Taking Care of Mother

“People praise you for taking care of her,” I said to my brother. “They’ve been praising you for two years. They’re starting to praise me for the same thing.”

I came back to take my brother’s place for the next six months. He’s going on the road to research his book. It’s a book he’s been working on for ten years.

“If you spend your time taking care of yourself, like you and I have been doing all these years, it surprises people if you take care of anyone else. You’re supposed to be selfish and self-centered. People can’t believe you could do such a thing. And now they praise us for it. It’s a little like saying, ‘It can’t be possible!’”
Changing Places

I left Seattle with two weeks to drive back. My car died in Pagosa Springs, Colorado. I stayed with friends in Taos, until I could rent a car and drive home.

On what would have been my father’s birthday, (July 5th. He would have been 92, if he’d lived past 80) our mother fell at the foot of her bed after a bout of diarrhea. She thought she could gather her strength and get up, but she couldn’t. My brother, John, or Mark, or John Mark, as he was named, called 911.

She’s been in the hospital ever since, with cellulitis in her legs. Her concern isn’t about that, but about falling, which she now calls vertigo. In three years, she’s fallen four times, without injury. She’s in pretty good shape, considering. She’s laughing, complaining, telling stories, and complaining.

Mark is leaving town on Monday. If not sooner, he says. It’s Friday, I’ve been here since Tuesday. We go to the hospital, twice a day.
She’ll Just Have to Forgive Me

I’m writing this in Barnes & Noble, in the Northpark Mall, in Davenport, Iowa, across the river from our home town, Moline. So far, it’s the closest I’ve found to a compatible writing atmosphere.

I walked into the Midwest Writing Center in Rock Island, a couple of days ago, and met Bruce and BJ, who were sympathetic souls, and it felt good to feel a small part of something locally.

Last night, I went to an AA meeting, since that’s another sympathy, but the meeting, seven other men, was not especially welcoming. I’ll try another meeting, but maybe my association with AA has lost its resonance.

Mother was happy, yesterday, because her doctor thought he’d found the source of her falling. I assumed it was age, but he said it was her thyroid.

“I don’t have a thyroid,” she said. “It was taken out.”

“That’s the point,” he said.

For a long time, she neglected to take her thyroid medication, and it showed up in her blood test. Since her thyroid was taken out so long ago, she thought she didn’t need to take the medication.

Then, the doctor failed to show up at the hospital. She was disappointed. We watched Seinfeld and had a few good laughs.

She got her hair washed, after five days without. She looked a lot better. She has lovely white hair, with a sprinkling of gray and darker colors. I’d say brown, since that’s her natural color, but the dark strands look black. The problem was an absence of control. She asked for a bobbie pin, but no nurse had any to spare. One nurse brought her a paper clip, and they had a laugh about that.

Every time she mentions her neurologist, she mentions how fat he is. She asked the student orderly what he put in his spiked hair. She admired all the nurses’ colorful smocks, with pictures on them, of flowers and other designs. One nurse wore a top with I (heart) Nurses all over it, dozens of times.

Mark and I have been trying to describe her, to understand how her behavior has influenced us, genetically, and otherwise. She acts as if she
owns the place, and then is, occasionally, congenial with the hired help. She’s self-centered without being self-aware.

When she was visiting our brother Scott, in Honolulu, six months ago, she criticized Scott’s seventeen-year-old daughter (one of the twins) for her low-riding hip-hugger shorts.

“Jessica was mad at me for that,” she says, and then, almost as an aside, she said, “She’ll just have to forgive me.”

She’s single-minded to a fault, she’s determined to follow her own course, no matter what anyone else has to say, and she continues to fault all three of us for being the same way. Do as I tell you, not as I show you.

She’s grateful for our presence and our care, but she still thinks we’ve made profound mistakes in our lives by not choosing to go into professions that would have ensured our financial success.

It’s an old story, and the references to it get short shrift and no lasting attention. She’s right, of course, in the ways of the world. None of us is secure in our worldly position, and yet all of us have been able to survive, doing what we love to do.

And all of us, despite our reputations as self-centered people, look to the well-being of our disgruntled, cranky, old mother, who, at 88, has a benign Swedish stoicism and a ready smile for all who come into her small but ever shifting pool of interest.
The Unasked Question

Mark told me a story. Many years ago, when he was a bluegrass musician, he took his parents, our mother and father, to see Bill Monroe, the Father of Bluegrass, play at a small gathering in Alpha, Illinois, a farm town, an hour or so south of here. A female singer and guitar player, a friend of Bill Monroe’s, opened the show, singing old country ballads, long storytelling songs.

Mark characterized this story as a big mistake he’d made. After the woman sang, Bill did his part of the show, and then he said, “Let’s get Norma out here for another song,” and our mother immediately shouted out, “NO!”

Everyone turned to look at this rude woman, and Mark hid his head. I laughed at the story with a gusto that betrayed my recognition and our shared humiliation. It wasn’t the first, and it won’t be the last, outburst of her eager participation in the human drama.

Mother is opinionated and often unfiltered, but she isn’t an unredeemable boor. All of us have inherited the characteristics of being outspoken, and I admire that in myself, in my brothers, and in my children, but some restraint is a virtue.

As a kid, Mark stammered. I’ve heard him say he saw the competition at the dinner table and opted out. He developed a technique for getting attention by not speaking. He developed another technique for retaliation by speaking in such a way to piss off anyone who was listening.

Yesterday, he said there was something fishy about Hitler and his little mustache. When I asked him what he thought was fishy about it, he took offense. He said he was only asking the unasked question.

“I admire that,” I said, “but when you ask the unasked question, you have to expect to . . .”

He interrupted, “. . . get ridiculed.”

“You have to expect to answer some questions yourself,” I said.

When Gladys Axene was just out of high school, she got a summer job as a maid for the widow of the president of Sears Roebuck. She was betrothed to a local man and moved here from Chicago.
Mrs. Kittle moved back to Chicago at the end of the summer, but, for that brief time, Gladys, age seventeen (she had skipped third grade) worked in a rich woman’s house, putting on parties, serving meals, and preparing rooms for guests. Her fellow workers were all Black, called Negroes, at the time. Or worse.

In 1930, that was an unusual experience for a white girl from Moline. She said it took her a couple of weeks to adjust to taking to Black people (all down from Chicago with their employer) but she did, and she enjoyed their company. She became an outspoken advocate for equal rights, not in the sense of becoming political, but in her everyday encounters with others.

She told me the story of leaving Mark in the speech clinic in Iowa City, and then coming late to Parents’ Day, the next Sunday. All the parents had come for all the other kids. They found Mark, on his bed, crying. Mark doesn’t cry, these days. He once told me that emotions were not part of his vocabulary. He laughs and points out the flaws on the news, in history, in the behavior of others. I shouldn’t say flaws. That’s not right. He is kind to people for their flaws. He is unforgiving for what he perceives as lies and deceptions.

A while back, I decided to give him the benefit of the doubt. I began to take him seriously, after an adult lifetime of listening to what sounded like paranoid fantasies. I heard an intelligent man, wellread, who asks the unasked questions, to a fault. I heard a man who often knows what he’s talking about, but who also has a bent toward being a self-righteous victim.

“They screwed me, again,” he says, referring to the mistaken listings in the TV magazine. He is a collector of taped copies of old movies from the black and white era, and sometimes the listings are not accurate.

He has another inclination. He will ask the unasked question until his companion in conversation is fed up with unasked questions and becomes annoyed with him. At that point, he feels justified in believing he’s been rejected, once again, as always, never to be honored for his true character. How common is that in our family? In any family? In all families?

It occurs to me that this is similar to the classic child’s question, “Mommie, why is the sky blue?” and it’s inevitable response, after the thirtieth time, “Shut up and eat your cereal.”

There’s no external antidote for this sense of impending and ultimate betrayal. My ex-mother-in-law told her daughter, “You beat on a
man until he breaks. If he doesn’t’ break, he’s a good man.” Mark beats on every relationship with the same fervor.

The problem with that, I thought at the time I first heard it, was, how can you know you’ve beaten him enough?” and then I got married to the daughter of that advice.

I must add, at this point, however, that my ex-wife never beat on me, but she did have a sharp tongue. Restraint of tongue and pen is on my mind, just now.
There I Will Be

I come to the Barnes & Noble before I go to the hospital. When I get to the hospital, I feel free to be there. One might say I need to take care of myself, before I can take care of anyone else. One might say I need to write, or to work, or to focus on something for a while. I’m aware that the freeing comes from something that occurs that has no name. There’s no activity associated with it, except perhaps prayer and meditation, but those words are loaded with religiosity.

I noticed it, when I wrote my last small series of poems before leaving Seattle to come here. I wrote poems, in a cafe called Victrola. I want to describe what occurred when I wrote those poems in that cafe. I came into the consciousness of an awareness. Awareness is freeing, and it can come in prayer and mediation, or it can occur in other ways. One way it occurs is in the writing of poems.

An old girlfriend, many years ago, said, “Steve, when you start to write poems, you become spiritual.” I knew she was right, even though I’d never thought of it that way, before.

I noticed, more recently, that, in a roomful of people, I focus on the being of the room, and poems come out of that. It’s easier for me to see the being of us all, myself and others, when I’m among compatible others, but it occurs in any room of others, regardless which others it might be.

“Wherever two or more of you are gathered in my name, there I will be.” I see that as a statement after the fact. I see that all beings always gather in a communion of souls. It is a communion that’s hardly ever recognized by any gathering of egos, personalities, and identities.

The trick is to focus on the presence of being and not on the presence of egos, personalities, bodies, etc. When the recognition of the presence of being occurs, all the rest of it comes into play, without attachment.

Thus: poems. Thus: a good feeling on the way to the hospital.
Release from the Shuffle

Mother is getting released, today or tomorrow. She seemed to have gotten lost in the managed care shuffle. I called her doctor, and then went to his office and spoke to his nurse, and she said, after a little prodding, that Mother was free to come home.

Mark is not quite ready to hit the road, but it would be good to get her out of the hospital, regardless of the crowded conditions at home.

Mark and I butted heads, but we’re still getting along. I’m inclined to continue the discussion, but I’m just as inclined to let it be. We both have good feelings for each other, but we both have contrary thoughts behind the other’s back. Mark is not one to air his opinions directly but to save them for impersonal subjects. I’m not ready to bust down any doors.

I sat with Mother, last night, and we watched the real life version of Law and Order and Seinfeld. We’re quite content with each other when the TV is on. Whatever must be said can be said during commercials. This might sound like false communication, but our souls don’t care. That is to say, the presence of being that we are, separately and in common, is conscious of TV as one grain of sand in the endless reaches of eternity, or just a mild soporific.

Time to go see Mother at the hospital and maybe bring her home.
I brought her home, and she tried to re-assert her dominion. “You boys certainly made a mess of things. Didn’t you clean, at all?” I knew she was only trying to show she wasn’t dead yet, so I didn’t respond. She cleaned the kitchen sink.

She says she doesn’t need or want to take her pills. “You’re not a little kid,” I said. I showed her the pills I take, a year after my heart attack. She looked at them in disbelief.

“No,” she said.

“Twice a day,” I said, “and I’ll take them until they tell me to stop.” I’m healthy, and I got a real scare. Apparently, in her case, the effects of old age and a deteriorating physical self aren’t enough to convince her to take the pills. Or, it’s enough to conjure a virulent denial. Since there’s no cure for old age, all the pills, exercise, and diet are only stays against the inevitable. She doesn’t want to succumb to the inevitable, just yet. It’s as if the inevitable is lying in wait for signs of weakness, to pounce upon her weakened frame, as she stumbles along, at the back at the advancing herd.

I made a list of her medicines, morning and night, the ones to refill and the ones to re-order. She was only interested in the one that might counter her fear of falling. She thinks it can be fixed. She won’t imagine that it’s the system faltering. She’s smart enough to know what’s true and not, but even whistling in the dark can have a musical beauty.

She’s a Swede. If it’s broken, fix it. If it can’t be fixed, forget about it. After my concussion, in ‘84, my parents were nice to me for a week. Then the message was, “Time’s up. Get up and get on with it.”
The Challenge

It will be an interesting challenge to see the presence of being in the room and not become attached to the form it takes. Or, the form it’s leaving, either. Maybe, especially. Maybe this is the best lesson in seeing that I could ever have imagined.

If I can witness the presence of being in the room with my mother, without attachment to her coming and going, maybe I can do the same for myself, in my own coming and going.
No Good Flight Goes Unreturned

Easier said than done. She was crabby again, today. I got her an appointment with her doctor this afternoon, and I went to the grocery store for a break. Coming back, I hesitated at the front steps, prepared to witness a wave of congestive heart failure, i.e., the panic of confinement, when another sense occurred.

It’s been said that the mind searches its memory to find other occasions that match the present, in order to show us what we are looking at, and what our options are. I remembered standing still in India, a dozen years ago, when I had nothing to do but go see a teacher I’d come to like, and eat and sleep. Life was brought to a lovely stillness. And here I was, feeling the same thing.

‘Taking care of mother’ means doing what’s happening in the moment, any moment, right now, right then. Her slight case of senility means answering the same question that’s just been answered as if it’s just been asked for the first time. These are both prescriptions for peace. I felt peace, standing in front of my mother’s apartment building, looking at the grass and the trees and the sky beyond.

I went inside and pretty soon our other brother, Scott, called to tell us his son, Brandon, was on TV playing goalie for the U.S. Olympic Team in the FINA World Championships in Barcelona, Spain.

Mother kept saying, “It’s thrilling. Isn’t it thrilling? Which one is Brandon?”

The U.S. tied Serbia-Montenegro, the tournament favorite 5-5. Brandon’s face was on screen several times.

“Another great save by Brooks,” the announcer said, and later, “Brooks was beaten badly on that shot.” Scott called from Hawaii to tell those of us in Illinois to watch Brandon swimming in Spain.

“Oh, it’s so thrilling!”

I went to the bank, and one of the officers remembered mother. “She’s very proper, isn’t she?”

“Well, she keeps telling me how fat her doctor is. She was going to tell him personally how fat he was,” I said, “I don’t know how proper that
is. She’s very opinionated. If she was a character in a movie, she’d be a lovable character.”

In person, hearing about all the people and all the things she doesn’t like can get annoying.

“Everybody in this family is a smart-aleck,” I said, after a sharp exchange of barbs, “including me.”

Mark moved to Key West, I moved to San Francisco, and Scott moved to Honolulu, about as far from this center of the vortex as you can get and still stay in the country.

“I wish my family could live closer,” she always said. No one would explain the most obvious reason why we didn’t. We all came to love where we lived. Mark has lived here for the last two years. I’m committed to the next six months. No good flight goes unreturned.

“How do you feel about being back?” the bank officer said.

“I have many different feelings. On the drive across country, I was surprised to see how much I wanted to be here.”

“You can get to know your mother,” she said.
Peaches and Cream

Mark and I drove to the Farmer’s Market, to get onions, beans, corn, and tomatoes. I found out that ‘Peaches and Cream’ refers to ears of corn where yellow and white kernels are mixed together.

At home, mother said, “What’d you get this for? Are these onions? Who’s going to eat this?”

The stalks were long and full. I took them out to the dumpster. I told Mark, “For someone who wants to be in control of everything, and now she can’t be in control of anything, she tries to be in control of something.”

After the Farmer’s Market, we drove to the library to look up Brandon’s exploits on the Internet, then to Augustana College, to check out the library cafe, then to Brandon’s other grandmother’s house. Marilyn is a lifelong smoker. She’s 75, and her apartment reeks of embedded smoke and the current cigarette in her hand.

Marilyn is otherwise delightful. She fixes us coffee and offers us donuts. She has a TV she can’t turn off. Her son knows how, but he’s not home. Mark closes the cabinet doors on Martha Stewart, so smoke won’t get in Martha’s eyes, I suppose.

Marilyn has a cockatoo that she never wanted, that a friend left in her care. The bird whistles and says, “Pretty bird.” From time to time, he buzzes the room like a low-flying plane, like a crop duster, flying ever closer to my head, never landing. We talk about various family members. It’s easy going gossip, with points of personal history, anecdotes of danger and survival, experienced over the years. Mark tells the story of nearly slamming a glass and metal door across Brandon’s fingers, when Brandon was a boy, he says, nearly slicing off his fingers.

“Then,” I said, “we’d be watching a one-armed goalie going to the Olympics. What a hero!”

“No,” he said, “it’s be the story of a one-armed alcoholic, who never went to school and lives alone in his room.”

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A Gentle Buffalo

Mother is a gentle Jeckyl and a buffalo Hyde. When she’s in a good mood, she’s terrific, but when she’s not, she’s a sourpuss. Bitching and moaning, complaining, pointing out everything she doesn’t like, pointing out everything and not liking any of it.

“She does what you do,” I said to Mark. “She says, ‘Aw, I don’t believe that,’ just like you do.”

“I wasn’t always a cynic,” he said.

I asked Mark for advice, “So, how do you deal with it?”

“I don’t pay any attention,” he said. “The first six months, it drove me crazy. Then I realized it doesn’t mean anything. It’s not real. I stopped listening. I hear her, but I don’t listen to her. That’s why I wait on her. I just get her what she needs, and I don’t pay any attention.”

I heard him telling me his version of a wise man’s truth. Her thoughts and her words are just thoughts and words. She talks like her body feels aches and pains. An ache or a pain is a constant noise in the body. Her words are the verbal manifestation of that internal noise.

“Good for you,” I said to Mark, “That’s right.”

He said something about the effect of the constant barrage, even if you don’t give it any weight.

I said, “It’s the environment you’re living in. It’s good to get away from it.”

That’s why he didn’t get Internet service and went to libraries, instead. He could get away for a few hours. Mark has a laptop. He was the one who got me my first computer, years ago.

Last night, Mother told me a story. She was taking care of her three boys, her husband, and her mother, when her sister-in-law came to town for a small surgery and left her one-year-old son, our cousin, in her care, saying, “He always cries when he goes to bed, so I walk him until he calms down.”

The first couple of nights, she walked the baby. On the third night, she put him in his bed and explained to him that he was going to have to go to sleep without being walked. He went to sleep and did so quietly every night for a week and a half.
Then, she learned that Dorothy had gone to the movies, one afternoon. She called Dorothy up and said, “Come get your son. He’s ready to go home.”

Well done, Mother. Maybe I can try some similar tactics on you.
The Walking Stick

I just got back from riding my bike on the river. Not on the river but up the river on the bike path. The river is the Mississippi. This stretch of it is the only part that runs east to west, before it turns south, on the far side of Rock Island. I’m sleepy and tired, but it feels good.

Last night, Mark, Mom, and I went to dinner at a local family restaurant, and for dessert, we ate pie called French Silk. Man, it was the best, the kind you hold in your mouth, because it tastes so good.

After taking Mother home, I joined Mark and his boyhood pal, Jeff, at Gouvernor’s, a tavern I once got drunk in. We told stories of past, present and future, our family and ourselves.

This morning we got a letter from Aunt Dorothy, in praise of her cane, her ‘new best friend,’ She called it her ‘walking stick.’

“What good’s a cane gonna do you, if you fall?” Mother said.

“If you have a cane, you won’t fall,” Mark said.

“It’s to keep you steady, so you won’t fall,” I said.

She thinks her walker will save her if she falls, but I can tell the letter from Dorothy is having an effect.

“Nobody ever sees me without my walking stick,” Dorothy writes.

(Music by Cole Porter)
Doing Something

I switched over to the Borders Bookstore Cafe. There are lots of people here, tonight - mostly young people studying. I’m familiar with this crowd. It’s not bohemian creative, but it’s young, and at least it’s doing something.

Borders is more brightly lit than Barnes and Noble, and I like that, but it’s beginning to close, every night, at 10:30. I asked the counter girl why it’s closing at 10:30, and she said, “We discovered it helps us get out of here sooner,” She was being smart girl humorous, not dumb girl smart-ass.

This writing is in a valley. It seems as if there’s little to say. Since Mother has begun her neglected medication, and perhaps since she’s home again, and perhaps since Mark is still here, her care has become easier. I bought and made dinner, tonight. It was merely a larger portion of my usual fare of catfish nuggets, mixed vegetables and rice.

She kept saying, “It’s enough for ten people.”
“Well, I’ll get out of your way,” she said.

I gave her small tasks, like slicing the onions for the fish and slicing the tomatoes for the salad, and asking her advice about the corn. She told me, after I asked, that her Swedish mother didn’t teach her to cook. Her job was to set the table and wash the dishes. She learned how to iron clothes at the 4H, in Nebraska, after she’s been married for four years.

She praised me for my cooking. Amazing. She and my father had praised me for painting their house, twenty years ago. I’ve never been praised for my art, my writing, or my stage work. I was praised for not drinking, but not for my university degrees.

It’s easy to cook and wash the dishes. I’ve been living alone for ten years and for many years, on and off, before that.
“Where’d you get this recipe?” she asked.
“I made it up,” I said, it’s fish, rice, and mixed vegetables, with Italian seasoning. How hard is that?
“Where’d you learn to make this?”
“I made it up.”
“You need to take care of yourself before you can take care of anyone else.” I thought.

To take care of yourself, you have to know who you are. If you don’t know who you are, you’ll think taking care of yourself means being self-indulgent. If you’re self-indulgent, you can’t take care of anyone. If you’re self-indulgent, you’ll think you’re indulging the people you care for, and you’ll resent them.

Looking at a red pick-up truck for sale, it occurred to me,” The way you act toward the least of these is the way you act toward me.” (Saith the Lord, so to speak.)

I said to Mark, the skeptic, “I bet you didn’t believe I actually had a heart attack.”

“Yes, I did.”

“I bet you heard about it, and you said, ‘Yeah, sure, a heart attack. I doubt it.’”

“How do you know you had a heart attack?”

I started to describe what happened, and he made a reference to the movie on TV at the time.

“I guess you don’t want to hear the story.”

“I thought you were done.”

“I wasn’t done. I was only starting to tell the story, and you commented on the movie.”

“Why are you so upset?”

I stood for a minute and said nothing.

“I’m going for a bike ride,” I said. “I’m going to get some exercise.”

I was upset because my brother’s opinion means something to me. As does my mother’s. These people, who are habitually negative, their opinion of me matters to me. That’s what bothers me.

I believe my brother expects me to live, act and think like the vast majority of people who he thinks are deliberately hostile and ignorant. He assumes that all who disagree with him are criticizing him. He won’t abide criticism, so he defends himself against all disagreement with any means available to him.
I was raised in a critical, judgmental atmosphere, too. It has colored my perceptions. It’s all only thought, feeding on perceptions, born from a limited set of experiences. Like cobwebs in a vacuum. In my deepest, free self, I am untouched by these things. In my personal self, they are constantly in play, to a greater or lesser extent.

Mark is delaying his departure, and I sleep on the couch. He does not explain or apologize. He says I should have stayed another week in Taos. It surprises me to see how much I care about my brother’s opinion, given what I know of his thought process.

I rode my bike west on the River Run bike path. Yesterday, I rode east. I rode to Sunset Park, or what used to be the Sunset dump, near where my friend, Adey, and I explored the wreck of the old Delta Queen riverboat.

There are three ‘riverboat’ casinos in the Quad-Cities.

The Quad-Cities were originally Moline, East Moline, Rock Island, and Davenport. With Bettendorf, they’re sometimes called the Quint-Cities, but the QC, or the QCA, are usually called the Quads or the Quad-Cities, with Bettendorf nosing out East Moline for higher honors. Davenport and Bettendorf are on the Iowa side of the Mississippi, joined by three in-town bridges and two interstate bridges on the edges.

The riverboat casinos are clearly fancied-up barges, full of slot machines and gaming tables.

Instead of riding my bike the ten miles back up the river toward home, I rode across town on top of the bluff that most of the towns sit on. At the top of the bluff in Rock Island, I saw the street going down again. I know that going down means going back up again, and one of my bike-riding mantras is, “Never go down to go up.” I didn’t want to climb another hill, if I didn’t have to.

I turned into a graveyard/cemetery at the top of the hill. I rode to the back of the cemetery, reading tombstones as I went, waving to the groundskeeper on his tractor, until I discovered a fence at the back, with no opening. I saw a deer. It was a teenage deer, not yet fully grown. He, or she, spotted me and ran across the path, stopped among the gravestones, and turned to watch, not fearfully but cautiously. I rode around him, and he turned his head to watch me, looking down the side of his flank.
I rode back to the street. A mausoleum with European names on it, as tall as a small building, had a frieze of Chief Black Hawk, the Sac and Fox leader whose home was on the bluffs of the Rock River, a tributary that flows into the Mississippi just South of where I rode.

His words, carved in stone, described the Indian ritual of visiting the graves of ancestors in times of grief and sorrow. When I got home, Mark told me the Indian name of the cemetery. He asked me if I rode by Saukee, the golf course, also named in reference to, if not in reverence for, the local Ancient Americans.

We watched Brandon’s team win again in Barcelona. Mark made pancakes, this morning. They were good. I began them reluctantly, all sugar, flour and oil, but I finished them with gusto.

“Energy food,” Mark called them.

I rode twenty miles across town, burning up the energy. Brandon can eat all the pancakes he wants. The coach gave his team the weekend off, in preparation for the second round. Time for plenty of Spanish pancakes.
He’s an asshole,” I thought.
And then I thought about it.
“What do you call someone who fucks with people and then laughs about it?”
“An asshole,” I answered myself. “My brother is an asshole.”
I’ve always thought of him as a wounded animal who wouldn’t receive love and needed respectful treatment.
Then I thought, “He’s an asshole.”
I laughed. I felt better, a lot better. When I got home, I didn’t bother trying to handle the previous incident in conversational headbutting. I looked at him as an unrepentant, chronic, even likable, asshole. He was very nice toward me. We went out to dinner. Mother wanted to give Mark an outing before his departure.

We went to The Captain’s Table, on the River, and we had three different kinds of fish; grouper, catfish, and mahi-mahi. We shared. We had a good time. Mother complained about the fish. It was either too spicy or too oily, or just not good enough.
“You paid for it,” I said. “You earned the right to bitch and moan, all night long.”
“What did you say?” she said.
“I said, you can complain all night long, if you want.”
She picked the restaurant, but she didn’t like the salad, the bread, the fish, the corn, or the light shining in the window. It was the setting sun, angling across the water and reflected on the glossy wooden backs of the booth.
“I like booths,” I said, “I like John Wilkes Booth, Edwin Booth, telephone booths, photo booths, and restaurant booths.”

Mark was nice, all through dinner. That’s the nature of passive-aggressive assholes of any kind. If you don’t try to be nice to them, they lose their adversary, their foil, their patsy, their sucker - their mark, so to speak.
Good Shots and Bad Shots

This morning, Mother yelled from the kitchen, “I’m falling!”

She was in a panic. I ran into the kitchen, threw my arms around her waist from behind, and held her. She was clinging to the refrigerator door handle. I held her until she calmed down. When I first got there, her body was shaking. She was shaking like a building in an earthquake, not like a frail woman about to fall. She sat down in a chair.

“I thought that was over. I didn’t think that would happen, again,” she said.” She was shaken and perplexed.

“Vivian had a friend who stopped taking her thyroid medicine, just like you did. She said it takes a couple of weeks for the full effect to kick in,” I said.

We had been watching Tiger Woods hit good shots and bad shots at the British Open, when she got up to go to the kitchen to eat some cereal, her first meal of the day.

I drove to Wal-Mart to buy an electric screwdriver. This afternoon, Mother gets her hair done, for the first time in two weeks. Kobe Bryant has been charged with felony sexual assault.

I came to Borders instead of Barnes & Noble. The decaf here tastes flavored. Barnes & Noble serves Starbucks. I’ll be back there, tomorrow. Tonight, I’m going to a poetry reading.

My little brother has been milking the disrespect he got as a kid, for a long, long time. I just wrote ‘the disrespect I got,’ By accident, so to speak.
Saving the Kitty

“I think you hurt Mark’s feelings,” she said, as we slowly walked to the front door of her apartment building.

I didn’t say anything. I had gone with her to church. Riverside Methodist was my old church. I was President of the Junior Methodist Youth Fellowship.

Mother had a ‘spell,’ as she’s calling it, when she loses her balance, or thinks she is. After she’s been sitting for a while and stands up, she has a ‘spell.’ She takes a pill, Meclazine, which is either a harmless placebo, or I don’t know. She takes one and has a spell, so she takes another and has another spell. Still, she swears by them. That sounds like a placebo to me.

Mark drove us to church and picked us up. I didn’t experience any revelations in church, except to re-witness what I’d seen before. I saw a lot of old people and their relatives, with a few young families. At one point in the service, people spoke into microphones that were handed to them, told of their relatives who were in the hospital or at home, ailing, and asked for prayers for their recovery and well-being.

The song before the sermon asked God for rain in dry times and thanked God, even if no rain came, but still asked for rain, “Please, God.” The sermon was about allowing God’s hidden hand to heal what didn’t seem to be healing. There was talk of joy and celebration. What I witnessed was misery loving a little company.

It was enjoyable to greet people and shake hands, to say hello and “good to see you.” While Mother sat waiting for Mark to drive up, I scouted the church, in order to see old haunts of my innately celebratory youth.

On the drive toward lunch at Hardee’s, I asked Mark if he said he’d seen soccer games in Riverside Park.

“Right there,” he said.

Lo and behold, there were eight or ten guys standing by some cars and one of them had a soccer jersey on. We pulled into the parking lot, and I jumped out to ask one of the guys about finding a game. I said I played two years before at Hauberg Center in Rock Island. He said his group was
going to play a league game in Savanna, but he thought there was a game at eleven on Sunday at Hauberg. We drove there, but there was no game.

Mark said, “That’s what always happens. They always lie to strangers.”

I reacted.

I said, “Somebody must have hurt you real bad. To you, everybody’s a crook. Everybody’s a liar.”

Mother said, “That’s right.”

I said, “Somebody must have kicked you real hard.”

“Everybody wants me to just shut up,” he said, and we drove in silence for a while. At lunch, he ventured a couple of mild comments, but he was a different Mark. He was quiet. Mother asked him questions, which she never does. I often ask him questions, trying to steer him toward a truly interesting subject.

He was pontificating, this morning, and I was tired from sleeping on the couch for ten days.

I said, “You talk like Sherry said I used to talk. You talk like you’re talking to a roomful of people.”

“I talk like someone’s going to tell me to shut up. That’s why I live by myself.”

Back home from our Sunday outing, I said to Mark, “Mother thinks I hurt your feelings. Do I owe you an apology?”

“No,” he said.

I left and drove here. On the way, I mulled over the confrontation. At first, I couldn’t pinpoint the need for an apology. I thought I hadn’t objected to him talking but to what he’d said. He always takes any objection as deep personal criticism. Then I realized I did criticize him and not his words.

I had said, “You must have been hurt by somebody. Someone must have kicked you real hard.”

The problem is, I don’t like him. It isn’t just what he says. I don’t like him. He’s been driving people nuts for years. He talks until people are so annoyed, they insult him with their refusal to listen any longer. Then his original premise is fulfilled. Like his early experience as a stammerer.

Never mind that. I don’t like my brother, right now. I don’t think he’s an honorable man. For whatever reason, real or imagined, he abuses
people, directly and indirectly, until he’s rejected, and then he can maintain his self-justification.

Last night, I questioned him about his musical career, which I’ve always thought was remarkable and praiseworthy. I was interested in the way he developed as a musician, and he told me. It was a good exchange. This morning, he was giving what I’ve described as, “an indiscriminate running commentary of his every inconsequential prejudice.”

I had a pleasant and hopeful encounter with a soccer player that didn’t produce the desired result, and he tells me, once again, that nobody can be trusted. He says it with a sort of delight.

I attacked him for his negative attitude. I didn’t engage him in debate, and his feelings were hurt. His feelings have been hurt since day one. My girlfriend told him a dozen years ago that he was the angriest man she’d ever met. He vehemently denied it, accusing her, to me, of being a typical woman.

I used to say that if Mark was the runt in a litter or kittens, his mother would have tried to kill him. I had a cat that tried to do that. My ex-wife and I saved the kitty. I’m tired of trying to save the kitty.
The Art Critic

After Mark left for the road, I worked long and hard cleaning his room, converting it into my room. I hung some of the paintings I brought with me. I rearranged the furniture and got rid of a lot of the deadwood from a mausoleum; the room that had once been my father’s office and Mother’s office, as well.

Mark kept it pretty much as it’d always been. I changed it. I showed it to Mother. On her way across the living room, she felt the fear of falling and asked for a Meclazine.

In my room, she started to laugh and then asked, “You want the desk there?”

Then she said, “Oh, you put your paintings up.”

She looked at one of the paintings, I couldn’t tell which, and said, “Oh, how horrible!”

Then she laughed some more and seemed to accept the inevitable. Leaving the room, she pointed to a decorative painting in the hall and said, “You could put one of your paintings here.”

Since she’s gotten old, I don’t take her criticisms personally. I don’t believe she is the withering critic I once thought she was. I wondered what would have happened if I’d always thought this way. A therapist once told me that her letter to me, then, was the harshest letter he’d ever read from a mother to a son. And what if it was only water off a duck’s back and not the buckshot to the heart I pretended was rain?

Mark came back, after two hours on the road, and I was glad to see him. I decided, yesterday, not to apologize to him, as I’ve done before. I began to feel like I’d grown up a little bit, again. I felt like his older brother, I felt like his father, as if I had laid down the law, irrespective of his feelings, and he had to live with it.

I tried to show him I was different from all the rest. I ended up proving to him that I was just like everyone else.

“Shut up, Mark,” I said, and he finally shut up.

We had a lovely evening, together, and today, his send-off was warm and friendly.
I forgot to mention that Mark is a cross-dresser. Mother doesn’t know. Last night, I heard him, in the bathroom for a long time. I caught sight of his pony-tail pulled loose and hanging down the middle of his back. He’s an old guy who dresses up like a plain woman with lovely hair, shaved legs, and nice skin. He’s fashioned a pair of amazing breasts for himself.

We never talk about it, but the other day, I found a small tape recorder on the front seat of the car. I played it back far enough to find out whose voice was on it. I heard the last message he’d recorded.

On the cassette, he described playing with his breasts, when he heard a knock on the door. It was brother Steve coming in from New Mexico. I clicked off the recorder, wondering why he’d left it on the front seat. I never mentioned it, and the next day I saw that he’d retrieved it.

I was eager for the demonstration of his declared freedom. I was hoping for it. It would have been a sort of Independence Day for both of us. He didn’t do anything of the sort, but today he wasn’t an asshole. He was a fine fellow and a good brother, not to mention a good son.

He came back off the road. He’d put too much weight on his truck. It was swerving all over the road. He made it to Iowa City, before wondering why he was carrying so much paper and books. It is his professional identity as a reader, writer, thinker, and commentator on life.

He’s writing a biography of Ernest Hemingway, but it’s a thinly disguised history of the human race. I think it’s good stuff, good writing, good book. I think it might be one of the best idiosyncratic discoveries of the literary world.

I was surprised when I read part of it, two years ago, and found that his tangential style of speaking, when put on the page, is engaging and entertaining. The best thing about a book is that you can tell it to shut up, and it doesn’t get offended. You can pick it up again when you’re ready for more.

He cleared the shelves in the garage to make room for his boxes of newly jettisoned weight and said, “I’m throwing all this stuff away, unless you want any of it.”

I found a room-size bamboo mat, with oriental animal and flower designs.
“I like this,” I said, “I want to keep this. It ought to be good for something.” I thought about it.

“It’d be good for a picnic,” I said.

I added, “Like I’m ever going on a picnic.”

I laughed.

He laughed.

“Yeah, I’m always buying things that might be good for something I’ll never do.”

Tonight, we’re going to watch Brandon play Greece. If the U.S. wins, they’ll be guaranteed an Olympic berth or be very close to clinching it.

Tonight, Mark sleeps on the couch, and I sleep in my new room.

“Don’t work so hard,” Mother said, when I was setting up my room.

“I’ve been waiting two weeks for this.”

“Don’t use that chair, you won’t like that chair.”

“One of the things that come from being as old as I am,” I said, “is that you learn what you like and what you don’t like.”
White Sheets

The U.S. Waterpolo team lost to Greece 4-2. Apparently, that means no Olympic berth for Brandon. We watched ESPN for an hour and a half last night and an hour and a half today, but no U.S. Waterpolo. I found the score on the Internet.

“You didn’t buy white sheets, did you?” Mother asked, in surprise.
“Yes, I did. Isn’t it shocking?”
“You bought white sheets?”
“I like white sheets. What kind of sheets do you think I should’ve bought?”
“Sheets with a pattern.”
“Patterns are for little girls and old women.”
“How about green?” Mark said.
“Oh, no,” I said. “Green sheets would bleed all over my other clothes in the washing machine.”
I was kidding. I’d brought a red pillowcase with me, and Mother had said, “Oh, NO! Red is no good! Red will bleed all over your whites.”
I’ve been washing that pillowcase with whites for ten years.
“I can’t believe you bought white sheets.”
“I grew up on white sheets. I like white sheets.”
“Well, you’ll have to wash them before you use them.”
“You’ll slide all over them, if you don’t,” Mark said, “and if you sweat on new sheets, you’ll regret it.”
Mother lived with a man who wisecracked and three boys who did the same. She’s bereft of original humor, although she laughs a lot at things she thinks are funny.
“You’ve already changed this place,” Mark said. “It looks a lot better. Your room looks like a fancy hotel room.”
“I brought some paintings. The computer helps. I don’t feel like I’m isolated in Mother’s back room.”

There are two girls talking, near where I’m writing. I thought they were speaking Spanish. The girls are dark-skinned. I thought the one talking the loudest was Chinese.
Then the dark-skinned coffee girl said to another barista, “Two loud Japanese girls are talking.”

The Japanese girl turned and said, with a straight face, “Hey, are you Indian? Are you listening to us talk?” and they both grinned.

The Japanese girl continued, “What did you call me, the other day - a dirty little Mexican?”

The East Indian girl came out from behind the counter and chatted amiably with a middle-aged Japanese woman, in Barnes & Noble, in the Northpark Mall, in Davenport, Iowa.
The word superflow came to me as I walked out of Lagomarcino’s, one of Moline’s original landmarks, after I had a Green River. It’s nothing more than lime soda, but it’s been a popular drink since way before I was a kid. I was moving through the day in a non-deliberate state of being, i.e., superflow. It means not being attached to anyone or anything but being easy in the flow of whatever I’m doing.

After breakfast, Mother remarked that I’d really changed since I was a kid. Back then, I was always throwing my clothes around, and now I’m organized.

“I had a maid, back then,” I said.

“Maybe I didn’t do the right thing, always picking up after you boys.”

“You did the right thing. You showed me what a well-run house looks like. I learned by your example.”

“You sure learned a lot.”

Her niece, Dareth, called from Columbus, Ohio, and I heard my mother answer as a lovely woman, who Dareth loves, talking to her favorite niece on the phone. She’s never been that nice to us, and it’s a lesson to hear it. I often catch glimpses of that woman, but I bet Dareth meets her whenever they speak.

I rode my bike down to Rock Island and stopped in at the Midwest Writing Center.

“What have I stumbled into?” I asked BJ and Bruce. There was about to be a presentation by a lady who has written a book about her dog.

“I better hurry up and write a book about a dog,” I said.

BJ said, “It’s a talk about how anybody with a special interest can publish a book on that subject.”

I know how to publish a book. I just don’t know how to sell it. I left, and went looking for the building Adey and I wanted to turn into a coffeehouse/dance hall/theatre called Blind Street. It never got started, for reasons that went into a book called Half Past Kissing Time. It was gone, razed, replaced by urban renewal, the kind that leaves a lot of empty lots covered with weeds.
I rode onto the Rock Island Arsenal, a U.S. Government weapons depot, looking for a bike path to the Iowa side of the river, but the U.S. Army requires bicyclists to wear helmets, so I went looking for a cheap helmet on 11th Street in Rock Island. In the Dollar General Store, patronized by mostly African Americans, I noticed a subtle shift in the way I carry myself, into something more suitable to the neighborhood.

I rode to my grandfather Brooks’ old house. It was broken down and disheveled, with broken windows and the front porch covered with leaves and trash. The porch swing was hanging from one chain. When I was a boy, I sat with the men on the porch and watched them. My white-haired grandfather sat on one end of the swing. It was a thrill in my young male identification.

Back home, I had lunch and sat with Mother for a while, and then I drove to the Goodwill and bought a pair of shorts and three T-shirts, then to the Canadian Discount Drug Outlet. In business for only a month, its entrance was through a locked door, then down the hall, and ‘have a seat’ next to the woman on the phone, in front of her computer. It all seemed fly-by-night, literally, ordering drugs from Canada and having them flown in at discount.

I drove to the bank to see why I’d received two new ATM/cash cards, then to Lagomarcino’s, and then to Borders. None of this explains superflow. It goes to say that the entire day was spent in that state of being. I felt unattached but not separate.

I like my mother when I’m in this non-attached, non-separate, non-deliberate state of being. Everything occurs in a non-judgmental acceptance. This description fails to describe a way of being that asks and needs no description. Description is a way of understanding. What I call superflow doesn’t describe anything. Everything that is, is.

The only way I can show what I mean is to tell you what I did, and say that nothing happened, and I was at peace throughout. Except, the wind off the river made my bike riding the opposite of superflow. I pedaled like one thinks, when there is no superflow. All day, I pumped and pedaled, while my consciousness remained effortless.

Here’s the magical version of this day. At the Goodwill, my ATM card, from my joint account with my mother, was rejected, so I paid cash, and at the bank, I asked why that had happened.
I said I’d been using the ATM card for at least a week, charging things at Walmart, HyVee, and other places. The girls at the bank were amazed. The ATM card has no name stamped on it. It should have only been good at ATMs.

“Maybe, I’m just lucky,” I said.

Or, it’s the superflow. May the superflow be with you. That kind of thing.

“Gee whiz, Captain Zen, how can I get the superflow to work for me?”

“Just be good to your mother, Jimmy, and see what will happen.”

In the superflow, the feeling toward others is like, “We’re all in this human thing together. We know it, we enjoy it, and we enjoy knowing we’re doing it. We enjoy being as we are, whatever we are.”

There’s no wink and nod, because there’s no need for it. It’s understood, at the most fundamental level of reality.
Nearness to Grace

I’m starting to love my mother. Let me be more specific. I’m starting to experience a life of love in the presence of my mother. A life of love is the awareness of the most fundamental reality, unchanged and unchanging, beneath, above, and within everything else.

Christians call it grace and give credit to a beneficent deity, or they take credit for having a worshipful self. That’s OK, as far as it goes, but the simple truth is what it is, without any credit due to anyone, external or internal. The awareness of that natural, fundamental, common reality gives a mind peace, and that peaceful mind experiences everything in a sense of love, including my mother.

My non-love toward her is mired in history and personality, but those distinctions are peripheral to what occurs in the acceptance of being itself, i.e., in the acceptance of being here, and in the acceptance of her being herself.

Last night, I spent two hours cleaning the kitchen. When I first got here, it looked like the kitchen of someone with bad eyes who lived with someone who had no desire to clean anything. I realized, as I was cleaning, that I was having fun. The service to my mother was a tangential benefit.

I made dinner, and Mother praised me. That felt good, but so did making dinner. It was the same dinner that I would have enjoyed making for myself. The Buddhists are right about service to others, but only when it’s identical to service to oneself.

At most, every mealtime, mother talks about her childhood, her parents, her children, her grandchildren, and some of it is new information to my ears. I wish I could recall the dialog, the monologue, but I don’t have a novelist’s ear. What I recall, written the next day, is the stuff that sticks to the wall of the mind. When the movie comes out, you’ll get to see the warm kitchen ambiance and listen to the warm kitchen banter.

Gladys and her mother, Hulda, washed the dishes together. It was the time they got to be alone, together. She had four brothers - all older. All her brothers got football scholarships to college, and she went to work as a bookkeeper secretary.
I found my soccer game, and tonight I get to play. When I thought of moving here to care for my mother, I thought two nights of soccer would occupy me away from her in a positive way, and now it seems an unnecessary diversion. It’s a welcome pleasure, but it’s not necessary in my remaining at peace with her. Right now, I don’t anticipate a problem. She may have problems that I have to deal with, but that all seems non-problematic, to coin a strange phrase.

I’m not as clearly in awareness of the superflow. Today, my thoughts are of a more pedestrian order, but my pedestrian thoughts are in essential harmony with my awareness, if you get my drift.

I drift in and out of grace. Nearness to grace has a grace of its own. Nearness to grace also borders on gracelessness. The idle mind will run to deny that grace ever existed. It wants to regain its graceless control. Or it will run to a formal structure of grace that promises grace but cannot truly provide it.

Grace is the state we are always in but seldom recognize. Grace is the state of recognition of grace that we are seldom in, that we, as humans, have converted to music, art, literature, religion, and by gradually diminishing degrees, everything else.

I bought a book of Georgia O’Keefe. Her work doesn’t make me cry, as Mark Rothko’s work has, but it has a felicitous feel to it. It is grace and nearness to grace. Saying grace, by the way, is like kissing grace’s picture. When I was in high school, (and flinging my clothes all over the room) I had a light-absorbent plastic cross on my bed-stand. I named the cross GRACE, so I could live by the light of Grace.

I’m beginning to kiss my mother’s photograph. I was standing at the sink, last night, and she was sitting in her chair at the kitchen table. I was about to put a long knife in the utensil drawer, when I imagined sliding it between her ribs. To imagine killing anyone is always disturbing. I imagined trying to explain it to the court. I imagined trying to stage it as an accident. I thought it would end my life as well as hers. It was the briefest of fantasies, without anger or satisfaction.

Why would I imagine such a thing, when all is going so well? Maybe I was killing the mother I don’t love and making room for the mother I welcome into my open heart. My fantasy seemed less like a murder, more like surgery.
I don’t fear spending six months with this woman. I once feared spending three days with her. Another fantasy of mine, yesterday, was to remain as her companion, indefinitely. That fantasy evokes the specter of terror.
Just a Once-over

I’m tired. I played soccer. One kid called it the all-Mexican game. “And one old white guy,” I said.

Eventually, there were three other white guys, all of them older than the ‘Mexicans’ who were local boys and one girl of Hispanic descent. I played OK, but I realized the magic of two years ago has gone. It’s no fun to lose the magic, but it’s always better. I played not great, not awful. It was 80 degrees at 7PM, on a big grassy field off Andalusia Road, in Milan, Illinois, pronounced MY-len. I found the field by instinct and accident, because there was no sign of it on the road.

It felt good being tired after the game, and I’m still tired. Mother has a burning rash on her cheeks and arms. She thinks it might have come from a lotion meant for her legs, but I recalled the rash bothering her last night, before she put on the lotion. She tells me about a similar reaction to a red sweater, many years ago. I put some of the prescription lotion she got at the hospital on her face and arms. She was tormented by the itch. I looked into her eyes. Eye contact is a rare commodity in her house.

She caught me looking and smiled weakly, as if to say, “I’m sorry I’m such a bother. Is it OK if I ask for a little sympathy?”

As I left the house, I put concrete patch in another section of the sidewalk. It’s had a fissure in it for years. The landlord, a local dentist with four offices, was reported, on the front page of the local news section, as having finally paid his water and electric bills.

I spend time in my room at the computer. I feel guilty not sitting with my mother. I came out for lunch and asked her if she wanted something. I fixed us both a sandwich, and she made a glass of chocolate for herself.

Last night, I delayed my departure for the soccer game, because she’d put a dinner in the oven. I didn’t want to leave while the oven was still on. She doesn’t use the microwave. Thirty-five minutes instead of eight. When I removed her dinner, after 35 minutes at 350, parts of it were still cold, so I put it in the microwave and finished it off.

“Your dinner’s ready,” I said.

“Oh, you didn’t have to do that,” she said.

“It’s easy,” I said.
It is easy. She has a cleaning woman who shows up every couple of weeks, but I vacuumed the place, anyway.

“Just a once over,” I said.

The binge of cleaning, buying, organizing, and cooking will pass, but just as surely as the need to eat, it will return. I was at home, today, not wanting to go out, feeling tired and house bound, and then, all of a delightful sudden, I was up and out.

I went to the Bettendorf library and bought five copies of The New Yorker, at ten cents a copy. I went to Goodwill and bought an answering machine for $2.38. I think the lightening storm, the other night, fried the old one. Or, maybe it was the skin lotion. Or a red sweater.
A Wendy’s Conversation

Last night, we went to the American Legion for the Friday Nite Fish Fry. At first, it was fun sitting in a large meeting hall (set up with long tables for eating and a dance floor for the band) with hundreds of WWII and Korea veterans and their wives, until I realized I was inappropriately dressed. I was wearing the standard Quad-Cities outfit of T-shirt and shorts. All the vets were in sport shirts and slacks, a few in suits and ties, the women in dresses and makeup, with their hair done. The men had short hair, many in crew cuts, military style.

I enjoyed the ambiance, until I felt the unwelcome of my difference. And I’m not a veteran but a war protester, to boot. There was no apparent hostility, but I finally had to accept my difference. A youngish couple, in their forties, came to sit at the table with me and Gladys. We exchanged pleasantries. The band came in, to set up. I made eye contact with the singer and her two musicians.

Back home, I watched TV with mother. This morning, we ate breakfast, before I went out on errands. Later, I drove her to Carol’s salon for her Saturday shampoo and styling. I sat with her and Carol, while Carol brushed her out. Carol and I went to high school together. I gave her a book of poems last week. This week she said she’d read them.

“Well, some of them,” she said. “They’re deep.”

I told her I was glad she read them.

“I never expect anyone to read them. I’m always surprised and happy when they do. It takes almost the same awareness to read a poem as it does to write one,” I said.

Mother and I went to Wendy’s for lunch. After eating, she began to talk, of things, of the past, often asking me if Wendy’s has a big salad, compared to the small ones we ate. Each time, I answered that they did. She asked me if I was going grocery shopping, several times. I said I already had gone shopping, each time she asked.

She told me about the country club where she and Dad used to play golf and bridge, both which she loved. She had to give them up when her eyes went bad on her, two years ago.
It was a fairly engaging conversation. I was surprised by it. I noticed that there is no love light in my eyes as we speak. As much as I let myself appreciate the banter, I was still unhappy.

“Let’s get out of here,” I said. “I’m tired of this place.”

On the drive home, she said, “You don’t talk as much as you used to.”

“That’s right,” I said. “I spend very little of my time talking.”

“Well, I don’t want to bore you,” she said, and I had no answer.

“You don’t always have to talk about deep subjects. Sometimes, it’s good to just have a friendly conversation,” she said.

I know it isn’t about being bored, and it isn’t her repetitions. It isn’t her subject matter or her manner. She’s become much less negative, in the last week.

While she was having her hair done, I drove around Moline on a kind of wandering tour. I listened to a conversation on Christian radio about living in this modern American society. The culture has changed in the last sixty years, the speaker said, since the advent of media marketing to youth. The speaker’s focus shifted slightly to blaming the media instead of the marketing. I agreed with the conclusion that the popular forms of communication were drawing attention and energy away from deeper concerns.

I don’t blame the media but the commercialism of media. There is money in the hands of the young, and the market economy wants that money. Marketing for that money is the culprit, but never mind. It is the way of the world to draw attention away from what is substantive and profit-less.

“It gets my attention, but is it worth my attention?”

If my highest concern is getting along in this world, in this culture, in this economy, if my concern is getting by and getting mine for me, then I’ve got no problem. Instead of living like that, I’ve spent much of my life concentrating on what’s good for my spirit.

People say ‘what’s good for the soul.’ I say that my soul doesn’t need anything. My soul, and everyone’s soul, has no need. It doesn’t exist in the realm of need. The soul is as free and complete as God is, but my human self needs soul. I’ve needed to make a life where my soul was welcome, not for my soul’s good, but for mine.
My mother is 88, and she experiences much that reminds her that her life is coming to its inevitable end, and yet what engages her attention is the avoidance of the soul. The practice of her heart is in fond memories of the past.

In that past, I spent time trying to engage her at a deeper level with my writing, my art, and my words, but to no avail, so I’ve let go of that effort. She wants to engage me, in some reassuring way, as mother and son, and that path has never been open. This is probably what nearly everyone does, as the end nears. She wants me to personally reassure her that her personal self is loved and will be loved forever.

I can’t imitate a love that not only doesn’t exist but is no use in the recognition of the soul. What is death if it isn’t the one true occasion for the recognition of the soul? The truest self, of everyone of us, is the least personal. At the same time, it is the true self, the impersonal being, i.e., the soul, that gives the personal self its life, its heart, its spirit.

This is why the personal god of the Christians has such an appeal. “Christ loves you!” “Jesus gave up his life for you!”

My teacher used to say, “The purpose of meditation is to reach a point where one can stop meditating.”

To believe in personal death and personal salvation is to reach a point where the personal is no longer necessary.

My job, if I choose to accept it, is to engage with my mother, in the way that I can be free, in impersonal love, and still care for her. I think she wants me to do something I can’t do, something I think is the worst thing for both of us. I can love my mother for who she is.

My teacher went to his teacher and told him that his family wanted him to come home, because they needed him. My teacher told his teacher that his family was illusion to him. He wanted to stay with his teacher.

His teacher said, “If your family is illusion to you, then it will be easy for you to take care of them.”
The Bix

I went home in a cheery mood. Mother wanted me to come and sit with her and watch the news. She told me that Carol had shown her an article about a mother who killed her baby.

“How could anyone do that?”

I fixed dinner for myself. She said her lunch at Wendy’s was enough for her. After Raymond, one of her favorites, we watched a show about a mother who abandoned her baby at five days. Thirty years later, the grown baby, now a woman with children of her own (after being called ‘the garbage bag baby’, since she was found in a blanket and a black garbage bag) she seeks out her mother, just as her mother is seeking her out, at the same agency for adopted children.

That segment was followed by a story of two grown women who discover they were switched at birth and raised by the wrong parents. Both stories were emotional tales of decent people caught in extraordinary circumstances. I was choked up by both, a reaction I like having.

“I love this kind of story,” I said, noticing that my mother was talking loudly over the stories with references to my cousin, Karen, who was adopted.

“I get choked up, and I like it,” I said.

“I never feel that way,” she said, “I suppose I should,” she added.

“I like to cry,” I said, “it feels good.”

And then it struck me. I’ve been criticizing myself for not loving my mother in a more emotional and more openhearted way. The other day, I moved to hug her, to embrace her, and she stood, stiff and unresponsive. I kissed her face when she was in the hospital, but when she takes my arm as we walk, it’s not with affection but from necessity.

I am continuing to take responsibility, i.e., blame, for the emotional vacuum between her and me, between mother and son. I’m emotionally and physically more open than she is, and I’ve been thinking of myself of cold and stiff.

Knowing who I am frees me, even when there is no reciprocity. My love life has seemed empty of partners for the last ten years, but my heart is not empty of love. My heart is the home of love. It is the ground of my
soul. My heart and my soul are at peace with each other. I need to witness how this plays out.

There’s a band playing, tonight, in the middle of Borders, and this afternoon, Barnes & Noble was full of happy faces. It’s the weekend of the Bix Festival. Davenport is the boyhood home of Bix Beiderbecke, outcast genius alcoholic musician, and it’s the 100th Anniversary of his birthday.
A Vivid Dream

I had a vivid dream of two women. One was like my ex-wife, and the other was like the woman I called the love of my life. Both have appeared in my dreams, but neither, I believe, is who she was. Each is my dream’s creation, standing in for what I feel about their place in my life. In this dream, I was being pulled between the two. I chose to go with my wife type, who I hugged as she was walking away. In that instant, I felt my own sense of easy familiarity and friendship with her, but I felt nothing coming back.

I left her and went to the bed of my lover, a woman I’ve gauged my sense of self against, in my dreams, many times. She took me to her with a kiss and an embrace. She told me about another man who had just showered her with flowers, poems, and kisses. She was my partner, but she was so beautiful, men were infatuated with her, smitten, in love, obsessed by her. She pulled her dress over her head, revealing her young, lovely, and sensual body to me and someone else, nearby, like she would with anyone else that was near her. She was available to the attentions and attractions of the world.

I asked her an important question. I asked her if she understood, by her experience, what had occurred to me, in my experience. I said I’d given a poetry reading in that very room, the day before, and people had fawned over me, as if I were the source of their happiness, their joy, their wonder. I thought the same thing occurred to her as a beautiful and sensual woman. I wanted to hear if she understood that the consciousness of others was theirs, and their reaction to us was not ours to claim.

Did she see the misunderstanding of anyone thinking either of us was desirable because of the expression of our inherent beauty? She didn’t get what I was saying. She talked right past it, as if she was ignoring it.

Neither woman was my self. Neither could be my partner in awareness. In affection, in love, in desire, in attachment, for sure, but not in awareness.

I went to church with mother, this morning. I heard, again, people needing each other’s prayers, needing each other. Not needing the source of the prayers, the source of us all. I asked mother about the sermon.
“I don’t like her voice,” she said.

Last night, I saw the beginning of **Sidhartha**, a movie made in ‘72. I heard Sidhartha tell Govinda, his friend, after years of devotion to meditation and other practices, “It’s all a trick. We have not found any truth.”

I lay in bed and thought, “I could step out of this way of being so easily. Why don’t I?”

I feel compelled to be consumed by this illusory reality and to consume it, as well, in the apparent belief that I can be free and not free at the same time.

I don’t speak to my mother, or anyone else, for that matter, in the manner of awareness that draws me to itself. Instead, I give credence to the common human way, even to the way of my mother and brother, the way of the beleaguered mind.

I sat with my mother in Hardee’s, eating a pork sandwich, talking about the characteristics of the pork sandwich, the cold air from the air-conditioning system, the gloomy weather, and why some men wear pants that pile up on their ankles.

Without accommodation to my mother, I wouldn’t continue in the church, I wouldn’t eat at Hardee’s, and I wouldn’t carry on such a conversation with anyone, without at least a sense of irony.

I felt myself becoming angry, and then I laughed, “What place in this world, what food, what words, are not just as illusory?”

But some illusions are better than others. Some give primacy to grace, and others kick sand in your face.

I looked at the tabletop in Hardee’s. I thought about the presence in the room. I saw an arrangement of color in the light. I saw a sculpture of iridescence. I saw the curve of the cup. I saw the line of the table’s edge; I saw blue lying in wait for my eyes.
Nothing to It

I rode my bike past Port Byron, almost to Cordova, to Camp Hauberg, on the banks of the Mississippi, where I went to church camp as a boy. It was an idyllic time and place. On the long ride back, more than an hour, already tired, I watched the thoughts that come from adrenaline and exhaustion. What occurred to me was this, “The love of money is the root of all evil, the Bible says, and the Christians attack the symptoms of evil and not the root. Just as the Christians, among others, worship the symptoms of God and don’t go to the root.”

I asked myself what it is in my being with my mother that disturbs me. I imagined myself in the room with her. I saw myself in a quandary, not knowing how to perform. The answer, of course, is to not perform but to be as I am.

I looked at my inclination to perform in her presence. Since I decided to stop fighting her, some years back, I began to speak positively, whenever I spoke to her. On the phone, I would stay positive in a demonstration of acceptance. It worked, on the phone, but here I am, with her, day after day. I’m with her, hour after hour, knowing she carries an energy different from mine, not to mention different prejudices and attitudes.

So I let it all go. I’ve already begun to do this, but my thoughts hadn’t caught up to the reality, so my sense of making a change only made the change conscious. At home, after the ride, I was much freer and looser.

Just before sleep, I watched some more of Sidhartha, after his love affair with Kamel, the courtesan who teaches him about making love with a woman. After they’ve been together for some time, she says to him, “You aren’t truly in love with me, are you? You don’t love any one person.”

He says, “And neither are you in love with me. How can you love anyone when lovemaking has become an art form?”

I identify with these people, so completely at ease in love, they are beyond attachment to one person. This is not a bad thing, unless one feels compelled to pretend to be something else. I’ve judged myself harshly for this characteristic. I think I must have serious limitations if I can’t love one person to the exclusion of all others.
To love all, to love the presence in the room, to be in the world but not of the world, must be indicative of psychological, emotional, or physical limitations. It must be a weakness, a failure, or cowardice.

Because I have all the wants, needs and desires of anyone, I think I must stay loyal to them or call myself a failure as a human being.

I know my freedom is in letting go of these attachments, letting go of this life of attachment, but I want to eat my cake and not pick it up, too. I played with that image for a few seconds. Usually, it’s “have your cake” and eat it, too. But that’s not accurate. As a human cake-eater, I want to have my cake, just like everyone else, but I don’t want to pick it up. I want to experience this life in all its particular glories, but without anger, greed, lust, envy, pride, sloth, or gluttony.

The object of these ‘sins’ is not the problem. The problem is the obsessional attachment to them, as if carrying these ‘sins’ will bring the objects closer, faster. Sidhartha and Kamel are in love together, and they bask in each other’s presence, as they bask in the true source of their love, as they do in themselves.

Feeling lustful, for example, is only trying to grab what’s already filled your hands.

Have I wandered too far from taking care of my mother? Taking care is not an effort. After my bike ride, I brought her a sandwich, a bowl of soup, a glass of milk, a cup of coffee, and a dish of chocolate-covered peanuts, as she had just requested. She remarked on how fast and how well I did it.

“It’s easy,” I said, “there’s nothing to it.”
Look What Happens

There’s a pretty young woman in my sight. What draws me to her is the softness in her eyes and her softly open mouth.

I drove twenty miles to an AA meeting, last night. When I got home, mother said, “That’s not necessary.”

“Too far for God?” I said.

“I thought you didn’t need that, anymore.”

“I don’t need it. I like it. You still go to church, don’t you? Why? Don’t you get it? Didn’t you understand what it was all about, a long time ago? Why do you still have to go?”

It was a good meeting - fifteen people around a table in a church basement. It was standard AA fare, talk from the heart about what’s true in our lives. Some were newly sober, one was a ninety year old man, who’s been sober for thirty years or more. There were three women and a dozen men, all ages, different professions, different levels of education, some religious, some not.

At the end of the meeting, I looked around the room at fifteen people who all spoke; who were articulate and self-possessed.

I thought, “When people with strong egos discover humility, look what happens.”

When I went out to the kitchen, this morning, mother was having problems. The toaster oven was burning some English muffins, she had overfilled the coffee pot, it spilled over onto the counter, and she couldn’t find the little yellow plastic measuring cup. I poured out the coffee and made some more, showed her the measuring cup, and rescued the toast. No harm done.

Patricia, her cleaning lady, came over and cheerfully made the place sparkle. In conversation with Gladys, I heard Pat say, “I’m old enough to know better and too young to care.”

She laughed at her own joke. She’s 63 and looks like Granny in the Tweety Bird cartoons. I have no idea what she was talking about.

Mother fell asleep in her chair, last night, trying to watch Letterman. I put on Sidhartha, and watched that. “You were sleeping,” I said, a half hour later.
“No, I wasn’t,” she said, “I was just waiting for the show to come on.”

“Letterman is over.”

“Oh, darn, how did I do that? What did Letterman have to say?”

“I don’t know, I’ve been watching this.”

“Well, I’m going to bed. Good night.”

“Goodnight.”

I remembered my father, just before he died, saying he stayed up late, watching TV, delaying going to bed, because he didn’t want to miss anything.

He once asked me, late at night, “Do you think TV is for millions of people or just for you?”

“For millions of people,” I said.

“I think it’s just for me,” he said.

The next day he denied he said it.

Sidhartha leaves his lover pregnant and gets a job as a ferryman. His ‘wife’ and child show up, years later, and she dies from a snakebite. The son he’d abandoned, rejects him and runs off. Sidhartha weeps. The old ferryman dies and Sidhartha takes over. His old friend, Govinda, shows up, after following the Buddha until his death, and the two friends work as ferrymen, together.

“Stop searching,” Sidhartha says, “Live in this very moment. Be at peace in your heart, Govinda.”

It was a nice movie about the consequences of a truly spiritual life, when it is lived without concern for the ways of the world. Sidhartha’s life is filled with love and loss. Because his love is deep and genuine and unattached, he remains as he is, always the same, as everything around him changes, often to his sorrow and pain.

It’s just as the old boatman describes the life of the river, “It is always the same. It is, at its origin, as it is, when it reaches the ocean. And it’s always changing.”

It’s not a life for everybody. It’s not a life for anybody who isn’t born to it, despite the external and internal truth of it.

Sidhartha is not a householder. He has no inclination for hearth and home. He claims he knows how to ‘think,’ to ‘wait,’ and to ‘fast.’ These are
truly powerful abilities, much in need in the world, but he has no gene for domestic commitment.

I am in this domestic reality, doing domestic things, in support of my mother, but there is, in me, no inclination for living this way. Yet I wonder how far I will ever go away from it. At the point of Sidhartha’s greatest success as a householder, when he is a successful businessman, with riches and a beautiful, pregnant lover, he says, “This life is done!”

He plunges into the river that carries him to poverty, again, peace, again, and aloneness, again, not necessarily in that order.

Bob Hope died, yesterday. His wife asked him, recently, whether he wanted to be buried or cremated.

“Surprise me,” he said. And thanks for the memories.

I think I’d like to be hauled down to the river and burned on a pyre. At least, if death feels cold, it’ll feel warm for a while.
Happiness is Revolutionary

Mother looked at me, after my soccer game, as we sat together and watched TV, and said, softly, “Stephen, are you unhappy?”
I looked at her, and I said, truthfully, “No, I’m quite content.”
And it’s true. I’m glad to be doing what I’m doing.
“You’re waiting on me,” she said, earlier, as I served her dinner.
“You waited on me,” I said. “Now, it’s my turn.”

It feels great to not be the one waited on. To be waited on is to sit in judgment of whatever comes. Sitting in judgment feels like sitting in muck and mire. ‘Waiting on’ is doing whatever occurs. It’s fluid.

Several times, I’ve heard Mother say, “Look at all the people,” and “Look at the crowds,” or “Look at the audience.” She said it watching the Baseball All-Star Game, watching Letterman, and watching the soccer game between Manchester United and Celtic from Seattle. I didn’t understand her fascination with crowds, her sheer astonishment, until last night.

Marveling at the audience in the Ed Sullivan Theater, she said, “Doesn’t anybody stay home?”

She stays home. I proposed we go out for dinner at the Village Inn, every Wednesday.
“Why?” she said.
“Because I want to.”
“Why Wednesday?”
“Because I play soccer every Tuesday and Thursday, and because the Village Inn has the best pie. I can go, and you can stay home,” I said.
She laughed.
We go for the Fish Fry on Friday night, the Hair Salon and lunch on Saturday, Church on Sunday, and now the Village Inn every Wednesday. That feels like a good balance to stay-at-homeitis.

Yesterday afternoon, in the lavatory of the downtown library, under an especially bright light, I notice a patch of slightly raised skin on the tip and side of my nose. I imagined a grotesque growth overtaking my boyish good looks, like an alcoholic’s nose, eighteen years after my last drink. I first noticed it, six months ago, when I made a video of my last one-man
show. I filmed myself primarily from one side, to minimize the raised map of New Jersey forming on my already large nose.

It’s still there, today. Of course, it’s not as noticeable as my self-consciousness would make it out to be. This deformity serves to counterbalance the good feelings I’ve been having. It’s an old tendency of mine to imagine some catastrophe, whenever I’m on the verge of feeling truly happy.

“Happiness is revolutionary,” I wrote, some years ago, and then contributed my spare change to the revolution. In my thinking mind, I seem to enjoy life only in contrast to the worst that might occur. In my non-thinking mind, I’m at peace. I live in constant wonder and delight. Literally. Absolutely. Life astounds me. I’m delighted by my astonishment.

I see a little of this in my mother. I remember her, when she was in her sixties, showing genuine curiosity. I thought then, that it was a rare quality in humans who tend to live lives of deadening routine and seem content to be deadened by it.

The same beautiful girl I saw yesterday is in this different cafe. Other beautiful girls have come and gone. Beautiful women are emblematic of my daily astonishment at life itself.

I had a great time playing soccer last night. Suffice it to say, it’s sheer physical delight. It’s fun. I showed Mother my sweat-soaked shirt, my trophy of pleasure.

If my nose gets bulbous and pitted, I can look out at the world from behind a different mask than the one I’ve been wearing. The current one is different from the youthful mask I wore for a very long time. Occasionally, I notice someone looking at my current mask disapprovingly, but mostly, I expect to be treated well.

“Teddy said you have savoir-faire,” Mother told me.

She was complimenting me on the clothes I wore to church, a few days ago. Teddy was her brother Harry’s second wife. Harry and Teddy lived in L.A. among movie stars and right-wing conservatives.

Maybe, I’ll go to Hollywood and become a grizzled old character actor. Or I’ll have some serious cosmetic surgery and fight my aging to the death. So to speak.
A Normal Baby

We went to dinner at the Village Inn, and Mother told family stories, cogently and coherently. Most of the stories were recapitulations of parenting and her fears about it. For instance, when she was first pregnant, she was afraid of having a baby that wasn’t normal.

Her aunt Hulda, with the same name as her mother, told her, “Look at all the normal people on the street, every day. There’s no reason to think you won’t have a normal baby just like them.” She stopped worrying about it. That baby was me.

“You should count yourself lucky that your kids are normal,” she said to me.

“I wouldn’t say they’re normal, exactly,” I said.
“І mean physically.”

“At six feet seven inches, Jaxon’s not quite normal, but he’s a great guy. He’s a good man, a gentle man,” I surprised myself with the emphasis on gentle. It is a characteristic I like.

A woman told her to delay spanking her kids.

“Wait until the anger is gone, and then, if you still think they need a spanking, go ahead.”

The woman said she had a technique. She had a stick for spanking, but it was always put away, at a distance. It took time to go get it. Usually, by the time she got it, her anger was gone.

“I took her advice.”

“It’s good advice.”

“She was older than me, so I listened to her.”

One day, she says, my brother and I were running up and down the stairs at the bank. She told to stop, but we didn’t.

“I said I was going to spank you both, so I drove down to the river, and I spanked you both. I had to do that or my threat would have been useless.”

As she told the story, I remembered the wide staircase at the bank. I didn’t remember the spanking.

Her sister-in-law, Marlowe, had migraine headaches, and she had some friends who were Christian Scientists.
“They got her interested in Christian Science. You know they believe in mind over matter. It helped her, I think, to get ride of her migraine headaches.”

I was content to engage in these mundane, householder conversations. Chop wood, carry water, and eat at the Village Inn.
The Old Vaudevillian

Mark sent me an email, telling me to pick up his glasses from the old guy who was trying to screw him. He said the old guy was crazy. I was a little apprehensive about getting in a downward spiral with a whacko optometrist.

He yelled from the back room. I couldn’t understand him, so I waited. He came out, talking. He was a pale-skinned, pale-eyed, pale-shirted, pale-trouserered old guy, a Jew, by birth and habit, a mensch, a talker, a man without filter, a likable, slightly whacko, former stage performer, composer, and singer, called Hy Singer.

“I wouldn’t change my name. I didn’t care if my name is Schwartz or Goldberg. Besides, I had a high voice back then, before my voice changed. So . . Hy Singer.”

He said he’d had several good conversations with John, as he knows Mark. It bothered him that I was going to send John the glasses without adjusting them to his nose.

“It’s his problem, now,” I said.

As we talked, I said I was a painter and a writer.

“Are you famous? I better get your autograph. John’s going to be famous. I better get his autograph.”

He said he was funny, because everything came out funny. After I prodded him, he told me about his career, growing up in a stage business family. He wrote music. One guy he called by name, the president of a record company in New York, said he was another Gershwin.

“Aw,” he said, “not really.”

He said Tony Bennett told him, recently, to get back in the business.

He said, “I’m dropping names, but these are only people I used to know.”

He tells me how he got way too drunk with Hemingway in Harry’s Bar in Key West. I mentioned that John lived in Key West most of the time. He says John never told him.

He gets me a box to mail the glasses in. He spends our time in conversation cleaning and adjusting the glasses to John’s absent nose.

“You’re probably in John’s book,” I said.
Mark didn’t say ‘the old Jew’ tried to steal his money. Mark isn’t anti-Semitic. He’s anti whoever he thinks he’s mistakenly trusted. The old man, former vaudevillian, was more interested in talking that he was in work.

I hear him say, on the phone, “This is wholesale. We sell to the doctors, wholesale. This is the same. I’m being honest.” And then he said, “You heard the old expression, ‘You get what you pay for?’”

He told me about his rock and roll nephew.

“Aw, screamin’, terrible music. Awful, doesn’t last. You can’t listen to it. Not like the old music you can listen to, over and over, and you get something different each time. Anyway, I gave him tapes of my music. He listened to it. He said, ‘Hy, this is good!’”

He said he couldn’t stay in the business.

“You have to tell the same joke, over and over. I couldn’t do that.”

He’d just finished recording two of his songs, and he’s sending them out.

“You never know,” I said.

I went to the car and I got him a book of poems.

I signed it, “For Hy. In the heart. From Steve.”

I handed it to him, over the heads of his next customers.

“I know you won’t read this, but enjoy it, anyway,” I said.

“Hey, thanks,” he said, surprised, I think, by the book.
Blood Everywhere

Mother stopped me as I opened the door to leave for the afternoon. “I want to say something,” she said.
She looked down and then up. “Norman was good to us. Not toward the end, but over the years, he treated us well.”

Earlier, she told stories of her fabled brother, the tall, handsome, rich entrepreneur and card partner of John Wayne, Barry Goldwater, among others. Harry died with Alzheimer’s. She tells stories of Harry’s last wife, the social editor of a local Newport Beach newspaper, who, she believes, married Harry to serve as her escort to social functions. “She took him for a lot of money,” Mother said.

Blaming women for the failures of some men is a staple in her critical diet. Norman’s last wife did him no good, either. Harry’s first wife, Wanda, who everyone credits with doing right by Harry, slapped their son across the face, hard, when he didn’t want to eat some vegetable, Mother says, ruefully.

Norman paid Mom and Dad to fly to L.A. to watch Harry during his Alzheimer’s. Norman and his wife went on month long vacations, several times. Mother and Dad enjoyed the luxury of Harry’s ocean-side home. On one visit, however, she heard Dad call out from the bathroom. “There was blood everywhere,” she said.

He’d fallen, getting out of the shower. He hit his head, and busted an artery. “I cleaned up the blood,” she said.
I didn’t ask her if she meant then or later.

She grabbed clothes for his naked body, held a compress to his temple, and drove him to the hospital. She remembered seeing a sign pointing to the hospital, days before. At the hospital, they sewed the artery up and dad said, “My hip hurts.” They discovered he’d broken his hip in the fall. They had to drive back to Illinois, in winter conditions, the whole way.

“I did pretty good,” she said, looking to me for confirmation. “You did great, especially getting him to the hospital.”
“Mark says Norman is a bad guy, and he was, toward the end, but he was good to us, over the years. Mark says he worked it out so he got all of Harry’s money, but he’s his son. He deserved it.”
I left it alone. I’ve got my own opinions.
The Presence of Will

Since the game, last night, during which I played poorly, I felt depressed, or my own version of it. Last night, I said I felt old and slow, but I think what I felt is the down side of my age. On Tuesday, I felt young and strong. Two days later, I felt old. It’s the sense of not being able to do what I like to do, whenever I want to do it. It’s the feeling of being physically limited, feeling incapacitated. It’s being conscious of my body not working the way I’ve depended on since I was born. As I age, I’ve felt this diminution of strength and movement. As an athlete, as a man, as a human being, this loss is depressing.

I look at my mother, and I see her depression, and there is no cure for it. Her wellbeing is tied to her physical life. She says she’s a Christian, but she never speaks of herself as a spiritual being. I speak of myself as a spiritual being, and I feel depressed because of the aging of my body. There may be some identification going on here, too. I’m empathetic by nature. I reflect my environment.

I woke up thinking of the sad plight of my mother, stuck in her chair all day, every day, going out to eat or to church, to get her hair done, to the doctor, but with no energy or desire to exercise, not even walking up and down in front of the apartment complex, afraid of falling, resigned to her plight. She used to get up every day and do yoga by the bed, but that’s a thing of the past, as she says. She’s mentally and physically tied to her limitations, and I’m feeling that, too.

I’ve been here for three weeks. The newness of it is wearing off. My explorations have become routine. It occurred to me not to let the conditions of my environment become the quality of my being. I’ll be living in this environment for five more months. I need to stay free of it.

It occurs to me, as it has occurred to me whenever any similar question arises, in any situation, that there is no problem. I’m free, and I’ve always been free, in the underlying presence of this moment of being.

I wonder if I could paint in my mother’s house. In order for me to do that, I’d have to accept the presence of joy, and I edit my joy in my mother’s presence. I allow her presence to occupy the presence of joy.
I think the reason I write in public is that I don’t allow anybody to occupy the presence of my spirit. I sit in the presence of the room, not in the presence of any one person. The presence of my spirit is at one with the presence of the room.

Rarely do I allow that matched union to occur in the presence of any single person. I would call that love. I don’t believe it’s wise to be openly free in the dominating presence of the unfree. I call it dominating, because the unfree are willful.

The will, mine or anyone else’s, seeks to dominate what seems like a threat to its wellbeing. What feels like a threat to anyone’s will is living in the presence of the moment, i.e., living in what’s called God’s will.

I may fantasize about my mother, or others, or a lover, or the world falling into agreement with my spirit, but I can’t willfully be will-free in a willful world.
The Task Master

After writing, this afternoon, I drove up to the freeway, then to the Illinois side of the river at Rapid City, then up to Cordova, to see how far I’ve been riding on my bike trips. I punched the trip gauge at Cordova and drove home, alongside the bike path.

As I got to the bottom of the hill below the house, I saw that what I’d previously thought was twenty miles, or more, was only fifteen miles. Then I saw what looked like smoke coming from under the hood. I was only three blocks from home, so I drove home and popped the hood to see some liquid sprayed all over the engine on one side.

I consulted the owner’s manual about overheating. I read that the engine was probably low on coolant. The reservoir was empty. I replaced the fluid and filled the radiator.

There are two guys who live together above us. One of them, the really tall one, came home, just then, and I asked him if he knew what was going on with my car.

“No, I don’t, but it doesn’t look good!” He laughed. “I know nothing,” he said, “but my roommate knows a lot. He should be home, soon. You should ask him.”

Within minutes, his roommate showed up, and I asked him. He had me start the engine. He took one look and told me what the problem was; a hole in the feeder hose. He said we could go up to O’Reilly’s and get a new one. He said he’d give me a ride. We drove up there, got the hose, brought it back, and replaced it.

On the way up and back, I asked him about himself. He was in the army in Virginia, worked as an auto mechanic, is studying to be a nurse, and he writes and paints a bit. I like both of these guys. Heath is generous and helpful by nature.

His friend is 6’10”, and “too uncoordinated to be a basketball player,” Heath says. The have been friends since third grade, when Heath moved here, with his mother, after the divorce from his birth father, who beat him. His father also taught him auto mechanics. Over the summer, Heath was forced to go live with him.

“What size is that nut? Get me the right wrench! Now!”
If he was wrong, his father whacked him. He learned good and quick.

“That’s a good reason to forget,” I said.

“Yeah, but I was good at it, anyway.”

I gave him a book of poems.

“You might not like the poetry, but maybe you’ll like the art.”

In the middle of my coolant adventure, I told mother about the car overheating. When we went out for fish at the American Legion, she was worried.

“I can’t afford to buy a new car,” she said. “We’re a poor bunch, aren’t we? You need to find out how much money I have. I sure hope that car doesn’t break down, again.”

Instead of arguing about her negative ‘the glass is half broken’ attitude, I said, “If you believe in God, you have to believe in God’s will. You know that wonderful feeling when you say, ‘God’s Will be done.’”

At the American Legion, she was free of worry, and the dinner was good. We sat at a small table. I had the shrimp, this time. Her fish was meatier than last time, she said.

I was watching the people, when she said, “What are you thinking about?”

“I’m thinking about whatever comes into my sight,” I said.

It was true. I was thinking thoughts like impressionism, like sensory reactions.

“I used to think about everything, all the time,” I said. “That’s nothing but trouble. When I think about what’s in front of me, I’m happier.”

It’s not much like the kind of thinking I used to do. I used to extrapolate from what I saw into the past and future, endlessly weaving tapestries of speculation and concern. Some of it was clever and inventive. Some of it was perspicacious and analytically wise, but not much of it was peaceful and joyful.

“It’s no good to have negative thoughts,” she added.

I was tempted to explain that it’s the nature of all thought to avoid the moment of clearest being, but I didn’t.

We went to Whitey’s Ice Cream for a cone.
Uncle Everett was friends with the original Whitey Lindgren. I worked for his successor, Whitey Tunberg, who made Whitey’s into a Midwest icon. Whitey Lindgren asked Gladys if Everett had gotten that life insurance he’d recommended. Everett took out a policy on his life and named his sister beneficiary, because he knew she would have to take care of their mother, if anything ever happened to him.

It did. He died in a car crash in ’54. Mother got $20,000, and my parents got Everett’s business. Grandma lived with us from then on, until her death, when I was in high school.

“She was the nicest person, so easy to care for. If only everybody was so nice.”
A Pin for Her Service

More itching. More scratching. The pharmacist at KMart thinks it might be an allergic reaction to new drugs. Carol, the hairdresser, thinks she should see a doctor.

Mother says, “No. It will go away.” At Taco Bell, for lunch, she says, “Doctors don’t know any more than I do.” She’s cranky.

“Did you stop talking to me?” she asks.

She wants to sit in Taco Bell and carry on a pleasant conversation for a while.

“I’ve got nothing to say,” I say.

“Make something up,” she says.

I have a long history of talking to women who want to talk. I talk to Carol about people we know and don’t know. I talk to another woman who’s getting her hair done, an eighty-year-old retired teacher. It turns out we were both teachers at Black Hawk College in Moline in ’66.

Mother doesn’t know that her conversations are redundant and repetitious. But, it’s up to me, too, of course. I don’t feel like talking just to talk. And the history of our conversations doesn’t encourage me. Few of our conversations have ever had a creative energy that might inspire interest in them.

Talking to Mother is a lot like talking to Mark. They show no genuine interest in the other, and there is no interest in the creativity of mutual engagement. In this situation, with anyone I meet, I’m inclined to silence, in pursuit of stillness, in willingness for grace. Silence is the gateway to stillness. Stillness is the shape of grace. Grace is the presence of the nature of eternity. Talking to Mother is a lot like talking to Mark.

I chose to care for my mother. Her basic needs must be met. Her health must be looked after. I want to be a positive presence in her life, or at least a neutral one. I imagine improving her outlook, but I don’t expect it. I spent too many years with that goal being stymied and thwarted.

Telling the truth is the best way to accept what’s already true. The truth will set you free. True freedom is more important than anything else.
A woman from the church called to invite Gladys Brooks to be in church on Sunday, to receive a pin in honor of her service to the congregation.

Off the phone, she says, “I can’t go to church, tomorrow.”

“Why not?” I ask.

“They want me to walk down front and receive a pin, but I can’t do that. I might fall.”

“Then don’t do it. Stay in your seat. Or simply stand and let them come to you,” I suggest.

“I couldn’t do that.”

“Why not?”

“What would people think if I couldn’t walk up front?”

“Who cares what they think? Is this the church of God, or the church of what people think?”

“I can’t go.”

“You don’t want to cut off your nose to spite your face.”

“This has only been a while that I’ve been like this.”

“So let people know what’s happening with you.”

“What will they think?”

“They’ll think Gladys Brooks is having difficulty walking. What’ll they think if you don’t show up, at all?”

“I don’t want any old pin, anyway. I don’t need to be recognized.”

“The lady from the church said that all three women said the same thing.”

“Well, I can’t go. What if I fell?”
Big Ideas

When I got home, this afternoon, I was not in a good mood. I wanted to hide out. I started making dinner, poorly, at first. I put string beans in boiling water, without cleaning them, and without cutting off the ends.

“Did you clean them?”

“Yes, I did,” I lied. I thought the boiling water would clean them.

“Did you cut the ends off?”

“No,” I said.

I went to the kitchen and began to cook for real. Being present, instead of mailing it in. Male-ing it in? I made a pot of potatoes, onions, and polish sausage. I put Mother to work cutting the boiled-clean beans, and I made plates of cole slaw and sliced tomato. I fried some fish for myself, and we sat down to a comic conversation.

“What’s this?”

“Cole slaw.”

“What’s this?”

“That’s cole slaw.”

“Is this rice?”

“No, it’s cole slaw.”

She decided the spices on the bite of fish I offered her were too hot, and the hot sausages were not hot at all. I read off the list of Italian spices; marjoram, thyme, rosemary, savory, sage, oregano, and basil.

“Which ones are hot?” I asked

“None of those are hot. These Italian spices are too hot for me. Don’t give me any more of that.”

Before eating, she said she wanted to wash off the old cream on her face and arms and put some new cream on her dry skin.

“Go and do that,” I said. “Go and wash your arms and face.”

She went in the bathroom, washed the old salve off her arms and face and put on a fresh coating of Jergen’s lotion. And it burned. How did that happen? Maybe the washing was too harsh.

She told me to buy a pie from the pie lady at the Farmer’s Market, today. I bought a cherry pie.
“Whoever made this pie put too many cherries in for the crust,” she said. “Never buy a pie from this person, again.”

Despite the comical exchanges, I enjoyed dinner. I like it when I’m ‘waiting on her’. In this reality, doing is always appreciated, and it satisfies everyone. Twice a day, every day, I leave to write. I’ve been doing it for thirty years. I never feel recognized when I say, “I’m going to write.” Writing is not doing. If I say, “I’m going to the grocery store,” or “I’m going to ride my bicycle,” that’s recognized. That’s ‘doing.’ If, when I come home, after writing, I show something from the store, then I’ve brought home the bacon.

My brother wanted to show our parents how to make millions in their business by selling subsidiaries. It’s a common practice in the franchise world that Uncle Harry pioneered, but they wanted him to work, not ‘get big ideas.’ They were happier when he put in eight hours behind the counter or behind the wheel of the company truck.

Mark learned his lesson. “I wait on her, and I keep my mouth shut.” It works on her, and it works on me.
Will Power

She didn’t go to church, and I didn’t argue. I went for a bike ride. Last night, I watched the Mariners beat the White Sox 10-0. It’s amazing how easy it is to make me happy. There’s a new counter girl in Borders’ whose become my new, current muse, the first such since I came to the Quad-Cities. She looks a little like me. A familial resemblance, I think.

We always fall in love with something in our own image. Even God did it. He created Man in his own image. I never knew what that was supposed to mean. In his own image. I think it may have originally meant, “He made it up, he used his imagination,” and not, “He looked in the mirror and copied the image he saw,” like Leonardo da Vinci doing a self-portrait.

And what does ‘used’ his imagination mean? How does that work, exactly? I’ve been in the imagination business for forty years, and I’ve never ‘used’ my imagination. I’ve gained from the use of my imagination, but my sense is that imagination uses itself. I only pay attention.

‘Pay’ attention?

Yesterday, after Mother got her hair done, while she sat in the drier, Carol and I talked about her going to the doctor. I said she was as stubborn as a mule. I gestured to indicate blinders, “She drives to the goal without looking anywhere else.” Carol nodded and smiled.

“Maybe that’s how she got this far,” she said.

She was indicating that my mother’s life was one of admirable accomplishments, driven by her will, and that was commendable and justifiable.

Carol goes to the same church as Mother. They are both believers in God, they are people who trust in God, presumably, and they are Midwesterners who believe in the primacy of human will. In these parts, it’s a given that God gave man free will to be used. Like using your imagination. Free will was Adam and Eve’s downfall, but it’s the nom de guerre of everyday life in the Quad-Cities, USA.

I didn’t contradict Carol. When in Rome, let the Romans be Romans. Those who are blessed with boundless willpower are good at preaching
willpower. When they lose their willpower, they still preach willpower, and feel like failures. Anyone who looks to the source of their own will may see that its source is the same as the source of imagination, and that source can’t be willed or used, except by its grace.

Pay attention. Spend attention. Use attention. Be at attention. The degree of attention I give anything is dictated by my attachment to it. My greatest attachment is the source of everything I am, think, and do. Call it Buddhist Narcissism. Call it love of the will of God. Call it a gift horse looking into the mouth of his own gifts. Call it a creative being looking at the source of our being’s creation.

As I was leaving Borders, last night, after writing, after enjoying the presence of my new muse, after stepping into the oven hot air of the Mississippi River Valley night, a thought occurred, like a message floating to the surface of a deep, still pond,

“Maybe it’s time for me to become a true poet.”

Not that I haven’t always been a true poet but that I haven’t let myself act as one. I’d just read some of Mark Strand’s poetry. It has the same easy tone of inevitability I see in my own recent work.

This time with my mother is freeing me from my childhood. It’s freeing me from my attachments. I’ve been carrying an unfulfilled promise in my sense of self. It’s freeing me from my self, by allowing my self to do what it needs to have done.
I went into the kitchen, took some dishes out of the dishwasher, and hand-washed them. Mother loves the dishwasher. She can’t see the poor job it does on dishes. It takes too long. The things that are used the most sit in the dishwasher waiting for a load to accumulate. I’m used to washing my dinner dishes as I make my dinner and as soon after I finish eating as I can. There’s no pile of dirty dishes. Do it, and it’s done.

I told my kids, both in their thirties, “Don’t try this, you’re not old enough,” but it works.

Mariners won again, 8-2. I watched them after my bike ride. Either the scale is broken, or I’m losing weight, even with this Illinois fat diet. Tonight, I made a sandwich for Mother, fish and rice for myself.

What I said, about seeing what’s in front of me, not thinking about much beyond that, is true. I noticed it, today, as not holding onto thoughts. This is an adage of enlightenment, but this is the first time I’ve watched it while it was happening. Mother and I were watching a public service announcement. The woman in the ad was a second grade teacher.

She said, “Oh, she has an awful voice.”

I had thought, too, “Her voice is harsh.”

But, by the time she mentioned it, I was already watching the next images, with no lingering attachment. I thought it and let it go. I wasn’t holding onto the thought. I remember the kind of attachment that would have meant an ensuing thesis of commentary, until the next thought was picked up, held, scrutinized, and coddled. This time, it was thought and gone. I’ve been living alone for ten years with this awareness in place, but I haven’t been able to see it in contrast.

My mother is the model for the habits of my thinking. Even with her short-term memory loss, she’s inclined to hold thoughts. We have a genetic inclination to hold onto thoughts, like pieces of flotsam and jetsam in a shipwreck, trying to work our way to shore, or rebuild the boat, until the practice becomes an attempt to stay afloat in an endless drifting seascape of flotsam and jetsam, and the shore is forgotten.
It reminds me of a dream I had many years ago. I was adrift in the middle of the ocean. I felt panic. I thought about swimming to shore, but the shore was out of sight, maybe thousands of miles away.

Then, I realized I could float. I could swim. I was at ease. I was at home in the sea.

You can’t be lost at sea when the sea is an easy place to live. I discovered I was like a dolphin, and all the panic went out of my body, forever.
“I don’t think I’m long for this life,” she said, in a voice of quiet resignation.
“What do you mean?” I said, after a time.
“I have too many problems,” she said, “and they’re crummy problems, not like the problems other people have.”

Her skin is dry and flaking, her arms are discolored, she can’t see well, and she has constant memory lapses. She’s having a hard time making coffee for herself, in the morning, even though I set it up for her, the night before. She doesn’t want to go to the doctor. I get what she’s feeling. It’s a hopeless merry-go-round of problems that can’t really be fixed. Going to the doctor is a depressing routine of asking and getting no good answers.

A couple is moving into the apartment below us. I had to shift things around in the garage, to make room for them. I was happy with empty apartments, above and below, and empty spaces in the long, ten car garage. I liked the spacious quiet.

I did laundry, went to the store, came back, and fixed lunch.
“What’s on your mind?” she said, looking at me.

I had been trying to solve her physical problems without really concentrating on them. My brother’s wife, Liz, thought it might be her daily wine mixing with her medications. I doubt it.

“I’m not thinking of anything in particular,” I said.

“Are you mad at me?”

“Am I mad at you? No, not at all. Mad about what?”

“You don’t talk to me, anymore. You used to talk a lot.”

“When I was in high school?”

“When you were here, last year.” (It was two years ago.) “You talked all the time. We had great conversations.”

I thought about it.

“I think the heart attack changed things for me,” I said.

That may be true. It’s been true in many ways. But, as I recall our time together, two years ago, I was living an aggressive life, trying to get my books and art out in the world. My energy was assertive. I tried to
assert myself in her life, as well. After three weeks, I was feeling oppressed and wanted out, fast. I couldn’t wait for Mark to arrive and take my place. But I’ve changed, and the heart attack may have ensured the change.

“I don’t talk as much as I used to,” I said. “I used to have a noisy mind. Now, I have a peaceful mind. I like it a lot better. Talking always gives me a slight headache. I prefer the stillness of not talking.”

I learned to be a talker. I became somewhat obsessive, talking my way to a verbal high. Now that seems like another drug from another era.

“I sure hope that man from the church doesn’t come to see me, today, since I wasn’t in church, yesterday.”

“Christiansen?” I said.

I remembered an aggressive friendliness, at the door to the sanctuary. No sanctuary in that. Well, a kind of sanctuary. It always feels like the welcome to a casino or a real estate promotion. It’s a warm feeling, if you want what they’re offering.

“Don’t you like him?” I said.

“I like him just fine, but he’ll want to talk, and I don’t want to talk to him.”

“You want to talk to me, but you don’t want to talk to him? What’s the difference?”

“You’re my son, we can talk about anything.”

Actually, that’s not even remotely true, but I suspect she doesn’t mean ‘anything.’ She means she can talk the way she wants with me. I don’t have the same expectation of my conversations with her.

I began to wonder if her sense of impending death didn’t actually make me feel low. I’m not afraid of her dying, and I have no stake in her living longer, but the sadness of her wanting to die may have affected me. It’s like the old and sick buffalo dropping away from the herd to die alone. She may have been pulling away, for a long time now.

If she wants to talk to me in a hopeless attempt to whistle away the gloom, I don’t want it, but she may be getting ready to speak more clearly the ways of her heart. That would cheer me.

I am her first-born, and she’s on the road home. I won’t engage her as I have in the past, in an attempt to reconcile the past. I’m more open, in my less noisy mind. I like it when, in an attempt to explain something, I actually hear some true understanding.
“Why don’t you talk to me?” she asked, and I answered, “I used to have a noisy mind. I don’t have a noisy mind, anymore.” That surprised me, coming out so simply and clearly.

She told me not to worry about my heart.

“I don’t worry about it. I’m conscious of it, but I don’t worry about it,” I said.

“Your stents are good for seven years,” she said.

She had a stent put in, last year, to replace ‘the balloon’ they put in eight years ago.

“I’ve got six more years, then,” I said.

I had three stents put in one artery, a year ago.
The Essence of Smoke

I went to the Isle of Capri, a riverboat casino in Bettendorf, Iowa, and gambled away eight dollars in nickels. I tried to do it as fast as possible. It still took half an hour.

When I got home, after suffering a controlled loss, I felt better. I made dinner. Mother loved it, and she had a second glass of wine. She talked, and I listened. I listen-talked, as the interested son. It worked. I was interested. She told some good family stories.

One year, she was visiting with Nicole, Jessica, and Brandon, Scott and Liz’s kids. Nicole was arguing with Brandon, and she told him to shut up.

“I don’t like that,” Grandma said to Nicole.

“You love your brother. You don’t talk that way to someone you love. Nicole said, ‘Brandon says it to me,’ and she ran to her room, crying. I asked Brandon, ‘Do you say that to Nicole?’ ‘Yeah, I do,’ he said. I said, ‘I want you to go into the bedroom and apologize to Nicole for talking to her like that,’ and he did. I think she thought he was coming in to get her, but he apologized to her. I don’t know if it made a difference, but I don’t like that kind of talk. I never told my boys to shut up. Your father and I never talked to each other like that. My parents never talked to each other like that.”

Mark’s unrelenting fear and anger is that everyone will eventually tell him to shut up.

“My parents spoke Swedish to each other, when they were alone, not to anyone else. I learned enough to understand them. My brother Everett got a bicycle, one year. He never got anything, but one year he got a bike. I don’t know how. It was red, and he parked it on the porch. We had a porch with no railing. I thought, ‘Oh, I’d like to take that bike for a ride.’ So I did. Yes, I did. I took it off the porch, and I rode it around the yard. We had a big yard.”

She indicated with a sweep of her arm.

“I rode it around the yard, and I put it back on the porch, right where it was. He never knew. I loved to roller skate. They put black top on our street. Black top is great for skating. Did you have skates?”
“Yes,” I said, “I remember the key. We rode around Georgia Court.”
“We never had microwaves. These young wives, today, they have so many conveniences. These noodles are good.”
“You want some more?”
“Maybe a spoonful.”

I didn’t go back to the AA meeting, tonight. Instead, I came here to write. It’s true, I don’t need it - as long as I have this sort of prayer and meditation, this writing, this sitting in the company of truth. The translation of sat-sang, the Indian group prayer and meditation, is ‘being in the presence of truth.’

“I’m going out. I’ll be back in a while.”

I drove eight and a half miles to this cafe along the river toward the setting sun, onto the bridge, onto the freeway, off and into the parking lot, in the door, past the long stacks of books and magazines, to one corner of the building, called Cafe Espresso, where, with coffee, I write, occasionally looking at the people.

By the time I get here, I’ve changed the aura of my consciousness. I use the word aura to mean more than atmosphere.

The Isle of Capri reeks of cigarette smoke, recycled into the essence of smoke, a kind of naturopathic toxicity. It always feels good to leave such a place.
The Tongue of the Heart

“When all is said and done, it is impossible to destroy anyone or anything ‘in absentia’ or ‘in effigy.’” Sigmund Freud

Over the last five years, while I was working to promote my work for publication, I seemed to be in a necessary effort, to finish the business of being a writer. Now I think I’m in a necessary effort to finish the business of being a son. The effort is not the effort of will, it is the effort of my character to fulfill itself.

What I’m doing isn’t willful, but it isn’t purely creative, either. This is not God’s will, entirely; it’s genetic will. I’m acting out the character of my human self. Being with my mother is like taking my work to the marketplace. At the end of that work, even with bankruptcy and a heart attack, even with no great worldly success to show for it, I knew I had done what needed to be done. I knew there were no more ‘what-ifs’. I had done as much as I could do, given my primary focus as a free artist.

I know I’m not done with this effort. Two years ago, mother called me and said she needed me. I flew in. She was suffering her first bout of macular degeneration. She had a mini heart attack, and was having aftershocks. She was forgetting things. She couldn’t drive herself to do what needed to be done. After a month, I was done. This time, it won’t be a month for a few more days, and I know I’m not done.

My memory clock keeps telling me it’s time to be done, as it was two years ago, but I know better. Yesterday, when she said she wasn’t long for this life, I knew it was too soon.

Today, her skin seemed better, although there was what looked like a small burn on one finger. The flesh of her arms is thick and fatty, mottled, but the deep discoloration seems to have faded.

When I was coming to write, today, I didn’t feel as inspired or energized.

“This is what it must be like for writers who write for a living,” I thought.

My pen is moving more deliberately, less fluidly. It doesn’t feel forced or false. If it felt forced or false, I’d stop, not be design, but by
instinct. I’ve never written anything that felt forced or false. Those are my credentials. I have been true to that.

I felt the onset of identifying with my mother, becoming her aloneness, her estrangement, her disappointment, her apprehension, her willingness to death. She seems to be living in a spiritual vacuum. Unable to fill it with activity, she tries to fill it with memories. She wants my company. I’m ambivalent. At first, I thought my ambivalence had to do with her, but it is my own ambivalence.

I’m afraid of my mother. I have been, all my life. Her presence seems to want to engulf me to satisfy her own needs. I’ve kept my distance, because there always was a distance. Her love is grabby. My children told me her hugs were like a vice grip, not tender, not affectionate. Her touch slightly repulses me, because it’s not tender. There’s no sensitivity in her touch.

She sees colors and loves them. She loves the colors in the Oprah and Martha Stewart magazines. I thought of that when I was thinking of her physicality. I never saw a tender look. I often saw a bemused look. I never felt a tender touch, but I often felt a firm touch. There was no affection in her touch or in her words. I remember thinking, when I was off to college, what a great mother she was.

She did the job of mother very well. I never knew any other reality. I didn’t know anything was missing. In my sexuality, I discovered the joys of the body, but it was many years before I discovered my desire for, and my pleasure in, affection. My father was afraid of his physicality. My mother was oblivious to hers.

I think the disjointedness I felt at the beginning of this chapter was in reaction to my fear of identification. After a lifetime of its absence, I’m much more inclined to be physically affectionate, and here I am with the model for disaffection. I’m being drawn to a crisis.

“Put it on the tongue of your heart, and let your heart speak.”

That sentiment occurred to me, all of a sudden. I’ve used it in other circumstances, where I was hesitant to act, but wanted to feel what I felt toward someone.

I thought, “Put it in the hands of your heart, and let your heart embrace her.”
I don’t need to become affectionate with my mother. I don’t need her to become affectionate with me. I don’t need to speak words of affection. I need to recognize love and affection in my heart, and let my heart choose its methods.

Fourteen years ago, I was struggling with the image of my mother, as an evil queen, who ruled over a dark castle. She was in a high tower, and a baby was in the deepest dungeon. I had been warring with the queen for many years, when it became apparent to me what I needed to do.

“Stop fighting the queen, and rescue the baby. Pick up the baby!” I said to myself.

I held one hand out for the baby and one hand up to God, and we were both embraced. Now it’s time for me to embrace my mother, in her time of greatest need. It is my need, too, but I can accomplish this in the sanctity of my own heart.

When I put words in the mouth of my heart, I don’t need to speak. It’s amazing how much gets accomplished when there’s no effort at accomplishment.
On the Road

Mark checked in from the road with this email.

Louisville today, Churchill Downs, this morning, early, but they are tearing it down, replacing w/new structure, so I missed another old place; (the space button doesn’t work on this computer, no, it does, but I gotta hit it hard) this is a snob place, so its on to Lexington and the second biggest library in the world after Harvard, so they say; you didn’t mention the insurance letter from Miller insurance. Please send it to Dareth immediately; my trip is as much chore now as adventure and I pulled another goof in Fort Wayne; the minister’s suicide distracted me from my real task there, getting news print of Mary Hem first marriage in 1930; (this space bar is a pain) I should have stayed another day in Bloomington, but I got mad at the damn copier; I spend half the day finding all the books, and get to the copy stage, and the computers down for the day, but they had a lot of hard-to-find books; so now I must rely on Ky U and Ohio State. Then Penn State, if not too many mtns - I am still carrying too much; then Buffalo where I think resides the NY shrink who first diagnosed Hem nuts; old guy now, nobody has interviewed, and a prof visited Hem 6 months before the end, said he looked like hell; then Toronto if they don’t empty the van coming back; International Falls and Sault Ste Marie are just Bettendorf Bridges; on to Boston and NYC; don’t know if I have nerve to sleep in NYC yet; no doubt they search every van parked all night; every city has a rest area on the way in and the way out so its perfect for me every day; love to you both; Mark
Faded Glories

Her skin looked better, today. She began to get out of her chair, last night, and then she let herself drop back down in the chair, again.

“You did that very well,” I said. “You seem pretty limber.”

She scoffed.

After my soccer game, I sat with her, watching Judging Amy, Seinfeld and Letterman. Letterman had a bit with two of his guys in an oyster-eating contest.

“Why is he doing this? Who cares about oysters?”

“It’s just for fun.”

“Well, it’s not funny.”

I got her started watching Letterman, two years ago, and now she’s habituated to it, regardless of the lame humor. It’s like watching Live! With Regis and Kelly. Everyday she says, “I don’t like her,” but everyday when I come into the kitchen for breakfast, Regis and Kelly are on TV.

“You need a lamp,” she said.

I was looking up people in the phone book. I decided she was right, so I rearranged the furniture in the living room. There’s a long sofa against the back wall, but Mark had put an armchair in front of the sofa, so he could use it instead of the sofa, which was uncomfortable for TV watching. Adding the chair meant moving one of the two matching marble top tables to the side. The two tables had been in front of the sofa, side by side. Now, one of them was behind the new armchair. Out of sight, out of mind.

“Where’s the other table? Didn’t I have two tables?”

“Weren’t there two tables here, before? Where’s the other one?”

No matter how many times I point out the second table, it doesn’t stick.

“Where’s the other table that was here, before?”

A never-used reading lamp was next to the chair by the TV. I unplugged it, untangled the cord, and put it by my chair. I switched two end tables, and then moved the marble-top table next to my chair, close to where it had been since Mark brought in the armchair.

“Where’s the other table that was here?”

“It’s right here,” I said, pointing to it.
“Wasn’t it next to this one?”

“Yes, but now it’s over here. It’s better this way.”

It was better. I liked the new arrangement. After she went to bed, I did some other minor feng shui. The place looked better, and it functioned better.

“There’s a lot of clutter on this table,” she said, this morning, referring to the telephone table by the window.

And then, the real shocker, “Those pictures of Brandon don’t need to be up there on the closet door, anymore.”

I removed them and hung them in the hall to her bedroom. They were newspaper pages, enlarged photocopies of when Brandon was named Basketball Player of the Year for the State of Hawaii, and one picture of him playing ball for UCLA. He committed to waterpolo, spoiling everyone’s dreams for his college and NBA career, and became NCAA Waterpolo Champion, twice, and then the National Olympic Team goalie. Not bad for a big disappointment. The US Waterpolo team won again, yesterday. Now 4 and 0, they look good to win the PanAm Games, now being played in the Dominican Republic.

I guess I must have put the removal of those old and faded newspaper glories on the tongue of my heart, because I never said a word about removing them. Down they came.

Scott recommended we go see Seabiscuit. Mother said no. I’m going to see it and then suggest it to her, again. I think about bringing some new energy into her life. Not so much it overwhelms her. Not so much it overwhelms me.

I went to the Isle of Capri, yesterday afternoon, with a two-dollar roll of nickels I found in my pocket when I thought I was done, the other day. I won back two and a half dollars and then rode that to my eventual demise as a big time gambler.
Miss Mamie

Going out to dinner tonight, on my suggestion, was a real test. We went to Miss Mamie’s, a place run by a woman I went to school with. She was on vacation. Before we left for the restaurant, mother’s arms frightened me. They were like red elephant legs. Her hands and face were flaking and peeling. She said there was no itching. The deep discoloration was gone. It was like she’d been sunburned.

At dinner, I looked at her arms and at my arms. I looked at her arms and I saw my arms. I look at my arms and I saw hers. The food was great. The service was good. The room was good. She told stories of the past. I participated in the conversation. Going and coming, I held her hand, I held her arm.

I’m feeling is the unprotectedness of my distance. It’s been easier to deal with her by maintaining an engaged distance, like a writer does, like a nurse does, like a saint whose spirituality is blissful.

I was reading in *Thoughts Without a Thinker*, by Mark Epstein, a Buddhist psychiatrist, that one needs to confront all of life’s attachments in order to be free of them. I saw too many Westerners in India who seemed to want to skip to nirvana without confronting their own neuroses.

“The causes of suffering are also the means of release.”

I’m capable of identifying with whatever I’m reading, watching, or being among. There is some tendency to believe I carry whatever psychosis I encounter. Occasionally, I believe my awareness is only an imitation of true liberation, that my attachment to the awareness of spiritual freedom is only masking my pitiful state of desperate aloneness, i.e., my fear.

I believe this in my mind. In my spirit, I don’t carry such doubts. In my heart, I carry no doubt. Still, I want to be free to love the people I love as people love each other, not just as God loves God.

Because of the teaching I learned at the knee of my mother and repeated, decade after decade, I’ve sought out relationships with other unprepared people. To this day, I don’t believe I know what fulfilled human love is, if there is such a thing.

What I do know, right now, is that the opening I granted myself, yesterday, and over the first month with my mother, has left me feeling
shaken. I can assume an EMT’s distance and care for my mother’s disintegration, but in my crippled emotional psychology and in my physical self, I’m unnerved.

I don’t need to become her tormented son, her heartbroken son, her Job Junior, covered in sympathetic festering welts, running sores and open wounds, nor do I want to disintegrate alongside her, out of empathy. This is simple, when it’s a duty to be performed, and it’s simple when I remain in the awareness of Being, but when I open my heart to all that it contains, I am at a personal loss to be dutiful or free.

As soon as I said that, I knew what I was saying wasn’t true. There is no problem. I simply had an awkward evening, full of sadness, pain, duty, stress and peace.

It reminds me of Miriam. I was visiting in The Owl and the Monkey, a cafe in San Francisco where I’d been a regular for years. Several of the same people were still there. They told me about Miriam. They said she had mental problems. They said she was hanging around the benches, a few doors down from the cafe, so I went looking for her.

Miriam had not been a close friend, but we had known each other for years. She had introduced me to a girlfriend. We’d always been friendly. I found her sitting on one of the street benches. I hadn’t seen her in eight or ten years.

She said, “Oh, hi, Steve.”

She began to ramble, more and less incoherently. She was talking to no one in particular, after acknowledging me, briefly. She referred to a mutual friend, a man she’s been in love with, and she spoke elliptically about things I couldn’t understand. She was talking as I left her. I’m not sure she noticed me leave.

I went back in the cafe and talked to the others. As I told the story of what I’d seen, tears came to my eyes. It was heartbreaking to see her, to be with her, to leave her, to tell the story.

The people I spoke to were surprised to see my tears. They thought I was immune to such a reaction. It doesn’t hurt me to feel such things, and it doesn’t change my deeper awareness. I’m free, and I’ll always be free. My freedom is not a cool, intellectual remove from all these other relative realities.

It’s just that this current reality is beginning to hurt.
Good in the Soul

I called her doctor. I said I had questions I wanted answers for. I learned a little. The nurse said someone would call back. I told mother I’d called the doctor. She was disgusted.

“You shouldn’t do anything so underhanded.”

“I didn’t do it for you. I did it for myself. This has been a problem for two weeks.”

“Well, I won’t say anything about it, from now on.”

“You don’t have to say anything. I can see it. I told them you didn’t want to come in for a visit. I just wanted some information.”

You’ve got to call a skin doctor for this.”

“I called your regular doctor. They’re going to call back.”

I left for the afternoon. If they call back, and I’m not there, she’ll have to deal with it. Underhanded manipulation? You bet. The problem has been that I’m not sure who I’m dealing with. I’m inclined to give her respect for her individual wants, but I’ve already made financial decisions without her knowledge, and I’m more and more inclined to make other decisions for her.

She seems lucid and self-willed, but she also seems prone to lapses, not only in memory, but in judgment. I don’t want to see her as mentally incompetent, because she isn’t, but I don’t want medical conditions to go untreated because I’m being nice to my mother.

I’ve been gradually pushing the envelope, taking control in areas where she has had control. I don’t want to render her helpless, and I don’t want to do what she can still do, but I’m enjoying this gradual process of shifting authority.

How many billions of children have had to do what I’m doing, wrestle authority from their elders, while granting them the honor and respect they’re due?

I feel some anger in this process. I felt it, talking to the nurse on the phone. Part of my anger, it seems, comes up whenever I take on work I’ve never done before. It’s related to the anger I felt when I was a kid, learning things in my father’s presence, when he would mock me for my incompetence.
“Send a boy to do a man’s job,” he’d say, or he’d pull the tool from my hand and say, “If you want a job done right, you have to do it yourself.”

The truth is, it’s easy to take care of business, but it’s fraught with contradictions, when that work has been someone else’s.

“The Buddhists assert,” I read in Thoughts Without a Thinker, “that the more we grasp emptiness, the more we feel real....”

I woke, this morning, in the room of my paintings, remembering how mother commented on the color in Oprah’s Magazine, on the painting by a local woman hanging above the TV, and on the design print in a frame that was a gift from Brandon.

I thought, “She has no interest in what I do. I write every day, and she never asks about it. She asks me where I’m going but not what I’m doing.”

This phrase came up in my mind, “Is there anything you’ve ever done, in your life, that feels good, in your soul, every time you do it?”

It was unconsciously addressed to my mother. I may never say it to her, not out of any reluctance to say it, but, in part, because there’s no reluctance to say it, and no compulsion to say it, either.

The emptiness of my mother’s sense of who I am has freed me, after all these years, to discover my own reality. Because it is a reality, and not manufactured from reflections, I’m not compelled to explain and apologize for who I am, as I felt it necessary to do, for so many years. I don’t need to hide myself or proclaim myself. That feels good.

The statement of doing something, every day, that feels good in my soul, came moments from that reality the true. I would love to share this truth in being with my mother, as I would love to share it with the world. Despite the knowledge that others don’t share my luck, or the awareness of this way of being, I’m still lucky in what I do, and in what I am.

I test drove an ’85 Mercedes-Benz, today. That felt good, too.
Mercedes Bends

So much to tell. The Mercedes has a problem in the transmission. I took it out on the freeway. After fifteen miles, I felt a jerk. Then, I felt it again, a few miles later. I thought it was a gear change. The RPMs ran up too high, and I drove under thirty, down the fringe of the freeway, then back onto surface streets, toward the dealer. By dropping into neutral, and then back to drive, I could get the gears to shift out of second, where it seemed to be stuck. Todd, the car guy, thinks it’s a module and easily fixed. We’ll see.

Mother called the skin doctor, while I was out, yesterday, and again, today. She made an appointment for next Tuesday, four days away. I played soccer last night, and for the first time, I felt like I was a part of the group and not the odd man out. I felt strong. I got home from that and fixed dinner, my own usual concoction of catfish nuggets, mixed vegetables and rice.

“Stephen, you’re such a good cook.”

“Thanks,” I said.

This morning, she was clear-headed, chatty, and commenting on the newspaper articles. She’s been reading All You Ever Wanted to Know About Sex But Were Afraid to Ask, by Dr. David Reuben. She wanted to read it and said it was on the bookshelf in my room. I scoured the books in the room and the garage. I couldn’t find it. She kept asking about it, so I got it for her at the Bettendorf library. She commented on various sexual habits and showed her disgust for them.

She told me, when I was just out of college, that sex between a man and a woman was ‘spiritual.’ I took that as a ringing endorsement of sex. I agreed with her wholeheartedly. I still agree, but from a slightly different perspective. Spirituality is sensual, and sex is one of the great spiritual expressions, not to mention one of the great physical, emotional, and psychological expression, too.

I called my brother Scott, to talk about the car, and I got my niece, Nicole, the one I never talk to, and we had a great chat.

“This is great, Nicole. I never get a chance to talk to you.”

“Yeah, I know,” she said and sounded genuine delighted.
We talked about school and such. I said we should do this more often, and she said we should.

“Tell Grandma I miss her and I love you, both.”

I usually talk to her twin sister, Jessica, who is a fledgling writer and painter.

I woke at 5:30, this morning, thinking about my new Mercedes. I enjoyed being excited about it and went back to sleep.

The Buddha made clear that some kind of humiliation awaits us all.

Mark Epstein

Birth is suffering, decay is suffering, disease is suffering, death is suffering, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair are suffering, to be united with the unpleasant is suffering, to be separated from the pleasant is suffering, not to get what one desires is suffering. In brief, the five aggregates of attachment (the basis for the human personality) are suffering.

The Word of the Buddha, Buddhist Publication Society

Being with my mother is being with my own inexorable mortality. I’ve been scrutinizing the skin of my arms. My physical characteristics mirror my mother, not my father. She was a young looking woman well into her seventies, even into her eighties. Now she looks like mottled wax that’s melting slowly onto itself. Her skin is sagging on her arms like decaying drapery, like a Francis Bacon portrait of Dorian Gray.

I’ve been an athlete, and my mother played a little golf. I run around with twenty-something soccer players, and she did a little yoga. If I were a woman, I’d have her small breasts and big legs. I can see my future before me, and it’s not a pretty picture. Babies are not generally as beautiful as everyone says, and old people are not generally ‘as beautiful as ever.’

This car-wreck of the body is fascinating as it is repulsive. I can’t choose another roommate. The wattle on my neck is not going away with a good lotion. I want to be able to stare into the face of this abyss and not flinch.
“Stephen, I want you to look at my face and tell me if I look any better, today.”

Last night, I brought her chocolate ice cream for dinner, and she said, “You don’t have to do this.”

“You deserve it, for being here, for being alive.”

I thought about saying, “for being my mother,” but I didn’t.
Glaydies

When I was a young man, my mother said to me, “Well, you’re not Vincent Van Gogh, you know.”

She was trying to throw a little water on my Big Ideas.

Vincent Van Gogh was the eldest son, after the death of his namesake, the first-born Vincent who died at birth. Hilton Als, in The New Yorker, says, “Vincent could never live up to the legend of his brother, the ghost. Nor could he fit comfortably into the traditional role of eldest child - responsible, uncomplaining, a model of good sense for the siblings who follow.”

The poet I am, the artist who is who I am, is back. After being the responsible son for a month, not including the four months of work and preparation that got me here, I saw and felt my presence as a creative spirit.

This afternoon, I imagined my being here in Moline, and my image instantly jumped to Hawaii where I have visited my brother almost every year, for the last seven years. My habit, while I’m there in paradise, in a big city I call Cleveland by the Sea, is to ride my bike to various spots where I paint and write. In my image of it, I saw a spiritual fellow, crisscrossing the landscape, in touch with the substratum of the land and sea, over which civilization has constructed its concrete camouflage.

I am that fellow, nearly invisible, in this civilized jungle. I am an artist. I realized the image when I sensed where I am in spirit. After this time of being responsible, my deeper responsibility has emerged. I can feel it, I can see it, I know it, in the sudden absence of concern I was otherwise carrying.

“Samsara is Nirvana,” the Buddhists say.

It means that this responsible, suffering, practical reality is also heaven in disguise. I am free when I no longer worry about the disguise. The language of the spirit that I’ve been referring to, for the last month, in these notes, is a touchstone, but it’s not the freedom it describes.

I’m more at ease in the skin of a poet, a creative spirit, because I am skinless in that identity. I feel free as a poet, because, for me, being a poet is being free. It’s the face of god turned to the world, when there’s only a
divine absence behind it. Out of divine absence comes this presence of being.

There is no problem in being nothing at all and having so much to do. I fixed dinner, which mother loved, and she spoke in response to the NBC Dateline about people who can’t read.

“I wonder how my parents learned to read.”

“I imagine they learned as children in Sweden. It’s easier to learn to read a second language, if you already know how to read the first,” I said.

“I really wonder how my parents learned to read. I remember the other kids in school had difficulty with the difference between i-e and e-i.”

“How did my parents learn to read?” she said.

It’s been a while since I was in tune with the presence in the room, but tonight, as I write, there is no separation. This is the state of being in which art is not created but simply is.

When I’m slightly out of tune with my own inseparable self, I feel what every responsible human being feels, I feel the weight of the world, and I have no apparent choice but to carry it. When this awareness becomes itself in me, the world is weightless. Samsara is Nirvana.

I don’t know what will come of this, but it doesn’t matter. This is not a mine to be dug or even a fully laden fruit tree to be plucked. It may be only coincidental, or it may be connected, but I felt, today, that my duties with my mother were well in hand. I imagine more challenges will appear, but the month I’ve been here has settled into a sense of capability. I know I can handle what needs to be handled. That is, I can be responsible to the needs of this world, and I can be responsible to the greater needlessness of this being.

God doesn’t need anything. My soul doesn’t need anything, but my responsibility to that Vast Needlessness is the source of my fullest life.

A telemarketer called, today, asking for Glaydies Brooks. I told mother what he said.

“Someone else called me Glaydies. Who was that?” she mused.

“I love that name, Glaydies. It’s very pretty,” I said.

The light is back in my eyes. It’s never left me, but now I can see it. It’s not in the mirror. That’s a twinkle in the mirror. In my sense of being, I can see the light in my eyes.
Adolph’s Taco House

“You could get sick of this music in a hurry,” she said, referring to the music in Adolph’s Taco, in Moline.

She had been telling stories of her five trips to Mexico, after the boys were gone. Then she told me the story of the woman in Honolulu who, in a long dress and carrying a baby, wore open heeled slippers onto the escalator at the Mall. She showed her disgust at such irresponsible behavior.

I didn’t respond.

She looked at me and said, “You’re not talking to me, today?”

“I have been talking,” I said, and I had been.

She pressed the issue, and I took the bait.

“You’ve been telling me what you don’t like. I can’t respond to that.”

“I’ve been telling you how much I liked Mexico. I haven’t said any bad things.”

A little background is necessary here. Jack Gellerstedt called me, last night. His father was in school with Mother. As we talked about our relationship to our parents, he said that Chet Gellerstedt had described my mother as having a sharp tongue. This morning I asked mother what she thought of Chet.

“He was handsome. He was nice. Everybody liked him. He was a real gentleman.”

So I went for it, in Adolph’s, our favorite Mexican restaurant.

“Jack Gellerstedt told me his father said you had a sharp tongue.”

“No, he didn’t. I don’t have a sharp tongue. Wanda had a sharp tongue.”

She was quiet for a minute.

“People who have a sharp tongue are mean. I’ve never said a mean thing in my life.”

“I don’t think you intend to be mean. You don’t try to be hurtful. You just say what you think. You speak your mind.”

“But that isn’t having a sharp tongue.”
I thought, “Oh, shit, I’ve done it now. She’s an old woman. Let sleeping dogs lie. This is a can of worms. Try to soft-pedal it.” I didn’t think any of those words, but in a collided moment, that’s what I felt.

“Maybe we have different definitions of what it means to have a sharp tongue,” I said.

“Have you ever heard me say anything with a sharp tongue?”

I thought for a moment. I thought about letting it slide, letting her short-term memory loss wash it all away. It didn’t.

“You tell me, the next time I say anything, would you?”

“I’ll do that,” I said.

“You’ve certainly given me something to think about.” The surprising thing was that she seemed genuinely self-reflective.

“Chet Schmidt said what he liked about me was I never had a mean thing to say about anyone. What have I ever said that was sharp-tongued.”

“When I first moved into my room in your house, when I put up my paintings, you looked at one of them, and you said, ‘Oh, how horrible!’ I didn’t take it seriously. I took it with a grain of salt. I know you didn’t mean to be hurtful.”

“That hurt your feelings, didn’t it?”

“Sure it did, but I understand how you speak. A few minutes later, you pointed to a place on your wall, and you said, ‘You could hang one of your paintings here.’”

“What did I say was horrible?”

“You said one of my paintings was horrible.”

“I didn’t say that in a harsh voice, did I?”

“No, you were almost laughing.”

Then she told me several stories of people hitting their children, including the one about Aunt Wanda.

“I never hit you,” she said.

“No, you didn’t.”

“Your father never hit you.”

“I remember him hitting me five times.”

I held up an open hand of five fingers.

“He had big hands.”

“I have big hands, and his were bigger than mine.”
“He had a hard time finding gloves. In the winter, he didn’t even wear gloves. If he hit you, you’d feel it.”

“One time, he knocked me across the room.”

I sat in Adolph’s, after lunch, after she’d had her hair done, long enough to let her talk, and I opened up a long dormant topic. It used to evoke an argument about whatever sharp-tongued rebuke she had made. This time, it wasn’t about the subject of the rebuke but the style of the rebuke.

I told her something my ex-wife said, “Your parents are good-hearted people.”

“Your father was the sweetest man,” she said. “He was never mean to anyone.”

Last night, when I came in from writing, she asked me how it went.

“It went great!” I said.

And then she surprised me again.

“What are you writing?”

“I’m writing a book. I’ve got eighty pages, so far. It feels good.”

“What’s it about?”

“It’s about you,” I said.

“Then it’s about a dull person,” she said.

“Your life is dull if you think it’s dull. Your life is dull, but you aren’t dull,” I said, pointing to her.

Never a dull moment. There’s no such thing as a dull moment. Jack Gellerstedt, who called from Virginia, is a guy I knew in high school. We didn’t become fast friends until our 40th Reunion, three years ago. Since then, we’ve discovered our common interest in the way we see life.

Our parents were in school together. He asked me to ask my mother what she thought of his father.

“I’ll ask her in the morning,” I said, “when she’s alert. I may end up hearing about your dad for the next month.”

Little did I know what I might foment, after I told her she had a sharp tongue.

“Everybody in our family has a sharp tongue. Scott does, Mark does, and I do,” I said.

And then I saw her sharp tongue soften. I was briefly afraid I might cause a heart attack and a family scandal.
“How could you tell your sweet, dear old mother that she was a vicious harpy and a spiteful harridan?”

“I didn’t say it!” I proclaim to the family court of last resort.” Chet Gellerstedt said it!”
The Monkey and the Modern Woodmen

Freud recognized that the inability to tolerate unpleasant truths about oneself was essential to narcissism.

Mark Epstein

When I got home, I was curious to see if there’d be any fallout from Adolph’s. On the way home, I got a copy of About Schmidt, which she had requested, and a free pint of Ben & Jerry’s Chunky Monkey, courtesy of a coupon from my long-distance carrier.

I went to my room, and after a while, she called me. She had poured water into the coffee maker, and some of it missed the reservoir and spilled onto the counter. She was worried that something mysterious had occurred. She showed me the spilled coffee grounds on the floor by the trash.

“That’s no problem,” I said.

“It is a problem,” she said, “You’re going to kill me.”
She sounded shy, like a little girl.

“No, it’s easy to clean up,” I said, and it was.

Standing up to my mother, in that way, less confrontational than in the past, more considerate, but also more to the point, may have had a positive effect. We ate sweet rolls for dinner and laughed about it. Adolph’s had been a full meal, at 3PM.

We watched the first hour of About Schmidt, and she laughed happily at Jack Nickelson as a retired insurance company executive in Omaha. If my uncle Everett hadn’t died, my father might have ended up in a similar position in Omaha in the farm implement business. Orly Long, one of my parents’ friends, was an executive at Modern Woodmen, the company in the movie.

My mother has long professed a belief in the supremacy of men. Men should be in charge, not women. This comes from a woman who exerted control over everyone and everything in her path. But my taking her to task for her sharp tongue may have put me in the male position she automatically bows to. At least, she says she does.
The other piece of business I want to describe is my arrogance. I wondered at the change in my behavior at the soccer games. Sandwiched in between the two times I’ve played here in the Quad-Cities, I had a heart attack. The heart attack changed me in ways I am still noticing. After the last game, it occurred to me that it killed my arrogance.

“Arrogance is a strong wind to blow a weak man,” I wrote when I was an arrogant, young man, not yet ready to admit I was either a weak man or a strong man.

I might say that arrogance is a strong wind to blow an unsure man, but weak encompasses more. Humility is the gift of weakness. To recognize one’s personal weakness is to open the gift of surrender to a greater reality than one’s personal self.

I am not carrying the same arrogance, the same pretense of self, and it lets me be vulnerable. My undeniable vulnerability showed me to be genuinely vulnerable. The truth is inescapable when one’s eyes are opened.

As I was talking to my mother, this afternoon, I felt compassion for her. I didn’t want to hurt her, and I didn’t feel weak. I was in the absence of arrogance. A strong wind is not necessary to carry a strong man. A strong man is a weak man who’s not afraid to be strong.
Eternal Transient

As humans, we crave union and disunion, as Mark Epstein says. We crave union with the all and disunion with the all. Death and life, God and the ego. It’s been my experience that the confusion is the answer. Neither is not nor. In this case, neither is more than both. Knowing that union with the all is omnipresent, inevitable, and inescapable doesn’t diminish the disunion of being human. Instead, it grants it a special status. The knower can know the unknowable, because the unknown is inherent. ‘Who I am’ and ‘who I become’ are not at odds.

Mother, this morning, was back teetering on the edge of resignation. She said she was not doing very well, but we went to church anyway. In Subway, after church, she kept saying variations on the theme of being done.

“I’m not going back to church.”
“That was the last time.”
“I’m not going back.”

At the front door, at home, she said, “I’m not coming out, again.”

One woman we spoke with at church was Dorothy Trimble, whose family owns the funeral home that Mother has chosen for herself, as she did for Dad.

“I have that insurance,” she said in Subway. “I’m glad I’ve kept up my payments. They’ll pay for any facility, or home, but I have to be hospitalized, first.”

What will become of my mother after she dies? I don’t know. I began to say, “I have no idea,” but I have plenty of ideas. Ideas abound. And some presumptive answers, too. What will become of my mother before she dies? I don’t know. She’s eternal, and she’s transient. It seems to me the less she clings to her transient self, the freer she is to be eternal. To be eternal in the transient body is to be torn by confusion and doubt. And it is to be free, if the confusion can be embraced.

After my father died, my son said, “It’s easier to love him, now. His personality doesn’t get in the way.”

Going to church, this morning, my mother’s touch was pleasant. I held her arm. She held my arm. I held her hand. She held my hand.
Grandma’s Legs

As I was coming to the door of Borders, the wind was blowing and the rain was just beginning. An elderly woman took a fall. She had a cane, but it did her no good.

“Oh, my,” she said as she fell.

I was with her in a second. She wanted to get up right away. A woman from Borders, putting the rolling racks of books inside, because of the coming rainstorm, and a man I guess was her son, were at her side as soon as I was. The Borders woman asked her if she wanted to fill out an accident report.

“I don’t know. My wrist is sore. You try to block your fall, you know,” she said.

The son and I suggested it would be a good idea.

She seemed to be a frail woman, but she got back up like she had been physically capable all her life.

When I got coffee and sat down, the rain clouds burst and disgorged their contents, like buckets dumped out.

At lunch, mother told me a story I’d never heard before. All her adult life, my grandmother, Hulda Axene, had an open wound on her leg. It never healed over. She had to dress it, every day. She said the milk cow had kicked her. Cleaning the bandages had been an odious chore. She had to stand on one leg whenever she did the dishes or whenever she had to stand in one place for very long. I remember her gauze-bandaged legs. I thought it was what old Swedish grandmothers always wore.

It was such an unusual condition that my mother was invited to address a roomful of doctors about her daily routine, changing the dressings. She said it was the same day we took the Rocky Mountain Rocket to Denver for the weekend. The doctors were impressed by her presentation, and the Red Cross promised her a steady supply of fresh bandages.

“The doors to heaven opened,” my mother told her doctor.

At the end, Grandma developed phlebitis in her legs, and they were amputated above the knee. I used to lift her into bed at the end of the day. I was happy to do it. She was a sweet old lady.
“We took the train to Denver. You boys loved the dome car, Mark especially. We stayed overnight at a hotel and came back the next day. My mother was never crabby. Some people, when you care for them, complain about everything. They order you around. Get this. Get that. Not my mother. She never complained about anything. I told myself, if I ever got like that I wouldn’t be crabby. A lot of people are.”

I watch my mother furrow her brow, pinch her mouth, and get a sour expression on her face when she tries to do something or remember something. I thought I saw anger, but I also thought she was angry for not getting it right. It’s not anger at anyone or anything in particular. It’s effort, frustrated, redoubled, and frustrated again.

“I was pretty good at giving talks. I gave book reports at my church, and they wanted me to speak at other clubs, too, but I said no. I had you kids to take care of. I didn’t have time to go around, giving talks for free. Oh, sometimes, they’d give you five dollars. I told them I only give talks for my own church, not for anyone else.”

She told me that story years ago, and the punchline was different. Then, she said, “I couldn’t do it for my own personal gain. I could do it for God, but I couldn’t do it for myself.”

At the time, I agreed with her motivation. I still do.
Already Dead

I rented three movies over the last two days, About Schmidt, About a Boy, and Catch Me If You Can. Because of the British accents, mother couldn’t watch About a Boy.

Brandon’s TeamUSA won the Pan Am Games and qualified for the Olympics in Athens, in 2004, next summer. “That’s nice,” mother said, this morning, but later, talking to Dareth, she was effusive.

My teacher in India believed that ultimate awareness relieves us of all our attachments, therefore, of all our neuroses. I agree, but until that freedom is the fulfillment of our thinking, these attachments will continue to work their destructive and dysfunctional magic.

The attention to human habits, frailties, sins, desires, etc., can become a distraction from freedom, or it can become like learning syntax and grammar, a functional step toward clearing up the dysfunction. A good education can’t write a poem, but it can get obstacles out of the way of a poem, if it’s learned in order to be forgotten.

I’m happy at the ease of my being with my mother, the ease of accepting her situation, the ease of making it the current form of my being. I know this ease is the evidence of my freedom. I learned to act as I do through decades of experience, but I also become free. I don’t have to cope with difficulties when there’s no one doing the coping and when the difficulties are identical to everything else.

When I say that no one is doing the caring, I mean there is no particular Steve or Stephen taking care of her. I am here, but I am not here in the shape of any rigid ego.

This morning, I went into her bathroom where my shower stall is. She doesn’t use that shower; she uses the tub in the other bathroom. The floor was wet, I flushed the toilet, it began to overflow, I reached into the toilet bowl, and pulled out a large pad she uses for ‘personal’ protection. I mopped up the overflow, and I took the rug and towels to the basket for the laundry I was doing later. After my shower, I took the refuse to the wastebasket in the kitchen.

“Oh, Stephen, my toilet is clogged. Could you ...”

“I did. It’s fine, now.”
None of this is to demonstrate anything to my credit. I enjoyed myself, as I watched how meaningless and easy the whole thing was. It wasn’t even anything for me to do. It was simply done. I watched it being done. I wasn’t watching my beleaguered self doing it. There was no beleaguered self to watch.

Riding with a friend to a soccer game, after my return from India, I said, apropos of nothing, or in summation of my awareness, “We are all already dead.”

I meant, then, that since thought is how we define ourselves, and thought is always a chronicle of the nano-second past, we are ‘already’ dead. The only truly alive self exists in the thought-free present moment.

I was riding my bicycle yesterday. After two and a half hours of pumping, I rode past the John Deere Harvester Works, the factory where I worked when I was barely out of college. It was bleak work in a bleak environment, and I imagined myself at work, then, not knowing that I would one day be riding past, outside, now. Then I imagined myself, thirty years from now, looking back on that sweet moment on wheels as I flew by, alongside the river, behind the factory, as if that reality was then, as well.

I am already dead. My mother is already dead. Both of us are alive in this moment.
The Picture of Gratitude

As surely as it remains the same, it changes.

Today, Mother had her appointment with the dermatologist, who turned out to be less of an ogre than reported. She got a prescription for her dermatitis and some good advice. We went to The Belgian Village, a famous local bar and eatery, for lunch. She said it hadn’t changed in fifty years. It’s the kind of place where everything is the same, even the bartender and the waitress, even the dirt on the floor. Or at least it seems that way.

We had a reuben sandwich and spinach soup. The reuben was big enough to cut four ways. It was the sandwich Mother and Dad always got with a beer. Mother had a beer, then another. She said she shouldn’t have had the second beer.

At the drug store, on the way home, I thought of dropping her off and getting away. I remembered how I felt, yesterday, how easy it was to care for her, and today it became tiresome. I wanted to get away. The lunch was repetitive talk, dead horses being beaten with sticks, pummeled, poked, prodded, teased, and whipped. It isn’t that these conversations are so awful - they’re not. They are mildly interesting, seldom rising above or sinking below the mediocre.

“It could be interesting,” I imagine. “No, it can’t.”

I went into Osco to get the prescription filled.
The pharmacist said, “Ten minutes.”
I said, “Or two hours.”
“Sure,” she said, looking slightly puzzled.

I was prepared to come back later, as long as I could leave as soon as possible. I went back to the car, prepared to drop my mother off and be gone. At the house, as she got out of the car, she felt a ‘spell’ coming on. She leaned against the car and tried to swallow a Meclazine.

“I can’t swallow it without some water,” she said.
“I’ll get you some,” I said.

I went into the house and began to see the irony of my desire, to be done and gone, stymied by this change of circumstances, compared to the proclamation of my peaceful ease yesterday.
Back with a cup of water, I suggested we go see if her prescriptions had been filled. I could have waited ten minutes, but now it would be at least twenty.

I reflected on my current impatience, after saying that my patience, yesterday, wasn’t even patience but the fruit of awareness. Patience is what I was practicing, just then. Yesterday, I wasn’t patient; I was at peace. Now, I was not at peace, and I was being patient about it.

“You’re very nice to me, Stephen. I appreciate it. I was nice to my mother.”

“Maybe somebody will be nice to me, some day,” I said.

Back home again, she was still unsteady. I envisioned the prospect of having to stay with her throughout the day. If I were a constant caretaker, I don’t think I could manage to be peaceful, even if I was only required to sit with her and do little else.

It isn’t that she’s difficult to be around. She’s not, most of the time. I need to not be around her. I need to be nourished by stillness. My thoughts are conditioned to not being still in her presence. My thoughts are conditioned by a lifetime of unstill thinking.

She struggled to the door, up the stairs, and home. After a few minutes of discussion about her new medication, I came out. At the bridge, the traffic was so heavy, that I took the long way around, through heavy traffic, until I am here, now, not yet at peace.

I saw what occurred when I was at peace. Today, I’m seeing myself. I’m being patient, deliberate, concerned, and ill at ease. This is an ego state.

On this warm day, the heating panels at the base of the wall by my leg, are on. I’m uncomfortable. I’m writing, and I’m waiting, patiently, for peace. I don’t seem agitated, angry, or upset. I’m seeing myself. I’m self-conscious, not self-aware. This is an unhappy state, not miserable, but not at peace, even when things go well.

I’m glad to be able to describe this difference. When I see what occurs, I’m free. When I see myself in a world of others, I’m not free.

Soccer tonight. We’ll see how that goes.

I stopped writing, and instantly, I felt clearer. I saw myself writing. This writing did not occur. In my consciousness, it was written. In my awareness, it occurred. One is hard work. The other simply is.
To the eye of the reader, there may be no difference between writing that is written and writing that occurs, but reading that is read, and reading that occurs, are just as different. Samsara is Nirvana.

Just now, I’m grateful for this day. I wasn’t ungrateful, before. What’s the difference between being grateful and being grateful? One occurs in awareness, and the other occurs in consciousness.

‘Gratefulness is occurring’ is easy.

‘I am feeling grateful’ is like holding up a snapshot of gratitude. One embraces you, and the other is a picture.
Ducks in the Sun

If there is no love story in the room, there’s still a love story in the heart. For a while, I was beginning to imagine falling in love with my mother, but a couple of the good old days, and that day is past.

Last night, after she went to bed, she came out to the kitchen in her nightgown. I couldn’t tell what she was doing. I thought about going to see. She brought her purse from the kitchen table, put it on the living room table, and went to bed.

This morning, I looked in her purse, and her two checkbooks were missing. I imagined her hiding them on some pretext, but I left it alone.

I bought a large watercolor painting tablet. It occurred to me to begin painting my mother. Last night, I watched Frida, about Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera, artists who lived a lifestyle I’m familiar with. As it occurred to me to paint my mother, I realized I couldn’t paint her, before, because there was too much baggage attached to it.

I can’t paint someone ‘I’ know. I have to paint what the painting knows.

As esoteric as that sounds, the act of painting is not about painting the object of the painting. It’s not about painting the maker of the painting. The painter isn’t painting himself or his model. He’s painting the painting.

The painting occurs. If there is any business attached to the painter or the model, the painting will become self-conscious.

The painter looks at blank canvas and paints the history of its fulfillment.

It occurred to me I could finally do that with my mother. I could be an artist in her presence, because her presence no longer dominates the presence of the room.

Buying the paper was a sign of the possibilities.

When I came in, last night, after soccer, mother was perplexed, trying to figure out which of two tubes of salve she should put on her face and which on her arms, neck, and legs. Before I left, I said which was which, the small one for her face, and the large one for everything else. She was not sure which one was for what. She read the instructions on the boxes, and couldn’t comprehend it.
I put some on her swollen ankles. This morning, she took a dehydration pill for her ankles and started a long day of constant trips to the toilet. It made her grumpy.

“I’m not having a good day. I’m in a bad mood. I’m going to have to wear a skirt. These pants are too much trouble.”

It’s stuck in my thoughts that Dareth, her niece, asked her if she couldn’t take care of herself. She told Dareth, “Oh, no, I couldn’t possibly get along on my own.”

Dareth is providing financial assistance. If I weren’t needed, I’d simply be living off my mother and Dareth’s money. Even then, I’d still be a cook, driver, housekeeper, and companion.

Mother seems articulate and sensible when she talks on the phone. She often says intelligent, even wise things. It’s sometimes difficult to know when she’s being stubbornly independent and capable of her intentions or being dangerously incompetent.

So far, so good.

Maybe I’m switching out of this verbalization into a more visual representation. I’ve been talking more chitchat at home, and I’ve been afraid of letting that get out of hand. Mother comments on everything, good and bad, and I’ve reached a point, in my own life, where I’ve let go of even the thinking version of that.

Lisa Marie Presley was on Regis and Kelly this morning.

“What’s that awful sound?” Mother said, not looking at the TV. “Oh, she’s terrible. She has a terrible voice.”

“That’s Elvis Presley’s daughter,” I said.

“She’s probably trying to be like him. I wonder what ever happened to his wife.”

“She’s still around,” I said.

“Oh, that sounds awful.”

I thought, “Sometimes, I feel the same way, but I don’t want to catch this mental diarrhea. Yeah, I know, it should be water off a duck’s back, but even ducks sit in the sun when they get the chance.”
At the Speed of Life

This evening, the clouds parted. Being in being returned, as opposed to thinking of being in Being. Enlightenment is not a thinking man’s game. It’s similar to the old AA saying, “He’s too smart for God.”

When mother asks, “Stephen, what are you thinking?” it’s a sign of freedom when I have to think about it. When I have an answer, it’s not a sign of freedom. My mind is no less capable when it’s empty. It’s more capable when it’s empty, because it doesn’t have to get empty before it can act.

Before I came to Illinois, I imagined my six months here as being like my six months in India, a dozen years ago, and it has been. Every day has been in the present, full of energy, awake, peaceful, and busy. I began to slow down in the last couple of days, not in the sense of going slower. I’ve been going at the speed of life, and slower is slower than life. In India, so much occurred, and nothing occurred, at the speed of life.

At the speed of life, I’m not at the mercy of my mother’s depression, malaise, disappointment, sadness, anger, doubt, fear, confusion, worry, or her normal attempts to understand and control everything. At the speed of life, I’m at the speed of awareness, and awareness is still. In stillness, life is like a car wreck, without the screeching tires, crunching metal, and mangled bodies. The speed of life is when everything that’s fast is not fast, and everything that’s slow is not slow.

The ordinary speed of thought needs an accelerator and brakes.

The trips to the toilet subsided, but the new ointment is still a mystery.

“It’s not like a lotion. It’s dry. It’s not like a lotion at all.”

Her ankles already seem less swollen, and more clear of the rash. We watched Dr. Phil, about people who had lost a lot of weight, how it affected their relationships in surprising ways. Most people resist real change.

When I stopped drinking, almost twenty years ago, I notice the change in the people around me. The first time they saw me sober, they were full of excited praise.
The second time, I often heard, “You know, I probably ought to quit. I drink too much, myself.”

The third time, people would look sour and turn away, as if to say, “I don’t want to deal with this anymore. Where’s my beer?”

My mother has complained I’m not the old Stephen, the one who engaged in her kind of conversation, who ate whatever she ate, who was tormented by unresolved issues. Her condition doesn’t allow her to think too much about it.

I’m beginning to believe I can maintain my freedom in this unfree world. In India, a country characterized by spirituality, it was easier. In the US, a country characterized by commerce, power, and accomplishment, it’s less easy, but so far, so good.

A young couple came in the cafe, teenagers in the prime of their burgeoning sexuality. The girl had to hide her breasts - her nipples were aroused. The guy pulled his long shirt down over his crotch and bent at the waist, to hide his arousal. They were delighted with each other and with themselves. I remember that state of arousal, in this town. It colored everything I was and everything I thought, felt, and did.

It was wonderful, until I wanted it to stop, and it didn’t stop. Then, one day, in my thirties, I felt it loosen its grip, and I rejoiced. I became aroused by the absence of arousal. I saw the face of freedom.
The Pleasure Fascist

Be still. I’ve wondered what might step me over the line, from passing as a loyal member of the society of common consciousness, into being an habitual practitioner of awareness. My loyalty to the ways of attachment, to the way things are done in the world, is a little astounding to me. Despite a lifetime directed by my otherness, I’ve continued to act as if I don’t get it. I’ve played along, as if I’m in the game. I know what’s on TV. If that isn’t emblematic of someone who belongs, I don’t know what is. I talk to people in the vernacular of every common belief system.

I believe that stepping from ordinary consciousness to awareness is a natural evolution, so I haven’t taken up the mantle of a spiritual path, I haven’t undergone a rigorous regimen of religious practice, I carry no belief system, I am what I am, and that’s all that I am.

Living with Gladys is a rigorous regimen, but she’s not my guru. Or maybe she is. Maybe her motherhood (Scott, Mark, and Steve’s Brotherhood of the Motherhood) is the teacher against whom I define myself. In this case, un-define myself. Her world is made up of definition, and her great difficulty, now, is accepting how those definitions aren’t working, as she tries to remember, invent, or discover something to cling to.

Her review of the past is a search for definition. She wants to come to a conclusion, in more ways than the obvious. She wants it to be a happy conclusion, but her physical reality insults her, every day. She wore a skirt and only went to the bathroom four times in three hours.

Still she says, “I’m not going to take that pill, anymore! You don’t know how much trouble it is!”

One time, she called from the hallway, “I’m falling!”

I ran to her side. Her whole body was shaking like a tremor in the earth. I felt some satisfaction in her spell. When she was feeling more sure of herself, she was also more agitated, more unpleasant to be around. When she’s feeling her debilities, it ratchets up a bit of humility, she’s softer and sweeter.
When I bring her things to eat and things she needs, she’s kinder in her gratitude. I don’t need the gratitude, as much as I enjoy the kindness in her voice.

I’m accepting of her, when she’s not in control of the forms of her life. That acceptance isn’t like forgiveness; it’s being free to live in the moment.

Brandon’s mother, Liz, told Mother that Brandon got a gold medal at the Pan Am Games.

“What’s a gold medal?” she wondered, struggling to understand.

At first, I thought she meant for me to tell her about the Pan Am Games and the waterpolo victory, but she meant the medal itself.

“Is it a piece of gold with a ribbon on it?”

“I suppose it is. I don’t know.”

Later, she wants to know, “Liz said Brandon got a gold medal. What’s a gold medal?”

I tell her. I feel the relief when the question and the answer have no moral dialectic attached to it. I like it when it isn’t about to become a diatribe about some real or imagined matter of history. It’s out of time. It has no past and no future. It’s the story of itself.

“If only everything were the story of itself,” I think, “and not the imagined past and future of it.”

I saw, this morning, how mental her reality is. Watching some young pop singer on Regis, she said, “The band was never this loud when Frank Sinatra sang. He always had the band play quieter.”

She’s a keen observer of the world she inhabits. That is to say, her mind is always riding shotgun, always keeping an eye out, always maintaining a safe distance between her and everything else.

This is the great affliction of human thought. Always of the world, but never truly in it. To be in the world but not of the world is the truest freedom.

The mind tries to reverse that, in hopes of attaining its own version of freedom. What it gets instead of freedom is slavery to its own habits, judging, calculating, predicting, remembering, analyzing, anticipating, appreciating.

And yet the capacity is there for being in Being.
“Look at this color,” she says, holding up a page from *Oprah*. A few seconds after being in the middle of the color, she is outside it, putting it in the record.

Am I doing the same thing, this minute, as I write?

Years ago, on Mt. Tamalpais, outside San Francisco, Mark told me to look at the sunset.

“Look at that sunset! Look at it! Steve, look at the sunset!!”

I said he was a pleasure fascist. Instead of standing in awe of the sunset, instead of becoming awe itself, he turned it into an exercise in comprehension, an instruction for his blind brother.

This is my trip to India, deep into the heart of lightness, where I get the chance to step over the line from innate awareness to awareness in practice. I see the fruits of this practice. Speaking to my mother requires me to forget the past and the future, and when I do that, I’m at peace. One of Jay Leno’s guests, last night, was a woman who discovered a painting in her possession, that she never liked, was a Jackson Pollock, worth millions of dollars.

The greatest difficulty with a Pollock, and the great joy of a Pollock, is that you have to stand in front of it and be with it. You can’t analyze it, you can’t get any intellectual distance on it; you can’t define it.

Jay asked the woman why she didn’t know it was a Pollock for all the years she had it. “Wasn’t it signed?”

“The dealer said his style was his signature,” she said.

Mother said, “They call that a painting?”

Jay asked the woman, “So now do you think it’s a good painting?”

“Get real,” she said.

Everyone laughed. She hated the painting, but it made her rich, and she still hated the painting.

“This is a great story. This is a truly heartwarming story,” Jay said, sounding genuinely wistful.
This is Your Mother

I don’t know what to call my own mother. I want to call her Ma, or Mom, but I rarely do. ‘Mother’ feels too formal, but I’ve gotten used to her signing her letters, ‘Mother,’ and ‘Your Mother.’ On the phone, she might say, “This is your mother.” When I’m talking to my kids, it feels good to call her ‘Grandma.’ I tried using that as my own reference, but, of course, she’s not my grandmother.

Before I was married, my fiancée, Julie, said to her, “I don’t know what I should call you; Gladys, Mrs. Brooks, Mother, or what?”

My mother, in her prime, at 51, thought for a moment and said, “Call me Ducky.” She was being a smart aleck. Now she says it never happened.

I’m uncomfortable with any of her names because I don’t feel especially loving toward this woman, my mother. She was never intimate with any of us in a warm, easy, joyful way. She was Our Mother. She was the general of the house, and she ran it with skill and flair. She was a great cook, but there was no sense that what she cooked was cooked with love. Love was not projected into the food she prepared for her husband and her boys, but we ate like kings. Every meal was great. We always had clean clothes, ironed and folded. Our rooms were comfortable and orderly.

I honor my mother, and I appreciate her. She looked out for our wellbeing all her life. But I don’t have a warm place in my heart for her. This has been deeply disturbing. I want to love her. I’m a loving man. So I love her as best I can. But loving her for what she does, or did, is to love myself for what I do. Loving anyone, for what they do, is not loving them for who they are, in their deepest self.

When I was a senior in college, a friend took me aside and warned me that my girlfriend, my future wife, wouldn’t love me for who I was, she would only love me for what I did.

I thought about it, and I laughed. No problem. I didn’t love myself for who I was. I loved myself, if at all, for what I did. I had no idea who I was. I couldn’t imagine anyone loving me for who I was. Why not love me for who I was? Because I had never seen or felt any such thing.

‘Who I am’ is as imprecise and nebulous as you can get. It has no shape or form. Such is the case for love itself. It has no shape or form. “I
love you for who you are,” is like saying, “I nothing you for the nothing you are,” or “I everything you for the everything you are.” Absolutely, totally, unconditionally, forever and ever.

And yet, I know the nature of this love.

A girlfriend once yelled at me, on a bus, “You don’t know the meaning of love!”

Of course, she was right. The meaning of love has more to do with meaning than it does with love. In the meaning of love, I love my mother. I know what that means, and I mean it when I say that I love my mother. I tell her that I love her, because it’s true, in the meaning of love. I’ve learned the meaning of love, and what I feel toward my mother, in the scheme of things human, in the meaning of love, is love.

True love is to recognize the absence of separation between any two that appear to be separate. The meaning of love is the bridge between separate people. True love is bridgeless, meaningless, and wider and deeper than any river.

At the deepest level of the simplest, truest reality, there is no difference between my mother and me. That’s true between me and anyone else, between anyone and everyone else. My mother functions as a unique and separate entity. In her own way of thinking, to love her is to love her separate self. I don’t love her separate self. There has never been a bond between us as separate selves.

I don’t necessarily love anyone as a separate self. I feel desire, admiration, fear, envy, anger, companionship, kinship, etc., with the separate selves of the world, but to call it love is to quantify the unquantifiable.

I like my son, I appreciate him, I admire him, I share a bond with him, even as separate selves, but there is a moment of love in our being together that dissolves all distinctions. Such a blessing is the recognition of love itself, and no one is present for its appearance.

When the absence of self is apparent in being with another, that is love. Being with my mother doesn’t welcome the absence of self. As with most human beings, the absence of self is anathema to her.

There’s very little precedent for the absence of self in our common social behavior. We praise and recognize the presence of self. The larger the ego - the better. The more power that ego displays - the better. All our love
stories and songs are about the desire for love and the failure of love. That’s the work of egos and the play of the self.

As my mother approaches the dissolution of her self, the opportunity for love ought to increase, but, as is the case with almost everyone, the opposite seems to be true.

All last night, and again this morning, my mother was glued to the TV, watching The Great Blackout of 2003. Her reaction to it was to see how nice people were acting toward each other.

People were reacting in relief that the blackout wasn’t a terrorist attack. But for most people, the breakdown in normal order is an opportunity to let go of the controls that restrict our innate happiness.
Phylum and Phorgetum

I thought things had changed. We went out to dinner, and it was easy, friendly, and satisfying. Rewarding comes to mind. It started to ask her questions about family, but before I did, she was telling stories.

“Every Sunday, my mother would clear the dining room table for me and give me the Sunday paper. I would cut out pictures and make dolls out of them. I’d cut out pictures of furniture and make rooms for them. In the yard, in the fall, when the leaves fell, I’d separate them into rooms. My girlfriends and I would pretend to be grown-ups. I was Mrs. Enexa. It was my name backwards. Axene. Enexa. Mrs. Enexa.”

“Did you make up husbands?”
“No.”
“Did you make up children?”
“No.”
“Did your brothers have cars? Did they fix up old cars?”
“Oh, yes. Harry had a car. It wasn’t much more than wheels and a frame and seats. One time, when Everett was with him, he went around a corner, and Everett fell out.”

“I loved school. I always loved school. I made sure to read everything the night before school. We had Biology. That’s the study of plants. Phylums and all that. I read the chapters the night before. I thought, ‘This is pretty interesting.’ The next day, the teacher had us take a test. The day after the test, she said to the class, ‘I want to read this paper.’ She read it to the class. I thought, ‘That sounds familiar.’ It was my paper. She gave me an A+.”

“Joyce Kunkel told me, ‘Study hard in the beginning, and the teacher will think you’re a good student, and then you don’t have to study after that.’ But I was always prepared.”

“Scott was a good student. One teacher called me in and said, ‘Are you saving your money for his college education, because he’s a very intelligent boy.’”

The waitress was young and attractive. I thought boys probably hounded her. I noticed her, indirectly, and she noticed me, indirectly. We
didn’t look at each other or flirt. I liked it that my sexuality felt alive. I attributed it to my sense of wellbeing.

Soccer, last night, was no great shakes as far as heroics goes, but I enjoyed the work-out and the camaraderie. I felt self-assured. I felt the absence of doubt. I felt happy and strong. I asked several players, “What do you do when you’re not playing soccer.” It’s often a good opener. Most of the guys I talked to work at one of the local manufacturing plants, or ‘tractor factories’ we used to call them.

Mother’s rash seems to be fading. I bought some carpet cleaner and cleaned the spots and stains in front of our chairs and in the paths to the kitchen and the bedrooms. It worked. The carpet looked like new. A neighbor left some homegrown tomatoes at our door. Vivian, next door, brought over some homemade cookies. I went to Old Navy and bought some long shorts.

I went to the art store in Davenport and bought another large tablet for drawing. I asked the man if he had any rag paper. He said he didn’t know, but Cary probably did. I asked him about something else, and he said he’d have to ask Cary. I asked him about a third thing, and she said he wasn’t sure.

I said, “I bet Cary knows. We ought to ask her,” and he grinned. “Yeah,” he said, “and there she is, the woman who knows everything.”

I stayed off the Government Bridge to the Arsenal Island, between Davenport and Rock Island. The first time I used it, there was a barge coming through. I had to wait half an hour. The second time, it was quitting time on the Arsenal. I had to wait twenty minutes. I took the Centennial bridge home. It was slow, but it was only a five minute delay.

“What are you doing in the Quad-Cities? Don’t you live in Seattle?” one of the soccer players asked me.

“My mother,” I said, “I’m here to take care of her.”

“I know,” the guy said. I realized he was asking me something else. “And there are so many other good reasons to be here,” I said.

I played on the side that was mostly teenage and twenty-something second-generation Latino hotshots. As open as I got myself, many times, they preferred to carry the ball into tight quarters, pass to each other, and shoot. I wasn’t on their radar screen. I didn’t take it personally.
“I thought you were going to become an actor,” mother said, at dinner.

“I did become an actor,” I said. I wrote and performed one-man shows in San Francisco and Seattle.

“I mean on a TV show.”

“I’m no good at that kind of acting. That requires memorization, for one thing. I can’t memorize. I can’t remember the things I write, myself. I’ve written thousands of poems, and I can’t remember any of them.”

“You could just apply yourself,” she said.

“It doesn’t work like that. Some people are good at it. I’m not.”

“I sure hope Scott’s kids can find jobs when they get out of school.”

Mark has been driving east, yesterday from Steubenville, in Ohio, toward Pittsburgh. I emailed him to ask if he’s been caught up in The Blackout of 2003.

In Iraq, they are laughing at the Americans who panic when the electricity and water go out for two days in 85-degree weather. They have been without electricity and water for two months, in 120-degree weather. The President says the reaction of Americans to this crisis shows our mettle. It’s the kind of mettle I call tin foil.

You see what happens when I get caught up in the conversational merry-go-round? It merrily goes round and round and round and round and round and round and round and round and round, albeit, sometimes rather interestingly.
Pitting Cherries

“Stephen, I don’t know about you.”

We were in Wendy’s for lunch, after her Saturday hair appointment. She had been telling me stories. Well, I’m not so sure she was telling me stories. I was listening, but she seemed to be talking for her own pleasure, with no sense of me as her confidant.

Last night, in the Village Inn, the same scenario occurred. That was enjoyable, and this was pleasantly enjoyable, for the first forty-five minutes.

“I used to pit cherries for my mother. I had that big granite bowl with cherries in water and a bowl to my right.”

“It was a granite bowl? Wasn’t it heavy?”

“Yes, that’s right. I left the stems and pits, and put the pitted cherries in the second bowl. I can’t tell you how many cherries I pitted.”

“Did you have a tool for pitting the cherries?”

“No. I just pulled them out.”

“Didn’t you squish the cherries?”

“No. They come out, if you pull on the stems.”

“Oh, they were soaking in water, and that loosened them up?”

“Everett and I wore socks on our arms, cut off, when we cleaned raspberries, so we wouldn’t get cut up by the thorns. Raspberries are soft, so you have to be careful. We picked strawberries and gooseberries. I never liked gooseberries, to pick or to eat. Strawberries aren’t so hard to pick.”

And, after an hour, she said, “Stephen, I’m not so sure about you. You’re bored by my stories, aren’t you?”

“I like the stories,” I said, “but I get tired, after a while, sitting in Wendy’s.”

“Your brother Mark used to like listening to my stories.”

“I like your stories. We did this last night.”

“Where? We did what?”

“We did this, last night, in the Village Inn. Your stories are interesting. But I have work I want to do, and I’ve got a lot of energy. I don’t want you to give me a hard time, just because I get restless after an hour, sitting in Wendy’s.”
“You know that old people like to reminisce. When you’re old, you need someone to talk to. I don’t have anyone I can reminisce with.”

“It isn’t like we never see each other. We live together. We have plenty of time to tell stories. We don’t need to catch up. I like hearing your stories. Some of them are stories I’ve never heard before, but I don’t want you to give me a hard time about it.”

“Clarence Ehlers was a good talker, but he always swore, ‘Goddamn this, Goddamn that.’” She laughed.

“Charlotte Ehlers taught me how to make angels’ food cake. Now you can buy a box for that, and it’s good, but then we had to separate the egg whites and beat them. She taught me how to make a lot of things. She was a good cook.”

I have to learn how to deal with this. I like to listen to her stories, but we’re falling into a pattern, where she talks for way too long, sitting in uncomfortable places, until she notices my lack of enthusiasm, and then she accuses me, with justification, of finding her boring. It’s deadly boring. It reminded me of conversations with Mark. He didn’t start this pattern of talking as if one is in a reverie, with little regard for others, and then accusing others of bad faith for not accepting the arrangement.

They’re both right about one thing. I want them both to shut up.

“I’m just going to have to say ‘stop’, when I can’t listen anymore,” I told her.

I thought that if I let them run on long enough, they’d run out of gas, but I need to say, “Stop, that’s enough. I can’t do anymore.”

If the last ten seconds is the only memorable reality, I assume her short-term memory won’t accept I could be tired, after an hour. This may be more habitual than that. There is a common tendency for both of them, to glass over, to talk in a solipsistic reverie, until someone says, “Stop!”

This is also a kind of aversion therapy for me, in terms of living in the past, even in terms of living in thought. Every addiction gives something that feels good, and then takes back more than it gives. The all-too-human habit of living in the past (and, by extension, the future) is an addictive state that gives a little, i.e., some of the stories are enjoyable and seem relevant, but they are told in such a way that the present is drained of its vitality, taking back the pleasure that was given.
I have an old poem about my father, in which I said, “There’s no love in the story, if there’s no love in the telling.”

I wasn’t sure, for a long time, what that meant, but this is it. The telling can be a present and loving reality, and if it isn’t, the story is vacuous, emptied of life.

I kept looking across at my mother, hoping to see a woman who was present, telling a story to another person who was present, with love that was present, but what I saw was an old woman who was reliving the past for her own pleasure. Taking drugs in my presence, and then getting bothered because I wasn’t as stoned as she was.

I even tried to get a contact high off her reveries, but I couldn’t do it. I need to learn to approach this in some way that’s beneficial to her and to me. “Love the sinner, hate the sin,” they say. I was happy to see that she was happy, and her happiness seemed to be dependent on my presence.

“Your brother used to like my stories.”

He’s told me different. I’m sure he did something to keep his own sanity while he humored hers. I want to ask him, but he’s another druggie. I’ll ask him, anyway.

The answer to this won’t come from anyone else. The problem here is not with my mother. I’ll take care of that, one way or another, and she won’t remember it, anyway.

Do you, dear reader, remember the business about her being sharp-tongued?

“Stephen, you’ve given me something to think about?”

I haven’t heard another word about it. This too shall pass. But, the challenge is mine, to live in close company with someone who is addicted to the past, who is also someone for whom the present is the only reality she can retain. The present is the only true reality, and the past is the only reality she depends on.

This is a paradigm.

“I couldn’t hire someone to do what you do,” she said, when we were on our way to the hairdresser’s. “My friend Katherine hires a woman to come in everyday. I don’t know what she does.”
Tell Me More

“No, I’m not bored, I love your stories, tell me more.”

I forgot. I’m an old charmer. I should have led her on, like a schoolgirl looking for some gentle positive reassurance.

As I was coming out of the house, I thought, “Why don’t I just shut up and get through this,” and the answer came back, “I’m a writer in this life, and that is how I respond to this situation.”

Then, as I was driving along the riverbank, the river gleaming in the night with the cities’ reflected lights, with the Celebration River Boat, churning its way upstream, I thought of drawing my mother while she talks. If I can draw her, I get to be present, no matter how deep she goes into a reverie. I’m an artist - it’s what I do. Let sleeping Glaydies lie.

The woman I referred to earlier as my cafe muse, Ann, by name, appeals to me because she looks at me with open-eyed anticipation. I imagine she looks at everyone that way.

There’s no opening to any further connection between me and her. I suspect this reality is what pleases me. It’s the feeling, in my own heart, reflected in my own eyes, that I enjoy imagining is in her heart, that I see reflected in her eyes. Until there is an opening, or a closing of any more connection between us, I seem content to enjoy this sense. I just realized I’m sitting here at ease, not thinking of anything related to my situation, whatever that might mean.

“They (our emotions) do exist, but we can know them in a way that is different from either expressing them or repressing them.”

Mark Epstein

One purpose in writing this book, for me and anyone who might read it, is to establish the knower of emotions as an empty being, so full of life it can only function as a witness to the very life it enacts. This book exists in the realm of true emptiness. The reader and the writer appear to occupy the role of the actor of it’s consciousness and its awareness. A book, any book, this book, is clearly unbound by any particular being.
Being Sociable

We went to church. I skipped the soccer game. She was up early, trying on clothes. It was apparent she wanted to see and be seen. Her skin condition has cleared up. She was sociable. I was ready to begin to draw her at lunch, but she wanted to go home after the service. I grabbed a donut from the chat room next to the sanctuary.

Getting out of the car, at home, she asked me how I liked the service.
“I enjoyed it, but I’m not long for going every week.”
“You didn’t like the sermon?”
“I liked the sermon, fine, but I’m not a card-carrying Christian.”
“Don’t you accept Jesus as your savior?”
“No, I don’t.”
“Who else could know the glory of a newborn baby?”
“Everybody. It’s natural.”
“Who could have created this universe?”
“The Bible says the nature of God is beyond understanding.”
“Well, that’s true. You can’t figure it out.”
“I don’t try.”
“You look nice, this morning. You’re a handsome man. All my boys are handsome men. Well, it’s no wonder. They had a handsome father.”
“And a handsome mother,” I added.
One woman, in church, said to me, “When you turn sideways, at a certain angle, you look just like your mother.”
“Except my nose is bigger,” I said.

During the service, another church leader was introduced. It was Diane Whitmore. She was a year younger than I was, in Sunday school. She spoke with warmth, charisma, strength, and compassion. She spoke like a born preacher. The regular preacher sounded like a Sunday school teacher next to her. I said so.
“I’ve heard people say that,” Mother said.
When Diane was standing up front, mother said, sotto voce, but too loud for a whisper, “It’s Diane Whitmore.”

I parse my words with my mother. I keep my own counsel. I’m sure, to her, it seems as if I’ve lost my tongue. But, given her frailties and quirks,
it seems to be a good policy. AA calls it ‘restraint of tongue and pen’. Always a good idea.

So much of my life, any life, is habitual. When I live alone, I don’t live as habitually, in some ways, but companionship with my mother is triggering some old habitual behavior.

In India, it’s said that true spiritual liberation is difficult for a householder, but my teacher and his teacher recommended that we don’t divorce ourselves from habitual reality.

“If you have to go to the mountains to be free, how free are you?”

I’ve known, for a long time, that I have an empathetic nature. There’s a constant temptation, in my habitual nature, to be like whomever I’m around.

When I was a young man, I could mimic whomever I was with so quickly and accurately, that I seemed to be their instant intimate. Now I get to witness the same inclination without having to indulge it. For years, I fought the inclination. Now I recognize the state of my being in which there is no inclination to match the nature of those around me.

In India, I picked up the musicality of the language, and some of the Indians I met remarked how Indian I sounded.

“It’s not difficult,” I said, “You just speak in a slightly musical voice and everything sounds Indian.”

“It’s true,” they said, and laughed.

I don’t want to become my mother. What a shock. I have a long history of fighting her presence in my presence, but now I can welcome it, not by becoming it, but by being who I am, without becoming anyone, even without becoming Steve.

As time passes in this Asylum Ashram, I’m feeling less and less vulnerable to any mundane mimicry. My dear old dad called me ‘The Moline Mimic’, once, and don’t we all mimic the reality we’re born into? The challenge is to recognize the emptiness that precedes, succeeds, and engulfs everything we learn to be.

For instance, I wonder who is writing this story. Stephen Brooks, Son of Gladys, is a character in the story, but he seems not to be the author. Abhaya, son of awareness, could be the author, but his writing would carry almost nothing of the struggle of this situation. Steve Abhaya, the poet, is not the author. I hear from him only occasionally in this text. There is,
instead, the form of a writer who seems to write the story, a ghostwriter, built from many years of reading and writing. There’s also a speaker who seems to come in from time to time. There’s the voice of the story as imagined by the reader. I don’t know him except by my own ear as a reader, like a glance in someone else’s mirror. Who I am is nowhere to be found in any or all of these.

Who I am is the constant witness to the writing, but I can’t even claim him as the author. The author seems to come out of the tip of the pen, and as soon as he does, he’s gone.

The disappearance of pure being into form doesn’t bother me. In fact, I like it. My mother disappears into whatever form appears every day. She claims to know me, or someone I’ve been. That’s about as true as me knowing who she is, or who she was, based on the evanescent partial evidence I see every day, or the unreliable evidence of memory.

Even as a family, we’re part of the river. Our vague familiarity and our constant change show me how unknown we are to each other.

This old woman is my mother, Gladys Myrtle Axene Brooks, and she’s unknown to me, as I’m unknown to her. We share the intimacy of unknowing, or we mimic our shadows.
The Gist of the Story

I thought I was done writing. The story had a sense of completion. It may still be true. I did two drawings of my mother at breakfast this morning, while she told me a story about my cousins back east. The story was prompted by an email from Mark, in Boston.

Last night, I rented the movie Signs with Mel Gibson. Mother kept asking me what the name of the movie was. She couldn’t hear what the actors were saying, no matter how loud the volume was. It was a confusing story for her. I switched over to the TV, until she went to bed, and I watched the rest of the movie.

After I left the house, today, I passed the new neighbors who’ve moved in below us. They had put up a cut-out script of their name, Dreher, by their front door. I stopped the car, rolled down the window, and told them that my brother was married to a girl named Dreher who was from East Moline.

“What’s her name?” Tom said.
“Her maiden name was Liz Dreher,” I said.
“Elizabeth Dreher is my sister. My half-sister.”
“Then, we’re related,” I said.
I stuck out my hand, and we shook.
“I didn’t know they were back from Hawaii.”
“They’re not. They still live there.”
I was on my way to the courthouse to get a copy of Liz’s daughter’s birth certificate for her passport.

“Small world,” I said to our new neighbor, our relative by marriage and adoption. Liz was adopted by Tom’s father when Tom was a boy, before Liz’s mother divorced him and re-married her first husband, Liz’s biological father.

It felt good to do the drawings. She never even noticed I was doing it. This feels like a postscript. I can’t help it. When the energy to write changes or stops, there’s no denying the energy. Any story I write about my mother or anybody else could continue, ad infinitum. But, I think the gist of the story is here, and it’s a poet’s instinct to be as succinct as possible. I suspect I’ll add to it, but for now, it feels at a stopping point.
Sweet Roles and Bread Pudding

Tonight, I wonder if I have any more to say. My hand is moving with difficulty, as if the muscles don’t work. There’s more to say. I could say more. I want to tell the story of dinner at Miss Mamie’s, tonight, but my hand feels arthritic, all of a sudden. This is a sign.

Dinner was good. I gave a book of poems to Joyce, the owner and one of my old classmates. She gave me a take-home pack of sweet roles and bread pudding.

This is almost torture, like being someone with no creativity, trying to write an essay.
Clouding Over

The oddest thing is occurring. As I edit this text from the beginning, my eyes are clouding over, and I feel heavy. It’s the opposite of my experience in the writing of it. Writing these pages invariably left me feeling lighter and clearer. Now, the sense is of unhappiness and despair. This story feels joyless to me, as I read it.

Maybe it’s time to feel the pain and sadness I describe.
The House Dick

The problem I have being with my mother isn’t paying attention to her. Instead, I need to pay true attention to myself, while I care for her.

Yesterday, we sat together watching Dr. Phil. The discussion was of couples who ignore each other because they believe they’re so different from each other.

Phil said, “Sitting side by side, watching TV, is not being together.”
My mother and I often sit side by side, watching TV. I realized that my attention was always on her, as it was right then.

I was raised, in my nature, to be sensitive to who she was, not who I am. I’ve spent my life as a poet, writer, artist, and performer, and as a spiritual type, paying attention to the truth of my own being. My mother taught me to ignore my innate being, in favor of giving all my attention to her, and by extension, to the world. This is a common teaching.

As I write this, I feel the clouds part and the sun shine. Declaring one’s self shouldn’t be a struggle against the self of anyone else. It’s not a struggle to define a self; it’s merely to be as I am, to be as you are, to be as one is.

I used to say there were three Steves; the Steve my parents created, the Steve I created, and the Steve that God created. What I’m interested in now is the one that no one created, the one who is. I see the presence in the room. It is who I am. It is the fullness of being, without name.

I woke at 5AM. I remembered the talk I was going to attend this morning at the Midwest Writing Center, a talk given by a mystery writer. I remembered the mystery I wrote and abandoned, fifty pages in, called The Detective in the Hotel of Incidental Melodies.

I once imagined a movie about a guy who walks down the street in a town, stops in front of a movie theater, buys a ticket, goes in, sits down, and watches the movie. As he does, the camera follows him and then turns to the screen. The movie begins to watch the movie and never comes back. The movie we see becomes the movie he is watching.

Today, I imagined the rest of this book as poetry, that is, written in the voice of my free spirit. I don’t know what any of this means, but I love the sense of possibility.
Ghosts

finally had enough of the jfk library; i forgot my blue card and had to go back upstairs to get it before i could see the next page and that did it; i need permission to breathe here and all of a sudden none of this bs means diddly; i gotta get out of here; they are insane to a person here; they make everything as difficult as possible because that means its the safest; a bldg full of robots in new clothes; mary hemingway has had nobody look at her papers yet and yet they are as locked up as everything; i cant turn the papers in the folder; must be up and down all the time; i wish i had a can of spray paint to fill these walls w/happiness; i know i am leaving things i can use here but ive had it; but its closing time and maybe i will try again tomorrow but i doubt it; i cant look at one of these people in the face again not once more not once; now you know; how are you; mark

This email from Mark seems, at first reading, another example of his attitude that everyone is hostile to his wellbeing, but there’s a glimmer of truth in his paranoia.

Last night, I watched Bowling for Columbine, Michael Moore’s Oscar winning documentary about gun violence in America. Essentially, he can’t explain why Americans kill each other at a rate unseen in the rest of the world. Canada has as many guns but almost no violence. It isn’t just the guns. “Guns don’t kill people, people kill people!” And we are the people.

There is something in the habitual character of American society that inclines us to violence toward each other. In Canada, neighbors don’t lock their doors, and everybody receives national health care. They care for and about each other. They are all in it together.

In the US, we’re not all in it together. We’re in competition with each other, and the devil take the hindmost. This is a country of people who are at odds with each other. It’s not merely racial. It’s not just the complications of diversity. Other countries have diverse populations. Here, diversity means threat, and the threat is met with violence.

Once begun, the pattern of violence continues until something changes it. Nothing has changed, since the beginning. I watched Gangs of New York, recently, and that story illustrates the history of violence in this country. That violence is in all of us, because we are all in it, and vice versa.

I wake up, every day, in the house of my mother, not with a sense of love and acceptance, but with a sense of conflict, judgment and suspended
rejection. It is subtle, but I have never not felt it, despite the smiling faces and general sense of bonhomie.

When I came into Borders, today, Ann was back behind the counter. She’s been away for several days.
“I thought you’d gone off to New York,” I said.
“I wouldn’t go there. I’d go somewhere else,” she said.
“Where would you go?”
“I’d go to Ireland.”
“Do you have relatives there?”
“No, I just want to get out of here. I might get thrown in jail for this, but I hate it here.”
“I know what you mean,” I said, “I’ve had friends who went to Ireland, and they were treated well. There.”

I looked at her, and I thought for a second about talking longer. There was no one else in line. I continued.
“When I was in India, I said to myself, ‘There must be other countries in the world where you feel welcome.’ But you don’t hear about them, because nothing bad happens there.”
“Why did you leave India?”
“It’s a good question. I thought about it. Basically, I’m not Indian. I’m an American, like it or not. I don’t feel as welcome here, but it’s familiar.”
“As soon as I’m done with school, I’m out of here.”
“What are you studying?”
“Nutrition.”
“Well, that’s good everywhere.”
“Hopefully.”

In my country, in my hometown, in my mother’s house, I feel a quiet hostility. Mark is inclined to see that hostility as external. I’m inclined to see it internally. Either way, there’s a climate of hostility, and when there’s no apparent hostility, there’s the absence of mutually supportive acceptance.

At breakfast, in silence, mother finally said, looking at me, in a soft and gentle voice, “How are you?”
“I’m fine,” I said, looking in her eyes.
I thought, “This is the look of acceptance and love I want to see.”
At the same time, I knew she had decided to speak to me in that quiet, smiling way. I knew it was deliberate, because I’ve done the same thing with her.

I began to think about beginning a life of love and acceptance with my mother. I would like to break out of the old patterns that are in place only out of empty habit. I once called the habits we learn from our parents ghost characteristics, qualities of behavior that have no original life of their own and exist only because they are repeated.

To live in original harmony with oneself is to be free of these ghost characteristics. To be free of all habitual behavior is to be liberated in life. It isn’t necessary to stop all human behavior, but to become free of its habitual character. Let the ghosts die. If a ghost drives a car, it isn’t the fault of the car. A liberated spirit can drive any car as well as a ghost can, and have more fun doing it.

The first step in any liberation is to be aware of whatever is occurring. When I recognize the habitual sense of judgment and the absence of acceptance I carry in my character, it’s with a deep sense of sadness. I have carried this sense of sadness in me all my life.

The first feeling in the opening of liberation can be difficult, but even as I feel the weight of my sadness, it feels better to acknowledge what’s true.
My Friendly Muse

I’m been sitting in Borders for half an hour, editing this book, when I hear a familiar voice. It’s Ann, my friendly muse. I continue editing, when I recognize in myself, a deep and wide sense of happiness.

It occurs to me that I must need to know that someone is present who I love and respect, even if its at a distance. This is the need in my heart to come alive in its truest nature. To imagine another in the heart is to allow the heart to come into its fullness.

It’s similar to what I said earlier about putting a thought on the tongue of one’s heart. It isn’t necessary to court Ann as my lover. My heart doesn’t depend on becoming attached to another person for it to be free and alive. That is, I don’t need something to happen between me and Ann. For the sake of my heart, it has already happened. It is happening.

I’m grateful whenever my heart has a way for it to come into form, but it is the nature of my heart that gives me such delight, not the action of any other person.

This love in my heart occurs in me, without the presence of any other person, and it occurs in me in the making of a poem or a painting, and it occurs in me in the recognition of human beings, beyond my control and beyond my expectation.

There’s a book out now analyzing the great sports teams in history. The author concludes that the makeup of such teams is largely a matter of miraculous happenstance. One reviewer of the book is upset with the author for not pinning down what goes into the occurrence of greatness.

It’s obvious that if that was knowable, great teams would be formed, all the time, but they aren’t. All the ingredients for greatness have been chronicled before, and those ingredients have been combined, over and over again, and greatness is still elusive.

So is the occurrence of love in the heart, in such a way that is recognizable and undeniable. Everybody falls in love, all the time, with one object of their love or another, but true love remains elusive. In the essential truth of our being, true love is not elusive. It’s constant and inescapable.
The occurrence of it in the form of our thoughts, feelings, ideas, and actions, is elusive. Why is that? It’s because our thoughts, feelings, ideas, and actions are elusive, by their very nature.

Trying to capture lightening in a bottle? Don’t blame the lightening. Blame the bottle, if you must. Lightening is only a concentrated form of the light. Light is merely lightening, spread among the million moments of sight.

I know you’d like this to be a story about how I fall in love with Ann, we meet, we become great lovers, and everybody lives happily ever after. I know this could be a story of the blossoming of love between my mother and me. You’d love that, too, wouldn’t you? So would I.

I imagine you want me to approach Ann with charm, wit, honesty, passion, and desire. You’d love to hear all the juicy details, but I’ve been down this garden path before, and I’ve learned to recognize the beauty of the garden and raise my eyes from the cobblestones, or the rose petal path, if you will.

I’m not against discovering the bower at the end of the path. I’m not afraid of the thorns on the roses. I’d like nothing better than to find everlasting love in the form of a beautiful woman, not to mention an openhearted mother. Love and lovers are not identical.

As I seek to be in the presence of the greatest reality, there are forms of being that carry that presence more clearly than do other forms, and my eyes are open to those forms, including the form of being called Ann.

When two beings carry the presence of the greatest reality into a shared awareness, that is the highest expression of this life, but any expectation of that union occurring is like collecting bottles of joy.
Bottle of Joy

As I was writing the last passage, I had an experience I cherish, as a writer. The writing reached a sort of conclusion, a while back, and I thought, “It’s a good story. It’s all there. I guess I’m done.”

The writing was kind of quiet for a while, and then it started up again. Today, I intuitively felt it had become more than a good story, it had become a book.

As I wrote ‘bottles of joy’, I felt the sense of something alive. As I wrote those words, I dropped my pen on the table like a hot pistol. “Ah!” I said, and I grinned, as the pen bounced across the tabletop.

I wanted to tell someone. I wanted to tell Ann. I looked for an opportunity, to tell my imagined partner in sublime, but, after a few minutes, I went to my car and drove home.

At home, I tried to tell my mother what had happened. I described it, and I looked for analogies she could understand.

“It’s like when an athlete does something that’s not predictable. He’s going along, he’s playing well, everything is good, and then something happens that shocks him. You’ve seen Tiger Woods when he sinks an especially long putt or drops one in from the long grass. He pumps his arm and says, “Yes!” It’s like that.

“I don’t understand,” she said.

We went out to dinner. She wanted to find the place that Uncle Walter always liked, a fish place, on a north/south road. She didn’t know what town it was in. After driving west for several miles, I remembered her thinking it might be the Red Lobster in Davenport, so we went there. It was the one she was thinking of, but it was crowded on a Friday night, with a thirty-minute wait. We went to a nearby ‘family’ restaurant called Bob Evans.

It was too cold. The air conditioning was set on high. She liked the cole slaw, but not the fish, not the role, and definitely not the baked potato. She said it wasn’t fully cooked. I suggested she ask for another potato, but she kept eating. The waitress came by, and Mother told her it wasn’t cooked. She didn’t want to order another baked potato. She said she’d try some mashed potatoes.
She didn’t like them or the gravy. She kept eating the baked potato, down to the skin, complaining all the while. I felt good. I didn’t care. My meal was fine. We got peach cobbler and shared it.
The waitress said, “How was everything?”
“Terrible,” mother said, not looking up.
“You told the waitress your meal was terrible.”
“It was terrible.”
“You liked the cole slaw, the role and the fish.”
“No, I didn’t like the fish, it was too spicy, too salty.”
I told the waitress, “My side was good, I enjoyed it.”
The complaints and reviews continued on the ride home. It was warm water off a happy duck’s back. She started in on Ted Danson’s TV character, a grouchy, complaining doctor named Becker.
“He’s a real crab. He doesn’t like anything. Nobody likes being a crab.”
“Who’s being a crab?”
“I am,” she said.
“Who said you’re a crab?”
“Nobody, but I am. I’ve been more crabby, lately.”
“Some people get crabby when they don’t feel well,” I said, in happy shock at this turn of the conversation.
“My mother was never crabby,” she said.
“If you can’t do anything about it, what’s the use of being crabby?” I said.
“That’s right, you can’t change it.”
“There’s a great AA prayer,” I said, and I repeated it. As I did, she knew parts of it and tried to say it, too. I was surprised that she’s heard of it, before.
“God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.”
“That’s a good prayer,” I said.
As we pulled into the garage at home, she said, “We haven’t had much luck with restaurants, have we?”
“That’s why people find one place they like and keep going back to it. The Village Inn is good. I like it there.”
“Mark did, too,” she said.
It was unusually dark at the front door. I said so, and she said, “I thought it was dark.”
“The bulb’s burnt out,” I said, “I’ll change it.”
“No, don’t change it. Let somebody else do it.”
“I’m not lazy and it’s not hard to do.”
She was afraid I’d fall, putting the new bulb in. I got a bulb, carried a chair from the kitchen, and changed it.
At Borders, tonight, I said to Ann, “I’ve been here for a couple of months, and you’re the most awake person I’ve met.”
“I don’t know,” she said, “I don’t get much sleep.”
“I don’t mean that kind of awake.”
“Oh, you mean ‘with it.’”
“Yes, that’s right.”
In that moment, I knew I was talking across a gulf to someone who someday might know what I meant. I still felt good.
“It’s a book!” I hold it up to the world by the binding.
“It’s a book!” I say, the proud papa who only contributed his sperm but loves the baby more than anything.
MY OLE PAPPY

As it turns out now, NY Pub is closed Mon and Brandon is playing Sun and Mon at 7pm on Long Island, a short drive from here but the tickets are $50 and $250 each night depending if i want a seat or a better seat and food; so its a little over my head; no doubt Brandon could get me in free but that involves socializing w/his friends which is risky or avoiding them, which is embarrassing; last thing I think Brandon may want is a pony tail uncle looking for a cheap seat; so I have 3 days to kill; or I could just go on to Charlottesville and forget NY completely; I dunno; let you know how it comes out; mark;

Pity is I could video both games and bring you the tape; last night Brandon blocked a penalty shot; is that as rare in soccer as I think it is in waterpolo? and Moses is the team captain, billed as goalie but Brandon does all the shot blocking; he must be oldest player. Why not call him the shot blocker? Goalie, it sounds like rookie. All he does is block shots or try to. Tho his outlet pass is a key to the game. I still dont know what a hat trick it. Is that when you stick the ball in your shorts and look innocent. If you get this, I will check email before leaving this Yale Library sometime near closing at 5pm today. Give me some advice at this crucial juncture, please.

Too bad youre not online; its almost 4pm here now and i gotta go; they charged me ten dollars cover charge at the yale library and they had nothing i came here to get; its in the computer catalogue but its not on the shelf; and its not checked out either; 14 items; and they look at me blank face; not their problem; all i got for my ten bucks was email; I am not having good luck in these libraries; yale univ library is a second rate library; their microfilm equipment is ancient and their shelves like berkeley but w/o the books; iowa has 3 times the hem books yale has; and they charge admission; i should have known when they charge for water, its a clip joint; i know you like to hear all this; love to mother; mark

Its 4:15 now and I am out of this Yale nonsense; on to Virginia I think; can't decide about Hilton Head; its a good thing to do on Labor Day; Peter Axene may be a bundle of fun; a long way out of the way tho; long way but I hafto greyhound to alaska anyway and a few days wont matter; guess who

I was standing at the sink, tonight, while Mother sat at the kitchen table. She said something, and I thought to say, “You guessed her, Chester.” It was the sort of thing I might say to my father, or he to me. I didn’t say it, because she wouldn’t have enjoyed it.
I imagined being in this situation with my ole pappy instead of my Mother. It made me feel happy and sad at the same time. He would have been ninety-one, last month.

I easily imagined him sitting in the chair where she sat. I easily imagined loving the pleasure we might take in each other’s company. As different as we were, we were the same in the ways that resonate in the heart.

After her hair appointment, she was unsure about where she wanted to have lunch. We ended up at Arby’s, where, by her account, she and Mark had a great sandwich, once. I think it was actually she and I, two years ago, but this time, it was a big disappointment. She said the sandwich was no good, and the curly fries were cold.

I said, “This is a fast-food place. Nothing here is good. This is eating for entertainment. I don’t like it, either. I don’t feel comfortable, here. I don’t like the cold air, the furniture, the food, or the noisy music.”

“We don’t have to eat lunch. We can just go home.”

“No, I want you to go out to lunch when you want. We just need to find some places we like, like the Village Inn, some place we like every time we go there. I don’t like the bad food any more than you do, and I don’t like complaining about it.”

“Whatever you want to do, we’ll do that,” she said.

Then we went to Jewel for a couple of frozen dinners, for when I play soccer and she’s home, alone, at dinner-time. She came into the store, the first time in two months, or maybe longer. Mark always did the shopping for her, and so do I. The difference is that he always bought and ate what she liked.

With a grocery cart for balance, she took her sweet time shopping. She walked more than she has since I got here. She bought fifty bucks worth of TV dinners, deserts, sweets, cakes, and pizza. She was having a good time. I went along for the O.J.-police-pursuit/slow-boat-to China/stop-action-photo-shoot. Despite the granny-behind-the-wheel traffic jams, it was good to see her mobile and enjoying herself.

“You didn’t enjoy yourself,” she said.

“I was glad to see you moving around like that,” I said.

I began to imagine her concluding that living with me was not good for her, because I was so difficult. On the other hand, I’m glad for the
emergence of my decision-making about these excursions into the world of dining out. I told her that, on my own, I wouldn’t choose the same places she chose, and she seemed open to changing the list.

And then she bought all the food I would avoid, pizza, fried chicken, cashews, frozen dinners, etc.

“We should get some frozen fish,” she said.
“We already have frozen fish,” I said.
“No we don’t!” she said, emphatically. We do.

This morning, Carol and I were reminiscing about being teenagers in church, going to MYF meetings on Sunday night, going to camp, going on hay rides.

“I loved the hay rides,” I said.
“You didn’t go on any hay rides,” Mother said.
“Yes, I did. At least, two times, that I remember,” I said, happily.
“No, you didn’t!” she said, adamantly. “I wouldn’t have allowed it.”
I smiled at Carol, over my mother’s newly coifed head.
“I guess I must have dreamed it, then. It was a great dream, though.”

After I dropped Mother at home, I rode my bike up to a coffeehouse in Moline, called Fireworks, because it’s also a pottery making and painting place. On the way home, I rode past a pill container, lying in the gutter. I kicked it and realized it was full. I stopped and rode back. I picked it up and saw that it was issued yesterday to a female at an address in Moline.

I decided to find the owner and return it to her. I began to imagine the adventure of it. I rode home, got the car, and drove to the address. I buzzed the apartment. A gruff male voice said, “Who are you?”

“I found Terri Granger’s medicine in the street. I have it here.”

The man came down, with a teenage boy trailing him, both shirtless. The man was in his fifties, with a long vertical scar across his ribs and belly. I told him where I found the pills and handed them to him.

“She must have dropped them out of her hand and didn’t know where to look for them. I appreciate it.”

He was gruff and unsmiling. He took the pills and turned away. End of story. What kind of medicine was it? One pill, three times a day. One day missed already. Who was she? What was she doing when it happened? Was she walking, with her hand out over the gutter? Was she riding in a
car, with her hand out of the window? Was she riding a bicycle? Were the pills for absentmindedness, for small-motor muscle control? Was she trying to throw them away? End of story.

I left. No good deed goes unappreciated.

I listened to my mother scoffing at various matters of nominal concern. I realized it’s not her criticism that’s off-putting. She’s often accurate in her judgment of the things she describes so negatively. It’s the anger in her voice that’s unsettling and unhappy.

I don’t know when the anger started or why. It’s probably been there most of her life, overlaid with high spirits and a willful good nature, connected to a basically good heart.

I remember going with her and Dad, in ’84, to Tortilla Flats for dinner. Afterwards, sitting in the front seat of the car, she flew into a rage, pounding the dashboard with both fists.

“My life is nothing but a big disappointment. I DESERVE BETTER. I DIDN’T GET WHAT I DESERVE!”

“Amazing,” I thought, at the time. She would later deny she said it, of course. Dad was silent during her brief and unusual tirade.

It’s said that the unexamined life isn’t worth living. A friend once said that the unlived life wasn’t worth examining. My mother has not lived an unlived life, but there’s been little examination of it.

Mark writes from the Yale Library, and mother says, “He sounds lonely.”
The Monitor

She was sick, during the night.
“I’m sorry,” she said, as I tried to clean up the dark stains on the carpet next to her bed.
“Don’t be sorry. You didn’t do it on purpose,” I said.
“No, I didn’t.”

She comments on the TV, as if she’s watching the making of the show and not the show itself. This is a family habit, not to listen to the music, but to watch the conductor and comment on his eyebrows. To listen to the music is to be at one with music. It’s a tradition in this house to keep distance between oneself and whatever is occurring.

I remember a New Yorker cartoon. A grumpy man is slouched in an armchair in front of the TV. His wife is standing in the doorway with a friend. “Harold doesn’t watch TV, he monitors it,” she says.

As an artist, I have no inclination to analyze art. I walk up close to paintings and see how they feel. I wrote poetry for five years before I could voice an opinion about anyone’s poetry, mine included.

When I was younger, I was afraid of feeling, afraid of what I might feel. I discovered I could immerse myself in life and not be lost. And then I discovered getting lost. I became lost and discovered I was still present.

I scrubbed and scrubbed the bedroom floor, but it didn’t all come out. I’ll take another run at it later.

This kind of writing could be criticized as monitoring my life, of always maintaining distance. I’ve never found any writing about what’s occurring to be a device for separation. Instead, it’s a way to recognize the connections. Whenever I put words to what’s true, I see it more clearly. I feel it with less distance. Distance is in the holding of a thought. The holding of a thought is a manifestation of fear. Most of what passes for irony, distance, analysis, and opinion, is doubt, living in fear.

As I think about my family’s habitual posture of critical analysis, I wonder about my time sitting with a teacher in India, listening to him speak. I remember telling someone, “He kept surprising me with the answers he gave to people’s questions. I never saw him thinking.”
Was I listening from a safe distance? I wasn’t. I wasn’t listening at all. I simply heard the truth with all my faculties open. My awareness, intelligence, consciousness, and sensitivity were not asleep just because there was no will in them. They were more acutely tuned, perhaps by years of practice, and by the unfettered nature of their being.

She had a part of a peach and some orange juice. Then, just before I left the house, she had some chicken noodle soup. We skipped church, this morning. Thank God for small blessings.
Something to Love

I asked Mark how he got along with Mother at lunch, listening to her stories. He said he kept asking for details. I excised that from today’s email and passed the rest along to her.

At lunch, she said Mark liked her stories.

“He always asked about my family. He was interested in my family.”

“Mark always had an interest in the family,” I said. “He’s a bit of a historian.”

I went out and got things for the house. I bought a bottle of wine for Roseanne, downstairs. Last night, after my bike ride, I was too tired to go to the store, and the house supply had run out, so I asked Roseanne if she had any cheap, sweet wine. She gave me a third-full bottle of Strawberry wine. I said I’d get her some more, but she said it wasn’t necessary. I did, anyway. Mother wanted me to, and so did I.

“Can you get some wine for Roseanne?” Mother asked, when I got home from the store. Roseanne wasn’t home, so I left the bottle leaning against her door.

“I already took wine to her,” I said.

“You’re a doer!” Mother said.

“I’m a doer,” I said.

When we were sitting at lunch, I remembered Mark’s method, and then I remembered her line about me being a doer. I got up and did some dishes and then some cleaning in the kitchen. I’m a doer. When I go to a place to write, I write. When I’ve finished writing, I leave. As often as I spend time in coffeehouses and cafes, I don’t hang out there. I don’t spend time in chitchat, even with the many friendly acquaintances I’ve made over the years.

The impetus to draw, while Mother reminisces, is even greater with this small bit of realization.

“My parents had the only phone in the neighborhood. I don’t know why. My father never used the phone.”

“Do you think your brothers had anything to do with it? You know how teenagers are, always begging their parents to get the latest thing.”
“Maybe they did. All the neighbors used our phone, from blocks away. I had to run and tell them if they had a call. I hated that. My mother liked it. She didn’t get out much. It gave her a chance to visit. They would sit on the porch and visit.”

“I envy that time,” I said. “It always sounds great.”

“It was a lot of work,” she said. “They paved our street with asphalt. Asphalt is great for skating. Did I tell you I had skates?”

“Yes.”

My brother had a bicycle. Did I tell you that?”

Yes. Did you ever get a bicycle?”

“Heavens no.”

Later, she asked me if I ever considered going into accounting.

“Not in a million years,” I said.

“I loved figures. When I worked for McLaughlin Body Company, we had three desks pushed together with accounting books on them. Whenever he had a problem, he’d ask me to try to figure it out. I loved to work out the numbers . . . get the figures to balance. I always loved that.”

She balanced the books for Dad’s business. She was good at it. It made her happy.

“Scott says he’s the happiest when he’s working on cars. He says he’s never had a complaint. Now that’s something. Not one complaint. You’re lucky if you have something to do that you love.”

“I’m happy when I’m writing or painting,” I said.

“It’s good to find something you’re happy doing, especially if you can make money doing it.”

She knows I’ve never made any appreciable money doing what I do. She talks about a second cousin who is wheel-chair bound.

“He’s never been able to find a job,” she says, as if there’s some mystery to it.

I’m a doer. I like to hear that. It seems to solve something. It gives me a way to think about these situations, a way to find solutions that didn’t seem available before.
True Compassion

I picked up an issue of Parabola devoted to compassion. I’ve been conscious for some time of the Buddhist belief that compassion is the earthly fulfillment of a liberated soul.

I once wrote that true compassion requires no words, no deeds, and I believe that, but I also believe true compassion leads to words and deeds. I don’t believe it’s a state of freedom induced by deliberate behavior. You don’t automatically get compassion by acting in service to others.

The attachment to others is the downfall of liberation, and compassion for others is its fulfillment. Say what? Nobody knows de trouble I seen, go down, Moses, way down in Egypt’s land, co-dependent no more.

Fireworks is across the street from the original Whitey’s Ice Cream, where I worked as a teenager. It’s two blocks from Hasty Tasty, where I met my friends for burgers and sodas in junior high and high school. These places have lost their nostalgic glow for me.

When I first returned to San Francisco, the scene of some of the most dramatic memories of my life, I saw how clearly that reality no longer existed. The other day, I looked down the ravine where I crashed my bike and suffered a concussion during the last days of my drinking. It evoked no sense of that drama. It’s only a ravine.

I told a friend, twenty years ago, that I could already see the future of whomever I was dating.

“You have the curse of Cassandra,” he said, “being able to foretell the future spoils it for you.”

If compassion is sharing the suffering of others, that only compounds the suffering. True compassion is sharing the freedom of others, beyond the suffering. True compassion is sharing the liberation of others. Liberation is with us as surely as suffering is. Samsara is nirvana.

I was pleased to learn, when I was first in India, that putting one’s hands together in an apparently prayerful gesture and bowing slightly, means, “I recognize the God in you.” When it becomes a rote action, even that lovely gesture doesn’t invoke the truth of it.
It’s ‘Mocha Monday’, in Fireworks, and I didn’t know it, until I read the sign in the window above my head. Tomorrow, Mother goes back to the skin doctor for a clean bill of health. I gave her a copy of Newsweek with a big article on statins, the cholesterol reducer.

“This is an article about the medicine you and I take,” I said.

As I was leaving the house, she told me she was reading the article.

I’m sitting across from a woman whose physical presence screams sensuality, whose manner whispers, “Don’t even think about it, but I don’t mind if you do.”

Mother talked about my ex-mother-in-law.

“One day, I looked in her car. It was full of newspapers. It was crammed to the gills with stacks of newspapers. She saw me looking at the newspapers, and she said, ‘I’m saving those newspapers for the coupons.’”

I love human beings. How could you not love human beings? So many variations on one themeless reality.

The sensuous one is showing me her engagement ring, sliding her ring hand up and down a smooth brown arm. I’m showing her my appreciation for the diamond sutra and the rounded breasts of her arching back.
The Good Old Days

We went to the skin doctor and then to The Belgian Village for soup and pie. I positioned myself to watch the overhead TV, so I could listen to her stories with minimal attention. It didn’t work. I ignored the TV and still couldn’t pick up the string.

“You’re not interested in my stories, are you? Mark was always interested in my stories.”

“The problem is, you’re not talking to me.”

“Who am I talking to?”

“You’re talking to yourself. When you reminisce, you go away, and I might as well not be here.”

“Mark always took an interest.”

“That’s right. Mark likes to reminisce, too. I don’t care about reminiscing, as much and you and Mark do.”

“Memories are important. God gave us our memory to enjoy. If you didn’t have memories, you’d be a sorry sort. You’d have no life at all.”

“That’s not true. This moment, right now, is the only place where God lives. God doesn’t live in the past.”

“God gave us our memory. It’s a blessing to have memories.”

“God gave us heart disease and cancer, too, but that doesn’t make sickness a good thing. All I want is for you to talk to me. Memories are OK. There’s nothing wrong with stories, if you’re telling them to someone else when you’re talking. We’re here, together, supposedly having a conversation, but when you reminisce, you go away.” I gestured off into the ether.

“Scott and I used to sit and watch Burns and Allen, together. What a great show that was. When we get together, we get to have those memories. It’s wonderful to share memories. Without your memories, your life would be nothing.”

“No, it wouldn’t. Without memories, there is still this moment of being alive. This moment is where God lives. When you have a happy feeling about a memory, this moment is where you feel it.”

“Feelings and memories are the same thing.”
“The Bible says the only way to be with God is be as a child. Don’t you believe what it says in the Bible? Children don’t live in their memories. They live in the present moment, crying one minute, laughing the next minute, looking around, and seeing what’s in front of them. It’s the same thing as being born again.”

“When you get old, you’ll be glad you have your memories.”

“I am old, and I have memories. Memories are great, but I don’t live in my memories.”

“But all my life is behind me. I don’t have much life ahead of me.”

“You have this.” I gestured to the table, to us, to the room.

“Look at all this. This is real. You mean you’d rather be off in a memory than being here with me?”

“That’s what I am doing? I’ve been talking to you. You just don’t like my stories.”

“You’ve been telling stories to yourself. If you want to do that, that’s OK, have fun, but don’t complain if I don’t like it.”

“I have wonderful memories of when Rachel was a little girl.”

“But that little girl is a grown-up woman now.”

“I know that,” she said, petulantly. “But remembering when she was a little girl makes me happy.”

I don’t mention that those same memories don’t make Rachel happy.

“Right now, you’re talking to me. You just told me something. You told me how you felt, but when you reminisce, you go away, you go off somewhere by yourself, and I’m supposed to sit here and enjoy it.”

I picked up an empty bowl of soup.

“If I sit here and eat soup, and I don’t offer you any of it, but I keep it all for myself, after I’m done, I can’t say we shared the soup, just because we were sitting at the same table, at the same time.”

“We shared the eating, but not the soup,” she said.

She looked at the SUBWAY sign across the parking lot. Her eyes lit up. “Look at the way the letters curl up at the ends like arrows.”

“See? You told me that, right now. It’s happening, right now. You didn’t go away, to tell it. Do you see the difference? You can tell me stories and go away, or you can tell me the same story and be present.”

She looked puzzled.
“Your memories are very important,” she said. “Without your memories, your life wouldn’t be worth much.”

“When I was in India, I had no memories of India. I’d never been there, before. They didn’t know me, and I didn’t know them. And I loved every minute of it.”

“It was all new to you, that’s all.”

“That’s true, but I was there for six months. After a while, it wasn’t all new, but that’s the point, anyway. To a child, everything is new. For me, as an artist, I see the world as new, for the first time. I can’t think, ‘Oh, this is the same old bowl of fruit.’ I have to see it like I’ve never seen it before. It’s not so easy when nothing seems new. Coming here to this town, where I was born, where I grew up, there’s so much that I could reminisce about, but I don’t care about that. I like to see it like it’s a new place.”

“Well, a lot has changed, that’s for sure.”

When we got up to leave, I said how much I enjoyed the conversation. Mother went up to the counter and talked to the lady. I saw something of the old Gladys, a lively, curious, woman who was interested in the world around her. She stood in front of the glass cases, water condensing on the curved surface, with a half smile on her face, chatting with the smiling little woman, behind the cases, older than I am but not as old as Gladys.

I’ve condensed this thirty minute conversation. I have no idea if it will have a salutary effect or not. I was at a dead-end, trying to paste up some method of handling these deadly reminiscences, this graveyard of eulogies.

I don’t have any expectation of transforming my mother from a past-thought addicted, normal human being into a moment-dwelling practitioner of Zenish awareness.

“That woman you went to India with, Suryo was it? When you and she got together, you had lovely memories to share with each other, didn’t you?”

“We never talked about it.”

“When you’re older, you’ll be glad you have those memories.”

As we were getting in the car to leave The Belgian Village, she said, “I’m glad I have my memories of your father. He was a wonderful man. I sure got lucky with him. I watch Dr. Phil, and I realize how lucky I was to
find him. I spotted him right away, and I grabbed him. I wasn’t stupid, either. I was very lucky to find him.”

“You were very lucky,” I said.
Relaxation

Before our discussion about reminiscing, I tried to say that my difficult with our fast-food bull sessions was that I’m a doer, and it wasn’t my habit to sit and chat.

“You have to learn to relax,” she said. “You can’t be rushing around, all the time. You have to learn to take it easy.”

I was surprised by that argument. I’ve never heard it before. I’ve never considered myself unable to relax. It’s true that I’m a doer. It’s true that I have very little idle time. I don’t do nothing. Or, so it seems. In fact, I do nothing all the time. I do nothing when I’m moving around, getting things done.

I’m at peace, and in peace there’s no need to relax. I’m not tense. I don’t have to be busy to feel good about myself. I feel good when I’m doing something or not doing anything. I enjoy what I do, whether it’s going to the store or coming to write. The effect, of being relaxed in my heart, is that so much gets done so easily. Nothing is a struggle and nothing is my freedom. It’s the divine paradox.

What doesn’t appeal to me is getting drunk on escape. People who need to relax need relief. When I was driving home from soccer, last night, I thought about the taste of a beer, a cold one. Having a beer is not something I think about, but the ninety-degree weather, the two hour game, and the plethora of beer signs put me in mind of it. I thought about where I’m living, and I imagined the people reaching for a beer to escape. Beer is a common and acceptable escape in this reality.

When I got home, I noticed Mother’s wine bottle had considerably less wine in it than it did yesterday, when I filled it for her. This morning, I noticed her coffee can was empty, and I just bought it, Saturday, four days ago.

I showed Mother Mark’s latest email at breakfast and she was upset by it.

St Louis this morning; muggy, raining off and on, hot; drove from Charlottesville yesterday 800 mi slept rest area 20 east of StL; sore butt; sorbet? getting 14 mi per gal; plan tuneup in McCook this weekend and swim in pool before they close it Labor Day; then Denver, Casper, Sun Valley and Seattle next weekend; planning long weekend in McCook incl first shower since Dareth; this is the
longest I've gone w/o a shower since Beanblossom Bluegrass festival in 1973 when I went ten days; tho I sponge down every night and wash my feet, its not the same; I hope the McCook rest area is still open w/a new remodeled shower; had the worst biscuits and gravy yesterday at a W Va plaza but couldn't resist a Wendy's supper, baked potato and chili; i will skip the chili next time; and the root beer; ice water is the only drink now w/food; a baked potato w/plenty of butter and chives is all the meal I need; clear skies so far til today; still thinking its possible to drive to Anchorage; I wonder; later, mark Washington Univ library opens at 730 am; first day of classes today

“I don’t like this. He shouldn’t drive 800 miles in one day. His father would be upset with him. I don’t like this one bit. Let me see that email one more time. No, this is very upsetting to me.”

Then she said Kelly Ripa’s voice was harsh. Then she said the bread was too soft.

“You’re in a bad mood, this morning,” I said.

“No, I’m not in a bad mood,” she said.

Maybe she was just reacting to her motherly fear for her son’s wellbeing, driving across country, but I realized my stomach was in a knot. My long time, automatic reaction to her habit of criticism was to get a tense stomach. I had an ulcer when I was living at home, after college and before I got married. It went away when I moved away.

Yesterday, she said that something I bought wasn’t right.

“Yeah,” I said, “and I should have been two inches taller, too.”

She laughed.

I know I can defuse her criticisms with humor, I can ignore them, and I can realize that I am free, but a steady drip in the sink needs a new washer in the faucet.
The Family That Talks Together

I took her to dinner at The Village Inn.
“You always choose good food. You choose for us,” she said.
She had seemed interested in the chimichanga, so I ordered two chimichanga dinners. She didn’t like it.
“You usually choose well,” she said, “but tonight, you failed me.”
“No,” I said, “you failed me. You didn’t like what I ordered. Either stop eating or stop complaining. You have a choice.”
She smiled, and repeated the choices, “Either stop eating or stop complaining.”
“You’re someone who’s a good cook, and you can’t cook. When people can’t do what they’re good at, they criticize everyone else who can.”
“My mother was tough. I don’t know how she got so tough,” she said, and over the next while, she said, “I think my father always moved his lips when he was reading. Your dad’s father never worked, after they moved to Rock Island. Your dad’s mother, Cora, was a very ambitious woman. She took in boarders. They bought that house for $5,000. Your dad’s uncle Bert was a doctor. He made money during the Depression. Nobody else did. He opened an account with $500, and he said anyone in the family could borrow from the account. They had to pay it back, but anyone could borrow from it.”
“He was a generous man,” I said. “That was kind of him.”
“Those were hard times. It was hard to make a living. Nobody had any money. My father worked hard, but he didn’t have any money.” And then she said, “He built two houses. He sold the first one.”
“On Oprah, today, they had fathers who didn’t talk to their kids. And the funny thing was, they looked exactly alike, the sons and the fathers. But they never talked. The men came home from work, and they were tired.”
“They talk business, all day long, and they can’t talk business with their kids,” I said.
“My father didn’t talk to us,” she said.
“My father never talked to me,” I said, “but I talk to my kids. Julie taught me to talk. She demanded I talk to her. I’m grateful to her for that, and I always talked to my kids.”
“That’s wonderful. The men on Oprah said they were going to change.”

“I doubt it,” I said. “It’s hard to change, but maybe they will. You have to start when the kids are young, and then keep it up. My kids and I used to go for long walks and talk, but I always talked to them.”

“But you were divorced. You weren’t around.”

“I still talked to them.”

“One man said when he came back from the service, his mother shook his hand. That’s the way they did it, back then.”

“Jaxon is a hugger. We hug each other. I get up on one step, so I can hug him, he’s so tall.”

“I don’t know how he got so tall,” she said.

“I’m so full,” she said, “I don’t know how I got so full. It must have been the pie.”
A Song to the End of Stories

This morning, I thought I was being too hard on the old woman. I thought she must be unconsciously aware of my lack of enthusiasm.

“If I was happier in her presence, she’d be happier in mine,” I thought.

I reminded myself that she’s eighty-eight, she can’t see as well as she used to, she can’t cook, she can’t drive, she can’t go for walks, she can’t play bridge or golf with her friends, she can’t remember things that happened five minutes ago, and she has health problems. Her husband is gone, her friends are dying off, and her family is scattered. So the world doesn’t measure up to her critical attention. So what!

Then I said to myself, “But she was exactly the same way when she didn’t have all these problems, if not more so.”

Even so, she’s an old woman.

I thought, “This is a woman who lives in doubt and fear, and she masks it with a sharp tongue and a stoic bravado. If I saw her as the vulnerable person I know she is, I’d be kinder to her.”

This morning, she was telling me stories of her childhood, and I was listening, interjecting remarks and asking questions, but sometimes, I was only watching her eyes, as she talked.

“You’re not interested in these stories, are you? I was rambling on,” she said.

“You tell me I’m not interested, whether I pay attention or not,” I said.

“I just thought you weren’t interested. I was rambling.”

She was afraid I wasn’t interested. She attacks out of her fear of rejection. If I could remember her fears, I could be kinder to her, quirks and all.

“You have stories from your past that you could tell,” she said.

“I have plenty of stories. I just don’t have as much desire to tell them,” I said.

But I believe she isn’t interested, because she never has been. I’ve had a highly anecdotal life, and perhaps, since I’m a writer and I’ve already
chronicled a lot of it, I don’t care about telling stories of my life as much as she does.

I wrote a poem, years ago, that said, in part, “Every poem I write is a song to the end of stories.” I wasn’t sure what I meant at the time I wrote that, but that line has resonated. Once I’ve told a story, I can let go of it. There’s nothing in most memories to keep them alive. Memories are like dreams, vivid and enjoyable, but here is another day, another night, another moment of reality.

I imagine my mother’s sense of her memories. It gives her pleasure to tell the same story over and over, as if it’s the first telling, each time. Her short term memory loss gives her the sense that every telling is fresh. She’s recalling happy times, or times she has made happy.

It reminds me of something the child psychologist Haim Ginott said. He wrote in his great book *Between Parent and Child*, that children like to hear the same story over and over again, because they want to know if it’s still true. I suspect my mother is doing something like that, at the end of her life.

I told her I wasn’t particularly interested in my memories because my life is busy and full.

“Full? Here?” she said, incredulously.

Instead of trying to tell her that having a full heart makes life full everywhere, I said, “Well, I am writing a book.”

“What about?” she asked. I knew she wouldn’t remember that I already told her it what it was about, even if it was about her.

“It’s a book about you,” I said.

She looked doubtful.

“What are you going to call it?” she asked.

“GLADYS,” I said, and she looked equally dubious. I didn’t bother to tell her my subtitle, *At the Speed of Life*. I thought it might sound too esoteric.

It’s a temptation to keep silent about my life around my mother. Except for the things that are comprehensible to her, like having children or working for money, I’ve never gotten a positive reception for what I am and what I care about. It’s also a temptation to be completely explicit. The predictable response frees me. It doesn’t matter what I say.
And she’ll forget it, anyway. Last night, as I went out, she asked me where I was going.
“To write,” I said.
And as I left, she said, “You have a perfectly good room. And a desk.”
Away from the house, I thought to say, “I’m writing a book about you. How can I do that here?”
It feels like a real adventure to bring her along in this enterprise. I did a painting of her favorite chair, the other night, after she went to bed. I put it in a nice frame, and I hung it on the living room wall. The next morning, she sat down at the table under the painting and never noticed it. I expect she’ll tell me she doesn’t like it, as soon as she notices it, but it was more fun to put it up than to hide it.
“My parents life would make a great story,” she said. “That house and all the neighbors. Now, that’s a story.”
My parents revered their parents and denigrated themselves. My mother said her mother was a saint. My father said his father was a saint. I heard them say that separately, honestly, reverently. My father said his father was such a great man, he didn’t deserve to live longer than his father. His father died at 82, he died at 80.
“How was it that Grandpa Brooks didn’t work?” I said. “It was The Depression. I suppose he was already too old to get work.”
“It was hard enough for anybody to find work,” she said.
“So, what did he do all day long?”
“I think he walked downtown and played cards with some other men. Yes, I think that’s right.”
An Angry Voice

The feeling surged.
I thought, “I hate her. I hate my mother.”
I’ve thought such feelings before, but it hasn’t come up in me as such an overwhelming emotion. I was on my way to pick her up from the hairdresser’s. When I got there, the feeling had passed.

We went looking for a place to have lunch. I was determined to skip lunch and have a cup of coffee, instead. She was moving especially slow, and she was holding my hand. I held her hand. I wondered if this revulsion was the same as what I’ve felt with other women, recently. I wondered if it wasn’t what’s kept me single these last years.

The feeling comes up when I think someone loves me against my desire. Is it a childhood fixation?

We drove to several lunch places. One was Denny’s. She stopped at the door.

“Are you sure you want to go here?” she said.

“Let’s go in,” I said, firmly.

Inside, she said she hated the booths. She spoke the words with vitriol in her voice.

I said, “Let’s go home.”

She turned to the very nice and friendly waitress and said, “What do you have for lunch?”

The girl showed her the menu, and she didn’t like anything she saw.

“Let’s go somewhere else,” I said.

We drove to Taco Bell, where she regularly went with Mark. I was beginning to think I could never last the six months I committed to.

On the way, I said, “Whenever you don’t like something, you get angry. You speak in an angry voice, and your face looks angry. It goes right to my stomach. I feel your anger, as if you’re angry at me. If you don’t like something, all you have to do is say it in a normal voice. You don’t have to say it in an angry voice.”

“Do I do that? That’s terrible. I don’t want to do that. You have to tell me, if I do that. I didn’t know I did that.”
She became soft-spoken. It continued as we drove home. But then she said, “You’re putting a tone in my voice that I don’t think is there.”

“You mean I’m making it up?” I said.

“Well, no.” And that’s where we left it.

She’ll forget we had such a conversation, but I felt better. I felt clear of my own anger. I’m hesitant to write that I hate my mother. I’m inclined to downplay that I don’t like her very much, but I know there’s love and affection in me for her.

Liking and loving are locked in a dance with my abhorrence. If I can release one of these, the others will be released. Neither needs to be held. Freedom is in being, and peace and joy are the manifestations of freedom. It would be nice if there were other words for peace, joy, and freedom that don’t sound as trite and overused, but I’ve been an articulate writer for a long time, and all the best realities are milked to death by banalities.

At breakfast, Mother was talking about Uncle Walter, who’s adopted daughter was Karen, my favorite cousin. Karen is an original, a creative sort, who was a great actress. My father liked her, too, although my mother doesn’t believe it. I saw my father canoodling with Karen, joking and having a great time.

“Walter said the only time he ever heard from Karen was when she needed money.”

“You never liked Karen, did you?”

She thought for a second and said, “No, I didn’t. She thought she’d been picked by the wrong parents. She wanted two famous writers for parents.”

“Don’t you think it was hard for her, being raised by parents who couldn’t sympathize with her?”

“I suppose so,” she said, a bit grudgingly.

I was lucky because my father had some creative inclinations, but I’ve known the same difficulties Karen knew. She wanted to be an actress, but her father said he wouldn’t support her doing that. She went to Baylor, a good Christian school, where she got a lead in a school play as a freshman, something unique in that school’s history.

Last night, Mother told me the story of my father’s decision to stop drinking forever. I heard it was because he dropped me on my head, when
I was a baby, and that’s why I’m crazy. He also said he quit because he ‘couldn’t stand the consequences.’

“He was sitting in a rocking chair, holding you in his arms, when you were a baby. He said he almost dropped you and he vowed to never drink again. He was a man of his word. He never did.”

“I saw him drunk, at the country club, one time. He was a sloppy drunk,” I said.

“No, you’re wrong about that. He never drank. Never. He was always the one who would drive everyone else home.”

I thought, “I can’t counter the myth machine,” and I left it alone.

“I prefer my father as a real human being, not a saint,” I said.

“He wasn’t a saint.”

“When I was sixteen, I saw him turn the speedometer back on a car he was selling. He said he had to do it. He said people expect it. I was shocked to see my father do that.”

She had nothing to say about that. My mother and father weren’t saints, and they weren’t devils. I thought I didn’t qualify to be a poet, when I read that Cyril Connolly had said poets were born from a great imagination and a rotten childhood. I thought I had a great childhood.

This being here, with my mother, is a crucible. I can try to take care of her in the kindest, best way, and I can let it serve me. I don’t want to be at odds with her condition or her character, but I need to work with both.

I need to be clear in this marketplace of emotions, thoughts, and physical conditions. I need to be free of my own history, and I need to be free of hers. I can’t do that by assuming the demeanor of a professional caretaker, and I can’t do that by getting caught in the hold of emotional attachments.

I sat on my couch in my apartment on Queen Anne hill in Seattle, in 1989, and I felt terror. Before that, I’d never felt safe enough to feel terror. It was overlaid with fear, and above that, loneliness. I’d always solved the problem by solving the loneliness. It was always a temporary solution. For the first time, I went beneath the loneliness to the fear, beneath the fear to the terror, and beneath the terror, I found peace.

The image of my terror was a naked baby lying in the middle of the road in the middle of the night with no one else around. The words came to me, “Pick up the baby.”
Beneath the terror was peace. Beneath everything that occurs is peace, at the deepest level, not in the thing itself, but beneath it, where nothing seems to be.

Yesterday, I bought a book at Osco Drugs that describes all the medicines that are available. I looked up Meclazine. It said that Meclazine doesn’t take effect for half an hour and lasts 12-24 hours. Mother would habitually take one just before going out.

“Just to be safe,” she said.

It also said that Meclazine works on the causes of dizziness better than it does on the symptoms. She hasn’t had any spells for quite a while. Maybe that’s due to the synthroid she began in the hospital.

“Mark would be happy to learn that I’m not having as much trouble with falling. I used to fall all the time.”

“Mark said it was four times in three years or three times in four years,” I said.

“Oh, no,” she said, confidently, “it was all the time.”
Creamed Chipped Beef and Mashed Potatoes

I bought a Toyota pick-up truck for $800. Heath, the guy upstairs, who helped me a couple of weeks ago, checked it out for me.

“For $800, this is a good deal,” he said.

Later, he showed me his portfolio of drawings and paintings. He told me he’d read my book of poems three times, and he wanted me to autograph it.

“With pleasure,” I said.

After looking at his art, I told him, “You have all the skills. All you have to do is keep doing it.”

“That’s what people tell me,” he said.

Mother noticed the excitement I took in my purchase.

“You’re happy,” she said, as if she approved.

“Well, there’s a risk in everything,” I said, “but this was a good risk.”

If she can spot my happiness, I’m sure she can spot my unhappiness. She is my mother, after all, the woman who once believed she knew me better than I knew myself.

Tonight, at dinner, she said, “Stephen, I can’t stop thinking about what you said, this afternoon. I never knew I sounded like that.”

“It’s true,” I said.

“Wanda had a sharp voice. It used to scare me.”

“You don’t sound like Wanda. You sound the way you sound.”

“I don’t know how to change it.”

“You’ve already started changing it.”

“How?”

“Well, you know you do it. That’s half the battle.”

“That won’t change anything.”

“Most people won’t even admit they need to change. If you know you want to change it, then you’ve already started to change.”

When I was cooking our dinner of creamed chipped beef on mashed potatoes, she said, “You can’t make mashed potatoes from cold potatoes. You’ll have to fry them.”

“I can make mashed potatoes from hot potatoes,” I said, “I’ll heat them in the microwave.”
“You can’t make mashed potatoes from cold potatoes.”
“They won’t be cold. Just watch me.”
“OK, but you’re wasting your time.”

I heated the potatoes in the microwave, added milk, and mashed them in a bowl with a masher. I put the creamed chipped beef over the top of the mashed potatoes and served them.

“You did it,” she said. “I didn’t think you could do it. This is good.”
Joy and Happiness

I came back to my college to play in the annual alumni soccer game. The practice game was yesterday, and today is the big game with the current varsity team. Last night, twenty of us players went to a restaurant for dinner and then to a bar for fun.

When I’m here, I feel normal among people of all ages. Grinnell was where, without my knowing it, I first felt completely at ease. I was among people who were intelligent and creative in a place where those qualities were commonplace, unimportant, and not peculiar.

This morning, watching TV in my room at a campus guesthouse, I watched Isabel Allende, the Chilean novelist and transplanted American, describe her own normal and peculiar self. Someone asked her about happiness, and she said happiness was never a consideration. She cared about writing well, connecting to others, and changing the world. She laughed at the idea of happiness. Her native Chile cherishes its unhappiness, she said.

It got me thinking about what my mother said about me relaxing. It’s true that I’m not as much in happiness as I’ve been at other times. Since early this year, when I said I would come home to be with my mother, I’ve gone into another gear, another sense.

Walking on campus, last night, by myself, under the elms, in a place I love, I noticed I was walking with the same purpose I’ve been feeling for the last six months. This time with my mother is not a time for happiness, but a time to do what needs to be done. I’m a doer in this reality. Happiness is not my focus. For instance, I could have stayed another week in Taos, but I left that lovely place, to come to a place I don’t associate with happiness.

As I walked more slowly, I felt the disparity between the sense of ease and acceptance I feel in Grinnell among these people and the absence of that sense I feel living with my mother.

So be it. You can’t make a silk purse out of a picture of silk and some poorly written instructions.

I called Mother before dinner, to see if she was OK and to let her know I was thinking of her. She said that the two other women in the
building had been looking in on her. Vivian stayed for a long visit, and Roseanne asked if she wanted to go for a ride, but she told Roseanne no, she didn’t want to go for a ride.

She asked me details about where I’m staying. She sounded happy. She has often said and often asked me if we were a happy family. Being happy is important to her.

My sense of responsibility trumps my sense of happiness, and it reminds me of the way my mother was a mother. I’m being with my mother the way she was with me. It causes me to carry a certain resolve, and I can feel it in my face as a look that might be taken for anger.

As I drove away from Moline, yesterday, I noticed an anxiety, a heavy sense of foreboding, a worried sense, and it seemed to be inherited. I could tell the feeling had shallow roots. I tried to hold it, so I could observe it. As soon as I tried to hold it, it disappeared. This is an excellent test of feelings. By trying to hold what I’m feeling, I notice how weak it’s hold really is. I recommend the technique.

Isabel Allende talked about her sense of joy. Joy was not proscribed by her ethic. Today, I feel an easy joy, and I cherish it. I try to feel this joy, and my joy is pressed wide, into the skin of my smiling face, into every corner of my being.
The Draft Dodger Hero

Big day in KC yesterday; KC Public had nothing it was supposed to have, then to Union Station--the shell is as it was, giant high ceiling 4 or 5 floors of open space--the KC massacre just outside the front doors in 1936 where Pretty boy floyd was said by JE Hoover to have shot down w/ his pals five fbi agents; they've no mention of it now; I had to ask and they don't like talking about it; the home made root beer place went out of business so I had a coffee there in the giant open space at a little table, went to the mens room to shave and plan my day w/map from the info booth a nice place to begin the day; two giant screen movie screens but not til afternoon; as a senior, I get in for $5; first stop was the courthouse to track down a subpoena I found at JFK library served to Hem 4/23/18 first to the city hall who sent me to the federal courthouse where in the clerks office a girl at the window gave me shit but her boss sent me to the 5th floor US attorneys ofc who sent me to the federal records center across KC to the south end where a girl showed me the docket books that show he was not charged nor was there a trial involving him or the KC star his employer; answer? he was evading the draft, this is one of my discoveries on Hem; his version is he was rejected by all 3 branches for his eyes so he joined the red cross to drive ambulance and get near the action; truth is he didn't sign up for the draft as he was req and fled to KC where his uncle got him on the KC Star where they catch up w/him so he joined the Missouri natl guard which did not save him so he fled KC to the Michigan woods fishing and hiding out til his KC Star pal Ted Brumback suggested they join the red cross ambulance which is what saved Hem from the law bec 6 weeks after arriving in italy, he was a wounded hero; which is also a cute story bec there was no battle at that time; truth is hem was at the river Piave across which was the austrians, its like rock river and each side sat all night to listen for noises from the other side at which they could fire mortars and one night this american kid at the front for the first time comes strolling up w/ his bag full of candy and cigs and no idea where he was, he calls out, hey you fellows look what I've got for you and they try to shut him up but its too late and a mortar comes screeching over the river and whammo, the kids wounded and the two italian soldiers are killed; back at the command post they hear this, run to the river to find the american kids alive but unconscious and they carry him back to first aid, while one italian officer says to the other, shall I kill this sob and the other officer says no, we need him; he is our American hero to get more aid from the Americans so they invent the tale of his heroism that Hem hears when he wakes up in the morning on his way to a Milan hospital in Milan; later, Hem figures it all out and writes the real version in A Farewell to Arms or at least closer to the real version than the Italian officers wrote for him at the time; and this is what
changed E Hem from a grinning fun loving kid into the Nobel master writer; its a secret he had to keep his whole life long; someone could and will someday look up in Italian records to find the names of the two Italian soldiers killed there that night and ask the families if they know the true story handed down from generation to generation; could maybe find the names of the officers who cooked up the heroism. that took most of the day; then I went to 3 private homes to find relatives of figures in the Hem saga but none where home so I gave up and fled to Lawrence the Univ of KS to use their microfilm which since they closed at 8pm I got only for a hour and a half but it was all free, almost got locked in the library when it closed; so I went to a frozen custard place in the center of town where they dip soft serve; its something new I guess; tastes ok but they have no place to sit and fancy sundaes like fresh raspberries hot fudge and pecans; $3.50; you remember the mobile unit; dontcha love that name, the mobile unit; right now I am a mobile unit; i blow into town, make a few copies, blow outa town; grab a frosty on the way thru and I dont even hafto remember the words to songs; so this is kind of a long email; after that I drove out to the rest area west of topeka--held up briefly for a pickup truck on its side, a car crumpled into its roof, traffic held up a half hour getting 2 lanes into one; turned cool in the night almost cold this morn; its beginning to look like a bus ride to alaska bec if its cold here, its colder there; this morn took a back road up ten miles to Manhattan and Ks State Univ which is where I am now; McCook tonight; love to you both; Mark; ps scott doesnt answer his emails

I’m including Mark’s email because it shows the character of his imagination, his scholarship, and his language. I like my brother when he’s most alive and not entrenched in some discouragement.

Mother liked my new car.

Scott said, “You’ll be driving it for the next fifteen years.”

Mother is tickled pink she’s not falling. Of course, that doesn’t mean she’s falling, but that she’s been afraid of falling. She walked out to see my new pickup, stood around it, and walked back, unassisted and with some confidence.

My trip to Grinnell restored my sense of others and my place among them. I felt like I was among my tribe. My mother and I are not from the same tribe, despite our obvious connection. This is no one’s fault, and it falls within no one’s ability to control. We’re lucky if we find our compatibility among others in this world. The knowledge of our universal
compatibility as beings, as souls, as ones within the One, doesn’t solve the separation of our personal lives.

At the reunion, I talked to a man who was born in Bangalore, India, and a man who was married to an Indian woman. If there’s a country where my sense of tribal compatibility is strongest, it’s India.

My mother suggested that if I wanted to stay in India, I would need a job. The man from Bangalore said he knew an American woman, a painter, who lived and painted in India and sold her paintings in the US. The India influence was a selling point in the galleries where she showed her work.
Bacon and Eggs

It’s become easy. Mother wanted bacon and eggs for dinner, so that’s what we had. We cooked them, together, and it was kind of fun. There was no tension between us, and the food was good. Can I credit my current happiness for this slight but powerful change? I can if I want. Can I say that’s what did it? I don’t know for sure.

Mother’s weekend was good for her, regardless what happened to me. Let’s say we both feel better, and the result is good for both of us. Even people from different tribes, who have a long history of awkward accommodation, can get along, when the wind is right.

She repeated how much Scott and Dad liked bacon, lettuce, and tomato sandwiches, and she told me how Aunt Marlowe’s habit of serving English muffins with breakfast didn’t please Dad’s desire for toast. The gentle bounce of our dinner conversation felt good.

I worried, as I thought about our getting along, that it might not make good reading, but I held out the hope that I could rise to the challenge. If Isabel Allende can describe in magical detail the Chillean angst, maybe I can describe the equally dissonant harmony of my mother’s house. ‘This too shall pass’ applies equally to good and bad times.

Before I wrote this chapter, I read some poems from a small book I wrote in Seattle before this trip, and I heard the voice of the tribe I’ve been describing. The voice of my poems is the voice of my spirit. It often resonates when I pick up an old poem, even at random.

As I came into Borders, tonight, I noticed my attitude seemed to carry the lowered expectation of being among contrary tribes. I changed that attitude to one of generic optimism, the expectation of no expectation, and I immediately felt good.

I would like to be able to stay in an open spirit with all my fellow human beings, wherever I am, including with the one who is my mother. I want to believe that it’s always possible. Tonight, I liked her, and we even kidded each other about our different habits.

I said, “See, isn’t that good? We’re done with eating, I’m done with the dishes, and there’s nothing left over.”
She said, “I always put the dishes in the dishwasher. I rinse them off, of course.”
“That way, you have to leave dishes in the dishwasher,” I said.
“I start the dishwasher as soon as dinner is done, after the dishwasher is full, of course,” she said.
“The dishes you use the most sit in the dishwasher, and when you need them, you have to get them out of the dishwasher,” I said.
“Well, we each have our different ways,” she said.
“That’s right,” I said, “everybody has the way they like to do it.”
As she was leaving the kitchen, to watch Seinfeld, she smiled warmly and touched my arm.
“Every cook has their own way of doing things,” she said.
And the birds flew across the river and into the trees.
Two Worlds

I bought plates for my pickup and then, insurance. I took the TOYOTA lettering off the tailgate and put ABHAYA letters in their place. I said to Dave, the one-armed guy from the other building in this complex, “It’s my car. Why should I have someone else’s name on it?”

I live in two worlds. In my awareness, I live in spirit. In my consciousness, I live among egos; that imagined reality of self and selves. One of the senses I carried with me from my Grinnell weekend was that I was among healthy egos. There, for the most part, people are confident in themselves, to the degree that the personal self is a free play zone and everyone else’s flourishing self is part of one’s own flourishing self, mutually shared and mutually enjoyed. It is my sense of community, rarely in evidence. Most communities of ego are mutually competitive.

I used to imagine that my parent’s generation was good at commitment to others, and my generation was good at commitment to self. The marriage, job, religion, and children commitment leaves many egos desperate to be recognized, and the individualization commitment leaving many egos desperate to be absorbed in a greater whole.

My mother devoted her life to others, parents, siblings, husband, children, friends, church, and she sits alone in her old age, not wanting to be with others, soaking in memory.

Last night, at the mention of the World’s Fair on TV, she suddenly recalled that her brother, Clarence, drove her and her father to the Chicago World’s Fair for the day, in 1934. Clarence, she remembers, was not at the Fair. She doesn’t remember being with her father. It’s a surprising memory. She says she didn’t remember it for many years, and now, suddenly, she does.

The image of twenty year old Gladys and her forty-seven year old father, the Swede, John Axene, walking around the World’s Fair, together, begs for more, but no more comes.
Apple Pie

“Stephen, I don’t know about you. You say you don’t have any money, and yet you go around buying things.”

I stood in the living room, silent, thinking she was about to expose my subterfuge. I spent a thousand dollars of my mother’s money on a pickup truck. I told her I had saved enough money for the truck, and now I was broke. In truth, I have another three thousand squirreled away to take care of myself after this next four months have passed. My mother has been generous to her family in the past few years, until her physical condition make her feel insecure about everything.

I’m unwilling to tell her she paid for the car. I feel justified, logically. It cost me eight to ten thousand dollars to come here, counting the cost of the trip, one dead car, and the lost earnings of my normal work schedule. Emotionally, I feel guilty taking money from an old woman with limited resources, no matter how much it cost me.

“And you bought a pie!” she said.

She didn’t mention the car. Earlier, she spoke a desire for salami, so I drove up the Jewel and bought some salami, along with an apple pie.

“You used to want me to get pies from the Farmers’ Market,” I said.

“I don’t like those pies. Don’t buy any more of those pies.”

“I won’t. That’s why I got this one. It was on sale for $2.50, and I paid for it out of the grocery money.”

My mother was a bookkeeper. She’s been curious about the bank statements. Sometimes, she’s curious about things I’ve already taken care of. Usually, that’s the end of it.

I felt like putting a thousand in her account, and I will, if it comes to that, but her curiosity usually passes. There are so many bills I could pay our of our joint account, but I don’t. for fear she’ll run out of resources before her time is up.

That’s probably not likely, but I sometimes feel like a scam artist, bilking an innocent old lady out of her life’s savings to spend on wine, women, and song. Money has long been the tender of her tender feelings, and if what I get out of this trip is transportation back home, I’ll feel satisfied.
She and I have been getting along well. The spaghetti I made last night, with her instructions, elicited praise. I imagined a real friendship in bloom, but today I realized I can’t turn wishful thinking into a true intimacy. That’s an old pattern in my life. I’ve had several long-term relationships, built from the desire for a girlfriend that converted loneliness and wishful thinking into true love. When I stopped imagining more than what was true, I stopped having lovers. It’s been ten years.

After my Grinnell trip, I realized how much I need to be with someone I can be at ease with, on all levels, physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual. I think it may be why I write this sort of book. You, my collective, individual, self-defined reader are such a partner, one who’s able to grasp all one might say, and who is ready to jump in.

I began the habit of addressing the ideal reader, thirty years ago. You’ve probably honed the skill of finding the ideal authors for who you are. Authors are legion, and so are readers. I’m glad for this mating ritual that finds us mutually well met.

“Mark was so interested in my history,” Mother said, yesterday. “He was always asking questions.” This email, from the town where we were boys together, shows that interest.

That’s great news; does she have a walking stick or is it unnecessary now? What is synthroid? Sounds like a pill. I am in the McCook library today, been in their campground since lets see this is Tues, I came in from KC on Sat. Went round town Sunday and guess what; at 412 East St I asked the old guy in the alley picking his garden if he lived here long and he recalled not only that we lived across his alley but that us kids I think more you than me kept climbing on his milk truck and he had to chase us off; he said mother called us in for dinner and supper and let us run the rest of the time. Said his name is Abner Huff and his mother Ona. He is 79 now and his old milk truck is parked in his driveway; he gave me little yellow tomatoes and a hat full of grapes from his garden; said he worked at a grain place part time in those days where they left grain on the ground and he gathered it up, brought it home said he could raise a hog in the barn across the alley from us and next door to him but it was illegal so he fed his hog on the quiet til one day or night I forget Mother heard the hog squeal and called the cops on him; I think he is still pissed; I am tempted to go back today and say how bad I feel about the hog and if I can make it good but I bet I dont; Ernst Dairy, it says on his truck. Someone has rented or bought 412 it has one of your paint jobs, an off brown w/dark trim; Abner said if the people are home, they be glad to let
me in so I may go back around supper time; none of the names I knew then are in the phone book now but I am going thru the newspapers on microfilm and all the MHS yearbooks are here so I’ll dupe a few of the choice pp and mail them or wait and bring them. Abner remembered mother very well, that Dad was a traveling salesman, and also that we moved to Georgia Ct; I think he was glad to see us go; he said to send his best to Mom; he is ten years younger and was living w/ his folks then before he got married for 58 years, he said. Ask Mom if she remembers his mom, Ona Huff, across the alley at 412. 1943 age 17, he rode his Schwinn to Wausau Wis in 2 weeks even tho his Dad worked on the RR and he could have got a pass. Didn’t knock on the door at Georgia Ct. I talked to her last time. She showed me inside the whole house. Basement is all carpet divided into rooms. Found out today the Budigs were the Buick dealers, three Budig brothers; we lived under Arthur and Angela at 1210 W2; haven’t got over there yet; I thought it was down E. 6th St toward the water tower; so this will be a big day for me, seeing Budigs for the first time. Sleep here again tonight, to Denver 6am tomorrow for whole day at Public Library then to Boulder library and on to Casper. Alaska drive is out; couple in the campground who drove their camper in 95 said its too late in the year; said the time to go is 7/1; might still take the bus bec next year is the Olympics. Turned cold on the way here; KC was hot and humid; now its chilly at night, but hot in the afternoon. Sure enjoyed that shower on Sat; planning another tonight; they repainted the showers not remodeled; same little spray. --Mark

When she read his email, Mother denied calling the police on anyone. She couldn’t remember the people across the alley. She was fascinated by the letter and read it many times. This morning, she was still reading it.
Just Happy to See You

My friends from Virginia came to town. I joined them at their campground. We sat around the campfire telling stories. Today, they picked me up for coffee and lunch. We told stories, some about our parents. I noticed a theme in my words.

“I never fell in love with my mother, and she didn’t fall in love with me,” I said.

Jan said, “And it won’t ever change.”

As we spoke, I drew closer and closer to a simple truth.

“What I see now, and didn’t see before, is what rarely happens. It’s when someone is simply happy to see you. Whenever I see my kids, everytime I see them, I’m glad to see them. I used to over-ride that sense by being entertaining and charming, and then I drank. That made the question irrelevant. I stopped all that, and now I can tell when people are glad to see me, and when they aren’t. Last night, I knew you were glad to see me. That’s why I told so many stories.”

Jack said, “It doesn’t happen very often, maybe five or six times in your life, when you meet people who are glad to see you, and you’re glad to see them.”

I was apprehensive about telling my friends how I was not in love with my mother. Something in my thinking says I should be, I must be pretending not to be, I must be covering up the love I really feel.

I told them how much I admire my mother, how, in the many ways we love other people, there are several ways I love her. I said if I ran into my parents on the street, as strangers, I’d think they were great people.

Jack compared my mother to his father, another stoic Swede. Jan said she felt bad because, like my mother, she didn’t cry as readily as other women do. She said I could ‘tune out’ my mother.

I said I was a stoic Swede too, but I recognized another part of my being, an openness to spirit and feeling. I said I could become a stoic with my mother and take care of business.

“But, I don’t want to lose who I am, just to handle the situation,” I said. “I want to be free, even in this place where that’s the most difficult.”
“I thought I wanted to go to Vietnam and show those bastards that I could kill people and feel nothing,” I said. “I thought I could do it. I don’t know if that’s true or not, but I have that cold inclination in me. I’m an empathetic poet of the heart. I don’t want to get caught up in my mother’s stoicism. Even so, since February, I’ve watched myself act in such a way that I could get this field plowed, get these crops in, and get the cows in the barn before the first snow fell.”

We went for lunch at Lagomarcino’s. Jack noticed the painted tin ceiling. He said he saw one like it in a restored building in Virginia but the guy said it was plastic, molded to look like the original tin.

“He cleared up a lot of things for me,” Mother said, after Jack and Jan left. “What was his name?”

“Jack,” I said.

“I was thinking of Kenny, his cousin, or his father’s cousin. She was married to Opel. I played bridge with Opel. And his mother’s name was Lillian. That’s right. I used to see his father pushing her around the mall in a wheel chair. But I was thinking of Kenny. He was married to Opel. I saw Opel with Kenny, but it wasn’t Kenny, it was her son.”

“Jerry,” I said.

“I thought he was Opel’s husband. They look exactly alike. But he was her son. Your friend cleared up a lot for me. He doesn’t look anything like his father,” she said.
The Good Son

I drove my mother to The Village Inn in my new pickup, and she loved it. Today, I bought a sympathy card for a friend of hers whose husband just died. She raved about the card.

“Hallmark!” she said. “Where’d you get it?”
“Wallmart,” I said.
“Wallmart?” she said.

My mother would have liked to have been rich, like her brother. She likes fancy brand names.

I told her my friend Jack was a retired engineer.

“That’s what I wanted you to become,” she said.

“You must cry yourself to sleep every night, knowing your sons didn’t become what you wanted them to be.”

“No, I don’t. My sons are fine men with good character,” she said in a determined voice.

On Dr. Phil, yesterday, a woman described her marriage, “We don’t love each other. I don’t think we even like each other very much.”

“I’m living in a relationship like a marriage of convenience and accommodation,” I thought.

We get along fine. We act like we care about each other. We don’t step on anyone’s toes, much. I think about the subterfuge of the pickup truck, and I realize how much of our relationship is just this side of dishonesty. I have a perfect excuse to keep my mouth shut about matters of disagreement. I mean that to sound elliptical.

I once thought that telling the truth was not only necessary and right, but would cause breakthroughs in my family relationships. After the angry-voice conversations, recently, I thought it might still be possible, but discretion is the better part of valor. I leave the truth to be spoken when there’s no other accommodation.

My mother’s age and mental condition are healthy deterrents to my urge to purge. This further acceptance of our limited relationship gives me more impetus to move slowly and judiciously.

I’m learning to be a better cook, and my mother’s vast experience in the kitchen is teaching me. For example, bleach cleans a blackened coffee
pot. A little bit of flour on fish fried in a pan gives texture to the fish. Thick sliced tomatoes seem to have more flavor. SOS applied to a pan makes food stick less the next time it’s used.

“Your father couldn’t cook a thing,” she said.

“He could if he had to,” I said. “If you can learn one thing, you can learn anything. If you can replace a carburetor, you can cook a meal.”

“I learned how to make clothes.”

“If you can follow instructions, you can learn anything.”

“You just follow the patterns.”

“I’m not great at everything I do, but I know I can learn. I can fix cars. I can’t retain the information the way Scott does, but I can do it. I put my motorcycle back together, after it was stolen and the guy busted it apart.”

“I sewed all your clothes, coats even,” she said.

“Going up to The Village Inn, she remembered playing the piano.

“I remember that, too,” I said. “It was great having music in the house.”

And I never said to her, “You’re no Van Cliburn, you know.”

What a good son.
The Big Game

I like this place, after all. I’m in Fireworks. It feels good, here. The coffee is good, even by Seattle standards. It’s got a bite to it.

I’m a block away from the Friday night Moline High School football game, a big spectacle, as I recall. I remember the pungent nights filled with the aromas of fall, the crowd, the game, girls, and burgeoning sexuality. It was sensuality with sex at its core. It was boyhood as it becomes manhood. It was feeling alive in every cell of my being.

I fixed another complete dinner that impressed and satisfied both my mother and me. I imagined driving her to Carol’s tomorrow morning.

“Where’d you get that new truck?” Carol says.
“My mother got it for me. It’s great, isn’t it?” I say.
“I got it for you?” my mother says.
“How’d you think I paid for it? I don’t have any money. And thank you very much.”

It’s amazing how much I like this $800 truck. I love to drive it. I’m fixing up the little things that come with a used vehicle, filling rust spots and touching up the scratches and dings. I never felt at ease in the Cadillac.

“I have to tell you the truth,” I say, in my latest fantasy. “I bought the truck with your money, not mine.”
“I thought you didn’t have any money,” she says.
“Well, I needed a car.”
“Did you write a check?”
“No, I got the money out of the account.”
“How did you do that?”
“It’s a joint account, if you remember.”
“Oh, that’s right. I want to go to church, this week. If I don’t go, they’ll come knocking on my door, wondering what happened to me.”
“I’ll take you. No problem. We can take your car or mine.”
“I didn’t like Mark’s truck. It was too hard to get in and out of.”
“I love you, Mom. You’re the greatest mom a guy ever had.”
“I love you, too, Son. You’re the most wonderful son a mother could ever have.”
The Stranger at the Game

There’s a woman sitting nearby with the almost cartoonish face of real beauty. I’ve been with beautiful women like her, and I never coveted their beauty or feared the grasp of other men for it. I’ve been with sexual women, and I always felt the covetous desire of other men.

I went to the football game. It was just as I remembered. The aura of the night was like being in a movie. The lighting of a football field lights everyone equally, as dramatically as it does the players, coaches, cheerleaders, or band members.

As I walked the front row of the more recently installed aluminum bleachers, I imagined there were several people in the stands I probably knew in high school. Now grown, with children and grandchildren, on the field, or roaming the sidelines, the stands, beneath the stands, around the ends of the field from side to side, into the parking lots and in the darkened streets surrounding the field.

I found a place to stand and watch the game. I didn’t see any familiar faces in the crowd, but the scene was intensely familiar. Without the compelling sexuality of my teenage self, I still found the atmosphere richly sensual, especially as a visual feast.

I decided to climb to the top of the bleachers and watch everything from a higher vantage point. I stood at the top of the steps, against the chain-link back fence. Next to me was a man with a camcorder trained on the field below. A man close to my age, he was wearing a baseball cap and had a beard and mustache, neatly trimmed.

I spoke to him, to be friendly, because his presence felt friendly. We began to talk, and we hit it off. He was a local pathologist with two sons, one in the high school band and the other in the junior high band. Both bands performed at halftime. The doctor pointed out his sons, playing the trombone and the drums, along with various other characters in the bands.

I’d like to transcribe our conversation, but what made it memorable wasn’t the details but the sense of easy companionship we felt with each other. I suspect that, like me, he finds it uncommon to find a kindred spirit in this place.
He said that, at the University of Wisconsin, on his first date with his now wife, after they’d already done something else, he suggested they go to a poetry reading. He said she thought, “This guy has too much energy.” He said the reading was by Robert Bly. I said Bly was quoted on the back cover of my last book. He said he’d like to read the book.

“I love poetry,” he said.

“If I was standing next to my car,” I said, “I’d give you a copy, but my car is a couple of blocks away.”

“Do you know the place called Fireworks?” he said.

“I was just there,” I said.

“Could you leave a book there? I’ll pick it up when my wife and I leave the game.”

“Done,” I said.

We parted with grins, friendly words, and waves. I went to my car and got a copy of the book, took it to Fireworks, and left it with the girl behind the counter.

When I got home, I told my mother the story. I was not able to carry the full sense of delight I experienced into the retelling, but at the end of the story, she said, “Well, you’ve had a lovely time, tonight.”

“I did,” I said.

“You’ve had several good experiences this last week.”

“I have,” I said. “This is the way I usually experience my life.”

The doctor and I were kindred spirit masquerading as individuals. This extraordinary reality is commonly mistaken for a world of strangers. A stranger is not just a friend we haven’t met, as the saccharine wisdom goes, a stranger is our self in a disguise slightly different from the one we are wearing.
Mongolian Beef

I decided to transfer $800 into my mother’s account and make the truck my own. I felt better, immediately. I recommended she buy an $90 TV from Walmart for her kitchen. We went to lunch at Ming Wah. She got out of the booth and walked up to the counter just to ask about some sweet and sour sauce.

“I think I could afford a TV,” she said.
This afternoon, I bought one, brought it home, and hooked it up.
Looking at the new TV, she said, “You boys have certainly done good things for me.”

At dinner, she began coughing, and I put my hands on her back in a gesture of support and comfort. It felt good.

I can’t ask my mother to become the mother she never was. I can be with her in the limited but positive way we’ve always been able to manage between us. As I was leaving the house, tonight, I stopped at the kitchen table, where my mother sat unable to master the intricacies of the new TV’s remote control.

“I’m going out for a while,” I said.
She laughed, in a soft and delightful way.
“OK,” she said. “See you later.”
No More Miracles

At Bishop’s Buffet, Mother chose the Senior All-You-Can-Eat, and I chose a small Jello, small macaroni and cheese, and a piece of pie. She had biscuits with chicken and gravy, mashed potatoes and gravy, pudding, yams, cole slaw, and two more I don’t remember. I didn’t choose to eat less from a sense of discipline. I got what I wanted and no more, a sign of anxiety abated.

She told me a story I’ve heard before, but it illustrates my mother’s good qualities as a working mother. When Scott and Liz were a young couple, staying at my parents’ house, they had an argument, and Liz stormed out.

Mother went after her and said, “Go back, never leave without solving the problem.”

And Liz went back.

She said it was the only time she meddled in their affairs. She read the advice in a book, in a sincere attempt to learn the business of being a wife and mother.

She said my father’s one fault was guessing at what she wanted. “Just ask me,” she told him. “Don’t guess. It doesn’t work.”

“Guessing what other people think is almost always wrong,” she told me.

We went to Bishop’s church. The service put me off religion, as it always has. I heard way too much emphasis on Jesus, the intermediary, and almost nothing about God, the source. The preacher read a good prayer, asking God to help us with his promises, because sometimes we’re afraid of them, because we don’t believe God will keep his promises, and because living in the full light of God’s promises is overwhelming.

There’s so much in the church that protects people from confronting and knowing the reality of this existence, especially the divine.

Last night, in Fireworks, I dipped into my own spiritual writing, reading from Be Yourself, a book of ‘self-recognition, not of any one way or path, not in the form of any particular spirituality, but in the truth of the reality of Being Itself.’
Culled from the writings of half a dozen years, it packs an intensity of consciousness into the emptiness of awareness. The voice of the book is overwhelming, even to me, and I wrote it. There is no ‘audience’ for such a book. There are only a few unpredictable readers who may never even hear of it.

Mother asked me about the minister.

“She’s good at what she does,” I said. “She speaks well, she writes well, but she’s not charismatic, and her voice is high. She might be good in the long run, though.”

Later, she asked me again about the preacher.

I said, “She’s good, she speaks well, she writes well, she’s in the line of American preachers, but the ones you see on TV are charismatic, and that’s the standard these days. She’s not charismatic.”

Years ago, I worked for a local nursery, planting trees. I partnered with a lay preacher, and he told me a story. He was on fire to leave the ways of the world behind and get as close to God as he could. He gave a sermon, one Sunday, that basically asked everyone in the congregation to lay down their nets and follow Jesus in a life of uncompromising commitment.

When the sermon was over, he thought he’d fulfilled his mandate. He expected a response in kind. Instead, everyone complemented him on the quality of his sermon and then talked about where they wanted to go for Sunday brunch.

My mother’s preacher toils in the fields, as did my mother. Their reward is in a job well done. Heaven can wait.

The minister, in her sermon, described one of Jesus’ miracles, and I thought, “No more miracles.” As soon as I thought it, I felt a sense of rich relief. What if there were no more miracles and we all fell back into the simple divine?
A Man of Action

I rode my bike to Cordova, forty miles, roundtrip. It impresses my mother every time I do it. It occurred to me, as I rode, that the problems I describe must seem, to any intelligent reader, easily solved. It seems that way to me, too, but I’ve learned that the third-party wisdom of the mind is easy, and the practice of it is less easy.

Most of what we do takes time to become the way we do it. After I’d been going to AA meetings for a year, I noticed a strange feeling I hadn’t noticed before. I sat in it, for a while, and then I recognized it. It was the feeling of being accepted. It was the firmly entrenched sense of acceptance. It took a year for me to experience it, and know it.

I had been going to meetings, several times a week, and I was always welcome, as a matter of course. Without that year, I might have felt the good of it, but I wouldn’t have known it as a part of me.

It also occurred to me I might seem like a corn-fed Hamlet, the sort who talks things over before acting, when action seems obvious from the first scene. I think Hamlet is the best play ever written. I once read it through as if every single line was perfectly true, and it worked. Hamlet, I believe, is a man of action, who is also a man of self-awareness. He’s in no hurry, because he knows he’s capable of doing what must be done. He wants to see what’s true and what’s not true. Actions will come in due time.

I’ve noticed a steady coming to terms with where I am and what I’m doing. I seem to be working the situation to the benefit of my mother and myself, as far as I’m able, and it takes time. It takes time enough just to be familiar with the environment, not to mention knowing the right things to do.

The anxiety that occurs in any situation can be like warning lights on the dashboard, calling attention to what needs to be attended to.

I feel much better than I did two months ago, when this time began, and much better than I did seven months ago, when this became a possibility.
At the Edge of the Garden

The only people who really count are your mother and your father. I’ve been trying all my life to speak to these people in such a way that they would embrace me. I’m still trying. It’s the way I think of the world. The world is my mother and my father. I have been trying all my life to speak to the world in such a way that it would embrace me.

I have chosen to speak as my Self, in my Self, without myself being present. That is, I’ve been trying since I was in my early thirties, to be true to what is true in my Self, in the hopes that it would be clear to someone else. At the same time, I’ve tried to couch this truth in terms that my mother and my father might understand and embrace. And I’ve failed.

I’ve tried small things that I knew would please their sensibilities, their prejudices, their habits, their limitations, and I’ve had some success at gaining their glancing appreciation, but I’ve been unable to recreate myself in their image. I don’t think I could if I could. The small ways I’ve been accepted by my parents, and the world they represent, don’t satisfy me, or them, or it.

It occurred to me that when this time with my mother is over, I’ll be finished. I thought I could die then or go to India. I’ll have finished my dance with my parents, my dance with the world. It was a good feeling.

“You do your best work when you are exhausted,” the old guru in the dream said to me, when I was young.

I also said to myself that I haven’t stopped since I got here. I haven’t been at rest. I rode my bike forty miles, more than two hours without stopping, and then I went to write.

I’m at peace, but I’m not at rest. I won’t be, until I am exhausted. Not exhausted physically, but exhausted of this effort to be embraced by my mother and my father, to be embraced by the world. Then, when I am exhausted of this effort, I will be free to do whatever comes after that.

If that’s my best work, it will be because I’m exhausted of this work. I’ve worked exhaustively to be finished with this work, so I can be finished with it. I haven’t done this in order to do something else. What comes after this is unimaginable, unplanable, and unanticipatable.
Now that I’ve said it, I suppose I might begin to think about the future, but that kind of thinking has never yielded anything for me. I’m standing on the precipice of nothing.

The minister, this morning, compared the fear of God’s will to standing on the edge of the Grand Canyon, afraid to step off. I wanted her to say it was also the fear of standing on the edge of the Garden of Eden, afraid to step in, not knowing what might occur next, because there’s no precedent for it. I’m still walking toward the precipice, walking toward the garden.

There’s no effort in this effort. It only continues to be what it continues to be.
The Painting of the Chair

This afternoon, my mother noticed the paintings on her walls had changed. I switched them when I framed my painting, using one of her frames. I showed her the painting I did of her chair, last week.

“Oh,” she said, in genuine delight, “I love it. I even love the colors. It’s wonderful. You did that? When did you do that?”

“Last week, at night, after you went to bed.”

“It’s beautiful. When did you do that?”

“Last week.”

“Oh, I love it.”

She was mightily impressed, and I was happy. It was good, and I liked it. I was happy my painting of her chair pleased her.
An Author’s Challenge

One of the hardest things in the world for a writer is to show compassion: it is the very opposite of this craft. Let is take compassion itself as a subject. Compassion may be the single most important trait on the spiritual path, the very essence of enlightenment. The Talmud asks, “How can one follow after the Divine Presence? It is a consuming fire! Rather, follow after His attributes. Just as He is gracious and compassionate, so you should be gracious and compassionate.” Compassion is not just another virtue, it is the chief means of attaching ourselves to God.

On the other hand, compassion can also be one of the most crippling of traits. The Talmud says, “a person with compassion has no life.” Not just emotional life, but essential life - spiritual life. A person with too much compassion, who is preoccupied with the welfare of others, will have no time left for personal spiritual growth. Such an individual will never study, never pray, never meditate. Nothing will become of him. “Only a person who is cruel to his family as a raven (which is said to abandon its young) can ever truly acquire Torah,” says the Talmud. Progress on the spiritual path not only requires cruelty to oneself, and the denial of many of life’s basic comforts and needs which impede the spiritual quest, it demands cruelty to others as well. There is simply no way to come close to God without first knowing how to turn one’s back on others, and their misfortunes.

Truth is the greatest compassion that one human being can possibly show to another - that which transcends the world of duality altogether. Truth always enters our lives unexpectedly, engaging us in a moment of absolute being - of Presence. For Being is truth. It is the only truth worth conveying.

But can writing ever convey such a truth? There is something beneath each written word that reflects the ultimate goal of human searching - a glimmer of the Oneness that underlies this world. It can be revealed, perhaps, but only when an author comes to the realization that there is nothing more than can be said.

Eliezer Shore in Parabola, Spring ‘03
The Yellow Chair

Once again, I thought I was done. I had a book. Now, I believe I have a challenge, to describe the compassion that is as impersonal as God is.

Two years ago, I had a falling out with an old friend. On the pretext of taking me to task for how she thought I had treated another woman, she also condemned me for failing an old girlfriend.

Joni had cancer and died. Before she died, I sought her out and visited her, but my friend thought I should have stayed with her in the last year of her life. I said I was willing to do that, but I didn’t.

Joni and I had not been together for ten years. She had another live-in lover after me. We cared for each other. Every time our lives crossed paths, we met with fondness and affection, but we saw our lives from different perspectives. She was a psychic and her spiritual world was filled with external forces. I was a poet and my spiritual world was internal and filled with emptiness. In her dying, she sought every means to expel the invading force of her cancer. I would have wanted her to let go of all her practices and be as she was, beneath and beyond the cancer.

During our visits, there was no intimacy between us, and I felt helpless. We had separated, and our mutual recognition was across a wide gulf. I looked for any indication I should stay with her, but I didn’t see any. I stayed away and let others care for her.

I faulted myself for staying away. My friend faulted me for a self-serving lack of compassion. She’s another artist, whose life has been filled with others she feels compassion for, social misfits and wounded men, some with fatal diseases, for whom, it seems to me, she has neglected her own life as an artist. She denied that, and I believe she carried the same dilemma as I do.

I’m empathetic, but I’m an artist with a spiritual awareness. I recognize that my art and my soul are impersonal. I’ve felt the sting of criticism for not living a more personally committed life, for not caring about others with more zeal. I’ve also criticized myself for not caring for my art and my soul with more zeal.

I see that I’m concluding, in these pages, that no one is at fault. There is true compassion in my art and in my soul. There is no problem. I am
capable of the actions of a compassionate man, without losing my dispassionate awareness or my passionate art.

“Stephen, I can’t tell you how much I love that painting. I keep looking at it, and every time I do, I love it even more. I don’t know what it is I like about it. I like the colors, but I like it for . . . it has . . . character.”

She laughed, and then she said, “You are a much better artist that I ever thought you were.” After thirty years of vitriolic condemnation.

The painting, an abstractly realistic rendition of the chair she sits in every day, all day long, is a friendly picture. In a half an hour, late one night, I drew the chair in charcoal, and then I painted it with oil pastels. It is a loving rendition of my mother’s chair, without any intention on my part to do anything other than what I’ve ever done in any painting.

I looked at the paintings I brought with me, the ones that hang in my room, paintings that represent some of the best work I’ve done, and I see a difference. The ones in my room are less personal, some more and some less abstract, but they offer my mother no way to identify herself in them, except in her deepest self. That’s not a path open to her in the normal course of her life.

The passions of the soul and the passions of the heart can be the same, but most people need a face attached to any passion for it be embraced.

Throughout this story, I’ve said that I don’t feel any great love for my mother, and yet the painting of her chair is loving, and so is her response to it, more than any expression of love she has ever uttered. The picture gave her a face to love.
Chamber Music

There’s chamber music in Fireworks.

Mother and I went to Adolph’s for tacos and then to Whitey’s for ice cream. We ate and talked, at ease with each other. She told stories, and I asked questions. She was never angry in her voice or her demeanor, and a good time was had by all.

“I’ve done a lot,” she said, reflecting on the stories of her life.

“You’ve had a full life,” I said.

She was describing events, dinners, trips, family gatherings, and saying, “When I was young,” about her times of accomplishment.

When my own children were young, I changed diapers for five years. It surprised me when I thought about it, later. I’ve often described how it happened by saying, “You do what’s in front of you. I never thought about it. It was just what happened.”

And so it is with my mother. It’s what is in front of me. It’s what I’m doing. I think about it, I write about it, but I think about it less.

We were sitting in the same booth as last time. She was telling me about Myrtle and Sterling Silver and Sterling’s mother Goldie Silver. I thought I wouldn’t be able to remember the dialog, as I haven’t for most of the last few days. Our being together has gone along so swimmingly there are no hooks for the mind.

There’s no need to love or hate my mother. There are no lingering enigmas to untangle. The complications of this life seem workable and we’re getting along great.

Driving home, I said, “Well, Mom, we’re getting along great.”

“What do you mean?” she said.

“Sometimes, roommates don’t get along, and we get along.”

“I always got along with my boys. Didn’t we always get along?”

“Yes, we did,” I said.

I remember the difficulties that began when I became independent of the family and began to seek other levels of understanding. Now, in her presence, I accept the reality of my original teacher, and I’m free to be as I am.
A Solitary Life

This morning, I felt a new or renewed sense of ownership in my connection to my mother. This is what happens in families that are bound together by time and circumstances. At first, I thought it was a good thing, a source of pride; another generally accepted, time honored sin.

We make an ethic of our condition and then we defend our ethics. It feels good to honor my mother and my father, but not when it comes out of habitual dependence.

So, since it’s early September, pride cometh before the Fall.

My mother has told me several stories of people who expressed their love for her. Myrtle Silver gushed, “You are my very best friend, I love you, Gladys.” Kenneth Patterson, who just died, said, “I love you, Gladys.” She says Chet Schmidt said something effusive to her, as well.

I’m inclined to think of the effusive expressions of love I’ve had in my life, and the relative isolation I’ve lived, somewhat like my mother. I see qualities in her that I see in myself. One is a public personality that can be quite popular, along with a solitary nature.

My mother is not bothered by her solitary life. She lived alone for eight years after my father died. Except for bridge games and church services, she was content in her aloneness. Even now, she seems content sitting in her chair, reading Oprah and Martha Stewart in great detail.

Her interest in the TV is less than meets the eye, as it is with me. It’s on, but she pays less than rapt attention to it.

She’s opinionated, but not without some intelligence. Her concern for others is genuine, but there’s a degree of practiced behavior in it.

At 88, she still shows a remarkable curiosity about the world and the people in it. I used to say that my mother’s world was like a glass dome on a cutting board. Inside that dome, she knew all there was to know. Even though the dome was glass, and she could see beyond it, she had no understanding of anything outside it.

There was a story in the paper about a man molesting a three-year-old girl.

“How do you molest a three year old girl, that’s what I don’t understand?” she says genuinely perplexed at the mechanics of it.
Her perplexity isn’t just sexual, and it’s not a sign of suppressed trauma. She has the same reaction to many things in the world.

She says Myrtle Silver got lost, all the time. She would take a wrong turn and be completely lost. It had nothing to do with age. She always did it. Otherwise, she was fine.

“You know, if you make a wrong turn, you can get lost in a hurry,” she said.

I used to imagine that senility was voluntary. Old people, bound to their limitations, go on vivid and exhilarating adventures, any time they want. I don’t believe that, but I wonder about it. My mother asked me, three times, why I bought cinnamon rolls. Each time, I answered with a slightly different explanation.

It has a curious effect. If I’m happy with the purchase, it’s kind of fun and interesting to explain it several different ways, and maybe it reassures her, on some level, to hear it several times. I don’t know.

She told me, again, how my cousin Karen didn’t want the parents who adopted her, but this time, she talked about how Gertrude and Walter shouldn’t have adopted any kids.

“They didn’t know what to do with them,” she said.

Walter Jr. was a rambunctious child. One time, he got up on the living room table holding a big knife. Someone told Gertrude, and she ran over to disarm the boy. Then she told a story of Mark, as a boy, pretending to carve a carved statuette she had on display in the living room. Walter Jr.’s wife, Janice, panicked, and shouted for Mark to stop. Mother laughed. She knew it was pretend.

I said I wouldn’t remember her stories, and now I’m remembering them. Maybe it’s a shift in the way I’m listening.

I’ve spent two months learning my mother and myself as we share the same space. That hasn’t happened for more than forty years. All my time in between, were visits with clear exit strategies provided by the Joint Chiefs of Staff. I’m already planning my departure, four months in advance.
Looking at my mother, napping in her chair, I felt affection for her. I began to love my mother. It occurs to me to continue writing in this way, until I leave here. That means, at the current rate, I’ll have a 600-page book. Why not? I can paint her, I can paint myself, and, with any grace, I can paint the painting.

It’s good for me to do work related to my reason for being here. It means that even when I come away from home, I’m still focused on that crucible.

Yesterday, she seemed particularly repetitive. She remarked a dozen times how green the golf course was at the John Deere Classic, now being played a few miles away.

At almost midnight, she remained in her chair, after saying she was going to bed.

“Do you want to watch more TV?” I said.

“No. I’m just thinking. I’m worried about Mark. I don’t know why he wants to sleep in that van of his.”

And then she said, “There are a lot of crazy people in this world.”

“Nobody would have any interest in Mark or his van,” I said, “he has no money, and he doesn’t look like he has any money. The only thing he’s got that might be worth something to anyone else is his guitar, or his laptop, and that’s not worth much, except to him.”

“Well, I’m just worried about him.”

“He’ll be OK,” I said.

We haven’t heard from him for two days. Actually, I heard from him that morning, but it wasn’t anything I could acknowledge. He wanted me to send him mother’s credit card to use to rent a car in Anchorage. He’ll pay cash, but he needs a card to rent a car.

I got a cashier’s check from my bank in Seattle and deposited the price of my car in my mother’s account. Now I own my car outright.

I like the idea of continuing this writing. It may chronicle changes I can’t anticipate. Right now, I’m grateful for the loving feelings I’m experiencing.
Johnny Cash and John Ritter died yesterday. Today, people are speaking of their presence among us. The presence of anyone we love is the opening to recognize the love we feel, and that is the opening to recognize the love we are. In our inherent being, each of us is love itself. We experience our inherent nature, when we feel love for anyone. I’m happier when I can live in the presence of my own inherent nature.

Part of what was so difficult, in the last two months, was the sense that my love was in abeyance. My inherent nature is never in abeyance, but in this reality, it is often obscured by contrary thoughts and feelings.

Standing at the kitchen sink, looking out at the soft rain that was falling, I remembered the sensation of coming to my grandmother’s house in Moline, when I was a boy in Nebraska. I always felt loving toward my grandmother. I associate rainy days like this one with that love.

At my home in Seattle, at certain times of the year, when I smell the rain, I feel those feelings. I’ve never felt the same way in the presence of my mother, and this morning, I did.

I may have loved my grandmother in place of my mother. She may have been no more loving to me than my mother was. My mother has described her mother as a saint and a tough woman.

I have no memories of her being particularly loving toward me or anyone else, but when I was in India, hugging an eighty year old guru, I thought of my grandmother. The skin on my teacher’s neck reminded me of her. In that moment, I felt love for both of them, I felt the love in my heart, I felt the nature of my being in its essential truth, and they were the same.

This morning, I felt it in my mother’s house.

My friend, Gregory, in Taos, wrote me back when I told him about the painting of my mother’s chair.

He said, “When your mother can sit in the chair you have painted, you will know that you have made a good painting.” And then he added, “If you make a good painting, then what?”

I replied, “If you make a good painting that your mother loves, you’re done. I’m done. What next?”

It makes me think I should begin painting people I know and love. I’ve never done that. I’ve avoided it. I describe that avoidance in this fairly recent poem.
The History of His Soul

I haven’t painted portraits of those I know, for fear they’d be faithful to an ideal, to honor and reveal, to paint wings in the brush strokes, to paint earth and blood in the forms, to paint music in the colors.

Keats wrote of Cortez when he meant Balboa on the brink of the vast Pacific, but he left Fanny Braun to the history of his soul.

If I paint your face, or you, sitting close by, or turning away, I might not be able to sleep alone, again, content in my fathomless art.
This Dance Hall

I found my ego voice, tonight, having dinner at the Village Inn. I told the pretty waitress she reminded me of Paulina Porizkova, the fashion model and actress.

“She’s a beautiful woman,” I said, “as are you.”

She seemed to walk with a little more bounce in her step, a twinkle in her eye, after that. I noticed I had acquired a persona. I chatted with my mother as if I were her bright and happy companion. On the way to the car, I winced, in my heart, to think I might become what I had just become.

I’m at ease, being caught off balance by my life.

When I can dance so easily in this world of relative realities, this dance hall of egos, I’m supremely at ease, and that makes me ill at easy.

Paying for my car, driving it around, enjoying the feel of it, no matter what it cost, gives me a sense of power. Power may not be a dangerous commodity for the regular practitioners of power. But, for me as an artist, the meek shall inherit the earth.

A friend in college once said, “Steve, you always have one hand on the rug you’re standing on, ready to yank it out from under you.”

I thought it was witty college repartee, but I remembered it, and I see how true it is. As much as I imagine power, I keep myself out of its clutches. I’ve seen the power of my art come from abiding in insecurity and powerlessness.

When I was first sober, I loved the AA slogan, POWERLESS. Joni hated it. She was an incest survivor. Feeling powerless was her enemy. At her death, she was powerless, still fighting tooth and nail for power.

As a poet and painter, I surrender to my powerlessness, and I witness the power of beauty and truth. God’s will, as they say.

Whenever I feel the surging power of ego, I enjoy it, until I don’t. Ego has a limited shelf life. It loses its cleanest potency quickly, and then something like the Devil takes over, not the vaunted Satan of religious mythology, but the newly crowned Ego clones itself, until it can’t remember its own origin.

Each of us is born, every moment, on the verge of the Eternal, and then we clone our own image until we lose touch with our own source.
We try everything in our power to recapture our true self by committing greater and greater acts of ego, when it is our gradual stepping away, from the source, into ego, that doomed us, in the first place.

This book may not contain much practical advice on how to take care of elders, but it contains the one best piece of advice there is. Be as you are. To thine own self be true. Be true to your truest self. It is the only part of you that never gets cloned, never gets lost, never tempts you with power, never betrays your heart. When your truest self seems like only one small voice in the wilderness, it is still the one true voice you will ever know.

You may not feel like the King of the Village Inn, cavorting with Czech supermodels and charming the young and the old, but you will be free.
The Pockets of Peace

I’m slightly embarrassed by the struggle I describe in getting along with my mother. It seems like a problem that doesn’t exist. I drove her to Carole’s and then to Ming Wah for lunch. We sat, happily at ease with each other and chatted amiably about many things, more or less seriously.

Mother is no longer afraid for her health. She’s doing well. She says, “I can’t tell you how relieved I am to not fall, anymore.” Her skin is clear, her mind is relatively clear, and her home life functions smoothly.

Carole introduced me to Cheryl Venckus’ mother, who said Cheryl is back home, living with her mother. Her husband died, in Florida, I don’t know long ago. Carole suggested that the three of us get together for lunch some day. I agreed, wholeheartedly.

“Cheryl was a firecracker,” I said.

Her mother said, “She still is.”

Cheryl’s sister married one of the sons of my mother’s good friend Lucille. Cheryl’s father and her sister’s husband died of heart attacks within days of each other, some years ago. Cheryl’s husband died of a heart attack.

“Everybody’s afraid to get too close to us, these days,” Cheryl’s mother said, jokingly.

“I had my heart attack,” I said, “so I’m immune.”

“Join the club,” Cheryl’s mother said.

She had a heart attack and so did Carole. Cheryl’s mother described everyone who’s survived as ‘strong.’ It’s a popular sobriquet around here. I’ve learned to survive in this reality. I’ve been able to take care of my mother and take care of myself.

In Seattle, I spent time in a coffeehouse that was a relatively benign atmosphere with friendly people. Then I found a coffeehouse where I felt instantaneously welcome in my creative self. I realized how functionally mediocre the previous place had been.

Now I’m in Pleasantville with undercurrents of distrust, and I’m fine. When I came back here, some years ago, after many years away, I thought the people who remained here must be living lives of quiet desperation. I
discovered that everyone seemed content and secure in his place. My discontent was not the same as everyone else’s.

The pockets of pure peace in the world are like phone booths of the spirit, sometimes like a house or a meadow, but the best guide to freedom beats like an innate pacemaker implanted before the body was born.

One of my English teachers in high school was Miss Roseberg. One of her favorite poets was Edgar Lee Masters, and one of her favorite poems of his was about the fictitious character, Richard Corey, who lived a seemingly perfect Mid-western all-American life, until he went home one day and put a bullet in his head.

Richard Corey did. Not Edgar Lee Masters. He wrote poetry. Poetry is a better way to open up the portals of the mind.

My teacher in India talked about the mind being like a prison whose only escape was the realization that there is no prison. I didn’t carry the feeling of being in any prison in my life, because I felt free, but a lot of my freedom was the privilege of a trustee who’s allowed out on work release, or like a parolee whose freed on conditions never made clear, but here in this vast asylum of standard social values, I feel the invisible walls.

There’s nothing wrong. I get three squares a day and all the TV time I want. It’s quiet here, but it isn’t the quiet of the soul. It’s the quiet of pacivity.
A Confrontation With Wonder

I was surprised by my critique of society. A change has occurred. My car is taken care of, my routine is routine, my mother is OK, and I’m feeling my oats.

Cheryl Venckus is an interesting development. I liked her mother. That’s always a sign in favor of the daughter. Cheryl is my age, so obviously she’s no Paulina Porizkova, but it will be enjoyable to meet up with her, no matter what.

I have nothing to say. More could be said. I’m not interested in writing that feeds on itself. I won’t keep writing just because I think it’s a good idea. I’ll keep writing because I’m a writer who keeps writing, or I’ll do nothing, or I’ll begin painting. I won’t begin painting just because it seems like a good idea. I’ll begin painting because I’m a painter who starts to paint.

We like art because we recognize ourselves in it, but we recognize ourselves in different ways, according to the art and the degree of our awareness in the depth of our being.

Talking about my mother, writing about my mother, understanding her, loving her, can’t paint a painting, but it can get itself out of the way. I’m thinking of painting. I’m thinking of nothing. I feel good about it.

The artwork presents no particular truth - it does not ‘mean’ something or other. Rather, it offers the deeper truth of Being, a moment of reflection on the fact that there is something rather than nothing. This is what Heidegger means by art’s ability to open up a world, to illuminate the fourfold structure of the earth, sky, mortals, and gods. “By the opening up of a world, all things gain their lingering and hastening, their remoteness and nearness, their scope and limits…. A work, by being a work, makes space for that spaciousness.”

Uselessness is not the artwork’s essence but is an important aspect of its otherness, its ability to arrest our attention. Art is not a piece of equipment but a slab of existence. The authentic work therefore obtrudes upon our field of experience, forcing a confrontation with wonder.
Instead of the curiosity and marvel of the spectacle-soaked everyday world, instead of the play of cheap novelty and distracting images, we confront an existential insistence on the question of what it means to be here.

Only art itself can open up that space from within. Art, like consciousness, cannot be translated into any terms other than its own.

Mark Kingwell in Harper’s Magazine August 2003
The Useless Art of Making Art

Art is grounded in uselessness. Here, in this reality, I am being useful. When use becomes an over-riding ethic, it drowns out wonder. Wonder is useless. Unless it can be sub-categorized as therapy or entertainment, wonder is useless. Even as worship, wonder becomes subordinated to a systematic usefulness.

As we sat in church, this morning, I grew restive, to put it nice. The baptism of a baby and the consecration of new members seemed to be about serving the church. God’s plan seemed to be to create a world that would serve him, with all our attention going to Jesus and the church.

Angie took the microphone and said she was feeling better.

At lunch, Mother was annoyingly repetitive, and then she said, “I’m feeling my age, today.”

There are days that have a dark cloud or two, but the clouds in the sky parted, after hours of rain. I’m looking forward to my bike ride.
A Long Bike Ride

The ride felt good. When I got home, there was an email from my son about the upcoming visit of my brother, his uncle. It touched a nerve.

Well, I am uncomfortable that you gave him my address. You know how he is about wanting to park in the neighborhood and 'not intrude'. I love Mark, but his manipulation of situations is so much a part of him that I don't think he could control it if he wanted to. For that reason, I like to hang out with him on neutral ground.

I wrote back:

The way you and Rachel ignore my mother, your grandmother, and the way you feel about Mark, your uncle and my brother, makes me feel ashamed of my family. This has been an issue for me, too, but I’ve continued to maintain contact, and now I’m living with my mother. I’m discovering that she is far from a monster, and Mark, despite being annoying as hell sometimes, is also a decent fellow sometimes. I don’t see you acting the same way toward your mother’s family. There is no great love between my mother and me, but I believe it’s good for me to come to terms with my family, and that’s proven true during this time that she and I are in such close proximity. I had to deal with Mark, who I wish was different, but he isn’t, and I’ve found I can set limits and enjoy the rest. You can handle Mark. I shouldn’t feel ashamed to have given him your address.

I still feel the awkwardness of my family and my children. I’m a divorced father who has grown children who live separate lives. My parents were not divorced, but I lived in deliberate separation from them, until my father died, ten years ago.

I became closer to my younger brother and his family, but even with them, there is still distance. I love my son and daughter, but I’m not completely at ease with them, except when we’re together. I feel some residue of distance.

I’m not intimate with my family. This time with my mother won’t solve that sense of separation, but it might clear up the reasons for it. Better yet, it might give me some peace about it.
I’m not happy about the distance I feel between others and myself. If I can see how I create and maintain that distance, I won’t feel as confused about it.

I’m at peace in my spirit, but my spirit is not at peace in the world. My spirit can never be completely at peace in the world, but I’d like to discover as much peace as there can be, and my family is a good place to start.
Your Own Shrink

I’m torn. I’m being pulled apart. It’s a good way to discover what’s real. I live in wonder and I paint and write. I live in the world and I’m useful. I look after my responsibilities, and I live in the purest irresponsibility there is.

I see how I want this writing to be finished, so I can spend my time in wonder with painting and poetry, but I see how this writing chronicles a significant time in my life that’s evolving. When I think I’m finished writing, some other layer is revealed.

When my son was ten or so, my ex-wife invited me to see the therapist they had both been seeing. I went, with real curiosity. After the session, the therapist said to me, “You don’t need a shrink. You’re your own shrink.”

My roommate, at the time, a buddy, said, “Brooks, you always have your thumb up your ass, taking your emotional temperature.”

It’s been a habit of mine to witness my own behavior, not to dwell on it, but to unhook it from my spirit, to find the thorns and pull them out.

Mother was angry. Everything she said was in an angry voice. I know, from my own experience, that there is an origin for feelings, in the recent or the distant past. I’d already laid the groundwork with her, by talking about her anger and how I felt it. I felt the same twisting in my gut.

“Your voice sounds angry,” I said.
“She seemed surprised, but she didn’t balk.
“I don’t know why,” she said.
“What makes you angry?” I said.

“David Letterman says he’s going to have a baby, and he’s not married, and he announces it on national TV, that makes me mad.”

From then on, as she discussed the disturbing complexities of having a child out of wedlock and being with a man who doesn’t want to get married, the anger went away.

I wrote my son, last night, sending him the last chapter, and I told him:

I’ve been writing about my experiences with my mother. It’s been good. It’s a daily meditation that gives me the freedom to jump back into it, and I like what it’s becoming, too.
I don't need you to figure anything out, or do anything, or change anything. This is all part of a process that I'm in the middle of. I started out with my mother, feeling all the shit of 61 years, and I've been able to clear a lot of it. Your email is part of the ongoing process, and I'm grateful for that. I see that my mother is a woman limited in her awareness, who is decent and well-intentioned. Her habits are superficial and seem much deeper. The love gap is unclosable. She is who she is, and it isn't her fault. I am her son, and I can see how I learned things from her, good and bad. She's responded to some of my insights, and the rest will remain. Mark, too, was an asshole, until I told him to shut up, and then we had a nice time. There's a lot more to this, than this short review, and it's not over. It feels good to me to have taken on this task, and I am being rewarded, not having to carry around personal mythologies and bullshit that has no life in the present moment.

I love you, totally, and my personal history is only stuff.

As soon as I told him I didn't need him to do anything, I felt good, again.

Today, I took my coming-of-age book, SWIMMING, up to my old high school and donated it to “the archives,” since much of it takes place in that school. I talked to a young vice-principal about taking a tour of the school, and he invited me back on Wednesday. This time has treasures not yet discovered, and all it takes to discover them is to pay attention.
The Witness

A beautiful thing occurs when I do this writing, and it happens almost every time. When I start, I’ve forgotten what happens, so I don’t anticipate it. I begin describing something that’s happened or something I’m feeling or thinking, and in the course of writing, I’m raised from the mundane to something sublime. Grace occurs out of the ordinary.

In the last chapter, I wrote, “I need to look after my responsibility.” I changed it to, “I look after my responsibility,” and I recognize the truth instead of the judgment. I begin to speak with some awareness, instead of with self-judgment. When I begin to write, I feel the attachments of my ego, and as I write, those attachments lift, and I begin to see as my egoless self.

As I write, I begin to let go of my self-image as a man burdened by petty concerns, and I begin to recognize my awareness without ego. Every time that happens, I experience the grace we all share as eternal beings in our inherent selves. To my delight, I recognize the greater reality, and that gives me perspective on the lesser reality that is my life and its perplexing complexity.

Because of the nature of writing as a witness, I become the witness I am, and the reality I witness becomes more clear. It becomes clear, because the nature of being a witness is clear. This writing begins, each time, as the journal of a man and becomes the diary of a witness.

It’s why I don’t care much what I reveal about myself as a person. Myself as a person is the least of my concerns. I’m a witness to this particular life more than any other. I see what occurs in the foreground of my awareness.

I’ve said it in various ways in this story. There’s a lot of psycho-babble and enlightenment-babble about this reality, but it comes down to a very simple transformation. This transformation may be aided by the way a poet speaks, but it comes down to allowing the spirit to speak more clearly in place of the personal self. As my personal self, I’m grateful for this unaggressive transformation. My personal self is given a greater place in the common being of us all by being witnessed without separation, and I become the voice of the witness, who is free.
All the Bright Colors

What I said, yesterday, about becoming the witness to the essence of my reality is true. I become witness to the greater reality, and all the relative realities become clearer.

Only the soul sees the soul, and from the eyes of the soul, the man is seen. As a man, I’ve learned to see and judge myself, and I’ve learned to see and judge the world. As my soul self, I’m free to see beyond myself.

When I do that, I feel nothing but acceptance, peace, serenity, and then, understanding is possible. Understanding, in the mind, is the weighing of judgments, but the understanding of one’s soul self is always couched in acceptance. That feels the same as forgiveness in a thinking mind.

In the awareness of the soul, forgiveness is unnecessary, but it feels like forgiveness to the mind. That’s why religion promises forgiveness. Most people hear the message from their judgmental minds, and judgment needs forgiveness.

I wake up, every day, in a judgmental reality seeking forgiveness, but in the innate reality of my deepest self I live a peace beyond judgment and beyond the need for forgiveness. Every day, I’m born again, and every day, I discover I exist beyond birth and death.

Mother has been feeling her age, lately. She spilled her wine glass at dinner, the day before yesterday. Then, yesterday, she broke a glass and cut herself on the hand. Then she spilled a box of pasta all over the kitchen floor.

She loves to show me the beautiful colors in the Oprah magazine, and today, it seems to be the colors of rather ordinary ads; bright colors to be sure, but not remarkable.

We talked to her stockbroker on the phone, and she sounded cogent and articulate.

She’s been sleeping in her chair more than usual, but this morning she did her “exercises” for the first time in six months. She used to do yoga by her bed, every morning, and she’s begun that again, at least a little.

She got a rebate check for $26 from her car insurance, and she suggested we spend it on a nice dinner, probably tomorrow night.
wonders if we have cockroaches. It’s only a few specks of dirt and lint on
the rug. She asks me when I’m playing soccer. I say I’m playing tonight,
and she asks me if I’m playing soccer tonight.

“I could just fix some soup and a sandwich,” she says.

“I’m not playing until almost seven. There’s plenty of time for me to
fix supper,” I say.

She asks me if I’m playing soccer, tonight. I say I am.
My brother is in Seattle, and my son doesn’t want him staying in his house. My mother said she was angry at Jaxon for that. I said he found Mark difficult, and she says she didn’t. I said that Jaxon didn’t want anyone staying in his house, including me.

“If I needed a place, I don’t think he’d want me there, either,” I said.

“Well, I’ll keep my nose out of it,” she said.

She added, “Doesn’t he remember all times he stayed here, and the time Mark took him to Hawaii?”

“He was a kid, then. It doesn’t count. I changed his diapers. That doesn’t count, either.”

It bothers me that my son is inhospitable toward his family, but have I been, too. I didn’t let Mark stay with me, a few years ago. I said my niece Jessica could stay at my place, if she came to school in the Northwest, but she’s a kindred spirit.

I’m of two minds about family. I don’t see the bond that family is supposed to engender, and yet I feel responsible to act as if there is a bond. The writer of this story, the one I call my soul self, sees that family is one of the relative realities that occurs in everyone’s life.

My teacher said, “When you’re driving your car, drive your car.”

So I say, “When your family is a reality in your life, be with your family.”

As Ramana said to Poonjaji, “If your family is illusion to you, then it will be easy for you to take care of them.”

(When I described family as “a relative reality,” no double entendre was intended, but I like it.)

What bothers me about my family is not my family. My habitual attachment makes it a problem. The attachment to family is a sign of ego. If I can be with my family, free of my attachment to it, there’s no problem.

As Mother put it so eloquently, “I’ll keep my nose out of it.”

If my son doesn’t open his house to family, it’s hurtful to me, if I’m hurt by it. I’m hurt by it, if I think his actions are about me. Then I act as if his actions are a part of my mind. The same is true of my brother and mother. If their lives are part of my mind, I’m not free, either.
When I recognize my freedom, the surprise is, I recognize the bond I have with all that is, including my children, my parents, and my brothers. Then, I love them easily.

When I feel bound to my family, I don’t feel free, and I resent them all. Then my love is conditional and reciprocal.

“Doesn’t he remember all the times we took him in?”

Then the ledger books come out, and nobody is free.
In the Trenches

I’m back in the trenches of relative reality. We went to The Olive Garden for dinner. This afternoon, in Borders, I spoke to my muse of the cafe, Ann, who was sitting at a table like an ordinary patron. She was studying ethics. She said it was difficult because it wasn’t clearly defined.

“I like ethics,” I said, “because you get to find out who you are.”

I wished her well and left the cafe, happy and sad to see how much older I am than she is. I’m glad I don’t rush my attractions out ahead of my awareness.

Tonight, she came in The Olive Garden with her mother. I remembered wanting to ask if her mother was single, on the outside chance the apple didn’t fall far from the tree.

Ann and her mother went straight to the bar, where her mother ordered and drank a tall beer, and Ann sat without a drink. Her mother looked miserable, and when I went up to say hello to Ann, she didn’t look friendly.

“Are you following me, or am I following you?” I said.

“You’re following me,” she said.

“I’m here with my mother,” I said. “That’s why I’m in the Quad-Cities, to look after my mother.”

“This is my mother,” she said, and I saw no eye contact between us. I left them alone.

At dinner, Mother didn’t like the salad, the wine, or the entree. She liked the little girl at the next table, who was an angel-face in spaghetti sauce.

My dinner was very good, and the waiter was terrific.

“I’m sorry if I spoiled your dinner,” she said, afterward.

“I’ve learned that when I notice the good and not the bad, I have a better time of it. I wish your dinner was as good as mine was.”

“I do, too.”

She’s an old woman, who bends over her plate and forks the food in without ceremony. She peers around the room to see who’s shown up in her world. She can’t see very well, and she can’t hear what the waiter says. He repeats, and I repeat. She asks me several times what day it is.
“Is it Thursday?” she said.
“It’s Wednesday,” I said.
“Wednesday?” she said.
She forgets what she’s ordered.
“What did I order?”
“I think you ordered the stuffed chicken?”
“Stuffed chicken?”
She eats olives in the salad, and then says, “There are no olives in this salad. They used to have olives.”
“You ate the olives.”
“No, I didn’t.”
“You can ask the waiter for more salad with more olives.”
The waiter brings fresh salad with a dozen olives in it. She eats two full salads and keeps eating salad after the dinner comes.
“You can stop eating salad, now,” I say.
“I don’t want to waste it,” she says.
She doesn’t finish her entree, by half, but it’s too spicy for her, anyway.
“I didn’t know I ordered anything so spicy,” she says.
“It’s an Italian restaurant, you have to ask about the spices, if you don’t like hot food.”
“I didn’t think it would be that spicy. It certainly wasn’t as good as last time.”
“It’s too bad you didn’t enjoy your dinner.”
“Your tastes change when you get older,” she says.
Weary and Sad

I feel weary and sad. I said to my mother, in my thoughts, “When you don’t feel good, I don’t feel good.”

She’s been off her feed lately, and I imagine it’s her mental condition that’s doing it. She seems to be more foggy than usual, and I bet it’s difficult for her. She’s not happy, and I can feel it.

Carole, the hairdresser, gave me an address book of all the graduates of Moline High. I discovered a couple of things. One of the out-of-reach heart-throb girls of my adolescence is an artist who lives in Denver. My high school girlfriend, Vicki, lives in Davenport, and I decided to send her a copy of SWIMMING. There’s a chapter devoted to our virginal sex life, and I love that chapter. She deserves a copy. I just re-read it, here in Borders, and it holds up well. I held up well, too, when I was seventeen.

I didn’t go back to my high school for a tour with the vice-principal. I realized I have no tie to the place, anymore, at least, not enough to milk the nostalgia. More interesting to me is seeing Luis, a kid I played soccer with, on the front page of the sports section, as a star player at Moline High School.

I’ve only been here for two and a half months, and I have three and a half months to go. It seems like a long time, when I think about it. Time always seems like a long time when I think about it. I intended this to be a true commitment, a marathon, and not a visit. I can handle any challenge, when I imagine it ending soon, but I can’t do that, this time.

As I write, I remember the freedom of my awareness, but my mind does what most of us do when confronted with freedom, it resists. It doesn’t want to go there. We imagine heaven as a boring place with white robes and a lot of sitting around, because the mind can’t visualize spiritual peace any other way.

I knew a guy in recovery, years ago, who said, “Whenever I pray, my life gets better. When I don’t pray, it gets worse. So, I don’t pray.”

There’s no impetus in the mind to be free. Freedom of the spirit means that the mind loses primacy. It becomes a secondary tool of the spirit. When there’s unhappiness and difficulty, the mind is fat and sassy. When there’s peace and serenity, the mind has no power to augment itself.
It will try to take credit and take control of the peace and serenity. Eventually, the mind can be led to appreciate the better life of its surrender, but it habitually resists the change.

I’m living with a woman whose mind is bound by its own deterioration. It’s an unhappy mind. It can’t assert itself and become stronger, and there’s no apparent surrender to spirit. It’s still a mind, trying to do what minds do.

She’s unhappy, her mind is unhappy, and I can feel it.

It’s said that one can be too smart for God, and I think there’s such a thing as being not smart enough for God. A mind that believes it has power may ignore spirit, and a mind that’s lost power can’t stay open to spirit.

Fear and confusion are pervasive addictions of the mind, and there’s no peace available in them.

In Fireworks, last night, there were young teens, and no one else. I felt the isolation of my environment. In my awareness, in the spirit of my being, there is no isolation. I’m stuck in the thought of isolation, in a greater reality where no isolation exists. And I’ve gained three pounds.
Shotgun Weddings

I made up a package for my old high school girlfriend, Vicki, with copies of *SWIMMING* and *The Dancer in the Heart*, and now I’m having second thoughts.

“Think twice!”

“Which mind do I use, the second time?”

I wonder why I send my books to people that were characters in those books. I write as a communication, and the writing isn’t complete until someone reads it. Since I’m not widely published, I suppose find my readership where I can.

I have no desire to rekindle a relationship with Vicki. She’s married with three children and probably grandchildren. We separated for good reason, but I cared about her, and I want her to know that. I wrote about us, and I want to share that with her. If I was a character in someone else’s book, I’d be curious to read it. I had a novelist friend who said I was in one of his books, but I never read it. He never showed it to me, and I was disappointed.

Maybe I do it because it’s a crack in the way things are normally done.

Another old girlfriend, from my San Francisco days, now lives in Davenport. I wrote a book during our time together, called *Savage Amusement*, and she said, then, that she wanted to read it when I was finished with it. I didn’t know where she was, until two years ago, the first time I came here to help my mother. I knew she grew up nearby, and I contacted her brother. He told me she didn’t remember me, but she’d like to see the book.

“Odd,” I thought, but I sent her a copy of the book. I never heard a word from her. Disappointing, but still interesting.

I sent a copy of *SWIMMING* to another girl who was my adolescent ideal. Her sister thanked me for the book, and that was the last I heard of it. It was disappointing, and I see a pattern developing. I’ll send another just to see if the pattern holds.
I went to see Mark’s old optometrist, the other day, and he surprised me by saying he liked the book of poems I gave him. The kid upstairs loved the same book, but both of these readers are male.

Ann, my part-time muse hasn’t said anything about my poems, and the pathologist at the football game, who seemed so eager, hasn’t said anything, either.

Maybe it’s my version of Mark’s unasked question, a way of testing the waters, taking the temperature of the atmosphere, finding out who’s up to the challenge and who’s not.

Ever since I first thought I’d be a relatively unknown artist/writer, I’ve engaged in these shotgun weddings. It feels a bit like sending my books to my parents, over the years. As disappointing as that has been, I kept doing it.

I’m not making my mother’s life any better, it seems. She isn’t becoming a joyful old woman. The longer I live in this joyless land, the less joyful I feel.

I thought I was tired of painting words, that maybe it was time to paint colors. Then I thought I ought to stick with it.

Books are a self-selecting reality for all of us. The people who write books are the sort of person who writes, and the realities they usually describe belong to that sort of person. And, usually, they tell the stories that best illustrate their particular vision.

And then, there are the publishers, who choose what they choose, according to who they are. One of my writing friends said to me, early on, about publishers, “There’s usually only one guy, and if he has a style similar to yours, he’ll publish your stuff.”

A retired Navy man told me that there was no Navy, there was only a guy behind a desk, and if he liked what you said, you got through, and if he didn’t, you didn’t.

And then there’s the readership, made of people who not only read books but buy books, because the business of connecting stories to readers is, above all, a business for profit.

So, I print my own books, for the most part, and I give them to people I choose as readers. I don’t choose readers who will necessarily love the book. I choose readers who seem worthy. But in what sense are they worthy? Are they worthy of being asked the unasked question, of being
read the unread poem, of being shown the unseen painting, of meeting the unmet self?

“You know me, and I know you, but here is the unknown, and maybe even the unknowable. How do you like your fair-haired boy, now?”
Mundane Details

Mother was worried. Mark called and asked for her credit card number. She couldn’t find the card. I told her I’d sent the card, already, because he needed it and asked for it. She would have given him the number, but she’s worried about the card being stolen and used by a master criminal who can pick my letter out of millions. I told her the details of the exchange, several times, before dinner took her mind off it.

I enjoyed it that Mark had created a stir. I enjoyed trying to make it clear. I enjoyed it that it wasn’t a secret anymore.

She told me a story about Scott needing a new suit for his job and how she’d let him use her credit card number. Then, when the bill came, she found out he’d bought two suits instead of one. He said they were on sale and too good a deal to pass up.

Her comment was, “He needed the suit.”

I showed her the three shirts I’d just bought from Goodwill for $3.38. They had a ‘buy one, get two for free’ sale on men’s long sleeve shirts. I hadn’t even noticed the sign, before I picked out the shirts.

I said to the cashier, “It’s my lucky day.”

“You have too many shirts,” Mother said.

“I have limited space in my house,” she added. “That’s why I don’t buy anything new.”

It’s fun writing down these mundane stories. I’ve never done anything quite like it. I’ve always loved the mundane details of life. The difference is that these details are about my mother. I’ve never written down the mundane details of my mother’s life.

I’ve often described the mundane details of my own life, in the same way that John Keats or Alan Ginsburg described the minor details of their major lives for all of us to enjoy. This story begs the question, “What major lives am I describing, a generally unknown author and his senescent mother living quiet days, in a small town on the Mississippi River, far from the madding crowd?”
Life is Beautiful

I seem to be slowing down, as I become accustomed to the way things are, in this sleepy hamlet by the big river. I noticed myself moving more easily, this morning, going to the Farmers Market, the store, the Methodist Church Rummage Sale, the hairdressers, the store, back home, between each time out, back to the hairdressers, and finally back to the rummage sale with Mother, to check out the baked goods sale.

We bought a chocolate zucchini cake and some store-bought pretzels that had been coated in sugar and cinnamon and baked.

“Oooh, just like candy,” Mother said, and I grinned.

“What are you grinning at?” she said.

“Just smiling,” I said.

I felt the familiar sense of being trapped in a squelching reality inside an oppressive reality, and then I felt good, and free.

How we are in our lives is largely a result of our nature, both physical and spiritual. “Be as you are,” implies that the most peace you can enjoy lies in accepting your reality, whatever it is. As clearly as I’ve witnessed grace, I’ve witnessed torment. Do I have anything to do with either? Not a whit. Not as much as a bean. Not as much as a breath of air on the wing of a butterfly in Tanzania.

I sat in the large meeting room of the old Aldersgate Methodist Church, now part of the Riverside Methodist Church, on a plastic chair at a long Formica table next to my mother, and I felt good. I looked around the room at the people eating pie and Sloppy Joes, I looked at the minister, the church ladies, and the church guys behind the tables of food, I looked out the windows at the open field covered with bazaar booths and rummage sale tables, I looked at the people and the trees and the sunny sky, and I felt as free as a bird on a wire.

The ladies offered Mother a pecan pie for $7.50. It was too much money and too many calories. We both wanted a bite, but a bite wasn’t possible. I got her a coke, and she asked me how much it was.

“75 cents,” I said.

“75 cents for a coke?” she said, incredulously.
“You’re complaining about your own church?” I said, smiling. “You really are cheap.”
She laughed.
She thought about the apple butter, but $5.50 for a pint jar was too much. I agreed.
“I like apple butter,” I said, “but I don’t like it that much.”
“Me, either,” she said.
There was an obese woman sitting nearby.
“She’s really fat,” Mother said, putting onions on her Sloppy Joe.
“Don’t say anything,” I said.
“I know,” she said.
She picked up several of the baked goods for sale and examined them.
“I used to bake,” she said to the woman, “but I don’t anymore. That’s why I’m so interested.”
The woman was the same one who called her about receiving a service pin, back when she was so afraid of falling.
“Did they send you a pin?” I said, knowing she didn’t get one.
“No, the purpose of the pin was to pin it on during the Sunday service, to make a show of it,” she said.
“Have you ever talked to the preacher?” I said. I didn’t see any interaction between them, and I couldn’t remember any.
“Oh, sure. She said hi. She called me by name. But I’m not active in the church, anymore. I used to do all this. I used to lead groups and put on these kinds of things, but I’m not active, anymore.”
It’s so much easier transcribing these stories now that I don’t have the fog in my eyes that I had, early on. The fog was cleared by clearing up my personal attachment, both positive and negative, to this reality. If I don’t have any personal emotional or psychological stake in what happens, then whatever happens, only happens.
It occurs. When life occurs, without attachment, life is beautiful.
There are two black guys at a table near me and two Japanese guys at the next table. I feel a kinship with outsiders and people perceived as outsiders. But today, I don’t feel like an outsider, because I’m not outside myself.
Yesterday, as I was driving, I thought about the Moline I remember from my youth. It was a wonderful place. But then I felt the same way about McCook, Nebraska, Grinnell, Iowa, Eastford, Connecticut, San Francisco, California, and Seattle, Washington, not to mention Yucatan, Mexico, and Lucknow, India, among other places. The common denominator in all these wonderful places was and is wonder; my wonder, the wonder that has been magically implanted in my spirit, and by osmosis, into every other part of my being.

I believe this is the generic spiritual reality of all beings, but I seem to be lucky enough to be hit over the head by wonder on a semi-regular basis.

Mother told Carole about the painting of the chair, “I didn’t know he painted it. I thought it was by a real artist.”

“A real artist,” I repeated.

“I mean like one I bought,” she said, weakly.

“Steve is a real artist,” Carole said, “and a real poet, too. You get to brag about him.”

I let that pass, but I liked hearing it directed at my mother. I was smiling. There was no resentment in my heart. I felt free. Life is wonderful when life is full of wonder.
I Spilled Coffee on the Poet

Scott’s wife, Liz, called from Hawaii and left a message, so we called back. We learned all the news from Honolulu, and Mother spoke happily and enthusiastically about herself, and me, and everyone else. We talked about Mark going to Alaska. All during the conversation I heard a slightly angry edge in Scott’s voice. I knew he wasn’t seriously angry, but there was a tone of anger.

After the call, I said to Mother, “Did you notice, all during the call, that Scott sounded a little angry. I know he wasn’t, but there was a touch of anger in his voice.”

“That’s what you said about me. Scott wasn’t angry. I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Never mind,” I said. “I’m going out for a while, I’ll be back later.”

I’ve heard that edge before. Everyone in our family has spoken with the color of anger in his or her voice. It’s a tone, an inflection, a characteristic of this family. I bet I’ve had it in my own voice, too. It’s a slightly threatening tone of voice, a defensive and challenging tone. It’s the kind of thing that if you don’t notice it, consciously, you hear it unconsciously. Now that I hear it consciously, the tension in my belly is unmistakable.

I don’t hear it as personal, anymore, but I still hear it, maybe better, since I don’t believe it’s personal. The twisted gut feeling is also not personal, and I feel it more sharply now that I don’t believe the emotions attached to it.

I’m surprised to see so many intent faces in the next room at Fireworks, tonight, as people, male and female, paint their various pieces of pottery. I’m glad to see it.

When I came in, the barista asked me if I was the guy who wrote the book of poems. She said the man who picked it up told them all about me. She liked the cover art.

“Did you do this?” she said.

She said she was an art student at Blackhawk College, and she wrote a little poetry, too. I gave her another book and asked her what her name was.
“Mona,” she said.
“Steve,” I said.

Mona is a young Black woman with long dreadlocks, thick-frame glasses, and a strong presence.

I just spilled my coffee across my new copy of Emily Dickinson’s poetry. She’s the only poet whose collected poetry I’ve bought several times. I thought to myself, after buying the book, “Emily Dickinson is the best poet this country has ever seen. Nobody else even comes close.”

That’s not absolutely true, but it shows how I feel about her poetry.
Caught in the Rain

I rode my bike in the rain. I got to Port Byron, and the rain started, almost a cold rain, steady. I turned around and rode home. After fifteen minutes, I was soaked, and my hands were cold and stiff. After half an hour, I began to enjoy the ride. I thought about Shackleton’s sailors in the waters of the South Pole for days, and I knew I was in no pain at all. I put my head down and kept pedaling. I was drenched, soaking wet. I realized it wasn’t going to get much worse, and it didn’t.

When I got home, and I was peeling off my wet clothes, Mother thought I was just going out. She’d been napping.

In Church, this morning, I asked myself why it was so difficult for me to be among people who worship in a way I don’t. It occurred to me that just because most students don’t learn much, that’s no reason to leave school. It wasn’t a particularly apt analogy, but it reminded me to be a little more tolerant and accepting.

Still, I had a hard time of it. I thought about leaving the synagogue, but it was more interesting to look at my difficulty. Why do I begrudge people their mythology, their personal god, their beliefs? They say they want everyone to share their faith and beliefs, but they don’t really care. Nobody proselytizes, nobody twists my arm, nobody seems interested.

After the service, I had a conversation with the assistant pastor about taking care of our elder relatives. His mother died last year in her 90s. His wife tried to pronounce my Hindi name, Abhaya, but she didn’t ask any questions about it.

Maybe I don’t care for it because it’s so tepid. The Bible quote was about Jesus ordering his disciples not to tell anyone about his healing of a deaf man. The more adamantly he ordered them to be silent, the more they spread the word of his healing.

The entire religion is based on people following the word of the only son of the only god, and here were his disciples ignoring his orders and doing exactly the opposite. The minister’s lesson from this was the natural eagerness of humanity to spread the good news, as if Jesus was only practicing a little reverse psychology.
I’ve wondered, over the last 24 hours, what would happen in the world if people broke out of the routine realities of life and proclaimed their wonder? A soldier in battle approaching the enemy lines, rifle in hand, surrounded by the ranks of his compatriots, stands up and speaks the wonder of his awareness.

“Look at this! Look at where we are! Look at what we are doing! Look at this reality!”

I’ve had such moments in the middle of soccer games, in cafes, on the street, but I’ve kept my wonder to myself. Of course, I have. There is no precedent for wonder.

At Bishops, Mother told good stories of our relatives. I watched her speak to strangers and old friends with aplomb, with social graces, with a friendly word and a smile, and I saw why people have always liked her.

It is a quality of recognition of the basic value of all people that I share with her. I could say her manner was artificial, but I feel it in myself as genuine. It’s easier for me to honor other people in a brief exchange, in a moment in passing, than it is when conversations are engaged and the social dance begins, in its earnest routine.

My mother passed a couple, walking close to their table, slowly. She looked at them eating. She might have said something intrusive or presumptuous, but instead she smiled, and she put her hand on the man’s shoulder.

She looked at the woman, and said, “Did you enjoy your meal?”

“Yes, we did,” the woman responded, enthusiastically. “It was all very good.”

She said Uncle Lawrence always wore a suit and tie with a white shirt. When he went out to eat, everyone thought he was a minister.

“How I get the pastor discount?” he always asked, in fun.

When we were walking, her arm in mine, back to the car, she stopped, every few feet, to marvel at a sign, at the display in a store window, at people passing, at colors and patterns, at whatever she saw that caught her eye.

We walked by the corridor where she and my father had run a restaurant for several years, and she didn’t recognize it.
Tonight, during the Emmy Awards show on TV, she got up to get a cookie. She stopped in the middle of the room and said, “This is the way to the kitchen, right?”

I’ve always wanted my mother to be a deeper character, but the deepest character among us is a design painted on water by the wind.
Miss America at the Emmys

I told Mother I wanted to paint her.
“No,” she said, “I don’t want that.”

We watched the Emmys, last night. I used to watch awards shows and imagine myself receiving an Oscar or an Emmy, and then, one day, I realized why that wouldn’t happen.
“I’m not one of those people,” I said to myself.

I was a performer, an actor, a writer of dramatic pieces, but I’m not one of those people who become professional at it.
“I want to maintain my amateur standing as a human being,” I said, once.

It’s the same impulse that allows me to speak my wonder. I have the capabilities that might have made my mother and the world happy, if I had become a professional in this life. I’m capable of being a charismatic presence. Instead, I’ve sought my empty invisibility.

Osho Rajneesh spoke of the crystallization of the ego, when the ego has nowhere to go with itself but to explode, implode, and dissolve. My mind has all the same habitual characteristics it’s always had, but I pulled the rug out from under the mind’s expectations for my life.

Mother looked at Bill Cosby, last night, and she said, “He sure is black!”

She looked at the new Miss America, this morning, on the Regis and Kelly show, and she said, “I didn’t know she was Black!”

She didn’t speak either time with any negativity, more like a child who’s seen something new.

There were a couple of things I left out of the previous two chapters, and I wanted to get them in. There is a new sense of urgency in wanting to get it all in, to get it right, to tell the whole story. The business about her not wanting to be painted is one of them.

This afternoon, I went to see a high school friend, who’s now a dentist, to fill a crack in my temporary crown. I seemed to be the only patient in his lovely office in the woods of Rock Island. His two nurses were cordial, and he and I chatted about bike paths to Chicago and his newly refurbished house on the river in Port Byron.
While we were watching the Miss America Pageant, Mother commented on Miss Florida, who went on to become Miss America.

“Her face is blacker than the rest of her.”

Yesterday, in church, Mother leaned over, held her program up to cover her mouth and whispered loudly, “Your hair looks beautiful.”

I winced and shrugged her off. I was flattered, embarrassed and shocked. I looked around to see if anyone had heard the remark about my hair. I was glad to see the pew behind us was empty.

Earlier, on our way to church, I realized we had each, separately, chosen to wear light brown and tan clothing. We looked like fashion twins, like a mother and her grown son who lives with her. I thought about changing my shirt, but I decided to ride out the accident of impressions. Whatever I looked like was the accident of my birth.

The assistant pastor’s wife, looking at our faces, said, “You look so much like your mother.”

“That shouldn’t be too surprising,” I said.

I thought, when I began this time, that it would be like my six months in India. It has proven to be every bit as much a challenge, to see who I am, to see who I’m not, and to accept the truth, whatever it is.
Forever the Same

I don’t usually write on my computer. I’m going to try this for two reasons. I went to Fireworks, last night, to write, and nothing came to the surface, or nothing went below the surface. I had nothing to write, so I didn’t write.

When I got home, while we were watching CSI-Miami, during the commercials, I switched over to the Raiders-Broncos Monday Night Football Game.

As the camera focused on one player, Mother said, “That man’s skin is really black.”

I said, “Why do you keep pointing out how black everyone is?”

“I’m just talking.”

“But why are you talking about how black he is?”

“Well, I feel sorry for him. His skin is so black.”

I was stunned. And I was wrong about her comments, in the last couple of days. She wasn’t noticing as a child. She was noticing as a woman who had grown up conditioned to believe that lighter skinned people are better looking, or at least better off in the world.

“Why do you feel sorry for him?”

“Because his skin is so black, that doesn’t look good.”

I became indignant.

“That makes me angry,” I said.

“It makes you angry?” she said.

“It makes me angry to hear you say that. If you can’t see the beauty in people with dark skin, it’s because you’re trained to think black skin is unattractive. If you can’t see the beauty in it, you need to think about what you say, and you need to pay attention to what is beautiful. Some people, with the blackest skin, are truly beautiful and some aren’t. It’s got nothing to do with the color. It has more to do with symmetry than it does with color.”

As time went on, I realized I wasn’t angry. Anger comes when there’s an emotional attachment to the question. I was righteously indignant; because it was something I knew to be true. There’s no question in my mind about the presence of beauty in people of all colors. I don’t feel
personally challenged by the question, except to realize my mother’s prejudice.

“That’s nothing but racial prejudice,” I said.

“I worked with Black people, when I worked for Mrs. Kittle.”

“For one summer,” I said.

“It took me a while to get used to it, but I did,” she said.

“And if you lived with black people who had very dark skin, you’d get used to that, and you’d see the beauty in them.”

“Well, I just feel sorry for them, that’s all.”

“There’s nothing to feel sorry about.”

She never changed her tune. I continued to talk about it for some time, but she remained silent. I let it drop to silence. She never volunteered any change in her perception. I wasn’t angry about her ignorance. It reminded me of her inability to see the beauty in my art, beyond what seemed familiar to her. In Gladys’ world, some things remain forever the same.
String Beans and Ham

This morning, I gave my mother the bank statement, without her asking for it. She had a couple of questions about amounts paid, but after an hour or so, she put it back in the envelope and watched TV.

Part of my reason for not showing the statement to her was the expectation she’d make a fuss about every check and then repeat her questions over and over. So far, that hasn’t been true. I wanted to get this episode over with, and take what came. She asked me about the money I withdrew for the truck. I said I replaced it.

“Unless you want to pay it yourself,” I said.

“No,” she said.

“It doesn’t matter,” I said, “because I got money from my bank and I replaced it.”

I hope that’s the end of that tempest in the teapot of my mind.

The credit card I sent Mark had expired. He didn’t need it, anyway. We watched George Bush talk to the UN General Assembly this morning.

“You want to watch that man?” she said. “Why?”

She didn’t recognize him.

Miss America was on David Letterman last night, and Mother didn’t say anything about how black she was. I’ve come to believe my mother is now, and maybe always has been, a relatively superficial person. Racial prejudice is, for her, as it has been for so many people, a remarkably superficial evil.

I wouldn’t be surprised if she dropped the subject of blackness because she knew it displeased me. I don’t mean she cares about what I think. She’s learned to adjust her subject matter according to its reception, no matter who she’s talking to.

She did tell me a good story this morning. I told her about my visit to the dentist, yesterday. She told me about taking me to the dentist, in Nebraska, when I was a little kid.

The dentist, a man she didn’t know, was a handsome older gentleman with white hair. He had one rule; no parents in the room while he worked on the child.
Apparently, she wandered back toward the room where he was working on me, and she heard me crying and him yelling, “Shut up!” and manhandling me in the chair. She pulled me out of there, and we never went back. That’s my mother at her opinionated and decisive best.

“You have to know how to treat children,” she said.

“Mark had braces,” she said.

“That’s right. I remember that,” I said.

“Nicole had braces. I paid for her braces. I don’t think she wears them, anymore.”

We talked about cooking pasta for dinner. I cooked fresh string beans, last night, and I learned you can cook beans for a short time or a long time. If you cook beans with ham, they pick up the flavor of the ham, but the longer you cook them, the softer they get.

I once felt the loss of storytelling in America, the kind of storytelling that had no psychological depth to it, but resonated with flavor like beans and ham, mundane details in bas relief, pictures of ordinary life told with love and charm, but I don’t live in those times, and my bean story will have to do.

Last night, I put together a concoction of leftovers, new potatoes fried with some catfish pieces and peas. I added a sprinkling of Parmesan and some bacon bits. It was delicious.

This afternoon, eating chicken salad on saltines, with my mother, I noticed that my reluctance to hang out with her and talking on her level had subsided. Still, I left the house in minutes. Sometimes, I wish I were out of here. But here I am. I’ll take superficial ease over unresolvable unhappiness.
The Ghostwriter

Dr. Phil is running a series of shows in conjunction with his new book about overeating in America. Mother is catching the fever.

“I don’t know why you bought those apple turnovers. I thought you wanted to watch your weight.”

“Yeah, but you gotta have some fun,” I said.

I’ve been trying to wean her off the high cholesterol diet she’s been on, forever, getting rid of the high fat foods in the refrigerator, but she keeps asking for bacon and eggs and hamburger. I don’t think Dr. Phil will have a lasting effect on her psyche.

The apple turnovers were right next to the chocolate cake she asked me to buy. I bought several kinds of fruit and put them in a big bowl. It didn’t influence her, but it got me to eat a plum and half an apple for lunch.

“If you buy bananas, don’t buy very many. When you buy bananas, you have to eat them right away, at least one a day,” she said.

I’ve stopped serving her ice cream, at night. Today, I got a gift certificate in the mail for a free pint of Ben & Jerry’s.

Writing like this is a kind of permission I give myself to act in a way I wasn’t taught. Ever since I began calling myself a poet, I’ve done this. When I write, it’s as if a ghostwriter takes over the telling of my story. The person I was born and raised as tells a story that is true and benefits from the awareness and insight of the ghostwriter. My psychic girlfriend Joni’s partner Katherine once said, “Poetry is your soul voice.”

My prose writing, like this, is an amalgam of my soul voice and my ego voice. Here, I get to tell the stories of my mundane life with some of the awareness of being that is my soul voice.

I painted a picture, yesterday, quickly, in my room and put it aside. This morning, I looked at it. I liked it. I thought about the voice of the artist that makes paintings. That voice is not much present or it’s present for only short periods of time.

On the phone, I told Reuben that I’m here in Illinois on purpose, and my art may not be free to express itself. I said that was OK, because I want to do what I’m doing. The voice of this ghostwritten autobiography suits
me, right now, because of the subject matter. I get to be in the presence of my awareness without forsaking my mundane and personal purpose.

I told Reuben I missed the company of people like him and the city of Seattle, which feels like a person like him, but here I keep my own counsel through this kind of writing.

As I was painting, yesterday, I knew I wasn’t giving it my useless all.

Reuben, who’s been running a gallery the last six years, is just now starting to paint on his own, again. He said his creativity is like a child who wants attention, and his response has been, “I’m busy. Don’t bother me. I have work to do.”

My mother has no way to understand this. The only way I could be here with her is the way I am here. By taking care of her, I made it possible for us to co-exist. If I were here as my artist self, she’d be unable to accept it, and I’d be unable to stay.

As it is, I told Reuben, it’s almost perfect. That ‘almost’ is a stay against the darkness, a candle of perfection. I may not be able to live truly free in this place, I may not be able to write any real poems or paint any real pictures, but I won’t be shut out completely.

Anything is possible. However, anything is not probable.

I said to Reuben that being here is like eating in a cafeteria. The food is OK. It won’t kill me. But, it’s not fine dining.

I’m here on purpose. The purpose is greater than the accommodations I have to make. The ghostwriter is the go-between, between the sublime and the mundane. The sublime is everywhere. Grace is everywhere. Awareness is everywhere. The mundane is everywhere. Be here now. Where can you go and not be here?
Cordova and the Windmill

Mother mentioned something about the potato salad at the Windmill Restaurant and about going to Cordova to show me her friend Katherine’s house on the river. So, this afternoon we did both. I got home at just before five, as she was watching the end of Dr. Phil.

“It’s too late, it’ll be dark,” she said.

“No, it’s only five, it’ll be light for two more hours,” I said.

We had a nice drive to Cordova, but on our first pass through town, she couldn’t find Chet and Katherine’s old house. We drove down the highway, came back, and retraced our route through town, north along the river, and there it was. She said it was rundown, and it was. The driveway to the house was only an opening in the roadside bushes.

I drove through, on the grass, and around the house. It was the kind of place that started out as one room and became three and then a porch was added and a flush toilet bathroom, and then steps, from the top of the cliff to the river’s edge. The old steps were still solid except for the last four or five, which were washed away and hanging down, broken.

A hurricane had blown through many years before and destroyed the houses on both sides, and three large trees, but the old cabin was untouched. Insurance got the two neighbors’ houses rebuilt but no such luck for the Schmidts.

I tried the door and it was unlocked. Mother told me to go in.

“Do you want to come in, too?” I said.

“No, I’ve seen it, before, many times.”

Indeed, she and Dad had come to that place many times, with a gang of friends. Katherine and Mother went to grade school together. Dad and Chet drove the bus to Mexico for a local travel club in the Thirties, when they were 18. It was the adventure of his life.

I found a photomontage on the porch wall, called Some famous faces that included ten or twelve men and women with the largest photo being of Gladys, smiling broadly and pointing at the photographer. Another one was of four men facing the camera, with my ole pappy in profile, four years before his death, still an imposing figure in his blue sweater and white hair.
Mother was happy to see the place, and she told me stories, about the storm, the rooms being built, sitting on the screen porch, how she sewed the curtains for the back door, how Katherine mixed pancake mix, and she had made the pancakes, and all the good times they’d had with their friends.

At the Windmill, it was obvious she was in a good mood. She thanked me for taking her to Cordova, but I had as much fun as she did. The house reminded me of Jackson Pollock’s Long Island house, where he did his best work. I said that I could live there. As an artist, it would be ideal, four rooms, a little musty, with wavy floors, homemade construction, screened porch, surrounded by an open grass field with trees, and the river, beautiful and powerful, flowing by.

After we’d been eating for a while, Mother praised her potato salad, her fish sandwich, and the cauliflower soup. She heard herself. She looked up at me, and said, “Isn’t it better to hear me...”

She didn’t even have to finish the sentence. She laughed out loud, not at her words of praise, but because she was happy. I could see it. Her face was beaming.

The waitress was pretty, the food was good, I was happy, too. The heavyset man at the register asked me how the food was. I said the food was terrific.

“It’s me,” he said. “It’s because I’m here. That’s why everything is so good.”

“That’s right,” I said. “It’s all thanks to you.”
An Entity of Time

Once upon a time, I had a young, stunningly beautiful girlfriend. I described our relationship as two years of one-night stands. I was so conscious of her inevitable, eventual departure that I never had one moment of security.

It just occurred to me that, even here, in this radically different environment, I feel the same. As much as I was afraid that my beautiful girlfriend was going to leave me, and our temporary heaven on earth would end, it was the way I’ve always been. She only made external what had always been true in my heart. Everyday, I feel no reliable continuity from the past to the future.

This is an important lesson in my awareness. It’s always true. Every day feels like an entity of time that has no past or future. Each new day is not the first day of the rest of my life, but the first and last day of what is.

I’ve never led a routine life. I imagine most people do. I imagine their experiences of normal routine, as engaging pleasure or debilitating drudgery, carry a sense of past and future in some kind of continuity, but I have a genetic, spiritual difficulty believing that in my own life.

I’m in Fireworks, in the early afternoon, because Mother has an appointment with the chiropodist, and I don’t want to sit in his office feeling constrained and wanting to be free to go write. I’m thinking about this business of continuity because yesterday, as full as it was, seems distant and disconnected to what’s occurring today.

Yesterday was a good day, but the continuity of any day is, at best, subliminal. Some things have occurred in the past couple of months that stand me in good stead in my relationship with my mother. Her attitude has improved, and so has mine.

Some of this is just doing it. After a while, it’s easier. Some of this is not being able to do it, and after a while, that becomes more difficult.

So, I’ll tell a joke. Mother told me this one. She said one of their friends told this joke. It might have been Boats Aronson.

I asked why he was called Boats.

“Probably because he had big feet,” she said.
Boats Aronson stood up in church, one Sunday, and said he didn’t want to be called Boats anymore. It wasn’t dignified.
Gladys told him, “Boats, I can’t start calling you Carl. I’ve been calling you Boats for thirty years, I can’t change, now.”
But that’s not the joke. Here’s the joke.
Little Johnny was the center of a divorce case. The judge couldn’t decide which parent should have custody of the boy, so he asked Little Johnny which parent he wanted to live with.
“I don’t want to live with my father,” he said, “because my father beats me. I don’t want to live with my mother, because she beats me. I want to live with the Cubs, because they never beat anyone.”
The Cubs are currently in first place in the National League Central Division, with three games to play.
Changes in the Weather

There’s an emotional basis for the sense I’ve always had, of never being able to depend on yesterday for the way things will be tomorrow or even today. I became aware, a long time ago, as a sensitive boy, that my mother’s moods went through a dramatic change, not even from day to day, but from moment to moment, or at least, from hour to hour.

When she was happy, the world was bright and joyful. When she wasn’t happy, it was dark and miserable. She was never one to elucidate her emotional state of mind, but she acted it out. She was a Swede with four brothers. I was a kid with an empathetic nature. I felt her emotional state, and I was smart enough to adjust to it, for the sake of my own well-being, and to coax her in the right direction, if I could.

Those days are long gone, and now her mood swings are minimal. She’s pretty predictable. Since she’s gotten healthier, her general mood has improved.

My training in the unreliable weather of life has not changed. I’ve come to believe my distrust of life’s reliability was due to my mother’s nature and the way I learned and adjusted to it.

Just as I gave credit to my too-beautiful girlfriend for what came naturally to me, I’m beginning to think I gave too much credit to my mother for what also came naturally to me. My awareness has taught me the unreliability of this world of relative realities, and I’ve always had this awareness. My mother, my girlfriend, the world in general, and the world in its many ways, have all shown me the external face of my internal consciousness.

I haven’t been living a life torn apart by realities I can’t trust. I’ve been living with the awareness of the truth. Despite any evidence to the contrary, there is no dependable reality in this world.

Getting old, having a heart attack, going bankrupt, discovering the fallacy of my imagined destiny, even the tragedy of 9/11, have all conspired to convince my literal mind of the truth I’ve always known.

I see, even more clearly, how my existence, despite fifty books written, a thousand paintings painted, three one-man shows performed, and a lifetime of well-wishers, is as evanescent as everything else.
I watched Confessions of a Dangerous Mind, the movie about Chuck Barris, the creator of The Dating Game, The Newlywed Game, and The Gong Show. In it, he bemoans his fate. He thought he might become someone who wrote something other’s might quote, but he never did.

I have written things that others quote, and I still feel the same sense of personal evaporation. This isn’t folly or failure; it’s clear awareness of the truth of existence.

I’m not thinking about ancient wisdom, these days, I’m experiencing it. I have always experienced it, because the legitimacy of all wisdom is the common, simple truth it describes. It thrills me, whenever it occurs to me that my life isn’t learning anything, it’s only being true to itself.

Roseanne and Vivian came to visit, with a bottle of champagne to share. I demurred, and Mother joined in. I took Mother’s car in for servicing, and the ladies stayed. When I got back, Mother said they’d just left.

“Roseanne did all the talking,” she said. “But that’s all right,” she added, in reflection.

I want to keep my amateur standing as a human being. I once asked an artist friend of mine if he could imagine living his entire artistic life without New York ever hearing of him. I’m beginning to see, happily, that my life isn’t the failure of my worldly ambitions to become rich and successful, it is the fulfillment of my truer ambition to be what I am, in every way I am, without any dependency on the external reality of the world.

In order to believe myself, in order for my ego self to come into compliance with my soul self, I need to accept the personal disappearance that is death.

Seeing my mother in her last days is good for me. I used to think she was a victim of her own failed ambitions, but I’m not witnessing that in her behavior. She doesn’t bemoan her existence. She seems to be content to be who she is, reading magazines, watching re-runs of Seinfeld, and eating dinner with her son.
A Hundred Year Rivalry

I’m in Fireworks on a Friday night, and instead of writing, I’m going to the football game. This place is setting up to be a teen music fest. When the ladies were over, this afternoon, Mother pointed out the painting of the chair.

“Stephen painted it. I think it’s terrific,” she said.
Vivian said, “Well, he didn’t get the color right.”
Mother scoffed, “You would say that!”
Roseanne said it was her idea to hang paintings on that wall, so Mother could look at them from her chair.

My mother became my defender. Vivian became my mother’s old persona. Amazing.

I’m off to the game. Moline vs. Rock Island. A hundred-year rivalry.
Former Bad Boy Lives with Mother

Moline lost for the third time out of the first five games. But today, the Cubs play for the Midwest Divisional title. When I left the car, they were up 5-0, in the third inning.

After lunch at Ming Wah, Mother wanted to go to HyVee to find the sweet and sour sauce she likes. It’s a white sauce. She says the red sauce is not the same, it’s too sweet. I asked the woman in Ming Wah what the difference was between the white and the red sauce, and she said, “No difference. Same.”

Mother frowned and shook her head.

I imagined the wandering we might do at HyVee. I decided to give us an hour to wander around. I remembered another method I’ve learned to practice patience. When washing the dishes, don’t wash the dishes, wash the dish you are washing. So I didn’t focus on getting out of the grocery store, I focused on what was occurring in the moment.

Mother pushed a grocery cart for stability. She moved slowly and stopped every few feet to examine what was in front of her like she was looking at Mt. Rushmore, up close, one face at a time.

At lunch, she said something about potato sausage.

“I love potato sausage.”

“I didn’t know that,” she said. “There’s a store over by Willard School that sells potato sausage. I don’t know if it’s still there, but we can go see if it is.”

I thought she might forget about it, while we were shopping for sweet and sour sauce, but she didn’t.

Going to the car, she said, “We can go look for that market where they have potato sausage.”

We drove to 16th Street, past Willard School.

“Turn right,” she said.

I saw a sign across the backyards.

“There it is,” I said, “Jerry’s Market.”

“Where?” she said.

“Right around the corner,” I said.
I started to get excited. I really do like potato sausage. My grandmother used to make it. I’ve loved it ever since I was a kid. We pulled up in front of a neighborhood grocery. In the window was a handwritten sign.

Swedish Style
Potato Sausage

I got even more excited. We moved slowly to the door, slowly inside the store, and slowly up to the meat counter. We stopped to buy Traditional Plain Rusks and examine various other Swedish imports and brands. We were in a truly ethnic neighborhood grocery meat market. I’ve been in similar stores in Chinese neighborhoods, Italian neighborhoods, Mexican neighborhoods, Russian neighborhoods, Native American neighborhoods, African American neighborhoods, Indian Neighborhoods, but I’d never been in a Swedish neighborhood store - among my people.

From the Swedish type guy behind the counter, we ordered a pound and a half of potato sausage, some herring, a little Swedish cheese, and a pint of potato salad. I got a big kick out of it. I made small talk with the man and, I supposed, his daughter. My mother was in her element, too. She told me I needed cranberry sauce to go with the potato sausage, what she also called potato baloney.

“She says you should have cranberry sauce with potato sausage,” I said to the man, with a questioning look on my face.

The man smiled, “I never do. I just eat the sausage.”

When we got home, she began to cook the sausage. As I was leaving, I stopped in at Vivian’s.

“My mother is cooking. I’m always a little nervous when she cooks. It shouldn’t be a problem, but I’m going to go write, so could you check in on her, to see how she’s doing? I’ll be gone for an hour and a half or two.”

“Sure, no problem,” she said. She introduced me to her youngest daughter who was visiting.

“Hi.”

“Hi.”
“Did you get the sweet rolls?” Vivian said. She had offered us a taste of her fresh cinnamon rolls as we were leaving, earlier. She said she could give us more.

“Leave it on the table,” Mother said. “The door’s not locked.” And she did.

“We got the sweet rolls. They’re great. Very good. Thank you.”

I wonder about my meeting with Carole and Cheryl, tomorrow at Miss Mamie’s.

I thought about telling Cheryl how I used to be a drunk, a bad boy, a bohemian artist, not the polite, well-mannered, good boy I am, taking care of my dear, sweet, old mother. Then I thought about how women of a certain age begin to prefer a man they can depend on, a decent fellow, even if he is taking on the characteristics of his mother.

This afternoon, Mother said, as we drove to Jerry’s Market, “Mark was always very thoughtful. So are you, Stephen. I’m lucky to have such good sons.”

As I write, an obese woman and an obese man are discussing the price of a boxed King James Bible as if it’s a piece of untasted fruit, at the table in front of me.

I think it’s time to go see if the Cubbies won. A license plate, in front of me, coming here, today, read, CUBSROK.

My mother and I drove by her Aunt Hulda’s old house. She told me about taking the train to Chicago to visit her father’s brothers and their families. Her father would send them up with boxes of apples and other fruits and vegetables picked from his own orchard-garden. She said she was annoyed when her cousins would refer to Chicago as The City, as if she grew up in the country.

The obese people were talking loudly back and forth across the cafe about his order.

“Honey,” he said, “I’ll have the caramel apple latte.”
Cubs Win! Cubs Win!

The Cubs won, 7-3. The pictures of Wrigley Field, with thousands of jubilant fans against a deep blue cloudy sky, were beautiful. The happiness in Chicago was a pleasure to witness. I enjoyed the win, the celebration, the surprisingly thoughtful remarks of the players, the victory lap around the outfield in front of the appreciative fans, the photography of the scene, and I cheered. I pointed out the beauty of the moment, on screen before us. Mother, reading Martha Stewart Living, was uninterested.

“This is what some marriages are like,” I thought, “when it’s nearly impossible to share your enthusiasm with your partner, who may have an equally difficult time doing the same with you.”

I once sat at the table in the kitchen of this apartment with my mother on one side and my father on the other. I noticed that when I faced one of them, I knew who she was, and when I faced the other one I knew who he was, but when I faced them both, I didn’t know who I was looking at.

I thought my parents suffered from a serious disconnect, that they were fundamentally incompatible, that they stayed together because of the laws of domestic gravity, but I’m beginning to admit they were happy with each other, and I was the one who didn’t get along, who didn’t fit in, who wanted more, who was fundamentally incompatible. Even as I say that, I fear the growing ease of living with my mother.

When we were eating dinner, she said, “You seasoned the salad too much.”

“I put anchovies in it, I took a chance.”

“Well, don’t use anchovies ever again.”

I saw her mix some of the potato sausage into her salad, and I was put off by it, for a second, and then I did it, too. It was good that way.

Finally, there was nothing left but one of Vivian’s rolls.

“Eat the last one,” she said.

“I’m full,” I said.

“No you’re not. You could find room for that roll.”

I laughed. “I’m full means I don’t want to eat any more food.”

I washed some dishes.

“Eat the last roll,” I said.
“I’m full,” she said.
“No, you’re not. You can make room for one roll.”
I was kidding, and she knew it. It was an easy exchange on a day when she was not in a good mood, not in a bad mood. We’re getting along with each other. I’m beginning to feel a pleasant, habitual bond with her. I’m glad, I’m relieved, I’m pleased, and I’m a little horrified.

The bond doesn’t run deep. It feels like the bond I’ve felt with others I’ve lived with, despite our differences. It begins to feel like what I saw between my mother and my father, a ritual that became who they were. They became inseparable in their familiarity.

While I was gone, Vivian was in to see her, “all afternoon,” she said.
“I was only gone for two hours,” I said.
“I don’t know why she came over.”
“Maybe she was just feeling sociable.”
Later, she said, “I don’t know why she came over. She was here all afternoon, and then she came back, again.”

Mother thought the stove was on, with the potato sausage still cooking at a low temperature. She left the coffee pot on, too. Vivian had turned them off.

“I must have turned them off, when I came in,” I said.
I don’t have to worry about becoming my mother. The other day, Mona, in Fireworks, said she didn’t read poetry, she only wrote it. She said she didn’t want to be influenced by other people’s writing.

I told her that when I started out, I wrote more poetry that I read.
“Then, I stole,” I said.
“Stole?”
“Steal from everybody,” I said. “Who you are will come through, no matter what. You can’t stop it.”
The Hat on the Cat Woman

I went to lunch at Miss Mamie’s with Carole and Cheryl, now calling herself Sherry or Chery, minus the l. We met and talked for three hours. Chery and I did most of the talking, Carole is quiet and seemed content to be quiet.

Chery looked like the kind of woman I’d have nothing in common with, but we got along great. I still feel closer to Carole, with whom there continues some kind of attraction. After talking about classmates and personal histories, I ended up talking about the awareness of my soul. Both women encouraged me to speak along those lines, and I did.

As we were leaving, Chery said we should get together again. I said yeah we should, and we left it at that. I’m not drawn to either woman enough to pursue them, but I enjoyed the time we were together. I could describe the conversation, I could describe Chery and Carole, but I don’t think I will, much. I want this story to be about my mother and how my relationship with her plays itself out.

Chery lives here now, with her mother, who is not debilitated, but who doesn’t like to live alone, and doesn’t like Florida, where Chery would prefer to live. She said she feels alien in this environment. She dresses like an outsider.

Mother thought her style was her statement about being different. My clothing, here in Illinois is an accommodation with the local style, but my hair is not. Chery dresses like a Florida New Jersey Southern California Las Vegas Mercedes Benz widow, in black pants and black cowboy hat, jewelry and makeup, with a sparkling personality. Not a Moline Maroon. I liked her, immediately.

There’s no doubt she wants to be with her mother. She says there was trouble at home, during her school years, so her memories of that time are tainted. I assumed she was referring to her father, but I don’t know.

It bothered me that I talked as much as I did. My mother assumed the women would do all the talking. She wanted to know what we talked about. Without rehashing the spiritual direction the conversation took, there wasn’t a whole lot to tell. I mentioned that Chery wore a hat and said she wore hats all the time, because she didn’t like her hair.
That became an oft-repeated refrain over the next couple of hours. “Why does she wear hats?” “What’s wrong with her hair?”

I paid for lunch. It was fun. I thought the poorest one should pay for lunch, or the man should.

The sermon, this morning, was unusually good. The minister’s voice was clear and not harsh. She told a story of a Sunday school teacher who asked five year olds what it took to get into heaven. Was it good works, good intentions, good relations with God? No answer. Finally, one kid said, “You have to die, first.”

The preacher then said that the Kingdom of God, or heaven, is here, now.

As I tell this, I’m as reluctant as I was to speak about it to Chery and Carole. Carole is a Methodist churchgoer, and Chery is a lapsed Catholic. They asked me about my experiences in India, and I told them, pausing to say, “Do you want to hear a story?”

Whenever I get a chance to speak about self-recognition, I feel eager and hesitant. I imagine speaking without hesitancy and without eagerness. I felt self-indulgent. I’d love to indulge some more. It felt selfishly satisfying to speak to two attentive women about what matters to me the most.

When I got home, I went for a bike ride, but the wind and the cold drove me home. Back home, again, I sat with my mother in the kitchen and told what I could tell.

“Why did she tell you about her hair? How did that come up?”
“Did you ask her why she wore hats all the time?”

We watched 60 Minutes, and I was loquacious, all during the show. I think I was well-fed by a little female attention, not my mother’s. When Carole and I hugged, outside the restaurant, we held it for longer that Chery and I had. It was a warm hug. It felt good.
Jumping in the Mud Puddle

I like Carole, and my mother likes her. She has a thriving business and a good personality. I enjoy her company. It’s not hard for me to hang out in the world with my mother or with Carole, but I live in the entrance to the Oracle’s Cave, and it’s not the kind of place many other people inhabit.

When Carole hugged me, it felt really good. I’m going to ask for more hugs, but I’m old enough and experienced enough not to mistake physical comforts and physical desires for Nirvana.

Carole objected to my assertion that discovering our inherent nature as love itself was sufficient for happiness. She said that, even though she lives alone, she needs people, and that the service to others she’s able to experience with the people in her salon is good for her and necessary to her.

I don’t doubt that. I said the Buddhists hold service to others as the highest expression of the self. I also believe it’s not possible to become one with God simply by choosing a life of service. I said that when anyone discovers no separation from God, and understands that this personal self is illusory, then service comes naturally.

I said there was a time when being with my mother wouldn’t have been possible for me, because solving my relationship with her and others was more important than the peace I’ve discovered in my own heart. With peace in the heart, everything else is less important, and therefore easier to live with.

Carole and Chery laughed when I told them the story of Poonja and Ramana Maharshi, who said to him, “If your family is illusion to you, it will be easy for you to take care of them.” Like most women I’ve encountered, both Carole and Chery have an easier time putting the social cart before the self-recognition horse. I’m still more inclined to pursue my own self-fulfillment than I am the fulfillment of others.

Thinking of Carole, I said to myself, “She’s a giver, and I’m a taker.” As a giver, my giving still seems self-centered, when I think about it. We talked about AA, yesterday, and AA is a program for self-centered people to recognize a self greater than the ego.
This morning, I saw, again, how my mother, in her dotage, is the same as she was at her strongest. She has no particular interest in my thoughts and feelings, not now, not ever. She wants to know what’s going on, so she can proceed with her own life.

The truth will set you free. Any truth. It’s good for me to see how literal my mother is. She’s not interested in depth, nuance, shadings, or complexities. What she likes is what’s best. What she needs to know, she will ask about. Nothing else interests her.

Regis and Kelly played a game, spraying shaving cream all over each other and laughing about it.

“I don’t like that. I don’t see why anybody would want to do that. It’s like when they pour champagne over the coach’s head, after they win. It’s stupid.”

“Didn’t you ever jump in a mud puddle, when you were a kid?”

“No. I wouldn’t want to make dirty clothes for my mother to have to wash.”
The Roots of a Tree

Walking back to my table, in Fireworks, I realized that Moline had become familiar, in a new way. It’s no longer magical, no more nor less than any other place.

I rode my bike down to Sunset Park, this afternoon, since I couldn’t ride, yesterday. The sun was out, but it was still cool and windy. Riding west into the wind took almost twice as long as riding back east. The whole ride felt good.

Last night, I watched Martin Scorsese’s documentary on the blues. I commandeered the remote and ignored my mother’s interest in anything else. She went to bed early. In the movie, an African guitar player quoted a Mali saying, “The roots of a tree cast no shadow.” It’s the kind of truth that needs no understanding.

I said to mother that if there was anything I wished I could do it was sing and play an instrument. I imagined singing the blues. When people can’t hold their heads up, can’t feel free, can’t imagine freedom, can’t escape the denigration of their spirit, that feeling is the blues. As one bluesman said, “The blues is not a plaything.”

Another definition of the blues is “feeling good about feeling bad.” That’s transformative art.

When I was 18, at college for the first time, I heard Leadbelly from across the hall, and I heard the sound of my heart. A boy from Memphis was playing from his trunk full of Black music, and I heard the music I loved at first sound. The blues is honest music. I was a white boy from a postcard youth, and I loved the blues as my own. I imagined singing the blues. I can’t sing, but I can sing the truth. It’s what I’ve always been at in my poetry, to sing the undercurrent of love, not in longing and desire, but in recognition of the unseen.

The roots of a tree cast no shadow.
I’m starting to not listen to my mother. So, I turned off the TV, and I looked at her as she spoke. I picked up the paper, and I did it, again.

As I listen to her repeating stories, repeating things she’s just said, repeating what she said a few minutes ago, I wonder if there isn’t some purpose in her memories of childhood. She remembers, not to tell me a story, but to remember. When she tells a story, she seems relieved to remember it.

If I respond to a story, as if it’s part of a dialog, if I tell her a memory of my own, she will respond as if no time has passed since her last remark, she’ll continue with a thought of her own, not cognizant of what I said.

That’s not unusual in conversation with anyone. We tend to follow the track of our own thoughts. In this case, that there’s almost no sense of a shared dialog. So be it. I didn’t come here to recapture a lost relationship, or to invent one that might take its place. The best time I have here is when I accept what’s before me as reality.

She said something about going with Mark to a local orchard for apples and cider. She said Mark liked the cider. I proposed that we go. Last night, I finished the work that I usually save for the morning, and this morning, I proposed it, a second time.

“If you want,” she said. “Do you want to go?”

“I thought it might be a nice outing for you,” I said, and she changed the subject.

Then she said, “I used to peel apples and make applesauce, but I don’t peel apples anymore.”

Patricia was here, this morning. I asked her about the hall bathroom. Denise, from downstairs, said there was a leak in her light fixture, under that bathroom. I couldn’t find any standing water, but I saw a stain in the tub I’d never noticed before. I don’t use that tub, but Mother uses it every Sunday before church.

Pat said the porcelain had worn off, and water was leaking through the tub surface.

“I had to replace an entire floor, thanks to a worn-out tub like this one.”
I called the maintenance company and left a message. I went downstairs to tell Denise, but she wasn’t home.

“Remember, Gladys, I told you and Mark, last year, about this tub.”

“They don’t believe in telling the landlord anything,” I told her. “They think he won’t do anything, and if he does, he’ll raise the rent.”

The kitchen floor has holes in it from Dad’s chair, now Mother’s chair, being moved back and forth. The rug in my parents’ office, now my room, has holes in it from chairs being moved back and forth. The light above the worn tub doesn’t work, probably from water leaking in the apartment above. It’s still a nice apartment, but there are repairs that haven’t been made, over the years.

My mother’s throat had a whistle in it. I’ve heard it before. I thought it was a cat meowing. Today, it was worse.

“You’re whistling,” I said. “You sound like a tea kettle.”

“I know,” she said. “It’s right here.” She touched her throat. “I don’t know what it is.”

There was an article in the paper about the five-second rule. It’s become a mini urban legend; if you pick up dropped food off the floor, before five seconds have passed, you can still eat it. Researchers at the University of Illinois decided to test the five-second rule. They ran tests on household floors, and they were surprised to see no pathogens, no microbes, no germs, nothing infectious. Apparently, the five-second rule could be extended indefinitely. The scientist were so surprised, they ran the tests again. Nothing.

I told Mother about the study. She told me that Nicole and Jessica called her up on the phone, when they were very young.

“They were so excited,” she said. “‘We’re potty-trained,’ they said. They were so excited.”
One Door Opens

I was grumpy. Annoyed. My eyes felt cloudy. I thought about going to an AA meeting.
I wondered, “What is making me feel this way?”
I remembered the hug I got from Carole. Warm contact with a woman. The door cracked open. I’ve seen this before. After a period of sweet celibacy, some meeting with a woman will touch me in my physical, emotional, psychological self, and I’ll react. Something has been given and something withheld. My equanimity is broken, open, one hopes.
I went to play soccer, and no one showed up. No game. There’s a game, indoors, at Augustana College, on Sunday morning, at 8:30. Too early, wrong day. It’s getting cold, and that means the end of my forty-mile bike rides, too.
I may go to the Y.
“It’s not free,” Mother said.
She recommends an exercise place, a gym. I’ll probably go to the Y. I can put the cost of it on my own credit card. I can pay for it, later. The Y here is great. Warm and cool swimming pools, basketball courts, weight and exercise rooms, a track. $75 membership and $30 a month. But, I can’t go without exercise. In Seattle, I can play soccer year round. Not here.
As for the female connection, I won’t pursue it and I won’t reject it.
The Wind off the River

What would my life be like here, if I didn’t write about it every day? I went to the Fitness Center that Mother recommended, and it was shabby and cost the same as the Y.

The best thing about physical memory is that it fades. Wouldn’t it be tough if you could recall physical sensations without having them? Or, maybe it’d be like a drug that occupies the mind without recourse to reality, a kind of sensual senility.

I told a friend, at the end of my drinking, that it was like being ‘this close’ to enlightenment, without being able to be there, like living behind a glass wall in paradise.

It’s clear and sunny, and I want take my bike out, but the wind off the river is blowing....
It Felt like Forty

I rode twenty miles, but it felt like forty. The wind was out of the north, a cross wind, no matter which way I rode.

I took mother to The Village Inn, and I was tired. I looked at the menu and considered my options: a vegetarian omelet with egg substitute, fresh fruit, and multi-grain pancakes or the ham and cheese omelet with hash browns and regular pancakes. I considered the choice I was making. I thought about deciding to eat more wisely. I chose not to. I loved my dinner. I ordered chocolate pie for dessert. I loved it.

I felt good at dinner, more like the Steve my mother remembered from two years ago, the Steve who indulged himself and felt good about it. I’ve done less of that, this last year, like a reformed drunk. The condemned man ate a hearty meal.

My mother and I had a lively conversation, and by the end of it, she was satisfied and made the first move to go home. I asked her about meeting Dad, and I asked her about her family.

“You had good parents, and so did Dad,” I said. She didn’t understand what I was saying.

“Your parents treated you well,” I said.

“My father was soft-spoken. There was never any arguing in our house. No one ever raised their voice.”

They were her parents. Nothing more need be said.

I watched another episode of The Blues, and it put me in mind of one of the purposes I imagined for my stay here; to take myself even farther out of the mainstream of art in America.

I imagine you, the reader, the way I imagine God as the listener, the one who knows, the one who understands, the knower. I do the same kind of thing as a painter.

This morning, Mother said, “You haven’t done any more painting.”

“No,” I said, “I was going to paint you, but you said you didn’t want me to.”

“Oh, well,” she said, leaving the door open. I was surprised.

I thought about this time as a kind of sabbatical, a retreat, even a hibernation, and I thought about renting a studio and taking on some large
canvasses. I think about myself as an artist. Why do I paint, and what do I paint, now?

In *The Blues*, I saw a clear dichotomy between the types of artist one might become. Skip James was a unique singer in the 30’s, a powerful, almost angelic voice in human pain. He disappeared for thirty years and reappeared in the 60’s as pure as ever. Last night was about B.B. King, among others. I’ve never cared much for B.B. King, and I couldn’t say why. He’s as good as there is, and he’s a beloved figure, but, last night, I got a hint at why I’m not drawn to him.

One man said B.B. was an unusually ambitious man and described his and the blues of others like him as ‘bar blues,’ a certain pattern of music that evolved into the widely accepted modern version of what’s called ‘the blues.’

The successful, highly commercial, and easily recognizable blues of B.B. King can’t hold a candle to the original, unique, almost terrifying beauty of Skip James. I wondered what I could do that would fulfill the Skip James in me, since the B.B. King in me has had his day and proved to be a wash-out.

“Way out here in the middle of nowhere, where I came from,” I thought, “what would I write?” That went quickly to, “What could I paint?”

I thought about human faces, painted from the inside out. I thought about painting my mother, about painting the faces of everyone in my high school class, about painting the face of everyone in a small town.

This speculation is only the mind trying to play ball with intuition, trying to join in with the spirit, a kind of me-too-ism. I don’t know what to do, but I recognize the presence of the artist; a disregard for duties and responsibility, a kind of self-indulgence, a flurry of inconsequential ideas, and a desire for sex. All of these are the whirlwind around the center, which is calm and will move in the way it will.

It may not be possible to be an artist in this place. I can’t disregard my responsibilities, and I can’t be alone, here. I’ve seen my entire life diverted from its central reality. It wouldn’t surprise me to see the next three months diverted, as well. It has occurred to me that being an artist is not as easy as even I imagine it to be.
The Envious Impostor

I stopped, as I was leaving the house.
“I’m going out for an hour or so,” I said.
“Where are you going?” Mother asked, sleepy-eyed, from her chair.
“I’m going to write,” I said.
She frowned. I felt like I said I was going out to run the bars. I felt guilty leaving an old woman alone.

I wrote, earlier, about the presence of the artist. It’s more like the presence of the ego’s attempt to become the artist. There’s nothing to be done by the ego. The artist self, the soul self, the spirit, will appear in place of the ego that has tried to become the artist and cannot. The impostor ego will disappear, in the true presence of the artist, and there will be no problem.

In this ego state, there is no artist, no presence of the artist. I’m feeling like an evangelist, standing in for God. The artist is not God, not a god, the artist is no one, but his presence is the absence of self. In that absence of self is the grace that creates and invents itself as art.

These words, are just words, and this could all be bullshit.
Mother is in a weird mood, too. She didn’t compliment me on my dinner, tonight, or the rice pudding I made, or the salad.
At breakfast, this morning, I said, “You’re quiet, this morning.”
“That’s right,” she said.
So it could just be the weather. It has turned cold. Summer has gone away. In the Midwest, suddenly, indoors becomes a haven.
Small Potatoes

Instead of taking anything personally, one would be advised to say, “Oh, look at this. This is happening.”

Mother was late getting up. I got up at my usual time, and she said, “You’re up early, this morning.”

I took a shower and got dressed. As I was going to the kitchen for breakfast, she was sitting in front of the TV, in her nightgown.

“What did you get dressed up for?” she said. I was wearing the same clothes as I wore the day before.

“I’m going to eat breakfast,” I said. “Are you getting dressed?”

“I will. I just stopped off to check the news.”

To check the news? It was out of character for her to be dressed so late in the morning. As I was eating breakfast, she said, from the other room, “I feel like going back to bed.”

“You can, if you want to,” I said.

“I don’t know how I got this cold,” she said.

“Maybe you got it from me,” I said.

“Do you have a cold?” she said.

“I do. I guess it’s a cold. I have a dry cough,” I said, and then I added, “You could get a cold at church.”

I thought I was her only connection to the outside world, but that’s not true. Eventually, she got dressed and went into the kitchen to eat breakfast, at least two hours later than usual.

During this brief exchange, there were several times when I could have begun speaking in a more elaborate way, but I didn’t. I learned to speak my heart, after I left home. Coming home, I feel unable to speak. I can speak the way I learned to speak at home, and that can be useful and enjoyable, but it’s not the language of my heart.

My mother can be a lovely woman. She’s practical and opinionated. She enjoys the people she sees as part of her life. She’s worked hard to be a good and decent person. She doesn’t expect anything from others. She appreciates little things.

I had a dream, last night, of being in the presence of a Japanese (Zen?) teacher. I was in his room, and I was going through the voluminous
pockets of his robe, looking for nail clippers, when he came in, surprising me. I jumped and yelled out. He didn’t react. Instead, he told me how intimate my mother and I were, as if she knew my heart.

“I don’t remember that,” I said. “If that happened, it was a long time ago.”

I get up, every day, and I come home, every day, to a house where I’m not seen. In my mother’s house there is a persona I inhabit that’s easy and familiar to me. I’m not at a loss to be that person, but it’s not who I am. Who I am has become my awareness of the absence of any persona. If I were truly free, I would be at home in my being, in the home of my mother, but what I’m feeling is a deep need to make myself visible.

There’s nothing wrong with that. It’s what the Creator of the Universe did in the beginning of everything that is. It’s the action of the artist to need to make himself visible, not as a person but as a manifestation of his being.

It’s a challenge to paint in front of my mother. It’s like conceiving and giving birth in front of someone who has shown no capability of witnessing such a thing, with any acceptance, or grace, or understanding.

It’s why most art is created in solitude, or in the company of empathetic people. I don’t write in front of my mother, either, and the people I do write in front of have no idea what I’m doing.

I went into Goodwill, this afternoon. There’s a drawing table, marked sold, for weeks now, and I asked about it. They said they have to call the owner to see if they will pick it up. As I looked at clothing, I thought about the table, like one might think of a pretty woman one is afraid to approach.

I’m afraid to reveal myself to my mother, and yet, with three months to go, I don’t know if I can avoid it. I don’t need to perform an act of courage. Courage is small potatoes, in my experience. It will occur, or it won’t occur, for reasons of its own. Art works in the way it works, to the greater glory of creation, not the creator.

God knows, but only Time will tell.
The Template

I went to the local art store. I met the owner, and we talked for quite a while. I went into his store, months ago, and I had no contact with him or anybody else. He gave me a verbal tour of the local art scene, including names and numbers.

It’s the sort of thing that happens to me as an artist when I’m present. Without sounding psychically possessed, it’s only natural. When I walked in, I was exuding artist pheromones. That’s easy to detect. It’s the same way we bump into our future friends and lovers and realize, later, how pre-planned the whole thing seems. We wear badges of energy, and we’re easy to read, even when we don’t think we are.

When I left the art store, I saw how my energy had changed on the way to the art store. I saw how my decision to paint my mother wasn’t difficult. It was easy, because it was already done.

She’s gotten used to me, over the years, especially since I stopped drinking, seeing me on my occasional visits, and in my phone calls, as attentive, solicitous, self-effacing, as a perfect foil for her motherness, her Gladys-ness. She’s having to adjust to a different person than she’s used to, whether she realizes it or not.

My style of dress has changed, too. After seeing Orfée, by Jean Cocteau, back in the 70’s, a movie about an older poet, I thought I should get some looser clothing. I did, recently. I’ve always worn jeans and plain shirts in solid colors and heavier material. Recently, I bought khaki and corduroy pants and high quality dress shirts that hang loosely.

I’ve begun to dress like my Uncle Harry, a dapper fellow, as well as Orphee, i.e., the actor Christian Marquand. Looser clothing changes how I feel. How I feel changes my clothing.

I’ve talked about becoming more mature, about growing up, about becoming the poet I am, the artist I am, without explanation or apology, and without external validation.

My mother is the template on whom that image is being engraved.
The Drawing Table

I went to Goodwill and found the drawing table without the sold sign on it. I bought it.

Mother’s cold seems to have lowered her intellect. She was dumb at breakfast and quiet at Carole’s. I went up to Carole and said I wanted another hug.

“The hug, last week, felt so good, I’m going to ask for a hug, every time I see you, from now on,” I said.

“I liked it, too,” she said.

While we were hugging, I knew I had made more of it than it was. I had needed it, and it felt good, but this time, I didn’t need it as much. At lunch, at Minh Wah’s, my fortune cookie said, “It is better to try to idealize the real than to realize the ideal.” Does it mean that it’s better to create an idealization of the real, or is it better to hold the real as one’s ideal? I accept the second. I victimize myself with the first. If one can realize the ideal, where’s the problem? Most people seem to idealize the ideal and demonize the real. Oh, well, Confucius ten times removed is gibberish.

Mother wanted to find the butcher she once bought roasts from. She thought it was on 53rd St., but when we approached 53rd, she didn’t recognize it, so we wandered up and down several other streets, until we went back to 53rd and drove past the point of non-recognition, and there it was.

We bought a chuck roast. She got the idea, this morning. I chose not to object to it. She wants to make it, and I’m glad to see her do anything other than sit around. When I was a kid, I loved her roasts, with potatoes, onions, and carrots, alongside. I’ll eat some of it, with great pleasure.

I’ll set up the drawing table in the living room. Drawing, as a beginning for painting, will happen.

Last night, in Fireworks, I made eye contact with a woman across the room, and it felt good.

Today, Carole said Karen Johnson, a classmate of ours, ran the consignment shop, a few doors down. I went for a visit. We recognized each other, just as neither of us had recognized Carole. We had a nice reunion. Karen said she didn’t remember Cheryl Venckus.
I’m sitting in Borders, sweating like a guy with a chest cold. I bought Mother some Luden’s menthol cough drops, and she was thrilled to see they were still being sold.

While we were driving around looking for Covemaker’s, the butcher shop, she was determined to find it, just to feel better about not finding it, and when we did find it, she felt better.

At lunch, she noticed the hairstyle of the woman at the next table, and she said, “Cheryl could get her hair cut like that.”

She has occasionally, over the last week, wondered about Cheryl wearing hats because she didn’t like her hair. It’s all she knows about Cheryl.

“She could wear a wig. A lot of women wear wigs. I don’t know if women still wear wigs. Dolly Parton wears wigs. Johnny Carson used to make fun of her bosoms. He said he’d give a week’s salary just to get a peek in there. Did you see that movie, *9 to 5*? She was good in that movie. I’d like to see that again. I don’t go out to movies, anymore.”

“It comes on TV, from time to time,” I said.

When I first got here, I rented a couple of movies, but she got lost in the middle of them, so I don’t try that anymore.

When we were on our search for red meat, she said, “The butcher shop is on the same road as the graveyard where my folks are buried.”

I remembered going to my grandmother’s grave, many years ago. When I was in India, in the Osho Rajneesh Meditation Center, during a meditation, I suddenly felt like talking to my Grandmother. I imagined sitting by her grave, by a tree, talking to her about why I still had a gut. Was it my love of food?

She said to me, in my image of her, “It’s not about the food.”

I felt better and came back to the present, sitting on a marble floor, the size of a football field, in the company of a thousand others, all in immaculate white robes. I had taken refuge under my white shawl. I pulled it off my head, looked around, and smiled at that marvelous scene.
Bridge Building

I set up the drawing table, without objection from my model, and began drawing. I did two large drawings of her in her chair. Like most of my art, the drawings surprised me with how good they were.

Joan Baez says of her singing, “It’s brilliant, but I don’t have anything to do with it. I’m only in charge of maintenance and delivery.”

The drawing table had a strut missing, but I tightened it up, and it worked just fine. I’m all set. I can draw at a moment’s whim. My model is always in place, sitting for me without any complaint about the tedium of modeling.

Mother was watching an episode of 48 Hours Investigates, the story about Kobe Bryant’s rape case.

“She should never have gone in his room,” she said.

“You think it’s her fault?” I said.

“What’s a girl doing going up to a man’s room? It’s just like that girl with the fighter.”

“Mike Tyson.”

“She wouldn’t have sued Kobe Bryant if he wasn’t a rich man.”

“You think she’s lying? A girl gets raped, and you blame the girl?”

“Why did she go up there with him?”

“You have no idea. You weren’t there, and neither was I. You have no idea what happened, and yet you’re willing to blame the girl.”

I spoke in a matter of fact voice, but I was taken aback. She sounded angry. She was angry, this morning, at a story in the newspaper about a garbage truck driver who drove the wrong way down a street just to speed up his job and get home early.

“Any woman who goes to a room with a man should know better.”

“So there’s no way any man and any woman can be alone, together, in a room. You’re talking about a sick society.”

“It is a sick society.”

“But this kind of trial is so that won’t happen. It shouldn’t happen.”

“If he was a poor man, she would just forget about it. He’s a rich man, so she sues him.”
“If a man rapes you, forget about it, but if a rich man rapes you, sue him.”

“There wasn’t any rape.”

“You don’t know this girl, and you’ve already condemned her. If you had a daughter, you’d tell her to never be alone with a man.”

“She should know what’s going to happen.”

My mother was raised in a different time. Her beliefs are common to her generation. If only Kobe Bryant could get a jury full of Gladyses.

Tonight, when I left the house, I said, “I’m going to go work on my book.”

That felt good. Work and book are good buzzwords for my mother. When I tell her I’m going to go write, it’s like saying I’m going to go make stuff up. “Work on my book” sounds like, “Build a bridge.”
The Time

The weather turned good, again. I left the football and baseball games on TV and rode up to Katherine’s house in Cordova. It’s early October, and I was attacked by bugs. Ladybugs. It was creepy to look down and see half a dozen bugs on my shoulder that weren’t there a minute before. They were only ladybugs, but it was still spooky. Ladybugs have an amazing ability to cling to anything. I’ve seen them on the windshield of my car, at 65 miles an hour. I expected to take a rest at the cabin, but the whole place was covered in ladybugs. I kept pedaling.

Mother was home sick. No church today. She was moving very slowly and coughing. And sleeping in her chair. When I got home, she hardly noticed I’d been away for three hours. She made herself some milk toast for dinner. It looked pretty good. She ate some of my potatoes.

I forgot to tell a story. I was hugging Carole in her shop, yesterday.

Mother said, “He hugged me one time, and his wife said, ‘I wish he’d hug me like that.’”

I said to Carole, “I did, but that’s another story.”

The more I thought about it, the more it revealed. Maybe I didn’t hug my wife like that. Hugging Carole and hugging my mother were in front of other women. I felt safe doing it. I was able to embrace women easily, when I felt safe doing it.

If it became sexual or became an act of intimacy, that was different. I was sexual with my wife, but I don’t remember being affectionate. Back then, I didn’t know what that was, between a man and a women. I was affectionate and loving toward my mother when it felt safe to me.

It occurred to me how impossible it is to tell a story. There’s so much I’ve left out of this story, inadvertently, unconsciously, deliberately, because this theme is specific, and because it’s impossible to tell a story the same as the reality.

I was moved again by the **The Blues**. In the film by Mike Figgis, the story was about the British musicians who absorbed and imitated the American Black music they loved. They, in turn, influenced a generation of Americans to pay attention to the roots of American music, which had been systematically ignored in this country.
I first heard the blues from other white guys in my own country, but the popularization of that music came through the British musicians who loved it and played it for large audiences. At the end of the film, one of the Brits said, about the original masters, that they played for themselves, and they sang the truth.

It’s been on my mind, all day, how I’ve been imprisoned by my awareness of the audience, the readership, the other, the mother. I’ve wanted my mother and the world, her surrogate at large, to recognize and accept my art.

I’ve never substantially changed my work or produced anything to please an audience, but I’ve never been free of it. As I get older, as my career shows how limited my audience has always been, The challenge that seems to be taking shape in my awareness is “Can I be free of this otherness I still think about?”

In the middle of anything creative, I’ve never been concerned with anyone or anything other than the moment of art as it occurred. “The best gift is one left on the doorstep,” I once wrote. Can an artist, given the gift of creation, leave that gift on the doorstep of the moment, without wanting recognition and acceptance, love and reward? A true amateur, by definition, is one who does anything for the love of it. Am I a true amateur, or am I deluding myself with pretensions of being an amateur, when all I am is an unsuccessful professional?

Can a man die, without recognition, and be at peace? Skip James was a drug dealer, an angelic singer, and then a preacher. In the middle of his life, he was alone in his glory. Have I diluted my chance at glory by clinging to power?

I think I’m rambling. I think that, when I’m onto something that hasn’t become clear yet.

I’m starting to see myself more clearly in my mother’s mirrored eyes. I wanted her to see me, but I’m beginning to see myself.

I’ve been afraid to go back to India, to disappear in India, beyond the eyes of the world I grew up in. I’ve been afraid to be so selfish, to think that there was nothing in my life but my spirit and its own unfathomable source. And act on that alone.

I’ll get that chance, soon enough, as we all do, when the time comes, and what is the true nature of time, if it’s not now?
Mother never got dressed, today. She stayed in bed, until I knocked on her door. She came out and sat, in her robe, in her chair, and I brought her tea and toast and her meds. She used her walker getting to the chair. She’s weak and tired. I sat at my computer sneezing and blowing my nose. I’m still coming to terms with the lesson of my mother’s age and her nearness to death. This illness could prove fatal, or it could pass, like it does for most people. She’s treating it like an annoyance.

At the end of every ambitious person’s life, at the end of every successful person’s life, is the same question I ask myself.

“Am I at peace with my life?”
“Is my mother at peace with her life?”
I think she is.

She set out to be as competent as she could be, as a worker, a wife, a mother, a homemaker, a friend, a grandparent, and as a person in the world. She believes in Jesus, and she seems to be content to go to her reward. She reviews her life almost daily, and her stories are generally positive, as if she’s fairly satisfied with how it’s gone. She never asks questions the way someone in doubt or fear might.

Her mother, Hulda Axene, watched soap operas without paying them any attention, and she cut up newspapers with a pair of scissors, to no purpose, as she waited patiently for death. Grandma accepted death and wanted her life to end. She was happy to have worked hard in her life, and there was no need for it to continue.

My mother watches Seinfeld and Judging Amy and reads Oprah Magazine in great detail, and she seems to be feeling much the same as her mother did.

There have been many times in my life, after finishing a book or a set of paintings, that I thought I was satisfied with my work. I feel pretty good about myself as a person, among others in the world, but I’m not ready to watch TV and read magazines and wait for death.

Still, the question is the same for my own mortal self? Am I at peace? Can I leave this world without regret, while I’m in it? Do I have unfinished business? In my heart, no. I have no unfinished business. That’s been true.
since I first became conscious of my impersonal being. My soul self has never had any business to begin, to carry on, or to finish. My personal self adapted to the world, became aware of my talents, and developed an agenda of intended accomplishments.

Except in terms of scale, I’ve been able to do what I hoped to do, beyond my expectations. And, still, there is a piece of work to be done.

When I was recognized by my teacher in India, I instinctively turned to face the 200 or so people gathered in those rooms.

He said to me, “Don’t be afraid of them. They are your friends.”

Perhaps he knew how vulnerable I was in that moment, but I was grinning at them all.

I said, haltingly, “No . . . I . . . love . . . them.”

There’s a way of being among others that’s not in recognition of the separation between us, but is the expression of there being no difference between us, and that is my own unfinished business in this life.

I experienced it as a performer, doing one-man shows with intimate audiences. I described it, then, as ‘breathing with the audience.’

I experienced it, that day in Lucknow, laughing with happy people about the soul of us all.

When I first saw Poonjaji, it was different from any other person I’d ever seen. I didn’t just see a man speaking to others about Being, that’s almost common. I saw Being speaking to Being. I saw love pouring out toward itself.

As soon as I saw it, it became the only true ambition I’ve ever had. It remains in my heart as the only business I have left unfinished. I don’t know how such business is begun, engaged in, or finished, and that’s where peace comes in.

Peace is the only engine that can drive such a turbine. There is no way I can fulfill this ambition. The first step is to know it is true. The second step is to take no further steps.
The Sweet Drama of It

Mother went to the hospital. It was her idea.
“Mark would have had me go before this,” she said.
She and I both have the flu. In her condition, it made her feel abnormally weak. I called 911, and a gang came to haul her down to the ambulance. At the hospital, the same one as when I first got here, we waited three hours while she was tested. Her EKG and blood tests were good, her blood pressure was high, and finally, after a CAT scan, they said she needed to come back for a PET scan, to determine if the dark spots on the lymph glands in her chest were infection or cancer. They gave us a nebulizer machine and sent us home. She wanted to stay, but there was no justification for Medicare.

At that point, one might despair of the managed health care system, but the nurses were very helpful, including arranging a crew at the house to lift her back up the stairs and the possibility of a home health care worker coming daily to the house. They made calls to the doctor to find a way to keep her in the hospital as she wished.

And, her car battery died. A nice lady in the parking lot volunteered to jump it and off we went. Today, I bought a new battery. She won’t use the nebulizer for her lungs. She says she doesn’t need it, and she seems to be slowly improving. She stayed in bed. I did laundry, went for meds and Ensure dietary supplement, did cleaning and ironing. I’m still sick, too.

At the hospital, I was attracted to one of the nurses. I might have flirted with her if I wasn’t sick and sitting with my mother. Ron, from upstairs, walked into the ER, and we chatted.

“I didn’t know you worked here,” I said.
“I’m here all the time,” he said.

Today, I asked his roommate, Heath, if he’d ask Ron about the nurse, Rosa. She seemed interested, however much I can’t say, but I thought the indications were there.

It’s tough trying to help my mother while I’m sick, too, but I was able to put a little of what I called for, in the last chapter, into effect. I sat in the ER watching other patients and a lot of nurses, doctors and EMTs moving in and out, and I did what I said was my truest ambition. I let love pour out
toward itself. I don’t mean, of course, romantic love. There’s no best way to describe this phenomenon of human awareness, but it dissolves the separations that make life complicated and conflicted.

When I saw Papaji, I said I saw love pouring out toward itself. I was describing an awareness of his awareness. When one recognizes the undivided entirety of existence, there’s an acceptance of all others and of oneself, that doesn’t artificially eliminate distinctions. It focuses attention on being itself, instead of the forms that being takes in this life.

I’m willing to talk around this subject, since I’ve been doing it for a dozen years or so. I know I can’t finally put in words what is a state of consciousness beyond description. The descriptions, even as much as they fail to convey the awareness, can’t diminish it, and might reassure someone who’s come into recognition but hasn’t named it for true.

If I know a man, and you know a man, but we aren’t sure we know the same man, and I describe that man to you, I may use all sorts of limited descriptions, “He’s tall, he wears a hat, he has brown eyes, he leaps when he walks, he sings when he talks,” and you might say, “Oh, yeah, I know him, he’s my friend.” My description doesn’t do our friend justice, but since we both know him, our recognition is triggered by slight reference.

As I sat in the ER and saw, not as one person looking at other people, I was free of my little concerns, and those concerns were more easily accepted. I still wish for a quick end to this flu, but when I look at the presence of the room, I’m OK.

I got the feeling that Mother would just as soon have died, but it was not to be.

“I was a burden to Mark, and now I’m being a burden to you,” she said, as we drove home.

“No problem,” I said. “You’re not a burden at all.”

Rosa seemed to be hanging around the ER when it was her time to go home. O the sweet drama of it.
Another Day

It has been another day of illness. Mother stayed in bed, asleep, until noon. She woke, briefly, when I woke her, and then she went back to sleep. At 2PM, Vivian gave me a tureen of homemade chicken noodle soup, and within seconds, as if by magic, Mother was using the walker to move to her chair to watch Dr. Phil.

“It’s like that guy on Carol Burnett,” she said, not joking, but making a reference to a comic’s rendition of an old man hunched over and walking by quarter inches.

Last night, I noticed how happy I was with my mother incapacitated, in bed in the back room, and me watching the Cubs and Red Sox on TV. I’ve been emptying her bed-pan and answering her every need, and I was sick, too, but I felt happy. She’s needy and appreciative of my presence. The illness may be helping me by squelching my energy. Otherwise, I’d be champing at the bit.

I’m living in a house of illness, and it affects my thoughts. The world gets narrow, just as it does under the influence of alcohol. I can’t do much, and what I can do is small. As I write this, I’m sitting in Fireworks, and my skin is clammy and sweaty.

I thought about my mother dying, an empty house, the completion of her life as my mother, but as soon as the thought occurred, it was gone. On my way to the hospital, two days ago, following the ambulance, I felt sharp pains in my chest. I thought about another heart attack. I could have been driving myself to the hospital, but the pain stopped. It may have been sympathetic pain, or it may have been nothing.

I’d like to have ridden my bike, today, but the infestation of Japanese beetles and all the rest of this, canceled that. I don’t have much imagination in this condition, but my dreams were vivid.

Last night, I was driving my infant son across the bridge to San Francisco in the cold. He was strapped to the windshield, as if that was normal. He slipped, and I slowed the car. He slid off the side of the car, and I stopped. I rushed to get him into the car, before anyone saw us. By then, he was a small boy, battered and frightened, and I felt like a criminal.
She didn’t think she could get to the bedroom from her chair. It was midnight. She tried to stand. I put the walker near her, but she began to waver like a stack of wooden blocks. I held her, as she slowly crumpled to the floor, and sat.

“This is just like before, when I fell all the time,” she said.

I got her to turn toward the chair, and I pulled a second chair up close. I got her to extend her knees, then I helped her to her knees, then standing, so she could flop back onto the second chair, where she sat for a long while.

“Isn’t this pitiful,” she said.

“It isn’t pitiful, it’s just what happens,” I said.

I suggested options, “The guy upstairs is a nurse, and if we need him, he could help me carry you.”

“No, I’ll be OK. Just not right away.”

I thought about the movie I wanted to watch. I was happy when she said she was going to bed, but she’d been in her chair for ten hours. I brought her porta-potty out, once, and she maneuvered that well. I thought she was getting stronger, but it was late in the day, she’d had two glasses of wine, she’d eaten, and she was tired. So was I. I thought about calling 911. I thought about her sleeping on the couch. I wanted her back in bed, for my own sake, as well as hers.

“How did I get here?” she said.

“Where?”

“How did I get here?” She looked down at herself.

“You walked.”

“I should have never gotten out of bed.”

“I think it’s a good thing you did. Now we just have to get you back in bed.”

“How did I get here?”

“You walked from the bedroom to the chair.”

“I did?”

“Yes, you did.”

“What day is it?”
“It’s Thursday.”
“I should never have gotten out of bed.”
“Are you ready to try it, again?”
“No, I need a little more time.”
I stood in front of her chair, turned my back and said, “You could lean on me, if you need to.”
“No, I can’t do that.”
After another few minutes, she decided to try it. I stood next to her as she struggled to her feet. As she put her hands on the walker, I wrapped my arms around her from behind, across her belly, and held her firmly.
“I’ll fall,” she said.
“You won’t fall,” I said, “you can’t fall.”
For the next ten minutes or so, we moved slowly across the living room to the hall, toward the bedroom. In a slow-motion shuffling dance, we moved as one. I held my mother from behind. I felt the same happiness I’d felt earlier. It felt good to help my mother walk.
She doubted the proceeding, and I praised it. I had suggested placing chairs along the way as rest stations, but she didn’t need them.
As we reached the hall, I said, “We’re halfway there. Doing great.”
We made it to the bed, and I helped her turn and sit down on the side of the bed. I took her shoes off. I had put them on her, in the living room, for traction. Her socks were slippery. I got her robe off, and she turned and lay down. I pulled the covers over her legs.
“I don’t know what I’d do without you,” she said.
“I’m glad I’m here,” I said.
I leaned over and kissed her on the cheek.
“I love you,” I said.
“I love you, too,” she said.
And then she said, “Aren’t you sick?”
“I am, but I feel good. I’m still strong,” I said. “This was easy for me.”
“I’m not getting out of this bed, again,” she said.
“If you have to stay in bed, that might be a reason Medicare would accept.”
“No, I’ll get up. I’ll get over this.”
“The flu made you weak. Me, too, but I’m getting better, and you’ll get better, too.”
She went to sleep and slept through the night. When I got up, I realized I had slept through. No coughing fits, no trips to the bathroom. She stayed in bed, and I brought her breakfast, coffee, and the newspaper. I taped a message on the remote for the TV I put on an end table at the foot of her bed. She had trouble with the remote. Unlike the one for the TV she’s had for years, it required her to push 0 before any single digit channel, and the only channels available on non-cable TV were 4, 6, and 8.

My note read;

Channel 4 is 04
Channel 6 is 06

This morning, she seemed to have followed the instructions. Later, she sat up on the side of the bed for egg drop soup and half a banana for lunch. She lay back for Oprah and Dr. Phil, and I left the house to go write.

As I drove away, I was reminded of being a parent with very young children, when the world narrows down to their wants, needs, and desires, feeding and cleaning, lost sleep. It’s a maintenance reality, not one for contemplation.

As much as I was glad to get away, I was glad to be caught up in the care of another. I felt a sweet affection for my old mother, as I walked her across the living room to the bedroom, my arms around her, and my face buried in the back of her neck.

When I kissed her, it was a simple kiss. It isn’t that I loved her for who she is, it’s that I stumbled on a way of being my natural self, and the natural self is the way of being love itself. I found a way to open the love of my heart that is my inherent self, as it is for everyone. It was only natural, and natural is love itself.
The Letter Writer

I’m still sick. I feel good, so I try things. Then I see how sick I still am. This morning, Mother felt better, too. She had planned to stay in bed. I brought her breakfast and lunch. I was at my computer, when I went to check in on her. She was sitting on the floor at the end of her bed. She’d been moving to the bathroom, to take a shower, when she crumpled to the floor, like an imploded building.

She sat there for a long time. I’ve learned to believe her when she says she’ll move when she’s ready. I helped her to stand and then walk, like we did the night before. Later, Dareth called, but Mother said she wasn’t up to it to talk to her.

“Isn’t that awful,” she said, “that I couldn’t talk to her?”

“She understands,” I said.

She did, and she thanked me for my two letters, a couple of months ago. I wondered why she didn’t answer my letters.

“I’m not a letter writer. I’m more used to phone calls. You’re a writer,” she said.

“I write when the spirit moves me.”

“Well, it moved you, twice,” she said. She wished me and Mother well.

I’m glad for the baseball playoffs on TV. The Cubs won, last night, in four and a half hours. Some of that time I would have usually spent away from the house.

I notice, as I write this, that I want to finish it, get to Walmart, get provisions and a bell for her to ring, in case of trouble, and get back home. The same single-mindedness happened to me when my kids were small. Divorce probably saved my artistic career. I’ve never had to resent anyone because of my divine selfishness. I mean, my artist life. There’s very little evidence of a career. I did get a good idea for my Zenictionary.

It’s a great piece. I hope somebody sees it, some day.
The Air Horn

Cubs were winning as I left the house. This afternoon, instead of a bell for my bedridden mother, I got her an air horn, hand-held, easy to use. She said she’d never need it.

“Yeah, you’re probably right, but it’s here, just in case.”

I brought her a huge ham sandwich from Heavenly Ham, and she ate the whole thing. She was sitting on the side of the bed like someone who was about to jump ship. I got her a seven-day pill dispenser, so there’d be no doubt she’s taken her daily meds. Her falling may be due to missed pills, especially the synthroid, which she now swears by.

Her friend Katherine called, when Mother was asleep, so I chatted with her. Nice lady. She said she’d call back, later.

“You’re a wonderful man, Stephen.”

“Yeah, I’m a hell of a guy.”

“You are.”

What pleases people is simple. Everything we think and do, as human beings, is an effort to stave off death, and anybody who helps us do that is our hero. I mean that, not crassly, but simply. The mind is in the business of ensuring the survival of the body and no matter how we dress up our fears and desires, that’s what it comes down to. Except for the recognition of our innate being, which literally cuts to the chase. That; we call love.

The recognition of our innate eternal self trumps the fear of death, because it correctly sees beyond that limited reality.

I feel better, tonight, stronger and clearer. I told Mother I was feeling better.

“Good for you,” she said, with resignation.

“If I’m feeling better, maybe this flu is ending. It’s been a week. If it ends for me, it’ll end for you.”

I have to go see if the Cubs 7-0 lead will hold up against those pesky Marlins.
The Tapioca Test

Cubs won, last night, and if they’d won, tonight, they’d have clinched a spot in the World Series, but they lost. Tonight, I grew weary of being home, watching TV. Then, Mother came walking out of her bedroom, and I saw my chance to get out of the house.

This afternoon, she said, “Was Ronald Reagan actually President of the United States?”

She’d heard his name on one of the Sunday talk shows.

“Yes,” I said, “for eight years.”

“It’s hard to believe,” she said.

Today was a day of mixed signals. I got up an hour early to make sure she was taken care of. Before, I was able to sleep later than she did. She always got up and started the coffee and fixed her own breakfast, if she didn’t become confused about it. Even then, it meant I could stay up later and get up later, after a full eight hours sleep. Today, after six and a half, I was up and getting her breakfast, coffee, and the Sunday paper, turning the TV to a channel that worked, before I could take a shower. No problem, just different.

Then she tried to walk to the bathroom. Fortunately, I was standing nearby, when she started to fall. I embraced her, and held her, until she was willing to move again. She has no embarrassment about using the toilet in front of me. I’m becoming her nurse, without our old familial proprieties.

She spent the day sitting on the edge of her bed, and I left her to her thoughts. I was curious about the thoughts of an aging woman, with short-term memory loss, and death so near, but I’ve discovered she has no interest in the subject.

Years ago, in The Owl & the Monkey Cafe, in San Francisco, we talked, one day, about a fellow we called the Green Man, who stood, night after night, in the shadows, across the street. It was imagined that he was a wise man, living outside normal society, and it was proposed that we invite him into the circle of the cafe crowd, buy him a beer, and see what he had to tell us.
He took the beer and had nothing to tell. The mysterious stranger, who always wore an dark green overcoat and green pants, was not only not a wise man, he didn’t even pretend to be an intelligent one.

When Mother asked about Ronald Reagan, I wondered if she was slipping away. On the phone with Scott, she said she thought Dareth was 50, when she’s in her 70s. She’s known Dareth since her childhood, and Scott is past 50.

And then she came out and sat down in her chair, just like usual. She asked for a glass of wine and ate dinner, with interest and pleasure.

She did ask me to get some tapioca at the store. That has to be a sign of dementia. No, wait, I like tapioca, too. I’m going nuts. Sickness spoils everything. I did admit to myself, last night, that I loved my life as a drinker. For many years, I loved it. This afternoon, I spoke to Gregory in Santa Fe. A routine blood test revealed he had high blood pressure. He had to change his habits. He did, and it’s the end of an era for him. Another agent provocateur, artiste, public menace, has had to trim his sails.

I don’t need to get drunk and live the life I used to live. I just need to express some joie de vivre, one way or another.
No Joie de Vivre in Mudville

Lingering illness. And my new glasses sit poorly on my nose. I have to take them off or hold them a quarter inch in the air.

I don’t feel like a writer. I feel like a guy who’s taking care of his mother and has the flu. No joie de vivre. I look at the presence in the room, and I feel a light but slight awakening.

I look at an article in The New Yorker about Pablo Neruda, and I can’t begin to care about it.

The early stages of illness are a kind of drunkenness, pleasantly different from the ordinary, and then it goes downhill quickly, just as drunkenness does. Maybe my happy life as a drunken poet lasted a couple of years, and even then, some of my unhappier memories are from that period. Drink is a Dumbo’s feather, an excuse for flight, and an excuse for the fall.
In the Fraction of a Moment

Feeling better enough to think I’m better, I switched off the baseball game (Red Sox/Yankees) and left Mother to watch Everybody Loves Raymond.

I’m wondering what the story is, here. The great drama of it is not very dramatic. I did begin to think there was a breakthrough breaking ever so slightly through, in yesterday’s juxtaposition of home life with Mother and the desire for rebellion in drunken joie de vivre.

I’ve become the good son my mother always wanted, and I’ve kept alive the creative spirit. As they’re compatible, they’re also at odds.

“How’s your table working out?” she said, referring to my drawing table and the work I might be doing on it.

“I’ve done two drawings,” I said.

“You did two drawings? Can I see them?” she said.

“No,” I said.

“You’re not finished with them?”

“That’s right. They’re just begun.”

I felt like berating myself for my low production. Then I remembered the artist and his model have both been sick for the last week.

I’ve been looking at my Zenfinitions, 1500 words defined in the language of Zen. It may be my best work, and the power of each part of it is packed into a tiny space. They hit like little atomic reactions, infinitely small, but infinitely large, so that one at a time is sufficient, and ten at a time obliterates the effect.

This is the key to my sense of life at its most wondrous. Whenever I look for some grand dimension to life, when I want something large and loud to occur, I’m thrown back on this simplest of truths. The moment of truth is a moment. Miss it, and it all begins to blur into time; tedious and terrifying.

In the fraction of a moment, wonder thrives.
A Pale Memory

“You need to be loved too much,” another poem told me, years ago. As my mother fades from this life, I remember such things.

When I was a small boy, I seemed to wring my hands in sadness, knowing something was missing and not knowing what it was. I didn’t miss the recognition of my parents as being a capable boy, I missed the sense of being in a place of love that fills the heart with easy delight.

I found that sort of inherent delight in my own being. Still, as I watch my mother become a pale memory of herself, even in her own eyes, I feel that sadness.

This morning, after taking her pills, she asked me if she’d taken her pills. I poured Slimfast chocolate drink into a glass to go with her orange juice, peeled orange, banana bread, and coffee. She wondered why the chocolate milk (sic) was gone from the glass but the can still had chocolate milk in it.

I poured the remainder into the glass and said, “Now, it’s all in the glass, and the can is empty.”

When she went back to sleep, later this morning, she looked like a cadaver. I don’t say this to be morbid, but to tell what I see.

The other night, lying in bed, she asked me what the light was that shown in the mirror. I turned off her bedside lamp, and the reflection disappeared. I turned it on, again, and she asked me what that light was.

I have imagined that being with anyone with Alzheimer’s, or senility, or memory loss, might be like being with their simplest self, even closer to the true self than to the layered ego self, but what I’m witnessing is the ego stripped to its least capable self, as if I’m seeing only mixed, muddled, and garbled remnants of personality, scrambled computer codes, and not the essential spirit in a childlike form.

The hope of my heart to sit with my mother in peace and happiness will not come the way I imagined. I’m not afraid of, or put off by, the sight of my mother no longer acting like my mother, and if she finally no longer recognizes me, I can accept that, too.

My knowledge of the transience of thought and the impermanence of identity helps me welcome her as her soul self, whether her ego self has
any traction or not, but I don’t see the light of her eternal being shining through. Instead, I see the light dimming in the house of her ego identity. She seems more like a machine slowly breaking down that she does like a soul being stripped to its essence.

I still hope, as we both come out of this illness, that more soul recognition will occur, at least in my own heart. Caring for her has become blessedly simple. Last night, in Walgreen’s, I was walking like a dancer, feeling more healthy than I have in a long time. It made me smile and make a joke with a guy at the counter.

Red Sox won, last night. That series is tied 2-2. The fifth game is today. Tonight, the Cubbies go for the kill.
Watch and See

Cubs were losing, as I left the house. Mother was watching Judging Amy. The talkative, opinionated woman I’m used to has gone quiet.

I talked to my high school friend, Jerry. His mother, at 91, died this morning. She had the same macular degeneration and increasing dementia that my mother has.

I did another drawing, very much like the first two, the style almost the same. Sometimes, no matter what I imagine, pictures come out the same. I can only watch and see.

I was excited to watch the Cubs, two innings away from the World Series, but when they fell behind, my interest evaporated.

I know that when I die, in the absence of my presence, interest in my life will flare, briefly, and I will have lost interest before anyone else begins to not care.

This is not a sad thing to say, but the inevitable truth. If there is interest in me, because of my work, that interest will conjure a man who no longer exists, who never existed. There’s nothing wrong in that, because it will engender a presence in the imagination of the one who lives on. The man who dreams, and the man he dreams, are equally imagined in the heart of us all.
The Water’s Fine

After getting Mother’s breakfast, I discovered she’d taken two days doses of her pills. I moved the pill container to the kitchen where I can monitor it. After a while, she came out to her chair. I went back to bed for a nap.

In the dream, I was underwater. I could see a line in the water above my head. I could grab it, but I couldn’t pull myself up. There was no strength in my arms. I couldn’t pull myself to the surface, only inches away. I was drowning.

I’d never had a dream like it. I couldn’t save myself from drowning. The curious thing about the dream was the surprise that I couldn’t use my arms. I had no strength. I was holding a line at the water’s surface, and I couldn’t pull myself up.

Yesterday, I went to Osco Drug to get more of my own heart medication. While I was waiting, I put my arm in a blood-pressure tester. It was twenty points higher than three months ago. I did it again, last night, at the same place, and it was the same.

I don’t register stress. I think this situation is well in hand, I think I’m lazy and self-indulgent, I have high blood pressure, and I’m drowning.

This afternoon, I decided to ignore the old lady and relax. I got in line for the bridge and waited twenty minutes just to get moving. I honked my horn and waved my arms, pointing at one idiot who didn’t move up, because he was timid, and honked at another who tried to cut in, and I smiled as I did it. I was relaxing.

The Cubs lost, last night, and the fan who interfered with a fair catch, is being reviled as the man who lost the series. There’s a game seven, tonight, but I don’t care. The Mariners already disappointed my desires for the season. Still, I look forward to the next game.

The dream aside, I slept well, and I feel pretty good. Mother has become a shell of herself. I imagine saving her by becoming a loving and caring son, talking to her, sitting with her, charming her into good health and happiness. It was my intuitive thinking as a child, to adjust to her moods and say the right thing.
I still imagine it. When there’s a moment for it, I’m cheerful and lively, but it feels like trying to start a fire in wet embers.

I’m glad three months passed before she slipped to this more dependent state. I’m prepared to live in. Knowing there’s an end to it gives me some solace. I’ve had thoughts of living here indefinitely, and it scares me, but, It’s still my life, wherever I am. I’m inclined to put a good face on whatever occurs.

I’ve never had a drowning dream before. I could see the light. I had hold of the line. There was nothing I could do.

“Save me, Jesus,” I said, to myself.

Then I thought of Buddha. “Let go and drown. The water’s fine.”
Soup and Salad

Cubs lost; a big tragedy in Chicago. They were beaten by a group of unrelenting players, a team working together, rather than a recently assembled lineup of potential all-stars.

Mother came out of the bedroom, this morning, on her own, and made herself a snack of crackers. I fixed her breakfast. I got the old kitchen TV out of the garage and put it back where it had been before. I made a sheet of channel listings in 72-point type for the bedroom wall by the new TV. She may be back in there, sooner or later.

We have almost no conversation between us, these days. I thought it was because I had become cold to her, or she’d decided I was someone who didn’t like to talk, but I believe she’s not making the mental connections that energize her familiar character.

She asks me, at dinner time, not to go to any trouble, to make her a sandwich and a salad, only. When I cook, she asks again for a sandwich. The salad is the most complicated thing I make, usually, and a sandwich would be just as complicated.

I keep telling her I enjoy cooking, and I do, but she acts as if anything other than a sandwich is asking too much. She’s not just being polite, she seems lost in a swamp of disability.

I don’t feel like I’m writing a book, anymore. I feel like I’m making notes in a vacuum. When my mother was a character, acting her usual self, I had a story, but I’ve never kept a diary, i.e., notes on a daily life. I’ve written journals that became books, but there was always a compelling urge to write, until the book was finished, written within its own sense of self.

In other words, I’ve written books about my life, but they weren’t driven by circumstances. They were driven by the art of writing them, the same way a painting is not about the subject of the painting. Monet said, “For me, the subject is of secondary importance: I want to convey what is alive between me and the subject.”

In my more autobiographical books, where my subject was my life as an artist, there was something between my subject and me, and it was the art.
I’ve written a lot about myself in this book, and much of it has been about myself as an artist, but my mother has been the focal point, unlike other times, when I’ve written about friends, acquaintances, and lovers.

One’s mother is a significant figure who doesn’t come and go, except in the awareness of the eternal, and her fading from view has affected my story more than any other character would.

I wrote a long letter, yesterday, to Julie Donaldson, who was the subject, in part, of a novelized autobiography I wrote twenty years ago. I found myself describing her as an icon in my life; I said she wasn’t responsible for that and under no obligation to it.

When I asked Carole for Julie’s address, I said I wanted to clear up some old business.

There’s a connection between these two icons and the sense of letting go that’s come up in my consciousness. Julie and I were born on the same day in the same hospital. Our mothers were exact contemporaries.

There’s a vacuum in my story, all of a sudden, as there will be a vacuum in my life, eventually. And the story will change, again.
A New Thing

I was sitting with Mother when *Survivor* came on.
“You like that Survivor show,” she said.
“I do like it,” I said. I was quiet for a second.
“I can watch it in the other room, if you want,” I said.
I sat still for a minute, and then I left the room. I was curious to see if she wanted me to stay with her. There was no other show, at the time, that she preferred, but when I left the room, she didn’t call me back. She seemed lost in her own private limbo, but changing channels gives her a sense of control.

I asked her, earlier, how she was feeling.
“Good, I guess,” she said, “I thought I was getting better.”
It was clear she’s thinking of her physical condition as the only thing that matters, and I understand that.

As I came here to write, the Red Sox were leading the Yankees in the seventh game of the league championship series, 3-0. Cool.

In the last chapter, I began to describe the true nature of this book, not based on the art of literature or the soul of an artist, but based on the art of life itself and the soul of us all, based on the absence of a relationship between my mother and me, and the presence of absence that allows for. I’m beginning to glimpse a new occurrence.

Last night, watching Johnny Lang, the singer/guitarist, on Letterman, I began to imagine a new way of reading poetry aloud, i.e.,

*Deconstruct a poem as you read it, like singing a song.*
*and build into it - behind it, under it, above it, around it,*
*and through it - so the meaning is clear but subordinate* to the musical being, the vibrating string, at the center of the art of the poem – *read aloud, three times or more.*

I don’t know whether that sensibility has any legs, but it’s the first time I’ve imagined it.
A Real Idea

Every time a real idea occurs, it comes without warning. No fanfare, no build-up that’s noticeable. No big bang. It simply occurs.

I was watching Johnny Lang sing, and I noticed how much went into the presentation of his song. He was dramatically acting the song, with dramatic music and facial contortions. The language of the song, presumably the ‘message’, was a part of an environment. The language was only the meaning thread in the experience of the listener.

I came of age, as a poet, believing in the power of the word, that everything else should be subdued, with no dramatic presentation, no histrionics, no personality. Let the poem be the poem.

I’ve felt and shown disdain for poetic gimmicks, dramatic delivery, Robert Bly’s mandolin and fur-skin vest, Alan Ginsburg’s drums. But, what if the poem was the vehicle of its own presentation? What if the language of any poem was read in pieces, repeated, split off, thought about, sung, danced, intoned, enjoyed.

I picked up a copy of Matisse in L.A. and read a poem at random, pulling it apart, putting it back together, reading it, stopping and starting, discovering it, enjoying it. It worked! I was amazed. I was beginning to think I was wrong about this, but maybe not.

Red Sox lost, dramatically, just like the Cubs.

Mother fell, yesterday, afternoon, but this time it wasn’t the same. This time, she simply fell and got back up. No crumbling. It convinced her to use the walker. She used it, in part, to get herself ready to go to Carole’s, tomorrow, and get her hair done. That’s a big deal.

“I’m hungry,” she said, as she was eating the soup and sliced pear I brought her.

“Get some frozen fish and frozen macaroni and cheese, for dinner, tonight,” she said.
The Magic Place

Driving here, tonight, I thought about Moline, the place I’ve come home to, time after time. It was a notion from Don Juan, Carlos Casteneda’s hero, the notion that there’s a magic place from which to experience everything.

I thought, “There’s no magic place, here.”

I thought of how I sent my books to Julie Donaldson, the girl I imagined as my youthful ideal. In my letter to her, I noticed I was clearing away the magic. No magic person, no magic place.

My mother no longer carries any magic for me, either. As I was driving the old streets of my old hometown, I thought, “There’s no magic anywhere, with anyone.”

Except in my spirit. That’s not magic, either, but greater than magic. Magic comes and goes. The center of my being is constant.

The imagined past is a dreamland of magic and terror, depending on one’s experience. All the teachers speak of letting go of the past and living in the present moment. The entanglement of lives, in our thinking, perpetuates the past and makes living in the present moment almost inconceivable.

I showed Mother the video of the dinner with my son and daughter, her husband and his girlfriend, just before I left Seattle. I used the slow-motion and pause buttons on the VCR to give her long looks at her grandchildren. In one sequence, I held the picture on my daughter. I missed her. I realized the one I missed wasn’t the daughter I’ve known, but the daughter I don’t know. I began to discover her in those few minutes of slow-motion and stop-action.

It occurred to me, over the last few days, that I was thinking differently of the way I live. I saw myself returning to my life in Seattle with less baggage, less carried thought, less magic, and it felt good. I felt cleaner, more able to be present, without nagging business, the lingering illness of the past.

To be free of the past is not a negative. It’s not a rejection; it’s not a renunciation. Anything that is renounced can come back and bite. To be free of the past is to complete one’s amends. The past doesn’t hold me, I
I hold it in the grip of my regret and desire. The only one who knows how to release that grip is oneself. One can’t be led to it by discipline.

Religion talks of the ease of entering the Kingdom of God by repenting of one’s sins. One can’t repent of one’s sins by saying, “I have sinned.” One has to genuinely repent. That means recognizing the grip on one’s own past and releasing it. Easier said than done, and it’s only done in the heart of the doer.

‘No magic’ sounds terrible, but as soon as my consciousness dropped the external search for it, my awareness fills me.
The Entangling Mythology

We went to the hairdresser’s and then to Ming Wah for lunch, a big lunch. Mother walked and talked, and I told Carole I’m going stir crazy.

“I get out of the house, but after half an hour, I have to get back. It’s like having kids,” I said, “the world gets smaller.”

I’m still not completely healthy. I thought about taking a long bike ride, in the sun, but by the time we got home, at 3PM, I was tired, and the air was full of Japanese beetles.

My cafe muse, Ann, has lost her magic, too. That is to say, I have lost some of the magic I call by Ann’s name.

In Ming Wah, I offered Mother a fortune cookie, but she refused it, so I took them both for my own.

The first one read, “Simplicity of character is the natural result of profound thought.”

The second read, “You shall soon achieve perfection.”

When I was in India - that was my immediate expectation. I reverted to my lifelong belief that whatever is achieved occurs when it’s ready to occur. I still believe that, and I’m glad for the way awareness has taken form, over the last three months.

In my personal mind, just as I see in my mother’s life, I imagine my life coming to an end, not literally.

Lately, I’ve imagined going to Paris, after this period ends, and that was followed by a sense of disappointment, as I reminded myself how old I am. An old man in Paris. So what? I would be seeing Paris through eternal eyes. I’ve thought of going to India and coming home broke. So what? I did that, twelve years ago. I’ve thought of going to Scott’s place in Honolulu. There’s nothing to do there, but sit in the sun. So what? I’ve done that five times in the last seven years.

At lunch, Mother said to me, “What are you thinking?”

I said I was thinking about nothing.

“You must have been thinking something.”

“I was thinking about the bump on your head.”

Carole had noticed it. Mother told her about her falling down, yesterday.
“I saw it, too,” I said, “but I couldn’t remember when you got it.”
I could have said, “I was thinking how unbelievably bored I am.”
I could have said, “I was thinking how much I wish you were dead. Just kidding.”
I wondered what she would make of such a statement.
When you can easily imagine someone dying, it’s not very far from imagining them dead, and that’s not far from wanting them dead. Thoughts are like loaded guns.

At the Red Cross, years ago, I gave blood, and I saw a cop’s gun, hanging on a hook on the wall, as he gave blood. It shocked me to see a gun, hanging on the wall, like an ordinary thing. I thought about owning a gun and why I didn’t want to own one.

“If there was a gun around all the time, you’d think about using it, and then eventually, you’d want to use it, and then it would feel wrong if you didn’t use it. It’s like world dominance and owning a fondue pot. If you have it, you feel compelled to use it. Thinking is like that. As long as it’s allowed to become entrenched, it will fester.”

I sit with my mother in her world with small respite. Despite the awareness of endless horizons and the endlessness of being itself, there’s the absence of freed thought. All her thinking, and all the thinking in this environment is habitually ego driven. Not evil ego, but ordinary ego.
I asked her what she was thinking, just to see.

“I’m thinking about that woman,” she said of another patron in the cafe. “It must be difficult,” she added.

I can’t even remember what the woman’s difficulty was, but I recognize my mother’s mind trying to re-engage in the world, just as I want out of the entangling mythology of the ordinary.
She read an article in the paper, about a salad at a local restaurant. She said the picture of it looked good, but she couldn’t identify the ingredients in the photographs.

She reads billboards. “Two for one sale,” at the video store, for example.
Across the street from Ming Wah is a large green billboard with white lettering. It’s a message from Nextel.

**I DO, AND THEREFORE I AM.**

It is the entangling mythology of the ordinary.
Pregnant Relaxation

The World Series started, tonight. Yankees v. Marlins. I don’t care as much as I enjoyed caring about the Cubs and the White Sox.

Ann said to me, just a few minutes ago, “How many times am I going to have to serve you, today?”

Confused for a second, I answered, “Uh, twice. This is the last time. I know it’s difficult, but I appreciate it.”

I’m beginning to feel like the forgotten, invisible man. It’s not a bad feeling. It’s not self-pity. It’s just the way it is.

In the ashram, in India, they said it takes three days for the body to arrive, three weeks for the mind to arrive, and three months for the heart to arrive. I’ve been here for over three months, and today, I realized my status as a newcomer/visitor has passed, internally, as well as externally.

I looked up at the Borders Cafe, and I saw it with familiar eyes. This is a good thing. No more stranger magic. I’m just here, now. Be here, now, is preceded by get here, now.

I guess I’m starting to relax. I’ve been getting here since last February, when I began to prepare for it. About nine months. OOPS, here comes the baby. And I didn’t even know I was pregnant.

Monet painted his dying wife on her deathbed, devastated, and in love with the colors.
A Lovable Dog

The Marlins won the first game of The World Series. It was fun to watch. Late last night, I watched the second Harry Potter movie, and it was fun. Today, I took a nap, instead of going for a bike ride and fighting the biting beetles. It felt good. Like fun.

Mother is on the mend, and I’m feeling healthier. I got her some cinnamon rolls and tapioca for lunch.

It occurred to me, many years ago, that work, i.e., the occupation of the mind and body, solves all human problems. Being a health care provider is a 24-hour-a-day job. It’s not difficult, but it’s constant. As long as I’m occupied with things to do, I’m occupied in my thoughts. The mind is like a lovable dog that wants to be trained and told what to do. When it has a task, it’s happy.

Working solves every problem except the awareness of the soul. The soul is not concerned. The soul doesn’t have a problem. I have a problem when I lose touch with my soul self. My soul self is the dog’s true master. The habituation of the life of the mind convinces the mind that it’s the master of itself, and then the trouble begins. The amiable, old dog becomes a mongrel.

I’ve been conscious of this disparity between masters, for such a long time, I’m not likely to become my own dog, not even a top dog. I’m at the point of consciousness where awareness of my soul self is my life. The occupation of my mind in work is not my highest desire, but I don’t fear it or resent it.

I don’t need to hide out in a cave, a monastery, or an ashram to keep my consciousness clear. I don’t need to keep my mind in a state of constant tribute to the eternal.

After four years of sobriety, going to meetings all the time, I went on a three month long, 7,000-mile car trip, back to the Midwest, to the Southwest, to L.A. and S.F., and back up the coast. I wondered if my recovery would stay in place. I had nothing to worry about. I stayed sober, without a blink.

Coming here to this semi-toxic environment, becoming the live-in caretaker to my mother, who raised me in a miasma of addictive behavior,
i.e., the common addiction to mundane-centered realities, has not been a real threat to my awareness. After all, it was laying in bed, in my parents’ house, late at night, as a socially compliant teenager, a good boy, staring into the darkness of my own identity, that I first saw past the relative realities of my existence.

Mother stopped me, last night, and told me a story.

“I was thinking of that picture of Brandon and the girls. (The one on top of the TV) I remember when it was taken. It was a Sunday morning, and Liz said she didn’t have a picture of the kids all dressed up. ‘Go and get your best clothes on,’ she said, and they jumped up and did it. Right then, Brandon even put on a tie. And she took that picture. I was just remembering that.”

I looked at the photo of the three smiling kids, all dressed up, for a posed picture that probably came out of something Mother said to Liz.

My mother is concerned about the machinery of her mind, as she gets her strength back. She wasn’t talking about the occasion of the photo as much as she was talking about the condition of her memory. It was still working, and she was relieved.

I’ve finally given up believing that there is substance in the meaning of her talking. When she asked me what I was thinking, yesterday, I wasn’t caught, as I have been in the past, thinking she was genuinely curious about the expression of my character. She wants to know the mechanics of my behavior, not the essence of my being. She doesn’t want to see through me, and probably never could.

I went to graduate school with a poet who wrote stories of his childhood. The turning point of his consciousness was when he came home from his first day of school. His mother asked him what happened at school. He realized, for the first time in his life, that his mother didn’t know his mind. He could have a life of his own. He could have secrets.

My life has become clearly, and finally, unknown and unknowable to my mother. This seems patently obvious, but there has always been, in my own thinking, a desire to be seen through, to be known, to be accepted as my most transparent self. No pun intended.

Transparency. I’m transparent in my own awareness. My mother’s disabilities and her addiction to these limited realities is not a rejection of who I am, it’s not a threat to who I am. The routine work of caregiving and
conversation among the mechanics of the mind has not gotten me drunk. I passed the test, and I was the one who imagined the test in the first place.

Most people, I assume, would think of this as ordinary life, with ordinary challenges and ordinary work to be done.

Sherry Hamilton said to me, when I was thirty, “Steve, you refuse to be ordinary,” and I took offense. I didn’t think I refused to be ordinary. I liked being ordinary, but maybe she was right.
After All

I went for a bike ride, after all. It felt good. Only twenty miles, but it was good for me. And the biting beetles were few in number. It was a sunny day in the high 70s. The cold spell went away.

Every day, I come to write, with no thought of subject matter, or only a few words to work with. I find myself saying more than I imagined I had to say. My mind follows the day’s activities, until I write, and I reveal to myself the depth of color in the blank canvas.
Dog Brain

I was still asleep when I heard moaning. I grabbed my robe and went to the kitchen. Mother was clinging to the table and afraid to fall. She was inches from her chair, but she didn’t sit down. I got her to sit down.

“Sit down,” I said.
She tried to reach for the chair that was in front of her.
“Just sit back down in your own chair,” I said, and she did.
“I was going to fall,” she said.
I had put her pillbox by her plate the night before. I put a piece of tape over the rest of the days of the week, so only Monday was available to her.

“I took my pills, didn’t I?”
“Yes, you did.”
“I don’t know why I was going to fall. I took my pills. I took my thyroid pill.”
“Yes, you did, but the pills don’t work immediately. They only work over time. I don’t know why you were going to fall. It happens after you stand up, after you’d been sitting for a long time. You don’t get enough blood flow to your head.”

It was a futile argument. She doesn’t believe her heart has anything to do with her health problems, just as Dad didn’t believe smoking had anything to do with the emphysema that eventually killed him.

I’ve begun to wonder if I’m out of my depth, taking care of her. I’m beginning to wonder if I’ll have to stay home all day, just to be around, in case she falls.

Later, as I left the house, I said, “Do you want to go to the bathroom, before I go?”
“No, I’m fine. I’ll be OK.”
“Do you want the porta-potty in here?”
“No, but where’s the walker?”
I brought it closer to her.
I wonder if it wouldn’t be good for her if there was a chatterbox, a talker, living here. Nobody in this family is a talker. I learned to talk, but the older I get, the less inclined I am to talk. When I sit with her, these days,
she has nothing to say. She has no reminiscences. I suspect she’s only thinking about her physical wellbeing.

“This is pitiful,” she said, when she was shaking in the kitchen.

I didn’t try to talk her out of her bad feelings. She has a justifiable right to them.

She wanted some herring. I brought her some herring and a bowl of pea soup.

“There’s vegetables in this soup,” she said, pleased by the surprise.

She doesn’t talk about Kelly Ripa, anymore, and she doesn’t comment on her magazines. She sits in what I can only imagine as a kind of resigned despair. When I speak to her, she has little to say in response.

I came out to run some errands, and I’ll go back earlier than usual. If there’s more that needs to be done to care for her than I’ve been able to do, I don’t know what might happen.

After her falling scare, I lay back down on my bed, and I thought about all this.

“Thy will be done,” occurred to me.

Even though I don’t have an image of an anthropomorphic god, it has always given me a sense of immediate peace to give up my will. “Thy will be done,” means, “Not my will be done,” and my dog brain is at peace.
A Perception of Heaven

Mother seemed almost back to normal. She’s amazingly durable and resilient. When I got home, this afternoon, she sent me back out again.

“Can you go to the store and get a DiGiorno’s Pizza Supreme and two cans of beer?”
“Sure, what kind of beer?”
“I don’t care.”
“Bud lite? Miller lite?”
“OK.”
I finally got the new license plates for my pickup. I had fun putting them on.

Fireworks feels warm and friendly on a Monday night.

Mary, the girl behind the counter, said, “You’re the kind of person where the glass is . . . .”
She wasn’t sure about the expression.
“. . . is half full,” I said.
“Yeah, that’s right,” she said, “half full.”

A stranger came up to me and said my truck’s lights were on. I jumped up and ran out.

“How’d you know it was my truck?” I said.
“You’re the only person with that name on his truck. What’s the name?” he said.
“That’s my artist name. My name isn’t Toyota, so I put my own name on it.”

He grinned. I thanked him for telling me about the lights.

Monet was disappointed by his work. He tried to do things he couldn’t do well enough for his own satisfaction. I like what I do. I’m easily satisfied. I’m amazed by the simplest expression. I’m amazed I’m alive. I don’t have the driven ambition to accomplish something monumental. Great artists are judged by the degree of adversity they overcome. These are human standards for greatness. God never broke a sweat. God never struggled to get it right. God never tried to be God.

Today was Vivian’s birthday; she’s 72. She brought over some birthday cake, and I decided to give her a present. There were two framed
photocopies of small landscapes I’d sent mother, last year. I found them on a shelf in the back room, stacked away like forgotten mementos.

“I want to give Vivian a present. Which one of these do you think she might like?” I said.

I held them out, side by side.

“This one,” she said. “I like this one. I like them both, but I like this one the best.”

I gave Vivian the one Mother liked, a beach scene I’d done in Honolulu, two years ago.

What is greatness? How is one thing greater than any other? I’ve done small paintings in a few minutes that struck my heart like a dagger, not because I’d done it, but because one thing next to another had opened a perception of heaven.

The face of God is the sudden absence of all other faces at once. It’s the sudden presence of nothing at all, in the midst of too much, for too long.
Almost the Same Bed

Mother was in the living room, when I got up. I fixed her breakfast and called her into the kitchen. She took a long time coming. When she finished eating, she stayed in the kitchen. I coaxed her back to the living room. When she got out of her chair to move, she became shaky, afraid of falling. I sat her back down again. I encouraged her to try again. She rose, got shaky, and sat back down. On the third try, she moved, slowly, her right leg first, and her left leg coming up to meet it.

“I have to go to the bathroom,” she said.
“I can bring the porta-potty out,” I said.
“No, I don’t want that. This is terrible. I took my pills. I thought I was over this. I thought I was all done with this. Am I going to become a cripple?”

“Just do what’s in front of you,” I said.
She walked, slowly, to the bathroom and then back to the living room. At lunchtime, I brought her some yogurt and a pear with a fresh cup of coffee.

I took my car to have the breaks worked on. When I got back, she was having skin problems. Her rash and dry skin had come back. I got her two skin lotions, and she put them on.

“I put on that Jergens that I always put on, and this started. I can’t use that lotion anymore, and I’ve been using it for years.”

Every time I think she’s getting better, she gets worse. Every time I think she’s slipping, she gets strong again.

The only good thing for me is that I’m not going through her difficulties, and I know, in the long run, her difficulties will get worse.

There’s a story about two of the more famous poets in New York in the Fifties. One of them, broke and homeless, suffered an overdose and almost died. He was lying in the hospital, in terrible shape, when his friend came to see him. After idle talk, the friend said, “Well, it could have been worse.”

“How? How could it have been worse?” the one said.
“It could have been me,” his friend replied, ruefully.
It could have been me, and it probably will be me, eventually. Buddha’s teachings were based on the observation that life is suffering. In my youth, until very recently, I couldn’t have disagreed more. I thought my life was embarrassingly free of suffering, like Buddha’s life as a privileged prince.

Last night, after turning out the lights, I realized I was lying in a bed not far from the bed I lay in as a teenager, staring into the darkness of my own identity. I did it as I did then, and the thought occurred to me, “I rely on my programmed material. I don’t go back to the original question. Why am I alive and conscious, when my consciousness is the only reality I’ve ever known, first hand?”

Then it occurred to me, “Don’t look at what you are aware of, look at your awareness.”

Without thought, this glimpse of being itself is energized peace, the source of energy, and the place of peace.

When I was a teenager, I actually felt selfish to think I could have no other consciousness than the one I was in. I thought I was being self-indulgent to think like I did, until I realized that everyone else was in exactly the same boat, - the same boatless boat on the same endless sea of pure being.
The Flowering

It’s a phenomenon of human thought that our consciousness becomes so easily self-centered. The society we live in corrects us by advising us to think of others, and we end up with an other-directed, self-centered consciousness, still blind to the miracle.

There’s a young woman in Florida, right now, who’s the center of a legal dispute over her life and death. She suffered inevitable brain damage a dozen years ago and has been living on feeding tubes ever since. Her body still looks like the body of a conscious woman, except she doesn’t speak or slow any other signs of consciousness. All her movements are autonomic, as far as I can tell. Her parents want her to remain on life support and get therapy, in the hopes, I presume, that she’ll recover and return to being the daughter they love and remember.

As I watch my mother, I’m seeing something similar. My mother lives in a world of restricted consciousness. Sometimes, she seems like a clumsy imitation of the woman who once inhabited her body, and other times she seems almost the same. I believe I’m watching a human being who will never again function at the level of consciousness she once enjoyed. I don’t want to pull her breathing tubes and shut down her life support, but I’m being shown the truth about the mind and the body. They are both transient.

The young woman in Florida is gone from consciousness. Her body functions poorly on its own, and her mind functions like a one cell battery in a 747. Yet, her parents see the distorted but familiar shape of her face, and they fantasize her presence.

Debility drains us all of personality, and we mistake personality for essence. We want to believe the family dog is smiling at us.

Am I being heartless and crass, unfeeling and uncaring? I’m sure I am, in the eyes of those who believe Heaven will be a family reunion of charming and loving personalities.

I’ve felt and acted like a friend and companion to my mother, and she has stared back at me, uncomprehending. My mother is slipping out of her life, and it’s painful to watch. When she says something that’s familiar in style and tone, it’s not a sign that she’s present, but that the machinery of
her mind is still functioning, the wheels are turning, the synapses are jumping, if only a little.

I suspect that long-time health care workers are familiar with this inevitability, and some family members accuse them of not being good to Uncle Joe. Uncle Joe is not present to complain, but we still want to believe he’s about to become his old self.

We want to believe, for our own sake, because we don’t want to believe that our lives are so easily dissembled. Our lives can vanish before us, even as we continue to inhabit a shell of our worldly self.

The electric heart of our being is not personal, and the incredible luck to be able to witness its presence in the spirit in our lives ought to be the center of our recognition, but we turn away from the sun and hold our thoughts on dying flowers.

My mother has been a magnificent flowering, and the essence of her beauty is without beginning and without end. Her petals are falling, and my fingers can’t reunite them. We can let our own petals fall as they may, if we think of the blinding light that gave them their color.
A Rough Day

Today was rough. I got up an hour before usual and found Mother in the kitchen with the front door open. I closed it and saw that she was holding her pill containers and ignoring the pill tray I had set out for her. She was so afraid of falling that she went straight for the synthroid and skipped the rest.

The skin on her face was peeling. I helped her apply the last few squeezes of dermatitis medicine to her face and arms. The itching had come back and kept her up for part of the night.

“I’m allergic to the lotion I’ve been using,” she said.

I didn’t say anything to contradict her. I gave her the rest of her meds and went to take a shower. When I got back, she’d eaten breakfast. I sat down with her and ate my own breakfast.

“Do you want to move into the living room?” I said.

She got up out of her chair and started to waver. She sat back down and asked me if she’d taken her pills.

“I wanted to take my pills so I wouldn’t fall again.”

“They don’t work like that,” I said, knowing I was wasting my breath. “They have a cumulative effect.”

“They worked when I first took them, and they worked all along, and now they don’t work.”

“But they didn’t work, at first, because they need to get in your system. Then they worked for a long time. I don’t know why they don’t work now.”

I decided to let her carry her notion out to its conclusion. I don’t believe her fear of falling is affected by her synthroid medication, but she’s fixated on them, just as she was on Meclazine.

“Try it again,” I said. She stood up and sat right back down again.

“The thyroid pills aren’t working.”

“Why don’t you call the doctor and ask him about it? Maybe you need to go in and get tested.”

“What good would that do?”

“To find out what the problem is. You should call your doctor.”

“Dr. Ade? He doesn’t think they work.”

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“He said that? He said they don’t work?”
“He said he didn’t know.”
“He’s not a thyroid specialist, but you should call him. He’s a doctor, and that’s what doctors are for. You call him and say, ‘My medicine was working, and now it’s not working. What should I do?’”
“He won’t do anything,” she said.
“So you don’t call the doctor and you do nothing about it, but sit here with no answer, guessing what’s wrong. I’m not a doctor. I don’t have the answer.”
“You don’t have to be sarcastic about it.”
“I’m being sarcastic, because you won’t do what needs to be done.”
I stood still for a minute.
“Well, you’ll do what you want, anyway, so it’s up to you,” I said, and I left the room.
She got up and came into the living room. An hour later, she was on the phone calling Dr. Ade and Dr. Sanguino, the guy who discovered the thyroid problem. She told Dr. Sanguino’s nurse he had prescribed the synthroid a year ago.
“It was three and a half months, ago,” I said, “in June.”
“She wants to know if I saw Dr. Sanguino in the hospital. It wasn’t in the hospital.”
“You were in Trinity. You were going to tell him how fat he was, the next time he came in your room.”
“I wasn’t in the hospital.”
I called the skin doctor, Dr. Weinar, and got refills sent to the drugstore. Before I came here, I picked up the meds. I’m feeling a little frazzled by this latest development. She’s stubborn and wrong, as much as she’s stubborn and right. I decided to bring in the experts. I’m going to go look for a book on caring for an elderly parent.
A Friendly Cup of Coffee

I went to the library close to the house and asked about books on caring for an elderly parent. A woman I thought was attractive, two years ago, helped me find a book. We hit it off. At first, she asked me about the weather.

“Is it nice outside?”
“It’s sunny and bright. It’s cool in the shade and warm in the sun. And the sun is bright.”
She smiled.
“My son is bright,” I said, “and so is my daughter.”
She laughed softly. I knew her name was Bonnie, but she wasn’t wearing a nametag.
“And your name is?”
“Bonnie.”
“Hi, Bonnie, I’m Steve.”
“Thanks,” she said, and it struck me as a delightfully odd response.
“I put a book on hold. Can you check it?”
She went to the computer.
“You’re second on the list. It looks good,” she said.
“I’m looking forward to reading it.”
“I think my son is reading it, right now,” she said and smiled.
“Oh, yeah? Well, thanks.”
“Thank you,” she said.
I smiled and left the library. As I was crossing the parking lot, I thought about going back and asking her if her kids were as old as mine. I didn’t.

Bonnie has always intrigued me. She’s short, not a whole lot younger than I am, with long gray hair with a few natural streaks at the forehead. She’s plump, if you see it that way, or voluptuous, if you see it that way, like a warm, sensual icon. My kind of woman. She has a likable face, and, since we finally spoke, I see now that she has an easy manner and good teeth. I like her.
I don’t know what to do about it, other than do nothing, but my tongue loosened up, today, as it has not done the dozen other times I’ve been in that library.

Back in the stacks, we fumbled playfully with the various titles. I pulled out a large tome about caring for elderly relatives. It looked good. I expect it to be useful. I could have gotten such a book a long time ago, but Mother’s situation seemed entirely manageable, until recently.

When I got home, this afternoon, she had arranged for a blood test at the doctor’s, tomorrow morning. I gave her the skin medicine and she put some on, right away.  

Who knows what will happen? I’ve got two more months to wander around Bonnie. I didn’t say anything to her two years ago, because I knew I was leaving town. I’m still leaving town, but I could enjoy a friendly cup of coffee, couldn’t I?
On a Day Like This

What a day. When I got up, early, Mother’s door was closed, and I heard the shower. Half an hour later, she emerged with a tale of woe. She’d fallen, when she first got out of bed, even before she’d taken the pills I put in a small dish with a printed sign on it, Take these pills in the morning. She managed to get herself up and dressed.

She sat in her chair for a long time, before saying it was time to go to the doctor, but she didn’t get up. Instead, she went to sleep. I left her alone. After a while, she woke and said it was time to go. She got up very slowly and moved slowly to the door. At the front stairs, I stayed especially close. We made it to the car, to the doctor’s office, and into the lab for her blood test.

When her name was called, she seemed asleep, almost as if drugged. She’d been dragging her left leg, and when the nurse came out to help her, she couldn’t move it. We decided to get her into a wheel chair and take her into the doctor’s side of the clinic where she could be evaluated, to decide whether or not she should go straight to the hospital.

The doctor thought she was showing signs of a stroke, but she kept repeating the need for a new prescription for synthroid. Eventually, we arranged for a CAT scan. She had blood drained, and then we went to the diagnostic center, where we waited some more. Finally, she went in for a brain scan in one of those space age, rotating, head-camera, hollow, giant donuts.

After that, we went back to the waiting room and waited for the results to be sent to her doctor. He called with his analysis. Nothing major had occurred, maybe a mild stroke, nothing to do with synthroid. After I talked to the doctor, she asked him about synthroid, and he told her, as he told me, it probably had more to do with her age, her flu, and a mild stroke. She seemed to understand the idea of a stroke.

The doctor asked me, and then he asked her, if she wanted to go to the hospital and, possibly, to a nursing home. I said she wouldn’t want that. She said she didn’t want that. After three hours of waiting, testing, and waiting, I drove her home, stopping at Subway for a ham and provolone sandwich with a root beer, for her.
Because of the blood test and the CAT scan, she hadn’t eaten anything all day, and it was 2PM. She ate the sandwich. I emphasized that this was new and different, unrelated to synthroid. I said it was more likely due to age, illness, and a mild stroke. She seemed to get it.

I stopped at the Village Inn, for a French Silk chocolate pie. “On a day like this,” I said, “You need a treat.” So did I.

As she got her strength back, she became more and more coherent. “You want to solve the problem. Maybe you’ll get better, and maybe you won’t. If you don’t, then we’ll deal with that, but right now, there’s no simple answer.”

She stopped asking about the synthroid. The blood tests won’t be back for a day or two. She said the ham sandwich was good. She made it up the steps, at home, not one foot on the step and then the other up to the same step, but one foot per step. By comparison, it seemed like she was bounding up the steps.

“I don’t want to go to a nursing home. Home is better. You can eat what you want. And watch TV. I couldn’t do it without you,” she said.

I felt good about today. I made choices and decisions. I moved my mother through the day with calm assurance. I took charge of the day, talking to the doctors and nurses, talking to my mother, orchestrating what I could. My experience here is paying dividends, in the way I care for my mother, and in the way I am myself.
Pieces

Mother became clear when she needed to describe her situation, or when she’s doing what needs to be done. She lives in a direct world of functional realities and behavior. She’s not introspective. It’s not going to happen. It never was going to happen. She’s a three dimensional person in a four dimensional reality. Her condition reduces her to two dimensions, even one, but she’s good at less than four.

Most people live the same way she lives. She’s a woman who showed great presence in her life, but hers was the presence of personality.

The other day, something occurred in my consciousness that she wouldn’t understand, because it’s not in her perception to see it. If I told her about it, she would respond to the limits of her understanding and no further. A person who is not introspective will respond as someone who is not introspective. I looked at the people around me, and I saw them as instances of God, if you will, or as the single reality of Being Itself.

These words are already too much language for a simple seeing. I saw half a dozen people, and I didn’t think, “These are instances of a single being,” but I saw that reality. It was a thrilling moment, quiet and still, and each person seemed not less and not more than they are as individual beings. I saw the whole, in which the parts were clear and not separate.

This is occurring as my time with my mother gets more complicated, less easy, more demanding, less restful. Awareness doesn’t care who I am or where I am. It occurs, regardless of circumstances.

I also saw three more deer, today. On two other occasions, riding my bike, I saw deer, after the first time in the cemetery in Rock Island. A pair of deer were young and plump. It struck me as unusual to see fat deer.

I’ve also noticed that every month I’ve been here, someone has died in a motorcycle accident, while not wearing a helmet. Ah, freedom.
Coffee with the Buddha

And today, my mother seemed back from the brink. She gets worse, she goes to the doctor, and she gets better.

I used to go see a doctor at the UCMed Center in San Francisco, just up the hill from my apartment. One day, I said to him, “Doc, every time I come here, while I’m walking up the hill, my symptoms go away. So, let’s do something different. I’ll make an appointment, I’ll come to see you, I’ll say ‘Hi, Doc,’” and I’ll turn around and go home.” He was not amused, but I was onto something.

Psychosomatic symptoms are symptoms of something other than what they seem. My mother is not introspective. She’s literal and physical, not emotionally expressive, and she’s old. I don’t believe there’s nothing to her problems, but I also believe that mind and body are interrelated.

She limped out of the house, yesterday, and practically ran back in. This morning, she seems much better.

An old friend called her, this morning, and she talked coherently and cogently, for twenty minutes, about all kinds of things, with only a few memory lapses and no discernible weakness.

Joyce Kunkel and her husband, Larry, are retired university professors who travel the world. They’re the same now, as they were, in Nebraska, when I was a kid. Mother kept saying how wonderful it was that they were still so healthy. For herself, she admitted to macular degeneration and little else.

At breakfast, she repeated headlines from the newspaper, and I made brief secondary comments. I felt bad that I didn’t feed her verbal volleys, so she could practice a little thinking and talking.

I read the book from the library, and it had a few things to say I could use. Hypothyroidism could be responsible for some of Mother’s symptoms, if her synthroid isn’t working. I read, also, that 80-90% of the elderly are cared for at home by relatives. Most of them are sent to care facilities because of caregiver burn-out, rather than worsening physical conditions. Only 25% of caregivers are male.
The Bible says that not caring for one’s relatives is lower than being a non-believer. The book was produced by a Christian company, and it was interesting to read quotations from the Bible along with the text.

The Marlins won game five of the World Series, and now lead the vaunted Yankees 3-2.

What’s missing in my life, or at risk of being missing, is not my spiritual awareness or my relative wellbeing, but my art. Art is the experience of art, and this writing is as close as I’ve come to it, in the last three and a half months, except for one painting and half a dozen drawings. No poems.

In the book I cited, one caregiver said she needed to get away from her parent and do nothing that referred to that parent. This writing I do is in reference to my mother. I do almost nothing that’s unrelated to this situation. Watching TV, going on the Internet, doing the crossword puzzle, doesn’t count, because my mind is always tuned to her presence, however slight that may seem. Everything I do at home is in the psychological presence of my mother.

I go to Goodwill and wander up and down the aisles, looking for a shirt or a pair of pants. I don’t need any shirts or pants. I need to wander. It works, even if its only for fifteen minutes.

I’m thinking about coffee with Bonnie - or the Buddha.
The Allegiance to Form

When I got home, this afternoon, she had put a roast in the oven. It was the roast we bought, two weeks ago, just before she went to the hospital. I didn’t look at the setting on the stove. I should have. It was set at 475, instead of 325. It worked out, because that size roast takes a long time to cook. I added potatoes, onions, and carrots. I made a salad, and when the vegetables were done, I made gravy from the pan. That was cool. She showed me how.

It was the kind of meal I used to love. Now, I would have preferred rice and fish. It was fine, but I noticed how un-delighted I was. I’ve lost a few pounds, lately, by eating smaller portions. That frees me up to eat things I enjoy, in between meals. And it works.

Have you noticed how mundane this discussion is? I need to read about Monet.

“How would a poet paint flowers?” I thought, as I looked at prints of Monet’s irises and water lilies. I turned the page and read this by Stephane Mallarme, who once said that poetry was the language of crisis. There are many kinds of crises, even the crisis of the moment.

. . . Say, my dream, what shall I do? With a look to embrace the chaste absence of this vast solitude and, as one plucks an enchantingly closed water lily to remind one of a place, one of the water lilies that are suddenly there and whose deep whiteness includes the nothingness of an untouched dream, a happiness that will never be, only to go on, holding one’s breath in awe of the apparition: to row on, very slowly, in silence, not breaking the spell by dipping the oars, nor with the sound of splashing washing the shimmering semblance of my theft of an ideal flower, visible in the rising bubbles as I flee, before footfalls approaching unexpectedly . . .

Le Nenuphar Blanc
The abstraction of Monet’s watercolors precedes Rothko and Pollock, but his recognizable subject softens the threat that pure sense imposes.

The hardest trick for any artist is to overcome the allegiance to form, as it is for all of us in this life. Even if the greatness of an art is not in its familiar form, something must remain of the familiar shape for people to feel safe within it.

No one wants to look into the face of God, but a picture of God that looks like a man is revered. The distance is maintained. Man remains in power of his god.
I drove Mother to Carole’s. When I came back to pick her up, she was trying to move from the drier, across the salon, to be combed out and styled. She started to shake, and the ladies got her back sitting down. As I came in the door, she looked at me, sadly perplexed, and said she needed a Meclazine.

“A placebo,” I said to Carole.
As we got the water, I said, “Even if these pills worked, it would take twenty minutes. She believes they work, so I give them to her.”
She finished, and we walked out to the car. She wanted to go to Arby’s for the ‘au jus’ sandwich they’re currently advertising on TV. We went there, and it became a model for our lunchtime outings. We liked the food, and we enjoyed the conversation. We got on the subject of singing, and I said I couldn’t carry a tune, even though I think I can. Mark can’t either, even though he’s an accomplished musician.

“Did Dad sing?” I said, “I don’t remember him singing.”
“No, he never sang.”
“Did he ever say why he didn’t sing?”
“No. Dorothy (his sister) sang in church. She belted it out. I sang in the chorus. One year, we went to State, two girls and two boys. Marcille Lydick and I were chosen. She was a soprano. I was an alto. She had a beautiful voice. I didn’t, but I had a true voice. It was a great honor. We went down to Champagne and sang in the State Chorus, with kids from all over the state. Marcille’s father drove us down. We stayed in some people’s house. They asked people to donate housing. It was a great honor.”
“It must have been fun.”
“It was a real thrill,” she said, “I forgot all about that.”
“You got to meet kids from all over the state.”
“Yeah, some boy fell for Marcille. She was real cute. I wasn’t, but we got along real well.”
“Did you ever see her, again?”
“What? You mean, after high school? No.”
“Who were the boys who went to State?”
“I don’t remember. Marcille’s father drove us. It was a real honor to be chosen.”

We had one French Dip sandwich that I cut in two, a baked potato, with ‘senior’ cokes, i.e., no charge. She asked me a half dozen times if her sandwich was only half of it.

“Can you imagine if you had to eat a whole sandwich?” she said in awe of the size of it. “There’s a lot of meat on this sandwich.”

We talked about her taking piano lessons.

“I don’t know how my parents could afford it.”

“And Harry played the piano, too,” I said. “Did anyone else play?”

‘No, just Harry.”

“And he was a music major in college,” I said.

“It was a thrill to sing in the State Chorus. I don’t think they do that anymore.”

“Cheryl Venckus sang in the chorus,” I said, “but I don’t think they went to State.”

The loud muzak and the guys smoking at a nearby table didn’t detract from the mood. She said she wanted to go to Whitey’s and split a sundae. On the way out, we passed the two smokers, and one of them had his legs sprawled out in the aisle, crossed at the ankles.

“Kick them out of the way,” I said to Mother and smiled at the guys. The one with his legs out pulled them back, and both of them smiled.

As we were leaving, she said, “Didn’t he say I had a mini-stroke? Well, that’s what caused the problem.”

She took my arm as we walked slowly, but easily.

A man held the door for her.

“Thank you, sir,” I said.

“You’re welcome,” he said.

Sitting in Arby’s, I noticed the flat gray landscape. It’s the light. Not Parisian, not Moroccan, not Tahitian, it’s a dull light, and everything seems washed out, like it is in the movie About Schmidt.

At Whitey’s, she wanted a ‘Special Sundae.’ She opted for the Tin Roof. I asked the girl behind the counter what made the Special Sundae ‘special.’ She thought for a moment and said, “I don’t know.”
I told my son on the phone, this morning, “If you’re lucky, at some point in your life, you’ll get to live with your mother, long enough to see yourself. It’s not always pleasant, but it’s good.”

He told me he and his sister were trying to get their mother to move to Seattle.

“I haven’t lived this long with my mother since I was eighteen,” I said, “but you know your mother a lot better than I did mine.”

When we got back to the house, with slow ease and no mishaps, I said I was going out for a while.

“I don’t blame you,” she said, “I’d want to get rid of me, too.”

I laughed.

“I go out to write,” I said. “I do it, every day. It’s the same thing I do when I live alone. I’ve always done it. Don’t blame yourself.”

I knew I was going out, I knew I needed to be alone, but I wasn’t in a panic to leave. I was doing what was good and what works.

Oh, and by the way, while Mother was having her hair done, I went to the library to see Bonnie, but she wasn’t working. I noticed how happy I was to go looking for her. It was a good feeling to be so otherwise intent.
Dark Ages

Recently, I came across a poet in The New Yorker who writes in a way I like. I went looking for his book in Borders. It’s rare, these days, when I find someone I like. It was gratifying. It restored my faith in my judgment. I was beginning to think I was the dark one in this Dark Ages of Art. It’s odd. There’s an over-abundance of work available in all the arts, but I don’t feel the joy of it. Maybe that feeling is communal, the way it was in the late Forties and the early Seventies.

My son sent me access to his new blog, an interactive home page. I’m familiar with his extensive web page. What I noticed was his brilliant language and imagery. Except for the web stuff, he’s almost non-productive as a painter and writer. I think he’s lost interest in the world of art and literature. I think he doesn’t believe in the old ways of communal exchange. Neither do I, but I’ve been through a time when I did believe in it. I don’t think he’s done that in his own life. I don’t believe in the Internet as a path for art. Without being in the physical presence of any work of art, it’s like kissing a picture of yourself. I probably feel the same way about the printed word, Mr. Gutenberg.

I was just rereading the last chapter, and I thought, “This must be terminally uninteresting to anyone else.” Actually, I didn’t think that, until I tried to put it into words. I didn’t think anything; I only reacted as a reader who wasn’t interested.

I need to write this book, all the way to the end. Without this writing, I would be wandering in the back allies of frustration. I used to drink to fill the low landscape. If I were a different sort, I could pray all day long. But, writing is a way for me to be in the world and stay artfully grounded.
Lost and Found

I got up early and went looking for the Sunday soccer game. I found the gym, but there was no one there. I bought a pumpkin pie and went home. They weren’t selling pies at the gym. I went to the Village Inn for the pie. At some point, this morning, I became irritable.

Scott called. Mother was speaking in a loud voice in the phone. I told her not to shout. Scott said it was OK on his end. He said Mark has been emailing him. Yesterday, I wrote Mark and asked him where he was. It seemed that every time I praised his writing, he stopped writing. This time, he switched over to Scott. Why does this matter?

I suspect I’m being sucked inexorably into the family dynamic vortex. It means having one’s life entangled with the lives of others, on a level of interaction that may not be trivial but isn’t profound. It’s simply entanglement.

Art has not been my escape but my fertile opening. ‘Fertile opening’ sounds like ‘vagina.’ Escape is like having sex. Making art is like making love. Escape is addictive. Like all addictions, its reward is temporary, followed by a feeling of loss, followed by a need for more addictive behavior. Making art is satisfying. It doesn’t demand more of itself, but more of itself occurs.

My energy has come back. This morning, I was ready to explode. I was energized. I wanted to play soccer.

I saw a newspaper photo of a painting that I liked. It was by a man who’s having a show at Blackhawk College. He’s speaking and showing his art, Tuesday morning. It was the man I spoke to in his art supply store, a couple of weeks ago. I want to go to his show and tell.

I’m not feeling any resolve I feel restless. It could be good. It’s energy looking for its own direction.

There’s a young woman, a girl, setting her watch and listening, next to a table of three young woman; girls, who are talking like friends. The watch girl has a physical disability that’s not apparent most of the time. I’ve seen her often in this cafe. She’s not unattractive. She reminds me of my ex-wife at her age.
She’s spending way too much time adjusting her watch. She glances, hopefully, hopelessly, toward the girls next to her, not at them, but across their table.

I suspect she’s bright, and they’re not as bright, but she would love to be one in their company. It will not happen. She knows that. Her desire to be a part of such a circle of common caring will pass, as it has many times before, but it will not go away.

She’s become intent on a private thought. It’s a shallow thought she can’t bask in. She may be conversing, in absentia, with the near table.

I wonder if I’m describing myself, but, as I do, I realize I’ve found my art, and I’m not angry anymore.

I found my art by looking at the fertile opening, the space in time, between my awareness and my consciousness. One might say that I got out of myself by focusing on someone else, but that’s only the form of it. The heart of it was the presence of being that belongs to no one and everyone, all at once, in every timeless moment.

It is the disentanglement.
Settling in for the Winter

I was just settling in, at home, when I came out. I don’t have the same sense of fertile opening as I did a few hours ago. I slipped back into caring for my mother, fixing dinner, watching 60 Minutes and Dateline NBC, commenting on the Elizabeth Smart story.

I ought to be able to focus on my mother with the same freedom I felt writing about the watch girl. But the watch girl and I have no relationship. My mother, in her minimalist Swede way, demands my engagement, my entanglement. My mind demands it.

She’s gone back to Meclazine and hoping for an increased dosage of synthroid. I understand her single-minded determination to make herself better by fixing the problem. I can even admire it, but it wears on me.

When I don’t get enough sleep, exercise, or artful disengagement, I’m at a loss. I can be at a gain in a moment’s opening, but the cumulative effect of this situation has its price.

I wonder how much of this struggle is due to my character, or if this is typical of anyone in my situation. My guess is, both are true.

Today was cold, is cold, maybe down to freezing, tonight. I slept with the windows open, last night, and I was not warm enough for comfort. I had great dreams, however, fantastic dreams, more fun than a good movie.

I want to draw my mother’s face, up close. I have enough of the larger poses to work on. Let’s see what the Winter brings.

Marlins won the World Series. I love the underdogs, generally speaking, except when I lived in San Francisco, during the reign of the Joe Montana 49ers. I’ve been missing my adult hometown, lately. Mark is in SF, doing the things, wandering the city, that I would do if I were there. It feels good to feel those feelings, even if they are triggered by his emails.
The Empty Hours

“You haven’t done any painting, lately,” she said.
I felt chastised.
“This bread is dry,” she said.
I felt chastened.
“No blame,” she said, “it’s just the way it is.”
“You hair looks pretty,” she said.
“That’s not what a man wants to hear,” I said.
I poked around the house, did laundry, typed a little, slept a little, worked a crossword puzzle, called the doctor, got the mail, made lunch for Mother, made her bed, reinvented the wheel, decided to go with the same design, round works well.
I’m planning to go see Bonnie, but my energy is low. I’m waiting to recharge. Yesterday, my energy was high, and today, it dropped.
Am I Manic-Depressive, Panic-Persuasive, Colonic-Implosive, Demonic-Derisive, Ironic-Impressive, Catatonic-Corrosive, Chronic-Dismissive, Teutonic-Repressive?
Mother got a letter from her friend Ruth in Tampa. She says the facility she’s in is not to her liking. Her husband died, recently, in the same nursing home, and she misses him.
“Just like you, Gladys, but we have wonderful memories.”
I wonder about the solace of memories. If you don’t have your family, career, friends, etc., at least you have your health. If you don’t have your health, at least you have your memories?
People seem to be saying that a life well-lived is enough to fulfill them in death. Maybe not in death, but in the waiting room for death. The mind is a storehouse to draw from, for the last empty hours of life. Apparently.
When I think about it long enough to recognize it, I long for the presence of another human being with whom conversation is the equivalent of this writing. Pure poetry occurs in the space between two panes of glass, neither window nor mirror. This prose alternates between window and mirror.
I’ve never met anyone, as a lover, who could speak toward disentanglement, as a matter of course. Almost all conversation grinds down to a bare transference of information, with something added for color and texture.

The levels of art are transference, transcendency, and transformation. The same qualities apply to all interactions. Most interaction is barely transference, i.e., the exchange of information, slightly altered by the presence of personality.

People have soul, character, personality, or a job. Most conversation hovers at the level of job and personality. Almost none of it rises to character.

Soul is an absent given, rarely encountered in the flesh. Soul is the domain of transformation, and character rises to transcendence.

This is a good lecture to give myself as I approach Bonnie, and prepare to let nature take its course.
Monsoon Lines

It couldn’t have gone better. But, before I tell that story, I want to amend something I said about never having a lover who spoke toward disentanglement. I have had such a lover. The woman I went to India with, Suryo, was such a woman. It was a quiet joy to have that experience with her.

By the time I got to the library, I trusted that whatever works, works on its own. I approached Bonnie, standing with two other librarians, two women who seemed to recede from the center, without being ignored. I asked about the book I placed on hold, the one her son was reading, the last time we spoke.

“Has your son finished that book, yet?” I said.
“Yes, he has,” she said and checked the computer.
“You’re second on the list.”
I took out my own book of poems and showed it to her.
“Do you have this on your shelves? I wonder if I showed it to you, when I was here, two years ago. Do you take books by local authors?”
One of the women said she’d seen it, and it turned up on the computer.
“Then, this one is for you,” I said.
She took the book and thanked me. She asked me what I wrote. I think she asked me if I wrote poetry, holding my book of poems, but she may have implied other things.
“Poetry is the base of what I write, but I write a lot of things.”
We looked at each other with tentative, expectant, gentle, fearless eyes. I say we both did. I believe that’s true.
“If you read only one of these poems, I’ll buy you a cup of coffee.”
We began to talk. She moved out from behind the counter, moved to the end of the counter. I followed her, until we were relatively alone.
“Your son must be younger than mine,” I said.
“He’s 37, next month.”
“My son will be 37, next month. They’re the same age. When’s your son’s birthday?”
“On the 24th,” I think she said.
“Mine’s on the 6th,” I said. “My son is older than yours. Do you have other kids?”

“Another son. He’s 34.”

“I have a daughter. She’s 33. They live in Seattle. I live there, too, but I’m here, looking after my mother, for a while.”


“Your husband?” I said, pointing to her ringless fingers.

“No husband. I’ve been divorced for twenty years.”

“It’s been since . . .” I said, “thirty years for me.”

“Really,” she said, surprised by the long time for both of us.

We talked about the rental movie section. I asked about Y Tu Mama Tambien, spelled it, and she looked it up on the computer. I noticed that she didn’t know about the movie, didn’t recognize the language. It should have bothered my critical self, but it didn’t.

“The Moline downtown branch had it, but not right now,” I said.

“We don’t have it,” she said. “We don’t have a foreign section.”

“Someone told me they were mixed in with the other movies, when I came in, last time.”

I went to the stacks and picked out two movies, Monsoon Wedding and Behind Enemy Lines.

“Curious imagery,” I thought.

As I stood in the movie section, I looked over at her and caught her looking at me. I looked away, as she looked away. My male ego had scanned her, physically, when we talked. She had what I have called a softly ruined face, aging, but not less beautiful for it. As short as she was, I saw her low raised-heel shoes. I saw her breasts more revealed than any other time I’d seen her. I saw her wide hips and abundant girth below the waist, which was narrow by comparison. I could say she was heavy, but I’d have to see her naked to judge it. She had an iconic body; voluptuousness I am very comfortably aroused by.

I took the movies to the counter as she was talking to a woman she must have known outside the library. The woman seemed to fall away. I wasn’t pushy, and Bonnie wasn’t dismissive, but the woman seemed to recognize something, and backed away.

“I’d like to hear what you think of the poems.”

She seemed to agree. I don’t recall her answer.
Bonnie, in my judgment, is not a talkative person, but at ease talking. She maneuvered me, as I did her, as we did together, without will or effort, without a lot of conversation. As I left the library, the encounter felt perfectly fulfilled, all by itself.

There is a will of its own that betrays the artifice of human will. When something true occurs, it occurs without objection or obstruction. If this sounds less than romantic, it is the origin of romance. It is transcendence that dwarfs the romance of willful personality. The ego can hardly find a seat at the naturally unfolding drama of life.

From within it, I saw my smile. I witnessed the pooling heart warm the widening reach of its radiating peace. In other words, poetic thought aside, I felt good all over.
Bonnie Times Three

I didn’t tell Mother about Bonnie. I thought about it, but I didn’t. We had a nice evening. She seems much better. The doctor called, yesterday, and said her synthroid dosage was correct. She seemed to accept it.

I was restless, last night, losing an hour’s sleep, in anticipation of this morning, and in reaction to meeting Bonnie, and then I got up early, but I had wonderful, wild dreams.

This morning, I went to see and hear Bruce Carter at Blackhawk College. The talk was terrific. He revealed himself to have similar habits and sensibilities about art and life. We have the same taste in materials and methods.

A woman sat next to me and greeted me with easy friendliness, like like-minded people in a common environment. She said her name was Bonnie. I liked her style of dress, her manner, and her looks. I wondered about the other Bonnie, who didn’t come to an art talk, whose style hasn’t impress me. I began to doubt myself, as the mind does.

On Saturday, Carole said she ran into Bonnie Seesland’s parents, and I asked her to get Bonnie’s address, the next time she saw them. Bonnie was a buddy of mine in high school. That’s three Bonnies in the last four days.

I thought Bruce and I might fall into a fast friendship after his reading. We smiled like compatriots. He touched my arm with complicity. He said he read and liked my poems. I said his paintings reminded me of my own.

He said he avoided melancholy in one painting, working on it until it carried a positive feeling. I feel the same inclination, to be uplifting in my art, but I carry an equal willingness to betray the darker side of my human character. Let the light master the dark by its own power.

If a painting reveals less than illumination, let that be, too. It’s been my salvation, coming out of my own darkness, into the experience of awakening, to love and forgive my flawed self.

I’ve fallen in love with purity and absolution, saintliness, only to be reminded of my crosscurrent reality, my yin yang reality, time and again, to the greater clarity of my vision. I’m happy to be living this messy,
troublesome, difficult, strange and beautiful life as a human being. In my humanity, I don’t lose wonder and vision, but I gain a ground for wonder and vision to occur.

I’m not so in love with heaven that I fear hell, and I’m not so caught by hell that I don’t love heaven.

Bruce had a recent landscape he said was the first with a human figure in it. The figure was murky and out of place, on a road from the near distance to the foreground. I suspect trouble ahead for Bruce. His painted nature is unspoiled by any human presence. Some students suggested a boatman in one painting he was doing for them, and he complied with a smudge on the water.

I’m surprised to hear myself saying this. He said something that’s true for me, too. He speaks to find out what he’s thinking. I should try the same with Bonnie.

Here goes. I think Bonnie is a lovely woman, a goodhearted woman, a woman who has lived alone, without enough love, without self-pity, for a long time. Oops, I thought I was going to say something revealing and negative, but the words came out the way they did.

I’m going to go see if she’d like to go out to dinner.
Crabby and Bossy

She wasn’t there. I was glad. I was too tired.
I went to the store for Instant Mashed Potatoes and Krispy-Kreme donuts and then to Kentucky Fried Chicken, all on Mother’s request.
I called Reuben to say how happy I was he was never intimidated by me, nor me by him. I suspect others are put off by me. Bonnie wasn’t.
I’m focused on her. Am I entangled? Not yet. Am I obsessed? No. I want to find out what’s what. I imagine the physical company of a woman; her body, her face, her not yet known character, her otherness.
Mother was crabby and bossy. She must be feeling better, but she said her tailbone is sore. She complained about the mashed potatoes and the spices on the chicken.
I called the phone company to get her a cheaper plan. The operator said I needed Mother’s permission to make changes in her billing. I put her on the phone, and she handled the questions with abrupt aplomb.
Later, a phone solicitor called, and she answered, in a strong, demanding voice, “What do you want?”
She listened to the answer and hung up, without further ado. I love that quality in my mother.
On Dr. Phil, there were mothers who were working themselves to death, raising their kids, and not knowing how to handle it.
“I never got worn out raising you kids,” Mother said.
She was right. I don’t remember her ever complaining, or getting tired, or wishing for a different life.
Good Bread

It seems harder to write, as I turn my attention elsewhere. I don’t want to hang out in this writing, but that would be a mistake. It’s better for me, no matter what else I do, if I open this fertility. Knowing my own fertility, I don’t expect it from someone else. I bring my own fertility to any meeting, instead of showing up in need of it.

Mother made her own breakfast, including the coffee. She read the newspaper and commented snippily at various articles.

Her short-term memory loss became oddly acute. She asked me if we had any bread, after already asked me that. I said we did.

Then she said, “Is there any bread?”

I said there was.

“I’d like a piece,” she said.

I put the bread I kept in the freezer in the toaster oven. We eat so little bread, it was getting stale and moldy, sitting out. I’d already shown her the bread in the freezer.

“Do we have any bread?” she said.

“Yes, I’m getting it,” I said.

“Is there any good bread?”

“Yes.”

“I’d like some bread.”

I gave her two slices.

“I only want one,” she said.

Bruce Carter asked me how it was going with my mother. I said it was going well.

“Are you doing any work?” he asked, referring to artwork.

“Not much painting, but I write, every day. I did a painting of my mother’s chair, and she loved it. After thirty years of saying, ‘How horrible!’ she liked it.”

“That’s powerful.”

“I think it is.”

“This period will change your art.”

“I suspect it already has.”
One of the things he said, during his talk, was that he’d seen his life in spirals. For example, in high school he was a freshman and later, a senior. Then in college, he was a freshman and later, a senior. In life, he felt like a freshman, and now, at 55, he feels like a junior.

As he said that, I felt like a senior, perhaps a man in his senior year. I told Reuben he’d seen me doubting myself as an artist, and now I don’t carry that doubt. I think this time with my mother is erasing the vestiges of that doubt.

The doubt I had in my awareness as a spiritual being evaporated, a dozen years ago. The doubt in myself as a human being has lingered. One of the things I’ve been feeling this last four months is the sense of how other people have broken off contact with me or not maintained contact with me, over the years.

I’m feeling a sense of acceptance about it and not a hope to change it. To accept oneself in this life doesn’t mean accepting only the positive or only the negative but accepting both. My character and personality don’t conflict with everyone else, and they don’t agree with everyone else.

I see this occurring, not as something to be dealt with, but as the way one becomes a Senior. There’s no struggle in acceptance. Acceptance doesn’t change the potential for conflict or agreement, but it resolves doubt in the mind.

When I’m with my mother, the thought occurs that I could, maybe should, court her happiness, but I don’t. Yet, it often surprises me to hear how kind my voice sounds, when I haven’t spoken to her for a while.

Her tailbone hurts, and she can’t remember what might have caused it. I can’t either. She didn’t injure it exercising, the other morning, but she hasn’t done any exercising since.

She put the walker aside. “This thing isn’t helping me,” she said and started walking without it.
With Sting on Oprah

By the time I got to the library, I didn’t know what I was going to say or do. As I was walking up the ramp, I smiled, because I knew the person I was approaching already liked me, and whatever was about to happen would be something easy between us.

When I saw her, I was put at ease. I turned toward the magazine racks and found an Architectural Digest, an old favorite of mine, because it shows art work in homes rather than museums. I thumbed through it, as I sat at the end of a long table.

A woman stood at the copier, nearby. She was having a problem. She thought maybe she was using it upside down. I told her which way to do it.

“Do you think it won’t print checks?” she said.

I smiled. She realized she was using the wrong side of the copier.

“Damn you,” she swore at the machine, in a friendly, self-mocking way.

I glanced at Bonnie, wearing black, her hair whiter than I recalled. I liked her face again. I found an Art News and read that. I didn’t make a conscious decision to sit down where I was. The turn toward the magazines had simply occurred. I was deep into thought-free thinking. I looked up at Bonnie, again, and she was waving and smiling. She came around the counter and across the library.

“I read your poems, and I love them.”

I stood and then sat back down. As short as she was, she was then above me. She told me the story. She was home, yesterday, her day off, reading my poems and watching Oprah. She raised her eyebrows, as if to say, “Isn’t that what you do on a day off?” She said that Oprah’s guest was Sting, the singer, who’d written a book.

“Oprah had him read some of it, and she said it sounded like song lyrics.”

She tried to explain the confluence of images. She was reading my poems, he was reading his lyrical prose.

“It was . . . it was all . . . it fit together.”
It was perfectly natural, or naturally perfect, I want to say, as I write this. I was thinking thought-free, and so was she. I was nervous and nerveless. And happy.

She looked happy. Later, I could bask in how happy she seemed. It mirrored my own happiness.

“Would you like to go out to dinner?” I said.
I could have waited, she would have said more lovely things, but the words came out of my mouth.

“That would be great. When?”
I didn’t say anything.

“I can’t, tomorrow night, I’m baby-sitting my five-year old granddaughter.”

“Friday night,” I said.
She thought and smiled, on the heels of other smiles.

“I think Friday would be good.”
She asked me to call her tomorrow, at the library, to confirm. I suggested Miss Mamie’s and said I knew the owner.

“I think someone here at the library knows her, too.”
She asked me how I got started writing poetry.

“I wrote a poem in 7th Grade that got published. It was a terrible poem,” I said.
She told me she’d written a few poems, that she had wanted to write poetry. I saw a woman, standing next to me as I sat, who wasn’t intimidated, who wasn’t pretending to appreciate something alien to her.

As I left the library, I took her hand and held it.

“I have cold hands,” she said.
“Warm hands, cold feet, or something,” I said.
“I think it’s something else,” she said.
“I was kidding,” I said.
“I know you were,” she said, and it thrilled me to hear her say that.

This petite woman, gray-haired and voluptuous, spoke in a strong, clear voice, the voice of a senior, perhaps.

When I got home, I told my mother about it.

“I have a date on Friday. I’m taking a woman out to dinner.”
She smiled a big, happy grin. It was nice to see.
One Doctor’s Opinion

I saw strong currents rise in my psyche. I could feel the fear of losing my way, as I move toward true spiritual freedom. The goal of becoming unbounded by my attachments has come up in me over the last dozen to twenty years, without a discipline to enforce my commitment.

In other words, no one, including myself, has told me I needed to seek awareness. I’ve come to realize it as the inevitable direction of an unfettered heart. I found a teacher who told everyone as much, but I already knew it was true.

This fear has no fear in it. I don’t expect Bonnie or any other human reality to alter what’s naturally true. I was only afraid of wanting to live in Illinois. One of the things that came up in our conversation was that she’d never lived anywhere but here. I imagined not wanting to be happy, here, in this place, but that’s circular logic. If my happiness and freedom are here, then they are here, not elsewhere. Or they are everywhere true. And I’m putting the horse a mile in front of the cart.

It’s good to be afraid of love. Real love is the only thing that can vanquish the fear of love. Being afraid of love can be a clearinghouse for false love. Real love is the nature of my being. Fear of love is the fear of its imitators. If real love comes in being with this woman, or any other woman, it will show itself the same way it always has.

As I wondered about these things, my desire for Friday night didn’t change. I called her, this afternoon, about our dinner date. She reminded me that Friday is Halloween. She has a commitment to go to her daughter’s house, so I’ll pick her up there.

I went to the doctor’s for a blood test and heard his personal opinion of the state of art in America. I complimented him on the original art in his office’s hallways.

“Most offices hang prints, instead of original work,” I said.

“You pay $2000 for a print and it’s worthless as soon as you buy it. You look down in the corner, and it says ‘No. 859 out of 2000’, and then they print 2000 more, and it’s worth even less.” (He seemed to be stuck on the number 2000.)

He asked me what I painted, and I told him.
“You know . . . personal opinion,” he said, “in a hundred years, they’re going to look back on this time, on the art of the last half of the Twentieth Century, and they’re going to say, ‘What went wrong?’ He paused and looked at me over his glasses. “They’re going to say, ‘What went wrong?’” I had no response to such foolishness. I could have said, “Well, you know, personal opinion . . . doctors are all quacks, they don’t know shit. All they want is your money.” I’m dumbfounded by the gall of the stupid, and I have no desire to argue with them. He pulled his finger out of my ass and said my prostrate was fine. That was good to know.

Mother was in some pain, today, with constant discomfort in her tailbone. The doctor said her problems are largely due to old age. I said she wants a fix for everything, but I agreed with him on that subject. “She’s a tough old bird,” I said, “and she surprises me, sometimes. I think she’s on the downward slide, and she’ll spring back and do pretty good, but I don’t expect her to lose ten years, any time soon.” “That’s good to hear,” he said. “Some relatives don’t want to believe their loved ones are getting old.”

I had my blood drawn, my blood pressure tested, I coughed, and I left a urine sample. As an opinionated ass, he was an efficient and helpful technician.
Years Later

I remembered something else the doctor told me.
I said, “This is the longest time I’ve spent with my mother since I was eighteen years old.”

“Probably since you were a little kid,” he said.
I fixed scalloped potatoes and hot dogs, tonight, as per her request, this morning. This is a new routine. She mentions some food she’d like, and I get it, the same day. Yesterday, it was creamed chipped beef on mashed potatoes. Both days, she has had nothing to say in praise of her choices.

Her tailbone is killing her, so to speak. I suggested she have someone look at it, but she said no, as usual.

Watching Dr. Phil, today, about the birth of a child into a family, Mother said that her sister-in-law, Lenore, had insisted on coming to help her after I was born, her first child. She didn’t want Lenore’s help, but she came anyway. She stayed for a week, did all the cooking and cleaning, and after the week, Mother bought Lenore a gift. She thinks it was a purse.

“Were you glad she came, after all?” I said.
“No,” she said. “I wanted to be alone with my baby.”

In retrospect, I was happy for Lenore’s visit, and I felt some respect for my mother. Because of my mother’s insistent, negative presence in my life, and her insistent positive presence, as well, I don’t automatically love her more for wanting to be alone with me. Sometimes, the village that it takes to raise a child saves the child from certain members of the village.

On the other hand, I wonder what might have happened if she’d been able to be alone with her baby without interference. Could it have been a better beginning? I doubt it.

Dr. Phil is intervening in the life of the family of a pregnant fifteen year old. The dynamic of the family was hostile, all around, until his probing presence discovered the snakes under everyone’s rock, and began to suck the venom out of the compacted village.

What am I talking about? Is this a premonition? I’m never surprised when things said at, one point, become relevant, days, weeks, or even months later. Years later; sometimes.
What I may be saying is that in this entire time, changes are occurring in this family, because of the changes occurring in its eldest son and his mother. What changes they are I may not know, and it may not matter if I describe them, but to allow them is the reward.
My Lyrical Ride

I was watching the beginning of Whale Rider, a lyrical, poetic, earthy, watery, psychically charged movie about a girl and her grandfather. In the scene, they were riding a bicycle down the road in New Zealand between her school and their home, and they were laughing. They seemed to laugh all the way home, without any reason for it.

Without thought, a line came into my mind, and I wrote it down. It became a poem.

I want to say I’ve been laughing all day,
even though I’ve been quiet in my heart.

My heart holds an auditorium of silence
where all kinds of laughing dance,

All in their own private ways,
and one of them is you.

My poem is about my brief, lyrical ride with Bonnie. Walking into the kitchen, I almost cried. I’m a poet of the heart, and it was the first like it in many years. I’ve written other poems in the intervening years, but not with a woman as the point of focus.

When I got up this morning, I discovered another water leak, this time above the sink in the hallway bathroom. There was water on the counter, dripping from the hanging light fixture, just missing my small, open jars of pills.

I got dressed and went upstairs, to see if I could locate the source of the water bubbling the paint on the ceiling of the bathroom. There was no one above us, and the door was unlocked. I went into the clean, empty apartment, nearly identical to Mother’s, with new carpet and no furniture. I found no water, either standing, leaking, or running.

I suspected that the leak was in the pipes that run to the showerhead I use every morning. That means major surgery in my mother’s house. I
called the Building Maintenance Manager, and he said he’d call back. We’ll see.

In the meantime, the story of the leak was too much of a challenge for Mother. Since I went upstairs, she thought the problem was upstairs. I said I didn’t think it was, but she couldn’t understand the difference. She also thought Liz’s cousin lived upstairs. Actually, Liz’s stepbrother lives downstairs. She asked me who used to live upstairs. I said I didn’t know.

I can’t expect her to remember or understand things I might say, so I’m even more inclined to truncate, edit, and eliminate elements of dialog that I might otherwise engage in.

On *The View*, a new woman host was sitting in the fifth chair, and Mother kept asking me who that was. No matter how many times I said who the woman was, she was still not sure. It was easier to say I didn’t know.

Who lives upstairs? I don’t know. Where is the leak? I don’t know. Who is that woman? I don’t know. Her questioning doesn’t persist after that.

I don’t want to deny the effect that Bonnie is having. Because of my awareness and my history, I know the source of my openheartedness is within myself, but without an external focus for that energy, no poetry appears in the form of love poems.

As the object of my open heart, she becomes the way for my soul self to speak in human language, and that language is poetry. When this inside-outside union is made real, all I have to do is tell the truth. That formula is true in everything, at every level, but in the open heart, it speaks as poetry. The fact that it hasn’t occurred in this way, in years, is more proof that it can’t be instigated by desire, or by effort of any kind.

I was sitting alone, late at night, watching a sympathetic movie, when the words appeared of their own volition. This morning, sitting in the same chair, watching *The View*, with my mother, I could feel that poetic energy go into silent abeyance.

There’s nothing to be done. Everything to be done is done by its own doing.
The Woman in Red

The maintenance people came and found the source of the leak. The toilet upstairs leaked whenever it was flushed. The apartment has just been rented. The new tenants flushed the toilet, before they moved in. The leaks, in the week past, were caused by the cleaning crew. I was wrong to assume it came from my mother’s apartment, but I never saw or heard anyone moving around. They shut off the toilet, and they’ll come back to fix it.

Bonnie and I went to dinner at Miss Mamie’s, last night. She turned out to be a better match than I imagined. Her sense of self is nearly identical to mine. I’ve often thought I wanted to meet a woman who didn’t think the same things I did, but who thought the same way I did.

She touched my arm, all during dinner. Our legs were constantly touching, without effort or comment.

We traded histories and experience, awareness and feeling. I told her how much I liked to look at her face. I told her how happy I was in her presence. She said the same of me.

As obscure and arcane as I believe my perceptions might seem to others, she shared them, and we talked effortlessly. It was a pleasant surprise and no surprise at all.

She graduated from the same high school, seven years after I did, in the same class as my brother, Scott.

“He was a big basketball star,” I said.

She didn’t remember him. She was quiet and kept to her self in high school. A classmate said he remembered her wearing long cardigans and holding her books to her chest.

“Were you developed, then?” I said.

“Yes, I was,” she said.

“You were hiding out.”

She confirmed my guess. Her parents had died when she was nine years old. She was raised by a much older sister. She was married, had two sons, was divorced after 18 years, and began to emerge on her own, driven not by will but by an innate desire to know.

She sold her house, recently, and has been moving from place to place, even considered a move to California.
I asked if she was a good kisser.
“Yes, I am,” she said.
In the car, after dinner, I kissed her. I thought her upper lip had a light stubble, but she was a good kisser. Late last night, I thought it might have been my mustache that caused the feeling of stubble.
I drove her home, and on the drive, it seemed as if I couldn’t have my way with her. No immediate sex. She said she was slow and shy. She said it, I agree to it, I agreed with it, and still I was frustrated. I was happy for her determination. I was even happy to have my will frustrated by her self-assurance.

Back at her son’s house, we kissed and made plans for a walk on Sunday. I walked to my truck, and she called me back, to join her inside with her son and his wife. It was a pleasant time with friendly people.

Today, I stopped at the library, and we made new plans for tomorrow, since the weather is turning cold, and a long walk is less likely.

Mother was very nice about the date. I brought her a potted chrysanthemum, yesterday, before the date, and she was pleased by it. I wanted to tell her, symbolically, that I wasn’t abandoning her.

She said, “I’m glad you had a good time.”

I’m in the throes of mixed feelings. I’m trying to find the escape clause. I told Bonnie I didn’t want to lose my spiritual autonomy. She said her twenty years of living single had given her the room to stay in her own spiritual awareness. I suspect she’s as reluctant as I am to fall into an entanglement.

She’s a foot shorter than I am. I want to imagine we’re not attracted to each other, that there’s no passion, that we’re too much alike, and that we’re too much like friends to become lovers, but I can’t know that.

As attractive as I think she is, we’ve been drawn together for other, perhaps deeper and better, reasons. When something seems meant to be, there’s alarm in the mind with no say in the natural, inevitable, truth.

Before we left the restaurant, she made a point to show me this poem from my book, The Dancer in the Heart.
The Woman In Red

Between physiology and psychology, I lean toward the sun. Years ago, at Carol Ann’s, everyone ran onto the roof to see the moon’s eclipse. “You’re a poet,” someone said, “Aren’t you interested in this?”

“I’m a sun poet,” I said, surprising myself from deep within my buried psyche.

Let’s be honest, I long for a fortuitous meeting with the woman in red. But why do I want a name for the god who gives me this grace?

I don’t need to know her name to know she is none other than who I am. I am drawn to the sun, until, consumed by its identity, I name the world by its light.

I begin to burn up the kindling ground I call the moon, I call She. She has a magical face, it’s disturbing to look at something so beautiful. When I look at her, it’s difficult to think. Only her beauty thinks in my eyes. I search her face for the name of her beauty, but her perfection can’t satisfy my naming.

I want to take her into me, until I am taken into her. This is my greatest fear and desire - that I will be swallowed up in my own surrender, I will be washed into nothing by the waves of my own outpouring heart.
Cobb Salad

My handwriting has taken on the look of shorthand. I’ve never been at the writing of a book for this long, and my available time is abbreviated by my commitments. And now I’m beginning another level of commitment, with the appearance of a woman in my life.

It’s a little daunting to think that she might be the fulfillment of The Dancer in the Heart, the woman who is the other, who is my self.

I took my mother to the Village Inn, after her hair appointment. I said I’d rather not go to a fast food restaurant. Later, she questioned me.

“When did you turn against fast food restaurants?”

“You’re exaggerating what I said. I said I prefer nicer places.”

“I never liked fast food restaurants,” she said. “I didn’t think the food was as good, but your father said I was wrong. He said the food was fresher and the kitchens were cleaner. He was right.”

“I just think places like the Village Inn are more comfortable.”

“I solved the problem,” she said, this morning. “I found out why my tailbone is sore. I’m sitting on it all the time. If I sit forward, it takes the pressure off it.”

“Does it feel better, then?”

“Yes, it does.”

At lunch, I ordered the veggie omelet, and she had a Cobb salad.

“I always used to love Cobb salads. I can’t remember what they taste like. But I wanted hash browns, too.”

I ordered hash browns on the side.

“Didn’t Dareth tell you to spend your money while you were still alive? You don’t get to go out to eat as much, these days, so why not get what you want?”

“It’s too much,” she said.

She ate the entire salad and the hash browns.

“Now, I want something sweet.”

“Do you want a slice of pie?”

“No, just something sweet,” she said.

She had me pour maple syrup over some Ritz crackers. She ate them with a fork and a spoon and her fingers.
It’s unusual to watch a controlling, judgmental, proper woman eat restaurant crackers and syrup with her fingers, and do it unselfconsciously, and with pleasure.

But, then, her son, Mark, is the first person to ever suggest to me that it’s OK to eat pizza with a spoon.
“I have another date, tomorrow night,” I said.
“Another date?” she said, skeptically.
“She’s going to take me out to dinner,” I said.
“What’s going on?” she said, skeptically.
“Well, something good might be happening,” I said.
“What good could be happening?” she said, skeptically.
“There’s a lot of good that can happen between a man and a woman,” I said, with some pleasure.
Later, she said, “This woman must like you, too.”
“Yes, she does,” I said.
“I wish Mark would find a woman.”
“I can almost guarantee that won’t happen.”
“Why not?”
“Because he’s not interested.”
Later, she said, “Why do you have a mustache?”
I looked at her for a long time. I had just, not twenty minutes before, thought about shaving it off, to make way for better, smoother kissing.
“I grew it and I liked it,” I said.
“My father had a mustache for as long as I knew him.”
“Did you ever ask him why he had a mustache?”
“No.”
A bomb has dropped into the small room of my consciousness. As I struggle with my sense of Bonnie, a new understanding begins to emerge.
I thought, “You don’t need me, and you don’t desire me. What have we got here?”
This is the state of self I’ve been in for ten years. Without an attachment to need or desire, I wonder what my relationship to any woman might be.
“Let light make love to light. Where is the problem.”
Many revelations are occurring in the way things have always been before, and may never be again.
I found myself listening to Bonnie, the other night, in a new way. I found myself talking in a way that betrayed the old way. I began to think
about other times of meeting women. In retrospect, I hear myself speaking to less than eager ears, uncomprehending ears, sympathetic ears that didn’t correspond to acceptance.

“You didn’t listen to them, because you already knew,” I thought.

I could hear, within moments, that my awareness was not being matched. And what if it is now being matched? What does that do to my patterns of relating to women? It leaves them behind and renders them useless. I’m used to being alone, in what matters most to me. I’m used to relating to others on other grounds than the most intimate.

I thought about her touching me, all through dinner, after, and since.

“Are you touching me to hold me near, or to hold me away?” I wonder.

I’ll see her again, in a few hours. I’ll know more, then, or I’ll know enough to not care about these questions.

I took Mother to church, this morning. It was Communion Sunday, All Saints Day. She didn’t go down to the altar, because of her problems walking, and I didn’t go, because I’m not a true Christian. I’m not a Christian.

“I’m a mystic,” I thought to say, if asked why I didn’t participate, “I am the body, I am the blood.”

That thought stirred in me a sense of true communion. In the ceremony we’re asked to take of the blood of Christ and the body of Christ. I’ve consumed the truth in my being, it’s already within me, as it is in all of us. We are all the bread, and we are all the blood. I left the service, at one point, just to get a breath of fresh spiritual air.

I made bacon and eggs for Mother, instead of going out for lunch. It was what she and Dad always ate, after church, every Sunday. And then, they’d play golf.

“It was a good life,” I said.

“It was a wonderful life,” she said, nodding her head.
She praised my clothing, going to church and coming home.

“I like the way Uncle Harry dressed,” I said.

“He had an extensive wardrobe. He was a sharp dresser. He always like to dress well.”

I’ve unconsciously shifted from my father’s Oklahoma cowboy casual to my uncle Harry’s natty urban chic.
“Teddy (Harry’s wife) said you have ‘savoir faire’, Mother said. “I guess she was right.”
This afternoon, I put my jeans back on. Savoir faire is useless in matters of the heart.
“What’s your friend’s name?” Mother asked.
I already told her, but I told her, again.
“I want to write it down,” she said.
“What’s your friend’s name?” she said.
I told her, and I think she wrote it down. She’s still got a pain in her tailbone, and she’s dealing with it the best she can, in the way she deals with everything, by toughing it out.
She’s become quieter. Walking out of church, inching along, she said, “I don’t know why I’m walking like this.”
As we were coming back to the house, I said she wasn’t falling, she was just moving slowly.
“Because I’m being cautious,” she said.
Bonnie and I went to dinner at Biaggi’s Ristorante Italiano, a terrific place, with a funny, friendly, knowledgeable waiter and good food.
When I picked her up at her apartment, I saw that she lived in a high-rise rabbit warren. Her apartment was like a nun’s cell. When we came back to her place, I forced myself to admit how disappointed I was in her taste. Kitchy bric-a-brac.
“I’m a real artist,” I said. “It pains me to see plastic angels.”
“You can help me,” she said.
Or teach me, or show me, or something equally embarrassing, but appealing to my ego.
At dinner, as we continued to fill each other in on relevant background material, I saw a lovely, adorable, genuine, kind, bright, and attractive woman.
Walking into the restaurant, we held hands, and it thrilled me. I use the word ‘thrilled’ to describe some feeling I’ve had with her. I use it to mean a sense of delight that runs from enjoyable to being overwhelmed.
I thought, “I’m going to have to take this woman somewhere away from here, maybe away from the familiar, so we can both begin fresh.”
I thought to say to her, “If you come to Seattle, you’ll blossom.”
But more than that can happen. And besides, she’s already in full bloom.
“I’d like to lie naked with you,” I said, “at some point, in the future. I think that would be wonderful.”

She repeated that she was inclined to move slowly. I said it surprised me to see how that was fine with me.

“I see a lot of things I’d like to do,” I said. “That doesn’t mean I have to rush over and do them. And it doesn’t mean I don’t like them.”

Still, a lot of touching went on.

I just now looked out the window at my truck and imagined being in it with her. Then I imagined being in it, alone, and I felt regret.

“I love being on my own,” I thought.

I’m still afraid that Bonnie can’t match me in ways that would make me feel alone, again. As long as I’m alone, I’m content to live alone. I never feel alone or lonely in myself. It’s only when I’m among people who don’t share my awareness or my consciousness.

I don’t feel superior to anyone. Awareness is not a hierarchical reality. In my awareness, I’m conscious of the limitations of sharing with those who don’t recognize themselves.

Yesterday, in church, I remembered an experience of the difference between the ego self and the soul self.

Whenever I lean forward, into the world of personal selves, into the world of ego, I feel diminished. When I lean back into my soul self, my spirit, nothing is diminished, in myself or in anyone else.

I told Bonnie the story of being in Pune, India, with Suryo, and being angry. I had gotten angry after she met me at the ashram art studio, where I’d been working. We left the ashram, went out onto the public road, to the cafe at the corner, to a rickshaw, and to another cafe for dinner. I was caught in anger.

Suryo said, “You know how to do this.”

I leaned back, into my soul self, out of my ego self, and I was free. I felt peaceful and happy, and I laughed. I didn’t feel any anger. I remembered how it happened. When I painted, in the ashram, I was in a state of openness, innocent intimacy, and vulnerability. Without protecting myself, I walked out into the world of ego separation. I became angry, as a protection. It was an ego protection of an egoistic vulnerability.
When I lean into the world, I worry about Bonnie’s short stature, her wide hips (which I secretly covet), her lack of urban sophistication, her taste in decoration, and whatever else I can conjure up for disagreement.

When I lean back into my soul self, I see I’m with a woman of depth and character, a woman of fearless wonder, a woman still living in delight, after a lifetime of insult and assault.

Some woman came into the library, a while back, and got into a rage about something, and Bonnie spoke to her with calm clarity. When the woman left, the other librarian asked her how she did that. She didn’t do anything. She recognized what wasn’t hers, and left it alone.

“She’s a librarian?” Mother said. “That must be a dull job.”

“It’s a good job, with different people, all day long, looking for different things,” I said, “and you help them find what they’re looking for.”

“I didn’t mean dull,” she said.
Mocha Monday

I’m in Fireworks, and the place is jammed. I got a mocha grande from Mona. I saw her playing bongos with a guitarist on Saturday night in Borders. I like this place. I’m beginning to feel at home here in Moline. This is my hometown, but until recently, I was an outsider. Whenever I’d come back, I’d come as a ghost, playing the image of myself from an idealized past. Even the negatives were idealized. Moline is no longer nostalgic for me. It’s a town on the Mississippi where I’m living, right now.

I’m so happy to have this writing. If I weren’t able to put myself out in front of my self, I don’t think I’d see this time as clearly. As I do this, I discover, day after day, that the character of my being, that I commonly think less of, is true. It may be a characteristic of all human self-images, or it may be the result of my own limitations. When I’m able to tell the truth from the openness of my heart, I Rediscover my own worth.

In church, yesterday, it occurred to me that people need to shout their spirituality, because in the soul, it lies indistinguishable from eternal nothingness, and in the world, it’s lost in a cacophony of noise. To fall back into the eternal, into stillness, into empty nothingness, is to discover the greatness of being, no matter who we are, but to step out into the marketplace of limited selves, is to lose consciousness of the true self.

I said to Bonnie that I like being this person, this Steve, but in this form, I don’t discover what gives me my love of being present. In this form, the love of being present is ego, and that kind of love comes and goes, but in being, there’s nothing but love and acceptance, and that never changes.

Mocha Monday is the rendezvous of local teenage social show and tell. It’s the watering hole where all the animals come, aggression is ignored, and hope is kindled. I could have gone to the library and checked out a certain book pusher, but I didn’t.

My hand is sore from this writing. In the past, I would have stopped writing long before this, on principle. If my hand was sore, it meant I shouldn’t be writing, but I’ve kept writing, because I’m happy with the results.

Ordinary Ecstasy
“You’re not going to be a great artist, until you take on what you believe is your responsibility, not what someone else tells you is your responsibility, but what you believe is your responsibility.”

Just before I went to bed, I wrote the above to myself, and I thought of my son and my daughter, next.

I woke up at 2AM and called my brother in Honolulu. It was only 7PM, there.

I went back to sleep, and as I did, I entered the state of mindless contemplation where self-recognition occurs. I looked at nothing and thought of nothing, and I felt the fear of empty self-consciousness, and then I felt the fullness of being.

I woke up early, when the phone rang. It was the doctor’s nurse calling with the results of my blood test. Despite diet changes and less exercise, lately, my numbers were excellent.

My daughter emailed pictures of herself and others at her own Halloween party, and I showed them to Mother. We were both impressed with her beauty in her costume as a Swedish folk singer.

During the night, I remembered a book of the writing I did, following my time in India; that I wanted to show Bonnie, a book called Ordinary Ecstasy. I read part of it, before I went back to sleep. It felt good to hear my poetic voice describing the burgeoning awareness of a free man.

At lunch, Mother recalled the man on Dr. Phil who couldn’t live without TV, and she described everyone in the family who was a good talker.

“I loved it when your father and I went out to dinner. That’s when we got the chance to talk. He was no dummy, your father.”

I turned down the sound on the TV and listened to her talk about talking, and then about party games, and then about playing cards.

Earlier, at breakfast, I told her that Mark was going to Hawaii for a month. She asked me when Mark was coming back here, and how long I was going to stay.

“He’ll come back on January 9th,” I said, “and I’ll be here until then.”

“I wish I wasn’t so much trouble,” she said.

“You’re no trouble to Mark, and you’re no trouble to me,” I said.

“I would die, if I could, but I can’t,” she said.
“If you can’t die, you’re meant to stay alive,” I said.
She told me about a party game she learned from a magazine, that they used to play when she was organizing parties for their friends.

“You tie a woman’s nylon stocking around your waist, and you tie another one to that one, with a grapefruit in the toe, and you swing it down between your legs, and you put another grapefruit on the floor, and you have a race, where you swing the grapefruit and knock the other one across the room.

“It was hilarious. You should have seen the gyrations. People went crazy. They went crazy. It was so much fun.”

There’s another woman in the café that I’ve seen, before. She reminds me of an old girlfriend, from Baltimore, who was into alternative video. This woman seems my type. She’s well educated, I’m guessing, Jewish perhaps, slim and good looking, but cool and intellectual.

I was just with Bonnie at her library. We sat on a sofa chair, and I stared at the pale white skin of her hands and neck, her face and chest. Pale, white skin, with traces of red and blue in them. Lovely skin. I wanted to make love to her and stop talking.

“Can we hold hands in the library, or is it against the rules? Is there a sign, ‘No Hand Holding!’?"

“We had to warn a couple, once. No getting on top of each other.”

I gave her the copy of Ordinary Ecstasy. She read parts of it and took to it, immediately.

She can’t come out, tonight. She’s babysitting her five-year-old granddaughter, as her son goes to an AA meeting with her ex-husband, his father. She was upset by an injury to her cousin, a man she grew up with as a brother.

Seeing her distraction, I asked her if she still liked me.

She smiled, “I like you very much.”

I want to be told, one way or the other, if this is the right woman. I try to object, but I continue to want to be near her.

I think it would break my heart, to find out I can only be free in myself. It’s been my experience to know the peace and love of my innate being, to see it manifested in my daily life, to see it flare into moments of pure joy. It’s also been my experience to see my innate self at greatest play in the world, when I’m in love with someone else.
I watch myself become more ebullient, more fun, happier, more playful, more at ease in myself, in my mother’s house, because of Bonnie’s presence in my life.

I was laughing at *Everybody Loves Raymond*, last night, as I haven’t laughed, in all the other times I’ve watched it, and it wasn’t a better show than any other. The same thing occurred during the *Tonight Show*, and when I watched the Broncos/Patriots football game, sitting in the kitchen, by myself. I was celebrating the Patriot’s victory, as if I was a loyal fan.

When I called my brother at 2AM, he thought something bad must have happened.

“No,” I said, “I just feel good, and I felt like calling.”

Maybe she’s not the one, but she’s the one my heart has chosen, and I’m grateful.
Polar Similarities

I went back to the library and put a book on hold. Bonnie wasn’t there. I sat at a table and did some editing. It felt good to be there. I missed her, in an enjoyable way.

At home, I fixed hamburgers for Mother on her George Foreman grill, and she said the patties were too big. Three times, she told me that.

After Raymond, I put on CHICAGO, the movie, and we watched it together, sort of. She napped through part of it.

“Mom,” I said, “this is good,” referring to one scene.

My hands and feet started moving, and I sang along, just like when I saw it in a theater.

“That’s not what I thought a movie called Chicago would be like,” she said.

Still and all, she seemed to enjoy it. I saw a half-smile from time to time.

It sticks in the craw of my memory that I wanted Bonnie’s rapt attention, this afternoon, when she was preoccupied with concern for others. I habitually choose women who are interested in themselves, and then I desire their attention, or I simply feel free to live an independent life.

It’s worth something to me to see these things rise to the surface, when I’m in a relationship that doesn’t fit my familiar pattern. I expect to treat Bonnie differently, because she’s different. I expect to act differently, because my relationship to her is different. Changes in my life have changed the choices I’m making. That changes the world I live in. That changes the way I live in the world. All good.

I see Bonnie as someone who habitually cares for others, while she guards her own heart. I see myself as someone who only peripherally cares for others. Neither of us is the polar opposite of the other. We’re probably yin and yang to a single, rotating reality, so to speak, creatively speaking.
A Chill in the Air

There’s a chill in the air. I’m wearing heavier clothing. I went to the library to see Bonnie and make a date for tonight. She looked beautiful in a red sweater. We smiled at each other across the room. Then I thought of something negative, and I rejected my feelings for her, in an instant of judgment.

Love is the avenue of the heart, the center of one’s being, and the mind rejects it. If the mind can’t object to love directly, it will find other ways to get back its primacy.

I’m in a struggle with the possibility of love entering my life from the outside. From the inside, the mind has lost the battle, and the heart has won, but from the outside, I’ve kept the battle at a stalemate by not taking a lover. Now, it appears that the battle has been taken to the field. Desire seems to be a general of the heart, but desire works for the mind. Desire keeps love as a question of effort and control, mentally and emotionally within the mind’s purview.

The mind is good at throwing up red flags, since the mind operates on the principles of self-preservation, but the heart of one’s being is not interested in self-preservation as much as it is interested in the fulfillment of one’s innate self. Bonnie reads poetry and books of spirituality, not the foo-foo stuff in either area. It’s what interests me, as well, so my mind uses what appeals to my ego to counter the good.

When I’m in my heart with her, I don’t care about questions, but coming out of my mother’s house, I carry the temperature and the humidity of that environment.

At the corner, at the bottom of the hill, I chose to turn toward the library instead of coming here to write. Before I left the house, I thought about how I was, meeting with Bonnie yesterday, and how I judged it.

She didn’t know I was coming, and she’d just been talking to her cousin who was injured. It took her a few minutes to shed that concern and be with me. When I leave my mother’s house, it takes me time to shed that concern and be with myself, or with anyone else, in an intimate way.
In the same way that devotees leave the marketplace and take up meditation in an ashram, it takes focused attention to shed the concerns of the mind and be in the heart.

Shortly after I met Suryo, who was a longtime follower of a charismatic teacher, she began working everyday as a counselor, and I saw her pick up her concerns and let go of her awareness, and it made her seem less present in the heart.

I’ve been in concern for my mother for nearly nine months, long before coming here. I’m witnessing the challenge to my awareness that works by changing the field of consciousness. My relationship with women has been a shifting field of allegiances. I’m seeing it shift again. Can I truly accept a relationship that serves my soul, when my mind, my ego, clever and devious as it is capable of being, fights for control?

There is no problem. Thy will be done. Fall back in stillness. Let what is true be the way of your being. If I hear these words as clichés, then I’m still listening to the words and not to the reality they describe.

My mother asked me what ‘my friend’ and I talked about. At first, I said we were still telling each other our biographies, getting to know each other. Then I ventured the rest of the story.

“We talk about spirituality.”

She had nothing to say, after that. My mother lives in an immediate world of practical considerations, and she always has. Her religion is a concern of the mind and not the spirit. It’s a practical matter, to resolve the questions of the soul, so she can put her mind at ease taking care of business.

“What kind of shirt are you wearing?” she said. “Is it corduroy? You have too many shirts.”

The shirt I was wearing is one I wear several times a week.

“You’ve seen this shirt, before,” I said.

Last night, David Letterman was back from the hospital, where his girlfriend gave birth to his first child, a son.

“He seems happy,” she said. “Having a baby has made him happy.”

Her eye for the superficial had seen the truth. Tonight, I’m going to introduce Bonnie to her. We’ll see what she has to say about that. I thought she would have already seen how happy I’ve been, lately, but she hasn’t commented on that.
Bonnie called and said she and her daughter-in-law were going over to her son’s house, because his wife was having trouble with him. He’s an alcoholic, and there’s a rift in his marriage that his drinking only exacerbates. She said she’d call back when she could.

I didn’t go out, didn’t write. I stayed home, watching TV with my mother, waiting for a phone call that didn’t come. This morning, I called her at the library. She called back on her lunch hour. We engaged in a conversation about addiction. She was physically and emotionally tired, so we made a date for tomorrow night.

Yesterday afternoon, I stopped in at the art store that Bruce Carter runs, and we chatted. He asked me about the woman I was ‘with’ at his talk at Blackhawk College. I said I didn’t know who she was. I said she walked up and sat down like we were old friends, and we had an easy connection. He thought something was going on between us.

“So did I,” I said, “but when it was over, she was gone. I think she’s married, although there was no ring. She said something about when we came here. I assumed she was saying she wasn’t alone.

We talked about art technique and materials. Then he said there was an opening January 1st, on his radio interview show, called Art Talks, and would I come on. I said I’d love to, and we set it up.

Telling these narrative details is a bit of a struggle, because of my new relationship. My teacher suggested the only way to be free is to let go of all relationships, and this is my test, right now. I see the test in my being with my mother, and now I can see it in being with Bonnie.

Being with someone is not the same as being in relationship with them. A relationship is a thing unto itself, and it binds all parties involved. Alcoholism isn’t about alcohol, it’s about a relationship with alcohol. The relationship is what kills the drunk and spoils the booze.

**Being** with Bonnie is not a problem. It’s the mind’s provenance to create a relationship and then make that the focus of one’s consciousness. That serves the mind’s self-preservation. The mind has no true reality except in relationship, and that becomes the home of the ego.
Christians might liken this to the presence of Satan in their lives, drawing their attention away from God, but it is the presence of the human mind, already living in self-separation from God, from Being Itself, from All That Is. The mind seeks to perpetuate its life by keeping up the soap opera in which it is the director.

My mind wants a scenario with Bonnie that it can complicate and resolve, invent and dissolve, prevent and evolve, kill and resurrect.

In my personal history, as it is in all history, the pattern is set between a man and a woman, in fact between any one person and any other. That pattern is to create a relationship, not to ensure the continuity of the connection, but to ensure the continuity of relationship for the use of the human mind, in all its psychological, emotional, physical, and spiritual complexity.

The true communion between a man and a woman, or between anyone and anyone else, is not ensured by relationship. Relationship doesn’t instigate a true communion, and it can’t derail one.

My last, longtime companion, Suryo, claimed that she and I were spiritual buddies. That was true. We were in a relationship of mutual interest. I’m wondering if it’s possible for Bonnie and me to be in a communion of mutual being, what’s called soul mates. If that’s so, there’s no need to start a relationship, to manage a relationship, or to end one.

My mother and I have operated in a relationship for all the years of my life. That relationship has changed, but it hasn’t gone away. The challenge to me has been to let go of the relationship, while playing out what remains of it, as true to my spirit as I can.

When I began this chapter, I thought I would analyze and dissect my feelings about being with, or not being with, Bonnie. I thought I’d look into my fears and expectations, but all of that is the inventory of the mind.

In the inventory of the heart, in the spirit of my being, there’s only the emptiness of an uncluttered warehouse, minus the building. You put two of those empty warehouses together, and now you’re talking communion.
Camouflage

Fixing dinner for my mother, puttering around the house, making sure everything is in place for a smooth functioning environment, I realized something. I was happier, when I was in contact with Bonnie, than I’ve been with my mother. This isn’t brain surgery, but it sure is brain science.

Happiness in, happiness out. I was as happy as I’ve ever been, twelve years ago, in India. I came back to this country wanting to see if I could sustain that openness in a spiritually bereft society. I did, and have, but at a price. My openness has become camouflaged.

I’ve used the image of actually going to prison, as a gauge of my ability to remain free. Could I, in the direst circumstances, locked up in an dark cell, for a long time, “walk joyfully amidst the sorrows of life.”

I’m not in prison, so I’ve judged myself as less than liberated, because I haven’t felt the constant joy of my own freedom. That’s an absurd expectation. Carrying the image of those extremes as my example, I’ve missed the erosion of my happiness. In other words, since I don’t live in the worst conditions, any loss of awareness must be my fault.

And, now, living with an unhappy woman, I’ve experienced a glimmer of local freedom, not the freedom of recognition in my deepest being, but the freedom of being able to spend some happy moments with another person.

My mother is old and suffers the debility of her age. It makes her unhappy. Of course. She’s remarkably upbeat about her misery, but misery is what it is. Swedish misery. Unexpressed, unrecognized, but ever-present. My mother’s cure for life is to do something, but she can’t do much of anything.

She’s stopped reading her magazines. She doesn’t tell family stories. She doesn’t go out to dinner. She says my salads have too much spice in them, even though each one is nearly identical to the one the night before.

When I was singing and laughing, this last week, her demeanor didn’t change.

It may sound hyperbolic to keep using the word freedom, but I’ve experienced it, in myself, in India, and to some degree in Seattle and San Francisco. Here, it seems like a dream, and here, there are dreamers. Bonnie
may be one of them. I used to be one of them, but I can’t accept the dream, when I’ve breathed the air of the reality.

I call it freedom, but it’s only breathing freely where the air is clear and clean. Any dream of the future can’t match the reality of the present, when the present is free.

I’m either describing a place other than this one, or I’m describing the moment of possibility with Bonnie. I’m describing the character of my being breaking out of its camouflage and surprising my eyes.
A Fact of Life

“There are some people who have lucid dreams of freedom, and others, very few, know what freedom is.”

Those words came to me as I was falling asleep. I fell awake. Freedom is a real state of being, and dreaming of freedom, no matter how much it comes out of one’s innate knowledge, no matter how sharp and clear the dream is, isn’t yet it’s own reality.

I’m beginning to see, in meeting Bonnie, how true I’ve been to my own word. It became clear to me, ten years ago, that I couldn’t get myself another girlfriend and dream her into being what I was seeking. My experience, in surrender to my own nature, convinced me that the same surrender was necessary in finding a true companion.

Now, as I’ve glimpsed with Bonnie, I see that I’ve been looking for someone who was in my heart and not the object of my heart’s desire. Not someone who merely was a friend to my heart, either. My previous relationship was one of mutual interest and physical desire, and the next one needs to be one of mutual awareness, and then the fruits of physical desire are welcome, too.

I asked myself if Bonnie is someone who has had a lucid dream of freedom and is content to remain in the dream, or is she someone whose sense of freedom is her compelling destiny.

It’s every human’s destiny, I believe, to become reunited with their soul self, to be self-recognized, to drop the separation between the self and the Eternal, between mind and awareness. But that’s the work of the Eternal. Most people are not even remotely conscious of the possibilities of true self-recognition, real freedom.

Many people dream of freedom, or hold it out at arm’s length, in a place called Heaven, or they’re satisfied to listen to other people rhapsodize about freedom in various forms, but a few are quietly drawn to realize freedom in this moment.

I can talk about creativity in the same way. I’m an artist, and I’m compelled to be, not by a willful ego, but by the nature of my being. Other people are less compelled. Others may enjoy the presence of art. Most are indifferent, if not hostile to art.
I believe everyone is creative, but it becomes a conscious awareness for only a few. It exists in all our lives, it affects all our lives, but only a few grasp the presence of creativity as an active force in their lives.

Later, last night, it occurred to me to ask, as if I was speaking to Bonnie, “Are you just playing with me, enjoying my attention, or do you know something?”

I turned the question around and asked myself, “Am I just playing with her, enjoying her attention, or do I know something?”

I saw how important this question has become to me. I believe I’ve seen something, and I need to know if it’s true. Nothing about meeting Bonnie means as much, by a wide margin, as this question does. If I’ve seen someone with whom I share awareness, then not only have I been what I believed, but I can begin to live my life in the unfettered spirit of my heart. I can begin to be un-camouflaged, with this woman. All the rest is play.

In a dream, last night, I was sitting in the company of others. In one sense, I was being Shakespeare, and in another, I was talking to Shakespeare. I was describing the words that were coming out of my mouth.

“My words come from imagination, and they come from reality. In my mouth, they don’t lose the nature of their character, but they take on a character of their own.”

I could feel the words in my mouth as I spoke them.

My mother seems to be fading out of this book that I began to chronicle my time with her. I ask if I’m failing my duty to her. The answer is that my mother is fading from her own life. I imagine I could drag her back to the table, but I believe I’m witnessing a fact of life.

There’s very little to report of her, these days, and I haven’t spent any less time with her. The pain in her tailbone may be squelching the little enjoyment she feels.

“I’m surprised at how well I sleep,” she said, this morning, at breakfast.

“Mark used to make hard-boiled eggs,” she said, later.

“I don’t make them, because they’re high in cholesterol,” I said.

“Oh, no,” she said.
I jumped up and made some hard-boiled eggs. She ate them along with the fresh pumpkin pie that brought over, hot from the oven, with whipped cream.

“The style of houses used to be two stories,” Mother said. “Now, it’s more one story houses. My parents had a two-story house. That was when you didn’t have telephones on every floor. We had the bathroom on the second floor, and the phone was on the first floor. When I was taking care of my mother, I had to run up and down those stairs. I hated those stairs.”

“Was that when you were a kid?”

“No, it was after you were born. She had a stroke, and we moved in with her, so I could take care of her. I got one of those folding gates and put it on the front porch, so I could put you out there. You were very good. You wouldn’t complain, you’d just play there on the porch. I took care of her for seven years.”

That couldn’t be true. I was born in ’42, and we moved to Denver in ’45. It must have felt like seven years.
Swimming in Warm Water

“You have sadness in your eyes, but you’re not sad,” I said.
I asked her about all the stuff I wrote about in the last chapter. She told me who she was.
I said, “Is that what you believe or what you know?”
“Know,” she said, quietly and surely.
I found myself swimming in warm water. We sat on her two wooden chairs and talked. I said I was glad she wasn’t scared off.
She told me how little she could say, even in her own family, about who she is, at heart.
I took her home to meet my mother and show her some books and paintings. I gave her two small, framed prints, and she chatted with Mother.
“I remember you,” Bonnie said. “What’s your name, Mrs. Brooks?”
“Gladys.”
“Didn’t you used to come into the library.”
“Yes, I did, but that was some time ago,” Mother said.
Now, I’m sitting in Fireworks by myself. The pottery section is busy, but the coffee section is deserted. I brought Bonnie here, last night, and we sat with our arms around each other.
We went back to her place and talked some more. We talked about who we are and who we’ve always been. It was genuine and simple. We were in recognition of each other.
We kissed at the door, and the kissing became an embrace of unseparate hearts and bodies. I could feel my body give itself up to love.
When I got home, my mother asked me nothing about Bonnie.
This morning, she said, “I couldn’t see what your girlfriend looked like. It was too dark.”
They had spoken in front of Mother’s chair. This morning, she had nothing to say about her, and I was content to stay quiet. There’s nothing to say, when peaceful joy is the subject. If Bonnie and I had met under more superficial circumstances, there’d be a lot to say. I could jump into that kind of talk, anyway, and I may. At this level of beginning, it feels inappropriate.
After my two months with Papaji, in Lucknow, I couldn’t describe the experience. Five years later, I found the voice for that story, and I wrote it. This feels similar. I don’t want to ascribe the recognition between us to the available details.

“We fell in love by a lamp post. Since then, I’m especially fond of lamp posts.”

I held her and lifted her,
until I could lower myself
into the embrace of her heart.

The best I can do is a line of poetry. Poetry doesn’t care about my desire for poetry.
Therefore I Am

I picked up Mother at the hairdresser’s. She said she was having a rough day. I couldn’t tell. She seemed to be moving better than usual, but she was anxious about feeling unsteady.

We went to Ming Wah for lunch, and she commented on the new addition. They’d cut a doorway into the new room. It was covered with plastic. Mother couldn’t be certain if there was a door there. She was concerned that the new room would be cut off from the rest of the place.

“The woman who runs this place, her husband died, and her business increased. Funny. The woman who runs Adolph’s, her husband died, and she works there, every day. I asked her one time. She looked harried. I said, ‘Why do you keep working?’ and she said, ‘What would I do?’

“Don’t do anything,” Mother said to me. “Why should she do anything? Why do people have to keep working?”

“Some people don’t know how to do anything but work,” I said.

As we were leaving Ming Wah, she read the billboard across the street, “I DO, THEREFORE I AM.”

“What does that mean?” she said.

“People define themselves by what they do,” I said. “You are what you are, not what you do.”

She had no more to say on the subject.

We drove to Jerry’s, the Swedish meat market, for Rusks, potato sausage, and herring. They were out of herring. I bought some small pieces of homemade fudge. We ate the fudge, as we drove to the Methodist Church to pick up her order of nuts from way back at the church bazaar yard sale.

I walked into the side room of the church, lined with tables of packages with name labels on them. One of the ladies said, loudly, “You’re Gladys Brooks’ son.”

“Yes, I am.”

“Are you the one who lives in Hawaii?”

“No, I’m the one who lives in Seattle.”
I watch how being with Bonnie has me calmer, lighter, happier, looser, more relaxed. I’ve held myself in abeyance, like holding my breath in my body, in my life.

Freedom is the freedom to breathe, and love is its other name. I don’t think of Bonnie in the way that desire thinks, I think of her in the way that the spirit breathes.

When we got home, there was a message from Bonnie that she’d call back. I taped a message that I’d be out for a while, and I came out to write. I might have been afraid to leave the phone, but I wasn’t.

As Papaji said of freedom, “Where can you go and not be here?”
Sunday Brunch

Roseanne went to Texas for six months and left her apartment empty. I thought it might be a good sublet for Bonnie, so I asked Vivian about it. She gave me Roseanne’s phone number, and I called her. She said she would do it, for $550. I told Bonnie, but her current rent is less, and she’s OK where she is.

This morning, Vivian poked her head in the kitchen door, with her daughter poking her head in, too, and she asked about me. I heard the conversation and came out to say that Bonnie wasn’t interested.

Mother told me she didn’t like that other person poking her head in the kitchen. Then she asked me what it was about. I told her, briefly, and we were off to the races.

“Why does Bonnie want to live here?”

“She doesn’t.”

“Why would she move into Vivian’s apartment?”

“She wouldn’t. It was about Roseanne’s apartment. It’s not going to happen, so it doesn’t matter.”

“I don’t think it’s a good idea.”

“It’s not going to happen. It was only a possibility.”

“I don’t like it that your girlfriend is going to move in. It’s my home. I live here. I deserve some consideration.”

“Nothing’s going to happen. Forget about it. She’s going to stay where she is.”

 Doesn’t she have a place to live.”

“Yes, she does, and she’s happy there.”

I asked her, “So you don’t like the idea of my girlfriend living in this building?”

“No, I don’t.”

“Do you like the idea of me having a girlfriend?”

“I don’t care,” she said, definitively, not harshly.

Last night, Bonnie and I went out to eat at a ‘40’s style restaurant, in the building where Hasty-Tasty used to be, the burger joint I grew up in, in Junior High, and where Bonnie worked when she was seventeen.
We were the only customers, until a few more came in, but it was comfortable and friendly. We talked about her alcoholic son.

After eating, we went back to her place and sat on her two wooden chairs. We talked about her son and other subjects.

At one point, I said, “I suspect we are so similar in some ways that we can keep ourselves preoccupied and away from what we really want. We aren’t touching each other, like we did last night. And we both like to do that, right?”

“I do,” she said.

“I don’t know, I’m just making this up as I go,” I said, “but last night when we were holding each other, something happened. I realized I’d been holding myself back for a long time. You became self-sufficient, and so did I, and last night, we started to let go of that self-sufficiency and melt into each other.”

“I felt it, too,” she said.

“But, tonight, we’re talking and not touching as much. It’s not just you, it’s me, too.”

I had asked her if she was comfortable with her sexuality, and she thought for a moment and said she wasn’t. Now, I can’t remember why that was. She asked me about my experience painting nude models. I told her about The Dancing Girls of the Buddha, a 50 painting series, done over several years. I started out painting ten different nude models dancing. When I was done, I saw that the paintings gave off a sense of peace. They had transformed the sexual energy to creative energy to peacefulness. I was amazed by them.

Finally, she said she’d only been out with me for four times.

“I’ve only been out with you four times. We have that in common,” I said.

She smiled.

“I wasn’t all over you, tonight, either. I’m being an aggressive male, and if I didn’t do anything, maybe you’d be the aggressive one, so I’m going to stop being aggressive and do nothing.”

I still love being with her. She showed me her battered copy of The Tao te Ching, translated by Stephen Mitchell, she’s been carrying around for several years. I was glad to see it. It meant her spirituality was beyond my influence.
During the evening, we went to HyVee, and she bought four gallons of water. The tap water in her building has been befouled. In the lobby of her building, she chatted with another tenant, who said it was so bad it ruined her cooking. Bonnie said she was going to submit a sample to the county testing laboratory.

“You could become the Mother Theresa of the building,” I said. “They’ll change the name of the building from WARREN to Saint Bonnie Face. St. Boniface!”

I agreed with Bonnie’s tempo in our burgeoning love.

“I’m too fast,” I said. “I paint fast, but I can’t write poetry fast. I need to slow down. When I paint houses, I have a tendency to work fast, and when I slow down, I discover my natural rhythm.”

I noticed I was happy to not make another date, to go home earlier than the night before, to take time.

Mother was already in bed, with the lights out, an hour before she usually went to bed. I stood in her bedroom doorway and talked to her.

“I’m going to watch Saturday Night Live,” I said, after a while.

Twenty minutes later, she came out and asked me for a Pepsid AC and a glass of water. She had an upset stomach. This morning, she was crabby. She said her tailbone still hurt, from sitting on it too much.

“How do you know that?” I said.

“I decided it for myself,” she said.

“You’re crabby, because your tailbone hurts.”

Apparently, she agreed with that. At lunch, I made her bacon and eggs with cinnamon raisin toast. She was very happy.

“Oh, that smells good,” she said.

We skipped church, this morning, but we didn’t skip Sunday brunch.
Readiness is All

I went looking for Stephen Mitchell’s book at Borders, to maybe give Bonnie a newer copy. As I was scanning the shelves, picking up this and that book, a big volume of *Ramana Maharshi, Osho on Zen*, and Mitchell’s *Tao*, among others.

I felt a curious disinterest in reading any more of other people’s work. I have several books that could slide easily into the racks. Is it time for that to happen? All is in the readiness. If I could publish my way out into the wide world, maybe I could be content to live anywhere. Or, maybe, there’s no quid pro quo, just a time for it to occur, or not to occur, regardless.

So much of my talking with Bonnie is lost to memory. I only hint at the reach of our conversation. I began to think I should write two books, but I don’t think that will happen. I’m here to care for my mother, and that hasn’t changed. Mother prefers my attention to be on her. That hasn’t been entirely true since I came.

Writing this book and being with Bonnie take me away from her presence. I’m sure my mother can sense that, but neither this book, nor Bonnie, needs to be a distraction. Both need to be, and both are, a resource.
Hesitant Eagerness

I tried to fix the microwave and killed it deader than it already was. I bought another, smaller one, for a good price. I went to the appliance repair shop, but it was CLOSED. I found a new microwave, cheaper than the repair cost would have been, at a fancy warehouse store.

Mother spilled water on the counter, trying to fill the coffee maker, so I emptied it out, mopped up the counter, put the coffee maker on a clean towel, and filled it up. No leak. She missed the receptacle. I told her about my test, and she seemed to accept it.

I can’t substitute my current life with Mother for a new life with Bonnie, but the infusion of possibility in my heart betrays the heaviness I’ve been living with.

I’ve been wanting to tell this story. When Bonnie and I were talking, a couple of nights ago, I told her the story of meeting Poonjaji.

“When I first saw him speak, I saw something I’d never seen before, and I haven’t seen since. I’ve seen a lot of teachers, and I never saw in them what I saw in Poonjaji. Not a man speaking to a group of men and women, but I saw Being speaking to Being. I saw love pouring out toward itself. I saw God talking to God,” I said to her, “and the minute I saw that, it became the one thing I was truly interested in.”

I said I didn’t know what other people saw, but that’s what I saw. As I was talking about that experience, I looked into her eyes, and I began to allow Being to speak to Being, but I wanted a two-way street and not a one-way awareness.

She and I haven’t surrendered to each other, so my mind feels happy to debate the issue. Of course, our spirit doesn’t need to surrender to anyone. It lives in a state of surrender without change. But we are still uncertain of each other, and that’s to be expected.

When I began to describe that awareness of Poonjaji, I felt myself eagerly hesitant, realizing how profound that experience was for me, and eagerly hesitant is how I feel about Bonnie.

Last night, I remembered the soccer games I played every week in Seattle, and I missed the company of those people. I was ready to drive back to Seattle and be safe in that familiarity.
I’m more at ease in myself than I am in the possibility of a relationship, but that’s the character of the mind and not might be true. In my mind, I want to force a togetherness with Bonnie, and that’s a reaction to my uneasiness.

I’m not at the mercy of my mother, either. I’m bound only by my thinking. I spent many hours in her company, yesterday. She’s feeling low. I’m in the company of a woman who is profoundly unhappy, and I can’t change it.

We watched The Elizabeth Smart Story, last night. When she was rescued, finally, I was choked up, enjoying my happy sadness, my sad happiness.

“I hope she wasn’t raped,” Mother said, when it was over.

Then she wondered, “When did this happen?” she said. “How come I don’t remember this? Where did this happen?”

“In Utah,” I said.

“Maybe that’s why I don’t remember it. It was so far away. There was a girl, locally, who they always talked about. Elizabeth something. Maybe that was this girl.”

I’ve thought about talking to her about her memory loss, but I haven’t gotten very far with that idea.

“You have some problems with your memory,” I said, testing the water, but she didn’t respond.

I never comment on, chastise, or point out, her lapses. When she blamed the coffee maker for the water on the counter, I said it was difficult to see to pour the water.

When I was in myself, writing, and then coming home to take care of my mother, I was in a routine that wasn’t difficult to balance, and now I’m unhappy. In the recent past, whenever the possibility of a relationship would evaporate, I felt better, immediately. I don’t want that to happen, this time. I want to walk through these clumsy thoughts of attachment and step out into a shared acceptance. Since I don’t know what that looks like, I need to stop looking for it. I’m holding onto a possibility, when, if it’s true, it’s already true.
Potato Sausage

I’m going to pick Bonnie up at the library at 9PM. I stopped in, this afternoon and she told me she was working late, so I asked her if I could drive her home. She said she’d be tired. I said she’d be among friends.

I stayed in the library for a few minutes and then checked out a movie. At home, I installed the microwave and remembered the potato sausage we bought on Saturday. Mother came out to the kitchen, and we cooked it. She sat in a pulled-up chair by the stove, with two timers going, to watch to make sure the sausages weren’t overcooked. If they were, they’d split. They were. They did. They still tasted good.

I called Jaxon. We chatted amiably about my new girlfriend and his getting older. He’s 37, and that makes him on the edge of being no longer young, in the eyes of young women, and in his own eyes. He’s 6’7”, and the difference between him and his girlfriend, Monica, is the same as between Bonnie and me. I told him I was worrying about my new girlfriend, and I haven’t been in this reality for a long time.

“I’m glad you’re having an adventure,” he said.

I’m sitting in the pottery section of Fireworks. It’s a warm, sandy yellow in here, with bright lights over all the tables for the sake of artistry, and I like it. I’m not fond of shadowy rooms.

Across the street, I can see where the original Whitey’s Ice Cream used to be, with a new building near where I worked as a teenager. It’s raining in Moline, and the streets glisten in the car lights and the neon.

Talking to my son lifted me out of the doldrums. He told me to keep him posted about Bonnie. I said I didn’t think it was interesting to anyone but me. He said it was to him. I said I’d use him as a sounding board.

Mother was upset that the potato sausage split open, but I didn’t care. I liked them without the skins.

“It just happened, this second,” she said. “I don’t know how that happened. It just happened, this second.”

Her face was inches from the pan. She set the clock for half an hour. It had been forty minutes or more. I left her to it, because she seemed pretty competent, at the time.

“I don’t care,” I said, “they still taste good.”
She didn’t notice the new microwave. I’ll tell her if she wonders about it.

Jaxon and I talked about the decline in testosterone as we age. He said he was glad he wasn’t being ordered around, anymore.

“Yeah,” I said, “no more whips and chains. Just a light touch on the shoulder, asking, ‘Um, Steve, what about it, buddy?’”
Notes in the Night

I woke up at 5AM, and wrote down some thoughts that occurred to me about the qualities Bonnie and I seem to have in common. In recognition of common being, or common character, what one sees in the other seems to be a projection of oneself. It’s like recognizing the reflection in a mirror. The description of what one sees is self-reflecting as much as it’s a description of the other. As I recognize in Bonnie what’s true for her, and is also true for me, I see her more clearly, and I see myself more clearly. It isn’t like projecting it on someone else. That way confusion lies. Clarity tells the truth. I’m curious to hear her sense of this. We’ll see whether I’m projecting myself on her, or recognizing her in what we have in common.

There is in me, a characteristic that’s learned, that doesn’t come naturally, to announce or reveal my feelings. When I do that, I notice I speak with some effort. I’ve learned to blurt out things I might otherwise keep to myself. It seems to have come out of being a poet, or vice versa, and being with people who demanded that I tell them what I was thinking and feeling.

You protect your self-sufficiency, your autonomy. It makes you seem guarded or formally diffident, at a distance, and cool. I can’t ‘read’ you, because you don’t live in a world of emotions and thoughts, in reaction to the world around you. You live in a world of stillness, and stillness is unreadable. When you do open up, you seem instantly personable and present, warm and friendly.

It’s easy for you to neglect your physical self, because it isn’t the center of your consciousness, but when you live in the body, it’s an acutely felt experience, mostly pleasurable and satisfying. You can talk your way out of what concerns you, not out of fear, but as a way of gaining perspective, until it becomes clear and inevitable, and then you act. You’re self-motivated, not out of ego gratification, but out of the deeper motivations of your innate character.
Talking Hands

I sat in my truck, outside the library, in the rain. I could see Bonnie finishing her work, her gray head appearing, from time to time. She came out at nine, and we drove to her apartment complex.

“I can drop you off at the door,” I said, “and you can get some rest.”

“I need it,” she said, and I think it surprised her that I wasn’t going to come up.

I shut off the motor and the lights, and we sat for a while. We held hands. Her right hand was in my right hand, and a lovely thing occurred. Our hands danced and held each other in slow, constant movement.

“Our hands are talking to each other,” I said.

She smiled and nodded. We watched them move together like lovemaking, like dancing, like mutual signing.

“Let’s try the other hands,” I said.

We held left hand to left hand, and they spoke well with each other, but not as well as the rights. Right hand; left brain; intuition. Left hand; right brain; reason.

Our intuitive hands were in sync and at play with a softly muscular grace. Our reason hands were in a similar embrace but with less energy.

She showed me the pinky on her left hand. She had cut the tendon, when she was six years old, and it never could grip or bend, after that.

“It’s good for drinking tea,” I said, holding my little pinky out, for effect.

We made a date for Wednesday night, and I drove home. Last night, I woke up in the middle of the night and wrote the previous chapter. I’ve never been in a relationship where I recognized the other and, in that recognition, recognized myself.

This is unique.
Emancipation

Mother and I went to the Village Inn for dinner. It was an easy, quiet time. Her food was too salty, with too much pepper, but she didn’t complain in a crabby voice. She only said what she thought about it.

I held her hand, she held my arm, we moved slowly and in tandem with courtesy and kindness for each other.

“I don’t know why I move this way,” she said, and then she said, “I’m unsure of myself, I’m still afraid of falling.”

I went to the library, this afternoon, to leave off a couple of rental movies and pick up a couple more. Bonnie said my name, and I said hers. I purposefully acted like an ordinary patron.

“See you later,” she said.

It’s a pleasure to realize how much I care for Bonnie in such a way that superficial thoughts are irrelevant and incidental. In many ways, Bonnie has all the female attributes I desire, and yet that’s not why I am drawn to her.

I don’t trust love between a woman and myself. I’ve been with a lot of women, and some for a long time, and none is still with me. I used to say, “If only one would stay, I would still be with her,” but that’s not strictly true. I left more than left me, but I’ve never found one I could stay with and know that sense.

I might be at the beginning of a reality I can’t compare. I don’t know that for sure, yet, but I know what it feels like. If this is transient love, I’ll still have tasted its lasting counterpart. At least, in my imagination, I’ve finally seen the image of what before was only a remote possibility.

I sat with an enlightened master who recognized me as one like him, and it was impossible to deny. I declared I could never again accept less and dream it more. I am ready now to accept more and dream less.
The Same Tribe

The power went out, just as I was about to leave the house. I looked around and saw the whole building was dark. I could see and feel the effects of a big windstorm. Leaves were swirling and branches lay on the ground. I drove to the grocery store, and it was dark. I drove down the road to another store, and the power was on. I went home and set out candles and flashlights for Mother, who seemed perfectly content, and I left the house, again.

There’s so little to report about Mother, these days. She’s become quieter and more even-tempered. Mark writes long emails from California, and Mother likes to read them. He isn’t hesitant about giving his opinion about the encounters he’s had, in long run-on sentences without punctuation. I’m surprised she can make them out, but she does, by reading and rereading them, many times.

It’s an effective technique. She isolates a phrase and repeats it. It encourages attention to details that get lost in passing. Comprehension is not in getting the meaning of a sentence but in sitting with it for a time.

I have a date with Bonnie, and I’m excited about it. I notice the different nature of the excitement. Bonnie is different from previous attractions. I’ve been attracted to women for their beauty and their energy, always knowing, intuitively, that they were objects of conquest, in many subtly different ways, because they weren’t from my tribe. I’ve used that word to describe the un-crossable gulf, the human difference. That difference made the crossing exciting, but it doomed the landing.

‘My tribe’ may be a tribe of one or two or a few. I felt like I was making up a likely story if I said that to a woman who wanted to be with me, but now I’m beginning to believe what I felt and to trust myself.

When I met Poonjaji, I saw doubt, in the belief of my spirit, disappear. In meeting Bonnie, I’m seeing doubt in the belief of my human heart disappear.

I stayed with Papaji for two months. Bonnie commented on that, saying most workshops with teachers last two weeks. I’ll have been with Bonnie for two months, before I’m scheduled to leave here, but I got to sit with Papaji for three hour a day, and I only see Bonnie a few hours a week.
On the other hand, I’m with Bonnie one-on-one. It’s my habit to immerse myself in any new relationship, and I can’t do that with Bonnie.

I’ve been immersed in relationship with my mother for four months. It’s revealed itself to be little different than it was in the beginning, little different than it was two years ago.

A lot of what I had to say, in the early weeks, about the daily routine of our household, is still true. I still make meals, wash dishes, clean clothes, bring her things, buy what needs to be bought, take her where she needs to go, talk about the same things, watch the same TV shows, and deal with the same ailments, but we’ve fallen into a comfortable routine that seems to satisfy both of us.

The appearance of Bonnie is of so little interest to Mother, it hasn’t disrupted much. I bet that will change, as I begin to push the limits of that.

“You brought home so many girls, when you were in college,” she said, last month.

I don’t remember bringing anyone home, except Julie, who became my wife. My high school girlfriend, Vicki, was never invited to the house, by me or by my parents. My mother has taken thirty years to accept Scott’s wife. None of that bothers me, anymore, but it helps to keep it in mind.
Unchanged Forever

I showed Bonnie the pages called Notes in the Night, the characteristics I see in myself that I thought I saw in her. She agreed with them all. We sat in a back booth in Panera and talked for a couple of hours, before we went to her house and looked at the video I made before and during my trip to Moline.

On the video are scenes of Reuben and Joni, my house in Seattle, the lake nearby, dinner with my kids, scenes on the road in the Cascades and Montana, my visit with Gregory and Susan in Taos, shots of Mother and Mark. She seemed interested in all of it, but I noticed her interest in Taos.

“One of my fantasies,” I said, “was to find a place to live that neither of us knows.”

We touched and held, caressed and were generally affectionate with each other. It became undeniable that we are birds of a feather, from the same tribe, essentially the same, sympatico, soul mates. True soul mates discover that they have nothingness in common.

I said to her, repeatedly, that her behavior indicated to me that she returns to stillness no matter what else claims her. She said that was true.

As we were going into Panera, she recognized a woman from her class in school, and the woman asked if I was the one she was engaged to. I’m not. That relationship ended a couple of years ago. The woman did remember my brother.

“He was a tall one,” she said, “with a butch haircut.”

Bonnie talked about her sex life, which is primarily celibate. When she said she was slow to engage in sex, she was saying that was her nature.

I told her I had led a profligate life that ended when my drinking went bad. In the last ten years, I’ve had opportunities to have intercourse, but I couldn’t do it.

I told her I was glad she had breasts and hips, a woman’s body. At her apartment, I put my hand up the back of her sweater, touching her bare back, while we were entwined on her two wooden chairs.

She balked.

“That’s why you don’t want to have sex,” I said, “your skin is so beautiful, you need to guard the gold.”
Before our date, she had her hair cut. The bulk of it was trimmed away. She looked lighter.

“You’re gorgeous,” I said. “You were good-looking before, but now you’re gorgeous.”

I asked her when she knew she was good-looking, at what age. She laughed and said, “Sometimes, I think I look good, and sometimes, I don’t.”

“I like your face,” I said.
“I like your face,” she said.

So we like our faces. We were a couple, last night. She told me she was happy in her self-sufficiency, although people had begun to think she was a Lesbian, because she didn’t date. She told me that despite the happiness she found in her own life, she wanted to feel the dependency of a relationship, to be with someone. I said it was the same with me. I told her that when I wasn’t with anyone, I had to admit it was by choice, and that I liked my life, but I want to be with someone, too.

She said she never read Hamlet. That should be a deal breaker to my way of thinking, but instead, I talked about Hamlet like I was telling her a story.

I sat her on my lap, at her house, and discovered the real weight she carries on her small frame. In my mind, that’s usually a kind of protection against sexual aggressors. There’s a question still in my mind about her diffidence toward sexuality, but her affection, although it isn’t sexual, is genuine, and I love it.

I told her I’d always loved breasts for their softness. I said I became soft because of their softness. I said that one day I discovered I equated that softness with affection. She thought it was a remarkable bit of self-knowledge. I said it startled me, too.

We talked about our tendency to tell things we had seen or thought to others who didn’t get it that we weren’t bragging or showing off but just saying, “Look what I found.”

If she has a negative sexual attachment, it’ll be a problem for her to clear away, and if we continue to be as compatible as we were last night, and ever since we met, that problem will dissolve in the absence of any perceived threat.
When I picked her up at her apartment, she was full of happy energy and talkative. After a few minutes, I started to tell a story and stopped.

“Wait a minute, I don’t want to talk,” I said. “I liked it better when you were talking.”

“Why?” she said.

“Because I’ve heard myself. I like hearing you.”

During the night, and for the first time in our being together, I felt the words, “I love you,” come up in my heart. It happened twice, and I felt the genuine, humble truth of it. I didn’t say it. I said a lot. I said enough. I saw and heard and felt what I was looking for.

I can’t retell three hours of conversation, but I think I am beginning to write a new book, a second book, a second half to the book I began four and a half months ago.

When I got home, Mother was happily watching Letterman. She asked me nothing, and I told her nothing. This morning, it was the same. I thought about wanting to tell my mother what was happening to me, but that story is for another mother and another son. I ought to feel some empty loss because I don’t have the kind of relationship where I can rush into my mother’s loving arms and sing the news of my heart.

Or at least rush into my mother’s good graces and tell her about her expanded world. I’m capable of acting my part in that loving drama, but I know the one-sidedness of that kind of scene.

Bonnie and I agreed we were uncommon people, attached to the stillness at the center of our being, delighted by the world around us. Her parents are dead, her children grown, her siblings far-flung, and her interest in the social contract absent, and I am nearly identical to her.

Her favorite sister lives in Moses Lake, Washington, near Seattle, but I think the direction of our lives is still unclear. I found myself talking fondly of Taos, but I’m fond of other places, and I’m fonder, perhaps, of some place unknown.

My life has changed, and yet it feels remarkably and blessedly the same.
Bonnie said she’d call, today, about getting together, tonight, but she didn’t. Earlier, on my way home from writing, I thought about going to the library to see her, but I didn’t. If I went when she said she’d call, I would be trying to maintain control. I drove home and waited an hour past the time we were to meet, and now I’m here. Coming here, I was filled with the emotions of attachment. I use that word to remind me to bear witness to myself. At the same time, I was glad to see and feel the surge of emotion at a level I haven’t seen for a long time.

I imagined her being overwhelmed by my attention and assertiveness. I remembered a girl telling me, thirty years ago, “You come on too strong, and you fall too hard.” If I can’t open my heart and my mouth in the expression of love, then it’s only a game of social balances.

I imagined my life alone, even as I told myself that there’s probably some simple honest explanation for her not calling. Still, I imagined living out my days alone, and the feeling was not dark.

I imagined only being with those women who come toward me, but in the last few years a half dozen women have come toward me, and I wasn’t interested in any of them.

I feel sad and heartbroken, on scant evidence. I analyzed last night for fatal faux pas moments. Everything I’ve done with her has been toward realizing a true love with her. I’m long past being the victim of my desires. I’ve pursued the recognition of a love beyond that, a true love, and beyond that, a life together.

My brother once said that the only question a man can truly ask a woman is, “Will you marry me?” and that the only answer is, “Yes.” He’s right in the absolutist sense. Everything else is social friendship and manipulation for sex.

And, as soon as I felt rejection, I stepped apart and felt free. As I write this, I’m enjoying these feelings of heartbreak.

I can’t be with a woman who doesn’t want the full expression of my human heart. I imagined that was only possible in relationship with someone who was a free soul in a committed human life. Last night, that felt true, but I need to see that fullness in return.
My eyes are heavy, and I feel embarrassed to be seen by the patrons in this cafe. I look at them, anyway, because I have only one way to live.

The liberation of my spirit in the heaven of my own soul is the final goal of this love, whether it proves fleeting or lasting.

I’m probably exaggerating what I imagine, but I’m not exaggerating my reaction to it.

If Bonnie doesn’t want to make love to me, if she doesn’t want to be with me, there’s no exaggeration in my sadness. I felt this loss, last time, ten years ago. From that loss, I was given so much gain, that I’m able to embrace whatever occurs.

I finished writing, began to leave the cafe, and the lines of a poem came to me. I returned to my chair and wrote it out.

Heartbreak

Heartbreak
is the spoon of my life.

By its metallic edge I am fed the unexpected elixir of my spirit made bitter sweet.
The Call

After my episode of brokenheartedness, I fell into a consciousness about being who I am in the world.

When I got home, I wrote this passage,

You’re a deeply serious person, but you don’t reveal that, or even witness it in yourself, except when something occurs that requires it, and then you drop into another gear, like another state of being. That sense of a deeper, more serious self, is familiar and reassuring. It is your self that responds to necessity. At other times, you appear light and easygoing, when your circumstances don’t trigger any greater necessity.

I went to bed and slept well. This morning, I wanted to find out about Bonnie. I wondered about her calling and Mother naturally, or preternaturally, forgetting to tell me. I thought about calling the library, but, instead, I went down there. It’s only five blocks away. Bonnie was working, and her face lit up to see me.

“You said you were going to call, but you didn’t,” I said.

She didn’t apologize but pulled me aside and told me her cousin had taken her to the doctor, and then she went to her cousin’s house. She had told me, earlier she thought the bad water in her building was causing the irritation in her mouth, but the doctor said it was a potentially cancerous growth. The doctor said it might have been caused by stress, that her concern for her son had been causing her a lot of stress.

In the stacks, still within eyeshot of the other librarians, who didn’t know her worries, I reached for her arm, and then her hand, and held it.

“I was concerned,” I said. “I thought maybe you’d called and my mother didn’t tell me. Last night, it brought up some interesting reactions in my writing.”

She seemed curious, but I dropped the subject.

“Do you want to get together?” I said, “I do.”

“Tomorrow?” she said. “My cousin is coming to get me, today, and I’m tired.”

I told her about taking my mother to the hairdressers, tomorrow, and I suggested she call me, mid-afternoon.
She said she told another librarian about not reading Hamlet, and she said, coincidentally, there was a copy of Hamlet left behind. I gave her a new edition I bought at Borders, yesterday.

“This looks much better,” she said.

As I left, I felt self-centered. Even as I heard her fear of cancer, I’d thought of myself first. It crossed my mind, last night, that something serious could have happened to her, to cause her not to call, but I dismissed that, in order to soak in my own feelings.

I was still put off that she never called me and never apologized for not calling. I said I probably would have done the same, but I didn’t believe it when I said it.

She doesn’t yet think of me as her intimate, and as much as I think I do her, I probably don’t. I’m being intimate with my feelings about her more than I am with her.

I felt separated from her, and I’m not at peace in these feelings. Part of my over-reaction, and my under-reaction, comes from a sense of vulnerability. Whenever I reveal myself to another, my personal reaction is to feel exposed and to feel wrong. When I feel wrong, it’s a pretty good sign I’ve taken some healthy chances.

I imagined her falling ill with cancer and me not being considered an intimate. How would I feel? How would I deal with that?

My old girlfriend, Joni, fell ill, two years ago, and died of cancer. I hadn’t been with her for ten years, and I wasn’t her intimate, anymore. I went to see her, but I couldn’t care for her. I felt conflicted in my distance from someone I had cared about, someone who was in need. I suppose some of that is occurring now, in retrospect.

I took my mother’s rented Nebulizer back to the hospital. I thought about seeking out the nurse I found so attractive, but I didn’t.

I started to watch a war movie, last night, and I shut it off. I’ve lost interest in war movies about man/boy heroes and the long-suffering families who love them.
Borders Blues

I’m sitting on a sofa in a different Borders. It’s different, because of where I’m sitting, with live blues playing in the background. I’m back in the stacks between Art and Architecture, and Social Sciences.

I went back to the library, and the world had changed, again. It was almost empty and quiet, and as I walked to the counter, Bonnie and I became happily intimate. Tori and Ken were nearby, talkative and friendly. I went to the movie section and motioned for Bonnie, as librarian, to come help me.

We talked a bit about movies, and then I said, “It hurt my feelings that you didn’t call me, yesterday, even to tell me about the doctor.”

“I should have called you,” she said.

I asked her about the doctor.

“The worst part was the way he told me,” she said.

“He didn’t reassure you?”

“No, he was cold and unsympathetic.”

“The bum,” I said.

We talked about meeting tomorrow.

“And just hang out?” she said.

“Hanging out is good,” I said.

None of this conversation conveys the easy connection between us. I still noticed how thick she was around the hips. I’ve been concocting ways to ask her about it.

Then tonight, I told myself, “If you’re so lucky to find a woman you care about, who cares about you, who lives in the world the way you do, forget about imperfections, or else look at your own.”

By the time I drove home, I was feeling strong and clear.

“I got my balls back,” I said to myself.

I wasn’t running in fear. It wasn’t the phone call that never came, it was my attachment in fear. I act as if I’m complete in myself, but the absence of a loving other has been a hurt in the heart of my mind. All the benign endurance in the world can’t soothe the wounds of a scarred heart, a heart that’s been cut again and again in the same tracks, cut by others, cut by myself, cut by being an uncommon man.
I fixed Mother my favorite mix of catfish nuggets, rice, and veggies in Italian seasonings and olive oil. She said the salad was good. We watched Seinfeld, and I laughed out loud. Life in the world is so very simple.

In Borders Cafe, with blues in the background, looking around at all the academic hipsters and suburbanites in casual chic, I thought I might be in Seattle, perhaps even in New York.

A visiting blues man is teaching the crowd to play music on provided instruments, like a school workshop for the terminally tone deaf. He’s being adorably loving.

Bonnie’s beaming face is a beautiful light in the world, in my eyes, in my heart, in this momentary eternity.
Sex in Abeyance

I woke up at 5AM; thinking that what could doom my relationship with Bonnie is what protects it.

I’ve consistently chosen sexually attractive women, often with voluptuous bodies, who were protective of themselves, reserved, disinterested, and since I got sober, heavy below the waist.

My mother has thick legs and belly, and she’s locked up tighter than a drum in a prison. I notice that the only way my mother touches me is by touching my clothing. Her hands become sensual feelers. As she caresses my clothing, it repulses me, even when I recognize how good it feels, soft and gentle.

I’m protected sexually by choosing sexually inhibited women. I can desire them and not be threatened by them.

A girlfriend in college, the most sexually attractive girl on campus, swooned whenever I touched her sexually. I liked it, but it put me off. I felt left behind on the shore, as she roared off on a sea of sensuality like a powerboat compared to my bare feet. I believed she left me and went back to her previous boyfriend, because I wasn’t sexual enough for her.

Joni demanded I have sex with her, every day. I felt threatened by that. I desired her to distraction, but her demand gave her control.

Suryo and I were wildly sexual, during our first month together, always on my demand, as was her custom in her previous affairs, but she was relatively non-participatory in any passionate feelings. She never opened her lips to kiss.

She had been slim in her previous relationship with a doctor who demanded she give him sex on a daily basis and demanded she diet. With me, she was heavy. I wanted her to want me, sexually, but she didn’t.

Bonnie and I are a match in our sexual distance from each other. She’s affectionate, and I love to be affectionate with her. We touched and held hands, from the first date on.

She says sex is spiritual. That’s what my mother told me when I was first becoming sexual.
I believe sex is spiritual, but I believe spiritual acceptance opens the door to physical, emotional, and mental sex, as well. As a male, I believe physical sex also opens the door to the others.

Bonnie is slow to have sex, and I wonder if it isn’t a way to protect herself. The weight around her hips makes her walk a bit stiffly, and it seems to lock her up. It’s like she’s wearing a flesh chastity belt.

That protects me, too. I chose her, in some part, so I can be safe from a sexually aggressive woman, but it may simply lock me into a familiar relationship, born of habit. My parents were in such a relationship.

When I drank, I was sexually permissive, protected, and, I thought, free. After I drank, over the last twenty years, I would often react in dysfunction to what I didn’t want to do. I couldn’t sustain an erection, when I was afraid, hesitant, or repulsed.

Fear and desire are the most common sexual characteristics. In my private fantasies, I’m happy to be with sexually assertive, voluptuous women, but in my active relationships, I seek our sexually desirable women who back off from my desires.

I’m protected by that. I can feel my sexuality, and I can practice it as a one-way assertion, without feeling threatened by any woman’s sexual desire for me.

I’m repulsed by my mother’s occasional touch, but when she’s incapacitated, I’m affectionate with her. Maybe she was never sexually abusive to me, as I’ve wondered whenever I tried to explain this reaction. Maybe I only learned to mimic what was familiar to me, familiar to my mother and father. We model our parents’ relationship in seeking relationships for ourselves, unless we change, and here I am with Bonnie, in a relationship that continues to model some familiar patterns and break new ground in other ways.

It draws me to her, and may ultimately doom our being together, unless we can change it, unless I can change what I’m attached to. I’m addicted to sexuality in a particular way. Sex isn’t the addiction, it’s my relationship that addicts me.

If I can release my hold on that relationship, I will be free, and the same applies to Bonnie. I can talk to her about this, only if I see my addiction first, and not try to change her to solve my problems.
I went to the bathroom and picked a New Yorker out of a pile of magazines, to take back to bed, to read myself to sleep. The cover was a drawing of a man who had written in large prose on the floor, writing himself into a corner.
An Immodest Proposal

Mother was moving slowly and seemed especially slow to comprehend simple things, yesterday morning, but we made it to Carole’s for her three hour permanent. We took her donut cushion to help her with the pain in her tailbone. I dropped her off, gave Carole a hug, and drove to Bonnie’s.

She was waiting, and I drove back to my mother’s to get my camcorder. I came back to the car, filming, and made a short piece of tape of her and the two of us.

We drove to Borders and drank cups of chai. I wanted to ask her about sex, but instead, we went to the Eastern Philosophy section and looked at some books.

So much happened, yesterday, I’m having difficulty remembering. I might not want to remember in the same way I described the way I feel about my camcorder.

“Photography gets in the way, and then being present takes a back seat to being an observer,” I said.

She said her daughter-in-law, a terrific photographer, shows the same tendency.

I tell that, because I don’t want writing about Bonnie to get in the way of being with Bonnie. It’s not a problem with my mother, because writing about her is often being more present than being with her in her overly mental, debilitated consciousness.

I had to drive her home and go pick up my mother, but we made a date for later. She noticed her son getting into his car, and I called his name. We chatted, and she asked him if he was the one outside her window, the night before, calling her name. She was asleep, but a neighbor told her she’d had a visitor in the night. She thought it might have been me. It wasn’t. It was Chris.

He looked serious, but she said it was a look he often has. They visited, and I went to get my mother. I said she was getting a permanent, and he thought I said she was getting a permit. He wondered what kind of permit an eighty-eight year old woman would need.
I drove Mother half a block to Subway, and we ate lunch. She asked me, over and over, if foot-long meant hot dog. She asked me several times where we were. She asked about the place that sold baked potatoes. I finally guessed the Hungry Hobo, and she became confused about Subway and Hungry Hobo being so similar.

These sessions have become second nature to me, and I have no difficulty with them. At 6:30, last night, she seemed content and not resentful that I was leaving. By that time, she seemed capable, again.

Bonnie and I drove to Barnes and Noble and talked our way through the Eastern Religion section and the Poetry section. She bought me a copy of the *Tao Te Ching*, translated by Stephen Mitchell, and I bought her a copy of Kabir’s *Ecstatic Love Poems*, translated by Robert Bly, the book that inspired my greatest output of poems, nine months after I returned from India.

On our way to the bookstore, I said something about being the one doing the courting and her not courting me back.

She said, “Well, I don’t have a telephone or a car, it makes it difficult.”

She held my hand and rubbed my thumb with her fingers.

“There,” I said, “you’re courting me, now.”

I had begun to ask her about her sexuality, and I told her it was a pattern of mine to get in relationship with women who were attractive but weren’t as interested in sex as I was.

She said, playfully, that she’d pull away from me. I called her a ‘dance-away lover’, a line from a book I once read.

“That doesn’t sound good,” she said.

“It *sounds* good,” I said, “it just isn’t good.”

In the stacks, talking about books and movies, we began to language dance, discovering how we felt about a lot of things, laughing and playing. We weren’t identical in our opinions, but our sense of the world was in tune like two skilled dancers.

My skepticism began to fade. We drove to Panera, where we’d been a couple of nights before, and we found our corner booth open. Throughout the night, a new level of ease was obvious, but I still had questions about her sexuality. Was it the result of trauma? Was she reluctant to be sexual for reasons she’d never addressed?
We talked about her marriage, not a good one, during which she’d been able to experience surrender to her own great pleasure and joy, but her husband had not surrendered with her. I was glad to hear what she said about herself. It alleviated my fears, more than before. I began to think I was the one with the hang-ups. She talked about her other relationships and her gradual decision to abstain from unsatisfying sex.

I told her how I’d discovered, in the last ten years, that I was being celibate, despite my reluctance to admit it. We both abstained from sexual attachments in order to become clear in ourselves.

Then, she said what effectively changed my consciousness. She said she wouldn’t live with anyone without being married. I asked her why she was in favor of marriage, when she didn’t believe in doing anything just to belong to normal society. She said it was a commitment between two people.

“Then why get married?” I said, “Wouldn’t the two people know the commitment already. What would be the need for a marriage?”

“They can be married in private, but they should be married.”

I told her about asking Suryo to marry me, ten years ago, and how she’d laughed at the idea. She was used to living with people in and out of an ashram for whom love was the acceptance of existence between them all.

Bonnie asked me about the women in my life, “What did they think about possessions in the material world.”

Joni said she loved beautiful things, and wanted me to make more money. Suryo said she didn’t think I would ever make enough money, and that my lack of commercial success with my art and writing was a failure of ambition. She said she lived in this world, despite her experience with enlightenment.

I had said to the last woman, “Do you want a life, or do you want dinner companions?” She said she wished she was ready for me but she wasn’t.

Bonnie is unconcerned about the things of this world, and when I said I’d chosen to live a life outside of the willful, success driven limelight, she smiled.

We continued to talk and enjoy ourselves immensely. We drove to her house. I showed her part of a tape of the one-man show, NOTHING,
that I had put together, this past summer, and we cuddled. We cuddled, hugged, and eventually kissed goodnight.

When we were coming into her apartment, she said she wanted to go to India.

“I’m not going to India with you unless you marry me,” I said. “Two can play at that game,” I added. “They don’t take kindly to unmarried couples in India.”

She grinned.

Before I left her apartment, we embraced, and I said, “You have my heart.”

As I was driving home, I knew I would ask her to marry me. It was as clear as anything I’ve ever known. I lay awake until 2:30, thinking of telling her I wanted to marry her.

“Let’s cut to the chase,” I thought I’d say. “Will you marry me?”

I couldn’t go to sleep, but I didn’t care. I was awake with happiness. This morning, as we were getting ready for church, Bonnie called to tell me how much she liked my video.

“You’ve had some real insights,” she said, “It’s good. I’ve learned a lot, watching your tape.”

I thought of telling her what I felt. I’d wondered if, in the light of day, I’d feel different. I didn’t. I felt the same. I thought of asking her to marry me, right then, but there’s no urgency in this knowing. There’s no hurry, and there’s no need for delay, either. What is right knows the time, and then the time is right. To be with someone who has your heart is to lose interest in other questions and considerations. To clear away questions and considerations is to be able to know your own heart, to know the other’s heart, and to be known by the other.

Mother and I went to church, and then to Wendy’s, and then to Whitey’s. She was clearer but still unsure of herself.

“Are you and Bonnie going out, tonight?” she said, without any tone of judgment or apprehension.

“Not tonight,” I said, “tomorrow is Bonnie’s birthday.”

“Are you going to celebrate her birthday?”

“She has to work,” I said. “I’m going to pick her up then.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I don’t know,” I said, “I’ll think of something.”
Fearless Freedom

I wrote the following and put it in a blank card with a picture of waves breaking at the shore.

Bonnie,
On this special day,
knowing the depth
and breadth of my heart,
there is only one question left,
Will you marry me?
With all my heart,
Steve

I’m in that calm mind where thought is a pleasant thought of no thought. This transformation in consciousness has occurred, from anxious concern to peace in anticipation of momentous action. The loveliest of realities occurs in the human heart and mind when resolve is not an act of will but an inherent act of knowing. You can’t describe it, without it becoming a glory of the will, when it is the falling away of the will that shows it best.

I bought Bonnie a gift and a card. Then, I did laundry, made dinner, extended the cuffs of my navy corduroys, typed the last chapter, went shopping and picked up Mother’s medicine and a new bottle of wine. And here I am, writing, again.

Last night, Bonnie and I talked about our commonly held expectation that if nothing comes of our being together, we have faith that it will serve to the freedom of our selves.

Osho said, “Everything that isn’t necessary for your freedom will be taken from you.”

I want to add, “Everything that is necessary for your freedom will be given to you.”
Some Sun

I called my daughter, Rachel, to tell her about my mother’s sterling silver service set. Mother and I had been talking about her days entertaining friends and family.

“Young people don’t entertain like we did,” she said.

“I think Rachel does. We just saw pictures of her Halloween party. I think she likes to entertain. She’s not like her parents. I think she really enjoys that sort of thing.”

“Well, she can have the silver, if she wants it.”

“I’ll call her and ask her,” I said, “if you’re serious.”

She was. I got on the phone, and Rachel was happy to hear from me. She talked a bit about work and school, and then she said she was pregnant. I was very happy for her, and then I told her I was going to ask Bonnie to marry me, and we raved about that for a while. I remembered the silver set, and she remembered she had to study. We had been talking in a way that thrilled me.

“I love you, Rachel, I’m so happy for you,” I said.

“I love you, too,” she said, “Don’t tell anyone I’m pregnant. It’s so early, I’m still afraid of miscarriage. I want to be sure, before I tell some people.”

“You can tell Bonnie,” she added.

We enjoyed our startling news some more, and then I went back to the TV with Mother.

This morning, I acted as if our routine was normal, and nothing was happening. After lunch, I drove to the library.

I was nervous, in a way that’s become familiar to me. I had no doubt about what I was about to do, but the complacency of my habits had been undercut. I didn’t have a solid footing for normal thought. My heart was clear, and when I thought about doing nothing and saying nothing, instead of proposing, my heart was still at peace. But, clearly, it was time for action.

I believe the circumstances of our relationship together are solid, I believe that my sense of who she and I are, singly, and together, is solid, and I believe that what will be is already done.

Still, I was as insecure as a leaf in the wind.
I was in the library for a couple of minutes before I saw her. I crossed the front to meet her by the **New Arrivals**.

She smiled.

“It’s been a quiet day, nothing much has been happening,” she said. I thought, “That’s about to change.”

I handed her the card, and she smiled.

I motioned for us to step into the magazine area.

“Let’s go over here, I want to ask you a question.”

She opened the card and commented on the lovely scene of waves at the shore, and then she read the words.

She seemed stunned.

“Oh,” she said.

She told me, in fits and starts, as she has before, that she’s slow-moving in these matters. Still, she seemed happy. Several times, she thanked me.

“Let me say the words out loud,” I said. My voice and my eyes were vulnerable.

“Will . . . you . . . marry . . . me?” I said, distinctly, but more softly than I had imagined it.

She repeated not wanting to say anything, right then, but she never seemed to refuse or deny the possible.

“It’s how I feel,” I said. “I’m not in charge of what you say or do, but I realized the other night, that my doubts had disappeared. I realized that this is how I feel, and I knew I had to tell you.”

She was nearly speechless, looking lovely in a red sweater, and I didn’t feel discouraged. I’m sensitive to rejection and defeat, but I didn’t feel any of that. She didn’t laugh, and no negative expression burst onto her tongue.

“Will you still pick me up, tonight?” she said.

“Yes, of course,” I said.

I touched her a couple of times, and she touched me. I walked toward the door, and we parted.

“Bye,” I said.

“Bye,” she said.

Leaving the parking lot, I almost ran over a guy.
I went to the bank to do some business, and on an impulse, I told the
teller what I’d done. She told me about her second husband, who she had
doubts about. At 38, he’d never been married. Early on, he told her he was
going to marry her. She thought he was crazy. He proposed, after six
weeks, and said she could tell him whenever she was ready.

It was two years later, but, “He was my best friend - still is.”

“At the wedding,” she said, “his mother came up to me and said, ‘Is
he here?’” His mother didn’t believe he’d actually go through with it.

She was so happy she couldn’t finish the transaction. We talked for a
long time, and then I came here.

I did it. I didn’t get the immediate reaction I might have hoped for,
but I got a pretty good reaction, and my mind hasn’t invented a
catastrophe, so far. I did what was true to my spirit. What’s true to my
spirit is good for me. I feel a little sad, because I can’t bask in total
acceptance, but I notice that my body is completely relaxed. I did an
amazing thing in my own life. It’s something I could easily have never
done.

It’s a dreary, overcast, rainy day in the Quad-Cities. Yesterday,
Mother said Kenneth Patterson thought this was the garden spot of the
earth.

“I think it’s the armpit of the world,” she said, matter-of-factly.

In winter, when all the leaves are down, and the sky is slate gray,
dirty slate gray, it looks barren and empty.

On the darkest day, some sun is always shining.
Ready, Set, Stay

The more things change, the more they remain the same. I said my life had changed, and it probably has, but probably not in the way I imagined.

I picked up Bonnie at the library, and we drove back to her place. “Anything happen to you, today?” I said.

She was sweet and happy, and smiling; her eyes were light and bright.

In her apartment, I gave her two presents. She opened the wrapped present, a book. The other gift, a painting, remained in the bag.

She told me that the reason she’d called me on Sunday morning was to describe the reaction she’d had, watching my tape. Her reaction was a reiteration of her life-long disinterest in marriage, despite being married, with two kids, despite an engagement, three years ago, and despite my shocking proposal.

When we first sat down, on her two wooden chairs, I said there was an odd formality between us, like we were strangers, but intimate.

“Something has come between us like a wedge of unity.”

“That’s a contradiction,” she said.

“Yes, it is,” I said.

She persisted in her belief in living a separate life. Her sisters thought she was crazy.

“When I said I might become a nun, that was true. I still might.”

“I feel like I’m getting the psychic heave-ho,” I said.

Gradually, I felt a new freedom. I told her I had questions and doubts about her, but the way she talked on Saturday night, my doubts had been dispelled. Now, they were back, and I voiced them.

“I wondered about the weight you carry around your hips. Women who are protecting themselves do that, like wearing a chastity belt.”

“I’ve thought about that,” she said.

I also told her how amazed I was to have met her, that I’d met a lot of women, and no one had seemed as close a match.

“I thought we could have so much fun, together.”

After a while, I was out of my chair, standing, moving.
“I’m a passionate person. You can see that in my poetry.”

“Yes, it’s true,” she said.

“I wanted to be that person with you. I haven’t been able to do that, to be that with any one person. I didn’t think I could, until I met you. I’ve said a lot of things to you, and you haven’t balked at any of it. I thought you’d feel the same way, meeting me, someone like you, but I haven’t heard it from you. I wonder about that. Maybe I’m wrong about you.

And, why do you live in this place? There are places where you might not feel so alone in who you are. But maybe it’s your job to be one, alone, among so many.”

I finally gave her the painting, and she loved it. She looked at it with the same genuine interest as she had the book. She has an untrained eye, and she saw it clearly, pointing out the color changes among the painted flowers. I remarked on her perception, and she was surprised.

As I write this, it occurs to me that she doesn’t know who she is.

“I thought I had met my match, that I could be free with you. I thought you would be as happy as I was. Here comes this guy, like you, and you don’t seem to care.”

As the night went on, she told me, as she has before, how the brain injury, from her tonsillectomy, leaves her unable to respond well when she’s tired.

“And it’s past your bed-time,” I said. “You know, I’m available in the mornings, too.”

At one point, in the acknowledgment of the painting, she said, “You’re a good guy.”

“I’m not a ‘good guy’,” I said, as if it were a diminutive.

“You’re a good person.”

“You’re a good person, too. It helps to watch you at work with others. Some people fake being good, but I watched, and it’s who you are.”

There was no use in persuading her, and I felt free from wanting to do that.

“I was courting you, and now I’m not. When you said you wouldn’t live with anyone unless you were married, I took that as an open door. When I drove home, that night, I felt a sense of knowing I haven’t felt in thirty years. You should have a knowing of your own. I don’t want you to do anything that doesn’t feel right for you.”

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I felt looser and freer. I was moving around her room, not sitting like an anxious suitor. I felt like my own self, free of entanglement.

“You chose me, too. And I chose you. Maybe, I chose you to be done with the idea of being with one person. The only other way I’ve been as free was with a lot of people. When I was on stage, I discovered it took fifty people to match the energy. When I was with Papaji, there were two hundred people there, and I turned toward them. I felt completely at ease with them, just as I did with him.”

I danced with her. She kissed me. We were still happy with each other.

When I decided to leave, she said, “I want to walk you down.”
I’d always left her at her door, but we went to the lobby, instead.
“Call me, sometime,” I said.

It occurs to me, in the moment of this writing that you, dear reader, are my match, my fifty; my two hundred.

By the time I got home, I was feeling strong, I felt good. I said what I needed to say, of which this writing is only a fragment.

She still cares for me, but maybe she cares for her solitary path more. And, maybe my fears were justified. Maybe she’s blocked in her sexuality, some way she doesn’t realize. Maybe there’s just no energy there.

Maybe I’m destined to a singular life that needs a roomful to match it. In my first one-man show, one night, I saw it work. In a room of fifty to a hundred people, from the start to the finish, it was as if the audience and I were breathing together.

I imagined that kind of unity with Bonnie, but maybe I was wrong. Maybe I was right, but it’s not time yet. Not ready. She used that expression a couple of times.
Coming Home

I feel freer, but I don’t feel happier. I feel relaxed. I’ve been on a crusade for nearly a month to be with Bonnie, and now I’ve made friends with a nun. I won’t fight city hall. She is what she is. I am what I am. ‘Be as you are’ was Ramana’s mantra. I accept that, and I choose to live it.

I like it when I’m under no obligation to any other human being, and I’m hearing that Bonnie likes it, too. I thought we could form an alliance of non-attachment. And maybe we have, simply by recognizing each other. I say this as if I know she has the same feeling I have, but I can’t be sure of it.

The greatest difference between us is that I still want to hold and be held. I want to enjoy the pleasures of the flesh. My body still seeks its ease and release, and I don’t want to deny it.

We held hands in love, I thought. Nothing in Being denies the joy of transient being. Sensual life is transient. Only with another who understands the nature of temporal pleasure, along with knowledge of the eternal, can sensual pleasures be cherished for what it is. Sex is spiritual, and the spiritual wants to live in all we do.

Just now, I unconsciously put my left hand on the back of my right hand, and they lay together in a moment of comfort and care.

Mother was a bit cranky, today. She thinks all the food I cook is too salty. She asks me if I salted it.

“I don’t salt anything,” I said.

“Don’t buy this, anymore,” she said.

“Bring me a cookie,” she said, in an uncharacteristically demanding voice.

The last couple of days I’ve jumped up to bring her things, but a couple of times I forgot to bring what I said I’d bring. My mind was balking at some of my service. It’s an old habit, from my childhood.

Her tailbone is killing her.

I discovered my computer has been failing to send messages, as far back as four months ago. I went back and re-sent all my unsent messages. I got some curious responses to messages originally sent in response to outdated emails.
I took my glasses to my idiosyncratic optometrist to replace a nose pad that fell off. After listening to his analysis of the failure of the educational system and his exhortation to include his wisdom in my book, an hour later, I got my glasses back.

At the library, I got a copy of Passage to India, to catch a glimpse of the India I love. The night before last, I watched Y Tu Mama Tambien, a delightful movie, but what caught me in my sensual heart was the scene of a street-side cafe. I saw images that conjured, from my memories of the Yucatan, the warm light, the rickety table, the dusty floor, the smell of cooking, the sensual ease of entering the establishment of unassuming people and pulling back a chair.

I want to come home to my heart, in this transient world. I want to experience, in my transient life, what’s true in my awareness. I have, in a few humble ways, away from this overdeveloped nation.

Finally, the woman who is just like me, doesn’t want to be with me. She’d rather be alone. Instead of being deeply hurt by what I could feel as a rejection, maybe I’m the same as she is. Maybe I’d rather be alone, and not be with her, even though I’m just like her, and she’s just like me. Because we are the same.
A Poem Read to a Singer

I’m in an odd state of mind. I want to say I’m lost, depressed, angry, disappointed, and brokenhearted. I’m seeing all of that, and I’m becoming clearer. All my adult life, I’ve been carrying two torches, two levels of love in my heart.

Jesus and Mary made love every night! (Emphasis for effect.) Jesus and Mary were lovers. She was his intimate. She wasn’t a prostitute, and she wasn’t a nun. She was a sexual woman who spoke intimately with Jesus about God and love, in all it’s manifestations. They were man and woman. They were passionate partners. He was the luckiest man on earth to find such a woman. Upon his ascension, he came to her, not to one of the boys. She carried the message of his reunion with the Eternal back to the world.

That kind of union has been my theme, and I’ve only been able to carry it out in my poetry and in moments with some women. My love poems have outshone the women they addressed.

I can look back on my adult life, and see a constantly repeated theme of speaking the truth and loving the other to whom I am speaking. I write and paint to the eyes and ears of another. I speak about my love to all, but I speak my love to a woman.

My best poetry is written in recognition of love for a woman, and I’ve never met a woman who wrote back, spoke back, or loved me back in kind, with passion and sincerity, with one eye on the Eternal and the other on the temporal.

This episode with Bonnie proves my point. I’m not satisfied to be with her in love of the Eternal. I once imagined a woman as a loving presence in the room. Then I looked for a woman who was an active loving presence in the room. I want to make love and express my love with passion equal to my poetry.

Bonnie has gone along with me for quite a while, but when it came to a declaration, she fell even more silent than she was before. I need a partner with imagination and awareness, one who loves to make love and play, one who has passion and is passionate, and that seems to be my endless pursuit.
I seek a relationship in which we say to each other, in the throes of a passionate embrace, “I recognize the god in you.”

Joni said we were gods, but she meant it as if she and I were gods in the flesh. Every human being is a genius, a god, the center of the universe, beautiful, powerful, and wonderful, not in their personal self but in their being.

Suryo wanted Papaji to recognize her as a goddess. He laughed and called her a goddess. Over the next half hour, walking away from the master’s house, she went into a rage, about what I can’t recall, because it ended as quickly as it came.

We are not gods and goddesses in our personal lives, but in our being. How can anyone be conscious in this unlimited reality without gasping in awe?

To be in love with another is to admit the miracle and share it, and then it bursts from stillness, like a poem read to a singer.
Love’s Trajectory

Living in Love’s Trajectory

I’ve written quite a few love poems
in recognition of the love that’s found
in the absence of love’s object.

And if it were perfectly true,
I’d be done with poems written
in love’s trajectory, but it’s
where I live, in this life.

Born in the heart of love,
I live in love’s trajectory,

I know, as an archer knows,
that arrows are not my love,
nor is any of their targets.

But what if love is motionless,
what if desire doesn’t seek out love
but leaves love behind?

What if love is motionless, and the only way
to find it is to be still, with no desire to seek it out?

What if love exists only in the effortless quiet
of my soul? What then, my poetic self?
She’s a nun, in the truest sense, and I’ve helped her recognize it. I could make a joke about it, but I’m happier to see the truth of it.

I went to the library to give her the poem, Love’s Trajectory. I found it in an email I sent to someone else, last year. When I came into the library, she was happily surprised to see me. We said ‘hi’ and ‘how are you’.

I gave her the poem, and went into the stacks. I found a book of Rumi’s I hadn’t seen before, and she came back to tell me how much she likes the poem.

“I thought you would,” I said. “I thought it was about you.”

“This is how I feel. I just can’t express it as well as you can. You have a gift.”

“It surprises me, too,” I said.

I pointed to the last line of the poem, What then, my poetic self?

“This is my problem. I’m living on two tracks, on two levels, and they are both important to me. It’s who I am, in this life. I think it’s sinful not to love this life, to love someone.”

“I sure can pick ‘em, can’t I? I fall in love with a nun.”

“You’ve taught me a lot,” she said. “You wrote in the copy of Hamlet you gave me, ‘Skip the nunnery.’ When I read that, I thought, I can’t do that.”

“I hope we can still be friends,” she said, and her eyes betrayed a genuine and gentle hope.

“It’s up to you,” I said.

“Why?”

“I think I overstated my case. I need you to call me.”

As we parted, she said, “I want to talk to you about that Rumi book.” She said, in the stacks, that she didn’t connect with it, when she had connected to other of Rumi’s work. The book is called THE GLANCE Songs of Soul Meeting.

I left, feeling lighter and freer.

“She’s a good woman,” I said to myself, “She’s a good person.”

I didn’t feel any more sexual attraction, any more desire. I looked at her, and I liked her for who she is, not for being my lover.

I drove to Fireworks.
“I’m early,” I said to Mona. “I’ll have to come back, later, just to keep the balance.”
I asked an older woman, Robin, what her name was.
“I’m Robin, I see you all the time,” she said.
“It doesn’t seem right to see people, time after time, and not know their names,” I said.
I noticed a change in my demeanor. I felt upright, grounded, clearheaded, free in my spirit, open, happy.
“It was all in my head,” I said to myself, thinking of Bonnie, and then I knew it wasn’t all in my head. It was in my heart, and my head tried to frame it.
“Maybe, that’s your twin track,” I told Bonnie, being a nun and being in the awareness of herself. If she was still stuck at that level of awareness, she’d be a nun, for sure. I thought she’d be a beautiful nun.
That is what she is, without the habit of one.
I used to joke that my spiritual advisor was Nun the Wiser. Apparently, she still is.
Thanksgiving Preview

I called Jaxon, and we talked about finding a woman. “It’s harder,” he said, “if you’re not in the mainstream.”

The cleaning lady called and asked if she should come tomorrow, or next Friday, a week later, the day after Thanksgiving. It set Mother on a loop of questioning.

“What day is it?”
“Thursday.”
“Is Thanksgiving tomorrow?”
“No, it’s a week from today, next Thursday.”
“Is she coming tomorrow?”
“No, next Friday, after Thanksgiving?”
“Today is Friday.”
“Today is Thursday.”
“When is Thanksgiving?”
“Next week.”
“What day is today? It says here; Thursday.”
“That’s right. It’s Thursday.”
“Is Thanksgiving tomorrow?”
“No, it’s a week from today. It’s always on Thursday.”
“What day is today? Tell me again.”
“It’s Thursday.”
“Is it Thanksgiving tomorrow?”
“No, that’s next week.”
“Is she coming tomorrow?”
“No, she’s coming a week from tomorrow.”
“What day is it? Is it Wednesday?”
“No, it’s Thursday.”
“When is Thanksgiving?”
“Next week, a whole week away.”
“I thought she was coming tomorrow.”
“No, she’s coming a week from tomorrow.”
“Is tomorrow Thanksgiving?”
“No, Thanksgiving is on Thursday, a week from today.”
I’m not exaggerating. That’s what she said. At first, it’s exasperating, but if you go with it, it has a kind of rhythm, like *Who’s on First* by Abbott and Costello.

She’s been saying the exercising she tried to do was the cause of her problems.

“I shouldn’t have done the exercising.”

She said she got down on the floor to exercise and couldn’t get up. She thinks it did more harm than good. I suggested she start slower, and I praised her for trying. She agreed she should start with something simpler.

“I’m worse off since I tried to exercise,” she said.

“What day is today? Tell me, again.”

“It’s Thursday.”

This afternoon, she was surprised by the movie channel. I’ve told her about it, before. Mark used to watch it for his own pleasure, almost exclusively.

The mother on Raymond drives me nuts, but I don’t say much about it. I’m happy to leave mothers out of our conversations. There’s a lot to be said for letting go all the petty, and not so petty, grievances of life.

I invited Mother to go out to dinner, tonight.

“I thought we were going to have Denver sandwiches?”

“That’s good. We’ll do that.”

“I couldn’t go out to dinner. I don’t know what I’m going to do about Thanksgiving.”

We’ve been invited to Marilyn’s, Scott’s mother-in-law.

“We can worry about that, next week,” I said.
Chop Water, Carry Wood

Before I went back to see Bonnie, I felt foolish in love. I said to myself that I had stuck my neck out toward women, and none had chopped my head off. I wasn’t sure what I meant, but I meant it. Then I read, in Coleman Barks’ intro to The Glance, that Rumi’s friend-love-mentor-other self, Shams of Tabriz, was longing for a companion before the two had met. A voice asked him what he would give.

“My head,” he said.

I wanted Bonnie, or any woman, to chop off my head, by being the other that inspires my poetic awareness, wherein my head, my thinking self, is lopped off, rendered useless.

Rumi had a beloved friend, a lover in the least worldly sense, a friend he embraced, whose companionship opened his heart to himself, until there was no separation between them.

This is my quest, and it’s not romantic. It’s my already known nature, reflected in another. I don’t expect love to free me from life’s complexities. I don’t expect sex to divinate my body. I expect what I already am to be seen in another. And I expect the mirror to dissolve into sand, into water, into air.

Now that my sojourn to Bonnie’s nunnery has changed, I’m content to have made a friend I can carry in my heart.

Today, I imagined meeting a woman and finding my home. It wasn’t a vision; it was an image of what might be, different from what has been. I imagined a casual conversation that opened into a steady recognition. I imagined another artist whose beauty and eloquence, in love, makes me still.

Mother called the hospital, this morning, to reschedule her PET scan. It’s been a couple of months since she canceled it, and she’s suddenly worried. Last night, she had heartburn, and, during the night, she fell, raking the top of the dresser by her bed, knocking everything onto the floor.

When I got up, she was dressed, and almost everything had been put back in order. She spilled her pills, and a couple of them were smashed, so I got her a new set. I got her breakfast and coffee, the doctor’s number and
two Tylenol. When the nurse called back, she took down the time of her PET scan, but I had to call back and get more details. I wrote it all out, so she’d have a reference sheet, when she asked more questions.

We got an email that Dad’s sister, Dorothy, the same age as Mother, is living in a home, with her memory nearly gone, and her son and husband trying to figure out what to do next.

Mother said Michael Jackson could never had molested any children, because he’s too famous. Nobody that famous would do anything so stupid. She still sees the world as a conscious thought process. She has no sense of unconscious motives, addictions, or character defects. It’s a world of choice and will for her. Her condition remains a struggle of her will to overcome its challenge.

Rumi said, “I see my beauty in you.”

Being with Bonnie showed me what’s possible. What I seek is what I saw in Papaji. I’ve seen it through the lens of my poetry, many times, but I’m drawn to see it in the one I love, without language. Language to follow, if it does. I never know, and I like it that way.
My Eyes Delight

After I’d been back from India, for a while, still basking in the grace of recognition, still feeling the love that flows in everything, I tried an exercise, at night, in the cafe I frequented. I began to look to see who loved me. Who, in their inherent self, showed love I could recognize?

“Who loves me?” I asked myself, as I gazed out across a sea of faces, men women, and children, people known and unknown to me.

I wasn’t looking for people who liked me, or acted as if they loved me, or were attracted to me, but whose soul self was open, whose love I could feel, unchecked. I never knew who I might recognize. It was often the least predictable, the least likely, the least conventionally desired.

I just now looked around the Borders Cafe, on a bustling Friday night, and I saw a little curiosity and that’s about it. These are cloudy spiritual waters, no matter how bright one’s beacon might be.

As I drove here, tonight, I drove along River Drive on the Illinois side of the Mississippi, in Moline. The city had put up white lights through the lower branches of trees, on bushes, signs, and pavilions. In the dark, all that was visible was the strung lights. In the trees, they formed unlikely shapes, extended strings of light, sculpted shapes formed by unconscious art. I’m guessing the workers put them where they could reach from stepladders. The tops of the trees were left bare. The mile of lights was a gathering of bright figures, beautiful and startling, standing quietly present, with the wide, dark waters of the Mississippi behind.

When Rumi said, “I see my beauty in you,” he was saying how grateful he was that his love for another had pulled that love so far out of himself that he could see it. His partner in brilliance was so openly in a state of love in Rumi’s presence, he saw himself shining in that love. He saw his own love, as the recognizer of such light. This is the nature of real love, given, taken, and known, without boundaries.

By my poetry, and in my awareness, I’m blessed to witness the nature of my own heart, and now it’s time for me to witness my nature in the heart of another.

As I begin to witness more than the love I feel, I begin to witness the love that others feel. I’ve been so focused on the nature of my own being,
my first inclination is to see how my nature shows itself. I say that I love, and I see the way my love declares itself. It’s time to see the way love declares itself toward me.

The way I’m speaking may sound convoluted, but I’m speaking of non-specific love, the love that defines us all and has no ownership. The one who claims this love is claiming the air for his own.

“Who loves me?” is not a parlor game. It’s a terrifying, risk-taking state of vulnerability. One must do it. It’s not passive. And it’s not wanting to be courted. It’s not a self-serving glory of the ego. It is the active engagement of one’s being with the active being of others, without prejudice or fear. The love that is the nature of our being is the primal energy source. It’s not for the timid.

There’s no commitment to act upon this innate action, but there might be. That’s unpredictable. There’s no will in this way of being, but there may be what looks like will. The action of the energy that comes from the source is one step from Being Itself. It begins to take on the appearance of will. The farther action gets from the source, the more it adopts the nature of human will. That’s why it’s always right to step back into the source and see the nature of one’s actions from the best perspective.

I thought of my mother, too, as I was saying, “Who loves me?” When I’m conscious of who loves me, I’m already moving in a world of love occurring. I’ve sat in my mother’s presence, in the way of being one who is in the reality of love itself, and occasionally, rarely, she will join me. I don’t look for her to love me or not. I look to see who whose heart is fueled by its own nature.

I am love itself. You are love itself. We are love itself. Which of us is fueled by our nature? When I stop asking which of us is fueled by mental, emotional, physical, or spiritual thought, those ways lose primacy. They aren’t dismissed; they just aren’t primary.

In their place, I look to see who is with me in love itself. By asking myself who is with me in love, I begin to live in love, in order to recognize it.

My brother thought it was odd that people prayed to get God’s attention. I said the purpose of prayer wasn’t to get God’s attention, but to get one’s attention on God.
I ask, “Who loves me?” not to live in the attention of others, but to live in my own attention, with them.

“I see my beauty in you.”

The sun shines bright in my eyes’ delight.
Here We Go

The last chapter sounds like a conclusion, a last chapter, but before, when I thought I was done, I was only beginning another phase. So, here we go.

Today is the Fortieth Anniversary of my first date with my future wife, the mother of my children, and it’s the day President Kennedy was shot.
A Restaurant Painting

Mother was having a bad day. Several times, she was shaky. Her mood was low. When I picked her up at Carole’s, she staggered, getting out of the drier. We went to the Village Inn, and she went to the bathroom. I picked a book near the toilets. She complained it was too close to the kitchen. The coffee and the pancakes weren’t hot, the portions were too small, the entire breakfast was too much to eat, her seat was too low, and there was a bump in it.

“Oscar used to complain every time he was seated by the kitchen,” she said.

“Every time?” I said.
She began telling me familiar old stories.
“You’re bored,” she said.
“I don’t like it when you’re crabby. You get crabby, when you have a bad day, and you’re having a bad day.”

She had trouble getting out of the booth. I needed to steady her slow progress out of the restaurant, more than usual.
“I hope nobody sees me like this.”
“You shouldn’t feel bad. It happens to everybody.”
“No, it doesn’t.”
“To almost everybody, in some way.”
“Not you.”
“It will. When I look at you, I see myself. I had a heart attack. I never thought that would happen to me.”

As we were leaving the parking lot, she said, “I wish you could die when you want to.”
“That would be great, if you could die when you decided to die. It happens to some people.”
“Not me.”
“You’re too strong.”

As we were driving home, she said, “You used to like me, Stephen.”
“When was that?” I said and laughed.
“I thought you liked me.”
“I still do,” I said. I lied, but it felt good.
“You’re a much loved woman,” I said.
I was told I was a much-loved man, in the last days of my drinking. I knew it was true of her.
“I can tell people like you, and always have,” I said.
“There are women at my church who told me they love me.”
“I can see it in their eyes, when they see you,” I said. “You’re just having a tough time, right now.”
“Yes, I am.”
“Whenever I feel good,” I said, “I don’t think anyone’s bored by me. You think I’m bored, because you are. You’re having difficulties, and it makes you unhappy. It’s a tough time, but you’re doing well. You only complain a little bit.”
I held up two fingers, not far apart.
“When I was taking care of my mother, she never complained. I’m lucky to have you, here, Stephen.”
Living in the recognition of love is not for sissies. As soon as the mind becomes conscious of being superseded by a greater awareness, it goes into another gear, to regain its hegemony.
I sat in the Village Inn, looking to see who was in the openness of the heart where love has no name, and I couldn’t shake the habit of thought that prevents my own openness.
Coming out of such a clear state of awareness, that degree of vulnerability leaves me open to everything, even its opposite in crabbed thought. Pinched thought is the norm for my mother, and I’m susceptible, in her presence. It’s not her fault. She’s not unusual.
I was happy to be provoked to tell her things, that in a more composed state, I’d avoid.
“I don’t like it when you tell me I’m bored. You insult me when you do that. I’d prefer if you asked me if I’m bored.”
“You looked bored.”
“I don’t think you can see me well enough to say that.”
To tell her that her complaining was the result of her physical difficulties, and then to tell her that she was loved, felt good. Even telling her I liked her didn’t feel false.
Because I am not like her, I don’t like her. Because I am like her, I like her. I didn’t need to paint the complete picture for her.
“I like that painting, behind you,” she said, in the restaurant. She said that, once before, about the same painting. I agreed with her, then.

“I think it’s mediocre,” I said, this time.
“The colors have faded,” she said.
“It’s a restaurant painting,” I said. “It’s designed to offend no one.”
As I write this, two mothers and their young children have come into the cafe. One little girl and her slightly older brother were trouble. She yelled, and her mother ignored her, occasionally telling her, to no effect, that she should do this or that.
She and her brother sat at a table, and the brother tipped the table. The girl yelled, and the brother, looking in his mother’s direction, lowered the table so the girl was the only obvious disruption.
Two women sat at the next table next.
One asked the other, “Why this table?”
The other said, “Because of the kids.”
The girl yelled and I said, “Maybe, we should all yell. Nah, it wouldn’t work. The kids would love it.”
The mothers and kids moved to a table even closer. The two women moved away.
“We don’t want to take the chance,” one said.
Another couple sat at the next table. The woman went to the rest room, and the little girl, about five, sat at the man’s table.
“What’s your name?” the girl said.
“My name is Benjamin. What’s yours?” The girl seemed uninterested in what he had to say.
“She never used to do that,” the mother said.
“Come and sit here,” she said, “and I’ll buy you a book.”
“Uh, oh,” I thought, “bribery instead of authority.”
Finally the gang left, except for the girl, who didn’t answer her mother’s call from across the cafe. Instead, she looked at me.
“What’s your name?”
“I want you to go to your mother,” I said.
“What’s your name?”
“I want you to go to your mother.”
“What’s your name?”
“I want you to go to your mother.”
“What’s your name?”
I said nothing.
“What’s your name?”
“You’ve never been disciplined, have you?” I said, “I want you to go to your mother.”
“What’s your name?”
She was cute as a button, adorable, and incorrigible. I said nothing, looked at my writing, and ignored her.
Her mother finally came and got her, after watching the entire colloquy. I was happy not to succumb to the little girl’s manipulation. I didn’t get angry. I enjoyed it. I could have done more.
“Children who don’t accept authority before the age of five are a torment to us all,” I thought.
I went in the bathroom, on my way out of the cafe, then came back to the table and wrote it down. I was going to talk to the two women who moved, but I let it go.
The 50 Yard Line

“Are you going out with your girlfriend, tonight?”
“No,” I said, “I’m not.”
“What happened?”
“Our relationship changed. She became a friend.”
“I thought she was a friend.”
“She still is, but it’s not romantic.”
“I didn’t know it was.”
“It might have been.”
“You brought home so many girls, when you were in college.”
“I still don’t remember that. I think you’re exaggerating.”
“I’m not exaggerating, unless I’m lying,” she said. “I had to cook for them all. I had to make up a bed for them.”
“They stayed over? I have no memory of bringing any girls home, except Julie. I don’t remember who that could have been. I dated a lot of girls, but I didn’t have a steady girlfriend, until Julie, and I married her.”
“One girl had her hair tied up in braids. She was very pretty.”
“I wonder who that could have been.”
“There was one girl we saw on the street in Moline, and you said, ‘That’s the girl I’m going to marry.’”
Who? Julie Donaldson?”
She scoffed, “No. It was Sally Ainsworth.”
“Oh, Sally. I don’t know why I didn’t marry her. I even went to Valparaiso University, in my junior year, just to see her.”
I wondered about Sally. When I visited her at Valpo, she confessed to me, tearfully, that she’d had sex with another guy on the fifty-yard line of the deserted football field in the middle of the night. I said it didn’t matter. A year later, I met the girl I married, a girl who’d slept with half a dozen other guys. I didn’t care. But, I hadn’t slept with Sally, or anybody else, for that matter.
I told Bonnie I’d come close, several times. For many years, I drove by one of the spots where I came close, and I always wondered why I didn’t go all the way, so to speak. Then, two years ago, I passed the same
spot, and, without thinking, I said to myself, “If I’d have fucked her, I’d have married her.”

I was shocked by my own statement. That was why I didn’t have sex with Sally Ainsworth. I didn’t want to marry her. But why not? Especially, after telling my mother, “That’s the girl I’m going to marry.”

And, all of a sudden, she remembers that, and I don’t. And, she remembers all those girls I brought home, and I don’t.

“I think you remember one other girl and Julie, and you think it was several girls.”

I’m sitting in the Art Section at Borders.

“Is it OK to take my coffee into the bookstore?” I asked the barista.

“As long as you don’t spill it. And then we’re coming after you,” she said.

“I’ll spill my name on the carpet,” I said.

I believed, all these years, that my mother was indifferent, if not hostile, to the girls I dated and the one I married, and now, in her dotage, she seems to have been paying attention, all along.

When I got home, I thought again about Sally. She was the only girl who really liked having sex with me. She was passionate about it. As I thought about that, I began to think I was seriously dysfunctional, back then and, maybe, today. But, I thought, she didn’t seem to be having sex with me; she was just getting excited about sex, like boys do. I have come to the conclusion, after years, that there was a good reason why I didn’t stay with the women I didn’t stay with. And they had good reason not to stay with me, whatever that might have been.
The Simple Truth

I keep remembering more of my Village Inn conversation with Mother. We were there for over an hour. I had become quietly angry, and anger is not a family tradition.

“I never got angry at you boys,” Mother said.

She had been retelling the stories of Wanda’s anger at her son and Larry Kunkel’s anger at his son. Both of them had hit their sons, and it disturbed my mother and father.

“Your father never hit you,” she said.

I smiled, weakly. We’d had this phantom conversation, before.

“Five times, he hit me,” I said.

“No, he didn’t.”

I remember the times. It made an impression.”

“He never hit you, not in my presence.”

“That’s probably true. I don’t remember you being there.”

“Well, you never saw me get angry,” she said.

I tried to remember an incidence of her anger, any incidence, other than the general tone of anger that was common, but I couldn’t.

That may be when I became testy. I’d spent nearly five months in conversation with her denial, in which the past was a rosy glow of happiness and good times. That’s what I believed until I went away to college and started dragging legions of hungry, sleepy young women home for Mother to room and board.

I drove by Sally Ainsworth’s house, this summer, and I tried to think of ways to contact her, but my attempts at contact with women of my era have gone for naught. I’ve been reading the poetry of John Clare, a contemporary of John Keats, my hero, and, as they both have said, “Full many a night have I wandered in thoughts of love past.”

“You don’t like my stories,” Mother said.

“I’ve lost interest in the past,” I said. “It doesn’t interest me as much as it used to.”

“Well, it interests me, and I like to talk about it, and who else can I talk to?”
Immaculate logic. As long as I’m here, this is my duty, but I think, after being with Bonnie and being with myself, in the open range of the truth, to sit with Mother in the narrow confines of denial, became too much.

Then, when I switched the consciousness to the truth she knows, I was fine. Talking about her physical condition, and the genuine affection her church friends have for her, relieved me of my angst.

“Be a saint, or be corrupt, and then I won’t have to emulate you.”

Those words came into my thoughts, several days ago.

A while back, I wrote that you, the imagined reader of these words, were my foil, my perfect other, my Shams of Tabriz, the one who challenges beauty and truth out of me. I’ve written several of these books, without any real hope of publication, and it’s never seemed to matter. It’s in the writing, that I’m aided and abetted. This kind of book is probably written more to myself than any other kind of book I write, but these books aren’t diaries. Without the sense of a real reader, I wouldn’t be so positively affected by the process.

I can’t keep a diary or a journal. It doesn’t interest me to listen to myself speak in the language of daily habits and behaviors. I need to be pulled outside myself by this form. For that I’m grateful. It’s why I understand the need for so many to hold in mind a personal god, to whom one can address oneself, in the language of the soul.

It’s my belief that there’s a common ground for all of us to speak in the language of the soul, and it doesn’t require being a saint, or being obedient to an externally held god, for the language of the soul to flourish.

I’m not a saint, and I’ve been as corrupt as many, but I’ve seen the simple truth of this existence operating in me and me in it, and I see how accessible it is to all of us. Still, we are corrupt in our habits and behaviors, not in being evil by nature. Except in being habitually self-defining in our human nature, we’re not separate from the truth of our eternal nature. We’ve defined ourselves out of our simple divinity, into a more complex corruption in which divinity has been banished to the garden, not from it.

As Adam and Eve, we’ve sent God to his room, back to the Garden, as we wander in a world of our own making, until we discover there’s no wall to the garden and we never left it.
Mother didn’t go to church this morning, and she took a long time getting dressed. I was conscious of our conversation, yesterday. I remembered looking at her with unfeeling eyes.

“You used to like me, Stephen,” she said. I was nice to her, last night, and again, this morning, but some part of me is content to be her attentive son and not her doting son. She’s been in a long period of discomfort, and her manner is less than congenial. No fault to her, but I can’t play the loving son who tries to raise her spirits with a song and a dance, as I’ve done in the past. Apparently, it was enough for her to believe I liked her - enough for her to be impressed by it.

I brought her fresh cinnamon rolls from the oven, and coffee, for lunch.

“Don’t say I never brung you nothin’,” I said, like my father might.
“Can’t ever say that,” she said.

I don’t believe I’m being negative to my mother. Her mental state is prone to denial and illusion, and a reliable honesty is a fair antidote, as it is for everyone. I believe there’s an honest good that can be conveyed, that doesn’t diminish either of us.

I was going to say, “At least I hope so,” but I don’t hope so, I believe so. The simple truth begins to be freedom, and it doesn’t apply to anything less than everything.
A Good Will Walker

I’m reading Rumi and John Clare, and the confluence is no coincidence. Clare writes with straightforward directness about the natural world, and Rumi speaks in a passionate, ecstatic voice of the supernatural reality. Thinking of these two writers, I see my own way, in writing as straightforward and direct as I can about the reality Rumi knew.

One of the first things I told Papaji about my sense of recognition was that I felt, not more spiritual, but more real. As time goes on, I see how I’m being responsible to what occurred between my and my erstwhile teacher.

Mother was a little daffy. She’s had these periods of mental slippage before, and she’s become lucid again. I can’t predict what will come next. I bought her a small bottle of Aleve, because she wanted to try it, to alleviate her body aches and tailbone pain. The pharmacist warned me that she shouldn’t use it before, or in conjunction with, aspirin, since it kills the effect of aspirin as a heart medication. I explained to Mother not to take Aleve with her own meds but any other time was OK.

She asked me, several times, to explain it. I wrote instructions for her on a pad in large letters. Problem solved. She came in the other room and explained it to me.

“I can take Aleve any time . . . except not with my other medications.”

“That’s right,” I said, and I was proud of her.

The answering machine coughed up two old messages, and I knew we were in for an adventure in understanding. I had to explain it, and then I tried to dismiss it. Changing the subject worked.

I bought her another walker from Goodwill, and that meant she now had two walkers. It was confusing, for a while, but she liked the new one better than the old one, so that helped.

She’d been sleeping all day, except in brief periods, and last night, she didn’t sleep as well, in bed. I have no way of keeping her awake during the day, but she’s no bother to me at night, so I expect it to work out. I told her about all her daytime sleeping.

“Sleep is good for your body,” I said, in my non-medical, non-expert opinion. “It’s a way for your body to restore itself.”
As I came into Borders, tonight, I thought of taking the night for poetry, for myself, but I didn’t do it. I still haven’t gone to the movies, yet, but I rent a lot of videos. It’s a good excuse to go see my new old friend, Bonnie.

True love lives in absence.
Clare

You live in absence.
Rumi

The pain I think I feel
when I feel your absence
is when I feel your presence
and try to hold it.
Abhaya

I sit sunbathing in grace,
in the absence of reassurance
not comforted by the familiar,
and the door opens in me everywhere.
Abhaya
By What I Said

When I wrote that last page, I felt a twinge of Bonnie. I went back and looked at the line from Rumi. In that same poem, after saying, “You live in absence,” he said, “More is required,” and “Love wants an arm and a leg.”

I called Reuben. I asked him about a camper top for my truck. I asked him about his gallery and his own painting. I told him about Bonnie.

He was convinced, by what I said, that Bonnie and I weren’t as finished as I thought. I found myself agreeing with him.

After the call, I felt happier and more excited. As I was going to bed, I was unsettled. I’m not sure I like thinking about Bonnie. I began to plan to see her at the library. I began to re-envision a future with her.

When I think of being with her, I’m at peace, but when I think of getting there, I’m unsettled and unhappy. I tried to re-envision the peacefulness I felt, this last week, but my attachment to solving the riddle of love is an agitation of the mind.

I wrote, last year, that it was my habit to put myself in harm’s way, but that it was not my habit to put myself in love’s way. I need to go see Bonnie in the way of love. If I can simply put myself in love’s way, I’ll be fine.

If I walk in the world the way a much-loved man walks, I’ll invite the recognition of the occurrence of love, in me by others, and in others by me.

John Lanchester, writing about the poet, John Clare, in the New Yorker, said, “Poets need luck in life, and they need it in death, too, if their work is to find readers.”
A Perfect Example

She wasn’t there. I felt the small town claustrophobia of the library. The librarian I met, last week, working with Bonnie, checked out my movie and a book I had on reserve. I thought she was pointedly conscious of me as Bonnie’s friend. If I was a novelist, I could describe the excited shyness I thought I saw in her.

Tonight, I have a different take on this latest incarnation. I’m very much like Bonnie in our hearts, and in being the simple beings we are, but, in another way, I’m not like her.

When I think of abandoning my way of being busy in the world and withdrawing to a way of being in my stillness, I’m always at peace, but I seem to have some public role to play that hasn’t been played out.

Like Bonnie, I’ve imagined a life of retreat, at peace in a monastery of some description, not religious, and I don’t feel any loss in that, but I’m also drawn to a public life, and I feel a fulfillment in that.

Reuben is a hopeful romantic in imagining my love life. I met an artist, at the closing of his last gallery, and I felt a common bond with her that he believed would flourish, but it didn’t, and I think, now, for good reason.

I need to be with a woman who can accompany me in the extremes of my life, as a public and private man, in a profound and profane mix of realities.

I felt, standing in Bonnie’s world, today, that she’s content with it, and I’m not. She has no energy to join me beyond her world and no traditional female obligation to link herself to a man’s life.

I’ve come here as a visitor. I’ve come into an awkward fit and then found Bonnie, living a life I’d choose if I were bound to this reality. If I lived here, I might live the way Bonnie does. It’s a way of life I imagined, back when I was thinking of coming here. I imagined caring for my mother might bring out in me a time of retreat, in stillness.

Everything is a perfect example of itself.

In other words, I see what only appears to be true, become true, as I see it more clearly. In some other words, the deepest beauty is skin deep, if only one can see it. In even more words, if you want to predict the future,
look at the present in its truest reality. In last words, what you see is what you get. When you get it.

Bonnie is who I am, but I’m more than what I am. It’s true that love is motionless, but love becomes itself, in motion as well. I recognize my stillness in Bonnie, but my stillness is moving.

“All at once, in moving, I am still,” I wrote, in a poem 25 years ago, long before I went to India.

Street Wise

I’m permeated by an unaccustomed sense of wellbeing, a peacefulness, in the midst of a warring climate.

This time, the eye of the hurricane is not an emptiness at the center of turbulence, but a calm.

It’s an identification, in the senses, with all that does not feel its senses.

I think to make some metaphor of the street, yet, the sense is not of the street, but of the ease and warmth of the blooded animal that walks in it.

I am that man who breathes, whose heart holds the limbs in embrace, unbroken by thought.

All at once, in moving, I am still.

Bonnie is the heart of my heart in my hometown, but I don’t live here, anymore, and nothing is wrong.

“Nothing bad is happening,” I heard myself thinking, as I walked into Borders.

I can talk to Bonnie, now that my mind has caught up to my reality. I can love her, now, without hesitancy, knowing the unfathomable depth of our recognition, and knowing I have no need to marry with it, or with her.
Our proximate marriage has been overshadowed, from the beginning, by its endlessness.

(Doesn’t he talk sweet when his tongue is untied?)
One Drop Falls

Mother was back to her recent normal self, not sleeping as much, more lucid, a tad bit friendlier.

“Get one of those baked chickens that Jewel has. And some yams.”

I dreamt about my father. He was in a state of intense agitation, having done some wrong, it seemed. He gave me a bundle of money, saying I would be getting a lot more. He had a young wife. She had a daughter, a child named Julia. I told Julia she had a lovely name.

Time for stillness,
this time is always being born.

Time for stillness,
a drop of rain for the sea.
Beach Boys

I emailed Mark to tell him the storage facility in Glendale had called to warn him his bike could be stolen, since it was tied on the top of his van, without a lock. He called us from Hawaii, and then I checked my mail for this message.

That bike is not worth the trouble to climb up on the roof, unhook everything, lift it down to steal it; it is nice of them to call tho. Its my sign to everyone that there is nothing in that van worth stealing. And I just finished typing a whole message but leaned on the wrong button here on Scott’s keyboard and it erased everything. I hate computers. My Radio Shack used to do that; I would get to typing fast and hit two keys at the same time and suddenly the screen vanished; I lost good stuff that way; I hafto be too careful for me to like computers yet; errors should not be fatal but its nice here in Hawaii for a month; LA was very depressing w/cold nights and fear of police knock on door at 4am; hap once at UCLA then I slept in same spot the next 3 nights just like Berkeley tho I got tickets in LA where I didn’t in Berkeley; it all began Fri at Cal St Northridge where I got copies of Wyatt Earp document from closed special collections and on my way out stopped at travel agt in student union who had this ticket for Monday and I had til Sat closing to buy it so I searched all day and found Glendale w/first month $1 special for total $42, parked it Sun night and caught city bus to LAX 8am for $2; take same bus when return 12/28 a Sun morning 6am so have all day to get there; month here is too good to pass up; doing laundry for Liz now gotta go--Markie

Mark called, and we talked for half an hour. Mother was delighted to hear him, but she had a hard time understanding where he was and for how long. He’ll be at our brother’s house for a month, until the end of December.

“Tell me, again,” she said, “I can’t picture it. You’re at Scott’s house?”

She and Mark were there, a year ago.

I was happy for him. I made him promise to have a good time. The phone Mother was using was cheap and sounded loud on any other extension. It was as if she was shouting, but she wasn’t. It hurt my ears, and I became almost angry, too angry for the reality.

When I was preparing dinner, Mother kept telling me I could have bought whole, uncooked yams and cooked them in the microwave instead
of the mashed, canned yams I bought. I became abrupt with her, for just a moment; long enough to warn me something was up.

“What happened to Bonnie?” Mother said. “Did you fall out with her?”

“We’re still friends,” I said.
“It’s none of my business,” she said.
“I’ll tell you about it, next week,” I said.

I went by the library, again, today, and . . . no Bonnie.
I thought, “She had to go to the doctor. I hope she’s OK.”
I don’t know if my edginess is due to my separation from Bonnie or not. I feel some cynicism creeping in, a sign of unhappiness and self-pity. It occurred to me that, as a character in this story, my feelings about the end of our relationship were too easily transformed, but that’s a judgment looking for a case.

Maybe, I’m just raw. The appearance of the aura of poetry speaks to that as, not a cause, but an ambiance.

It’s all going on inside itself.
Nodding Off

I took Mother to the hospital for her PET scan. I had an hour to kill. I thought about driving to the library to see about Bonnie. I decided to get some coffee at Fireworks, instead. I felt better for the decision. I felt warmer, not out of balance. I drove to the library, and Bonnie wasn’t there. I didn’t ask anyone about her. I felt like an undesirable, a stalker. No one there gave me that sense. I invented it.

Mother wanted to go to the Belgian Village for soup. We got Cream of Broccoli soup and sat in a booth. Mother complained about everything she wasn’t praising, i.e., the soup. She said the soup reminded her of the Soup Nazi on Seinfeld. I said her complaining reminded me of the Italy Episode on Raymond. She said she wasn’t complaining; she was just talking.

I tried my darnedest to pay attention to her, as she talked about Katherine’s small kitchen, about Marilyn’s even smaller kitchen, about how lucky she was to have a great kitchen at her old house. She had me read the menus on the wall. I did, and then I got a menu from the counter. I gave her several looks of interest. This time she didn’t say I was bored.

I once wrote, in a poem about my father, that there is no love in the story if there’s no love in the telling. He loved to tell stories. Mother loves to remember stories, but there’s no love in the telling. She’s not a storyteller. She’s a memory talker. She’s a rememberer.

I stood by her as she questioned the woman behind the glass cases about items for sale. I’ve become acquiescent in my role, in lieu of being a participant on equal footing. I’ve become the one in charge and the one who fulfills her needs. As we ate lunch, I felt fine, and I wondered how successfully I seem to accommodate whatever situation I’m in.

I wonder about Bonnie. Have I done what I’ve done so many times before? Did I accept the limitations of a relationship in hopes that the virtues would override the rest, and then cover my doubts with dreams?

I’ve become invisible in my mother’s house by only doing what needs to be done, within her world. I’m not seen in the substance of my character, so I don’t act in that substance when I’m around her.
I felt freest when Bonnie said she wanted to remain solitary. I’ve had notions of acting out of my deeper character, but I don’t. I’m free in the way I live here by acting consistent with who I am, but only in ways that are compatible with my surroundings.

I’m true to myself, in the way I live my life. Even with my mother, I’m not false, but I’ve accepted the limitations of my surroundings in limiting my expression. I don’t shout. I don’t dance. I don’t sing. I don’t make love. I don’t speak what I know. I had begun to imagine a life of freedom with Bonnie, and I wanted it. Am I failing my freedom, when I accept this partial birth syndrome?

I’m not alone in this. I look around, wherever I am, and I see souls nodding off, in the eyes of men and women.

Sociopaths and psychopaths act out the freedom of their egos. We envy the drunk his selfish freedom. Dictators and a few exhibitionist celebrities act out their personal fantasies. Anything that can be imagined between two human beings is occurring, somewhere in the world, right now. Movies and literature are full of imagined freedom.

I feel a limitation that doesn’t exist. I’m describing the mind’s reality. In the heart of the heart, no such limitation exists. My thoughts are dwelling on a difficulty, because I’m dwelling in thought.
I don’t know what’s going on. I have no big picture, and the small pictures are falling off the mantle.

A woman came to the door of Fireworks, just ahead of me, and she held the door for me. I saw her name on a tag. Kimberly Wiseman. I wondered if she lived her name. We glanced at each other in the cafe.

She’s doing some writing in a notebook, reading from what may be a text. She’s probably in her 40s; still trim and looking like a real estate salesman or a singer. She spoke to two guys, and I guessed it was about performing somewhere. She has a ring on her wedding finger, but she doesn’t act married. Married, in the Midwest, is the end of sexual allure, used only to find a mate. She’s not my type, and despite my long experience, and my most recent experience, here I am, imagining the miracle.

I wish I had Bonnie’s resolve, born in her as a child, to live an ascetic life, without contrary energies. I’ve contemplated it for twenty years or more. It would make my life a succession of easy choices. Maybe that’s the point. As a poet-artist, I live in uncertainty, open to the unseen inevitable. I seek a love life that parallels the love life I have with the Muse.

Love is absolute and unchanging, but the occurrence of love, in form as a work of art or as a lover, is transient. I don’t fear the absence of love, I fear the loss of love’s occurrence.

As extraordinary as the embrace of love is, I ought to be devastated when it subsides. But it subsides into itself, and that never goes away. There is no away in love, only the fading of its form.

Waves of love from a sea of love. Or call it poetry. I want to call it something other than love, as tired as that word is, how approximate it is, but no word is adequate.

I feel better. I waved at Bonnie, and crashed on the shore, as I wave at poetry and crash into a poem, as I wave in passing at Kimberly Wiseman, as I am waved into being from the source.
Turkey Day

Mother and I went to Marilyn’s for Thanksgiving. It was delightful. Her son, Matty, was as friendly and engaging as she was. I felt at ease with him. His friend, Randy, was there, too, and he was friendly but quiet. Marilyn and Mother get along pretty well, and the whole time was enjoyable.

I saw a round Swedish welcome plaque, next to the front door.

“I didn’t know you were Swedish,” I said to Matty, who is Hispanic like his mother.

Marilyn has a flair for the decorative. She got the plaque, because she liked the design and the sentiment. Her house is a pastiche of available styles, a mélange of well-chosen cast-offs, since Marilyn, at 75, is limited to the money she gets from social security.

“She’s an avid reader,” Mother said, and Marilyn pointed out the stack of books she’s currently working on.

“She doesn’t have a good reading lamp,” Mother told me. “I don’t know how she does it.”

Marilyn put out a feast of Thanksgiving favorites; turkey, stuffing, mashed potatoes, gravy, candied yams, cranberry sauce, peas, asparagus, rolls, apple salad, and pumpkin pie. Her landlord’s friend gave her a cake, and we had that, too.

Marilyn’s other son, Philip, was supposed to be there, but we were told he came to the door, saw Randy and Matt, and left. We didn’t get any explanation, except that Phil was a ‘prima-donna,’ according to Marilyn.

Randy couldn’t hear out of one ear, because of a bicycle accident, a month ago, when he ran into a dumpster and suffered a concussion.

“The doctor says the deafness might go away,” he said, “I hope it does.”

“It’s funny when I’m talking to him, and he doesn’t hear a word,” Matt said.

We talked about family, for the most part, and it was congenial and relaxed. After dinner, Mother needed to use the toilet, but it was up the narrow stairs in Marilyn’s small apartment. I helped her up the steps and left her to go into the bathroom.
Matty told me a story of a guy whose car broke down and he needed to wait for a friend. Someone in the complex took pity on the poor fellow and let him wait on their porch.

A car finally pulled into the complex, and the guy said, “Oh, here’s my friend. Can I use your bathroom before I go.”

They said yes, and he went inside, while they waited for his friend. Nobody came. The man robbed them and ran out the back door.

I told Randy and Matt the story of going to see Brandon play waterpolo in Berkeley, when I was in San Francisco, two years ago. I told them another story, too, and I noticed how animated I became, feeling some of what others have called charisma, which is nothing more than a feeling of being one with the story, the audience, and myself. My ease with Marilyn and Matty may have released my energy into the story.

I went up to see about Mother, as she was coming out of the bathroom.

“I was calling for you,” she said.
“I never heard you,” I said.
“Her toilet is too low, and I couldn’t get up. There was nothing to hang on to.”
“I’m sorry I didn’t hear you,” I said.
I helped her back down the stairs, one step at a time.
“We need to go home, now,” she said.

She rested on the sofa, and pointed out Marilyn’s false fireplace, which she moved around the room as she pleased. I gave Matty ten bucks for his mother from my mother, since Marilyn usually refuses any help.

Mother was shaken by the mountain climb and her temporary imprisonment, but we both had a good time. She wolfed down her meal with gusto, including a second plateful and pie. When we got home, I called Liz and told her how much fun we’d had at her mother’s house.

She’d already talked to Marilyn, and she was eager to tell me the story of her ‘prima-donna’ brother, Phil.

When Phil came to the door and saw Randy and Matty, he turned around and left, because they had stolen a considerable amount of money from him by writing bad checks, presumably for drugs and alcohol.

Liz said how pleased she was we’d gone to her mother’s house.
“I really like Matty,” I told Scott.
“He’s a likable guy,” Scott said, “but he’s done some bad things.”
“I’m surprised he didn’t end up in jail,” I said.
“He should have gone to jail, but Phil never called the cops on him.”
Last night, I remembered my ‘charismatic outburst.’ I remembered a bit of the same at Bonnie’s, that last night.
“That’s the real Steve,” I thought. “Maybe if I lived in this repressed reality, I’d bust out of it, like that, just because of the pressure.”
Going to bed, I thought, “I haven’t found my public voice, yet, or I’d do it, more often.”
I thought about writing it out as a spoken piece.
“It only works when it’s spontaneous,” I thought.
As I contemplated the sense of speaking, I was in my voice. That bit of self-awareness put everything else in perspective, and I felt free of concern about Bonnie.
This morning, after the visit of Pat, the cleaning lady, who still looks exactly like the granny in the Tweety-Bird cartoons, Mother and I were sitting quietly, and she said, looking at me, thoughtfully, sadly, “Are you eager to go home?”
“You mean, to Seattle?”
“Yes.”
“No, I’m fine,” I said.
Two days ago, I wanted out of here. Wanting to leave where I am means I’m not present where I am. Whenever I’m truly present, I’m happy to be wherever I am.
Nuns and Hugs

I went to the library, yesterday, and talked to Bonnie. We agreed to get together on Sunday, to talk about Rumi. It was a curiously awkward, easy meeting. I saw her more clearly as someone separate from me, and I was happy to set up another time for us to get together.

Last night, I went to a basketball game with Jeff Miller, Mark’s best friend. We talked about people we knew, about Mark, about my parents. He remembers Mother upbraiding him for a bad attitude about something he ate and didn’t like.

At the game, I ran into one of my junior high school teachers, now 75, who once insulted me, when I was in college and had long hair. He came up to me at a basketball game that my brother, Scott, was playing in, and he said, “Hello Gladys. Oh, I’m sorry, I thought you were your mother.”

I told him the story, and he said he loved the name Gladys. He had three relatives named Gladys, and Gladys was the name his golfing buddies called a bad golfer. I wanted him to speak to me as a person, man to man, but he called me ‘the smart one’ and continued to talk as if he was giving a speech.

It was great fun to go to a game, and mother approved.

This morning, she asked me about Bonnie.

“What happened to you and Bonnie?” she said.

I thought for a second, and she backed off.

“Oh, well, I don’t have to know.”

I went ahead. It turned out to be a good thing for me to try to articulate.

“Bonnie wants to be a nun,” I said. “It’s no good for me, but it’s good for her.”

“Is she Catholic?”

“Yes, she is.”

“Does she like the idea of being ordered around?”

“It’s not like that. If you live in a monastery, life is simple. Bonnie is quiet and spiritual. It’s something she’s thought about since she was a kid.”

“You have to accept the discipline.”

“And if you do, it’s not hard to live there.”
“She’s a Catholic?”
“I like to say she graduated from the Catholic Church.”
“Graduated? You can’t graduate from the church.”
“I graduated from the Methodist Church, and I graduated from A.A. I learned all they had to teach me, and I moved on.”
“Isn’t she too old to become a nun. I guess not.”
“There’s no rule. She had children, and she had to wait until they were grown.”
“What about the father?”
“She’s divorced. Twenty years.”
“I have a friend whose daughter is a nun. She was the weakest, shyest girl. She couldn’t do anything for herself. But I guess everybody’s not like that.”
“There are all kinds of reasons people want to live a monastic life.”
I was glad to explain. It helped me. I liked what I was saying. It made sense. I didn’t tell Mother about alternative spiritual situations, ashrams, non-religious retreats, etc.
“A friend in Seattle lived in a monastery,” I said, “and she loved it.”
Another example of the women I’ve become attracted to, even as I try to keep alive my dreams of a physically satisfying life.
Jeff and I talked about the athletic decline that comes with age. He was an all-around athlete and coach, who loves to run, but injuries and a knee replacement brought that to an end. He also told me how he begged Mark to stop researching and write his book, and try to get it published, even though Mark doubted it would be published. I said nobody published my books, either, but it would be good if he could finish it.
“He may keep putting off the end of it simply to keep it alive in his own experience.” I thought.
Going to Carole’s this morning, Mother said she was cross-eyed, not dizzy, but not normal, either.
Carole and I hugged.
“That’s my hug for the week,” she said.
“Mine, too,” I said, thinking it might not be true, but it was true.
My Cafe Muse

I look at Ann, my cafe muse, and I’m still attracted to her. Bonnie is the right kind of woman for me. She’s the right age and temperament, and she prefers the monastic life. Ann is young and out-going, and her energy and demeanor appeal to my sense of being in the world. Of course, I haven’t heard about her monastic leanings.

Mother and I went to the Belgian Village for spinach soup.

“A stranger in this town would never know about this place, and this soup,” she said.

I noticed, when I was talking to Bonnie, yesterday, that I was in an affected state of mind, a state of attachment. I wondered, afterward, if it would ever be possible for me to be with a woman in a clear state that opens the recognition of love in being, that writing poetry affords me.

I enter into any love predisposed to a heightened reality. In other words, I fall in love, ruled by desire, and I hope love will rise from attachment. This is like hoping God will come to me if I love the church.

Papaji said some desires weren’t misleading. A burning desire to be free is one. I think the key to that is ‘burning’ desire. A burning desire will burn away even the desire it begins with.

I do not have a burning desire to be with Bonnie, or Ann, or anyone. What is my burning desire? It is to be awake and aware. And yet I continue to court a dream state. I court it, and then I set fire to it, with a burning desire to be awake and aware.

As I spoke to Bonnie, yesterday, I saw my eyes seeing, being themselves at their best, in vision and not just in looking. When I entered the library, I thought of falling back into my soul self, of recognizing the presence of the room, and I did, even in my affected state.

In my soul self, there is no loss of love.

And my body wants to hold and be held.
A Clean Mirror

“I don’t have the gift of gab. All my articulation comes from time spent in language, trying to speak truthfully. People with the gift of gab respond to any situation with words, thoughts, and more words. I respond with silence. Whenever anything strikes me in wonder, my answer is stillness. I have the gift of quiet.”

I thought about why I haven’t become a speaker, and that stillness is why I should become a speaker. Instead of being unsure in my stillness, I can depend on it for my surety, my sureness, my suretudeness.

The surety that this book is done again and begun again. I’m engaged in more autobiography than in my mother’s biography, these last couple of days, and that implies something. I’m feeling good in myself, again, and that’s a good start.

I wonder about the nature of the universe. Why is there this world, this reality; this universe? If God were content to be God, this never would have become what it is. It is in the nature of God to create himself in form. If God isn’t content to be God, why should I be content to be in God. If it’s natural for God, in his metaphorical splendor, to become less of himself, fractured into these myriad forms, isn’t it natural for me to recognize myself in lesser forms, as well? Lesser forms made full. Each of us, including God, is the macrocosm and the microcosm.

What I said about charisma is a lesson to me.

“Charisma is nothing more than being at one with the story, with the audience, and with myself.”

And, stillness is my strength, not my weakness.

I’m beginning to see the mechanics of my way of being.

“There’s no love in the story, if there’s no love in the telling.”

At Marilyn’s, with Mother out of the room, I was storytelling in charismatic play.

I want to enjoy my gifts. I enjoyed my gifts at Marilyn’s. I didn’t, with Bonnie, it occurs to me.

“You belong on stage,” a friend said, years ago.
Mark writes from Honolulu that Jessica has the poster of **The Blood & Turnips Poetry Festival** on her wall. He said he’d never heard of it.

“Could you do it, again? Is there a tape of it?” he said.

It’s a work of the past, but it may be an indication of some interest, internally and externally.

Being with my mother is being in the limitations of my narrow self. Because it’s not what I’m bound to, I’m free to become what I sought, when I left this place, as a young man. Maybe I can leave here, this time, with clear eyes and a clean mirror.
A Gentle Mantra

The idea of enjoying my gifts struck me like a concussion of happiness. It occurred again, last night, when I wasn’t thinking of it, and I realized how beautiful that concept is.

I grew up not enjoying my gifts. I kept associating with people who helped me not enjoy my gifts. I’ve been with people who appreciated and supported my creativity, but the sheer enjoyment of my life in these gifts has been avoided, especially by me.

I’ve been acting as if my gifts were never enough, unless they yielded the fruits of fame and fortune, but those things are unrelated. Last night, I had to keep telling myself what I had said. I kept forgetting it. It became a gentle mantra.

I’ve gotten close to finding a partner by being with those who see the good and the worth of what I’ve done, but there’s been no participation in the enjoyment of the gift.

The obvious partner for my self-recognized enjoyment is an audience. The performers I’ve always liked have enjoyed themselves in the moment of their performance.

I went to Bonnie’s house at 3PM, and she wasn’t there. I waited twenty-five minutes. I threw pebbles at her window. I asked a woman if she knew Bonnie Frye, and she said she only knew her a little. She let me in the building, against building policy. I knocked on Bonnie’s door and left my card. I waited, when I heard footsteps. It was the woman who let me in. She asked me if I was one of Bonnie’s sons.

“I’m older than Bonnie,” I said.

“I wasn’t . . . I knew she had two sons, that’s all,” she said.

I drove home and asked Mother if Bonnie had called. I checked the answering machine. No call.
Off the Hook

When I got home, I tried to check my email, but my modem wasn’t connecting. I discovered Mother’s phone was off the hook and had been since Scott, Liz, and Mark called, at 1PM, nearly four hours, during which Bonnie might have tried to call. There was no message before that time or since.

Mother and I went to church, this morning. It took her hours to dress herself, but she was determined.

“You have no idea how hard it is, when you can’t see very well,” she said.

She moved very slowly, this morning, and it’s become second nature for me to move with her. She didn’t have time for breakfast or coffee.

“Maybe there will be coffee at the church,” I said.

Usually, there is, in the Welcome Room. There wasn’t any. On the way out, she spotted a lone donut hole and went for it. She took a bite and said she didn’t like it. I took it from her and looked for a wastebasket. Not finding one in close range, I ate the rest of it.

The highlight of the service was singing *O Little Town of Bethlehem*. The radio stations in the Quad City Area, the QCA, have been playing Christmas music since Thanksgiving, and I’m already fed to the gills, if that’s a proper reference, or even if it’s not.

I just now looked at the presence of the room, on a quiet Sunday night in Borders, and it reminded me of the presence of a truck stop in Wyoming at 4AM in the dead of winter.

I’m feeling desolate. I’ve been thinking of another characteristics I think I saw in common with Bonnie. Early on in my sobriety, I felt serene and spiritually free, until I realized I wasn’t feeling anything at all. I was numb. It’s easy to be serene and/or heartless, if you don’t feel anything.

I got out of bed, at 2AM, and read the love poems I’d written early in my sobriety, packed with the energy of a dam, filled to bursting. I met Joni, and over the next two years, we lived a volatile existence. A friend called us Holocaust and Apocalypse. It was part of our healing to discover and experience our individual pain and emotional turmoil. We did that for each other, albeit unwittingly.
Bonnie seems a dispassionate person, and I took it for serenity, born in the recognition of her innate self. Maybe I was wrong. Can anyone know the true self of another? I say you can, in the essential, but not in the way it becomes a person.

I’ve seen my mother, in her last days, no matter that they may last for years. She’s stoic. Her frustrations are not emotional. Her spiritual life is practical. There is, in her, an odd affection that she has for others, and others have for her.

A man at church, thin and dapper, grins at her and says, “There’s the cook.”

She laughs and says, “Oh, he always says that.”

It’s true. Referring to a church dinner, some years before, when he called her the cook. He’s always says it with the same look of endearing affection, and it stuck.

People are becoming equally kind to me at church. It’s the kindness of strangers huddled together against a mighty storm, the incomprehensible nature of existence.

“The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee, tonight.”

Mark twisted his ankle, playing basketball, and he says Honolulu has been cloudy every day since his arrival.

Yesterday, Mother told me she’d gained weight.

“Mark will be happy to hear that,” I said, and he was.

“You need every calorie you can get,” he told her.

I thought of going to the library, and becoming angry at Bonnie. I read in an article about Billy Connolly, the Scottish comedian, a contemporary of mine, that his wife-to-be admired him for his animal habits, excessive drinking, and eating fish with his hands. She said it thrilled her. As a drunken poet in San Francisco, I had a hard time being the bad boy I aspired to be. I have no desire to reprise my clumsy attempt.

I long for my own life, away from these others, a life more of itself in the enjoyment of my gifts. I haven’t adequately expressed what I mean by that. Enjoying my gifts means spirit playing in the life of Steve Brooks, because it’s a life worth playing well. I mean being my soul self, filling out my personal self, with energy and happiness.
A Double Dose

I was getting out of the shower when I heard a crash and a yelp from the kitchen. I started for the door, naked, with a small towel. I thought better of it, and I went back for a robe.

In the kitchen, Mother was sitting in her chair, pulled out from the table and sideways.

“I had a spell,” she said. “I thought I was done with that.”

Then she told me I had forgotten to put out her pills, and she’d come to the kitchen and found the pill containers and took her pills from them.

“I put your pills out,” I said.

“No, you didn’t.”

“Yes, I did. Look, here are the pills for a week, and here’s Monday’s, and they’re gone. You took two sets of pills.”

“There weren’t any pills.”

“You took the pills, and then you forgot you took them. You took a double dose. Don’t ever do that. Don’t use these pills, ever. Every Saturday night, I put the pills for a week in this dispenser. Here’s Sunday and Monday, empty, and today is Monday.”

I was acting like a parent, scolding a child. The pills had been wrapped in a rubber band, she’d taken the rubber band off, and she’d ignored the weekly dispenser.

“Don’t use those pills. Let me do that. It’s my job. If you don’t think I put the pills out, ask me about it.”

“Why did I fall? I took my pills.”

I decided not to tell her how her pills work. Instead, I tried to give her another plan.

“When does this happen? It happens the same way, every time. When you stand up, after sitting for a while, this happens. When you first stand up, don’t move, right away. Just stand still. Then, if you have a spell, you can sit right back down.”

“Maybe I did take a double dose of pills,” she said.

She didn’t have any more problems, the rest of the morning. The phone rang, and I jumped for it, thinking it might be Bonnie.

“May I speak to Gladys Brooks, please?” a man said.
“May I ask whose calling?” I said.
“I’m calling for Gladys Brooks,” he said, softly.
“Who is calling? Who are you?” I said, insistently.
“This is a courtesy call for Gladys Brooks.”
“But, who are you?”
“Oh, this is her former book club, this is a courtesy call.”
“No, thank you,” I said and hung up.

Bonnie didn’t call, last night or this morning. I’m going by the library
and see what the story is. I don’t expect to get satisfaction. My pride is hurt,
and my feelings are hurt, by this behavior. I overplayed my hand, I
suppose. I ‘came on too strong,’ and I ‘fell too hard.’

Actually, I don’t feel bad about that. I’ve done that, before. An earlier
girlfriend, also here in the QCA, many years ago, said, of our brief, intense
affair, “This is the longest, shortest relationship I’ve ever been in.” So be it.

It occurred to me that I probably better not ask anyone to marry me,
any time soon. Come to think of it, I learned a lot from that question.

I don’t subscribe to the belief that we create our own lives, but there’s
a creative energy in any work of art that seems to make creative decisions,
along the way that work best for the fulfillment of the piece.

I never think, as I’m living my life, that I’m making plot decisions,
that I have a script, or that I even remotely know what’s coming next, but,
in retrospect, it often seems perfectly inevitable.

An author who is happy with his work may say, “The story seemed
to write itself.” That’s how I feel about my life. The story seems to write
itself. Nothing that occurs is out of character, but nothing that’s most in
character has any deliberate consciousness to it.

I don’t plan what I do, but when I do it, I might think, “Of course I
did that. That’s exactly what I would do.” Then I think about the future,
and it’s a mystery to me.
The Phantom Call

“Bonnie,” I said, and she came out of the back room. I looked at her, to see what she would reveal. She moved across the library to a more private area.

“What happened?” I said.

“I had to go with my grandson to the hospital. I called your mother, about two o’clock.”

“I came by your place at three, and then went home about 3:30. I asked my mother if you called, and she said you didn’t call. I discovered later, that the phone had been off the hook.”

“I did. I told her.”

“I guess she forgot.”

She looked a little peeved.

“Why did you have to go to the hospital?”

“Chris is a wrestler, and he seems to get hurt, a lot. He thought he was fine, on Saturday, but on Sunday, it was worse. We had to leave the Mall, and go to the hospital.”

I looked at her and waited for something new. She was calmly looking at me with self-contained eyes.”

“Well,” I said, “I think this friendship is done.”

“I told you it was going too fast.”

“There’s nothing coming from you. I thought all that affection was genuine, but I guess not.”

“It was too fast for me.”

“That’s it, then,” I said and turned to leave.

She had nothing to say. There was no discussion. I had no thoughts of continuing a one-sided discussion.
When I got home from the library, Dr. Phil was on. I walked up, put the TV on mute, and asked my mother about the phone call.

“Bonnie says she called here, yesterday, and talked to you.”

“She didn’t call. What?”

“She says she talked to you, about two, and left a message.”

“I didn’t talk to her.”

“Maybe you did, and you don’t remember.”

“I wouldn’t do that. Do you think I would do such a thing?”

“No, I don’t, but she says she talked to you.”

“Do you think I’d lie about that?”

“No, I don’t. The phone was off the hook, and she couldn’t have called you, unless she called, and then you left the phone off the hook, and you forgot about it.”

“I knew you were waiting for a call. I wouldn’t say you didn’t get a call.”

“Well, I’m done with Bonnie, in any case.”

“But, you thought so highly of her.”

“I did, but maybe I was wrong.”

“If you can’t count on her, that’s no good.”

“That’s right,” I said.

Later, I wondered about her saying she knew I was waiting for a call. She didn’t know that until 3:30. Regardless, Bonnie never called back to arrange another time for us to meet. I was in the library for five minutes, before I went to the back room and called her name. Even then, she didn’t apologize, or offer to meet another time.

Mother and I talked about it, during the time we watched Dr. Phil.

If the phone were off the hook, since the call from Hawaii, it would have interfered with their phone service. I called Liz and asked her about it. She said her phone was weird after that call. It was as if she could hear us, when she used the phone, like a party line, but since she had initiated the call, she could still use her phone.
Mother is capable of forgetting important things. This morning, she forgot she’d taken her pills, but I do that, myself. Forgetting Bonnie’s call is another matter. On this occasion, I tended to agree with my mother.

When she said she wouldn’t lie about Bonnie’s call, I believed her. She never bad-mouthed Bonnie. She had appreciated and supported my interest in her.

“You thought so much of her,” she said. She was perplexed.

“I still think Bonnie’s a good person,” I said.

I suspect she doesn’t know how to be honest with a man. Bonnie’s father committed suicide when she was ten. She married an alcoholic, abusive, controlling, and unresponsive husband. She raised two boys, one of whom said he didn’t like it, as a kid, when she was so cold to him, and the other is a practicing alcoholic in a combative marriage.

Her spirituality, as non-Western as it is, may be something she references, not something she lives, like Christians reference the Bible but don’t live as Jesus suggested.

Through a variety of relationships, I’ve learned to communicate with others, with women. It was frustrating to talk to Bonnie and get nods of agreement, without any independent thought. She showed me the written thoughts of others, but she had little of her own to share.

“Do you think she really wants to be a nun?” Mother asked.

“I doubt it,” I said. “I think she just likes living alone.”

Women in my life have shaken me out of self-centered complacency. They challenged me to see things I wasn’t looking at. I could easily have thought I understood everything, as broad as I believe my consciousness is, but I only knew what I knew, and there was more to be known.

I’ve learned to speak my self, and I learned how to speak to women.

“This isn’t the first time,” I said. “When we were first going out, she said she’d call me the next day, and she didn’t. She said she had to go to the doctor.”

She said the problem in her mouth could be cancerous. When she went back to have it checked out, she put off dealing with it, until after the holidays. I wondered how anyone could postpone knowing, without showing some emotional concern.

And, as my respect for Bonnie has plummeted, my respect for my mother has increased.
“Why would she say she talked to me?” Mother said.
“She knows you’re forgetful.”
“I wouldn’t forget a thing like that.”

Since she knew my mother was forgetful, she would have called back for that reason, alone. I don’t believe my mother would sabotage my love life. Instead, she’d attack it, head on. Bonnie is more likely to avoid a simple confrontation.

Before I became more confrontational, I used to stew in my own juices, until I learned to drain them off, and breath fresh air into my blood. I was occasionally confrontational when I was drinking, and eventually, in my sobriety, I became consistently direct with people.

I confronted Bonnie with the prospect of marriage, and I saw who I was dealing with, someone who takes solace in the Tao and goes to the doctor when she needs an excuse.

“I had one boyfriend who broke a date with me,” Mother said.
“He said his grandmother was sick. What a lame excuse. He could have just said he didn’t want to go out.”
Less Than Perfect

I was sitting at my desk, talking on the phone to Jack, in Virginia. My eyes moved from one painting to the next and back again, without thinking about it. Over the course of half an hour, I realized how alive and resonant those four paintings were.

After a painting is done, my eyes become critical, disengaged, or at least not submissive to the art. The surrender I feel in painting is overshadowed by a suspension of surrender. I assume a critical distance.

Jack told me about reading some of my poems, along with some by Stanley Kunitz, to a group of friends who meet to share readings. The crowd appreciated my poems but praised Kunitz. Jack thought it was easier for them to praise Kunitz, because he’s a well-known prize winning poet.

People are afraid to respond to a work of art without something telling them how to respond. I’m guilty of looking at my own paintings as the work of a relatively unknown and unheralded painter, unless I’m in the process of painting them or looking at them absentmindedly. I’m often more in surrender to the truth and beauty of other people’s character than I am to my own.

I got Mother to watch Maid in Manhattan, last night, and again, today. She fell asleep, and even when she was awake, she couldn’t follow the story. The movie was superior to her usual TV fare, and she seemed to appreciate it, however unwittingly.

She couldn’t get the coffee maker to work, this morning. She hadn’t put any water in it.

I’ll never be absolutely certain whether Bonnie called or not. It doesn’t matter. I broke into her comfort zone, and Bonnie the Nun came to her rescue.

I see how much I wanted to believe some woman could be my match. I believe I’ll be more circumspect in my expectations from now on. Even so, I don’t regret this latest foray into the world of self-matchmaking. The first time God made the world in his own image, he was disappointed. The second time has proven problematic. I’ll forgive myself for being less perfect than God, who has proven himself to be less than perfect.
Adventures in Elder Care

“You aren’t doing any drawings,” Mother said.
“I don’t feel like doing that, lately,” I said.

It occurs to me to say, at this juncture, that most of the concerns I had, early on, in this Adventure in Elder Care have subsided into solutions and routine. I haven’t seen any mother-son conflict arise, for quite a while.

I went to the cafe and wrote this entry, short as it is. I began to read from The Tao of Zen, and stopped. I knew I had time to sit in my own interest, but I stopped.

This writing is the effective compromise for this time. I get to sit in the consciousness of my awareness and my circumstance. I don’t feel the detached openness to paint or to write any poems.
What’s in a Name?

We all live at a level below our capacity. I know it’s true for me. Being an artist is the most difficult life imaginable. I watched a little of a soap opera, today. TV soaps are dramas performed by skilled actors practicing their craft, and none of it is art.

The longer I’m away from my art, the less I care about my craft. The longer we’re away from our awareness, the less we care about our spirit.

I heard Barry Sanders, the great NFL running back, describe his career. When he lost the creative love of the game, he didn’t care about the rewards he might have gained by his craft. He could have stayed in the game longer and profited from it, but he stopped playing at his peak.

I wondered if my interest in Bonnie wasn’t compensation for the absence of my best game. My best life is living at the opening to the Oracle’s cave, where the breath of the gods is at my back, and out of my mouth and fingers come images of truth and beauty.

I’ve never had much interest in the craft of any of my gifts. If I were more of a craftsman and more of a self-promoter, I’d have been more successful, by tens.

When I’m in the heart of the heart, I love playing in the craft of my art, but when I’m down from the Oracle’s cave, walking in the streets and fields of commerce and concern, I lose heart. That’s how I feel, today. Anyone, who gets what I just said, can recognize themselves in it.

I have likened this time to my time in India. At about this time, I was going home. In the first three months in India, I was living in the ashram of a teacher who was not my teacher. In my first three months here, I lived in the ashram of my mother. In India, I went to see a man who became my true teacher. Here, I met Bonnie. In India, about this time, I went to Nepal. Here, I go to Borders.

This morning, Mother told me about family names.

“Scott was the hardest name to pick. He was born in a Catholic hospital. The nun kept coming in and asking me, ‘Do you have a name, yet?’ I wanted to name him Robb, your father’s middle name, but he didn’t like it. Mark was named after your father, John Mark.”
“He uses John everywhere, but in the family. He uses it in Key West. He used it as a comedian. He uses it, here, around town,” I said.
“T) wanted you to be called Stephen. I never liked Steve.”
“I know.”
“Stephen was easy, because of your grandfather, Stephen Asa. I don’t know where the name Asa came from.”
“The Bible. It’s a biblical name.”
“I asked my mother why she named me Gladys. She had nothing but boys, and she wanted a girl. She said she had always wanted to call a girl ‘Gladys.’ I didn’t like it. The boys called me Happy Bottom. I didn’t like that, but when I heard how much my mother liked the name, I accepted it.”
“You wanted to be called ‘Meredith’, didn’t you?”
“No, but I would have liked that name, if I could have chosen. My middle name was Myrtle. I asked my mother about that. She had a neighbor named Myrtle. When I was born, Myrtle was so happy for my mother, she named me after her friend.

When Jessica and Nicole were born, Liz said Nicole was easy, but it took a long time to think of Jessica. I suggested she name the girls’ middle names after their grandmothers, Gladys and Marilyn. Liz came to me, one day, and she said, ‘I hope you won’t be offended, but I decided not to call them that.”

She looked at me and shrugged, in her practical way, as if to say, “Do what you like, it’s no skin off my nose.”
“I didn’t like the name Brandon,” I said. “I don’t care for alliterative names, B,B, Brandon Brooks. What surprised me was how popular the name Brandon became, and now he’s Brandon.”
“At least nobody called him Brandy. I don’t like that, shortening the name, like that. Dorothy named her son Brad. I thought it was short for Bradley, so I called him Bradley, and Dorothy corrected me. You can’t call Scott ‘Scottie.’ It sounds like a dog’s name.”
“I used to hate if anyone called me Stevie. But my soccer team, we all call each other by that kind of name, Billie, Dougie, Stevie.”
“Stevie?”
“Who cares? It’s fun.”
Intent and Content

Mother wanted to go to Long John Silvers. The one by the mall had been redecorated. It’s also an A&W, so it looks like a ‘50s teenage hangout, full of families. The teenage help worked like they were happy to be working there.

“It’s too bad about your friend, Bonnie. What happened there?” she said, out of the blue, while we were eating crab cakes, fish, and shrimp.

“I gotta get some more root beer,” I said.

She had been watching Oprah, before Dr. Phil. Oprah had a show about bad doctors. I told her the story of Julie’s thyroid cancer, how the revered family doctor had frightened Julie and me with his stories of the disfiguring operation and the high probability of death.

At the hospital, on the day of her proposed surgery, she said, “I don’t want to be here.”

“Then, let’s get out of here,” I said.

She got dressed and we left the hospital. We got in a car with her parents, who were talking about the Mayo Clinic.

I told them, “I don’t know anything about this. If you think the Mayo Clinic is a better place, then let’s go there.”

“I thought her mother made that decision?”

“No, I did, and the Mayo Clinic doctor was great. He had done 500 operations just like it. He put her at ease. She even joked about going to the Mayo Clinic and having her throat slit.”

Tonight, I liked my mother. I escorted her in and out of the restaurant, on my arm. I sat with her like a friend. I enjoyed her company. I felt like a loving son.

“Did you like your meal?” she said, after we’d gotten in the car.

“I did. If I ate there more, I’d get sick of it, but once in a while, it’s fun.”

“I don’t like all that fried food. It just shows you what advertising can do,” she said, and then she asked me, “What’s in that bag?”

“It’s a piece of fish,” I said.

“Are you going to eat it, later?”

“Much later.”
During dinner, she got chills.
“I’m shivering, and I can’t stop,” she said.
She’s been cold in her 75-degree apartment, lately, and her eyes have been worse.
“That show is too dark, and the picture’s not very clear,” she said, last night.
Tonight, I asked her how a high definition commercial looked to her eyes.
“It looks good,” she said.
I’m sitting next to a room of mostly women, painting pieces of pottery. Everyone looks intent and content. In a world of craft, craftiness is king.
A Pretty Penny

Please open the letter from Gloria Levine and if its not too long, type it in for me. She is the daughter of the 104 yr old Irene Goldstein in Mich who yells into her mothers nose all the time; same thing hap in LA w/ 98 yr old Tillie Arnold now living w/ her 82 yr old sister who wont let her answer any questions but insists on yelling the question into her face and then turning to me hinting its hopeless, not seeing Tillie's expression that she wishes this awful woman would go away; the old black woman who worked for Hem and later at the Hem Museum has a son just like that; every time I saw her in town at Winn Dixie etc. I ask her and the son answers every time; he wont let her talk; how are you; oh she's fine; its like the Cuban girl and her State Dept escort on my tour--each time I ask something on Cuba, the escort answered; I said, is Cuba really as bad as everyone says; and the girl starts to say oh no but the State Dept lady steps on her line and says oh its much worse; after the third question, the girl looks at me hinting its hopeless and I look back yes I see what you mean; but to make a long story short I'm curious what Gloria says; sent her mom copies of her loveletters to Hem in 1920 from the JFK library. He kept hers; she discarded his; Not much is new here but I am injured since day 3 and it changes the whole month; my right foot swelling is going down slowly but it will hurt til April like my sprained toe last year Hawaii is haunted for me--mark

I'm planning to go to the YMCA and get some exercise. I wasn’t eager to do that, but as soon as I wrote that first sentence, it was a done deal. One of the virtues of writing is getting it out in front of you.

I admire Mark’s world of eternal conflict. It is the traditional world of writers - and everyone else. The parallel universe is the world of internal conflict, also the world of writers and everyone else.

Once you grasp the reality of no separation, that universe of conflict becomes less momentous. I’ve been trying to write in the reality where conflict is illusory, and I’m sure it’s cut into my earning potential. He said, ironically.

I got an email from an old friend, who’s been an avid reader of my work, who puts my books in her bookstore, and she describes me as a writer who has “the capacity to render heartbrokenness on the page/in the story.” I was struck to hear someone say that. I haven’t wanted to characterize myself that way.
Of course, a heart can’t be broken that hasn’t known its own nature in the fullest. Most of what’s called heartbreak is only the failure of desire. Regardless of what I’d like to think about myself, it comes as a bit of a relief to see myself as a writer of heartbreak.

I’m heartbroken in the world. I saw that Sean Penn admits to being a man of rage. He believes his rage mirrors everyone else’s rage. So I’m a man of heartbreak. When I see a certain picture of myself as a young boy, I see heartbreak, in my face and in my hands.

Heartbroken in love. Heartbroken and still in love. Heartbroken, Still, And In Love.

I know how true this is, because my first response to it is to admit it, and to wonder how I can speak it. I live in a perpetual state of heartbrokenness. I can’t imagine living any other way. It’s like living in a state of eggbrokenness. After an egg is broken, it becomes useful, as a baby chick or as breakfast. Its closed universe is broken open to the common air.

I showed Mother the email from Mark. After she read it, she said, “Where is he?”

“He’s in Hawaii.”

“He doesn’t sound like he’s there. He sounds like he’s where he was before.”

I reread the last couple of lines out loud.

“Oh, yeah, but he doesn’t say anything about them.”

I like to read about Mark’s curious travels in the endgame of Hemingway’s associations, the fading ripples of his life, not his fiction.

Mark talks to people who knew a man who would be dead, if he were alive today.

I read the story of Porfirio Rubirosa in Vanity Fair. He was one of the great lovers of the 20th Century, dead since ‘65, the year I got married. Hundreds of rich and beautiful women loved him, knowing he was a philanderer, because he was charming and paid each, in turn, the ultimate compliment of being present with them, ignoring everyone else, if only for the briefest time.

Some of his lovers are still alive, but they are older than dirt. Well, older than I am.

I feel relaxed. I don’t feel like getting all exercised up. I feel like sitting here, in the presence of an apparently Jewish girl, who reminds me
of an old lover, the one my friend, Peter, a novelist, described as ‘finally, a quotable girlfriend.’ This woman is thin and unsmiling, never looks up, reads, and eats from a small container with long, graceful fingers, one hand buried between her thighs.

I love the sense of myself as a poet of heartbreak. I like that image of myself in the world. Instead of presenting myself as a man who has evolved into being a true companion of the heart, it would be more honest to present myself as a completely heartbroken lover, who mirrors the heartbreak of everyone else.

There’s a pretty penny to be had from that persona.
A Local Nepal

So the Moline YMCA becomes my local Nepal. I got a month long visitor’s membership. I tried out all the exercise equipment, the cycles; row, pedal, step, pump, walk, and run. I tried the sauna, steam room, Jacuzzi. I swam in the pool. I made chitchat with several of the guys, mostly middle-aged men. I enjoyed myself. I’m out of shape, five pounds heavier than I was this last summer, but I have a way to change that.

When I got home, Mother was full of cooking ideas for me.
“’You never make spaghetti,” she said.
And, “I like baked potatoes.”

And, “What about the picture I showed you of chicken breasts with mushroom soup?”

And, “You never make spaghetti.”

I didn’t get home until 5:30, and she’d gotten cans of pasta sauce out of the cupboard, along with a packet of sweet and sour soup.

She was delighted I’d gotten a membership in the Y.

“I used to walk on that track,” she said.

She told me about Dr. Phil. I had watched part of it, with subtitles, when I was riding the stationary bike at 25 MPH, to the tune of a 100 calories burned, in ten minutes, about one cookie’s worth.

The show was about husbands who brought home the money and expected everything else to be provided by their wives. Dr. Phil talked about being a provider in several categories. The men were only interested in being financial providers.

“How could a man be married, for as long as these men were, and not know better,” Mother said.

“They want everything done for them,” I said.

“How could they not learn? I don’t know how your father learned, but he did. Don’t these men talk to their wives?”

“Did you and Dad talk?”

“All the time. How could they not talk to their wives?”

“Did you talk before you were married?”

“Yes, we did. We talked about everything.”

She thought the problems on Dr. Phil were simple and obvious.
“You just talk to your wife. How could you not?”
She thought it was just something you learned.
Reuben called back to tell me the size of his truck canopy, as he called it. Here, they call it a topper. I call it a camper shell. He’s willing to sell me his. I told him I was looking at used ones, hoping to buy one for $200.
“That’s fine,” he said. “I paid a thousand for mine, but I’ll sell it to you for two hundred.”
“I thought you wanted to trade it for art,” I said.
“Well, yeah,” he said.
“That’s a better deal, don’t you think?”
“That’s a great deal,” he said, and we were both happy.
In Lieu of a Lifetime

Second day at the Y, after going to the dentist. I went to high school with Doctor Bruce. I got a chance to see how good he really is. He built a new cap for one tooth, in less than twenty minutes, including conversation. He was good at his job.

At the Y, I was amazed to see how fat some men are. It’s an education to watch people walk around naked. There’d be a lot less fantasizing about the opposite sex, if it were common. Of course, the Diana’s and Adonis’s are still stunning, but the rest of us are a map book of gerrymandered outlines. One man looked like he was carrying another full-sized human being in his gut. It’s hard to say gut, because it hung on him like an alien invasion.

I talked to Julio, another newcomer, who had double knee replacement surgery, five weeks ago. He was on a program of rehabilitation that began the day of the operation. He didn’t mind, he said, because he was pumped full of morphine.

Eventually, the pain was so bad he cried.

“I have a high threshold of pain,” he said, “but I cried like a baby, it was so painful.” And still is.

I told my dentist I was impressed by the materials that dentists’ are using these days; instantly moldable, long-lasting, durable materials that were not in existence, a few years ago. He said graduates of the best dental schools are five years behind, because it’s so expensive to stay current.

And here was Julio, with two brand-new knees I wouldn’t have known about, except for the shaved skin and scars I wouldn’t have noticed if I wasn’t looking at them.

On the other hand, my mother has a white growth on the back of her hand like a crystallized pile of salt she can’t remove, because Medicare doesn’t pay for cosmetic surgery.

I sat at breakfast, looking, not into but at her sad, milky eyes, as she looked back, telling me the current condition of her health. Her tailbone is better. She hasn’t fallen in a long time, or gotten a spell in days, her eyes seem the same as before, and her memory is working well, when it doesn’t get stuck on the unlikeliest of glitches.
She still seems to have a hard time accepting that Mark is in Hawaii. Who was on Oprah is clear, and the bridge club meetings she hosted, ten years ago, are clear. She doesn’t tell me much about the distant past, either. I suspect some of that is adjusting to what she believes is my interest or lack of interest.

As I looked at her, this morning, I caught myself acting like a hired professional, talking to her, not condescendingly, but not genuinely, either. I forgive myself for knowing her conversational range is limited, and I’ve learned to limit my range, accordingly, but it still feels like I’ve stepped inside her narrowing circle of awareness, and I make almost no attempt to enlarge it.

It occurred to me that, after I’m gone from here, after Mark is back, one day, she’ll turn to him and say, “Stephen didn’t really like being here. I think it was difficult for him.”

She will mean it, as a judgment of herself as a burden on others, but it will be true of me as a caregiver/son with a diminished capacity for the job. I believe Mark is better suited to roll with the tide in this environment. I think she misses him, because he speaks a language similar to hers. His capacity is far greater than hers to be fluent in that language, but it’s more in common to them, than it is to me.

I’m starving, here, and I can’t feed her from my weakness. I think Mark is stronger, here, than I am. This is not alien territory to him, in the way of thinking, and it doesn’t drain him to be here.

Mother touched my shirt, again, this morning, and the loving caress embedded in that tactile curiosity, cut me. I can’t accept it from her in the way it’s given. It’s taken, and I know she has no idea she even needs it. I can’t give it to her. It’s too late for it to be given and taken honestly. I can’t caress her sleeve in lieu of a lifetime.
My Current Guise

It took me five months to be able to say, “. . . in lieu of a lifetime.” After I wrote that line, I packed up and drove to the grocery store, feeling a sense of relief.

Today, at the hairdresser’s, Carole came to me for her hug, and I went to her for mine, and Mother said, “Sometimes, a hug is good.”

I can hug my mother, but I don’t. Not since the first week, when I felt rebuffed in my attempts at embrace. But a hug is a worthy compromise, a token of embrace, not in lieu of anything.

I went on errands, this morning, and stopped at the library to return a movie and pick up another. Bonnie wasn’t there. I imagined her in hiding. After I left, I noticed how excited I had gotten just walking in the place.

In my current guise as brokenhearted poet, I’ve felt the regret of lost loves. One, in particular; Evelyn, the quotable one. I didn’t respond to her interest, because it was so soon after losing Roxan, the one I called the love of my life. I knew I would lose Roxan, and I dwelt in her absence for a long time. She gave me the image of loss. Evelyn could have been a real companion, but I wasn’t interested, at the time. If I had been sober and not drunk on loss, I could have seen Evelyn more clearly, but I didn’t want to.

I realize, too, that I have no bad feelings for the women I left, only for the ones who left me. I’m angry at Bonnie, for not being the woman I imagined her to be. In who she is, I have no argument.

Mother has been feeling cold, lately, so I turned the heat up. The heat rises, and the cooler air settles down to where she sits by the big picture window. Yesterday, we looked out at the first snowfall of the year. Only an inch or two, but it stayed on the grass.

On TV, and in the movies, characters change according to the story’s demands. It would be nice to tell a story of my mother becoming the openhearted, emotionally nurturing woman we all expect from our mothers, but she is who she is.

I’ve come to a point where it’s not difficult to see her virtues, because I’m no longer looking for virtues I used to miss in her. I don’t miss my absent mother, so I can accept the woman who is present.
The rampant fantasy in human drama is the idea that we are all one heartfelt word away from our dreams. That’s true if the word is is. What is; is what we are. What we are is the only fulfillment of our dreams. The woman who is my mother is the mother of who I am. The acceptance of who I am is what I seek. The acceptance, of who my mother is, is what I seek.

I have no anger or regret for who she is, only for who she is not. Who she is not is the phantom of my disturbance. Any disturbance I feel is released in the letting go of the unreal.
A Loss of Faith

When I got back to Carole’s, Mother was finishing up. We told Carole about the email that came from Jaxon, this morning.

I am on a plane to san jose right now. Adobe is sending me for work. I only got 4 hours sleep last night. Fun, eh? --jaxon

When Mother got up from her salon chair, I said, “Gladys, have you had your hug, today?”

“Gladys?” she said.

I hugged her, and she responded as she did five months ago, by remaining stiff and unresponsive. I thought the neutral site of the salon would give us both the freedom to give and receive a hug. But my mother is nothing if not consistent.

We drove to Ming Wah’s for our usual egg rolls and soup. She told me a couple of stories I’d heard before.

Carole had asked if she was having a bad day. I couldn’t answer conclusively. She moves very slowly, but when I tell her to walk normally, to take bigger steps, she does. It goes well, and within seconds, she reverts to her hesitant shuffle.

“It’s a habit,” she says, “habits are hard to break.”

She seems less lively, a telling description. Her sense of living has taken blows of gradual diminution. Each day she seems to be a little less eager to live. I can’t say she’s more eager to die. I don’t see that, but the attrition of her faculties is taking its toll.

For seven years, she lived alone and well, taking herself to the country club to play bridge and golf with the ladies, to church to participate in women’s groups, to social circles of friends to play cards and talk, to restaurants, in the daytime, and shopping in the mall and grocery stores.

“How was it, living alone for all those years?” I asked.

“It was fine, because I was prepared for it,” she said.

“When Dad was on the road, you were pretty much on your own,” I said.

“I didn’t go out for dinner,” she said.
She has no illusions about her situation, and I believe she’s ‘prepared’ for whatever comes. Her mother’s last days were a primer for her. She admired her mother. I heard her call her mother a saint. I heard my father call his father a saint. Both said they weren’t equal to their parents.

After a 20/20 show about a teenage rape victim, who had foolishly gotten herself in the company of the boys who raped her, Mother said she knew right from wrong, somehow, even though her parents told her nothing about sex.

“I probably learned about it from my brothers.”

Even they were figures of respect.

“I didn’t want to do anything that wouldn’t make my parents proud of me,” she said, and, “I wanted my brothers to be proud of me, too.”

What her family thought of her governed her actions. She was able to make moral decisions by considering their opinion sacrosanct.

Both my parents thought they didn’t measure up to their parents. I thought, if I thought about it at all, that if I lived my life to please my parents, I would’ve failed myself.

I did honor them in their virtues, but not in their entirety. I agreed with my parents that they did not measure up. I wanted to measure up to a standard I never witnessed. My children seem to carry no such burden.

After all these months with my mother, I admire her open-minded determination to do the best job she could in being a wife, mother, friend, and person among others. It’s genuine. She’s lived her life in relationship to others, certainly not to herself. She sees herself as someone who has done what was right, who did the best she could. In that sense, she has led a successful life. A life full of successes, and her failures were made in the attempt to do the right thing.

I believe my father died, in his own mind, a failure. He set his sights low and achieved beyond them, without any personal satisfaction. He had the capacity for introspection, but I think he was afraid to look.

My mother said he never drank, never, in all the years she knew him. I saw him drink, on at least one occasion, and it was a sorry sight. He became a sloppy drunk, fawning over the waitress in an obsequious manner, demeaning himself. He said he didn’t drink because he ‘couldn’t stand the evidence.’
Mother admits he stopped drinking when he was afraid of dropping me, as an infant, while he sat, holding me, in a rocking chair. I’d bet he actually dropped me. As an alcoholic, myself, I bet there was more to the story, for a man who married at 27. He had the look of a man with heartbreaking secrets. I loved my father, unconditionally, and I liked them both, in their prime, for their finer qualities, and I don’t discount those qualities, to this day.

It occurred to me, as I came her to write, that I’ve finally ‘lost faith’ in women. Bonnie has a role in this final disillusionment. I noticed, years ago, that my freedom from attachments came in the form of a sense of losing faith.

My attachments were all felt as a matter of faith. I had faith in alcohol. I had faith in life as a meritocracy. I had faith in desire, in ambition, in effort. I had faith in my body, as I had faith in the world to be a place of just reward and fair punishment. As I’ve broken the attachments that kept my freedom from me, I noticed each new freedom first appeared as a loss of faith.

I have lost faith in women. That doesn’t mean I don’t believe there is good in women. There is good in women, and in most of the things I’ve held as attachments. The error is in the attachment. The error is in having faith in the changeable, transient, relative realities of this life, that they would be dependable to my spirit.

I believe I’ve been carrying an attachment, a faith in women that granted them an unreality they don’t deserve, positively or negatively. No woman is my salvation. Not my mother, not Bonnie, not anyone I’ve known or will know. Perhaps I can’t adequately describe this faith. This faith has no reality. It has no particular quality. It’s a faith. What is true requires no faith for it to be true.

Whenever I act on faith, I lose ground from the truth. This is not to say I’m a cynical, atheistic nihilist. My spiritual life is wider and deeper than what is practical, visible, tangible, predictable and knowable. I’ve seen the nature of existence. I can call it nothingness, and I can call it God, without fear of contradiction.

It’s the lesson of my vision that, in matters of faith, the loss of faith is faith’s purest reality.
Every time I’ve lost faith, I’ve felt freer to see the virtue of what’s real in the thing I had given my faith to. The truth of my being has been confirmed in the stripping away of the attachment otherwise called faith.

The faith that I’ve had in women has betrayed my love for what is true in women. I’ll gladly chase the truth and leave the billowing skirts of faith to the poets of desire and loss.
What Thorn?

This was my fourth day in a row at the Y. I arranged my day so I could take Mother to church, fix bacon and eggs for her after church, watch a little football, go to the Y, come home, fix dinner, watch 60 Minutes, and then come out to write.

This writing, this practical meditation, while it doesn’t engender much I call art, does have an effect on my wellbeing, that two hours at the Y doesn’t equal. Together, they give me energy and relaxation. It’s not quite serenity, but it’s close.

There was a family visiting in church, this morning, a man and woman with five daughters, ranging in age from seven years old to six months. The husband was in charge of the baby. The littlest girls hung on their mother. The oldest girl rode herd like a proud and competent junior mother, the second sat by her father in simple love of her life. The mother looked happy but tired. Thin, a little hunched, she seemed to need a vacation she’d probably never take. The girls were quiet, without disciplining, and each one’s eyes sparkled in the company of her sisters and their loving parents.

They were the best example of God’s presence, and the next best example was the music.

“The organist is terrific,” I said, “has he been here long?”

“He’s been here for a long time. He’s wonderful,” Mother said.

Music is the true praise of God. The music, the silence of prayer, and the light in children’s eyes were my favorite parts of the service.

This afternoon, I trimmed Mother’s fingernails, and she jumped, she was so afraid I’d clip her skin. There were no mishaps.

At dinner, I made a larger than usual salad, but she thought it was too spicy. I put no spices in it, but I had used a peppercorn dressing.

“Never use that dressing again,” she said.

“You don’t like pepper. I forgot,” I said.

I was slightly disappointed she didn’t praise my special salad with lettuce shredded the way she said the Vietnamese restaurant called Pasteur does, with sliced eggs, salami, onions, olives, tomatoes, green peppers,
shredded cheese, croutons, salad toppings, and bacon bits. I enjoyed it, and let her sensitivity to pepper go. She ate her whole bowl.

She was cold, again, today, in a hot apartment. When we walked to and from the church, to and from the car, to and from the apartment, she moved well, I thought, and her mental acuity was pretty sharp.

At Carole’s, on Saturday, I tried to remember the town on The Peninsula, south of San Francisco, where my kids grew up, and I couldn’t access the name.

“I can name all the towns around it, but my mind won’t go there.”
“A senior moment,” Carole said.
“Mountain View,” Mother said.
“Mountain View,” I said, immediately.

I look at my mother, and I hope, when I’m her age, in her condition, if it comes to that, I can be playful and free about the slipshod nature of thoughts, but I didn’t like it when I couldn’t name that town, whose name I’ve known for thirty years.

Last night, I thought of Kathy Bressler; my first girlfriend, who said to me when we were forty-two, that there was something special between us. I wrote a book that included our reunion when we were twenty-three, just before my marriage. At 6AM, after four and a half hours sleep, I read that section of that book, and I wanted to send it to her.

And I wanted it to be published. I’m a good writer. I thought, “This is the kind of book I wish I’d written.” I did write it.

I’ve often wondered what thorn I might inadvertently pull from my ignorant foot that would release the energy that’s kept all these books a secret in the world.

I’ve never had any subject matter I could know better than this life I’ve been given, and I’ve plumbed its depths and mined its strata. I’ve harvested its crops and pressed its wine. What thorn?
A Kiss

This morning, Mother told me how to make chili. She wanted some chili. I resented her demand for chili. I made a list of the ingredients to buy at the grocery. At lunch, I said we could have chicken breasts and mushroom gravy, a suggestion she made last week.

“I thought we were going to have chili, tonight.”

“Just because you told me about chili doesn’t mean we’re going to have chili,” I said. “I like cooking, but I don’t like cooking on demand. I respond well to suggestion. I don’t respond well to demands.”

“No. I know. You shouldn’t,” she said, and then she apologized.

“I didn’t mean to tell you what to do.”

“I know you didn’t,” I said, and I was surprised by the gentle tone in my voice.

Maybe, this time will give me the freedom I seek from the yoke of my own internalized mother.

I bought an album for photos and made a display for the photos of the figure paintings I did, over the last ten years. I had a loose collection I’d gotten when I was on my way here, in June. I stopped at Reuben and Joan’s and they gave them to me. They were the prototypes for the book, *Sex in All Our Lives* that I co-wrote with Joan and illustrated.

One friend said she didn’t like the mouths on the women I painted. I saw what she meant in some of these photos. The mouths of many of the figures were down-turned, held tight, sour. Not all, but some. It occurred to me that none of those women would say the words, “I love you.”

I thought I painted women who were bold, strong, forthright, confident, sure of themselves, even in their nudity, their nakedness. But, few of them look back with any interest beyond themselves. They’re self-contained. Some of this is a true rendition of the women who came to be models, some is who I am, and some is how I see love between a man and a woman, between a woman and myself.

One of the better paintings is of a seated nude, called *Stone Woman*, and it’s a Buddha. The Stone Woman is an icon of serenity, beyond need or desire. Some of this is the nature of art, beyond the personal, but it’s also a reflection of my separation from a woman of tenderest human love.
The image of woman, imprinted on my mind, was first formed in my mother’s presence, and I can’t supersede it by trying to negate it.

Just now, as I sit here in this thought, an image occurs to me of freeing myself, by embracing my mother, not by pushing her away. As I see the embrace in my mind’s eye, I embrace my mother, and my mother passes through me, and I pass through her, until she’s behind me, and what’s in front of me is open.

I’m often attracted to women, without noticing their mouths. When I do notice a woman’s mouth for its attractiveness, little else matters. I’ve seen women who were otherwise attractive, but when I looked at their mouths, I was put off. Bonnie’s mouth was pleasant, but not open to a kiss. I asked her if she was a good kisser. She said she was, but she wasn’t.

The woman I loved, ten years ago, was a wonderful kisser and very affectionate. The woman I held up as my ideal, Roxan, was a good kisser, who kissed me, twice, in a way that diminished all others. She kissed me with passion when we met, and when she said goodbye, two years later.

If I were Prince Charming, I would not carry a glass slipper about my kingdom; I would carry a kiss, to be fitted to a kiss that was fitted to mine.
Freddie’s Socks

It’s true that I’m heartbroken. There’s nothing in this life that hasn’t shown itself to be heartbreaking. There’s so much that’s exhilarating and of generous delight, but the end of it is heartbreaking.

I said ‘of generous delight,’ and it sounds sweetly archaic, but I can’t use the trite and tired to describe the gulf between what breathes inherent joy and a world of disdain.

I told Bonnie I want to breathe deep and tell my passion for this being, without regard for any ultimate failure.

I wrote, last night, apropos of nothing, “Let me fail to describe something. Let me fail to describe love.”

Tonight, as I was driving, I thought about going back to Seattle. It’s going home. I thought about being heartbroken in the world, not merely in love, with women, I thought of my friend, Reuben, who I’m sure, is as heartbroken as I am. I thought of anyone and everyone with a capacious heart, who must be as heartbroken as I am.

There is no other way to describe this state of wonder, unafraid to witness itself in a desolate environment, Godot, not waiting, but present, where the many are derelict in their awareness.

This heartbreak is the only way to honor what the heart knows. What’s broken is not the heart of the heart, but the notion of the human heart as a carrier of wonder. My human heart is heartbroken, so my eternal heart can breathe freely, unencumbered by desire and loss.

“You must feel good, going to the Y,” Mother said.

“I do feel good,” I said.

“I know,” she said, a bit nostalgically.

She used to exercise regularly, even daily. She’s been cold in her chair, and today, she decided to eat less, probably after watching Dr. Phil. I saw part of the same show from the seat of my exer-cycle.

“Mark would kill me, if I told him I wanted to eat less.”

“Well, you have to get nourishment.”

“I know, but I don’t want to eat so much.”

After going to the Y, I went to the store, to get mushroom soup for the gravy to put on chicken breasts, but she nixed that menu and, instead,
she ate a salad I loaded up with ingredients like last night’s salad, but with a less peppery dressing.
   “There’s more football, tonight,” she said, almost offering it to me.
A man at the Y said he’d cared for his parents.
   “You become the parent, and they become the child,” he said.
I was dressing, and another voice said, “Mr. Brooks.”
I turned around and saw a vaguely familiar face.
   “Freddie,” I said, and it was Mark Fredricksen, one of Scott’s oldest friends.

   His parents died a few years back, his father from a heart attack. We talked about the incidence of heart attacks in his family. We compared heart medications. We both take the same, but he gets his for a third of the cost, through his electricians union. His mother died in a head-on collision, at nine in the morning on the Interstate, for no apparent reason.

   After commiserating, I noticed I’d forgotten to bring any socks. Two socks came flying across the aisle between the lockers.
   “Thanks, Freddie.”

   Some people you just like. I’ve always liked Freddie, and he let me wear his socks.
A Vision Pissed Away

I woke up at 4:30, and almost stayed up. I lay in near sleep. I became aware of my pattern of speaking about my deepest experience, and how easily that’s followed by mundane events. That was followed by a sense of how I might speak about this life. I could speak for the heartbreak in all of us, in such a way that turns the recognition of heartbreak into the recognition of the heart that is eternal.

I chose not to wake up and write anything down. It all seemed clear and obvious. That seems to be common to the thoughts that occur in the middle of the night.

Papaji said, “Be awake when you sleep and sleep when you are awake.”

When I got up this morning, Mother was across the hall, talking to Vivian. She asked her to go to a store and buy her a warm winter outfit, like a tracksuit, and some knee socks. She believes her chills are caused by her wearing the wrong clothes.

Vivian came back, at noon, with clothes for Mother. She went out so quickly, because a snowstorm is predicted.

Mother didn’t like anything Vivian bought. When I came out for lunch, she told me to take the sweater back to Vivian and tell her to take it back to the store and get her money back.

I took it to Vivian and thanked her for trying.

“She’s a hard person to do business with,” Vivian said.

“That’s right,” I said, “but thanks for trying.”

Mother kept lamenting Vivian’s purchases.

“I can’t believe she bought that stuff. It was just awful.”

She repeated variations of that theme for the next hour.

“It’s my fault,” she said, “I should have looked at some catalogs.”

And then, “I can’t believe the clothes she bought. They were all wrong.”

I stopped at Goodwill, on my way here, but I couldn’t find anything appropriate. There was a red sweat suit, but Mother rejects red, because it bleeds when you wash it. I offered her my kneehigh socks from soccer, but she wouldn’t try them, because they’re red.
Last Month

I went to **Old Navy** and told the girl what my mother needed. She pointed out a few things, and I bought two outfits and some socks. I went to the Y and then home. Mother was making the chili I said I’d make, tomorrow. I took over the cooking and followed her instructions to the letter. She kept repeating instructions and asking me the same questions.

“What’s in that can?”
“Did you put the beans in, yet?”
“What’s in that can?”
“Have you added the beans?”

I put the outfits on her bed, but she didn’t want to look at them. After the chili cooked for a while, I asked her if she wanted any.

“Not right now,” she said.

I ate two bowls of pretty good chili. She went to the kitchen and tried to pull a plate from the cupboard, but couldn’t pull it free. I set her up at the table and fixed her a bowl, with oyster crackers.

“When did you get these?”
“A month ago . . . or two,” I said.
“I didn’t know you had these. When did you get them?”

I went back into the living room.

“Did you put salt in this?” she said from the kitchen.
“I put in the salt you told me to put in.”
“It’s too salty.”

She had told me earlier, “You can always add salt, but you can’t take it away.”

She put the dishes in the sink and went to her chair.
“I put the clothes on your bed, for you to look at.”
“I don’t feel like doing that, now. I have a headache. I think it’s the red wine. I don’t think I want anymore of that red wine.”

I told her about running into Freddie.
“Does he look the same?”
“No, he looks older.”

I’m annoyed. This is my last month. I bet I’m programmed to reject this place as I leave it.
I don’t like it that I forgot what felt like revelations, last night. I think this responsibility is keeping me from my better work, but I also think that’s an empty argument. So much that’s happening has been good. Mother blames the wine and her clothes. I blame the incompatibility of cultures. Sometimes, it’s just the barometric pressure.

I went by the library, today, but I didn’t see Bonnie. I buried myself in routine, today, and then I felt rejection. When one becomes attached to details, the details become significant.

I ran into a soccer player at the Y. I told him I tried to find the Sunday morning soccer game, a couple of months ago, but there was no one there. He said they only play at that facility when school is in session. There’s one more game before I leave town. I missed two months of games, maybe seven or eight games, minus the times Mother went to church, so maybe I missed two or three games. If she stays home, this Sunday, I can go.

I think about getting back to Seattle. When I was here, two years ago, I took good care of her and doted on her. I did no writing or painting. After three weeks, I was stir-crazy. I imagine I’m replaying that failed attitude, this last month. It’s not a good idea. It’s better to be in the moment, regardless of the time.

This is my fifth day of exercising. That has my energy flowing. I like having a lot of energy, but I need to live an energetic life, to go along with that.
Piling On

Mother didn’t like the clothes I bought her. They were too big, she said. I said I could exchange them, but she didn’t want me to. She didn’t try on the socks. She said they were scratchy.

I tried to do too much, yesterday, laundry, grocery shopping, cooking, buying clothes, writing, exercising, writing, checking out movies, typing and editing. I’m better off when my day is simpler. Today is simpler, and my mind is still trying to take on new tasks. It’s the habit of mind to pile on.
Tantamount to Being There

It snowed, and the roads are icy in patches. I came out, anyway, knowing the main arterials would be clear, and they were.

I feel better. I got my rhythm back, and Mother was in a better mood. Which came first, the mother or the child?

There are lovey-dovey teenage couples in Fireworks.

I’ve been thinking of India. For the first time in the dozen years since I was there, I feel my connection to India as a longing to be there. A longing, if it’s accepted, is a keen sense in the current moment. A keen sense of being there is tantamount to being there.

Isn’t tantamount a fine word? Hemingway would comment on his vocabulary, from time to time. It’s one of his finer qualities. If I take longing for India as a feeling of separation, it feels bad. But if I allow it as a sensual recognition of something I love, it feels good.

The two couples nearby are bright, funny, nice-looking, and out of the mainstream. They play and kid with each other, inside the bubble of their youth. The girls are amused by the guys and adoring when they aren’t feigning indifference. The guys are sweet-natured, when they aren’t posturing as aloof. Both girls are dressed and made up like flappers from the 20’s. The boys wear Punk black with studded belts and headbands, a lip ring on one, small ear plates on the other.

They make a contest of throwing empty creamer cups at the trash receptacle. Then they talk on their cell phones. They languish in the luxury of angst and tentative sensuality. I don’t long for my personal past. I don’t feel any separation from what’s still in my sensate spectrum.

I was cheerful, after the Y. I felt at ease with Mother. It comes from retiring to the present moment from the battlefield of past and future expectations.

These four seem to be performing for my benefit, arranged as they are, facing in my direction. It gives me a sense of gratitude, even knowing they don’t see it the way I do. None of them has bought anything to drink or eat, and yet they occupy a couch and a table with noblesse oblige, without the oblige part.
I read another good poem by Franz Wright in the New Yorker. He describes Li Po sitting at the foot of a mountain, until there is no one there but the mountain.

I love being a poet, absent from the world; a hand writing the words. I saw a painting in the New Yorker that reminded me of color in India, and my heart broke, not heartbroken, but broken like a rule is broken, to experience the new.

I bought a large chai with one of my fullypunched drink cards, this time, with non-fat milk, and I think I tasted the spices better.
Give and Take

I imagine one of the men at the Y asking me what I do, and I say I’m a poet. He stares, at a loss to grasp the meaning of that, so I say, “Imagine how you felt on the best day of your life. That’s what I write about, every day.”

Of course, it’s not that I experience that peaceful elation every day, but every day, it seems available.

Mother walked past me, going from the kitchen to the living room, and she touched the sleeve of my shirt. She caressed the cloth of my shoulders, and I didn’t take physical offense. It felt nice, and I didn’t reject the pleasant feeling. It was a very light touch.

I gave her a pair of my athletic socks. She complained they were too tight.

“Don’t look a gift horse in the mouth,” I said. “Don’t you want to be warm?”

“I don’t want socks that I don’t want,” she said. Later, she put them on. She said they were too small.

“You have thick ankles,” I said. “They’re thicker than mine, and I’m a big guy.”

“Would you put this one on me?” she said.

I did. I folded them so they were not as binding but better than her ankle socks.

She was worried about money. I got the bank receipts out, so she could see her balance and stop asking me the same questions, repeatedly. She was worried about her stocks, so I got that paperwork. She was concerned about Christmas cards. I found her box of good cards.

Matty, the erstwhile thief, came by the house, after calling, to borrow $30, until Monday. I told Mother about the loan, and she told me not to do it.

“It’s one time,” I said, “and it’s only $30.”

“Don’t do it.”

“It’s a done deal. I’m not going to go back on what I told him.”

“It’s a bad idea. You shouldn’t do it.”

“I know how you feel,” I said.
“How much does he want?”

“How much does he want?”

“I thought he wanted more. I wonder if he gave that $10 to his mother.”

“You’ll have to ask her.”

“You shouldn’t loan him any money.”

“If he gives it back, great. If he doesn’t, it’ll never happen, again.”

He came to the door, looking red-eyed, one eye almost closed, and acting friendly.

“See that station wagon, out there? I bought it from a guy in the apartment complex for $50, and I drove it to Iowa City and back, and it’s running good.”

On the phone, he had said that was the reason he was short of funds. There was a ladder of the top of the wagon. Matty’s a house painter. His sister wanted me to find work for him, since I’m a contractor. I wouldn’t have been able to care for my mother, if I had to work every day. The time I spend away from her is about four hours a day. What I do, during that time supports my main concern.

I gave Matty the $30, and he was gone. He stayed long enough to be solicitous and courteous, but he looked like a man with hidden priorities.

The weather is bright and clear. There’s snow on the ground, and ice is a hazard, but the roads are clear, and the sun is shining.

I just went to the toilet in Borders, and a man, older than I am, drying his hands, ahead of me, cranked out paper towels for me, too.

“Thank you, sir,” I said.

“Bathrooms and women,” he said, “both precarious.”
All Work and All Play

I out-did myself with dinner, tonight. Spiced chicken breasts, mashed potatoes made with chicken broth, gravy made from mushroom soup.

“So fast,” Mother said. “How’d you make it so fast?”

“I’m a genius,” I said.

“You must be,” she said. “This is really good. You’re going to like it.”

I did like it. After dinner, I called Freddie and told him I’d left his socks at the desk at the Y. The guy behind the counter said he knew Freddie. He said Freddie was a good guy. I said Freddie was a good guy.

“That’s Al,” Freddie said, “I used to live next door to him.”

Freddie, whose real name is Mark, said 95% of people call him Freddie. I wondered if he wasn’t tired of it by now, but he said he wasn’t.

“Hey, I want to do something,” he told me. “Your mother and I have the same birthday, so I want to come by with my son and say hello.”

“That’d be a great idea,” I said.

He asked when we’d be home, “It’s a Saturday, so would 3 or 4 in the afternoon be OK?”

“That would be good,” I said.

When I sit down to write, because the slate of my mind is wiped clean, every day, I can’t imagine there’s anything to write about. Then it surprises me how much I remember, like this conversation with Freddie.

I wrote a book similar to this one, in 1975, 28 years ago. I didn’t look at it for a year. I could only remember two or three incidents from the three months I’d spent writing. I was stunned by how much had occurred in those months. Several things seemed to happen, every day, hundreds of things occurring over the time of the writing, and I’d forgotten almost all of it.

Several years passed, and I had the same experience rereading the same book. It’s a good thing we can’t remember everything that happens, but it’s been a lucky thing to be able to see how much my memory had missed.

I remember Mother self-describing this book, a book about her, as a dull story. My experience has been that not work, not play, but paying no attention makes Jack a dull boy.
The Equality of Souls

I went by the library, to get a new movie. I took with me a copy of the part of this book that’s about Bonnie. I saw her in the back room.

“Bonnie,” I said, “this belongs to you.”

“Oh,” she said, smiling, “I’ll get it back to you.”

“No, keep it. You contributed to it. It’s yours.”

“Thank you,” she said. “How’s that book going that you were writing?”

“This is it. Part of it. This is the part of the book that you’re in.”

“When will it be done?”

“I’ll stop writing, when I leave town.”

She reached out to touch my arm, but I can’t remember if she completed the gesture. I checked out a movie and left. I didn’t get hot or bothered.

It ought to amaze me that I so easily reveal myself to someone who I ought to be guarded around, or that I reveal myself in this kind of writing, but the details of my personal life are not what matter. What matters is the expression of my being, as it occurs in my art. That’s my work in this life, that’s the personal character of my impersonal soul.

When this writing elevates from the personal, that gives me satisfaction, not in telling my story.

If Bonnie has nothing to say, after she reads my perceptions about her and about our time together, I’ll rest assured in the veracity of my judgment in the writing. If she wants to talk about it, to clear it up, I’ll rest assured in my original assumptions about her character and not in the disappointment I felt at the end of our time together.

I called Mark at Scott’s in Honolulu, and put Mother on, so she could talk to him and find out how he’s doing.

She never calls anyone, even if she wants to speak to him or her. I’ve inherited the same tendency, but I overcome it, occasionally.

Mark says he’s doing better, driving himself in one of the cars Scott has for sale, out to Portlock, near Hanauma Bay, and swimming, every day. Mother talked to him for ten minutes. He may have a hairline fracture in
his foot, from playing basketball on a hardwood floor in street shoes, but he manages to get around.

A couple of things occurred to me as I was driving away from the library. As much as I fall for some woman and then elaborate her presence into a fullness that I discover later is lacking, I do that with everyone. I remember believing that everyone I saw on the bus or the streetcar, in passing, only briefly, knew and understood everything I did, or more than I did. I couldn’t imagine my awareness was any different from anyone else’s. Sitting in the sauna, at the Y, with middle-aged factory workers, I assume we are the same. I’m right, of course, in the essence of our being, but I’m wrong, in believing there is the same awareness.

This is not an error in my attitude toward women, but a failed estimation of people in general. The answer is not to demean the worth of others, but to let the equality of souls be the focus of my attention and let the differences fall where they may.
Liability for Life

I just bumped into the back of another car at the exit from the freeway, a block from Borders. The woman and I got out to exchange information. There didn’t seem to be any real damage, maybe a scrape on her bumper, but I couldn’t tell, and I don’t think she could either. I gave her my name and my insurance agents number. She had a friendly dog in the back seat and a young woman in the passenger seat.

“Hello, puppy,” I said, and let the dog nuzzle me.

The woman gave me her name and number. Her name was Bonnie. That’s Bonnie number four.

I wasn’t paying attention to the car in front of me, like my last accident, three years ago. I was looking back up the road, and the road was clear for a turn, just like the last time. The car in front didn’t turn into traffic when it could, just like last time. The lesson for me is to watch the car in front of me, before looking at anyone else.

Mother discovered that her chair by the window, even with the drapes drawn, was five degrees cooler than the rest of the room.

“Damn!” I ran into a car from behind, when I wasn’t paying attention.

I feel like an outsider, today, like I don’t belong here, like I’m from somewhere else. Even so, people were nice to me. Even Bonnie, the car lady, thanked me and said she was OK. She thanked me for stopping and being helpful. I thanked her, but I didn’t say what for.

I looked at a painting in a review of a New York painter, and I thought, “How come I don’t paint?”

The answer was a precis of failure, the lament of an unknown, laboring in the social shadows for private reasons, staying true to the spirit, but hidden from public view, or some such nonsense.

I thought about composers. It occurred to me to imagine my poetry in another form, as I’m sure composers have had to do, but I quickly dropped the thought.

I am this one, doing this.
On the Clock

I woke, this morning, feeling unhappy about the accident. It conjures feelings that reveal how I’ve been feeling for six months, maybe for ten months.

In my role as firstborn son, I feel responsible. I’m inclined to try to make everything perfect. I carry a low level tension in this attitude. I move too quickly through the day, trying to accomplish enough to justify my existence. Even in my writing, as soon as I’m finished, I leave the cafe. I do everything as efficiently as I can. I move too fast for my own wellbeing.

This is habit. It’s a state of mind that’s been in place for a long time. Whenever I’m in a position of responsibility, I act this way.

I lay in bed, after six hours sleep, and I could feel the tension of the last ten months, not caused by the accident, but brought into focus by it.

I ran into the woman’s car, because I was moving in haste. I wasn’t speeding, but I was compacting the time I had, to get done what I thought needed to be done. This morning. I drove to the insurance office, on my way to buy staples and medicine, and I noticed I was still driving in haste. I thought I would slow down, taking care of a sedentary woman, but I haven’t done that.

There are moments of quiet and stillness in writing. I don’t rush through the day, but I move in deliberate haste in traffic and whenever else I think it’s necessary. I think it’s necessary when I feel responsible.

I was driving to the cafe to write, but I wasn’t writing. I was still on the clock. When I go off the clock, for however brief a time; it’s timeless. It’s why I don’t paint at home. I’m on the clock at home, and I can only paint in timelessness. I feel restless when I’m on the clock of responsibility.

There’s a sense of accomplishment, an ersatz satisfaction, being on the clock and taking care of business. It absolves all other concerns, but it kills creativity and obliterates awareness. Any intense consciousness obliterates awareness, and with it, peace and happiness.
Off the Clock

Being on the clock is what happens to all but a few. The dent in my bumper, if it came from my accident, and the possible, (I wrote passable) increase in my insurance, is a small price to pay for this lesson. I know all this stuff intuitively. My personal self, my ego, needs a lesson in order to understand it.

Being off the clock has been my intuitive salvation. I’ve sacrificed money, success, and family structure to live it. As much as I live it, it only takes a little nudge toward feeling responsible to others to reinstate the habit of being on the clock.

Being on the clock is a clear and understandable image to my mind. Living in timelessness makes no sense to my mind, because the mind recedes from prominence when I’m in timelessness.

Being off the clock tells my mind it hasn’t been forgotten. It’s been spoken to in its own terminology. Being off the clock isn’t the same thing as taking a break or going on vacation. Most people are still on the clock during times of rest.

This reinforces my reason for going to Hawaii, every year that I can. Scott and Liz make no demands of responsibility. I don’t drive a car, while I’m there. I ride a bicycle, and I have whole days in the stillness of my spirit. The last time I was there, I made fifty paintings, sometimes four a day, effortlessly, it seemed. Time is effort. Timelessness is effortless.

**Time is money** is a version of **Time is effort**.

It’s occurred to me that I’ve failed in my enlightenment by not living off the clock, all the time. If I were more of a failure at living on the clock, living off the clock might be easier. My mind is skilled at living on the clock, and it tells me how happy it is, when I succumb to the world of effort. Hasty effort feels like accomplishment, but it’s a drug for the addictive mind.

I drove Mother to Carole’s, this morning. She was afraid to go.

“I don’t like cold weather,” she said, “and winter has only just begun.”

It’s reasonable for someone with a fear of falling to distrust snow and ice. She bundled up against the cold, but it wasn’t as cold as she feared.
At Carole’s, after her shampoo and styling, after the comb-out, she sat reading *The Star*. Carole was already combing out another woman, and Mother continued to read the articles, look at the pictures, and comment on the affairs of the rich and the beautiful.

I sat in another chair and waited, occasionally exchanging knowing, forgiving looks with Carole.

“Do you want me to sit here, while you read the rest of the magazine?” I said, smiling.

“You can wait a little while longer,” she said.

“The Star is a tabloid rag,” I said, “but they do have a lot of great photography.”

“That’s the best reason to read it,” Carole said.

When we left, Carole gave us Christmas mugs, with small gift bags in them. We thanked her. Later, Mother said she shouldn’t have done that.

“She does it for everyone,” I said.

“I know, but she shouldn’t have done it.”

I said we should go home before the snow got worse.

“Whatever you want to do,” she said, and then, “We could stop for a roast beef and cheddar they talk about.”

We drove to Arby’s for a roast beef and cheddar with curly fires. As we were leaving Arby’s, she asked me if I’d done the grocery shopping.

“Yes, I did. We’re all set,” I said.

“I used to go once a week,” she said.

“I like to go whenever we need something.”

“You’re really on top of things,” she said, and she said it with appreciation, “You’re on top of things.”

After I got her home, ready to do laundry, I decided to go to the Y and lounge in the steam room and whirlpool.

“Don’t go out,” she said, worried about the ice and snow.

“It’s OK,” I said, and I went out to the Y and to pick up a fruitcake she requested and some stamps.

Tonight, as I got ready to go out, she said, “Be careful. Don’t run into anything.”
Soccer Sunday

Last night, I asked Mother if she was going to church, this morning, and she said no. I began to think about playing soccer. At 1:30, thinking about getting up at 8AM, after two nights of six hours sleep, I thought I might just sleep in. I woke at 7:30 and decided to sleep in. I got up, a few minutes after that and took a shower.

“I went back to bed,” Mother said, as I passed her, “I’ll bump into you.”

“I’ll be done in a flash,” I said.

As I was leaving the shower, she was using the porta-potty in her bedroom.

I got to the Center at 8:30, and twenty guys were warming up. Two teams of eight or nine players played, while a third team waited, so I played three sets of two fifteen minute games, an hour and a half, with the last game of stragglers and hard cases playing on until 11:00, about two hours of soccer. I scored the next-to-last goal, after playing my usual game of bonehead plays, quality plays, and pretty good soccer.

Once again, I was curious at the lack of recognition I got from the same guys I played with this summer. I thought, months ago, that it was some indication of my unlikable personality or my poor play, that nobody wanted to be associated with. I thought it was the awkwardness of talking to an old guy. I remember that awkwardness when I was a young guy. I began to think it’s a hesitancy to be buddies with a man of my demeanor. I’m not a contemporary, and even when I was, some people treated me as an oddball, someone with qualities that aren’t appreciated by regular guys.

The truth is, I don’t know. The only guy who made a point to talk to me was a guy I didn’t know, who introduced himself to me and named several of the players for my benefit. I knew them, and I told him so. One goalie was especially good, and I asked him, “Is goalie your profession?”

“Yes, it is,” he said, shaking my hand, “it’s my passion.”

He used his entire body, head included, like a weapon, repelling any and all attacks with controlled abandon - a true artist. He was the only one who looked me in the eye with a smile, between games.
After another game, a couple of guys wanted to retrieve a loose ball that had landed on the roof of the two story high office. They carried a thirty-foot ladder to the wall and raised it. I anchored it with my feet, and held it steady. When the climber came down with the ball, I volunteered to put the ladder back.

“I’ve done this before,” I said and carried the ladder back across the track to its storage spot.

Afterwards, Brian said, “Steve, you owe five bucks.”
I gave him five ones, and he said, “It’s five bucks.”
I had given him five ones, but he held out a $10 bill.
“What did I give you?” I said.
“You gave me $15.”
“Soccer makes me blind,” I said.

What it made me was tired. I haven’t run around like that for two months.

On my way home, I stopped at the Mexican bakery that Carole recommended. It was wonderful to walk into such a place. It was exactly like the bakeries in Mexico, when I was there, fourteen years ago.
Mother was happy with the assortment of goodies I brought home.
“I wonder how Carole knew about that place,” she said.

After breakfast, I lay down for a nap, and my body was in benign rack and ruin. I worried a little about my heart, since my arms were weak.

“Why would my arms be weak?” I thought, but I was happy.

I wasn’t on the clock when I played, before the game or after it. I have a tendency to let the dishes pile up and put off doing the laundry, but then I didn’t want to play soccer, this morning, either.

I’ve been looking at my cafe muse, Ann, and I wonder about my attraction to women when I’m off the clock, and they are on it, such as Ann, working in the cafe, and Bonnie, working at the library.

If I relate to them as muses, there’s no problem, but the timelessness I seek is not conducive to relationships in the world. As I live and love, off the clock, I can’t expect to mate with a woman who doesn’t have the same sense. And, most women, despite the centuries of romantic presumptions, don’t live in timelessness. As practical as men pretend to be, women are on the clock as much, if not more, than men are.
Non Time

My legs are sore. The soccer arena is a concrete floor with Astroturf over it. Two hours of running on that, and I’m surprised I can walk.

I called the insurance agent, this morning, first thing, and the woman said they’d wait to hear if there’s anything to be done.

My daughter emailed to say she doesn’t want me to tell anyone she’s pregnant, until January, when the embryo becomes a fetus. Isn’t that an old song, “When the embryo turns to fetus, I’ll be coming back home to you”. (When it’s Springtime in the Rockies)

I wanted to watch the season finale of Survivor, last night, and Mother wanted to watch it, too.

“It’s no fun watching a show you like with someone who doesn’t like it,” I said.

“How do you know I don’t like it?” she said.

“You told me you didn’t.”

“I might like it.”

So, we watched the first twenty minutes. She asked questions about everything and then began to complain.

“If you don’t like the show, I can watch it in the kitchen, no problem.”

“OK,” she said, “you can turn it off.”

“I can’t turn it off, right now, it’s in the middle of something.”

Eventually, I retired to the kitchen, where I stayed for the next two hours, moving back and forth, during the commercials, to get the laundry and put it away, make the bed, wash dishes, take her some fruitcake and coffee, etc. This morning, during the President’s news conference about the capture of Saddam Hussein, she pointed out a dirty area on the rug in front of her chair. I got the cleaner and cleaned it.

“Your hair looks nice, today,” she said, as I knelt in front of her, scrubbing the rug. I didn’t say anything.

“And I like you, too,” I said, finally.

I’m feeling tired of this fake friendship. If I knew my mother the way others know her, I might enjoy being with her. But I’m exhausted, after five months, living with her as two people with polite, barely compatible
characters. I bet she feels it, too. I suspect she misses Mark, not because he’s a boon companion, but because she can believe he’s more at home in her company. She’s been calling me Honey, lately. I think it’s another subtle expression of the gulf between us. She’s no dummy, when it comes to feelings of discomfort, in herself and those around her.

The accident showed up just in time to give me an excuse to feel things I’ve been keeping on the back burner. I put it on the back burner, and it fell behind the refrigerator. I’ll probably experience this unhappiness for a minute, or a day, and then I’ll be back in balance. Balance is not found in feigned ignorance.

It’s a beautiful lesson to live with someone who doesn’t remember things.

“Jewel sells a baked chicken that’s really good,” she said.
“I know. We had one. It was good.”
“When did we have one?”
“A month ago, maybe.”

We had the identical baked chicken, last night. I got it at Wal-Mart for a dollar less than at Jewel. I need to let things go in this relationship. There’s no use holding a grudge or any other feeling.

I’ve noticed the pliant nature of memory. I’ve seen my own mind skip and skim memories, since I was a young man. I noticed, when I was editing a book I’d written, months or even years before, I would feel and act out the sense of a chapter I would read the next day. I’d stored the information and presumably forgotten it. And there it was, enacted in my behavior, just as I was about to see it in print.

Just this moment, I crossed a line, from being smothered by the sense of my mother’s house, to breathing freely in my own awareness. I stayed in, last night, in order to watch the Survivor marathon, and I missed my nightly ‘meditation,’ It took until this moment for me to feel the relief I need.

There’s no conflict with my mother that requires my time away, it’s just being on the clock. If I were caretaking someone else, I’d still need time away. This time isn’t downtime. Watching *Survivor* is downtime. This is non-time. When one is truly off the clock, the clock melts like ice cream in the sun.
When I looked out the kitchen window, I saw that someone had written, in large letters, by walking in the snow, the words; I LOVE YOU and under that, IRENE, and under that, the name TEAMO. Antonio, the new guy upstairs, must had written it to his girlfriend, Irene Teamo. Then I realized the last line was TE AMO.

I was right about non-time. I realize I’ve described this awareness of Being Itself, in many ways, for 500 pages and five months. The reality never changes, and the relative realities never stop challenging it.

Tonight, I was at peace with my mother. I fixed her some salad and then broccoli with butter, and popcorn chicken. She got a package from her niece and nephew, my cousins, a box that contained BOND-OST Swedish cheese and lingenberries.

“I don’t know why they send this, every year. They really like the Swedish cheese,” she said. “Those lingenberries are really expensive at that Swedish market.”

“Jerry’s,” I said.

I showed her an email from cousin Brad about his mother, Dorothy, who’s being moved to a nursing home. Dorothy’s husband, Marshall, is 92.

“Wasn’t she already in a nursing home?” Mother said.

“She was, but they’re moving her.”

“I don’t know why Marshall had to go see her, every day, driving all that way, just to see her.”

I was astonished.

“Maybe, he did it, because she’s his wife, and he loves her, and he wants to be with her. Didn’t you go see Dad, every day, when he was in the hospital?”

“Well, yes, I guess so. I suppose so.”
Maybe she can’t imagine why anyone would come to see her. Maybe it’s not about Dorothy. Some of my mother’s sense of not being loved I’ve inherited. I don’t quite believe that anyone would want to spend time in my presence. This is what I’ve called a ghost characteristic; one of the characteristics we inherit from our parents without any basis in reality in our own lives. Another name for ghost characteristics is ‘human history.’ We’re all bound together by fear and desire; ghost characteristics that have nothing to do with who we really are.

When I’m in the presence of my son, I feel an autonomic love that occurs of its own accord, without will or effort. That love has shown me I’m capable of the highest love of others in this life. The greatest love is the love that ‘passeth all understanding,’ and I’ve seen its face.

Fireworks is crowded on Mocha Monday, mostly with teenagers but also with adults of various ages. I put some decaf in the dregs of my mocha, and I can report that’s not a good idea.

I went to the Y, today, after soccer, yesterday. As I walked in the door of the Y, I began to walk more smoothly, more athletically. I ran through the same workout as I did the first eight days. I’m tired, but I’m not as sore as I was before.

“I wish we could go out to eat,” Mother said.
“Anytime you want,” I said.
“I can’t go out in this weather.”
“It’s up to you,” I said, “I’ll trust your judgment.”
“We haven’t had one of those pizzas in a long time, I forgot the name.”

“DiGiorno,” I said, “I’ll get it, tomorrow.”

If I can keep my weight down in this shit-storm of fattening food, I’ll feel really good about it. When I first got here, I tried to institute some dietary changes. Mother went along with my rice, fish, and veggies, for a while, and now I’ll make her anything she wants, and eat it, too. As the 250 lb. laughing woman, on Dr. Phil’s weight loss team, said today, “If it tastes good, it’s good for you!” and all the other self-described fat people laughed in unison.

Making constitutional changes is next to impossible. It’s right next to impossible, almost touching, a unbridgeable distance, until the difference disappears.
A New Bag

At 1AM, last night, I wrote, “Why do I feel so good, all of a sudden? It’s because I just admitted to myself that I have no faith in desire for a woman. I felt it before I had any thought of it. I turned off the movie and the TV, and I felt it. I set the thermostat for overnight, put on my nightshirt and socks, and I felt it again. I went to the living room to retrieve the fingerless gloves I wear to keep my hands warm at night, and I realized it made me happy.

Oh, and in the middle of it, I read a line from my book, called, The Zenictionary.

**Zenfiltrate:** To enter into the truth, by taking on the appearance of truth, and speaking in a truthful way.

It could have been any other of the 1460 lines. They all say the same thing.

This morning, coincidentally, Mother was reading the same Zenfinitions from her notepad, called, The Zencalendar.

**Zensure:** The process of blocking out the light and the dark, while revealing the true character of both.

“Did you write these?” she said.

“Yes, I did. 1500 of them.”

**Zenjurious:** Of that which brings harm where it can do no more harm.

She read without comment but without rejection, either, in a voice of respect and, dare I say, admiration?

I went by the library, this morning, to get a new movie, and Bonnie checked it out for me. I felt sadness, and I saw sadness in her eyes.

“I read part of . . . part of your book . . . and it’s . . . the writing is very good,” she said.
“It’s good for me. We’ll see if it’s a good book,” I said.

I smiled at her, warmly, for a moment, as I left. Getting in the car, I thought about how the section I’d given her was about her, and she commented on the writing. I wrote a book about my time with Suryo in India. I gave her a copy when we got back. She had nothing to say.

It’s the same way my mother reacts to my writing.

“I sense a pattern,” he said, facetiously.

After I came in from writing, last night, after muting the TV, I said to Mother, “I love being a writer. Twice a day, I do something I love to do. Whenever I write, I feel good.”

“You’re very lucky to have something you love,” she said.

“That’s true,” I said, “I am.”

Today, I went to buy a gym bag, and it took me nearly an hour. Then, I had a choice to go write or go to the gym. I came to write. It’s no contest, really. Exercising and taking a steam and a Jacuzzi, as much as I enjoy them, can’t hold a candle to this peaceful energy.

I wonder about painting and writing. I suspect I can write, because it crosses the gap between the divine and the mundane, the profound and the profane. Painting isn’t as profane, for me. Neither is poetry, but this peripatetic prose can reach many points of the spectrum.

I had a great sex dream, last night, right after recognizing my freedom from desire. In my dreams, I’ve encountered lovers I don’t know, women unfamiliar to me, different kinds of women, over the years, and the dreams are enjoyably vivid. I could say, at least in my mind, that I’ve had a steady and satisfying love life.

This woman was articulate, as well as loving. We were physically, passionately at ease with each other, and she had a quick and wise mind. I noticed it, and I spoke about it.

“I don’t have to pretend with you,” I said, “You’re so intelligent, I don’t have to act like you are.”

She was apparently coming into some money. It seemed like it was dependent on something I might say or write. I’m not sure, now. That detail has faded.

She was naked in my arms, as we crossed a town that reminded me of Katmandu. We came toward several men I knew. I was concerned about
her nudity, but the love between us was so clear and real, there was no need to be worried about their thoughts or desires.

As we walked, I put my hand on her swollen, wet vagina. It was a wonderful feeling.

“Thank you, Jesus,” I said, and she heard me say it. I was happy to be with her.

She was no one I’ve ever known. She didn’t have a voluptuous body or a beautiful face. The best part of it was that we were together, completely and effortlessly.

I’m sure I’ll never see her, again. These lovers have appeared in my dreams to perfectly match the moment. I’m grateful for that appearance.

I bought one gym bag, a Wilson, for $14.99, from Kmart. I took it the car and transferred my clothes to the new bag. I didn’t like the color, gray with black trim, like my car, and the zippers were sticky.

I took it back in and exchanged it for a blue bag with black trim from Gold’s Gym. As I was walking back to the car, I said to myself, “This is my bag. That other one was my mother’s.”

The second bag felt like my bag. I liked it. The zippers were strong and smooth. There’s still time for a short stop at the Y. Why not?
What Comes and Goes

I didn’t go to the Y. I went home and watched Dr. Phil with Mother. The show was about anger and the fear that anger masks. Influenced by the show, Mother told me the one thing she regretted.

“I was afraid that when things were good, that it wouldn’t last. When I got married, I was so happy, I was sure something would ruin it. I didn’t trust it for a long time. I wish I’d known that in the beginning of my marriage. I wish I didn’t feel that way when I got married. It’s the one thing I regret.”

I have had the same feelings, for no apparent reason.

I remember her saying to me, “Don’t get your hopes up, and you won’t be disappointed.”

She told me she never said that. She got her hopes up, and her fear came out, and she got what she wanted, anyway. And she was still fearful. I’ve watched myself go through long cycles of wanting things to go well, and they did, and I still feared the collapse.

The woman from the insurance agent called this morning to tell me that Bonnie H. called, and we could go ahead with the claim, if I wanted them to.

“What would happen, if I didn’t want to?”

“I just needed to ask you.”

I suppose I might prefer to settle with the woman, without using my insurance, but I have no money to settle with anyone. I need the insurance. All the time I drank, I never had insurance, and I never had an accident that required it.

I was playing soccer, one Saturday morning. I joked with a guy wearing shin-guards that I played pick-up soccer for fifteen years without shin-guards and never got kicked in the shins. Within two minutes, someone kicked me in the shins hard enough to draw blood and hurt like hell.

Bad things happen. Good things happen. This too shall pass applies to them both.

I was embarrassed to write a sexual dream, as if I had become sexual in this writing. It was a dream. All the details of a dream are there to create
an image that suits the sense of the dreamer. I had a dream in which one part of my imagination found happiness with another part of my imagination.

In the dream, I was truly happy touching my lover’s vagina. It was like a engorged bouquet that my fingertips sank into.

Poonjaji warned me to watch out, as I approached my ultimate freedom. He said that even after Buddha was enlightened, dancing girls came to him in his dreams to tempt him out of his freedom. Maybe my dream, following so quickly on an epiphany of freedom from desire, was a divisive challenge to my awareness.

If I believed the characters in my dreams were anything other than my own consciousness talking to itself, I might feel threatened, but I don’t. There’s no bouquet tempting me, and even if there is, this too shall pass.
A Sweet Man

As I was eating breakfast, Mother got up to go into the other room. She put her hands on my arm, very gently. She leaned close to me, her face next to mine. I kissed her on the cheek.

“You’re a sweet man, Stephen,” she said, and kissed me on the forehead. She put her hands on my shoulders.

“You were a sweet boy. You’ve always been a sweet man. Except when you were drinking. Thank God, you put that behind you.”

I enjoyed her tenderness. It seemed like a farewell. Last night, late, she came out of her bedroom and asked me a question.

“Do I take my pills now, or when I wake up?”

“You take them when you get up in the morning.”

She’s convinced that the movie channel is different from the rest of the cable channels. She thinks she has to do something special to get to another channel. I showed her it’s just another channel, like all the others, and she still doesn’t get it. I left the TV on the movie channel, and I’m afraid, when I get home, she’ll have punched all the buttons on the remote and rendered the TV inoperable. It doesn’t matter. She can switch over to the kitchen TV, if worse comes to worst. Dr. Phil is ubiquitous.

I called my publisher, last night, and she agreed to send me some more copies of my book. The man who sublet my apartment has been very cooperative, but his father died of liver failure, this week, and that may make my plans change. I feel as if I’m already packing to leave. Everything looks like a postmortem to me. There are three weeks remaining. That’s a lifetime. Fruit flies live only 24 hours.

There’s a woman working the counter, today, who has eyebrows painted on her forehead. Literally, a half-inch above where any eyebrow could reasonably grow. I thought to ask her who told her that was a good idea, but I didn’t.

I looked up the number of an old girlfriend in the phone book. I’m a glutton for something, even if it’s not punishment. She’s the one who said to me, 23 years ago, when I broke up with her, that it was the longest, shortest relationship she’d ever been in.
I’m still wallowing in the personal, I’m not sunbathing in freedom, but I can feel the transformation occurring, as I write this.

I watched part of a movie, last night, about a writer who goes home to care for her dying mother. She tries to maintain her independent identity, but she’s beginning to be drawn into the family entanglements. The movie is about her false freedom and the false fulfillment of family. I’m betting the family will win her over, in the end. I’ll learn that, when I see the second half of the movie.

I’ve lived in my own world of false freedom. Real freedom doesn’t need any separation for it to be real, but it sure does make it a whole lot easier to maintain.

Dancing girls aren’t the problem. It’s the attachment to the idea of dancing girls that becomes a problem. Family isn’t the problem, it’s the attachment to the thoughts of family.

Oprah says she finally discovered why she resisted marriage and children, when she recently went to Africa, to set up programs to care for the millions of orphans in the AIDS epidemic. She thought about bringing a bunch of kids home, but she said her mothering instinct is not for the few but for the many.

As I heard that, I remembered the times I’ve felt connected to the universal self in a group of people, as a performer, as a poet, as a speaker, as a man sitting with Papaji in front of his people.

“I ... love ... them,” I said.

I wasn’t even remotely surprised when those words came out of my mouth. It was genuine. I was surprised I felt that way, when I thought about it, later.

Something will begin for me, in such a way, that I can be true to that instinct, and I don’t know what it is, yet.

As I was coming up the walk, a week ago, the thought occurred to me that I’m supposed to be older than I am, before I can speak. I’m still getting ready, and readiness is everything.

I feel the surge of freedom in my gut. I don’t feel the morass of the personal, as I did earlier. Nothing has changed.

I’m ready to go to the Y.
Mob Brilliance

I’ve seen something in groups of people that contradicts the notion of mob violence. I’ve seen mob brilliance. It’s related to the line from the Bible, “Wherever two or more of you are gathered in my name, there I will be.” There is, in groups of people, the potential for each one of the group to come into a greater awareness than each one might, on his or her own.

The universal self, the selfless self, is more easily revealed in a group than it is in an individual, just as mob violence can be drawn out of people who would never, individually, act in a violent way. The whole is greater than the sum of the parts.

I’m drawn to speak to an entity of the spirit and not a physical entity. I told Laura, my publisher, last night, that I was going on the radio January first, and she predicted a good time.

“You have the gift of gab,” she said.

What I have is the gift of articulation. I can speak what I care about to someone who can hear it. I’ve been concerned about who that might be; one or two people, a few, here and there. But when I speak to mob brilliance, I speak to the wholeness of the parts.

The other thing I’ve seen more clearly is my inclination to controlled abandon, otherwise seen as recklessness.

I take chances in my writing and my paintings. I risk color and language at the edge of incomprehensibility. It’s what makes me an artist. I do it in my life, too. I noticed, when I was painting the big house I painted to make the money I needed to come on this adventure in elder care, that I took chances, moving quickly, right on the edge of accident, at the limits of my sight, like playing soccer with almost disregard for safety. It is to do something well, without hesitancy, without fear. And then I run into the back of someone’s car.

I had a few frightening moments, climbing all over the outside of a three-story house, on a sloping roof, under the eaves, pulling dozens of painted-stuck storm windows off, stretching the tip of my sprayer as far as I could reach. I was one step from disaster, one step past disaster.
I wondered why I did that, when my other inclination is to step easily in peaceful moderation, to feel serenity in work, to meditate, on the job. Why are there these two inclinations?

I take pleasure in wirewalking, parallel to the fearless detachment of art and spirituality. My proposal to Bonnie falls in this mix, somewhere, too.

When I’m cooking for my mother, I sometimes drop things and juices fly. I bang pots. It looks like I’m out of control, but it feels like being out of control but not out of rhythm.

Sometimes, in this writing, as I’ve done for forty years, I write into the blank white space, with no concept where my metaphorical feet will land, with no sense of what sense I’m making, but trusting that sense will make itself.

That’s my part in mob brilliance. Look! Can you see the will that speaks with no one present but presence itself? That’s what I’m talking about.

Mother asked me where I was going, tonight. I told her I was going where I go, every night. I said I would be back soon. I noticed the dent in my front bumper. I may never get insurance, again.
The Two Girls Down Front

Laura said I had the gift of gab. Whenever I talk to her, or others like her, my tongue is loosened. She’s a writer and an artist, and I’m at ease among artists. I presume a level of innate understanding that I haven’t found, very often, among other people. Speaking to like-minded people is satisfying, but it doesn’t answer the question of how one speaks to everyone else with the same ease.

The answer to that question is the awareness of an audience that can respond the way a few can.

I took Mother to the foot doctor, today. She was sure it was a bad idea. Before we left, I shoveled the walk.

“I shouldn’t come out on a day like this.”
“It’ll be fine. The walk is clear all the way to the garage.”
“Whoever shoveled it didn’t make it very wide.”
“I shoveled the walk,” I said, “I didn’t have time to do a more thorough job.”

Scott and Liz sent us six boxes of chocolate covered macadamia nuts. Mother loved them, on her last visit, and Liz remembered.

“Did you try those nuts? Aren’t they good?”
“They are good,” I said.

She loves the tiny, marginal artwork in The Bridge, the mailer from the Methodist church. She points them out to me, every week.

“Aren’t these drawings good? I wonder who does them.”
“They look generic to me. Your taste in art is not the same as mine.”
“I mean, for what they are, they’re good. They’re cute.”
“Sure, they are. They’re cute.”
“I wonder who does them. Look at this one.”
“I’ll email the church and find out who does the drawings,” I said, and I did.

I couldn’t resist telling the minister that my mother has shown more interest in those drawings than she has in my own artwork.

I’m reminded that my mother is not the all wise, all seeing, all knowing mother of the arts. This is another example of the better purpose I have in addressing myself to the universal self and not to any one in
particular. You, dear reader, are the universal self. In person, you are one of the few.

Most people will buy a book or look openly at a painting if they have had the work recommended to them. There is a peculiar thing that happens in art. If enough people are interested in an artist or his work, that work takes on a heightened reality. It’s very hard for anyone to pick up an artist’s work and feel the full effect of the art, unless it has that heightened reality.

As a poet, writer, and artist, wanting my work to be seen and read, I have felt that limitation. Over the years, I’ve been hoping to meet the few who can embrace the reality of a work of art on their own. Now, I’m eager to enter into that heightened reality, where a communal spirit inspires receptivity to the art.

The negative view of this is that it’s difficult for people to accept work when they haven’t been told that it’s worth their effort. The positive view is that the communal reality of any work of art makes it available to many people who wouldn’t otherwise see it or hear it. Mob brilliance is a true thing.

When I was performing my second one man show at a cafe in San Francisco, my girlfriend, at the time, Evelyn, the quotable one, noticed two girls down front, who were unsure about what they were watching. They didn’t know me, or the poetry I was satirizing. Evelyn said they looked around and saw others having a good time, they looked at each other and shrugged, and from then on, they were eager participants. They jumped in. They went with the flow. Mob brilliance overwhelmed them.

It helps me to not wait for that communal openness and acceptance, but to recognize it for the good thing that it is, and to speak to it.

I’ve been speaking to a diminishing audience of people who might be interested in what I have to say. It behooves me to begin to speak to the communal acceptance I know exists everywhere, all the time.

The presence in the room doesn’t belong to any one person but to everyone. To speak to it doesn’t diminish anyone but elevates everyone. A rising tide lifts all boats. The best gift is one left on the doorstep. Like snow. No one feels slighted by the snowfall because it’s given to everyone and not reserved for a few.
Mother wanted to go for lunch, after the doctor’s. I said I didn’t like to eat a big meal in the middle of the day. I said I’d prefer it if we went to the Village Inn for dinner.

“I’ll have to get all bundled up, again,” she said.

“Ah,” I scoffed, “it’ll be easy.”
The Family Crucible

The minister wrote back. She said the drawings were from various ‘clip art’ sources found on the Internet.

“I’m delighted your mother enjoys the artwork, so much. Thanks too for the positive feedback. It’s very helpful to the office staff to hear these words of encouragement. I will be sure to pass them along.”

Mother and I went to the Village Inn for dinner. The ease of our being together is so different from a few months ago. There’s little to report from casual banter without any undercurrent of family angst.

Scott had recommended a movie, and it’s now available for home rental, so I stopped at the store, but all the copies were out. Mother said she liked that Bridges sons’ movie, so I drove to the Moline Library and rented a copy of The Fabulous Baker Boys.

“I don’t know what I’d do without you,” she said.

“If I wasn’t here, Mark would be here, and you’d be fine.”

What she said scared me a little, so I told her about my situation.

“The man I sublet my apartment to, his father died last week, and he wants to go be with his mother, so I have to get home in the next month and a half.”

Last night’s movie, about the writer who comes home to take care of her dying mother, ended much like my sojourn here is ending. She made accommodations to her mother’s life, blended in for a while, and then went back to her own life, having profited in the heart from her time in the family crucible.

The mother admits to accepting her husband’s weaknesses and staying with him because she chose to. The husband is a college professor and a mediocre writer, whose derivative novel goes unfinished. If his wife had left him for a life of her own, she might not have died of cancer, and he might have become the writer he dreamed of being. Or not.

All this talk about speaking to the mob brilliance and not to individuals may be evolving out of my time here with my mother.

My mother is the individual, and all the women I’ve known have been the individual by extension that I’ve been trying to make myself clear to, all these years.
Sherry Hamilton said to me, when I was a young man, that I talked like I was talking to a roomful of people. It shocked me, and I reformed myself, learning how to talk to one person at a time. I faulted myself for any attempt to perform for an audience. I believed I needed to direct myself away from that self-serving impulse. I tried to solve the question of who I’m talking to, by getting more and more specific. At the same time, my awareness has become less and less specific.

My mother was a puzzle that kept appearing, until I saw that the pieces of the puzzle are hers and not mine. Her puzzle is not mine to solve. It’s not my puzzle. I’m free of this search for her recognition. It isn’t in her to give it, and it isn’t my need to seek it from her. If I don’t need my mother’s recognition, if I don’t need any woman’s recognition, I’m free to seek the true recognition I need, in the nature of who I am.

God wants to recognize God. The god in who I am recognizes the god in who you are. There are so many analogous ways to describe this simple equation.

My father sold farm machinery to farmers when we lived in Nebraska. The winters, in Nebraska, were long and harsh. I asked my mother if Dad was home all winter. She didn’t remember. I don’t either. For half the year, he was gone, five days a week, and in the winter, no one remembers where he was.

As I was writing, tonight, in Fireworks, Robin came up to me, and we chatted. She works two jobs, and she was tired. She works at a Nautilus Center, showing people how to use the machines, before coming, to manage the pottery workshop. When I asked her where the Nautilus Center was, she said it was next to the cemetery.

“No connection between the two,” I said, joking, but she smiled softly, like someone who’s tired beyond thought.

“I don’t want to disturb you,” she said, as she made her exit.

“No problem,” I said, still wondering about the magical attraction between men and women.
The Calendar is Ticking

I’ve reached this point, before, when I knew what it was I wanted to do, what was right for me to do, what others would be happy I was doing, and I have yet to do it. Maybe, I’ll never do it.

I suspect it depends on some unknown I don’t know about.

I went out and got new wiper blades for my truck and a pair of winter boots for Mother. Tomorrow is her 89th birthday. Freddie is coming by at 2PM, after she gets her hair done.

We both got 2004 calendars for Christmas, from Liz.
The Sauna Boys

She didn’t like the boots I bought her, but she did like dinner.

Earlier, at the Y, after my workout, I went into the sauna instead of the steam room. A man came in, after a while, and I began to talk to him. I asked him about the difference between the dry heat sauna and the steam room. He said the steam could carry germs, so you could catch a cold from someone else, and the dry heat was better, anyway.

He said he was a doctor, and he was from Egypt, originally. I asked him how he got to Moline, by way of San Francisco, and Pennsylvania Medical School. He said a recruiter touted this place. Turns out, he loves it here. I said I was an artist from Seattle and I loved India.

“For an artist, of course,” he said.

He said he was an internist. I asked where he practiced. He said Trinity Hospital. I said my mother was there. He asked me who was her doctor. I said the one I remembered was Sanguino. He said Sanguino was his partner.

He asked me about my mother. I said Sanguino had discovered the thyroid problem.

“Hypothyroidism one of the causes of senility, and falling,” he said.

Another is depression. He praised me for not dumping my mother in a home. He said he has many patients over 90 who are doing well. He told me about some of them.

He recommended I travel to Egypt to see the pyramids. I said I’d probably love Cairo, since I love cities.

I’m skimming the conversation. We talked about many things. Everything I learned about him came from my questions. When he began to speak about my mother’s condition and his practice, he spoke without prompting.

“Failing eyesight is another cause of senility,” he said.

Some old people fall, because they forget they are walking,” he said.

All his children were born here.

“Do they get back to Egypt?” I said.

“We go back, every three years,” he said.

“That’s good,” I said.
I was in the sauna longer than I would have been on my own. I stood to leave. He’d told me his full name, but I’d forgotten it, by then.

“What should I call you?” I said, “Doc? Or do you have a first name?”

“My name is Ahmed,” he said.

“A-h-m-e-d?” I said.

“Yes.”

I shook his hand, “It was good to meet you.”

He praised me for taking care of my mother.

“It’s good for me,” I said.

“I’m glad to meet such a good man,” he said.

I thought it was good to meet a man who said I was a good man.

Tonight, we watched the end of The Fabulous Baker Boys. I wondered why my mother loves a movie about two brothers who play music for a living. They hire a singer, the artistic brother falls in love with the singer, and the brothers break up their act. The singer and the more creative brother begin to live a more honest life, more faithful to their instincts and less faithful to their economic wellbeing. A story I could identify with is a story my mother loves, defying everything she’s ever told me about the choices I’ve made in my life.

I saw Dr. Phil tell a family of adults to talk honestly to each other about everything. It’s a true thing among people who speak truly. I have begun that manner of dialog before, and each time, I’ve been met with uncomprehending disinterest.

I will ask her about the movie; just as I tried to hug her at Carole’s, but I wont hold my breath.
Mother’s Birthday Day

She likes The Fabulous Baker Boys because of the music. She used to play the piano. She likes the music.

“What about the story?”

“It’s not much of a story.”

I got an email from Mark, after a week of cyber-silence. Mother read it a few times.

“It’s the first time he sounds like he’s having a good time,” she said. “He doesn’t say anything about his foot, but it must be better.”

Your computer sent the emails twice; I will bring the maps; Portlock is the only thing fun close in; other places are Makaha and 3 Tables by Foodland on north shore; Sunset is fun close to the shore; the current is very strong in shallow water; Sandy is fun to play in the shore splash but I’m afraid in deep water bec the only way to leave is to ride a wave onto the sand and I think I may be too old for that now; used to be fun back when I bent easier; the features of Portlock beyond the water and rocks is nobody goes there, many days I am there alone, other people are fisherman on cloudy days, cliff divers mostly kids who work up the nerve, surfers who once in a while get a wave to ride on their boards and there were two days when couples showed up w/little kids and a dog who chased frizbee or tennis ball into the water amd climbed out on the slippery green mossy rocks where I could never climb out; there is a rope tied to a spike someone put in years ago that hangs in the water for wimps to use to get out and there are a few ledges to climb out on but the easiest way and funnest is to let the right size wave lift you up so you turn around and sit down on the ledge as the water leaves you there and goes back to the deep blue sea; one tip is rubber shoes; I am the only one I saw there this time w/rubber shoes but it makes climbing out much easier and I have a new game which is standing on the flat rock as waves crash near me and not letting the wave take my feet out from under me; and the other game is to stand at the edge farther down where there is a cove and waves crash into the cove and splash high into the air, the point of this games to stand under the falling splash even locals dont do this; one day a surfer came over to tell me not to do that and he showed me the scar on his arm where the wave knocked him off the rock but he is FOS bec I keep always a watchful eye on the next wave so I am never taken by surprise and if the next wave is bigger than I want, I skip back onto the dry rocks; rubber shoes allow for quick retreat too, w/o them I could slip on a wet rock; never ever walk on the green mossy rocks, they are slicker than snot on a doorknob; well, I walk on them but very slowly and very
carefully and always looking for the next wave because I know there is no standing on green mossy rocks when a wave comes even a small wave; if there is a danger it is not looking for the next wave; and I did this a few times in the past till I formed the habit of always looking at the next set of waves; as long as you see what is coming, there is no danger; I should write more but the pizza is done—Mark

Tell Mother I miss her. Is that an Everly Bros song; did they really play at your graduation? Other features is nobody ever brings a radio and I can pee anytime behind a rock. Later I will tell how you cannot walk all the way around to Hanauma Bay bec the path turns into a cliff about half way around the point. I did once tho walk from Sandy Beach to Hanauma Bay at the waters edge; that I should do again maybe I will next week but it takes 4 or 5 hours. Probably longer at my age; I remember only a couple awkward places where I had to jump over a narrow chasm; I did that in 1985 one day by accident, I left Sandy Beach to see how far I could walk and damn if I didn't walk all the way to the toilet bowl. You meet fisherman on that walk too. Pizza now.

“He says he misses me. Why?”

“Can’t you imagine anyone missing you? Don’t you miss some people?”

“Yes, sure.”

“Can you imagine your friends missing you?”

“Well, yes, we had some good times.”

She got several cards from Dareth and her family. She was very pleased. Today is her 89th birthday.

“Dareth didn’t call me. She usually calls me on my birthday.”

It occurred to me that my stories aren’t filled with the detailed drama of most good stories. I’m fond of that kind of story, myself, stories filled with tension and conflict. All day long, I absorb details of psychological, emotional, spiritual, and physical life, but my poetic nature is to cut to the chase, to the quick.

I made a video clip of the lights on River Drive, at night, and this morning I noticed I had taped over half of the short segment I made of Bonnie. All that’s left is a brief glimpse of her surprised expression where I caught her, as she sat waiting for me, in my mother’s car. I opened the passenger door to film her and then inadvertently slammed it shut, cutting off her brief hello - an abrupt conclusion to a brief hello. The story of a relationship I slammed the door on.
This morning, I took the boots back and bought Mother a pair of slippers, but she couldn’t get her feet in the ankle hole. I took the slippers back and got groceries.

“I was in better shape when Mark was here,” she said, this morning.

Last night, on her way to bed, she let out a yelp, and I heard a thud from the other room. She had fallen on her side. It wasn’t a spell; she just fell.

“That’ll be sore in the morning,” I said.

She took an Aleve. She was lucky she didn’t break anything or hit her head.

“I’m in poor shape,” she said. “I shouldn’t complain so much.”

“You can complain all you want,” I said, and I thought, “as long as it’s about a real problem.”
Inside a Self

Mother and I were watching *Seabiscuit*. Young Red Pollard’s father had him recite an Emily Dickinson poem from memory.

We never know how high we are
Till we’re called to rise,
And then if we are true to plan,
Our statures touch the skies.

The heroism we recite
Would be a daily thing
Did not ourselves the cubits warp
For fear to be a king.

“Dickinson is the best,” I said to my mother.
“What?”
“Emily Dickinson is the best poet there is. She’s the only one whose poems actually **thrill** me.”

She says something that I recognize as true, as soon as I hear it said. The movie built on the poem’s sense of becoming more of ourselves by living in the realm of greatness, until greatness is our common nature, as she and I believe it is, for all of us.

I remember a line from one of my earliest published poems, “I’ll put myself inside a self larger than myself and watch it fit.”

I wondered if I’ve done that. I have, but the pull back into my lesser self is constant. The lowest common denominator is the Religious Denomination most subscribed to.

I came to Borders and found the *Shambala Pocket Classics Book of Emily Dickinson Poems*. I thumbed through the book looking for the one in *Seabiscuit*, but it wasn’t included.
Last Exit to Moline

I bought a used copy of the movie Last Exit to Brooklyn from the library for a dollar, and, at the beginning, there’s an epigram;

I will rise now and go about the city,
in the streets and in the broad ways.
I will seek him whom my soul loveth.

Song of Solomon 3:2,3

Freddie came by, on Mother’s birthday, his birthday. We had a lively conversation about people we knew and know. Freddie was on his way to have a beer with Pete (Steve Peterson), another friend of Scott’s. I joined them. We sat in a bar I got drunk in, 20 years ago, a bar that Uncle Everett was a bartender in; 60 years ago.

Freddie said he used to go visit my parents, when he was in college, just for fun. Mother would feed him, and he and Dad would sit and joke and smoke cigarettes.

Last night, Mother said she didn’t want to go to church, this morning, but my intuition said she would.

“I changed my mind,” she said, this morning.

“That’s cool,” I said.

The woman in the pew in front of us, had a six month old baby girl, very sweet and well-behaved. She looked Korean, and her husband looked like a big, homely galoot, maybe a mama’s boy. I thought she might be a mail order bride. The wife sat between her husband and his mother, and all of them were pleasant to me and to each other. Toward the end of the service, the couple bundled up the kid and split.

After the sermon, the service ended with a live nativity scene, with Joseph and Mary and the infant Jesus in a manger. The holy mother and father raised the baby out of the crib and carried him up the aisle, to the appreciation of a happy, singing congregation. It was the couple that’d been sitting in front of us, dressed in costume.

I was going to tell the story of my dreams, the last two nights, but I conveniently forgot to do it, yesterday. The first night, I dreamed I had met
the perfect partner, a lovely woman who loved me beyond any question. I could see it in her eyes and her demeanor. I knew it in my heart. I’ve never had a dream lover who gave me that sense, before. There was absolutely no doubt about her love and the bond between us. Then, it was revealed that I had been in a car accident, and I had forgotten it. The accident caused the death of another man.

In the dream, I was smoking dope; when I bent down to pick up a joint from the floor of the car. I ran into a car driven by a man who, it turned out, was a friend of mine and the man who sold me the marijuana. In waking life, I’ve never been a marijuana smoker, and I was never in an accident where someone died.

My perfect mate learned about the fatal accident, and she learned I was an alcoholic. She turned cold and left me. When I woke, I felt devastated, hurt, remorseful, and repentant. In my half-waking state, I prayed for forgiveness.

I wondered if I haven’t always believed that my years of drinking, and less than honorable behavior, haven’t disqualified me from speaking freely and from taking a true love.

I know I can speak the story of a life. I know I can be in relationships with similarly compromised people, but can I speak of pure love, and can I be accepted in purest love? Of course I can, but I see the question arise in my mind, and I wonder about it.

Last night, I had two lovers, and both were physical. There was no meeting of souls, only the pleasures of the body. It felt good, but what a contrast from the meeting of the previous night.

A dream is only a way to filter a sense, until it’s seen or felt more clearly, a drama catered to fit the moment. I don’t normally have sex or relationship dreams as often as this. Usually, many months will pass between such dreams.

Pete said Scott told him I had a girlfriend.

“And I asked her to marry me,” I said.

“That was fast, but then, you’re in a restricted time frame,” he said.

“My brother, Mark, has said some idiotic things and some wise things, and one of the wise things he said was that there’s only one question a man can ask a woman, and that is, ‘Will you marry me?’ and there’s only one thing the woman can say, and that’s, ‘Yes.’ Everything else
is compromise and pretense. She didn’t want to be married. She says she’d rather be a nun.”

“Is this a recent idea?”

“No, she’s always felt that way.”

“How old is she?”

“She’s your age. She’s not qualified for the church. She’s like me. She graduated from religion. There are many ways to be a nun. You can be a nun in your own private life. Or you can join a….”

“An order.”

“Yeah, something like that. I sure can pick ‘em. The last woman I was attracted to was a lesbian minister.”

“How long did that last?”

“About 20 minutes. That’s OK, the last woman I asked to marry me, laughed. That hurt. This woman was a great match for me, spiritually, but physically, I was out of luck.”

I recognize, now, that I told the story with no rancor or bitterness. And, I’m glad I prayed for forgiveness for killing a man who sold me the dope that caused the accident that killed him, in a head-on collision on a hill.
Along the Trail

In my mother’s house, I leave morsels along the well-worn, circular trail, an unfinished article in the New Yorker, in the bathroom, a bag of small powdered-sugar cookies in the kitchen, a movie in the VCR in the living room, a book of crossword puzzles in the bedroom.

I didn’t go to the Y, today. Instead, I went back to Goodwill and bought three shirts. Then, when I was brushing my teeth, I noticed a lone remaining molar on the upper left had been growing out, sideways, and was catching my cheek on its protuberance.

I’m gradually becoming an old man. It’s not a negative in life, anymore than corrosion and decay are a negative in nature. It occurred to me, this afternoon, that I don’t want a girlfriend who won’t age in the next ten years.

I’m sure you’ve noticed I say, “It occurred to me.” I ought to say a few words about that. It’s my job to pay attention and recount the story of my life with my mother. It’s not my job to rattle off a string of personal opinions. “It occurred to me,” recognizes the difference between the man I’m writing about and myself as impersonal witness. Occasionally, this writing rises to the level of witness, but it often remains at the level of observer.

I prefer to live in the realm of witness, but the telling of this story requires that I act as observer. As observers of ourselves, we can slip into the personal ax-to-grind mode, and that sort of story is of no interest to me. That realm is for call-in radio shows and backyard fences. My mother is concerned about herself and those around her, but there’s more to a duck than feathers.

As we drive to church, each Sunday, we pass the same sights, every time. When we pass one billboard, she always reads it.

“Fazoli’s,” she says, with a comforting chuckle, “that’s the place that Mark’s friend (or Jeff, if she remembers his name) likes to eat at.”

To hear these remarks repeated, week after week, almost verbatim, can be exasperating, but I wondered if there wasn’t some other use for it, beyond the moment of her short-term memory.
When my kids were young, I read that children like to hear the same story over and over, because they want to know if the story is still true. I wondered if Mother wasn’t reassuring herself that, despite her shaky hold on the recent past, some things are still true.

“Uncle Walter always loved to eat.”

“David Letterman always loves ‘Will it Float?’”

She looked at my shoes, this morning, the shoes I’ve worn, every Sunday for five months, and she commented, “Those are nice shoes,” as if she’d never seen them before.

That state of wonder, in the moment, is what we all seek in our routine lives, but she needs to be reassured.

“Mark always made hard-boiled eggs.”

“Your father always had bacon and eggs after church.”

“Are you going out?” she asked, as I was putting on my coat.

“I always go out, twice a day, every day,” I said.

That’s not so reassuring, but Fazoli’s is.
A Burst of Freedom

I’m living in the heart of whatever darkness I’ve carried into the world, and there is no demon here.

It occurred to me, coming out, today, thinking of my teacher in India, that he had the arrogance to assume power. I don’t mean he was an arrogant man, I mean that, in human history, it takes some sense of personal privilege to take on the role of teacher. I don’t mean teacher in a system of teachers, I mean assuming the mantle of a public persona requires that there be no impediment to it.

Poonjaji was born a Brahmin. His uncle was a recognized Hindu saint. I was born of no particular caste. My uncle was a recognized American saint, a wealthy businessman that others came to for advice, but business is not my interest.

I think I’m getting close to naming the impediment I’ve carried. I haven’t felt I had the right to become a public persona. It isn’t that I felt inadequate to the position, but that I felt inadequate to assume the position. I believed I could handle it, but I didn’t believe I had the right.

My mother isn’t a sinner. I thought I’d ask her if she’s ever sinned, and I’m sure she’d say yes, since she’s a Christian, but she’s led a life with no attraction to sin. I’ve felt the attraction to every sin. One of my favorite parts of the Alcoholics Anonymous 12 Step Program, was, and is, the 9th Step, in which one seeks to make amends for the wrongs one has committed against others.

It’s a divinely selfish step, in declaring oneself to others, by admitting the wrongs one may have done them, one frees oneself from long held mental burdens.

I doubt my mother would understand that act. She’s often apologized to others for hurting their feelings, but the meat of amends is recognizing how one has held onto behaviors that are harmful to oneself. My mother doesn’t think like that. She doesn’t feel or look to know her deeply held characteristics.

In being released from long held thoughts, limitations, attachments, negative behaviors, I felt it as losing faith in those attachments. I’ve lost faith in this long held sense of myself as being unworthy.
It’s in the nature of attachments, that we hold onto them, until we let go of them. We hold them for cause, even if we don’t know it or believe it. I’ve held the belief that I’m unworthy for a reason. I’ve had faith in that negative belief. This writing is a process to identify that faith, that belief, that attachment, and let it go.

Being raised a Christian taught me I was unworthy in my nature, that only belief in Jesus was the antidote, but that’s merely trading one belief for another. It may be a better belief, but it isn’t true freedom.

I am an adaptive, empathetic person. Here, in my mother’s house, her church, her community, I feel the teaching of my unworthiness. It’s not being directed against me. I’m holding it.

This is the belly of the beast. I’ve had faith in this beast. I’ve had faith in my unworthiness. It protects me. It protects me from joy, and it protects me from freedom. I’m protected from the power of my freedom and the power of my joy.

A man, wearing a red Christmas sweatshirt, just sat down at the next table, facing me. The Greatest Gift is Jesus is embossed on his sweatshirt, Lund Boats is embossed on his hat, and both messages are advertisements for attachments of the mind.

I was going to write more about that, but suddenly I felt peaceful.

I’m a sinner. I have sinned. Repentance is not saying how bad one feels about being a sinner, it is letting go of those behaviors. It’s no longer holding them. I don’t hold the sins of my life, but I held the feeling of being a sinner. In order to be free, one doesn’t let go of the bottle - one lets go of the thought of the bottle.

It’s time for me to let go of the thought of myself as unworthy, not to become arrogant, but to let go of this impediment to my freedom.

Taking care of my mother is of no value in increasing my worth as a person. My worth is inherent. Taking care of my mother may have helped me let go of any thought of my worth and my worthlessness. I’m not free by my worthiness. I’m not unfree, by my unworthiness. I’m free by the nature of my being free.

Let’s see how this burst of freedom affects my life.
Swimming in the Air

Changing a thought that’s lodged in habit is as simple as calling it out of its shadowy cave and giving it to the light. It’s not necessary to name a thought as its replacement, because shadows evaporate in the light, and there’s no need to replace a shadow. It’s often done, and that often works, for a while.

I don’t need to know where it came from, or what its history is. That’s another way of enshrining it and keeping it alive for posterity, but it’s often done, and it has some value.

The best way to be free of any attachment is to become what it isn’t, in its absence.

A young woman with a baby just came to my table and called me a traitor. It was Rose, who works at Fireworks in Moline. Here I am, drinking coffee in Borders, in Bettendorf. She was carrying her baby girl, Corina, named after a Bob Dylan song, she said.

I said there was an even earlier song by Snooks Eaglin, called Corina, Corina, that might be the same. It was a good song, too.

Rose said she comes here, too, because she lives in a small town, nearby.

This afternoon, I went by the art store for more paper and to price a sheet of clear polystyrene for a large charcoal drawing. Bruce caught me, as I was leaving, and said the radio station will be closed on January 1st, so we need to pre-record our talk, on Sunday the 27th, and he’ll come by the house, on Saturday, the 26th, to look at my work.

Mother wants to find a restaurant for Christmas Dinner for the two of us. Freddie said, the other day, that one Christmas, he and his wife could only find a Denny’s open.

We got a beautiful picture of Scott and his family, in the mail. As I get closer to leaving here, I’m becoming exited about going to Hawaii. The greatest attraction is the air. I felt it, for the first time, almost thirty years ago. The air is a warm, fragrant embrace. I miss that air. It’s been two years. I want to go and swim in that air.
Snaggletooth

I made an appointment to have my snaggletooth molar pulled, on January 5th. It’s pushing against my cheek. If I grimace I can catch the corner of my mouth on it. As poor as I’ve been, for so long, I’m glad I’ve kept my teeth in good order.

“I figured out why Dorothy lost so much weight,” Mother said. “Is it bulimia, when you don’t eat?”

“Anorexia,” I said.

“That’s it. We went out to dinner, and she only ordered a fruit plate, and she barely ate any of it. She was down to 118, and that’s too little for her size. They’ll notice she doesn’t eat, in that home she’s in. They won’t let her get away with not eating. Marshall and Brad must not have noticed she didn’t eat anything. She doesn’t like to cook. Whenever we went out to eat, she’d only order fruit, and she didn’t eat much of that. We went out to dinner, and I was prepared to eat a meal, but she only ordered fruit. I thought I better not eat so much, either. They’ll see how little she eats. That’s why she lost so much weight. It was a while back, but we went out for dinner, she only ordered a fruit salad, and she didn’t eat any of it. Not much. That’s why she’s so thin. Is that Bulimia? No, that’s when you throw up. I was surprised when she ordered fruit. I had to change my order, just to go along with her. You know, she lost a lot of weight, she was so thin, and that’s why. She just stopped eating. She didn’t eat anything at all, just some fruit, and very little of that. I wondered how she could have lost so much weight, but I think I figured it out. We went out to dinner, and when we did, she ordered fruit, and I was surprised, because she was always a good eater. They’ll feed her in that home, and if she doesn’t eat, they’ll see it. They’ll see how much she eats. I remember, we went out to eat, and all she had was fruit. She just had a little bit of fruit. That’s all. That’s why she lost so much weight.”

I didn’t say a word; I listened and nodded. I was fascinated to hear the story of Aunt Dorothy and her extreme fruit diet. I asked Mother what she wanted for lunch, and I gave her some options.

“Tomato soup,” she said, “and some herring,” and then, “I’d like a slice of BOND-OST cheese.”
Still Not Yet

Some thoughts are the most spontaneous. Last night, on my way to bed, I thought, “Everything I’ve done has been the work of a man, and yet, I thought of myself as not yet a man.”

I didn’t write anything, yesterday evening. I read Emily Dickinson and wrote half a poem. In his introduction to her poems, Billy Collins said her poems could be sung to the tune of The Yellow Rose of Texas. I was put off by that revelation, but it was oddly comforting, as if the shredded universe had a common tune.

It’s Christmas Eve. I glance, occasionally, at my unfailing muse, the redoubtable Ann of Borders. In six months, I’ve never seen her to be less than a delight. I’ve never been able to say one word directly to her about my attraction, and in some ways, I’m grateful for that. I haven’t had to elevate the mundane or lessen the ethereal. She’s a girl who works in a cafe, making coffee drinks for people, and I’m a man who sits at a table and writes in an artist’s sketchbook. She’s someone with a bright spirit, and I look to her spirit for a touch point. She’s the belly of the Buddha.

I’ve been carrying, in my character, a way of seeing myself in the world that protects me, as someone who hasn’t yet arrived at the moment of fulfillment. I’ve been aided in my state of unrecognized fulfillment by having my work remain largely unknown.

I embraced an enlightened master as an equal, and he embraced me as a son. I challenged his authority, and then submitted to his mastery. I’ve been blessed and honored by many, but I haven’t yet become the one who blesses and honors.

I’ve done many things. I’ve done them well, with genuine sincerity. I recognize the good in what I’ve done, but I’ve continued to think of myself as not yet a senior, as I said, in these pages, months ago.

This is not a challenge to become something I’m not, but to let go of something I’m not. I’ve been holding my self-denial like a winter coat, in every season.

It’s time for me to let go of my tightfisted self-denial.
The Model of My Love

Christmas Day night, another thought occurred, spontaneously, as I was getting ready for bed, “I don’t think my life is significant. I think life is significant. And I have it.”

It felt good. It felt true. I like it when words match a reality and make it clearer to the mind.

I bought Mother a giant poinsettia and, at first, she said it was too much. As the day went on, she praised it, again and again. I rented a couple of movies I thought we both might enjoy, but she didn’t like either one of them. She wanted The Color Purple, but Blockbusters didn’t have it in stock, much to my, and her, amazement. She kept asking about it. I said I’d get it at the library, today.

“Oh, but they won’t have it.”

“Yes, they will. I saw it there, but the library’s closed for Christmas.”

Today, I went to the library and got it. Bonnie and I both failed to acknowledge the other.

I needed to get out of the house, yesterday. It was a cool but sunny day. I went for a two-hour walk, down to the river, up to Campbell’s Island and back through Silvis. Two things made me I wish I’d brought a camera. Both things seemed to have a presence; two trucks, side by side in an empty lot, and a stick, lying in the street.

I enjoyed the pace of walking. By the time I got home, I was tired, and Mother was upset with me.

“I thought you weren’t coming back,” she said.

“I used to ride my bike for longer,” I said, “I only walked for two hours.”

“That’s too much!” she said, adamantly.

It had been a good workout, and at 3:30, Mother was ready for dinner. I put together a big dinner of barbecued chicken, mashed potatoes and gravy, fruit salad, rolls, vegetables, and sweet potato pie, because the store was out of pumpkin pies, by the time I got there.

Mother stopped in the middle of the kitchen, smiled, and embraced me.

“I’m so happy that you are here,” she said.
“I’m happy to be here,” I said.

I know she hugged me because it was Christmas Day, and that’s what she’d learned to do on Christmas Day, but I accepted it as genuine for who she is. I’ve learned the same kind of affectionate protocol, but I’m glad I’m a fan of spontaneity. It may be why my kids grew up in consistent, gentle rebellion against all holiday protocols.

In the afternoon, I watched one of the movies Mother had rejected, and I was pleased to see an old character actor I’ve always liked.

“Harold Gould,” I said, “I haven’t seen him for a while.”

Last night, with no conscious connection to that actor, after hours had passed, I was at my computer, when I got the idea to google the name of the woman who has always been the gold standard for me. Roxan Gould, no relation to Harold, was almost 18, when we met, and almost 20, when I last saw her. She will turn 45 in a couple of weeks; about the time I’m scheduled to leave here.

Before I googled her, I googled myself, and I was pleasantly surprised to see several books mentioned. When I googled Roxan, her pictures came up as a model for an agency in Denver. There she was, 25 years later, looking more mature, still beautiful, and with a light in her eyes, a playfulness and a seriousness, posing like a mature woman who hasn’t lost her innocent heart.

I sent a copy of my poems, The Dancer in the Heart, the book that begins with poems about her, to the agency, asking that they forward it to her.

I took the package to the post office; even knowing it wouldn’t be open until today. I was happy to reach out to her. I wasn’t in a state of desperation or fantasy. It felt like one old friend reaching out to another. I began to witness myself. I saw a calm delight. She may not respond. She may be married to a wealthy man, as I’ve always imagined. I have not achieved prominence, as I always imagined I would, by this time. I’m still a poet, and she’s still a model.

In one photo, she’s sitting cross-legged, in a yoga posture, her large, green, cat eyes focused at a distance. In another photo, her long, lanky frame lounges against a wall, her smile and posture casual, loose and relaxed.
When I knew her, she would glide down the street like a schooner under full sail, erect and graceful. She seems just as self-contained, but more at ease with herself. I was glad to see her looking no less for the wear.

Other women have been compared to her, but there has been no comparison. To connect to her reminds me who I am, in comparison to the model of my love. No pun intended.
As I walked into Borders, I was singing. I was friendly with the guy behind the counter. I was chatty with the men in the sauna, this afternoon. I was relaxed and easygoing with my mother, at home. It has to do with Roxan. My approach to the young love of my life has to do with a sense of myself as worthy of my own respect.

I said, a few chapters ago, that it was time for me to let go of the sense of myself that I’d been carrying, as someone to be judged wanting. I said that dragging that ego ghost out into the light was all I needed to do to be free of its hold on me, free of my holding it. We keep a hold on the shadows that dog our steps. I’ve kept that shadow self, until it was clear to me it was time to be done with it.

I see myself reacting differently whenever the thoughts familiar to that ego ghost appear. I don’t hold them. I’m beginning to see new thoughts appear in that ego ghost’s absence.

The thought to look for Roxan came out of that newer consciousness. If someone were to challenge me at the level of that old ego ghost, I expect my reaction would be, “That’s not who I am.” In the past, I might have accepted the characterization and struggled with it. There is no struggle with a shadow self, when it’s been dragged into the light.

Mother started to tell me a golf story and then stopped herself.

“No, go ahead,” I said. “What’s the story?”

“Ruth’s husband, when we were playing golf, one time, the ladies were teeing off, and the men were at the men’s tee, behind us, and he took his shot and shanked it right into her leg. She was in real pain, and he dismissed it as no big deal.”

“That’s terrible,” I said.

“I thought it was terrible,” she said.

“It should have been the other way around,” I said. “He should have been upset, and she might have said it was no big deal.”

“That’s what I thought. Another time, he said someone stole his golf clubs. He was a bad golfer, but he always bought the most expensive clubs. He swore up and down about whoever stole his clubs. Then, they found them, over on the practice range, and he still wouldn’t admit he left them
there.”

When I was seeing Poonjaji, every day, after the first week, I was walking in the Arboretum, when a dull ghost of a man’s shape seemed to appear in my body, and I watched the image drop down, slide down, sink, slip from within me, into the ground beneath my feet and disappear. It wasn’t frightening or spooky; it was only an image. When it disappeared, it was an image of myself I no longer carried within me.

I was not exorcised. My enlightened awareness had no more use for such an image. As I write this, I remember that I’ve used the notion of ghosts before in my imagery. I don’t believe in ghosts. I believe in images as a way we have of showing thoughts in forms we can recognize. It helps to get something outside ourselves, so we can see it for what it is.

I’ve long had an image of my poetic self as a beautiful young woman, clear-eyed, earthy, and ethereal. Roxan was that to me. She was the image of my most beautiful self, made apparent in front of me.
I Hate to Tell You

Bruce Carter is coming over to look at my books and art, in preparation for our radio interview, tomorrow. I found myself getting ready for his visit. I noticed I was acting as if it mattered more today than it did yesterday. I wondered if it wasn’t the ego’s reaction to the self-image I’ve been talking about.

If the mind can’t play one role, it will play another. The function of the ego is to assume control. It will do so with whatever it’s given. Whenever I have the sense of myself as worthy, my mind will promote a sense of control, based on that. My actions will take on an aura of importance and significance.

The creation of an ego self doesn’t care about good and bad, positive and negative. It cares only about control. It will seek to be in charge of any reality it sees before it. Belief in success and failure are both ego states. Staying in the moment, with no effort to control the past or the future, is alien territory to the various egos of the mind.

If I believe this interview matters to my wellbeing, either positively or negatively, I’ve engaged an ego state. I can still do that, and remain free, if I see that I’m doing it and don’t hold the thoughts as they come and go. I’m human, and I like being human. I just don’t have to stake my life on it.

“Do you have any paintings you like that you can show him?” Mother said.

“I like all the paintings I brought,” I said. “That’s why I brought them.”

She was active, today. She wanted me to dig out the large wall map of the world, so she could find Iran, because it was in the news, with a major earthquake, and then Iraq, then India, then Seattle.

“I have a hard time picturing where you live,” she said.

She wondered if there was a place to hang the map. I found a wall in the living room, by moving a painting to a bare space on another wall.

“There is a bare space there,” she said.

She got a Christmas card from a young Swedish couple who live in Virginia.
“I guess they just want to make a friend. Well, that’s not me,” she said. The couple has the same Swedish name as her maiden name.

On the way to Carole’s, she told me another couple of stories. She was wearing a blue pea coat. She said the only thing wrong with it was that it showed everything, every hair and every spot.

“I got a phone call from a woman I played bridge with, on the day before. She said, ‘Gladys, I hate to tell you this, but there was a hair on your blouse, during the bridge game.’ I thought, ‘Why didn’t you tell me, then?’ Or pick it off. That would have been the best thing to do. ‘I hate to tell you.’”

“I saw a movie I really liked,” she continued. “It was The Doctors. I thought Katherine and her sister would like it, so I got a copy and took it over to their house. The next day, Katherine said, ‘I hate to tell you, but we didn’t care for the movie.’ After all the trouble I went to, she could have skipped the comment. ‘I hate to tell you.’”

“When people say, ‘I hate to tell you, they mean, ‘I love to tell you, but I don’t want to admit it.’”
Effortless Virtues

“Your son is a very interesting man,” Bruce said to Mother, as he was leaving, after our conversation.
“I know he is,” she said.
“It must have come from somewhere,” he said.
She smiled.
Bruce and I had a good time chatting. He told me we can’t do the taping tomorrow, Sunday, but on Tuesday morning, instead. He forgot he had a granddaughter’s Christening to attend, tomorrow. All the better. I had already asked Carole if she could take Mother home from church, in case I couldn’t get the taping moved back. She said she’d be glad to.
“No, I don’t have to go to church every Sunday. I’ll stay home,” Mother said, firmly.
“You don’t have to do that, Gladys. I’ll be happy to bring you home.”
“No, I’ll stay home.”
When she was in the bathroom, I asked Carole again.
“If she changes her mind, would you give her a ride home?”
“Of course.”
“I’ll try to change the time, anyway,” I said.
And now, I don’t have to change it. Bruce and I engaged in an abbreviated version of a radio conversation. It was easy and fun. I’ll save the glory and gory details, for later. He was worried that the broadcast date, January 1st, wouldn’t have an audience, until I pointed out that New Year’s Eve is the night before, and on the 1st, the party’s over.
“That’s right,” he said, “the party’s over.”
He said there were four kinds of people who listen to his show. The art crowd, the student crowd, the PBS crowd, and a fourth group made up of people you can’t predict, people who listen for their own reasons. I told him about the pathologist I met at a football game, three months ago, who recommended I listen to Art Talks, on the radio.
We have soccer in common, besides art. The difference is that he started as a small boy in Brazil, and I didn’t start until I was in college. Another difference is that he quit, and I’m still playing.
He was surprised when I said I was almost 62. He thought I was a gray 47.

“Of course,” I thought, “two years older than Roxan.”

When she and I met, I was 34 and a half, and she was 17 and a half. I thought she was 25, and she thought I was 25.

Meaningless trivia. The best part of today was spending time with a bright, articulate, conscious, alive human being; effortless virtues with endless rewards.
Beat Up by the Good

I feel beat up.
I took Mother to church, this morning. She was talkative, during the service, leaning over to whisper, with her program held up by her mouth, loud enough to hear, two pews away.

“He doesn’t have a strong voice,” she said of the man leading the congregation in song.

“Isn’t she wonderful,” she said of the woman playing the piano with another woman on saxophone.

The regular minister was on vacation. The assistant pastor took over. He spoke with passion and humor. Another man read Bible selections with a rich, deep, musical voice. He thanked everyone for being beautiful and wonderful. He said the service was wonderful and beautiful. His voice was soothing and inclusive.

I appreciated the preacher’s call to greater adherence to Jesus’ message of love and care for others, but at the end, he turned political, reading a list of ‘facts’, about the dedicated Christianity of our Founding Fathers. He seemed to call for this to become what it was meant to be, a truly Christian nation, and not succumb to the power groups that have turned us away from that. He didn’t name those powers, but he hinted at Hollywood and other secular forces.

“Wasn’t that wonderful?” Mother said, as we were all standing to leave. “Didn’t you love the sermon?”

“No,” I said, “I didn’t.”

“You didn’t? Why not?”

“I didn’t like it when it turned political.”

“I didn’t hear that.”

“Never mind,” I said, choosing discretion as the better part of indiscretion. “It was great. It was a good sermon. He’s very passionate. I like that.”

On the way out, Mother said she wanted to invite Carole to lunch at the Village Inn. I agreed.

Several people commented on how good the sermon was. One woman stopped Mother and said, as a pointed aside, that she didn’t say
this to most people, but she preferred the assistant pastor to the regular pastor. Mother laughed and agreed. Then the woman talked about how much she liked living in the Fort Armstrong Senior Residence. It was good to hear someone, in Mother’s condition, describe a home for the elderly with such praise.

I hailed Carole, and Mother talked to her.

“Isn’t there something you wanted to ask Carole?”

Then, she invited her to lunch. We said we’d meet her there. On the drive over, Mother asked me again what I didn’t like about the sermon.

“I like his passion,” I said, “but when he started talking about making this a Christian country, I didn’t like it. There are a lot of people in this country who aren’t Christians. What do we do with them? Kick them out? Shoot them?”

“I agree with you. I didn’t hear him say that.”

“It was at the end. He read a list.”

It was a good lunch. With Carole present, I noticed I was constantly attentive to my mother’s wellbeing, physical and otherwise. I noticed that the catsup bottle was heavy with catsup at the top. I took a napkin and wiped it clean.

“This is what happens, when you’re in my situation,” I said to Carole.

I felt responsible for small details and large ones. I spoke in a relaxed and sociable tone, but I could tell I was in a low state of stress. Being with my mother is like going to her church. Nothing bad happens, but I feel like a trustee in a minimum-security prison. It’s a humane and decent place, clean and well cared for. I have privileges and free time, and I know my time is coming to an end. I’m treated with some respect, and my duties can be satisfying, without being very taxing, but I feel the presence of the walls. It’s constant and unrelenting, and nothing can be done to change it, until I walk out the gate, and I’m gone from here.

I got Mother to tell Carole the Brandon Peeing Story.

“Oh, this happened, and when I told Brandon what happened, he didn’t remember it, but it did. When Brandon was a little boy, one day, he said, ‘Grandma, I have to go pee.’ ‘OK,’ I said, and I went with him to the bathroom.
He went to the toilet, and I stood by the door. He stood still, for a long time. He just stood there, and finally, he turned around, and he said, ‘Grandma do you know what P stands for?’

I said, ‘I think so, but what do you think it stands for?’ and he said, ‘It stands for Privacy.’
The Jelling

I’m living in a marriage of convenience with my own mother. I noticed something I’m hesitant to admit, and that’s all the more reason to admit it. I’ve noticed that once in a while, my mother and I get in a kind of rhythm, a common energy, an agreement of thoughts and attitudes, like people who seem to love each other.

I see how I could run with it and play out the camaraderie, the jelling of personalities, but I don’t. I back off. I wonder about it. Is it a sure sign of my dysfunction as a son, unwilling to admit how much I truly love my mother?

A similar thing has occurred between me and others. Occasionally, with a woman who wants to get closer, I’ve seen myself back away from a similar kind of closeness. With men, too. I have the ability and the opportunity to become close to someone, and I choose to stay away. Not with all, but with some.

With my mother, I have a genetic and familial predisposition to speak the same language of thought, feeling, and attitude. It feels like love, but I wonder if it isn’t only a shared language of superficialities.

Oscar Wilde once said that he’d looked into it, and he found that there was no greater reality than the superficial. In many ways, I agree. The world of the present, in terms of thought, feeling, and attitude, is remarkably shallow. Life, in this form, is shallow and transient, and the sharing of the superficial is acting in the moment of our apparent reality. It’s a pleasure to agree about what looks good and feels good, tastes good, smells good, etc. Or, by the same token, what’s bad.

When I was in Hawaii, for the first time, nearly thirty years ago, I stayed with my brother and his wife. After two months, I was feeling the claustrophobia of the islands, Rock Fever, the limitations of intellectual life in Honolulu, a city I called Cleveland by the Sea.

I said to Scott, as much in amazement as in judgment, “All you people talk about is what’s good to eat and what’s fun to do.”

He looked at me is disbelief. What was I talking about? What was the problem?

I was stuck in the mire of my mind, at the time. I couldn’t relax.
One guy said to me, after running into me on the beach, when I first got there, that I was the most intense guy he’d ever met. It was true, at the time.

So, let the superficials fly. I still don’t have any desire to make a commitment to it, no matter whose mother you say you are.
Just Thoughts

I just finished reading the book I wrote about Roxan, a year ago. It’s a small book that asks the question, “What does it mean to call someone the love of your life?”

It seems to suggest that there is no meaning in love. I think the love of one’s life is, more than any other love, the love that opens the door to who you are, so that self-recognition occurs, or it begins to occur.

Being with Roxan showed me, in a way that hadn’t occurred before, or maybe since, that I’m open to love itself; so that I could begin to recognize that I am love itself. Being in love with her allowed me to forget my inexperience in love. My heart, without a mind to control it, reverted to its deepest self.

I’m looking at a middle-aged couple at the next table. The woman is a tall beauty. The man is a longhaired, charming schlep. They talk in confidence and with pleasure, smiling happily at each other.

My time with my mother, as a child, and now as an adult, has not been the occasion for my heart to open. Perhaps I don’t know the meaning of love. Perhaps, in it’s meaning, I love my mother. But in its essence, beyond meaning, love occurs when it’s already occurring. Love meets itself where it’s already been met. In other words, Love doesn’t get generated by effort.

In preparation for my radio interview, I looked through my poems, and I was stunned by the power, beauty, and truth of the poems in The Dancer in the Heart. I couldn’t find any poems, since then, that equal those.

“I may be done with poetry,” I thought.

I may be done with painting. All my best work may be behind me. I may not be done with speaking, at least not in as creative a way as the way I’ve been in my poems and paintings.

These are just thoughts. They are just thoughts of the way true love has manifested itself in my life.
Sweet Moline

The other thing that disturbed me in the assistant pastor’s sermon was his disclaimer, toward the end. He told about a woman who came up to him after an earlier, equally passionate sermon.

“You’re not perfect,” she said.
He looked aghast, as he told the story.
“No, I’m not perfect,” he said. “My wife and kids can attest to that fact.”

The congregation laughed in happy recognition of a fellow sinner, confessing his flawed humanity. In his declaration of imperfection, he was identifying himself as a fallen soul. Among the fallen souls on earth, God is separate. Only an act of forgiveness, whose full force is granted after death, can finally reunite the fallen with the Eternal.

I would have liked to hear him say, “Yes, I am perfect. And so are you. We are all perfect beings in the eternal being that defines our true nature.”

I would have preferred him to recognized the inseparability of all beings with Being Itself, and not revert to the well-worn, safe separation of human beings from their creator.

I don’t have any problem recognizing my identity as a human being, the same as everyone else, but I’ve been inclined by the nature of my soul’s presence, to identify myself with the soul of Being Itself.

It’s clear to me that I’m the son of my mother and father and the brother of my brothers, but the clothing of our family’s character doesn’t fit who I am.

I’ve seen this disinclination to join the crowd in my behavior, all my life.

When my Uncle Everett died, and my parents inherited his business, we were called upon to move from a small town in Nebraska back to this large city in Illinois. My mother was surprised at my readiness to move, to leave all my friends behind. She asked me how I felt about the move.

“Let’s go,” I said.
I feel at home anywhere and everywhere. I have felt what I call **instant intimacy** with people I only just met. At the same time, I have no bond, no allegiance, no heartfelt commitment to anyone or any place.

I watched my teacher act the same way. He seemed to speak with great love to the deepest part of everyone he met, and yet he seemed uninterested in remembering anyone. I wanted him to take me to him, as his nearest and dearest, and he seemed to do that. Then, he acted as if I was a stranger. I knew he wasn’t cold or egocentric. In fact, he was warm and egoless-centric.

This time with my mother has brought into sharp focus the reality of my identification. It’s not my mother’s fault I don’t identify myself with her. I would understand if she felt denied by my indifference. I know she’d like to live in a more closely knit family. I can’t help that.

She didn’t hurt me, and put me against her. I’m not against her. She’s a good and a kind woman. Sure, she had a sharp tongue and an unemotional way about her. She’s not a doting, loving, nurturing mother, but her heart is not false.

I see now that I’m not at fault, either, in this disengagement. The separation I felt from her, as a child, and as an adult, may have aroused in me this question, to learn why my mother is **not** the love of my life, to learn the true nature of love. I grew up compelled by desire, and finally, compelled by a need to know my true self, to discover the nature of love itself in the nature of my own being, and I’ve done that.

I’m sitting by myself, at a table in Fireworks, surrounded by couples and groups, engaged with each other, and I feel no desire to be like them or to be different from them.

Moline,
Moline,
Sweet Moline,

I was born in Moline,
I’ll lay me down in Moline,
Sweet Moline.
I wrote a longer version of that poem, when I was a young poet in San Francisco. Everyone loved that poem, and many still remember it. I’ve lost the full version, and I can’t remember more than what’s here.

The sense of love for one’s hometown is the sense of love for the home of one’s heart.

This longing in my heart to embrace you,
is the embrace in my heart that is you.
On the Air

We did the taping, this morning.
“"I don’t know what that sounded like, but it felt good,” I said to Bruce, after we were done.

We sat across from each other at a carpet-covered round table with a microphone between us. An engineer named Dave worked behind me, behind glass, with Bruce keeping an eye on both of us.

He went almost immediately to talking about my, in his words, abstract art and unreal philosophy. I told him stories and read poems about the unseparate nature of the real.

At the end, he said I had my feet on the ground, like Miro. It was a golden opportunity for me to constantly ground my spiritual, poetic dialog. I told very little personal, anecdotal history, but enough, I thought. I’ll know more, when I listen to the CD that Dave gave me, after we were done.

I brought two paintings with me. They were a warm presence during the interview. In the hallway, a woman joked about buying them for the station.

“For thousands,” I said.
“For both?” she said.
“For more thousands,” I said, smiling.
I told mother it went great.
“What did you talk about?” she said.
“We talked about poetry and art,” I said.

That was the extent of our conversation about my exciting and satisfying morning on the radio. I feel energized, exhausted, and relaxed. I went to Goodwill and bought myself three sweaters, like one I saw on a guy on TV, a style I’ve never worn, but one that looked right.

Scott called and said Mark was on a plane to LA.
Pat, the housekeeper, said, today, that it was great that Mother’s sons were taking care of her, that it was unusual for men to do that. It reminded her of a woman she knew who had five grown children.

“How is it that a woman can take care of five children, and five children can’t take care of one woman?”
Mother has been speaking her worries that nobody would take care of her.

“I don’t know what I would do without you,” she said.
“You don’t have to worry. Somebody will be here with you,” I said.
I told her Mark was better suited to stay here, anyway, and he was coming, soon.
“He doesn’t have the obligations I have,” I said.
At the end of our talk, Bruce said, “You look like a man who doesn’t have any worries.”
“I have worries,” I said, “but it’s like water on the window. Just let it run.”
Or maybe I said, “Let it pour.”
I sure don’t want worries to pour. I’d prefer steady sunshine, a light mist, or an occasional cloudburst, not a steady downpour.
Surrender

When I got home, Mother was cold. She had opened the shades and pulled back the drapes, and it was near 70, by the window. I cranked up the heat, got her a glass of wine, and fixed dinner.

She said she’d gotten a feeling of being all alone in the world.

“I’ve had that feeling,” I said.

“I think it was being cold,” she said.

“That’s what that kind of aloneness feels like,” I said. “It’s a sense of being terribly cold.”

I got a CD player and batteries, and I tried to listen to the tape, but I couldn’t get it to work. I have to admit I feel some apprehension about this first foray into public speaking. The interview felt good, but I don’t know what it sounded like.

On my way to the Y, I felt like sleeping, and then I had a better workout than usual.

The fear that my mother felt is the terror I’ve felt, the recognition in my physical self that life is fragile. No one can cure that vulnerability. I reassured her, but there’s no reassurance in the face of that simple truth.

The only reassurance is in surrender. To surrender one’s mind, one’s fear, to the great, empty unknown, called God or Being Itself, The Eternal, Existence, by any other name or no name. In that absurd, absolute surrender is the only peace. To turn to the eternal void, and say, “Thy will be done.”

To cling to her children, to whom she’s been separate in time, distance, and feeling, will not suffice. It wouldn’t suffice if everything was rosy and always had been. There’s peace and joy in the final acceptance of fear, in the total absence of fear that follows that surrender? There’s no family alternative to surrender.

Sometimes, it takes the terror of being alone, to realize everything is here in this moment of being. The only way to embrace the eternal is to let go of everything.
Year’s End

On my way home, last night, I remembered that some man had called, asking for me, and Mother didn’t know who he was. I imagined it was Bruce Carter, calling to say the engineer had failed to record a word, and we had to do it all over again.

“That’s why my CD was blank,” I thought.

I actually felt pretty good about doing it over. The great omission, from the tapping, was my potential answer to his question, “What’s next? Do you have any ambition to do anything? Establish a dynasty? Some other creative work?”

I answered that I lived in response to God’s will, the Muse’s will, and that my desire was to be free in my awareness.

Later, I remembered that I have wanted, for ten years, to mount some creative work on stage, around the very subject we were talking about. It completely escaped my consciousness, when he asked me the question. I thought I could say that, during our second taping.

I discovered I’d been playing the CD with the volume off. I listened to the tape, and I was happy with it. My delivery was clear and kind. I liked the way I didn’t cross-talk Bruce’s observations but kept to a flow of images and ideas. I liked the man being interviewed. That needn’t have surprised me, but I was happily satisfied.

I suggested to Mother that we could listen to the radio, tomorrow night. She had no response. I was apprehensive, before the taping, that I might say something she might be upset by, but I don’t think I did. I think she may have difficulty understanding what I have to say, but not the tone of it.

When I got up, this morning, she was having problems. She’d dropped her glasses case behind the dresser. I retrieved it. I noticed that the bath mat in her bathroom was missing, and she wouldn’t or couldn’t say where it went.

She said the TV didn’t work, and neither did the coffee pot. I changed the channel on the TV. She forgot to put water in the pot. I think she’s keeping some of her concerns and problems from me. I think she wants to shield me from her shortcomings and shield herself from admitting them.
She’s always been privately in control. That desire continues unchanged. She uses a lot of security pads, probably more than necessary. She can use ten a day, as far as I’m concerned. If she wants to throw the bath mat away, it’s no problem.

It’s New Year’s Eve. It occurred to me that 2004 will be my year. That’s the way I feel, every year. Actually, this last year felt like a work year, a year to think about my mother and act on that.
Over the Hump

“Did you get me a glass of wine?”
Mother and I watched the various shows on New Year’s Eve. We watched the remote from the Tonight Show, showing the ball drop in Times Square, in New York and then the cast of Stomp came on, along with a marching band from Brooklyn.
“Boy, are they shakin’ it. They’re getting some real exercise there. Are they in New York?”
“No, it’s Jay Leno.”
“Where is he?”
“He’s in Los Angeles.”
“Where’s that ball they drop? Oh, that’s in New York.”
“They already did that. It’s 12:30 in New York”
“I remember one time, in Hawaii, it was so noisy, I had to get up.” And then, “When you’re young, it’s a big deal.” And then, “When I was dating. I had a guy take me to Short Hills, and that was fun. It was fun in Hawaii when the girls were young. You have a can, and they shoot the fireworks in the can.” Then, “We used to go to Prospect Park, sitting on the side of the hill, and they’d shoot ‘em, but that was a long time ago.” Then, “That wine is kinda fruity. It’s good.”
“So, you’re going to stay up and celebrate?” I said.
“No, I’m going to bed.” It was 11:15.
“But I thought the Millennium was really thrilling to watch, the different time zones. Has Letterman been out?”
“He’s in re-runs,” I said. I switched it over to Letterman, just to show her.
“Somebody was going to sing. What happened to Dick Clark?”
“Dick Clark is done,” I said, as we watched the streets of New York empty out, and the streetcleaners come in.
“Yeah, Guy Lombardo used to play. I’m going to bed. Stay up as long as you want to. Happy New Year, Stephen.”
She held her hand out. I got up and hugged her.
“Oh, don’t knock me down,” she said, and then, “Happy New Year.”
“Happy New Year, Mom.”
Kill Joy

If I spend much time thinking about getting out of here, I’ll ruin the last ten days. In my thoughts, I’m scared to death that something is going to force me to stay her longer than I bargained for. These are just thoughts, born of other thoughts, feeding on imagination and fear, all unreal.

Mother has been a little jumpy. She feels cold, sitting in her chair, most of the day, getting no exercise. Last night, she was finding fault with everything. She asked for pizza, tonight. I said I might get a Harris pizza, a local favorite, and she said she wanted a frozen pizza.

“One of those from the store,” she said.

She seems to be afraid I’ll leave her, and Mark won’t stay. This is a parallel kind of thinking to my fear. The nearness of my departure puts my being here in a new light.

I noticed, many years ago, that people who wait in line, at the doctor’s, on the phone, on the job, go into a kind of trance. Time becomes an amorphous soup. Everything slows down to fill the time, without any contrary actions. It’s a kind of suspended animation.

I look back on these six months, and I wonder how much of that I’ve been caught up in. I’ve written, every day, to focus my sense of being present, in this trance-inducing waiting room, but my mind may have done what minds do to get through any unhappy time.

My mother is conscious of her own unwanted condition, and she thinks it’s not a positive reality for her, Mark, or me. She doesn’t make it worse by her behavior, and she tries to be as little trouble as possible. I bet she’s champing at the bit to reinvent the universe, without the resources to accomplish it. She has a stoic Swede attitude, ‘Oh, it doesn’t matter,’ but in the mind, that doesn’t cut it. The mind is a killjoy with that attitude.

In the heart, ‘nothing matters’ is a freedom, but in the mind, anger and despair follow hot on its heels.

The missing bath mat magically reappeared, this morning, on Mother’s bed. I put it back on its hook, and I didn’t say a word.
Streetwise

I got to this table, and someone had left a map, Streetwise Seattle.
One of the lessons in dealing with my mother, or anyone like her, is to recognize she’s operating on a blind set of instructions. She’s a diminished version of herself. Her debility has created a set of responses that are fairly predictable in their simplicity.

It’s no use expecting her to remember enough to function smoothly. What you see is what you get. It would be nice, I told Reuben on the phone, if you could read everyone like the Terminator could, seeing a brief, accurate readout of whomever you’re dealing with. The problem is, you have to feel people out.

“That’s good sometimes,” I said.
“In the dark,” he said.

Mother and I listened to the radio, last night. It surprised her that Art Talks ran for an hour. She seemed to listen. Her only comment, during, and when it was over, was that my voice came across well.

“I don’t understand what you say, but your voice is clear.”
She had no negative comment. I was glad to sit with her and listen.

When it was over, I went looking for a place that was still open at 8:30, on January 1st, 2004. I drove around the Quad-Cities, from place to place, and then home. I realized how peaceful I felt. The interview was good for me. Listening with my mother was good for me.

“As you’re progressing along in your life, what is your goal? Are you looking to enjoy. Are you looking to pass through; a sojourner of life. Are you looking to establish a dynasty. You’ve got twenty books, here, in front of us. What are you trying to do?”
Mother is cranky. I suspect she may be using my departure as a turning point, a time to die or carry on. But then, I’ve noticed my egocentric mind wants to attribute too much to my presence. It always surprises me to see how little of what occurs has anything to do with me. It doesn’t surprise me to see how persistently egocentric my mind is.

Each of us is the center of the universe, in our essential being, because that being is without form and timeless. Our minds try to take charge of that reality by making each of us, personally, the center of our own visible universe. Nice try, but no cigar.

It is in my inherent nature, that I am love itself, but that doesn’t mean Susie and Mary think I’m hot.

In the beginning, the universe was without form and void. And then God said, “Hey, what about me?”

My energy, to write this story, is winding down. The chapters have been getting shorter. I wondered, after three months, if I could reach 600 pages, and this page, in the form the story is in, at this early stage, is 599. 600 is an arbitrary number, as in January 9th, when I’m committed to finish my time here.

Coincidentally, January 9th is Roxan’s birthday, her 45th. I met her when she was 17, 28 years ago. One of the amazing perspectives of acquiring age is seeing time for what it is. A girl, who I thought was ageless perfection, the personification of youth in its ineffable glory, and all that romantic effluvium, is now middle-aged. Nothing stays the same in time, and everything is as it is, in the timeless moment. Thinking of seeing Roxan is not a romantic thought to me, but a test of the timeless. Does anything show itself timeless, in this relative reality brought forward in time? I don’t have an answer for what might be true between us, maybe nothing, but in myself, I can see an answer.

I said, a while back, that Ann was my muse. I said that when I saw her, I saw a spirit that my spirit rose to meet. Her presence was a call for my presence to affirm itself. I kept her safely at a distance, so I wouldn’t betray that agreement in spirit. I did that for my own benefit. Roxan was the muse I went home to. I honestly tried to enter into a domestic
relationship with God. I don’t mean that she was my god, but that she was my muse, someone who performs a godly function.

God is a focal point in eternity. Accepting God’s presence in one’s presence is a way of accepting one’s presence in God’s presence. It’s a way of understanding the reality that each of us lives beyond the ordinary reality of our mundane existence. I wanted God to come home with me and be my everyday companion. I have never stopped wanting that.

Maybe my disappointment in my mother is that her mundane companionship has never hinted at the divine, or that, as a boy, she was divine to me, and then I saw her fall from grace, in my own eyes, into something that became the opposite of a muse, the opposite of inspiring.

I’ve wanted the Eternal to be my companion in my being with my mother, and the Eternal has not disappointed me, but I’m still looking for The Woman in Red. Five years ago, in The Woman in Red, I wrote:

I’m drawn to the sun, until,
consumed by its identity,
I name the world by its light.

I begin to burn up the kindling ground
I call the moon, I call She, I call Her.

She has a magical face, it’s disturbing
to look at something so beautiful.
When I look at her, it’s difficult to think.
Only her beauty thinks in my eyes.

I search her face for the name of her beauty,
but her perfection can’t satisfy my naming.

I want to take her into me,
until I am taken into her.

This is my greatest fear and desire,
that I will be lost in indefinable beauty,
I will be swallowed up in my own surrender,
I will be washed into nothing by the waves
of my own outpouring heart.
I’m sitting in Borders, past my time to leave, past the concern I feel, like clockwork, for my mother’s wellbeing. I stopped writing, and I sat still, with no purpose. I’ve been defined by purpose.

“I don’t like that table,” Mother said. “Get rid of it.”

She was referring to the drawing table I bought at Goodwill, months ago. I used it for four charcoal drawings of my Seated Mother. (As in Sainted Mother?)

“Take it back to Goodwill,” she said.

I immediately cleared my drawing tablets and carried my box of materials to the bedroom. I folded the table and carried it out of the apartment, either to the garage or to my truck, but I stopped in the hall.

“Maybe Heath could use this table,” I thought.

I went upstairs and knocked on his door.

“Do you have any use for a drawing table?”

His eyes lit up.

I showed it to him, and we carried it upstairs to his apartment. I unfolded it and tightened the knob.

“There’s one support bar missing,” I said.

“I can fix that,” he said, and we had a deal.

As I was sitting here, I read a little from The Tao of Zen, and then my butt got sore.
A Loving Presence

“I use women to trick God out of my heart.” Another spontaneous thought, as I was getting ready for bed.

This is the point in the story where it all comes together in an epiphany. Last night, I remembered a line from The Mary Tyler Moore Show. She was dating a much older man, and she couldn’t explain why. After it was over, she said maybe she dated him so she could learn something. Her boss, the lovable, grumpy Lou Grant, said, “Sometimes, the only thing you learn from an experience is that you didn’t learn a thing.”

That’s funny, but I think I’ve put my finger on what I have learned. My mother became the anti-muse in my life. She discouraged my creativity and criticized my art. When I’m in her presence, I’m not inspired to be in my own spirit.

This writing is reflective of the source of any inspiration. I’ve written about my mother, but I only do that when I’m away from her, in the presence of others I might call muse, or in the presence of the source I’ve discovered in myself.

When I was a small boy, I saw my mother as my muse. She was God incarnate, as was my father. Her fall from grace into the mother she became was greater for me because of the kind of person I am. Others might not have felt the grace or the fall from it, as clearly, or as painfully, as I did, by my nature.

In my mother’s spiritual lexicon, I’ve fallen from grace, as the son who was going to fulfill her dreams for her child’s life. She’s been as disappointed in me as I’ve been in her.

Years ago, at the suggestion of someone else, I began to imagine God as a loving presence in the room. As I did it, I felt the room filled with light. The love was almost overwhelming. I realized that I had previously imagined God to be a being of judgmental presence and distant love.

My image of God had been built from my parents’ way of being with me. My mother was a judgmental presence and my father was loving from a distance.
When I imagined God as a loving presence in the room, and then as an active, loving presence in the room, I could imagine parents who acted like that, and I could imagine lovers who acted like that.

I couldn’t accept Roxan, or any of her successors, as an active, loving presence in the room until I could accept myself as such a being, as someone welcoming such a presence. I’ve been practicing that awareness ever since.
The Fortune Teller

When I’m inspired to be in my own presence as the presence of Being Itself, when I’m inspired to recognize others’ presence as the presence of Being Itself. That’s what compels my spirit in the world.

Reading the paper, Mother remembered the story from yesterday, “I wonder what the mall walkers did, today. Sat around crying, probably.”

She said it without sarcasm or rancor, as if it were a simple fact of life. The local mall owners have decided to not allow the people who come into the mall as early as 7AM, to walk the mall for exercise, in wintertime. They can still come in at 9AM, with the regular customers, but the mall walkers say most of them are done exercising by then.

Besides their main business as franchise holders for Tastee Freez, Mother and Dad ran a Big T Family Restaurant in the mall. She’s familiar with the mall walkers. She’s never voiced any complaint about them, so her judgment is surprising.

Yesterday, she said, “The mall walkers are crying because they can’t walk in the malls, anymore.”

I wonder if it isn’t allowing no sympathy for her own situation. She cuts herself no slack, and she gives no quarter where none is taken.

I found her calling in a prescription for more Detrol. She has enough for another week, but she decided to double up her dosage. Detrol is for bladder control.

“I asked the pharmacist about it,” I said, later, when I went to pick up the prescription, “and she said it was OK. People do it all the time.”

“It probably won’t work, anyway,” she said. “I have friends who had operations to improve what I have, and it didn’t work. I’ll probably have to just put up with it.”

Her trips to the bathroom have dramatically increased.

“It’s ruining my nights,” she says, “I can’t sleep.”

After Carole, we went to Ming Wah. On the way, she asked me where I went, when she was getting her hair done.

“I go to Fireworks.”

“Fireworks?”

“It’s a coffeehouse.”
“What do you do?”
“I’m writing the same book I’ve been writing since I got here.”
“Well, I hope it works out,” she said.
“I doubt it,” I said. “Nothing else I’ve ever written has worked out. Why should I expect any different, this time?”
She laughed. Out loud. She was amused by my stoic discouragement.
“But, it works for me,” I said.
At Ming Wah, the fortune cookies reminded her of the carnival Mark and I put on in the basement of our house in Nebraska when we were little kids.
“You boys talked me into becoming the fortune teller. People really believe that stuff,” she said.
The kids whose fortunes she read were wide-eyed believers.
“I thought I should at least tell them good things, mostly what would happen if they worked hard in school.”
“Some older people showed up and wanted their fortunes read, but I said, ‘No more,’ and I stopped. Marlowe went to a fortuneteller, who told her about a bad accident, and she thought it was about me, so she called me and told me to watch out. She really believed that nonsense. When older people came and wanted their fortunes read, I stopped. I was all dressed up, too, with a head scarf and everything.”
“That’s cool. You were a good sport,” I said.
I remember that mother; she was fun.
There is an odd conspiracy, in this society, to encourage all manner of creative endeavor in children, and then become horrified if they want to make a life of it. As if the creative life is the life of a child, and we must put away childish things when we grow up.
I talked to Bruce, today. He said his mother was equally discouraging to his creative life, but he grew up with his father, who encouraged him. I said my father was mostly silent on the subject, but I could feel his support.
Nothing else has been successful for me. Why should I expect it any different, now? Followed by a big laugh from the fortuneteller.
“Good-bye, tooth,” the dentist said, yesterday, and it was out.

Last night, I went to an AA meeting, in the snow. Eight inches of new snow fell yesterday. Since it was my 19th AA birthday, I was asked to speak, and then when we broke up into three smaller groups, I was asked to lead the meeting.

AA is one of the great levelers. I was sitting in a room with two dozen strangers from a wide variety of circumstances; all with a practical, spiritual solution to one of the great destroyers of life. As I looked around the room, I saw half a dozen people I felt drawn to. The large group divided up by counting 1-2-3. I was a 3, and two of the people I was intuitively drawn to were in my group of seven. One other was the first man I talked to, crossing the parking lot, and then going back to our cars, at the end.

I could paint a colorful portrait of the meeting, but I don’t care to. Maybe its the anonymity of AA, and maybe because it’s not what this story is about. At home, Mother asked me about the meeting. She was under the impression that AA had saved me. I said I quit on my own, when I finally knew I couldn’t drink anymore, or die. She became content to believe that God saved me. Fair enough.

I’ve become discontent in this environment. I’m intent on leaving. It’s time to finish all the business that needs to be done so I can leave. I thought the snow might stop me, but the roads, today, are clear, after one day of bad driving conditions.

Today, Mother seems almost healthy, certainly strong enough for me to not worry about her.

I overheard two guys talking, on my last day at the Y, yesterday. Both had aging parents, a common reality in this part of the world. One man was relieved. His mother wasn’t doing well, but she had married a man and moved to Florida.

“Thank God for her husband,” he said. “He takes care of her. If it wasn’t for him, I’d have to take care of her.”

I’ve spent six months time, caring for my mother, but none of my money. I feel the guilt of the poor. My poverty is my own choice. I have no
practical excuse. My parents worked all their lives, and they stressed how important their choices were, to ensure their financial wellbeing, above all else. They ended up two blocks from where they began, almost as poor.

A lifetime of effort and reward, and my mother isn’t much better off than I am, and she’s dependent on my brother and me. I suppose there is some irony to gloat over, but I can’t. I can feel a little better about my willingness to forsake wealth and security for the wonderful life I’ve led.

The sun is shining, and the snow is beautiful. I have errands to run.
All is Well

When I came to the door, I heard a man’s voice. I listened for Dr. Phil, but it was Mark. We grinned and hugged each other.

“Who is this man in your house,” I said to Mother.

Mark drove in, half an hour before I got home. He stopped at Borders, looking for me, a half an hour after I left there. He told Mother and me about his trip. I told him about some of the changes in the house.

Eating dinner, I swallowed a piece of chicken, and it stuck in my esophagus. After twenty minutes, a few swallows of mashed potatoes dislodged it. Trying to cough up the obstruction, I spit blood from my missing tooth.

Mother seemed a little overwhelmed to have both of us in the house at the same time. I told Mark I was afraid he was freezing to death in his van in Missouri. He said he was freezing, in a motel with not enough heat.

It’s four days before he was to be here. It’s almost too soon. I have books coming in the mail, and the unlikely chance of a response from Roxan. Still, it’s time to be on my way. I’m not sure how this writing will conclude, if at all. I know, from experience, that I’ll write something, after some time has passed.

I suspect I’m in benign shock. Mark is happy. He continues to tell stories of how people treat him badly, but he’s happy to be home, and we were happy to see each other. Mother seemed a bit befuddled. All is well.
Wrapping Up

No bad blood and no bad feelings. I’m not sure I have anything more to write about. Mark and I went to lunch at Lagomarcino’s with his old buddy, Jeff.

I mailed my large paintings back to Seattle. I forwarded money to Jaxon for safekeeping. I bought a February first airplane ticket to Hawaii, at a good price. I’m going to get my truck road-ready, tomorrow.

I marked out a rectangle on the bedroom floor, the size of the truck bed, so I can find out how to pack it. It’s twenty degrees, outside, clear and sunny, but too cold to stand around packing the truck, without a plan.

I’m relinquishing control of the household to Mark. He looks strong and healthy, after a month in the sun, but more, I think, after six months following his own heart on the trail of Earnest Hemingway.

He was wearing old, broken and chipped glasses, when he has two new pairs in his pocket. He is truly frugal. He’s decided to wear out the old pair, so his new ones will last him 25 years. Jeff and I laughed, because, in 25 years, our eyes will change their prescription at least five times.

“My eyes are the same as they were when I got these glasses,” he said. “Almost the same.”

He said he didn’t get along with Scott on this trip, and Scott said it was their best time together in years. It was good for Scott, I believe, and not so good for Mark, because Scott laid down a few boundaries and stuck to them.

I signed up for a month with Scott, and I have no business in Hawaii. I told Mark I think I deserve a month in the sun. I don’t know about deserve. I just want it.
Anticipation

I called Gregory in Taos. It’s as cold there, as it is here. He says, in his practiced sarcasm, he’s had too many visitors to be glad to see another, but he’ll welcome me for a couple of days. I have three weeks to spend, before I fly out of Seattle. I’m not sure what to do. I have nowhere to hang out, before then. I can go a lot of places and cover a lot of ground, in the meantime.

“Look at the presence in the room, sit back in your soul,” I tell myself.

I could stay here two more weeks. Mother doesn’t want me to go. She’s worried about the cold weather. It’s nasty cold, but it’s supposed to warm up by this weekend.

“Stay here until it warms up,” she said.

“That could mean I stay here for another two and a half months.”

“Then stay two and a half more months.”

I could stay until Friday or Saturday. It won’t kill me. I’m enjoying my time with Mark, but my mind is telling me I’ll be trapped here. Nonsense. I need to make a few phone calls and see the lay of the land.

“See the presence of the room,” I tell myself.

The mind occupies the foreground so effectively, it seems as if there’s no other presence in the room.

The mind says, “Be afraid, be vigilant, be uncertain.”

Gregory said, “God, guide me on the path and protect me from those who have arrived at the truth.”

“I don’t like people who have the revealed truth in their back pocket, either,” I say, “They want to take it out and hit you over the head with it.”

“What’s in your back pocket?” he said.

“My back pocket is empty,” I said.
The Drifter

Mark and I had a little blowout. He was watching a tape of mine, one I use for personal sexual gratification. When I came in the room, he said it was good. He was going to make a copy for himself. I should have been embarrassed, but I wasn’t. I was offended.

“Wait a minute,” I said, “you’re watching my tape, and you’re going to make a copy of it, and you never said anything to me. You didn’t ask me if you could do that.”

“What are you getting upset about? Oh, you’re embarrassed, that’s it.”

“No, that’s not it. I’d like you to be a little more courteous, that’s all.”

“What’s the big deal?”

“You don’t get it, do you? You could apologize for looking at my tape, and if you want to make a copy of it, you could ask me.”

“Why do you have to get so worked up about it?”

“You don’t see this, do you? If you were a gentleman, you’d act like a gentleman. It’s as simple as that.”

“OK, I’m sorry. OK?”

“There. That’s it. Do you want to make a copy of it?”

“Yes.”

“Then, by all means, I’m willing to share the wealth.”

Of course, the bad blood wasn’t about the tape. I don’t think Mark respects anyone, so showing respect is only expedient. He’ll do it, if it gets him something, or if you happen to be a musical hero of his.

I took my truck to the dealer to see what it needed for my trip. They said the radiator leaked and had to be replaced. Mark would’ve said they knew I was leaving town, so they screwed with me. The thought crossed my mind. I noticed Mother was sounding cranky and critical. I thought she was picking up the pattern of her life with Mark. Now, I’m picking it up, too.

I had an hour to fill, while my truck was being fixed, so I walked to the mall, in freezing cold weather. It wasn’t so bad when I was moving briskly, with my gloves and stocking cap on.
I got a piece of chocolate pie and coffee at Bishops, and then, as I was walking back, I crossed paths with my cafe muse, Ann. She was walking with a tall, young guy. I didn’t recognize her, at first, but she recognized me. She smiled and said hi. So did I. Within minutes, my spirit had lifted.

I was going to go write, but I needed to put my camper cover on, to see if it still fit. I drove home put the braces on the truck, and then pulled the cover across them. It worked.

I was free, for a short while, to come here, to Fireworks, and write. Mona asked me if I was going to ‘drift’ on my way home. I said I wanted to, but, ‘After being responsible, it takes a little while to be free enough to drift.’
Lunar Orbiter

I fixed dinner for Mark and Mother. That made me feel better. I was tired. I think some of that is because I’m done here.

I got welcoming emails from friends out West. I called Chris Blum, on the Gulf Coast of Texas, close to Mexico. He was very open to a visit, but he’s twenty hours from Taos. I can stay several days in SF, maybe a week, with a couple of friends. I need is a place in LA, and I’m good.

The more I slow down; the better off I’ll be, in the long run. I have to let go of my escape mentality. The longer I stay here, with the realization I don’t have to be here, the stronger my dislike for this place gets. I don’t mean this place, exactly. I mean my Mother and my brother, who sit, side by side, mocking the world on TV. I wondered if I wasn’t angrier than I normally allow myself to be.

Certainly, my spiritual awareness is a ready refuge.

Chris, in Texas, is an artist. When I called information for his town and asked for him, the operator said, “Oh, the artist.” Chris’s sense is that the monkeys are running the zoo.

“But you’ve always known that,” I said.

“Yeah,” he said. “You have to look on the bright side.”

Even the brightest among us fall back on clichés. Mark is critical of the world. He used to be funny. Sometimes, he still is. His irony has become paranoia, and his underpants have become an iron maiden.

I just remembered my exit from Katmandu. I felt like we were never going to be able to leave, running around trying to buy a plane ticket with an empty credit card, paying the hotel bill with cash from the credit card, after being sick as a dog over the previous two weeks. I was nearly delirious with weakness, happiness, and uncertainty. And then, as if suddenly, we were in the air, flying to Hong Kong.

In a half dream, it occurred to me, as certainly as anything I’d ever known, that fear was not real, and love was.

It calms me when I love my mother and my brother. It leaves me cold and frightened when I don’t. The core of that realization is that it calms me when I live in my inherent nature, and it frightens me when I leave it for the lunar landscape of fear.
The Eyes of a Child

It’s my last day here. I’m all set to drive out of here, tomorrow. Alexandra emailed from Taos that I should spend a couple of days with her, after staying with Gregory. I still don’t have a place in LA.

Last night, Mark and I had a talk that started with him saying he was done with Scott. I doubt it. He then said there were only three people who treat him badly, Scott, Liz, and me. He said we reprimand him when we think he’s wrong. He said it’s a tone of voice. He said Scott and Liz lie in wait for him to make a mistake. Then they pounce on him.

I asked him is he had any responsibility for that. He said no, he didn’t. I felt calm, as we spoke, but I also felt my energy rise. I said I’d heard anger in Scott’s voice, anger he wasn’t aware of. I also said that Mark’s hobby was pissing people off. He denied it, and I said he had told me as much. He denied it.

I said there was no way for me to object to anything he had to say, because he always took offense, no matter what I said, or how I said it. I said it was impossible for me to engage in a conversation about this, because he always accused me of attacking him.

He has no sense of his effect on others. He believes it’s all about being criticized, in an insulting tone of voice, being reprimanded for being thought wrong.

Then he said something that changed my awareness of us all. He said that Scott and I are passionate, we get emotional, and he doesn’t. I agreed with him that I’m passionate. Then, I said I didn’t like it when my emotions undercut what I might be trying to say.

He scoffed.

“Don’t cut off what I’m saying,” I said. “I’m telling the truth. I’m glad you said what you just said. It’s true about Scott and me. It’s also true that it bothers me when my emotional nature interferes with what I’m saying.”

He seemed genuinely surprised. I was surprised to be able to make the distinction between the passionate and the rational.

Mark’s emotional state is repressed, sublimated anger. When he’s happy, he’s rational, and he enjoys himself.
I told him what he said to me, when he was twenty, standing in our cousin’s apartment, in Portland, Oregon.

“You said, ‘Emotions are not part of my vocabulary.’”

“You remember something that happened, that long ago?”

“I remember a lot of things you’ve said. A lot of what you’ve said to me has had a profound effect. You were the first person to tell me it was OK to eat a pizza with a spoon. That was forty years ago. One time, you said I should write down my dreams for a year. I forgot about it, but the next January 1st, I woke up and wrote down my dreams. I kept it up until the middle of March. I quit when it was taking me two and a half hours to write them down. That was thirty years ago.”

“You think outside the box,” I said.

I asked him if he thought he was a thwarted genius.

He scoffed, “You do what you can.”

I asked him if he knew he had an original mind.

“If I had an original mind, don’t you think I’d know it?”

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to tell you something you already know.”

We talked some more. He said this family doesn’t encourage anyone, “Nobody encourages anybody,” he said.

Mark and I have encouraged each other for forty years, and Scott is generally supportive. He was referring to Mother. He has a sense of lost entitlement he’s still hurt by. I’ve already described my part of that drama.

“You said something tonight that I’ll remember,” I said.

This morning, he seemed to think I’d jumped back on his side, and he could spout endless pronouncements, as of years past; foolish, wise, and speculative thoughts in words.

“All of Mother’s medicines are useless. The more expensive they are, the more likely it is they’re placebos.”

I’m a passionate person, and I’ve been disappointed I can’t pull off being totally dispassionate, but the greater unhappiness is to be without passion. It felt good to tell him, “I am passionate. It’s who I am. I like it. I don’t like it when emotions interfere with what I’m saying.”

Living with my dispassionate mother has been an exercise in practicing her faith, while keeping my faith alive, at the same time.

At breakfast, I looked at her eyes.

“Well, it’s been good to be here,” I said.
“It’s been wonderful that you were here,” she said. “I got to be with you and Mark, and I got to be with Scott, when he worked in the store, so I’m very happy for that.”

I looked in her eyes again. It felt as if our hearts met in a kindness, like between children, hopeful and innocent, in a moment beyond time.
The Quest for the Rest

I told Ann it was my last night in the Quad-Cities.
“You mean you don’t like it here,” she said.
“There are other places I like more,” I said.
I told her she was in my book, “I call you my cafe muse.”
“I want to read it. You’re going to have to send me a copy. You’ll have to come back and do a book signing.”
“It’s almost 600 pages,” I said.
“I just finished a 500 page book,” she said.
“I’ll send you a book, but I need an address.”
“I’ll give you my parents’ address. I’m going to school, in the fall.”
I read her note, “Ann McMillin, with all i’s,” I said.
“We’re an unusual breed,” she said.
“I could tell that,” I said.

My truck is loaded, and it runs more smoothly than when it was empty. I thought I was driving more slowly, more fluidly than before.

Last night, I thought I was sick. I feel tired. I woke up early, and I’ll probably wake up early again, tomorrow.

Reuben called and read me a new poem. It was softer and more fluid than I’ve heard him before. He told me about friends of his, a couple who live in one of the tonier sections of San Francisco.

“How come you and I aren’t rich?” I said.
“We’re rich in all the other ways,” he said.

A box of copies of The Dancer in the Heart came from my publisher, this morning. That’s auspicious.

Talking to Jack in Virginia, tonight, I said I was curious about the rest I’ll get, after this time.

“I might already be feeling it, but I can’t tell what it is until I get away from here.”

“When you find out, tell me about the Quest for the Rest,” he said.
“The rest of the quest is yet to be seen,” I said.

On the Road
As I was driving into Taos, I ran over a dead dog. I visited friends in Taos and Santa Fe. I visited my childhood sweetheart and her father in Phoenix. I spent four days with my nephew in Long Beach and wrote seventeen poems. I stayed a week in San Francisco, and wandered the city I love. After a long conversation, a friend offered me his bookstore. I visited a spiritual retreat in the wine country and saw, once again, that the world is my ashram.

I was welcomed everywhere I went, but when I got to Seattle, the guy I’ve shared a house with for eleven years accused me of failing to offer myself and my work to the world. He accused me of preferring my comfort. Then, he admitted he’d gone home to Michigan, over the Christmas holidays, and at forty-five, for the first time in his life, he felt old.

He’d put himself out in the world in a way that I envied but couldn’t copy. I asked him how that was going for him. He said he was worse off than I was, in terms of acceptance and reward.

Answering his charges, I became impassioned. I was defensive, at first. Then I spoke in support of my deepest belief in the life I’ve chosen, the one that’s chosen me, just as I did with my brother.

I write this in Starbucks on Kapahulu and Date Street in Honolulu. I just got in before the rain came down. I’ve been here a week, staying with my brother and his family, riding a bicycle, and reading this book.

I see how Mark and I carry the same desire to be seen and heard for who we are. It’s the touch point of our attachment to this world, that is, to our mother. My awareness gives me a peaceful detachment in my spirit, and Mark has built a detachment in his mind.

The morning I left Moline, I went into Mother’s bedroom to say good-bye. She was sitting on the side of the bed, in her slip, half-dressed. I sat beside her and held her hand. I kissed her and told her I loved her. She asked me to wait. She wanted me to stay.

I talked to her, the day before, “Oh, Stephen, I’m in terrible shape. I have terrible pain in my legs.”

She said how happy she was I had stayed with her. She said she was happy that Mark was there, “You did a wonderful job when you were here, and Mark is doing a wonderful job now.”

She went to the doctor, and she’s waiting for the results.

“I’ll check back with you,” I said.
“I hope you do,” she said.

Now, it’s the beginning of March, and Mother is in the hospital, about to go into a care facility. She had a stroke, just as the infection in her legs was clearing up. She can’t move her left side.

Mark says she sleeps all the time, she eats good, and she keeps her eyes closed, even when she’s talking. She won’t answer the phone, on her own, and I haven’t spoken to her since she went into the hospital two weeks ago.

Now, it’s two weeks later, and she’s in Rosewood Care Facility. Mark goes to see her, twice a day.
Heartland

It’s been three months since I left my mother’s house. She’s now living in a place called Heartland, and Mark looks in on her. I’m back in my apartment in Seattle, beginning to paint again - houses and pictures. I’ve gone through a weeding out process. I put half of my paintings, ones I might call lesser work, in the back room, and I’ve hung the better ones, several of which I re-framed.

I’m seeing the effect of the time with my mother. Living in the world without carrying the weight of judgment is a certain freedom. I’ve experienced other people’s judgment, recently, in acceptance and rejection, and it seems to no longer have any effect on my wellbeing.

The albatross has flown from its home around my neck. It’s apparent to me that I no longer carry the unconscious sense of the judgment of others. I don’t look to gain the good judgment of others or to combat the bad. I’ve always acted as if that was the best way to act, but despite my best intentions, I’ve felt the weight of judgment.

How has this change occurred? I went back to the center of my attachment. My longstanding attachment was not to my mother, but to a particular relationship with my mother, and I saw it more clearly than ever. I paid attention to it, I experienced it, and I did what I could to treat it with acceptance and without judgment.

This time, I felt her judgment and my own judgment with a deeper willingness to accept it for what it is. When people say, “Do this, it’ll be good for you,” it’s often thought of as an undesirable task, like swallowing bitter medicine. This has not been medicine, and it’s been good for me. I’m better for it. I feel better. My life is better. I’m happier, more at peace, more open to the enjoyment of my life.

My relationship with my mother is my story, my story is not anyone else’s story, and everyone’s story is one’s own, but everyone is a child of parents. Who we are and, how we live in the world, are colored by that primary relationship. My colors are a little brighter for the time I spent in the company of my mother. Thank you, Mother. Thank you.
Another Loss of Faith

I recently realized I have no more faith in myself. I got an idea for mounting a new stage show, and soon after that, I realized that the faith I had in myself, for so many years, was gone. I don’t have any belief in the inevitability of my charisma and creativity. It’s gone. A perfect scenario for a one-man show came to me. Even days later, it felt like a great idea, but I had no faith in it.

I don’t have any faith in the book I just wrote, either. I recognize how good it is, but I don’t believe in its inevitable or eventual success in the world. It isn’t a matter of doubt. I don’t doubt my abilities, my value, or my accomplishments. It may be the bankruptcy/heart attack that finished off this belief, this sense of destiny, and it’s taken a couple of years to accept its demise.

The end of faith had signaled my freedom, many times before, and I notice a sense of relaxation and peacefulness. It isn’t resignation or defeat. It’s letting go of the mind’s hold on my life. This is the end of the common belief that without a belief system that includes mental will, nothing will happen to support the fulfillment of my life. I’ve never subscribed to that belief, but I’ve believed in destiny, as if that belief supplanted a belief in will. Energy has welled up in me, over my life, to accomplish great things, by my own standards, and I came to a belief in that energy.

I believed in my inherent nature to act with even greater success in the world than I might have had with conscious will, ambition, and hard work. Self-belief took the place of self-will, and now I have neither.

Russ Sullivan, 72 year old, ex-Navy man, said, the other day, during a soccer game, that I had the killer instinct. That may be true, when the game requires it, but I have no belief in it. I can’t depend on it. It’s simple, really. It’s not a debate in my mind about belief or non-belief. It’s gone. The belief is gone, and the debate is gone.

I don’t know what’s going to happen next. The consistent urgency that I’m familiar with, to the point of it being commonplace, the steady urgency to produce art, has subsided, or changed, I can’t tell which. Something may come along that overwhelms me, or nothing may.
A year ago, when I was working, I needed to leave the job every day and go be creative. Now, I paint all day, with no need to stop. It surprises me, but it feels easy. I used to be afraid I would become a housepainter who writes, instead of a writer who paints houses. I used to feel squelched when I wasn’t being creative. Now I don’t care about that.

In the background of my thoughts is the awareness of the great potential of my being, but that has an urgency of its own and not the urgency of a thwarted life. I can say that I’ve had a thwarted life, because I don’t feel that sense anymore. Nothing is blocking me from acting, and nothing is demanding me to act.

I am at peace. It strikes me as an apt conclusion to this story. I am at peace. I am about the business of being at peace. This state of being has different priorities than the ones that are familiar to me.

I talked to my mother, yesterday, and she’s not at peace. Or she is, and I can’t tell. She doesn’t like the food she’s been getting. Mark says its been baby food, prescribed by the doctor, presumably because she can’t swallow regular food. Mark says she can. Mother simply says the food is no good. She says she has a nice room. She says she’s never going to get better. She may be right. I said I loved her. She said she has loved me for a long time. I liked that.
My Freedom

At once it struck me what quality went to form a man of achievement, especially in literature, and which Shakespeare possessed so enormously - I mean negative capability, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.

John Keats

The only other unfinished business was the anxiety I felt with my brother and my children. Recently, on his request, Jaxon and I went to see the therapist we’d been seeing before I went to Illinois. In the session, I became ‘upset’, as Mark is wont to say. I became emotional about my children not wanting me to stay in their houses. The therapist suggested I listen to my son’s side of it. I did, and I began to hear better his difficulty with having anyone in his house, not just me in particular.

Tears came to my eyes. I said I was happy to know him better than before. Then, the therapist suggested something that I had said in a letter to my children, two months before. When I was in San Francisco, I called Jaxon and asked him if I could stay in his house, in the two days I was going to be in Seattle, before flying to Hawaii. He said no.

I asked him, “How is that not supposed to hurt me?”

He said he thought it would. He said he was uncomfortable. I said he should do what was uncomfortable and see what would happen. He said he wanted to talk about it in therapy.

I called an old friend from twenty years ago, and we met for coffee in Mill Valley. I described to him how hurt I felt. My friend said he’d just had a conversation with a friend of his, a divorced father in the same situation. The man finally realized it was an unsolvable dilemma. He wasn’t his children’s friend, and he wasn’t a traditional father, either. His children couldn’t treat him as a friend and they couldn’t treat him as a parent, and the reverse was just as true. It was an unsolvable dilemma.
I wrote my children and described to them that we were living in the same unresolvable situation. The therapist was suggesting the same thing. I felt a great sense of relief. I was glad to be able to express my hurt and anger at the rejection I felt, but I was even happier to accept the truth. I said I had long believed that the difficulties I felt with my family could be resolved with some diligent attention and effort.

When my son said he was uncomfortable, and I said he should go ahead, anyway, I thought something could have been resolved but maybe not. In session with the therapist, we spoke about the uncomfortableness we both felt, and what was resolved was the need for resolution.

My daughter is building a life for herself that doesn’t include me. It’s the kind of life I don’t live. That doesn’t exclude me from her life or her from mine, but it recognizes a simple truth about who we are. My mother, my brothers, and my children are all unsolvable dilemmas. I saw that with my mother, and I accepted it. That acceptance has had a ripple effect in my other relationships.

My son and I laughed and talked, on the way home, like two people who appreciate their unique differences in a common bond of the spirit. This is the practical equivalent of spiritual non-attachment. I felt the sadness and anger of unresolvable relationships, and I’m glad I’m the passionate person I am, but I’ve seen the freedom of accepting the truth that can’t be touched by human will or desire. I’m at peace in that acceptance, and that is my freedom.
Three Orphans

Mother died in her sleep, four months after I left. Mark had just been to see her. He said her eyes were blue. Her brown eyes were blue.

She’d been in the hospital for the infection in her legs, when she had a series of strokes. She couldn’t use the left side of her body, but she was still cognizant, with some difficulty in talking. Her doctor, a man I went to high school and college with, said she had one foot on the banana peel. She survived the hospital and returned to the first nursing home, where, by coincidence, her best friend from childhood, Katherine Schmidt, was across the hall. The two had a reunion of sorts, before Mother died.

The message on my machine was from Mark, nearly in tears. When I spoke to him, he said he wasn’t sure he could get through it. His friend, Jeff, was there to help. My brother, who abstained from an emotional life, was unsettled by his mother’s death.

I talked to Scott, and we made plans to fly home. Mark was surprised we would want to. For me, it was a given. Mark suggested I bring my camcorder. I left it, inadvertently, on a seat in the Minneapolis airport. I realized, as I flew on, how much I prefer the reality of the moment to a movie of it.

At the memorial service for Mother, all three of us spoke, and all three of us choked up as we spoke. I read the chapter from this book called, Grandma’s Legs. Mark thanked everyone for coming. Scott said how much he loved his mother. The room for the service was filled, much to our surprise. Several people spoke about what a wonderful woman Mother was, and several mentioned her wanting nothing less than perfection.

“We’re orphans,” I said to my brothers, and over the next few days, others said the same thing. The three of us are getting along better than we have. I predicted as much to Mark.

“There was a skunk in the woodpile,” I said.

We all loved her, and we all felt the burden of her expectations.

“When we were young,” I told the banker, “she said she couldn’t drive us apart.”

“Well, you should get together, more often, from now on,” the banker said.
Memorial

I was in Borders, thinking I might begin a final chapter. I looked for Ann, my cafe muse. I’d sent her an early copy of the text for this book, and then a cleaner, bound copy. I wondered what her sense of the book was. I thought she’d be a good reader, but I didn’t see her.

As I was leaving, as I was looking at bargain books, I heard her voice, and then I saw her smiling face. I told her why I was in town, and I asked her about herself, and then I asked her about the book.

“I’m about halfway through the first version. I know you said in your letter, that the second book was better, but I thought I’d read both of them and compare them. It’s great to read about places I recognize,” she said.

She said she was living in the bookstore, these days, getting ready for more school. She asked me, or I told her, about the possibility of buying Mother’s car by paying two-thirds of it to my brothers. She wondered why I didn’t drive it back to Seattle, and I said there was reason to do that, and there was good reason to leave it for Mark.

I said I was glad she was my muse. She said she was happy to be. She asked me if she’d see me around. I said I’d be back, to work on this writing, but she’s not here, tonight. Today, Scott, Mark and I went around town, taking care of Mother’s financial affairs. I just looked up and saw Ann. I’m still fond of her. I’m attracted to her, too, but my appreciation of her character undercuts my imagination, and I like the effect. I enjoy the easy distance.

Since we’re getting along well, I’m not happy about calling Mark an asshole in this book, but I did. He objected to me saying that he liked to piss people off. He said it wasn’t true.

“I heard you say it. You said it to me,” I said.

And then, today, he said the same thing; referring to someone he’d talked to, just this morning. After that, I thought he might be covering his expectation of pissing people off, by saying he did it on purpose. Regardless, he hasn’t pissed me off, during this time. He said Mother’s death had changed him. As much as I might doubt that, I know something has changed in all our lives, and Mark was acting in a way I hadn’t seen him act, before.
Mother’s house is now a bachelor pad. That air of expectation and judgment has lifted. It was remarkable to me, to see three grown men, who have lived in the shadow of her strong presence and unremitting criticism for more than fifty years, feeling tenderness at her passing. For the most part, I’ve been happy in this time of natural life, in the ordinary reality of her passing, but when I began to read a story of her strength of character, my voice was quavering.

At the memorial service, when I spoke, my voice breaking, I said, “I like it when my heart opens like this. I can feel what I’m feeling.”

I was remembering eleven years before, when our father died. We’d held a memorial service in the same chapel. At the time, I read a poem I’d written about him, and my voice broke as I spoke.

“Speak up, Stephen, people can’t hear you,” Mother said, loud enough for everyone to hear her, clearly.

When I read the story, this time, I said, “It’s OK, I’m good at this.”

That thought surprised me, but I was glad to hear it. In a way, I was talking to her, across the absent distance.
Clearing the Books

Mark and I had a colloquy, last night, ranging over several subjects. Several times, he said something like, “The point you’re making...” or “Your thesis is...” or “You’re trying to say...” and each time, I said something like, “I’m not making any point,” or “I’m only guessing at these things,” or, “This is my opinion, I don’t know anything for certain.”

I thought he was expecting a confrontation between my position and his, but I agreed with most of what he said, without kowtowing to anything. Today, I said to Scott I thought the ingrained judgmentalism, that at least I had inherited, had softened.

Scott came in the house, this morning, from his friend, Pete’s, and said, “Is anybody pissed off? Has anybody got a problem with anything that’s happened?”

Yesterday, Mark said he wanted the checking account cleared into his pocket, in payment for his service to Mother. Scott said no, and I said no. I was surprised by Mark’s attitude, but later, I proposed a settlement in thirds, and he agreed to it.

We agreed to set aside the furniture for Liz’s mother, Marilyn. Scott took a big bag of shoes and sweaters, along with the jewelry for his wife and daughters. I might take some crystal for Rachel, and the neighbor ladies, Roseanne and Vivian, will get a few pieces of furniture and household goods. The clothing will go to the church. Today, we all asked if there was more to be settled, and there was no new business.

I said I thought Mother’s passing would have a profound effect in our lives, for years to come, in ways we can’t even imagine. I woke up at 2AM and couldn’t get back to sleep until 4:30. That’s unusual for me. I thought, “I like the book I’m writing. There’s no problem.”

The night before last, lying near sleep, but still very conscious, I entered into a state of thought-free awareness, that seemed to be, in the consciousness of my own awareness, a state of calm, not unlike what I imagine Papaji and Ramana Maharshi knew in their fulfillment.

“I don’t know how it was for you,” I said to Scott, as we drove to the post office and the copy store, “but I internalized a judgmentalism that I hope is going away.”
As long as she was alive, and probably forever after, but less so, I’ve carried, in my habitual mind, a critical presence I learned from her. I heard myself feeling a kind of satisfaction, during the memorial service, that a judgmental need for perfection was in place, as if it had served me to expect the best I could produce.

Then, on the radio, I heard a man telling railroad stories. Then, he sang **Working on the Railroad**.

> I’ve been working on the railroad,  
> all the livelong day,  
> I’ve been working on the railroad,  
> **just to pass the time away**.

Maybe, for the first time, I heard the irony in that casual aside. Mark went to church on Sunday, to represent Mother. He said he refused to go with her, the last two years, because he didn’t want her to have to put up with his appearance, especially with his ponytail. He said the prettiest girl in church complimented him on his hair, telling him how good it looked.

This morning, I said, “So the prettiest girl in church liked your hair?”

“Yes, but the more I thought about it, the more I’m sure Werner Paulsen put her up to it.”

In our discussion of the differences between spirituality and religion, Mark said, “The religionists never relax.” Maybe we can all relax, as our mother has finally been able to do.
Compensation for Good

Then, last night, after soccer, I asked Mark to tell me the story behind his contention that the bank stole Mom and Dad’s house. He told me the whole story of his time in the family business, from the early days of success and high hopes, to the final days when Mother told him, “You can keep working, if you want, but we can’t pay you.”

All the stores that Mark oversaw made money, and that money went to prop up the store that Dad left for Mother to run. That store lost money for seven years, Mark said. I believed Mark’s description of the many reasons why. For one, he said, “Dad always had Mother under his thumb, until then.” I prefer to believe he never had her under his thumb, except in the realm of business, where he only kept them separate. He drove off to business, leaving her at home, until they opened that store.

When they finally closed the store, they still owed the bank $75,000, on a $200,000 loan, and the family lawyer told them they’d have to put up the house to pay for it. Mark finally admitted it wasn’t the bank’s fault for wanting their money back. I believe it was Mother’s fault, for believing the lawyer who told them they’d go to jail, if they didn’t give up the house. And it was the lawyer’s fault for his act of deceit saying that they could go to jail.

“There’s no debtor’s prison in this country,” I said, amazed at the ease of the deceit and the willingness to accept it on its face.

It had made Mark angry, and it may have helped make Dad a disappointed man. Mark asked Harry to intervene, and Mother told her brother, who created the company, to mind his own business.

In the course of telling his story, I stepped on Mark’s ongoing monologue with questions. I was delighted to hear the story, and I jumped in with prodding questions. Mark took sneering offense. He called me for interrupting him - his personal bugaboo. He was angry, and I reacted, and he got even more angry at me for reacting, and around we went.

I apologized, finally, for interrupting him. I agreed that I’d done that. Then, he interrupted me, in exactly the same way, but he saw himself doing it. And, from then on, I raised my hand or looked to him for cues when I could jump in. Just before bed, he brought up the business of being
outvoted by me and Scott when he proposed wanting Mother’s bank account in payment for his two years of service, as opposed to my six months and Scott’s no time at all.

“I was here, while you two guys did whatever you wanted to,” he said.

Mother had asked him to come home, at first, a year before her final confinement. Then she asked me to come before he came, only because he couldn’t get away any sooner. I thought she preferred my coming, but she didn’t. She had always wanted him with her, before she wanted me. I was happy to see my self-serving belief shattered. I asked him what compensation he thought he deserved.

“I believe,” I said, “because it’s true for me, that you profited from being with Mother. You lived expense-free for two years. Beside that, the time with her was good for both of us. Not only that, but you’re a writer, and I’m a writer, and we got to do our own work, during that time.”

After he went to bed, I thought, “There’s no compensation for being a good person. There’s no reward. It is what it is. It is, in itself, good. And that’s it.”

This morning, he asked me how I felt, and I said I felt great. I wasn’t sure what he meant, but he followed his question by saying, “So the soccer didn’t wear you out?”

We talked about Scott’s history with Mark and the business, but that’s not part of this story. Scott called, as he was about to fly back to Honolulu. We said we loved each other, and that’s true.

As I was washing my noon dishes, Mark was out working on his van. I thought, then, there was no family for Mark but his brothers. I have kids, and Scott has a wife and kids, but Mark is alone. I was glad to see his anger. This time, we walked through our confrontation and continued to talk in a way that was more forgiving of each other.

He said that if I lost everything, I wouldn’t be able to go on the same. I said I thought it would be devastating, but I knew my greatest happiness was in my heart in this moment. He said he felt the same, until last Tuesday. It’s been a week, and I think Mark has seen a real change in his life.

I thought, “He actually fell in love with Mother, in his own way, and her death broke his heart.”
That might be hyperbole, but I thought there was something in his attachment to her, that I hadn’t seen before. He’s shown more sorrow and anger (and maybe even a little compassion) in the last week than I can remember.
Intellectual Samurai

I went to the movies in the middle of the afternoon. I went to see Kill Bill, and all through it, I thought, “This could be Mark’s favorite movie of all time.” He’s a big fan of Westerns, and Kill Bill has the ethos of right and wrong, like the other big blockbuster of this last year, the one I called Kill Jesus, with sharp dialog, and the spirituality of existential retribution for wrongs committed and suffered.

I thought, “Mark, I’ve been trying to figure you out all your life, and I’ve either done it, or I’m getting close. You are an intellectual samurai. You have your own code of justice, and you never forget a slight.”

Today, he was talking about how invisible he is in Scott’s life. I disagreed, but he persisted. Scott doesn’t measure up to his exacting criteria. I suspect that Mark has honed his critical skills, and his sensitivity to deceit, to accurately judge 99.9% of the world. If he could wield a sword in fealty to his perceptions, there would be a lot of dead bodies, at least, metaphorically. Kill Bill is a story of professional assassins who have a ruthless awareness of the weaknesses of others, and the final question of the movie is about being true to yourself, no matter who you are.

My brother has stuck to his guns, or his swords, if you will, all these years. For that, I imagine him a samurai, and it’s either true, or it’s what feels good in my need for an image of him. The old Chinese master warrior in the film is described as a nasty, old son of a bitch. “The one thing that happens to old bastards is they get lonely,” Bill says, or words to that effect.

“They need other old bastards to compete with,” I thought.

I’ve been feeling a bit of that in these verbal sparring matches with Mark. Mark admitted, last night, to having some of Mother’s nastiness, and he felt bad for all the abuse he’s heaped on his best friend, Jeff, all these years. Jeff has taken it and stayed friends, and Jeff is not a bastard or a patsy. He may simply be a true friend.
The Buffer Zone

With Mother gone, there’s no buffer zone between us brothers. When she was around, we were nicer to each other, and we spoke in support of each other to her. Now, that buffer is gone. Mark and I went at it, hammer and tongs, tooth and nail, again, today, clearing the air by clouding the skies with our vehemence. Suffice it to say, he said what he felt, and I said what I felt. I won’t go into it; blow for blow. This book is about Mother, and it serves that purpose to say that when a big piece of the family dynamic is removed, everything changes.

The last thing I said to Mark was, “The chances of this book being published are slim and none, but in case it is, what do you want, in terms of changes to the text and payment for participation, i.e., the emails?”

He didn’t have any answer, at the time. It feels good to not lay out our grievances with each other. Despite everything, Mark and Scott are my brothers, and nothing changes that. That relationship is not about liking or even loving each other. It is. What is; remains.
Last Day

My last day in the QC, I saw Ann and Bonnie. Ann asked me, again, about the car, and when we hugged, she said she always wanted to go to Seattle. I told her to call me, if she was ever out my way. I asked her, finally, how old she was. She said she was 22.

I went to the Library, and Bonnie looked surprised and happy. We talked, and she touched me as we talked. We hugged. She said she’d just sent me a letter thanking me for the book. I got her letter when I got back to Seattle. It’s the best review I could have hoped for.

She said the book was, “Wonderful ... honest, humorous, and speaks brilliantly of the ups and downs within the family. And yet through it all, I could feel the heartfelt love and compassion that you expressed so well.”

She included, in her letter, this poem by Juan Ramon Jimenez;

Oceans

I have a feeling
that my boot has struck
down there in the depths
against a great thing.

And nothing happens!
Nothing ... Silence ... Waves.

Nothing happens. Or has everything happened
and are we standing now, quietly,
in the new life?

I called the Minneapolis International Airport Police Lost and Found, before I left town, and I asked about the camcorder.

“Can you describe it?” the man said.

“It’s a black case. It has an adapter, a cord, and two cassettes.”

“What’s the name of it?”

“I can’t remember, I traded for it, I don’t remember the name, oh...” I suddenly remembered, “There’s a hairbrush in with the camcorder.”
“That’s it!” he said, excitedly, “That’s what I was waiting for.”

On the way to the airport, I wanted to tell Mark that regardless what we think of each other, we’re brothers, and that won’t ever change. When we pulled up, he jumped out to help me unload my luggage, and he said, “They’ll get on my case for leaving the car.”

A man came and did just that, and he ran out too quickly for my planned remarks, so I said, “So long. Brother.”

“Have a good trip,” he said, as he was leaving.

In the papers we divided up, the last few days, among some letters and photographs, I came across this poem I’d sent home, some years ago.

**Mother’s Day**

If I were to write a poem called Mother, as I’ve seen others do, I’d be inclined to go beyond details into the silent whirling center of perfect love.

I’d want to speak in recognition of the common miracle, that I cannot honestly call by one name and wouldn’t want to, even if it were mine to call.

In other words, some particular absence in my life has helped me see what would jump to my eyes in her name, if I’d been so lucky to see it small and infinitely large, as I’ve discovered in my own heart, and in others, the same.
This lucky knowledge is a glimpse of her heart as mine, and so I know her well, and better, and love her, as much as I could point to her and say, yes, I know a love of constant blessing, and here it is, back and forth between us, unbroken by division.

Mother, I love you, in ways unnamed and named, in ways said and unsaid, and always, I am your son.

Stephen