

About Howard in Paul Harding's *Tinkers*

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Acknowledgements

Though she would no doubt decline the honor, Mimi was the provocateur of the following discussion about Howard. I still remember when she, distinctly exasperated, declared in class how disappointed she was in Howard. Almost immediately, students reacted with diverse opinions, no two ever in complete agreement. As a consequence, I proposed to Mimi that we engage in an extended written conversation about Howard, to which she agreed, and Marly, being Marly, wanted in. Each of us was to try to give the best arguments we could for the view that we actually opposed before making a final statement. We generally held to this formula, but, as often happens with students who think for themselves, the conversation became more free form. As I was putting together this booklet, Zoe surprised me with an unassigned essay on Howard that offered a new perspective. I especially appreciate about the light the final *Borealis* passage sheds on the ending of the novel. I am only nominally the teacher of these exemplary students, my 50 years in the profession earning me but scant deference, insufficient in the end to persuade vigorous young minds that my perspective is inherently superior to theirs. It's not. This collection of arguments concludes with a story by Mimi Xue. It is a story about two brothers who, unlike the father and son in *Tinkers*, are able meaningfully to reconnect years after the bond between them appeared broken beyond repair. The story serves as Mimi's true Final Word. I have included in this collection an essay by Akshay Warriar, a student of mine several years ago, whose argument set the stage for this one.

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Artwork:

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I. Hugh

A. It Was Never About Howard's Epilepsy

Though it is reasonable that Howard decided to leave home to avoid being sent to an institution as his own father had been, what is not acceptable is that in the fifty years after his 'running away,' he did not make more of an attempt to become a part of George's life and the lives of his other children, in whom he appears to have little curiosity. If Howard truly cared for his family, he could have taken steps to ensure his family's well-being during his absence. The tragic reality is that Howard was so enchanted by his own 'poetic' experiences that he neglected his family responsibilities. If he had been from the beginning a more conscientious and responsible father and husband, it is likely that Kathleen would not have sought to have him committed. They could then have worked toward a solution together. Megan may seem like the woman Kathleen was not able to be, but Megan was never the mother of his children. Kathleen's cold silence towards her husband was surely not the character of the woman whom Howard had married. Kathleen was once a vibrant young woman with expectations that her marriage to Howard would be fulfilling. Tragically, Howard's fascination with his own internal experience left Kathleen isolated. She essentially had been abandoned long before Howard drove off in his wagon. When Kathleen left the brochure out for Howard to see, it was likely her final attempt to make Howard see how his self-indulgent reveries were hurting the family. It was never really about his epilepsy. Howard is not some misunderstood poetic hero who was unappreciated by his wife and family. It could even be argued the family was better off without him. The final question is what does Harding want the reader to 'see' in Kathleen? Does his portrayal of Kathleen encourage the reader to view her as one of those pitiable country women who live lives of quiet desperation? Are we to think that the tapestry of grass and flowers is to serve in the place of the pendant he would have the country women buy? Or does he want us to see Kathleen as someone who, unlike the country women, is unwilling to 'settle'? Kathleen clearly has her own internal reveries, but she is able to put these aside for the good of her family. Can the same be said for Howard? Can the same be said for the readers of what would otherwise be a pathetic account of a man buried alive in the past, hopelessly entangled in his self-indulgent reveries? Howard's most fundamental problem is that he viewed the drama of his epilepsy as his hour upon the stage. George turned out alright in the end, but what of Joey and George's sisters? If George at the end of his life is seeking his father in the downfall of his own body and mind, it is only evidence of how desperately George needed his father. In the end, *Tinkers* is not about a son trying to reconnect with his father, but rather about a son's longing for what should have been his birthright. We can philosophize all we want about linear and non-linear time, but it really only serves to distract us from Howard's failure as a father.

B. Strange Old Men

There is no necessity to see Howard as 'abandoning' his family or even running away from what is for him an intolerable situation. Rather, his action can be understood as preserving something he has seen in his poetic reveries, that 'deep and secret yes', a profound affirmation of his own experience. That Howard makes but what one attempt to contact his family, and that one encounter itself brief and awkward, may be sympathetically understood in light of Howard's anxiety about being recast by his family as someone who is broken or selfish or mentally ill. For some reason, however, it is this one apparently vacuous encounter that George remembers in the last minutes of his life. That it was Christmas day (1953) is, of course, not surprising; it was on Christmas Day a quarter century earlier that Howard savagely (albeit unknowingly) bit George, the event that led to Howard driving his wagon past his own home toward an uncertain future.

George remembers that Christmas Day, not as if it were happening long ago but as if were happening in an eternal present:

As he died, he did not remember getting up from the table and muttering, For Christ's sake, what is it now? and walking to the door. He remembered all of the time that stood between himself as a boy of twelve and himself as a middle-aged husband and father contracting to zero as he recognized the old man on his front steps as his father. Howard Aaron Crosby had come upon the family house in West Cove, Maine, one night after making rounds through the county selling brushes and soap to housewives, seen his family in the dimly lit kitchen window, hit his mule, Prince Edward, with a hickory switch, and kept on down the road in his cart until he arrived, nameless, in Philadelphia.

That George's last memory, his last chance to finally "see" his father, focuses on this day of days suggests that George is trying to find greater meaning in the guarded words he and his father exchanged:

His father sat on the edge of the couch with his hat in his lap and the motor of his rented car idling outside. Food steamed on the table and he said No, no, he couldn't stay. He asked how things were: Are you well? How are your sisters? Your mother? Joe? Oh, I see. And his is? Ah, Betsy. And you are? Claire, yes. Yes, yes, of course you are shy—I am a strange old man, yes. Well, no, I'd better be going. It was good to see you again, George. Yes, yes, I will. Good-bye.

The pronouns in this passage that refer to Howard shift without transition from "he" to "I". It is as if George takes on the perspective of both himself and his father, much as Howard had done while watching his father fumble with an apple:

It seemed to me that even if I could pick an apple up with my failing hands, how could I bite it with my dissipating teeth, digest it with my ethereal gut? I realized that this thought was not my own but, rather, my father's, that even his ideas were leaking out of his former self. Hands, teeth, gut, thoughts even, were all simply more or less convenient to human circumstance, and as my father was receding from human circumstance, so, too, were all of these particulars, back to some unknowable froth where they might be reassigned to be stars or belt buckles, lunar dust or railroad spikes. Perhaps they already were all of these things and my father's fading was because he realized this: My goodness, I am made from planets and wood, diamonds and orange peels, now and then, here and there. . . and I cannot concentrate on this apple, this apple, and the only thing common to all of this is that I feel sorrow so deep it must be love.

We also notice, in the final lines of the novel, the absence of quotation marks and that the word "yes" is repeated six times. Though apparently of little significance, this repetition recalls the "deep and secret yes" that Howard remembers his father was trying to find and what Howard himself had thought he was trying to find as he searched for his father in the woods, knowing full well that his actual, living father was not there:

I imagined climbing trees and tasting for traces of my father in their sap. This is how I thought of myself, as looking for what he had always called in his sermons the deep and secret yes . . .

Whatever Howard and his father were searching for is also what George is searching for *and hears* as he relives Christmas Day 1953. What he hears is not the "deep and secret yes" coming thundering out of a clear blue sky. It comes in the only way possible, in everyday human speech. As he lies dying, we may imagine that George feels what his father felt, a "sorrow so deep it must be love." When Howard tells Claire, "I am a strange old man, yes.", that same description applies now equally to George himself. George, Howard, and Howard's father are all strange old men. their separate identities now coming together as one. Howard's final word, "Good-bye" (*i.e.*, "God be with you"), is also George's, one which we may imagine Howard's father was also thinking before he was taken away:

Throughout his illness (that is the word that now, for the first time, came to my mind, and it shocked me and suddenly made me frightened), he had remained kind and remote toward me, as he had always been, but I had lately noticed him looking at me with a sort of wistfulness, as if he were not looking at me, but at a drawing or photograph of me, as if he were remembering me.

In the final moments of his life, George too is trying to remember his own father. The final scene of the novel serves as an affirmation of the strangeness that these three men shared. When Howard drove his wagon, drawn by Prince Edward, past the home where his family was expecting him for dinner, he was affirming his own strangeness. This strangeness is nothing less than the secret knowledge that knows love binds all things together, transcending time and place, and tells us we are made of dust and stars and that George, Howard, and Howard's father are one, just as we all are one. There is finally no separation. Of course, this 'strangeness' does not put food on the table and is what responsible folks understandably call madness, though usually acknowledging that such madness is not in itself harmful to others. And so it is, a madness, a sacred madness, without which, as Hamlet reminds us, "this brave o'er hanging firmament, this majestical roof, fretted with golden fire" would be "no other thing . . . than a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours." Let those who labor to make ends meet keep safe in their hearts and minds the knowledge that such love is what binds us together and makes our otherwise fragmented and broken lives whole. We should not be surprised that this knowledge comes through men who were suffering dementia, temporal lobe epilepsy, or dying hallucinations – men who, in the words of the Sermon on the Mount, are "the least among us." For that very reason, love was able to speak the "deep and secret yes" and be heard over the din of life going on as usual. We should also stop whatever we are doing and listen. We may recognize ourselves in Kathleen, whose fault, if there be one, is ours as well. Kathleen hears the 'yes' but does not recognize it for what it is:

And here is Kathleen, lying in her bed, which is set in the bare branches of a tree as dark as a burned-out vision—black-limbed, ash-sapped, spun in night. It is winter and winter winds shake the branches and the bed moves with them. It is winter, and the tree has been stripped of its bright mantle of leaves. It is winter because she lies awake with a bare heart, trying to remember a fuller season. She thinks, I must have been a young woman once. She lies on one half of the bed. The dark form of her sleeping husband lies on the other half, turned away, sleeping so deeply, it is as if sleep is another world. Only her face is visible above the top of the bedcovers. It glows like a pale egg. Beneath her face, tucked under her chin, is the clean, ironed, starched white sheet, folded back over the top quilt evenly and overlapping it by exactly six inches, as her mother taught her when she was a young girl. Her hair is pinned up and covered by a sleeping cap that her mother sewed for her many years ago.

Although her hair reaches below her waist, she lets it down only to wash it—twice a month in summer, once a month in winter. Her hair is auburn but has lost its richness; it has begun to thin on the crown of her head. She finds herself furious that the cut on her husband's head might bleed through the bandages and stain the clean pillowcase.

Kathleen did not recognize, lying awake on that winter night, that the answer to her own quiet desperation was as close as the touch of a hand reaching out to her own dear, damaged husband. His need was also hers, yes. She had that 'strangeness' too. Don't we all?

C. Conclusion

I have always resisted the notion that poetic reveries and the practical concerns of everyday life are necessarily at odds. In *Tinkers*, Howard and Kathleen were not able to construct a life together that married their different perspectives. It could have been otherwise. Each failed the other.

II. Marly

A. The Snapping Thread

While they find each other for fleeting moments in Paul Harding's *Tinkers*, Howard and George are forever disconnected, reaching for everyone but each other until it is too late. They both run away, searching for replacements of the love they share for each other, but it is in vain. They travel to abandoned sheds, and to thick forests, and even all the way to Philadelphia, but by the time Howard reaches out directly twenty-five years after he abandoned his son, the thread connecting the two has stretched far too thin, and it finally snaps.

Howard sees the physical world as products and the miniature versions of them. When making his tapestry, he sees a daffodil as "a bright *miniature* sun." George's "boats constructed of birch bark and fallen leaves" are *miniature* "dragon-prow ships" of Viking kings. And *George himself* is a miniature version of Howard. But miniaturizing shrinks and flattens; it forces George to contort into a cramped box he cannot fit inside it crushes his bones in the same way Howard's bite did.

Howard and George are not the same. George is not a miniature version of Howard. While George is "already fading away," Howard is "lit and used up and then dark. Lit too brightly." And yet they are intrinsically and intimately connected by the absence of warm, unconditional love. It would appear that both George and Howard grew up in loving families, but Katherine, George's mother, feels "...no more connected to [her children] than she would to a collection of stones" and Howard's "father was always in the room upstairs at the walnut desk tucked under the eaves." They both had to learn to fend for themselves, and, what's more, they both believed love had to be intertwined with sorrow, or even guilt, to be true. So they run. Maybe they're running *from* their families, from the burden that is simply too heavy to bear, but if that's true, they're also running *to* find the love they so desperately need. But while either of them are alive, they never once think to run *towards each other*. Unconditional love runs both ways. That's a real, physical experience. If Howard couldn't be there to find the peace that George might have found, George didn't truly find him. He found what could have been.

When George runs away, he takes solace in the shed by his "friend Ray Morrell's farm." As this turn came up, "George took it without thinking." It was at this shed that "he and Ray Morrell went and smoked and played cribbage and told stories and jokes." Ray is "his best friend in the world," and he unconditionally loves George in the way only a child can. George instinctively comes here because he needs to be reminded that *someone* loves him. It's not enough to reminisce. He needs to *pinch* the cigarette "butt with two or three drags" that they shared. He needs to *feel* "his bitten hand against the cold wood" of the shed. Because more than love, more than anything, George wants to feel grounded in a world he can't be sure is real. After all, the hand he puts against the shed that he imagines is "holding back a tremendous fire" is *just* his imagination, and he must "lower his hand to his lap."

It's not Howard's first time running away. Throughout his life, Howard completes odd jobs "at one time or another on his rounds, sometimes to earn extra money, mostly not." These jobs consist of things like "shoot[ing] a rabid dog, deliver[ing] a baby, put[ting] out a fire," and "pull[ing] a rotten tooth." So, if it's not for extra money, why would he spend his time doing these things? What if that was Howard's way of running away? Take Gilbert, the man "whose tooth Howard pulled." Howard visits this "hermit" once a year to tote "on his back the supplies he knew Gilbert required down an old Indian trail that followed the river." Once the list of supplies had been "refined and finally established, the men no longer spoke at all. For the past seven years, neither man had uttered a single word to the other." As evidenced by his tapestry weaving in the

fields, Howard doesn't think or express himself through words. Gilbert doesn't either, and they share an intimate bond they need not discuss. Howard wasn't running away, really; he was running to someone who loved him. It may seem like Gilbert depends on Howard to deliver his necessities, but Howard depends on Gilbert just as heavily to provide a sense of stability and reality. When Howard pulls Gilbert's "single black tooth planted in a swollen and bright red throne of flesh," it's an excruciatingly *physical* task. Howard can finally escape the confines of his mind, even just for a moment, to make something happen in the real world. Howard leans on Gilbert... until Gilbert was nowhere to be found the next winter. Howard, and his "troop of mournful flies," had kept "vigil the previous autumn until the frosts came and they, too, had succumbed."

Once Gilbert is gone, Howard feels like there's nowhere left to run. Howard reaches a breaking point once he sees the Eastern Maine State Hospital's brochure that Kathleen left in "full view on the corner of the top of the bureau." But it's not really *about that*. His entire life, Howard has been searching for unconditional love. In Howard's mind, how unconditional could Kathleen's love have been if she felt her only option was to send him away? What about therapy? What about medicine? Was Kathleen's silence that of the "forbearance of decent, stern people," or the "quiet of outrage, of bitterness?"

Of course, Howard is *not* innocent. He was quiet, *too*. When Howard finds George after he ran away, they "drove back to their house without speaking." George walks to his father from the shed, desperate for words of reassurance. Howard "put his hand on his son's shoulder for a moment... seemed about to speak but then smiled and *removed his hand*." Just like Kathleen, Howard stayed silent when those around him needed a voice. Silence may have worked for Gilbert, a hermit who survived without social interaction for much of his life, but Howard failed to realize that is devastating for those around him. Howard spent much of his adult life searching for a "deep and secret yes," which for him, may have been synonymous for unconditional love, and maybe that's why he stopped talking. Maybe Howard thought a "yes" had to be *secret* to be true. He didn't vocalize his feelings to his father or mother, and in turn, he never discussed the way Kathleen made him feel. Maybe Kathleen's silence wasn't that of *forbearance* or *outrage*—it was the silence of *fear*. She wasn't scared of Howard, *per se*, but she was scared that Howard wouldn't respond, fearful that if she tried to talk, it wouldn't resonate.

When Howard runs away for the last time, he meets Megan, a kind and gentle soul who seems to be everything Kathleen wasn't. But "Megan was never the mother of his children," and Kathleen's *seemingly* "cold silence towards her husband was surely not the character of the woman whom Howard had married" (Himwich). While it seems obvious that Howard ran from his family because it was an "intolerable situation," maybe he was running to Megan for the same reason he ran to Gilbert. Maybe Megan was a source of unconditional love. Maybe Megan held the "deep and secret yes" that Howard had been searching for so long. *Maybe* Megan was a way of making Howard's world feel *real* again. Are these all the same?

But while Howard is hundreds of miles away, being consoled by the new love of his life, George and his family have been left in the dust. It's assumed that George turns out alright in the end, but what of Joey? His sisters? Kathleen? Maybe Howard's voyage was necessary to fulfill *himself*, but it wasn't the voyage he needed to make. All voyages come to an end eventually, and heroes must return to their homeland. Ibn Battuta circled back to Morocco; Columbus came back to Spain; Odysseus arrived home to Ithaca. Howard returned to George, yes, but at the cost of *twenty-five* years. George's last living memory is of the Christmas dinner that Howard comes back for. George has been looking for everything Howard has all these years. George, too, wants the warmth of unconditional love. George, too, wants the world to feel real. George, too, has been searching for a "deep and secret yes" to all of his unanswered questions. He hears Howard say the word yes "six times" at Christmas dinner, but is it enough? Howard owed it to his son to tell him he loves him, that he's thinking about him, that all he wanted was to visit him, but that he was scared. He owed it to

George to say *everything he never got to say*, starting with the reassurance George never got in the shed. Instead, all George got was a three-letter word. If this word was “secret,” and buried so “deep” it takes painfully careful reading of the text, who are we to guess George got everything he had needed for twenty-five years?

Howard and George have always been connected. They’ve wanted the same things, they’ve thought the same things, and there has always been an invisible thread attaching one to the other throughout their lives. But if Howard thinks all it takes to repair their relationship is a “yes,” he’s dead wrong. George deserved *more*- something *explicit*, something *real*. And so did Kathleen. This book isn’t about a son trying to find his father—it’s the tragedy of words left unsaid. This thread snapped long ago.

Goodbye.

B. Hugh’s Response:

And God be with you as well, Marly. Your discussion of Howard’s relationship with Gilbert is very helpful, though I am not sure that “unconditional love” is what Gilbert does for Howard. It seems to me more about recognizing a kindred soul, the affirmation that that provides. It is true, however, that Megan unconditionally loves Howard, but she is not a kindred soul as Gilbert is. It may be that Howard saw in the mouse-burial that George himself also had that “strangeness,” a strangeness that George only fulfills in the final eight days of his life.

This one sentence from your statement makes an unwarranted assumption: “But if Howard thinks all it takes to repair their relationship is a “yes,” he’s dead wrong. George deserved *more*- something *explicit*, something *real*.” There is no indication that Howard thought the awkward little conversation he had with George in 1953 would repair their relationship. The ‘yes’ repeated six times at the end of the novel is only there for the reader who must make the connection. What does happen at the end of the novel is that George’s identity merges with his father’s. It is not something that happened in 1953. That merging of identities is what the ‘yes’ is all about, but it is not something Howard has done for his son. It is something that George has done for himself. He has wanted since the beginning of the novel to “think about” his father and “see” him again. He has succeeded in doing this in the most meaningful way possible. George knows now what it was like to be his father. None of this repairs the relationship, but it is perhaps enough for George to be able finally let go. George certainly deserved more, but what he did achieve in the very last moments of his life was his identity with his father. That in itself suggests George forgave his father. In the natural history of father and sons such forgiveness is a profoundly recurring theme. Perhaps we should be more forgiving as well.

C. Mimi’s Perspective on the Mouse Burial:

Howard’s account of George giving a dead mouse what he believes is a Viking funeral shifts from a retelling of the events to a description of George’s emotions regarding animals, and then back to the current flow of time as George and Howard both return home. What’s interesting is that this section is told from a third person point of view, focusing on Howard, and yet the section about George’s night time fishing contains information regarding George’s inner thoughts that Howard couldn’t possibly know. Knowing this, it’s not a stretch to think that Howard is projecting his own viewpoints onto George. By watching George give a mouse, a seemingly insignificant being, the respect of a Viking funeral, Howard believes that George is a boy with a great appreciation for animals. In the description about George’s fishing, it’s stated that George “had terrible notions of a frantic squeaking bat impaled on the barbed hook, trying to free itself and only

breaking its own fragile wings in the process [...] So when the bats came out, George cooked what fish he had, if he had any and watched darkness settle and then went home” (89). Howard’s inference may have stemmed from another instance where Howard silently observed George performing an activity. Perhaps Howard had seen his son night fishing on multiple occasions and noticed that the boy stopped when bats started to appear. However, it’s pertinent to note that since Howard never spoke to George about what he was doing, George may have not been giving the mouse a Viking funeral at all: “Cremation came to Howard’s mind, a vision of Viking kings lying on their funeral beds on the decks of their dragon-prow ships, swords in hand, set alight, and sent blazing into the dark surf, flames snapping’ from the ships’ sterns like pennants in a gale” (90). The notion of a funeral was entirely conjured by Howard’s mind and the entire bat and fox night fishing matter could be too. It’s possible that George was simply burning a mouse out of a young boy’s curiosity, or that he only stopped his fishing because it got too dark.

After George is done setting the mouse ablaze, Howard walks “not to the house but past it, up to the road, and then turned back around, so that if anyone in the house saw, it would look as if he was returning from the after-dinner walk he had said he was taking” (91). Howard purposefully does not talk to George about his actions which seems to be a trend in their relationship. Even after Howard bites George and George runs away, Howard doesn’t utter a single word of apology or start any conversation that sparks a genuine connection between father and son. Howard believes that George and him share a silent understanding, but there’s no way for the reader or George to see that if Howard constantly avoids building a real relationship with his son. This is the main flaw in Howard’s character. When faced with a situation he’s not equipped to deal with Howard believes (once again, in his projection onto George) that “the only choice seems as if it would be to run away, leaving the struggling animal on the end of the line, and to return the next morning to collect the rod and hope that a fox had happened along and eaten the bat” (89). Howard is so blinded by his own poeticism that he doesn’t understand that he must make an effort to understand others just as he expects Kathleen and George to understand him. In this scene, if Howard had taken the opportunity to ask what his son was doing with the mouse, he may have been able to discover something wonderful about George, and yet because he is more comfortable living in his own version of reality, Howard is left with a mere fantasy.

D. Hugh’s Response:

The arguments you make in your responses are so effectively stated and so well supported by quotations from that text that I almost forgot for a moment that my own arguments are somewhat different. I was especially struck by your discussion of the Viking funeral. You argue very effectively that Howard is projecting his own imaginative preoccupations into George. I do think it could be argued that there is good evidence in the text to believe that George’s imagination works in a way that is not dissimilar to his father’s. This is especially apparent in the description of George’s thinking after the “dog-bite”. There are other examples: in his work with clocks, there is often a digression into philosophical musing and, as he is dying, it may be that his experiences, though set off by what is happening to his body, are shaped by his own preoccupations. My point would be that it is possible for a reader to conclude that Howard knows his son well enough that he feels his identity with him just as he did with his own father. Of course, it is possible, perhaps even likely, that this experience of identity is itself illusory. In the context of the novel, however, it appears to be a real thing. I sense that our disagreements may stem from our fundamentally different feelings about the book: for you, the personal relationships depicted in the book are disappointing on many levels, while for me the book reveals possibilities and intuitions that I personally find meaningful. I have no real rebuttal to your arguments, simply a different perspective. The burden is on me to argue as effectively for my perspective as you do for yours.

III. Mimi

A. Too Little, Too Late

Over the course of *Tinkers*, George does become closer to Howard and begins to understand Howard's experiences more (in "seeing" Howard in the same sense that Howard "sees" his father), but ultimately, George and Howard fail to make the meaningful connection that George was seeking out. If the reader views *Tinkers* as a cloud of time that George and Howard are both navigating to find each other, then it is possible to see that George might've been able to find out about Howard and his own father's relationship and justify to himself why Howard left them. Howard may be able to see what a great man George has become, and through these visions they may have gained greater empathy and understanding towards each other.

Yet, despite all of this, Howard goes to meet George and his new family "without turning the engine off" of his car (197). Howard never intended to stay with George for more than a few fleeting minutes, and yes, George does think of this reunion, however brief or inadequate, in his final moments, but this doesn't necessarily mean that George was able to find Howard again. The last lines of the novel, and presumably George's last thoughts are Howard's farewell, "Yes, yes, I will. Good-bye" (201). In the world of *Tinkers* where life, death, time, and nature are all seemingly one, Howard shouldn't have said goodbye to George if this was a "happy ending". This goodbye does serve as closure in some sense to George and Howard's relationship, but because the book never shows the consequences of Howard's departure, the reader, George, and Howard cannot fully come to terms with the father and son relationship. Howard is not able to understand or apologize for George's hardships after his abandonment, and George isn't able to fully grasp why Howard left them. The ending of *Tinkers* does serve as a conclusion to George's search for Howard, but just like Howard's efforts to reunite with George, it is too little, too late.

B. Generational Trauma: I Didn't Know Any Better

One of the most pivotal moments in *Tinkers* is when Howard leaves his family, effectively separating himself from his wife and three children. Although this action can be viewed as irresponsible, despicable, or any other myriad of negative adjectives, it's important to properly understand the motivations and influences that led up to this defining moment in Howard's life before rendering judgement. Howard did not have an easy childhood, and Paul Harding draws obvious connections between the relationships between George and Howard and Howard and his own father's. To properly understand why Howard left his family, and most nominally Kathleen and George, one must understand Howard's complex relationship with his own parents.

Howard's own father was a pastor who seemingly had some degenerative mental disease that made it difficult for him to be present in the raising of his son, Howard: "My own father was always in the room upstairs at the walnut desk tucked under the eaves, composing. He was even there when we ate dinner and when I did my lessons" (137). It's clear that the absence of a father figure in Howard's childhood directly impacted his raising of his own children. Howard leaves most of the child rearing to his wife, Kathleen, but more importantly than that, it affects how Howard perceives his connection with his children. Howard is unable to create a meaningful relationship with his own father in life. He never got to truly understand the "strange, gentle man" (138) that his father was when he was with his family, but after his father was sent away, Howard was finally able to understand and love his father completely:

I often had dreams in which my father came into my bedroom to kiss me and cover me up with my blankets, which, restless sleeper that I was, had fallen to the floor. In those dreams, I awoke and, seeing my father, felt an

overwhelming sense of how precious he was to me. His having died once. I understood what it would mean to lose him, and now that he had returned, I was determined to take better care of him. Dad, I said to him in those dreams, what are you doing here? I'm not gone just yet, he would tell me in a humorous tone that I should have recognized as belonging to a dream, since he had never used it in life, although I had often wished for it. Well, this time we're going to make sure you stay well, I would say, and hug him (150).

In Howard's own experience, he was actually able to love his father more deeply in his absence than in his presence, and without any reference point of a more present father-child dynamic, how could Howard have known that this might not have been the best way to connect with his own children? Howard's lack of knowledge is not something that he can be blamed for. His abandonment stems not from ill intent or even complete selfishness. He believes that because he was able to find his father through a tacit understanding, that George can do the same with him. He doesn't speak to George about his own father or when George holds a funeral for a mouse not because he doesn't want to or because he deems George unworthy, but rather because he truly thinks that George will be able to understand Howard's pride, love, and kindness through nothing but silent action. Additionally, this is why Howard is able to justify leaving George. Howard thinks that because his family survived after his father was sent away, his present family will be able to do the same, and maybe even appreciate and understand him more if he was gone.

This theme of implied understanding can also be applied to Kathleen. Although it can be argued whether or not Kathleen and Howard loved each other, it's still clear that for at least a few years, this unspoken connection and some kind of affection existed between them. Kathleen always makes the children wait for Howard to return to have a family dinner, and Howard tries to make up for his shortcomings by expressing his care for Kathleen in spiritual and poetic means rather than concrete actions or words. After stopping in a field during his rounds Howard:

considered shaving off the sliver of penny, as slight as a fingernail clipping, the convex angle dull and dirty, the concave bright and clean, and returning home to Kathleen and dropping the silver into her open hand. He considered her surprise and her usual anger and then that anger turning back to surprise and then into delight as he took his tapestry of grass and flowers from behind his back and put it in her hands (74).

Howard is aware that "he had neglected his rounds" (73) and that this would anger Kathleen. The understanding that Kathleen is a practical woman who works hard to take care of his children is present in Howard. He is not simply a poet who strays off his course and abandons his responsibility. He is aware of the implications of him not completing his rounds, but he still tries to make Kathleen happy in a way that he knows how. So when his efforts are wasted when he has a seizure, it's natural for him to feel bitter that he isn't appreciated, and, additionally, it makes it all the more hurtful when Kathleen betrays him by setting out the sanatorium pamphlet for him to see. As Howard states, "His despair had not come from the fact that he was a fool; he knew he was a fool. His despair came from the fact that his wife saw him as a fool, as a useless tinker, a copier of bad verse from two-penny religious magazines, an epileptic, and could find no reason to turn her head and see him as something better" (135).

Once again, Howard's past fails him. He never witnessed his own mother and father communicating healthily, and only witnessed their interaction when "[his] mother dressed [his] father in the parlor rather than their bedroom and that this frightened [him], seeing, for example, [his] father's thin, pale legs naked in the room where he consoled windows" (147). Howard associates one of the only times that he sees his mother acting in a caring manner towards his father with emotions of fear and discomfort. Howard doesn't see the issues in his and Kathleen's relationship because, once again, he has nothing better to compare it to. It's not a coincidence that George and Howard's families are very similar. This similarity is not a product of an author's

forced metaphor, rather it is human nature. Howard based his own family and his personal relationships off the model of his own. He is flawed not because he isn't trying his best, but because his past forces his best to fall short. Howard's abandonment cannot be completely justified as it had real consequences for his children who were innocent in their family falling apart, but Howard did what he believed was best for his family and for himself. Yes, Howard is deeply flawed as a father and as a husband, but one's ignorance is not a crime if they didn't have any other resources.

C. Marly's response to "Generational Trauma":

Were the people of Maycomb good people? Were they despicably racist? Or did they just not know any better? When I was in 8th grade, this was my final essay prompt for *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Back then, I claimed that they *were* good people. In fact, I said, In Maycomb, the blatant racism and white superiority shown every day was normal for the time, and the people didn't know anything different. But I was younger and more naïve then. Some people *did* know different. Scout did. Atticus did. Boo Radley did. One does not have to be familiar with the acts of a good person to *be* one. Just because the people of Maycomb had been told that black people were inherently inferior doesn't mean they had to believe it. We all have gut feelings, consciences, that lingering feeling in the back of our heads. To blame someone's actions on their surroundings is to absolve them of their guilt, to make them feel better about anything they've done- or haven't.

It is the same case with Howard in *Tinkers*. Just because he'd never *seen* healthy family dynamics doesn't mean he can't know how to exercise them. What's more, how do we know he hasn't seen them? Howard *knew* Jack Levanseller bought a horse "for his daughter, Emily" because he loved her. Howard *knew* Ezra Morell, the man you called "when you needed something big pulled." While he was tough on his son, Ray, Ezra *loved* him. Ray had once asked his father about baseball, and in his typical gruff manner, Ezra responded with, "Cobb Three has shat his stall full again, ye chatty pup. Now go clean it up before ye're behind with the feed." But the point is that Howard had witnessed positive father-child relationships before. Howard didn't need to talk to George to express his love, no; he just needed to acknowledge him, and he failed to do even that.

What's more, Howard did know how to acknowledge the people he loved. He talked to Megan, rambled on about shadows and dreams and life, enjoyed her "cheerful ministrations," called her "my love." Mimi, it is absolutely wrong to say that "Howard's lack of knowledge is not something that he can be blamed for." For one, he had no lack of knowledge. But even if he did, that's no excuse. You *know* what's right. After all, why did Howard finally visit George so many years later? If your contention is correct, Mimi, that Howard believed a tacit understanding was all he needed to connect with George, why would he have wanted to visit him at all? Don't you think Howard felt a tinge of guilt, of dread, that he abandoned his only family? This isn't to say Howard is a bad person. His actions are inexcusable, and it's also inexcusable to blame said actions on his childhood.

Perhaps the people of Maycomb aren't bad people. Their actions were inexcusable, but every day, they may strive to be better. Howard did; maybe that's why he decided to visit George after so long. But the unsettling truth is that it was too late for both of them. Tom Robinson was still shot 17 times, and Howard died before he could truly reconcile his relationship with George.

D. Hugh's Response to Marly's Comment:

Marly, you have argued with your usual vigor. That's what makes our disagreements so productive. It forces me to summon the evidence, evidence, insight, and energy if I am to truly engage with you.

First, I am sorry to say that Atticus is not one of the “good people” in Macomb. He does believe that all men are equal before the law, as he states his summation to the jury, but it is also clear in Harper Lee’s second novel, *Set A Watchman*, that Atticus believed that the same rights and privileges could not be accorded African Americans because they were not yet sufficiently civilized. Scout’s view of her father dramatically changes in that second novel where they part company. In the first novel, Atticus says and does all the ‘right’ things, and Scout believes what he says. It turns out, however, not that Atticus was a hypocrite but that his views on African Americans was not fully understood. That Scout, however, was born, raised and educated in Macomb tells us that even in a racist society a person can still think for herself.

I don’t believe, however, that the question of upbringing is especially relevant to our discussion about Howard or George, at least not within the text of the novel itself. Howard’s actions do not need any other justification than his desire to be his authentic self. In seeking his authentic self, Howard makes choices that for better or worse affect the lives of others. It is certainly true that the need to be one’s authentic self does sometimes come into conflict with that same desire in others. All I would argue is that such a conflict is not necessary. Howard’s failure is that he did not recognize that desire in Kathleen. As I have said before, each failed the other. In that unhappy circumstance, the obligation of the individual returns to him or herself. It does not excuse Howard’s or Kathleen’s actions, but it also would serve no purpose to blame either one. What is most instructive is, as always, what happens next. Finally, a strong argument could be made that an individual’s primary obligation is not to herself but to others. Our disagreement about Howard may come down to our disagreement about first principles.

E. Hugh’s comment on Mimi’s “Generational Trauma”:

Mimi, the effect of your argument is to give Howard another disability. Making him a victim of an emotionally deprived upbringing serves to excuse otherwise inexcusable behavior. If your argument is valid, the implication is that each of us owes our choices of how to live and what to do to the environment in which we were brought up as a child, whether that be positive or negative. Making Howard into a victim robs him of the human dignity that we grant ourselves, that despite any limitations we may have, despite any deprivations or disabilities, we yet may choose to live by life-affirming values. Your argument makes victims of us all. In terms of the novel alone, we would have to ask if George is not also a victim of his upbringing? Is that why George himself never makes the first move to reconnect with his father? Why he “never permitted himself” to even think about his father? Do we excuse him because of the ‘dog-bite’ and his own emotionally deprived upbringing? Though you draw your argument reasonably from the evidence the novel provides, it does not appear to be the argument of the novel itself to demonstrate the consequences of our failure to disclose ourselves emotionally to each other. You are aware yourself that your argument comes from a position outside of the novel. It is not wrong, but the consequence of taking that position is analogous to taking the position that our choices are the result of factors outside of our control. For me, both Howard and George find ways to affirm their lives despite their limitations. Kathleen as well! She successfully fought for her family. The subsequent generations of Crosby’s confirm that. We should look to the achievement of these different affirmative values as a triumph, even though they are at times in conflict with each other, though I would argue that such conflict is not inevitable. In Howard’s case, he suffers from epilepsy but is able to find within that experience a beauty that makes his life worth living despite all its limitations. Howard never uses his epilepsy as an excuse, rather his epilepsy becomes a window through which he is able to discover for himself a life-affirming value. There are other, more inspiring models of such self-overcoming. Stephen

Hawking comes immediately to mind. Hawking is a giant of the human spirit, Howard is closer to our own possibilities or, at least, to my own.

IV. Post Mortem

A. Hugh

I am grateful to both Mimi and Marly for forcing me by the passion and logic of their arguments to see for myself what is at stake in our reading of *Tinkers*. It is the possibility of finding life-affirming values not simply in spite of severe, debilitating limitations but precisely because of those limitations. The lesson of the novel for me is to take ownership of my limitations in a way that changes what appears to be an excuse for not living a good life into a window onto possibilities that would not otherwise have appeared. Howard's 'strangeness' is my own. I argue on his behalf for myself. My judgment is that each of us is doing the same. Howard acts as each of us must in the face of a society that would make us all like everyone else: he strives to realize his authentic self. I continue to believe that this can be done within the context of loving family and friends and our obligations to them. There is, however, no guarantee that all will work out harmoniously. When it doesn't, we are justified in seeking a life that affirms who we must truly are. In Howard's case, he caught a glimpse of a beauty in nature that is given only to a few. I would fight, as Howard did, for my own small window upon that world. As a result of our conversation, I can see how a very similar argument can be made on Kathleen's behalf. As I mentioned in my comment on Mimi's essay, Kathleen successfully fought for her family. The subsequent generations of Crosby's confirm that. We should look to the achievement of these different affirmative values as a triumph, even though they are at times in conflict with each other. I would, however, continue argue that such conflict is not inevitable. The proof of which may be found in my own life, though it is also true that what has been true in the past is no guarantee for the future.

B. Marly:

Tinkers does not tell a story of father and son. It does not tell one of family at all, really; it tells one of self-discovery, of finding out what makes us tick in just the way Howard's clocks did for him; it tells one about how far we are willing to go for who and what we love. Howard has been in search of a "deep and secret yes" since he was a child, and his life becomes consumed by it. He is strange, and obsessive, and he even left his family behind in pursuit of this answer, but for the ethicality of his actions was a moot point. It wasn't so much about "poetic reveries" as it was about figuring out who he was when stripped **of** his family and his belongings. Who are we without the elements around us? Do we know? Do we need to? Howard *did*! Running away from his Kathleen and children and not ever truly returning was selfish, to be sure, but for Howard, it was justified in seeking a life that affirms who he truly is. When 'yes' is repeated six times on the Christmas Day on which George dies, George's identity merges with his fathers. This is something George *has done for himself*. The father-son relationship was never fully repaired, and George deserved more, as did Kathleen and the rest of their family, but one must consider that their relationship may never have been whole even if Howard *did stay*. In Howard's brief visit on Christmas Day 1953, he didn't know what words to use to make things better. Maybe Howard was in the wrong, and maybe he wasn't. But that's not what matters. He found what he had been looking for -- *his true self*.

C. Mimi

If I'm being completely honest, I didn't enjoy reading *Tinkers* nor did I find deep philosophical value within it. Many times, I found the book overly poetic, monotonous, and irritating, and this can also be said in the context of my feelings on Howard. I can't say that arguing for the sake of Howard's character changed my disdain for him, but I was able to find some sympathy for him that I didn't have at the beginning of this process.

I believe the vast majority of things in life fall into a binary system. In this case, either I am able to acknowledge Howard's flaws and forgive him or I cannot. As Marly wrote in her response to my paper, there will always exist people who strive for something better even if they don't have the resources or information to truly know what that better thing is. There is always a different way that can be found. Yet, I acknowledge that this is easier said than done. The conclusion I came to after finding quotes in defense of Howard and searching for a viable argument that would contextualize his behavior was that even if I can't excuse him, I don't despise him. Honestly, it's hard to say what I would have done if I were put into the situation that Howard was, but then again, this can be said for any of the characters that Howard's abandonment affected. Although I didn't enjoy *Tinkers*, I can acknowledge that this is the mark of skillful characterization. I can understand Howard's motivations, the betrayal he must've felt his entire life, the feeling that no one had ever truly loved him, and yet I can still firmly believe that Howard was in the wrong. I think this type of reasoning is something that each human being goes through with every personal relationship in their lives, and that's the beauty of *Tinkers*. I disliked the style it was written in, but I understand that its intention was to convey the boundlessly complex, inexplicable, and sometimes boring nature of going through life. Howard's leaving of his family has an infinitely intricate web of influence on George, Kathleen, his other children, and even future generations beyond that. They each have to make their own decision of whether Howard's goods outweigh his bads. For me, they didn't, but that judgment is something every individual character and reader must make for themselves.

V. Addendum A: “An Incomplete Journey,” Akshay Warriar

After a long-awaited 8 days in 191 pages of fractured memory in Paul Harding’s *Tinkers*, George Washington Crosby dies, but not before leaving us with one last recollection: Christmas Dinner, 1953. The stage is beautifully set for the scene – George’s stories paint the extraordinary (and seemingly out of character) journey that Howard embarks on in order to reunite with his long-lost son. However, when he does indeed come face to face with his neglected child, the dramatic relief and reconciliation are not there. Instead, Howard gets up to leave from George’s house during one of the most festive and familial times of the year and exits with only a “it was good to see you again” and a “good bye” (191). The book ends, and George dies. Although George’s memory and stories throughout the novel seemed to be chaotic and unorganized, they generally progressed as George searched for a lost connection with his father. However, as indicated by this ending scene of the book, it seems that George never finds his father. Instead, he dies never having had established a true relationship or understanding with Howard that George seemed to be looking for throughout the novel.

To truly deconstruct¹ this scene and the significance of the end of George’s journey, it is first necessary to analyze the beginning of his story and George and Howard’s relationship in this context and throughout the novel. The first indication of how George felt about his father was very important because it set a critical precedent as a first impression and gave the reader a general idea of their relationship. Instead of depicting his father in a warm and loving light, he describes Howard as a “magpie, a loony bird” who relied on his wife Kathleen to deal with his epilepsy (20). George even took solace, along with Kathleen, in insulting his late father and his disability along with the impacts it had on their future after Howard’s death. Of course, later on in the book, we learn that these personalities are pretty much reversed – Kathleen seems to be the apathetic one, while Howard the more empathetic but still inept. Additionally, due to the image that George paints in the reader’s mind, we immediately grasp the deep resentment that he holds for his father and his disability. As the stream of memories progress of course, we begin to understand the warmer side of Howard, and who he really is, through his memories of selling trinkets, doing small favors for money, and helping Gilbert. Once we achieve this understanding of Howard’s other side, we reach a crucial nexus point in the relationship between the father and son: the mouse’s funeral. Although this scene is short and annoyingly obscure, it seems to represent one of the only points in the book where a lucid and deep emotional connection exists between Howard and George. It demonstrates a tacit understanding between the two (even if George did not know that Howard was present during the cremation) that also recognizes a barrier between them, as if they were forbidden to make true contact with each other by some unspoken rule. This concept of an invisible barrier, perhaps representing Howard’s epilepsy, persists throughout the novel, but comes up once more when George runs away. After learning about Kathleen’s intention of sending Howard to a mental asylum, he steals his father’s horses and intends to run away to his friend Ray Morrell’s farm. This destination is overtly symbolic because it represents that which George desires most – a stable and happy relationship between father and son. It is especially important because George could have run anywhere that he wanted, but only ends up going as far to his friend’s house. Although this may be because he was just too young and fearful to venture farther, it is still representative of George’s idea of an ideal life. Once Howard finds his son in the abandoned barn that George was staying in, the reader receives yet another reminder of how Ray’s life is truly just an ideal. Howard’s inability to express his affection and sorrow to his eldest son demonstrates that even a decent relationship is an ironically unreachable utopia that George could never have.

While an analysis of George and Howard’s relationship elucidates the superficial reasons for the end of the book, it is also important to analyze the root causes and dig deeper into Howard’s own relationship

with his father. We only get a small glimpse into George's grandfather's life (interestingly he is never referred to in that manner) at the beginning of Chapter 3. The first thing to notice is the very interesting perspective through which this story is narrated. It seems as if Howard is using George's mind as a conduit, perhaps trying to convey something to George as an explanation of his behavior. Another very interesting concept about this memory is that without the initial introduction during which Howard thinks about why he did not "tell George about his own father", it is nearly impossible to distinguish whether the narrator is Howard or George (127). I found this of paramount importance because without even reading into the text, a certain parallel theme seems to emerge, which is indeed corroborated by the memory that follows. It seems as if George is a mirror image of his father, at least during their childhood. Howard was just as alienated from his father because of the condition that he had. He felt the same sort of empathy that George did for his mother, who was also encumbered by his father's illness, "getting [him] shaved and into his clothes" every morning (133). In fact, just as in George's life, Howard's wife also arranged for her husband to be taken away, a situation that nearly identical to that of George's life. These memories seem to be both a candid apology to George from Howard through some sort of connection as well as a justified defense of his actions and character. Howard seems to be saying that he was shaped, and just as traumatized, by his father's disaffection during his childhood.

One last important concept to analyze in order to determine how and why the book ended as it did is an examination of the actual physical and mental journey that both George and Howard embark on. At this point, it seems evident that the 192 hours that it took George to die and hallucinate were a search for meaning in his relationship with his father. Howard's journey is a little different but just as difficult. Not only did he have to work through George as a conduit to convey his own side of the story to both George and the reader, but he also went to the extreme lengths the reader would expect of a compassionate and loving factor to actually find George after decades of separation. Both of these characters' journeys are meant to emphasize the sheer distance that Howard's condition created between them and how hard they had to work to even progress an inch in their relationship. They both seemed to be striving to no longer just be "an acquaintance of a friend" to each other, but to model the relationship that we saw earlier in the novel between Ray and his father, which set the framework for the entire story (138).

At the end of the novel, the question still remains: why, after such a long and arduous journey, do George and Howard not find what they were both looking for? Finding the correct answer, I believe, is impossible for anyone besides the author himself to figure out. However, I think that it is fair to speculate that through an amalgamation of all of these experiences and memories, the reader can deconstruct the novel in a way that reveals the subtleties that hide behind the façade of a sweet reconciliation. George's and Howard's stories are not supposed to regale the reader of a hero's journey spurred by love and compassion, but instead of a tragedy whose implications hold material impacts in the everyday lives of too many people. The paths of these two main characters will never meet - their fates are parallel lines asymptotically divided by their experiences, emotions, and personalities. This barrier, perhaps bulging with the sheer amount of emotions and conversation that wants to cross, never seems to rupture.

VI. Addendum B: “The Benevolent Stranger,” Hugh Himwich

At the beginning of Chapter 4 of *Tinkers* George, who will die within the next seventy-two hours, wakes at night and finds a person sitting on the couch next to his bed, reading from a book that defies any easy description. Its passages seem to be on the one hand an account of mystical experience and on the other simply nonsense or even worse, the product of pathetic mental dysfunction. George thinks of this familiar, but unidentifiable person as a “benevolent stranger” (p. 157) of unknown age, “radiating a sense of possessing hundreds of years . . . a simultaneity . . . as if the person experienced any number of times at once.” He hears the “silvery voice” of this person saying, “I think that these years of days, this near century of years, is a gift from you. Thank you.” (pp. 158-159) The “benevolent stranger” then reads to George from the book to help this man of eighty years get back to sleep and perhaps as well to ease his dying:

Cometa Borealis: We entered the atmosphere at dusk. We trailed a wake of fire. We were a sparkling trail of white fire hurtling over herds that grazed alluvial plains. The purple plains: steppe and table, clastic rocks from an extinct river strewn over the bed of an extinct ocean. Perhaps, far away, there was a revolution—the storming of a bereft fort built on the bend of a remote, misty, woods-shrouded river. But here only heavy-coated caribou lifted their shagged heads, their velvet antlers, not even stopping their chewing while our silent blazing passed across the cold sky, followed by their wet black eyes, but only because that is the nature of eyes and of light. Winds swept over the plains. We never saw the caribou or the revolution. We were a burning fuse. We barely caught a glimpse of the darkening world below us before we burned away to nothing. (p 159)

Who is this “benevolent stranger” and what book is this and who has written it? Later, George will ask his wife, Charlie’s Nan,

Who is reading to me? Who is reading? What is that book? She said, What book, George? Have you been reading to Gramp, Charlie? Charlie said, No, Nan. She turned back to George and said, No one is reading to you, George. George said, The big book. No, my love, there is no book; no one is reading to you. There is no one here all. (pp. 175-176)

We may well wonder at this moment if we are to interpret the last line literally, that *there is no one here at all*, and who it is that actually speaks these last lines. Is it Nan’s voice or is it that of the benevolent stranger in chorus with hers? Note that the last sentences are different from the preceding ones, having no “he said” or “she said” before them, though a reader would naturally think of them as those of George’s wife. It is certainly possible that the benevolent stranger is simply a creation of George’s dying consciousness, except that for George and for the reader, that strange, benevolent person is real. If George is hallucinating, then we as readers are hallucinating right along with him. We heard the stranger say, “Now, let me read you something to get you back to sleep.” (p. 159) Another possibility is that the voice of the benevolent stranger is that of the narrator, who *is* and, at the same time, *is not* the author Paul Harding. As readers, we are very much in the position of George to whom the benevolent stranger is reading so that he may get some sleep, perhaps to dream, where he may find some final peace, as indeed he does in his final living memory of a visit from his father Howard, who, though dead, is then very much alive to him. George himself is remembered in these pages as are all those who live for us in loving memory. Simply put, the characters are fictions in the author’s imagination as he gathers about him the voices and memories from his own family history and creates for them a world in which they seem to live again both for himself and for the reader. The statement, “There is no one here at all”, is true not only for George and the reader, but for Paul Harding himself. And yet, it is all so real that the page upon which this is being written is marked with tears.

That it has been necessary to use quotation marks to separate commentary from text in the above paragraph has the danger of creating the impression that the characters have distinct identities. In the

indented paragraph above, however, where George is first asking his wife who is reading and what is that book and she tells him that there is neither a book nor reader and we are anonymously told further that there is no one here at all, the lack of quotation marks invites the reader to hear but a single voice and a single mind at work. Indeed, the lack of quotation marks permits a kind of permeability that is characteristic of the text throughout. Here Howard's mother is talking to her son after he has first 'survived' his own epileptic seizure:

First, she scrubbed the blood out my ears. The sounds of the world hissed in my head, clearer than I remembered them.
I said you are in a state, she said.
I went looking for Dad.
Then she scrubbed the blood my face and hair. . . . (p. 155)

In the line, "I said you are in a state, she said.", Howard's mother appears to be repeating a statement that she had previously made, but Howard has not heard. Indeed, Howard tell us and his mother that he "had a spell and went deaf." (p. 154) Howard's deafness appears to be the result of the blood that his mother is scrubbing out of his ears. The voices of mother and son mingle with that of the narrator and, strangely, also with silence of the author himself as he crafts the scene. There is no one speaking here at all. There is only the moving, creative consciousness of the author.

The permeability between characters and between the characters and the author may also be seen in the way Harding changes perspective in the shift from "I" to "you" and "she" in the line quoted above, "I said you are in a state, she said." This is a miniature version of a more dramatic shift of perspective that occurs in extended, more intensely poetic passages of the text. In the following example, that Howard introduces by saying that his father "leaked out of the world gradually" (p. 134) the 'leaking' soon becomes a mingling of identities, as Howard's father, suffering from dementia, fumbles to take hold of an apple. The identities shift from "he" to "I", a mingling that includes Howard and his father and the loving memory of the author:

Another time, I found him fumbling for an apple in the barrel we kept in the basement. I could just make him out in the gloom. Each time he tried to grab a piece of fruit, it eluded him, or I might say he eluded it He succeeded once, after appearing to concentrate for a moment, in upsetting an apple from its place at the top of the pile, but it merely tumbled down from along the backs of the other apples and came to rest against the mouth the barrel. It seemed to me that even if I could pick an apple an apple up with my failing hands, how could I bite with my dissipating teeth, digest it with my ethereal gut? I realized that this thought was not my own but, rather, my father's that even his ideas were leaking out of his former self. . . . and as my father was receding from human circumstance, so, to were all these particulars, back to some unknowable froth where they might be reassigned to be stars or belt buckles, lunar dust or railroad spikes. Perhaps they already were all these things and my father's fading was because he realized this: My goodness, I am made from planets and wood, diamonds and orange peels, and I cannot concentrate on this apple . . . and I cannot concentrate on this apple, this apple and the only thing common to all this is that I feel sorrow so deep, it must be love . . . (pp. 135-136)

The love expressed here is at once that of Howard, Howard's father, and the author, who seems to say in his own person the final lines in the quotation above: "the only thing common to all this is that I feel sorrow so deep, it must be love." It perhaps takes a certain kind of deafness to hear the author's voice here.

Many more instances of the mingling of identities between characters and between the characters and the author could be cited, but perhaps enough has been said to encourage readers to test out this thesis in their own reading. The all too often frail power of love is invoked in the passage above. It is love by which one may become one with another and whereby those who are no longer with us may yet reside within us. Each person must answer for him or herself what is more fundamental, the separation of our several identities or their identity. The writing of *Tinkers* poses the question.

There remains the question of the existence of what we may call the *Liber Borealis*, a mystical, intensely poetic book from which Charlie first and then the benevolent stranger seems to be reading to George. At other times, however, passages from this strange book simply appear, leaving the reader to make sense of their connection with the surrounding text. It may be that there is a kind of sleight of hand at work here, that encourages us to think of the *Liber Borealis* as something other than the novel *Tinkers* itself just as that a similar sleight of hand encourages us to separate identities of the characters from each other and from that of the narrator and of Harding himself. Similarly, the ‘identity’, if you will, of the *Liber Borealis* is not distinct from the novel itself. Of course not! Like all magic, once explained, it seems almost too obvious to make a bother about. Yet, there is something more here because the passages of the *Liber Borealis* do not simply extend and deepen our understanding of the surrounding text, but reflect the deepest soundings of the author’s own creative consciousness, on the move and at large everywhere in the novel, and is finally the real magic of the novel, its “dark and secret yes”.

Footnote: As I was writing this essay, I was also, more or less simultaneously, writing a short story in which not only the identities of the characters merge but also where one of the characters seems to become aware that there is a less than benevolent presence that is shaping the story of her life and that of the man from whom she seems unable to free herself. I confess it is manipulative and cartoonish and unpleasant but in the end (a small joke here) I get what I deserve or rather someone who is impersonating me gets what he deserves. You’ll have to decide. In any case, I would swear on a stack of bibles that though I wrote this, the “I” of the piece is not me nor is the supposed author of this piece. It’s all a kind of sleight of hand. What I hate about this piece is that ‘other thing’ that makes Harding’s *Tinkers* so meaningful. You should ask me, “But, Hugh, where is the love?” I ask myself the same question. It may be that this shady little piece makes my point about *Tinkers* by contrast.

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.

VII Addendum C: “Response to Akshay and Hugh” by Zoe Kunz

Going into my reading of the two essays about whether or not George reconnected with his father, my interpretation was that he did have a meaningful connection with Howard. After reading Akshay’s essay, I reformed my thoughts a bit. I still think he found some sort of connection, but I don’t know how deep and genuine of a connection it is. I think George found some meaning in his dying days that satisfied his yearning to find a relationship with his father, but that doesn’t necessarily mean that it is as close of a connection as you or I may feel to our fathers. No one except George really has the authority to determine whether he reconnected with his father because we are just onlookers from the outside. I may consider my relationship with my father to be close given that we go on ski trips together every winter, and someone that goes out to breakfast and goes to the grocery store every weekend with their father may think that that isn’t a close relationship. The other person’s opinion doesn’t take away value from my view of my relationship with my father, just as Akshay’s view that George didn’t connect with his father because “their fates are parallel lines asymptotically divided by their experiences, emotions, and personalities” doesn’t mean that George couldn’t feel a connection to his father spiritually, no matter how separated their lives may have been.

I may be misled, and I don’t want to put words in his mouth, but my reading of Akshay’s essay gave me the impression that he was expecting to find George and Howard to keep in touch after Howard’s visit on Christmas in 1953, and since that visit didn’t spark a desire for the two of them to catch up and stay connected, then George didn’t achieve the ideal relationship with his father, and the story ended as a tragedy. Contrarily, I think that as George explored his memories of his father in the last week of his life, he put them all together to create some idea of his father that may not be realistically representative of who his father really is, but the character that he created in his head satisfied his yearning to meet his father again. So, in discussing the different perspectives of if George succeeded in his search for his father, a question is raised as to what defines the connection. In my mind, as long as George died feeling satisfied in his relationship with his father, then that is a successful connection. I don’t care how accurate or true the connection really was; all that matters is that it was George’s mission, and so if George is happy, then he succeeded.

In response to “The Benevolent Stranger” essay, I developed ideas about the way that *Tinkers* is written, and how the style contributes to the story. There is a decent amount of discussion about the vague use of pronouns and identification of specific people throughout the book, as is pointed out with the quotations in the essay:

Who is reading to me? Who is reading? What is that book? She said, What book , George? Have you been reading to Gramp, Charlie? Charlie said, No, Nan. She turned back to George and said, No one is reading to you, George. George said, The big book. No, my love, there is no book; no one is reading to you. There is no one here all. (pp. 175-176)

First, she scrubbed the blood out my ears. The sounds of the world hissed in my head, clearer than I remembered them. I said you are in a state, she said.

I went looking for Dad.

Then she scrubbed the blood my face and hair. . . . (p. 155)

These quotations exemplify the cloudiness of who is speaking and who is present in the story. I think this particular shift and vagueness of the perspectives in the story is meant to give the reader an idea that they’re all similar and somewhat interchangeable. George, Howard, and Howard’s father all have similar enough experiences and thoughts that they can be confused or switched up easily. This similarity connects them to each other and defines a relationship between all of them. This further solidifies my idea that George and

Howard are indeed connected in some way throughout their life, which gives George access to a relationship with his father in the last few days of his life.

Lastly, the final borealis passage, the *Homo Borealis*, ends with the idea that “finally, we were joined” (200). There is no articulation of who is being referred to as “we,” but it is not unreasonable to assume that this passage is applicable to George and his father. After years of being apart, and with one short visit down the road, George concludes his life as he finally feels rejoined with his father.

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VIII. Mimi's Final Word:

All That's Left is Cigarette Ash

Where do the boys go when it gets cold out?

Do they have a place to sleep?

Where did their mums go? Did they get taken?

Or had they had enough of taking care of things?

Kun's hands tremble in his pockets as they reach for the nearly empty pack of cigarettes on instinct. His fingers naturally close around the rolled paper, but he doesn't light it. His back is cold against the brick wall across the street, his eyes trailing the shipping workers as they transfer packages into shipping containers. He realizes, belatedly, that he probably looks like some kind of creep.

"Dumbass," he hears someone laugh, and the boy that Kun's been watching turns around. He isn't really a boy anymore. He looks like a man now and sounds like one too. He lifts another shipping box from the cart and tosses it into the truck. He's probably taller than Kun now, but he was tiny when he was a kid. (The kind of small that's particular to being nervous all the time and just a tad bit malnourished). Kun finally lights his cigarette and takes a long inhale. The boy still has a baby face though. Despite the definition of his jawline, he still hasn't grown into his features all the way and that at least, is some kind of comfort.

When Kun's done smoking, he crushes the cigarette butt beneath his shoe and takes one long look at the boy. Then he turns around and heads home.

The next day, Kun finds himself standing across the street again. The boy never smokes with his coworkers, but he does stand with them, chatting and laughing animatedly. When his eyes and nose scrunch up in joy, his smile boxy and teeth as white as ever, he almost looks like the boy that Kun used to know like the back of his hand.

The men get back to work, and Kun watches him lift boxes with practiced ease. He used to be so skinny when they were kids (they both were, but Kun was older). He knows he should leave, but his feet stay rooted to the concrete beneath him, something telling him he should stay just a little longer. He smokes the rest of his cigarette and just as he is about to leave, the boy emerges from the truck and jumps off the side. The boy's ankle twists as his foot meets the ground.

Kun's moving before he even realizes it. He crosses the street, barely glancing to see if it's clear, and jogs to where the boy is lying. "Yangyang," he says and the name feels strange in his mouth. His brother stares at him with confusion clouding his eyes. The realization that Yangyang doesn't even know what he looks like anymore almost knocks Kun off his feet right there. Distantly, one of his brother's coworkers says he's going to call an ambulance and then, Yangyang's face twists grotesquely in recognition. "Go away," Yangyang grits out through clenched teeth. They're barely audible with the way the boy's voice is strained in pain, but the words are unmistakable.

The woman at the counter looks up at him with barely concealed boredom. "Qian Yangyang, you said?" she deadpans. Kun nods. "What's your relation?"

"He's my brother." Kun replies, nearly stumbling over the words that feel unfamiliar in his mouth. Her eyebrows furrow in suspicion, but in the end she doesn't question it. She tells him the room number and Kun nearly falls over himself in his haste to get to the elevator.

As he's waiting for the lift to arrive the sound of Yangyang's voice relentlessly replays in his head. *Go away go away go away*. Of course, he didn't really expect anything different, but some naive part of his brain had hoped that the last ten years would just be washed away—that all his crimes would be forgiven and Yangyang would still be that little boy that life hadn't touched yet.

The elevator slows to a stop, and Kun's feet carry him to the second room on the left. Yangyang's laying on his side in the last bed with the curtain drawn halfway around him, his left foot covered in a white plaster cast. His eyes are closed and when he opens them to meet Kun's gaze, they're guarded.

"I came to visit you," Kun says. Yangyang doesn't react. Kun thinks that Yangyang looks a little bit like their father—years of hurt written on his face and even more years left for it to haunt him. At that moment an overwhelming sense of something inexplicable hits Kun in the chest. Regret? Longing? Disappointment? Maybe it's a mixture of all those things. He had wanted Yangyang to grow up happy. He had wanted to protect him from all that.

"I don't know what the hell you want now and I don't care," Yangyang says, voice hard.

"I just wanted to see if you were okay," Kun replies quietly, eyes cast down.

"It's none of your business. You can leave. I've made my way around just fine without you," his brother says without looking at him, his words clipped. With that, Kun doesn't really know what to do. Yangyang will have to forgive him on his own time, if he even wants to at all. He knows he doesn't have the right to expect anything else, but he can't deny that it still hurts.

"Right," he nods, "I'll go." As he turns to leave, he glances behind him, but Yangyang isn't looking back.

The following morning, Kun gets Yangyang's address from one of the boy's coworkers. Yangyang has a tiny apartment across town, but when Kun finds him, he's sitting in the hallway with his belongings scattered around him. "Yangyang," he says, and his brother looks up. "What happened?"

"None of your business," Yangyang snaps, but Kun can figure it out for himself.

"You can stay with me."

"I don't wanna fucking stay with you."

"If you had anywhere else to go you wouldn't be here right now. Come on, don't be stubborn."

"You know you're not the only person I've got anymore, right? I'll figure something out."

Kun winces. "At least give me a chance," he murmurs, his words coming out hushed and desperate. "I don't even have to speak to you if that's what you really want. Please, just come with me. I can't just leave you here."

Yangyang's eyes darken as he practically growls out his next retort, "It didn't stop you before." It's a low blow and they both know it, but Kun swallows the anger and the thousand justifications that threaten to escape from his teeth. Instead, he takes a breath and fishes out an old receipt and a pen from his pocket. On it, he hastily scribbles out his own address and leaves it on the step by Yangyang.

That night, Kun dreams about his mother for the first time in years. She's standing in the stairwell of their tiny house, banging her head against the wall. Blood runs down the side of her face, disappearing into

the neckline of her white dress. *I want to die, I want to die. Why can't he just kill me?* He dreams about reaching for her. He dreams about her pulling away.

You're the reason I can't die.

He wakes up with a start, his hands frantically reaching out in front of him. His hair is matted with sweat. He's tired.

There's a knock on the door. Yangyang stands in his doorway with a duffel bag slung across his shoulder while his arms are occupied by his crutches. Kun stares at him for a moment, completely dumbfounded, before Yangyang clears his throat uncomfortably. Yangyang's fingers are white around his crutches as he grits out his words, like saying them is the most painful thing in the world, "Just so you know, this doesn't mean anything okay? I'm only here because I don't want to bother my friends."

Kun jerks his head in a nod. "Right."

(The thing is, Yangyang used to need him for everything. Being the younger sibling, Yangyang had grown up anxious and timid and he got spooked by every little thing. Still though, Yangyang had Kun and Yangyang had their mother. Kun had himself. When their mother had her youngest child, she finally plucked up enough courage to stand up to her husband, just barely enough to spare Yangyang from the worst of things. Sometimes Kun had hated Yangyang for that—for being protected, for following him around everywhere like a lost puppy, for depending on him for love when Kun didn't have any to begin with.)

(But if he was really being honest with himself, most of the time, he didn't really mind it.)

"How's your foot?"

"Fine."

"Are you taking time off of work?"

"Yeah."

"Do you - " Kun starts, but Yangyang interrupts him.

"Stop," he says quietly. "I don't want to do this."

"I just want to talk to you."

"You can't just - " Something starts bleeding into his tone, maybe frustration, maybe longing, maybe something else, and Yangyang takes a deep breath before continuing. "You can't just show up in my life after all these years and try to act like you still care about me. It's too late for all of that." Yangyang isn't shouting like Kun would have expected, but his words still feel like a knife in his side.

"I tried to find you," Kun tries, but Yangyang scoffs and all of a sudden his shoulders are tense and his walls are up again. "Yangyang- "

"Just leave me alone, okay? The fact that I'm even here is bad enough," and with that the conversation is over. Yangyang pushes past his shoulder and hobbles over to his couch. He lays down and closes his eyes and all Kun can do is stand there.

A week goes by in a haze. They don't talk.

In the nights, Yangyang goes out to do who knows what and Kun hardly even sees him during the day because of his work. It feels like Yangyang isn't even real—like he's a ghost or maybe a dream.

That night, Kun goes out to a bar which he hasn't done in at least a few years. After a few too many drinks, he's just a bit too tipsy. It makes him want to run his mouth, and he knows he should stop bothering the bartender who doesn't really care about his problems, but he's too strung out to really care.

"He hates me," he slurs out and the bartender gives him an unimpressed look.

"Whoever this guy is, I'm sure he doesn't hate you."

"He hates me," Kun insists. "Imagine that. You know, when we were kids, he used to follow me around like a little duck. He'd hold onto the back of my shirt all the time, and now he hates me." He realizes mid-way through his sentence that his head is definitely tilting and his vision is probably not supposed to be so blurry, but he continues anyway, "He was so annoying when he was a kid, you know? He couldn't do anything for himself. He wouldn't leave me alone for a minute. 'Kun, come play with me. Kun, what are you doing?'"

The bartender looks like she'd rather die than listen to him anymore so she quickly makes a vague excuse that he doesn't hear. "I just want him to talk to me," Kun says and he doesn't even realize the bartender's already on the other side of the room. He rests his forehead on the table and the varnished wood is cold against his head. "I just want him to talk to me," he repeats, and he realizes he's crying.

When he finally lays down to rest, Kun's memories fill his dreams again. Downstairs, their mother was crying and their father was yelling and there was glass shattering, but crouched on the carpet of their shared bedroom were two brothers with the door shut tight behind them. They had their hands over their mouths trying to stifle their giggles as they got lost in a game of make belief. Back then, they were in a different world, completely untouchable.

Again, Kun wakes up sweaty and exhausted. He sits up and turns to stand. The wooden floor is cold beneath his feet and with a defeated sigh, he slips down the hall to get himself a cup of water to drink. He's a few feet away from the kitchen when he hears Yangyang whimpering. For a moment he freezes, merely listening to the boy's pained noises as he shifts restlessly in his sleep. Then, as the realization of what's happening hits him, Kun jerks to life, kneeling next to the couch and reaching for the boy gently.

"Yangyang," he whispers, running a hand through his brother's sweaty hair. "Wake up. It's just a dream." It takes another shaking of his shoulders before Yangyang gasps awake, eyes wide and terrified as he takes in his surroundings. Kun waits for his breathing to slow down before he asks, "You okay?"

"Fuck off," Yangyang says, voice hoarse as he shrinks away from Kun's touch.

"Yangyang—"

"Go away," he insists, and Kun realizes there's tears on Yangyang's cheeks. "I hate you."

"Yangyang," he says, softer this time and he realizes his hands are moving out of instinct—the action oddly familiar. Yangyang struggles in his hold, but Kun gathers him into his arms anyway. "It's okay," Kun murmurs. "It's okay. Everything will be okay"

"Why did you leave me?" Yangyang says, and then the boy is sobbing. He stops fighting Kun and falls limp in his hold as his shoulders shake. "Why did you leave me?"

Now, there are many things Kun could say. He could tell Yangyang that he was also just a kid, and on the day that he left his father had beat him until he couldn't move, and well, how could he have gone home after that? He could tell him he'd tried to go back for him, but he found the house empty with a sale sign in the yard. He could tell him how that day was the lowest moment of his entire life and how he had almost let it kill him right there on the front porch of their empty house. He could tell him he'd thought about him every day—missed him, cried over him, dreamed about him, hated himself for years for him, but in the end, he doesn't say any of those things. He tells him the only thing that really matters. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

They sit at opposite ends of Kun's dinky kitchen table. "One day, he caught me ditching class," Kun says. The plastic chair is hard against his back. "I thought it wouldn't be so bad since he didn't even say anything to me at first, but halfway home, he stopped me in an alleyway and..."

"It was bad," Yangyang guesses, and Kun nods.

"I couldn't come back after that."

That night, he had laid down on the dirty concrete for a few hours, watching the stars pass by over his head. He had wondered if he should just never get up. His body ached and he was tired. He really was. Honestly, he hadn't even thought of Yangyang in that moment. He knew it was selfish, but it was survival, because if he had taken one second to think about how Yangyang would be alone in that place, trapped between their mother and their father, maybe Kun would've gone back—and that was the one thing that he was absolutely sure would've killed him. But no, he hadn't gone back and instead he had collected up all the shattered pieces of himself and glued them back together into some semblance of a man, and for a long, long time it was bad.

Finally, when he was a little older, a little more stable, he went back for his family. When he came home though, he found his brother gone and his house empty.

"Remember that day he threw Mom's flower vase at her?" Yangyang says, "and how she got out that big suitcase from inside her closet and slammed the door behind her with his car keys in her hand?"

"I remember." The only thing Kun really remembers was holding Yangyang as he cried.

"We thought she was never going to come back."

"Yeah."

"But she did though, a few hours later." Looking back, Kun thinks his mother probably had left them that day, but then the guilt dragged her, screaming and crying, back to them. "I thought that's what you were going to do. I always thought that you'd be home the next day or the next night or the next morning after that. I waited for you to come back every day."

"When did you stop waiting?"

"I don't know. It took a long time for me to give up."

"By the time I made it back home, you guys were gone." They lapse into silence after that. It's not tense, but it's not comfortable either.

And then, "How did you find me again?"

Kun smiles at the thought of it. "After I got a promotion at work, I wanted to buy those fancy cigars from the other side of town to celebrate. I saw you across the street at the shipping yard."

"You found me buying cigarettes?" Yangyang repeats incredulously and if Kun listens close enough or maybe lies to himself convincingly enough, he thinks Yangyang's tone could almost be fond. They both fall into silence again. It stretches out long and thin between them.

"It must have been hard," Yangyang suddenly murmurs, "being all alone." Kun's gaze flickers up to meet him. "You must have had a hard time."

Kun stares at the boy sitting in front of him, shocked by the sincerity in his eyes. Kun tries to stop it, but a lump rises in his throat anyway and his eyes start burning. It was hard. It was so hard, but for the longest time he felt like he wasn't allowed to think that, not when it must've been so much harder for everyone he left behind. It was hard, trying to make a life for himself when he was just a teenager and his mind had taken much longer to heal than the wounds his father left him. It was hard and somewhere along the way Kun had turned into a person he hated. Being here, in a home he bought with his own money, the only real vice he has being the smell of tobacco that he carries with him, was something that took all of him,

and he had almost given up a thousand times, and he had cried and screamed and died a thousand times more.

It was hard, and Yangyang sees that. Yangyang sees him. So Kun cries and squeezes his brother's hand tightly and Yangyang doesn't let go.

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