TRIALS OF FORM: TWO ESSAYS ON VARIOUS SELVES

I. Letters from Ruth:

Since the 1950s, my grandmother's children have been scattered across the nation from the family farm in Iowa. My family came to Oregon in the early '60s. Since then, my grandmother has kept track of all her children and grandchildren and helped them keep track of each other. In this essay, I examine how my grandmother creates a sense of continuity among the family through her scrapbooks and letters.

II. The Walking Circle:

In the late '70s, I was a teenager in Bend, Oregon, dreaming of becoming a great writer. I walked around Bend late at night and filled many notebooks with my aspirations. In this essay, I look back into those notebooks from the perspective of a summer job I had ten years later.
TRIALS OF FORM: TWO ESSAYS ON VARIOUS SELVES

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I. Letters from Ruth

In her most recent letter, my grandmother writes: "We really appreciated your last letter, Mark. I'm sorry it's taken me so long to answer. Grandpa and I have arthritis flare ups ever so often but have learned to live with them. Take care, Love you, Grandpa & Grandma Price."

* 

In my favorite snapshot of my grandmother, she looks like one of her own granddaughters, Iowan sun and wind in her face and in her short-cropped brown hair. In plaid dress and white apron, she kneels on the back porch of a farm house, one cat in her arms and four others gathered nearby to have their picture taken. Her hand-written caption in the scrapbook reads: "Me and my pets on our back porch before my Dad enclosed it. The tub and basket held cobs for kindling. My evening chore."

In an older picture, a much younger Ruth Ellen Ridler, all done up for her first professional portrait, looks to be waving to someone standing next to the photographer. Next to this picture, my grandmother writes:

I came along on November 25, 1911. Just in time to begin my life in one of the coldest winters on record. My Dad's oldest brother Erie came out out to help pick corn but stayed to cut green wood and feed fires in two stoves to keep me from freezing. There wasn't money to buy coal. I came down with pneumonia when I was a few weeks old. Dr. Harper made at least one trip with team and buggy to check me, to leave instructions for my care.
and to encourage two very frightened parents.

My Dad walked across the pasture to Uncle Louie's place to get milk for me nearly getting lost in a blizzard one time. Ran into a fence and recognized it and which way to follow it to the barn yard. In the spring Uncle Erie went back to Ohio.

In the spring or summer they dressed me in my cousin Opal's first baby dress and took me into Greenfield to get my picture taken. I seemed to like it.

During World War I, she went to school "in the primary grade" with twenty other farm children at Haven Lee #2. The schoolhouse was a small, square building with outdoor toilets and a coal house out back. Every day, two of the pupils would have to haul in drinking water from a quarter-mile away on a carrier one of the fathers built. Sometimes she rode the two miles to school with her cousins Gladys and Opal and her Uncle Louie driving the team. At one school program when she was very young, she recited this poem:

Mary had a little lamb,
With fleece as white as snow,
And every where that Mary went,
The lamb was sure to go.
I wish I had a little lamb
With fleece that was snow-white,
I'd have it sheared and then I'd knit
For soldiers day and night.

A few pages later, next to a wonderful picture of my grandmother and my grandfather taken while they were dating, my grandmother writes about her teenage years:

We enjoyed our radio in the winter. After we could use the big dry-pac battery we could run it more. If I wanted to listen to Rudy Vallee I had to use the ear phones. My Dad said his singing made him sick. The first program like Grand Ole Opry came out of Chicago and we wouldn't miss it. Later it came out of Nash-
ville, Tenn. A winter or two Lee Rusk, Homer's (her brother's) friend came over Saturday nights and we would play parcheesi. When we were smaller the neighbors came over Saturday nights or we'd go to another neighbors home and play Rook and Somerset, but when the radio came we stayed home more, unless we went to school or church programs. We listened to Henry Field's radio station at Shenendoah in the morning and at noon for news and weather. We had it better than the pioneers. The weathermen could tell us if a bad snowstorm was headed our way so we could make a trip into town for supplies . . .

In the hot summer we only had a cave to keep to keep our cream and eggs fresh so twice a week Mom and I would start for town early with our produce, driving Maude to the single buggy. We would try to get back before it got so hot. Our variety store would have 9-cent sales. Mom would give me money for my shopping. Barretts for my hair, scrapbook material, pen, ink, and stationary. Then we'd go to the drug store for a 10-cent dish of ice cream before we started home.

She was going on sixteen when she went on her first date. A boy asked to take her home after a church meeting one night. He had graduated from high school and was helping his dad on the farm. After their first date, they went to movies on Wednesday nights now and then. She'd spend a Sunday afternoon at his home with his sister and two brothers. Neighbor kids would show up, and they'd sing or play games together. She never mentions the boy's name, but she does write that he had a black Model T roadster. When she was seventeen, he went to Ames College for a short course. When he came back, he was different, and she had changed, too, "so it wasn't so much fun being together," she writes. After her brother got his first car, they'd drive to town on Saturday nights in the summer and go to a movie, or she'd walk around the square
with her girl friends and talk to the boys, or perhaps they'd go play miniature golf. After oats harvest, there'd be money to spend, and she and her brother would spend two or three days at the county fair. She'd twirl the wheel and win a string of beads and a box of candy, although such games of chance were frowned upon back home.

She was eighteen when she and my grandfather, Ralph Price, went on their first date—June 26th, 1929, as she has carefully recorded. "I think my parents were surprised," she writes,

their fun-loving, ball-playing, day-dreaming daughter would begin dating one of the older young men of the Community. Ralph had a new Model A car so we went to Creston to the movies. Ralph & I and our friends, Amelia Robert and Chester Bowen went to Shenendoah, Iowa, to radio stations KFNF and KMA and saw the radio programs live.

Ralph's Grandpa McIlvain thought they should marry the fall after that first summer they'd begun dating, but they waited and "in the winter of 1931 became engaged," she writes, "and began making plans for our life together." In the picture, they are standing next to a friend's house in Bellevue, Nebraska. In the background, the tall trees stand bare against the big midwestern sky. A Model A sits in front of the neighbor's rambling, many-porched house. My grandmother, small and pretty, her hair waved and parted on the side, is wearing a black, long-sleeved, knee-length dress pinned at the shoulder, white satiny stockings, black slippers with bows around the ankles. My grandfather, as always, towers
over her. Twenty-four years old, he has a farm boy's rugged good looks, with a half-grin at once roguish and shy. He is wearing his best three-piece suit—the collar starched, no doubt—yet, hands in pockets, his head tilted toward my grandmother, he looks relaxed and comfortable, having his picture taken with his best girl.

There are other pictures of my grandmother's family and my grandfather's family, all explained with my grandmother's captions. The hand-written text tells of my grandparents' early lives up to the time of their engagement. There are also pictures and stories of their parents' families. There are lists of births and lists of deaths and a section titled, "Family Members in Military Service of Our Country." My immediate and not-so-immediate ancestors served in every branch of the military and saw action or served, she lists, in "Indian Attacks, French and Indian Wars, Revolutionary War, Civil War, World War II, Korean War." On the title page of this scrapbook, she has drawn "Our Family Tree," on whose branches I see my name, my brother's and sister's, my father's, my uncles', aunts', and cousins'. The roots of this tree are labeled with older names, some familiar--Price, Ridler, and Gile (my grandmother's mother's maiden name), and some I'd never heard before--Fitzgerald, Wallace, Wilson, McIlvain, Lester, Harrington, and Blackwell--English names, Scotch-Irish names. Our roots reach into Anglo soil. In the
crown of our family tree, she has written:

"And he shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water that shall bring forth his fruit in his season, his leaf also shall not wither, and whatsoever he doeth shall prosper" Psalm 1:3. So it is with a family tree. In the early sixteen hundreds at least three "roots" of our family tree sailed to a new land to help settle that land and through joy, hardship, and suffering but with great faith in God, they did their part in helping to make and to keep our United States of America a land of the Free.

My sister also has an "Our Family Tree" scrapbook. Hers differs from mine in some of the pictures and bits of detail here and there, but the two scrapbooks tell the same story and all of it in my grandmother's autograph. I really don't know how many cousins I have on my father's side, but I suspect that most if not all of Ruth Price's grandchildren have somewhere on a shelf or in a drawer an "Our Family Tree" scrapbook that they thumb through, like I do, some time around their birthdays.

*  

My grandmother's parents, Grant M. Ridler and Loie Genevieve Gile, were married in Greenfield, Iowa, by Pastor H. P. Dudley of the Presbyterian church on June 28, 1909. If you're patient, and you have a reasonably good atlas, you can find Greenfield, Iowa, about 75 miles east of Council Bluffs on Highway 92. Their first home was a cabin, unfinished on the inside and difficult to heat, about a quarter of a mile south of the house where my grandmother grew up. Their neighbors, Lou and Nettee Wolfe, would have them come and
stay in their home until the cold snaps had finished snapping. Grant and Loie sold 40 acres they owned to buy 40 acres across the road that was part of the old Gile homestead, settled by Thomas Monroe Gile and his wife, Ruth Cordelia Lester, in 1871. Thomas, a Civil War veteran, was born in Plainsfield, New Hampshire. In another scrapbook, I have two of the letters he wrote home while stationed in Vicksburg, Mississippi. He moved to Rockford, Illinois, in 1856 and married Ruth in 1864. They had one son, Arthur, who died of cholera when he was not quite a year old. He is buried in Cherry Valley, Illinois. His parents then left Illinois and came west by covered wagon to settle in Adair County, Iowa, on the homestead east of Greenfield. Grant and Loie Genevieve had two children--my grandmother and my great-uncle Homer. My grandmother's Uncle Louie Gile raised sheep, and so Loie Genevieve always kept a pet lamb around the yard. She kept a vine over the kitchen door--Morning Glory, Moon Vine, sometimes a hop vine. The dried leaves of the hop vine in a pillow were supposed to cure a headache. I have but a single, dream-like image of meeting my great-grandmother when I was very young. I see her sitting at a table in her backyard, near her flower garden. The sun is very bright, and I remember noticing how dark her hair is. I also have a single memory of Great Grandpa Ridler, as we always referred to him. He is walking down the street with a sack of groceries in one
arm. The cord from his new hearing aid dangles from his ear and disappears into his pocket. My father slows the car and asks him if he wants a ride home, but Great Grandpa Ridler would rather walk. Then he waves to my sister and me in the back seat. We wave back, but I'm not sure we knew who he was.

My grandfather's parents, Charles Edward Price and Carrie Olive McIlvain were married December 12, 1895, at the McIlvain home in Stuart, Iowa, about twenty miles northeast of Greenfield. They lived on a farm in Guthrie County until 1900, then moved to a another farm near Greenfield. My grandfather had an older brother, Lewis, who died of colitis while still a baby. Glen, Ralph, and their sister, Ruth, were born in a house that stood in an apple orchard near an old corn crib that remained for years after the old house was torn down. Their younger brother, Floyd, was born after they moved to the farm across the road. My grandfather went on a little adventure when he was two years old. My grandmother quotes from a "60 Years Ago" item in a 1967 edition of the Adair County Free Press:

A two year old child of Mr. and Mrs. Charles Price of Harrison Township caused considerable excitement in the neighborhood Thursday of last week. The child wandered away from home about two o'clock in the afternoon. It was not long before the parents missed the child and started to search. Not finding the child at once as they presumed they would, the neighbors became interested and turned out. At one o'clock they found the child sitting on the bank of a stream a half mile from the house. The child did not appear to be worried about its
condition until it saw the lights and heard a cry go up from the searchers as a signal to others the lost was found. The child began to cry but was soon comforted as it was not hurt and did not suffer the great anxiety that the mother did from the time they missed the child till it was found.

According to my grandmother, this account does not describe how the phone lines of the county lit up nor mention all the many local men and boys who turned out for the search and wandered the corn rows with lanterns late into the night. Nor does it tell of how for many years Charles Price kept a list of the names of the searchers so that their aid would not be forgotten. Ralph, his sister, and his brothers all went to Harrison #9, called the Gatch school for the family that lived across the road from the schoolhouse. Ralph was allowed to drive himself and several classmates to their 8th grade graduation ceremony. He was an avid reader and was a big fan of Thorton Burgess's Brer Rabbit stories. He learned to be a good public speaker while at Harrison #9; he would eventually become a preacher. In high school in Greenfield, he played football and sang in two operettas. He graduated in 1925, made plans to go to business college, but decided to farm instead.

My grandparents were married in the fall of 1931 on September 16, Great Grandma Price's birthday. They had six children—four girls and two boys—my father, Harold, the third child and the younger son. Like so many American families of the mobile '50s, my grandparents' children dis-
persed. My Uncle Roy is in San Diego. My Aunt Mary is in Texas. My Aunt Sharon writes poetry in Missouri. We ended up in Oregon. My grandmother keeps track of all our comings and goings--births, graduations, marriages. To find a family member, you first write to Grandma Price. My grandfather finally tried his hand at business one time and purchased a filling station in Stuart, Iowa, but he didn't like it and went back to farming. He wanted to live in the Ozarks, those rolling forest-covered hills of southern Missouri and Arkansas, so they sold the farm in Greenfield and moved to Salem, Missouri, in 1960. The older letters in my sister's collection bear the Salem postmark. Eventually, they settled in Mountain View, Missouri, a small town about 90 miles east of Springfield, near the Mark Twain National Forest. All the letters in my collection are from Route 2, Mountain View. Mountain View happens to be my mother's home town, where her mother still lives. Her birth is recorded in my grandmother's aunt's diary. Both my grandmothers have been active in the Forest Dell Ladies Aid of Mountain View and have recently been collaborating on signature quilts for various grandchildren of various families. My father and my stepmother and their two daughters moved to Mountain View a few years ago. Though I've lived in Oregon for all the life in my memory and have only visited the midwest once or twice when I was very young, I think of the Mountain View of my
grandmother's letters as my second home.

The details of my own life are a bit sketchier since I must rely on my memory, that of my sister who is almost but not quite my age, that of my father who is far away, and that of my mother who is close but, like me, never lets fact stand in the way of a good recollection. I was born in Kansas City, where my father went to trade school. I've heard tales of an apartment with rats and a pickup seat for a sofa and the black woman who ran the switchboard and watched me from time to time. My own memory flickers on a bit looking back to when we lived in Fortuna, a little town near Eureka, California, where my sister was born. I see a hillside covered with grass, the wind blowing waves of grass like the waves of the nearby Pacific. I see my cousin, Scott Underhill, and me pulling our pantlegs up to our knees while we had our picture taken and thinking we were really very funny fellows. I see my sister in her walker. The story from that time is about how my sister would scoot her walker up to an electric fence by the pasture and hold on to the charged wire with both hands, seemingly unperturbed. My memory kicks in for good about the time we moved to Albany, Oregon, where my brother was born, where my sister and I started school, where we grew up watching a television show called the '60s full of astronauts and hippies and soldiers and ten thousand situation comedies about real-life families,
not one of which resembled ours. The images of my childhood are mixed up with images from television. I know many fairy tales, but not as well as I know Bill Cosby's old stand-up routines. I remember that the first time men walked on the moon came somewhere near the end of the starship Enterprise's five-year mission. I need my grandmother to put all the snapshot images of my life together in a scrapbook so I can see what happened.

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In the first scrapbook I can remember seeing printing were clipped-out articles about Mr. Ed, the real families of Jerry Mathers and Jay North, and Clayton Moore, the man behind the Lone Ranger's mask. "Hi-Yo, Silver" was one of the first phrases I can remember ever sounding out on my own. I remember wondering how it could sound so heroic on TV and look so silly in print. What I liked best about that particular scrapbook, and still do, were its marbled-paper covers, red and green and pink and blue, something she learned how to make in a 4-H class a long time ago.

Even older scrapbooks than the one with marbled-paper covers have survived, almost incidentally, among the clutter my sister, my brother, and I drag around from our childhood. Looking through them again is like finding in the broken earthenware jugs of a ruined granary the scrolls of ancient sacred texts thought lost in antiquity. Looking through them
disinters feelings I can neither understand nor describe. Assembled for very young grandchildren, these scrapbooks are made of magazine and calendar pictures clipped out and mounted on pages cut out of green and brown grocery sacks and bound with glue, sometimes yarn.

My grandmother, whether intentionally or otherwise, has captured an idealized American life created in the pages of the popular press of the mid-century. From what must have been a Dairy Association calendar or some such, an illustration shows a rosy-cheeked, red-headed little girl in yellow sweater and green dress smiling proudly as she stands next to her prize-winning polled Hereford on a sunny, grassy hillside, like the one in Fortuna, other cattle grazing in a pasture in the background, summer cumulus towering in the airy distance over a low, Great Plains horizon. Two little girls in their mothers' clothes toast each other with glasses of milk during a tea party in a sunny suburban back yard. A freckled youth in a flannel shirt and denim jeans with rolled cuffs smiles at the viewer as he leans against a pile of sheaved corn, before him a gathering of enormous, prize-winning pumpkins, glowing in the autumn sun.

The sun is always shining in these pictures, always. A family on horseback pauses by a lake to watch a fly-fisherman try a cast. Above the lake, the tilted, gray granite block of a Sierran peak, snow-dusted, gleams beneath a gleaming
blue sky. I used to wonder why the real sky was never the deep, almost violet blue of the sky in the scrapbook pictures. I didn't know that the color of early color photographs was often air-brush enhanced. I've longed to see a sky that blue, and days that sunny, and people as healthy as those in the old picture-scrapbooks.

The animals in the animal pictures are always babies—kittens, calves, colts, and pups—or else they are running, galloping, swimming, flying, or leaping, like in the picture of the gray cat caught in mid-pounce as he chases a ping-pong ball across the net. But most often, they are babies. Ten piglets suckle at the belly of an enormous white sow. A bay colt drowses in a pasture spotted with buttercups and dandelions. A little girl smiles at a tiny grey kitten perched atop a pile of brightly-wrapped Christmas presents beneath a tree. In what I believe to be an unretouched photograph, an adult male lion lies next to a black-faced lamb.

And most often, the people in the pictures are children, or adults with children, or well-balanced families—a man and a woman with a little boy and a little girl. On a sunny country road, a group of boys and girls, all smiling, parade past on bicycles and tricycles. All the bikes have baskets, and all the trikes have streamers trailing from the handle bars. Framed by purple and red-ribboned lace valentines, a curly-haired little boy cradles a sleepy-looking St. Bernard
puppy. From the same calendar, a chubby infant in a pink bonnet sits in a purple hatbox labeled, "Easter Bonnet." A blond brother and sister laugh as their Cocker spaniel puppy barks at a leering Jack O'Lantern.

I don't remember which pictures I liked when I was very young—these scrapbooks are of a time in my life beyond my recalling—but I know which picture affects me most now. In an illustration by C. J. Sternberg, we are looking as if from a nearby hilltop down upon a scene in winter. Six great, round '40s autos are parked behind an enormous, yellow two-storey farmhouse. Horses and cattle stand in a corral between two red farm buildings in the background. Some families are just arriving, the women in fur-collared dresses, the men in fedoras and overcoats. While the parents take in their bundles of presents, the children run off to join the other children who are building a snowman or pulling each other on sleds. One car has just pulled up before the house. An elderly man helps an elderly woman out of the car. Further up the walk, a younger couple walk arm-in-arm toward the house. Before them, a little boy, his arms open, runs toward the door. From the open doorway beckon a little blond-haired girl and a woman in a long red dress. Faces peer from the downstairs windows. This picture reminds me of something, perhaps simply of looking at this picture when I was very young.
Some of the pictures are torn, and the pages have been handled so often that the heavy grocery-sack paper of some of them has become soft, crepe-like, but the glossy magazine clippings of these first scrapbooks my grandmother made for us retain their bright, fantastic color. The only theme I can see uniting these pictures into some kind of whole is that they are what you might point out in a magazine to a small child sitting in your lap—"See the horses? See the baby talking on the phone? Who's she talking to?"

* *

From out of bright pictures sewn together, from out of hand-written text on the hand-made pages, I see my family's history and my own life begin to emerge like the patterns in the quilting blocks pieced together by some patient lap-quilter.

* *

Besides the scrapbooks, which have come regularly, and the letters, which come like clockwork, like autumn sun and spring rain, other packages have come over the years from the post office in Mountain View, Missouri. Every Christmas, my brother and sister and I count on a box from Grandma Price. She always sends useful sundries—socks and pencils and envelopes. She sends cookies and candy and tiny jars of berry jelly, exactly the sort of items you'd expect a grandmother to send. Some years we get a picture painted on felt
or linen. One year I got a hand-made linen desk organizer with all sorts of pockets sewn in for scissors and tape and pencils and envelopes. If you're really lucky, you might get a patchwork quilt. The trouble I have with my grandmother's gifts is that I know she's made them all herself. That's just what you learned to do when you grew up on a farm in the '20s. But if you've grown up in suburbia in the '70s, you aren't used to having someone make things for you. I rarely use anything my grandmother has made for me. I save everything. On the bed is a quilt she made a few years ago sturdy enough that I feel comfortable using it (not to mention that it's a very cozy little blanket).

She's sent me some things, however, that I insist upon hoarding. I must've been about ten years old when I got the map reader's scope, a small magnifying lens about half an inch in diameter, mounted in an eyepiece set atop a metal cylinder about one inch high, oval openings around the circumference illuminating whatever object is beneath the lens--map, agate, or moth wing--a handy and very portable low-power microscope. The story behind it is that it was used to read Civil War maps that were drawn in miniature to take up less space. Whatever its true age and use, I remember feeling like I held something recovered from Pharoah's tomb. Since then, I've always kept the map reader's scope in my room and then shown it to only a very few people.
One year she sent me a copy of the 1947 college edition *Winston Dictionary*, an inestimably valuable heirloom to a youngster who read the encyclopedia for fun. The atlas alone is priceless, the world still a European colony cut up into far fewer pieces than it is today, French West Africa taking up nearly a third of the continent, India broad-shouldered before Pakistan, French Indochina undivided. I still have my '47 Winston. The binding is disintegrating. One year I inherited part of her stamp collection or possibly her Aunt Loie's, I'm not sure. I never did become philatelist enough to actually mount the stamps in an album, but I do sift through the stamp-filled cigar box from time to time. I like the one commemorating the Echo 1 satellite. "Communications For Peace," it reads, a silver sphere in orbit around a troubled globe. The oldest stamp I have is stuck on the inside front cover of my '47 Winston--a 1942 one-dollar United States War Savings stamp.

I was jealous of my sister for years after she got the red letter box. My grandfather made a small portable laptop desk with a slanted top to write on and a drawer beneath to hold supplies. My grandmother painted it a bright glossy red. I have learned to forgive them all.

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I think of the drawers and closets and shelves she must
have filled to hold all the supplies and materials she saves to make her scrapbooks and fill her Christmas boxes. I think of the hours she must spend selecting and cutting and pasting and sewing and writing, especially writing. Except for a few clippings from *Grit* and other newspapers, the text in all the scrapbooks she has made is in her own hand. She is sitting out the age of the photocopier. She keeps her own diary faithfully, I know; she refers to it in her letters often. My sister and my brother get letters as regularly as I do, as I'm sure my many cousins must. She writes to her own children and to kin of her own generation who survive. In her life, she has surely written enough to fill several books, yet she would blush to hear me call her a writer. Instead, she has chosen to tell her stories in her own hand and always for an audience of one.

My grandmother's letters speak in a quiet voice of the rituals of the day, the week, and the season, the farm wife's time. She never dates her letters, so I must keep the postmarked envelopes if I want to know whether the letter is from 1984 or 1974. The calendar year is never as important to the daily business of living as are the time of day and the day of the week; hence, her letters are all headed "Sat a. m." or "Sun eve." Occasionally, the world creeps into her letters but only as far as it has managed to creep into Mountain View: "We are dry here in the middle USA, the food basket
for the nation," she wrote during the summer of '88. "Rations may be short for a while. So they say anyway. My cupboard is never bare. Even in the year 1934 which they are comparing '88 to it wasn't bare then either." Media cries of alarm do not impress her.

Most often, she writes in the cool and the quiet of the morning and so her letters are filled with the tasks yet to be done for the day. Reading a recent letter, I felt like I had dropped by her house and just missed breakfast:

It is a bit early to go to the store and I have washed the dishes, more to get the syrupy plates etc. washed. We had the last of the scrapple for breakfast. I've always read of it in older stories and wondered what it was. It's fried sausage, drained and all crumbled up, then you cook corn meal in salted water with the meat added about 10 minutes, pour in a loaf pan and when it's cold, cut in slices, thin ones, and fry much as you would french toast. Grandpa didn't say much about it, he loves just plain fried cornmeal mush. We had the last of it this AM and there was some pieces left on the plate. He took them, said no cat was going to get them. He likes our cats so not wanting to share told me he liked the scrapple without me fishing for a good word for it. Ha! I found the recipe in one of the papers we get.

If there were an Ars Dictaminus for the midwest, that punctuating "Ha!" would have to be included. It shows that the world (or your spouse) isn't pulling anything over on you, that you can make a joke and take a joke with the best of them.

I read about my grandfather in every letter. I can't remember having ever seen his handwriting, but his presence looms large in my grandmother's. I read regularly about his
trips to the local mill for mill-ends, which they use to stretch their wood supply. It's only been in the last 10 years or so that he's had to slow down:

At 74 your Grandpa was still cutting and hauling cord wood, but he is now past 83 and things have changed. We watch and caution each other. I guess that's how we are to do it to live long and happy years together.

I read a lot about my father since he's moved back there. He's a grandfather himself now. He's kept my grandparents' car, "Old Green," on the road for the past several years. "We didn't get to see your Dad yesterday, Mark, his day off," she writes, "but he had been here both Monday and Tuesday evenings after work getting 'Old Green' back on track. We went out Sunday evening to go to Church and it had 'died' that afternoon." The jet stream wandered up into Canada early this last spring and caught them without enough wood. "Had Grandpa not been able to haul us block wood from the mill we would have been out except I'm sure your Dad, Mark, would have done something about that situation." Dad's been getting a lot of good press since he moved back. He never writes, himself. He, like his son, is too much of the age of the telephone. Not too long ago, I spoke to my grandmother on the phone for the first time in probably fifteen years. I recognized her voice immediately. She sounded the same as she did when I was a child. I wondered later why I hadn't called her sooner nor more often. I simply have always thought of her as her handwriting, I suppose. To have
read her scrapbooks and her letters all these years and then
to finally talk to her on the phone was like suddenly having
two Grandma Prices.

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Though I've received them all my life, I didn't start
replying to my grandmother's letters until I was a teenager.
And even then I was disclosing little and hiding much. I
found it easy to begin by thanking her for whatever she'd
sent most recently--there was always something--and difficult
not to write, "Send more! Send more!" Toward the end of high
school, I was in the drama club and worked on the school
paper, so I could write about the plays I'd acted in and the
stories I'd written and about what a good job I'd done.
Until then, I relied on writing little travelogues for her,
trips my friends and I took into the mountains and forests
and the high desert surrounding Bend, Oregon, where we lived.
These trips were good source material because I could write
for pages without having to say too much about myself. I
once wrote eleven or twelve pages about a hike up to the top
of Smith Rock in Central Oregon, the central plug and several
dikes of an extinct, vanished volcano now standing as the
walls of a gorge on the Crooked River. I went on for pages
about the view of the Cascades from up there.

What I couldn't write about, of course, was the little
fling I was having with various drugs at the time. Nor how I
couldn't stand school and wanted to drop out every day. Nor
could I share the horrid teenage poems I was writing then,
which she knew I was writing, all about watching the lights
of Bend from Pilot Butte with a dark-eyed girl from the
senior class and drinking wine we'd stolen from her mother's
cabinet, decorating in turgid verse our embarrassing
rehearsals of love. Nor could I share the poems I'd written
about coming home from the park and eating a tiny square of
paper I'd bought with a tiny blue dragon printed on it and
laying awake all night watching icicles of violet neon light
drip from my hands. Nor could I tell her all about the night
I spent in the cemetery because I was too sick from Night
Train wine and Marlboro cigarettes to walk home. The cool
and the dangerous do not write letters to their grandmothers.
She saw only the part of me I could safely put into writing
and send to Mountain View. Perhaps I was afraid of making
her angry with me, afraid of disappointing her or of worrying
her. More likely, I was simply ashamed.

But I'm doing better, thanks. As the years have passed
and I'm no longer cool and dangerous, I've let more and more
of the daily business of living into my letters. I tell my
grandmother about the classes I'm teaching and the classes
I'm taking. I track the procession of the seasons here in
the Willamette Valley for her. I keep her posted on which
trees are in bloom, which leaves have fallen, as she has kept
me abreast of all the doings in Mountain View. I let her in on what my wife and my brother and sister are up to these days, as they comment on my activities in their letters. More and more, I consciously try to pattern my letters after hers; in short, I have become my grandmother's west coast representative and the curator of a small but growing collection of Ridler/Price memorabilia. (At least I will be until my sister demands that I return her scrapbooks and letters.)

I began this essay when it dawned upon me how important my grandmother's letters have been to me in the time since my parents' divorce when I was fifteen. The quiet voice of her writing was a soothing, steadying presence throughout the strange business that was my adolescence, that adolescence has become in late 20th-century America. I don't blame my parents for anything; the world they were raised for was not the world they arrived in as adults. Others have had it far worse, and there are children today whose waking lives are the nightmares I was comforted were only dreams when I was a child. I lack nothing in the end, save a stable, whole family to rest upon. And yet I find a stability and a sense of wholeness in my grandmother's letters for which I find no other source.

Through objects and images and especially language, my grandmother has constructed a presence that has bridged the
two thousand odd miles between a little town in Missouri and various little towns in Oregon. Such notions as writing having a voice and writing conveying a presence are part of our legacy from the Romantics. In her way, my grandmother has participated in a literary tradition dating back in this country to Emerson, who wrote in "Nature" of how words stand for natural facts, which in turn stand for spiritual realities. It's part of our cultural heritage, this faith that our words can carry something of our spirits, something we take, too readily perhaps, for granted. Certainly in the field of literary theory, these notions of voice and presence have been challenged, some would even say laid to rest. But I'm not convinced either way. Whether some part of my grandmother's being lives in that fine cursive script or whether it's all a dream I have spun from her words, I can't say, but I call the voice I hear Grandma, and I answer that voice with a scripted self of my own whose origin I'm just as unsure of but who, I hope, sounds like me.

Sentence-strings are the ties that bind our family, it seems. This past winter, back in Bend, my brother and his wife had their first child, a little girl I held when she was barely a week old. I've not seen her in the two or three months since, for, like her father, she was born into a modern, that is to say, dispersed, family. But since her birth, I've received a steady trickle of mail from my
brother, not the letters you might expect of a proud young father, carefully documenting every minutia of his daughter's early life. Rather, he writes of the books he's read and the books he'd like to read and the books he'd like to write, the sort of thing we talk about when we're together, and while he doesn't particularly dwell on them in his letters, his wife, Cheryl, and young Sara Robin are there on every page, as they were there in the room where my brother and I sat talking the last time we visited. It's as if, in his letters, my brother has taken up the task of writing family, as if he were saying, "I'm still here, and so are you." My sister, no doubt, has begun a quilt for our niece. I have one of my sister's quilts and one of my grandmother's. They are garments, in a way, for they clothe the spirits present of those not with us in the flesh.

And as I examine all the scrapbooks and the boxes and the quilts and all the letters, I find myself struggling to find some sort of statement, some summation of meaning to offer the reader who has troubled this far, but I can't think of what it would be. This is not a story with an ending but a story about family, a story which has come to me in pieces gathered up, only to scatter again when I am gone, to find their way into the pages of other scrapbooks, pieced together into other quilts, written into letters by some other's hand, to become a history whose figures are of one many-named blood.
I pitched the idea for this essay in a letter to my grandmother. In her reply, she told me about learning to marble paper in a 4-H class and about how she came to making scrapbooks naturally. Her father's sister, Loie May, kept them as did women in her mother's family. (She has a scrapbook of her great-grandmother's.) I close with her thoughts on this essay:

As to your essay, Mark, it is a lovely idea, not because of me etc. but of the idea of keeping families together, even though great distances separate us all. I've always felt this way but more so now when it's one of our foundations left. You know the family, after His creation, was God's first institution. Even though the world out there flaunts all these statistics about the downfall of the family, I can name countless families helping each other out through every kind of calamity that can weigh us down, and share what problems come. And I'm sure you can do the same.
II. The Walking Circle

Some people drink away their youth; I've seen it done and tried to drink my share. Some people work away theirs; I can't say, myself, but I bet my mother and father and grandmothers and grandfathers could tell some stories. Sometimes I think I let it just run away down the gutters of Bend, Oregon, like the snow that turns to a river of cinder-brown slush in the white winter sun, but more I think I just walked it off, like an anger, like a good meal.

I wish I could say I walked like a Thoreau up and down those dark-green Cascade slopes, or following, as I often dreamed, ignorant of alkali, a line of solar water stills across open high-desert range running off forever east of Bend. But if I learned my ritual walking circle encompassed more than two miles, I'd be surprised. For nearly all the three years' worth of miles I marched took in probably all of four or five streets.

A summer job that was ten years and a hundred miles away from Bend, Oregon, got me to thinking about that long, endless walk I took one night when I was seventeen. The summer before my last year of college, I worked for a shuttle service that ran between Corvallis, Oregon, and the airports in Portland and Eugene. Every night, I'd get up at 2:30am, try to shower myself into consciousness, take my seat at the
counter in the local Lyon's restaurant (the only 24-hour place in town), and slog down cup after cup of that incredible coffee they make in those all-night places, the bitter dregs of what they poured hours ago at dinner, plus a little grill-cleaner to give it flavor. I smoked then, too. Anything to wake up enough to make the 4:00am run to PDX and back, a 200-mile round trip, without killing myself and my passengers.

Summer was almost over, and the nights were cooling off again. I pulled into the Airport Express parking lot at about 3:45, my usual time, my teeth grinding from bad coffee and cigarettes with maybe a hint of autumn chill. I stood next to the '81 Chevrolet Cavalier station wagon, the "limo" they gave me to drive on the early run, and had one more smoke while it warmed up. Then I noticed the sky.

Maybe it was because I'd lingered outside long enough for my eyes to adjust. Maybe it was because there was no moon. Maybe it was because the August night was cool and clear. I'd lived in the hazy, humid Willamette Valley for years. Never had I seen a night sky like this one. Jupiter and Saturn were like searchlights. Mars twinkled a fierce red. Sirius howled. The Milky Way glowed with a dim, diffuse, almost violet illumination. The sky and the late-summer smell lingering in the air brought back for a moment the cool August nights of Bend, but just for a moment. I had
to get to work.

I took a pack with me that held my notebook and my summer reading. I stuffed it on the floor under my legs and pulled the seat up until my knees were just grazing the dash. Paying customers got leg room. I arrived at the Corvallis Nendel's at 4:05, thought about having a smoke, had a sip off the thermos instead, peeked into the empty lobby and was back on ninth street by 4:10. I picked up two drowsy-looking passengers at the Shanico Inn at 4:15. They were the kind we like. They'd be asleep before we got out to the freeway. I cut back over to Fifth, then over to Fourth, then on through the silent town—traffic lights warning no one, a kid yawning in a booth at the town's only 24-hour gas station. He waved at me sometimes.

I pulled in at the Townhouse at 4:20, no one in sight. We waited anyway. The guy who'd driven this route before me left people behind, stranding them at 4:30 in the morning, so he could keep to his schedule. But I knew we could make up time out on I-5 north of Woodburn. So we waited. A no-show, finally.

We crossed the bridge and headed for the freeway. At a few minutes past 4:30, we slid smooth and easy down the ramp onto Interstate 5. I silently rejoiced at the acceleration. A few minutes later in Albany, we pulled through the parking lot of the Friendship Inn. I liked that they called it that,
as the Friendship Inn's desk manager was a mean, snarling old man who hated everyone who'd ever lived. We waited. Another no-show. It didn't surprise me. Many people canceled out when that 3:30 alarm went off.

Back on I-5. We'd take the 22 miles to the Salem exits in less than 15 minutes, with a good wind. I could make 70 mph and feel good about it for the short stretch between Albany and Salem. My passengers snored. I started thinking about the stars over Bend again. I started thinking about my walking circle.

During the summer of our nation's bicentennial, I was cooking hamburgers at Dandy's Drive-in, Home of The Roller-Skating Car-caterers, on Third Street in Bend, Oregon. At about 10:30 on Saturday nights, we'd start taking down the stainless-steel filters from the stainless-steel hood over the stainless-steel grill and toss them into the stainless-steel sink. It was our way of telling the customers that we were ready to go home. But at a quarter till, as sure as you're sitting there, someone, some local football hero with that night's homecoming queen, would pull up in his daddy's Dodge Ram four-wheel drive with chrome and flaps, flash his halogens and running lights mounted up on the roll-bar, and order a Double-Dandy with cheese and bacon, a fishwich with extra tar-tar, large fries, onion rings, two cherry Cokes, and a banana supreme with extra hot fudge. Please. And
extra ketchup.

Then he'd sit back, put his arm around Stacy or Tracy or whoever she was, crank up his Steve Miller tape, and relax. Meanwhile, we'd curse him and all his family while we made his order, knowing that we'd be doing well to get out before a quarter after.

One night long into that summer, after the manager had come to lock up and had mercifully shut off the radio (this being the age of disco), after I'd strolled the eight or nine blocks to our house by Juniper Park, my legs aching from standing on the concrete floor all night, my hair, clothes, and notebook smelling of burnt grease, after I'd come in and said hi to our dogs who couldn't sniff me enough after work, after I'd shut off the TV and the lamps in the living room where my brother and sister had fallen asleep during Saturday Night, after I'd tip-toed past the door to my mother's room, after I'd shut the door to my room and dropped my notebook on the desk and gotten out of my greasy-smelling shoes and my greasy-smelling jeans and my greasy-smelling shirt, after I'd stretched out on my bed, my legs and back aching from the concrete, my arms stinging with little pinhole burns from spattering grease, after all the Coke I'd drunk all night because it was free and the grill was hot, after a night of cooking Double-Dandies with cheese and fries and onion rings, I just couldn't sleep.
I got up and tried to read, but I couldn't concentrate. I turned on the radio softly, but it was all disco, disco, disco, thump-dada-thump-dada-thump, dance the night away, baby, but I didn't feel like dancing. I tuned the receiver between stations on the AM band and listened to the ionospheric surf for a while, an old cure for insomnia, but I got tired of that soon enough. I couldn't sit still. I picked up my notebook and read what I'd written a few nights before while I was at work. Twelve summers later, I was able to find that notebook and that passage in a box on a shelf in the garage.

It is this strange taste of life in my mouth that puzzles me. There is a shimmering core of absolute harmonious consistency humming quietly on the face of all these crazy humans, and somewhere deep, deep, deep within, beneath thirty miles of bedrock, impregnable, it roars like the god of waterfalls, it is complete and takes on the full spectrum of light and sound. The heaviest, strongest, meanest drill imagined would pull but a single drop, the lightest wiff of fume from this well, leaving a rust on the tongue and a desolation in the soul, an eternal emptiness wherein the rug is finally pulled from beneath. Everything, every object, every mote of dust, every atom, every thought, everything is inseparable, one immediately takes up where the one before leaves off, all is continued, destroying past, present, and future because time is one and all is the single resplendent word spoken and speaking and spinning and motionless and universal.

This harmony, this truth, is so utterly incomprehensible, so devastatingly mindblowing that it has become the object of pure, primitive fear. The brain that dwells on this truth must eventually either join it without reservation or retreat into madness. The ego that attempts to live within the realm of this truth must face its final destruction, there can be no individual particles of truth, there can be no separate aspects of it. The preservation of harmony is never
allowing any denial of it to exist. Thus, when a single conscience enters the realm, it is obliterated, consumed, engulfed, just as the water of a single river is swallowed by the sea, bringing an end to the river's existence.

The many misspellings, the questionable grammar, the skewed diction, none of that bothered me in the least, if I was even aware of it. Nor was I concerned whether or not I'd actually said anything. The sound of it on the page, that's what I loved—to get to use words like "desolation" and "resplendent" and phrases like "the god of waterfalls," and that last bit about "an end to the river's existence."

I needed a walk that night, that was it. I needed a long walk to unwind my sore legs and to let my wonderful thoughts run loose for a while. I put my greasy clothes back on, slipped my notebook into my back pocket, crept back out past my mother's door and my snoring siblings, let the dogs have one last "wiff," and left. Rather than crunch my way down the gravel driveway beneath my mother's window, I slipped through the backyard and jumped the fence into Juniper Park. The sky glittered agelessly over the town's glow, showering a gentle light upon me. Even the junipers seemed to raise their branches to greet me. I picked up Franklin Avenue at the corner a block from our house. A police car drove past me and gave me the once-over, but no harm would ever come to me. I was one with the resplendent
We crossed the Salem overpass at 5:00am, right on schedule. Enough vehicles had appeared to be called traffic, the first intimations of morning rush hour. A faint blush in the eastern sky hinted at dawn, but the parking lots of the malls, vast lawns of asphalt, still glowed orange in the mercury-vapor lamplight. The Highway 99E exit marked the city's northern boundary. The freeway spread out its lanes, inviting velocity. Another 10 minutes or so and we'd be past Woodburn, PDX another 45 minutes away. Then I'd open her up.

I'd squirm a bit in my seat and try to get loose and comfortable but stay alert. For the next hour or so, I would hardly be driving at all, steering only when I needed to change lanes. When I started the early morning run, the long straight stretch between Salem and Portland was the dangerous part of the trip, coming or going. After a while, the Cavalier would seem to stand motionless, vibrating a bit as the freeway rushed by beneath, and someone else would come and sit in my body and drive, and I would feel my self slipping away—only to snap awake when the car had crossed over into the other lane, the noise of the reflector-turtles bringing me back.

I adjusted, thank god. I learned to speed through the Woodburn flats, like the truckers did, as much to stay awake
as to make time. The state troopers with their zap-guns hovered about the cities and the truckstops, where the traffic came together, but they were merciful out here on the flats, I had learned. Once past the Woodburn exit, I moved over into the fast lane and let the Cavalier creep up to 80. It felt good, like dreaming of flight.

As the miles unraveled, I thought about the nights I'd get off work at Dandy's and be so wound-up that I'd have to go walk it off, but something else besides soda pop and the evening rush, I remembered, was driving me. I promised myself I'd try to dig up some of my old notebooks when I got home. Most of it was embarrassing reading, especially the stuff I thought was so good at the time. But I never wrote so much nor was ever so awed by writing as I was then.

By the time I got to the Safeway parking lot on Franklin and Third, my legs had already loosened up a bit. The parking lot was as wide as a lake with just the cars of the stocking crew scattered about. I stood at the intersection of Franklin and Third, at five in the afternoon one of the busiest in town, and watched its lights change mindlessly. Third Street, which was also Highway 97, the main north-south route from the Columbia to California this side of the Cascades, was deserted. I crossed on the red.

Half way across, I stopped. There wasn't a single vehicle up and down Third nor on Franklin. I walked out to
the middle of intersection and sat down and watched the lights change for a while. After a minute or so, I found myself getting antsy, like I was about to get run over by a truck, even though I could see down both streets for half a mile. Finally, headlights appeared down Third, and I could hear a semi downshifting. I was excused.

I continued down Franklin, exhilarated. A block later, I looked back and saw the truck rumble through the intersection over the point where I'd been sitting, or so it seemed. I wanted to write a story about the last ghost in a deserted city after the world ends but decided that I had already written it, that I was writing it. Crossing Franklin was an old railroad overpass. As I approached, the pedestrian tunnel yawned like a toothless mouth. The last ghost slowed his steps considerably, suddenly not so sure he was indeed the last. I considered climbing up and crossing the tracks but proceeded through the tunnel, savoring the quiet little panic that was rising in me. I listened for the other set of footsteps and tried not to run. I waited for a rock or club to brain me as I came out. Nothing happened. The last ghost was truly alone.

We'd passed Woodburn at 5:15 and were now about 45 minutes out of PDX. In the distance, I could see the glow from the Unocal truckstop at the Aurora exit. It was late enough that if I'd wanted to, I could've got out my Walkman
and listened to National Public Radio on the earphones, but I usually waited so I could listen on the even sleepier return trip. I was already losing my caffeine and nicotine edge.

The sky was a sky again, discernibly brighter than the dark surrounding landscape. The cones of Hood and Jefferson were washed purple against the ultramarine bowl of morning rising in the east. My passengers, if still asleep, would often begin to stir a bit at this point in the trip, as if from behind their eyelids, somewhere still in their dreams, they sensed the approaching day and the jet airplane waiting with the dawn to take them away.

With my back to the Cascades, I had watched a different bowl of morning sky many times from the old hospital hill just down Franklin from our house in Bend. I'd sit on the ruined foundation, sometimes long enough for the sun to come up and the town to wake up around me, sometimes just long enough to look at the streetlights and rooftops of downtown Bend before proceeding on my way. The old brick hospital had been torn down and replaced with a larger modern facility out east of town. The new hospital looked like a multi-storey parking garage. As I crossed the weed-littered parking lot of the old hospital, dirt and dandelions erasing the cross-walks and the parking lanes, I could sometimes trace in the dark sky the outline of the old building and wonder how many people sleeping in the houses around me were born in that
space in the sky where the maternity ward used to be, and how many other people sleeping out in the cemetery spent their last moments in rooms that were now so much mid-air. I could almost see the doctors and nurses scurrying about in that cube of night sky as I tried to guess how many lives had begun and ended here.

We passed the rest stop in the fir grove, and the traffic announced that Wilsonville, one of Portland's little bedroom towns, was just ahead. We drove past condos, truck stops, a cineplex, and a Holiday Inn. At 5:30, the warning sign for the I-205 cut-off swept by overhead. We were just over 20 minutes out of PDX. I slipped over into the slow lane among the trucks, as usual just in time to get off onto I-205. The freeway aimed us at the sunrise. We were in the home stretch, the pastures and hamlets between West Linn and Lake Oswego belying the urban sprawl just minutes to the north. I was thinking of my reflection in the store windows on Bond Street when it dawned on me that I was recalling more than one night. Sitting in the intersection—did that happen the first night I went for a stroll or later? And walking up Hospital Hill, I remembered, was a scheduled stop on every circling of the city. Now, remembering every walk that I could remember was like remembering one walk one night. And everything that happened to me over the two or three years that I would go for these evening constitutionals
now seemed to have happened all in one night. Over the years, I seemed to have made for myself a myth of the walking circle. I began to wonder how many of the details I recalled were from memory and how many were introduced in the retelling. My brother, my sister, and I have a joke about my mother's stories of our childhood she tells our friends and spouses. As the years pass, the stories get better and better. They also get farther and farther away from the true incidents as we recall them. We look at each other and smile and shake our heads, as if to say, "That's not what really happened." But isn't it? We were children when these things happened (if they happened at all). Why should our recollections be any more accurate than our mother's? She was an adult, after all. Besides, haven't we added and deleted and revised as we have retold these stories to ourselves? I could remember walking past the Trailways bus depot and watching the last bus of the night pull out and how, to the brilliant young writer, it looked like a ship of lost souls sailing away into the astral plane. I wondered if I'd really thought that or if later I told myself that I should've thought something like that as I encountered so evocative a scene as the last bus of the night pulling out of the Trailways bus depot. For the moment, I couldn't decide.

We topped the rise over Oregon City, the Willamette River a brief glimpse beneath. Mt. Hood loomed enormous and
purple ahead. We hit the outskirts of Milwaukie, rush hour now in full progress. The roar of the city woke my passengers. They sat up and blinked at the traffic and the morning. In a pasture below us, a trio of radio towers rose out of a blanket of mist. Up on a hill sat a giant, glass-walled church with the words "NEW HOPE" in gold letters beaming down upon us. We were pointed north again, skirting Milwaukie and approaching the first of the Gresham exits, crossing over the busy arteries leading to downtown Portland. We topped a rise. Off to my left, the downtown buildings in a distant miniature still glittered. We were 10 minutes from PDX. After the bus had pulled out, I remembered, I would take a right at the corner and stroll on down Greenwood.

The driveway in front of the Portland terminal sits nearly empty all night long. But 10 till 6, just before I'd pull up, chaos would erupt. By the time I'd arrive in the Cavalier, the cars, busses, and cabs would be three or four deep before the curb. People left their vehicles sitting in the middle of a lane if they couldn't get to the curb. If you got stuck behind one, you were stuck until its driver or the tow truck came and moved it. The drivers of the cabs and busses all had schedules to keep. The civilian drivers were often on their way to work after dropping off Aunt Louise. No one let anyone else in or out. It was like feeding time at the shark tank. Fortunately, the Cavalier
was small and maneuverable, and I was almost always able to dart in and park at the curb. When I started driving, my passengers would ask to be let off in front of their individual airline desks, and I would risk my life and theirs weaving back and forth to the curb. Later, I'd take any spot I could find and unload everyone from there. If someone asked to be let off further down the line, I'd kiss off my tip in my mind and say, "Portland's a small terminal. I'll call a skycap to help you with your bags."

The madness of the terminal was a shock after the long, meditative drive north. I could see the bewilderment in my passengers' faces—they'd been deep asleep until just a few minutes ago. When I set their bags out on the curb, they looked at me like they couldn't believe I was just going to abandon them here after taking care of them all night. But they mumbled a dazed "thank you" after I collected my fare and my tip, and I wished them a safe flight to wherever it was and left them to their own devices. I had a route to complete, one that had begun long before their arrival, one that would continue past their departing. As I closed up the Cavalier and was already looking around for possible escape routes, a recorded voice said over the loudspeaker, "Welcome to Portland International Airport. Please do not park in the roadway in front of the terminal. Violators will be fined and their cars impounded. Thank you."
I had half an hour to kill before I had to be back at the terminal to pick up baggage and passengers for the sleepy 7:00 return run. I entered the traffic like a kayaker enters whitewater and drove back out the terminal entrance to the Sheraton hotel. They had a coffeeshop there that opened early. I sat in there and drank their $1.00 coffee ("Refills no extra charge") and smoked cigarettes, stoking up for the trip home. I also had time to make a scribble a bit in my notebook. I wanted try to get down anything interesting about a passenger or about the trip itself.

As I glance through that notebook, it has occurs to me while writing this that I have also distilled the details, thoughts, and recollections of many runs to PDX down into one run to the airport one morning late in the summer before my last year of college. It was easy to do; one trip was very much like another up and down that same hunk of I-5 between Corvallis and Portland, Oregon. And there were several trips when I contemplated my old walking circle, as it seemed I had found myself on another circle, circumnavigating another late summer's evening. The passengers changed--some, in fact, were very strange characters--but looking back, they all seemed to have been riding together on the same run.

But anyway, there I was, smoking cigarettes and swilling coffee. Perhaps this is the entry I made that morning:

Sheraton Inn, 6:00am. I'm finishing the 4:00am run
to Portland today. Something about these restaurants makes me wish I had something to write. The lady behind me talks about quitting smoking, Chinese restaurants in Portland, and the age her daughter was when she started leaving the girl by herself.

I had what I thought were two interesting story ideas in the Eugene airport yesterday: a psychic detective story and a post-modernist, post-apocalyptic science fiction adventure/romance. (They're in my memo pad for work--I mustn't forget to take them out & put them in this daybook.)

But this morning, I wish I had a real idea for a real story with real characters. It's hanging out in these family restaurants & airport coffeeshops that does it to me. There's so many freaks, mutants, & "real" people that it's discouraging. How do I get them all on the page? How do I invent my own characters who come close to the flesh & blood I see around me? How, like Borges's wizard in "The Circular Ruins," do I dream a real man?

You can't. There's nothing new under the etc. Like it says in the Universal Plot Catalogue, you can only assemble raw materials & construct plot & characters out of that. Only God creates ex nihilo. The rest of us are just construction workers.

It occured to me that what I've written about driving limo ("Run Diary") are mostly little character sketches. But I've also been aware of the circularity of the run up & back. If driving limo has any of the archetypal journey to it, then it's a circular journey, a there-and-back journey. It includes the archetype of the circle, of endless return, and the characters, taken as archetypes, represent forces encountered in the Great Journey.

It all reminds me of the book on Tantric Buddhism I glanced thru in the library yesterday--the bit about the "short path." All people you encounter are enlightened beings. Every sound you hear is mantra. Everything you see shines with Heaven's radiance.

6:35. I gotta go.

Often, I left myself only 15 minutes or so to get back to the terminal, check in at all the baggage offices, gather up passengers, and get away from the loading platform before the platform officer wrote me up for occupying too much space
for too long a time. After I got good at it, I could hit every item of my agenda and still have 5 minutes left to sit and thumb through the reviews in Willamette Week while the platform officer glared at me. Efficiency is its own reward.

I pulled away from the PDX loading platform at 7:05 with no passengers but with enough baggage to pay for the run and enjoy the ride home. I got into one of the middle lanes back on I-205 and let the workers of Portland fight over the fast lane. They were on their way to work, but my workday was half over. I had the Woodburn flats again to make up for lost time in traffic. I found NPR on a local station and got caught up on the day's insanity from around the globe and right here at home. While the various factions fought it out, I thought about the deserted little shop just down the street from the bus station on Greenwood, and I thought about Tommy Barton, the writer I wanted to be.

There were three other people there the night I went to the first meeting of the writer's interest group. We met in an empty shop on Greenwood next door to a laundromat. There was just one little lamp that would've been poor illumination for a closet. A homemade woodstove that somebody had hauled in and connected loosely to a stovepipe in the back of the shop kept away the chill of the night. We were lucky it was summer. There weren't enough chairs. Tommy Barton sat next to the lamp in an ancient recliner he'd brought in. I sat on
an overturned bucket at his feet, a prophetic arrangement. The other two "writers" were a tall, thin, goateed fellow I recognized from the town's only used-book store and a small, thin woman all in black, obviously his girlfriend. Tommy did his best to try to keep the discussion on writers and writing, but it was obvious that writing was only a sideline for these two: She wandered around the shop all night, looking soulful, and he would answer all of Tommy's comments with questions like "What is truth, anyway?" or "What is reality?" After a while, we just ignored them, which seemed to suit them fine. He was, however, very nice about all the cigarettes I bummed off him that night. "We all share," he'd say with a meaningful smile.

I don't know anything about Tommy Barton or where he came from or what he was doing in Bend, Oregon. Later, I heard that he had a twin brother, but that was more than I knew about his background when I first met him. He must've been in his early thirties. He had wavy blond hair and well-defined Nordic features. He looked like how I imagine Young Werther must look. He took to me immediately and was always very patient with me though at times I must've come off as a complete idiot. Tommy Barton was the only person I've ever met for whom writing was a vocation in the religious sense. He didn't seemed to be interested in writing stories or in getting published. He wanted simply to write, on whatever
subject came into his mind. From what little I remember of what little I read, I suppose I would call Tommy Barton an essayist, lacking a better term, although he wasn't really writing essays. To me, "essay" implies a central, guiding thought, perhaps with a beginning, a middle, and an end. But Tommy Barton didn't write that way. It was all one work—the Book of Tommy Barton, and it went on and on, page after page, with no clear beginning and no end in sight.

It was clear after the first meeting that this writer's interest group was going nowhere, but Tommy Barton and I agreed to meet again. He showed up a few nights at Dandy's, looking like Lord Byron at McDonald's. He asked me more than once why I worked at the drive-in.

"For the money," I said.

"Why do you need the money?" he asked in reply.

Once, he invited me out to his place in the country. He lived on some acreage a relative owned out in the sagebrush near Sisters, Oregon. From his kitchen window, the Three Sisters were so large and so clear that they didn't look possible. He lived in a one-room shack made of scrap wood and salvaged windows. He called it "Random House." Inside, there was a stove, a sink, a cabinet, an enormous table, and a sleeping loft. Salvaged windows ran in a continuous row around three sides of Random House. From his table, you could see the mountains, sky, junipers, and the occasional
deer wandering around out in the sagebrush. If I'd read any Thoreau yet, I would've compared Tommy Barton's place to Walden. Instead, when I later read Thoreau, I compared the descriptions of Thoreau's place to Random House.

We wandered around out in the sagebrush until it got dark, then we went in. I gave him the cigarettes I'd bought for him in town and sat down at his table while he lit the stove and the lantern. I fiddled with the pipe I'd taken up recently because I'd seen pictures of writers smoking their pipes and read some of Tommy Barton's writing. He had an old typewriter, but most everything he'd written was in longhand, a graceful cursive covering page upon page of newsprint, which he bought by the ream.

We sat talking late into the night by the hiss and the glow of his Coleman lantern. Random House was a Mecca for every moth within five miles, it seemed. The many windows were covered with them. He wouldn't talk much about his own writing specifically. He preferred to talk about writing as a way of life and about writers as those who had a calling. He told me that no matter what, I must never stop writing, that now that I had found my way onto that path, I must never lose it again. There would be dry spells. But I must never give up the vision.

Tommy Barton was a Romantic, obviously, but who cares? I couldn't believe what I was hearing. I couldn't believe
that a person like this could exist, let alone in Bend, Oregon, let alone that I should ever find him. He asked me who my writers were. He put it that way—"Who are your writers?" I mentioned a few names, science fiction writers mostly, and a couple of poets. Then he started talking about a writer named Henry Miller, a writer who had tapped into the wellsprings of the universe, to listen to Tommy Barton. I have since read Norman Mailer's invocation of Henry Miller as well as Kate Millet's crucifixion of him, and I have read him again and again myself and witnessed all his shortcomings and his outright failures. But that evening in Random House, I thought I had found my master. After meeting Tommy Barton and hearing him talk about Henry Miller, I knew that the only thing I would ever want every day for the rest of my life would be to write, to be a writer. Tommy Barton read a passage from one of Miller's books. I didn't take notes or even understand much of what I heard. I was simply dazzled. Years later, I believe I finally came across the passage I was read that evening. It comes from Miller's book, The World of Sex. In this passage, he is discussing how he set out to write his second book, Tropic of Capricorn:

... In telling this story I am not following a strict chronological sequence but have chosen to adopt a circular or spiral form of time development which enables me to expand freely in any direction at any given moment. The ordinary chronological development seems to me wooden and artificial, a synthetic reconstitution of the facts of life ... I am trying to get at the inner
pattern of events, trying to follow the potential being who was deflected from his course here and there, who circled around himself, so to speak, who was becalmed for long stretches or who sank to the bottom of the sea or suddenly flew to the loftiest peaks. I am trying to seize the quintessential moments in which thing happened, things which altered me profoundly. The man who tells the story is not the one who experienced the events recorded. There is distortion and deformation, but only for the purpose of capturing the true inner reality. Thus, for no apparent reason, I may often lapse back into a period anterior to the one I am talking about . . . A man does not go forward through life along a straight, horizontal path; often he does not stop at the stations indicated on the time table; sometimes he goes off the track completely; sometimes he dives below and is lost for a time, or he takes to the air and is flung against the side of a steep cliff . . . What goes on at every moment in the life of each and every man is something forever unfathomable and inexhaustible to relate. No man can possibly relate the whole story, no matter how limited a fragment of his life he chooses to dwell on.

The path a writer follows, I learned from Tommy Barton, is in reality the circumference of a circle whose center is nowhere in sight. The writer must learn to obey his sense of an inner source of gravity. Like the moths in the sagebrush around Random House, he follows the light.

I drove home that night with the windows rolled down, cold air blasting over me. I was feverish, inflamed. Over the next several years, I would devour everything Miller had written that I could lay hands on. I tried to write like Miller, think like him. I wanted to be Henry Miller. He dreamed of the individual's self-redemption, a quest into sensuality purified by the sacraments of art. I caught fire. I was like a religious fanatic, a born-again evangelist of
the word. But I was by temperament more the mystic and so quit my mission to win converts. I was then alone with my notebook, and born of that solitude was my nightly vigil, my walking circle. Not long after that one evening at Random House, Tommy Barton told me he was going to Mexico to visit a friend. I haven't seen him since.

Coming back, that long stretch of Interstate 5 north of Woodburn was the worst part of the whole trip. My mouth tasted like an ashtray, and my blood had turned to tar. I was lucky not to nod. The exciting part of the trip was over—the flight into the sunrise, the madness of the terminal. The drive back to Corvallis under the hot August sun was all drowsy drudgery. I often wished a passenger or two would stay awake for the run home. Although the conversation seldom included me—I was just the driver—the chatter would keep me awake. But when I drove home empty, not even Bad News Radio could keep me alert. I needed Dirty Harry Donner to ride shotgun on the trips home.

I was just finishing up at the loading platform at PDX one morning when this old fellow asked if I was headed south. I told him I was, but I wondered then how he was going to pay. He looked like the stereotype for a Depression-era hobo. He stood about five feet tall and looked shorter. He wore an old fishing cap with the front brim pinned up to the crown, festooned with all sorts of pins and buttons that said
things like, "Kiss me, I'm Irish!" Unruly white hair stuck out from under his cap. His eyes were small and pinched half-shut. Beneath his potato-nose, his mouth was red and puckered like a child's pout. Though it was summer, he wore a flannel shirt and an old green sweater that matched his old green work pants and his logger's boots. All he lacked was a bindlestiff, but his belongings were stuffed in an old two-wheeled grocery cart as if to compensate.

I was, in fact, about to ask him if he could pay when checking my list I discovered that he was my reservation for the return run, paid in advance. Good enough, sir. Please get in. And then, from the time he sat down in the seat beside me at PDX till the time I let him off at the Friendship Inn in Albany, he spoke one sentence, one long breathless sentence 75 miles long, whose countless clauses tied together with only "and," "but," and "then" flew past me like the boxcars of an express at country crossing.

I can't begin to reproduce his masterful syntax; I can only give a sense of the vast range of subject matter he covered. After the first 10 miles, I gave up any hope of conversing with him; Dirty Harry Donner was strictly a monologist. After 25 miles, I abandoned prompting him or giving any sort of indication that I was even listening; it was unnecessary. It was like listening to a radio tuned to the collective unconscious. I don't know where he came by
the name "Dirty Harry," but he gave me his card right off. On the front was a picture of Clint Eastwood from one of his man-without-a-name westerns and the inscription, "Have gun will travel. No problem too big or small will solve. Get in touch." On the back was this message:

Happiness is what you are,
not what you have;
What you give,
not what you get;
Not what somebody does for you,
but what you do for somebody else!

He laughed often, a chuckle both hale and perverse. He told me how he and someone named Shirley had had the whole bus station in stitches. I wanted to ask: What bus station? Who's Shirley? But he never so much as paused. He and Shirley cornered one of the Trailways bus drivers and asked him if he was bustin' ass or just draggin' ass. Then he produced a set of photocopied pictures of donkeys in various poses with various props and attire, all with cute captions. The red-and-white striped donkey was a Candy Ass. The donkey in a U-Haul trailer was Haulin' Ass. The donkey with a bootprint on its backside was a Busted Ass. Half a donkey was Half-Assed, and so forth. He had a sheaf of other photocopies with all the wise and witty sayings you see posted in coffee rooms and auto parts stores. Then he told me about his most recent campaign: to get a proper crosswalk signal in front of a nursing home in Lebanon, Oregon. It seems the old
one changed too soon for the old folks and they'd get caught half-way across the street. The seniors of Lebanon were dropping like flies. The city council wouldn't listen, of course. They were all covering up that a wealthy resident had left $17,000 in her will to an unspecified nursing home, the ambiguity in the wording leaving the money in the control of the city who had other plans. The city council didn't care about the old folks and considered Dirty Harry Donner a royal pain in the butt. (Somehow, I could believe it.) But a similar case was brewing in Coos Bay and he'd written Mae Yih and the highway department and Mark Hatfield's people were very interested. You just can't let 'em push you around. He'd learned that while he was laying in the burn ward after the gas heater had blown up in his face. He was ready to give up then, after they'd cut patches of skin off his hands to sew on his face. But then he found the Lord while he was laying there, and the Big Wheel Upstairs told him, "Don't let 'em push you around."

Dirty Harry used the title, "Big Wheel," a couple of different ways in his discourse. The Big Wheel Upstairs was, of course, God. But he also talked about the Big Wheel of Justice rolling into town to take care of a few people. The Big Wheel of Justice came as the climax in all his assorted political and social campaigns. For instance, the Big Wheel of Justice would soon roll into Lebanon, Oregon, to take care
of those who were sitting on the $17,000 he needed for his crosswalk signal. The Big Wheel of Justice was invoked as he told me about his first campaign in Oregon, the Three-Years War to save the covered bridges of the state. The importance of saving the covered bridges was not just an aesthetic issue; there were spiritual ramifications. He assured me that covered bridges were covered in The Book, specifically in the chapter on Revelations, as he put it.

Dirty Harry, who definitely had the air of the prophet about him, seemed to favor that "chapter" of The Book. He referred to it as he assured me that the first shuttle after the Challenger would never get off the pad, this fact being explicit in Revelations. Early in the history of manned space flight, a Russian cosmonaut had told his earthbound listeners from his lofty post that he couldn't see any god up there. For mocking the Lord, the Russians would pay, Dirty Harry told me. At the end of a later mission, the hatch of a Russian capsule was opened to reveal the corpses of three cosmonauts, new that, of course, was kept secret for years. We, too, have paid dearly the price for mocking God. The Challenger astronauts are the Six and the One in Revelations. The next shuttle won't get off the pad, and the twisted wreckage at the bottom of a smoking crater will stand for a thousand years as a bleak monument to man's pride and folly.

I wanted to ask Dirty Harry why, if this is all the
Russians' fault, their space program is doing so much better than ours and with less-advanced technology to boot? I didn't get a chance.

As the Big Wheel Upstairs was taking care of his own, the Big Wheel of Justice was rolling along, if slowly, back here on Earth. Dirty Harry's father was every bit the radical individualist his son was until cancer brought him down. Their last campaign together exposed the Mafia connection in the Snohomish County sheriff's department. Late one night after this revelation was made public, .357 Magnum rounds entered his father's trailer. Enough was enough. Dirty Harry, belying his namesake, didn't believe in guns, but he did believe in taking action. He went to town the next day and purchased a handgun and promptly registered it at the sheriff's office so all would know that he and his father were hardly defenseless. The bait worked. That night, when a few deputies came to finish them off, these sheriff's henchmen were greeted at the door with the blinding radiance of an arc light Dirty Harry had borrowed from a Sea-Tac runway. The deputies were blind for weeks. Dirty Harry and his father dumped them on the steps of the sheriff's office and left Snohomish County soon afterwards.

When I dropped off Dirty Harry Donner at the Friendship Inn, we shook hands and he thanked me for my company though I'd hardly spoken a word. As I left him, he was headed for
the Appleby's restaurant across the parking lot, pulling his two-wheeled grocery cart full of campaigns and photocopies, one wheel the Big Wheel of Justice, one wheel the Big Wheel Upstairs. I didn't envy the patrons of Appleby's. "And they, whether they will hear, or whether they will forebear, (for they are a rebellious house,) yet shall know that there hath been a prophet among them," Ezekiel 2:5.

But I was alone that last ride south and fought sleep the entire way. Or was it the last ride? Perhaps it was the first. Dirty Harry Donner had let me glimpse the truth. It was up to me to keep to the straight and narrow, he had told me, for the circle was drawing ever tighter. I knew this kind of weariness the mornings after the walking circle. After making my rounds downtown, I'd pick up Third Street and head for the Denny's just a block from the intersection of Third and Franklin. I liked the seat by the wall at the end of the counter, where I could see all the other patrons and watch the lonely semis out on Third. Not yet of the age of Decaf as we know it, I'd drink that harsh, well-steeped crude oil the waitress would pour for me until my optic nerves were singed. I'd write in my notebook until my pencil became too heavy. Then I'd make my way home at last. Crawl over the fence into the backyard. Hush the dogs, who couldn't understand who it could be at that hour. Creep past my mother's door. Fall into my bed. Sleep like the dead. Drop my
Who was it that used to walk the streets at night? Who was it that found the amazing underside of life in the empty streets of Bend? Lost, but uncaring, somehow at home in isolate pools of radiance beneath lonely traffic lights and glowing signs. Was it me? Could it have been I who wrote of sitting in the all-night restaurants, smoking cigarettes, drinking coffee and ice water, writing about how amazing it is to be alive? Was that me? It seems incredible. I consider those moments I spent awake in a sleeping city as my finest, as if they were all part of a dream or even a past life, when I was young, inspired, and mad. Not that I'm so much older now; it's only been a couple years, but so much has happened to make a short time seem vast, so many things I thought eternal have crumbled into dust and left me shaken and dizzy, sometimes paralyzed. But here I am again, in my beloved diner, beneath the glittering heavens, and I wonder if I ever really left. A mysterious circle, of which I am both beginning and end, is complete.

Steady work and departing my mother's house closed my walking circle. How much of it happened and how much is a story I gathered from old notebooks, I can't say. It doesn't matter. Youth becomes a story you tell yourself. The more often you tell it, the better it gets. The Run Diary is another chapter in the same story, a story with lots of cigarettes, bad coffee, and the endless turning of wheels. Henry Miller wrote, "The man who tells the story is not the one who experienced the events recorded." The One Who Experiences is gone forever. He vanishes when the pencil hits the page. It occurs to me that Tommy Barton, Dirty Harry Donner, and I really all partake of the same being—we are all a story someone is telling himself, someone who
circles around himself, so to speak, trying to follow his potential being. But it also occurs to me not to forget that it is I who am telling the story, my story. This story, whoever is telling it, begins in the middle of the night beneath the bright summer stars and ends like this:

I nodded my way down I-5 to the Albany exit, managing to make it in one piece. I gassed up with fare money at the Truax station and listened to the kid in the heavy metal t-shirt bitch about his boss. I promised I'd take the company's business elsewhere if he got fired. When I got back to Corvallis, I stopped by Nendel's to drop off baggage. A lady there asked if I were going to Portland. I told her I was just getting back, but the 9:00am limo should be along soon. Sure enough, there was Gloria in the blue Chevy van just as I was pulling out. We waved.

I parked the Cavalier and turned in my fares. My wife had walked over at 7:00 and taken our car to work, so I hoofed it on home, happy to stretch my cramped legs. When I got home after the last run I'd made to Portland for Airport Express, I wrote this in my notebook:

Last day driving the limo. I'm trying to understand. But for future contemplation, here's how it works:

pull out of Lyon's at five till four.
slide fast and easy onto the freeway at about
4:30, rejoicing at the acceleration.
Friendship Inn at 4:35, then on north.
hit Salem at around 5:00. 15 min between
Albany and Salem.  
I like to hit Woodburn around 5:10 because I know it's only another 40-45 min. to PDX. then it's Donald/Aurora exit--Leather's/Unocal open 24 hrs. for yr convenience. then the fir grove rest stop. then Wilsonville and the famous Holiday Inn. then I-205 at 5:30. long stretch through the woods. rise above the narrowed Willamette River Valley. on past New Hope. on past radio towers. over a rise I can see airport 10 min. away. off to left, downtown sparkles. PDX at 6:00. Sheraton muzak till 6:30. 

I closed my notebook and put down my pencil, closing another circle. I called my wife at work to let her know I'd made it home all right. Then I stretched out on the bed and closed my eyes and dreamt I know not what.