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The Gift of Tongues: Essays

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THE GIFT OF TONGUES:
ESSAYS

By

John D. Monger

THESIS

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SIGNATURE APPROVAL FORM

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ABSTRACT

THE GIFT OF TONGUES: ESSAYS

By

John D. Monger

The essays in this collection touch on three overlapping themes: the interplay between family and individuals; the role that having a "sense of place" plays in shaping us; and the transformative power of art. The author uses the personal essay form to explore his experience in order to find connections and meanings that might not be apparent except by examining that experience through narrative.

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2009

DEDICATION

This collection is dedicated to my wife Marla, to my children, Sidney, Sean, and Sam. This collection is also dedicated to Robert and Angela Monger and their descendants.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thanks to my thesis director, Dr. Ron Johnson for his guidance and patience. Thanks to my thesis readers, Diane Sautter Cole and Mark Smith, for their careful reading and helpful suggestions.

For introducing me to the power and possibilities of creative nonfiction, I want to thank John T. Price of the University of Nebraska at Omaha. To the English department at Northern Michigan University for giving me the chance to complete this work. To Roger Rosenblatt and the Southampton Writers Conference. To Lynn Walden for her guidance.

Thanks to my father and my siblings for answering my questions. Finally, to Marla, Sidney, Sean, and Sam for helping me in your own way.

This is a work of nonfiction, but certain names and details have been changed to protect the privacy of those depicted. This thesis follows the format prescribed by the *MLA Style Manual* and the Department of English.

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INTRODUCTION

When I was a child, family holidays meant the smells of roasting turkey, sweet potatoes topped with gooey marshmallows, and my grandmothers' powdery perfume lingering in the air. I tried to spend almost as much time sitting at, or as near as I could get to, the dining room table where the adults lingered after our meal as I did with the other kids. We were relegated to a card table set up so the adults could eat in peace. Once I scraped my plate, which I always filled with too much food, into the garbage, I quietly followed the conversation, switching my gaze from one speaker to the next. I noted the gestures and facial expressions as much as I did the words, much like the "juvenile listener and observer" that Gay Talese describes in his essay "Origins of a Nonfiction Writer" (250). Whether I was conscious of what I was doing or not, I was gathering material. Writing does not simply describe or even interpret the world; writing shapes the world. As a young writer, I am the product of both my experience and my reading.

*

Over the last two decades, creative nonfiction has taken its place among the world's major literary genres. Frank McCourt, one of the genre's most popular of writers, has added his name to a list of writers known primarily as memoirists, including Frank Conroy, Tobias Wolff, Mary Karr, and Chris Offutt. In his trilogy of memoirs, *Angela's Ashes*, *'Tis*, and *Teacher Man*, McCourt recounts the events of his life, including illnesses, deaths, his father's alcoholism, and the crushing poverty of his childhood. In McCourt's wake, a torrent of memoirs followed.

To certain critics, though, the rising popularity of creative nonfiction—even the term invites controversy—parallels what they see as a coarsening of our entire culture. Critic James Atlas argues that contemporary nonfiction, specifically the memoir, “has produced a virtual library of dysfunctional revelation” freeing writers from disguising “their transgressions as fiction” (“Confessing” 26). James Wolcott attributes the popularity to a “desire to show one's pain in plain sight” (“Dating” 32). In another essay, Wolcott makes his contempt for the genre even more apparent:

[T]he weakling personal voice of sensitive fiction is inserted in the beery carcass of nonfiction. Creative (fiction) writing and

creative nonfiction are coming together, I fear,
to form a big, earnest blob of me-first
sensibility. ("Me, Myself, and I" 213-214)

But is such contempt justified? Is contemporary nonfiction a more sophisticated version of our culture's interest in television talk shows where relationship problems seem to be solved in an hour or reality shows where faces, houses, and lives are given a "makeover" in the spaces between commercials?

Admittedly, creative nonfiction presents unique problems for both practitioners and critics. For example, several years ago, I walked into a class on the modern American memoir, apprehensive about the upcoming discussion. That evening, Kathryn Harrison's *The Kiss*, a memoir that generated a firestorm of criticism when it was first published in 1997, would be dissected by our class of graduate and undergraduate students. In the book, Harrison recounts her consensual affair with her father while in her early twenties. Because our professor was attending a conference, he had asked the graduate students (of which I was one) to lead the discussion. After I set down my backpack, I sat down and slouched in my seat, dreading the coming discussion.

After everyone settled into seats around the seminar table, students began with the obligatory jokes and denunciations. One student asked, "Is she from Kentucky?" I'll admit that easy jokes about her roots in Appalachia had occurred to me as well, but sitting through a three hours of invective aimed at Harrison sounded unappealing. I sat silently, but not for long.

In many ways, our class debate mirrored the exchanges in the print media. Although critic James Wolcott claimed that he was willing to analyze the text, after reading his descriptions of Harrison's sentences that "leave wistful little vapor trails of Valium" and scenes that are "postcards from perdition" (33), I began to think otherwise. Most students' comments mirrored those of critics like Wolcott and others who focused on Harrison's incestuous behavior. Some students thought Harrison's writing lacked emotion and shared Elizabeth Powers' view that the "bland, affectless presentation" (39) distanced them from the material; others students made similar arguments to those of Michael Shnayerson, who viewed Harrison as too "willing to market herself," adding that the "dreamlike style" of the book seemed like a product of "a writer who wrote it in a dreamlike state" (60). Still others thought the writing was bad. The comments focused

primarily on Harrison and her behavior rather than the book, much like Rhonda Lieberman's reference to the book as an "oedipal soft-porn fest" (10). A few students suggested Harrison was being too coy and wanted more graphic descriptions of the affair. Aside from these vague references to the bad writing in the book, no one seemed to be willing to talk in specifics. Apparently, Harrison was both calculating and sleepwalking at the same time.

I began to think that the discussion had drifted too far from the book sitting on the table in front of me. When a student made a comment about Harrison being a pervert, I jumped in.

"We have to stick to the text," I said. "The only thing we can judge is what's in our hands."

In an Op-Ed piece written for the *New York Times*, Tobias Wolff defended *The Kiss* and argued that critics "preface their attacks on [Harrison] with expressions of suspicion or downright contempt for the personal writings that have recently found favor with readers" (29E). One reason for the scorn heaped on Harrison is that any serious discussion about *The Kiss* legitimizes her right to publish it. What critics really want is silence. Even though I stood with Wolff and those who defended her, as I write this essay, I'm unsure where to begin talking about the

book. The people who spoke in defense of the book—including me—always prefaced those comments by making sure to point out that, one, they had never been party to such behavior and, two, were in no way endorsing her behavior. For whatever reason, many of those in the classroom were reluctant to speak. By defending the book, does one also defend her behavior?

The problem was none of us had the critical language to discuss this book. How does the critical language change when the discussion shifts from fiction to nonfiction? What subjects are off limits for a critical discussion? What is the relationship between aesthetic quality and author intent? Maybe relationship is the wrong word, but I wonder if the quality of a particular work can overcome dubious or murky intentions. In certain cases, such as the controversy surrounding James Frey's 2003 memoir *A Million Little Pieces*, that answer may be clear, but what about Kathryn Harrison or other nonfiction authors accused of bad intentions?

In critical discussions of a novel such issues are usually irrelevant. Harrison's book, though, demonstrates the limits of trying to discover an author's intent in a work of creative nonfiction. How can scholars "evaluate" such works given the differences between fiction and

nonfiction? Is it possible to view creative nonfiction from the perspective of, say, New Criticism, where the evidence for an interpretation derives from the text only and questions of biography—or autobiography—are irrelevant?

Another student in class questioned this approach: "So we can't comment on her actions at all?" I began to backpedal. Forced to take back my earlier statement, I conceded that as readers and critics of nonfiction maybe we couldn't completely separate the life from the art. The most important difference, possibly the only difference, between memoir and fiction is this blurring of the boundary between life and art. Underlying the story is the question of how to tell it, which would seem to lead us back to intent. Is the author presenting events to portray herself in a more sympathetic light or justify certain actions? Or is she trying to grapple with experiences that most readers can't comprehend? How do those who study creative nonfiction make those judgments? Determining Harrison's—or any other artist's—intent looks as if it would be a fruitless exercise for literary critics. Were Shakespeare's or Faulkner's motives marred by marketing concerns or bad intentions? Would it shock us to learn that the intent of these authors was complex and even contradictory? Would we be shocked to learn their concerns involved more than Art?

What if nonfiction is not so different from fiction? To avoid the critical dead-end of deciphering an author's intent, maybe literary criticism can offer some enlightenment. Although he was writing about novelists, Wayne Booth reminds us of some important distinctions:

In any reading experience there is an implied dialogue among author, narrator, the other characters, and the reader. Each of the four can range, in relation to each of the others, from identification to complete opposition, on any axis or value or judgment: moral, intellectual, aesthetic, and even physical. (90-91)

Booth points out that the "implied author"—what he called the author's "second self"—should not be confused with the real person who created the work: "This second self is usually a highly refined and selected version, wiser, more sensitive, more perceptive than any real man could be" (87). In creative nonfiction, such distinctions are especially important because the real person who creates the work is typically recounting the actions of an earlier, less perceptive, unwise self.

So despite claims that the book was a marketing ploy or that the author was not in control of her material, *The Kiss* is an intentional, or conscious, work of art and

should be read it as such. As Harrison writes at the beginning, the action takes place "out of time as well as out of place" (3). She makes reference to airports, cities, and motel rooms where she meets her father, but her only specific references are to "unreal places: the Petrified Forest, Monument Valley, the Grand Canyon" (3), places of extremes. Although the events are recounted in the present tense, the lack of detail and few references to time or place create the effect of a dream unfolding before the reader, a dream that Harrison creates.

Through her use of repeated images of insects and animals as metaphors, Harrison tries to illustrate her situation. At one point, she traps a roach under a glass:

I watch how it must relentlessly search for the seam . . . in the glass that might offer some hope of climbing, penetrating, escaping. But there is nothing about the glass that it understands. (65)

Harrison's spare, minimalist style is her attempt to analyze her own actions, an attempt to place herself under that glass. In many ways, those actions prove to be as mysterious to herself as to an outside observer.

Looking into her past for the roots of her behavior provides little insight. As a child, Harrison asks her

grandmother for one of the kittens from her Persian cat's litter; her grandmother tells her to be patient and wait until their eyes open (89). Without understanding or being able to stop her actions, she forces open the eyes of the kittens (90). She knows it is wrong but can't stop herself. Something that she doesn't understand, some dark urge or desire, makes her do it.

Harrison intentionally blurs the line, though, between unwilling victim and consensual partner. She appears to be under some kind of spell after her father kisses her:

In years to come, I'll think of the kiss as a kind of transforming sting, like that of a scorpion: a narcotic that spreads from my mouth to my brain. The kiss is the point at which I begin, slowly, inexorably, to fall asleep, to surrender volition, to become paralyzed. (70)

Over the course of the relationship, Harrison begins to wake from her sleep. Rather than simply being an automaton, Harrison doesn't claim that she had no part in the relationship. Referring to her stepsister, Harrison writes, "How I wish that I were her, sinned against, not sinning" (171). The act of sinning implies volition, free will. This admission is one of the first indications that she is coming out of her long sleep. The kiss that she places on

her dead grandfather's cheek (190) begins the process and her mother's death (197) completes it. Harrison cuts off her hair to let her mother know before she died that the affair with her father was over (195). At the end, Harrison gives no explanation or apology for her behavior.

Much like those students in my class and her critics, she is searching for a way to talk about a difficult, dangerous subject: "Is there a way to tell a stranger that once upon a time I fell from grace, I was lost so deeply in a dark wood that I'm afraid I'll never be safe again?" (174). *The Kiss* ends, appropriately, with a dream. Ten years after her mother's death and the end of her relationship with her father, Harrison dreams that she is standing in her kitchen and sees her mother: "In this dream, I feel that at last she knows me, and I her. I feel us stop hoping for a different daughter and a different mother" (207). Instead of an apology for or reflection on her affair with her father, Harrison shows the reader the cost of the struggle between mother and daughter. In this passage, Harrison never even mentions her father. She might never understand why she began her affair, might never find the seam under the glass, but it is clear what Harrison lost.

In many ways, those actions prove to be as mysterious to herself as to an outside observer. Harrison looks into her past for the roots of her behavior. She knows it is wrong but can't stop herself. Something that she doesn't understand, some dark urge or desire, makes her do it. Writing the book is Harrison's attempt to understand that younger self.

The memoir invites criticism of the author, maybe even personal attack. Harrison's memoir brings up many issues about the difficulty of reading and commenting on memoirs, such as how do you separate the life from the art? You can't—not completely. In the case of *The Kiss*, the lines are so blurred that the critic sometimes doesn't know what to criticize. But if you can't at least suspend judgment, then how can you hope to judge the art. Ultimately, the reader and the critic can only judge the book in their hands.

Toward the end of class, a student asked me if I would recommend the book to someone. In other words, did I like *The Kiss*? I'll never forget the way the book made me feel. Harrison undertook an almost impossible task. However, I don't remember being asked such a question during a discussion of Milton or Henry James. It didn't really matter with those authors; the value of their works was

implicit. With the contemporary memoir, questions of value have only begun to be addressed, and those questions are tied to what we as readers, critics, and writers think of the "I" narrating the book.

By mutual agreement, the class ended after an hour and a half of sometimes heated debate. We hadn't resolved much and probably could have made better arguments, but I was glad it was over. Discussions continued among small groups of students as they gathered their books and walked out of class. Ironically enough, as I was writing this essay, I had the same problems everyone else had, talking about the life, the controversy, instead of the text. I had a hard time figuring out how to get to the book itself. *The Kiss* is that kind of book.

*

What critics of creative nonfiction often fail to recognize is that the genre offers unique possibilities for writers. While important distinctions may exist between fiction and creative nonfiction, what they share is narrative. The literary critic Peter Brooks has written about the special place narrative occupies in human knowledge:

Our lives are ceaselessly intertwined with narrative, with the stories that we tell and hear told, those we dream or imagine or would like to

tell, all of which are reworked in that story of our own lives that we narrate to ourselves in an episodic, sometimes semiconscious, but virtually uninterrupted monologue. (201)

Brooks tells us that we live surrounded by narrative, "recounting and reassessing the meaning of our past actions, anticipating the outcome of our future projects, situating ourselves at the intersection of several stories not yet completed" (201). While Brooks wrote these words in an essay about the novel, they apply to creative nonfiction as well.

*

The personal essay is a character study. Instead of a character created by an author, the self is the character being studied, being created on the page. According to Phillip Lopate, "The hallmark of the personal essay is its intimacy" (xxiii). So like E.M. Forester's well-known distinction between flat and round characters, the self presented in a personal essay must be round. In other words, the self must be convincing to readers; it must be a human voice. Wolff states, "[T]he best memoirists have an astonishing capacity for seeing themselves in the round, fully implicated in the fallen creation of which they write" (29E). Memoirist and critic Jill Ker Conway echoes

this view: "We want to know how the world looks from inside another person's experience, and when that craving is met by a convincing narrative, we find it deeply satisfying" (6). Reversals and contradictions are necessary for an essayist. In the personal essay, spite, anger, and pettiness can be virtues, revealing the author's humanity.

*

In addition to the influence of writers of the memoir and personal essay, I have absorbed lessons from practitioners of the other branch of creative nonfiction: literary journalism. Although he began his career as a novelist, Norman Mailer has been particularly influential on my creative nonfiction. Unlike many of his works, both fiction and nonfiction, Mailer's *The Executioner's Song* has one notable absence: Mailer himself. An American literary celebrity since his mid-twenties, with the 1948 publication of his World War II novel *The Naked and the Dead*, until his death in 2007 at age 84, Mailer lived a life as large as many of his characters. He stabbed his first wife, ran for Mayor of New York City, and repeatedly expressed his wish to write the Big Book, a work that would put him in the same category as Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, and Dickens. Mailer talked about this wish so often that critics began using this idea against him, repeatedly pointing out with each

new title his failure to write that Big Book. Critics also took the title of his collection of essays, short fiction, and poetry, *Advertisements for Myself*, as further evidence of Mailer's outsized ego.

Beginning in the late 1960s, Mailer began writing narrative nonfiction. Perhaps the weight of critical expectations caused the change in direction, but Mailer probably began to notice the works by Truman Capote, Gay Talese, and Tom Wolfe, among others. Although Mailer has expressed a "long-held distaste for journalism," according to J. Michael Lennon (94), Mailer's archivist and one of his literary executors, perhaps he was intrigued by the opportunity to shape a new genre: Creative Nonfiction. His first book-length work of nonfiction *Armies of the Night*, which depicts a protest march on the Pentagon during the Vietnam War, was subtitled *History as a Novel. The Novel as History*.

Mailer continued to defy genre categories with *The Executioner's Song, A True Life Novel*, according to the book jacket—a subtitle that was dropped from later editions. The book, which won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1980, recounts the life, crimes, execution of Gary Gilmore, the first person executed in the U.S. after the Supreme Court reinstated the death penalty. Gilmore

refused to appeal his death sentence and was executed at Utah State Prison by firing squad in 1977. Mailer divided his thousand-page book into two halves: "Western Voices" and "Eastern Voices," focusing on those voices involved in Gilmore's life both before and after his death sentence. Gay Talese and Barbara Lounsberry note that Mailer is "completely absent as a character or identifiable consciousness" in the work, calling this technique substitutionary narration (101). This narrative technique allowed Mailer to disguise the fact that he never met Gary Gilmore. In doing so, he created an innovative work of creative nonfiction and one of the works by which he will be remembered.

Substitution narration—sometimes referred to as "free indirect discourse," "represented speech," or "narrated monologue" (Hernadi 35)—allows a third-person narrator to adopt the accents and diction of the characters. Paul Hernadi argues this technique constitutes a "fourth category" of literary discourse that could be added to Socrates' three modes (mimesis, diegesis, and mixed modes): "Since the narrator in such cases *substitutes* his words for a character's speech, thought, or sensory perception, the most adequate term suggested so far for this type of literary discourse seems to me 'substitutionary narration'"

(35). Citing examples of this form of narration in Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and Bellow's *Herzog*, Hernadi argues that as modern authors sought to depict the consciousness and psychology of the individual, this technique has become especially important (41). In the following passage from *The Executioner's Song*, the narrator provides a look into the mind of Brenda, Gilmore's naïve, childlike cousin:

Gary was kind of quiet. There was one reason they got along. Brenda was always gabbing and he was a good listener. They had a lot of fun. Even at that age he was real polite. If you got into trouble, he'd come back and help you out. (5)

Brenda's diction is evident in the use of "gabbing," "a lot of fun," and "real polite." Gilmore's actions as an adult are a stark contrast with Brenda's portrait.

In addition, substitutionary narration allows an author to cover background material or large spans of time quickly, as in this passage, which follows the section quoted above:

Then he moved away. Gary and his brother... and his mother, Bessie, went to join Frank, Sr., in Seattle. Brenda didn't see any more of him for a long time. Her next memory of Gary was not until

she was thirteen... Gary had been put in Reform School. (Mailer 6)

Because the narrator is absent or invisible, this approach combines the advantages of third person omniscient narration—which allows readers in the characters' minds while simultaneously offering a kind of objectivity—with the advantages of first person narration in which the narrative voice is closer to speech and readers can identify with a particular character or characters.

In each section, Mailer changes the narrative voice to mirror the personage who is the focus of a particular section. For example, the beginning of the first chapter focuses on Brenda, and the diction and sentence construction mimic her voice: "he was swell ...he was real polite"; "He certainly knew how to use big words" (Mailer 5, 7). When Mailer shifts the story to Gilmore's girlfriend, Nicole, the language, while still simple and colloquial becomes more colorful: "the house looked as funky as a drawing in a fairy tale. ...In the backyard was a groovy old apple tree" (71); "he had also split up with his old lady" (72). Mailer is using what critic David Jauss calls "the technical resources of point of view to manipulate distance between narrator and character, and therefore between character and reader in order to achieve

the effect he desires" (para. 5). Using simple language and subtle changes to the narrative language allows Mailer to remain in third person point of view while presenting the story through multiple points of view, getting readers closer to Brenda and Nicole, and, finally, Gilmore.

While giving readers a glimpse into the lives of those closest to Gilmore, Mailer also prepares readers to see through the eyes of a convicted murderer. In the section titled "Nicole on the River," the events are recounted from Gilmore's point of view. Once again, the narrative voice shifts. Mailer creates a fragmented, clipped narration: "It was like his drawing. Very definite"; "He had a fight with Jim. Got angry and beat him half to death" (103-104). The language also has a harder edge: "Found a brick and broke the window. Cut his hand, but stole the gun he wanted" (103); "Jim's father, a rough-and-tumble fucker ..." (103-104). In these passages, Mailer remains in the background, placing the focus on the personages in a story.

Although his narrative technique offered several advantages, Mailer also faced a number of challenges. Substitutionary narration makes reflection largely impossible for the author. Two questions illustrate this problem: Where does the author insert his reflections? And how can readers distinguish between the author's

reflections and those of the personages through which he is narrating the events? For readers, the technique can be distancing. The meaning of a particular incident or conclusions drawn about the material appears to come from the characters, so an author must carefully manipulate the material or risk distorting a character's belief and knowledge.

Perhaps reviewing the circumstances surrounding the book's composition will shed some light on Mailer's use of substitutionary narration. Lawrence Schiller, a journalist and filmmaker who had worked with Mailer on the book *Marilyn*, had obtained from Gilmore the exclusive rights to tell his story, but, after conducting hours of taped interviews, Schiller realized the story was too big. Mailer took over the project after Gilmore's execution in 1977. Unlike, say, Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*, which was based on hours of interviews conducted by Capote, Mailer relied on the existing interview material and conducted his own interviews. In the book's "Afterword," Mailer estimates that "the collected transcript of every last recorded bit of talk would approach fifteen thousand pages" (1051).

To assemble such a massive amount of material into a coherent form, Mailer applied his novelistic gifts to create a new hybrid of fiction and nonfiction—or at least

add to the canon of this new hybrid form. J. Michael Lennon writes that this blending of forms derives from "Mailer's reversible dualism," his refusal to be a partisan for any particular approach to narrative forms:

He is an enthusiast for whatever form is closest to hand and like a good street debater can score points at will when arguing for its merits and weaknesses... As a connoisseur of forms, he does not willingly jettison anything from the tool kit he has assembled over fifty years, and he has surprised readers for decades with his narrative inventions, bringing out new variants every few years. (98-99)

Mailer continued to defy critical expectations until his death, and, as Lennon points out, during the last three decades of Mailer's life, critical praise for his work became more elusive. One exception has been Joan Didion. In a book review for the *New York Times*, she wrote that Mailer had indeed written the Big Book: "a thousand-page novel in a meticulously limited vocabulary and a voice as flat as the horizon, a novel which takes for its incident and characters real events in the lives of real people." Only through his technical innovation—his enthusiasm for various

forms—was Mailer able to create a groundbreaking work of creative nonfiction.

*

The essays in this collection touch on three overlapping themes: the interplay between family and individuals; the role that having a "sense of place" plays in shaping us; and the transformative power of art. The title of this collection comes from a quote from James Joyce. While working on *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, he wrote in his notebook, "Art has the gift of tongues" (Scholes and Kain 86). In this quote, Joyce is taking something typically thought of as a religious phenomenon, the ability to speak in tongues, and staking a claim for art. In the First Epistle to the Corinthians, Paul lists gifts from the Holy Spirit:

Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. To one there is given through the Spirit the message of wisdom, to another the message of knowledge... to another the ability to speak in different kinds of tongues. (1 Cor. 12:7-10)

There is an ambiguity to Joyce's quote. Was he arguing for the inclusion of art in those gifts from the Holy Spirit?

Or was he making the argument that art was the only form of transcendence left in the modern age?

*

Although many essays in this collection probably address family relationships in some manner, "An Important Law of Human Action," "The Gift of Tongues," and "Digging" deal directly with this theme.

"The Gift of Tongues," the title essay of this collection, is another example of the personal essay allowing me to find meaning in an event that might otherwise be a funny anecdote. What eleven year old puts a ventriloquist dummy at the top of his Christmas list? It was a challenge to recreate the experience for readers, but I also had to figure out what this experience meant to me. Not just what happened, but why it happened, and why it was important.

Nonfiction writers can shape their experience. That's not to say they can make things up to serve or make themselves look more heroic or kind or charitable than they normally are. In the preface for his collection of nonfiction monologues, *Sex and Death to the Age 14*, Spalding Gray provides a useful description of his creative process that parallels the process for many memoirists:

I tape-recorded each [monologue] performance, played it back the following morning and made adjustments in my outline. It wasn't as though I was having new memories as much as remembering things I had long forgotten (xiii).

In my own work, nonfiction allows me to extract meaning from everyday experience. For example, the essay "Digging" comes out of a memory I have of planting flowers with my mother one late spring morning, and I've always remembered her telling me that we might be getting a new president. This memory is one of the most vivid moments of my early childhood, but before I wrote the essay I didn't know why I recalled the event or what it really meant. The form of the personal essay allowed me to explore that experience and find connections and meanings there that I wouldn't have found unless I examined that experience closely.

Another important theme in these essays is our connection to and sense of those places where we live. In "This Prairie Awakened," I tried to write a *New Yorker*-style profile of a former professor. I admire the way Price rooted himself in his native Iowa, but I also admire what he's accomplished. Those accomplishments are linked with his passion. He has influenced my writing and the way I think about place and my connection to place, particularly

where I grew up. He showed me how I could approach that material, and under his influence my writing has become more lyrical. "The Real Thing" was certainly influenced by his writing. This essay is an attempt to use humor to explore those connections between people and places.

"A Confluence of Rivers" explores these connections by blending personal, critical-analytical, and historical perspectives by alternating between two voices: my great grandfather's and mine. Structuring this essay proved difficult. In the first draft, I simply dumped the passages that were in my great grandfather's voice in the middle of the essay. For this revision, I looked for natural breaks in my great-grandfather's narrative, so the essay still alternates between voices, but not as often.

"Thunder Road" is about the way art and artists not only speak to us, but very often for us. As a teenager, I didn't have words to explain to my Aunt why the music I was listening to was great. I couldn't explain it, but the music could.

"If I Should Fall from Grace with God" is a memoir about growing up in northern Indiana in a large Catholic family, and the effect my mother's death had on the family. When I was thirteen, my mother began acting strangely. Less

than a month after being admitted to the hospital with some mysterious physical illness, she died. Because she didn't want an autopsy, the family still doesn't know the exact cause of her death—although we suspect it was pancreatic cancer that had spread to her liver. As one might expect, her death changed everyone in the family. What I didn't expect was how it would change the way I thought about my family and my religion. It's almost as if her death is something I had to go through, an experience that made me the person I am today.

"If I Should Fall from Grace with God" is about the search to replace or re-create what appeared to me as an ideal childhood. It's about learning to accept its loss and what replaced it. I learned to live with chaos and uncertainty. The title also refers to how my mother handled her illness. It was as if she said, I have given birth to nine children, seven boys and two girls, and lived fifty-four years, and now I'm done. Let me go.

*

The personal essay is such a flexible form. It can focus on story or reflection or information; it can be funny or philosophical; it can be the absolute truth or slightly exaggerated for humorous effect—mainly true except for a

few "stretchers," as Huck put it at the beginning of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.

The author creates a version of himself or herself on the page, but the essayist doesn't have to speak with one voice. In one essay, that voice might be largely spoken by a child. In another essay, the voice might be that of an older more reflective self. The voice could be humorous or melancholy or outraged depending on the material and the tone or attitude that the author takes.

The essay allows me to show how I experience the world. The essay is ultimately about connections with readers, with the natural world, with community, with family. The personal essay allows me to go back to that holiday table and revisit those memories, not simply for the sake of nostalgia, but to try to figure out what it all meant.

The Gift of Tongues

"Art has the gift of tongues." —James Joyce

I'm making out my Christmas list at our dining room table when I spot him in the 1978 JCPenney's catalog. He is on the same page with Charlie McCarthy, Howdy Doody, and Bozo the Clown. I have scanned the catalog for weeks to assemble the right combination of presents, fighting with Liz and Matt, my older sister and younger brother, over who takes the catalog to bed with them. A Dallas Cowboys football helmet and shoulder pads are on the list, along with a dozen other items. But Lester is different. He is more than a present.

Now on Christmas Eve, I've forgotten almost everything on my wish list. Still, I can't control my excitement and decide that walking from my bedroom to the dining room, where the presents will be stacked around the tree, will take too long on Christmas morning.

I decide the best place to sleep is the bottom shelf of the coffee table in our living room, so I grab my pillow and blanket, fold the blanket in half like a sleeping bag, and place it on the shelf with my pillow on top. Once camp is ready, I crawl into bed, cramming my skinny, four and a

half foot frame into this small space. My brown hair is one length, parted on the right, and comes down to my shoulders. I look like a young Jodie Foster, the *Freaky Friday* Jodie, not the one from *Taxi Driver*.

A few minutes later, as I pull my pillow and blanket out from under the coffee table and walk back to my bedroom, I notice my mother and father standing at the dining room table wrapping presents for the family. They know better than to put presents under the tree for the youngest kids before Christmas day. Given the chance, we will try to peek under the seams of wrapping paper or try to lift the tape without tearing the paper. They look at us with the same suspicion a small town might reserve for an outlaw motorcycle gang. They will spend the rest of the evening pulling gifts from their different hiding places and wrapping them. So right now, the tree is barren--except for the all lights, ornaments, and a thick blanket of silver icicles. The aroma of pine mixes with slowly melting plastic.

*

At four o'clock, some internal Christmas alarm sounds and the three of us--Liz, Matt, and I--wake as if we've received a shot of adrenaline. I have gotten out of bed and find

myself standing in front of the tree with no clue about the intervening seconds.

I am awake enough to remember my parents' rule about presents: We're only allowed to open our own presents. This is because Liz and I once broke Matt's Big Jim doll before he ever had a chance to play with it. Don't blame me, the thing was defective. We found it sitting at Matt's place at the dinner table—it hadn't been wrapped—and we wanted to know how it worked. The doll was supposed to have two faces: A normal Big Jim face and an angry, constipated Big Jim face. The hair was this plastic shell that fit over his head and a button on his back turned his head around, while the hair stayed put. But the goddamn button didn't do anything, so I started turning the hair to see Constipated Big Jim. I kept turning it and turning it and turning it a little more because I could almost... see... the ... face. POP. The hair shell came off in my hand. After a few minutes spent trying to stick the hair back on, Liz and I returned Jim to his original spot, gently set the hair on his head, and then walked away. Who sleeps that late on their birthday anyway?

So now, as we circle the tree, a pack of badgers ready to pounce, we are under strict orders to open only presents with our names on them. Everything else has to wait until

after Christmas dinner--ten hours away! And we aren't allowed to wake anyone up either. I scan the boxes crowded around the tree.

"Hey, Matt, here's one for you from Santa," I say. My father still keeps up the pretense that our presents are from Santa and will do so almost the three of us are almost into our teens.

"Gimme," Matt says.

"That one's got my name on it," Liz says, pointing to a box within my reach.

The next thing I know, torn wrapping paper is up to our knees. Small scraps of paper and tape are stuck to our pajamas. Bows are sliding down the sides of our heads. Matt poses his Chicago Bears action figure, and Liz spreads out the pieces of her Fun Time Sonar Range, while I try to keep my Dallas Cowboys helmet from sliding over my eyes. My father never wants us to outgrow our clothes or shoes too quickly, so he always buys everything two sizes too large. The cool thing is that if I spin really fast, I make it all the way around without moving the helmet.

"You've got another one over here," my sister says to me as she continues to play with her toy oven/fire hazard.

"Watch out," I say as I step over her.

"You watch out."

"Shut up."

"You shut up."

I grab the toaster-oven-sized package and claw at the snowmen covering the box. The first thing I find under the wrapping paper is a logo, Eege Goldberger Doll Mfg. Then, behind a plastic window in the box, I see Lester. His painted eyes stare permanently to the left, circled by gray granny glasses. His skin is smooth and shiny, like the top layer of chocolate pudding. Blush covers his plastic cheeks, and he's dressed in a mustard-yellow turtleneck that looks like corduroy. His pants are brown twill. His shoes black vinyl. On the outside of the box, next to the plastic window, are the words I've been waiting to hear:

"Put on a show with your own celebrity ventriloquist's doll!"

*

Exactly where and when my fascination with ventriloquism began is unclear. As second youngest in a family of nine, I have some stiff competition when it comes to getting noticed. Liz, Matt, and I look so much alike my parents always get asked if a pair of us are twins. Even meals become a competition. The last chicken leg or dinner roll sets off a pitched battle. We are like a pack of half-starved dingoes. And whoever has the funniest line or can

act the stupidest has the whole family's attention—at least for a moment. Since I'm too small to beat my older brothers at basketball and football, I've tried to find other ways to stand out. I draw cartoon characters, but that isn't much of a spectator sport so maybe show business will be the way to make myself different. What better way to stand out than to have a small black man perched on my lap?

Once most of the wrapping paper is gone, I open the top of the box to free Lester. Standing about two feet tall, he has a permanent grin. Black curly hair, slightly finer than fishing line, hangs over his glasses. His sweater and pants button in the back. At the base of his hairline, a looped string sticks out from the back of his neck. After tugging on the string to watch Lester's mouth open and close—my own mouth copying this movement—I go to work.

I grab Lester's hand and touch Matt on the arm. In the highest pitch I can manage, I say, "Hi, I um Lessthur."

"Funny," Matt says and taps Liz on the arm. "Look." He goes back to playing with his new football player. Liz scrunches her face but says nothing. I'm not satisfied either. My voice is too high and too slurred, like Sylvester the Cat on helium. Plus, my lips and my jaw moved. Lester's voice isn't supposed to sound like Mickey

Mouse. Lester is hip and street smart, and I want to be too.

*

Before watching Willie Tyler and Lester on television, the only ventriloquist I knew about was Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy. Bergen seemed too much like Lawrence Welk. The only other act I saw was Wayland Flowers and Madame, and they were too fabulous and flamboyant for northern Indiana in the late 1970s. Willie Tyler, who started appearing with Lester in the late 1960s, is the Bill Cosby of ventriloquism. I have picked up some slang from *The Jeffersons*, *Fat Albert and the Cosby Kids*, and Jim Croce's song "Bad, Bad Leroy Brown" and want to show it off. But before doing that, I'm going to need some help.

When I pick up Lester's box again, a small booklet falls out. I read the cover: *Seven Simple Steps to Ventriloquism*. I open the booklet and read the introduction: "The most important thing about ventriloquism is to try not to move your lips."

Yes. I am on my way.

With hours left until breakfast—and until sunrise—I start practicing. The first part of the booklet talks about using substitute sounds. These are letters like B, M, F, and P that can't be pronounced without moving the lips, so

the good ventriloquist will learn the sounds that—if spoken quickly enough—can be substituted for these letters:

D replaces B: as in "dasedall."

N replaces M as in "Nonger."

TH for F as in "Thits like a glove."

T for P as in "Tractice Nakes Terthect."

The booklet also tells me to place a pencil horizontally across the lips in order to become more aware of what the mouth is doing as we speak. The lips should never touch. The mouth must remain slightly open. For the rest of the morning, I keep Lester and a pencil close by as I continue to practice, but I'm starting to crash. It's too early to be up without some HoneyCombs or Golden Grahams.

When my parents get up at about eight o'clock, my father gets the turkey ready for the oven, so it will be done around three o'clock. He always buys a bird that weighs almost as much as Matt so he can feed twenty-five or thirty people. While my father has his forearm jammed up the turkey's wazoo (one of his favorite words—my father's not the turkey's), my mother cooks fried eggs and browns the sausages. My father has also bought a pastry filled with cinnamon and spices that's warming on top of the stove. On this Christmas, when we sit down to eat, Lester sits in my lap. My father opens a bottle of champagne and

pours a glass for my mother and then for himself. Then he pours three glasses for us, like we're big kids. Wow. The only problem is it tastes like apple soda that's sat out in the sun too long. When we get our picture taken during breakfast, I hold the glass up to Lester's lips.

After breakfast, I have to leave Lester at home while we go to mass, but I don't mind Christmas mass because St. Thomas, our church, is always packed. Sometimes we can't even find seats in the pews so we have to stand in the outside aisles or in the church lobby. My oldest sister Mary goes to the Midnight mass because it's in Latin. Even though she's a hippy she likes the Latin mass.

In church, whenever I pray, I always thank God for my family and ask him to keep us all alive for hundreds of years like Noah and those other people from the Bible. For some reason, I have this feeling that something will happen. I don't understand what happens when we die, but I think about it a lot. Will I be able to go anywhere I want? Will I get to meet my grandfathers who died before I was born? I want to ask Grandpa Thulis what it was like to be a fireman in Chicago and I want to find out what my parents were like when they were my age. Did they worry about the same things? Was that world in black and white like the pictures we keep in those old cookie tins?

I'm not supposed to, but I always ask God for things. Like a new ten-speed bike and those white Nike tennis shoes with the light-blue swish. I also ask God to make me six-foot-six so I can pound my older brothers in basketball. I've taken my father's tape measure and put a small pencil mark at that height on the knotty pine paneling in the hall outside my bedroom, so I can mark my progress. If I want to play for Purdue or the Boston Celtics, I'll need to be at least that tall. My brothers Bob and Tom are almost six-two, so six-six shouldn't be too much of a problem. But if I don't play basketball for the Celtics or baseball for the Chicago Cubs, I'm definitely going to be a ventriloquist.

*

I can only imagine the ways I found to annoy my parents with Lester when we got home after church. Before Christmas dinner, we would usually pick up Grandma Thulis, so I might ride along with my father to her house to bring her over for dinner. As my father would start the car, Lester and I climb into the backseat. I decide to try out a line that I've heard on Fat Albert, so I shove Lester between the two front seats and point him toward the gas gauge on the dashboard. Using the substitution letters from my ventriloquism booklet, I say, " I hote that 'E' stands thor enough." Slowly, I turn Lester's head to look at my father.

Catching my father's annoyed glare in the rearview mirror, I place Lester back on my lap.

If I want to have my own routine, though, I need to think of my own jokes. I decide to improvise:

ME: Hey, Lester?

LESTER: What's up, man?

ME: Do you know the difference between you and a block of wood?

LESTER: Yeah, a block of wood doesn't have to put up with all these dumb questions.

ME: No, the difference between you and block of wood is ... is, um ... table manners.

I turn Lester so he is looking at me.

LESTER: Say what? That joke smells like those socks you got on.

Lester and I both decide the jokes need more work, but still I imagine our path to stardom. Lester and I will start small. Birthday parties, a few local clubs, and then some appearances on local television stations. Once we find a manager, we can expand our gigs to Chicago and Detroit. Our appearance on the *Tonight Show* will be the key. Then more television. Movies. Our own variety show opposite *The Carol Burnett Show* and *Donny and Marie*. A bitter break up. Then a tearful Vegas reunion.

*

After Christmas dinner, I stand around the adults table waiting for my opening. I spot my Aunt Flo and squeeze between her and my mother. I tug on Aunt Flo's arm.

"Look what I got."

"Ah," she says.

She gives me the same surprised expression that's frozen on Lester's face. Lester and I go through our routine then wait for the payoff. Aunt Flo nods her head quickly, as if she was a bubblehead doll: "That's ... very nice, dear."

*

In the weeks after Christmas, I practice my substitution letters, stick the pencil in my mouth, and drag Lester around the house with me. Eventually, though, I realize it isn't going to work. It's too bad. We might have had our own theater in Branson. Located right between Tony Orlando's Yellow Ribbon Music Theatre and The Yakov Smirnoff Show. The last time I see Lester, he lies face down on a pile of toys in a clothesbasket at the back of my closet.

This Prairie Awakened

By writing about the Great Plains while living here, Iowa writer John Price is trying to reverse a trend common among Midwestern authors—leaving. For many years, Midwestern writers followed a pattern similar to that of the most famous example of this exodus, Willa Cather. Although Nebraska is where Cather was raised and where much of her best work is set, she spent her writing life on the East Coast. Wright Morris and Hamlin Garland are other notable writers who left the Great Plains to write about it. Even two contemporary writers that influenced Price's thinking—Wallace Stegner and Wendell Berry—returned to places they viewed as the sources of their writing, but only after they left to begin their careers.

Situated along the Missouri River across from Omaha, Nebraska lies Council Bluffs, Iowa. The town begins at the edge of the flood plain and creeps up and over the Loess Hills (pronounced "Luss"). John Price lives in these hills near the end of a winding street. "I'm living where I always wanted to be living, three hours from my hometown," he says. Price, whose essays have appeared in *Orion*, *Best Spiritual Writing 2000* (Harper), *Creative Nonfiction*, and *In Brief: Short Takes on the Personal* (Norton), spoke with

me from his home in the Loess Hills. The author of *Not Just Any Land: A Personal and Literary Journey into the American Grasslands* (University of Nebraska Press), he teaches creative writing and environmental literature at the University of Nebraska at Omaha, where he is an associate professor. "If I lived anywhere else, I don't know if I would have written *Not Just Any Land*, and I don't know if I would have turned it into a book," he tells me. "This place feeds my writing. I'm totally inspired by this place." The book, a blend of scholarship, journalism, and memoir, describes his search for those lost places.

Born and raised in the mid-sized farm community of Fort Dodge in northwestern Iowa, Price recalls that his parents were very involved in that community and cultivated his early connection to place. Although his father, a family lawyer, and his mother, a nurse who worked with children with developmental disabilities, gave Price and his three sisters a sense of place and dedication to place, the farm crisis of the early 1980s undermined his dedication. Falling prices and huge debts caused the failure of more than 200,000 farms, affecting small businesses in rural communities as well. Price remembers suicides disguised as farm accidents and a sense of desperation. The father of a childhood friend lost his job

and hung himself. "I also had a sense of the place falling apart," he says. "All I really wanted to do was get away from it. I just wanted to get the hell out of there."

Although he applied to schools on the east coast, Price was accepted at the University of Iowa and began studying religion with an eye toward medical school. At that time, he said, pre-med students were advised to major in the humanities. One of his early teachers was Jay Holstein, who taught a course called Quest for Human Destiny. "I just got drawn into writing," Price says. As graduation approached, he asked Holstein "about becoming someone like him." Because he thought religion departments were becoming endangered, Holstein told Price he should consider a graduate degree in English. After talking to Ed Folsom, a Whitman scholar, about entering the English PhD program, Price discovered that he didn't have enough credits to be accepted, so he applied to the master's program at in the early 1990s. On the faculty at that time were Carl Klaus and Paul Diehl, writers who, Price says, gravitated toward nonfiction and the personal essay. "If I hadn't gotten in I didn't know what I was going to do," he says. "I found that (the personal essay) was really where my love was."

While the University is famous for its Writers Workshop, the Nonfiction Writers Program didn't exist when he began, so Price worked toward his master's degree and was accepted into the PhD program. He had considered writing his dissertation on post-colonial literature or the Victorian marriage plot. "None of it seemed to be really grabbing my soul," he says. He felt as though he faced a choice between his literary scholarship and his creative writing. Price also describes his subsequent topic choice, the farm crisis in literature, as a "more traditional literary dissertation," but a conversation about potential topics with Klaus changed his mind again. While the farm crisis was interesting, Klaus told Price, "This is not who you are." Klaus suggested Price blend his scholarship and creative writing. Intrigued by this suggestion, Price didn't know where to begin. He needed models of writers trying to live in Great Plains while writing about them. "I wondered what other writers out there are struggling with this," he remembers. "There was no scholarship at all on this. Nothing."

As he was beginning what he calls a "personal quest" to discover these writers and their work, Price and his wife Stephanie moved to Belle Plaine, one of the many Iowa towns hit with ongoing floods in the early 1990s. While

many Midwesterners were losing homes and businesses to the flooding, he found something. Price writes about this reawakening in his dissertation, which he finished with the help of a scholarship from Prairie Lights Bookstore in Iowa City, and what would become *Not Just Any Land*:

The Iowa I saw that summer was one of awesome destruction yet also one of surprising natural beauty. ...I became transfixed by a wild Iowa landscape I had never known. Cornfields and bean fields became inaccessible wetlands where snowy egrets stood piercing frogs in the shallows. There were swirling tornadoes of white pelicans; bald eagles snatching fish out of floodwaters; large, freckled hawks peering from the top of what seemed every fence post, every sign. (*Not Just* 4)

As the floodwaters receded, he writes that he experienced a "sense of longing" for this lost Iowa, but wondered if he and these plains he glimpsed during the floods "were both too far gone" (*Not Just* 5). When the first white settlers arrived in Iowa, 30 million acres of prairie covered the state. By some accounts, cultivation and development have left one-tenth of one percent of that prairie undisturbed.

The starting point and early model of the book Price hoped to write was *Prairy Erth*, which integrated personal narrative, regional history, and interviews with well-known and unknown people. He also points to the influence of New Journalists like Michael Herr, author of *Dispatches*, and Norman Mailer, writers who were able to create a compelling narrative out of interviews and research. "I had no training at all in journalism," Price says. "I had no idea how to do it." He contacted many more authors than appear in the book, but settled on South Dakota writers Linda Hasselstrom, author of *Going Over East: Reflections of a Woman Rancher*, and Dan O'Brien, author of *The Rites of Autumn: A Falconer's Journey Across the American West*; Missouri writer William Least-Heat Moon, author of *Prairy Erth* and *Blue Highways*; and Iowa writer Mary Swander, author of *Out of this World: A Woman's Life among the Amish*. These authors provided the models Price needed:

In their writing there is no easy back-to-the-land connection, no simple regional association... Their lives, as presented in their nonfiction, ask tough questions of readers...inviting them into the risk of commitment, displaying in full view its rewards and costs. (*Not Just* 23)

These writers became an example of "the struggle to articulate for others what it is that the land demands of us in our daily lives: the nature of responsibility" (Price *Not Just* 211).

The book begins in a tent on the Dakota prairie. As wind and rain confine Price to his tent, he peers at the 600,000 acres of Buffalo Gap National Grassland and waits (*Not Just* 1). Miserable and cold, a small figure in a vast, indifferent landscape, he wonders why he came and waits for some moment of enlightenment, for, as he writes, God. His closest brush with mystery is mistaking a pair of headlights visible from Interstate 90 for buffalo eyes. He imagines something important: To those travelers, he was part of the "dark unknown, something wild that might run out of the night and into the thin wedge of their headlights"; to Price, this is the sign he needs: He has become part of "the familiar land once again full of fear and mystery" (*Not Just* 29-30).

The last chapter of *Not Just Any Land* describes his visit to the Walnut Creek National Wildlife Refuge. On an October morning a decade ago, U.S. Fish and Wildlife officials released eight young bison into the Iowa prairie, a century after their species disappearance. The occasion is significant for Price not because of the reintroduction

of the bison, but because he has taken part in the restoration of the Walnut Creek prairie. He and his wife, along with other volunteers, walked through undisturbed patches of prairie and harvested seeds that were used in the restoration.

Because of the ways Americans have altered the Great Plains over nearly two hundred years, Price tells me that writing about this region is "a challenge of the imagination" and an "incredible act of faith." During our interview, he also admits that his early work tended to be earnest, more about what was lost. "A lot of my early essays were darker," he says. "I hadn't really seen that place-based hopefulness... [This region is] more altered than any other region in the country." Who better to address the problems and the hope than those living in that area and culture?

When he began publishing essays in the environmental magazine *Orion*, Price added a new element to his work: self-deprecating humor. Although his self-deprecating humor has always been part of his personality, he says, "It hadn't trickled into my work." Nor had he let it. To anyone who has met him, this feature of his character isn't surprising. In the classroom—especially a graduate classroom—Price would be hard to pick out. Seated at the

head of a seminar table, he looks younger than many of his students. He laughs easily and blends anecdotes from his life and his writing into discussions, anecdotes where he is often the butt of the joke. Humor is absent or downplayed in his early essays and his first book.

His first appearance in *Orion* is representative of this new voice. Titled "Man Killed by Pheasant," the essay begins with an encounter with a ring-necked pheasant as Price drives down an Iowa highway with his car windows open—listening to Jimi Hendrix:

Suddenly there is a peripheral darkness, like the fast shadow of an eclipse, and something explodes against the side of my head, erupting into a fury of flapping and scratching and squawking.

And being the steel-jawed action hero I am, I scream, scream like a rabbit, and strike at it frantically with my left arm. (*Man Killed* 143)

This voice owes as much to David Sedaris and Anne Lamott as it does E.B. White. Price uses the episode described above to draw connections where others might find only a funny anecdote. He describes himself and the pheasant as European transplants who have altered the landscape they share and by doing so are now connected to that landscape. Like the humans who introduced it to America, the pheasant has

thrived in this unfamiliar land, even driving out native species.

Because he tries to give his writing a sense of humility, Price tells me that this approach fits with an "eco-critical perspective" and the use of humor is becoming more popular in nature writing. During our interview, Price also says, "There is this relationship between humor and despair." He learned from T.C. Boyle—whose novel *A Friend of the Earth* is a fictional account of an environmentalist's struggle with these emotions—that nature writing devoid of humor is devoid of hope. So Price tries to strike that "balance between acknowledging the loss and acknowledging the hope." Humor, he says, "is the perfect bridge between them."

Edward Abbey was one of those authors that showed Price the way because Abbey, he says, could be fiercely critical of others yet turn that critical eye inward, "showing us how flawed that self is." He remembers being "blown away" by *Desert Solitaire*, the controversial author's memoir of his days as a park ranger at Arches National Monument. Thoreau, who blended humor into *Walden*, influenced Price as well. "He really set the tone for this kind of writing," he says.

Does Price worry that his writing won't be taken seriously because of the humor? He tells me a story about a recent essay that he submitted to *Orion*. The editor kept delaying publication, so Price contacted the editor and asked when the piece would appear. Price learned that the editor was saving it for the autumn issue because there were so many dark pieces. To him, this situation demonstrates the need for more nature writing that doesn't take itself too seriously. While he describes *Not Just Any Land* as a work about the search for the commitment to place, his new, recently published book of essays, *Man Killed by Pheasant and Other Kinships* (Da Capo), was written inside that commitment. Price calls it the sequel to the earlier book and many of the pieces in the collection were written in this new voice. "It took me a long time to accept that voice," he admits. "It didn't happen until I committed to living and working here."

Although Price received a job offer from a university "out West," he and his wife Stephanie—a former elementary school teacher who stayed home to raise their sons Ben and Spencer—chose to stay in Iowa. By teaching their children about the plants and animals native to western Iowa, they try to nurture their children's connection to place, to Iowa and to the Loess Hills where they are being raised. He

told me his family recently spotted a red fox and a woodchuck wandering through their yard. "Everyday there's something different coming out of the woods," Price says.

Loess refers to the light, gritty soil found in these hills, which rise in a steep incline from the Missouri River valley floor. These bluffs, covered in shortgrass prairie on the ridges and scrub oak in the gullies, rise as much as 200 feet above the valley floor and run nearly the entire western border of Iowa. Rather than being forced up by advancing glaciers or plate tectonics, they were formed by wind erosion—with some help from glaciers. Advancing and retreating glaciers ground up the soil in the river valley and hundreds of thousands of years of wind erosion created this unique and delicate ecosystem, a geologic feature found only in Iowa and the Shaanxi loess hills in China.

The majority of undisturbed native grasslands left in Iowa, according to Price, are in the Loess Hills, and activists and organizations, both nationally and locally, are devoting a great effort to preserve what is left and return segments to a natural state, showing what Price calls "Prairie Pride." The Nature Conservancy, acting in partnership with individuals and organizations, has set aside nearly 7,000 acres of the region for protection. Although farming and development threaten this ecosystem,

the greatest threat could be the forces of wind, rain, and flooding that created Loess Hills. With one of the highest erosion rates in the country, according to the U.S. Geological Survey, this place is a reminder of the complications facing those who want to protect it.

Although Price thinks the outsider's perspective chosen by Cather and others is necessary for some writers and considers this perspective an important part of the discussion about place, he is clear about which side he's on: "We need our artists and writers to stay home." By staying home, he says, writers may find it difficult to achieve the critical distance necessary and may open themselves up to criticism from the community. Another way of looking at it is that writers can be held accountable by members of the community. Price has his own reasons. "It's more personally fulfilling," he says. "I've taken this mess of emotion and done something with it."

The author photo for the dust jacket of *Not Just Any Land* was taken in the hills north of Council Bluffs. In it a figure wearing a baseball hat and t-shirt stands at the top of the ridge in the foreground, taking up less than half the photo. In the background are the dry grass and bare trees of early autumn. He holds a long blade of that grass. "Being close you see what's missing on a daily

basis," he says. "You see the scars." As Price continues his life and his work here, he will have to resist the feelings that seeing those scars might cause and accomplish what other Great Plains writers could not: creating literature as an insider.

Digging

*Between my finger and my thumb/The squat pen rests. I'll
dig with it.*

—Seamus Heaney

My mother and I kneel in the grass in front of the magnolia, its new green leaves and fuzzy buds both shaped like footballs. We are in the front yard of our house on Fulton Street, and I am seven years old. I get to help her plant flowers. All by myself. No brothers or sisters. Kindergarten's done. My father is at work. He left before I woke up. Liz and Matt are inside watching television. The grass still feels wet. It's an early summer morning with a fresh blue sky and cool breeze. I use my fingers to scrape a shallow bowl in the dirt.

"Like this?" I ask.

"You want to dig a little more," she tells me. "The roots need lots of room."

Weeds and bare patches of dark ground circle the magnolia. The tree is big enough that Liz, Matt, and I use it as a fort during the summer. When it's hot out and heavy leaves cover the branches, we slip between its leaves and sit in the shade on the low, thick branches. Our neighborhood in Elkhart, built after World War II, sits

between the large Victorian houses divided into apartments and new suburban developments where many of my friends live. We have straight streets running north and south. Eleven houses on each side of the street. An alley in back.

My mother, wearing Navy blue polyester slacks and white flower-print shirt, pulls weeds from near the edge of the grass to clear ground for the impatiens we are planting. She grew up on Kedzie Avenue on the southwest side of Chicago, one of four children. Three girls and one boy. She lost the tip of her right index finger in a bicycle chain when she was a kid. She hates her middle name: Gertrude. I don't blame her. She wanted her middle name to be Rose like her mother, whose first name was also Angela. She hates her middle name so much that she names our black and tan dachshund Gretchen Rose Monger.

Without looking up from the hole she is digging, she says, "We might get a new president tomorrow."

"Why?"

"Sometimes people don't tell the truth."

I have seen the president on television, sitting behind a desk with gold curtains behind him. His nose was crooked and his hair greasy and he wasn't Hank Aaron or Muhammad Ali, so I never thought much of him. If we are getting a new one, that must be important.

"Is that what the president did?"

"Yes. Something like that."

"Who'll be president then?"

"The vice president." She shakes a flower plant from its plastic pot and tears the tiny white roots.

"He doesn't lie?"

"He didn't tell the lies the president did."

"Oh."

I don't understand, so I watch her press the dirt around a flower plant and then move over a few inches to dig another hole. I only understand small lies, like when my mother asks if I punched Matt in the head and I tell her, No.

*

"Can we be done now?" I ask, my hands caked in drying dirt. I want to ride my bike or walk across the alley behind the house to play with a friend.

"Go rinse your hands with the hose," she says.

I stand and brush off the knees of my Toughskins, smearing the dirt into them. With dirt packed under my fingernails, I walk between the tips of the magnolia branches and home plate, a bare spot of dirt near the front door. My father can never get grass to grow there because that's home plate. We play "tennisball" with our friends in

the front yard--our version of baseball, but without the damage to the neighbors' windows. Over time, the bare patch changes shape but never completely disappears. My brothers and I won't let it.

On spring days, the smell of cut grass drifts in through the windows. One of my older brothers has to mow the grass regularly. Looking west down our street at house after house with uniform, freshly cut grass, I would think, This is how a neighborhood should look. We also have to rake the yard in the fall. The driveway has to be clear of bikes, toys, even the family car. Not because our parents make us. This place is our multipurpose stadium. Football, baseball, basketball, sometimes even boxing. My brothers and I are simultaneously the grounds crew and the players. Our L-shaped ranch house forms a kind of grandstand around the field--at least I imagine fans sitting or squatting on the gray asphalt shingles on our roof. Home plate is less than fifteen feet from my front door. During rain delays, we take shelter under the wide overhang that runs from the front door to the end of the garage.

My five older brothers haven't forced me into sports, but they haven't given me much choice either. Our driveway is a nonstop basketball game. When our backboard, which was made from compressed sawdust, disintegrates after years in

the Indiana weather, we take our ball down to the Luce's driveway, until dad buys a cheap pole and backboard from Sears.

The front yard doubles as Soldier Field in fall and Wrigley Field all summer. The sidewalk by the house marks one sideline, the row of bushes between our yard and the Evans's serves as the other sideline. The front sidewalk parallel to Fulton Street is the end zone. On cool fall afternoons, we run out of the TV room at halftime and into the yard to play until the second half starts. Because my brothers are teenagers, I'm at a disadvantage. It's like playing against a tribe of people eight-feet tall.

Every time grass tries to grow in this spot, our tennis shoes pack it, a scrap of carpet (home base) covers it, Tonka trucks and backhoes construct roads over it. We pound home plate with the aluminum bat, the bat that sometimes slips out of its vinyl handle and goes spinning through the air like helicopter blades. The dirt always pushes back the grass. Years later, when my father sells the house, the new owners will cut down the hedges—no great loss—and the maple and redbud trees we used as bases. When I drive by, I will crane my neck, looking for the outline of home plate.

*

My mother takes off her gloves and puts them along with her trowel in the flower tray. She didn't meet my father until after they graduated from Elkhart High School, even though they were in the class of 1942 together. She looks older than forty-nine, and I can't remember when she didn't have gray hair. When I'm out with my parents at restaurants or ballgames or museums, other people always mistake them for my grandparents, and because my hair is past my shoulders, they mistake me for a girl. You have such a nice granddaughter, they say. Or, Are you here with your grandparents? I don't know why her hair went gray so early. It could have been inherited, but my father has gray hair too. It couldn't be us.

It's early May, and the president won't resign for another three months, but he has more years left than my mother has. I know she likes to plant flowers, but I don't know her favorite song or book. Or if she likes to go to the movies. Or if she likes wine or if she drinks it because my father does. Or how old she was when her father slipped on those icy steps in Chicago and punctured his kidney. I don't know what dreams she had for herself. What would she do after all her children were grown—if she'd had the chance?

I pick up the end of the hose and reach behind the long row of yews to turn on the spigot, walk into the grass, and grab the end with my right hand. Water squirts between my fingers, spraying my feet and clothes. I switch hands and am sprayed again, point the hose straight up like a fountain, and fill my mouth with cold water.

You Cannot Be Serious

My professional tennis career ends not long after my father drops me off at the Central High School tennis courts for the city tournament. I think he wishes me luck, but I can't remember. On most of the other courts, matches are already underway. Marc Mahoney, my first round opponent, is already inside the fence getting his racquet out. He squats down like a catcher getting ready for a pitch. He unzips his Prince racquet. He reaches in his equipment bag and pulls out a can of yellow Wilson tennis balls. He takes out two balls and stands.

We know each other from CCD class—Sunday school for Catholics—when we were in elementary school. Marc still has the same build, a little taller and skinnier than I am. He was a nice, quiet kid. He wasn't part of the crowd that would roll up their CCD workbooks and smack each other in the back of the neck.

"Hi," we say to each other. He looks like he remembers me.

"You want to hit around before we start?" He asks.

The weather is sunny with no breeze, and it hasn't gotten humid yet. Later in the day, it will get humid. I unzip the cover of my Dunlop John McEnroe racquet. It's a

combination of different wood laminates. The grip is probably too large for my hand. Even though everyone is switching to graphite or aluminum rackets, McEnroe still uses his wooden racket and so do I.

We begin hitting a tennis ball around. Practice is where I'm at my best, so I am feeling good. I keep sending his shots back over the net and could spend all day hitting the ball back and forth like this, but after a few minutes, he stops the ball and shouts across the court.

"You ready to start?"

"Sure, let's go."

*

I start chasing Dean, my best friend, almost the instant the words leave his mouth. He knows what he did and is lucky he is riding his bike. Still, I sprint after him for an entire block and never feel my feet hitting the pavement, from our driveway, down Fulton Street to the corner, all the way to his house. Dean shuts the door to his house when I reach his driveway. I grab a handful of crushed rocks and fling them at the gray-blue house. When I grab another, Dean's older sister opens the screen door.

"Go the Hell home," she yells.

"Come out here, asshole," I scream and wait a minute for Dean. I drop the rocks. Walk home.

Soon after, my father arrives home from work, a police officer knocks on our door. I try to listen from our TV room but can't hear what they are saying. After the officer leaves, my father tells me I am getting off with a warning and that I shouldn't get so upset when someone says, "Your Momma."

*

Tennis is my way out. I am a tennis player. Since I've gotten a late start, I will have to wait to join the pro tour until after college. I will need that extra competition. I take tennis lessons at McNaughton Park from Mr. Whitmer, my history teacher. There are five courts. One has a backboard to hit against. On the south side of the middle court is a building that looks almost like a band shell. The concrete platform is about three feet high. We escape the rain under the building's roof.

The best time to show up at the courts is before lessons or in the evening. The backboard is usually free. When a tennis ball hits the wooden board, it sounds like cannon fire. The only bad thing about the backboard is squeezing between it and the fence to retrieve balls that sail over it.

*

I have patterned my serve after McEnroe's, one of the most unusual serves in tennis. He stands with his back to the net, his feet pointing toward the opposite sideline, instead of pointing toward his opponent. Almost without fail, I fault on my first serve and have to drop in a soft second serve, which allows Marc to run around to his forehand side so he can put all his force into the return.

*

One day during lunch period, Mr. Whitmer stops me in the hall on my way to the gym. A stocky man with a large nose and brown hair parted down the middle, he is shorter than most of his junior high school students.

"I hear you've been getting into some scuffles with kids and your grades have really gone downhill."

I lean against the cinderblock wall and look at the floor. Shrug my shoulders.

"Listen," he says, "you can't let this get the better of you. I know it hurts, but she's gone. Everybody goes through this, but at some point, you have to let go."

I avoid Mr. Whitmer's eyes. Look down the hall to the open gym doors. He puts a hand on my shoulder. What he says makes perfect sense, but it's as if I didn't hear him.

"Okay," I say. I nod and then walk toward the gym. Try to wipe my eyes without anyone walking down the hall noticing.

*

We have always had tennis racquets—including an ancient wood one with a handle the size of a small tree limb—crammed in our equipment closet but no one ever plays. Then one July, I sit in front of the television to watch a wild redhead play Bjorn Borg in the Wimbledon Final. I'm not a fan of John McEnroe at first. My first racket is a Bjorn Borg-model racket that was black with bright yellow and orange stripes on the frame. After falling short the two previous years, McEnroe beats Borg. For my next birthday, I get the Dunlop McEnroe model.

*

I am powerless to stop the onslaught. When I do manage to return Marc's serve, he is either waiting at the net to hit an easy volley, or he waits at the baseline for my return to float over the net. When the ball takes a lazy bounce in front of him, Marc tees off, sending a yellow blur over the net. The ball hits the court a few inches from the line on the far side of the court, too far away for me to even attempt a return. "Nice shot," I tell him and jog back to the baseline to receive his next serve. Have I won a single

point? I cannot remember. Winning a game is out of the question.

*

After spending two days on Mr. Whitmer's high school tennis team, I quit. Something about the situation doesn't feel right. Even Mr. Whitmer seems different, more like a coach and less like a teacher. He is tougher than at our lessons at McNaughton. Maybe he is trying to teach me a lesson or test me or push me away. Maybe he realizes the reason I need tennis doesn't have anything to do with being part of a team or playing formal matches. The older guys on the team have already established their hierarchy. The younger guys quickly form groups of two or three. In situations like that, I am the odd man out. That's the way it is. Mr. Whitmer probably made the first few days of practice especially hard to get rid of kids who don't really want to play. Even though I am in good shape, my hamstrings feel sore at the end of the first day.

After the second day of practice, I tell my father when he gets home from work. He tells me he is disappointed. I did the same thing with junior high school football. Spent less than a week on the team before I quit. With basketball, I was cut. I thought I was a pretty good

player, not as good as some of my friends but pretty good. I wasn't even an alternate.

"Why'd you quit?" he asks.

"I don't know."

"I don't understand, John. Any time something is tough, you quit. I don't know how you are going to get anywhere in life doing that."

I can't argue with him. Here I am quitting something again. It is the same old pattern, and it frustrates me too. I don't know why I do it. If something doesn't feel right to me, quitting is usually the answer. Eventually, I will learn he is right, but now I need to quit. It gives me control. I decide. The power doesn't belong to someone else. Disappointing my father is a bonus.

*

Almost any time in my life, what I've needed seems to appear, whether that was tennis or music or friends. Each of these gave me an identity, even if that identity was only temporary. I could rely on it until beginning a new stage of my life, almost as if my subconscious knew what I needed even if I wasn't aware of it. What appears to be a random series of persona and "styles" was part of a process, both of healing and discovering. Discovering who I was meant to be. In that way, my mother's death was a kind

of gift: "Here you are, John. Everything you know is going to disappear (Mother, family, self). Rebuild it like the Six Million Dollar man. Remake yourself. Find yourself. Be who you are meant to be."

*

"Match point," Marc says. I nod in agreement.

His serve goes to my forehand side and I drive the ball into the net. 6-0, 6-0. I will read the score in the local sports page two days after the match. I run up to the net to congratulate Marc.

"Good match," I say.

"You too."

I don't detect any sarcasm, but he has every right to be sarcastic. I don't belong on the court with someone as good as he is. It is almost as if we had been playing a different game. Marc will go on to be one of the best players in the area and certainly the city. I will go back to hitting the ball against the backboard. For me, tennis is an individual sport. I don't need an opponent. I already have one.

The Real Thing

Darkness has fallen by the time our caravan pulls into Tomahawk, Wisconsin. My friends and I have the routine down. Nearly every January for the past ten years, my wife Marla and I have driven to the Northwoods for a cross-country ski vacation, usually after meeting up with our friends Brenda and Dan in Madison. We don't leave Madison until Friday afternoon, when we head northwest on US 90/94 and then north on Hwy. 51, through Wausau and then to Tomahawk. We make our first stop at the little restaurant in Tomahawk for whitefish before driving the last twenty miles to The Farm. We've visited this place so many times that each trip no longer seems like a distinct entity but part of a larger, extended trip interrupted by everyday life.

*

I wasn't prepared the first time I saw Tomahawk in winter. Having grown up near Lake Michigan, I'm familiar with lake-effect snow, but this snow was something else entirely. Plowed into the middle of the streets, snow piled four-feet high served as median strips. The only places to turn were at intersections, requiring many U turns. The combination of pine forests and small lakes dotting the landscape made

the Northwoods seem remote, another country—even from Madison, only a few hundred miles south.

After finishing the same dinner we've had for the last ten years, whitefish (fried or broiled) and domestic beer, we get into our cars for the thirty minutes it takes to reach The Farm. It's usually about eight o'clock Friday night when we drive through the gate constructed of massive pine logs, past the wood-fired sauna (pronounced "sownah" in the local dialect) and the red barn with a large, black outline of a skier on one end, and up to the Farmhouse, a typical turn of the century American farmhouse that's undergone several additions and remodeling projects. We stop to let the family know we've arrived.

For more than a century, the Palmquist family has farmed and logged this property, and Brenda tells me that for the last thirty or forty years, the family has lodged hunters and skiers. Each year, I notice the different remodeling projects Jim Palmquist completes during the slow summer months: a large porch and a new entryway on the side of the Farmhouse; a new fireplace for the River Cabin; an addition that doubles the size of the Picaroon Saloon where Jim's wife Helen serves chili and cold meat sandwiches on Finnish wheat and white bread. Making our way past the skis leaning against the farmhouse, we walk into the entryway.

Inside the entryway, winter coats bulge from the rack and a jumble of ski boots turn the entryway into an obstacle course.

*

Palmquist's The Farm encompasses 800 acres of Wisconsin forest near the town of Brantwood. Bordered on the north and east sides by the Chequamegon National Forest—which stretches from Taylor County northwest of Wausau to Bayfield near the Apostle Islands—and on the west side by the Somo River, The Farm remains a working cattle and lumber farm. Today, much of the land is devoted to the groomed cross-country skiing trails that snake through the property. Before it became a bed and breakfast, Jim remembers his parents hosting hunters or skiers when he was a child. Three generations of the family still live there: Jim's parents, Jim and Helen, and their daughter. Jim maintains the buildings and grooms the ski trails; Helen books the guest and, more importantly, runs the kitchen. When she's not at her desk in the kitchen checking in guests or booking reservations for the following year (many guests book the same weekend year after year), Helen is carrying steaming trays to the buffet set up on an old table near what is surely the oldest of the three stoves in the kitchen.

Framed articles from *Home & Away*, *The New York Times*, and some regional publications line the wall to our right, all glowing travel pieces on "The Farm." In the brochures and on the Web site, the family calls it Palmquist's "The Farm," which I find awkward, but like everyone else, I quickly settle into calling it The Farm. We first heard about The Farm when Brenda and Dan invited us to spend a weekend. They have stayed here for several years, after hearing about the farm from a professor at the University of Wisconsin. Marla and I met Brenda and Dan in Madison when Marla and Brenda were graduate students in the landscape architecture program. Despite their matching skis, boots and ski gear, they are good friends and our one trip to the Palmquist without them wasn't the same.

The Farmhouse, where Helen serves breakfast and dinner, feels like the home of a Finnish relative who might offer an invitation to stay for a weekend, but a relative used to making breakfast for twenty or thirty. After saying hello to the family, we go to the Maki House for the night. On our first, while we unloaded our bags and ski gear, I looked up and saw the northern lights for the first time, the waves of light rising and falling, like clothes on a line being whipped by the wind. Free of the competition from city lights, the stars shine brightly and I imagine

that I have gone back in time, back a century, and that this cabin is not just a place we will visit for two nights but our home.

Jim stokes the wood-burning stove or fireplace in each cabin. At first, it will be almost too hot. Although each bedroom has a baseboard heater, the fireplaces and wood-burning stoves usually kick out enough heat to keep the cabins warm—unless the fire goes out. Once, on one of our early visits, while we slept in the River Cabin, three of our friends staying in the Red House let the fire die while they were sleeping. After falling asleep in a warm, cozy cabin, they woke up in a meat locker and had to light another fire quickly.

*

On that first trip, as I considered the extinguished embers in the stove of the River Cabin, Brenda asked me if I wanted to learn how to build a matchless fire.

"Thanks, but I have my own technique."

"I've heard about your technique."

I admit that my fire-building skills lack sophistication. I'm probably on a low-hanging branch of the evolutionary tree. On my first camping trip with Marla, I spent over an hour and went through reams of paper trying to start a campfire. Nothing I tried worked, so I called

upon the vast knowledge I gained during my three months as a Boy Scout and quickly improvised a solution.

"Where's the can of Off?" I asked Marla. "That's like lighter fluid, right?"

Displaying her Job-like patience, Marla handed me the can and crouched behind our car. I doused the kindlin' with Off and lit a match. After my eyebrows grew back, I realized--. No, it actually worked. The fire kept the bugs away and had that mountain fresh scent. Marla will tell this story--to anyone who will listen--to illustrate what she's forced to endure. In order to humor Brenda, I agreed to try her matchless technique.

She found one coal still smoldering. After a few minutes, she managed to get the fire going again. We continued to stoke the fire and it burned that whole weekend, although I remained skeptical of the matchless fire.

"Next time you won't have to use a can of Off," Brenda said.

"I'll keep it around just in case." She doesn't remind me of this story on every trip to The Farm, but it has become one of our running jokes.

*

Entering the Farmhouse on Saturday morning, we fall under the spell of Helen's kitchen: the smells of home-made blueberry coffeecake and Finnish egg casserole, with sour cream and bits of bacon; the cold quarts of whole milk at each table, beads of water condensing on the old-fashioned glass milk bottles; and the taste of first and second (and usually third) helpings. On Sundays, oven-baked Finnish pancakes and creamed rice topped with raspberry jam are the main dishes. We justify our gluttony by the energy we will expend skiing.

With our tongues hanging out and the tops of our pants unbuttoned, we listen as Jim tries snapping us out of our stupor by telling us about the trails. Wearing a Carhartt jacket and a worn red hat with earflaps, Jim is a study in contrasts. While his ruddy, red face seems to age him, his bright blue eyes erase those years. A former county extension agent, Jim will stop at each table after the guests have had breakfast to explain the skiing conditions, meet new guests, and catch up on news with repeat visitors.

"Now this trail is all discomboobulated," Jim will say, emphasizing his Northwoods' accent and pointing to a small section of the 35 kilometers of ski trails on the map he's handing out. Jim built many cabins on The Farm and teaches a summer workshop on log construction. One year,

when we told him that Brenda and Dan couldn't make the trip because they had moved to Michigan two weeks before our visit, he offered a classic Jim response, "Well darn them anyway."

"Yeah, darn them anyway," we agreed.

Now when we stay at the farm, these visits with Jim, which include only small variations on the events above, are as important as skiing or food.

*

"Hope is the thing with feathers," wrote Emily Dickinson. In my case, it should be the thing with skis. After breakfast, I want to take on the hills, but I know what is waiting for me. The smaller hills on the trails west of the farm are easier to negotiate than the ones around the ponds. The scenery is a little nicer too, more secluded, but I usually hit the trails around the ponds first.

Although I am not a frequent skier—I've skied maybe five times in the last ten years when I wasn't at The Farm—I look forward to these annual outings. The Farm draws skiers of different skill levels from all over the Midwest and the country. Because cross-country skiing only once a year tends to slow my technical progress, I make up for this with reckless enthusiasm. Dressed in my warmest red and black wool jacket and jeans with long underwear, I

resemble Jim more than I do some of the other guests and their fashion statements. I willingly strap long thin pieces of fiberglass to my feet and grab two poles with tips so pointed that I'm a danger to myself and other skiers. During the first day of skiing, I quickly shake off the rust of inactivity—and loosen my tendons and ligaments—by falling on every hill we encounter. Sometimes I do manage to keep my balance on a hill until I get to the bottom and feel like thrusting my hands in the air in triumph as if I've finished the Super G in the Olympics. When the trail goes left, though, I go straight, crashing through the frozen crust on top of the snow and going down in a heap. Slowly, I dig myself out and ski towards my friends who have paused to watch the show.

The first few hills are always a blur of lost balance and fresh bruises. When I do manage to keep my balance all the way down a hill, a curve or other obstacle conspires against me. Eventually, we will reach the hill where, on our first visit, I perfected my patented face-first stop—a stop so sudden and spectacular, it could have become ABC Sport's new image for the Agony of Defeat.

Skiing down that hill was not difficult. It slopes gently for about 200 feet. At the bottom of the hill, though, the trail takes a sharp curve and rises quickly to

another small hill. On subsequent visits, although my legs usually wobble a little, like a colt standing for the first time, I make it down with few problems. The thrill of victory! If I have time, I will go back up and ski down again to prove it wasn't a fluke. With my newfound confidence, I am ready for more.

*

With each passing year, I can tell I am in better shape because the faint figures of my friends up ahead on the trail become larger. And fewer skiers pass me by. Once, a lithe skier in a shiny, Technicolor bodysuit somehow manages to skate by me like he was in the biathlon, only without the rifle. I am tempted to hook my pole to the back of his outfit and hitch a ride. But he glides by too fast, so I make a note to catch him the next time he comes around. For a second, as the blur of royal blue, white, and fluorescent yellow spandex vanishes into the woods, I wish I had a rifle.

*

I maneuver well enough on the groomed trails, but when crossing a back road intersecting the trail, my limbs start flailing. Sometimes skiers going in the opposite direction wait for us to get across the road. As I struggle for balance, I barely avoid sticking my pole into another

skier's foot. Our first day of skiing usually ends with only minor injuries and a much-needed trip to the sauna.

On our first trip to the Farm, I was brave enough to try the wood-fired Finnish sauna. Brenda, Marla and I (Dan knew what I was getting into and stayed at the cabin) walked into the sauna, climbed to the upper deck, and sat on a platform near the roof of the cabin. The heat and steam, we quickly discovered, are at their most intense on the upper deck. After a few moments of feeling like my hair was melting, we moved down to the lower deck, where Brenda and Marla found the climate there tolerable. Although Marla and Brenda enjoyed the intense heat and stayed in the sauna for a half-hour or more, I walked out after five minutes. Apparently, no stay in the sauna is complete without following it with a jump in a cold pool or a sit on a snowdrift. But the only person I know who was hearty enough to sit in a snowdrift lives in Calumet, Michigan, near the northern tip of the Upper Peninsula. Enough said. I hastily dressed in the unheated changing room, feeling as though I had contracted a tropical illness.

*

During our first trip, on Sunday morning, after too many Finnish pancakes and too much creamed rice topped with raspberry jam, I was ready to take on some more hills.

Marla, for some reason, wanted to ski the trails west of the farm--something about them being more scenic. Those trails have only a few small hills, so I convinced our friend Dena to ski the real hills with me. Dena, a lover of the outdoors who grew up in Montana, wore backcountry skis and could have made her own trail. While her competitive nature sometimes revealed itself on the trails, my skills presented no competition. I think she wanted to ski ahead of me to watch the show.

Near the end of our run, we made the long ascent to the top of the last hill on the trail, a man-made hill created by digging out the pond to our right. The groomed trail ended at the top of the hill. The barest trace of any kind of trail was visible--made by a few brave skiers, but mostly children with sleds. The hazy sun shining down revealed that the hill was covered with as much ice as snow. I smelled pine smoke and saw it pouring from the chimney of the Pick-A-Roon Saloon's massive, fieldstone fireplace. From the summit, all the buildings on the Farm were visible: on the left, the Pick-A-Roon, where Helen Palmquist was setting out lunch; straight down the hill, the White Pine Inn, built of logs I could barely stretch my arms around; in the distance, the River Cabin next to the Somo River--which is more like a creek if you ask me.

Dena skied down first. Her backcountry skis, which are wider than standard cross-country skis, made her glide down the hill effortless. I readied myself, bent my knees, leaned forward slightly and started my descent. Advertising catch phrases went through my mind: Just Do It, No Fear. Immediately, I began to veer off the trail, toward the snow-covered pond. I might as well have had on a pair of ice skates. Planting my pole in the snow to change my direction was useless, like trying to plant it in concrete. I began to gather speed.

I tried to point my skis toward the trail but could only one ski going in the right direction. The other kept sliding toward the pond, my legs stretching farther and farther apart. Other skiers sometimes go down hills as they sit on their skis, so I leaned back to a sitting position. It was then that my skis shot out from under me. I wound up on my back, looking up at the gray sky.

I felt every bump and depression in the hill through my coat. A tree stump passed under me. In a few seconds, it was over. I came to a stop on the pond. Sprawled on the ice with my skis, poles, and limbs contorted, a poorly-drawn stick figure, I wondered how thick the pond ice was underneath the snow. After a few seconds, I rolled onto my left side to see how much ice I would have to cross to get

back on the trail. It was maybe twenty feet but as icy as the hill. I reached behind me to check for the stump lodged in my back, but found only the beginnings of the knot that was taking its place. After I gathered myself, Dena and I skied back to our cabin to get ready for lunch.

*

The Farm is where we meet friends every year to renew old jokes and pick up conversations where they left off, to note the gradual changes in each other and The Farm. Sometimes those changes are not so gradual, such as when we bring one of our children to visit for the first time. Originally a place where we would cram in as much skiing as possible into two days, The Farm has become something that is more about community and ritual. Although some friends will miss a year for whatever reason or visit once and decide that the food doesn't make up for the cold weather, a group of us continues to meet at the Palmquist's. The first year we went to the farm we couldn't wait to ski, and we spent all of Saturday and most of Sunday on the trails. While the snow has varied from plentiful to almost non-existent, the cold remains one of the constants.

No matter how much snow covers the ground, each year we spend less time on the trails, and more time reading, playing games, talking, or, now, playing with our kids. A

forty below wind chill isn't much of an incentive either. Gradually, the skiing has become less important. The Farm has become a place where past and present merge, where we continually try to recapture illusive memories, like trying to remember if a memory of the northern lights is an image remembered from a television documentary or book, or the real thing.

Thunder Road

*The screen door slams/Mary's dress sways/Like a vision she
dances across the porch as the radio plays.*

—Bruce Springsteen

I can pinpoint the moment my life changed. On a midsummer afternoon, I sat in our family room, known in our house as the TV room, where I wasted many hours of my youth on seventies television. My Aunt Marge, visiting from Florida, was in our kitchen talking to my dad. I took the cassette tape out of its plastic case, a bearded man in a leather jacket and holding a guitar smiled on the cover. I put the tape into my little boom box that I would soon carry all over the house. I shut the door on the tape player and hit the Play button. A wheezy harmonica was the first sound to come out of the speakers, backed by a piano. Then I heard that hoarse voice. I was about to be transformed.

The moment when one's life is changed by art differs from other such moments, weddings, graduations, funerals, in that it often comes unexpectedly. Books, paintings, and music each hold the promise of transformation, but it takes the right combination of excellence of the work and an individual's personal outlook for that transformation to

take place. Life-changing art can come out of nowhere, without warning. One day you're leading a life that can sometimes seem predestined, and the next, your doors of perception fly off their hinges.

Music didn't have much influence on me as a young child or young teen. I listened to the radio all the time and bought many singles - this was the era of the 45 rpm records - but music was just something to listen to or annoy the parents with on car trips.

I didn't show much aptitude for music either. Even though I played violin in my elementary school orchestra for two years, my progress on the instrument was poor. Practice was a dirty word to me, and, when the orchestra met during summer, the music teacher had to take me out of the room for remedial instruction. Nevertheless, I was a hit with my relatives. No visit to our home was complete until I would trot out my violin for a rendition of "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star" or "Mary had a Little Lamb." No one ever asked for an encore, though.

Mrs. Chadwick, my music teacher, didn't have the heart to can me, which came back to haunt her when all the elementary school orchestras in my hometown gathered at the high school gymnasium. Looking up at audience settle into

the seats, I pretended to tune up, like a professional ready to wow the crowd.

Mrs. Chadwick put the fingers of her right hand together as if she was holding a conductor's baton and gave us the signal to begin. Where? I wondered. I could hum the tune, but I sure couldn't play it. After the first few bars of our opening song, which was all I knew of any song, I quickly exhausted my repertoire. I tried to follow along by looking at the other violinists' fingering the strings. Bad idea. I had to look at them then look at my violin to find the right position, so I was a beat behind everyone else. Eventually, I followed along with my bow and dispensed with fingering the strings. Compared to my violin playing, fighting pole cats sound mellifluous.

*

When I was a boy, my parents would take our family—the younger kids still living at home—on historical vacations, usually to the East Coast. The plant where my dad worked as an engineer closed down for two weeks in August, and he added his two weeks of vacation to that, so we went on these grueling four-week vacations. (At the time, they felt grueling; today, I would kill for one of those marathons.) Often, our destinations were Civil War forts or battlefields, presidents' homes, or re-created historic

communities. After hours of walking in the August sun, our leg muscles tied in knots, we were candidates for heat stroke. But while we were in the car, the radio belonged to the kids, who fought like ferrets for the right to sit between our parents and control the dial.

My father, a classical music enthusiast, crammed boxes filled with records by the Budapest String Quartet, Arturo Toscanini conducting Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, and hundreds of others into a spare bedroom of our home. On these four week trips, though, we would "make battery to our ears with loud music," to quote Shakespeare. When our destinations were hours away from our home in northern Indiana, he would have to suffer through late seventies hits on the radio of our Chevy Impala: "Copacabana (At the Copa)" by Barry Manilow through Ohio; "Escape (The Pina Colada Song)" by Rupert Holmes through Pennsylvania; "Heartache Tonight" by the Eagles through West Virginia. My father's favorite hits, absolutely free. None of these songs proved to be a revelatory experience for any of us, but he was a good sport. My father even wore the Marshall Tucker Band T-shirt that one of my older brothers gave him a few years ago on his birthday.

Most of the pop music of that period was, and still is, unbelievably bad, and not bad as in good. As radio

became more corporate, artists that didn't follow formulas became marginalized. Like the writings published in obscure "little magazines," devotees had to search for bands like the Ramones, Talking Heads, and Sonic Youth.

For many, rock and roll fashion has been as big an attraction as the music: jeans, black leather jackets, cowboy boots, heavy metal hair. Except for the harmonic convergence that occurred in the early 1990s when Grunge popularized my beloved flannel shirts, I've been successful in resisting rock fashion. On the outside, I look like a standard-issue, American white guy. If I could pull it off, though, you would never get me out of red pants and white platform shoes. Or a red jumpsuit like James Brown wears—with a few of Keith Richard's scarves thrown in.

Since my conversion, I've read about music only slightly less than I've listened to it. Starting with magazines like *Rolling Stone*, *Creem*, and *Spin*, I progressed to books like *Psychotic Reactions and Carburetor Dung* by Lester Bangs; *Bird Lives! The Story of Charlie Parker*; *Stomping the Blues* by Albert Murray; and *Drowning in the Sea of Love* by Al Young. The best music writers are those who embody the qualities of the music they write about: Lester Bangs shares the anarchic, manic qualities of rock; Albert Murray, the urbane, improvisational, and in some

ways reserved qualities of jazz. I don't have the same knowledge of classical music writers, but they are sure to possess the qualities of their music. Each is capable of sublime moments just of a different character.

*

With the rest of my family oblivious, I listened to "Thunder Road," rewound the cassette, and played it again. I played the song repeatedly, as if I wasn't sure what I was hearing: "The screen door slams/Mary's dress sways/Like a vision she dances across the porch/as the radio plays..." Like a combination lock, the tumblers in my brain were all in alignment. When I heard Bruce Springsteen's album *Born to Run*, I had what I consider one of the few Joycean epiphanies in my life. I wasn't the same afterwards. Released in 1975, the record launched Bruce Springsteen to stardom. He appeared simultaneously on the cover of *Time* and *Newsweek*. At the end of the song, my aunt came into the TV room.

"What's that you're listening to?" she asked.

I told her the name of the artist and the song.

"Well, he's just repeating the words over and over again," she said.

You don't understand, I thought.

As Aunt Marge left the room muttering about contemporary music, I hit the Stop button, then Rewind. My aunt grew up with swing music: Benny Goodman, Artie Shaw, Duke Ellington. She hadn't had much contact with rock and roll, and when she was exposed to it, she usually found it lacking compared to her music. I might have asked my aunt to remember what it was like the first time a book, painting or song moved her, but I didn't. At that moment, it didn't matter if she or anyone else understood. I understood.

An Important Law of Human Action

"John," my wife Marla says, using a tone of voice calculated to bring jumpers down from rooftops or armed robbers out of banks, "you need to calm down."

I pace the floor of my kitchen, holding my skull as if it is about to come apart. While the summer world is bright and fresh, and brimming with life, I am glassy-eyed and fatigued, and, like Homer Simpson, as dirty as a Frenchman. Her efforts to calm me prove futile. I am inconsolable. My semester feels like it will never end. Cradling my forehead in one hand, I keep telling myself, "You have a little bit of work to do on your paper and the semester will be over."

Although I had completed my research weeks before the paper was due, my books and journal articles, to paraphrase Montaigne, lay fallow, abounding in useless weeds. To my cat, the papers scattered across the dining room floor offered another undisturbed spot to stretch out on for naps. I even tried bribing myself with gifts: a trip to an Omaha Royals game, a box of candy, a carton of cigarettes, a pair of panty hose. Although I tried to make my mind feel ashamed of itself, nothing could persuade me to end my idle ways.

With finals week over and two self-imposed deadlines passed, I had planned to spend a little time writing on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday, each day passing with little to show for it. After completing one section of the paper, I would realize I needed another quote from a critic or a representative example from the novel (Albert Murray's *Train Whistle Guitar*). As the paper grew like a virus, I struggled, but couldn't bring myself to sit down and finish it. I thought the Monday following finals week would be the end for sure. I hoped to turn in the paper and take a breath before I started my summer class that afternoon.

*

Call it what you will—defer, delay, put off, postpone, prolong—I live to be late. Procrastination is not an annoying little habit I picked up, not simply a trait that I exhibit only under certain circumstances, nor is it a mildly annoying attribute that everyone must fight against. No, procrastination is part of the very fiber of my being, the core of my soul. When it comes to procrastination, I am a Viking. My irresolute mind, like Hamlet's, could bring down kingdoms. The public library is probably building a new branch with the proceeds from my overdue fines. The world moves at a different speed from my internal clock. My

leisurely pace only becomes a problem when the world imposes its tyrannical deadlines on me.

Like a chess match between Kasparov and Big Blue, every move I make is countered by the procrastinator within. My opening gambit was to buy a book on time management, but I never got around to reading it. In an attempt to outwit myself—the Idiot's Defense, I believe it's called—I've set the clocks in my home and my car anywhere from five to ten minutes fast, which works for awhile, but then in a brilliant counter attack the procrastinator adjusts to the new system. (Marla longs for the day when all the clocks in our home are in the same time zone.) Finally, escape routes blocked, nearly out of pieces, I'm forced to resign until another day.

The only strategy that appears to work for me is keeping lists. Not one list but hundreds of small ones. Pockets are crammed with scraps of paper and to-do lists, 'tis an unweeded garden of tasks, I keep them filed in a drawer in my bedside table—the most recent one on top. I have this plan of someday typing all my lists on the computer, and then I'll be able to collate them by topic. My wife has learned to ignore these lists and doesn't hesitate to throw them away. Whenever I find a mass of wood

pulp in the dryer, I realize I've lost another list of books to buy, bills to pay, or appointments to make.

Part of my procrastination has to be inherited. Although my father has a degree in engineering and built his own radio when he was younger, he drove for months with his front tires emitting a muffled knocking sound. More than once I heard him muse about the origin of the sound. Finally, though the car was probably in for some other purpose, a mechanic diagnosed the mysterious noise: the tires needed rotating. I can imagine him shrugging his shoulders and smiling with a "What can you do?" look on his face. I have inherited this look and have seen it on the face of several of my siblings.

At family gatherings—graduations, weddings, holidays, reunions—my relatives stage an unofficial contest. Usually, the person directly involved in a particular occasion shows up on time—although as you will find out below, this is not always true. The rest of the family, the stragglers, arrive fashionably or unfashionably late—the equivalent of a plaid suit with white shoes. We manage to hold down jobs and lead relatively normal lives, but certain events bring out our tardiness.

Which reminds me of a day in the middle of June 1994. Dressed in summer suits, shorts and dresses, my family

waited under large oaks trees on Island Park in Elkhart, Indiana. As a merciless summer sun stared down at the crowd, guests sat in rows of aluminum chairs and used purses, baseball caps, anything at hand to fan the heat away. The humidity seemed to add an extra layer of clothing. The Elkhart and St. Joseph rivers flowing around the island teased the guests with the sound of their cool water. White silk ribbons hung from the bandstand and pots of violets decorated the brick walkway. Behind the crowd, in the pavilion made of river stone, white cloth covered the picnic tables and the buffet lined two long tables. Next to the pavilion, the BBQ grill was warming up to cook the Cajun chicken we had prepared. On the bridge across the river, the bride-to-be waited with her parents, but the groom—me—was nowhere to be found.

I was speeding from my father's house, through the commercial strips of Elkhart, to Island Park with Marc, one of my groomsmen. Luckily, my wife is a forgiving soul and knew, in this case at least, I had an excuse, however flimsy.

Because we were not impressed with the catering at the weddings we had attended, Marla and I had decided to prepare the food ourselves. We spent the days before the wedding chopping mountains of vegetables, stirring five-

quart pots of red beans and rice, and coordinating the chaos swirling around the kitchen of my father's house. Ten people, many with sharp instruments, toiled in a hot kitchen in the middle of June. After preparing the food (on time and ready to go), we then had to transport the whole affair over to the park on the morning of the wedding.

After numerous car trips to and from the park, Marc, one of my groomsmen, and I were the only members of the wedding party who hadn't gone home to shower and dress. Everything looked to be in place, we hadn't forgotten a thing, or so we thought. As I glanced at the dashboard clock in my car, an anvil hit me. What time is the wedding supposed to start? I asked myself. While a few early arrivers sat in the shade of the picnic pavilion to stay cool, Marc and I raced home to complete our odyssey.

I finally arrived somewhere between fashionably and unfashionably late to my own wedding, but the ceremony took place with no problems and we moved the party over to the picnic pavilion for the reception. It was at this point we discovered we had forgotten to bring a knife to cut the twenty loaves of sourdough bread we had transported from Wisconsin. My new father-in-law found a kindly fisherman who was happy to loan us his knife. Although it looked like he kept the knife in his tackle box for many fishing

expeditions, it would have to do. My father-in-law washed it in the river and began cutting the loaves.

*

Every time I tell myself it's my perfectionism that accounts for my procrastination, I'm quickly reminded otherwise. I've delayed buying a computer for the past six months. Although my wife brings her laptop home from work, I don't like the small keyboard and the disk drive is on the temperamental side—it shows up for work when it wants to. I even had the cash for the computer in my sock drawer, waiting for me to make a decision. "I'm taking the computer back to work after this semester," she threatens, frustrated more by my delays than by my commandeering her computer, which she rarely uses at home.

As I was driving to South Omaha to replace my expired, out-of-state driver's license, I pondered Montaigne's project. What does it mean to know oneself? I know on a conscious level that I procrastinate more than other people, but I don't understand why. What is at the root of my procrastination? Passive aggressive behavior? Low self-esteem? Epstein Barr with a twist of Lyme disease? (I've taken the first step by admitting I have a problem.) Although I don't consider myself a determinist—someone who views humans as being at the mercy of forces out of their

control—I'll be damned if I can figure out how to stop procrastinating.

Can anyone really know why he or she procrastinates? Is the underlying purpose of the essay—an exploration of the self—doomed to fail if all one can do is describe his or her behavior? Self-knowledge, while difficult, is possible. But change? An old comedian on his deathbed was asked if dying was hard. "Comedy is harder," he replied. I feel a little like that about knowing oneself: That's the easy part.

*

In *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, Mark Twain wrote that Tom had discovered an important law of human action. Namely, "Work consists of whatever a body is obliged to do and that Play consists of whatever a body is not obliged to do." Unlike Tom Sawyer I cannot get someone to whitewash the fence for me, so with books and journal articles stacked on both sides of the computer, I start working at 9:30 a.m., pausing only long enough for the dog's midday trip around the block. The end is within reach. I go through the highs and lows of an opera singer. But it is not to be. Three o'clock approaches then passes. I haven't showered for two days. My semester would continue for one more day. I call it quits, take a shower, pick up my wife, and go to my

summer class. When I tell my wife next semester will be different, a knowing smile crosses her lips. I could blame my procrastination on our fast-moving society. Maybe my year should be 14 months long, my semester 20 weeks, my week 8 days. I'll have to think about it.

Finally, completed paper in hand, I walk across the University of Nebraska at Omaha campus to the red house that serves as the Goodrich Annex, one of a handful of distinctive old homes scheduled to be demolished and replaced by new dormitories. The campus in these first few days of summer seems a quiet, hollow place. Less than a week ago, hundreds of students hurried to final exams or to hand in term papers, now a few scattered students appear to wander aimlessly. I walk into the Goodrich Annex and knock on the door of my professor's office, though he is probably not in. I put the paper in his mailbox. With an assignment to finish for my summer class, I walk back to my car to drive home. A man in white painter's overalls has roped off sections of the sun-drenched parking lot so he can repaint the white lines of the parking spaces. If I had some marbles, a dead rat and a string to swing it with, or an old window sash, I might trade them for a chance to paint the parking spaces.

A Confluence of Rivers

... it has been my wish to draw from every source one thing, the strange phosphorus of the life, nameless under an old misappellation.

--William Carlos Williams

At the confluence of two rivers in northern Indiana sits a narrow island a little longer than a football field. A history of the region reports that the local Potawatomi Indians thought the island resembled an elk's heart (*Indiana* 289). Elkhart became the name of the island and this island soon became a trading post and later the site of the village of Pulaski. Elkhart also became the name of one of the two rivers—the other became the St. Joseph. In 1832, Dr. Havilah Beardsley laid out the town of Elkhart on land purchased from Potawatomi chief Pierre Moran (*Indiana* 289). The chief was later honored by having a shopping mall named after him.

By the end of the 1830s, armed guards marched the Potawatomi to Kansas (*Indiana* 435). Eight hundred Potawatomi began the march, and forty-two died en route, closing that chapter of the region's history. During the remainder of the nineteenth century, Elkhart developed into

an industrial city, including becoming one of the first cities in the world to have an electric streetcar system (Riebs 118). When my great-grandfather arrived near the end of the nineteenth century to work in the lumber business, the major industries were in place, such as Miles Laboratories, which would later become famous for introducing Alka-Seltzer, and C.G. Conn, one of a number of band instrument manufacturers that led to the city's fame as "The Band Instrument Capital of the World."

Like all Midwestern cities, Elkhart has changed over the last hundred years: businesses moving out of downtown, shopping malls replacing downtowns as centers of commerce, families moving to suburbs. These changes haven't always been for the better, In fact, they sometimes limit our economic opportunities, and they affect our connection to our families, to those in our communities, and to that place we call home. Elkhart, which had by the 1970s had evolved into "The RV-and Van Conversion-Capital of the World," an industry prone to boom-and-bust cycles, seemed to offer few economic and cultural opportunities.

My family history is tied to the city. My great-grandfather and his brothers prospered through business ventures and real estate investments. For many years, the Monger building was among the larger office buildings

downtown. Monger Elementary School is one of thirteen elementary schools serving the community. The Monger Addition, a section of land added to the city, was another part of their legacy. Growing up, I knew about these details and thought they were interesting, but I didn't really feel much connection to them, at least in the way previous generations seemed to. Yet the town draws me back, although I'm unsure whether my family connections or connections to place exert that pull. Are there differences between then and now that account for this ambivalence?

To learn more about those differences and more about my conflicted feelings, I set out to revisit the story of my great-grandfather's journey from his birthplace in Virginia's Shenandoah Valley to Indiana. My father points me in the direction of some older relatives who might have some information on this chapter of our family history. Always excited to share his collection of genealogical material, he offers to make some copies as well as visit the offices of the city newspaper. I address a few letters and make some phone calls to my great aunt, Robert Wilmer's daughter, and my father's brother and sister. Understanding my great-grandfather's story, I hope, may provide some answers and help me understand my own connections. Why did he pick Elkhart, Indiana? What about the place drew him

away from the land where his family had lived and farmed since before the Revolutionary War? What had he heard and how did he arrive? For me, there is something essential in his story, a key to my sense of place and the past.

Through conversations with my father, I learn my great-grandfather, Robert Wilmer Monger, arrived from Virginia in 1898 and lived in Elkhart until his death in 1954. My search leads me to obituaries, letters, genealogical records, but these aren't able to tell me what I want to know. These artifacts and records only offer facts, not why something happened or what it felt like. Imagination must supply the remaining details.

*

As your wagon bounces over the ruts in the road, you ride in silence. The morning sun rises above the hazy Blue Ridge over to the east. To the west clouds roll over Appalachian Mountains. Your name is Robert Wilmer Monger. Your father, William Henry, is taking you and your brother Ben to Roanoke where you will start your journey. Ben is not yet awake. He slouches forward in his seat, wipes the sleep from his eyes, and yawns. You glance at the bag in the back of the wagon and wonder if you have everything you need. Guess you can buy whatever you have forgotten when you are settled.

You have been awake most of the night, thinking about this trip to Indiana, about the new business you intend to start with your brother Charlie, about leaving your family, about a new life. Also about strange things, like playing in the foothills of the Blue Ridge with your older brothers when you were boys and finding the shells left by Confederate and Union soldiers. Your family has lived in the Shenandoah Valley, from Harrisburg, Virginia, down to Roanoke, as long as anyone can remember, farming and selling lumber. Charlie, who has lived in Elkhart for five years, told you that Indiana is nothing like Virginia, no Shenandoah Valley and no Blue Ridge, just flat farmland and forests. But he said that there is opportunity. You have already said good-byes to father and mother, and Lizzie and Dora, your sisters. You look around the valley, maple leaves starting to turn orange, creek water turning the wheel of father's mill, mountains fading to a faint green in the distance, rows of corn fading to a pale yellow. You wonder if you are seeing home for the last time.

"So when are you coming home next?" Without fail at the end of long-distance conversations with my father, I get that question. I pause, unsure of how to answer. I don't mind the question, but it's a loaded one, bring emotions about

family and place to the surface. With each addition to my young family, the pressure intensifies. When thinking about how often to return for a visit, I always try to maintain that balance between staying long enough to remain in good standing with relatives and not staying so long that we exchange gunfire. Implicit in my father's questions is that the town in which I grew up is still my home, after living in five other cities and spending all my adult life away from "home."

Although I haven't lived in Elkhart since my late teens, I am still deeply connected, and deeply ambivalent, about where I came from. Today six of my eight siblings live in Indiana, with most scattered around northern Indiana. Two other brothers have strayed a little farther, one brother to Chicago and another to Washington D.C. I recently moved from Omaha, Nebraska, to Marquette, Michigan, from ten hours west to 10 hours north of home, to write about, among other things, the small Midwestern city where I spent the first nineteen years of my life.

As a teenager, I separated myself from Elkhart before I ever left. Thinking of everyone around you as part of the mob, the unthinking masses of American consumer culture, what the critic and Baltimore native H. L. Mencken called the booboisie, made leaving easier. In my twenties, I would

talk to friends who had also left, and we used our hometown as a reference point: "It's a larger version of Elkhart." Mary Swander, an Iowa writer and author of *Out of this World*, points out that this attitude is common in the Midwest: "This wasn't the usual adolescent desire to mature and leave the nest, but a deeper, more shame-ridden kind of longing. This was a longing intrinsic to the small towns and moderate-sized cities of the Midwest" (258). This longing was a familiar presence in my youth.

My family's story is the reverse of the story that Wisconsin writer Hamlin Garland tells in *Son of the Middle Border*, an autobiographical novel depicting a family's search for a place to settle. My grandfather and his brothers went "O'er the mountains, westward ho" (52) but instead of pushing westward, as Garland's family did, they stayed put. My father, except for his years at Purdue University and a stint in the Navy during World War II, has lived in the same city his entire life, and his father--my grandfather--lived his entire life in Elkhart. Some writers, like Garland, have talked about the "heartland mystique": A pull that these places exert even on those who have left them.

*

You were born in Rockingham County, Virginia, twenty-five years ago in 1874, near a little town called North River. You are moving to Elkhart, Indiana, with Ben. Your brother Charlie has lived there for the last eight years and has written to you about the prospect of starting a lumber mill. After learning the lumber business from your father, you have decided to light out for Indiana. Ben, a blacksmith by trade, has decided to come along to find a job with a carriage company. You told your father and mother that you would leave in the fall.

Floating on a barge along the Ohio gives you a strange feeling. There is nothing to do but watch the land roll by, fields of corn and hay run down the gently sloping hills right into the river, red barns and white farmhouses dot the hills. The farmland pushes itself right up to the banks on both sides of the Ohio. These towns, Portsmouth, Vanceburg, Maysville, and Aberdeen, make their living from the river. The farmers working in the fields or carting their harvest to town pay little attention to you as you float by, but occasionally children playing in the muck along the banks wave and run along with the barge for a short distance. You pass a brown-haired young girl standing on the bank. She keeps her eyes on you as you float from sight.

As you approach Cincinnati, a booming city, plumes from the smokestacks appear well before the city is in sight. Cincinnati is by far the largest city you have ever visited, and you are not sure you like it much. When the barge stops to take on coal, you and Ben gather your bags for the trip north, walk around the waterfront. The city sits on steep bluffs so that the streets, like rivers and creeks, all flow down to the Ohio. On the Kentucky side of the river, there are a few buildings surrounded by farmland. A short time later, you board a train and soon Ohio turns into Indiana.

*

With every chain store and restaurant that opens, small Midwestern cities prosper, but at what price? If progress means having a Starbucks in town, Elkhart is on its way. What happened is it becomes that much more like hundreds of other towns. How can Americans develop connections to cities so homogenized they could be anywhere in the country? These suburbs, which the public sector heavily subsidizes by investments in everything from sewers to new roads, continue to spring up in Elkhart, Omaha and other cities across America. When Thomas Jefferson described his vision of an America where every citizen owned his or her own patch of land, he could not imagine the unintended

consequences. If he knew how his vision has become distorted and misinterpreted, he might reconsider.

One of the few cities addressing urban sprawl and preserving green space is Madison, Wisconsin, a city of about two hundred thousand people. Should we be surprised that a place where livability, the environment, and maintaining a sense of place are urgent concerns is often mentioned as one of the most livable cities in the Midwest? Work, school, and shopping are all within walking or biking distance.

Even though one way to revitalize cities is by reconnecting them with their past, we must remember that the roots of urban sprawl and consumerism are also in that past. Then how do we move forward? How do we preserve what is essential in that past? Indiana essayist Scott Russell Sanders argues,

What most needs our attention . . . is the great community of land-air and water and soil and rock, along with all the creatures, human and otherwise, that share the place. (51)

Although I share Sanders desire not to "add to the literature of exile" (50), physical separation is sometimes necessary. To discover the solution to a problem one may need to step back. Robert Sayre, professor at the

University of Iowa, writes that we need a deconstruction of the Midwest, a deconstruction of "earlier generations and reconstructing or inventing new bioregions" (129). In other words, we need to discover traditions and practices that worked and keep those essential parts of the past. Maybe all this will lead to re-imagining the Midwest. While the efforts of architects, urban planners, and economists play a role in this project, surely storytelling also plays a role.

When I visit Elkhart today, I'm only vaguely aware of the island and the rivers. The island shaped like an elk's heart is now a park, Island Park, with swing sets and a band shell for summer concerts. The rivers serve only as scenic and recreational attractions, glanced at while crossing a bridge. Island Park was the spot where my wife and I chose to get married one sweltering day in June. Essayist and novelist Wallace Stegner writes, "a place is not a place until people have been born in it, have grown up in it, lived in it, known it, died in it" (201). That's certainly true of my family and Elkhart. Over several generations, the community has shaped us and we helped shaped it. While I believe in the idea of finding a place and staying there, of finding the sense of that place, I am

still looking for that spot where I can run my barge up on some sandy bank.

*

Ten days after leaving Virginia, you arrive in Indiana. On the last leg of your trip, you hitch a ride in the back of an apple wagon and then walk the last part of your journey. Near evening, you and Ben carry all that you own through downtown Elkhart. You walk down Main Street past the Bucklen Opera House and L. Helfrich & Son Furniture store. Shopkeepers are closing for the night, locking the doors. Streetcars and carriages—bicycles darting in between—crowd the streets with people on their way home. You spot the island that gave Elkhart its name. The island is somewhat hidden from the town. Both banks drop about forty feet down to the river, and unless you were standing on the edge of the riverbank, you would not know the strangely shaped island was there.

You should be at Charlie's home before dinner. He owns lumber mills in Marshall, Michigan, and Milford, Indiana, and wants you to learn the business by traveling around northern Indiana and southern Michigan, buying and selling lumber. You are going to make your fortune right here. Before leaving home, you told Lizzie that as soon as you have saved enough money you will buy a pipe organ for her

parlor. For a moment, in this strange place where you are a stranger, you imagine you are someone else, someone with no ties, no family.

*

When my wife and I lived in Omaha, my trip home was a straight shot east on Interstate 80. My wife and I would drive back about once a year, over Iowa's rolling hills and contoured cornfields, across Illinois's ironing-board flat farmland, and through northern Indiana's hills...well, they're not really hills, more like bumps. The trip took about ten hours, and we marked the time remaining by the landmarks. When we passed the University Park Mall, near the University of Notre Dame, our exit was about fifteen minutes away. "The longest fifteen minutes known to humankind," my wife called it.

Close by are recently built chain restaurants and a Borders bookstore. Each return trip we noticed another sign for a national retail chain. Those radio stations I grew up listening to come in clearly by that point. After spotting the Toll Road rest stop with the Hardees, five minutes remained. Then the tall Ramada Inn sign towering over the trees reminded us that exit 92, the Elkhart exit, our exit, was next. We pulled off the highway and onto the exit ramp, past the Bob Evans and the Olive Garden and over I-80. We

stopped, paid the \$2.20 toll. We pulled up to the light on Cassopolis Street. Turned right. Then left into the Sturdy Oaks subdivision: Home. Home.

*

Once I watched a flock of geese fly over my home. The light from the city gave their undersides a silvery glow. I followed their path across a deep blue sky as the call-and-response of their honking grew faint. They never broke formation, as if each knew exactly where the others were going. Like rivers around an island, my ideas about past and place mingle in my imagination with thoughts of my great grandfather, constantly moving in and out of the main current.

If I Should Fall from Grace with God

If I should fall from grace with God

Where no doctor can relieve me

If I'm buried 'neath the sod

But the angels won't receive me

Let me go boys

Let me go boys

Let me go down in the mud

Where the rivers all run dry.

-The Pogues

Prologue

I was born blue. On a Tuesday evening, my mother made the family pork chops and potatoes. A few hours later, she gave birth at Elkhart General Hospital. Something the nurses gave her during labor turned my skin a purpleblue. Eventually the blue went away.

My mother and father could have stopped at six kids. Even in the 1950s that would have been a large family—unless you were Catholic. Five boys with buzz cuts and one girl with curly brown hair. Instead, after almost ten years, my parents added three more. I'm number eight.

Sandwiched between my sister Liz and Matt, the youngest. Both my parents were over forty at the time, and this was the late 1960s when post-WWII chemicals and cures were doing horrible things to babies. Given the year of my birth and my mother's age, I'm lucky there's not an arm growing out of my forehead.

My mother, Angela Thulis, grew up on Chicago's South Side, second of four children. Her father, Bill Thulis, a Chicago firefighter, slipped on icy steps one winter and punctured a kidney. That left her mother, Big Angela, to raise four children by herself during the Great Depression. Big Angela would outlive three of the four.

Like me, my father, Robert Monger, was also born in Elkhart, as was his father. The family came from Rockingham County, Virginia, but around 1900 three brothers, one of whom was my great grandfather, came to work in the lumber business. Robert grew up the oldest of three children and wanted to major in English when he went to college, but his parents wanted him to be an engineer. Although Angela and Robert went to the same high school, they didn't meet until two years after they graduated. Robert was on leave from the Navy in 1944. Stationed in San Francisco, he took the train across the country. The last leg was the South Shore line, from Chicago to South Bend. When he arrived at the

station in South Bend, Angela and her older sister Genevieve were going back to Elkhart so they shared a cab. Robert thought Angela was easy to talk to.

*

My mother visited me often in dreams. Usually it would be a dream where she was walking down our street, Fulton Street, wearing one of her 1970's flowered shirts and navy polyester slacks. Or the brown sweater that came down below her waist and had the belt she would tie. She would stand on the sidewalk across the street near the Mason's house or a few doors down. Like she came to check the place out. Find out how things were going. Sometimes I dreamed about her sitting on a park bench or at a table in some restaurant. She never spoke. Just watched. She doesn't visit as much now.

I used to imagine that she had gone underground, like Jim Morrison or a CIA agent or a member of the Weather Underground. She was living in another city or state, maybe even another country, but someday I would run into her at the grocery store or at a gas station. She had to leave. Probably. A few times, I even thought I saw her. But the hair didn't match or the eyes were the wrong color. She must still be out there.

There was more snow then. Winter storms gathering strength over Lake Michigan and dropping blankets of snow over southern Michigan and northern Indiana. Michiana, the local newspapers and television stations call it. The smell of burning leaf piles giving me a headache every fall. The little green helicopters dropping from the maple trees and the buzzing sound they made if we put them in our mouths and blew. Spring storms flooding the gutters on our house, turning the overhang into a waterfall. Those same storms sometimes forcing us to run out the back door to take shelter in my father's wine cellar. Smells of the damp pine and wine cork filled our nostrils as we sat on old patio furniture surrounded by racks of his aging wine.

*

I hold on to those memories, despite the pain and confusion. Try to hold them in my hands. Turn them over. Put them up to the light. Try to break them open to get at the secrets they contain. If I were Billy Pilgrim, I could become unstuck in time and go back to change things. But what would I change? Most of what happened was out of my hands.

*

Chapter One

Crazy Train

The madman stuff happened like this:

I am up late, as usual. Can't sleep. Reading about the Rolling Stones. This book called *Symphony for the Devil*. Instead of studying biology, I'm on my bed with pillows propped behind me. The overhead light is on because I don't have a bedside light. Piles of clothes compete for space on the orange shag carpet with stacks of the *Sporting News* and *GQ*. A poster of a leopard, a copy of a da Vinci sketch by my sister-in-law that actually belongs to my brother Tom, and a picture of the Cubs 1984 roster cover the wood-paneled walls. The room looks more like a nest than someone's bedroom. Matt sleeps in the room next to mine and my father is asleep at the other end of the hall.

The Stones book starts with the Tattoo You tour in the early 1980s and flashes back to the childhood of each member of the Stones.

Near midnight, I get to the part about Brian Jones leaving the band. Drug problems. Paranoia. The whole bit. He was the Stone closest to the Beatles' mop-topped good looks, except he was blond. Sometimes he played a white, teardrop-shaped Vox guitar. He also brought the sitar,

marimba, dulcimer into the Stones music, but towards the end of his life, he preferred to experiment with STP and LSD. And hang out with Hendrix at the Monterey Pop Festival.

I get to the part about Jones's attempts to start a new band and about his house, Cotchford Farm—the Christopher Robin house, where the author who wrote the *Winnie the Pooh* books lived. Brian spends the night getting wasted by the swimming pool with a few friends and hangers-on. The next morning his maid finds him face down in Christopher Robin's pool. The coroner rules his death an accidental drowning caused by an overdose. But his death is shrouded in rumor and mystery. The British tabloids pounce on the story. Did the rest of the Stones conspire to have someone slip him too much of something? Did a mother of one of the many children he supposedly fathered have him killed? Did he owe money to a drug dealer?

The surviving Stones play a free concert at Hyde Park in his honor, and Mick wears a shirt that looks like a dress. The book has a picture of him wearing this white shirt with Pirate sleeves and a ruffled skirt that starts at the waist. At the concert, Mick reads a poem from Shelley about being "awakened from the dream of life"—

I'm Brian Jones, my mind tells me. I'm Brian Jones.

Waves of panic crash over me. *I'm just like Brian Jones*. My heart races. My brain feels as though it's trying to get out of my skull. I jump out of bed. Look around my room trying to figure out what's going on. I'm like some howler monkey flushed from a tree. Eyes darting from side to side. Panting. Ready to jump to the next branch.

I can't get my heart or my mind to slow down. I have to get out of this room. Stepping over the mess on the floor, I open the door to the hallway. Walk to the bathroom. My breath is quick. I splash water on my face. Calm down. It's okay. I don't know what's happening, but I tell myself it will be okay. I hold the toothpaste-colored sink and look down at the cool water swirling down the drain.

The mirror. Prematurely receding hairline above an already high forehead. Large, intense eyes. Nose shared by at least five members of my family. Okay, I'm not Brian Jones.

After a few more splashes of water, I cup my hands to take a drink. Turn off the water. Wonder what the hell happened to me. Has it started? My fear of becoming crazy, mentally ill, schizophrenic. I read it happens between late adolescence and early adulthood. Kids go away to college

all the time and start hearing voices. Attempt to jump from tops of ten-storey dorms. But I heard my own voice.

Back in my room, I avoid the Stones book, turn the light off and try to sleep. This is another one of those things I can't tell anyone. They lock up kids for this stuff, like those kids that write letters to *Creem* magazine. In some of their letters, they write about where they're institutionalized and say how much a certain band means to them, now that they're locked up. I don't want that to be me. I don't want to switch my magazine subscriptions to a place like Oaklawn. Like mom.

*

Chapter Two

Into the Mystic

I'm five years old, sitting in our church, St. Thomas the Apostle. My mother and father sit on either side of me. The slippery wood pews are uncomfortable so I slide around to get comfortable, and my parents take turns putting a hand on my leg or shoulder to get me to sit still. Kneeling on the little couches that fold out in front of our seats is the only thing that's comfortable, but after a minute we have to sit again. While Father Mike delivers his sermon, I look up at the PA system, a group of speakers at the peak of the ceiling where these giant wood beams meet. Hearing

the voice coming from above, I want to climb up there. Because there is no balcony or ladder nearby, I consider the best route. First, sneak behind the granite altar and the wooden crucifix where Jesus stares up at the peak. Then somehow climb up the sparkly painting on the wall of Jesus and Doubting Thomas. If I climb up to the top and crawl through, on the other side is heaven. And God.

*

Chapter Three

Gone Daddy Gone

A few days later, it happens again. The snow has melted into muddy ridges along the streets and sidewalks, and I decide to take a walk. Otherwise, I'll stay inside all day until after supper when I work at Kroger's or go to class. My father is at Bendix, where he works on targets that military missiles try to destroy. When it was "Take Your Children to Work" day, we could never go with him because we needed security clearance. Matt is in school. I only work in the late afternoons and evenings. So I'm home by myself all day which is way too much. I'm supposed to be working on school projects or whatever, but I usually watch television and think about all the things I want to do but can't because I'm stuck here.

After lunch, I walk in the direction of Kroger's, a little over two blocks away, except I turn left on Strong Avenue then left again on Kilbourn Street. I'm on the south side of the street when I spot a girl with long, wavy brown hair walking towards me on the other side of Kilbourn. She is about my age. Why is she walking on this street at the same time I'm walking in the opposite direction? I sense something sinister about the brown-haired girl being out for a walk at the same time as me. What does she want? The howler monkey feeling comes back. Sweaty hands. Pulse like a sprinter's. Electricity flows through my brain.

I walk straight ahead. Don't run home, I think. That will look suspicious. Don't look back until you reach the corner. Make it to the corner of Bower Street and look back. Nothing. An empty street. At the corner of Fulton Street, before walking home, I wait a minute to see if the brown-haired girl will turn the corner and walk towards me again. I make it home safe.

The part of my brain that hasn't cracked understands the brown-haired girl happened to be walking down the street at the same time as me. It was a coincidence. The howler monkey part of my brain knows what to do: avoid leaving the house.

*

I drop my only day class. My other class—freshman biology, which meets at night. My life can't seem to get started. My best friend, Sam Gianoli, is at least away at school, meeting girls, out on his own. I can't figure out how to make my life start, but bagging groceries in the hope of someday moving up to Produce isn't cutting it. And these lame classes that I'm taking make me feel like I'm still stuck in high school.

My biology class even meets at Memorial, my high school. It depresses me to be there. The room is the same one I had for high school biology, standard issue desks surrounded by black-topped lab tables. Most of the students are middle-aged and trying to start new careers.

My lab partner, Pete, looks like Jesus—if Jesus had gone to Vietnam and spent his twenties and thirties smoking Marlboros and weed. He has deep wrinkles on his cheeks and under his sunken eyes. Straight brown hair parted in the middle and an unruly beard. And he keeps telling me the same thing: "John, you know what I learned in Vietnam? Don't sweat the small stuff."

Pete tells me this one night as I stare down at the carcass of a fetal pig we are dissecting. Scalpel in my left hand. The pig, about the size of a hairless gerbil, lies in an aluminum tray filled with black paraffin wax.

Pete has pinned each of the legs so we can get at its major organs. I can't cut into this thing. I can barely look at it. I have no great love for pigs and will down three or four BLTs whenever my father makes them, but the thought that blood had pumped through this creature's veins keeps poking at my brain. It's now as lifeless as the snakes and rats floating in jars of formaldehyde that the instructor showed us. This rubbery, lifeless pig is waiting for me to remove its heart and lungs.

"What's the matter?" Pete asks.

"Um, yeah. I'm going to let you do it," I say. Hand him the scalpel. That's when he tells me about Vietnam and the sweating of small stuff.

Pete goes to work on the pig, and as he removes each organ, I write the name in my lab book. Stomach. Intestines. Lungs. Heart.

The company that supplies the pigs injects blue and red rubber into the veins and the arteries, and near the end of class I'm brave enough to lift a strand of blue and red with the scalpel.

Pete's on disability and drives a 1979 taxicab-yellow Corvette. He gives me a ride home sometimes. On the way, he lights up a cigarette and tells me stories. "Some of the shit I saw in Nam you would not believe," he says.

Sitting in a black-vinyl bucket seat, I look at him and wonder how a guy on Disability can afford a Corvette and wonder how I can get on Disability. I would settle for getting my driver's license. Sam played chauffer so much while we were in high school that I never got around to learning how to drive. When I was taking classes at the South Bend campus, my father drove me to campus on his way to work. Now he gives me a ride to and from my biology class—except when Pete can drive—and I walk to work at Krogers.

Pete tells me I have to learn to block shit like that pig dissection out of my mind. Not let it get to me. If little stuff like a fetal pig gets to me, what's going to happen when the real shit hits the fan? I nod in agreement. Open the door when we pull up to my house. Thank him for the ride. At home, I try to sleep and avoid the Stones book.

*

Chapter Four

One Bad Apple

A crowd of fourth graders stands around a classroom door. The boys try to grab each other and swing rolled up

workbooks toward each other's necks. CCD class. The Catholic version of Sunday school. After church on Sunday, I take my CCD workbook and walk across the parking lot to St. Thomas School. Built before the church, the one-story brick building has glass bricks for the lower part of the windows and regular windows for the upper part. Inside the halls and classrooms, the walls are these pale yellow glazed bricks.

Most of us are dressed in school clothes. I wear my brown Toughskins, a plaid dress shirt, and tennis shoes. I walk up to the edge of the crowd. Keep my back to everyone and wonder when this will be over.

"Come on, man," one boy says, rubbing the back of his neck.

"Don't be a wuss," another says.

Thwack! I hear the sound and feel the sting on the back of my neck at the same time.

"How's it going, Mongrel?" Tommy Simmons asks, his rolled up workbook still in right hand. I rub my neck and look for a target. It doesn't have to be Tommy. Anyone will work. I watch Mike Perry spin away from another student's blow and I strike. Two hands around the workbook. Right on the neck below the hairline.

"Monger, quit being an asshole," Perry says.

After taking our swings, we keep our backs to the wall until the CCD teacher arrives. In the class, the teacher tells us something about Jesus or Moses and the Israelites. The classes were usually taught by parents. Only once did a nun teach the class.

These classes continue through high school, but I will not remember a single lesson. I have more memories of the weird religious shows we watch on Sundays before church. It must have been a sin to show cartoons on Sunday mornings, and we are desperate for something to watch. Most storylines are about Jesus. Some are about the minor players, like Doubting Thomas or Judas Iscariot. Those shows give always give me the same feeling I have at the end of summer.

*

Chapter Five

I Can't Explain

My attacks are happening so often I try to tell my father. There's something wrong. The first time I try to tell him I'm careful to avoid words like crazy or nervous breakdown. I tell him that I don't feel well and need to go see the doctor. If I can get a doctor's appointment, I'll tell *him* I'm a raving lunatic. The doctor sees me but finds nothing

wrong. I never tell him about being mad. I mumble something about being short of breath and having sweating hands.

I talk to my father again one Sunday night. He's in bed reading. I avoid looking at him when I say I think I need to talk to someone. He wants me to explain what's happening. I don't tell him, but it feels like being caught by a black hole. As its gravity pulls me in, I see the breach, but there is nothing I can do to free myself. I know I will be hurled out the other side, but don't know whether it will be the same universe, if the same laws of physics will apply. Will I be crushed by its density? Will I survive the trip? My father tells me to give it some time and I'll feel better.

*

Chapter Six

Open My Eyes

An early spring day. The snow is gone but none of the trees have leaves yet. The sky is a uniform white cloud. Nine year olds, girls in pastel dresses, boys in jackets and ties, wait to receive first communion.

We line up inside the hallway of the school, standing between our parents. Three altar boys get ready to lead us. The tallest boy stands in the middle, holding a gold cross

on a long pole. The boy on his right holds a candle, the one on the left holds the Bible. The entire group walks out the school doors then straight across the parking lot. We enter the church through the front doors.

What happens in communion? You wait in line to go up to the altar. When it's your turn, the priest says, "The body and blood of Christ" and you reply, "Amen." Then you get the bread, a wafer that dissolves like a piece of paper in your mouth, only slightly thicker than paper. Like that paste you would make out from flour and water in elementary school-except someone has taken that paste, rolled it into thin sheets, cut circles the size of silver dollars from the sheets, and dried them.

*

Chapter Seven

Love in Vain

The room is a standard-issue hospital room, a bed, two chairs, medical charts, and that smell, the unending battle between disinfectant and shit.

We walk in and gather around my mother's bed. The covers pulled up to her chest, she is hard to recognize. Her eyes seem to have sunk into her head. Her bloated

belly, thin arms hanging at her sides make her look like one of those starving Ethiopian kids on the evening news. This is the first time I've seen her since that day she left for the hospital. The white sheets, blanket and pillows make the color of her skin more yellow.

The adults do almost all the talking. My father talks about church. Tom and Beth talk about drive back to West Lafayette. I keep looking out the window at the gray sky and a bare tree shuddering as the wind whips it.

"Burp." My mother slowly puts her hand up to her mouth. Beth makes a comment about my mother's burp being a sign of good health. What I don't hear is what my mother says to Tom when he leans over to tell her they are driving back to Purdue this afternoon: "Take me with you."

*

Chapter Eight

In Dreams

Every year, about a week before Thanksgiving, my father brings home a 3'X3' cardboard tray filled with a dozen loaves of day-old white bread. He has some kind of deal with the bakery and brings home a tray like this once or

twice a month. He usually leaves two loaves out and puts the rest in the freezer in the garage.

Several days before Thanksgiving—and even on Christmases when we would have turkey instead of ham—we make the stuffing. My parents bring out the roasting pan and lid. They put them in the middle of the dining room table and get out seven or eight loaves of white bread.

Once everything is in place, we begin. Liz, Matt, and I grab a few slices of bread and start tearing them into pieces and throwing the pieces into the pans. The pieces are Crouton size. It is like we are preparing a huge meal for birds.

We race each other, using our own technique to get through faster. Once we tear apart each loaf, emptied sacks and crumbs covering the table, my mother takes the pan to the kitchen, opens the oven door, and puts the stuffing in to dry. Several times a day one of my parents will open the oven and stir the stuffing so the bread dries evenly.

That's one way we know a holiday is coming. There is so much food to prepare. Having twenty-five guests for Thanksgiving or Christmas isn't unusual. My father buys turkeys that test the roasting pan's limits. They are bigger than our neighbor's dogs, the Maxwell's two tan Scotties. On holiday mornings, my father puts the bird in

the oven by the time we eat breakfast. My mother cooks most meals, but my father cooks more than any of my friends' fathers. That's his hobby. He handles the turkey or ham, and my mother does the side dishes.

*

On weekends, my father makes bread. In the same slacks he wears to work—I don't think he has any pants that he doesn't wear to work—and one of his white tee shirts, he starts the dough early in the morning and lets it rise. He has a few tee shirts that he can wear: the gray shirt with the Monger crest on it; the Marshall Tucker Band concert tee that one of my brothers bought him for his birthday; a Purdue tee. That's about it.

We watch him punch his fist into the swollen dough, and then he sets it aside to rise again. He spreads flour on the cutting board over the dishwasher. With his red handlebar mustache and gray hair, if he wasn't in our kitchen, you might mistake him for a baker in some small town in Germany. He works over the dough like he's mad. He kneads the dough with the base of his hand, the heel. That's the way you are supposed to do it, he says. After kneading for a few minutes, he scrapes the dough from the cutting board and then throws down a handful of flour. When

he is finished, he cuts the dough in half to make two long loaves, baguettes. He has a pan that looks like a stovepipe cut in half and then the two halves were welded to each other. When the loaves are swollen again, he puts them in the oven.

*

One night, he makes us seaweed. He's boiled long narrow strips and put them on our plates. It isn't the only thing we have to eat that night, but it's the only thing I can remember. The seaweed has a salty taste, like the ocean, and the texture is slimy and chewy at the same time, like eating strips of vinyl cut from a three-ring binder.

Another time he makes us peanut stew. He tells us it's a dish from Thailand. Where's that? We ask. A country near China. He cooks the dish in the orange stew pot, and it smells like peanut butter and pork. The peanut butter is dark and thin, almost like caramel. When he scoops it onto my plate, I stare at the peanut butter puddle on my plate. The hunks of pork are visible. A thin layer of oil floats on top of the sauce, like the layer on the natural peanut butter that my father buys sometimes. You have to stir in the layer of oil so the peanut butter for your sandwich isn't too thick. Disgusting. Why would anybody put meat in peanut butter? What's wrong with grape jelly?

*

My father loves wine. We have the only house in the neighborhood with a wine cellar. That sounds fancy, but it's really a glorified storm shelter. Since most of our house was built on a slab, he didn't have anywhere to put his growing wine collection, so he had a 10' by 15' cellar built in the backyard. To keep the temperature constant in the summer, he runs a garden hose from the spigot on the side of the house to the wine cellar where it's attached to a copper coil inside the cellar. The water running through the coil acts as an air conditioner.

When we go down into the cellar during tornado or thunderstorm warnings, we have to walk down steep steps, more like a ladder than steps. The wine racks are along the south and west walls. Behind the stairs are shorter wine racks. Boxes of wine sit on the floor. We sit on the lawn furniture we store in the basement: lawn chairs, a chaise lounge. The place smells of disintegrating wine labels, damp cork and mildewed pine steps. Today, anytime I smell wet cedar, I think back to sitting in that cellar and wondering if the storm passing above would rip off the cellar doors, their spinning shapes vanishing into the sky.

*

Chapter Nine

I Wanna Be Sedated

February 1987. A few days after my appointment with Dr. Dakin, our family doctor, my father tells me I have an appointment with a psychiatrist. I risk letting out my secret insanity, but I feel relief. Maybe this psychiatrist will have some answers about what is happening to me. There is still hope that the tests Dr. Dakin is running will tell me my thyroid is the size of a billiard ball or a tumor has taken over my brainpan. Maybe after a series of exposures to radiation and surgery to remove said tumor, I will be normal.

On the appointed day, sometime in mid to late February, my father and I get into the car—he drives—and proceed outside of town, past Pierre Moran Mall, named in honor of a long dead Potawatomi Indian Chief. We sit silently as we drive into the country. Most of the snow has melted, rows of corn stalks alternate with strips of snow. I never feel like talking in the car, unless my friends and I have had a few beers, and I'm not sure what we would talk about right now. ("So dad, do you think they'll lock me up today?")

After about ten minutes, we pull up to a small house surrounded by cornfields. At the end of the driveway, a detached garage has been converted into the doctor's office. The reception area is the size of a bedroom and has the requisite potted plants and calming beige wall covering. I sit down while my father tells the receptionist I have an appointment. I love waiting rooms and reception areas because of the magazines. I will read almost anything put on those end tables.

As we wait, I hear muffled voices talking on the other side of the door across the room. Who is on the other side of that door? And what problem is so big that they need a psychiatrist to solve? Soon two middle-aged men walk through the door, one in jeans and a work shirt, the other in slacks and a yellow sweater.

After saying goodbye to the man in the work shirt, the man in the yellow sweater walks up to me and says, "Hi, John. I'm Dr. Garner. Come in."

My father stays in his seat, and the doctor and I go into his office. Two chairs on my side of the desk. No couch. Woody Allen gets a couch. We sit on opposite sides of his desk. It feels more like my high school counselor's office than a psychiatrist's office.

"So, John, tell me what's been going on," he says.

I describe the attacks. I leave out Brian Jones and the Stones. Leave out the girl walking down Kilbourn Street. Dr. Garner asks me how I'm sleeping and eating and feeling and if I ever had thoughts about committing suicide.

No.

If I ever thought about hurting myself?

No. (Except with alcohol.)

If I ever heard voices of people who weren't there?

No. (My own voice is making too much noise inside my brain.)

Any history of mental illness in the family? I tell him about my mother going to Oaklawn. Any family history of the type of attack that I described? I'm not sure, I say. After more questions, he pulls a small, spiral-bound book from the shelves behind him, begins to thumb through it, then he asks a few more questions: Does anything seem to trigger these attacks? What happens during an attack?

I say, "It feels like the top of my head is about to lift off. My hands sweat and my heart races. It's like I need to run away or escape, but I don't know what I'm running from or where to go."

"Mm-Hm."

Dr. Garner puts the spiral-bound book down on his desk and tells me what I'm suffering from are panic attacks and the condition tends to run in families.

"There is no cure," he says, "but medication can often control it. In many cases, the condition can be managed. Sometimes it goes away. In certain people, it's a chronic condition."

He also says I seem to be suffering from depression probably as a result of the panic attacks and the uncertainty about not knowing what was happening to me. He wants to start me on an antidepressant and says something about the new line of tricyclic antidepressants having serendipitous effect for people with panic attacks.

So I'm not crazy? I don't ask him this, but I guess I feel relieved. I understand what's going on, but having these episodes for the rest of my life doesn't sound appealing.

"Okay. John, I'm going to ask your father to come in for a few minutes."

*

When my father comes in, I find out that he had something similar when he was younger. Jerk. Why did he act like I needed to get tougher? Dr. Garner looks at my father. "I think we should meet twice a week initially. Since John is

so quiet, we probably don't need to meet for a full hour. We'll only schedule half-hour sessions. Okay?"

He hands me the prescription and we return to the reception to set up my appointments. As my father and I leave Dr. Garner's office, the late afternoon sun is trying to melt the remaining snow. On our way home, I look at the cryptic scribbling on the prescription but can't make out the instructions.

*

Chapter Ten

You've Got to Hide Your Love Away

Summer 1980: The first time I notice my mother acting weird is after I return from a Chicago White Sox baseball game with my father and younger brother. I walk in the house through the garage into the utility room then into the kitchen. As I walk out of the kitchen, I see that she has taken one of our white linen bed sheets and spread it on the living room floor. She sits on the sheet next to my sister Liz. Leaning on her right arm, her legs bent, her left arm draped on her hip, my mother looks as if she is having a picnic in the middle of our living room.

We have the ugliest dusty-rose carpet with a brown and mustard yellow cross pattern, like a wool blanket stretched across the concrete slab foundation of our ranch house. Why anyone would want to relax in the middle of our living room? Especially since it is so far away from the television. Compared to everything that follows, spreading a sheet out in the living room doesn't seem that strange, but from this moment on, I pay closer attention to anything that doesn't fit the life I have always known.

*

After pounding Matt, I go in my room, shut the door, and lay on my bed looking at a magazine. A few minutes later, Mom shoves open the door and walks over to my bed. Grabs my arms.

"What's the matter with you? Do you know what you did to your brother?"

"I didn't start it."

She continues to yell at me, but I don't hear her. I see her mouth moving and a piece of food that has flown out of her mouth and landed on her lower lip. I wonder if now is a good time to tell her she has food on her mouth. I will wait. She's never yelled at me like this before and with everything else going on, I hate her for it. What's

the matter with her? Matt and I get into a fight practically on the hour. What's so different about this one?

*

After consulting with our family doctor, my father sends her to Oaklawn, a local mental health clinic, to be treated for depression, but her mood and behavior are only symptoms. She begins seeing a counselor and eventually is admitted. My father brings the kids out for a group session, and we look at pictures that our mother has painted of herself in Hell.

*

A few weeks before Halloween, my cousin Kevin comes to visit. On a cool, fall afternoon, Matt and, I are sitting in my bedroom looking at a dirty magazine Kevin brought with him. I have a *Playboy* that I found lying in the alley behind our house, but this magazine has sex and other stuff in it. Kevin is two years younger than me and a few months older than Matt. So anyway, he is staying in my bedroom.

He asks us, "You guys want to sneak out tonight? I brought some Cigs, and we could steal some bars of soap. Go soap some cars."

"I don't know," I say. "We'd have to walk past Mom and Dad's bedroom to get out the door."

"We could go out this window," he says, pointing to my bedroom window that faces Fulton Street.

I tell him that doing that will make too much noise. "Plus," I add, "somebody driving by might see us and call the cops."

"If we wait until after midnight, I bet we can get out without anybody hearing."

Kevin has always had the confidence I wish I had. He will introduce me to grass before Thanksgiving dinner when I'm in tenth grade. We open all the windows in my bedroom and smoke the joint he's brought. Afterward, I spray the air with Brüt deodorant to hide the odor.

"Okay," I tell him. We make plans to sneak out of the house after everyone is asleep.

I continue, "We'll pretend to go to bed and at midnight, and then come and get you, Matt. We can go out the utility room door."

We eat dinner with my parents and Liz, then watch television, the *Incredible Hulk*. Before going into my bedroom, I grab a bar of soap from the bathroom sink and a new bar from the hall closet outside my bedroom door. We take our jackets to bed with us and get in bed with our clothes on. I don't have a clock in my room, so we listen to the radio to find out the time, but we never hear it.

When we think it's near midnight, Kevin gets his cigarettes and we put on our jackets. I grab the soap and slowly open my bedroom door. The house is dark. Even the decorative light in the hallway outside the bathroom that is always on, for some reason, has been turned off. We open Matt's bedroom door to get him. When he is ready, we walk out his door and around the corner to the living room.

Once we round the corner, I see the outline of the figure's head and shoulders in the rocking chair, even though the lights are out and the curtains are closed. The rocking chair stops moving.

"Mom?"

"What are you boys doing?" she asks. "It's late."

"Uh, we were going outside for a little while," I tell her because I can't think of another excuse. "How come you're out here?"

"I don't think that's a good idea," she says. "We've had some problems when the other boys went out too late at night."

She says this as if my brothers got into trouble over the last few months, but they have all graduated from high school. The youngest graduated four years ago.

"All right," I say, "we'll just go back to bed."

"Okay."

We leave her sitting alone in the dark and go back to bed.

*

Not long after the night at Oaklawn, my father calls us into the entryway, a patch of vinyl between the dining room and living room that looks like white stone tile. He and my mother have their coats on, and he is carrying a small suitcase.

"Kids, your mother's going into the hospital for a few days so they can run some tests."

My mother isn't saying anything, and they aren't acting as if it's a big deal, but she's not going to the hospital for tests. She keeps things inside. She listens to everyone else, but has trouble saying what she is feeling. Sometimes she writes notes to my father about something that is bothering her. Last year, she wrote him a letter about our dog Sugar Ray. We had gotten this dog from the pound, and she felt like she was the only one taking care of it, so she wrote this letter to my father asking him and the three kids (me, Liz, Matt) to help her. Saying it out loud was too difficult for her.

My mother has eyes that seem to hold something back, things she has left unsaid. Even in pictures she regards the camera with suspicion. Why do you want to take my

picture? In a photo taken on her birthday, a store-bought birthday cake sits in the middle of the dining room table. Next to the cake is a stack of plates. She is wearing one of those sweaters that ties like a short robe. She must have been to the hair dressers. Tom and Charlie, goofy expressions on their faces, look at her as if she is about to say something. Liz, Matt, and I, three long hairs, smile at the camera. I wave. My mother is smiling but there is something far away about her expression, as if she is already gone.

 Holding the door open, my father says, "There are leftovers in the fridge. I'll be home later this evening."

 At that moment, I know she will never come back to our house. Ever. I don't know why or how, but this is one of the most important moments of my life. I tell myself not to forget her standing in front of our white storm door. This is important. You have to remember. Remember that she was here once. That she was real and not some figment of your imagination. Who else will remember?

*

Chapter Eleven

Should I Stay or Should I Go

This morning I don't want to get out of bed—as usual. I see

the little candlelight on out in the hallway, the one we use as a night light in case anybody has to pee in the middle of the night. The dim, yellow light reflecting off the dark, knotty pine walls makes the hallway look like a mineshaft.

I get out of bed and step over copies of *Sports Illustrated*, the Sunday edition of *The Elkhart Truth* and books scattered on the carpet of my room and into the hall. It will be dark for another hour. Liz's door across the hall is open, so I know she is awake. I notice the door to Matt's room is nearly shut, he's still asleep.

Our hallway: a picture of my great-grandfather Monger is across the hall to the right of Liz's bedroom door. He has gray hair and glasses and is balding. He looks like some old businessman, which he was.

Next is a picture of my grandfather Thulis, my mother's father. A Chicago fireman. Irish Catholic. A hairstyle from the 1920s on his oval shaped head, sitting on an oval shaped body. He died when my mother was young, so my grandmother brought the three girls and my uncle to live in Elkhart. When my father wanted to marry my mother, he had to take all these classes and convert. At first, his family—Congregationalists—thought Catholicism was some kind of weird cult. Eventually they saw the same thing in my

mother that he saw: a quiet person who was easy to talk to. A good listener. My parents started having kids in 1949 and didn't stop until 1969. My mother had nine live births—seven boys and two girls—and one miscarriage. They were strict Catholics.

Then a picture of the six oldest kids. Their faces surrounded by white, as if they were appearing through a cloud. Bill, who is the oldest, is stocky. The others skinny. Tom is the baby. Mary is the only girl. Next is a picture taken a few years later with the five oldest boys. My father stands behind them. Hair and tie askew. Tom, two or three years old, holds a toy cat in his lap so he won't cry. Charlie and Bob sit next to him. Charlie's shoes are separating from the soles. Bill stands to one side of my father. Tim on the other.

When I get to the bathroom, I find the door closed. Liz has beaten me to the punch. I'm not anxious to get ready for school anyway. Westside is full of cretins and miscreants as far as I'm concerned. I am halfway through eighth grade and I never get my homework done. Usually don't even look at it. I watch television or read magazines until my parents tell me to get to bed. Then sneak the black and white television set into my room.

I decide to doze while I wait for Liz. I sit down on the blue loveseat with a floral pattern in the living room, underneath my favorite painting, "Hunters in the Snow" by Pieter Bruegel. Most paintings are like photographs, a picture of a person or a scene. But this painting tells a whole story. The hunters, in the lower left corner, stand on top of a hill overlooking a small village. The hunters have their guns and carry small animals. A pack of dogs follows them. The village is in the middle of a winter day. Snow covers the ground. Smoke drifts from chimneys. A frozen pond is the center of activity. Ice skaters. A gray-green sky.

Next to that painting is one of a weird-looking girl with the frizzy, blonde hair. The girl's expression is like Mona Lisa. She isn't smiling, but she has a calm, watchful expression on her face. A smock or vest that looks like a tank top over a dark dress. The other painting depicts Jesus with angels swirling around him.

*

I have a clear view of the door, so when Liz is finished, Matt will have to wait in line. The rest of the house-- dining room, TV room--is still dark. The florescent light above the kitchen sink is on, but it's not bright enough to bother me. I want to doze until it's my turn to take a

shower. My father doesn't seem to be up yet. He usually leaves early for work, but not this early.

After nodding off for a few minutes, I see my father walk out of the TV room. He says nothing and doesn't acknowledge my presence. Just paces, back and forth across the entryway. That's where we set up our Nerf basketball hoop. During halftimes of Saturday TV games, or after school in the winter, Matt and I—and sometimes our older brothers if they are around—play.

My father gently kicks a regulation basketball that's sitting by the front door. It rolls slowly toward the closet doors. He is dressed for work, short-sleeve shirt, brown polyester slacks. He looks like one of those guys working at NASA Mission Control, working behind those huge banks of computers. Standard attire for an electrical engineer. His handlebar mustache is one of the few signs of his personality. He pauses to stare out the front door window, one arm folded across his chest, the other holding the glasses up to his mouth. I wonder what he could be looking at since he has the eyesight of a mole. Liz opens the bathroom door and I stand up. My father puts his glasses on and walks over to us.

"I have to tell both of you something," he says, as Liz and I stand next to the couch. "The hospital called

this morning. Your mother took a turn for the worse. They didn't think she would make it through the night, so they called and I went over. She died at 2:40 this morning."

Liz rushes into my father's arms. I turn and rush into the bathroom. Slam the door. Fucker. You bastard. I stand over the sink and cry. I knew it. I knew she wasn't coming home. We all knew, but no one said anything. After a few minutes, I look in the mirror. My eyes are flames.

*

When I open the bathroom, I see Matt sitting in the living room. My sister Mary must've slept on the couch in the TV room because she's awake too. My father, who looks even more like he should be my grandfather than he usually does, begins the phone calls. They are all the same. To Aunt Marge and my grandmother in Florida. To my brothers and their wives. To Uncle Ned and Aunt Flo in Normal. My brother Bob is on leave from the Air Force and is somewhere between San Bernardino and home.

Around eight o'clock, my father says to Liz, Matt and me, "I'll leave it up to you to decide whether you want to go to school today." Leave it up to me? I don't like school on a normal day. No way I'm going to miss out on a chance to skip.

"I'm gonna stay home," I say.

Matt and Liz decide they would rather go. They're both better students anyway. But the first relatives have arrived. I feel giddy. This is what I need. A party. Like Christmas and Thanksgiving when the house is full. So many conversations I can't keep track of them all. The rooms of our 1940s ranch home come alive with noise. My family at its best. At least one television with a football game on and my brothers crowded around, yelling at the screen about a ref's call or a bonehead play. I want everyone around again.

Everything's been so depressing lately, but the family is coming. We all have to stay together. No one can leave for school or a job or to join the military or die. Everyone has to stay right here, so things will always be the same. Like when I was smaller and I would imagine we would live for hundreds of years like the characters in the Bible.

My father keeps making the same call, like a telemarketer. It's a variation of what he said to Liz and me this morning: "Turn for the worse... didn't think she would make it through the night... died 2:40." That's okay because these calls will bring more people. I wait.

*

After Liz and Matt leave for school, relatives and visitors

arrive. They speak English, but it seems like a foreign language. I recognize their gestures and watch their mouths move, but I don't understand this language. I'm happy to have them here. I'm so happy to have them I keep breaking into a big smile and almost laugh, but I shouldn't laugh. My mother is dead. Sometimes I nod and smile faintly, as if they were friendly tourists from Belgium. I wish I understood you, but I'm happy to have you here anyway. They continue to speak this strange tongue most of the day.

Tom and Beth arrive with her daughter Ruth near noon. Tom looks like a trucker after a cross-country haul. Thin face. Tired eyes. He sits sideways in my father's chair at the dining room table. One leg propped up on a support bar. He has dark hair. Not dark brown like mine will be in a few years, but black. The only one in a family of blonde and brown hair. Recessive gene, I guess.

Yesterday, they made the same trip in reverse, returning to West Lafayette after a weekend visit to see my mother in the hospital. Tom is the closest in age to the three youngest kids. He moved out about three years ago. Of my older brothers, he seems the most like me. A fuck up.

He started going to Purdue about a year ago and soon he'll become an engineer like our father. In a few years, Tom will knock on the door, having driven up from Purdue in

record time, and pour champagne over his head to celebrate finding a job. But not right now. At this moment, he doesn't look like a young father, but like a kid himself. Like me.

During the afternoon, I feel happy, almost to the point of laughing. I have to put my hand over my mouth sometimes to hide a smile. I realize I shouldn't, but I can't help myself. I no longer have to wait. Those who haven't arrived are on their way. Except Bob. He's a mechanic on the C-130 Hercules cargo plane. It's has a rump that open on the back and is big enough to carry helicopters. We think my brother is somewhere in Nevada because he left Edwards Air Force Base when his leave began on Saturday. My father makes some calls to the base to see if we can contact him. Uncle Ned, whose soft features remind me of my father, calls the Nevada Highway Patrol.

He gives them the information, "He's in a metallic blue Dodge Colt. License plate..." The Colt has an all-white interior, and Bob paid \$4000 cash for it when he was home on leave a few months ago. He started his military service at a base in Southern Illinois, but has been out in California for two years. He will get out of the service and return home to live with us for two years before signing up again.

*

By evening, all the lights in our house are on: the fluorescent lights in the kitchen, the electric candles on the chandelier above the dining room table, the floor lamps in the living room. All of them. I sit at the dining room table in my father's chair, where Tom sat hours earlier. My family has gathered and just as quickly scattered all day, leaves caught in a whirlwind. It is a drizzling, cold evening, but the house is too bright, the lights too harsh, like stepping into the sunlight from a windowless room.

I stay in my father's seat, afraid the ground will give way if I stand. With my back toward the table, I watch a procession of family friends and neighbors file through the front door, neighbors who have never been inside our house before, who under most circumstances don't seem to give a shit about our family. My father greets them at the door. He looks like he slept in his clothes.

"We're so sorry, Bob," Mr. Luce tells my father--what everyone has been telling my father.

"It was good of you to come, Gary" he says. "Come in and have something to eat."

Everyone brings various offerings. Even with all the people at the house, tonight doesn't feel like Christmas or Thanksgiving. It's staged. The Luces brought over a turkey.

Jesus, who the hell feels like eating? All the food coming through the front door crowds the kitchen counter. Green bean casserole. Macaroni and cheese. Mashed potatoes. Pans still covered in aluminum foil. I watch. I'd just as soon throw it all in the garbage.

Looking at the scene already fading from my sight, I wonder how I knew my mother wasn't coming home. Which of the little hints over the last four months told me? Pieces that sometimes fit together like a puzzle: the time we found her sitting in the rocking chair in the darkness, the childlike pictures that she drew at Oaklawn to show us her feelings. Other pieces that don't fit: her silence about what was happening. The day she left for the hospital, I knew she wouldn't return. Part of me didn't want her to come back. She ruined everything.

*

Chapter Twelve

Psychocandy

At first, the meds Dr. Garner prescribed make me sleepy. Matt and I go to a movie with Chip Pforde and Ryan Becker. During the movie, I fall asleep. A few days later, we watch a movie in Chip's basement and I wake up during the final credits. I'm going from a spastic to a narcoleptic.

A few days after my first appointment with Dr. Garner, our family doctor's office calls about my test results. Dr. Dakin's nurse tells me the results are negative. No physical problems. Normal thyroid. No tumors. Damn. I thank the nurse for calling and hang up. A few minutes later, the phone rings again.

"Hi, John. This is Dr. Garner. I just got a call from a nurse at Dr. Dakin's office and she was concerned. She said that when she told you the tests came back negative the tone of your voice sounded disappointed. She was concerned that you might try to hurt yourself. Are you having any thoughts of suicide? Or thoughts of hurting yourself?"

Huh? Sure, I was disappointed. If something was physically wrong with me that would be okay. Having something mentally wrong with me isn't okay. I have lost too many other things and now I am losing myself. I can picture myself shuffling around the ward with the cast of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, or sitting in a rocking chair looking out at an expanse of green lawn wondering who the hell I am.

Dr. Garner tells me he wants to try a different antidepressant and another drug, Thorazine, which I've heard about through television shows—and the Ramones. Crazy

people take Thorazine. I know this for a fact. Does he suspect that something serious is wrong with me but isn't telling me? The old worries about straightjackets and shock therapy and an ice-pick lobotomy come back. Soon, I'll be planning my escape from the state hospital with Big Chief.

*

The Thorazine doesn't have the same effect as the antidepressants. It makes me feel like I'm wearing blinders, a mule walking around in a circle all day. At my next appointment with Dr. Garner, I tell him about not liking how the Thorazine makes me feel.

"How do you mean?"

"It makes me feel like I'm in a room with people, but I'm invisible. Like I'm just watching what's happening like it was a TV show."

"Are you still having panic attacks?"

I tell him I am.

"Let's try this. Instead of the Thorazine, let's try Valium in combination with the antidepressant." He writes out another prescription.

*

Chapter Thirteen

How Soon Is Now

Two days before the viewing, I try on the suit that I wore to my sixth-grade graduation. It's the same color as the Phillie Phanatic road uniforms, a kind of pale sea blue. But the suit is too small, so my father takes me out before the viewing to buy me gray pants and a V-neck sweater that's also gray but a shade lighter. I'm ready.

*

On the day of the viewing, we drive past the entrance of Walley-Mills-Zimmerman funeral home on East Jackson and park on the side of the building. It was built during the era of Ranch houses. My father shortens the name to "Walley-Mills" in conversation. The building's roof gently slopes from its peak and covers driveways on both sides. The entrance is in the middle. We park on the east side of the building and walk through the glass doors. The windows continue up to the roofline.

After we hang up our coats, I stand in the lobby. It doesn't matter who is next to me. Anyone will do. The lobby of Walley-Mills has a dozen chairs and couches with pink velvet upholstery. On either side of the lobby are paneled walls with sliding doors. Only one door is open. Three of my brothers stand outside talking. My sister Mary and some other relatives are talking inside. People put their hands on my shoulders or hug me. I don't want any part of this.

I am not going in that room. A crowd stands next to the coat rack. I wedge myself between the winter coats and the crowd. When that crowd thins out, I discover the lounge on the other side of the coat rack. There's nothing to be scared of.

In the lounge, people lean against the wall or counter holding Styrofoam coffee cups. A few people sit at the small table. I lean against the counter. I'm invisible. I'm a cousin from Chicago that no one recognizes. Aunt Virginia, my mother's youngest sister, curls her hand around my right arm and starts to guide me out of the lounge.

"John, I know it's tough," she tells me in her high-pitched whisper.

Tough? *Your* mother is still here. She has outlived three of her four children.

"I'm going in," I nod looking toward the window, "in a little bit." My eyes well when I look people in the eyes.

"Your mom would've wanted you to see her one last time."

"Yeah."

*

I escape to the foyer near the entrance. My sister-in-law puts her hand on my back and tells me all the reasons why

it's okay to come in. I listen then move to the sidewalk out front. I'm not going in there. That world can go on without me. They don't understand. If I go in there, that means she's dead. Up to now it's been playacting. Going through the motions. None of it means anything.

Outside the funeral home, I sit on the edge of the walk. I don't want anyone looking at me, but people can see through the window in the lounge to where I'm sitting. Shivering.

My aunt again. I stand.

"John, you are going to regret it if you don't see her."

She's right, but I can't figure out how to do it.

She puts her arm around my shoulders and walks me back through the door. Through the lobby. Into the viewing room. To the left, folding chairs line the wall and continue around the back of the room, forming a "U." The flower arrangements in white plastic vases block my view of the casket. I want to take things slowly. Maybe go back into the lobby, but my aunt holds onto me.

I see the casket through the flowers. Stained wood. Bronze handrails. I walk to the middle of the room. Run to the door, I tell myself. I don't.

Her face is still yellow. Her gray hair has been

curled. She is wearing her glasses. Last Sunday, at the hospital, her stomach was bloated like those African kids on television. She looks better, but her skin looks like wax. I breathe.

*

Chapter Fourteen

Tombstone Blues

So by week three of our sessions, Dr. Garner and I start talking about my mother's death and the funeral. I never talked about my mother's death with any of my brothers or sisters. Not once. We went through an experience that only we know exactly what it was like, what it meant, but we never talked about it with each other, like we all took separate paths through the same maze.

Our family simply wasn't built for that, but what was it built for? Wasn't that the time we should have been at our best? What does it say about us that we spent all our time together dancing around the subject? On holidays after my mother's death, there has always been a deep silence between us. We need anything to break that silence: wives, children, football games, anything to avoid being surrounded by that heavy silence. The closest I had come to

talking about her death was my conversation with my history teacher Mr. Whitmer in the hallway at West Side—and some drunken hysterics with Matt.

I tell Dr. Garner about the viewing, how I didn't want to see the body. "You did eventually look at the body, right?" he asks. He looks concerned. "Not looking at the body can cause some special problems later on."

"Eventually, I did. By the end of the night, I was able to stand in the room with the casket. But it was creepy."

When I reach that point in the story, I have nowhere left to hide. No panic attacks. No clinical diagnosis. No alcohol or anger. I'm a kid who misses his mom. Dr. Garner hands me a box of Kleenex. He leaves the room and returns with my father a few moments later.

"Mr. Monger, I think John has some unresolved grief over his mother's death."

"I'm not surprised," my father says. "We all had a difficult time coming to terms with it."

"I would like you to sit in on our next couple of sessions."

"I can do that."

"Good. I think this is something John needs to talk about before he can move forward."

*

Chapter Fifteen

In My Room

Cold crawls over my bones making me wish I had worn a jacket. Wind whirls around the group of us clustered under the green tent. The November sky churns above like smoke. A shopping center is across the street. To the south is the railroad yard.

The thought of her spending eternity here makes me feel trapped. Why? Is there some part, some essence of her out there somewhere? When we think of ghosts, are we really talking about those who haunt our memories? Is that how people live on? Are we comforting ourselves by thinking that there is something else?

Around the casket, people lean against each other, trying to find what little shelter we can. My sister-in-law places her arm around me because I haven't dressed for the weather. "You'll catch your death of cold," my mother would say. As the crowd thins, we linger by the mound of dirt and the hole in the ground, eventually leaving only family. November days in Indiana will always feel this way.

*

After the funeral we go back to church for a luncheon, then we return home. I worry about what is going to happen to Liz, Matt, and me. The three of us are almost a second family, a little like an afterthought. We hear tales of that older family: the boys throwing newspaper stuffed dummies out of trees into oncoming traffic. I have seen television shows where kids who lose their mother have to go live with relatives—or worse in an orphanage. Will my father send us to live with my mother's youngest sister and her husband? Aunt Virginia and Uncle Carl do have a shuffleboard court in their basement, but they seem even older than my father. What if he sends us to live with my oldest brother and his wife? Not good. I'm still recovering from the time they watched us when our parents went to San Francisco on vacation. Where are we going to go? What if no one can take us in?

*

On Saturday after the funeral, the family crowds into the TV room. It's like a family room, but all we do there is watch television. A fireplace separates the dining room and TV room. The cool thing about the fireplace is that we can walk all the way around it—or chase each other around it. We used to take crayons and draw lines in the cement between the bricks, all the way around the chimney. The

couch, love seat, and wing chair are all crowded with family—even the Ottoman, which we don't call an Ottoman because we don't know that's what it's called. For us, it's that thing we sit on to be closer to the television.

Nanny, my father's mother, and Kevin, my cousin is eleven but acts older than me, are the ones who really want to watch. They want to find out who shot JR on Dallas.

I squeeze onto the love seat to watch, but I can't sit still. I don't understand how you give up. You leave the three of us with that a-hole. Why? We got cheated. If my mother really cared, I think, she would have fought. She would have found a way, some way, to stay alive. She wouldn't have walked out our front door that day. She would have said, Let's go to a hospital in Chicago or to the Mayo Clinic. You don't go quietly. That was something that I always understood about my family: We were a bunch of stubborn bastards. How could she let go so easily? It's like sneaking away under the cover of darkness, it says you're ashamed. Was she ashamed of us?

Somebody has to fight. Somebody has to say, It's not inevitable. We don't have to accept our fate. I wanted some gesture, something that told me whether she gave a damn or not.

*

A week after my mother's death, I return to school. On the way, I worry about what's going to happen on this first day back. When I get to Home Room, I discover my fears have been confirmed. I sit down and notice a few students looking in my direction and then feel a hand on my back.

"Let me know if there's anything I can do, okay?" Mrs. Pippenger says, leaning over me. I nod.

Can't she see I'm trying to be invisible? Usually it works. Not today. She takes the attendance and when she gets to my name says, "John we are so sorry for your loss, but we are glad to have you back in class." Students nod and say yeah.

"Sorry, man," one student says.

I nod quickly.

"Thanks."

Later in science class, Donnie Herman says, "Hey, Monger. Where you been?"

"Shut up, idiot," Sheryl Neimann snaps. She hasn't said two words to me all year, but now she looks at me as if I'm a lost puppy. "Didn't you hear? He lost his momma. Poor thing."

"Shit," Donnie says. "Sorry, man."

Fuckers. I look up at the clock to find out when school will be over. Two hours. And then I begin stewing.

First of all, she isn't...wasn't my momma. It's mom. You don't know me and you don't know her. When school lets out, I make a mental note to be absent more often.

*

It snows that Thanksgiving. Do we have our normal Thanksgiving dinner? Does everyone come back a week after mom's funeral for the Holiday?

*

Memories flash by of being in school, watching television, opening presents, riding in the car on trips, but it's like witnessing someone else's life.

*

My hands, dry and hard, feel the fall chill. Soon I will switch to playing football in the front yard with my brothers. But I can play basketball anytime with or without companions. My father, finished with work, will drive up soon and go inside to fix dinner.

My tired legs begin to cramp a little. Sometimes I wake late at night with one of my legs knotted up tightly, on fire from the pain. I limp down the hallway and grab a towel from the closet, put it under hot water and squeeze out the water. Wrapping the warm towel around my leg, like my mother used to, I can usually fall back to sleep.

I pick up the ball and walk into the garage. In the laundry room, I toss the ball into a small closet crammed with footballs, baseball gloves, tennis racquets, Frisbees. I enter the kitchen where my father cooks dinner. The kitchen smells faintly of grease. Matt is in front of the television and Liz is in her room.

My father stands next to me and yells, "You guys ready to eat?"

*

Every Sunday, we keep going to church, but no one from the church has tried to talk with us or offer some counseling, or even to find out if we are okay. We have been cut loose.

*

One spring afternoon when I'm in the tenth grade, Blake Taylor, who lives behind us and two houses down, tells us his parents had a party over the weekend. He has six cans of Old Milwaukee in his gym bag and asks us if we want to try it. Since the Gleason's house is empty, we sneak in their back yard and take the beers into the playhouse in the back corner of the yard.

*

The ad in the Sunday *Parade* magazine says, *Any 13 Records or Tapes for One Penny*. Dick Clark adds, "What a great way to get the music you want!" Eddie Rabbit. Jackson Browne's

"Running on Empty." Kenny Roger's "Lady." The *American Gigolo* Soundtrack. The Eagles' *Hotel California*. The Charlie Daniels Band. Peaches & Herb. The Statler Brothers.

Even the songs on the radio depress me. Every time "Hungry Heart" comes on the radio, I change the channel. There's some Leo Sayer song, "I Love you more than I can say..." Awful. But I do listen to the Commodores "Three Times a Lady."

Couldn't I think of a better song to mourn my mother with? Not that there were many good ballads on the radio in 1981. "Beth" by Kiss is the only contemporary that comes to mind--and that's my sister-in-law's name.

What was it about *that* Commodores' song? Lionel Ritchie's high, mournful vocal. A piano and some strings are the only instruments. The lyrics are why I listen to the song:

*Thanks for the times
That you've given me
The memories are all in my mind
And now that we've come
To the end of our rainbow
There's something
I must say out loud..*

*You're once twice
Three times a lady
And I love you
I loooowwuuve you.*

Jesus. I swear to myself I'll never tell anyone that I listen to this song in my bedroom at night. I turn off the bedroom light, turn on the radio, lie on my bed, and sing along with Lionel.

*

Chapter Sixteen

Cretin Hop

I walk through Blake Taylor's living room tapping my index finger to my teeth. I am a senior in high school, and I can't feel my teeth. Too much vodka. We do this almost every weekend. If no one's house is free, we drive around in Sam Gianoli's Caprice Classic.

I know I'm in Blake's house, but it's as if the house is filled with water and everyone is moving and splashing about, but I can't hear what they are saying and the movement of the water keeps rocking me back and forth. To get out of this pool, I walk over to his stairs. I reach the top of the stairs and lean against the wall. Stan Bishop walks up to me smiling.

"What's up, dude?" He asks. We're all dudes. Stan stretches out the word as if it has twelve letters: duuuuuuuuude.

"I'm fucked up," I say. "Can't feel my teeth." I tap them again.

"You need to lie down." He walks me into Blake's parent's room and tells me to take it easy. The room is dark, but it feels like I'm back in the pool and the bed is floating on top of the pool. Everyone's moving around so much the bed won't stop moving.

"I'll get a garbage bag," Stan says. "Don't puke in his parent's bedroom, okay?"

"Bring me a girl."

"What?"

"Bring up a girl."

"Okay."

Stan comes back with the bag and his friend Sally Stratton. She's cute. Curly, golden hair. Curves. I try to lift my head and smile at her, but my shoulders are stuck to the mattress. She kneels by the bed. This raft that won't stop moving.

"Are you doing okay?" Sally asks. She likes me.

"Feel my teeth," I tell her.

She won't feel my teeth and doesn't want to get on the raft with me. Tells me to stay in bed and to hold on to the bag. Fine.

My eyes close for a little while and I can hear the two of them talking with someone else—it sounds like Blake.

"You can't move him," someone says. Then the waves rock me to sleep.

When my eyes open the next day, the house is quiet. I wake up with my forehead pressed against the black plastic bag. Light sneaks around the blinds, but the bedroom is still dark. I take the plastic bag to the kitchen and throw it in the trash. In the living room, Blake sits at the intersection of the sectional couch, watching a movie with the sound off. Someone is sleeping on the floor near the front door.

We exchange Heys, and I sit on the couch. My brain is heavy. I can feel it in my skull, as if it has turned to lead.

A few minutes later, I walk out his front door and past Tim Gleason's old house. Between Tim's and this white house next door, there is a side yard that we use as a shortcut. It's seems too wide for a side yard but not wide enough to fit a house. I cut through the yard, cross the alley, and walk into my backyard. As I open our backdoor, I

wonder if I told my father that I was sleeping at Blake's. When I was ten or eleven and my brother Matt locked this backdoor on me, locking me out, rather than walking around to the front door, I pounded on the door for a minute, and then I broke the glass pane nearest to the doorknob. I only cut my hand a little.

*

Chapter Eighteen

Can't Hardly Wait

After talking about my mother's death with Dr. Garner, the panic attacks stop. I don't understand the connection between my panic attacks and my mother's death, but the panic attacks have stopped. Nothing. I flush all the pills down the toilet. During the sessions with my father, he tells me about a letter my mother sent him when she was having problems with her gall bladder about two years before she died. He also mentions a letter my older brother Tim sent him several months after my mother's death. Dr. Garner has us meet every other week, then once a month, and in late spring we end our sessions. I'm cured. Mostly.

A few months after I began having panic attacks, I'm accepted at Ball State University and will go away to school in the fall. I'm breaking the family tradition. My

father, three older brothers, and a sister have all attended Purdue, but I have applied—and been rejected—twice, once after high school and then again this past spring. Texas A&M also sends a rejection letter. Since Blake is in the architecture program at Ball State, and since I don't know anyone at Purdue—except my sister—Ball State seems like a safe choice. So at the end of the school year, Matt and I travel down to Muncie to visit Blake for the weekend. That weekend, an architecture professor has a party at his home. We meet all Blake's friends.

*

In late May, I begin working for the city parks department. I'm assigned to take care of the smaller parks and flower beds. I drive around the water truck to water the beds that don't have sprinkler systems installed. I hook a hose up to a fire hydrant, fill the tank, and then spend the day driving from park to park. Since we don't have an extra car, my aunt arranges for me to take a taxicab to work most days, which is embarrassing. I spend my days mowing small parks and watering flower beds

*

One Saturday afternoon, in the summer of 1987, I'm in my room listening to "Back to the Blues," a program on the

local public radio station. My father walks in the open door wearing slacks and one of his white tee shirts.

"John," he says. "I wanted to show you those letters I told you about."

"Yeah, sure."

I sit on the edge of the bed and he sits down next to me. The last time we talked like this was when I was fourteen and he told me about nocturnal emissions. I still cringe when I think about that conversation.

My father holds some handwritten pages. On the top page, I recognize my mother's handwriting, her neat, looping cursive.

"Your mother wrote this letter a couple years before she died. She was having trouble with her gall bladder and wasn't sure she would make it."

My mother doesn't know what will happen to her, but she wants him to know that she had had a good life. She ends the letter by telling him to take care of the kids.

"A few months after her death your older brother sent me this letter."

Dad,

I'm writing this letter because I cannot make sense of mom's death either intellectually or spiritually..

We both stare down at my bedroom carpet. I hear my father crying. He puts his hand on my leg and tells me I'm not alone. For the first time, I realize what he has lost.

*

Near the end of the summer, when I blow most of the money I've saved for school on a kick-ass home stereo system, my father is not pleased.

*

At summer's end, my father drives me to Muncie on a gray, cloudy day. We say little during the car ride south. The flat expanse of farmland, so easy to imagine as the bottom of a shallow sea, rows of feed corn drying on the stalks, the distance between farmhouses measured in fields, makes me wonder at the immensity of it.

After running into problems with campus housing, I find a place in a new apartment complex with Blake and Stan. Since the dorms are full and I'm on a waiting list, I could end up sleeping in a gym on campus. I tell Blake about it and he says the apartment he is renting with our friend Stan and Troy, an architecture student, has three bedrooms and one is large enough for two beds. I telephone campus housing and talk to a woman. I tell her I'm not really a freshman so I shouldn't be required to live on campus, and by the way, I have lined up an off-campus

apartment. I get the okay and will be living with three people I know.

In Muncie, the day is overcast and rainy. When we pull up to the apartment complex, we find out that not only is the complex new, it's unfinished. Thick mud circles the building like a five-foot wide mote, so we make sure to stick to the sidewalks. The inside of the apartment is finished, but signs all over indicate that it hasn't been long since construction workers left. Thin scraps of carpet have been discarded near the baseboards. Packing tape sticks to the kitchen countertop. Work boot prints line the empty bathtub.

My father and I move in my bed. I brought half the bunk bed I shared with Matt when we were in elementary school. Then we bring in a dresser and the new stereo that ate up most of my savings. Even though the materials look cheap, this place is mine—and my roommates. Everything will be okay.

*

Later that afternoon, my father and I walk outside the apartment to say goodbye. We both choke up, surrounded by the unfinished apartment complex and ankle-deep mud. He seems worried about me. He starts the car and drives away. What did he think when I started the madman stuff? Was he

worried that I was cracking up? I could see my fate, but there was nothing I could do about it. For a few months, a rip in the universe caught me.

While he is worried about me going off to school, I can't help but think that, like me, he is thinking about more. The time he show me the letters from my brother and my mother. Our sessions with Dr. Garner earlier in the year. My feeble attempts to tell him that something was wrong with me. The talks about my grades we had the kitchen, where he stood backlit by the fluorescent light above the sink and told me that I needed to apply myself or I wouldn't get into college. The morning he stood in front of Liz and me told us our mother had died. My confirmation and first Communion. The Polaroid of him standing in our front yard holding up a smiling baby-me.

I worry about him. We're all gone except Matt, and he'll leave for school in two years. The family my father spent thirty years raising has almost moved on. We'll get together in various combinations on holidays and weddings, but the family we have known is a memory. We'll have our own families, and we'll experience the chill of memory playing with our children on fall days, remembering the chaotic holiday parties, long family trips, and football games in front yard of the house on Fulton Street. If time

and memory allow, this image of our family will always
haunt me.

Hard to Explain: Composing "If I Should Fall from Grace
with God"

May 2008. I arrive in Elkhart about an hour earlier than the time I gave my father and stepmother. They are probably finishing dinner, so I decide to drive around the city. When I pull off the Indiana Toll Road at about seven o'clock, the sun is still high in the sky. Instead of making a right and going straight to their house, I turn left, going south towards downtown Elkhart. I take Cassopolis all the way until it dead-ends, drive past a McDonald's, movie theaters, and chain stores. Closer to town are the bowling alley and gas stations. Cassopolis ends at Beardsley Street. Just on the other side of the old mansion in front of me is the river.

I turn left, west on Beardsley, and then drive past a foot bridge leading to Island Park, but I see construction fence in front of it. It's closed for repairs. I keep driving to the stop light on Johnson Street. Turn right on Johnson and go over the bridge. On my left is the hydroelectric dam that holds back the St. Joe River at about the level of the bridge. To my right, at least twenty feet lower, are Island Park and the footbridge.

I continue down Johnson Street and make a left on East Jackson, a street both my parents at one time lived on. I pull into a Shell station on the corner and turn my car to face a building across the street. It's the Wally Mills Zimmerman funeral home. The building looks much like the image in my mind. Built probably in the 1970s, the building's roof overhangs both sides of the building so cars and the hearse can pull up. I try to picture myself sitting on the curb outside the funeral home more than 20 years ago. I write down a few details about the building and continue my journey.

*

I have come to Elkhart to do some research for a memoir I'm writing about my mother's death and its effect on my family. I've made plans to interview my father, now in his early 80s, and some of my brothers and sisters. I also plan to visit the Elkhart public Library for information on my mother's death and to look at the local newspaper to get a sense of that time.

I know there is another footbridge to Island Park, so I pull my rental car into the parking lot of Lundquist Park. Playing soccer in an open field at the park are a dozen young Latinos. I walk towards the footbridge and spot Island Park below me about 15 feet lower than the bank on

the south side of the river. I hike toward the large picnic pavilion made of smooth river stones. It's where my wife and I had our wedding reception.

Today is nothing like that sweltering day in mid-June when my wife and I decided to make dinner for about sixty people. We brought thirty loaves of sourdough bread to serve with dinner, but then discovered we had forgotten to bring a knife. So my father-in-law walked over to a nearby fisherman, whose feet dangled over the water, and asked him if we could borrow a knife. My father-in-law brought back a wood-handled kitchen knife with a blade almost as brown as its handle. He stuck the knife in the river to rinse it and then began cutting the bread.

Under the shade of large oak trees, I cross the north side of the island, to the bandstand where we held the wedding ceremony. For some reason, the city parks department wouldn't let us use the bandstand, so instead the City Clerk performed the ceremony on a brick patio right in front of the structure. I watch Latino couples walking the brick paths and wonder if they are much different from the immigrants—including my great grandfather—who settled in Elkhart during the previous century. Maybe they see possibilities where others don't.

After I get back to the car, I drive west on East Jackson, toward Main Street. Before reaching Main Street, I turn left into a new downtown redevelopment project along the Elkhart River. There is a small ice skating rink and picnic tables alongside the river. There is nothing organic about the space at all, the designers thought of everything. As I reach the end of the street, I think about the hermit that lived under the bridge straight ahead. A few times, I saw him or the shelter he'd built of cardboard boxes on the riverbank. I wonder if designers thought to leave a space open for him under the bridge.

*

During a visit to Elkhart a few months ago, I asked my father about some pictures I found. We keep them on the top shelf of the coat closet in old Christmas cookie tins. I showed him a photo of my grandmother and one of my brothers. On the back of the photo, my mother noted the date and place in her graceful handwriting. My father told me it was my brother Bob in their den on Kenyon. Another photo is of the same house during Christmas, an old fashioned toy gas pump and presents surround the tinsel covered tree.

The next photo is of him and my aunt in a row boat, but I do not know where or when it was taken. He told me

the picture was taken at his grandparent's summer cottage on Lake Wawasee. The two of them look between ten and twelve years old. Marge is shirtless and looks like a Tom Boy. My father tells me, "I got to spend most summers at the lake while I was growing up." He thinks it was because he was sickly growing up. My father sometimes spent the entire summers there, while Marge would come out for a week or two. "Marge would say it was because I was grandma's favorite grandchild," he says.

When you think you're getting close to my father, he can become prickly and short with you. I've called him after not talking with him for weeks and after five minutes, he says, "I got to go. It was good to hear from you." In that way, he's like his mother, we called her Nanny.

Dr. J.C. Fleming, the family physician, said my father's problem was either acute appendicitis or tuberculosis. My father laughed at the wildly imprecise diagnosis. To get another opinion, his parents took him over to a sanatorium in South Bend. A review of my father's X-rays and the results led to diagnosis of anemia and bronchitis, so he missed most of second half of sixth grade. My father spends the entire spring listening to Chicago Cubs games and recording the box scores in a little

booklet given to him by his father. Miraculously, he recovered when school ended in June.

I handed him a picture of my grandfather, looking very much like a film director Orson Welles. At the time the picture was taken, my grandfather was a Democratic city councilman in Elkhart, I learn. Later he became a county commissioner. Both my grandfather's parents were active in Democratic politics. "Grandpa voted Democrat until Roosevelt ran for a third term," my father said, "and then voted Republican for the rest of his life out of spite."

My father wanted to major in English at Purdue, like his father had at Dartmouth. His father, a great collector of books, had attended Dartmouth at the same time as Norman MacLean, author of *A River Runs Through It*. The two of them probably took some of the same English classes, but MacLean went on to graduate school and later into teaching while my grandfather returned home in the mid 1920s with a new bride. There was talk of him going to New York and finding work at a new magazine called the New Yorker, but that didn't happen. He did various things, mostly in the lumber business, but never found something that defined him as a writer, teacher, or businessman. He published a few book reviews in newsletters and continued to collect books. During the Great Depression, he couldn't make payments on

the house so the bank had to foreclose. Nanny wondered how great-grandpa could give \$25,000 to the local YMCA but couldn't help his son. In the mid 1960s, while my grandfather was in the hospital dying of emphysema, my father read him pieces from the humorist SJ Perelman.

*

The next morning, when my stepmother leaves to run a few errands, I restart the conversation with my father by reviewing the details of the photos above. I want to interview my father again and if I can talk with two of my brothers and my sister, that will be great. Since I can't interview my oldest sister Mary, who died several years ago, I want to include some of her writing and what she told family members about our mother's death. My strategy with all these folks is to start with the best/funniest memories of growing up in the Monger household, then move closer to the bone. I guess getting interviews with brothers and Liz is not so urgent, but my father is in his mid eighties. I don't want to say it, but the clock is ticking.

I rehearse my explanation: This is a survivor's memoir, so I want to show people the winding path I took in order to be okay with this experience, but I'm mainly in it for the art. The books that are my models are not self-help

books, but *Angela's Ashes*, *This Boy's Life*, Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist* and *Dubliners*—and probably a hundred other books.

*

Matt and Liz come over after dinner the following day. We go down in the basement. I set up the microphone and my laptop, and then give them my thesis spiel: my struggles with school, working a dead-end job, having a panic attack for the first time. "It starts with that experience," I tell them, "and then I go back and look at different memories I had growing up." Eager to share my ideas for this book, I go on about myself, not letting them talk.

Shut up already, I think as I listen to myself dominate the conversation.

"So...uh, good times," I say.

Liz tells me about one of her strongest memories, coming home from school one day and not feeling good:

Mom was in the back yard doing some digging. I sat down with her and we had a conversation. I was maybe about 10 and had a headache, and I hated school because you always get picked on, and I hated the teachers because they want you to apply yourself. I don't remember the specific conversation. I just remember I had a comforting

feeling after I talked to Mom because she understood. I always felt better after I talked to her.

Liz and I recall many of the same details surrounding our mother's illness and death: watching her leave the house for the final time; visiting her in the hospital the day before she died. But they remember something I have no memory of, our dinner the night before she died. During dinner, our father said that he didn't think our mother was going to make it. I have no memory of this event.

*

I've borrowed between eight and ten photo albums from my father. They were stacked on a shelf in the front hall closet and in the entertainment center. They probably get looked at once a year—if that. I leave my father a letter to let him know I'm borrowing them. All these photos albums cookie tins stuffed with photos seem to weigh on him. Whenever I ask to look at this stuff, he says, "Take whatever you want." Is this because his life has moved on? Is it too much to organize, to store, to deal with? I fully intend to give them back because I have too much stuff of my own laying around in piles or in boxes under desks. I would like to scan a few, but Marla's scanner probably isn't up to the task.

What do I hope to glean from these photos? I'm hoping to jar some memories, get some physical details to include in my essays. Although it seems late in the process, I'm still searching for clues, details, symbols. My memory is decent and I can remember what the gist of what was said, but often in my early drafts I will "write down the bones," then I can put some meat on them.

*

On my last day in Elkhart, I pack the car so I can leave town after lunch, so I'm late meeting Charlie at the restaurant. He is waiting for me when I walk up the street with my notepad and laptop. We go into the restaurant and set our things on the table. After we order sandwiches, he tells the woman behind the counter that I'm working on a "little" project for school, like I'm building a candleholder in shop class. Although I'm tempted to stand up for Art, I keep my mouth shut.

We sit down, and I explain my project. Charlie tells me a few things I've heard before: She was easier to talk to and "practical about little stuff," but she could also be tough. When Charlie was in high school, he tells me, he went to a wedding reception at the Italian Hall in downtown Elkhart. He hadn't eaten. Our second oldest brother Tim arrived at the reception and found Charlie drunk, so Tim

tossed Charlie in the back of his gold van. Tim put him in the bathtub. "When Tim brought me in," he says laughing, "Mom started yelling at Tom, 'Don't you ever come home like this.'"

During our mother's last few months, he says he wasn't around much. He was living in Indianapolis and working for a community development program. Charlie thinks the last time he saw her was the last weekend before she died. "I remember being shocked by how she looked," he explains. The last time he had visited before that weekend was the family softball game. His girlfriend at the time came up with him.

I ask Charlie if he remembers the last family trip he took with us. He thinks the motor home trip was in 1972 or 1973 because the summer he graduated from high school, 1974, he was working. Our mother, he tells me, didn't want to travel in anything other than a motor home until Matt was out of diapers, so our father rented a Winnebago. "We went through Detroit and into Canada and stayed near Niagara," he says. Then we drove through Upstate New York and picked up our great grandmother in Windsor, Connecticut. He recalls visiting Boston and, at some point, spending the night in a mall parking lot but having to be out the next day because of an auto show.

*

The lunch crowd has gone back to work, and I am sure we have talking for more than an hour. My mind begins planning the upcoming car trip. I have more work than I realized.

Our mother died, and that's terrible—tragic even—but how did it constitute a fall from grace with God? It looked that way when I was going through the whole thing. Here were these two things—my family and my religion—that I took for granted, that I always knew would be there. Suddenly, one event, my mother's death, wiped out both those things. Losing the family might have been the larger blow, but the way we were left hanging by the church community was a blow as well.

*

My childhood was not perfect and neither was my parents' marriage, so before we leave the restaurant, I ask Charlie if he could recall any fights they had. He tells me about a time at Grandma Thulis's apartment when my mother was yelling at my father because he was spending too much time on his work, choir practice, ministering, and leaving her with all the kids. "Grandma Thulis jumped in," Charlie explains, "she said to Mom, 'Well, I took care of all you kids by myself!'" Grandma Thulis was referring to raising her four children—my mother, her two sisters, and their brother—after her husband died. I wonder why our

grandmother didn't defend her daughter and whether or not she realized the difference between four and nine kids.

Outside the restaurant, I tell Charlie I will try to bring my wife and kids to Elkhart later in the summer. We talk about his three boys and their plans for the summer and say goodbye. Before starting my trip, I scribble some notes and wonder where this is leading or what I'm looking for. There is more work to do, but all I can think about is how much cooler it will be up north.

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