

# JOHN UPDIKE



HUGGING THE SHORE

ESSAYS AND  
CRITICISM

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*John Updike*

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THE SHORE

ESSAYS AND CRITICISM



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## Foreword

WRITING CRITICISM is to writing fiction and poetry as hugging the shore is to sailing in the open sea. At sea, we have that beautiful blankness all around, a cold bright wind, and the occasional thrill of a gleaming dolphin-back or the synchronized leap of silverfish; hugging the shore, one can always come about and draw even closer to the land with another nine-point quotation. This is a big book but perhaps a quarter of the words belongs to other people. A good review is, among other things, a little anthology; my own experience of authorship urges me to heed the author's exact expressions and to condemn him, if he must be condemned, out of his own mouth. One of the chief labors, strange to say, of this assembling has been to ascertain which paragraph indentations, in the excerpted passages really are part of the text: *The New Yorker*, where most of these reviews appeared, mechanically indents every such excerpt in smaller type, so I had to look up all the originals again. Also, for reasons known only to the fabled ur-fathers of its style manual, all titles are set in quotes instead of—my orthodox preference—italics. But for such fine points, I have changed little, and have nothing to complain of in the handsome way this most scrupulous and considerate of magazines has sponsored my improvised sub-career as a book reviewer. Edith Oliver calls me up to suggest books or to approve my suggestions; Susan Mori patiently escorts the untidy manuscript into smooth, error-free type. Under the wings of their recurrent kindness and acumen and coddling good humor the bulk of this book was produced and it is gratefully dedicated to them.

As with this collection's predecessor volumes, *Assorted Prose* and *Picked-Up Pieces*, I have included a number of oddments—brief essays turned to oblige a friend, attempts at humor and fantasy, journalistic assignments. The oldest piece in the "Persons and Places" section is "A Mild 'Complaint,'" which was blithely composed in January of 1961, accepted promptly by *The New Yorker*, and then allowed to languish on the bank of unpublished "casuals" as the years and the decades lumbered by. I assumed that the piece, so fragile and literary in its joke, was thus informally killed; but when I suggested that I be allowed to give it decent burial in this omnibus the editors pronounced the little thing still vital despite its long comatose and ran it in the issue of April 19, 1982—twenty-one years, three months, and a day after the date of its composition. The second-oldest piece is "The Tarbox Police," originally published in the March 1972 issue of *Esquire* and waiting since then for the kindred company of other "insufficiently famous Americans" to bring Cal, Hal, Sam, and Dan into hardcovers. The ten imaginary interviews were published separately as an elegant slim brown volume by the London John Press under the title *People One Knows*, a title I have omitted but echoed here in the last section, which immodestly marshals some "autobibliographical" prefaces and responses but at least has the good taste to exclude all of those spoken interviews pulled from a limp-witted and complaisant author, whirled onto cassette tape, and then elevated, with many a typist's flub, to the dignity of graven utterance. Let them perish in the pit of media-inspired ephemera! Every word in this book has been *written*.



I have tried to group the reviews into bundles handy for piecemeal reading. Since it is my habit, by way of giving good measure, to review several books together, some violence has been done to achieve these new groupings: for the sake of national cohesion, Muriel Sparr had to be disentangled from both Ann Beattie and Raymond Queneau, and Queneau from I. M. Thomas. But in general, since the pairing of books often gives the review its coda, and yields chords that could not be struck otherwise, I have striven to keep the reviews as they originally were, at the cost of some disorder. Italo Calvino and Stanislaw Lem appear in two different sections, for instance, and my running appreciation of Anne Tyler is interrupted by considerations of Ursula K. Le Guin and John Cheever. The general trend of arrangement is chronological, patriotic (America first), and from fiction to non-fiction. Not counting the classics pondered in "Three Talks on American Masters," one hundred thirty-one of "other people's books"—34,869 pages, by my calculation—are specifically reviewed or introduced all within the eight years since I wrapped up *Picked-Up Pieces* with the prayer "Let us hope for the sakes of artistic purity and paper conservation, that ten years from now the pieces to be picked up will make a smaller heap."

The heap is not smaller, and the ten years are not even up. What is my excuse, and why do I feel obliged to offer one? How better would my eyes, wits, and fingertips have been employed than with those 34,869 pages? Would I really, instead, have read through the complete works of Dickens and Thackeray and taught myself Italian? Or would I have misspent the time in hardware stores, searching for the perfect doohickey to fit into my broken thingamabob? What is this shore I hug so repeatedly, with such a squint of guilt? Were not these exercises in appreciation and exposition composed, like anything else, by taking a deep breath, leaning out over the typewriter, and trying to dive a little deeper than the first words that come to mind? Of some I am proud enough, as work completed and self-education achieved. Of none am I ashamed, else I would not have admitted them to my summer-long clerical labor, my mustering of deteriorating tearsheets into the hefty form of this book. Another book. Another slain forest. Another pious claim on our besieged pocketbooks. Even in the age of Ecclesiastes (third century B.C., according to most scholars) the need for more books seemed doubtful. Whereas book *reviews* perform a clear and desired social service: they excuse us from reading the books themselves. They give us literary sensations in concentrated form. They are gossip of a higher sort. They are as intense as television commercials and as jolly as candy bars. I myself usually turn to the book review in a magazine or a newspaper just after the cartoons or the sports section, and I want them to be well done. That must be why I began to do them myself, in 1960.

The world craves book reviews far more heartily than it craves books: therein lies the beguilement and the nagging unease of the trade. Unlike the poet and the teller of tales, the reviewer writes by editorial invitation, in near-certainty of his product's being paid for and printed. He is safe, too, in his tone, which merely has to preserve the grammatical forms and a semblance of sagacity to win his audience to him, in satisfying collusion against the clumsiness, deludedness, and conceit of the book writer. Critical prose, like the prose of business letters, has its set locutions and inevitable rhythms, which begin to wear a drowsy into even the user's head. One misses, hugging the shore, the halting mimetic prose of fiction which seeks to sink itself in the mind of a character or the texture of a moment. What w

love about fiction writers is their willingness to dare this submergence, to give up, in behav  
of brute reality, the voice of a wise and presentable man. The critic comes to us in suit and  
tie. He is a gentleman. He is *right*. A pox on him, as Goethe said.\* Among the many pieces of  
paper I sifted to make this collection I came across the following note, evidently addressed  
so sternly, to myself:

An artist mediates between the world and minds; a critic merely between minds. An artist  
therefore must even at the price of uncouthness and alienation from the contemporary  
cultural scene maintain allegiance to the world and a fervent relation with it.

A fervent relation with the world: I suppose this is my critical touchstone, with its old  
fashioned savor of reverence and Creation and the truth that shall make you free. I find  
myself, in these pieces, circling back to man's religious nature and the real loss to man and  
art alike when that nature has nowhere to plug itself in. The sheer difficulty, nowadays, of  
investing fiction with seriousness is a kindred theme. Decline—in manners, craft, landscape  
and communal vitality—is not, I hope, unduly harped upon. At all times, an old world  
collapsing and a new world arising; we have better eyes for the collapse than the rise, for the  
old one is the world we know. The artist, in focusing on his own creation, finds, and offers  
relief from the tension and sadness of being burdened not just with consciousness but with  
historical consciousness; this relief is afforded minimally by the critical role. To show, in  
series of quotations, the author himself (dead or not) what he has indeed written: this does  
approach creativity, and some of the pieces included here (“A Feast of Reason,” “Dark Smile  
Devilish Saints”) give me in retrospect the bliss (as Nabokov and Barthes would say) of  
having seen a knotty thing through and phrased a clear conclusion. On grayer days I have  
felt, as a reviewer, engaged in mere summary and obliged to smother under explicit  
opinionizing those intuitive sensations of delight or illumination or their absences that  
accompany a purely gratuitous, spontaneous reading of a book. In such a reading, there are  
no symptomatic sentences to underline, no private index scrawled on the endpapers for use  
the judicial summing-up ahead; one scans the pages as one scans life, half asleep in the dream  
of sequentiality, now and then poked awake by a flash of beauty or the crackle of truth. The  
ideal reader's freely given, irresponsible attentiveness cannot be the reviewer's; and the  
reviewer, insofar as he foretells (as he must) what the book is about and what should be  
thought about it, destroys ideal readership for others. His role is as impure as his pronoun  
which so insidiously slide from “I” to “one” to “we,” surrounding the reader, who is suddenly  
enlisted in this small mob as “the reader,” while “this reviewer” stands off to one side like a  
ironic clone.

Well, who said life, or a life, can be pure? Here, then, without further apology, is the fruit  
of eight years' purposeful reading, carried out, much of it, to secure me the pleasures and  
benefits of appearance in *The New Yorker*. Some of the best-researched and most happily  
undertaken reviews belong to my twenty months of living alone in Boston, with two great  
libraries—Harvard's Widener and the Boston Public—minutes away, and my foam-rubber  
reading chair three paces from my dining table and two paces from my bed. Solitude and  
small quarters are great inciters of literacy. Also, as it happened, in this land of fragmentation  
held together by legalities, the payment for a monthly review roughly balanced a month

alimony payment that was mine to make. At the beginning of those eight years, I had left  
big white house with a view of saltwater. An inland interim of reconsolidation followed, and  
now I live again in a big white house with a view of saltwater. I keep looking out the  
window. The clean horizon beckons. All sorts of silvery shadows streak the surface of the sea.  
Sailboats dot it, some far out. It looks like literature. What a beautiful sight!

J. U.

*September 1982*

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\* Or something like it, in German. Feminists: if the preceding sentences trouble you, try this version: "... the voice of a  
wise and presentable woman. The critic comes to us in black dress and pearls. She is a lady. She is *right*. A pox on her,  
Goethe said."

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## *Persons and Places*

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## INTERVIEWS WITH INSUFFICIENTLY FAMOUS AMERICANS

### *The Pal*

THE PAL IS PALE, like water. He is everywhere, in different forms. On the golf course, he presents as a swing and a slice, then a swing and a hook. Or as the rattle of the ball into the cup, unexpectedly, from far away. He is a good putter, the pal.

At poker, he is inscrutable. He is a face above cards one cannot see. He raises the bet. What does this mean? Is he going high or low? If he loses, he will borrow money from one. If he wins, he will keep it. When he shows his cards, he has the cased King. Or he was bluffing and folds, scrambling his cards together in a quick exasperated little tent-shape, beside the tall golden cylinder of beer. He is most lovable then.

Look at that pal ski! Swish, swish, down the chute, over the moguls, away! He is not easy to keep up with, but one wants to. One wants to for the camaraderie of the ski lodge, his pale face ruddy above the steaming coffee mug. Or the camaraderie of the long drive home, in the chain of headlights, his eyes blinking, his head nodding, with sleepiness. A sleepy pal is a dear pal. Even were he to nod off and drive head-on into a trailer rig, it would be a good way to go, there would be no grudge.

At tennis is he less benign. He slashes, he wheels, he whaps an easy overhead into the net. "Come up to the net," he insists. *Fuck you*, one thinks. Still, the parallel patter of sneakers on the clay is pretty, though the opponents lob over our heads, and we lose the set.

At parties, one never talks to the pal. In this he is like a mistress. He observes and he sulks. He dances only the slow dances, often with one's wife. That, too, is a mode of palship. That and calling one's children "Butch," no matter what their names.

Interviewers find him elusive, almost rude.

Q: Could you in a word or two describe the gratifications of being—how shall we put it—  
—a pal?

A: Meagre. Few.

Q: Would you advise young men, freshly graduated from college and as yet undecided about their careers, to follow in your footsteps and become pals?

A: No.

Q: What has been the principal ingredient, in your experience, of palship?

A: Beer.

Q: And its sustaining teleology and ambient essence?

A: Death.

Q: Thank you very much, sir.

A: Forget it.

Then he is on the phone, trying to set up a paddle-tennis date, or a fishing trip, or a rendezvous in a duck blind at 4 A.M. Refused, he sounds hurt. He has no other fun. He is at the

bottom of one's swimming pool in a snorkeling mask, picking up hairpins and pennies. He silhouetted on one's roof, adjusting the television aerial. One returns from a trip, and the dregs of his dinner wine are on the table, his pajamas are underneath the bed. Ambushed, he is unembarrassed. "Butch here cut his knee while you were gone." What can one say? One says, "Have a beer."

The pal is a mist, he is a puddle. He fogs the rearview mirror, he is a gratefully gulped glass of water at the kitchen sink. As at sea, there is a horizon of melancholy, which recedes and cannot be crossed, though one sails for days, in stubborn silence, the rigging creaking, the waves slapping the prow, a single gull weeping off the stern. His beauty is, he opens up the horizon within oneself. For if he is your pal, you are his. The male desert within us is coterminous. He is a mirage.

### *One's Neighbor's Wife*

WHAT IS THERE about this wonderful woman? From next door she comes striding, down the lawn beneath the clothesline, laden with cookies she has just baked, or with baby togs she no longer needs, and one's heart goes out. *Pops* out. The clothesline, the rusted swing set, the limbs of the dying elm, the lilacs past bloom are lit up like rods of neon by her casual washday energy and cheer, a cheer one has done nothing to infuse.

In certain party lights the mat slant of the plane of her cheek wears beneath the lamp the somber rose glow of earth seen from the window of a jet pouring west against the sunset; the fall would be death.

Her house is full of crannies, of cluttered drawers and dusty shelves, repositories of wedding gifts and high-school charm bracelets and snapshots of herself as a child. These are unimaginable treasures—bones of her flesh, relics her life has generated. One studies her husband wonderingly: how can he withstand such a daily pressure of bliss? His skull looks two inches thick, all around.

She touches her children, and they rotate in the oven of her love. Her dog, too, dumb sharer of her hours, is stroked and ruffled. Her hands, oval and firm, bear no trace (if one excepts the wedding ring) of awareness that they are sacred instruments—much like those Renaissance paintings wherein the halo of the Christ child, having dwindled from the Byzantine corolla of beaten gold to a translucent disc delicately painted in the perspective of a three-dimensional caplike appurtenance, disappears entirely, leaving us with an unexpectedly Italian-looking urchin.

Her conversation is inane, sublimely.

There is a scent to her, a scent to the sight of her in her clothes, that rustles free into the air when she moves, though her movements are brisk rather than voluptuous. Desires attaches, one notices, less to her person than to her surroundings, to the landscapes she walks through, the automobile she slides packages in and out of, the garden she tends, her crannies in her house, its curtains and rugs and towels—as though she were a sachet of lavender scent in a drawer of tumbled, cloudy fabrics.

Her person. She has freckles wherever one can see. A bikini reveals the demure little saddle of fat that pads the base of her spine. When she lifts her arms, shaved and powdered patches are revealed. What color would her pussy be?

A: My pussy is the color of earth, of fire, of air shuddering on the vein of a rock by the side

of a stream, of fine metals spun to a curly tumult, of night as to the expanded eye of the prowler it yields its tints of russet and umber, subtle husks of daylight colors. Each hair precious and individual, serving a distinct rôle in the array: blond to invisibility where the thigh and abdomen join, dark to opacity where the tender labia ask protection, hearty and ruddy as a forester's beard beneath the swell of belly, dark and sparse as the whiskers of Machiavel where the perineum sneaks backward to the anus. My pussy alters by the time of day and according to the mesh of underpants. It has its satellites: the whimsical line of hair that ascend to my navel and into my tan, the kisses of fur on the inside of my thighs, the lambent fuzz that ornaments the cleavage of my fundament. Amber, ebony, auburn, bay, chestnut, cinnamon, hazel, fawn, snuff, henna, bronze, platinum, peach, ash, flame, and field mouse: these are but a few of the colors my pussy is.

Q: How can you bear to be the constant carrier of such splendor?

A: I don't think about it most of the time. Just when I take a bath, and when Joe says something.

Q: That shmoe.

A: Think you could do better?

One's neighbor's wife's *life*, not her womb, is the theatre wherein covetousness raves. One wishes to curl up on her furniture, to awaken to the dawns that break upon her windows, to see the eleven o'clock news on her set. Would it be the same old news? Impossible.

### *The Running Mate*

HER EYES are blue. Her breath comes easily, from her diaphragm and out through her nostrils in time with her strides. She never tires. Though the seasons change, and day and night flicker like the wingbeats of a circling predator, she is always there, beside one, running.

She wears Adidas jogging shoes, and a dove-gray sweat suit with canary-yellow piping down the sleeves and legs. In winter, she adds a cable-knit Norwegian sweater; in summer she strips down to crimson track shorts, with slits in the sides for greater freedom of motion, and a grape-colored tank top, stained to dark wine where she sweats. When it rains, she produces from somewhere a transparent polyethylene bandanna.

At corners, she shortens her stride, courtesy having long ago assigned her the inside position. On the straightaways, she may fall a bit behind, and one looks back with a heart-skip of hope, but she is still there, breathing easily, through her nose, above her smile displaying in her upraised hand a chewing-gum wrapper she paused to pick up, or a wildflower, or a snowball.

The steady soft thump of her running becomes one's pulse.

Her blue-eyed face floats in the side of one's vision like a corneal scar, and though one lashes out, and occasionally strikes bone, so that she bobs and staggers, the effort of running leaves insufficient leverage for the crippling blow one would like to deliver.

At zero, her breath flies from her lips in sheets of frozen vapor; at ninety above, her hair pastes itself in tendrils to her temples and nape, and every square inch of her exposed skin shines. One is told that by the eighteenth mile of a marathon blood has begun to mix with runner's urine, from the incessant concussion of heels on cement. There is no sign of that with

the running mate. At every milepost she says, "Isn't this fun?," an utterance she varies on with the exclamation "What a glorious view!"

Some of the views *are* glorious. Velvet autumnal valleys where a ribbon of river glints. Cityscapes, like organ chords rising, of glass and steel. Sandy country lanes lined with cowbells and raspberries. Suburban tracts where each child has a tricycle, each sprinkler has a lawn. Summer estates muffled by snow, the verandas deep in drifts and the tennis courts scored by rabbit tracks. Glorious, if one could but have an intermission. Why can't we stop?

An interviewer capers alongside and asks her this very same question. Her answers flow evenly, in time with her strides.

A: We have not been given permission to stop.

Q: Who would give this permission?

A: The same impersonal force or personal Divinity Who set us thus to running together.

Q: Together—exactly. Why must you always run beside this man?

A: He and I are plighted. He cannot run without me. I cannot imagine running without him.

Q: Where are you running to?

A: Wherever he leads me. He leads. I follow. That is the pattern. It is mutually sustaining, mutual spur and inspiration.

A tunnel mouth looms ahead. A traffic of trucks and buses makes the air of the tunnel cacophonous and foul. The tiled walls, set in the Depression, under FDR, have lost half the grouting, and leak dubious fluid. The catwalk for pedestrians is rickety and narrow. A single patrolman, doing penalty duty, stands guard above the hissing of air brakes, the squealing of tires, the shattering rush and rumble. Carbon monoxide asphyxiates the lights, and it is a matter of a moment in the murk to half-kneel and to trip the running mate. She flies over the pipe rail, and the crushing traffic never pauses. There is not a cry, not a stain, not a track save the trembling of guilt in one's knees as they pump toward the light.

Outside the tunnel, tenement houses the colors of mustard and olives top a man-made escarpment. The roadway lifts, grows level. A flattened squirrel marks the presence of nature. A homing pigeon circles toward an upper window of a tall granite prison. Some dingy children have uncapped a fire hydrant and are playing in the resultant lake. One of the children seems to be following behind one, with taunting soft footsteps.

But it is no child. It is the running mate. Her blue eyes. Her encouraging smile. One can look through her now, to curbstones and litter, as if through her polyethylene bandanna; but her pace is unchecked, her breathing easy and deep. A light rain begins, tingling. She offers like a flower a red truck reflector on a stem of bent wire.

### *The Counsellor*

ONE FEELS REASSURED, in the presence of the counsellor. There are those humming brown elevators that lift you toward his firm, and that stunning receptionist whose face is as soaked in powder as a Turkish Delight used to be in sugar, before the candy manufacturers began to feel the pinch. And then, his view! All of the metropolis seems encapsulated in his window like a town in a spherical paperweight—the spires, the bridges, the penthouses, the traffic



jams, the harbor, all there, twinkling. He rises in a cascade of pinstripes. His face is so clear and rosy it looks skinned. He is broad-shouldered, and not exactly four-dimensional, but making more of the three dimensions than the rest of us do: he *bulks*. "Fill me in," he says "on the problem."

While being filled in, he leans back in his chair and presses his fingertips together. There must teach that in law school—a variant of prayer, with the eyes wide open. He does not take a note. For he has summoned in another lawyer, younger, less bulky, to take notes, on a yellow legal pad held on his gaunt young knee. One feels, of course, wretched, fetching one clinging shreds of the organic world—life, that begins in the bursting of membranes and ends with a relaxation of the sphincter muscle—into such impeccable presences, such well-groomed offices. Since childhood, one has been told that there can be no squaring of the circle, but one hopes of the counsellor that he can cube an egg, and a scrambled egg at that. He leans forward, touches the desktop with his elbows, lets his slow silence bulk him large and at last offers, "There may be a way around that."

One could cry in gratitude.

With manicured hands he outlines in the air a program of counter-terror, writ responding to writ, tort (from *tortus*, crooked) nullifying tort. There may be depositions taken. The demeanor of the judge cannot be foreseen. You want to call a bluff, but you don't want to call it to the point where it *feels* called. In a situation involving X, Y, and Z, who is to say that Z will prove rational, and not do the self-destructive thing? This is still a free country, with great opportunities for self-destruction. There are variables. Variables cost money. Show me a free variable, I'll show you totalitarianism. In a nation of laws not men, brinkmanship prevails from sea to shining sea. *Et cetera, sub rosa, entre nous*.

A twinkling maze of imponderable possibilities has arisen above the counsellor's glass desktop. One feels driven outward, from one's petty fate to general considerations of a more abstract and ramifying nature. One asks,

Q: What is justice?

A: Depends on the state. Justice in Delaware is mere mischief in South Dakota. Alabama, who knows? Had a client last week who was made to look pitiable in Alabama. This same fellow came up smelling like roses in Maryland. *Non serviam*, I say.

Q: Do you feel you are providing an essential service?

A: I service human foolishness. If foolishness were non-essential, it would have faded away aeons ago, with the hand-held flint chopper. *Requiescat in pace*, chopper.

Q: Let me put it another way. Do you feel that the noble intent of the law is always commensurately served by its minions?

A: Define me a minion. We build on air. All of us. We build on air. When the Pilgrims landed at that there rock, this was lawless forest. From here to Big Sur, lawless forest. Now we've got such a structure the average man can't go two hours without committing a misdemeanor. I don't say that's good. I don't say that's bad. I say that's a fact. Out of this fact some fortunate few of us have generated an industry. Out of some other fact our worthy colleagues at the bar have generated a contrary industry. It all comes out in the locker room where they polish your shoes while you shower. Define me a minion, I'll give you a misdemeanor. *Sic semper tyrannis*. You follow me?

Q: I'm getting there. Can you estimate how much this lecture has cost me?

A: It would be ill-advised to comment at this time.

Q: Can you tell me if you think we have a case?

A: It would be premature to venture a comment this far down the road.

Q: In general, *sub specie aeternitatis*, what are my chances?

A: All I can say at this juncture is *Nihil ab nihilo, de profundis*. Best of luck to you and yours. I've really enjoyed our conversation. [*One stands to go.*] Here, let me show you the Polaroids of my wife and kids. Cute as buttons, huh? The house in the background, we bought it for seventy grand in 1967, it would go for two hundred big ones now, easy; and that leaves us an acre out back to retire on. Keep your nose clean, your powder dry, your chin up. Have a stick of Juicy Fruit, foul stuff but it saved my sanity when I gave up smoking ciggyboos. If that ain't your cup of tea, take a lick of the receptionist on your way out. Ha-ha-ha. Ha-ha-ha-*ha*.

At the hourly rate that his counselling commands, each "ha" has cost 12½¢.

### *The Golf-Course Proprietor*

HE SITS by the little clubhouse, in a golf cart, wearing black. He is Greek. Where, after all these years in America, does he buy black clothes? His hat is black. His shirt is black. His eyes, though a bit rheumy with age now, are black, as are his shoes and their laces. Small black points exist in his face, like scattered punctuation. His smile is wonderful, an enfolding of the world as his hand enfolds yours. Many little gray teeth, all his, they must be: something of the ancient marriage of tragedy and comedy in that smile.

How ancient is he? He has been sitting here since one learned golf twenty years ago. In those years, it was his son who manned the tractor with his gang of mowers, going up and down the fairways as methodically as a lover's caresses. Now it is his grandson. Once, in Homeric times, it must have been he, Theodoros, who manned the tractors. But times so epic are hard to imagine.

The first, second, third, and ninth holes can be seen from where he sits, and the fourth to where many a man has been tempted by the broad downhill leftward dogleg to hook into the marsh. The ridge holds its writhing occupants in profile, a frieze against the sky, before they mourn their shots, pocket their tees, and drag their carts down into the underworld. The fifth, sixth, seventh, and eighth holes are entirely out of sight, but the men in their bright slacks eventually return, advancing down the ninth fairway like a thinned army pulling its own chariots. Their odyssey ends in a ritual exchange with the owner, who has that essential capacity mythic characters have for waiting, waiting decades if need be, for the foreordained moment in the adventure to arrive.

Q: How goes it, Teddy, how goes it?

A: Not so good, John, not so good.

Q: Lovely day out there.

A: [*nods*]

Weather and health are discussed but never, oddly, golf. What does he know about golf?

Among the mysteries that radiate as he in his black clothes soaks up the sun are:

Q: How did he come to acquire this frivolously utilized acreage?

Q: Does it turn a profit?

Q: What is this Greek genius for acquisition?

The questions go unanswered. The seasons turn from spring (raw winds, patchy green plugged drives) to summer (insect repellent, lost balls) to fall (morning dew, goose feather baked fairways, terrific roll); the tractor mows back and forth, back and forth, on the contours of the course. Teddy is aging. He is shrinking in the golf cart, his handclasp growing feverish, his eyes misty; he disappears. Over the winter, one hears he has had a stroke. Speculation is rife. The course will be sold, a thousand ranch houses will spring up.

In the spring, the golfers return, in cleated rubbers, but he is not here. The golf cart sits empty, like Agamemnon's throne. The dandelions come, the greenhead flies, the August thunderstorms. Suddenly, he is there. His black clothes are faded to gray, and his face matches his clothes. He searches one's face almost blindly, through his feeble enfolding of the offered hand.

Q: How goes it, Teddy, how goes it?

A: *Τις δ' οἶδεν εἰ το ζην μὲν ἔστι κατθανεῖν, το κατθανεῖν δὲ ζην κατω*

*νομίζεται\**

Q: We thought you were dead. What's your secret?

A: [*gestures toward golf course*]<sup>†</sup>

### *The Child Bride*

AS ONE ENTERS THE PARTY, she is at the door, greeting. But how can this be the hostess? She is a child. A child in high heels, true; but baby fat presses with a delicate meniscus through the straps of these shoes and fills her red satin dress so it glows like a spanking new pillow. Her oval face is innocent of any wrinkle, though the pursed lips and focused brow indicate where wrinkles will come. Her hand, as one shakes it, has that slightly clammy bonelessness of an infant's.

Throughout the party, she tends to the little things—seeing that the nuts are in their little bowls, and that the little bowls are distributed fairly among the available tabletops, and that the windows are open a crack but not more than a crack. As she performs these tasks, she dodges among her guests like a puppy seal amid hoary, craggy icebergs. These guests are her husband's friends, and like him they are enjoying late middle age, with its warts, its wens, its grizzled facial crevasses, its tufts of falling hair, its snaggle teeth, its arthritic hips, its backaches, its wheezes, its sorry breath and boozy reminiscences.

The child bride shares none of this. She stands benignly at the side of some rambling uproarious elderly conversation waiting for her moment to duck down and adjust the dish of celery and olives, but she talks only, and then only briefly, to her stepdaughter, a lanky blonde five years older than she. This aging stepdaughter is the product of one of her husband's earlier marriages. His first wife was a woman in her early twenties, and so the re-

of them have been, all six or seven.

In this room of veteran partygoers, getting louder by the minute—the men barking and snuffling and staggering, though the glasses in their hands hold steady as gyroscopes; the women talking in voices parched to a whisper by decades of cigarettes and quarrelling with servants—the child bride should be a breath, a sprig, of spring. But in truth she has the heaviness of youth, that density of bones still supple and muscles still elastic and close interwoven, of blood as yet undistilled into bitter wisdom. Among the resonating barricade chests floating upon skinny pained old legs, her succulence, her silence make her fascinating. One cannot help asking,

Q: How did you get into this?

A: The same way you did. By being born. I was born later, is the only difference.

Q: Do you miss your own generation?

A: I never had much to say to them. I don't have much to say to these people, either, but they don't notice. Or if they do, they don't blame me for it.

Q: Uh—but isn't there a rapture in marching through history many abreast, arm in arm, singing the same songs, taking the same drugs, remembering the same wars and assassinations?

A: There is, but it doesn't compare to the rapture of being oneself. Have you ever read *Alone*, by Admiral Byrd?

Q: Your husband—how do you confront his flatulence and distemper, his sheer bald complexion, not to mention his houseful of closets, from which all his previous lives must keep tumbling?

A: I confront these things understandingly. I am his wife.

Q: But so young and smooth, and he so old and rough.

A: I'm not sure you understand women.

Q: Tell me.

A: One gives oneself to the abyss, and it becomes a cradle.

They stand side by side at the party's end, husband and wife; there is little disparity in their heights. He is effusive, drunk, funny, pocked, and aerated by the sinuous channels of experience. She is as sober and smooth and solid and sleek as when we entered. We say good-bye reverently to this wonder. When we come again, she may not be here. She has sacrificed herself, that one of us may live.

### *The Mailman*

HE LOVES all weathers. In summer he wears short sleeves, in winter he wears a cotton turtleneck under his regulation cardboard-gray long-sleeved shirt; that is the only concession he makes to inclemency. When it rains, his booming smile turns even a downpour into a drizzle, from which his visage is impishly sheltered by the visor of his regulation cap. When it snows, that is the most fun; amid the wide secretive radiance his footsteps thump-thump upon the steps as if enlarged by burlap wrappings, and the clack of the letter slot resounds throughout the house like a shot. His cheeks are red, his eyes maniacal with merriment as, shifting his

lightened sack on his shoulders, he heads down the freshly plowed sidewalk to bring the news to his house its parcel of joy. He is Santa Claus without the beard, Uncle Sam without the top hat, and he is police without the brutality, dailiness without ennui.

This blue thread who stitches together our weeks, who with the same benign aplomb delivers gold futures solicitations on claycoated stock, and electric bills with their carbon copy and even their carbon paper cunningly inserted within an integral paper cocoon like butterfly wings, and creamy stiff invitations to weddings and wine tastings, and dusty-rose stationery dented and crinkled by the tears and furious quill of a mistress or lover, and common-sense proposals from businesslike men, and epistles that like St. Paul's need no immediate answer—this ebullient human shuttle of our continent-spanning social weave, once he is moved one day to ask him,

Q: Do you ever feel blue?

A: Some days, but I kick it. Some days the old pouch weighs on me, but once I dump out the first couple *Vogues* I feel good again.

Q: Dogs? Gloom of night?

A: The dogs, I don't know, you don't see real bitey dogs like you used to. I don't know what it is. Their teeth get soft, watching television. They have the bark but not the nip. Like I was saying to the man down the street, next war comes along, us old guys'll have to go fight it. Gloom of night—well, I conk out pretty early. Walk fifteen miles in black shoes every day, you would, too.

Q: Monotony?

A: No, most folks are real nice, I stop and have a word with the different ones. Some people still send registered, so there's the receipts to mess with. Always something a little novel, you know. Can't say I thought much of that Francis Perkins stamp, though. Too serious. A stamp ought to give you a little lift, when you hit it with your tongue.

Q: I've always been interested in what you might call the romance of the mails. It's really a wonderful thing, to put a letter in some clanging box out at the corner of Grant and Woodbine and have it pop up in Colorado Springs two days later. The slots, the dark sack, and all the ins and outs of it—do you follow me? I mean [*blushing*] it's a *mystery*.

A [*puzzled*]: Well, not if you break it down step by step. They have these new computers now that you punch the zips into as the letters go by, I've heard it's the most unnatural job in the world. They have to take them off duty every twenty minutes or the guys go crazy.

Q: Junk mail? How do you feel about that? And for that matter isn't there a, how can I say it, certain stench of the *unnecessary* about most of it?

A: Yeah, but we love it, don't we? It's life, and life is sweet. Like sun and rain, bright and gray, it all beats pushing up daisies. You know what they say, don't you? The dead have no zip.

Q [*having exposed oneself with a serious concern and obsession, and been short-changed with facile optimism*]: Huh. Hadn't heard it put that way.

A: Think it over. Have a nice rest of the day.

Q: O.K. You, too.

A: No need to worry about *me*.

He goes off whistling, loving the weather. Photons beat on his broad chest, neutrinos penetrate black leather and swamp his toenails. There is a secret to life, but he hasn't delivered it yet.

He is moved to another route. Routes change. Years pass. One day an unsigned postcard arrives, with pencilled block letters saying, NOTHING NECESSARY ABOUT CREATION FOR THAT MATTER.

### *The Widow*

Q: NICE PLACE you have here.

A: I try to keep it up. But it's hard. It's hard.

Q: How many years has it been now?

A: Seven. Seven come September. He was sitting in that chair, right where you are now and the next minute he was gone. Just a kind of long sigh, and he was gone.

Q: Sounds like a pretty good way to go. Since we all have to go sometime.

A: That's what everybody said. The minister, the undertaker. I suppose I should have been grateful, but if it had been less sudden, it might have been less of a shock. It was as if he *wanted* to go, the way he went so easy.

Q: Well. I doubt that. But it's you I'm interested in, you in the years since. You look wonderfully well.

A: Ever since I stopped taking the pills. These doctors nowadays, they prescribe the pills, honestly believe, to kill you. I was having dizzy spells, one leg seemed to be larger than the other, my hands felt like they were full of prickles ... it all stopped, once I stopped taking the pills.

Q: And your ... mental state?

A: If you mean do I still have all my buttons, you'll have to judge that for yourself. Oh, I'm forgetful, but then I always was. I know if I stand in the middle of the room long enough it'll come to me. It's like the sleeping. At first I used to panic, but now if I wake up at three in the morning I just accept it as what my body wants. Trust your body, is the moral of it all, I suppose.

Q: By mental state I meant more grief, loneliness, sense of self, since ... you became a widow.

A: Well, first, there's the space. No, first, there's the ghosts. Then there's the space.

Q: Ghosts?

A: Oh yes, right there. All the time. Talking to me, telling me to put one foot in front of the other, not to panic. Rattling the latches at night. As certain as you're sitting there. Many times I've seen it rock by itself.

Q: Perhaps I should change chairs.

A: Oh no, sit right there. People do all the time.

Q: After the ghosts, space?

A: An amazing amount of it. Amazing. I never noticed the sky before. Seventy years on earth and I never looked at the sky. Just yesterday, there were clouds in it with little downward points, like a mountain range seen upside down, or a kind of wet handwriting, looked ever so weird, I can't describe it properly. And the trees. The way the trees are so patient, so *themselves*, gathering their substance out of air—it sounds silly, in words.

Q: So you would say then that since your husband's passing your life has taken a turn toward the mystical?

A: Not mystical, *practical*. The income tax, for instance. I do it all myself, federal and state. I never knew I had it in me to enjoy numbers. And people. I have friends, of all ages. Too many at times, I take the phone off the hook. I think what I meant about the space before it's space you can arrange yourself, there's nobody pushing at you with *his* space, nobody tell you you're crazy when you're weeding the peas at four in the morning and start singing.

Q: You often sing to yourself?

A: I'm not sure.

Q: I don't mean to pry—

A: Then don't pry.

One must be prepared, in interviewing the elderly, for these sudden changes of mood, for abrupt closure of access. Human material rubbed so thin by longevity resembles a book whose pages in their tissue fineness admit phrases from the next page or, in their long proximity *en face*, have become scrambled inky mirrors one of the other. Paranoia is the natural state of a skidding organism. Volatility is the inevitable condition of angels. The widow's face, so uncannily tranquil and spacious before, has grown hard and narrow as a gear that is cutting the transparent interface of the interview. One must return to scratch:

Q: But, er, ma'am, prying wasn't—I mean, what we want to do here, your testimony is so positive, so unexpectedly so, that we want to bring to the widest possible audience ... uh, it's of great value in this era of widows, to all those others who find themselves alone.

A: You are not alone. You are not. Not.

### *The Undertaker*

THE MAN is so young, is what strikes one forcibly. As if only the dead should bury the dead, we are startled by his downy cheeks, his supple puppyish bulk, his handshake limp and damp and silken as the handshakes of the very young are. Inherited the kit and caboodle—second-downstairs rooms wired for Musak and a basement full of coffins—from his father, probably. Or maybe the old man is stashed around the corner, coiled to cinch the deal.

But he never shows, it is the young man we must deal with. He wears the correct suit of lugubrious blue, and his voice is right, that strange *timbre* undertakers achieve, not quite deep enough to be ministerial nor high enough to be eunuchoid, but pitched in-between, as irresistible as a mountain stream of salad oil, onflowing but tranquil; nothing will ripple it. What they must see, these childlike blue eyes gliding through these rooms whose wallpaper holds faint veins of silver. Joy-riders decapitated. The last twisted husks of alcoholic ruin. Plump church-women turned skeletal by cancer. Beaming former athletes dyed purple in their final fit of asphyxia. Nobody should have to see such things. Who can begrudge him his fleet of Cadillacs outside in the parking lot, and the lambskin-lined Maserati he keeps for his private use, on weekends?

He responds to questions sympathetically, perceiving the interviewer as a kind of mourner to be handled with care.

Q: Do you enjoy your work?

A: I'm not sure "enjoy" is right. Work it is. I had wanted to be a florist. My father runs a greenhouse. My uncle took me on here instead.

Q [*the inevitable joke, delivered quickly*]: Well, you plant in both cases.

A [*unsmiling*]: It's human-relations work mostly. The craft angle of it anybody could learn in six months. It's the dealing with the relatives, the newspapers, even the old fogeys who control the cemetery lots, that is gratifying to me. That part of it you never get a hundred percent grip on.

Q: Do you have a basic philosophy for dealing with the—the survivors?

A: Neutral.

Q: Neutral?

A: I try to maintain neutrality. I take the cue from them. If they want to crack jokes, I know a few. If they want to have hysterics, we got soundproofing in the walls. Open coffin, closed coffin, public viewing, private service, scatter the ashes—it doesn't faze us. We're used to your service. Last winter we had an old lady who wanted to be hung in a tree as food for the birds, but the state doesn't allow it. Scattering the ashes isn't so popular in some localities either. What people don't realize, there can be *bones*. Teeth, too. Do it at sea, sometimes the receptacle floats, and you should keep the tide charts in mind. That's the kind of problem that's gratifying to me, one that tests your general knowledge.

Q: Have you read any Jessica Mitford?

A: That's the lady said we worked short hours and overcharged.

Q: 'Fraid so.

A: With all due respect, I don't think the lady quite got a grip on the extent of the service we have to provide. Door to door, so to speak. Deathbed to grave. Once the deceased becomes the deceased, he's on our hands entirely. That's quite an—

Q: Undertaking?

A: You said it. Also there's the sociological aspect. We try to leave the fabric intact, with one thread snipped out. Who's there when that nasty bit of work needs to be done? Not Mitford.

Q: Right. In conclusion, might we see your—receptacles?

They are beautiful. Big baby's cribs, lined with baby blue, pink, peach, lemon. A little set of them down here, below ground level. Marine metaphors flock to the swimming pool consciousness. These caskets are boats, calked and mortised and varnished for a long row on black water. Of course they will be rowed, not wind-driven or motor-propelled. *Row, row, row your boat*: we began in first grade by singing that round, and went on to *Michael, row your boat ashore, Hallelujah*. Charon used to pole his skiff of stiffs across the Styx, but this is an age of self-service; you row your own. The undertaker, down here in his watery cave of treasure amid the silent waves of curved mahogany and plumped-up satin, with frills or without, has grown even more boyish, broad, erect, and translucent; his blue eyes reflect an inner sky, and one remembers where one has seen him before. On the deep imagined sea. He is Billy Budd.

### ***The Bankrupt Man***

THE BANKRUPT MAN dances. Perhaps, on other occasions, he sings. Certainly he spends money at restaurants and tips generously. In what sense, then, is he bankrupt?



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