

**SPEAKING IN TONGUES: A COLLECTION
OF ESSAYS WITH A CRITICAL
INTRODUCTION**

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Introduction

"Have we digressed, however? I hope so."

William Gass

When I first decided to write a collection of essays for my thesis, I thought the task would be simple enough. The essays themselves, while challenging, proved to be no great obstacle. But then arose the matter of a critical introduction to explain and theorize about what I had done. This resulted in the taxing of both my patience and abilities. I made the grievous error of attempting to write an introduction before producing the essays the first time around. That effort has found exile in an obscure file folder, never to see daylight again. I hope to redeem myself here.

The problem confronting anyone trying to write about essays is the dearth of information available. Generally any commentary at all exists in the form of introductions written for anthologies and textbooks written to help college students produce essays. These analyses, without fail, are remarkably similar. Naturally all state the essay is a short, nonfiction piece of prose, but the great hinge they revolve upon concerns what they see as the two types of essays: the familiar and the formal. *The Harper Handbook to Literature* provides a good representation of how the familiar essay is defined: "An essay dealing with personal matters or subjective opinions or prejudices, often light

or humorous, with a familiar or intimate tone" (188). Hardly an exhaustive definition of the genre, and yet it exemplifies the approach and perception toward the familiar essay. The formal essay garners much more attention. The formal essay has structure, rhetorical strategies, definable purposes, and easily classified sub-genres (i.e., the argumentative essay, the informative essay, the biographical essay, the critical essay, etc.). Students, in my experience, usually grow quickly frustrated with the familiar essay because of its nebulous and vague definition and instead gravitate toward the formal essay with its seemingly clear-cut objectives and structure.

But does such a division between familiar and formal provide a true answer to the question, "What is an essay?" I believe it does not. In my quest to find criticism concerning the essay, I stumbled upon an excellent survey by Carl H. Klaus entitled "Essayists on the Essay." Klaus wanted to teach a seminar on the essay and encountered the same difficulties I did when attempting to compile a reading list. While he found many works on the careers of essay writers, he discovered that "the essay itself, the whole territory--its boundaries, its terrain, its deep interior--that was a place only a few scholars had chosen to visit" (155). Klaus turned to an interesting alternative: what did essay writers themselves have to say about the essay? Here Klaus unearthed a wealth of information. Many writers appear to hold very definite views on what constitutes an essay. Using Klaus as a starting point, I want to provide some basic parameters I believe most essays operate within as well some specific notions my work strives toward. I cannot promise anything beyond this; the elusiveness of the essay, as we shall see, is what so attracts the people who write it.

The first thing Klaus noticed about essay writers was how they classified their work. The writers Klaus examined never categorized in terms of formal or familiar; they always wrote either essays or Something Else. Joseph Addison conceived of his *Spectator* work in this manner: "Among my Daily-Papers, which I bestow on the Publick, there are some which are written with Regularity and Method, and others that run out into the Wildness of those compositions, which go by the Name of Essay" (IV: 186). This "Regularity" Addison terms "Set Discourse" (II: 465). I wish to call this "Set Discourse" the Article, the predominant form of short nonfiction we know today. Montaigne, like Addison, clearly understood the difference between the essay and the article. His work departs from that of scholars who "mark off their ideas more specifically and in detail I speak my meaning in disjointed parts" (824). According to Klaus, both Addison and Montaigne see the essay as "a form of writing whose distinguishing characteristic is its freedom from any governing aspect of form" (160). The essay develops into what Klaus dubs an "antigenre" (160).

This openness of form allows the writer to explore regions not normally accessible under the mandates of the article. I make the distinction this way: the essay is speculation-driven while the article is information-driven. The article writer always moves toward a point; the essay writer forever wanders. The article wants you to know something; the essay wants you to think about something. The article delivers facts while the essay offers possibilities. The essay asks and the article tells. Imagine George Will and Roger Angell attending a baseball game together. Will would keep a very neat and precise scorecard; Angell would eat several hotdogs and strike up a conversation

with the man sitting next to him. Will would nod approvingly when the pitcher walked the clean-up hitter intentionally with men at second and third while Angell would mourn the loss of a dramatic moment. Will remembers Bill Buckner allowing the ball to slip between his legs in the sixth game of the 1985 World Series in a classic error in fundamentals. Angell recalls cheering while Buckner chugged around the bases at Fenway Park in 1990 for his only inside-the-park homerun just days before his final release from the Red Sox. George Will writes articles about baseball; Roger Angell writes essays.

While most writers note the fundamental differences between the article and the essay, they diverge when evaluating their worth. William Gass abhors the article as a perversion and corruption of the essay. For him the article "furnishes seals of approval and underwriter's guarantees; its manners are starched, stuffy, it would wear a dress suit to a barbecue, silk pajamas to the shower" (25). The language of the article sounds like "writing born for its immediate burial in a Journal" (26). But G. K. Chesterton recognizes the danger in the freedom of the essay, "It [the essay] is always dealing with theoretical matters without the responsibility of being theoretical, or of propounding a theory" (3). Interestingly, though, Chesterton almost always wrote essays. Joseph Krutch refers to the article as "machine-made" (19). The complaint of these writers, even Chesterton in a round about way, lies in the narrow focus and rigidity of the article. Facts and statistics are needed, but give us some room to roam and ponder, meditate and stretch, they cry. Krutch complains that the article tends "to disregard everything which science cannot deal with" (35). This is

the point at which things commence to be worth thinking about for the essayist.

The chasm separating information and speculation does more than mark the provinces of the article and the essay; it says something fundamental about the way we view ourselves and the world. The great god science drives the creation of the article. The turn toward statistical studies even in the humanities is a direct result of science dominating our culture. Being a scientist demands respect and attention; being an English professor invites being looked upon as an eccentric or an anachronism. Give us numbers and models scream the masses, and the article answers the call. At the turn of the century, William Dean Howells already comprehended how society was changing when he wrote, "There is a lyrical sense, as well as a dramatic, an epical, an ethical sense, and it was that which the old-fashioned essay delighted" (803). Howells went on to write that he doubted whether that lyrical sense still existed in the reader. Modern humanity wants no speculation or doubt; he wants the world presented in cold, hard facts delivered in easy-to-read pie charts.

Against this tide of numbers the essayist battles because people remain the one subject science cannot reduce to equations or flow charts: not that it does not try. Humanity, warns the essayist, stands outside the glorious temple of science looking in and unaccounted for. "Just how," asks Krutch, "one can profitably consider dispassionately so passionate a creature as man I do not know, but that seems to be the enterprise to which we have committed ourselves" (19). The article can inform us about anything but ourselves; that is the job of the essayist, and he requires the freedom and openness of the essay to tackle such

elusive prey. I write essays because of my fascination with people, both their towering achievements and their trivial diversions. Now that humanity has been objectified out of existence, the form of the essay needs cultivation more than ever; because of that objectivity the essay lies neglected more than ever by all except a small band of speculators trying very hard to explain man to himself.

Essayists have no greater subject than themselves to examine, so the personality and presence of the author in the essay carry greater weight and importance than in any other form of writing. Essays consist of authors confronting their topics and then relating the results. Essayists are in the unique position of needing to be liked by an audience, or at least they must create the perception that they are likeable and interesting people. Virginia Woolf saw personality as "the essayist's most proper but most dangerous and delicate tool" (Klaus 171). How to share the discoveries made as a human without appearing self-indulgent or egoistic confronts every writer who tries to compose an essay. Along with this task also comes the burden of authority; essayists cannot hide behind facts or the detached style of the article; they are the only fact to present and they must convince the audience their assimilation and presentation of reality, the world seen through their eyes, provide a startling and fresh measure of the truth about being human worth considering. By bringing their temperament and consciousness to bear on their subjects, the authors demonstrate how humanity affects and changes the scenery by its mere presence in the world. Essayists must always participate in, not merely comment on, the topics they pursue.

The openness, freedom, and subjective approach to the topic of the essay should not fool the reader into the belief that the essayist simply rambles or roams aimlessly. As E. B. White cautioned in the Preface of his own collected works:

The essay, although a relaxed form, imposes its own disciplines, raises its own problems, and these disciplines and problems soon become apparent and (we all hope) act as a deterrent to anyone wielding a pen merely because he entertains random thoughts or is in a happy or wandering mood. (viii)

One of the major challenges the essayist faces is imposing order while keeping the illusion of informality. Connections must be made beyond the usual means of structure and organization. I try to write in a circular instead of linear manner, with all paths starting from a central point and eventually revolving around that focus. Other writers attempt to evoke a mood throughout their work regardless of the many directions they take the essays. Continuity of voice in an essay figures largely, but radically shifting that voice from essay to essay allows the collection as a whole to remain open. The essay writer must have purpose and method of some sort while fostering the illusion that all those words flowed in inspiration from the pen. A precarious balancing act ensues. Freedom always carries its responsibilities or anarchy and gibberish result.

Having demanded a method and purpose, I feel obliged to share the ideas that shaped this collection of essays. Two seemingly disparate concepts guided my thinking while writing: diversity and commonality. "Speaking in Tongues" tries to weld both and create an atmosphere the

rest of the essays can breathe and exhale freely. Humanity talks in a plethora of languages and yet we each need to be heard in order to make meaning and we are all trying perhaps to say the same thing. The essay believes this. Edward Hoagland remarked that "an essay is intended to convey the same point to each of us" (26). Can we get the point? Yes, because at the core of our existence a common thread holds us in fragile harmony. What is that thread? What shape does it take and how can we spot it in the daily fabric of our lives? These essays search for that thread; they try to point and lead the way while always recognizing the struggle and complexity of unravelling man and his existence. I have labored to be cunning and willing to employ any variety of tricks and to tackle any subject to weave that thread into my work.

Benjamin Franklin looked for that thread, too, but as a means of constructing a city where all could thrive and share, the subject of "The City and the *Tao*." He sought to encourage the diversity a city created without having the structure collapse under the weight of chaos. Franklin's solution mixed diversity and commonality into a perfect blend of urban triumph.

There are three essays in the collection which seem to press the idea of openness to the limit of endurance, especially in regard to tone and connection to each other. These essays are "Toto, I Don't Think We're in Oz Anymore," "Keeping Your Head," and "The Ping of the Bat, the Roar of the Crowd." But my purpose here consists of not just revealing the diversity of the world, but my own variety of experience and course of life. My true purpose in these essays is to play with that idea of personality. How can I attract and hold the attention of the reader? Certainly one strategy the essayist employs consists of presenting a

wide array of personae--what E. B. White calls an "extensive wardrobe" (vii). White goes on to claim the essayist can "be any sort of person, according to his mood or his subject matter" (vii-viii). The only restriction placed upon the writer is to never "indulge himself in deceit or concealment, for he will be found out in time" (viii).

My chances of earning the trust of the audience increases each time I go to the closet to change clothes, because eventually I am sure to don an outfit that appeals to the reader. And I have found that once she hears a voice to her liking, once she draws an agreeable picture of the type of person I am, she will continue perceiving me in the same way throughout the rest of the collection.

Perhaps an example will help to clarify. Let us assume a reader identifies with the person recounting his experiences of growing up in Kansas in "Toto, I Don't Think We're in Oz Anymore." The humorous and satiric approach to the topic suits the reader's temperament. Not only have I succeeded in holding that reader's attention there, I have also made my reader more willing to listen to a more serious essay like "Precious words, Splendid Reality," because the reader realizes the person speaking does not demand life be faced with grave earnestness or total seriousness. The reader imagines the narrator of this well-dressed essay to be wandering about in tennis shoes and a pair of jeans. By taking the openness the essay offers to the outer boundaries, I increase the number of tongues I can speak. I improve my chances of being heard.

The multiplicity of voices and tones serves another function as well. The embracing of so many subjects and styles lends to the development of my authority. I try to create a myth of great knowledge;

I can comment on baseball, foreign countries, good beef, and existential philosophers. I can address the reader as scholar, hick, statistician, and historian. My expertise knows no limits; surely I should be believed. My models here are Oliver Sacks and Annie Dillard. Both seem to know so much about so many things one simply begins to assume they always speak the truth and hold the answers.

The Truth. I hold a great faith in it and can feel it coursing through time and humanity. Truth can be discovered in a game as simple as baseball and in a concept as complex as why we speak at all. The search and pursuit of the Truth ultimately holds this collection together. Despite all our diversity, all the subjects covered in these essays, all the approaches taken to those subjects, there remains something fundamental and unchanging about being human. So I end where I began with "Precious Words, Splendid Reality" because I find, as did Walker Percy, that language provides that commonality of the human condition. Words enable us to chant and cry and sing and speak our world. And in those words we hear the echo of the Word calling to us to utter the true Tongue at last. Such words only find peace and solace in the essay; the article has no use for them.

Learning to recognize that not all short nonfiction is an essay could take us far in our teaching and appreciation of the genre. By informing students that most of the nonfiction they digest is article not essay, we would help them to become better writers. I remember the horror of my composition students when they confronted Annie Dillard in their anthology of "essays." They could not understand the metaphors she employed, let alone hope to aspire to such complexity in their own writing. By removing essays from composition courses, we could permit

students to concentrate on mastering the construction of the article; a much more realistic and immensely practical goal. A space would then be created for essays to be studied as a literary form in survey and seminar classes. For those who wish to write essays, classes headed by members of the creative writing department make much more sense.

Students and professors would recognize the essay belongs in the realm of the artist not in the hands of the novice. Like fiction, poetry, and drama, the essay would garner respect and closer scrutiny by critics. And most important, a new generation of speculators might see the essay as a vehicle for a career of musing and contemplation about this strange condition called being a human.

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Speaking in Tongues

On the day of Pentecost the disciples first spoke in tongues. They sat in the upper room of a friend's house anticipating the police to arrive and rough them up. They had been cowards and now Christ was dead and they wished they were the same. Suddenly a mighty rushing wind swept through the place and the multi-lingual conference began. No one could understand what the other said, so Peter and the rest stepped outside for a breath of fresh air. Jerusalem hummed with Jews from every nation all present for the celebration of the religious festival. Amazingly, each disciple spoke one of the languages of each country represented. In true scientific fashion, the crowd declared them drunk, as though alcohol acted as a sort of chemical Berlitz course in the brain. Humanity has always reeled and sputtered under the weight of the miraculous. No, no, cried Peter as he stood to address the crowd. We have something to say, only we lacked the certainty of what our message contained until you arrived to listen. Now we can dance together to the tune of the Meaning. And so Christianity was born.

Naturally, tongues held a place of honor among the church for years to come. Everyone wanted to share the blessing, to walk in the same rarified air as the apostles. But like any facet of religion, when people did not feel the power they pretended. Members would arise and begin to babble and claim they spoke a tongue no one present could

translate. Someone else went one better and informed the congregation his tongue was not earthly but spiritual, a sort of direct connection to God you might overhear but never comprehend, poor mortals. Paul saw through all this nonsense and informed the believers of Corinth to hush up unless someone could explain what was being said. What good were words if none could listen? What sort of a man wants to dance alone? Look, said Paul, "There are all sorts of languages in the world, yet none of them is without meaning." Those who speak and cannot be understood should elicit pity not admiration. Tongues and language are for people, not a person.

I sat in church in eager expectation for the arrival of the tongues. Who would it be? Would the monotonous drone of the preacher suddenly transform into spellbinding Swahili? I remained motionless hoping the Spirit might descend and utter some exotic dialect through me. Mrs. Lawhead, the fierce, iron-willed matron of the church would leap to her feet and translate. What truths would spew from my enchanted lips. Sinners would fall to their knees, the faithful would find strength and encouragement, my parents would usher me home in deep awe and respect, exempting me from all menial household chores so I could devote myself to reflection. But the tongues never arrived, and my peers informed me we had no use for them since we all spoke the same. Perhaps that was the problem; we all listened until we heard no more; we all nodded our heads in pious assent until we did not know what we affirmed; we all chanted the truth unceasingly until we could not remember what it sounded like. A cacophony of words arose, but there existed no silence to absorb and make them into language. Our incessant chattering found no reception.

One day the author Walker Percy sat at his desk in Louisiana and pondered the meaning of words. Actually he sat reflecting on the pathetic condition of humanity, but words soon entered the equation. There then occurred to Percy a wonderful geometric figure. The triangle. At one point of the triangle stood a word. At another point a speaker. But the figure could not complete itself until at the final point there appeared a hearer. Language, understanding, meaning, becoming human all derived from the glorious triangle. The Delta Factor he christened it. Humans need humans to be human. Culture, thought Percy, tells us we need only talk to ourselves, and we discover despair and loneliness as the results of our monologues. Never in the course of history have so many words been spoken but so little language created.

Percy wrote a novel all about constructing triangles and called it *The Moviegoer*. The hero, Binx Bolling, comprehends his despair one morning and decides to embark upon a quest which he dubs the Search. All through the novel he speaks, but we realize he speaks only to himself. No other characters know the nature of his quest because no one listens. But finally a woman named Kate does listen. She listens because she has spent herself speaking. Binx finds he has something to say, something that contains small threads of meaning, things he has said forever, but now someone is present to hear. And Kate to her own amazement responds to words other than her own, and slowly that wondrous triangle finds shape. Within its confines Binx and Kate create language and a world and themselves.

But all the while Binx fails to communicate with other characters in the novel, we slowly realize he converses with us. Listen, listen, listen, whispers Percy, I believe I have something to share, but I

cannot unless you complete the triangle. My words want to translate; my tongue requires interpretation. I wish to be heard, do you want to listen? Yes, we think, but remaining silent proves so difficult. We barely recognize a voice other than our own. Can we decipher the message? Will we feel the nudge and awaken from the trance? Tongues with no design. We have been babbling. We should be pitied.

One day I reclined on the couch to ponder the meaning of literature. Actually I reclined reflecting on the pathetic state of attending graduate school, but literature soon entered the equation. There then occurred to me the thought Walker Percy had explained all of literature with that magical triangle. Texts registered no meaning because the author had no plan of surrendering them to the reader. Critics argued and said nothing because they wanted no one to listen. All of the gibberish entering my ears was just that; tongues but no language, words but no intention. Like the rest of society, academia and art decided to speak only to itself. The thought of releasing words to a hearer, of relinquishing autonomy in the name of understanding baffles and offends us; we cannot embrace the Delta Factor because we cannot embrace another person. Intersubjectivity Gabriel Marcel termed it, the existential need of an Other to become an I. Finding yourself requires finding someone else to tell you if you are who you think you are. You cannot name yourself.

This strikes many as so much mystical, touchy-feely, psycho-jargon; interestingly, the exact reaction Percy said we should anticipate from an objective, empirical-driven society. This is the gritty world of modernity, not a nature weekend encounter group. So instead of listening to a text, we reconstruct it so we might do the

speaking. We do not write for a hearer but for ourselves and boast no one has the enlightenment to fathom our exalted tongue. Words, words, words but no language or meaning. Meaning is not absent from language or literature; it is simply being denied and held at bay. We cannot understand because we refuse to share or to listen. We will not participate in the triangle.

I do not wish to imply all of literature babbles so. I want only to identify a dangerous trend in literature, in all of culture, that threatens to cut us off from one another in the name of self-discovery or happiness or progress. There exist many authors like Percy who speak with the idea of being heard and of releasing their words so they might become something more. Many critics still attempt to listen and in doing so produce language. But the prevailing spirit of the age continues to drone on with tongues constantly speaking no language and words bringing no message, and the world twirls in a lonely waltz with no partners. Have the tongues of fire that descended on the disciples been extinguished or are they hovering very near waiting to burn a hole in our self-preoccupation and set the earth on fire? I hope I am speaking a decipherable tongue; I hope someone is trying to listen; I hope such things are possible. Who knows but that our triangle might envelop the world in flames.

Toto, I Don't Think We're in Oz Anymore

What is it like to live in Kansas? It is a question I am often asked as I was born and raised in Kansas, and there are so few people who call it home and so little literature on the subject. About the only thing most people know about Kansas is that they had to drive through it to get to Colorado. And they hated it. Really hated it. This leads people to speculate that living there must only intensify this loathing. While residing in Kansas is no Carnival Cruise, it does have its moments of quiet satisfaction. The best way to explain living in Kansas is to call the experience The Agony and the Ecstasy.

First the Agony. The greatest burden every Kansan must bear is The Wizard of Oz Angst. This Angst is the unidentifiable despair that perhaps our lives are being lived in black and white while everyone else enjoys a world of Technicolor. And of course there are the jokes: "Where is your dog, Toto; are those your children or Munchkins?" Such ridicule awaits every member of the Sunflower State who dares venture beyond her borders. My task is made no lighter due to the fact my mother's name is actually Dorothy. Her parents immigrated from England and I strongly suspect they surmised such a name would take my mother far in being accepted and loved here. It has only caused me grief as people speculate whether my father might have been the Tin Man.

The movie also gives people the impression that all Kansans live on drab farms raising pigs and wandering about painted scenery. Nothing could be further from the truth. Although Kansas is no Atlantic City, there is plenty here to make your pulse quicken. Take for instance the world's deepest hand-dug well. This achievement is a monument to pioneer fortitude and a tribute to the lengths people will go to live somewhere uninhabitable. Consider also the presence of John Brown in our state during the 1800's. Perhaps one could question his social graces, but never the fact the man brought excitement wherever he went. We think so highly of John that we had John Steurat Curry emblazon his portrait on an entire wall of the state capitol. Forget the murders, forget the insanity; the guy knew how to live and get media attention.

Attention is something every Kansan pines for. Even the briefest mention of our state in *USA Today* or the slightest utterance concerning one of our inhabitants from the lips of Tom Brokaw sends us into rapture. Walker Percy once wrote in his book *The Moviegoer* that no man feels his neighborhood is authentic until he has seen it in a film at the local theater. This holds true for Kansas residents; only our medium is television. We scan each national news story and sporting event with the fervor of a religious convert awaiting a vision. We pray to the giant Media Men of the East that our humble land will be visited by satellite dishes bearing news of our state to the rest of the country. Rumor has it that some may go so far as to secretly wish for a natural disaster epic enough to command national attention. Of course we always hope no one will get hurt. However, a couple of casualties would be a small price to pay to see Uncle Herbert describe for the whole nation how the tornado landed right in his barnyard and carried

off his prize Hereford. Such happenings validate our existence and confirm that we too experience life in a manner worthy of commercial airtime and print space.

Another trial facing all Kansans is the landscape. There is none. Kansas is a flat, treeless place with no landmarks. Many a young Kansas girl prays to the beauty gods that her figure will not resemble Kansas topology. These features tend to make residents moody, quiet and thoughtful. It is difficult to inspire each other to attain great heights when climbing into your pickup truck means you have scaled the loftiest point in the state. Kansans are not ambitious people.

Kansas is the shape of a rectangle. Only the upper right-hand corner of our fair land is missing. This is the portion Missouri stole from us and turned into the thriving metropolis of Kansas City. The little thieves didn't even have the decency to change the name to disguise the deed. We often lay awake at night wondering what could happen if only we had that corner back. Sometimes we lay awake wondering if anything will happen. Living in Kansas is rather like trying to have a conversation with a depressed adolescent: "What's happening?" "Not much." "What are you doing?" "Nothin'." You know there has to be more but you aren't quite sure what it is. This dilemma haunts every Kansan.

And now the Ecstasy. I must begin with the magical word cattle. Cows are everywhere in Kansas. They graze in pastures, they munch hay in barns, and they grow fat in feed lots. All that cow flesh hanging around makes for good eating. So good, in fact, *Gourmet Magazine* declared Wichita, Kansas, the Steak Capital of the United States. Kansans eat red meat every chance they get. Hamburgers, roasts, steaks

and hot dogs adorn every table. Our arteries cry for mercy, but we go right on consuming our beautiful beef. Most cannot understand our love for bovines, but then most have never tasted a Kansas T-bone. Roast beef covers a multitude of sins and Kansas's shortcomings.

There is plenty more to admire about living in Kansas. Like the wonder of this dry state producing more wheat than any other in the country. We're proud of this and proud when the Kansas Department of Agriculture tells us every farmer in Kansas produces enough to keep ninety-four other Americans nourished a year. No small feat considering Zebulon Pike declared this place the Great American Desert. No child in Kansas is ever named Zebulon.

And of course there are the people. Friendly people named Frank and Judy who know something about almost any topic. Politics, the economy, sports, religion--Kansans have an opinion on any subject because we're smart and there isn't much else to do but sit around and talk about what's going on somewhere else. Kansas is like an enormous think-tank no one ever consults. But that's fine by us; we don't care if anyone else understands the mess the country's in as long as we do. Someday we might get around to solving America's ills and then again we might not.

So that is life in Kansas. No bed of roses, but no stroll through a clump of nettles either. There is the Agony and there is the Ecstasy. I suspect most of us secretly enjoy this flat, unattractive hunk of land. Even when those *Wizard of Oz* jokes come our way we know there is plenty worth bragging about. Besides, there's no blow to the self-esteem a big Ribeye can't cure.

The City and the *Tao*

For the average American, any thought of the beginnings of our country conjures up one word: Puritans. The word Puritan in turn carries with it a host of cherished preconceptions. Puritans spent their lives in stiff collars, went to church constantly, obtained no pleasure in life, and lived in mortal fear of the torments of Hell. We derive this picture from being subjected ourselves to the torments of Jonathan Edwards' "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," and through the adherence to a pop-psychology that informs us all our inhibitions and guilt complexes have the stifling effects of Puritanism as their source. What results is a stagnant picture of colonial life and the belief that Puritans dominated the landscape and ruined everyone's fun. That the country came into being at all can elicit wonder if we subscribe to such a narrow view of society during pre-revolutionary America.

Of course such notions are false and deny the varied experiences that made up colonial life. As Martin E. Marty writes in his book *Righteous Empire*, by the beginning of American independence only four to seven percent of the population were church members, so obviously Puritanism cannot be viewed as the dominant or uniform experience of many early Americans. Perhaps what seems the most obvious example of a life outside the Puritan context and tradition exists in Benjamin Franklin. His *Autobiography* provides a detailed account of a philosophy

formulated to meet the challenges of a changing country. Franklin's *Autobiography* reveals surprisingly not a rebellion against or rejection of Puritanism, or for that matter religion of any kind, but a reshaping of it due to the dictates and pressures of society. The pressure most exerted upon Franklin, that which forced a rethinking not of values but of their attainment and purpose, was the expansion and urbanization of colonial Philadelphia. Franklin discovered and reacted to the fact Puritan doctrine could not thrive or aid in the development of his beloved city because of its decidedly narrow and rural constraints. Perhaps we can discover in Franklin's beliefs a kinship with Puritanism's morality while recognizing the two parties diverged greatly on the means of achieving that morality and the outcome of possessing it.

Franklin certainly began his life in Puritanism. He was born in Boston, the center of Protestant activity, and in his own words, "My parents . . . brought me through my childhood piously in the Dissenting [sic] way." Franklin quickly rejected his Puritan surroundings, however: "I was scarce fifteen, when, after doubting by turns several points, as I found them disputed in the different books I read, I began to doubt of Revelation itself." Such doubting carried tremendous consequences for a member of Puritan society, for religion provided the very reason for the existence of Puritan communities. Puritan thought and doctrine did not comprise a component of society; it **was** society. Choosing to reject Revelation could do more than put one's soul in jeopardy. Such a decision placed one outside the very fabric of daily life. People who voiced such doubts publicly usually found themselves escorted out of the colony. Franklin's misgivings about Puritan

doctrine were much more than philosophical musings; they threatened his ability to function and participate in the community where he found himself.

The closed nature of Puritan doctrine cannot be emphasized enough because it defined and limited the form any society adhering to it might take. The impulse of Puritanism was to remain closed and keep purity within the community. Dissent could not be tolerated because much more than a system of morality was at stake; the souls and eternal destination of the citizens hung in the balance. All other relationships such as economic, artistic, or cultural paled in comparison and subsequently found expression only in terms of necessity. Pluralism was not an option when the worldview held that only one path led to righteousness and salvation. Obviously such a community must remain small and constant in number except for the influx of like-minded disciples. Growth failed to occur because no variety offered itself for participation in the town or village. Not that this outcome proved all so horrible. For a people faced with the hardships of taming a new land and the need for fierce loyalty and cooperation, Puritanism provided a perfect rallying point. Not only a common purpose but a purpose ordained by God kept the Puritans together through the trials of settlement. Nor should we think dissenters did any differently; they simply moved away and formed closed communities of their own only under a different set of rules. Even when the size of Puritan communities grew to larger proportions, they still operated under the same attitudes and cannot truly be considered cities in the sense we think of them today. They simply thrived as sorts of enormous communes lacking the variety and multiplicity of opportunities generally associated with

urban areas. The Puritan mind always remained rural and isolated even when the actual population of a community might have suggested otherwise.

That Franklin should leave such a setting is not shocking. While other circumstances, such as his strained relation with the brother to whom he was apprenticed and a natural youthful rebellion toward his father contributed, I think Franklin sensed immediately that denying the tenets of Puritanism also meant exclusion from full participation in society. And Franklin refused to pretend to believe what he felt untrue. So at age seventeen Franklin set out for Philadelphia to find his fortune. He could not have chosen a more ideal environment. Pennsylvania was one of four colonies, Rhode Island, Delaware, and New Jersey being the others, with no established church, and together they "had always seen themselves as hosts to dissent and to varieties of religion," according to Marty. Franklin could devote himself to any pursuit without feeling the compulsion to give his allegiance and energies to an "ism." This was exactly what he did. While still in Boston, Franklin had converted to Deism and "concluded that nothing could possibly be wrong in the world, and that vice and virtue were empty distinctions, no such things existing." The *Autobiography* demonstrates Franklin's complete reversal of belief during the beginning of his career in Philadelphia. Such a repulsion of all moral and spiritual absolutes probably indicated his wanting to erase the traces of his connection with Boston and his family more than any elaborately constructed philosophical system. Franklin had his first taste of independence, and he simply wished to shed all inhibitions and encumbrances to enjoy it fully.

Living as a freethinker and in a moral vacuum soon caused Franklin great difficulties, at least in his eyes. He committed several "erratum" in his life, including spending money entrusted to him by Vernon, neglecting Miss Read while dwelling in London, and making advances to Ralph's lover while he was absent. Just as important, men who held the same views as he greatly wronged him. Franklin concluded that Deism, "tho' it might be true, was not very useful." This crisis in thought marked the true beginning of the maturation of Franklin's philosophy of living and functioning successfully within society, especially the world of the city. The closed community of Puritanism had been left behind, but so had the notion that man could form beneficial relationships and handle the stresses the city naturally produces by allowing individuals to follow their own selfish desires and impulses. An atmosphere that stifled growth and variety was the result of the one, and anarchy and chaos the result of the other. Franklin strove to discover a moral approach to society that maintained order and allowed creativity simultaneously; he wanted a code of conduct that permitted the city to profit from all the skills of its citizens without letting those same skills ruthlessly manipulate and dominate others. Franklin sought freedom without excess, plurality without disarray. A tenable philosophy such as this would require a great balancing act.

Franklin had already recognized the impossibility of Puritanism serving his purposes in an urban setting. Too many other warring factions and beliefs would keep it from achieving the focus and uniformity of thought it demanded. People also would find themselves restrained from pursuing the limitless resources and opportunities the city offered. The city in turn would suffer from segments of the

population not producing up to their capabilities or true talents. Puritanism was a religion of exclusion; he needed a system that encouraged inclusion. But more than that, any code that he adopted had to help the city function more efficiently. Mere speculation and abstraction would accomplish no good in confronting the daily problems and complex relationships present in Philadelphia. The bottom line had to be practicality. No rules of behavior would prove disastrous and rules with no means of application would prove worthless.

Interestingly, Franklin returned to the religion he rejected earlier as a solution to the dilemma. Puritanism contained the guidelines he desired although he stripped them of their dogma. Franklin boiled down what he considered the basics of all religions:

I never doubted . . . the existence of the Deity; that he made the world, and govern'd it by his Providence; that the most acceptable service of God was the doing good to man; that our souls are immortal; and that all crime will be punished, and virtue rewarded, either here or hereafter.

These I esteemed the essentials of every religion.

Franklin felt these essentials could provide a common ground for all the members of the city to interact and treat each other in a just manner. What he could not tolerate was the doctrine of certain religions that insisted these principles were their unique possession and that other religions operated in error. Franklin resisted any teaching of religion that did not have the "tendency to inspire, promote, or confirm morality." He understood that the imparting of exclusivity of revelation only served to "make us unfriendly to one another." One could afford to be unfriendly when living in isolation and wielding the

power to expel those in disagreement, but such luxuries did not present themselves in an urban setting. Franklin tried to appeal to a commonality of belief that would remove barriers of intolerance.

The morality Franklin espoused had one defining characteristic: infinite practicality. All the virtues he sought to perfect in himself had applications for the betterment of the city. Not the least appealing was Franklin's claim that the attainment of such virtues aided in success and the accumulation of wealth. He never asked anything of himself or others without a reason, believing that knowing why we should do something was a greater motivation than simply being commanded to do so. Franklin retained a great confidence that humanity could both apprehend the need for morality and achieve it through discipline and hard work. Reason was the only faculty required to become an upright citizen.

But Franklin's system of virtue had more than simple common sense on its side. Franklin deduced and drew upon what C.S. Lewis would later call the *Tao* in *The Abolition of Man*:

The Chinese . . . speak of a great thing (the greatest thing) called the *Tao*. It is the reality beyond all predicates, the abyss that was before the Creator Himself. It is Nature, it is the Way, the Road It is the doctrine of objective value, the belief that certain attitudes are really true, and others really false It is the sole source of all value judgements. If it is rejected all value is rejected. If any value is retained, it is retained. The effort to refute it and raise a new system of value in its place is self-contradictory.

Lewis goes on in his study to amass examples of how the *Tao* has been expressed in every culture and religion throughout time. Franklin guessed years before comparative religion that all of humanity holds certain values to be absolute and essential. He theorized that these values found their origin and authority in a Deity that provided them to us so we might exist in harmony and reach our full potential. Religions tried to control and manipulate these values and claim their sect held the secret to the attainment and practice of such virtues. Again and again in the *Autobiography* Franklin worked to present the *Tao* free from any religious prejudice or doctrine and to urge his readers that they could recognize these values by simply allowing their reason to verify them as true. The *Tao* offered the opportunity for everyone to be included in the community of the city, an existence Franklin searched for throughout the *Autobiography*. The *Tao* also supplied the moral structure necessary to keep that community operating properly.

Despite his own apathy toward religion, Franklin never proposed its abolishment. He reckoned that it accomplished some good by means of imparting the *Tao* along with its own unique doctrines; even "the worst had some good effects." Franklin surmised that perhaps people would recognize the authority of the *Tao* and the exclusionary nature of other doctrines. He pointed out as an example the problems Quakers encountered in trying to function in society as a whole because of the principle they maintained against war. Finally, many of them gave up "public service in the Assembly and in the magistracy, choosing rather to quit their power than their principle." It was these sorts of problems raised by doctrines beyond the scope of the *Tao* that Franklin

found crippling to the achievement of community and cooperation within the city.

We have seen that Franklin's morality was certainly not new. What was new was its existence apart from any other religion. By arguing that reason and effort could achieve a level of moral reformation, Franklin opened the city to anyone willing to work hard and created the atmosphere for the pursuit of any endeavor as long as it did not run counter to the dictates of the *Tao*. No longer did there have to be a question of whether someone was part of the elect, or a member of a certain sect, or regenerate from sin. Franklin had discovered a unifying force to hold together a pluralistic and diverse society. And the city could continue expanding in diversity as long as that force remained constant and agreed upon.

Franklin never remained in idle speculation; he put his virtue into action. The *Autobiography* rings with his efforts to improve Philadelphia: a fire department, a library, the paving of the streets, the founding of the University of Pennsylvania. Franklin made sure he worked for all of Philadelphia and not just part of it. By doing so, he contributed to the formation of a city consciousness. People were encouraged to think of themselves as Philadelphians first and Puritans and Quakers and Baptists second. Philadelphia had the opportunity to emerge as more than a conglomerate of isolated religious communities into a true metropolitan city with a distinctive character. Certainly Franklin's example contributed to Philadelphia's development, but the spirit of the *Tao* that existed in all of his writings had an effect as well, if not consciously, then unconsciously on the minds of the people.

The *Autobiography* contains not only an account of Franklin's life but also an account of the evolution of a philosophy that would take hold in America for years to come. Franklin's philosophy contended that if America were to become urban it must put aside rural ideas and isolationist tendencies. It must look for common experiences to share. Franklin recognized as well that in the quest for freedom of expression all laws and decency could not be abandoned or freedom would not be worth exercising. He believed passionately that the rich choices and opportunities that the city seemed to offer could indeed be a reality. Franklin appreciated most of all that without the *Tao* all would descend in an avalanche of chaos, factionalism, greed, exploitation, and self-centered materialism.

The one assumption of Franklin's of which I am never quite convinced occurs at his furthest point of departure from Puritanism. Franklin's great faith in the human ability to will oneself into obedience of the *Tao* somehow fails to ring true. Certainly such a prospect had no place in Puritan theology. We were fallen and the presence of the *Tao* served only as a reminder of our inability to improve ourselves to the most basic level of moral standards. Was Franklin truly an Everyman or an exception to the rule and able to will himself to accomplish what others could not? We witness this tension today in confrontations over social programs, care of the indigent, and the punishment of crime. Both camps square off in front of abortion clinics and pornography stores. That strain between Puritan and Franklin, rural and urban, divides and perplexes us still today. We would like desperately to believe all of us can tame our natures as Franklin did, but the world around us testifies to a different reality.

Keeping Your Head

I do not consider myself a lawless man. I fear driving even five miles over the speed limit lest the swift arm of retribution find me. I am the guy who slows to thirty on the highway and holds up traffic when a patrolman approaches. I take the "walk" and "don't walk" signs very seriously. I was the official lookout while my friends committed pranks in high school, and I often interrupted the festivities by whispering in a near-panic, "I hear someone coming!" No one ever came, but I was taking no chances on ruining my college career by spending time in the slammer for soaping someone's car. I remember reading as a child that to warrant consideration for entry into the space program you could not have so much as parking ticket. While I had no interest in being an astronaut, I wanted to keep my options open. Whenever I saw people pulled over by the side of the road, I thought, there goes their chance of ever getting to the moon. That's the kind of kid my parents had to put up with. I am no rebel; I have no cause.

Add to my love for the law a mortal fear of guns. I fired a rifle once in my life with an outcome so dire I swore never to touch one again. Some friends once convinced me to go shoot traps with them. Traps are hollow disks of clay propelled from a spring-loaded device that the shooter tries to blow into a million bits. The sport has no

real point that I can see, unless one is preparing for the day he might suffer attack by deadly shards of pottery or tiny, earthen UFOs.

Despite my total ignorance of the skill, I did fairly well; I shot the first five traps I aimed toward. After each turn, my friend set the safety of my twenty-two for me. At least I thought he did. I stood watching someone else's marksmanship when my gun created a crater the size of the Grand Canyon a millimeter from my foot. I imagined part of my leg resting peacefully at the bottom of it. Everyone decided maybe we had shot enough traps for the day. Now I get nervous just sleeping in a house that contains a gun. What if some mysterious aura from my body causes it to discharge?

Yet despite my lawfulness and abhorrence of firearms, violence loves me, seeks me, craves the pleasure of my company. For no less than three times in my rather young life I have nearly had my head dispatched from my shoulders. Each time the attempted means of sundering was the same: a large caliber gun or automatic weapon. My mere presence can turn the most innocent of gatherings into a near riot. Misunderstandings arise that a movie script could not contrive. And all of this from just minding my own business. Imagine what might occur if I had revolutionary or criminal tendencies; I would be dead or in prison within an hour. The ultimate irony of all must be this: each time my life was in danger, the person on the other end of the gun was a member of the government trained and paid to keep order and protect obsessively lawful people like me. Once an undercover cop, once a highway patrolman, and once the army of a foreign government. No hoodlums, no thugs, no terrorists; just the people we learn to respect and trust and go to for help.

* * *

In the summer of 1985 I found myself in the city of Chicago working for the Southern Baptist Convention. My conception of making the world a better place at this time consisted of becoming a full-time pastor and letting people flock to church so I could straighten them out. (I suppose Jesus would have been classified as a part-time minister, or bi-vocational as they call it, by the Convention since he didn't hold a position at the synagogue or a commission from a missionary society with by-laws and a constitution and an acronym, i.e., SBC). I have since realized there was a reason Jesus went to more parties than Sunday School meetings; all the really good heathens hang out at the former and tend to be infinitely more interesting than people at Sunday School. Gone are the days when even the town drunk and harlot would come to the sanctuary when the traveling revivalist pulled into town, because the church no longer exists as the religious and social center of a community, a sad yet brutal fact people inside and outside the church need to come to grips with as society gropes harder and harder for some sort of moral continuity. Because even if people couldn't swallow all that stuff about being bad to the bone and needing saving from themselves, they could at least subscribe to the notion that treating each other with respect and not fooling around with your best friend's wife and avoiding bashing each other on the head made the world a more decent place to live.

But I had realized none of this yet, so two friends and I drove 10,000 miles that summer all over the state of Illinois preaching and

singing at churches and youth camps, and now we tentatively pulled into the Uptown section of Chicago and into one of the worst neighborhoods around. We felt a bit uneasy because we had been there two days and hadn't had so much as a pot luck dinner. However, someone had tried to climb into my car at a stop light and a nice gentleman had offered me some cocaine he kept in a little baggie stashed in his wallet. I turned both offers down. The rest of the time we fed the homeless or distributed food to families or helped the elderly perform chores they found difficult on their own. And while it seemed odd not to sing hymns or give an altar call, I felt refreshingly close to the people I tried to help. I could touch them and feel them and smell them and sense the longing and hurt they carried.

One evening ten of us--the gang of three I was a part of and some college students working there for the entire summer--wandered over to a nursing home to chat with some patrons. I have a theory that most of us are generally a bore until we hit about age fifty. The reason most young people complain about their dreary existence is they don't know anyone very interesting and all their heroes fall into the under-fifty-pre-entertaining classification as well. Perhaps America's disdain for the elderly and growing old is an attempt to deny the possibility that senior citizens are having much more fun and enjoying life better than the rest of us. Age and experience are the two things business can't sell, so getting old gets portrayed as quite an awful thing.

After a delightful time in which several women told me I sang beautifully (they always do, even though I can't sing a lick, I can sing incredibly loud so I am probably the first voice they've heard clearly in years), we headed back to the church. Somewhere near Wilson Street

the sound of squealing tires and a car running about 100 miles an hour greeted us. To our horror the car, a huge 70s green Impala, jumped onto the sidewalk and headed straight toward us. Perfect. My first week in Chicago and some dope fiend loses control of his car and kills us. To my relief the car stopped, but things only got worse. A maniacal-looking man jumped from the car holding what looked like to me an exact replica of Dirty Harry's cannon. Even better. A mass murder by a psychopath. Suddenly the man reached into his pocket, obviously to pull out a hand grenade, and flashed a badge at us. That's right, a badge. Charles Bronson claimed to be an undercover cop looking for a gang that had just stabbed someone up the street. I hate to be critical, but if ten people ever looked less like a gang, we did. Most of us had on slacks and button-down oxfords, and some women were wearing dresses. One of us carried a guitar. Maybe a group of Mormons gone bad, but hardly a gang. Don't these people have to go to gang recognition school or something? Someone in our group finally blurted out, "We're not a gang, we're missionaries." I will never forget this guy's response. He put the Howitzer down by his side, looked up, and shouted, "Well, God bless you," and tore off in the Impala. God bless you? Never mind that I almost sent you to your heavenly reward, just good luck. Perhaps he should have said, "God blessed you."

* * *

I decided a change of scenery might change my weapon magnetism, so in January of 1986 I hopped a plane for the country of Haiti. Haiti lies just a few miles off the southeast tip of Cuba and shares the

island it inhabits with the Dominican Republic. Haiti was the first Black republic in the world and its capital is Port-Au-Prince. If you climb to the top of one of the hills Port-Au-Prince is built within and look back down on the city, you get the feeling the entire metropolis simply dropped from the sky and splattered over the landscape. There exists no symmetry, no logic, no sense of order as you take in the capital. No symbol better describes the entire country. Haiti runs rampant, not sure where it is headed but wanting to get there as quickly as possible. No reason can be discovered for the bloodshed that so often engulfs the land; except perhaps the people grow so frustrated with their suffering and oppression they feel someone, anyone, must pay with their life. So coups come and promises of democracy and celebrations fill the street, and then the promises end up broken and the whole process starts again. The country would take the heart out of anyone if it were not for the cheer and strength of the people. They clean up each mess and attend each funeral and look to the future to make their lives better, not with a pitiful ignorance but with a genuine faith that surely this time things will get better, must get better.

I went to Haiti to help a medical team. If you are born and live your entire life in Haiti, living to age sixty would stand as a crowning achievement. Most make it to around fifty-five. Should the need for help arise to increase longevity, your chances will not cheer you. Eight-hundred and three doctors practice in Haiti, nearly all of them in Port-Au-Prince. That is one doctor for every 7,873 Haitians, and a safe bet would place more than half the population out of the reach of those doctors. Compare this with America's glut of doctordom, one physician for every four-hundred and eighteen Americans. From there the numbers

just grow ridiculous. My favorite stat concerns the plethora of pharmacists residing in Haiti. Six. Six pharmacists for a country of over six million people, or one for every 1,053,667. Now those are some big drug stores, and as I mentioned earlier, almost all of this medical structure resides in Port-Au-Prince. The outlying areas do the best they can. Children die of simple ailments like boils and worms; the tiniest cut turns into a deadly infection.

So one January morning a doctor, a nurse, and eight more of us climbed on to the back of a flatbed trailer with sideboards and headed for the hills. Haitian roads are thoroughfares in the loosest sense of the term. Depending on the amount of rain, they range from dusty chasms to slippery mud pits. Sometimes the turns are so sharp backing up to get a better angle at the curve is a necessity. No experience rivals sitting in the back of a two-ton truck while the driver tries to ease up to the edge of a cliff. But we managed to chug along up the northern coast and make a stop at Gonaives. Due to its isolation from the rest of the metropolitan areas, Gonaives has always supported all the dissidents and plotters of coups in the country. To know what might occur politically in Haiti, simply talk to someone in Gonaives. The news the day we pulled through was that Baby Doc Duvalier, the tyrant of the country who succeeded his father Papa Doc, would soon fall prey to a coup. But those familiar with the country knew this to be a stock rumor circulating for the last twenty years. No one gave it much thought. So we pulled out of Gonaives and made for our destination high in the mountains. We finally made it late in the night, two-hundred miles in fourteen hours.

The name of the village we were to inhabit for the next two weeks was Tan Peddi, which one of the women in our party misheard as Tom Petty. We set her straight and made all the villagers honorary Heartbreakers. The largest family in Tan Peddi graciously gave up their hut for us to sleep in during our stay. Haitians weave the walls of their huts with sticks and branches and then cover them with mud that bakes into a somewhat adobe-type plaster. The roofs are thatched and full of rats. At night I could hear them running like lightning along the timbers of the ceiling. I prayed every night for their footing, especially when they passed above my bed. The hut probably compared to two average size bedrooms in America, one a bit larger than the other. Twelve people normally lived there. They must have slept with the rats in the timbers at night for all to fit.

At four in the morning people arrived for our clinic, and we did not open until seven. They came from everywhere. Some walked over twenty miles to arrive, and I marvelled at the gossip network that had to be in place for so many to discover our whereabouts. They waited patiently in the the Haitian Crouch: rear-end touching heels and feet flat on the ground. Haitians are masters of the long wait; it is all they can do in a country that wheezes exhausted and spent, striving but unable to offer anything more to its long-suffering flock.

Every Haitian has the same three complaints: head hurt, back hurt, stomach hurt. All of them needed vitamins and all needed worm medicine. This was my duty. I filled a plastic syringe with the green worm medicine and shot it into their mouths. The children liked seeing how far away they could stand to test my aim. Hundreds and hundreds came through the day, and when evening came we had to send some away. In the

afternoons Shirley, a Haiti veteran, taught hygiene classes to the women. Every woman received a hygiene kit with toothpaste, soap, and other essentials. Strange items these, their purpose and intent unclear, but all clung to them as if they were pearls of great price. The most popular article by far was the washcloths; the women delighted in wearing them on their heads when they went to church.

Haitian women are very beautiful and the men handsome. I noticed immediately in the mountains that the people did not cling to me as they had done in Port-Au-Prince, chanting the only English they know, "Give me a dollar, yes?" People move to the city in droves believing they will find work and instead find themselves reduced to the humiliation of begging. But in the country, where tourists rarely come, the real Haitian spirit is alive and well. All the time I stayed I kept thinking, if only the government would quit stealing and pillaging these people; if only they were given the basics of education and good farming techniques, this desolate country might thrive. But it does not, and I fear it never will because the only form of government anyone knows is the kind that takes for itself.

Our time quickly vanished and we headed back to Port to return home. We had most of a day to kill before our flight left, so we spent it seeing the sights of the city. The main sight, the only real sight, involves the people. They cover every inch of the city. The streets, the sidewalks, the buildings all seem constructed of humanity. The buses and the taxis have people oozing out of them as do the shops and houses. One can develop claustrophobia in a hurry. Humanity throbs and pulses like blood through the veins, and when we turned down a street

late in the day and discovered it void of anyone, the eeriness overwhelmed us.

Something had gone horribly wrong. The silence filled me with terror. It took only a moment to discover the problem. Smoke was rising from a street a couple of blocks away. Cries rose dimly from the area. The people had begun to riot, and unfortunately they headed our way. The scene exploded into utter chaos with people running everywhere, some throwing Molotov cocktails or whatever they could get their hands on. From around the corner, sliding along the walls of buildings, came several members of the military. During Baby Doc's reign two types of government militia existed; the general army and Baby Doc's secret police, the Ton Ton Macoute. The Ton could always be identified by their blue uniforms and dark sunglasses. These men were mean and violent, killing anyone Baby Doc wanted out of the way, generally at night and unseen. These were Tons slithering toward the riot. They spotted a man fleeing, grabbed him, and shot him in the head. Just like that, as though such an occurrence was part of the daily life of the city. They left him bleeding in the street and moved on to find more rebels.

We discovered that for some reason Baby Doc had chosen this day to be overthrown and leave the country. We made double time for the hotel. Out of nowhere an army transport appeared with every person in it pointing an M-16 at our truck. Two theories can be postulated during such a crisis; surely these guys know better than to shoot a bunch of Americans and incur the wrath of our government, or killing us or perhaps taking us as hostages would snub the imperialist dog United States and show them Haiti couldn't be pushed around. I hoped for the

former but feared the latter. Besides, who would know who killed us? The government would simply blame it on the rioters. After a pause that hung in the air like a safe above one's head, the transport let us pass around them. We arrived safely at the hotel, but rumors were flying that the rebels had closed the airport so Baby Doc couldn't escape. But he already had. Most of the cash of the country in tow, he had boarded his own private plane and gotten away. Thirty years of Duvalier tyranny broken and us there to witness it.

We decided to head for the airport despite the rumors. Guards constantly stopped us, demanded we turn back, searched to make sure no rebels were on board, and finally allowed us to continue. Every flight had been cancelled that day except ours. My luck always seems to hold when I reach the edge of disaster. We screamed with delight as the plane took off and screamed even louder when we arrived in Miami. I had escaped political upheaval.

My few hours in a country torn by revolution taught me violence can consume a country's character. Violence in Haiti has become the only way people can comprehend gaining and keeping control of the system. Many elections have been held since Baby Doc's departure, all of them marred by one party slaughtering the other at the polls. Simply making changes in the Haitian constitution will not bring democracy to Haiti; the people's very perception of how government works and their most rudimentary thought patterns must change first. This will take more than a generation to accomplish. This remains a problem our own government has never been able to comprehend. Putting the apparatus in place and pumping money into a country will not change its character or its comprehension of how society and government run. Violence has been

the way in Haiti since the beginnings of the country. I hope for the sake of a beautiful land, a beautiful people, they can learn new ways of creating change and keeping order.

* * *

I determined my gunplay problems revolved around my travels-- after all, what else could one expect in a crime-ridden ghetto of Chicago and a third world dictatorship? I made a vow to remain closer to home. So I remained around the house even during spring break in 1986 and returned early to school. I went to a small Baptist university in Missouri. People look at you funny when you tell them you attended a Baptist university. All the good ones, Baylor, Wake Forest, the University of Chicago, avoid letting anyone know they have ties to Baptists. I suppose this stems from Baptists not being thought of as the most cerebral denomination in the world, with good cause most probably. Just a few years ago the president of the Southern Baptist Convention commented he didn't think God heard the prayers of Jews. Nice theology and thinking. Nothing like telling God's chosen they lost communication with Jehovah somewhere along the way. But these types tend to be the ones that shoot their mouths off and make everyone else look bad. Like that well-meaning but oafish uncle who always embarrasses the whole family by his comments.

I for one received a tremendous education at the hands of Baptists. Nearly every class I took was taught by a Ph.D., and I had constant access to their expertise. Many of my professors remain some of my closest friends. My college experience taught me how to think and

question the prevailing notions of any given field. Perhaps most important, I attained the framework needed to specialize later in literature. One of the most striking things I have noticed in graduate school is how many people do not have a grasp of the basics of literary history or theory. No one ever painted the big picture for them in their undergraduate classes or gave them the tools to dissect and understand texts. And while I may not have learned the minutiae literary study sometimes demands today, I did learn how to approach and comprehend a text intelligently.

The school I attended resided in a tiny town called Bolivar. Rumor had it the biggest chapter of the Ku Klux Klan in Missouri could be found there, and Neo-Nazi groups hid out all over the area. A state trooper had been killed by one of these groups not long before I headed back to school from my break. I mention this because I am trying to give the patrolman who nearly blew my head off the benefit of the doubt; perhaps he was nervous and uptight about the recent death of the other trooper. What transpired was this: At the Bolivar city limits I hit another car and the accident was clearly my fault. I made no pretense of my innocence. I gave the other driver my insurance information and filed a report with the local police officer who was there. The officer asked me if I needed a tow, and I told him I thought I could make it back to my apartment. At this point the officer told me I could leave.

But as is so often the case in my life, things could not be so simple. Apparently the officer didn't mean okay I could leave; he meant okay something else. As I headed into town, a highway patrol car came bolting toward me. I wondered if there had been another accident so soon after mine. I pulled over to let him pass, and to my utter shock

the patrolman pulled his car over and jumped out with a gun pointed toward my vehicle. This man was livid. He began calling me names I never knew had been coined. He screamed for me to get out of my car and held the gun at my temple. I have never felt such terror in my life. This man had apparently lost his mind and was going to kill me. It turned out the local officer had called in that I was fleeing the scene of the accident. I still haven't figured this one out. I remained at the accident for at least a half hour, took the blame, filed a report and got permission to leave. I then had to walk over two hundred yards to return to my car. Not once did the officer try to stop me.

None of this impressed the patrolman. He kept ranting about how I had just committed a felony and wasn't as smart as I thought I was. He threw me against my car, frisked me, and handcuffed me. If you have never been handcuffed, you cannot comprehend the humiliation. I think it might have been better to let him shoot me. All this time I kept thinking of movies like *In the Heat of the Night* where innocent people in small towns are left to rot in jail, their families never hearing from them again. Lucky for me officer Bob finally came by to see how things were going. With the little nerve I had left, I told him he had informed me I could leave. Officer Bob got a little nervous and said he hadn't seen my driver's license. Then the patrolman got nervous. He uncuffed me, and I became so light-headed I fell down. To think that all my years of law-abiding had come to this. I later learned from another policeman I should have sued the patrolman for use of deadly force without cause. I was happy to be alive, reward enough for a wimp like me. I think this amusing incident was the nearest I came to really

being injured. For whatever reason, this patrolman had totally lost control of himself. He seemed to be waiting for a reason to shoot me.

* * *

Are all these events simply coincidence? Does it matter whether they are or not? I am not sure. What concerns me most is the razor's edge each misunderstanding walked between a humorous occurrence and a real tragedy. Each time the smallest provocation or false move could have resulted in people losing their lives. Which brings me to a troubling point. Was I given the benefit of the doubt, the chance of explaining each time simply because of the color of my skin or my nationality? What if I had been black and milling around with my friends in Chicago? What if I had been a Haitian innocently going to Market? What if I had chosen to wear an earring and keep my hair in a ponytail while attending college? Would that patrolman have paused long enough for me to blurt out my story? It is sobering to think that choices out of my control may have determined my still being alive. People like Rodney King have no chance to explain, and they pay the consequences of law officials crossing the boundary of justice. People like the man I saw shot in the head in Haiti. I must admit that it is still a white, male world and being white and male offers privileges we never even think of until we stand at the wrong end of gun. Looking clean-cut and middle-class doesn't hurt either.

Was taking each of these situations to the threshold of violence really necessary? Especially in the case of the two mishaps in America, the willingness of the police to use force so readily disturbs me. Law

enforcement officials seem increasingly frustrated at their inability to curb crime, at their seeming impotence in keeping order. My history professor always warned that in America the real fear was not revolution when it came to violence and oppression, but rather that the development to guard against was the formation of a totalitarian government. Sociologists have discovered when given the option between freedom and order, most people will always choose order. We are nearing such a choice in the U.S. In the near future local and state governments may ask for police powers and the suspension of certain rights to keep peace in gang controlled and violence-ridden neighborhoods. It will all seem proper and correct, but where do such decisions lead?

So maybe bizarre circumstances follow me about. But maybe my experience will become less and less unusual as we live in an increasingly violent society. In the name of law and order, the streets may become little more than prison corridors as we move from house to business and back again. Strangely the question may become, who do we fear more, the law-breakers or the law-enforcers?

The Ping of the Bat, The Roar of the Crowd

Like any relationship, learning to love college baseball demands overlooking its faults from time to time. Chief among these shortcomings is The Bat. The Stick. The Lumber. But of course none of these sobriquets really applies to the collegiate version of America's pastime because the bat in college ball traces its origins not to the majestic tree more lovely than a poem, but instead to Bauxite, mother of Reynolds Wrap and chewing gum covers. The college bat is forged of aluminum. Immediately problems arise from this situation. Calling the bat "The Shaft" lacks style and grace. Saying that a player in a hitting streak is swinging some hot metal fails to conjure up any nostalgia or enthusiasm for the game. But worst of all, the aluminum bat suffers from serious acoustical infirmities.

One of the greatest sounds in sports, in all of life for that matter, occurs when a major league ballplayer hits the ball in the sweet spot of the bat. The resounding crack tells the story. Forget looking to pick up the flight of the ball; everyone knows it is headed for the bleachers. A real fan gets a bigger thrill hearing a home run than watching it. Then there is aluminum. The aluminum bat pings, like the sound a child makes banging on the pots and pans with the silverware. The sound does not excite; it annoys, adds disharmony to an otherwise lovely time at the park. Acquiring the ear to recognize a well-hit ball off aluminum requires prodigious amounts of patience, and even the

expert can never really be sure. Equally frustrating results transpire when trying to identify a poorly hit ball. A wooden bat makes a dull thud after hitting the ball improperly, and the outcome is equally dull; a slow grounder or lazy pop fly. Aluminum also makes a different sound if the batter fails to meet the ball squarely, but it rarely makes any difference. The aluminum bat is so lively, so forgiving of lousy swings, that simply making contact is often enough to ensure a base hit or home run. A fan's poor ears suffer confusion, bewilderment, and anxiety. A ball that sounds destined for the shortstop off the bat can land rudely over the left field fence instead. Finally the ears give up and carry a grudge, refusing to process clearly even the sound of the ball hitting the leather glove, the second most pleasing sound in baseball. But the ears have been betrayed and take no chances on getting fooled again. Who's to say someone hasn't switched the cowhide with polyester or rayon they ask accusingly?

The NCAA says teams can use aluminum bats if they like, which compares to telling an army they can use automatic weapons instead of manually loaded muskets if they want. Much of the issue is economic. An aluminum bat will last just about forever, whereas wooden bats break with frightening regularity in the eyes of the Athletic Director. Consider the fact that the average big league player orders around six dozen bats a year and the cost becomes quickly obvious. And unlike aluminum bats that are factory produced with very little difference except weight, wooden bats are made to the specifications of particular and often superstitious professional ballplayers. Hitting a ball properly with a wooden bat is a science, the sweetest science, and players take tremendous pains to increase their chances at attaining

hits. Some players like long handles on their bats to generate more power; some like short handles to help with bat speed. Jack Clark, one of the strongest power hitters in the game, uses a bat as light as a little league model to get the barrel through the strike zone faster. Even with the toy bat Clark strikes out often. Julio Franco of the Texas Rangers can't get bats long enough; he hangs three fingers off the end of the handle. Now imagine all college ballplayers ordering their own personal bats and also the fact that they would be experimenting constantly with the design as they matured as hitters. Not a pretty fiscal outlook, especially when schools have the alternative of buying aluminum bats that everyone can share, a dozen of which more than fulfills the needs of the team.

As previously noted, hitting with a wooden bat scores as perhaps the most difficult feat in sports. Just ask George Will. The area where solid contact can occur is amazingly small, and pitchers strive to keep the ball very far from that tiny portion. But this matters little with aluminum. A pitcher can throw the nastiest inside fastball, and the hitter can fist it down the line for a double. Do the same thing in the majors and the batter's hands will tingle for a week; not to mention the ball will dribble harmlessly to an infielder or the bat will explode into a thousand pieces. Rarely do batters possess the strength to fight such pitches off for a hit. One notable exception is Mo Vaughn, the mountainous rookie first baseman for the Red Sox. Early in the 1991 season in the minor leagues Vaughn hit an inside fastball that shattered his bat a couple of inches above his hands. The ball found rest four-hundred and fifty feet later outside the stadium. Vaughn trotted around the bases holding the handle in his hand as a souvenir and received a

call to the Bigs two weeks later. But such displays of power are the stuff of legend and not the norm.

College pitchers therefore generally find it useless to pitch tight to a batter. They also shy away from throwing fastballs because of the difficulty of overpowering a hitter holding that bat containing a sweet spot the size of a Buick. College hurlers resort to chicanery. They throw an inordinate amount of breaking balls and off-speed pitches, and rarely to never do they throw inside on purpose. This can lead to arm troubles since breaking balls put more stress on the shoulder and elbow. Perhaps the incredible number of pitchers on the disabled list in the majors can be directly traced to all the curves and sliders young pitchers feel compelled to deliver at the college level. College pitchers tend to get hammered early on in their big league careers because they never learn to jam a hitter and any pro can belt an average breaking ball; that's how they rise above everyone else in the minors; hitters at any level love driving the fastball. And to top it all off, pitchers take longer than any other player to master their art. One component of that mastery resides in the ability to make every pitch look the same from a delivery point of view. So a pitcher's motion and arm speed must appear the same whether he throws a ninety mile an hour fastball or a seventy-six mile an hour change-up. Young pitchers have a horrible time with this skill. I have seen college pitchers change their deliveries for a breaking ball so radically they look on the verge of an epileptic seizure trying to release the ball. Hitters kindly deposit these pitches outside the confines of the playing area so we don't have to be tortured by their memory.

So what results in college baseball is the following equation: Lively Aluminum Bat + Developing Pitching = Epic Hitting Stats. Not just epic; mindboggling, awe-inspiring numbers every person who ever donned even a tee-ball uniform dreams about compiling. Let us consider the numbers of the team I follow most closely, the Oklahoma State Cowboys. The first thing to bear in mind when comprehending college baseball is that the average college team plays around seventy games including post-season play while the major league grinds through a one hundred and sixty-two game schedule. So basically doubling any totals gives an impression of just what these teams and players accomplish in comparison with the Bigs. From 1985 to 1988 Oklahoma State led the nation in run production. In 1987 they scored a whopping eight hundred and twenty-three runs, or 11.42 a game. In 1990, Oklahoma state hit .320 as a team. Most major league clubs reach nirvana if they have one player hitting for such an average. George Brett won the batting title in 1990 hitting just above that mark, while most of the Oklahoma State team hit way beyond it. Plenty of Oklahoma State players also hit over .400 in a season, a standard not reached in the pros since Ted Williams in 1941. But team stats pale in comparison to individual achievement. Pete Incaviglia and Robin Ventura were two of the most prolific college players in history. From 1983 to 1985, Incaviglia hit one hundred home runs and compiled a .915 slugging percentage, both NCAA records. In 1985 alone, he hit forty-eight homers, 143 RBI, and amassed a .464 batting average. Ventura, voted college baseball player of the decade by *Baseball America*, was a hitting machine. He posted a lifetime college batting average of .428 and in 1987 sustained a hitting streak for fifty-eight games, two better than Joe DiMaggio's major league

record. DiMaggio's streak is considered the most unattainable accomplishment in baseball. The naturalist Stephen Jay Gould claims the sheer mathematical odds and variables involved render it nearly impossible to even approach, so Ventura's bettering of the feat stands as one of the great accomplishments of baseball at any level.

There exists no mystery behind these colossal numbers; simply listen for the incessant pinging of the bat. And while these figures indeed overwhelm, they can lead to false impressions and hopes. Incaviglia provides a perfect example. One of the most prized picks in the major league draft, he has proved less than spectacular. Incaviglia will hit twenty homers or better every year, but his strikeout totals scare the bravest fan and his outfielding can often be an adventure. Add to this his reputation for choking in the clutch, and the player that so dominated college ball turns into a major disappointment. In many cases the aluminum bat can be found guilty for such flops . Hitting comes too easily for even average players, and power often proves an illusion when the switch to wood has to be made. Players suddenly discover fastballs screaming in on their hands, and they struggle to perfect the technique of fouling such pitches off into the stands so they can wait for a ball they can handle. Hitters cannot guess simply from a pitcher's motion whether a breaking ball is on the way. Even Robin Ventura, who has turned into an outstanding major league hitter, went 0-for-41 to start his first full season with the Chicago White Sox. Many college masters of the metal learn the brutal truth of the wood by never getting beyond minor league ball.

Yet the oddity that can so irritate us at times in the things we love can also be the characteristic that attracts. Because despite that

wretched ping and all its shortcomings, the aluminum bat makes college baseball one of the most exciting versions of the sport to watch. How will the pitcher defeat the man who stands with such a deadly hitting device at the plate? He must outthink him, fool him, keep him off balance and guessing at all times. How will a coach manage his pitching, know whether his ace is getting battered around or just falling prey to the dominance of the metal? How does a team keep its focus on the game when, as often happens, they suddenly discover themselves down by eight runs in one inning? The college game runs by a different set of rules than the majors, and all of these differences result from the bat, that great and giving provider of hits and offense constantly pinging and denying no man the chance to attain a base rip.

And after all, isn't that what draws us to the sport at the start? Mickey Mantle. Babe Ruth. Ted Williams. These men could make the ball do their bidding. People rarely come to see the pitcher unless he achieves the dominance and mesmerizing heat of a Nolan Ryan or Sandy Koufax. What we want are hits, majestic drives disappearing into the sun and into our memories. Ask adults what they remember of baseball in their childhood and they will describe a mammoth homer soaring off the bat of their idol. No one will conjure up memories of a wicked slider some pitcher threw to end a ninth inning rally. Pitchers simply put the ball in play; the less we see of them the better. College baseball fulfills all these wishes, fulfills them in excess until we are nearly exhausted with delight. A certain thrill enters into a college game knowing any player at the plate can jack one out of the place with the aid of the magic ping. No lead is safe, no margin wide enough. The best pitcher

on the staff can watch line drive after line drive cut through the air off his optimum stuff. No man can tame the ping.

Such a style of baseball recalls the early days of the game when men like Honus Wagner and Ty Cobb ruled the diamond. Specialization did not exist like it does today. The middle reliever, stopper and the concept of bringing in a man to face one batter had yet to be conceived. A pitcher went out to throw nine innings and took his licks as Gehrig and Ruth and Shoeless Joe sent the ball travelling all over the ballpark. In 1961 the New York Yankees hit 264 home runs, the major league record. In 1991 the St. Louis Cardinals were barely on a pace to hit more than one man on that team, Roger Maris, did. Maris hit 61 dingers that year to set the individual mark. Mickey Mantle was on a pace to do even better until a leg injury sidelined him at the end of the year. Big league baseball has become a bit tedious and everyone tends to think too much. Only the Detroit Tigers with Cecil Fielder and a group of hitters that seem to either homer or strike out bring back memories of when the game was simpler and power and offense ruled.

That simpler game still thrives in the world of college baseball. The ping sounds forth and players post numbers worth sighing over. And for the players, the aluminum bat offers a chance to fancy themselves the great hitters their stats claim them to be. In the end, only a handful of these boys will make it to the majors, so why not create a world for them where they can be the best for a few years? So what if the bat pads the batting average and home runs; everyone in life should get the aid of something like the aluminum bat to make them appear superlative in their field, their own special ping to stack the chances

of success in their favor. Maybe the real annoyance of the ping for me is that I have no similar edge to make me loom Goliath in my pursuits.

So that is my love/hate relationship with college baseball. Makers of aluminum bats claim they can design the ping right out of them, make them crack just like the wooden bats do. Perhaps they can, but I hope they don't. The crack of a wooden bat signals to the world a singular and independently earned achievement. The ping reminds player and fan alike that the ball floating over the fence had a little extra help getting there. A little extra help each person in life deserves, but only a few are fortunate enough to stumble upon. The rest must watch and enjoy.

Splendid Words, Precious Reality

**"But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood"
I Peter 2:9b**

I

Druids inhabit a strange corner of our imagination. They keep company with witches, goblins, gnomes, trolls, and dragons. Like most mystic groups, they find their beginnings in truth and attraction in rumor. Druids were a real people, part of the Celtic hierarchy that dominated Great Britain and much of northern Europe until the Romans, and even then they held tremendous powers over the Celts who revered them along with more than one intrigued onlooker. Druids formed a priestly sect and carried out the rituals and religion of the Celts. Often their ceremonies involved mysterious rites, and Caesar caught them sacrificing humans on more than one occasion. But the Druids also seemed to be the philosophers and law-givers of the people as well. Their reputation grew as a sort of enlightened community existing among savages. Druids held the truth and dispensed it with grudging infrequency the legend went. They came to be esteemed as more than mere mortals; many wished to fathom the secrets and power and truth they supposedly held. Druids guarded the Plan, to borrow from Umberto Eco, and one evidence of their possession was they never shared it with anyone or claimed to bear it. But everyone pretended to know the Druids

simply feigned ignorance because of their cunning, and the Druids let them go right on pretending.

Druids began fading in prominence around the seventh century. Christianity found in them a convenient scapegoat for all the decadence of Great Britain, so the Druids merged with another social class, the *fildh*, sometimes translated "poets," and lost their priestly function. The Druids garnered little attention until the eighteenth century when the study of ancient cultures began in earnest. Through a long series of mistranslations of Celtic texts and wishful thinking, Druids caught hold of the British imagination. Here existed a mystic link to the past, a means of validating the enlightened position in the world the British felt they held. Connections between the Druids and history began to run rampant. Some claimed Druids had invented language itself. Blake believed they were the original Patriarchs, Abraham and Isaac. And always the Power; the secret to the aboriginal stuff that held the world together and made it spin. People began building imitation Druid temples in their gardens, and hooded figures could be seen lurking about Stonehenge. Perhaps by acting like a Druid, the thinking went, one might carve a slice and control some of that mighty Power.

Even today Druids hold the same fascination. The rise in studies of the occult inevitably includes a preoccupation with Druids and the monuments they allegedly left behind. Every vernal equinox brings a band of supposed Druids to Stonehenge to chant and perform rituals. But the real intrigue surrounding these ancient priests-philosophers is the almost universal belief that a true Druid always remains incognito. The hooded masses are simply pretenders. While they dance around some rocks, the actual Druids clandestinely rule the world. A Druid might

work in a restaurant, sweep floors, or run a corporation. Perhaps like poor Goodman Brown, you are the only one not gathering in the forest every night for a Power management meeting. Druids are like the hateful old woman in town who hides a fortune in her mattress. How did she amass such riches? Did she live in splendor behind her drawn curtains? But perhaps the most devious ruse of all might lie in claiming control of the Power, participating in ridiculous seances and rites, chanting meaningless incantations to throw everyone off the trail so no one could suspect such an eccentric fool. Maybe the greatest deception exists in encouraging the perception that all such speculations and theories are the games of crackpots and madmen. Such a tangled web, such a beautiful labyrinth to conceal the Power pulsating beneath the surface of daily life. Oh to find it; oh to know with certainty it might be found. How would such knowledge quicken and recreate us?

II

"I've got the power."
C&C Music Factory

Words make life bearable. They release our greatest joys and lowest griefs. Words are not reality, but they give name to it; words mark our world, place our world, express our world. Language allows us to share reality and our world with other people. Some sad souls try to deny words their abilities, eradicate their meaning, lessen their power. Yet to accomplish this task they always resort to the very words they want declared obsolete. To claim words are easy to command or effortless to exchange would be foolishness, but to repudiate the

purpose and nature of words is insanity. Life then would surely consist of nothing but sound and fury.

When we want our words to travel beyond the immediate reach of our family and friends, when we think we have insight into a portion of reality, we write our words and show them to anyone willing take a look. Some might argue that video and audio have overtaken the printed word, but people tend to look upon those media as the realm where less serious pronouncements find utterance; the really important, profound offerings still find their way to books and periodicals. Those who utilize words to their best advantage produce what we eventually come to call literature. There exists in the English language a tight body of works, growing smaller all the time, that most everyone considers literary. On the boundaries are works that come and go, rise and fall, keep straining for acceptance into the exclusive club known as the literary canon. These battles for word immortality take place because increasingly people disagree on how to name reality and what words are best suited for any given situation. Should this object be called this or that? Does this rendering of reality deserve praise or condemnation? Another pervasive trend in word rating consists of redefining words to give reality a new name, often one different than perhaps the author intended, or actually intended but did not have full cognizance of in his consciousness. The women and men who engage in all this word play are called literary critics, or better, Word Druids. I am one of these people. I will show you why.

III

Important mystic words essential to my survival and the music of the spheres:

Spouse

Baseball

Father

Remote Control

Deferred Payments

Hard Drive

Tomorrow

All-You-Can-Eat

IV

Let me tell you a story about how I became a Word Druid. A few years ago I convinced a woman to marry me. On the second morning of our honeymoon, I awoke to find my wife unconscious. I called an ambulance. They arrived soon enough to save her body but much too late to revive her mind. My wife had suffered a massive heart attack due to a mysterious virus, and the lack of oxygen to her brain left her mind shattered except for the brain stem. She slowly succumbed to a fetal position. If I tell this story with detached abruptness, it is because that is how such events confront you. Abruptly. No warning, no preparation, not even a signal to stiffen your emotions and act bravely. A cold slap in the face and a high-pitched scream from life that perhaps all cannot possibly come to pass in the sickeningly simple way you have

imagined. You cannot even weep, because to weep would signify understanding, a dawning recognition of what has come to pass. And you have no idea, not even the slightest hint of the catastrophe and mayhem surrounding you.

But I knew none of this then. I simply sat and stared numbly at a television in an alien hospital in a strange city. And I tried to gather words. Any words. Words of encouragement, words of hope, words of hopelessness, words of despair. No one would offer me words of any sort. Remember this: doctors will avoid at all cost words that create a reality where you must live. They provided neither expectation nor dread; they employed stagnant language meant to hold me in a detached, anchorless terror. Life and death they can handle. Handing someone the charter to their new existence exerts too much pressure. I hated them at the time and do not care for them much now. But one thing I did discover; their refusal to name my situation permitted me a chance to create dwelling places of my own. I had the opportunity to establish a realm in which my wife recovered. I also had ample time to imagine a life without her. I teetered back and forth between contentment and depression, but they were my words and I exchanged them as freely as I wished. No one had the courage to speak what my genuine universe looked like. I think now this proved to work to my advantage; I made a sort of test run at grief without having to admit it would actually transpire. Words are most useful in this way. One can tailor model realities, try them on and test the fit.

Two weeks later we flew my wife home on an air ambulance so we could sit in an alien hospital in a familiar city. I now bathed in an ocean of words: helping words, suggesting words, comforting words, let-

me-tell-you-about-my-aunt-who-had-a-similar-experience words. Friends will say to you everything a stranger has the sense to remain tight-lipped about. All around me reverberated a great cacophony of words meant to ease my affliction but only increasing it. Job could stand the boils and the pain; the words spoken to interpret and soothe him caused him to cry out "Why?" to God. Not that these people did not mean well. We all wanted to know what this was about, and the only way to discover it lay in naming my plight and putting words to the mystery that had become my life. But none knew the words, the reality, so we threw phrases out in bundles, pell-mell, hoping a few would stick and accomplish the task. None of us had the patience to wait for the language to show itself. We all paced about like worried fathers in a waiting room hazarding names for a child yet to be born, not knowing the infant will bring its own name along as surely as it will bring its hair and eyes and hands. My world groaned in the pains of birth and carried its designation as well deep in the womb of meaning. Perhaps angst is the waiting for the name and despair the conviction your life carries no title.

I stopped listening to words and began reading and writing them. I read *A Grief Observed* by C.S. Lewis, the greatest book about naming suffering ever written. I also started keeping a journal. Nearly every day I would write whatever came to my mind; usually nasty, bitter things concerning the rest of humanity, and uplifting, superior things about myself. I came no closer to understanding my predicament, but I did know what my predicament was not, something just as important. So words became a release; I trafficked in them. I let them pass in and through, around and over. I desired nothing of language and so it offered

nothing. I felt that when the real words came, I would be ready for them.

Six weeks after marrying, I returned to the same church to begin my life as a widower. Her death defied logic and medicine the doctor claimed. She should have remained in her state for years and years. But I knew Heather better than that. If she had remained in her state, I would have remained in mine; both of us found rest. My only memory of the funeral resides in the music. We played all of Heather's favorite hymns. As I sang I suddenly realized, these words are true, these lyrics real. I sang louder and louder, my voice drowning out the hundreds of others gathered there. I must speak those words; I must embrace that truth. I could not sing strongly enough to convert the land into a temple for those words. From time to time I still feel the pounding of that moment and the trembling of my body as for a brief second in time those tidings became reality and fell like rain. *Who shall I say has sent me*, asked Moses at the burning bush. *Yahweh*, came the reply. Tell them *I AM* has sent you. Word and reality become one. The rest we chase so blindly is but shadow. The Word and not just the words had come to quiet my raging. I heard, I heard, and again I heard.

V

Of the nearly two hundred condolence cards I received, I answered but one. A year later I married the woman who wrote it. Her words, her splendid words, created a precious reality where I could live. I will not tell you what she said for they are our words and our reality. Some expressions lose their potency in translation.

VI

"Who are those guys?"
Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid

Now I perform my duties as Word Druid in earnest. I watch words, eat words, feel words, chant words, forever on guard to observe the Power. I search for the Power hidden in the pages of forgotten or neglected texts. Only a glimpse. Just to touch the hem of Its robe.

In the night the Power whispers. Perhaps. Perhaps not. Like a sudden flash of a childhood memory reality appears; you groan and reach, hoping like Isaiah the Truth will char your lips and make you pure so all you speak might come to pass. To be a conduit of that Power. But the vision disintegrates as your ruthless minds reels at the thought of controlling and crushing with those words.

For this I toil. Am I true Druid? I doubt it. The woman who lies next to me in bed knows more than I but she will not divulge her secrets. I fear the true literature of the world, the reality and the Power, lives in the forms of notes jotted in the margins of the "classics," on the backs of napkins, the panels of cereal boxes. All around us the Power is singing but we cannot follow the score. We cannot break the encryption. At least most of us. A few are humming softly to themselves. Tiny clusters meet to share the code. What must their lives be like? I wish I knew. But I go on with my charade and my rituals hoping and longing. Someday in the course of an overheard conversation, a phrase in a magazine advertisement, the Power will speak

to me again as it did in that church and again I will hear and be still.
Maybe once can sustain you because the longing for more carries you
watchful and expectant through life. Maybe I am a liar sent to lead you
from the path.

2
VITA

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Candidate for Degree of

Master of Arts

Thesis: SPEAKING IN TONGUES: A COLLECTION OF ESSAYS WITH A CRITICAL
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