Shortlist 1-33 (5.31.25)

1. **Death Makes Strangers of Us All**
2. **The Sound That Wind Makes**
3. **Where's That**
4. **River Notes**
5. **Butterflies**
6. **Dry Grass**
7. **The Man Who Couldn't Love Someone Like You**
8. **Cum carmine in meo corde**
9. **The Disappearing Katharines**
10. **Bird I**
11. **Bird II**
12. **Something's Missing**
13. **Man on the Moon**
14. **The Man Who Cried When It Rained**
15. **Two Fingers or Three**
16. **The End of Days**
17. **Trying Desperately to be Good**
18. **Why Me**
19. **The Library**
20. **Did You Touch Me**
21. **The Syllabus**
22. **Do You Have a Sister**
23. **The Song of Songs**
24. **Natura Naturans**
25. **We All Have Much to Learn**
26. **The Lightning Within You**
27. **The Great Sea-Horses Bare Their Teeth**
28. **Starry Starry Night**
29. **News from the Delphic Oracle**
30. **A Story for Remembrance Day**
31. **Isabel**
32. **The Only True Word I Know**
33. **All of It**

1. Death Makes Strangers of Us All

I met her first in high school. Her name then was Alice Cyan. We dated and did what teenagers usually do, being full of hormones. When we went off to college, we wished each other luck and that was it. I met her again in law school, though her name now was Francine Bedower. She didn't remember me, but I knew her the first moment I heard her laugh. It was like wind rattling through dry leaves. She was beautiful. I mean, really beautiful, statuesque, as they say. I slept with her once then,but so did almost everyone else. We didn't see each other all that much and, though we graduated from law school in the same class, there was really no reason to stay in touch. When I met her the third time, her name now Townsy Harper, she was working for a law firm in San Francisco and I happened to be close by. We would meet for drinks. She was divorced, had two kids, a daughter and a son, and a lot of cats, but no dogs. She had made a point of that, no dogs. She had grown so thin I almost didn't recognize her, but she knew me. She reminded me that when she and I were dating back in high school, her father had died and that's why she liked me. That puzzled me a little, but okay, that's as good a reason as any I suppose. Then she stopped coming by. When we met for the fourth and last time, I was in the hospital for what I was assured would be a routine colonoscopy. Her name was now Sally Caulder, same last name as mine, though spelled differently as it turned out. It startled me at the time. She was stooped over, staring down at me as I lay there, waiting my turn. I had recognized her right off, that same laugh, but tart. When I asked her who she was now, she spat her name Caulder in my face and told me she didn't know me and that she never wanted to see me again, biting down finally on "asshole" but seeming to look through me like glass. I can't say I blame her. After all, as I was soon to learn, she did not have long to live either.

2. The Sound That Wind Makes

(for Maya)

I want words to breathe like I do, weep when I do, and bruise easily.
I want words to dream and remember those dreams that first set me on this path.

I want words to grow old with me and become like the lines in my face and tell me old stories that keep my stumbling spirit from falling and new ones that tell of love forever young and freely given.

I want words of no regret even for the sorry waste of all I have left undone, unsaid.

I want words to hold up a mirror and see there all who at some time have gone hand in hand with me through this life.

O what a wondrously crowded reflection that would be, all of them in the morning of their lives, young and old alike.

O that words would fall like these tears and mark the page in silver and gold, the true colors of night, that these words would live on in their hearts and find some rest there, though I myself be nothing but the sound the restless wind makes on a cold night, the wind that sweeps down the mountainside and past all the houses in which loved ones have died and gathers up all those lost souls and scatters what is but dust and ash through the deep space of time.

3. Where's That

During a thunderstorm when everyone else was running for cover, one woman remained outside and seemed not to be bothered in the least. They all looked out from their hiding places and wondered at her. It didn't hurt that she was strikingly beautiful. Well, soon enough they all came out into the storm, feeling a bit ashamed, I suppose. At first, they couldn't keep their eyes off her, glistening as she was in the rain and flash of light. Eventually, however, their eyes followed hers to the sky and what they saw was only a roiling grayness that seemed to envelop the earth. They asked her what she saw. "Home," she said. And they, like the dumb little fish of another story, asked, "Where is that?"

4. River Notes

As I sit here writing tonight at my desk I am on the river and see myself in the flow of all things... the sounds of water, bird and wind are my voice, and all my senses are alive as though the stars are at elbow and foot... I breathe in the night and orion, aldebaran, and procyon come closer, and there you are again, musa, luna puella, your body curving and folding in the current, laughing and inviting me to dive with you beneath the rippling and lose myself at last, these words nothing but the falling rain.

5. Butterflies

for Sasha

Since no one else had the time, the old man had come out to the field with the child who was now jumping about, fluttering in the distance among the flowers and long grass, the border of dark trees like a commentary on the futility of it all. The child was set on catching a butterfly, though on that late spring day there were no butterflies. The child did not seem to mind, leaping now here now there, the butterflies seemingly just out of reach. Then the old man saw something in the distance that seemed to float just above the long grass. He looked long and hard and for the life of him he could not distinguish the child from a butterfly. When the child returned, sans butterfly, all red and green, happily exhausted, pointing out to the field, asking if he could return tomorrow to try again to catch a butterfly, the old man smiled and silently took the child's hand. Years later, when the child had become a man, he would return to the field and find his grandpa waiting for him.

6. Dry Grass

It was not you I was looking for or needed nor was I the Ramon or Ramona you hoped for. We made do, as they say, and built a house and a life several miles from the Itacah River to be safe when the spring rains came. There were no children, of course, but there was a garden of stone, sand, and stalks of jibati that kept the land and constellations in place. When you died, we went right on living together in the house built when you were as young and old as you would ever be. The folks on the other side of the Itacah never come this far west. They say these are the badlands, but we call it home. There's no need for talking. There's nothing to say. Don't mistake these words for speech. It's just wind sweeping through tall dry grass.

7. **The Man Who Couldn't Love Some Like You**

He had once been a happy man. He had loved everybody, boys, girls, old women who thought themselves still vibrant and sexy, and old men with dangerously foul breath. He found lovable what others considered obscene, like protruding teeth or flapping ears or a nasty-looking scar across the forehead. He even found drooling as attractive. He couldn't help himself. Others thought he was delusional or simply a dirty old man, until one day, he suffered a head injury, having slipped off a ledge while ogling sagging sunbathers. After he recovered, where he had once celebrated every blemish as a joy to behold, he now found crippling fault. His constant refrain was, "Who could love someone like you?" He said this whether the person was overweight, stuttered or blinked too much or had dull brown hair or had one too many eyes. He reserved a special place in hell for redheads, whom he previously had loved to distraction. Some fondly remembered the "dirty old man,' but now putting their full faith in what had before been but a naive myth, claimed he had once been a lovely human being. They asked him what had changed and he said, "I woke up." One day he took a good look at himself in the mirror and now saw himself as he saw others: unruly hair, yellowing and missing teeth, wrinkles that made his flaccid face look like a prune -- he even thought his skin had turned dark purple. So be it, he concluded, and banged his head as hard as he could against the glass. This time he didn't wake up. Those who had originally thought of him as a dirty old man felt somehow vindicated. They said they had known it all along. "Plain as the nose on your face," they said. Others, more simply, blamed it on the mirror.

8. Cum carmine in meo corde

As a child, he had always felt close to birds. It was as if the birds revealed to him some other way of being in the world, what he would now call, as an adult, another reality. As a 6-year-old and then a teenager and later as a father and a teacher, he never stopped hoping that the birds would not fly off when he came near or, more secretly, that the birds would actually come to him. They didn't, and he blamed himself, thinking if he had been a better person or more at peace with himself and others, the birds would naturally perch on his shoulders or nest in his beard. He scolded himself for such foolish thoughts. Then one day, while on a long solitary walk in the mountains, a bird did come to him but only to drive him off from its nest. It made him incredibly sad. When he returned home from his long walk, he slept the sleep of the dead but woke in the morning with a birdlike song in his heart. To the birds, however, nothing had changed. Yet, to this day, he still sings with the birds. Sometimes they do not fly away at once but seem to listen and join their song with his. He knew he was yet again being foolish, but now, at last, he felt strangely at peace.

9. The Disappearing Katharines

No one knew if Katharine was one or many because each time she vanished she came back as a totally different person who yet called herself Katherine and somehow knew things about us that only the true Katharine could know. We would perhaps have overlooked the startling changes in her appearance and personality (now like a sly cat, another time like a valkyrie or a damsel in distress) if only there had not been so many Katharines (this last time she had returned with a faraway look in her eye and raven black hair that had previously been unapologetically red) or if she had not insisted that she was in fact always the one and the same Katharine. And now she has vanished once again. We all wondered who she would be when we saw her next. Perhaps a prima ballerina prancing about in piping-hot pink pantaloons, prating on and on about some pearl of wisdom so priceless that it was actually worth nothing at all. It could never be true unless we could dance like her. We knew at least she would not be like us, blessedly familiar, wearing the spring grass down to a well-traveled path.

10. Bird 1

When I came to school today, I did not come alone. There was a bear with me. No one seemed to notice except for a girl whose eyes were filled with the glory of the morning and whose red hair played in the air. She gave me a look, laughed, and asked who was my friend. "What do you mean?" I replied. She laughed again and said "you can't fool me" and flew up into a nearby tree. Later, walking from one building to another, I heard the call of a bird, and there she was at my side. I asked, "Who are you?" She seemed surprised I didn't know. She said she was my student and had been with me from the beginning. This time when she flew away, I growled annoyance and padded on hand and foot to my next class.

11. Bird 2

So, I thought I was alone on the beach when a sudden gust of wind blew my tattered, old hat away. It was like the hat had wings or was some sort of kite, diving and lifting over the sea, but having no string attached, it disappeared over the water and surely landed wherever it is that kites go once they are set free. But then there was the call of that bird. I turned around and there, where there had been not one solitary person for months, was a girl wearing my hat. She laughed at my surprise, handed me my hat, and flew happily off. I knew then I was not alone.

12. Something's Missing

for K

A young woman was combing through the grass with her fingers, or rather, that's what it looked like. Her grandfather, seeing her out the window, thought to himself, she must be thinking about something BIG. He knew, because he, while thinking about all the questions that come naturally to an old man near the END, would himself run his fingers over the page on which he was writing as if to discover some secret he had been missing. He decided to go outside to be with her. She hardly noticed he was there, so he just straight out asked her if she was looking for something. And she, as if talking to herself, answered, "Something's missing." Her grandfather, who wanted to be helpful, asked if she was sure she was looking in the right place. Her reply surprised him: "It's not here, but it's only out here in the light of day that I can even think about it." The old man thought he understood and began running his scarred old fingers through the grass. He was thinking of her, her young life in summer and winter, and then, for the first time, she looked up at him and smiled. Somehow, each had found something.

13. Man on the Moon

Papa cried last night. It was about ten-thirty. My bedtime. I woke in the morning at six-thirty, showered, and drove to school. The sun was up. The days are getting longer now. It was hard to see. When I got home, mom asked if I knew where my father was. I didn't. She already knew that. We ate dinner as usual at seven, then did the dishes and laundry together. After I took out the trash, I went up to my room to do my homework. I stayed up later than usual, thinking about Papa. The night was so quiet I could barely hear myself think. I opened a window and leaned out, breathing in the cool darkness. It made me feel better somehow. What was it Papa said last night? It was something about a man on the moon. I looked up to where the moon was rising over the mountains and knew Papa was gone for good.

14. The Man Who Cried When it Rained

Why are you crying? *Am I crying?* Yes, you are. Is there something the matter? *No. I've had a good day except, of course, for the rain.* Maybe you should get some help. *What kind of help?* Like from a friend. *You're my friend.* But I can't help you. *Why do you think I need help?* Because you're crying for no reason. *But I told you.* What? *About the rain.*

15. Two Fingers or Three

(Boy girl, sitting on a bench in lamplight. Boy speaks first.)

There's something bothering you, isn't there? *No, I'm fine.* No you're not. *I tell you I am fine.* I'll believe that when you can tell me how many fingers I am holding up. *Two.* No, I was holding up three. *No you weren't.* Yes I was. Try again. How many fingers? *Two!* No, three again. Something's not right. We*ll, there's nothing wrong with my eyes.* Maybe not, but I know there's something bothering you. *You're right! YOU are bothering me.* I knew there was something. *I hate how you always think you know.* Like now? *Exactly! I'm leaving.* Then leave already. *I can't.* Why not? *Because I don't know where to go.* Home? *No.* Why not? *I can't tell you.* Well, you can come home with me. *Thank you.* Two fingers or three? *Just drop it.* What? *You got what you wanted, right?* What's that? *Me.*

16. The End of Days

He looked alive or at least no one seemed to notice that he was moving too deliberately to be really living. He retreated undetected to his office. He sat at his desk and surveyed the books he had yet to read and he student papers to be graded. What to do? Nothing is better than something, he thought. By some chance, he heard a passing girl say, "Fuck this shit!" and began to write. His writing took on the curve and vitality of a woman he had seen the night before. She had caught him looking and didn't care. He described her too tight dress and her dark eyes, her crude cursing, the jerk of her hands as she bitched on and on about how some clueless creep with balls for brains treated her like dirt. She was beautiful! When he left his office to teach his next class, he was almost gone. The students hardly noticed he was there. He sat in his chair and began to rock back and forth to their highs and lows, just pleased to catch them unaware. He continued writing about that badass beauty on the prowl. She was happy to oblige. The student to his right, for some unknown reason, began to write, and then another. When would class begin? It never did. After all, it was spring. He had nothing to teach them. Soon enough, they were all writing. About what? He had no clue. It seemed to him they didn't need him. He left them there. No one noticed he was no longer there.

17. Trying Desperately to be good

His clothes were patchwork, held together by dozens of safety pins. As he came on the bus, carrying what looked to be all had in a burlap bag, others held their nose and looked away. Truth be told, his smell filled the air. He sat next to a man in a business suit who quickly moved to another seat. Suddenly, there was a fight: the man in safety pins was screaming, throwing fists: "I could have had your life, your suit. You're not too good to sit next to me." Everyone, including me, look preoccupied. At the next stop, the man, whose tie was now tight around his neck, jumped off the bus and up the street. The man in rags threw his bag down next to me and flashed a revolver in my face. He said he was Matt Dillon and had killed bad men in his time. Not knowing what else to do, I didn't move, trying my best to be good.

18. Why me?

If I could have found the words, I would have stopped teaching on my own. Telling my students that I really didn't know what I was talking about and that they would have to figure it out on their own, just like me, 79 years old, fifty some years into a teaching career, still standing in front of them like a ricket-racked escapee from a home for wannabe poets, spouting nonsense that they benignly mistook for wisdom -- like the world is our soul inside out, a psychedelic mirror only an ardent Narcissus could love – none of that worked. The students knew I didn't believe there was such a thing as a soul, but they still thought I was onto something. That much was true. I was after something that would put me on the road again, some meandering mumbo jumbo by which I could convince myself I really did know something true and wise and send me off into the November rain. If I could find the words, I could quit, since there would then be no point in going on with this charade. Teaching is all about searching for meaning. If you ever found the key, you could bid your students good luck and goodbye, your last words as you walked out the door, "See you in Tulsa." Didn't they know that the writing I assigned them was a thinly contrived excuse for me to find the words? You see, while I was hired to teach these innocent boys and girls, to have them read the golden oldies so that they could discover what had oft been thought, but ne'er so well expressed, I instead had them respond to creative prompts that I wrote along with them. But here's the kicker – if somehow I found the words, the writing assignments, the whole house of cards would collapse, and I would be free. The students would be on their own and, no doubt, some of them would someday become teachers too, throwing sand in the eyes of their students and making them dream.

But then it happened – not the words yet, but one day Daisy What's-Her-Name realized she really wasn't learning anything and complained to the administration – her parents, she said, were paying good money for her to attend this exclusive school and here was this sad excuse for a teacher telling his students not to let schoolwork get in the way of their education. His teaching was nothing but the worst sort of humbuggery, the sort where the humbugger tells you to your face that what he's selling is not for sale, though she used other words like fake, senile, lost. She may have mentioned dementia. It was like the administrators had known this all along. The next day, I was gone. The memory circuits of the institution simply deleted me and rebooted. I was on my own, but now the words came to me unbidden – it was surprising because the words were phrased as a question. All this time, I had been looking for something else. (I confess some small part of me, some primitive generous impulse, was calling out to students I was never to see again: It's a question. Ask the right question and you can busy yourselves with other things, like getting rich, if lots of money will make you happy.) Abjectly kneeling before a beaming Aristotle, I asked, Why me? Why not a zombie? and was good to go.

19. The Library

When at last you've lost almost all trace of identity, and there's nothing it is like to be like you, God, All-Loving as He is, seeks you out. From a shelf in the clouds, He pulls out a book. You read: Call me Ishmael.... and there you are, with a damp, drizzly November in your soul, following funerals, and it's all you can do not to step into the street and start a quarrel. You want to die, though suspect it's an empty thought. Then, it's final. Lines of text bind you tight and you take to ship, the ghost of a whale leading you on. In the end, you are the only survivor, floating on a milky sea next to a coffin that you ride like a horse, praying the whirlwind never catches up with you.

20. Did You Touch Me?

Did you touch me? Did I touch you? *No* Then why do I feel like this? *I don't know.* Don't know or won't say? *Both.* Where are we? *You tell me.* You don't know? *No.* Well, we're 'here' at least, aren't we, you and I? *I think so.* Are you saying you don't know*? Yes.* Where else could we be? *I don't know.* The hell you don't! You touched me and I.. . *touched you.*

21. The Syllabus

He arrived at school that day eager to teach his students the meaning of *logos*, not the Gospel Word, but the Heraclitean River in which no man can step twice -- or was it once? Whatever. He was blooming like a rose and was about to explain it all when he noticed he had no students. Was it a holiday? He couldn't remember. He then noticed a hammer on his desk and several 12-inch nails. Before he could think, he was running, though others would call it falling. The students arrived on schedule and found him lying on the floor like yesterday's news, his eyes bugged out, mumbling over and over, "All is lost." When he recovered, he returned to teaching, but this time he stuck to the syllabus.

22. Do you have a sister?

His sister, well not exactly his sister, more like an aunt who was born after and somehow arrived in his life as though he had known her since childhood, his sister, if you like, though unknown as such to others who were actually of his blood, more like a greek goblin goddess, you know, like those sculpted images that plague the precincts of Cybele in Pessina --she asked as innocently as you please, if I had kept safe the letter she had written me when she was away for school and then away for good because someone, not me, had lied to her and had left her an orphan. Her question prodded another, Do you have a sister? And the answer was right there in that letter, along with a litany of liaisons, assignations, and other matings and musings, a letter of letters, depending on how you multiply the readings, that I had in fact saved into my present old age through what seemed now like epochs of history were actually no more than a boy who had withered away into adolescence, died and reborn again as a New Man, who in turn withered away, and now crept along on three feet, soon to be four – the answer was that every man had a sister whether he knew it or not and so every woman a brother. That's what the letter said and that she was my sister whether I liked it or not, whether I loved her or not, and that If she were an orphan, then so was I. But, you ask, is there, was there, such a letter? Here. Read it for yourself.

23. The Song of Songs

He thought of her as if she were with him, but the truth was that she was gone and she was not coming back. The last time they spoke on the phone, she had told him. And that was that. Still, he thought he could hear her voice, singing the song she had written for him, her father, though as it turned out, she had been, on that early autumn day, more in need of the song than he. It had been a song of farewell, though it seemed now, as he searched through the light falling around him, a lullaby, like the one his own father had sung for him when he was a child *and if that mockingbird don't sing*, his daughter's words now restless and unsettled like living with and without regret. He thought if he could just remember the words of her song or snatch their meaning out of the call of birds that never were to abandon him or feel their rhythm in the outflow of his heart or see the flash of her eyes in the flickering of the candle on his desk, she, the singer of the song, would be there now for him. Without knowing where the words were coming from, he began to sing. He sang of all he loved and all that he would be leaving behind when his own time came. Mostly, though, he sang of the sea, the song becoming the gentle rock and slap of the boat, following now only the river's stream taking him out. He too was not coming back.

24. *Natura Naturans**

It hit, which is another way of saying 'it happened', whatever the pull of gravity or the water rising over the banks into homes built on the flood plain or the constellations in their peculiar but inevitable configurations countenanced. It hit like a hot iron let stand and so became a sort of dark commentary de rerum natura, ironic, steaming with the smell and heat of compost, *natura naturans.* And so she left him and traveled near and far until she came to where all the trouble had begun, the yearning, pure and simple, without an object or home, without knowing, and there things stood as they had always been except now she was on her own for the first time and became somehow heedlessly clairvoyant, stirring up memories and desire and crosstalk among the young and the old, sounding more like the bleating of goats and howling of wolves, each on edge for what would happen next, though it would be but more of the same. It hit, which is another way of saying, everything and nothing changed.

*****_natura naturans_: 'nature naturing' from Spinoza

25. We All Have Much to Learn

Rosa, who matches wits with best, has yet to solve the problem of how to be two places at once. I tried to teach her the art – it's really quite simple— but she kept citing the common notion of the Romping Rhinoceros, first proposed by Aristotle, aka the Elephant in the Room, using that as a charm to ward off my nonsense. The whole problem comes down to the Idea of the Indefinite Dyad that Plato past down to me. I patiently explained that the number two is also one, so one can clearly be in two places at once, but she, sitting next to me and more than a friend but understanding little about love, whistled up her snorting Rhino and, as if out of the belly of the beast itself, declaimed it was all preposterous. How can one be so smart and so clueless at one and the same time!? QED. Like the rest of us sorry souls, she has much to learn.

26. The Lightning Within You

I go to the woods, looking for my father, who died forty years ago, and now lives in the roots of an old oak tree and talks to me in the talk of the leaves and casts his shadow in the light. There! a bird! he too speaks like my father, telling me all is well and that in every tree and shadow and every bird that flutters by is his promise to always be there for me. But what, I say, if there is no sun or winter comes or the trees die or the birds all fly away? What then will keep you close to me? You have much to learn, he says, about storms and the cold and the silence of the night when no moon or stars give their light. Storm, winter and silence, all these will keep you close to me. All things are a comfort – that there is anything at all, and not nothing, is your proof. You will understand when you hear thunder, and discover the lightning within yourself. All is well.

27. The Great Sea-horses Bare Their Teeth

You arrive in college out of an all boy's boarding school and in the first week meet your assigned mentor, the professor who will guide you through your undergraduate years. The professor has published books that are lauded by fellow scholars as groundbreaking and brilliant. It turns out that this celebrated scholar is to be your teacher in an advanced course for which your high school background has qualified you. You are enthralled – the professor's wit, teaching style, and knowledge of literature are of a caliber you have never before encountered. As it happens, during the day you occasionally meet your professor by chance, have coffee, chat about family and literature, etc. You also sometimes visit him in his office to discuss insights you hope he will find of value. He is invariably pleased, offers guidance and encouragement and tells you how much he enjoys these sessions. By the second semester, you dare to think you and the professor are friends. He takes you out to dinner and introduces you to fine Italian wine and cuisine and entertains you with gossip about colleagues. The professor increasingly commends you for your 'wild' ideas and insouciance. You don't know what the word means but take it as a compliment. One evening at a restaurant where they always reserve a private table for the professore, he mentions a composer, Nielsen, of whom you have never heard, and invites you to his apartment later that week to listen to the music. You eagerly accept and when you hear selections from Nielsen's glorious symphonies. you are thunderstruck and grateful and say so. He then tells you that he would like you to come up with him to his cabin in Maine. He also mentions other occasions when he will introduce you to influential friends at Harvard. They will enjoy getting to know you, he says, and will help you advance professionally. He then reads a high talking poem by W.B. Yeats and asks you what you think about the last line, "Those great sea-horses bare their teeth and laugh at the dawn." Whatever you said, if anything more than a stunned shrug of the shoulders, is now lost to memory, but you do remember his praise for your comments being out of proportion to even your own grandiose sense of self. He repeats his invitation to come to Maine. And then everything suddenly becomes unreal or rather all too real like having your face slammed against a wall. What do you do?

28. Starry Starry Night

Both poetry and mathematics are forms of madness, the latter well disguised by what appears to be its rational method and application, e.g., facing west, we plot a course to the third star to the left of that cottonwood where we pledge that someday we will travel. We are eagerly triangulating when a poet comes by and we dazzle him with our mathematical machinations. He seems for a moment unsteady on his feet and asks if he could sit with us. We say, "Of course," feeling sorry for our hyperbolics, but then, as if our diverging equations had actually driven him crazy, he begins to spout utter nonsense. He tells us we have already arrived where we seek to go and that the leaves are laughing at us. "Can you not see how the descending darkness of the evening is becoming one with the shadow of the tree?" We politely acknowledge the plain truth of what he says and, using that same darkness as an excuse, say we have to go. As we are walking off, we look back and then stare at each other: there's no one there. We return to where we thought he had been and now, a little unsteady ourselves, sit again beneath the cottonwood, laughing ourselves into each other's arms.

29. News from the Delphic Oracle

He saw the child in the woman, wild, innocent, mischievous, vulnerable and a nuisance to herself and others, not unlike how he had been when he was six, but try as he might, posing before his nemesis the mirror, he could barely conjure up the feeling of what it was like to be so young. Then one day, seeing his students for the first time after cataract surgery, he became unaccountably double or rather blind-sighted, seeing each of them as younger and older than they actually were, side-stepping reality, if you like, but yet somehow getting it all right. There was Sally, for instance, with flowing red hair, freckles, of course, and a smile that betrayed her awareness of how beautiful she was. Now, however, he saw her crying for papa when he would leave for work and crying again for papa when he departed this earth. She would in time become the sort of smartass, assertive woman, ever and anon unsparing of her smile, who would one day become his boss, if he were to live so long. And then there was Leo, a tortured face hopelessly entangled in his own arms and legs that would flop about like Udon noodles, his hands and feet dangling precariously at the extremities. Now, however, he saw Leo as an infant, well-composed in his mother's arms, being rocked to sleep to Ariel's own sweet music in his mother's lilting voice, Where the Bee Sucks, There Suck I and Come Unto These Yellow Sands and Full Fathom Five Thy Father Lies, complete with all the dings and dongs of the bells and the strangely soft crowing of roosters, and it seemed to him like riding on a bat's wing, and then, at almost the same moment, he saw Leo as a father, impeccably dressed in a three-piece suit, having finally realized the benefit of his mother's theatrical training, with one daughter clinging to his leg as if it were the trunk of a tree, complaining that it was her turn, and another, younger, smaller daughter whom he was dangerously throwing up in the air and having to lurch to catch in the nick of time, dragging along the first daughter who refused to let go of his leg, and miraculously not a trace of fear in the eyes of the at-risk child. After all, papa was strong and now he could dance. He could even feel Leo's future strength and grace in his own arms and legs, and, naturally enough, found himself, the teacher, 73 years of age, intending on his next visit to ask his doctor to approve a disabled parking permit, now waiting like the other students for class to begin. He heard himself announce an in-class writing assignment: they were to write about a childhood memory and then trace how that memory was like an oracle -- you know, like at the Oracle of Delphi that we all learned about in sixth grade. So embarrassing, his student-self was thinking, surely the old man can do better than that. All that Greek mythology was just a boatload of malarkey. Still, he knew he could hit that assignment out of the park just as he had actually hit a home run when he was thirteen, his team losing by three runs in the championship game for interstellar glory. It had been the bottom of the ninth inning, two outs, bases loaded, etc. He had even been disciplined enough not to allow his minuscule batting average of.023 or that he was leading the league in strikeouts to shake his resolve. The coach, not wishing to tempt fate, gave his butt a good smack, keeping his exhortation brief:: "It's just another at-bat, son." Of course, he was totally making all this up, but on the other hand, he had imagined this moment so often that the fantasy had come to substitute for any known facts. Indeed, everything he wrote for that assignment was a shameless fabrication, yet he knew that, like Odysseus, who was himself a skilled and inveterate liar, he could find within himself the resourcefulness to take on any Polyphemus he was likely to meet and prevail. He noted with satisfaction how he had worked words from their class vocabulary list into his essay -- stellar words like nemesis, precarious, anon, inveterate, and malarkey and, coming soon in lines yet to be written, peripherality, baptize, and charlatan -- and was confident that he had hit yet another home run, though he was also aware that his teacher-self, spying on him with annoyingly persistent peripherality, was laughing at his student-self who had just previously sneered at mythology. Nevertheless, despite this handicap, he believed he had in fact become like his students or, as matters stood, like his fellow students, fearing as they did that he would finally be discovered to be a charlatan, a nobody, and so consequently baptized himself a true student of the game, always striving to learn new tricks to beat the system that, despite all his best efforts and those of his classmates, would still win out in the end and beat the crap out of each and every one of them.

30. A Story for Remembrance Day

It happened that one day there was born to otherwise perfectly healthy parents a child with only two eyes and only two legs and only two arms and, most hideous of all, what was later referred to as a 'nose' for want any other word for a deformity that had heretofore never been seen. They named the child Adam because they considered the child a curse. A short time later a second likewise unsightly child was born, and they called her Eve because, in our language, the name meant 'twice cursed'. To our great relief, no other malformed children followed, but as our people watched these two precariously try to balance on two legs, they wondered what to do with them. It was decided that they should be placed in the desert out of sight of the public, but given --- we are, after all, a merciful people! -- the means by which they could survive if that were God's will, and our ancestors carved out a spacious garden for them where they planted fruit trees to provide them sustenance. Priests were assigned to observe from afar these cursed children and then, if they should perish, as expected, ceremoniously erase any trace of their existence. Many accounts of their strange behavior (the strangest was surely their torturous way of coupling as if the two were trying to become one) were faithfully reported to curious citizens. Too late our people discovered their mistake. Adam and Eve flourished in the garden and were alarmingly multiplying their kind. The priests reported all this, and it was decided that Adam and Eve and their misshapen progeny should be expelled from the garden with the hope that they would simply die off. What happened, however, was that these alien creatures had learned how to grow their own gardens from the abundance of seeds they had devilishly gathered. All too soon there were thriving villages, each surrounded by bountiful farms, and then, percolating like bacteria in a Petri dish, they populated noisy cities, and before long they had gained sufficient strength to rival our peace-loving people. In time, Adam and Eve and their wobbly two-legged offspring ruled the earth and drove our kind underground, referring to our ancestors as 'beetles' because of the funny way they thought they moved on what seemed to them far too many legs. Whenever one of these 'beetles' ventured above ground, they were either gleefully stamped out -- the snap crackle and pop of these precious bodies music to their protruding ears -- or put in glass cages, where the children of these new rulers of the earth, who had taken such strange-sounding names as Cain and Abel and Lilith, would howl in horror and delight at how these starving many-legged creatures gobbled up the leaves that had been given them as a tease. Happily, these 'beetles', our honored forebears, were able to cultivate a lethal virus that killed off this mutant species. Today, when our children are told of Adam and Eve and their hideous offspring, they are referred to as 'sinners' because it was by God's mercy that our ancestors were able to discover the virus and put an end to their two-handed reign of terror. The few hundred who survived the virus were penned up like cattle in what our children now refer to as Hell and allowed to starve to death, but not before indulging in grotesque cannibalism. This history has now been duly recorded in our Bible, the Story of Our Life, providing future generations an appreciation of the struggles endured to make possible the good life they enjoyed but might otherwise be taken for granted and conscientiously taught as well to our youngest as a warning not to be kind to strangers. The heretical 'Bible', written by the 'humans', as we now disparagingly refer to them because they lacked every grace of body and mind, has been symbolically preserved in an ironlike glass case and publicly displayed so that we never ever forget. Strangely, their 'Bible' also recorded the sins of Adam and Eve, claiming that all their descendants were likewise infected with the original sins of their founders, but was otherwise made up of wishful thinking and outright lies, though I suppose it could be said that we, whom they sought to exterminate, were the avenging angels of their worst apocalyptic nightmares.

Story Note: How did this story come about? I would like to hold Ted Chiang responsible but that would be to shift the blame for this misanthropic tale to someone who clearly possesses a more generous spirit. Still, Chiang's stories, especially "The Story of Your Life", encouraged me to look at humankind from an alien perspective and see ourselves as the Other. The story may also be understood as less than a genial and more of a pugilistic poke at how we too often cast aspersions or worse on those who are not like ourselves. I acknowledge, however, that, despite my 'conscious' intentions, others may justly criticize the story itself as encouraging the very maltreatment of Others that it purports to speak out against. In either case, the story will have served its purpose, and, besides, we also know that someday beetles will in fact inherit the earth.

31. Isabel

When I was but a toddler, some seventy or so years ago, our family would travel during the summer to the beach in our roomy Kaiser-Frazer. As we motored along, I would draw near to the pulse of the tires on the road. It sounded to me like "Isabel Isabel Isabel Isabel.... " The memory is so strong that all I have to do is hum along with my Ford Ranger, rolling peacefully along country roads, or discover at the beginning of the school year that I have a student named Isabel, so that when I say something like "Isabel, that was a great poem you wrote" or "Thank you, Isabel" for waking me up and informing me that unless I get to class in the next two minutes, my students will scatter like the wild birds they know themselves to be, or if I meet a woman at a social gathering who introduces herself as Isabel or Isabella or Izzy or even Bella, though her real name be Annabelle, my ears ring like a tuning fork and I hear her voice, holding off the dark and calling us home before the ghosts come out. Why Isabel and not Alexandra or almost any other name? Isabel was part of our family, though it is more factual to say that she worked for our family. She was a benevolent dictator and a shoulder to cry on. My most enduring memories are of the times when she would take my brother and me to her country house to churn butter. It seemed like a chore back then, a blessing now. That Isabel was a black woman is not something that registered with me at the time and that happy blindness may explain my dislike of the word race, that is itself a lie, as well as the outrage I feel when anyone is treated better or worse for no other reason than their the color of their skin. I trace my moral character back to Isabel. The steady, muscular kindness with which I try to treat my friends, students and total strangers also comes from Isabel. Finally, it was in the sound of the tires of that old Kaiser-Frazer that I discovered poetry, the power to give the world 'out there' inner meaning. My debt to Isabel is unpayable, eternal, and long overdue.

32. The Only True Word I Know

Story Note*: The story doesn't tell you what the true word is. You may be able to figure out for yourself. You'll find a strong hint of what that word is in the poem that comes after the story. If still in doubt, ask me and I will telll you. Toward the end of story I mention an episode that I had written about on another occasion. That part of the story follows the poem. The story itself actually happened during my three-year journey on the hoof. I don't share this story with my students out of concern it may inspire some romantic notion of adventure, and they take no account of the blank spaces that haunt theses lines, the loneliness and, at times, outright despair.*

I don't know how you know you have to make a change. You just do it and think about the whys and wherefores later. And in any case, I would only be making it up to sound like I wasn't crazy or something, as though I actually had reasons for doing what I did. Maybe it was the rain. Who in his right mind would throw a few things in a backpack, leave his car and bank account behind, and just set off walking in the rain? That's what I did. At nightfall I found a place along the side of the road to sleep, but I couldn't stop shaking. It didn't stop raining until early the next morning when the sun came up as though for the first time.

I had started out in Rhode Island but hitched rides that left me the next night in Georgia and the next day I was in the panhandle of Florida, walking down some back country road that would take me wherever I was going. I really had no idea, but I was going and I was going to stay gone. I know that this all sounds crazy, but it didn't feel that way then. It felt right and for the first time in a long time my head was clear.

When I had started out I had only a couple packs of cigarettes and about twenty dollars which paid for coffee and more cigarettes for awhile. The kindness of strangers supplied the rest. Folks who picked me up were curious about what I was doing and where I was going. What interested them most was that I didn't know. They saw my sorry shoes, shook their heads, and gave me money for a meal at the end of the ride. One man said he had never picked up anyone before but now he thought he would the next time he saw some young person thumbing a ride. It had somehow been interesting. I told him that was a bad idea.

I went wherever a ride would take me and that's how I found myself in a small West Virginia town, where an old preacher picked me up and took me home for a meal. He showed me with pride the wooden casket he had made with his own hands and how he was all set for eternity. He called it his boat. It was really no more than a crate, though its dimensions where about right for a coffin. I don't know about eternity. What I was really curious about were the huge old books that were lying on the casket as if to keep the lid on. He said the truth was in those books and I could see for myself if I wanted. The first one I opened had the picture of a young woman, tied to a stake, her breasts exposed, looking up at the heavens ablaze with lightning. I swear her whole body looked like it was electrically charged as though she were having an orgasm or something. Beneath the picture were the words, "Thou shalt have no other gods before me." I turned over the page and saw the words "I ad crucem!" scrawled over the English text. I knew what those words meant alright: "Go to the cross!" On another page was the picture of some wild man who was having a crimson X branded into his chest. After that I was in a hurry to go, but the old guy kept me there talking about how half the town was dying of cancer because everyone was marrying their own kin and goin' to hell. I got the crazy idea that he was about to ask me to nail him and his books up in that crate and set him adrift. I told him I had to go. He wanted to know why I was in such a hurry. I told him someone was waiting for me

in Winchester, which was just across the state line. He said he would drive me there, but I just walked toward the door and thanked him. I closed the door behind me and didn't look back.

My next couple of rides landed me in New Orleans. I was beginning to realize that though everything was new to me, I was not quite a stranger to the folks I met. In New Orleans, I fell in with others about my age who looked just as lost as I did. They had liberated an abandoned house, worked at odd jobs and did drugs at night. When I didn't partake, they became suspicious and shortly came to the conclusion that I was a narc. I had never heard that word before but its meaning soon became clear to me. They said my story about going wherever the road would take me just didn't add up. That wasn't the last time I was suspected of being a narc, but later it somehow didn't matter. They could just think whatever they wanted. The first time, however, it was a shock. I had been glad to have a place to crash for a few days, but they told me I had better leave.

I ended up spending a month or so in New Orleans, making some money by working out of a day load outfit that sent out sober men like me on jobs that paid ten dollars a day. If you didn't quit the job – loading, unloading, throwing bricks out of boxcars and digging holes – you got paid at the end of each day. In the late afternoon after I was paid, I felt like some goddam saint. Cripples, men with no legs, drunks and drifters like me were lined up along the sidewalk with their hands out. One fella, mounted on a board with rollers, had no arms or legs, just a cup. I had a simple rule. I would give away half of what I made and keep the rest. It was more than enough for my needs. They would call me father, though I was younger than they were. Maybe I looked older because like them I had grown so thin. A fellow worker had his own room where he let me sleep on the floor and he knew all the churches and other places where a person could find a free meal, though sometimes you had to pay by praying after you ate. I didn't like that and said so. I ended up basically stealing the food before the praying started. The problem with that was that they were on the lookout for you the next time. At night, I wandered the French Quarter looking in the jazz joints and at the girls who looked right through me as if I weren't there at all. I can't say I blame them.

I forgot to tell you that before I left to nowhere in particular, I had been a desk clerk at an otherwise respectable hotel called the Pilgrim Inn that catered to a certain class of working girl. They were all somebody's daughter and they sent the money they made back to their families. Some paid guys who protected them and would beat them up to keep them in line. I would take payment for rooms from the johns and take them up in the elevator first and then the girls. It became routine. I liked the girls, but they all thought I was queer because I hadn't done anything with them even when they offered for free. They would laugh and ask me if I knew which hole to put it in. I didn't mind. Everything had been going along fine until one night I was arrested along with the girls in a police raid and spent the night in jail. The next day they just sent me home. The hotel's lawyers had worked something out. The girls had to pay a fine. After that, I felt like I almost belonged and everyone treated me as if I were one of them. Then one night a little later I got beat up really bad by a guy who demanded to know where a certain girl was and when I wouldn't tell him, he came around the desk and let me have it. It all happened so fast I didn't even have time to be afraid or even feel any pain. I was kind of numb or stunned I guess. After that, the girls treated me like a brother, which I guess I was.

After I had saved a little money in New Orleans, I set out again. I had heard from others about riding the rails. It was fast and straight but they also told tales of railroad bulls that discouraged me. I thought hitching was safer. My first ride, a long sleepy cruise through the night, took me to Texas, a little west of Austin. It had been a sweet ride; the stars out the open window seemed to pump their light right into my veins. My very next ride, however, changed everything, but I have written about that before. I don't really want to go into it again except to say I came out whole after a man tried to force me to have sex with him and maybe for the first time in my life I had been brave.

That was then. What I really want to talk about is Richard whom I had met a year before all this craziness began, never saw again, and miss every day of my life. Before we parted he gave me a small carving, made from a random piece of wood found on an east Texas beach. He had used only the sharp edge of a stone. It was like something out of the prehistory of man and had three faces on each side, one emerging out of another. It is the face of every man I meet. For almost sixty years now, I have kept this carving with me. It really is Richard's story that needs telling, not mine, though maybe his is in some way mine as well. You see, he taught me the only true word I know and he taught me by example and it cost him dearly. He was the most courageous person I have ever known and the truest to his word.

Song for Richard

You spoke the only true word I know
And that word became an open wound
They cleaned with lye, not knowing
Your pain, your tears were like wine
That would save their shining souls.

Pick up the rifle, son
No you said
That's no SIR, son
Pick up the damn gun!
No you said.

They called the captain
They called the priest
They called the doctor
Are you crazy, son?

No no no

Come with us!
You walked away.

I see you now almost sixty years later
alone on that far thundering shore
"I will not fight your fucking war!"
You are carving a face out of driftwood
the face behind the face of everyone I meet
I have it still and think of you.

You came back. True to your word.
And they sent you to Leavenworth
Where your bruises became sores
Your sores gaping wounds
Your screams the blessing
That saves our sorry souls.

Poem Note: *Richard was eventually released due to the work of Amnesty International.*



The Untold Part of the Story

When I was a sophomore at Brown University, I returned home for spring break and asked my father to read some of my own poems and others by Rilke. My father, a pioneer in the study of the biochemical basis of mental illness, told me that my poems and those of Rilke revealed schizophrenia. I left home within the hour, on foot, never to truly return again. Before my father died, I had forgiven him and loved him as a father should be loved. Now, I am grateful to him. Grateful for endowing me with the same passion with which he lived his life, however imperfectly. My own life has been no less imperfect. That night, as I walked down a dark highway, singing to myself the Woody Guthrie song "Going Down the Road Feeling Bad," I vowed never to allow another person's assessment of me to determine how I felt about myself, my ideas or my poetry. I did not then return to Brown. When I did, I was married and a father.

That first long night on the road lead to three years of aimless but purposeful hitchhiking. There were others on that road. One bad man, the owner of an art gallery in Austin, Texas, lured me out to his ranch and tried to force me to have sex with him. I refused. Quietly but definitely. His hired man pulled out a knife. I said, "I will not." Quietly but definitely. I was not afraid. He did not touch me. In that precarious moment, I knew myself. It was as if life had asked me a question and I had answered.

I have found myself in other precarious situations, as I do even today. I will not chronicle these critical moments here except to say they put the integrity of my life in question. Each of these situations required of me an answer beyond any philosophy I had ever read. Philosophy does indeed ask essential questions, but it is only with our actual lives that we answer those questions. Such philosophical questions as Do we have free will? What is truth? Or Justice? are all too often illusions like the paradoxes propounded by Zeno. The illusion comes when we mistake the arena in which these questions are to be answered. What is truth? Observe how I live, not what I say. I necessarily live out my answers to what is true and good. I am my philosophy and all that I have suffered I own.

I am always on the road, aimless but purposeful, knowing that the road is where my true self is revealed. For me the literal and metaphorical road have become one. I know I have at least one great road trip still in me. We may pass by each other in the East Mountains or between here and there. If I look sad, ragged and tired, pass on. All is well.

33. All of it

Love has taken up knitting.

Truly, he was as alone as he had been in the beginning when there were only himself and the vast emptiness of space that seemed to want to swallow him whole.

In that time before time, he had discovered that if he whirled like a dervish, bits and pieces of his colossal corporeal being would fly off and, as he spun faster and faster, he filled the space around him with feathery forms that floated aimlessly about him.

Some had the shape of white linen on a clothesline but others looked like bats. There were even eyes looking back at him, dazzled, and he saw sharp, heavier bits of silver and gold that had been flung far off and arranged themselves as constellations, though for him the great stories were yet to be told. Theseus had not yet sailed for Crete. They were not yet the museum pieces they are today, though he could not deny the wonder they evoked.

As he had never seen himself, he looked upon all this jumble as simply Other and called it Friend.

Then, on what we now would call inspiration, he let out a great shout of greeting (SAL WAY TE wA LAY TE) and the bits and pieces began to attract or repel other bits and pieces.

In an instant that would seem to us endless time, doll-like figures began to emerge and some of these appeared to be giving parts of themselves to each other as though they were gifts.

He was still lonely, of course. After all, these figures, except for the eyes, were lifeless, but then, thinking he was making a joke, he began to play with these megoistic forms and discovered a power within himself to bring them to life and was able with practice to forget to remember that all their laughter, lovemaking, and quarreling were nothing but himself playing alone.

Some of these strange beings even seemed to be aware of their creator, but soon enough they began to vie for his favor, tearing each other apart, piling up body parts, and setting them on fire. Some, out of gratitude, made living torches of themselves. They thought he, their creator, would inhale the smoke and be pleased. He wasn't. Indeed, he was appalled to see what had formerly been bits and pieces of himself going up in smoke.

It was then he decided to stop spinning and take up knitting instead, hoping to piece together what was left of himself into one colossal Other, who might one day be a comfort for his loneliness.

He worked day after day for seven days without sleeping until he could no longer hold off the night, though it would have looked to us today as if he had just given up.

When he woke from his dreams, however, he discovered his loneliness had vanished. Before him was a wingéd Other. He called her Anima because he felt she had always been as close to him as the wind. Anima Animus Animus Anima was his mantra.

He now took up his knitting in earnest, but after every cycle of seven days, he would sleep and dream and discover upon waking other wingéd forms to whom he also gave names inspired by what he felt when he first saw them, names like Twilight and Shadow, Dawn and Cobweb, Shifting Sand and Trumpet, Midnight Blue and Riverunrun.

And all these lovely, strange winged Others would bring him earth, air, fire, and water as gifts, and he in turn would dream up worlds for them in which their strange and varied beauty would be at home.

He did not know exactly how all this had happened but felt as if he now had a purpose, though at the time he actually knew nothing at all about this. It was as if there were some great something at stake, but when the earth turned away from the sun on every seventh day, he would, like time itself, fall asleep and dream again.

Truth be told, he was still alone, but now the wind told him that all this, every bit and piece of it, was poetry.