



Chimes

Adam Fieled

Cover portrait by Dawn Gailey
Last Drop Coffeehouse, 2008
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Preface

I was born in New York City in 1976. The first few years of my life were spent in the New York area. Nevertheless, the first memories I have which carry a genuine sense of enchantment with them involve living in the Philadelphia suburb Elkins Park, where my family (which consisted of myself, my mother and father) moved in (if I remember correctly) late 1978. The house, 7825 Mill Road, was a blue twin we shared with a revolving cast of characters— for the nine years I lived there, no one seemed to settle into the twin directly adjacent to ours for more than a year. Though we had a spacious back yard with a shed (also painted blue), the general income level on that portion of Mill Road was resolutely lower middle class. Yet, the rusticity of the neighborhood made it enchanted for me— Tookany Creek running behind our block of twins, two Little League fields behind the creek with a generous chunk of good old-fashioned, Wordsworthian woods (now ploughed over into an apartment complex). Most of my friends had bigger, better-furnished houses than I did, but I didn't feel self-conscious about it. I always had adequate clothing and enough to eat.

Chimes begins from this ground; how it felt to be a lower middle class kid with a creative bent and an active imagination as the sucking 70s bled into the soulless 80s in America. In the midst of this, my parents divorced in a bitter and acrimonious way. I got used to splitting my weeks between them— the sense of enchantment I had with my father's studio apartment in the "Presidential" apartment complex on City Line Avenue in Philly comes to light here. By the late 80s, and the beginning of my adolescence, both of my parents had raised themselves materially— my mother was a practicing attorney and had purchased a middle-class consonant house for us on Old Farm Road in Wyncote; my father was still a teacher in the Philadelphia school system, but had married wealth, which his house, on Harrison Avenue in Glenside, reflected. As all these material transformations were taking place, *Chimes* does its version of Joyce, Proust, and Wordsworth— lays bare the process by which the artist's young imagination is constructed, through trials by fire and brushes with sexualized and intellectualized adulthood. I had already seen more class tiers than most American kids— my parents had both been raised poor, and my father's family that was left by the time I was born (my grandmother and two great aunts) still lived on C Street in Feltonville in North Philadelphia, near Olney where my father had attended Olney High School. My mother's roots were in Elmont, Long Island, New York.

Through the course of my childhood, I learned a mentality not that different from a gypsy's— not being attached to material things, caring more about imagination and creativity than worldly status and material progress. If I did fantasize about being famous for my art, I never fantasized about being rich; the gypsy strain I had running in my blood had already shown me the impermanence of all material things. The reason *Chimes* ends with me rejecting my father is that what he attempted to impose on the young gypsy was too severe— the need to conform absolutely to what his chosen image of me was. It was an image against unbridled creativity— an image bent towards a stable, solid life-path, which could and would not be mine. *Chimes* makes many detours— towards rock music and musicians, poetry, movies, locales I found inspirational when young— but the central algorithm is to demonstrate how the human mind acquires the tools it needs to lead a creative life. If these tools are sharply drawn and defined here, I have succeeded.

Adam Fieled 2013

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#1

I remember chimes. They were a swirl and eddy above a yellow door. Swaying happened and a noise and a rocking of wind; I was alive to light. I did not say, but was; I was not is, but being. There was a window opposite that was a rectangle and a flood of blue. Light was piercing it in beams and it was a movement and a lingering. I noticed the music of things, even then. I noticed that there was music not only in the chimes but in colors set against one another, yellow and blue and the white arms of the crib and in a moment I could taste them all together. I experienced moments as a kind of eating: I was hungry and I did.

#2

An iron on my feet was a big burning; a TV was a big noise but my noise, my burning noise, was bigger. My Mom rocked me in a small kitchen that was a mess of edibles, non-edibles, things that were there because we could use them. Soon there was a scar and it stayed there for a long time, I would look at my foot and remember the burn and be pleased; in the scar I had kept it, I had encased it in my flesh, it subsisted. Continuance was an excitement and a way of still existing. Sudden balloons of joy erupted often from faded pain.

#3

Tookany Creek shone of moonlight lavished on it from a sky that stretched over our big backyard. I stood at the window and it was late and I looked at the creek and it was a kind of song. I thought it was a dream and I thought that this was dreaming but I stayed there at the window and there was a shed in the backyard, it was blue like our house, but with white shutters and it was there for no purpose but as something between me and the stream that shone white and black from the moon. I stood at a level with my window and the stream made a rushing rustling noise and it was speaking to me and I listened.

#4

Father, my father, was there and he was fixing my window with special nails and I said I didn't like them and he said *they don't like you either*. First my father was there in the house and he was picking up a spilled scrambled egg with his foot and saying *bandy foot* or then he was at a picnic table in the yard with lots of big people on a sunny day and much smiling but that was soon over. Much was soon over and I knew what over meant in a young way and I sang into a tape recorder with over happening in the background. There was still hearing after over was over and after everything was over I went back to a room inside myself meant for continuation and continuing continued, and had not to ever end or be over.

#5

I was in my room that was a world and that looked out on Tookany Creek. What I heard listened to, playing my father's records on my turntable, was the sound of the sun coming through the window. The scene was set to a place that was not world, was entirely of itself, was a piece of another world and yet was in my world whenever I wanted. I wanted and wanted the music, and the sound was all around me and I wanted things that would let me sound like this world in my world, which was of me. I began hearing what I saw in Tookany Creek and eating moonlight in my ears.

#6

We had to go to an ugly place to see Grandma Bubba: a big dirty street with no trees. There were people beaten and bloody and there were policemen but still I would leave Bubba's house and hang out in the lot with dirty children. They had firecrackers and they accepted me because I did not judge them but still I was me and they were who they were. Once one of them came to Bubba's door to ask for money and Bubba said no and Bubba was blind and poor and her sisters were poor too. Bubba was blind and smoked cigarettes and made dirty jokes that I didn't understand. The ugly place was there and never changed.

#7

Our house on Mill Road was a two-story wooden twin painted sky blue, placed on a curving block on the bottom of a steep hill, and was itself on an incline. The wide backyard, where was a large wooden shed also painted sky blue, and which fed onto a gravel path and then down another incline into Tookany Creek, was set sharply lower than the front door and then Mill Road beyond it, while across the street shone the side face of another hill, on which began the houses on Harrison Avenue. The effect of this portion of Mill Road was seclusion, intimacy, and rusticity— it looked very much like a nineteenth, rather than a twentieth century innovation. The moon above Mill Road was secluded along with us, coaxed into a space privatized by immersion in a world apart from the rest of Elkins Park, Cheltenham Township, Philadelphia, and the wider world. That emotion, of being apart from things, was blended into harmony or moodiness, exultation or melancholy, by the song of the creek and its currents. Though my block eventually intersected with Church Road, where there was more worldliness, traffic, and a general sense of movement, what echoed in me on Mill Road was a way of being alone, of being private. I had no siblings. No surprise that the house was haunted by strange ghosts, strange ghosts and echoes. I awoke once covered in spiders and they were dancing and I couldn't get them off. Also a big round white light came into my second floor window, it shone there and dazzled me and screamed and my Father told me it was a police searchlight and I believed him but he was wrong. I can see the light today and what it was doing was charging me and I was being prepared to serve in a kind of army and I am serving in a kind of army now: the light knew. I screamed out of pained recognition when I saw it and that was a spirit that haunted the house. Other echoes shone off the surface of Tookany Creek, which soothed but was itself of another world that was faraway and deep and that I couldn't reach even when I waded in it.

#8

What drew me both to play baseball, and follow professional baseball, was an instinct. The drama and excitement of the game was enticing to me. When you play a game, you become more-than-you; you turn in an engine which develops into more than the sum of its parts. The kings of baseball were masters of a certain kind of reality, bearers of a certain kind of wisdom, and holders of a certain kind of knowledge. The trick was a simple one: to face confrontation boldly, no matter what. To dare yourself, also, to understand, that a life with nothing risked is no life at all. So, as a little prince of CAA baseball, I dared to face whatever pitcher was at hand, bat in hand. It laid down a gauntlet for the rest of my life: when you reach a precipice, if you have the nerve, jump. And I did.

#9

What I found in school was a world too slow, too drab for my tastes. What it meant to have a teacher was to have an adult standing over you, directing your actions, playing to be obeyed, and obeisance did not come naturally to me. The corridors of Myers Elementary School were long, high-ceilinged, and oddly shaped; Myers itself was odd, as a labyrinth of weird spaces, and in my moments of freedom there I communed with a structure which was to my taste. In class, I vented a sense of pent-up rage by making jokes, and when other kids laughed I found myself riding a high I later found in baseball, music, theater, parties, girls— anywhere ordinary consciousness could be raised above average, where you could transcendentalize past norms. It was a way of being on fire. I got used to disciplinary action against me, to being a semi-reprobate; but the high I got from class-clowning, and from wildness in general, was potent, fiery, and high-ceilinged in and of itself.

#10

I brooded through summers of playing ball and lemonade and behind Mill Road, behind Tookany Creek was a Little League field, and I would play there. I would play and bigger kids would come around on bikes and I would be threatened and there would be a few others with me. We would play until we were too spooked to play, because the teenagers were acting funny and we didn't know then what a stoner was or about strange peppery smoke or about what happens to people on acid, and we were scared of the noises and the smells and the cars and the headlights at sunset when playing stopped being fun anyway because the ball could hit you on the head.

#11

O what does the music mean but not mean when you are so small that you have no defense against it? Riding in a car and a voice said *touch if you will my stomach, see how it trembles inside*, and it was strange but more violent than a body of water, even one that moved, and the voice was of me but not yet, because there was something in the voice that knew me (and anticipated me) without me knowing it, and it was a voice that danced and it meant heat hot heat hot heat.

#12

I was in the bathtub and I said my name over and over again until I forgot myself. The lights in the bathroom were on but I went deeper and deeper into darkness, and an empty void, and I heard my name as a something foreign. I heard my name, and I truly was not, I was a null and a void, null and void, and I had no self to be. Then, slowly, I regained myself, but I did not forget the essential emptiness, the uncompromising NO that I found behind the quotidian YES of selfhood. This happened also riding in a car to Aunt Libby's, and listening to the radio I thought NOTHING ANYWHERE until NOTHING got so big I shut my mind down in fright, and my consciousness streamed mellower.

#13

My father was then in an apartment. I loved the apartment because it was small and different from the house and I could listen to cars late at night. I could listen to cars after watching baseball on a little black and white Panasonic and I was on a couch and it was comfortable and different and I loved my father for being apart from the house and what usually was. There were Steak-Ums in the apartment and a china bull and many times we went to see the Phillies play because it was important to have fun and for my father to be my father and do what that meant. I even once rode on a motorcycle driven by my father's friend and held on tight but the wind was almost too much. My father was almost too much too because he was so apart from the much that always was in me.

#14

There was decay so that my Mom and Dad could not even talk. I met people in suits that were called lawyers and who had cold offices downtown and who asked me questions about what I wanted. I had no choice but to choose so I learned that life was about choices that you can't look back from, can't take back, can't do anything about except to move fumbling forward from, and I moved fumbling forward from choices. Now there was another Mom and Dad to go with the first two, but there were too many Moms and Dads and I was too alone and when I stared into the bathroom mirror, or any mirror, I saw that I was very far from what I had seen in the creek, the moonlight, the night, the stillness.

#15

O, for American summers of ice cream, basketballs, hot dogs, softball fields. On three special weekends a summer, day camp became sleepaway camp, before I had been to sleepaway camp. We sat on picnic tables on Friday afternoons, after the rest of the camp had departed, waiting for the fun to begin, and our sleeping bags had been deposited in the Rec Hall. It was in the air then for me, and on the sunny Saturday mornings that followed: a sense of absolute, boundless freedom. Looking out over the fields, the archery range, the equipment shed, and back up to the rock path at the foot of the Rec Hall's steps, the day glistened inside and around us, a feast of gracious gifts. If we could inveigle a counselor to supervise, we could use the swimming pool, maybe (if he or she were mellow enough) for hours. The pool itself was up and around the corner from the Big Top pavilion, where the other counselors fired up tunes on their boom-boxes and gossiped about the night before, less ecstatic than us to be here in Norristown. Many times, I claimed the equipment shed as a personal fiefdom, so as to organize massive, junior-professional softball games. Everything was trundled out to one of the two fields which was separated only by a wire fence from narrow, curvy Yost Road, and more empty fields on the other side of it, which I often stared at, entranced at a young age by nature spirits without being consciously aware of it. Counselors played with us, including CITs (Counselors-in-Training), and the context required us to cut heads—if you weren't good enough, you couldn't play. Later, down all the fields I ran, shirt tucked into shorts, playing capture the flag. Or, there I sat at the campfire, being told scary stories, feeling the magic of a small clan huddled, marshmallow soft (as the smores we cooked) in that realm: *camp*. Eventually I discovered sex, my sex, through the knowledge of a little girl who saw a big man in me. She held my hand and kissed me, and it was a deep wave of knowledge that left forever aftershocks rattling my walls with fire and thrill, frisson. Those lips were tender, were fevered, were forever cleaved to me in my imagination after that one night outside the Dining Hall, which was suddenly far away as Neptune. There was a brooding and a bittersweet and a knowledge of what can be achieved when two poles of being meet in the middle to kindle sparks. I held on to it.

#16

Suddenly there was a school that was a bigger school. There were lockers and a sense of importance; a combination to remember that was only mine. There were faces that were unfamiliar and a feeling that things were forming. I was always on the telephone because real dialogue happened on the telephone away from the presence of intercessors. I was always on the telephone because what was forming was a group that was not for everyone and I was in it. The group of us that was not everyone had rules that must not be spoken. What must be spoken was all the ways in which we were all moving forward. Moving forward meant being big and bigger and bigger, knowing more secret knowledge, occult practices of the teenagers we were trying to be. It did not mean the fullness that I still saw in Tookany Creek. Now, every day was regimented around who could talk to who, and how. The new school, more straightforward architecturally than Myers, had long narrow hallways with uncarpeted linoleum floors, and tended to be dimly lit. The journey from class to class was an adventure of seeing what new faces there were and discovering what they meant. My new friends would talk to me and not others. Alex, especially, formed myself and others around him as though we were a shell. Once the formation was established, as I was encouraged to dress how they dressed and say the things they would say, I understood that a kind of circuitry around us was closed. Tookany Creek ebbed and flowed, mutated, gurgled, or froze, given what the weather conditions were, but we were more hardened. In the parlance we used then: we were cool. Alex was tall, medium build, and imposing. He had been around Europe and Puerto Rico and was worldly. He knew how to be and stay cool. We talked on the phone every night. I was being cultivated. The clique was Alex's fiefdom. I had none. When I was over Alex's house, I picked up his white Fender Stratocaster and remembered all the records I used to listen to, how I'd wanted to play music. I wondered if I ever would. My problems with obeisance showed up again: I could not obey Alex, or the rest of the clique, the right way. I wanted to be more free. But it took time, the length of an entire year at Elkins Park Middle School, for this to be acknowledged and assimilated. For then, I held the axe, postured, and let an enormous question mark sail out of my consciousness and off into the air, before making my way down to the party in the unfinished basement, where Alex held court.

Hypnotized by the wholesomeness of what had come before, I couldn't relate to being cool. The group threw a party at my house— the larger one, on Harrison Avenue in Glenside. The lines were clearly drawn— it was my house, but it was their party. The night of the party, I felt misplaced. I was in, but in such a way that I was supposed to know the special coordinates of just how I was in, and also the coordinates of what I'd failed to achieve yet. If I was in all the way, which I was not, it would've been my party too. All these divisions and precisions, amidst ten and eleven-year-olds, left me with a feeling of weariness. I didn't understand why a group like this had to be so structured, so sculpted, or why competition and backbiting had to be so fierce. Mythology bothered to attach itself to Harrison Avenue— one of the top kids, an ultimate arbiter of coolness, locked himself in the den bathroom, pissed at a flirtation which was developing. I stayed on the crest of the wave, playacting like everyone else. The drama coalesced in a series of heated confrontations, in both den spaces. I was there to register who was messing with who. Yet it wasn't right. It was all hammed up nonsense about consolidating a pecking order, who had authority to say what to whom. A natural libertarian, I chafed against the Victorian constraints of social discipline and propriety being imposed. It was no way for an eleven-year-old who was free-spirited, punkish, not tethered to any masts, and unimpressed by tethered-to-the-mast lifestyles, to live. A comb disappeared permanently from the upstairs den bathroom. Another arbiter kid put on some of my father's boxing equipment, and cracked a poster's glass case. The dour portion of the Township, and the attendant School District, would soon find out a disappointing truth— I had no allegiance to staying in this particular ring. I would just as soon fly free, and not worry about the Machiavellian manipulations of a bunch of pre-adolescents, pumped full of illusions and primed by fanged parents. The sense that this party would or could be the highlight of my young life was pure tosh. The drifting away, here, Roberta notwithstanding, would be sweeter than the living through. Fare thee well. So: I saw through what I saw through, I couldn't articulate it but I tried, and because I tried they called me a fool. I was a fool for caring and wanting to share and thinking that everything should be spoken out loud: real. I was a fool for being awkward when I should've been confident and confident when I should've been awkward. I kept trying to keep up for a while, I wore Benetton and Ton-Sur-Ton, I wore a blue and pink Swatch, I had more parties, but still it was all wrong, wrong for me, wrong to have my mouth forced shut by cool protocol, or any protocol at all. I was an artist, before I was an artist.

Subconsciously, I held fast to the axiomatic, self-schematic belief which forms the backbone of most highly intelligent people: you don't believe others, you believe yourself. This was necessary, as it would be later when I was ready to face the wider world: tensions were mounting. It was not unnoticed that I failed to react to the Harrison Avenue party as though it were an event for me. The group wavered in relation to me, picking me up and then dropping me again. I fell in love with one of them, Roberta, who symbolized my struggle with "cool." This was because for all her vaunted coolness, the iciness of her exclusivity, which manifested whenever she was forced to reckon anyone too socially lowly for her, an intelligent soulfulness shone out from her, and generated sparks. I could not help but recognize this intelligence, and see in it something and someone kindred. Sultry even at a young age, a lank-haired brunette, built sturdily enough to play serious tennis, I was warmed by what in her might be cultivated. The ice and the fire in Roberta's soul did furious battle, and I would always attempt to put in a good word: stick to the warmth, stick to the warmth. My success was intermittent, at best. Neither Roberta nor anyone else around her would admit that she had fallen for me too, but she had. I, myself, fought with my sense of knowing this. After all, and willy-nilly, I could never be, as was obvious at a certain point, really in. In meant fluency in projecting an ice-wall; it also meant contrived reactions and equally contrived posturing. The group itself had a self-schematic axiom: for those of us cool enough to be in, we sacrifice all else in our lives to stay cool enough to remain in. This, I was utterly unwilling to do. Did they find the sacrifice worth it? In any case I was a slave to Roberta's gaze, which went many ways, and was a burr in my side because she had no mercy. It was not to be. I was in love and it gave her an excuse to taunt which would relieve her pain, which was not an artist's pain and unacknowledged, and so taunts became the taut tensions of my everyday existence, and I bore up as best I could but I was only considered cool "in a way." Because I had not formed, I wanted what was outside of me; I needed my own help. I coveted Roberta's patina of blood and chocolate: that ooze.

#19

Over the years of my early childhood, my feeling about Feltonville never changed. There was an ugliness to it which could not be maneuvered around— it was not of me. I was to learn, later in my life— this was, in fact, who my father was. It was not just that for most of my childhood, he taught at Clara Barton Middle School, within a few blocks of C Street where he grew up. It was that this landscape, its sense of deprivation, of brutishness, was precisely my father's inner landscape, too. My father was a man who liked to fight— both when it was necessary to fight, and just for sport. He viewed his life as a series of potentially lethal confrontations. His method of dealing with hindrances was to bully his way through them, as though everything was a lead-in to jungle-law and might-makes-right. The class transition he made, from working class into the middle of things, was hardly a smooth one. He could not be genteel the right way. He taught wood shop. That level— wood— something tactile, something solid, which did not depend on the brain, or on emotions, for its subsistence— was one he did feel comfortable with. Forced to deal with intangibles— thoughts, emotions— and at an angle where he would have to extend himself to really understand— my father fumed with resentment. C Street retained its working class integrity for him— a context in which who you are was equivalent to how well, how fiercely, you could fight, and starting very much with the physical, humans as physical mechanisms. Reduced to anything spiritual, C Street could only be derisive. Salt of the earth, these people called themselves, except to say that absolute spiritual and emotional denial was always unimpressive to me as that. Bubba, it turns out, was in trouble. She couldn't even see shapes anymore. She made it clear, at a certain point, that she felt she had taken her life as far as it could go, and wanted out. "It's back to square one," I heard her say. My father, once again in the false position of spiritual advisor, had little to say back. He liked to build Bubba up, as someone who had kept his family together, but he was no one to soften or sweeten the blows which accrue to an individual life as it continues. You couldn't go to him for comfort. The situation of Bubba's desolation did, also, build itself up, and then did a hang fire routine for a while. Then, on a soft green spring day, I found my father at my mother's house. Bubba was dead, had jumped head-first from a second story window. She jumped because her partial blindness had become total. She had given many warnings which were not heeded. I looked at April blooming on Mill Road and thought of this and could not locate a center. Grass was green and the sun shone and I felt nothing even as I reached for a feeling. Suicide means you can't blame people for feeling nothing, though I did not think her culpable then or now. How I sat and listened to my father was by looking at his red Chevette, itself a remnant of Feltonville heritage, and mystifying myself.

#20

We were moving. This was to be the end of Tookany Creek as an active presence in my life. I felt Mill Road move into a new space in my mind for things that no longer subsisted, like Bubba. The new house, like Mill Road, was on a street that curved, and unlike Mill Road was of red brick. The houses on the opposite side of the street, which varied architecturally, formed (as was later grateful) a wall so that you couldn't see it, but Cheltenham High School loomed behind them, a humongous parking lot flanked on a far side by the building itself. When the CHS marching band practiced in the lot that autumn, I heard them, boisterous and bumbling. It went with the smell of red and yellow leaves burning. I had no presentiment at that time what CHS would wind up meaning to me. I had a new room on the second floor overlooking the street, and one streetlamp which looked haunting at night. As with Mill Road, few cars passed. The house had a second floor porch we didn't use much, and a stone slab first floor porch where we would sometimes eat dinner when the weather was clement. Mom threw parties there too, sometimes for new neighbors. This was a neighborhood she would be a part of, even if there was (it turned out) no special place for me. The bathroom was a special shade of yellow, as was the basement where the washer and dryer were. I didn't like the new house at first because it was new, it didn't look like Mill Road and my room was painted aqua like toothpaste and had a funny smell. The night we moved in I gorged myself on sweets and lay awake in pain for hours, the same that had happened at Bubba's wake. Then I became adjusted and Old Farm Road had its own place in the hierarchy of places that were, or were to be, more or less numinous, lit up with the religion of music and harmony, in my head.

#21

For a long time there was no sound that was my sound. Then one night, I was at my father's house, which was not Old Farm Road. Glenside, this Glenside, was posh, luxuriant. On the radio I heard a sound that I knew instinctively was my sound. It was resonant, sharp, and had echo; it sent reverberations out to the four corners of the earth; it would not be denied. The music began with a short phrase, a riff, played on a hugely fuzzed electric guitar. The riff, allowed to reverberate and fill a large, studio-generated aural landscape, was a thunderbolt shot down from Olympus. It tugged, as baseball did, at everything in me which was masculine, courageous, outrageous even, daring. When a human voice was heard, filtered in, intoning a harsh reprieve to an errant muse (*You need coolin', baby I'm not foolin'*), it could be heard as vibrantly raw or merely shrill, singing in a very high register. My own consciousness perceived nothing but the vibrancy of power: extreme, uncompromising volatility and nerviness. The drums filled out an expansively drawn landscape with even more authority, as though a tribunal of Greek gods had converged and were sending secret messages to me in Glenside, ensconced with headphones while my father watched TV impassively across the room. When the guitar spoke for itself, above the fray and accented by space made for it, it was a form of blues made sophisticated beyond blues I was familiar with: all the agony and bravado of blues guitar pushed into a space where more eloquence was required, to achieve a necessary release past overwhelming tension. The cascades of notes were not just a release: they were a hint and a missive sent to me about the possibility of ecstasy on earth, achieved nirvana, release from karmic wheels. The aural landscape was rocky, mountainous, and allowed the listener to climb from peak to peak with it. In short, it was a place I'd never seen, a miraculous place, with landslides clanging over other landslides so that no stasis or silence need be tolerated. I had to merge with the landscape, join it, become it. I would not be able to sit still unless I became one with this sound, until I could similarly reverberate. I needed to reach the four corners, the mountain peaks, along with it. This sound that began with a loud guitar, played hotly, showed me the world seen through an auditory prism of light and shade.

Things shifted. I went from cool to killed-by-lack-thereof. In a period of isolation, I learned about reversals, about temporality and its ruthless one-handedness. I faded into a kind of wallpaper; the kids around me did not, perhaps, see me at all. Then, as winter changed into spring, things shifted again: friends appeared out of nowhere, I had a role to play that was substantial, exterior blossoms and blossoming things had an interior echo in my consciousness. I learned thusly how one must wait to be blessed, that patience is a virtue close to heaven, that all things are eventually answered by their opposites, if the soul is maintained closely. I learned that seasons have each a particular flavor and shape, like candy and snowflakes, and that each season must have a slightly different meaning. The season which emerged, out of a much-desired present for my twelfth birthday: my first guitar was sleek and black and an Ibanez Road-star; my amplifier was small and black and a Peavey backstage. These were my appendages and I treated them as such. A day without substantial exercise was unthinkable; every new musical phrase was a mountain to climb, rock by rock, and a chance to demonstrate the doggedness of an artist. I was dogged and I could soon make many noises that had the robust quality of clanging landslides; what was important was that this was a kind of marriage. I wedded my guitar without ceremony because every moment was a ceremony that was holy and part of me. I was soon a musician, and I could know no other way to be because this was ordained and my destiny. I had found one key to Tookany Creek, and it was in the process of moving my fingers artfully. As they moved, my heart beat in rhythm, my brain facilitated this and all things were joyous.

#23

Now I had a sister who was half my sister, who was a baby and who I played with. My time was divided so that I was a brother half the time, when I was with my father and my other mother, who was not my mother. My life grew to have many compartments and I lost the cherished sense of continuity I had had, because things never continued. My life was splintered and I had more life then I should have had, and my world was an overcrowded subway car. All I could do (having chosen to be splintered) was ride the variegated waves as they broke around me, and my half-sister was a big wave and called me *Amio* and there was a big house they lived in that I was a visitor to and that was not precisely mine. All the same it was a big house and I had many friends that visited me at the house and there was a stimulating festive atmosphere that did continue for a while. The house was important— it taught me about luxury, what it meant to be pampered. My own, normal-sized, tan-carpeted bedroom was equipped with a black and white Panasonic television, of the kind no longer legal, too convenient, now. This meant that after a night out with my buddies, I could retire into bed, not to sleep, but to watch *Sprockets* and *Lothar of the Hill People* on *Saturday Night Live*. The gracious gift aspect of the TV being there also meant that on week nights, if I couldn't sleep, the TV would be there to keep me company, ease me into being restful. The den itself was equipped with a full-bar area— not relevant to me then, except as a place to sit when I would gab with, often, eventually, N on the phone, often for hours. It was a special space where my shenanigans with N couldn't disturb anything or anyone. Even if Dad was being predatory, the house was artfully spaced out and compositionally sound enough that I didn't have to be in the line of fire. He could pursue his rages and find other targets. Downstairs from the den, the finished basement was Den #2— a dartboard, a (by today's standards) primitive PC, with printer, and yet another spare bedroom hiding behind it. My friend, who was the beneficiary of this estate, once I at least owned shares of it and the shares were liquid, was Ted. We occupied the house— we rambled. The basement, Den #2, had a nice ambience to it at night. We used sleeping bags, burned incense, and listened to psychedelic music from the nineteen-sixties. If Dad was in the mood to pester, we had to tolerate. But he'd also bring us Philly-style steak sandwiches and fries from one of the better local delis, making up for his orneriness by offering up a Philly soul-food feast. Food he could handle. I was later to learn— the graciousness of the house, its sense of livability, of airy expansiveness, was typical of Glenside, over the rest of Cheltenham Township. Glenside liked, and still likes, to party. The larger houses, including Ted's, in other areas of Cheltenham like Elkins Park, had a sense of feeling dark, dingy, oppressive in comparison. Glenside could be spry. When it snowed, we took the sled right across the street to the Elementary School to ride the huge obstreperous slope it boasted— Easton Road was only a few blocks away. I was at the festive house two or three or four nights a week for several years. This, what was made of the custody battle. Otherwise, I was ensconced at Old Farm Road. And even as my father's presence, amid all the luxury, could only be an ominous one.

I learned what it meant to be torn in two by circumstance. What Sanibel Island was— a getaway resort for the high-society wealthy, with houses, on Seahawk Lane, filled with extraordinary amenities— was handed to me in a not-fortuitous package deal. I was this: the daughter's husband's son from a previous marriage. Nothing more, nothing less. I was not “in.” On this count, I was forced to plough through rough days, during which I was made to feel my expendability at all points. Yet I was moved, in a primordial way, by what Sanibel was as a tropical paradise. The palm trees radiated an extreme sense of luxuriousness. I watched a gecko lizard get chased, manhandled, and then let loose by a house cat. The main beach at Sanibel had sand dollars on a day-to-day basis, and I found and kept one. Ding Darling nature preserve had real gators and fleet after fleet of exotic birds. There were bars on Captiva where kids could sit and drink Shirley Temples and pretend they were knocking real drinks back. The whole Sanibel lifestyle was a seductive one— tennis in the morning, a court being one amenity provided by Seahawk Lane, then brunch, to see and be seen, at a swank bistro, semi-open air, with doors and windows thrown open. Afternoons could be spent poolside, all Seahawk Lane providing screened-in pools, reading and swimming. Dinner was the piece de resistance, and it was necessary to dress up for it. Phone calls had to be made; lists had to be consulted; plans might have to be shifted. Where you could eat was various, but this, more than brunch, was social call time, when high society swingers met in the middle of their money to impress, impose, injure, compliment, or deride the many others like them. There was theater at night, and art galleries. Beneath all the hullabaloo, there was nothing to worry about. Everything was taken care of. How you had the money you had was less important than just the facticity of its being there. You were either in or you weren't. Logjammed into an inferior position, not there by a genuine family right, but good-looking, intelligent, and capable of being charming, I did my best to appear as in as possible. I was not shabbily treated by everyone on all sides. Yet, at the end of the day, the daughter's husband's son from an earlier marriage could not be to the manner born on Sanibel Island. The palms, the Atlantic Ocean, the sand dollars, and the birds and gators at Ding Darling cried out to me from a place of purity: being here, as a nascent child-of-nature, was a birthright. High society was more muddy, and mixed a muddy concoction for me to drink, which left me half-queasy. It was about the cult of faux relatives I was forced to endure. They made no bones: I was in *this far* and no further. I could only take what I was given and be halved.

The mountains had danger in them. I felt it all over my young, twelve-year old body as we unloaded our trunks, trudged over to our assigned cabin: 8. Right in the middle of an extended dusk on a clear June night, and with the encroaching shadows, overhanging foliage, impinging, densely packed woods, and the sense of unfamiliarity, all became a symbol of a precipice not yet gone over, a reckoning not to be assayed lightly, a battle for survival. Jason, also from Cheltenham, and I got settled in the cabin as quickly as possible. I chose an upper bunk in the cabin's far right corner (according to the cabin door), Jason a lower which flanked the cabin's left middle. His parents gone, we achieved the half-insanity of too much newness. Athletic equipment was scattered all over the cabin. Adults were, too—some counselors, some friends of counselors. One of the counselors, who mentioned he was only visiting, bothered to say, "Isn't Cabin 8 the Lady in Black cabin?" "Yes," another one, also just visiting, answered, "it sure is." Outside the cabin windows, light struggled haplessly to survive. "Who was the Lady in Black?" After all these years, it might've been Jason or I who asked, I don't remember. "The Lady in Black comes in the middle of the night to punish kids who don't do what they're told. Remember, kids, just be good." "Did you see her?" "I was here the year she showed up. She marched into this cabin two hours before dawn and walked right up to that bunk, right there." He was pointing, it so happened, top-back-right. My bunk. I felt my twelve-year-old consciousness heaved off the precipice I'd intuited was there. It all caved in on me at once, as my insides fell—the dark woods the Lady in Black issued from were a mystery, which spoke to me from a great height, in a language I was too young to understand. The woods knew—I would have to understand later. The sense of danger, in the woods, in the mountains, and in the synecdochic story of the Lady in Black, were about really getting, really knowing, your own smallness, in relation to nature. In relation, also, to the mountains themselves, and their strange progeny. The spirit of the woods themselves was a Lady in Black. Did she kill the kid, someone asked? "No, she just dragged him out of the cabin to her house. He came back the next day." I see. Yet the sense of delirious, swooning, fearful energy, on my first night in a haunted place, made it so I spent an hour on my bunk, recovering, and let Jason handle the intros.

#26

Our lives are conditioned by contingent factors, small and large, which shape and consolidate our perceptions. To make a long story short, how we perceive is conditioned heavily by what we have already perceived. Everyone's "spots of time" are peculiarly suited or unsuited to their own individual identity. I remembered something, when I encountered Wordsworth as an adult, that I knew would make sense to him as a tiny increment of time which made a large impression on my mind. The wooden cabin was rustic, realistically built, and cramped, especially to hold nine kids and two adults. Thus was formed the backbone of life at sleepaway camp. By the early morning hours, the two adult counselors had returned to their places and were also asleep. I awoke at maybe 2 in the morning one morning, from my position straight back and to the right, top bunk, to see a man standing stock still in the doorway of the cabin. The cabin's door was entirely open. There was nothing to light the man's face— his head was a well-outlined but nonetheless indistinct black blob. In the state I had of being half-asleep, I did not experience the impression of him, including black outlines, as a sinister one, but rather a vision of madness— of consciousness severed from reality, set adrift from the tactile in a land of amorphous shapes and sounds. The frozen man, swimming in the web of black shadows, was mad. Comforted, I fell back into complete sleep, which remained uninterrupted. The next day, I conveyed to others in the cabin what I had seen, but no one but me had been up for it. I was never able to solve the mystery of who the man was. Yet when I flash on the precise spot of time— a drowsy, half-asleep twelve-year-old at sleepaway camp sees, alone, something odd happen in the middle of the night— it is specifically about the odd things that people see, or the odd sights which are on offer among the human race when no one is, or seems to be, watching. The privacy of the vision— the contingency of the unlit face, seen indistinctly as a blob— more importantly, the mystery of whether the lunatic could notice from where he was standing that my eyes alone were, in fact, half-open— the perceived unpredictability of the lunatic's consciousness (why us? why this cabin?)— how preternaturally still he was— are all conflated with the sense that the vision is about all that happens in human life, hidden from view, which is most of it. We are forced to reckon an insubstantial surface most of the time. Beneath that surface, what is most real about the human race does its dance, which has much to do with madness, the middle of the night, and stillness intermixed with motion, as it did here.

#27

A new school year was a new way of seeing and a new chance to move forward. I was sitting in a new class and on the other side of the class was a new girl. She was olive-skinned, had a dainty mouth and lustrous long black hair. Slightly exotic. The first time she looked at me, she smiled widely. It was a smile that had in it something strange— she seemed to already know me, and was already counting on me being hers somehow. I was stunned by her sense of self-possession, and even more stunned at how possessed I instantly felt. Even as a girl, she could move pieces around just by changing her facial expression. Dramatic. Our eyes shot into each other and intermingled. I was aware of something changing and something moving and before long I had her number (and she mine) and we were confidants and romantic dialogists chatting away afternoons and evenings. The unpredictability of our conversations veered over terrain usually untouched by children our age— the depth of souls, the sense of destiny built into human life, who was destined to make an impact, and love, who. The depth of N took for granted that love could be built from suffering, from trials and tribulations. The trials and tribulations she put me through were lightning bolts she would shoot at me, to make me aware that things were changing, or about to change. She was a mystic. Over the phone I played her the song called *Faith* that went *well I guess it would be nice if I could touch your body* and this had instant mythological significance as being a consummation of everything that subsisted between us. She cherished drama, in her dark-hewn, brunette way, and so there were peaks and valleys of understanding and frequent miscommunication, but the feeling of a continuous humming presence between us, of which we could partake, went on, as did the sense of her imparting priceless wisdom— here's who girls really are.

#28

Ted was a foil who could be leaned on and who liked to play straight man. I was a loon who needed a straight man, who would plan gags and make general mischief for teachers and those innocent enough to be duped. When we rambled through the house on Harrison Avenue, it was taken for granted we were a team, a Dynamic Duo on an expedition, the purport of which was to place us where we could have the fun we wanted to have. Ted and N learned to tolerate each other, even as N's flair for dramatics was less appreciated by him than by me. Ted and I had our own phone racket going, and, for amusement, might call anyone at any time. Phone expeditions, with us trading off as per who was on the line at what time, made it so we could feel the earth around us move, feel our power to change things. People's responses were always an adventure. Time, at Harrison Avenue, was never a constraint at all. We moved, in the clear, from call to call, looking for the right openings, fishing for the right articulations. In that great era, before cell and smart phones, the phone had an autonomy as something more real, more eventful, than it does now. The phone sat there, on the bar, for example, solidly beckoning us. Sometimes we meant it, sometimes we didn't, but we were mobile, we were moving. N experienced her nights the same way. Later, we wanted it to be atmospheric and ambient around us and we would burn my father's dhoop sticks and listen to rock music. This music came to symbolize the playfulness and the whimsy and the innocence and the elegance of what we imagined, of what we could articulate in our phone adventures, when the articulations came thick and fast. The overabundance of my life seemed rich at this time: there was continuance.

#29

Pancakes with no syrup. Spaghetti with no sauce. Ted's house and his family weren't the strongest, about hospitality. So the midnight raid on the fridge, as we also did at Harrison Avenue, couldn't deliver too many goods. Popcorn, maybe, and ice water. The house itself was a large one, creating what could've been an incongruous discrepancy; if, however, you didn't realize that Ted's parents were eccentrics, with unconventional views on almost everything. Not exactly religious zealots, they were nonetheless affiliated with an obscure strain of Judaism which originated in the American South. This meant that my own two parents couldn't see eye to eye with them the right way; thus, precluding a bi-familial bash. The family were strange. Ted's streak of hard-headed calculatedness about his future rebelled against the strangeness (queerness) of what he saw on a night-by-night basis. The house, and the block on Woodlawn Avenue, were also strange. When you walked through the glass-paneled front room, then through the front door, on either side your eyes were forced to wrestle with two enclave areas, mini-living rooms, all held with glass-paneling around. Yet the daytime effect of the way the house was built was, as is still characteristic of Elkins Park, dark, dingy, and arid. Weird stucco walls gave way to rooms seemingly built at odd angles to letting in daylight. Ted's house, however, came into its own at night. Once the sun set at chez Ted, the stucco, glass paneling, enclave areas, and everything else which could make the house spooky, turned mellow, and made it no harsh penance at all to spend the night there. I would find out in a few years: Ted's house at night was also a reasonable place to learn about something else. The house's kitchen led straight into a dining room area, also glass-paneled; in the middle of things, to one side, another door led into a laundry room. The laundry room door led out into steps going down, outside, into the driveway and backyard. It was here, a few years later, that I was initiated into the mysteries of cannabis. Ted, as I thought was peculiar, had pot stashed in one kitchen drawer. You'd think he'd be forced to stash his dope in his second-floor room; he was not. Through the laundry room, onto the steps, coats on (raw March cold), Ted filled up a bowl and invited me into a new kind of lifestyle. The first time with dope, for an adolescent, is as important as anything else. I would find it difficult to forget that Ted's house, as of that night later on, took on a new kind of aura. It was a locale which had ways and means of changing my life. I worked up to it, with the no-sauce spaghetti and the no-syrup pancakes. The house and its inhabitants, with all its eccentricities, rewarded me because I refused to judge. Back to where we are, dingy days, mellow nights, I could always be found at chez Ted, as he could be found at Harrison Avenue or Old Farm Road. The house, the family, held no steady rancor against me—I later understood that this was rare, in Cheltenham Township, at a sensitive juncture, which this was. The spaghetti and the pancakes look sacred to me now. Not to mention the cannabis which followed.

#30

Through music, words emerged in my consciousness as another thing. There were musicians who used words and they showed me. I saw that combinations of words could be molten and that the fires they ignited could be contagious. They could be a door that one could break through into another reality: a place hyper-real, full of things that had the palpable reality of what is called real, but were nonetheless better than real: voices channeled from ether, expounding heroic worlds of oceanic expansive experience. This was another way of moving fingers artfully; more subtle and durable, yet so much harder to do because so stark: mere imitation would get you nowhere. I was on the bottom of another mountain that would take me where the creek ran effortlessly. Or, alternately, I was walking along the ocean-shore, where I heard: *let's swim to the moon...let's climb through the tide...penetrate the evening that the city sleeps to hide*. A wild congeries of energies coalesced in my brain— what it would be like to seduce N with my own words. To sing to her, or for her, and so ravish her consciousness that all boundaries between us melted, and we could be completely lost in each other like I wanted us to be. To swim with her together, to a place of unrestrained, unselfconsciousness abandon. It was all hidden in the depths of the music— how emotions could stir the human soul into wildness, abandon, ferocity. That I could be the agent for that— the connective tissue between a mass of people and the ability to access primeval chaos, and states of unity, of definition, within the chaos— I related personally to the songs and lyrics that moved me. *You reach your hand to hold me but I can't be your guide*. To have that control in the chaos— to see the truth of who the human race were, and who N was, even in the grips of the most orgiastic dementia— I wanted that masterful control of people's emotions. As I would later approve of The Hierophant as an interesting trump in the tarot deck, I sought to find a place in me which could channel hierophantic tasks. My exposure to these crucial songs dovetailed, also, with the most baroque period of telephone madness with N. We told each other our dreams; performed strange voodoo rituals involving the Bible, stuffed animals, things written, concealed, and revealed later; explored instances, shared and otherwise, of the uncanny. Like a true, soul-level brother and sister, we couldn't stop shaking each other's brains. The moon and the tides existed for us together. Music, I later understood, could be cheap, as a manipulator of people's emotions; words were more durable. And, ultimately, even with all the songs in my head, it was a shared symbolic language which wedded me to N, an encyclopedia of personal references which only we shared. The chaos in the music hovered in the background, tantalizingly but with mixed or blended intentions.

#31

I saw a movie at this time that had a powerful effect on me. It was called *Apocalypse Now* and it was all about one man's interior world. This world had a cohesion made of short-circuited dynamism and it meant that green jungle, severed heads, napalm memories and the poetry of endings (bangs, whimpers) would have to be preeminent. I learned how internal cohesion is rare and a magnet that others are drawn to: the more coherence (even if it happens to be irrational), the more magnetism. Yet being a magnet meant drawing good and bad together; internal levels had to be minded, picking and choosing was not an option. Life and death were seen to be flip sides of a coin on a dead man's eyes. That was it: something compelled me to look death straight in the eye, as something interesting. The film had a way of making death, not attractive, but necessary, as a pivot point for the consciousness of the living. We, all of us, have to live our lives, thinking of, conceiving, our deaths. Kurtz takes this as a starting place, to use his life as an investigation about the possibilities of amalgamation, of death-in-life and life-in-death, and of the sense that the true manifestations of death or life do not ricochet without resonance with the other. The presiding river, dense forests of Vietnam sent their own resonance through me, as images, with what I had seen, the stark rawness of the Poconos— the woods at night, the night itself in nature's wilderness. What was closest to real life had also to be closest to real death. Kurtz was lost in not being able to differentiate, in seeing death in life and vice versa. Where I wanted to go, where I wanted to be, was with the maniac who had stood in the doorway of Cabin 8, past Tookany Creek— moving with stillness, stilled in motion, pursuing a solitary relationship with the night, the river, the forest, Kurtz, cohesive around the imperative urge to blend in to what was larger than me, to merge, to die into the life of the endless and boundless. That it was possible to die into a larger life, that perception, made, presaged, the consummation of my brain with language, with taking words out into spaces past even the forests and the rivers. Eternity was that marriage revealed.

Images were entering my mind and leaving seeds. I saw a man dangle with hooks stuck into his chest. He was looking for visions and to become a channel for voices that would take him and his people forward. It was a ritual called *Sun Dance* and it was a kind of extremity. I learned that mortification of the flesh can be a boon to spirit and that valuing spirit can be more than an act of volitional faith: it can be a pact with another world. It was around me all the time, and around N, and Ted: that there were other worlds, whole and imminent. The visible world, the surface-level world, was not everything; was, in fact, not that real. You could dig, both into yourself and into those around you, and find yourself in a place Other— realms and vistas opening into alternate realities. You could become a channel, and manifest energy from elsewhere to enliven the dullness of the everyday. When N and I, on the phone, entered our wonted trance state, our brains fused, and what came through us together were sparks taken from somewhere far away, somewhere out in space. Our own *Sun Dance* ritual was by no means as drastic as what was shown in *A Man Called Horse*, which I watched with the other kids. But brain-fusion, and sense of the imminence of ethereality, became a feature of my day-to-day life once N and Ted were in place. We were mystics together. It was not volitional that I witnessed the *Sun Dance* ritual, but it was volitional that I embraced it and that a chord was struck within me. The receiver of visions could hold a place of honor; whether I saw what I saw in a creek or an Ibanez or a pen, or N, the kind of seeing I was attuned to could move people from where they were to another place. Human consciousness was, or at least could be, transportable.

#33

I liked the festive aspect of celebrations, and the little adventures one could set loose at a party: running wild, smashing things, drinking forbidden alcohol. Driven by a delirious continuance, I put my hands all over girls' bodies. I prodded, pinched, teased, respectful yet prolonging the experience any way I could. My will dovetailed with a wonted continuance and I was precocious: jacket off, tie loosened, a little wolf. I learned how to ride a high and how to direct cohesive energy into a palpable magnetic force. At a festivity on the top of a Center City skyscraper in April '89, on an immense rectangular outdoor porch bordered by chest-high railings, I looked down to see, a great distance beneath me, an empty street, what I would later know as Sansom Street. I was talking to a momentary companion about my philosophy of life as not a game of chance but a game of daring. "Look," I told her, "watch." I took a wineglass I'd stolen while the adults in the indoor festivity area adjacent were not watching, and heaved it over the railing. She rolled her eyes, but, as I could not help but notice, I got away with it. Wherever the glass had crashed, and the resultant shards, were invisible to my eyes. Nothing happened. I wouldn't be henceforth carted off to reform school. I had been daring, riding on my luck, and I succeeded. Just as, at a birthday party at the Greenwood Grille, I snuck another wineglass out of the restaurant into the tunnel connecting one side of the Jenkintown Septa station to the other, and smashed it down in some kind of compactor unit. But on the top of the skyscraper, looking out over the baroque, well-balanced Philly sky-line, a seed had been planted which I hadn't noticed. What the city was, in contrast to the suburbs, was as invisible to me as the rogue glass-shards then. I was destined to learn that a spirit of adventure was one thing in the 'burbs, but could be pushed out and developed much further in the city, where crowds of interesting people could always mean interesting action. As we turned back into the main festivity area to shake off the April evening chill, I had a calm sense of being in tune with the cosmos. I picked up a spare Kahlua, and drank it.

My entire childhood, I enjoyed the stillness of houses in the middle of the night, when everyone was asleep. There was comfort there— everyone was still around— but also, as I discovered, a sense of freedom, invisible in the daytime. Consciousness became more fluid; perceptions widened; and all kinds of receptive sensitivity sharpened and honed themselves. The house in Mahopac where I had relatives was unassuming; yet I was sometimes able to tune in to a wavelength frequency there about oneness, states of unity, a sense of indissoluble bonds fastening together the perceptible world. One night, me and a bunch of other kids were asked to sleep in my cousin Camilla's wood-floored, white-paneled, rectangular bedroom. Camilla had a fish-tank I hadn't noticed much, set against the far wall, next to the raw, grained wooden door. I woke randomly in the middle of the night, while the rest of the house slept— set on a mattress with another girl-child I didn't know much, next to Camilla and her friend sprawled on the bed beneath a white comforter, elevated above us. At first, I was slightly irritated. But as I watched the fish swim around the tank, and listened to the mild hum the fish-tank made, I was not only mollified, I was entranced. The hum and the movement of the fish became a dynamo, a manifestation-in-motion of perfect peace, of a state of being completely covered by nourishing waters. I didn't sleep much the rest of the night. I was somehow able to rivet myself to paying rapt attention to a kind of symphony, being performed specially for me. The crescendo of the symphony transpired just as the dawn began to break. The stillness of the house ricocheted against the hum of the tank and the moving fish until I reached the apex of consciousness my young mind could reach. I was completely safe, yet completely free nonetheless. I dreaded the thought that anyone in the house would move. As had to be tolerated, the sun manifested, and feet began to shuffle in the hallway, breaking the magic spell. But Mahopac had an uncanny clarity for me of allowing moments like this to happen. I thought of these things, as I was riding in a train to Mahopac to visit my relatives. It was an endless classic day in the endless classic summer of '89. The train broke down and I was sequestered in it for hours, again slightly irritated at first. There was no one in my car; I took out my guitar and began to play. I had a sensation of Otherness from being in an unfamiliar place, a place strictly liminal. I learned for the first time, there and then, the magic of places that were not my home, were not destinations, and were in the middle of something. Though I couldn't feel the sunlight directly, there was warmth and a charm to the circumstances that I appreciated. It was the Mahopac wavelength frequency again. Travel could help me to channel; Otherness could rejuvenate one's interior world; mishaps could be gateways to other realities.

Because we are not only subjects but objects of perception, the subject's mind must bend towards an uncomfortable reality—the necessity of imagining our own objectivity. We must imagine how we are seen by others. If the mind takes pleasure in doing so, it is because another's experience of us is of something profound, special, important. I played in a softball game at a camp, whose name I did not learn, over an hour away from ours. I noticed that some kind of festival was going on. People, with painted faces and balloons, were strewn in groups around the campground. I had a rush of intoxication as I stood in center field—owing, I thought, to being surrounded by carnival sights. I learned, many years later, that there was another reason. Roberta Hirst, from Cheltenham, and from a camp only a few miles down the road, and which I assumed was on the other side of the Poconos and thus perhaps ten hours away, stood in a semi-conspicuous crowd watching me, from an odd, to me invisible, angle. That rush of intoxication was about Roberta, and what might have happened for us in a better world—freed from the shackles of a self-cannibalizing community, we could submit to the intense waves of romantic anguish we experienced for each other. Our bodies and our souls could touch. In this situation, the intense waves of romantic anguish were a torment only to Roberta. It says what it needs to say about her that she stood (I understood later) at the odd angle she did to me so that the status quo might be maintained, and our would-be marriage remain unconsummated. As she stood at thirteen, in the midst of the camp's carnival (a one-day, one would think), a butterfly painted on either cheek, she becomes the object of perception for me she could not be then. I know that love, hate, duty, and propriety are mixed uncomfortably and unevenly in her. She cannot run from, or embrace, love. She is frozen in the face of it. There is no freedom in her soul at all. Her sharp mind is starved by a life where too much is dictated to her, too fast. She stands—takes a few steps towards the ball field—steps back again. Pushes and pulls. After a few innings of watching me in center field (the odd angle is a secure one), she and her group migrate to another resting place in the carnival. I see her back now, in a way I could not then, made limber by the mountain air and wilderness spaces, almost ready to submit with me to the crucial feast. Almost.

#36

I did not belong at camp anymore but I was still there. There were few happy moments but they all involved solitude. One night everyone had gone to a dance but I stayed behind. It started to rain furiously, a preternatural pounding such as you find in the mountains in summertime (and these were the Poconos). The rain was coming down and lit me up with magic. I put in a cassette of a band called the Cure. The music was thick, viscous, gothic, and had rain and woods and darkness in it. Everything coalesced and my solitude in a wooden cabin in the rain was perfect. A world unfolded then, and opened for me— it was about nature's dynamism, nature's combustibility. Sheets of rain pelted the circle of cabins, set on a semi-drastic hill. The circular turf which constituted the middle ground or middle area, with the flagpole at the center point, was buried beneath the onslaught. The entire spectacle forgot me perfectly— I stood outside it. The ominous Cure tune was about that darkness, of being forgotten by natural forces which could only overpower the individual. The sheets pummeled everything— into the ground, into the trees. The cabin was solid, enough that I felt protected. I could observe all that natural mightiness without getting crushed by it. The cabin and the music seduced me into a trance state. I was not caught out in it— I was lucky. A British counselor, drenched but spirited, heard the Cure and stopped to commiserate and someone foreign affirming my taste was good, added to the ambience of the moment. I saw that perfect moments must be self-created to stick. What would be generated for me (dances, sports, entertainment), from the surface-level world, would not suffice.

The final insignia bequeathed to me by the camp realm: our bunk went camping, a few hours from the camp, deeper into the Pocono mountains themselves. This meant seeing something visionary—the roads, the highways, the flatlands version of the Pocono mountains. It was about isolation—for every rest-stop, there would be a twenty-minute lull, with nothing on the roadsides at all. The hills and mountains loomed over the roads, setting in place the commanding position which mother nature held in relation to the human race here. The highway spaces had dense woods on either side of them. We were even able to stop at a roadside McDonald's, but my mind reeled at what it must have been like to settle and live here, to have this McDonald's as a habitual hang-out place, or place of occupation, as the terse teenagers behind the counter did. When the natural dwarfs encampment areas, like this one McDonald's, where we all got and consumed the customary stuffs, it creates a dynamic against language, against moving forward by speaking. Nature wins, and that's that. We could've been on the moon, except to say that our human brains were imbibing exactly what the suburbs denied—the existence, around the human race, of the absolute sublime, and of sublimity forcing back our stunted attempts at imposing on the natural. The sublime denies the human, denies language, denies situations the human race creates to demonstrate momentum. We got where we were going, that early evening, by climbing up a seemingly endless hill. We set up our sleeping bags in a secluded campground area. After a few cursory, desultory attempts at lighting a fire (our counselors being no more advanced at this than us), and long after sunset, we went to sleep. In the middle of the night, I was woken with a harsh push. Baptiste, from France, had a pack of Gauloise cigarettes. For us men of daring, it was now or never. Baptiste laughed at our stunted attempts at sophisticated inhalation—yet it didn't matter. For me, my first cigarette was an extension of acting, playing my guitar or baseball, and all the class-clowning I had down in school. I joined a continuum larger than myself, into a consciousness of bigness, expansiveness, largesse. I was attempting, without knowing or being aware of it, to translate the sublimity of the natural vistas opened around me, and us. I had accepted a token the universe, nature, and Baptiste had offered me, to reiterate what I already knew— somewhere out there was a real life waiting to be had, and the life was mine for the taking, if I dared.

#38

I often remembered kindergarten: we would nap on the second floor of a two-story schoolhouse, and every day I would be unable to sleep, hoping to fall through the floor and land on ground level. On the last day of kindergarten I thought to myself, *this is the last chance, if I don't fall through today I never will*. I didn't, and it was my first experience of imagination being disappointed by concrete reality. Now, with words and music, I saw that I could build an imaginative world in which I could always fall through the floor. It would be a place of light and laughter and play and others would be invited in. I was aware of a new hunger for which this world was the only appeasement, and the world of sports and grades and television that surrounded me was but a dim reflection of it. My guitar and my books had grandeur that cast a shadow over everything and everyone that was ordinary or broken.

It was hidden in my gut— something I felt, but was unable to define for myself. A sense of the sublime, which took physical elevation and made it metaphysical. Like in Cabin 8, it was *that* thing—the imposition of nature’s largesse on a receptive individual, who was nonetheless forced to acknowledge their respective tininess— implanted like a booster shot, under my skin. This was how I registered the Catskills. Like at sleepaway camp in the Poconos, and unlike the Philly ‘burbs, everything here was only allowed to exist if a harmonious bond was forged with nature. The human race could not live against nature here. The Catskills, where lived several friends of my family, I found warmer than the Poconos, less about spooks. Maybe. The air itself always answered my brain with a sense of mystery. When the air, charged with mystery, not menace, I hoped, seemed to move, a part of who I was fell away, and was replaced with a phantom sense of otherness. We sat in the humongous, ranch-style bungalow, antiques strewn about as athletic equipment had been at camp, and I noticed the conversation did not levitate with the air pressure. Crystals were a fetish in Woodstock, and this family displayed their wares. They were oracles, it was said. The walls of the room were full-length windows, on one side, and in the darkness all that was visible was a brief plot of shrubbery. I picked up one of the larger crystals and fingered it. I was looking for a metaphysical channel to open; I wanted my sense of otherness explained to me. I found something else. It was here, in Woodstock, New York, that I met a famous writer, relative of these family friends. I sat beside him and listened to him discourse: drunkenly, cynically, and brilliantly. He took me on a tour of an imaginative landscape that he had created; it was all music and language and he had been rewarded with fame but no money. I saw in a flash that to build the world I envisioned, I would have to give things up. The practical world could be a problem; as with this livid specimen, my giant wings might keep me from walking. My vision, if it was to continue, might take away evident signs of success and accomplishment, outward significations of approval that most people depended on. Not being normal would be a blessing and a curse. Something oracular issued from the crystals after all.

#40

I got a high from theater and from being onstage and I did many theater things in school. I was given starring roles because I was able to self-transcend and be other people effectively. Sometimes, in rehearsal, a mood would overtake me of complete giddiness, which was like being on a magic carpet. I was so completely beyond myself that I had ceased to be myself; a solid Otherness cohered in my consciousness. It was a way of flying and of being in an enriched world that had safety and surprise, stability and excitement, in it, simultaneously. I was Mortimer, in *Arsenic and Old Lace*, and there was a body in the window seat. What it meant to me to be someone else was that Mortimer was a gift to wear on top of myself, or a sword to bear of who I was which was more than just me. Every time I spoke as Mortimer, I made a choice and decided who he was: I composed. My dear ladies composed with me, and every coloration they made was made to resonate with my own colorations of inflection, movement, carriage, physiology. We would be fun to watch because who we were together, as an engine working with a script, forced us all to self-transcend and be a living, dynamic tapestry. Theater itself was an engine churning out archetypes, giving people swords to play with, gently or with great ferocity, and broadening the scope of human comprehension. When, during a performance, Martha forgot one of her lines, I crept out on a limb and improvised us out of the jam. Theater was a game to take that value: helpfulness and cooperation: and transcendentalize it into something not just a sine qua non, but the ultimate protective sword for groups of people, casts. That way, the giddiness and the magic carpets could continue ad infinitum, and safety and surprise comingle.

#41

On the way to London I picked out a book to read called *The Catcher in the Rye*. The flight was red-eye but I began to read and couldn't stop. I was reading a story of myself, of another me who was magically on a series of pages. Holden Caulfield was me and his words were born of something that I could rightfully call my own. Oppressed by phoniness, harangued by clueless authorities, spinning through a maze of arbitrary circumstances, we flew over the Atlantic and were together. For the first time, a book had given me the gift of myself, and I found myself closer to me. I read straight into my hotel room, straight into a dream-extension of what I read, and words had demonstrated to me again their coherence and potentiality for continuity. Maybe I, too, could give people back themselves.

What books can do for the adolescent mind is both complicated and simple. Complicated, because if there is a call to literature, the adolescent's response to different books is a response to literature itself— form, structure, metaphor, characterization. Simple, because what the adolescent mind probes the surface of human life to find is keys to unlock what, for every individual entity, is a sense of identity which works. The adolescent will look for him or herself, and attempt to see what a book, and what characters in books, might work as, as reflections back. *The Chocolate War*, as a work of fiction for adolescents, is more for boys— there are no female characters in the book— and more for male sensibilities which tend towards the hardboiled, or macho. Holden Caulfield had articulated many things for me, in a way that I felt comforted by— what it meant to perceive of people and situations as phony, what it was like to be on a rampage, possessed by restless energy, what it meant to shoot out arrows at (phony!) others, just for the hell of it. Holden Caulfield was a vision of unhinged wildness. *The Chocolate War* mines far different terrain. Mired in the politics of having troops, keeping them in order, and enforcing conformity, the book is dark-tinged in its portrayal of unscrupulous manipulations, and unholy alliances. I could never be enticed by an easy sense of identification with Archie Costello. The aura of menace around him, of cloak-and-dagger meanness, of exclusive privilege and equally exclusive power over others, made Costello someone I would want, ostensibly, both to reject and to find distasteful. I did. Yet, as a young man innocent in many ways, not with any cloak-and-dagger irons in the fire, I was still covetous of worldly status, and would still like to take the transcendental sense of magic in my consciousness and benefit personally from it. In other words, to sell in the world; to be a star. Archie, as a character, is someone Holden Caulfield would find to be a harangue— full of unseen, arcane angles which Holden could call phony, and not be lying. Archie, in the strict sense of the word, is a phony. The problem is, that Archie Costello has all the power in the world, even as an adolescent, that Holden Caulfield does not, at the same age. My wonted quixotic idealism wanted both— to be as transparently the enemy of phoniness as Holden, but to keep in reserve that sense of developing and consolidating power, like Archie. Holden Caulfield and Archie Costello were both hypnotic to me, just as Kurtz, from *Apocalypse Now*, formed a wedge between them as well. I found the path of the sage and the path of the dictator equally interesting. As a book, a work of literary art, *The Chocolate War* is more uncompromisingly bleak than *Catcher in the Rye*. In a general and generalized sense, the bad guy wins resoundingly. My young brain, nonetheless, found a sense of solidity in *Chocolate War*, rather than *Rye*. All those early echoes, Tookany Creek and the rest, had to reckon the hard, cold reality of the adult human world, and all its fractured landscapes. The creek, for me, had to learn to run, even where the truth was stunted, painful, and ugly. Places, it seemed to me, where just to tell the truth outright was to express all that early harmony, albeit in a minor key, as was the case in *Chocolate War*. That was the only path, past phoniness. If you could carve out a way to do it, and keep your place in the world, you would seem to have taken everything you could take from Archie Costello as well. Dimly, in the distance, was the sense of what I would write as an adult. The music— emotionally restorative— was a slightly more pressing day-to-day reality. I still remained, a child who proudly read entire books; and beyond what was required of me in school. Several years

down the line, it was amusing to be forced to read the two books at CHS— and stunned, slightly bemused, to find both Archie Costello and Holden Caulfield maligned, in an academic context, as maladroit headcases. My privatized sense, of where the creek ran, remained unmoved.

Cheltenham was a creepy town in the Cotswolds, but I had to go there to see a family grave. We stopped for tea at a teashop called Sweeney Todd's, and they were playing the song that went *stop dragging my, stop dragging my, stop dragging my heart around*. The graveyard was by a big old Gothic-looking church. Cruel April had abated; the sun shone. I could not give a dead man back to himself but maybe if I tried he would listen. *There might be another world*, I thought this as I wrote a poem and placed it by the headstone. Words could be a source of continuance between our world and the land of the dead. They could have timeless life. As I walked around London, I had a camera on my person. We walked through Hyde Park; paused on a spot overlooking the Serpentine Lake. It coalesced into my brain—the word composition for such things not being in my head yet—that the way the lake looked in the mid and foreground, people seated on benches behind it, then more lawn, had a splendor or grandiosity to it, a sense of higher balance. I snapped the picture, and was initiated into the cult of the visual. This was mostly unconscious; only it turned out to be the universe's way of telling me that pictures and images, not just words and music, were to be part of my destiny and inheritance, too. For who I was at fourteen: my first work of genuine art.

Words about music were another kind of music that could reinforce the ethos, pathos, and logos of the music. Music and words became indissolubly combined in my mind, and thus they have remained. The voices that were to be my voices, that were just poetry, were hidden from me at this time. Mom wrote poetry, and was heavily invested in the poetry world on the surface— but I sensed in that world something fake, something twee and precious, that could not reach me the way that music did. It was about living in a country that had not yet produced a body of the most stalwart poetry, the way that countries in Europe had. I defended myself against raw poetry with the sense that music had more power. Yet, hidden in the background, mountains were set in a line for me to climb, when I was ready. Keats, Wordsworth— I knew the names, but could not yet know what they meant. Keats, Wordsworth, Byron, Shelley, and Blake were not taught in American schools, the curriculum of which stopped with Whitman and Dickinson. Thus, the mountain-voyage of adopting Keats and Wordsworth as voices was stunted by a lack of encouragement from the world around me. Mom was good, but stopped with the twee voices of American verse popular at the time. She was not a mountain-range, or mountainous, kind of poet. Yet, later in the my life, when I reached Keats and Wordsworth, everything depended on me having kept my consciousness clean— having internalized the Pocono mountains, for example, and having all the brain-voyages I'd taken with N memorized, classified by subject, mood, aftermath, and the rest. The mountains in verse were implied, for me, by other circumstances in my life (my stint at Harrison Avenue, also for example, having been a Byronic one), and made it so that I always subliminally responded to the English Romantics before the books could be in my hands the right way. The music which eased me into verse the right way was partly a drug, partly a way the universe had of rewarding me, high by high, for being attentive to ebullience, to what in the soul can celebrate. The Poconos and the Catskills still moved in me. As it was, there was something in me about poetry that was proud— that if I ever chose to do poetry seriously, I could make a permanent mark at it. But the days and months of these years passed without knowing either that voices were waiting to assail me the right way, or that poetry called out to me very personally that here was a germane calling for a brain like mine. My strapped on guitar was the voice I ricocheted back to myself, and I would never guess that the conjugal vows I took with my axe were merely preparatory ones, leading me to higher, more durable mountains in the distance.

#45

N was the girl with the olive skin. We continued to dance around each other, loving but not committing ourselves. At a party at someone's house in Elkins Park, we went outside together and my hands were gripped by something and they went all over her. It was the sheer compulsion to take the spiritual hunger I felt to reach her, to become a part of her, and make it physical. My body forced my soul to take account of it, to understand the essentiality of body-soul unity; and N, who was a real sister to me, was being compelled to join me, and to channel what work our brains always did together, and make them flesh. The heat of the moment, my hands on her back (she was wearing a long, blue, flowing dress), on her stomach, legs, insides of her thighs, was incredibly intense, took us into an absolute, incisively hewn present, which had eternity woven into it. We were becoming more real than we ever had before; our bodies had followed our brains into unity. We sat on steps, leading into someone's yard, and it went on and on. N did not resist; she submitted. Yet it was with a sense of regret, of understanding what my hands were doing, but not really embracing the burning sense of urgency which was pulsing through them. We had our way of becoming one, of being as unified as we could be: brother-sister, husband-wife, lover-lover. N did not wither, but nothing ardent manifested from her own hands, which sat demurely in her lap. It was a warm spring night. Nature itself was a big wave and it continued to course through me into her skin. I had no me, I was permeated by the feeling of two-in-one. Yet, when I called the next day, N would not commit to it ever happening again, or even to continue going out. She needed to hit me with the lightning or her autonomy, with the contradictory knowledge that her own self-contained unity was adequate to nourish her. I had an intimation that this was to be my life: full of beautiful, difficult women. N was the first and an archetype that remains visible to me when I mate, or even meet, another beautiful, difficult woman that is for me. I have a muse, she is like this: recalcitrant and blue.

A kind of madness would not let me focus only on N. There were other parties and other girls: always the same wave, frisson, feeling of two-in-one. I was even able to achieve this feeling with Roberta Hirst. When I slow-danced with Roberta at parties and dances, which had to be special— it didn't happen often— yet when it did, my hands on her waist created, for me, an internal overflow of scintillating electrical energy I was overtaken by. I channeled all of my emotional self into my hands, and felt— would've said if I didn't— a sense of submission, backwards moving electrical energy, on the other side, from her lower back. Our wave together was three minutes of intense ecstasy. It would take many years to learn that this wave, powerful as it was, was short-lived. But contact with the feeling of this wave had so much of bliss in it that I sought it out at every opportunity, and grew petulant when forced to live without it. It only seemed to work on girls that were beautiful; otherwise I felt nothing. Lack of control was desirable but led me into non-continuity. What echoes of Tookany Creek were in this feeling created a hunger that was not to be assuaged; unlike music and words, this wave could not be relied upon, and the focus I felt for music and words was dissipated here. It was my misfortune to learn that continuance, as applied to art, could actively detract from continuance in other situations and on other levels.

#47

Winter stars twinkled above another Recreation Center in Elkins Park. I had walked out of the party, dejected, deflated by too many ups and downs, social snafus. N had seen me making a blatant pass at someone else. Yet N and I were by no means officially an item. N was swinging on the swing set; I joined her. I wanted to commiserate with her at how superficial the whole thing was— people wearing masks, playing roles, no one being real with anyone else. I wanted to recalibrate my entire consciousness around N, and the state of sacred union, of oneness, we often achieved. I was unaware that N had seen the pass being made, not botched but only half-accepted. And, to her, a betrayal, of the sense of oneness we had together when we did our phone benders. N was always betrayed by the physical. So, she swung, under the eerie yellow-orange outside lights, weak against all the encroaching darkness, the parking lot and the stars. I noticed: she wasn't answering me the right way. I said, "Don't you think this party is...", and she cut in "no, I don't. I'm going back inside," leaving me to swing by myself. When I followed her in, in a few minutes, it was with the hollowed-out sense of having been broken, having seen oneness cut in half. There was the horror of it. The large, cavernous reception area led to several equally large, cavernous room spaces, empty, dark, and forbidding at this time of night, where I decided to spend a few minutes regrouping. Through an open door, I watched N make her usual party rounds. My date for the night was sequestered in one spot, and hadn't moved. I wanted to be somewhere else. Yet the demands of the evening required that I emerge and begin to do my own rounds. So, getting up my gets, I shut the door behind me (to all that wilderness) and walked straight over to the piano, where a bunch of random kids were huddled. The tunes I plonked out were simple ones, and I didn't sing along. I shyly approached my date and was evenly accepted. She had no heaviness for me the way N did, who would not speak to me for the rest of the night. But she liked her own body and the power it gave her. I myself should not, perhaps, have been a prisoner of the physical, but I was. I desired women physically in a way I could not hide. I wanted a shared oneness which was all-consuming. And my soul could only wish that there, under those stars, with light traffic rolling by on Old York Road, I could take N to the place where she might want what I wanted, and we could be all-consuming with each other, and nothing in us, physical or otherwise, could be anything but joined forever.

That year, N wrote a long letter in my yearbook, that ended with *I love you*. I could sense, even then, that this *I love you* came from a much different place than other kids' effusions; this was a bittersweet testimony, not to placid or innocent attachment, but to strife, hardship, misunderstanding, piercing ecstasies and equally piercing sorrows. It was from an artist to an artist; it bore the stamp of aesthetic appreciation. N had reached down into the depths of her soul and her words had the weight of big breakers. I felt them land on me even as I tried to avert them. Yet, outwardly, we still wrestled; attaching, detaching, attaching again. What we wanted was freshness all the time, and each seemingly permanent detachment made coming together again more piquant. It was the friction of hard sex prolonged over time; we were more perverse and more subtle than we knew.

#49

N and I found ourselves involved in something a little evil. N introduced a third party into our equation, specifically to heighten tension, underline drama, mix things up. He was innocent of our perversity and did not know he was being used. N took great pleasure in playing Catherine Earnshaw; we were to fight fiercely for the honor of her favor. This we did; however, I turned the tables on her by withdrawing my pledged affection. I did this purely to add interest to a scenario that was too soap opera even for me. Blood had been spilt; the third party was wounded by all of these intrigues. Somehow this blood stained us, and we were left with stricken consciences. The total effect was to cut off the continuance of the pure waves that passed between us. The construct of our togetherness vanished for the time being, to be returned to (necessarily with less perversity) later.

#50

Through a strange process of mirroring, my Dad, also, found himself in a dalliance marked by perversity and thrill-seeking. He was disgruntled, living in a big house with a woman who had ceased to turn him on. The house was splintered; what began festively had now been abraded into a mere veneer of bourgeois success. Dad was on his own, pursuing a woman ten years his junior. She was married with two children, and she would bring them over and the pair would fondle while we all looked on aghast. This took considerable time to pick up steam. Initially, it was easy to sweep under the rug; these visits were infrequent. Yet, seeds of discontent had been planted; my Dad smelled new blood, and it drove him into despairs of sensual avarice. I was too young to see the storm-clouds for what they were; I did not understand adultery, what it meant, how it could destroy lives. What was brewing made the games I played with N look very tame indeed.

There was Ted and I and even though we were not of the same family somehow we shared blood. We each rebelled against our father by being like the others' father: mine was brutally masculine, gross, muscular and gruff; Ted's was literary, effete, cultured and flirtatious. When Ted stayed over the doomed festive house, which was most weekends for two years, my Dad abused him mercilessly and Ted enjoyed it. Dad made Ted call him *your highness*, picked on Ted for getting rejected by popular girls, lectured him on sex-smells at midnight when we tried to watch *Saturday Night Live*, and made his own supremacy clear at each available juncture. He was feeding Ted's soul with the stuff of animal strength and it was a kind of intoxicant for Ted to imbibe; Ted was my straight man but was being fertilized for a kind of rebirth as an unrepentant, square-jawed jock. Moreover, the persona Ted was developing had a hinge towards the African-American side of things. He was down; he was his own version of a homeboy. The music he tended to favor was not unlike what I did: classic rock, a smattering of what later developed into alternative rock, too. But the Ted posture was about strong, tough, and not silent but leaning towards silence. Homeboy time. Even if rap, hip-hop and R & B held no particular distinction for him. My father worked and taught among blacks for the entirety of his career in the Philadelphia School District. A tough-guy persona was essential for him, as it would be for me, for similar reasons, later. But for then, for Ted and I, our blood was crossed.

The weekend nights we went ice skating at the Old York Road Ice Skating Rink, semi-adjacent to Elkins Park Square, also on Old York Road, weren't much for Ted and I: just something to do. Neither of us could ice skate that much. But there was a DJ playing good music over the PA, and taking requests, and a lot of Cheltenham kids hung out at the rink on weekends, so it was a chance to see and be seen. One uneventful ice skating night, I tumbled onto my ass as usual, and rose to see a girl, sitting in a clump of kids, on the bleachers, staring fixedly at me. My next pass, I got in a good look at her, and saw the spell was holding: she was still staring. She was a dirty blonde, thick-set build, with very full lips, a wide mouth, and wearing a dark green winter hat. I made up my mind: my next pass, I was going to stare as fixedly at her as she was at me. Ted was floating in the environs somewhere, and didn't know what was going on. So, here I came, looking at the girl in the green winter hat I'd never seen before, who seemed to want a piece of my action. I was close enough to make my presence known to her; we locked eyes; and what I saw in the delicate blue eyes was a sense of being startled, shocked into awareness somehow. Only, there was something so raw, so frank in them that I had to look away. My next, and final pass for the time being, the same thing happened. My eyes were startled, in an animal way, by how startled, how riveted her own eyes were, and I found myself unable to prolong contact. As Ted and I hung in the changing room, which had picnic tables and benches in it and doubled as a hang out space, I relayed to Ted, not without pride, what had happened. Ted was a reasonable, rather than a jealous type, but shy. So, the mysterious dirty blonde sat with her friends still, unmolested by us. Edward, our close acquaintance, a year older than us but kind, and conversant with almost everyone at the rink, was someone I could consult, so I did. I pointed her out, and he said, "Oh, that's Nicole. Do you know her?" "No, I was just curious. Thanks, Eddie." He chuckled, and left us alone, close acquaintanceship not guaranteeing me any more than that. I had wild hopes that Nicole would burst dramatically into the hang-out room with her friends, and perhaps propose marriage to me. When the gaggle of kids including Nicole, who had all been bleacher-hounding, left, they walked past us, down the steps and out. Nicole did not venture a final glance. For several months after that, I hoped Ted and I would see Nicole at the rink, but we did not. It was a lesson in the live-wire nature of desire, as it lives between people— how flames both begin to burn and are extinguished, out of nowhere, at the behest of forces no one really understands. Ted, that night, did his rounds, building a solid structure which would enable him to become a popular kid at CHS. I lit somebody on fire, but in such a way that all that could come from it was subsumed beneath implacable surfaces. Somewhere, I felt instinctively, was the key to the mystery I was looking for. Even if finding that key meant riding confusing, misleading, and/or agonizing waves.

What the matrix structure of the Old York Road Ice Skating Rink held for us kiddies— as has been said, a place to see and be seen. Ted and I were sad to watch on the ice. But quirks emerged during our time there— the appearance of strange kids, and strange situations, from other places. Like Nicole. It wasn't long after Nicole that a new, mini-epoch began at the rink, based on the manifestation of another figurehead, (they said) from Abington. Josie was a pretty, lank-haired blonde with a semi-mottled complexion. Like Nicole, she liked to sit on the bleachers with her Abington buddies. Word reached us that, unlike Nicole, Josie was loose. If you could get her down the stairs, into the parking lot, over past the big misshapen rock which was rather uselessly placed between the rink and the back of Elkins Park Square, into the no-man's-land area where older kids liked to hang, anything might happen. I wanted a shot at Josie, too. As was de rigueur, Edward was our go-between. I had faith that he could power-broker anything. I called to him, on a night in March getting slightly too warm to still be at the rink, "Eddie, can I talk to you for a minute?" "What's up, Foley?" "Is this thing about that Josie girl from Abington really true?" "I don't know. I don't know her that well." "You know what people are saying." "Sure I do, but there's nothing too definite about what I've been told." I was losing him. I had already semi-crossed a line Edward had set in place about what you (whoever you were, and however he ranked you) were allowed to extort, as precious data, from him. I had to act fast. "I want to meet Josie, Eddie. Can you help me?" "C'mon, Foley. That stuff doesn't come cheap. Remember, I don't know you too well, either." Next gambit: "Alright, listen, Eddie. Didn't you say earlier that you have a paper to write for Langhorne?" He nodded. "I'll write it for you. If you'll introduce me to Josie, I'll write your Langhorne paper. You know I can." "Really, Foley?" "That's right, Eddie." "Alright, give me half an hour. I'll see what I can do." The half hour wait was an itchy one. Ted was on an unstoppable roll. He'd lined up an impressive array of conquests. Mostly guys, mostly about how he was going to be situated. I was neglecting to do that task, because it just wasn't in me to do it. Whatever was going to happen at CHS, I was ready to wing it. After ending the half hour with ten minutes of stumble-across-the-ice, I walked into the changing room to find Edward sitting there with Josie. "Josie, this is Adam Foley. Foley, call me tomorrow night, I'll give you the assignment." "You got it, Eddie." I got terrible stomach butterflies; I thought I might vomit. I thought meeting Josie would be an ebullient, light-on-it's-feet kind of production. Josie's vibe up close was very heavy. I mumbled a few random pleasantries. Josie said, "Are you OK? You seem a little tense." I was extremely tense. "No, just recovering from falling on my ass out there." "Do you want to go for a walk?" "OK." Down the stairs we went, out into the lot. "Here's what I'm going to help you with, Adam Foley. Here's what you need. You think you know who girls are— you think you know what girls want. This is not about us being friends or not friends. You sought me out, here I am, but I'm going to give you my diagnosis." We were behind the big stupid rock— none of the older kids was around. "Here— you get to kiss me one time, no tongue." As was incredible to me, I found myself momentarily lip-locked with Josie. A group of older kids, twenty yards away, behind Elkins Park Square, were moving towards us. The thing had to end very fast. The kiss was over. "Now, here's who you are. You're the guy who always sticks out like a sore thumb wherever you go. You're the one who wants to do everything your way. You think you're special. What I have to tell you is this— you are special, Adam, but in this world not everyone likes that. Your friend goes out of his way to make

himself not special. You need to learn from us— you can't always be exactly who you want. Eddie said, you're a year younger than us. When you get to where we are, you better understand that the more you stick out, the more you're a target. So, here's how you pay me back." We went over to Hillary's in the Square; I bought her an ice cream cone. She ate it quickly, standing in the Square. Then, she took my hand, led me back to the rink. Even before the top of the stairs, she disappeared into a group of Abington kids. Had I learned my lesson? Sort of. I associated being special with the magic of words and music. I wasn't a target yet, except maybe with Dad. Who knew? Now, I had an extra paper to write. I would try, for Eddie and Langhorne, to make it a special one.

We had many adventures, Ted and I, but the roles we played were always the same. I was Quixote to Ted's Sancho Panza. If we were pelted with snowballs or pelting others with snowballs, staring at girls or being stared at by girls, making prank calls or getting calls from friends, always it was my job to instigate the action, be a man of daring, direct our movements. Ted would consolidate our activity, provide focus. He was the solid man. When I would push things too far, he'd reign me in. We grew into adolescence as an odd couple par excellence; Ted quiet, me raging, Ted pliant, me baiting. However much of my father's dominance Ted internalized, I was still able to steer things when I wanted to. Unlike N, Ted had no taste for self-made drama; things (me included) came to him. There was a long time in which neither of us could imagine a withdrawal for any reason. One night, we were talking to two grande dames from our class on the phone. The blonde happened to live at Oak Summit Apartments, a stone's throw from Harrison Avenue. The brunette was a particular favorite of Ted's. The conversation grew festive—as the saying goes, the vibe was right. They invited Ted and I over to Oak Summit. It was around 10 pm on a Friday night; not, Ted and I thought hopefully, too late to saunter over there, like the gentlemen of leisure we were. Our pre-adventure huddle was simple, but intense—if this was, finally, going to be orgy time, let's put our ducks in a row. I would take the blonde, and Ted would take the brunette. No fuss, no muss. We were giddy with how easy it was going to be; and that crowning glory was in the air, how we would return as conquering heroes to Cedarbrook Middle School. We would emerge as middle school slum lords; we would hand down laws. Only one piddling obstacle stood in our way, between us and our Manifest Destiny; my Father. Too sublime to give in too easily, we avoided him for an extra ten minutes, who sat in the kitchen, balancing his checkbook. But, soldiers of destiny we were (also), the mountain had to be climbed. Of course, good old Dad had a hearty laugh at our enterprise. The proposal offered was immaculate, and immaculately phrased; the answer was a resolute no. When we were back in the den, huddled around the TV again, Ted could only remark that if it as 7 or 8, he might've let us go. At 10, the lights for that sort of thing went out for kids our age. We pulled the one move we could pull, and called Oak Summit again. It was with sincerest regrets that we announced we'd been shanghaied away from what could've been gratifying for us all. We hoped we could be forgiven. Our two compadres understood completely, and huddled around their own TV. We knew then—my Dad could not remain a Freston figure for us forever. Tyranny would end, oppression be cut off, and all the pleasure that was our due would migrate right into our laps. All we had to do was be patient. And watch for the right windmills.

Camp had remained the same: it was all sports, ball-sweat, and male camaraderie. I had become an artist and needed to be nurtured. My cabin was full of cut-ups and I was victimized and it was a nadir in my life. Yet I was tough enough that they couldn't beat me up. There was, thus, no question of physical abuse. I was forced to bear the awkwardness of having once been a jock, and then moved on. Everyone knew this, so their jibes, as though I were an established geek, fell flat. I could still swing a baseball bat like a pro, and that was that. I also played a trump card one night: my middle-school yearbook was passed around, and everyone saw the deep-hewn inscription from N. My biggest enemies in the cabin spat: they were bitter. Even at a young age, I could attest to being a loved man, a man passing through two-thirds of a marriage. N dignified myself and my life to a substantial extent, and for that, I would always be grateful. Even as I hoped I hadn't sullied our intimacy by letting my bunk-mates experience the shock and awe of her inscription. My other relief-valve was a stage in a Recreation Hall on which I set up my gear, and I would press the distortion button on my Peavey and empty myself completely, thinking of N. There were bats nested in the ceiling and a battered piano and it was the only congenial place on the camp grounds where my solitude was real. Looking at the nested bats, hanging up in a line, I felt a sense of kinship with a place left raw, not untouched by man, but not too touched either. The Rec Hall was a dilapidated mess of sodden, splinter-granting wood, culminating in a slanted, tent-like roof like a country church. On a day to day basis, it was mostly unused, even as it was flanked, on either side, by a wood-shop and a metal-shop space. Tony, the counselor in charge of wood-shop, would sometimes peek through one of the open windows to comment on something I'd played. As a kid who only intermittently took lessons, I knew some ground-level music theory and no more. This, Tony spotted. Random kids came in to listen and it might as well have been an activity that could be signed up for like volleyball or kayaking. A kid willing to be that dogged and that alone was a sort of freak show. The kids got a taste of continuance (stinging phrases, me practicing finger vibrato, over and over) and I was shadow-bracketed, as ever, there.

#56

Dad was becoming unsettled and unsettling. Frequent inexplicable rages degenerated into depressions; fits of distemper gave way to a kind of ecstasy, self-contained and silent. Had I been an adult, the situation would've been obvious to discern; Dad's got a new girlfriend. Responsibilities had been put on the backburner; two children and a wife had been secretly toppled in favor of fresh, feverous fucking. The mood of the house became bullet-riddled; everything he did was a shot, a substantiation of newly kindled potency. I was starting high school and do not remember feeling sanguine. There was an excitement to Dad's new heightened sensibility, but it was the excitement of grasped-for risk; it had no stability in it, and as I walked the halls of this new school I had nothing to hold onto. I tried to mirror Dad's excitement but my own potency felt shrunken by pain and the usual frustrations of being a freshman. On my tie-dye: Jimi Hendrix.

#57

We had gone, briefly, to Disney World. Dad's ferment was obvious, but he muzzled it. One night, we were about to go to Epcot Center and I had the TV on. I saw a picture of a downed plane and the name of one of my then-heroes. I thought, of course, that he had been killed, and I entered a strange zone. I was sucked up into what felt like a void: my senses, materially unaltered, felt spiritually different, as if I was disconnected from the jubilant scenes that passed before my eyes (babies, families, six foot smiling rodents). Epcot was spaced, from attraction to attraction, as though it could be hills, small inclines, or flat terrain at any moment. Crowds of people moved in random formations in all directions, while other crowds stood and stared at what was in the enclosure areas. I was sucked up, from the inside out, into a space of non-being, where I reflected back a sense of there-ness which I did not feel. From being in a foreign place, among this many foreign bodies, I felt my consciousness lifting upwards and plunging downwards at the same time. Epcot was about space, and space games, and I moved into line with a space I had never felt before, and could not identify. Though it later turned out that it wasn't my hero who died, the other world I had entered, a void world, impressed me with its force and negative vivacity. Negativity, where this realm was concerned, was not the same as emotional depression; it was alienation from the condition of bodily awareness, and a realization of fluidities amidst seeming solidities. It was a taste of real death, or life-in-death.

A superficial calm held the tenuous balance of things for a while. I went on long walks to buy guitar strings, listening to Pink Floyd bootlegs. One morning I overslept and was late for science class. I did not realize it, but I was afraid to wake up. There were too many changes in the air and I could not rest. Ted was not in any of my classes; neither was N. CHS was ugly and cavernous. It was also, overwhelmingly, for someone who had not prepared for it the right way, and from the perspective of a still-little freshman kid, a mess. I felt deprived of security and safety. My youth assured that I did not realize, or half-realized I had these feelings. I pushed myself through the days on waves of instinct. I imitated, to an extent, Dad's gruffness; I sneered like he did; I had a hard shell. I played my guitar so long and so intensely that my calloused cuticles bulged. This was when I finally got the hang of finger vibrato, the stumbling block that stops competent guitarists from becoming good. The sound of a sustained, vibrato-laden note was my sound: a cry in the dark. One night, Dad came into my room later than usual. It was his habit to discourse, and I was his captive audience. He was bright; I listened. Tonight, he openly confessed to having a new girlfriend. She was "a little magic". She was younger, had two kids. She was the woman he'd been groping over the summer. I was left to piece these things together. Dad insinuated that a move was imminent; as things developed, this woman's magic would permeate, transform, and refurbish our lives. What could I say? Dad was eager for me to meet this magician, this enchantress. A date was set; we would have dinner, and I would see. There was no room to argue or maneuver, to dissuade. This was a *fait accompli*, a springboard to a higher level, rather than a descent into cruelty and greed. I wanted to believe Dad's rhetoric rather than incur his ire, so I acquiesced. Things did not feel very magical. This was more to push through.

Our dinner with the enchantress had the feel of a covert operation. We snuck out when no one was looking. It was a brisk night in early autumn; all light had vanished as we pulled into the parking lot of a Friday's-type joint. By this time, I had been allotted the role of father to my father; I was to oversee his actions, approve them, endure his impetuosity and confer forbearance on his enterprise. She was there; a slight, pretty lady in her early thirties. Her mouth, I noticed immediately, never closed; not because she was talking, but because she was perpetually startled, innocently shocked by everything. Just as I was overseeing Dad, he was overseeing her; manipulating her innocence into compliance, overwhelming her insecurities with certitude. He sat in the booth next to her, rather than across from her, and his hands weaved a determined path over all her pliant skin. He was playing to win. As of that night, that meal, all pretenses of normalcy and calm were dropped. Once I had conferred my (suddenly papal) blessing, my father's dynamism was terrific. We would move, he and I, into a new house with the enchantress and her two kids. Before I knew it the thing was arranged; a new house was waiting, of the same design, and right around the corner from the old one on Harrison. The enchantress left her husband and my dad left his wife and their baby. This cyclone of activity insured that Dad and the enchantress never really got to know each other. The enchantress and I barely spoke at all. She was not bright; her lure was all physical. She was afraid of me like she was afraid of everything else. Dad held me to my paternal role. He professed to need me there as overseer and I rationalized everything. Festive had given way to festering.

In the new house I had two small rooms: a bedroom and a “playroom” that I used for music. Importantly, however, the new house was uncarpeted, raw, wood-floored, under-furnished. It was also unwashed, grungy with soot and ash. The festive sense of airy expansiveness was replaced with a sense of dread and foreboding. However big the house was, I was always in Dad’s line of fire; he was undistracted, as he had been before, by others, and was even more morose than usual. This meant that my two or three or four nights a week there were fearful ones. Subconsciously, I began to move myself, and my physiology, back to Old Farm Road, now that the age of luxuriance was collapsed. The situation with Dad and his ferocious temper was a ticking time-bomb, especially as I did have a worthwhile place to retreat to. For that moment’s duration, I had a Les Paul and insomnia and I would pace and play with no amp into the wee hours. It became known at Cheltenham that I was a guitar player and soon older kids were interested in me. Before long I was in a band. The other guys were older and had cars. I was a freshman and looked even younger. Yet I became more or less the leader. We had to pick songs that we could sing: *Smithereens*, *After Midnight* (the real, fast version, not the beer commercial), but I had to convince them I could sing *Whipping Post*, well past my range. As with Ted, I became the Quixote, mad musical scientist. This was my first band but I knew instinctively our time together wouldn’t be long. I learned that not everyone who plays has any real commitment to playing; some just do it to be cool, or because it’s there, or to feel special. So I decided to give them only half of me; that’s what I did, which put me, again, at least sometimes, on terra firma, in the driver’s seat of my life.

#61

A sense of things not being right manifested in the new house immediately. I had nothing to say to the enchantress or her children; they had nothing to say to me. Dad's gaiety became shrill and forced. I had no good advice for him; he had given me a role I could not begin to fulfill. Within six weeks, the enchantress and her children were gone, back to the husband and father they had abandoned. Dad and I were alone in a creepy house, a shadow of the one we had so lately left. Dad's reaction to this stunning failure was to ape superiority; that though everything had gone wrong it was not his responsibility. Others had let him down. He had always been flinty; he became flintier. I was overwhelmed by the feeling of having been involved in a spectacular mess; I felt and shared Dad's criminality, which he himself had (to and for himself) abjured. I bore the burdens that he would not.

Ted and I went to see *Dead Again* in Jenkintown. Continuance had been broken; we were in high school and had no classes together and did not see each other every weekend. Moreover, as was predictable, Ted took more to CHS like a fish to water than I did. He'd made the right plans. Dad picked us up from the theater and tried to establish some of the old master/slave rapport with Ted. It didn't work; Ted played along, but the charm of the festive house had been overtaken by general creepiness and the feeling wasn't the same. Ted felt free to stand up for himself. Once we were home for the night, I could see that Ted wanted to leave. There were ghosts and echoes here but not like Mill Road; these were ghosts created by lust, inconsideration, precipitance, and madness. Dad's new thing was to posit the whole experience as having been "no big deal"; he had no notion that others had been forced to experience anguish, on his behalf and at his behest. As a tangent: Dad had a brother who was not significant, to him or me. He would show up for short periods of time: six months here, a year there, and then disappear again. However, he came to the new house with a prophecy. He had been to a psychic; the psychic had guessed my name, and predicted that I would soon reject Dad forever, and that if he wanted to salvage anything, he had better hurry up. It took a lot of nerve for my uncle to say this with both Dad and I sitting right there, but he did. Dad shrugged; I registered little on the surface; but it hit close to home, and I made quick to leave the kitchen. I went down to my room and turned on the radio; I heard *Great Gig in the Sky*, at the exact moment where a voice says, *if you can hear me say whisper, you're dying*. It was New Year's Eve, 1991.

By February, Dad and I were in an apartment at Oak Summit Apartments on Easton Road, a half-mile from the two houses. It was a drab space with low ceilings, narrow windows, and wooden floors. Moreover, the smallness and squatness of the place pandered to Dad's compulsion to head-hunt and abuse. There was no way to avoid him now. His abuse-routes became sure-handed. Even as the safety valve of Old Farm Road held, making my weeks a rollercoaster to ride, or a maelstrom to fall into. I had no way of knowing— I was in luck. Mom had already decided that as per Dad's disturbing behavior, if I decided to seek permanent shelter at Old Farm Road, I would not be forced to return to the Oak Summit apartment, where Dad's ubiquity imposed itself on me most severely. Mom had a sense of compassion that was benevolent in my direction. She was monitoring the situation closely. Dad slept a lot. Though I never saw her, the enchantress made frequent nocturnal visits. Catastrophe had left Dad's libido intact; she was apparently similar. One night, Dad had a friend over and they commenced to make fun of my musical aspirations. If I followed music through, they said, I'd wind up working in a gas station. I'd be a complete flop and failure, an embarrassment, in the world. This was said as a quip and caused great hilarity between the two thugs. I was devastated, not realizing the incredible cowardice and cruelty of disappointed, inappropriately honest, men. I was not generally prone to tears, but I, privately, wept bitterly. I felt like I'd been hit by a typhoon, and I had. In a way, though, this was good. It gave momentum to something that was building inside of me. I saw the absurdity of being my father's father and his whipping boy as well. Something had to be done, but I didn't know what. The sense of responsibility I had towards Dad remained. Winter slogged on.

It was around the time of Dad's birthday: April 28. I asked him what he wanted; he said he didn't know. He suggested we go to a bookstore and he'd pick something out. We went to a bookstore and he didn't pick anything out. The next day was April 28 and I didn't have a present for him. He flew into a rage; I was hit with a typhoon again. *You make me feel like shit*, he bellowed. Only, rage made him happy and secure. He was fine. I was the one who felt like shit. I was a father who couldn't please an adolescent son who was my father. Things were nearing a peak of misery; for the first time in my life, I was hitting a wall that I knew I could never get over. Something major had to change, or damages would start to become irreparable. How could I play, develop, grow, in an atmosphere like this? Dad would be in my face, willy-nilly; my guitar needed to be actively courted, continually pursued. I would either be abused or leave. The path of my departure was free. Ted's birthday, also, was in early May, and he had a party. Ted's house on Woodlawn Avenue had a front façade of windows which ran the length of the house, which was not set on a hill but also had a large white shed attendant on the backyard. It was my fate, in a year's time, as has been mentioned, to smoke pot in that vicinity for the first time. Woodlawn Avenue, as privatized as my stretch of Mill Road which was not far away (though Mill Road was only a memory then), did a rustic trick, inside and outside of Ted's house, of making everything crepuscular. A sunset realm. N was there, in shorts and a tee-shirt. Everyone was watching *Die Hard* but I put my left hand on N's bare right knee. It was very forward and she didn't resist. The spring twilight had enchanted us. The creek ran. Fate had decreed, in N's acceptance of my hand, that I would gain, finally, a girlfriend, and lose a father. The party would end but she was mine. I decided; I would never go back to Dad's apartment again. My Mom had been waiting patiently for me to see through his posturing; now, I did. I knew all this while everyone watched the movie and N smiled in her esoteric way. That Sunday, Dad called to ask when I'd be coming home, but it was too late. The next time I entered Dad's apartment, it was to collect my stuff; he wasn't even there. I was ready to live on Old Farm Road with Mom, ready to be young again and to live however I wanted, without fear of random senseless typhoons blowing me over. The credits rolled; Ted shot me a look of clean dirtiness. This was the end of my beginning; in my beginning was no end.

Several years later, on a semester break from college, I sat with N by Tookany Creek. Across the stream, up the slope, across also the gravel path, I saw the backyard, with shed, which had been mine when I lived on Mill Road. I said to N, “Do you feel any different now than when we first met? Do you like your life better?” N deliberated, smoothing the grass plots beneath her fingers, then answered, “Yeah. I would say I do. I have to keep changing, though. The circumstances of my life won’t allow me to stay still.” The stillness of the creek hadn’t changed. I couldn’t think of what to say. N also bothered to add, “I think you know what I mean.” I did, and said, “Of course, but being here is nice for me. It’s nice to know that some things don’t change.” N giggled, “Remember, Adam, this is your old ‘hood, not mine. I don’t relate to it the way you do.” We sat. When we were about ready to go (I was driving), I said to N, “There’s one last thing I want to say before we leave. I want you to admit that the way we talk hasn’t changed that much over the years. We still talk like we did when we were kids. And I have no desire to keep anything the same, but I want you to know that I’ll always have a place in my heart for you, N. You were the one who opened up my head to a wider vision of reality. You made it possible for me to see beyond myself. You were the right kind of witch to teach me the lesson that all things are connected, and that I could connect to whatever I wanted to. And if I’m dramatizing, I hope you’ll forgive me.” We both laughed. N held my hand. “Here’s what to remember about me, Adam. I’m a witch, and my witchcraft is about destroying boundary lines. The boundary lines between us can never be that pronounced. Even if you never get quite what you want from me, which you don’t. Think of us together as having a space for two souls which only we fit into. After that, the mystery has to remain.” We laughed again. Then, we stood for a minute, the creek mildly but steadily singing its approval, and then drove off, into the sunset.

