a bird on the wing.
For it's a time in life when like Spring in March,
All the new beauty of youth springs forth like the dawn.
Its "Happiness Is" time: its "High on Life" time.
It's a time when all is gay, simple, lighthearted, and spirits climb.
It is a time when friends are close, in a Special way,
Of High School games, "sleep-overs," parties, and fun filled days.
Of dreams, plans, and hopes ever new for friends to discuss.
And so be in the midst of it all – at this wonderful age – with so little fuss.
So, Jean, I wish you the happiest of birthdays in Seventy-Eight,
May this special Sweet 16 be Very Special for you,
With the joy and love that only this birthday can relate.
And when, you too, are older and looking back
Of your birthdays that have come and gone,
May this one you'll remember as one of the best –
For one as sweet as you deserves no less.

Love,
X
Dad

When I am at home, my father and I hit the coffee shop as mentioned. We talk about his paintings or the paintings that he most admires presently. Sometimes, we go off to galleries and look at paintings. He likes the work of Charles Vickery, an older, contemporary American painter who lives in the Chicago area and is renowned for his seascapes. My father admires the way he paints water – the way he catches the light in the water and above the water. He loves the way the water is painted so well a person can see into the very depths of the it, can tell how deep the water is.

It's clear my father and I share certain interests in common – but differences remain. Differences that make it hard for us to fully understand each other. I don't think he will ever understand what brought me to Japan or how I can stay and I don't think I will ever understand how he can so fully embrace Catholic doctrine. He doesn't understand why I bother keeping a journal and I don't understand why he doesn't take his easel outside and paint outdoors. He doesn't understand how I can put so much cream into my coffee and I don't know how he can use sugar in his coffee, and the list could go on and on. Still, when we get together now, we seem to accept each other well enough, accept what we cannot fully understand of or about each other.

The last time I was home, he wanted to pick-up a film for us to watch together, a film he greatly enjoyed: *A River Runs Through It*. "Have you seen the film?" he asked one afternoon in the coffee shop. I had not, but I had heard of the book – heard it was great. He thinks I'll enjoy the film, especially the scenery, "It will remind you of Idaho," he says.

So we pick up the film on the way home from coffee shop and later that evening we sit and watch it. It is a beautiful film about two brothers and their father –two brothers who grow up along the beautiful Bighorn River in northwestern Montana. It is a story of faith and love, and eventually great loss. One of the son's, the more wayward of the two, dies tragically in a fight. The father, a strict and disciplined Presbyterian minister, who enjoys the poetry of Wordsworth, is left to grieve the loss of his son, a son he never could understand – the son, who unlike his father was a hard-drinking, card playing, gambling man. At the end of the film, and still in grief, the father speaks to his surviving son about the lost son. With a weak and tremulous smile, the father manages to weigh the tragic self-destructive tendencies of his dead son against the qualities he most admired in him and say of him, "Yes, but he was beautiful, wasn't he?"

My father loved this ending to the film. It touched something in him. I didn't think much of it at the time. I didn't weight anything into it. But over the next few days of my stay, I noticed the way he would return to this closing of the film and comment on what a great thing it was for a father to be able to say about a son – to say he was beautiful – to say this even though clearly there was so much about the son's behavior and character that the father did not approve of and could not understand – but to acknowledge him so magnanimously as "beautiful."

"What a thing to say?" my father would say as he spooned some coffee into the coffee pot and I pulled down a box of cereal for breakfast. "What a thing to say. Wasn't that good?" he'd say again, shaking his head and looking at me. Was my father trying to tell me something in watching that film together? Perhaps, he

was saying something like, “Look, I don’t understand your movement to Idaho, your exploration of Buddhism, your living in Japan, but, you know, I do appreciate the things you are trying to live for.” I would like to think my father was trying to say that. I would like to imagine him smiling as broadly as the father in the film. I would like to see him have that sense of peace in his heart and maybe pride too. I would like for him to look at me and see me as the father in the film saw his son – as beautiful.

Turning to walk down the steps and into the house for Christmas, I see a poem on the wall in the atelier, a poem of Merton’s, a poem that seems to speak poignantly to my concerns – a poem my father sent to me some time ago:

Closing Prayer

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see
the road ahead of me.

I cannot know for certain where it will end.

Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am
following your will does not mean that I am actually
doing so.

But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact
please you.

And I hope that I have that desire in all that I am doing.

I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire.

And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right
road, though I may know nothing about it.

Therefore I will trust you always though I may seem to be
lost and in the shadow of death.

(No Stanza Break)

I will not fear for you are ever with me, and you will never
leave me to face my perils alone.

Thomas Merton

*

In the house, Kae explains what she was doing in front of the house earlier – what she planted in the soft soil of our potted bay tree. “Something came out,” she explains: “Something unexpected. It came with great pain while you were on the phone.” A “miscarriage,” she doesn’t say, but we both know we’re going to the hospital on this Christmas day. “But why the potted plant?” I wanted to know. “If we move,” She says, “I want to take it with us, the baby, wherever we go.”

Throwing My Life Away

He put his hands on my shoulders
And looked me in the eyes.
He said, I don't know how to put it to you
Gently, so here goes,
To marry and go to Japan, man
You're throwing your life away.

But life is meant isn't it
To be thrown away, finally? . . .

But I listened to him, I did.
I listened 'til I stood above the world,
Nothing below but cool, shifting shadows
I couldn't see through
Like sitting in a pine forest at dusk,
Trying to distinguish deer
From the smoke of a neighbor's fire.

But now, I prefer to remember purple coneflowers
That burst the Illinois summer into bloom,
My father carrying me into the pasture,
Guiding my hand towards things I could trust
With my own eyes – to bear the meaning up
Out of flowers into the light waiting
At the thin edge of a petal's history,
Giving us chance to see
Our cocooned world shattered
Into what lies beyond our own reckoning.

Chapter 8 / Quiet Accomplishment

Poetry is the most important thing that human beings can be aware of. Poetry is life itself, a central thing. It is the most important element in the world, human world and even beyond the human world because it gives us respect for everything else. It is taking every thing into account and bringing it to point . . .

Cid Corman, 1994 In Conversation

On March 12th, 2004, Cid Corman passed away in Kyoto, after battling the debilitating affects of a heart attack suffered earlier in January. For several months, many of us hoped for recovery. There were moments when it seemed he might pull through – he'd drifted in and out of consciousness and communicate in limited ways. During this time, Cid's friend Chuck Sandy traveled down from Nagoya to be with him. He then sent word of Cid's condition via email to friends and relatives. One message read as follows:

Cid was moved from that CCU (Critical Care Unit) room to a more regular room yesterday, and now can have visitors from 1-7 with no break in-between and no limit to time spent. That is a very good thing as what I feel he needs now is stimulation of kinds . . . We were only allowed in 2 at a time, and when it was finally my turn there was the feeling at least that Cid knew it was a big day. Shizumi had done a huge calligraphy of one of his poems for him for their anniversary and had brought in a yellow rose. These were on the glass wall on his right and as I came in he was looking at them. I brought the rose over, close enough for him to smell it, and he did – a very good sign.

*

When I arrived at Cid's home, a few days after his death, Chuck met me at the door. I was living in distant Niigata Prefecture and was unable to reach Kyoto ahead of the funeral, which was conducted very shortly after Cid's death. Shizumi could not afford to hold a wake.

Chuck greeted me at the door with a smile. He looked to be in his mid forties. His hair was short and the top of his head bald – the bare skin shone in the strong March light. His brown eyes were blood-shot, heavy with fatigue and sorrow. He pinched a Marlboro cigarette between the fingers and waved me in with his left hand, dropping his head down a little. He said, "Good to see you. Come on in." I walked into the entranceway, the genkan, and saw a cloud of smoke hovering in the house. Shizumi too was smoking.

Chuck was an English language instructor, a professor at Chubu University in Nagoya. He and Cid had become friends over the past few years. Their friendship began with a letter from Chuck to Cid – Chuck was struck by some of Cid's poems related to education and teaching Chuck was telling me. But he was also struck by something else in the man that he was not able to articulated to me that afternoon – something having to do with compassion and friendship – that in Cid's letters and poetry he found a comfort and a man he felt instinctively he could talk to about many difficult issues he was facing in his life. Eventually they met – Chuck taking the hour-and-a-half bullet-train ride down from Nagoya to Kyoto. Their first meeting went well, of course, and soon they were meeting

regularly once a month.

I ducked my head as I walked into the small house – the ceiling was that low. I took off my shoes and stepped up. Shizumi was there, bowing and thanking me for coming. She was in her mid-seventies – small, thin, and frail. She has never known robust health, and was presently recovering from a six-month bout of pneumonia. She stood five-feet tall and weighed perhaps seventy-five pounds. She was gaunt. The lid above her left eye drooped so badly she had placed a Band-Aid above the brow and attached it to the lid in order to hold the lid open. Her long grey hair was pushed back off her face and held with a blue cotton band. She was crying - had been for days – crying as she offered me tea. I sat down on the low coach against the wall. Chuck sat on a cushion on the floor before the kotatsu. We are crowded in here in this tiny living room. It was two o'clock in the afternoon.

Chuck was helping Shizumi. He was consoling her – keeping her company – and attending to the many tasks that follow from a death, tasks she could not concentrate on or attend to properly. Some of the tasks involved communicating with the executor of Cid's estate in the United States – what to do with all of his books, manuscripts, correspondences. It also involved going about the neighborhood and informing the neighbors of Cid's passing. If Cid had a regular mourning service – if Shizumi could have afforded it – this would not be necessary. The neighbors would have heard quickly by word of mouth – the word would be spread. And there would have been a wake in the home. Several

Large funeral lanterns would have been placed outside the door of the home. The entire front of the home would have been transformed into a kind of shrine. Large bouquets would have been placed in front. Perhaps large freshly cut bamboo and pine tree branches would have been decoratively arranged and fastened together with strong hemp rope to symbolize connection and ongoing life. A six to ten-foot tall water wheel would have been set up. All who came would hear the soothing sound of water running down and splashing through the wheel as it turned and turned for a day and night. But because there was not a formal wake such as this, where neighbors would have gathered, paid respects to Cid, and encouraged Shizumi in her time of need, it was necessary for Shizumi to go to the neighbor's home and inform each of them of Cid's passing.

Chuck was a Christian, he was telling me, "a born again Christian." He believed there was an afterlife and that Cid would arrive there in good time. During Cid's final days, Chuck was telling me, he tried to lead Cid to Christ. He brought the Bible to the hospital and asked Cid if he would like to hear some passages from the Gospel of John. Cid was Jewish, of course, but he wasn't a practicing Jew. He shook his head to indicate "No."

Though I knew little about Chuck, I sensed that whatever road he took to find his Christian faith, it must have been a long and arduous one. He told me of his many battles with severe depression and how Cid had been helpful in just hearing him out on this – how he encouraged him – how "fully supportive and understanding he was." There was humility about Chuck that I associate with those who have long suffered. There was no pretense about him. He was wise in being beyond trying to impress anyone. He accepting himself in a way I

admired.

He slept on the living room floor for the last two nights. He had gone unshaven for several days and would do the same today. Hardship was something he was ready for. He was a veteran of battles – a man who flicked his cigarette ashes into the ashtray in a nervous way and spoke in a gravelly voice, a voice interrupted from time to time with a smoker's hacking cough.

Chuck lit another cigarette as we waited for tea. He was relieved to have me here. He had been feeling overwhelmed. "I've been listening to Shizumi for days and trying to comfort here. I don't know what to say anymore," he said. "She cries constantly and talks of joining Cid – She can't understand the loss – can't deal with it."

Chuck was planning to sleep on the floor again tonight, perhaps return to Nagoya in the morning. This afternoon, we were going out with Shizumi to tell friends and neighbors of Cid's passing – to tell them he'd not be coming home from the hospital after all.

Cid and Shizumi were known in the neighborhood for walking hand-in-hand on their frequent strolls. They had lived in the neighborhood forty years. Japanese couples don't walk hand-in-hand, especially older couples – it's not the custom to show affection overtly. Knowing how reserved the Japanese are, I was struck by the outpouring of emotion I saw people in the neighborhood exhibiting when they heard of Cid's passing. I am talking about neighbors – yes, but also and post office clerks, waiters and waitresses, cooks, and small shop owners. In

many instances, tears welled in their eyes as Shizumi passed on the news. Sometimes the tears flowed wildly – tissues appeared and people exchanged bows. Some words of Japanese were exchanged rapidly – words of condolences and words honoring the memory of Cid: “He was a good man.” “We are all going to miss him.” Some women held Shizumi by the shoulders as if to steady her and give her strength as they looked into Shizumi’s eyes and spoke with her, trying to encourage her, as they too wept. Sometimes I would hear people saying “nakunarimashita ne” (なくなりましたね) in response to the news, which translates literally as “you have become lonely” – an expression that seems to acknowledge Shizumi’s condition as a means of sharing the grief with her. In the case of one waitress at the *Big Boy* hamburger restaurant, a frequent stop for Cid and Shizumi, the waitress was so overcome at hearing the news she ran from the table before taking our order – a new waitress appeared. Fifteen minutes later, when I got up to go to the restroom, I saw her still crying by the water dispensing machine near the back of the restaurant. When we were leaving after our dinner, she reappeared and met us at the cash register to offer words of condolences to Shizumi through her tears.

What was all this outpouring of emotion about? Cid was quiet and reserved in his way. He was not someone to visit with neighbors and talk with them much. He simply went about his daily rounds, his routine – got the job done, visiting the post office, the fish market – the restaurant. Moreover, he didn't speak much to his neighbors. He couldn't. He didn't speak Japanese. So how did he communicate? How did he develop closeness with these people? How did he touch their lives?

Chuck thought it was his benevolent nature. Simply, the way he smiled at people, accepted them, respected them, and loved them. Something Chuck and I both knew something of from our own experiences with Cid. It was Cid who had opened his door to us – accepted us for who we were in a magnanimous and non-judgmental way. It was, in this sense then, that Chuck felt Cid was communicating with the people in the neighborhood – a felt thing, a relationship conducted and maintained largely through non-verbal interaction. He had lived here forty years. He had become a neighbor, a friend, and eventually, I believe, part of the family. He loved the neighborhood, and the people in the neighborhood – they reciprocated.

Returning to the house after visiting the neighbors, Chuck stepped inside the entrance way and pointed to the two twenty-pound bags of dog biscuits and said, in a matter of fact way, “It’s time to feed the dog.” He then opened the back and reached down inside to pull out a handful of biscuits. “These are for the dog next door. The neighbor’s dog,” he told me and went on to explain, “Cid was planning to check himself into the hospital the very morning he suffered the heart attack. He expected to be gone awhile, so he went out the day before and bought these biscuits.” Chuck and I laughed to think of Cid doing this, spending his near non-existent money on two large bags of dog biscuits. And then to think of him lugging them up the hill to his home – just crazy and ill advised for a man with health problems. He didn’t own a car or even a bicycle.

Chuck explained it all to me saying, “He stacked the boxes here so that Shizumi could step out the door and feed the dog easily in his absence.

Normally, he'd keep them in the Kitchen. He put them here because he didn't want Shizumi to forget." We stepped outside and right before us, was the white bounding Samoyed, jumping up against the cinder block wall anxious for his treat as usual. Every afternoon, after a morning of writing, Cid stepped out for a walk. Before setting off, he threw the dog a few biscuits. When he returned, he threw him a few more. On this day, all three of us threw handfuls of biscuits to the dog.

Cid had been having health problems for some time. Nothing very major – small persistence problems like finding himself overly winded after walking to the nearby bus stop. His doctors advised him to come into the hospital for a check-up. They wanted him to stay over night for tests. Stubborn to the end, Cid refused to go for as long as anyone could refuse. On the very day that he was going to check himself in, he collapsed in the hallway after getting up from his desk.

When I visited his home this day after the funeral, I saw a large and worn black leather duffle that he had planned to take to the hospital. It sat on the floor in the hallway before his studio. It appeared extremely still. The duffle contained very little according to Shizumi – just a pair of pajamas, a toothbrush and paste, a few other items. Still, it could not be zipped shut because two volumes of W.C. Williams Collected Poems sat right up out between the lips of the thing. Going to the duffle and lifting the volumes out, I saw that many pages had been marked

for reference, small slips of paper slipped into pages of the book. How fitting that Cid would want to take these volumes with him. In many ways, Williams was the beginning for Cid, the beginning of his life as a poet committed fully to poetry. Cid had come full circle it seems – if Williams led him into a life of poetry, Williams would lead him out.

I carried the duffle into the living room from the hallway. I looked more at the volumes of poetry. I remembered Cid speaking of his visiting Williams. How he felt honored that Williams would share “Asphodel, That Greeny Flower” with him when it was in draft.

He had traveled to Williams’ house with Denise Levertov. But upon arrival Denise had changed her mind about going in. She was too shy or embarrassed. She didn’t feel she could just knock on the door and meet a man she didn’t know personally, despite the fact that she had been invited to do so by Williams through Cid on the phone. Williams would have none of that. When he heard she was in the car, he went out to greet her and encourage her to come inside.

It was this generous hospitality of Williams' that Cid admired and would emulate for the rest of his life, inviting young writers to his own home and becoming the inveterate letter writer, writing thousands of letters, and working actively to connect poets to one another in any way that he could. In speaking to me of the influence of Williams upon him, he put it this way to me once, "In the early 50's when WCW and Floss took me into their house like one of their sons - I learned decisively to want to share such cordiality in my own life – to the extent I could. To share life is what life is all about."

Cid was the poet who had opened his home to me and showed me a way into

poetry. In a way then, Williams had made it possible for me to be in Cid's home tonight. Inside Cid's house, evening coming on, we uncorked a bottle of red wine, the first of several. Shizumi was bringing her favorite pictures of Cid out. She wanted Cid to be present for this. She wanted to feel his presence – to keep him in mind – to speak to him. She thanked us for being here, again.

There were only three of us in the house. Shizumi didn't have much family. And to make matters worse, her brother, whom she was very close to, passed away two weeks earlier in the very same hospital where Cid had died. For more than a month, she was visiting both of them there.

Cid and Shizumi did not have children. The family she had, the family that called now and sent messages was, "the poetry family," she said. "This family" She reminded us, "Cid always said was the best family in the world."

As we drank and remembered Cid, Chuck continued taking inventory of Cid's books. He has to write the title, the publisher, and the date of every book in Cid's library, and there were thousands of books. He had his Apple laptop out in front him. He had begun this project yesterday. And for some reason, there is urgency here. I am not sure why, but I sensed it related to the sale of the estate – the executor wanted to begin selling things as soon as possible – Shizumi's needed money.

Chuck enlisted my help. I lifted book after book, from one of several boxes on the living room, and read the information to him. He typed furiously – getting all

the information down into the computer. We did this for hours, taking periodic breaks. Shizumi rested quietly on the couch and sipped her wine. Occasionally, she spoke to Cid in grief and anger, staring right into the photograph, weeping and asking, "Why didn't you go to the hospital earlier, why?" Sometimes, she talked about some of the books she recognized, or about the books of poet friends she recalled: Philip Whalen, Gary Snyder, Lorine Niedecker. We found all kinds of interesting books in the collection, rare books, limited edition books, signed copies. One book of poems by William Bronk, apparently sent by Bronk to Cid, had Cid answering every Bronk poem with a poem of his own. Cid has wrote his poems just below the short Bronk poems. He seems to have written the poems spontaneously and without revision – all of them of perfect syllabic form.

At ten p.m., it is time to return to my hotel near the imperial palace. After several bottles of wine, after our work of inventorying, and after sharing many a good story about Cid, we all stood for a last toast to Cid. I walked to the door and Chuck stepped out into the night with me. He wanted yet another cigarette – wanted to smoke under the stars. I was putting on my shoes when Shizumi came and handed me a small black book. She said, "I want you to have this one." I refused to take it. I told her it should go to the executor – to the library with all the others – but she insisted – her eyes filling with tears as she said, "The other books will go. I want *you* to have this. Cid would want this. He'd want you to have it." Her voice trembled, and the small black book trembled in her hands. Chuck was standing outside the entranceway, smoking, blowing the smoke smoothly up towards the night sky – the door was open. He was listening to the

encounter and nodding his assent. “Yes,” he turned and said, “She wants you to have it, to have something from Cid. I think it is OK to accept it.” I took the gift, a thin book with the faded title on the spine, *“In Good Time.”* I had never heard of the book before – never heard Cid speak of it. I thanked Shizumi for the gift. I stepped into the night, spoke a bit more with Chuck, and then walked down the hill towards the lights of the city to catch a cab to the hotel.

In the hotel room, I opened the book. I saw it must have been a “working copy,” a copy that Cid would have used for reference. I could see oil stains on the dark cover where years of use had marked it. Origin Press published the book in 1964, Cid’s own press – printed in Japan. It’s was a handsome book, still tightly bound. On the inside cover, Cid has written in ink something of an epigraph. It was difficult to read – the writing very small, but I made it out. It’s was written in his own hand:

Rabbi Uri taught –

“Man is like a tree. If you stand in front of a tree and watch it incessantly to see how it grows and to see how much it has grown, you will see nothing at all. But tend to it at all times, prune the runners, and keep the bugs from it and – all in good time – it will come into its growth. It is the same in a man: all that is necessary is for him to overcome his obstacles and he will thrive and grow. But it is not right to

examine him every hour to see how much has been added to his growth.”

True – but Rabbi Uri overlooks the crucial additional similarity: each needs others – or another – also to “tend” – “attend” that growth – not judging it – but caring for it.

Cid was forty years old when this book came out in 1962. It wasn't his first book, but it was certainly one of his earliest. Cid was slow to publish early on. He published individual poems in magazines, but he was not publishing books with established presses. One gets the sense from the title of the book, and from the epigraph, that Cid was suggesting that the maturation of his art, of poetry and the poet, was something that could not be hurried. It came, it developed, in its own *good time*, and that this had to be respected. This was good to hear. I was forty-seven years old – had been writing for more than twenty years – and other than one small chapbook, I had yet to publish a book of poetry.

As I paged through the book that evening, a postcard fell out from the pages. When I lifted the postcard, I saw the name of an esteemed American poet written across the bottom in blue flowing script. The card was from a poet Cid greatly admired, a poet central to Cid, and, unfortunately, a poet I am unable to name out of copyright considerations. Apparently, Cid sent a copy of *In Good Time* to this elder poet and he responded with the postcard. The postcard read as follows:

New York, 2 December 1964

Dear Cid,

Out with an earache on top of
etc. – ai – but your books
are here, the best correspondence.
I haven't compared *In Good Time*
with earlier versions (no
peace now) but as you must
know there is little around
up to its quiet accomplishment.
And quiet is a matter of
relevance: how lost the "quiet"
is so often. A unified book*
and for good – well, you're
the best haiku – Hi-Kuh –
man. Everything else
around pretty bad "translation."

What shall I say, what
Bill said 40 years ago to me –
You're not in all the
anthologies but will be
and if you are what'll it
mean?

My stuff in kind
I guess won't reach
you until after the
new year I guess. The usual
way – but to anticipate A
Happy One – the jobs don't
Let up - take care –

Love,

(Name Withheld)

*No criticism, just a thought –
the next one should be one where the end
cadences show off your “other” side.

Cid must have treasured this card. He left it in the well-worn book – a book, he referenced often, judging from the soiling on the cover and page edges. He left the card inside the book for forty years. He could have sold the card to generate cash, as he did many of his other cards and letters – but not this one. There is no other poet, short of George Oppen, or William Carlos Williams, whose words would have meant more to Cid than the words of this poet.

Alone in my room, with Shizumi's gift of Cid's book in my arms, and with his mentor's card tucked inside of that, I heard the promise of love, faith, and hope. And the falling snow, thick under the lamplights, reminded me of cherry blossoms soon to come and of their grace in filling our world in their own *good time*, never hurried – year upon year – and everlasting.

Beyond all critique

and all judgment,

I have to care

for one, anyone

who has the nerve

to believe in poetry

in a world like ours.

Cid Corman

Chapter Nine / Into The Air of Pegasus

I'm on a plane and headed to Columbia, Missouri. I'll stop in Chicago where my father has been hospitalized for over a month, and then I'll head to Columbia to resume my studies. My father has been growing weaker over the past year – an unexplained loss of weight, and now he has so much trouble breathing he has been moved to Intensive Care.

I spent the winter holiday in Japan visiting with Kae and the children. They have remained in Japan during the past year, as I attended the University of Missouri. They remained in Japan out of necessity – Kae's father is ill – terminally ill. Her mother needs her. In the midst of all this concern and anxiety, I receive news, two days ago, that my book of poems has been accepted for publication in the fall. I am elated by the news and look forward to telling my father about it when I see him in the hospital. I also think of David Wagoner, my old poetry teacher at the University of Washington. I haven't seen him in fifteen years. I'd thought like to write him a letter.

But I haven't written that letter – too busy packing and traveling. I left Japan sixteen hours ago. And now, with the plane lifting out of Seattle, I think more about the letter because I just met Paul in the airport lobby and received this script of Wagoner's play from him – a one act play, *First Class*, about Wagoner's studies with Theodore Roethke.

Paul is a friend from college days in Seattle. He's about forty years old. His

hair is black and long. He wears it in a ponytail – the hair thinning on top. Paul came out to the airport to visit – keep me company – as I waited several hours for the next flight to Chicago.

We sat in the lobby and traded stories – catching up on things. He knows all about cancer and what Kae’s father and Kae and her family are up against. Paul lost his wife to cancer a few years earlier. He is inquisitive and alert. He asks about my father. I am reasonably confident that my father will be all right. “He doesn’t have cancer. His heart is strong,” I tell Paul.

I first met Paul at the Dharma House in Seattle fifteen years earlier. We used to sit together. He has continued with his practice – has done long three-month retreats in Korea and has stopped through to visit with Kae and I in Japan on his way back to Seattle. Now he works as a social worker. He attends to prisoners in the Seattle county jail. It was good of him to come out and see me at the airport. Good of him to bring this script along that he knew I’d enjoy. He saw the play with his girlfriend just a few weeks ago.

I intended to write a letter to Wagoner. And now, looking at the script, which sits inside a bright orange folder, I halfway kid myself that now I most certainly have to – it was meant to happen. The plane lifts and banks over Puget Sound and then north over Wagoner’s neighborhood – I’m enjoying the lift I feel, the way the world falls away for a time – the way the window fills with empty sky before the plane rolls the other way and the window fills with green mountains shimmering water, and patches of cloud. I am taking a deep breath and thinking of my father’s troubled breathing. I relax with the outward breath, and think of how I’ll tell my father about the book soon.

First Class is a one-act play in which Theodore Roethke, Wagoner's own poetry teacher, is shown meeting his students on the first day of class. The actor playing Roethke is the only actor on stage for the duration of the play – fifty minutes. The material for the play comes from Wagoner's memories of studying with Roethke in the early 40's at Penn. Roethke moved to the University of Washington in 1947. Wagoner followed Roethke, coming out to teach at the university in 1954 and teaching there until 2002.

I am anxious to read the play but leave it until the on-board announcements cease and I can give it my full attention. When the time comes, I take the thirty-page script, stapled in the upper left corner, from its orange folder and begin. I don't read very far before I'm struck by sentences like this: "Young poets keep sending their first books to me. They want to be congratulated. Most of them should be getting sympathy cards." And here I am, I think to myself, about to send word of my book to Wagoner – and *yes*, of course, a copy of the book when I can. Would Wagoner send me a sympathy card the way Roethke speaks of doing? Maybe he would write something like, "Sorry, I read the book. Firstly, it is not very good. And secondly, it marks the beginning of a sad life in poetry. Get out while you can."

Wagoner loved Roethke and must have learned mightily from him. When I studied with Wagoner, I often heard stories about Roethke's teaching. I think it started the first day of class when Wagoner called us to the window – all fifteen

of us. He pointed out the window and said, "Your teacher is OUT THERE! Do you see him?" We all looked out the window expecting to see something – not sure what? We bent our heads in the direction he pointed to and saw nothing but a few students walking over the red brick square. We wondered for a few moments, and then we began whispering amongst ourselves until someone piped up, "What? Who's out there?" And then Wagoner, surprised by our lack of vision, clarified the statement, "The library, the library, do you see it? That's your teacher. Go and read all the poetry in English you can." And here, in the script, page two, the same thing, Roethke telling Wagoner's class at Penn: "There's the library. Your assignment this term is to read the bulk of poetry written in English. You don't have to read all of *The Faerie Queen* to know whether it's going to be useless to you. Or all of *Paradise Lost* or all of the *Excursion*. But you can dig, and eat and scrape and scratch. You can absorb. You don't have to annotate or grub like a scholar. Your brains are capable of osmosis. Treat the poetry section of the library like the land of Osmosis."

As I read the script on the airplane, I'm struck by how familiar Roethke's poetry lesson sounds. I am hearing echoes. When Roethke talks of nursery rhymes and how instructive they are in demonstrating how rhythms work in poetry, I hear Wagoner again doing the same in our class. Here is Wagoner recalling the words of Roethke in *First Class*:

*Hinx, minx, the old witch winks.
The fat begins to fry.
There's nobody home but Jumping Joan
And father and mother and I.*

“You hear the thump and smack of those Mother Goose rhythms?
Opening line: six syllables, five beats. You won’t find lines like that
anywhere else. Make them your closest friends. There are hundreds and
hundreds of thousands of poems in print, most of them bad, many of
them good, some of them wonderful, a few of them marvelous, a precious
few of them meant for you to love with all your heart. You have to find
them and the sooner the better. They’ll change the poems you try to write
into something better. Your best work will be a kind of magic amalgam of
them. They’ll live in your spinal cord and come to your rescue. They’ll
change your life. Go find them.”

And Wagoner did find them; he must have because he recited them in our
class all the time. Once when complaining about literary critics making too much
fuss about “meaning” in poetry, Wagoner recited *Hickory Dickory Dock* to make a
point: “Hickory dickory dock / the mouse ran up the clock, / the clock struck
one / the mouse ran down, / hickory dickory dock.” “Now,” he said, in a loud
voice, looking around the room, “Can anyone tell me what the hell that’s about
what? What that *means*?”

Reading the script, I realize how much of Roethke’s teaching – his sense of
poetics – came down to us through Wagoner. What didn’t come down to us was
the complexity and beauty of Roethke, the man. Wagoner didn’t talk about
Roethke much in personal terms. Here in the script, Wagoner achieves a portrait
of the man – whose life was passionately infused and centered in poetry.

Stage directions on the first page of the script alert us to the fact there is

trouble in the room. The play opens with Roethke in “a hospital bathrobe, slumped on a stool. He is in the Violent Ward of a private sanitarium call Halcyon in Seattle, Washington, but we have no direct indication of that except the bathrobe.” Roethke is reciting a nursery rhyme as the play opens. The nursery rhyme is cutting and sardonic; it is also playful. The scene works to place a sorrow and truth that was integrally a part of the man and his life as a poet – his mental illness – at the forefront of the play: “Mother, Mother, I am ill. / Send for the doctor over the hill. / In comes the doctor. / In comes the nurse. / In comes the lady with the alligator purse.”

Throughout the play, we see Roethke slip in and out of mental depression as he did in life. But always the poetry is there for him. It steadies him – a kind of trusted companion, a resource he can depend on. It reminds us of what he said of nursery rhymes – it echoes his thoughts here – how poets should make nursery rhymes their “closest friends . . . They’ll . . . come to your rescue.” Wagoner’s portrayal of his teacher is sympathetic, compassionate, frank, and celebratory. It says, “Yes, this is the story of a man – a story of how he lived and how he suffered, but most importantly it is a story about how he wrote poetry and taught – how he sang.”

I am moved in reading the play to see Wagoner honoring his teacher again after so many years. The play was completed in 2007 when Wagoner was eighty-one years old. Roethke would have been ninety-nine.

Following Roethke’s death in 1963 of a heart attack at the age of fifty-five, Wagoner went through Roethke’s collection of notebooks and gleaned various

fragments related to poetry and produced *Straw for the Fire*, published in 1969. Throughout his long career in writing, both as a writer (twenty books of poetry), and as a teacher of writing, Wagoner has honored Roethke. In doing this, he also honors the vocation of teaching itself, which Roethke once referred to as “one of the last noble professions.” Wagoner’s elegy for Roethke is the best elegy of Roethke we have. I quote only the fourth and final stanza below:

Elegy While Pruning Roses

*What saint strained so much
Rose on such lopped limbs to a new life?
– Theodore Roethke*

. . .
. . .

Ted, you told me once there were days and days
When you *had* to garden, to get your hands
Down into the literal dirt and bury them
Like roots to remind yourself what you might do
Or be next time, with luck. I’ve searched for that mindless
Ripeness and found it. Later, some of these flowers
Will go to the bedside of the woman I love.
The rest are for you, who weren’t cut off in your prime
But near the end of a long good growing season
Before your first frostbitten buds.
You knew where roots belonged, what mysterious roses
Come from and were meant for: thanks,
Apology, praise, celebration, wonder,
And love, in memory of the flourishing dead.

*

When Wagoner walked into Padelford Hall, room six, that September morning in 1984, first day of class, he walked in on time. He looked severe – a bit upset. He had a youthful face, smoothed skin, clean-shaven, black eyebrows and a head full of white hair that was combed with a part to the side. He wore khaki pants and a denim shirt with pearl buttons. He put his brown leather bag up on the table and came around in front and sat in a student chair. He sat quietly for about a minute, waiting for students to come in and sit down. He looked over the attendance list in his hand. He reached over to his bag now and brought it down beside him. He unzipped it and took several books out and placed them on the table. He was not looking up at us, nor was he greeting us as many teachers would have done by now. The noise in the hall quieted. It was a few minutes past the starting time of ten a.m. and still the quiet continued. He made no moves to greet us. We waited another minute and that long minute was long enough for most of us to begin wondering what we had gotten ourselves into. We knew, most of us, that Wagoner taught graduate classes and that we were lucky to have the opportunity to study with him as undergraduates, or, as in my case as a student somewhere in between graduate and undergraduate. I had already graduated from the University of Idaho in Biology but was here now at the University of Washington studying for a second degree in English. “Wagoner is a tough teacher and somewhat aloof,” I heard graduate students complain. “He’s not the kind of professor you’ll walk across campus talking to. When the bell

rings, he's out of there – gone.”

The most remarkable thing about Wagoner's appearance that day was what he wore on his left wrist – a thick, three-inch wide, deer skin watchband decorated with of Native American beadwork. It was beautiful and colorful: red, blue, yellow, green – all those beads shimmering in the sunlight as he settled himself in the chair. That marked him for me. There was something wild about him. He could look conventional in every other way – but here – here on his wrist seemed to be some kind of a talisman, a statement of unconventionality, a statement of allegiance with the native world, a more “primitive” world. I knew Wagoner was a poet whose concerns involved environmental issues. I had seen his poems published in *Wilderness* magazine. I had read his poems that spoke out against logging practices in the northwest, “An Address to Weyerhaeuser, the Tree Growing Company.”

I had done my homework on Wagoner. I knew a bit about him before I came into the class. I was already familiar with some of his poetry. When I met Wagoner, he was probably about fifty-seven years old. There was something youthful about his frame and weight. He was slim and had an athletic-look to him. He had been a smoker for some years, but had given it up fifteen years earlier. His face showed the signs of aging that one associates with smokers: the skin a bit dry and taunt around the bones, the color a bit ashen. His jaw set hard and flat in a grimly determined way. During his college days at Penn, he was in the Navy R.O.T.C. program (Reserve Officer Training Corps). This would have been at the end of WWII. His father worked in the steel mills of Gary, Indiana. Some of his brothers would do the same. He was a depression-era child. All of

these things seem writ on his face and carried in his bearing. There was strength in him, a certain no-nonsense about him.

On that first day, he just came in, put his satchel down on the table, and sat down. He was not trying to be particularly friendly – he gave the impression he was just coming in to do his job. The satchel could be a lunch bucket, I thought. He reminded me of my father – his no nonsense, straight away approach. Both my father and Wagoner had been Navy men – both born in June in the same year, one day apart: Wagoner – June 5, 1926, My father – June 4.

I was twenty-four years old. I had been working as a biologist for the U.S. government for a number of years. My most recent assignment was working as a foreigner fisheries observer in the Bering Sea. It was a god job for many reasons but one of the main reasons it was *good* was because it allowed me time to return to school. I worked for several months at a stretch and then return to Seattle. I had taken this job out of Seattle so I could study at the University of Washington.

The first time the idea of being a writer ever entered my mind was when I was in sixth grade, twelve-years-old. I felt a certain confident, audacious conviction that I could do it – could write – and that I enjoy doing it in a very singular way. It came when I was sitting at the kitchen table working on a long paper about John Paul Jones, “the father” of the U.S. Navy. I was struggling along trying to find the right words enough of them to tell a coherent story. I liked the way the pen felt in my hand. I liked the way I could take vague ideas in my head and try shaping them into something clearer on the page. I liked the whole idea of

penmanship – the physical activity of writing and shaping letters on paper.

My father would be nearby encouraging me as he made passes in and out of the kitchen for *Fresca*, peanuts, or more ice. In fact, I remember it was his idea that I choose John Paul Jones as a topic when I came home and told him I had to write about a famous American of the colonial past.

I admired my father's handwriting – the finest handwriting I had ever seen anyone actually write. It was like the penmanship of the signers of the Declaration of Independence. It had all those elegant shapes and turns. It was a handwriting that exuded a kind of joy in writing. It was bold and confident and full of life. I asked my father to write the title of my thirty-page paper on John Paul Jones on the cover of the paper folder that would house it, and he obliged.

In high school, I was considering going to college and majoring in English, but for various reasons, I pulled back and ended up studying Biology. Biology made sense. I reasoned, "I could study this and get a job that would take me into the field. I couldn't see how somebody could make a living with English as a major. I didn't want to be a high school teacher. And my confidence in my ability to write was non-existent when I finished high school. Whatever confidence I once had, whatever joy I once found in it, seemed to give way and collapse under the weight of what I was coming to see, like many others, as "reality," the reality of making a living.

I came from a working-class background – I was aware of that now, more than ever. Notions of being a writer were suspect. My parents strained to see writing as legitimate *work*. "Could you support a family with that?" I remember my

mother querying me. And knowing what I knew, even then, from my father's struggles with work, or my grandfather's, or what I saw in the south studying with African Americans in dilapidated schools, I could appreciate my mother's concern. I couldn't see creative writing as legitimate work.

And even when I did turn, on occasion, to entertain the idea of studying English, thinking I could maybe become an English teacher, something inside of me bucked at that too. I never met a high school English teacher who seemed happy in the position. Once, I met my high school English teacher in the produce aisle at the supermarket. I was working at the store when she strolled down the aisle. She was an older teacher, about fifty-five, always prim and proper in the class – a short, full-figured woman – the type of woman who wore her graying hair pulled up into a tight bun on top of her head and the type of woman who wore conservative dresses that come down past her knees. She wore reading glasses that hung from a sequined strap upon her chest. Whenever she had to read, she would lift them into the air ceremoniously and place them on her nose. I still see her calling us to the chore of reading Thoreau's *Civil Disobedience*. I see her peering out over the top of her glasses to see that we were all following her instructions. When she felt we were ready, she'd begin reading and discoursing on the wonders of this wild man, Henry David Thoreau. She didn't say he was "wild," but there was clearly something about him she disliked. She had little sympathy for him. Her discoursing, such as it was, was thin, and restricted only to the facts – no elaboration. "He didn't pay his tax. He was placed in Jail. He wrote the essay while in jail," She would say. If there was

any wonder in Thoreau, we were going to have to get that sustenance by ourselves.

Perhaps Thoreau frightened her. Perhaps she saw him as a troublemaker. His name often came up during those turbulent times in the 60s and early 70s. He was popular among student activists on college campuses. Civil disobedience was practiced like art all over the place then. In 1968, when the Democratic National Convention exploded into violence eight miles away from our school, the young leaders of the protests evoked his name. When Daniel Ellsberg was arrested in 1971 for *The Pentagon Papers*, he spoke like a student of Thoreau: "I felt that as an American citizen, as a responsible citizen, I could no longer cooperate in concealing this information from the American public. I did this clearly at my own jeopardy and I am prepared to answer to all the consequences of this decision." And Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. also spoke of Thoreau's influence upon him. He even emulated him when he wrote his own essay from jail: "Letter from Birmingham Jail."

I approached her in the aisle and said hello. I told her of my considering returning to college and major in English, adding that to my degree in biology and going on to become an English teacher. I hardly got the words out when she lifted her glasses to look at me, as if I were a book she were about to read. She put her to the side, looked at me sternly, and said "No, that would be a mistake. If you major in English you will be an English teacher, and I wouldn't recommend that to anyone. Do something different. It's really not a good life – take my word for it." And then, she said goodbye and continued shopping

without waiting for my reply, which wasn't really forthcoming anyway.

It would take me some time to clearly understand that the comment reflected more about her than it did about me, or the subject of teaching English. "She was wrong about Thoreau," I reasoned "so how could she be right about anything related to literature?" My enjoyment of Thoreau came from my reading him alone in the evening during high school. In fact, *Walden* was the first book I ever read where I felt the author was speaking directly to me – as if the book were meant for me – like a letter addressed to me. After *Walden*, reading became a new experience. The written word, I realized, had a mystery all its own. It was the written word that brought Thoreau into my living room at night – into my life. I fell in love with reading – realized in a flash what reading could be.

In Alaska, it became clear to me that I had really been wandering in the wilderness, figuratively and literally, for too long. I didn't want to be a biologist at all. My interest in poetry was only getting stronger. It wasn't something I felt I could just put to the side – be a weekend poet. I remember spending the weekends in a communal trailer that I shared with other biologist. We were far from town, isolated, literally in the wilderness. We were conducting field studies on the grazing habits of Dall sheep; those beautiful white sheep with the big curling horns. We'd spend days and days observing their behavior, watching carefully where they fed on the mountainside and for how long. Everything was dutifully logged. We observed them through a *Celestron* telescope from the base of the mountain. If we lost sight of them for more than a day or two, we hiked up to them and camp out, continuing to observe. On weekends when we rested, I read books of poetry while my biologist friends read the newest scientific

monographs on subjects related to wildlife biology. My interests were too far-gone. I knew this finally when on a three-day weekend I didn't travel into town with my fellow biologist but took the opportunity to hitchhike up to Anchorage and knocked on the door of the poet John Haines. I was at the University of Alaska. John Haines was not in, but that was OK. I felt the way I did in hiking up to see the sheep. I had to make sure they were there – I had to keep observing. Here too, I was observing. And what I found felt right to me. I was singing that old James Taylor song, "Close your Eyes" as I hitched-hiked back down to the camp around Cook inlet and south in the late afternoon of that early autumn evening:

Well the sun is surely sinking down
But the moon is slowly rising
So this old world must still be spinning 'round
. . .
So close your eyes
You can close your eyes, it's all right

*

The first thing Wagoner asked us to do was to introduce ourselves and then to say something about *why* we had registered for a class in poetry. Fortunately, I was not the first person to start. By the time Wagoner got to me, I knew I should answer the question seriously. One student responded by explaining how he liked to “play with poetry from time to time.” Wagoner pounced on that. “Play? Play? Play?” he questioned the student as he stood from his chair. His voice was loud now and moving up in volume and intensity. “We are not here to play with anything! We are here to work! To work! To work! Do you understand that? Do you get that?” Wagoner was staring hard at all of us now and continuing, “In this class, poetry is high-stakes – if you are not ready for that, find another class!” The student was unmoored, leaning back in his seat and sort of floating there upon it, swaying from side to side. I felt sorry for him, thinking it was probably not really representative of his feelings – he just said what came into his mind – something safe and conventional, not wanting to expose himself too much. Wagoner wanted us to know how much he cared about poetry – he wanted to make us absolutely clear on this one point: we were going to be serious about poetry in this class. Poetry we now understood was – well – his life – it wasn’t just another subject. He wanted us to come to class prepared to be serious about the adventure ahead – wanted us to be mature, committed, and serious about the adventure.

In retelling this story to others over the years, friends and fellow instructors have wondered if a teacher could “get away with replying to a student like that today?” “I don’t know,” I tell them. “I wonder myself.” And then I find myself thinking to myself about passion and anger in the classroom – is there room for it

– is it allowable, permitted – should there be? Should it be discouraged? Or should it, perhaps, even be encouraged? In reading Wagoner’s script today, I see Roethke too was given to scaring his students into what he called “the air of Pegasus.” And in Wagoner’s recounting of the episode below, I understand the passion that inspired his teaching, the art of his teaching. Here is Wagoner recalling the instruction of Roethke’s in *First Class*:

(He pauses and examines the faces of his class.) (apparently speaking to one of them) What are you laughing at? (listens) Well, I don’t know either. (apparently to another) Am I spoiling your lunch? (apparently to several others) I see you sitting there. Don’t think I don’t. Some of you slouched on the backs of your necks, thinking *Okay, buddy, teach me something*. Most of you are probably playing sleepy-bye, counting metrical feet, spooking yourselves with what you think are heavy thoughts. . . show me what you’ve written. As soon as possible. Let’s get it over with. I’ll be fair and kind. I’ll read what you’ve written and try to help. I’m here to help wake you up. . . I may be just another teacher to you, but you’ll soon realize I’m not. I’m something else. I’ll be sneaking up behind you and trying to scare you up into the air of Pegasus without forgetting the value of horse sense and horse manure.

I know two things about the horse.

And one of them is rather coarse.

And speaking of manure, I'm going to be your critic.

That first day in class with Wagoner, when we were giving our small introductions, it felt like Wagoner was interrogating us more than he was allowing us to introduce ourselves. He was putting us on notice that the class was going to be tough and rigorous in a number of ways. But clearly, the one way this class would differ from any other class I had taken was that it required a mental toughness. We were going to have to be objective and honest about each other's work, as well as our own.

Wagoner, himself, was not going to worry about our feelings. He was only going to be concerned about the poetry. He wanted to respond to the poetry as directly as he could, and he warned us it might be painful at times, saying, "It is OK to cry but don't let that keep you from coming to class."

When introductions ended, Wagoner gave students a chance to leave the class, "If any of you think you are in the wrong class for any reason please feel free to leave now." Three students stood to leave, including the student who spoke about liking "to play with poetry." Wagoner went through the syllabus and told us what to expect. We'd write poems. He'd make copies and hand them out. We'd go over them in class. The first homework assignment, Wagoner stood up and announced, "Write twenty lines of iambic pentameter. And if you don't now what iambic pentameter means, find out!"

When Wagoner came in the second day, the class was down to ten students. Two more students had dropped since our last meeting. He didn't seem surprised or concerned. He told us about Roethke's class, "Roethke's students had to sign-up for the class and submit poetry before they could join. If the poetry wasn't any good, they weren't allowed to join. You're all lucky – you joined without a test." Of course, we all knew we'd been tested on the first day.

I hungered for a teacher like Wagoner, a teacher on fire about poetry. There was no doubt in my mind that his passion for poetry was real. His life was about poetry like no one I had ever seen before. This was exactly what I needed.

Wagoner broke into poetry in every class. He would just begin reciting great poems – short and long – in an effort to illustrate a point. He would ask us to give him, "some verbs, nouns and prepositions." He'd write them on the board and then turn and make a poem out of them to illustrate the associative quality of language. This was not a high school teacher reaching below the podium after the bell had sounded to take a textbook out and announce sleepily that it was, "Time to read Thoreau." This was a teacher who *was*, first and foremost, a poet himself, a person whose life had been changed by literature, a person who had confidence and belief in the importance of poetry – the necessity of poetry and its power – it was something felt and translated to us immediately. If we were horses, Wagoner unbridled us, allowed us to feel the breath within ourselves lifting us into the air and away.

In the late 70s and early 80s poetry workshops in the universities were rather rare. Most college students had little exposure to creative writing in high school.

And if they were *boys* in high school in the United States, an interest in poetry is not something they'd want to tell their friends about. Wagoner was a masculine figure that could stand in the middle of the room and say clearly, "Poetry mattered." We weren't going to treat poetry as anything less than that: terribly essential – not precious but simply "essential," an essential part of living and life. That heartened me. Here, at last, an opening, a place to begin.

*

Wagoner's criticism was direct and honest. It sometimes sounded harsh, and it could on occasion make students cry in class. On one occasion, a student cried after Wagoner criticized her for reading a poem in too "sing-songy" of a voice: "For God's sake! Where did you ever learn to read a poem like that that?"

This was not a class that students could just walk into plop down in a chair and rest comfortable in. Students couldn't just fade into the background here. Wagoner called on students and asked them to respond, or read. He challenged us relentlessly: "Why do you say that? Explain that more?"

In 1985, when I was studying with Wagoner, he was the poetry editor at *Poetry Northwest*, a highly regarded poetry magazine that he had edited since 1966. He received thousands of submission every year, a gargantuan task to search through such a vast number of poems to find the few that would serve. He liked to come to class immediately after reading submissions. He knew what

he liked and what he didn't like – what worked in poetry and what didn't. And in no uncertain terms, he let us know about his likes and dislikes – what he considered good poetry and what he considered “weak.” He thought, for example, that most poems were “under-imagined,” and so he'd bring in poems that he felt were “fully imagined” – or “fully realized.” He'd bring them in from the pages of *Poetry Northwest* to read the poems to us and carefully illustrate their imaginative strengths. On other occasions, he would talk about the importance of the first few lines of the poem. “There needs to be a “hook,” something that makes the reader want to read the poem. It's got to happen on the page sonically or dramatically. It's got to happen quickly, or, as an editor, I'll stop reading.” We compared strong opening lines of poems he had published in *Poetry Northwest* against the opening lines in our poems.

And just as Wagoner shows Roethke doing in *First Class*, Wagoner peppered his classroom sessions with impromptu recitations of poetry. In talking about the importance of “music” in poetry – how the sonic quality affects the mood of the poem and how it is central to what the poem is trying to convey on the page – he recited “Peter Quince at the Clavier,” Wallace Stevens great poem: “Just as my fingers on these keys / Make music, so the self-same sounds / On my spirit make a music, too. // Music is feeling, then, not sound; / And thus it is that what I feel, / Here in this room, desiring you, / . . .”

If he saw us using too many careless anapests in our lines, he'd give us “Bagpipe Music” from Louise Mac Niece to let us hear the comic effect the skipping rhythm that anapests make: “It's no go the merry-go-round, it's no go the rickshaw, / All we want is a limousine and a ticket for the peepshow. / Their

knickers are made of crêpe-de-chine, their shoes are made of python, / Their halls are lined with tiger rugs and their walls with heads of bison." Wagoner's message to us: "Be careful with anapests and with rhythm in general – understand how rhythm carries meaning. Anapests are useful if your purpose is a comic one."

Wagoner recited poetry from many poets, but the poets he enjoyed most were Thomas Hardy and Yeats. On both accounts, it was their "ear" he admired, their "sound sense," as he called it. In speaking of Yeats, he tried to show us how Yeats "overpowered" the forms he wrote in. The poems were so impassioned, the cadences and the music so felt, that the reader didn't see the formal structure operating beneath them, or was, at least not distracted by it. Wagoner would recite, "The Fascination With What's Difficult" in order to illustrate this point. The poem is charged with a visceral anger that reads like a sudden outburst – unstoppable in its movement and convincing in its conviction:

The fascination of what's difficult
Has dried the sap out of my veins, and rent
Spontaneous joy and natural content
Out of my heart. There's something ails our colt
That must, as if it had not holy blood
Nor on Olympus leaped from cloud to cloud,
Shiver under the lash, strain, sweat and jolt
As though it dragged road metal. My curse on plays
That have to be set up in fifty ways,

On the day's war with every knave and dolt,
Theatre business, management of men.
I swear before the dawn comes round again
I'll find the stable and pull out the bolt.

When Wagoner looked at the first poem I submitted in class, I knew pretty well what to expect. I knew he'd tell me what he saw and heard – what he felt. After I read the poem aloud in the class, he raised his voice in an agitated way as if he were tired, as if he had already read too many bad poems for *Poetry Northwest* that morning. He complained about the poem's sixth line, raising his voice in disapproval, "I've *never* heard so many ugly sounds in one line of poetry in my life!"

I am sliding down in my chair at about this time. The room is growing quieter. I'm waiting for something to happen. I know I'm not going to say anything. I know my classmates aren't. We've learned to give Wagoner time to digest the poem, to ponder what he'll say about it – how best to approach it. Time slows. It feels as though an hour has passed before he clears his throat and begins to explain his comment. "You're talking about dancers for Christ sake! You are talking about movement, fluid movement. The scene is supposed to be elegant, slow, flowing. You want soft sounds here, sibilants – sounds that will slip off the tongue, glide over its floor. And here, you are with these hard sounds. You're using fricatives, hard sounding fricatives. Why are you doing that? Can't you hear that, all those k's sounds? They are contrary to your purposes. You're

describing a ballet dancer for Christ sake! Get rid of the pink leotards; give her a softer color – blue! Your telling us about her movements, your describing that – you want to tell us about the easy graceful flow of that – but your sounds – the language that you are using here is hard, rigid, jerky – fixed – too many fricatives.” I had never heard of a fricative before, and I wouldn’t soon forget.

*

What is lost when a teacher can’t teach in such a way? What happens if creative writing instructors have to be overly guarded in their responses, overly careful and calibrated? I am not suggesting that every creative writing teacher adopt a Wagoner approach. I am just wondering if there is still room for such an approach – should there be room? After all, Wagoner himself probably benefited from Roethke’s rough teaching style. Isn’t he as much as saying so in this play that shows Roethke’s teaching in action – an approach that brings the pages of Wagoner’s script *First Class* so alive. And when I think of how many good poets came forward through Roethke’s teaching – I think of Richard Hugo, Carolyn Kizer, James Wright, Tess Gallagher, Robert Sund, to name a few – I have to think his methods worked.

What is it that makes tough criticism actually productive? I think it has much to do with trust and love, in fact. I think that when a coach, a teacher, or a father criticizes the work itself and not the person, the student or child can recognize the difference and appreciate the criticism for what it is – often an act of generosity and love. Some years ago, I had a chance to join the Stuttgart Ballet

when the ballet arrived in Japan and put out a call for “extras” to join the ballet and help with a few scenes that required a large number of people to be on stage. I applied for the job, tried out, and was hired. I joined the ballet for their two-week tour around Japan. During this time, I observed first hand the way the ballet coach worked with the dancers. I remember him being severe. And I thought immediately, of Wagoner’s class and the way in which he taught us – coached us. On one particular day, for example, I saw the sixty-year old French coach lose his temper with a Japanese dancer. She was an accomplished dancer who had trained in Europe from an early age and had joined the Stuttgart a few years earlier. The coach was having difficulty getting her to be as expressive as he wanted. When she ran across the stage, he wanted more lift in her jump. He wanted her legs higher and parallel to the ground. I don’t know if this had anything to do with her being Japanese but in my mind there was a connection, The Japanese tend to be less openly expressive as a people and culture. They seem to make an art out of *not* fully expressing themselves bodily or verbally. Perhaps, this relates to the difficulty the dancer was facing in being expressive on stage. Despite her years in Europe, she was not as expressive as she needed to be for the dance. After repeatedly practicing the dance with the dancer, the French coach lost his patience and temper and grabbed a bamboo cane and started running after her. He slammed the cane against the floor and yelled at the top of his lungs, “I’ll smash your toes and then you will learn to feel the music!”

He never caught her. She bounded away, ducking in and out of ladders and props until the coach stopped running and threw the stick down – and doubled over, winded and laughing. That is my vision of Wagoner and my vision of a

coach as a teacher. Intense? Yes. Frightening? Yes. Serious? Absolutely. But also, someone who can laugh with the student when all else fails – can laugh because he understands how futile it is in the end – how audacious an enterprise to hope to realize an ideal in art. In her way, this dancer too was Pegasus learning to fly.

Wagoner was a coach. He was harsh and demanding to the extent he took us seriously – our aspirations to make art. He could have dismissed us, and said we weren't capable, but that is not what he did. He came to every class and made us work toward the goal of making a good poem. I think he felt that we were, teacher and students, trying to *serve* art and that in this pursuit, which would demand more of us than we knew at first, we needed to be as fully committed as possible. This commitment meant we had to put the work first and our feelings behind it. We were a team of sorts. The effectiveness of the workshop depended on all of us. We were building a community of trust – trusted each would tell the truth by their own light of reckoning. And he was the coach; warning us against taking criticism personally – telling us he was looking at the poem – and that we needed to be objective – to distance ourselves from the work in order to *serve* the work. We needed to be ruthlessly honest with ourselves, as Cid Corman would later tell me. And often after intense moments in our class, such as his tearing apart the sixth line of my poem, there would be laughter, a kind of relaxation that spoke of how learning came to us, and how failure was itself an ally we needed to embrace. I had been initiated. Wagoner edged me into the light where I confirmed for myself that poetry was as exciting as I sensed it could be. There was a lot to learn, but in that classroom, I felt myself coming home to something: I wanted to write poetry – to commit to that singular aim.

Coach or teacher, something about Wagoner reminded me of my father. Put another way, if my father taught poetry, he'd have taught like Wagoner. He'd show up with that stern face – humor would wait. He'd get down to business – “twenty lines of iambic pentameter.” He'd expect commitment – as he committed thirty years of his life to the Navy. Harsh and severe, he'd critique the work.

I see him on deck the USS Keith, the Navy Destroyer she spoke of the most, the ship he most enjoyed. I see him moving through the ranks of sailors. They are lined-up for inspection. He checks that their guns are held straight. He checks that that shoes and belt buckle are polished. He walks slowly looking each sailor in the eye. And that is how I see him checking the lines of verse. Are they clean? Are they in order? Are they tight? Is there anything extra here?

Wagoner and my father were officers in the Naval. They are the same age, born a day apart. My respect for both comes naturally. I can't help myself. I want Wagoner to approve of my poems. I want my father to approve of my life, the decisions I have made in my life. Reading Wagoner's *First Class* brings me back to thoughts of my father this morning as I fly to Chicago. I lay the script aside, and think of my father's suffering now – hopeful he will recover – that he will make it through this latest battle – that he will soon be home and breathing better. I know he will be happy to hear of the book's publication – the book coming at last. I'll show the book to him when it comes out in the fall. I am looking forward to that. I think there are poems there that he'll enjoy. I know one

of the poems he has seen and has spoken of enjoying. Perhaps the book will show him what I've been up all these years away in Japan.

As important a figure as Wagoner was in my development as a poet, I don't know that he ever really recognized that. After I finished my degree at U. of W., I went to Kyoto to be with Kae who had returned to Japan and to teach and write. I wanted to see what I could do with poetry. My teaching in a language school in Kyoto would give me most of the day for reading and writing. I would only teach in the late afternoon and evening. After some years of writing, I decided to apply to return to the States and enter a graduate program in creative writing. When I contacted Wagoner, inquiring about a letter of recommendation, he didn't remember me, which I understood, given the number of students he had taught and worked with over the years. He asked me to send him some of my poems and he would look them over and consider whether to write a letter of recommendation for me or not. I did that and waited.

When his response arrived in Japan some months later, I was stung and disappointed by the reply. He wasn't going to write a letter of recommendation. The poems weren't "strong" enough and he hadn't seen enough of them. He wanted me to send more poems. If he liked what he saw, he'd be glad to look at them and reconsider his decision. The initial rejection was too much for me. I told myself I was writing differently than Wagoner now – my sensibilities and aesthetics were at odds with his. I liked a direct poetry, a poetry written in *plain language*. I didn't care place a lot of importance on the use of wit in poetry the

way he seemed to, nor did I care for poetry that required a lot rhetorical scaffolding.

Considering our different sensibilities, it wouldn't matter how many poems I sent him, I reasoned. My poems wouldn't pass his "good poem" test. I had been writing for three years in Japan. I had come to know the poet Cid Corman and had begun to study with him. Though he and Wagoner were the same age, Corman had a radically different approach and understanding of poetry – one that I gravitated towards naturally. It was a direct poetry, a poetry that found its art in placing primacy on the artful clarity as in the poem below in which Corman speaks of his admiration of the poetry of George Oppen:

FOR GEORGE

What I like about him is
The honesty of his words –

Letting them be poetry –
Not making anything of

What the words make – but aware
Of what they are – hard come by

The way sun water breath skin
Feel upon emerging from

A good swim in the ocean –
The sense of having come clean.

(Stanza Break)

Even the sand underfoot
Seems consonant with one's weight.

Would Wagoner ever really be able to appreciate poetry so different in look, feel, and sound from that of his own? I had doubts and they got in my way – those doubts and the disappointment I felt in being turn-away from a teacher I so admired. I didn't send any further poems to Wagoner. I gave up seeking his letter of recommendation.

Today, I regret not sending those poems. If nothing else, it would have been fruitful to establish a conversation about poetry with him through correspondence. He was open to that. He invited me after all to send more poems to him. But sometimes too, I suppose, I thought then and maintain now, there is a time to break with one's teacher and move off on one's own. My sense of poetics was developing. Perhaps instinctively, I knew it was time to work on developing my own poetics. I didn't want to knock too hard on the door of approval at the expense of following my own path into poetry. Where I was going felt right. I wasn't going to turn back. Not now.

Several years later, after I entering an MFA program at Eastern Washington University, a strange and somewhat uncomfortable opportunity arrived. David Wagoner was invited to teach in our program, and I, having been his former student, was selected to be the student responsible for picking him up at the airport. It was with mixed emotions and some reservations that I accepted this

assignment. On the one hand, I felt honored to be so asked – it would be a great opportunity to speak with him again privately, alone in the car for the twenty minute ride from the airport and back into Spokane. I could refresh his memory about my letter from Japan – see if he remembered me – ask him what was wrong with those poems I sent (as if he would remember them)? On the other hand, it was awkward. I hadn't written back after he declined my original request.

I met him at 10 a.m. at Baggage Claim in the Spokane airport on a sunny day in March. I escorted him out to my twenty-something-year-old, fairly reliable, *Volvo* 144E. I put his luggage in the trunk, opened the car door for him and then got in myself. We sped away towards downtown Spokane.

I remember trying to put him at ease with regard to the reliability of my car, Emma. He looked concerned, asking how old the car was and if it was reliable. I told him, "Our chances were good. The car only looked bad." It's once sky-blue color was faded to a dingy sort of grey. And it did, in truth, run noisily and rough. Still, it was a *Volvo*, a comfortable car and reliable. He began to relax. "Think of the car as a poem," I wanted to say. "You get in and you are along for the ride. You don't want to expect. But you want it to be a good ride – you want it to hold your attention."

He looked very much the same as he had five years ago. He still had all his hair – whiter now. He looked comfortable: brown hush-puppy shoes, khaki pants, and a brown suede car coat. He rested his large familiar brown leather satchel on his lap.

When I first saw him in Baggage Claim, he seemed to recognize me a bit. I

could see his brown eyes doing a quick scan – I thought I saw some flickering lights of recognition there, but I also knew that he had been forewarned that he would be met the airport by a former student. He was on the alert.

On the drive in, I began to tell him of my being in his class five years earlier. The gears of recognition were turning. “Yes, he said, I vaguely remember you.” He was honest. When I mentioned my sending a letter from Japan, asking for a recommendation, he remembered me. He said he was sorry not to have been able to write a letter and asked why I didn’t send more poems?” I explained my reasoning. He listened thoughtfully and said, “You *still* should have sent the poems. I would have looked at them.” I asked, “How have you been doing? I was relieved to be past this exchange of the past. “This morning, just before leaving for the airport, I got great news! I have been awarded the Ruth Lilly Prize from *Poetry* magazine. It’s a lifetime achievement with a monetary award of \$20,000 dollars.” He was elated. I was happy for him – congratulated him. It was clear that despite all of his many accomplishments being acknowledge in this way meant a great deal to him, which kind of surprised me. In the car, he seemed then twenty years younger, a young poet looking for confirmation. He was beaming in the seat beside me. He was looking out the window at the passing countryside, the dry rolling hills of grass and Pine outside of Spokane.

We turned to the subject of Japan, and I mentioned I had come to know the poet Cid Corman. I mentioned how Cid had spoken of him, how Cid knew him. And Wagoner acknowledged this, “Yes, yes, I know Cid. How is Cid doing? Is he still writing those Japanese-like poems?” “Ouch” I thought, “Yes, yes, Cid is doing fine, “I told him. But, as I said this, I knew Cid would cringe to hear his

poetry be spoken of in this dismissive sort of way – “Japanese-like.” As far as Cid was concerned, he was a Bostonian, writing out of the American tradition, writing out of something more akin to an Emily Dickinson than the Japanese tradition.

I reminded Wagoner that he and Cid were at the Mac Dowell colony together at the same time – that they were both photographed together in a picture with Roethke. I tell him that I saw this picture in Japan at Cid’s home. Wagoner acknowledges this. “Yes and that that was a long time ago, 1945 or so.”

Corman, like Wagoner, was a fan of Roethke’s poetry, though not as devoted as Wagoner. Meanwhile, Corman found Wagoner’s poetry lacking. When I told Corman, a few years earlier, that Wagoner was my teacher at the U. of W., he quickly responded, “Wagoner never wrote a poem in his life.” Jeez, I’m thinking, now at the airport, “What’s with these poets that they can’t appreciate each other’s work?” Maybe there *is* after all something to what Harold Bloom said of “strong poets” not being able to tolerate the work of their contemporaries.

*

I’ll read *First Class* later – try to find some quiet time to savor it. For now, the plane is coming into Chicago’s O’Hare airport. How many times have I flown in and out of here? Thinking of the first time my parents saw me off when I was twenty – that long flight to Spokane and then my bus south to Moscow. My father told me on one of my recent visits home, that I would come back some day and they would be gone – parents would be gone. It was his way of trying to get

me to get serious about getting back to the States – “Don’t wait too long or we won’t be here.” His words take on more weight today – though I’ve always felt the truth of them.

My father’s has always spoken of his mortality – has always been aware of death and dying – and fearful of it. His father died when he was only fifty – cancer – his older brother already gone too – cancer. My father has been suffering from diabetes for thirty years. He took early retirement at 62 – wise given what he knew of his family’s health history. He’s tried to stay healthy – subscribing to *Prevention Magazine*, reading on health, eating well, and exercising regularly. Still, at 82, his weight down to 98 pounds and suffering from pneumonia, he is in the hospital, in the intensive care unit. The doctors have put a tracheal tube into his throat. I understand he is weak – sleeps a lot – but is conscious at times and aware of everything around him. He can’t speak now. He writes little notes on pieces of paper. My mother complains – says, “The notes are so cryptic and hard to understand they might as well be poems.”

*

I am in the kitchen with my mother. We are going to the hospital today. I share a poem with her – a poem of sorts, actually a letter, a letter from the novelist Gabriel Garcia Marquez that I came across yesterday on the flight in from Japan by way of Seattle. I found it in the *Pacific Rim Review of Books* and was struck by its poignancy and by the way in which it speaks of love.

I spent the winter holidays with Kae and children in Japan, where Kae’s

father was suffering from cancer. I hadn't seen my family in Japan for six months, not since August. I had to go. My father had grown weak and was forced to enter the hospital in Chicago just before Christmas. It was hard to fly off to Japan, uncertain, as I was if he would recover. In Japan, over the holidays I got daily phones and email messages from family at home reporting my father's condition. None of the messages brought any relief. The doctors didn't know what cause him to loss weight and grow weak. They treated his pneumonia, but it wasn't responding to antibiotics.

There were several close calls. Once he collapsed while walking in the hospital and was rushed into Intensive Care. Receiving word of this, I regretted not telling my father how much I loved him when I had the chance those times I visited him in the hospital before flying to Japan. I suppose I just assumed he would get better. I didn't want to go all soft and mushy on him, I might say. I might also say, I didn't have the simple guts to extend myself in that way. We spend so much time covering things up, learning in a way not too feel too much, being guarded about our feelings or careful in how we go about expressing ourselves it is a wonder we know how we feel about anything I think sometimes. I took a vow in Japan. I told myself that if I got back to see him alive, I would make sure did that. The Marquez "letter" amplified this feeling and the urgency with which I felt I should act. I include some excerpts below:

Farewell Letter

Gabriel Garcia Marquez

(For reasons of health, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Columbia's illustrious Nobel Laureate for literature, has declared his retirement from public life. He has terminal cancer and sends this letter of farewell to friends and lovers of literature.)

If God, for a second, forgot what I have become and granted me a little bit more of life, I would use it to the best of my ability.

. . .

. . .

To old people I would say that death doesn't arrive when they grow old, but with forgetfulness.

. . .

. . .

I have learned so much with you all, I have learned that everybody wants to live on top of the mountain, without knowing that true happiness obtained in the journey taken and the form used to reach the top of the hill.

I have learned that when a newborn baby holds, with its little hand, his

father's finger, it has trapped him for the rest of his life.

...

...

Say always what you feel, not what you think. If I knew that today is the last time that that I am going to see you asleep, I would hug you with all my strength and I would pray to the Lord to let me be the guardian angel of your soul.

If I knew that these are the last moments to see you, I would say "I love you."

There is always tomorrow, an life gives us another opportunity to do things right, but in case I am wrong, and today is all that is left to me, I would love to tell you how much I love you & that I will never forget you.

Tomorrow is never guaranteed to anyone, young or old. Today could be the last time to see your loved ones, which is why you mustn't wait; do it today, it case tomorrow never arrives. I am sure you will be sorry you wasted the opportunity today to give a smile, a hug, a kiss, and that you were too busy to grant them their last wish.

Keep your loved ones near you: tell them in their ears and to their faces how much you need them and love them. Love them and treat them well: take your time to tell them “I am sorry,” “forgive me,” “please,” “thank you,” and all those loving words you know.

Nobody will know you for your secret thought. Ask the Lord for wisdom and strength to express them.

Show your friends and loved ones how important they are to you.

Send this letter to those you love. If you don’t do it today, tomorrow will be like yesterday, and if you never do it, it doesn’t matter either, the moment to do it is now.

For you, with much love,

Your Friend,

Gabriel Garcia Marquez.

In the hospital, in the ICU, my father is awake and clear headed but unable to speak because of the tracheal tube that carries oxygen into his lungs from the hole that has been cut into his throat. He simply stares at me and communicates with his open eyes that suddenly regard me – hold me in their gaze without

blinking for the longest time. I understand that as “Welcome. It is good to see you. I am glad you have returned safely.” In doing this, his eyes seem fully expressive of love. There is no judgment here – there is no critique – there are no questions. Only his widely open eyes say he is awake – that he understands his body is failing. He understands he is so weak he cannot sit up by himself – which he cannot hold his head up. But his eyes take in the world, and I feel as though I am standing in the center of that world for now. He is blessing me with his eyes, and his silence in some overwhelming gesture of love that makes me uncomfortable, bashful as a child. “Why are you looking at me?” I want to say. But I’m feeling his love, his admiration, and his pride in me. He has taken words from my mouth. I feel undeserving of his attention; I know that doesn’t matter. But he looks at me, continues; he does not stop.

When we prepare to leave for the night – go off to have pizza with the family at my father’s favorite place, I tell him I have to leave for Missouri in the morning. He gets that, I gather from the way he closes his eyes and opens them again. He is not writing anything down now – too weak for even that. My mother goes beside the bed and kisses him on the lips. I line-up behind her, between the bed and the wall, and when she finishes I do what I have not done since I was a child saying “goodnight” to him after prayers. I lean over my father’s face and kiss him on the forehead. I say, “Goodnight.” I say, “I love you more than I have ever dared to say.” His eyes stay open – follow us – as we leave the room.

Eight days later, I receive a phone call, mid-afternoon. My brother-in-law tells

me that my father has died. It wasn't expected. Weak as he was, we all thought there was plenty of room for optimism: his white blood cell count was rising; he wasn't suffering from anything more than pneumonia. But suddenly, one afternoon, while he was with my mother and younger sister, he found it difficult to breath, couldn't breath: couldn't inhale, couldn't exhale. My mother and sister were rushed from the room and my father lost consciousness and did not regain it.

I feel the shock of the news – the dreaded words we all fear, "Hello Greg. I am really sorry to have to tell you this, but your father passed away about an hour ago." I am alone in my room. There are books of poetry scattered about, journals and pens. I let the shock roll through my body like thunder and hear it then dissipate into the air around me. My father is gone – I remember his accepting eyes. I feel a certain peacefulness descending. He struggled so many days. I think of music, an orchestral movement coming to a soft percussive end. I think of poetry and how it has opened my heart – and I cry – alone in the room, I cry.

Chapter Ten / The Children

Slowly, very slowly, he untied the red silk cord, slowly and wonderingly he lifted the lid of the precious box. And what did he find? Strange to say only a beautiful little purple cloud rose out of the box in three soft wisps. For an instant it covered his face and wavered over him as if loath to go, and then it floated away like vapor over the sea.

*From The Story of Urashima Taro, The Fisher Lad,
Trans. By Yei Theodora Ozaki*

It's Arisa's birthday today. She is eight years old. The youngest. I take a picture of her blowing out the candles on her cake and upload the picture to the laptop. She wants to see the picture. And then Jyoji and Airi gather 'round – to see the picture too. And then it's earlier pictures they want to see, pictures from a long time ago. I show the pictures – slideshows on the computer. There is music in the background, an acoustic guitar. We hear a homey – bluegrass tune – one that is slow enough to provoke thought and reflection – the music that comes right up out of the computer without my selecting it. The pictures slide in and out across the screen, and disappear in slow fades.

Airi is ten years old now and doubles over in laughter to see herself as a baby in Jyoji's arms. She is so big that he, only three years old at the time, can hardly hold her. He looks lost in the picture – unsure of what to do with such a baby.

As we sit around the table laughing at these early pictures, Emi walks in. She is home from school at 8 p.m. She's seventeen, eighteen in a few weeks. She looks down to see the photos of herself in second grade. She looks down to see how it was the time the whole class got together to send her off and on her way – to give her that goodbye party. She still remembers Yoshimi – her best friend – the

one in the picture who seems most concerned about her. The friend who leans forward, her face out in front of all the others students standing in a line – the one who turns her face toward Emi while all the others look straight ahead – the one who looks to see how Emi is holding up. She is going to miss Emi more than any of the other children.

I see a picture of myself and think suddenly of old Urashima Taro returning to home. According to Japanese folk legend Urashima Taro saved a turtle and was rewarded by the turtle with a ride upon his back to the Dragon Palace at the bottom of the sea. There, Urashima enjoyed the palace, married the princess, and stayed for a few days. When he wanted to return to his home, the princess gave him a treasure box and told him *not* to open it, ever. Of course, he returns and opens the box and sees a small purple cloud rise from within and then float away. With that, he suddenly turns old, and soon discovers that those two days spent underwater accounted for several lifetimes on land. His friends and family are all gone, deceased.

In the picture Emi and I are looking at, I'm sitting in the back of the classroom with Airi on my lap and my arm around Jyoji. He is four years old. I am feeling helpless in the picture. A student's father plays an acoustic guitar at the front of the class and sings a Japanese folksong of farewell. I see a picture of him as he bends into the microphone and sings his heart out. His eyes are closed. He is singing songs that speak of friendship and remembrance. As I look at the picture, I remember how sad I felt that day for Emi. For the first time in her life, she was saying goodbye to friends. She has a blank expression on her face that speaks of

disorientation, bafflement, and uncertainty: Where are we going? What will we find there? Why are we going? We were moving hundreds of kilometers north to snow county.

I was touched that Emi's teacher and her classmates would make such an effort as this – an effort to say goodbye to one classmate. I don't think we would do it in such grand style as this in the United States. We'd more likely say, "Ah, moving is just a part of life – we all do." And, of course, that would be true in America, which is one of the most mobile cultures on earth with people moving, on average, once every three years I've heard. We wouldn't take a full school day afternoon to say goodbye with songs, games, cake, and ceremony.

After my father passed away, and after finishing my studies in Missouri, I returned to Japan. And a few days ago, I returned to Kyoto to visit friends and read poetry to a small gathering of interested people. I read last night with Dennis Maloney, the poet, and founding editor of White Pine Press. He has been publishing works of Japanese literature in translation for forty years and keeps Corman's translation of Basho's *Oku-No-Hosomichi* in print.

Hours before the reading I was at *Shisendo* (詩仙堂), as the home is called. It is located outside of Kyoto city in the eastern foothills. Ishikawa Jozan built the house, the eccentric poet cum calligrapher of the early Edo era (1603-1867). The word "Shisendo" translates as "The Hall of the Immortals," or "The Place of Poetry's Immortals:" "Shi" (詩) stands for "poetry" or "poem," "sen" (仙) stands

for “immortals,” and “do” (堂) stands for “place,” or “hall.” As I enjoyed the home and looked at the portraits of the poets, the immortals, that lined the walls of the sitting room – the colors fading from the weather-exposed portraits – I could only think of the “immortals,” that helped me find my way to this home in Japan and with poetry.

恵美

*In Noh drama the actor indicates a journey, even a lengthy
Journey, by standing in one spot and turning himself in a
Full circle. Thus we see in this simplest of gestures, that points
Of departure and of arrival are one and the same.*

– David Jenkins,

From *The Gates of Night, Six Songs from the NOH*

Emi is a poem
Because her name means three different things at once –
Because the first syllable (恵) means blessing . . .
Because the second syllable (美) means beautiful . . .
Because the Chinese characters suggest
A multitude of meanings . . .

Because a further meaning in Japanese
is *niko-niko* (ニコニコ) – smiling –
Which is to say,
The onomatopoeic evocation of the act,
*The inner expression of the sparkle of teeth, the feeling of delight . . .**

She is a poem because she celebrates
Her fifth birthday . . .
. . . A poem because she wears a summer dress –
An appliqué of strawberries
Patched across the chest – strawberries
Inside a brimming bowl of cream –
So sweet & so cold.

. . . A poem because she sees into the pond
and kneels to coax the orange and red *koi* (鯉)
To rise and feed –
 A pinch of food for every gaping mouth . . .

She is a poem because she has the grace
To bow and apologize
When all the food is gone – to turn
'Round and 'round
And keep the fish company
As they circle to the bottom of the pond.

. . . A poem because without a word
She puts her hand in mine
To say she wants to go
. . . A poem because she's already resting
Half asleep in my arms
. . . A poem because she makes me feel
The heat of day – the passing
Fragrance of summer – as we turn
'Round and 'round and begin our walking home.

For Emi and Aiken Roshi

** This definition comes from Robert Aiken's A Zen Wave, Basho's Haiku and Zen (Counterpoint 2003, Berkeley, California.)*

VITA

Gregory Dunne was born in Chicago, Illinois, on June 3rd, 1957, the son of Ann Flaherty Dunne and Jeremiah Dunne. In December 1980, he graduated from the University of Idaho with a Bachelors degree in biology. After several years working as a biologist, he returned to study English at the University of Washington in Seattle where he graduated with a Bachelors degree in 1985. Gregory periodically took time off during his time at the University of Washington in order to support himself by working as a biologist (foreign fisheries observer) aboard Japanese fishing vessels in the Bering Sea. In 1986, he moved to Kyoto, Japan. In January of 1990, he returned to the United States to pursue graduate studies at Eastern Washington University where he received his MFA degree in creative writing – poetry in 1992. He married Kae Kikuchi of Mikame-cho, Shikoku, Japan shortly after finishing his studies, and together they returned to Japan where he began teaching at Kyoto University of Foreign Studies. In January 2007, he returned to the United States to begin doctoral work creative writing – nonfiction at the University of Missouri – Columbia.

Gregory is the author of two books of poetry *Fistful of Lotus* (2000) and *Home Test* (Adastra Press, 2009). His poetry, essays, interviews, and translations have appeared in magazines in both the United States and Japan, including *The American Poetry Review*, *Poetry East*, *Manoa*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Third Coast*, *Another Chicago Magazine*, *Kyoto Journal*, *Mainichi Shinbun*, *Sakura*, and *Willow Springs*. His poetry and prose have both been anthologized in *Poetry East's* 20th anniversary retrospective books: *The Last Believer in Words*, and *Who Are The Rich And Where Do They Live*, respectively.