

## AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Barbara Melton for the degree of Master of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies in English, English, and Philosophy presented on April 25, 2006

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This thesis is a series of personal essays that explore themes of fundamentalism, family, loss, personal growth and the question of free will.

The work reflects my study of the written word, of language, and of how people have tried to define, or have experienced, the numinous. The essays are roughly chronological and span a period of five decades, beginning in early childhood and ending in the present.

Using a conversational and sometimes colloquial style, I have drawn on my own experiences to speak to the concerns of anyone who has had a difficult childhood. I conclude, implicitly, that it is through a series of choices and conscious decisions that it's possible to give a different experience to one's own child something better, to give something better. I also make the case that loss can be a teacher and that different losses at different times in life can either maim or heal.

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Abraham's Daughter

by  
Barbara Melton

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*part i – the way it was*

## Introduction

*Man must evolve for all human conflict a method which rejects revenge, aggression and retaliation. The foundation of such a method is love.* Martin Luther King, Jr.

It started with a coincidence, not that I believe in them. At least a decade ago, maybe longer, I'd been thinking that I'd like to know what makes good essays and what kinds of people write them. I asked a professor I knew at Western Oregon University about them and even fiddled around with a short one describing my experiences picking strawberries when I was a kid. It's probably still lurking about the house somewhere.

Then I started working at Oregon State and a few years after that it felt like time to get back into the classroom. It had been a while since I'd been a student and I wanted to learn how to write better. So, four years ago, I walked into an Advanced Composition class and discovered that we would study the personal essay.

Not only was I surprised that the class I'd chosen more or less at random was a study of the form I'd been thinking of for so long, but I knew I'd enjoy that particular course from the time I leafed through one of the texts we were to use. It was *Writing with Power* by Peter Elbow. At the beginning of the third chapter he says, "The essential human act at the heart of writing is the act of *giving*." My writing friends and I had talked together for years about seeing the creative act as a gift, one that you receive and one that you give. Just give to the process and

the product freely, then stand and take whatever consequences follow, no matter how difficult or strange or abundant they might be.

When I was a young adult, my definition of love was "giving." Because of the pain and disappointment of failed marriages and other relationships gone sour, I moved away from that point of view. But by re-defining "giving" as something aligned with my creative and other spiritual impulses, I have begun to reclaim it. To be able to give powerfully, I think it's necessary to know how to accept well. In the end that's what my meanderings through the academy seem to have been about this time around, and I had to accept one fundamental thing: the essay form is mine, both to study and to write.

E. B. White suggests that essayists are "...congenitally self-centered." Adorno writes, "The law of the innermost form of the essay is heresy." And Samuel Johnson also gives us a little insight about the essayist:

The writer of essays escapes many embarrassments to which a larger work would have exposed him: he seldom harasses his reason with long trains of consequences, dims his eyes with the perusal of antiquated volumes, or burthens his memory with great accumulations of preparatory knowledge.

Egocentric, heretical, lazy. My goodness, that sounds like me! I will avoid research at all costs and I've never developed a desire for deep learning on a single topic. There are too many remarkable things in the world to explore for me to be able to stick to just one or two. And it never occurs to me that perhaps my stories don't capture and hold the world's attention because, after all, aren't iconoclasts by their natures inherently interesting?

So, in the spirit of not limiting myself to a single writer, period or style, I chose coursework for my master's program that either sounded interesting to me, fit into my work schedule, was taught by someone I wanted to study with or was about things I thought I should know. And yet, every single one of them, no matter how unsystematically chosen, gave me something that helped me see things more clearly or taught me something important, often something I didn't even know I wanted or needed to know. They all helped me towards my goal of becoming a better writer and I think there's probably something from each of my classes that found its way into this thesis in one form or another.

The study of the written word became a laser. Those words cut into me first by engaging my intellect and when reason failed me, as it inevitably did, I found myself at a crossroads. I could choose to accept a limited vision of the world, or I could enlarge the picture and let the words I was reading, and the ideas they inscribed, slice deeper and touch my heart. I know it's viewed with skepticism, this appeal to the heart (and the heart's response), particularly in the academy. But it is a human response and, after all, my studies have all been based in the humanities.

It was my good fortune to study the life and teachings of Jesus, the short fiction of Carver, the revolutionary ideas of bell hooks, the poetry of Dante, Wordsworth, Dickinson and Rich, and of course the personal essays of Dillard, Didion and E. B. White. I read some of Carver's short stories in Keith Scribner's class, stories I'd never read before because I'd taken a friend's word for it that

they were no good. I love the power and sadness in his work — it reminds me of Edward Hopper's painting *The Nighthawks*. Marcus Borg's Jesus sequence was an eye-opener, teaching me that a figure the size of Jesus can't be contained by a single interpretation. Considering my fundamentalist background, this turned out to be a personal revelation.

But I kept coming back to Dante and Dillard, two writers separated by seven centuries, by gender, by culture and custom and geography. When I read Dillard for the first time I can't say I was that impressed. In her essay, *Living Like Weasels*, she says, "I could very calmly go wild. I could live two days in a den, curled, leaning on mouse fur, sniffing bird bones, blinking, licking, breathing musk, my hair tangled in the roots of grasses." Since then, I've learned a little bit about how metaphors work, and I started to read deeper, to see the meanings behind her stated desire to live like a weasel, breaking necks, drinking blood, living under a thicket. A weasel is created to do those things and must do them, having no choice in the matter. I have choices and I think that the essence of what Dillard's essay says is that if we really could live like weasels, her choices, my choices, yours, would conform to our created natures as clearly as does the weasel's. It's what Dillard calls single necessity.

In *The Paradiso*, Dante's second guide, Beatrice, says to him, "The elements of all things...whatever their mode, observe an inner order. It is this form that makes the universe resemble God." In his 12<sup>th</sup> century way, Dante was asking his

readers to recognize and hold to their own single necessity. But before he gets to that point, he must move through *The Inferno*, Dante's version of hell.

We have so many useful sayings about hell: "War is hell," "Come hell or high water," "Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned." All bring to mind images or situations we can relate to. But I think Winston Churchill gets the infernal gold star for saying, "When you're going through hell, keep going." Such a pragmatic man. And I think Dante and Dillard would agree with him. Life is hell. But constantly reviewing hellish miseries can get you stuck where you'd least want to be. Don't get me wrong. I think it's important to go there and remember, with great courage sometimes, and to grieve as often and as long as necessary. But as Dante, the character, came to learn, you can move ahead and through, as long as you allow love to be your guide.

The essays that follow came initially from pain, anger and judgment. I wanted to prove to the world that the fundamentalism of my family and church, the fundamentalism that so shaped and warped me, was evil. That my parents and our pastors and Sunday School teachers and choir directors and church elders must be called to answer for what was done to me and for how deadly to my nature all that vengeful and rigid and confining dogma was. I wanted to describe for my readers a world I see as rotten, to expose its decay and depredations. To get to all the ghosts of my past and execute them with deft and devastating prose. Damn that hubris! It tripped me up again. I couldn't actually do it.

So I decided that I'd write a chronological group of pieces that contrasted my early life with all the wild and chancy turns my later life took until it brought me to here, to now, to a species of love. That's closer.

What I came to realize is that all my random choices, all my grief and anger and pain and occasional delving into various aspects of my own life have resulted in work that seems to have more to do with love than revenge. Dorothy Parker said that the best revenge is living well. I'm sure she had material riches in mind, but it occurs to me that living well can be defined in many ways. That I can even recognize love when it's offered sort of baffles me, but I can. And I try to give it back.



A word about the cast of characters: Orley is my brother and only sibling, ten years my elder. Cozmo is my son, whose given name is Christopher and who has more nicknames than I care to burden this work with. Tricia married him eventually and has become my beloved daughter-in-law. Jim carried the name Jimi at birth, after the famous guitarist. And Orion, my little star, is my younger grandson, the one who never knew his dad's dad, Randy.

## How to Make a Little Kid Crazy

*And Abraham stretched forth his hand, and took the knife to slay his son.*      Genesis 22:10

We didn't work on Sundays. Orley quit a job once because his boss refused to give him Sundays off. It became a scandal, at least in Dad's and Uncle Jake's eyes, if not to the wider Evangelical Mennonite community in my hometown, that a man connected with the church ran his business seven days a week. In my adolescent years, the youth group I attended debated earnestly about whether it was sinful to drive to the beach on Sundays, or to go out to eat. Because it forced people into ungodly behavior. Because you created a demand for goods and services, forcing people to pump gas or wait tables, to work on the Lord's Day, as you would not do yourself because you believed it was sinful.

I learned early on the difference between work clothes and church clothes. And you can bet I knew which day was which. One sunny summer Sunday afternoon, bored as usual, I wandered around to the side yard just as Dad squirmed his way out from under the house dressed in his overalls and blue cambric shirt.

"Daddy!" I could hear the shock and rebuke in my own voice. "Why are you working on Sunday?"

Dad looked grumpy and he gave me a grumpy answer. "The Bible says that if your ass falls into a well on the Sabbath, you're allowed to draw it out."

Well, that had the effect he was looking for; it shut me right up. Dad stomped his way into the house and I think I might have even bent over to look

through the crawl hole in the foundation. I was pretty sure there wasn't going to be an ass under there, but Dad's explanation had come to me so uninflected with irony that I tried my best to make it work inside my own head as literally true. In the end, though, I simply hadn't a clue what my father was on about, and he seemed irritated enough to keep me from pestering him with questions.

I found out later that he was under there fixing a broken water pipe. No wonder he was crabby! Even without a precocious offspring chiding him. And a girl offspring to boot.



The day I learned about Mom's illness I was almost eleven years old. We drove to Salem, about 15 miles away. The late spring sun warmed us through the windows of the car and I can still see the strobing of tree shadows across the back of the front seat as we drove east on Highway 22, along the Willamette River. I remember sitting in the two-tone green and white Chevy Belair with Dad while Mom went in to talk to the doctor. Dad and I didn't talk and I probably had my nose in a book, although I did notice he didn't turn on the radio as he often did. Instead, he looked steadily out the window and tapped the steering wheel gently with his wide, work-roughened fingers. I'll bet he was praying.

They say kids are more intuitive than adults, that they can sense when something has or is about to go wrong. I knew that a few months earlier Mom had taken to popping vitamins — she who had a hard time persuading herself to take an aspirin when her head ached. But I never saw it coming. So when Dad

drove us to my favorite hamburger joint and bought us lunch, I happily dove into my food and was munching away, blissfully ignorant of the fact that my world was about to tilt several degrees toward dark.

Mom looked at Dad in that fraught way parents aggravate their children with. Then she turned back towards me and said cheerfully, "Well, it's cancer."

I cried the day she died too, but that was because I knew I was supposed to. My tears on that earlier, bright May afternoon reflected the truest feeling a child can feel – impassioned and burdened with terrifying and unspeakable love. At that moment I still believed I was loved back.

Funny, the things I recall about the most joyful or frightening or devastating events in my life. The moment Cozmo was born the first thing I thought after that surge of creative ecstasy was, *He gets to play with dolls if he wants to*. My first thought after Mom's bombshell was, *She's pretending to be cheerful. She's pretending everything is just fine and dandy*. My second thought was, *How did this hamburger suddenly lose all its taste? It's like holding sawdust in my mouth*. I just sat there, the tears sheeting down my face, the bite I'd taken just before Mom spoke sitting in my mouth untasted.



We shopped in a small grocery store in north Dallas called Thrifty Market. It still stands, although its name has changed many times in the past half century. I haven't ventured through the doors in decades, but maybe I should. I don't even know if it's still a grocery store.

Mom, Dad and I would slowly troll the narrow aisles, walking on the cracked cement floors, the battered shopping cart squeaking and pulling to the left. Dad drove and Mom didn't, so we often made a threesome, and Dad always came into the store with us, probably because he carried the money. I wonder where Orley was. He so often doesn't show up in my memories of everyday activities. I suppose he could've stayed home on that trip – he's ten years older than I am so by the time I was four, he seemed like an adult to me.

One day I stole three Easter eggs from the store, the pastel sugary kind that were displayed in a big barrel near the front door. I don't remember sneaking, but I must have. I was old enough to start losing my teeth and had reached an age when I knew it was wrong to take things from stores. A tooth in the front of my lower jaw had come loose and flopped around every time I opened my mouth. Mom and I fought about it constantly. She wanted to pull it out and I resisted. I was afraid it would hurt.

As we drove home that day, Mom somehow discovered that I'd taken the candy. I can imagine myself taking furtive nibbles around my loose tooth, the stickiness of the candy coating my fingers and lips. I can't remember the moment of discovery and, oddly, when I misbehave in some way even now, I have a hard time imagining that possible, awful second when my bad behavior shows as truth on someone else's face.

I remember the aftermath, though. Instead of hauling me back to Thrifty Market to confess to the store manager what I had done, Mom held me down and yanked that blasted tooth out.



For years I blamed God — not for the tooth incident specifically, but for giving me to parents who seemed not to care what kind of person I was, never quite got how confused I was by their explanations of their faith, who lived more by the letter of the Good Book than by the spirit of it, and who often seemed cruel. Being saved was the pinnacle of my church's belief system, but it never seemed to take with me. So, at twelve, I kicked God out of my life, even though I still went to church and outwardly played the part my parents expected of me.

After leaving home, I fiddled around with atheism, Marxism, cynicism and agnosticism but it did me no good. Even at my hardest edge, when push came to shove I ended up praying. Or I would take solace and find hope in the beauty of a sunset or the power of the ocean. I guess old habits die hard and eighteen years of indoctrination, the emotional and cultural training that continued unabated regardless of my secret decisions when I was twelve, are hard to reverse. I'm just as glad, because I find it easy to believe in God. The thing is I also find it necessary to believe that God made us with free will. It hurts my head to imagine an infinite being who creates conscious, experiential, evolutionary creatures and then decides to micro-manage them all, even causing

them to do harm to themselves and each other from time to time — often as a teaching tool. It comforts me to believe that we do it to each other all on our own.

No, Mom and Dad have become the targets of my anger and blame. All I ever wanted to do was be me. Dad especially never did understand how completely I took in our church's teaching when I was small, any more than he ever understood my need for data and proofs later, or what was behind my everlasting question, *why*? Or how the tension between surrender and subversion could be so strong. He didn't have a rebellious bone in his body, and his own beliefs never wavered, not even when Mom spent three years dying.

Dad wanted me to grow up and marry a preacher or a missionary. Mom was desperate for me to "behave". I couldn't do either. It was like being Isaac on that damn mountain, although in the Old Testament story God saved him just as Abraham was about to sacrifice him. Turns out it's not God I'm pissed at. It's Abraham. If I'd written that story, God would've smacked old Abe upside the head. That would've been the test: are you human? Can you love? Will you defy even God to protect and nurture your child?

## What I'm Really Afraid Of

*Nothing is so much to be feared as fear.*

Henry David Thoreau

### *i. chaos*

I developed my first addiction in 1963. Mom had taken to her bed and Dad appointed me her caretaker, my boundaries the distance I could go on my bike and still hear the bell she rang when she needed me. Somehow, it seemed more appropriate to him that his twelve year-old daughter should empty Mom's bedpans and bathe her than that my aunt, come to stay the summer to help us, should be so burdened. I've never figured out his thinking. Dad and I never spoke about the cancer, either before or after her death.

From time to time, when Dad was home or when Aunt Elizabeth gave me leave, I hopped on my bike and rode to Woody's Market three blocks away. I would plunk down my quarter and buy five packages of plain M&Ms. Then I'd find somewhere quiet, somewhere private. I'd sit in the sun, the bike — my best friend — dumped in a heap next to me, the crunch of all those brightly colored discs of sugar and fat sliding down my throat in an avalanche of comfort, one right after another. It seemed the only thing I had any control over.

A few years later, I flirted with drugs and alcohol but never cared much for losing that level of awareness. Intellectually, I slid into the eye-candy model of literature, preferring Agatha Christie to Austen and Star Trek to Masterpiece Theatre, all the while slipping into a shallow cynicism and edged wit instead of hunkering down with *Howl* in order to understand what I *really* had to cry about.



*ii. abandonment*

Mom died when I was thirteen. I was alone with her in a house so quiet I could hear the sound of my own fear. About mid-morning the stillness broke. I got up off the couch and went to her room to see what the noise was and stopped at the doorway, riveted by the sound of her breathing. I'd never seen her unconscious before. She was 87 pounds, thin as a blade, a wasted crescent, pale as snowdrops, paper-skinned, lucent. Her breath was fierce, hard, growly as a puma's; she would have made a good wood rasp. There was just a wedge of throat, maybe two fingers wide, and then the rumpled sheet drifting across the hospital bed. She had two slitted eyes I couldn't see, any more than you see your own death.

It worried me, her breathing. I didn't know what to do, so I picked up her handkerchief, a pale square of linen and lace, to fan her face. But even I could see it wasn't helping her. I went back to the living room, sat back down on the couch and stared at nothing, trying to ignore my life, hoping it would turn out all right. I figured it was a test of valor and value, because don't the brave, good people always figure out what needs to be done and then do it? It wasn't death I was afraid of.

Everything I know about love and leaving comes from that moment. It's the focal point of my life and I hate that.



*iii. snakes*

I saw one once, a flash of squirming black in the hay Dad was mowing, and it scared me even then. I was only four years old and didn't quite know what it was, just a black wiggle scurrying between the mounds of straw and away, way more afraid of us than I was of him. Dad jabbed after him with his pitchfork and said, "I don't like them either." I didn't know how to say, "I don't dislike them; I'm afraid."

I tried to pick one up in high school. There was a terrarium in my biology classroom and I didn't ask for help, just went alone up to the snake in the glass and grabbed hold of him. I didn't realize how fast he would twist or how strong and muscular he would feel in my hand. It startled me. I dropped him like a hot coal, and I regret that more than any of my snaky encounters because I think I was brave enough that day to start getting over the fear. All it did was make it worse.

These days Jim, Orion and my friend, the other Barbara, snake-wrangle for me. Barbara lives next door to me and has learned to recognize the pitch my voice rises to when I yell to her if we're each working in our yards. One August afternoon after I got home from work, I sat in the car in my driveway and called her on the cell phone to come get the damn snake so I could get out. Her living room couldn't be more than twenty-five feet away from where I was sitting.

Last summer, Orion and I made sun tea. The jar had been warming on the patio for several hours, so I sent him out to grab it. I held open the screen door

watching him and was just stepping into the yard, when a big ol' green, stripey guy slithered his way from the yard across the little walkway and into the ferns under the kitchen window. Damn. I knew the buggers probably hid under there, but I'd never seen one and in the case of my particular phobia, I'm allowed to not be afraid until I see the snake. It's happened now, so that spot will never feel completely safe to me again.



*iv. false hope*

Three things stand out for me about the summer of 1964. I started having trouble sleeping. There were two spectacular fires within blocks of my home. Both in the middle of the night. Both of which I sneaked out on my bike to watch. And I discovered Vietnam.

I was fourteen and before then I'd never heard of the place; I'd never yet heard the phrase "military-industrial complex". Suddenly it dawned on me that we were shooting at people over there. It was a jungle. American boys were being drafted and slaughtered. My friend's cousin was one of them. It started to wear on me and I wished earnestly for an end to the war. One evening I heard something on the news—I forget what—that led me to believe there might be hope for an end. Maybe they were discussing table shapes and possible peace talks. I don't know but I had to leave the house. I was bawling like crazy and I didn't want to have to explain to Dad what was wrong. He wouldn't have understood.

I wandered around the neighborhood, just allowing myself to feel the hope. This was during Lyndon Johnson's term in office, you understand. This was before the Tet Offensive, the Gulf of Tonkin or My Lai—I didn't know I was weeping for future tragedy, for my own personal tragedy, and for my son's, until many years later. Looking back now, I feel for that kid who didn't have a clear picture, yet, of what war was all about, but knew it couldn't be good. It feels vicious to know how bad it's going to get before that little kid's summer wish is fulfilled. It feels monstrous to know how badly and at what cost the peace was finally gotten.



*v. my own power*

There is something about these black marks on white paper—putting down the fears and the pains and the joys of my life—that is frightening. I'm afraid of being stupid; I'm afraid of not getting it right. I'm sure my voice will never be strong enough to keep Mom from dying. Or maybe it was the childhood magic of my wordy precociousness that killed her in the first place. It's hard to accept that I'm just the snake, beautiful, terrifying, absurd. The little kid I am, the serpent trying to evade Dad's pitchfork, longs to be there again, where death is distant and the connections are still unbroken.

## My Beatrice

*Love called me here.*

Beatrice from *The Inferno*

They say smells trigger memories more powerfully than anything else. I believe it. One summer evening, as I pedaled my bike around the village where I live, I passed my new neighbors at 168 Azalea, just a few doors down from my place. It had been too hot to ride, then it was almost too dark, even with the light of the street lamps. This time of year, OSU students start moving into duplexes that stand vacant during the summer months. We generally have to put up with a month's worth of partying, or so, until they settle down and remember they actually need to study in order to pass their classes.

I saw this new bunch hauling things from the back of a pickup and into the house, assembly line-fashion. By the time I glided past I could hear the familiar sound of Jim Morrison insisting: *Hello. I Love You. Won't you tell me your name?* I saw the signature strobe of a black light blip in the living room, and then the scent of patchouli grabbed me and hauled me back to 1970. Back to chaos, personally and for my country as well, back to the time when I rejected the label the establishment wanted to hang on me. These days, I happily admit I was a hippie.

If it hadn't been for Pat Brockhaus, I might've missed the counterculture altogether. I was living in Dallas, Oregon, where I had lived all my life, and if you've never heard of it you know all you need to know about it. To call it a backwater would be generous. I didn't know Pat well, although we'd graduated

from high school in the same class, so it surprised me when he called and asked me to go to a party with him. It was dark by the time he picked me up in an old beater of a Volkswagen and off we went. We were going, he offered, to some guy's crash pad. I dressed in a pink and white outfit, complete with matching shoes and purse, and I wonder who, exactly, I thought I was back then. Pat's fringed vest and Jesus boots should've tipped me off.

We parked in front of a ramshackle little house with more weeds than grass in the yard and a blue light bulb burning on the front porch. The small, dimly lit house smelled of sandalwood incense and was crowded with people dressed in tie-dye, long skirts, fringed leather, frayed and embroidered jeans. They sported bare feet, beads and peace symbols dangling like pewter icons. The men all had mustaches and long hair. Most of them wore beards.

I sat quietly in my corner, hoping to attract as little attention as possible, not knowing that I might as well have had a neon sign over my head flashing out *straight...straight...straight*, not knowing what such a thing would even mean. But I was ignored for the most part and so had the chance to sit and watch. The music was Hendrix, I think. Or maybe The Who or Cream. The classics anyway. Candles flickered and incense burned. A black light made glowing fire of the white stripes on my sweater. It was very warm. I relaxed and watched the pageant combine and re-combine like a living kaleidoscope, wondering what it would be like to be encircled and absorbed by such an unlikely and exotic group of people. From time to time one or two of them came over to talk with Pat and

he introduced me to Frodo, a short, fidgety fellow who lived there. Mouse came by, a tiny girl with messy black hair and dark-circled eyes. She was with Gypsy, a tall, sturdy man with gray in his hair and beard. Fast Eddie, Doper Dan and Woody seemed to be a threesome and later I discovered that Woody was Danny's old lady. Both Danny and Eddie were bikers, but Woody looked more like a hip co-ed, with her long blonde hair and Lennon glasses, than a biker chick. They lived, I heard, in a log cabin in south Salem with Michael K, who I wouldn't meet until a few months later.

A bedroom door slammed open and I jumped. The tension in the room jumped right along with me as the biggest, scariest person I'd ever seen emerged, seeming to breathe fire. He was clearly pissed, scanning the room from side to side like a bear. Over 6' tall, dressed only in threadbare blue jeans, his blond hair a wild afro wreathing his head like a corona, meeting his full beard and mustache by way of a double isthmus of sideburn. All I could see of his face was a pair of icy blue eyes staring in fury. He was muttering something about land mines and hand grenades, and yelling about "those bastards who ripped me off". Thirty-five years later, I can still feel an atavistic tug. It still scares me.

I leaned against Pat and whispered, "My god, who IS that?" Pat took a nonchalant pull off his beer. "That? Oh that's Crazy Randy. You want to meet him?" Not on your life. Crazy Randy left in a hurry and Pat took me home. I laughed as I fell asleep, thinking of how my family would react if they could know about my evening. And others during that time of my life, too, for that

matter. Turns out, that laugh was on me. By Christmas, Crazy Randy and I were a couple. He gave me a wonderful leather necklace that collared my throat, an ice blue stone set in the middle of it. A week after he died I gave it, and my wedding band, to Cozmo.

You never know who'll turn out to be your Beatrice. She's the woman who went to Virgil in hell and asked him to be Dante's guide for part of his journey from the inferno, through purgatory and to the gates of paradise. These days I refer to Randy as my beloved, late, ex-husband. It's a short way for me to remember, and start to express, the complicated relationship we had. He came into my life when I was nineteen – and very naïve. Over 10 years after his death, he still hasn't left. It's hard to explain Randy and still harder to explain why I divorced him and why we never stopped loving each other.

He hadn't been home from Vietnam long when I first saw him. He came back addicted and alcoholic, damaged from what he'd seen and done, enraged. I had no business marrying him. I had no idea how to talk to him about his life and what Nam had done to him. He didn't know he could talk to me. Many years later he told me he was scared to death that if I knew what he'd had to do while he was overseas I would hate him and never speak to him again. The waste of it – and the isolation of it – still hurts.

Yet, somehow, we saw each other in a way that let us stumble and stagger and grope about like the blind, crippled people we were and find what was best in each other. It took a long time. I had to leave him. He struggled with his

addictions. We both struggled with trying to raise our son. I guess the key was neither of us was willing to give up on the other. He made me crazy. But I knew beyond any question that he'd be at my side in a flash if I ever needed him. All I'd have to do is call. I hope he knew the same about me.

## Rules for Hippies

*If you judge people, you have no time to love them.*

Mother Teresa

Michael K's beardless face and short hair shocked me twice. First, because he looked so weird that way, pale skin shining out where hair had covered it for so long, his near-sighted eyes more prominent, lighter than I had realized, the rich, red color and texture of his hair reduced to a faded, dark blond. It surprised me that cutting and shaving hair could have such an effect.

The bigger shock came from our mutual friends. Narc was about the most vicious insult that could be aimed at you, the connotation of the betrayal of brother by brother heavy in its single syllable. We all trusted Michael. He ran the Pala Coffee House in the basement of the First Methodist Church. He lived in a house he'd built himself on the back of a flatbed truck. He looked, acted, spoke like one of us, defying rules of behavior, laws of the state. To imagine him working for the cops made me afraid, sad, and angry. I had come to the world that Michael was part of in a direct trajectory away from what my parents valued and believed in.

I had fled to a world where it felt safe to rebel. Where I could experiment with all those "thou shalt nots" that had chafed while I was growing up. To be a hippie was more fun than anyone ought to be allowed to have. There was nothing between the thought of a subversive action and the doing of it. The stimulus-response model played itself out over and over in my life like a

mandala of colors I'd never heard of before, revealing itself in waves of pattern I imagined would never end.

The pattern broke like water on rock, splintering into its own obedience to laws not of physics, but of human nature. There were rules in this new world I had braved, and doctrine that could not be resisted without consequence. I had fled straight into the arms of a culture every bit as fundamentalist as the one I was running from. You don't cut your hair. You don't shave your beard. You don't defy the theology of the counterculture without risk.

## This is My Body

*This is my body, which is given for you...*

Jesus, Luke 22:19

If you ask me to name the most memorable day in my life, I'll tell you it was when my son was born. That was over 33 years ago and the memories of it are etched in my mind like the blade of a skate in ice. November 28. The gray sky. It's not really raining, just a film of mist on the air. I can see the little house we lived in, the shabby curtains, the odor rising from the oil heater and our dog, Sally, nestled around my feet, his curly white fur freshly washed.

I felt like crap. No energy. The baby was thirteen days late and I moved like a tank. My head ached and I couldn't motivate myself to shower or dress. By 6 pm, I wasn't convinced that I was in labor. There were no regular pains. But Randy and I made for the hospital anyway, just to be on the safe side, because it was a long drive. By the time we got there my labor pains were 3 minutes apart. The orderly dispatched to pick me up from the admitting desk in a wheelchair, thinking he knew more than he did, nearly lost a limb. When he asked if my water had broken and learned the answer was no, he suggested the doctor would probably send me home.

NEVER cross a woman in hard labor. It just doesn't pay.



Near the beginning of his *Confessions*, St. Augustine struggles with his inability to conceptualize God. He realizes that the idea of God can't be contained in the notion of a physical body. Nevertheless, he concludes at this

stage of his spiritual journey, "I was still forced to think of you as corporeal substance occupying space..." Something I have to keep in mind while reading the *Confessions* is that Augustine himself is corporeal. He must translate every insight, experience, thought, belief and doubt into words.

He speaks those words to his amanuensis. If not that, he would have taken up pen and ink to flow the words from his mind, through his brain and down the conduits of nerve, sinew and bone that are the arm, hand, fingers. They, his words, have become embodied. Belief incarnate.

But Augustine's words have survived two millennia. To stop at such a surface reading or easy explanation of his work seems lazy and inadequate. There must be more, but I haven't read to the end yet; I don't know how deeply incarnation is incarnated there. What I do know is a little bit about the Jesus story, the story of God incarnate, how he was described in John's gospel as "the Word."

So, three threads. My baby's birth, Augustine and the incarnation/embodiment underpinnings to his work – the embodiment that words are unequal to describe. John saying of Jesus, "In the beginning was the Word." I know the connection is there – I just can't quite see it.

OK then, generativity. In the beginning, God created... The breath of God in Genesis, the word of God, was all that was required for creation, and it led to Gilgamesh, Egyptian sun worshippers, the Norman Conquest, Gutenberg's printing press, the Mayan pyramids, the 2nd Law of Thermodynamics, Salem

witch trials, WWI, the discovery of penicillin, Apartheid, rock 'n' roll, Volkswagens, blogs, the Mars Rover, the World Trade Center. Mozart. My son. All the mishmash of wonder and destruction that was made possible because God spoke on the first day of creation. And because He was embodied by Jesus — the Word that connects God to us.

Creating life is a thing that no words can equal, whether you're God or Barbara. Words in such circumstances are gloriously inadequate. My description of the day my son was born might create the impression that it was a dismal, miserable, uncomfortable day, but it wasn't. It transported me. It spoke of the amazing qualities love can bring into the world and of birth as one embodiment of God's love for us. Death is another. It doesn't surprise me that the story of Jesus bookmarks his life by making a big noise about both his birth and his death. Resurrection is implied in all our births and deaths; whether you believe literally in Jesus' resurrection seems to me immaterial.

I think Augustine got that, maybe clearly, maybe through a glass darkly, but however well he may have understood it himself, surely he also understood how inadequate mere words were to present to his readers the story of God incarnate. Using a device, such as a parable or a metaphor, in this case the body, to make his case seems worthwhile to anyone who has ever tried to put the experience of generativity into words.

The Word, embodied, is made manifest in us all. "I love you," could have been the creator's first words. Anyone who has participated in the creative act,

whether the product was a child, a painting, a poem or an idea, knows the tender ferocity of a creator toward the created. When Cozmo came to us, some time after the sweet nothings had faded into aural nothingness, he embodied the best his father and I had to say to each other. This is a kind of truth I've never been able to come to grips with. It's too big. My human flaws, and Randy's, and Cozmo's, and those of others, keep getting in the way. I can only glimpse it now and then. When I hear his laughter, when he turns his head just so and I can see both his father and his son emerge briefly from his features. When he returns to being only Cozmo—the best thing, always, that he can be.

*part ii – catching a breath*

### Fog at Frog Creek

*Sleep not, dream not; this bright day  
Will not, cannot last for aye...*

Emily Brontë

I awoke to fog and when that happens there's nothing for it—I have to get up. The Who were on the radio singing "I can see for miles and miles and miles and miles," which made me smile because, of course, I could do no such thing. The tiny drops of water interleaved between all those air molecules and what I see is like a theatre's backdrop, softening all the hard edges and slipping a dreamy fuzziness in their place. Like a painting of sand, fog creates an image elusive and changeable as time. I know it will be gone soon, so I give myself the gift of it. Fog is my favorite kind of weather, especially in the morning. It limits sight. It contracts vantages and directs my view inward. It invites contemplation and if early morning birdsong accompanies it, all the better.

All the pains and aggravations, the fears and doubts and grievances of my inner landscape become muted, like the tones of a trumpet played with a hand held over the bell, mitigated by the loveliness of the half-seen grass and trees, the cobwebs between the plants on the back patio outlined in drops of water. And so I consider a burgeoning friendship, like a strange and spiky sea creature, too painful to handle, too valuable to drop. And I review a long-ago love, one of those things I didn't value adequately until it was lost to me. And a current love, so bewildering in its intensity, so terrifying in its obvious potential for personal loss. And all the daily hopes and joys and annoyances brought on by moving

through a lifescape that all at once seems too familiar and stranger than dancing on the sun or balancing my checkbook in Sanskrit.

My thoughts move in and out and around my still sleepy consciousness and a feeling of peace and right-with-myselfness drapes me in one of those completely still moments that I'd give anything for most days. I've never been able to coax this relaxed-to-the-bones state to me on purpose. The fog gives it to me this morning and I allow my gratitude for it to surface and then dissipate. The fog burns away and I turn to the other things this day promises.



My bedroom is a mess. I spend more time in it than I'd ever intended to. It's where the heating pad is that I lie on when my back's having a bad day. I was there a couple of Sundays ago, slogging through Dante, impatient with cornices and angels, ready to fly, resentful of gravity.

I moved into my house six years ago and I've never painted this room. The closet doors have been taken off. The overhead light fixture is hanging down awkwardly and the cover has been removed and never replaced. I have no dresser—I despise the small cramped drawers that keep clothing wrinkled and jammed up—so my t-shirts and turtlenecks and sweatshirts and slacks are neatly folded and rest on a bookshelf taller than Cozmo, bare-fronted and available for all to see. My bed has no head or foot board.

I'm waiting. The desire to put in a door from my room to the back yard lies most days banked and smoldering in the backmost part of my hindbrain. If I

let myself actually feel the need to make this change I will implode from the pressure. I can taste the morning air and hear the red sunrise juicing up the tall grasses out by the creek and I want to open the door and sit in the morning fog, fresh from my sleep and still warm from the covers. Where the door will be an inadequate window squats, through which I can see the tops of the trees out back by the creek as I lie reading in bed. They calendar through the year, informing me of the seasons' changes through their leaves. I see the clouds tumble past and when it's clear at night the stars come so close I feel like gathering them up to sprinkle on my raspberry sherbet. I'm ready to unbind myself from this 50 square feet of tether.

Yet, in a corner of this mess is a small ceramic vase, standing on my dressing table. It's the most beautiful thing in the room and its name is memory. It's not a vase at all, actually. It's a pot. A thing to plant stuff in. It's not that big, about 18 inches tall and foursquare in design, the outer walls and edges straight, tapering slightly from top to bottom. A nice shape—sort of like Randy. Without pretension. Easily grasped. Its interest lies in the glaze.

When I look at it I feel myself pulled into the depths of the blues and greens, like being at the seashore without the salt air. The finish is smooth in spots, rough in others, the roughness made of a scabrous, rusty brown that the softness of the other colors can't quite overcome. I found it in a local nursery and was drawn to it from the first. It was nestled in amongst many others, its porcelain glow like a jewel in a terra cotta setting. I wanted it and was ready to

leave it behind because of the cost, until I touched it. It felt as cool as it looked, even in high summer, even in the heat and stickiness of that place, with a coolness that could pull me under the sea so far the electric fishes would seem like stars.

I picked it up and the desire I felt for it flamed into necessity. Turning it over and examining its every aspect, I allowed myself to be engulfed in that feeling of rightness that comes now and then, even in the presence of a material object. I love it. I admit it freely. It looks so out of place in my bedroom I sometimes just have to laugh. I've not regretted for a minute the impulse that led me to buy it. It was made for me, to heal a place so sore human touch is too grating to endure.

*part iii – finding my inner weasel*

### Sweet Sorrow

*Your absence has gone through me  
Like thread through a needle.  
Everything I do is stitched with its color.*

W.S. Merwin

Living with Randy was a misery. I would get off work at the local K-Mart at 10:00 pm, drive home anxious and wondering if he'd be drunk or sober or if the baby would be clean and fed, or needing his supper and a diaper change. It was during this time that I started having anxiety attacks. If I were home with Cozmo in the evening and Randy was out, there was no knowing whether he would come home sober or drunk, what time he'd come home, *if* he would come home. The insecurity of it was terrifying. He wasn't a happy drunk and though he wasn't a batterer in the physical sense, he was a crack shot at finding those places in my heart that he could poke at and that would hurt the most.

Vietnam haunted him. One night he got crazy, took out an old rifle, and ran up and down the street in front of our house, challenging all comers, including the cars, to battle. He often raged that he'd been taught to kill but never un-taught. He would drop hints now and then, little teasers of his experiences in the Nam. He killed people. He became addicted to opium. He ran black market goods. He discovered his bi-sexuality. Because of his fear of driving me away I learned all this way after the fact, but I never stopped loving him. I had to leave the marriage before I went insane.

This was the same man, mind you, who would bring me flowers for no good reason, randomly fix me dinner to be ready when I came home from work,

wrote a poem called "Angel Clown" about our eldest grandson. Shared the music of Pavarotti with me. What's not to be crazy about?



Some kinds of news resist being heard. They masquerade as fatigue, annoyance, confusion, fear. The call came at 10:30 one night in February, thirteen years ago. It was Randy's younger sister, Jennifer. I'd just fallen asleep and my brain could make no sense of her voice on the other end of the line. She never called me. Odd bits of what she was saying started to connect with each other. "Mom and Dad are driving to the hospital." "Dee called an hour ago." "I don't know which one." "The EMT guys got there about 9 o'clock."

It must have taken five minutes before it dawned on me that something had happened to Randy. It was serious enough for his girlfriend to have called his parents. They were on the way to the hospital, but Jennifer didn't know which one. She was home alone with her kids.

"OK, let me know what you find out." I put the phone down and sat staring at it. What the hell had he done this time? I felt more pissed about being woken up than worried about Randy. He was like a cat. It reminded me of the time he'd been hit by a car as he crossed the street in the pouring rain, in the dark. That time, he'd gotten his thighbone snapped in two, but he'd lived to tell the tale.

The movement from love to disappointment is an old story, and I don't expect to be able to shed new light on it. It weaves its way through my days,

tendrils of darkness where light ought to shine, tiny ticks of sand blowing against a cliff, wearing it slowly into another shape.

At least once it worked from inside out as well. Of all the women Randy knew and, I will admit it here, loved, I know that none ever measured up to me in the way we have of trying to quantify the heart. After we split up, there was never a day I couldn't have picked up the phone and called him back into my life. He would have married me again any time I asked. He knew it. I knew it. His girlfriends knew it. Worst of all, Cozmo knew it.

I couldn't let that damn phone call alone. The fatigue and the annoyance and the confusion couldn't quite wipe out the fingers of fear that were tapping a little rhythm on my heart muscles. I sighed and swore and started making phone calls. It wasn't Salem Hospital. They had no record of him being there. He lived in West Stayton, so I called the hospital in Stayton. Yes. He'd been brought in. The nurse would check on his condition and call me back. Waiting has never been my strength. I wanted a cigarette like nobody's business but I'd stopped smoking almost ten years ago. When the phone rang and a man identified himself as a physician, I should have known right away.

But, some kinds of news refuse to be heard. When the doctor started by saying of Randy that "He hadn't been living..." I nodded impatiently. I knew what he was going to say. "He hadn't been living properly and so he had a heart attack/stroke/seizure..." Pick a number. Just tell me how bad it is, I yelled inside my head. But the doctor finished, "...some hours before the rescue squad

arrived." Finally, the news had to be heard. Finally, the worst that it could possibly be was what it was. Randy had died that night. Alone. I still wonder if he had time to know what was happening to him, or if he had been conscious for any length of time after the attack. If there had been pain. If he had been afraid. I thanked the doctor politely for calling me. It wasn't his fault that he had just turned my life dark.

My ex-husband died disappointed in me. Not in who I was as a person, but because I was the moated fortress, drawbridge raised, walls unscalable. The terrifying part for me was that he never held it against me. He was constancy in a broken body, loyalty in a wounded heart.

I called my friends from down the street, who rushed over to comfort and support me. Then I called Cozmo to tell him his dad had just died.



Some years ago, a high government official from Vietnam traveled to Washington to meet with the Secretary of Defense, the first step toward rapprochement. It was a tiny blurb in the news, but it pierced me like an icicle to the marrow. It's been over thirty years since that damn war ended and I find I still have trouble forgetting, to say nothing of forgiving. I even know it wasn't Vietnam's fault, entirely, for Randy being so screwed up. Truth be told, he was screwed up when he left at seventeen to go to war. But Vietnam surely made it worse, impressing like Dante's hot sealing wax on his already injured soul the terrors of war and all it entailed. He lived with those scars all his life, and those

scars rippled out like a stone in water to damage me, to damage my son. I can even see the ripples in Jim, the baby Cozmo and Tricia were pregnant with when Cozmo was seventeen, and it infuriates me. Still, if the man from Vietnam can accept a relationship with his former enemy, the one that dropped more bombs on his tiny country than were dropped in all of WWII, how could I possibly not choose to see things differently?

I remember when Randy finally got clean and sober. He was forever calling me at odd times, sharing with me the delights of experiencing things sober for the first time. Little things that are easily taken for granted. Shopping for clothes, cooking his favorite stew, writing a poem, working on his play, playing with Jimi, going to a movie, doing, for God's sake, the *laundry*. He told me some of the sorrows he was coming face to face with for the first time. Like the pain and rage and deep depression he tried to cope with when he first realized how betrayed he felt that his dad signed the papers necessary to let him join the army at seventeen. First stop after boot camp? Vietnam. I raged and cried with him over that one.

We were close in the way Dante describes as *caritas*, a love of heart for God. Neither of us ever quite lost God in the other's face. After the whiteout experience of our marriage, it was good to have that last two years or so to explore what real loyalty and trust were all about. I would tell him about my desires for art and community and he would share the hard road he walked, trying to reconcile himself to the rigors of choosing a sober life, trying to have a

'normal' relationship with his fiancée. His parents were completely baffled by our relationship. They were not alone.

But if single necessity has a name, it would be what Randy and I were building together before he died. It was not easy. It was not always pretty. It was very like Aslan, who was, of all the things he was, not a *tame* lion. Above all, Randy taught me stuff, the most precious of which was how to evaluate what is important in life.

So, when I found the vase in the nursery and bought it, it seemed entirely fitting that it had been made in Vietnam. It's my little, personal memorial to one of the most difficult people in my life. Because, regardless of what has been said here, I must not forget that that man made me mad as a hatter.

## Teach Your Parents Well

*Free Will...can conquer all if it is well sustained.*

Purgatorio XVI, 76-78

If you're not prepared to let your heart break, do not become a parent. My reality in 1990 was as far from the sight of my beautiful infant son sleeping in his father's arms as I can imagine. At seventeen, Cozmo was about to become a father himself, and he was homeless. Tricia, his girlfriend, had left her mother's home, and I think she would say that living on the street was a step up for her. Both of her parents had served time in jail and she drank, smoked, used drugs. It wouldn't have surprised me to find out she shoplifted; I'm pretty sure she carried a knife. I can't even remember the first time I met her, but I remember my impression of her. She was short, chunky, hard-edged and walked like a trucker.

During the following few months, I learned more than I ever wanted to know about how to survive in a camp with other homeless people near the river, where the best pantries and soup kitchens are in Salem, how to get medical care if you're pregnant with no home and no job. For much of that time Cozmo worked at the local Wendy's. How he managed that is beyond me. I remember one of the times he called me and told me about how he'd cried at work that day, just from the hopelessness of it all.

I can't say I reacted very well. I told Cozmo that he was welcome to come live with me, but Tricia was not. I'd like to pretend I had some noble motive for saying such a thing. I'd like to say that I was testing my son to see what he was

made of, but it would be a lie. I didn't think she was good enough for him and I wanted him to leave her.

He would not. He decided he'd rather live as he was living than to leave the young woman who was carrying his child. I didn't sleep well during those months. If I wasn't worried sick about the dangers they faced, I'd feel guilty for not offering them both sanctuary. On the other hand, I also knew that they would eventually have to figure out their own lives and that my over-involvement might hinder more than help. The hour of the wolf was more than an expression to me — it settled in and infused every waking and occasional non-waking moment as I picked at one idea after another, trying to figure out what to do, where to hold the line, how to help without rescuing.



Dante tells us that humankind's greatest gift, that prized most by God, is our free will. I don't know. I suppose it makes sense that God would like it, because it's a spot-on method for seeing if we're following the true path, adequately participating in mystery, submitting. Personally, I've found it to be a pain in the ass. Not because I object to being free to choose so much as that I have found the choice-making at times excruciating. The pitfalls may be negligible or enormous, and most of the time you can't tell which until you've fallen into them. Bad enough to find yourself put on the spot by a friend who just had her hair done by the Klingons, for instance, and wants to know if I like it. But what on earth is the right answer when your Dad is put on a respirator after his stroke

and you know — you KNOW — he would have hated it? Looking into your Mom's liquid brown eyes and having misguided hope stare back at you is enough to fella the strongest among us.

Most of the time free will and choice-making have more to do with whether to have that second (or third) cookie than anything else. Still, faced with some conundrums, I have to admit to being stumped. Back in 1990, the question was how to respond to the woman Cozmo appeared to have fallen for, but who I was fairly certain wasn't the right choice for him.

At this particular pitfall, Cozmo acquitted himself better than I did. He defied a mother he still has a desire to please, and he did absolutely what he thought was right. Turns out he did what actually was right, too. It wasn't just his stubbornness (although I suspect that was part of it), and he and Tricia have been together ever since Randy died. I have two grandsons now, Cozmo and Tricia are married and Jim, the son Tricia was carrying while she and my son tried to survive on the street, just had his fifteenth birthday. Sometimes when I call their house I can't tell if it's Cozmo or Jim who just answered.

I was talking to Tricia one evening and the conversation turned to marriage. She told me she was the luckiest person alive to have found Cozmo. "He's so forgiving," she said and also suggested that the two of them have saved each others' lives — in one sense literally, but also in emotional and spiritual ways. Sometimes you have to just do the right thing and quit worrying so much about how things look to others or whether your prejudices are born out. From

time to time you have to worry about the real stuff, like how your kids will survive not only their own backward choices but yours as well.

They break your heart. Not so much by doing what you don't want them to do. That's just understood. But when your kid ends up teaching you lessons of morality and ethics, you know that you've lost your baby forever. Thank god.

A parent who won't learn from her kids ought to stick to her day job. If we can't recognize the truth coming from our children's mouths, we aren't worthy of the task. I thank god every day for the spiral dance Cozmo and I do—for his willingness to do the right thing in the face of great pressure, for my own occasional wisdom, for both of us showing our warts from time to time. It's because of him that I finally made the decision to accept Tricia; it's because of him and the choices his choice forced on me that I have a family.

Choosing well forces me deep into the archeology of my soul, where doubt and fear wind around the permutations and bifurcations of paths upon paths—those taken, those not, those selected by others whose actions have or have had an impact on me. It's easy to get sidetracked. Free will. Sometimes I think it ought to be consigned to one of the lower circles of hell. It's an infernal gift.

Still, my nature has been conferred on me in the some mysterious way. Call it creation, call it evolution, call it some kind of monstrous, cosmic joke; I really don't care. I call it a miracle and it includes my ability to choose my path, regardless of my genetic make-up or the cultural and familial soup I grew up in

and which continues to reverberate in ways that sometimes bemuse and sometimes horrify me. I can choose to try to understand a man who is so different from me in so many ways that he might as well have been a different species, I can choose to quit tearing holes in my own soul, to go look for the wild rabbits that live down by the pond as often as I can, to remember to keep bird seed in my jacket pocket, just in case that crazy duck happens to be there too.

## Da Boyz

*Grandmotherhood is a divine state.* Margaret Kerr (a former boyfriend's mother)

Poor baby. You yelled all the way to Grammie's house. I heard your outrage at being pulled away from your Mother's arms — warm, safe, familiar — and at being plunked down in the cold Volkswagen to be driven god-knows-where by someone you barely knew. Grammie felt a little guilty and a lot frantic, wondering if this was a good idea.

Then, in the house and in the rocker, warm jammies and singing to Jimi. That's how I knew you then. You were nine months old and hadn't yet come to me, hands on hips, to inform the world that, "I'm not Jimi anymore. I'm Jim!" How could my son have named this blue-eyed, blonde baby after Hendrix, anyway? I still worry that he'll live up to his namesake and kill himself young with drugs and booze. Cozmo said, "He was a genius first, Mom." And I know he's right.

Still, here you are and a baby at Grammie's for the first time overnight, rocking in the bentwood. Yes, cry like there's no tomorrow. But you will sit here with me and let me rock you and soothe you with songs. I feel you against me, your little legs splayed to either side of my lap, your little head against me, my arms around you. I pat your back and stroke your head and fuzz my cheek with your hair — soft, so soft, and curly. It will be years before it's ever cut. Cry, but you are safe and I can feel you start to relax.

You listen to me sing. I sing every song I know and some I don't. You are fifteen now and you don't ask me, "Grammie, sing me to sleep" when you come to visit anymore, but I know you'd listen and feel loved if I ever picked up the old autoharp and strummed the chords for Scarborough Fair or the songs I made up for you and your brother. You are so your father's child — and I see Randy in you too. My mommy and daddy adopted me, so your dad's the only one I know who is related to me "in the blood" as it were, and now you are too. That makes you one of only two in billions. Even without the numbers I know how precious you are. We are together and it's all we need. The awareness of another, whose worth can't be calculated, is so big I feel myself falling into it.

You start to hum with me; our duet will last forever.

No. I feel the grief rising up that comes with knowing this moment will never be here again. I can't stop you growing up and out and I would not. But I know you will never again be nine months old, spending the night with me for the first time. My tears fall along with yours for time that passes and for memories that can't be paused.



The sun shone the afternoon of July 22, 1993 when Cozmo and I decided to grab a bite in the hospital cafeteria. We ate the bland, institutional food on offer and I was lingering over a cup of tea. He was impatient, so he left me there to follow in a little while. I felt no urgency. Things were dragging a bit and I figured I had plenty of time to dally.

Not long after he left, he galloped back into the room, his face and body all intensity and hurry. The urgency seemed to have presented itself and I looked up at him alarmed. "Mom!" he shouted before he had hardly broken the threshold of the door at the other side of the room, "Come on! Hurry!" Now I was galloping too, hoping desperately that we'd get back to Tricia's room in time. I barreled around the corner right after my tall son, but there was no young woman in the bed or anywhere else in the room.

"You're late," said a voice from behind us. We looked around at the nurse. She wasn't smiling and I felt my muscles tense a little. "Come this way." We followed her, feeling subdued and somewhat chastened, feeling as though we'd been caught out truant. The nurse led us down a short corridor and through a set of double doors. "There," she said and tilted her head ever so slightly to the right. Now a hint of a smile hovered around her lips. Or was I just making it up?

Then I forgot her and looked, with Cozmo, into the viewing area and down at the tiny morsel of life lying there, wrinkled like those unlikely dogs, fist jammed into an ear, mouth working, translucent skinned, perfect. Orion. The boy Tricia had borne by c-section. The baby Randy would never see. The tears fell down my face and I could feel Cozmo shaking, whether from fear, relief, or just from the reasonable reaction of being in the presence of a miracle, I have never known.



I think it was March. Jim and Orion agreed to pick up trash in exchange for a trip to the coast with Grammie. The wind was blowing and I was cold. We arrived at the beach late and others had gotten there before us, so all the good junk had already been claimed and our boredom with sifting up shards of plastic led us to steal time for playing tag with the waves and pestering the birds. That was big. I could still run then and we sprinted up and down the beach, bags flapping in the wind behind us, chasing seagulls and yelling at the tops of our voices.

Our fingers got numb and the ocean was so hard and blue the sun glinting off it hurt our eyes. When our bags were full we went to a restaurant for food and cocoa. We ate and drank and laughed. We warmed up. Then we went back to the beach to feed the seagulls and collect rocks and autograph the sand with sticks of driftwood.

It's not a surprise how I came to believe that pleasure must be bought and paid for with duty. My parents taught me well. I accept that picking up trash on beach clean-up day is a good thing to do, but I regret teaching my grandchildren that pleasure for the sake of pleasure is not allowed.



I go to the beach, and I take the boys there, because it's where I can most often connect with God. I go there demanding to know *why, for god's sake?*, asking for proofs and data again. Reassurance. It always pisses me off when I get

no answer. It's not that much to ask, surely, and there I am — right in the arms of the most powerful force on the planet.

I demand answers and all I hear is the surf. I am the snake, lost in the fog, tripping over the rocks hidden in the sand, wondering why it hurts. I often recall the day Mom died, and in the twilight there are times when the hopelessness of my gifts and the unstrung dread of my own success and the ceaseless fear that winds into my daily tasks and into my memories make me wish for the simplicity of a plain fear of snakes.

I remember the sunrise at Beverly Beach. The fog, the ebb tide, those ripples of sand like sculptures, shining blades of water running down to the sea, ocean creatures stranded, the cold and damp and sand roughing my bare feet. And the day in June at Foulweather, or maybe Perpetua. Up high, above the birds. No back pain, just warmth and wildflowers in my bones. I'd kill for another hour like that. And Gleneden. 9 at night. Solitude. Always solitude for the moments of closeness. The fog so thick I can't see the lights of the houses I know are there. No one passes by. As alone as I have ever been. No stars and the peace drenches me through like the fog in my hair.

## My Ruth

*Whither thou goest, I will go...*

Ruth 1:16

It was bad enough to have to tell Cozmo about his dad's death on that dreadful night in 1993. I called him as soon as I heard, then drove the frozen highway to Salem to be with him. The snow from a late February storm still blanketed the fields and trees on the way. We stopped at Denny's for coffee and to warm up, and as we talked and grieved together we came to the same realization: we were going to have to tell Tricia. She and Cozmo had split up some time earlier, she was living with another guy, who turned out to be a real jerk, and she was pregnant again.

Not that long before, she'd told me that Randy had been the first adult who had ever loved her. I also knew that Randy had been upset when she got pregnant, but had never stopped being loving and supportive of her. She was not going to take this well.

At 1:30 that morning we went up to her front door and knocked. Of course, she knew right away that something was wrong. As she cried, I sat next to her on the couch, holding her, rocking her, murmuring those little nothings we try to bandage severed limbs with.

"Why couldn't it have been my mother instead?" she agonized, and I realized that what I had thought of as wailing had little resemblance to the real thing. I've never before or since felt my heart shatter into quite so many tiny little slivers.

Our relationship swerved off onto a different path that night. When she and Cozmo first hooked up I decided I could accept it or I could make trouble for my son, his lady love, his child. When Tricia left him, found a different partner, found herself an expectant mother again, I had to decide if I wanted to be Grammie to that baby. That was a no-brainer. Orion and his big brother Jim bring my life meaning in ways I could never have imagined. But with Tricia I had always had reservations. I couldn't really help it. Or so I thought.

Suddenly, I had to see her through Randy's eyes. He'd loved her without any of those reservations that I clung to, and so I figured I'd better do the same. Yes. It's a choice, not fate. Responding to her pain and her need for a nurturing mom with anything other than love would not have been living like a weasel.



I moved out to Adair Village when I bought Frog Creek a few years ago. The creek that runs through my back yard dries up in the summer, but the frogs are forever. I haunted the Home Depot and Garland Nursery and, like a fool, I started right in, happily tilling the dirt around the house, pulling out weeds, felling diseased trees, planting flowers and shrubs, trying to learn how to garden. I say like a fool because it was only later that I realized I had moved to snake heaven and was busily creating habitat for them.

Tricia has no use for the creepy things either. We agree that their silence makes it worse. There's no warning and then there the damn thing is. The 'narrow fellow' as Emily Dickinson so aptly called them. We also agree that we

don't intend to let the snakes win. That we will garden and grow the flowers we love and learn about the seasons by getting our hands dirty. And not just metaphorically, either. Well, in my case, I guess it would be fairer to say I don't intend to let the fear win. The snakes aren't in competition with me. They have no idea I'm as scared of them as they are of me.

Now and then, Cozmo comes out to give Mom a hand around the place. I love to see him work hard and take pride in accomplishing things. But he usually heads out toward the creek to battle the blackberries and to trim and feed the photinia. Last summer Tricia came along and worked with me in the back yard. We worked along the narrow walkway that runs the length of the house from garage to patio in back. There's just enough space between the walkway and the house to grow things. It's a shady area and through the season I mark my calendar by what's blooming. Bleeding hearts come up in February, trilliums in March, ferns flourish 'till fall and the hostas would take over the place if I hadn't corralled them in containers.

Working with Tricia gave me great joy, watching her passion flower along with the plants. From time to time I would smile to myself, remembering how I saw her fifteen years ago and how I see her now. Even working in the yard she was beautifully groomed and dressed in her favorite light pink color. She loves dragonflies and animals and although she's still polishing some of those rougher edges, those parts of herself can't hide very well her loving and vulnerable heart.

That day, she treated me like a little old lady, fussing over whether I was lifting something too heavy for my bad back, watching out that I took little breaks, keeping an eye on me. At first it felt confining, as though she thought I couldn't take care of myself. I've come to see it as the love that it is.

The Old Testament character of Ruth said to her mother-in-law, "Let me now go to the field, and glean ears of corn..." In Ruth's time, her mother-in-law, Naomi, was actually not able to care for herself, not able to help support their household. After Naomi's husband and sons died, she returned from Moab to her homeland and Ruth, the Moabite woman who had married her son, decided she would go along – to continue to be part of Naomi's family, even though both of them were widows.

The story of Ruth and Naomi can be interpreted anthropologically, sociologically, through the eyes of feminism, as instruction for how to catch a husband, in all manner of ways. I think they all have uses, but all miss the mark unless they take into account that it's a love story between two women who might well have disliked, even hated each other. And the love Ruth shows to her mother-in-law is expressed out in the fields, where the crops grow. The medium of her love is dirt and seed, water and sun. Sustenance.

Later in Ruth's story, Boaz, who eventually becomes her husband, says to her, "It hath fully been shewed me, all that thou hast done unto thy mother in law..." Ruth's care and support of her mother-in-law is one of the reasons Boaz

is attracted to her. He recognizes her decency, her willingness to rise above the sad circumstances of her life, her ability to love.

I can't get out of my mind that Tricia would rather have had her mother die than Randy. I couldn't have done anything other than try to give her as much love as I could. I had to see beyond what I initially saw – a poorly educated, broken girl who was likely to make more really bad choices. What I discovered was a woman more determined than I've ever been. A woman who has more ambition and common sense in her thirties than I have now. A woman who loves fiercely, dreams big and isn't that good at taking no for an answer – a good wife to Cozmo, a good mom to Jim and Orion. A diamond in the rough.

The immortal Beatles told us that "...in the end, the love you take is equal to the love you make." I have to take exception with that. I gave a little. We were brought together because of our mutual love for Cozmo. Unlike Naomi's, my son is alive and well. But I know Tricia and I will remain close, no matter what happens. The one person in my life who talks with me every day, who says "I love you" to me every day, who worries about me, who buys me little presents just because, is my Tricia, my Ruth. What I've gotten is infinitely more than I've given. Just as this tiny morning glory seed will become infinitely more than you'd think just to look at it.

*part iv – one more breath, then the end*

## Living Like Dante

*...a weasel lives as he's meant to, yielding at every moment to the perfect freedom of single necessity. I think it would be well, and proper, and obedient, and pure, to grasp your one necessity and not let it go...*      Annie Dillard, *Living Like Weasels*

Annie Dillard started out not being my cup of tea. Of course, that sounds as though she didn't exist before I read her. Fair enough. My first impression on reading *Living Like Weasels* was of another extreme, deep-environmentalist wacko. I mean, really. Living like a weasel? Thinking of curling up in a den, drinking warm blood, biting necks because it's what you're built to do—it sounded like the Count'd been hitting the kool-aid at bedtime again. And living under the earth with grass roots in your hair? Yuck. I wanted nothing more than to believe she wasn't all that great.

In that first class, the one I discovered was all about personal essays, we read Dillard, among others. An assignment I was given was to copy down her words from the essay. Then I was asked to write a paragraph that mimicked her style. I resisted, but I did it. It's funny how things happen. Those assignments required me to look closely at the way Dillard uses words and rhythms and meanings—how she uses the fewest syllables possible to craft meaning. She says “The thing is to stalk your calling in a certain skilled and supple way, to locate the most tender and live spot and plug into that pulse.” She says it as clearly in how she writes as in what she writes.

Time passed. It's been four years and in that time I've surrendered to the worth of Dillard's words. I sat down last week to re-read her luminous essay

about weasels and, as I've suspected for some time, it ain't about weasels at all. Re-reading Dillard has led me even closer to understanding and appreciating her work. I've known for awhile that she is a masterful essayist, but I've come to believe she and I share values I didn't initially think we did. I'm stalking the calling of the written word, how phonemes and aspirated air, random lines, squiggles and scrawls — marks on paper — can be transformed by the fire of passion and become truth. All that we need for the growth of the soul.

A year or two into my program I took a Dante class and for the first time read *The Divine Comedy*, what Madeleine L'Engle calls his grand fantasy story. I started thinking in terms of living like Dante, because I had a notion that there was some connection between him and Dillard. All I could really remember at that time was the passionate reaction she had to her encounter with that furry little beast. The weasel, not Dante. Well, I thought, passion is a good place to start. To live like a weasel is to get into the skin of the critter, to smell the smells it encounters, to feel the refuge of the den as safety, to hear and taste as a weasel does. To feel whiskers quiver for whatever reason weasels' whiskers quiver. Love is implied by that kind of intimacy and I think it requires passion to allow that much openness to love.

Dillard may actually get all weak-kneed at the thought of rooting around under a wild rose thicket, but I have my doubts. Here's what I consider to be the heart of her argument: "A weasel lives as he's meant to, yielding at every moment to the perfect freedom of single necessity." Dante was for freedom, too,

in his 14<sup>th</sup> Century way. His *Comedy* is a road trip, and it draws us a map to the freedom that can only be experienced by yielding to one necessity, that of living as we are designed to live: in the passionate pursuit of love. There's a kind of miracle in reading Dante, just as there is in hearing the music of someone like Hildegard von Bingen. Seven or eight hundred years after their time, scholars can research their writing and music and transform it into something I can access, here in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Reading Dante's *Divine Comedy* and some of his letters has given me a new appreciation for the constancy of the human spirit.

He begins his massive work in a dark wood, where he realizes he has strayed from the correct path. He's confronted by three beasts that stand between him and the shining hill which had been his goal. Virgil is sent to him to be a guide through hell and purgatory, a journey he must make in order to recognize and renounce sin. Virgil, the author of the *Aeneid*, represents reason, a tool Dante, or any of us, can use to re-discover the true path. However, reason alone can only get him so far. Enter love. Beatrice, Dante's representation of perfect love, has sent Virgil to him and will, herself, wait for him at the other side of a curtain of refining fire near the end of purgatory. Then the two of them will continue through paradise together.

The story, of course, hinges around sin, at least at the beginning. Dante's beliefs about sin seem more akin to the negative space than to the figure in a drawing. In his essay, *The Pageant of Unbeing*, Robert Pinsky says about Dantean

notions of sin. "...sin is a self-inflicted absence, a hole or dead place that the soul tears into itself."

Dante also believed that man is a rational being and that reason plays a key role in man's damnation or survival. To his way of thinking, to possess rationality is to be able to choose. In Dante's world, the choice was between sin and obedience to God's will. His belief that reason is the beginning of the journey is embodied by Virgil, his guide from despair to hope and the opportunity for a better choice.

However, just as clearly as Dante believes in the rational mind and the rational man, so does he believe that to depend on rationality alone is folly. His letters are filled with love. In *Letter III*, to Morello Malaspina, he says, "So Love rules within me without resistance from any power;..." Later, in *The Paradiso*, love comes to him in the form of Beatrice, who continues to guide Dante when Virgil, and the reason that he represents, cannot go on.

We begin to see that sin is only a part of the journey that Dante takes in *The Divine Comedy*. Early on, he introduces love, expressed in Beatrice's statement explaining why she descended to hell to ask Virgil to guide Dante. "Love called me here," she says in *Canto II*, even before the horrors of hell become a personal, painful and terrifying experience for him. She sends Virgil to guide him through that devastating landscape, and we see that in the process of going through hell together, Dante and Virgil discover and express in many tender ways, the love they feel for each other.

In *The Purgatorio*, the final passage of Canto XXVII, is as moving as anything I've ever read. The final words Virgil says to Dante in *The Divine Comedy* are, "...here your will is upright, free, and whole, and you would be in error not to heed whatever your own impulse prompts you to: lord of yourself I crown and mitre you." The grace and the generosity Virgil exhibits as he sends his friend and fellow traveler off to paradise without him, is both beautiful and humbling, a model for any of us to follow. I wonder if it isn't the core, really, of the whole *Comedy*. Virgil makes clear to Dante that, because of his efforts and his faith, his will is to be trusted. He is a good man, and his impulses will lead him even further upward. And, not only that, he is now to be trusted to make his own decisions and find his own way. He has made his way through hell and purgatory. Paradise, and Beatrice await.

It's easy to misinterpret *The Divine Comedy*. I did. My own allergy to the concept of sin and damnation, those tenets by which I felt spiritually abused, stood in the way of my ability to read the thing for what it is: a metaphor. And Dante's metaphor says quite clearly that if you're in hell, suffering any of those torments he paints in excruciating detail, it was your choices that put you there. But Dante, the character, and I learned some things together that term. You can choose to see your Beatrice. You can choose to believe in the love she represents. You can choose to move closer to that love as you move through your life.

My introduction to Dante gave me a new perspective on Dillard, although Annie might feel rightfully bemused at the thought. Her essay may feature

weasels, but it is also a brilliant exercise in walking a mile in another's moccasins. It is almost as alien a thing to imagine what it must be like to be a homeless drug addict on the streets of Chicago, a Russian oligarch, a child working in one of Nike's facilities in Indonesia, or an Iraqi grandmother as to imagine being a weasel. Dante would say, "Look! Understand! Love!"

Just as Dante believed that love is the glue that holds the human race together, so does Dillard. Her description of her response to the weasel she encountered in the wild can easily be viewed as a metaphor for God's love for us. Annie imagined in detail what it would be like to be a weasel. Not only that, she says, "I tell you I've been in that weasel's brain...and he was in mine." And her response to that shattering encounter wasn't judgment, disapproval or repugnance. It took her to a place where she could feel a new sense of the purpose of her own life. We come away from reading the essay believing that she loved that weasel and more than that, that she understood him and understood that his essence led him to be as weasley as it was possible to be.

That's how I like to think of God. That is, as someone with ultimate power who nevertheless is willing to bond with me in such an intimate and loving way, in a way that gives all and takes nothing. A unique and challenging teacher once told me that love is the answer to every question. I think Dante and Dillard would both agree with that.

I knew beyond any question that I could depend on Randy to love me. I think that at some level he knew I loved him back, regardless of how insane our

relationship seemed most of the time. It doesn't seem to have anything to do with compatibility, but with the ability to see beyond the surface. That's Beatrice. If all she had seen was Dante's surface, he'd still be in the Dark Wood, communing with the beasts. But she saw with Love's eyes, and that made all the difference. To Dante, certainly, but I think maybe to herself as well.

Living like Dante is to accept love where it is offered, to yield, like Dillard's weasel, to the perfect freedom of single necessity. Love made me what I am and I have resisted both the love and the yielding. Yield is a word, like vulnerability, that frightens me. To yield, to allow myself to be vulnerable has always felt to me like giving myself up, making myself weak. Dealing with God, as I believe I do when I examine my own selfhood, has a built-in paradox. How can freedom be equated to yielding? My struggle is to understand that to yield is to receive. Vulnerability is strength.

These concepts do not come easily, either as ideas or as a way of living and they have tripped me up many times in the past couple of decades. In my search for a meaningful sense of, experience of and response to my own spiritual self, single necessity and my freedom to choose often collided. But I've come to this answer: maybe my single necessity is simply the built-in free will I believe I possess. As an experiential, evolutionary being, I can choose to be as human as possible and that's all there is to this occasionally maddening paradox.

I'd like to wrap this up with a neat, tidy summation and a clever twist that would tie my story to Dante's. But I can't think of one and maybe trying to be

clever and tidy misses the point. It seems to me that Dante was writing his life, just as I am writing mine, even though the Comedy is clearly fiction and clearly allegorical. In a sense, my stories about Randy, Cozmo, Tricia and the grandboys are fictionalized, too. I don't always remember the details that clearly anymore. But I do remember the feelings, and the comfort I've had in knowing that, even after death claimed him, my Beatrice is still with me.

## Mother's Day

*Sons are the anchors of a mother's life.*

Sophocles, *Phaedra*, fragment 612

I had to make a hard choice today: ride or mow. OK, I lied. Mowing didn't stand a chance. I love May. The lilacs come into flower, the birds go nuts and are willing to share, people start tidying around their places and the grass goes ballistic. Sure, I know I should mow, but the weather has warmed up and I can go to t-shirt mode. Bliss. I also know I should do the half-mile laps on my bike that are my main source of exercise. Winter left me kind of breathless, but I decided to putter around down by the pond instead. The pond's a short distance from the village on state-owned Fisheries and Wildlife land. Most days I find it deserted, which is just dandy, so far's I'm concerned. When I need a little more than the usual solitude, I generally head for water.

I've not seen any snakes down there, though I have no illusions. It feels safe enough, anyway, and the sun and the birds lull me into a happy nonchalance. So, I pedal south, taking the obligatory birdseed with me, just in case that rogue duck's hanging around today. I've almost forgiven him for nipping me on the shin that brilliant, cold December day when I ran out of food before he ran out of appetite.

Today there's a kid with red hair standing right at the edge of the water, as though he's hanging ten. He reminds me of the red-haired kid at Cozmo and Tricia's last Sunday, except that he's taller and stockier. When he turns to look at me a hidden anger seems to simmer just under the gray, red-rimmed eyes. I say

hello and he answers, then turns back to his contemplation of the water. Clearly, another soul needing to be alone, grappling with life's crazy pains.



That other little kid, the one with the shocking red hair, stood just at the edge of the cracked cement patio. He kept saying, "I'm invited to this party." I'm not sure who he was trying to convince. His face told a story of parties without invitations and universes of wonderful things he had not been asked to share in. "I'm invited to this party." He looked at me, as though trying to decide if it was safe to stick around, ready to book outta there if necessary.

Cozmo came out of the apartment with another platter of meat. My family has no concept of moderation. "Come have a barbeque with us on Sunday, Mom," he'd said when he called. Tricia asked me to make a fruit salad and bring a veggie platter. She sounded desperate. "We have to have *something* besides meat!" There was food tension between the hunter and the gatherer in that household.

I'd looked forward to it. To watch my lanky son cook charms me and he's pretty handy with a grill. The one in their back yard has seen better days sitting slightly crookedly, the grill needing to be fastened into level with an 's' hook. Cozmo was in his glory. Pork steak, brats, shrimp on skewers, hamburgers, regular hot dogs – the old barbecue was a cup running over. It was ambrosia.

"Wanna hot dog?" The little boy jumped, looking wary, as though caught doing something he wasn't supposed to do. Cozmo looked down at him, a

portrait of barely contained mirth. The smaller face, the one beneath the flaming hair suddenly broke into a grin. "Sure. Is there ketchup?" Cozmo had already turned and started walking back to the barbeque. "I think we can find some somewhere." The laughter lurked there behind the words. He must've been the Pied Piper in a former life—little boys are nuts about him.

The back yard's a mess. Even at that, Tricia's efforts are visible and I itch to get into the dirt with her and make the soil dark and rich, ready for all the flowers her heart craves. She and Cozmo work three jobs between them and neither of them earns insurance or any other kind of fringe benefit. They prepare and serve food and clean the restaurant's kitchen and cut the hair of local working-class men and women, many of whom are here in the country on a wing and a prayer in place of green cards. My family's poverty used to bother me, but Cozmo and Trish work hard and the boys know that they have a mom and dad who love them. There's poverty and then there's poverty.

The little boy with the red hair watched as Cozmo filled a plate for him. The more food Cozmo put on it, the bigger the kid's eyes got. I looked away to greet Tangent, one of the three cats in the household. He'd been let out as a special Mother's Day treat and Jim carried him around like a potentate. When I'd paid my proper respects I looked back to where Cozmo and the red-haired kid were deep in a discussion of the relative merits of potato versus fruit salad. The little guy had both on his plate and Cozmo was explaining the qualities of star

fruit to him. "See, look at it like this and it's shaped like a star. It's good." He popped a morsel into his own mouth, chewing happily.

The last time I looked, the kid with the red hair was munching away on his hot dog, looking a little dazed at being part of the party. He shouldn't have been surprised. The boys know every kid in that apartment complex. During the course of the afternoon, most of 'em were swirling in and out of the apartment, up and down the stairs, playing video games, playing tag, running cats to ground, laughing, fighting. Being kids. From time to time, one would stop whatever he was doing and realize that there was food on the grill and loading down the card table.

Every time, Cozmo seemed to be right there by the small person's side, quietly asking, "Wanna hot dog?" I couldn't keep track of all the mustard and ketchup-smeared grinning faces that day. Cozmo is my son's nickname. I realized that day that Randy and I had named him perfectly. Christopher: bearing Christ on a bun with a hot dog. He's not religious. His wife, my beloved daughter-in-law, expresses her spirituality in ways that probably have my parents grave-spinning. They are poor. I quit counting at seven extra children fed with meat, potato salad, veggies, fruit salad, strawberries that were at the peak of flavor and beauty and orange juice that flowed like milk and honey.

Jesus said, "I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly." He had been speaking of himself as the Good Shepherd, of his followers as his sheep. Those early disciples of his teaching became the first

Christians, and yet so many of the Christians I know and have known live lives bound by fear rather than by the abundance Jesus promised them. I have to ask myself what it means to live abundantly – to see, acknowledge and claim the riches that surround me.

I see my son and his family living abundantly. How does Cozmo do it who, as far as I know, has never set foot inside a church? How does Tricia manage to have enough, despite a horrific childhood, that she can give in turn to her children, to Cozmo, to her customers, to me? It's a mystery.

Maybe it's a gene that confers an awareness of plenty onto its owner, but I doubt it. Riding out to the pond to feed the ducks instead of doing my laps – that choice represents abundance to me. It's all and always a matter of choice and, as I may have pointed out already, the choosing can be everything from free and joy-filled to complicated to guilt-ridden to excruciating. Some days, my laps might have been the more abundant course to follow. I find that choosing abundantly requires me to be conscious, self-aware, introspective, courageous, active. The choice alone is never enough.

## Epilogue

*To be, or not to be. That is the question.*

Hamlet, Act 3, Scene 1

Orion was sleeping in my house a few months ago and I was watching him, the peace of sleep written on the smooth skin of his freckled face, in the little smile, in his arms thrown askew in a pose so relaxed I felt a twinge of envy. His soft, straight hair floated around his forehead, feathering the pillow all the way down past his ear and curling around his chin like a happy cat's tail.

It was a moment so undiluted it pierced through my life's clutter, tightening my breath and making me wish Hamlet were there so I could finally answer his eternal, whining plaint. Being is not a choice, it is imposed by whatever power makes it possible, and Orion is the culmination of all my desires to live. That we are here at all is a miracle, however one defines that.

Orion's not Cozmo's biological son and when he was born I had the opportunity to accept a grandchild who is no blood of my own. To more than accept him, to love him and dote on him, chase seagulls with him and make up a song with his name in it. To say to the world and to him, "I don't care about the particulars of your begats. You are mine, your mother is mine, and I am yours."

If only that moment of single necessity, that moment in the hospital when reserve and doubt flew out the window and my heart flew into the custody of a baby not even an hour old, could last forever. That would be bliss. That would be living like Dante.

I think I'll paint my bedroom this week-end.