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# Liner Notes

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**Liner Notes**

**by**

**Lou Alano**

A thesis submitted to the Department of English  
of the State University of New York College at Brockport,  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

**Master of Arts**

**November 4, 2001**

Liner Notes  
by Lou Alano

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## Abstract

For most of my adult life, my primary mode of artistic expression has been songwriting. Liner Notes consists of one part song lyrics, one part reminiscence on the events that sparked the songs, and one part commentary on the songwriting craft itself. Even the most successful song lyrics will "fall flat" when divorced from their music, and the lyrics herein will probably suffer a similar fate. What they lack in poetic refinement, I hope they make up for in their honesty, humor, and musicality. The memoirs have been shaped by my reading of numerous contemporary writers who work in multiple genres, most often in memoir and poetry. An examination of what motivates these writers, and how "meaningful" they view their own lives, comprises the majority of the introduction. The examining of the craft, and the re-examining of my past, have been undertaken with hopes that a "fountain of creativity" might be discovered.

in memory of  
Linda Scott  
and  
Danny Checkovich:  
two unfinished lives,  
two unfinished songs

and with deepest gratitude to  
Judith Kitchen

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## Destination Unknown: an Introduction

Miss Palermo, my fourth-grade music teacher, started class one day by asking which of her pupils had a piano at home. Along with a few others, I raised my hand, only to find Miss P soon conferring with my mom about my commencing piano lessons. I had no interest in learning the piano, or anything else artistic, and can remember crying at the prospect.

Nor did my attitude change, once the prospect became a reality. Time spent practicing was time lost for playing tag, dodgeball, kickball, four-square, and scores of other athletic competitions--competitions I find irresistible even to this day. Competitions that were going on right across the street, the sounds of bodies in hypermotion all too clear, while my own body sat perfectly still, except for my fingers. The resulting joyless, mechanical "music" must have belied my true desires. But joyless or not, for the next two years I would practice for at least thirty minutes a day, seven days a week, right after dinner, dutifully mastering my scales and arpeggios, plowing through the first three books of the John Thompson series, and performing for

whomever my parents or teacher, Mr. Henry Ferrante, wanted to impress. Joyless or not, those young, malleable fingers quickly acquired a remarkable degree of agility and speed, and my recitals inevitably produced hearty rounds of applause. What I remember most vividly, though, are the mistakes.

Those nightly sessions of deprived playtime did have one redeeming aspect: occasionally, Dad would forget that Wednesday night was lesson night. After work, he'd end up in one or another bar, tying one on, and tying up the family car in the process. If he wasn't home by six, Mom and I would start walking, from our home on Saxton St., down two or three miles on Jay, in order to make it to Mr. Ferrante's by seven. Then, after the half-hour lesson, we'd walk the same route back home. Jay Street had a carnival-like atmosphere, with its grocery stores, tailor shop, funeral home, movie theater, soda pop factory, multicolored storefronts and billboards, and even a live chicken store, where I once watched in horror as my grandma did the "honors" of slicing the neck of her pick-of-the-day. My animated revulsion spelled the end for that particular hands-on, old-world tradition, at least in my presence. Most of the shopkeepers, and many of the interspersed residents, knew Mom and Gram by name (Isabel and Frances), and some probably even understood why we were walking. But no



matter, this walk extended well beyond the one-block radius I was allowed to wander solo, and it gave me Mom all to myself, my brother and sister left to deal with Dad's alcohol-induced orneriness, once he finally made it home, with only Gram as a buffer.

The problem with my early musical training, I'm convinced, was the disparity between the music I loved and the music I was studying. I loved Top Forty radio, and often spent half the night with a transistor radio under my pillow. But after two years of John Thompson, the closest I'd come to a familiar tune was the very last piece I'd mastered: "Hungarian Rhapsodie No.2, by Franz Liszt (who coincidentally shares my birthday). This particular opus had already become a staple in Looney Tunes chase scenes, but could serve as party gag material at best. Ten years later, when I came across my old lesson books, I discovered that Mr. Ferrante had actually begun teaching me to play from jazz heads (as found in fake books) during our final month of lessons. Another year with him and I think I'd be a professional jazz musician today.

Instead, as soon as we moved from the city to the suburbs, too far to walk when necessary, I was given a reprieve. Almost ten years would pass before I would feel sufficiently interested to seek out lessons on my own. Practice as I would from then on, that decade of

musical dormancy permanently relegated me to "don't quit your day job" proficiency. Lucky the kids I never had, for they wouldn't have been released from their own musical training with only two years under their belt, no matter how they felt about it.

My renewed relationship with the piano began in my sophomore year of college, while living in a dormitory with a piano in the basement. My roommate, Steve Kesten, played some decent blues, and one night wheeled that piano into the elevator, up three floors, and into our room, where it stayed for the rest of the semester. Portable electronic keyboards were still a few years in the future, so we'd pulled off a major coup. I came across a Judy Collins songbook filled with transcriptions of the actual recorded piano parts from her albums, instead of the usual simplified versions. Here, finally, was music I could learn that actually meant something to me.

Next came lessons again. I went back to Mr. Ferrante, but that required too much travelling, and he kept referring to my talent in the past tense ("You were so good, you never should have quit.") The university's music department offered private lessons for credit (the real motivation?), and somehow I managed to pass the audition performing a ballad by Leon Russell. Soon I was spending two or three hours a day practicing,

and my serious attitude was rewarded with admittance into more classes usually reserved for Music majors: theory, composition, and even guitar lessons. By graduation, I'd only skimmed the surface of what I wanted to learn. At that point, I made the conscious decision to devote the next ten years to music, starving if it came to that, before ever looking for real work.

Teachers, parents, roommates, pianos--pivotal points along a serpentine musical path. Mostly serendipitous events which, when set down in sequential order, acquire a sense of inevitability, or design. But, after reading a recent newspaper article by Dan Vergano concerning the malleability of memory, not only is this personal causal flow called into question, but so are the actual events in that flow. The article cited a Boston University study in which participants were shown slides of events (such as spilled groceries), without being shown any slides detailing the causes of those events (such as someone pulling an orange from a pile of fruit). A few days later, when asked to recall the slides, 68% of the participants "remembered" seeing slides that explained the events, along with the slides they really did see. They "filled in the blanks," researcher Mark Reinitz explained, with imagined scenes that fit into the actual scenes' narrative.

If such "filling in the blanks" is so commonplace, what authenticity can I claim for "Liner Notes," this quasi-memoir comprised of song lyrics, fleshed out by interwoven essays? For starters, the accuracy of even the clearest of memories is debatable. Of those earliest musical memories, I'm now wondering how often Mom and I actually made that walk down Jay St., through a neighborhood now making headlines for its frequent, drug-related murders. How pivotal were Miss P., Steve, and that dormitory piano? And why do I feel most confident about the extraneous material, like Gram killing that chicken? The forthcoming, more recent memories, from which my songs are derived, have been subjected to less filtering by the passage of time. Such a basis for their authenticity, however, is undermined by the fact that those same memories are being preserved by an ever-diminishing number of brain cells. Also, the creation of a song in itself will distort as much as reflect, no matter how honest the writer, since, among other reasons, the particulars which ultimately survive are those which fit into the song's rigid and almost pre-ordained structure. So much for the actual slides of my life--what of those "recalled" slides that create the narrative's causal flow, the "why"s behind the "what"s?

Do chain-of-events narratives accurately reflect

experience, or merely bow to literary convention? Two events (ah, the unavoidable causal flow) have forced my usually unmeditative self to ask such a ponderous question, the first being the reading of that newspaper article. The second was the rejection of my earliest submissions for this project by my advisor, Judith Kitchen, on grounds that they "lacked any insight." Judith's analysis left me bewildered and unable to write for several weeks. I'd have readily confessed to the charge of insightlessness, and not without some pride. As I finally responded to Judith, insight seems to depend on the existence of some sort of inherent meanings in the chronicled events, and on causal relationships between them. Such meanings and relationships, in turn, seem to depend on a faith in certain religious or psychological principles. A faith in which I presently have little or none. To consciously attempt to sprinkle my work with insights strikes me as pretentious and obsequious. That, at least, was my initial reaction, and I've yet to be swayed that I have anything more to offer than some joyful, sad, funny, hopefully interesting, but ultimately meaningless personal stories, told as clearly and honestly as I can, with an allowance for my fascination with rhymes, meters, melodies and chords. Rhetorical devices, I suppose, but used only to convey what I've seen and felt, not what I've gleaned from it all.

For a writer (who has admittedly written very little of late), have I assumed an untenable position, a position which sounds entirely too dramatic (and academic) now that I've put it into words? Does such a skepticism in the existence, or at least in the discernibility, of events' meanings preclude a sustainable reservoir of material, or even enough to (ah, the real concern here) entitle me to that little piece of paper I'm pursuing? Does it really matter whether meanings are actually discovered, or just overlaid onto experiences through creative, and probably therapeutic, acts of interpretation?

Questions similar to these have been addressed by several contemporary writers when they've turned their hands to writing memoir. Over the past few months, I've revisited a number of memoirs (revisitations themselves) that I originally found particularly engrossing. As I reread, this time I kept a lookout for the authors' expressed views on memory, on sources of inspiration, and on meanings discovered, and/or overlaid. A gamut of beliefs, often as contradictory as they are convincing, have been proffered by these writers. Rather than spend the remainder of this introduction inventing a literary lineage in which "Liner Notes" can claim its place, I'd rather examine those memoirists' views, and hopefully discover, if not what I actually believe, then at least

what might best serve me as a writer.

"All knowledge is narrative," writes Jonathan Holden in his memoir, Guns and Boyhood in America (110). Like retracing the steps of a mathematical formula, writing retraces events in a process that not only leads to knowledge, but stands as a record of the journey. I begin with Holden, not because I necessarily agree with him, but because the format of his memoir most closely resembles my own: interspersed poems and essays, each shedding light on the other. His detailed memories of, and even moreso, his postulating on the origins of, his and most young American males' fascination with guns and violence, force me to immediately reconsider my low regard for sociological generalizations (interpretive acts). Through writing, i.e. through searching for the right words, "one comes to learn much more about the essence of the experience than one had expected... Good writing is a heuristic method of investigation" (24).

In I Could Tell You Stories, Patricia Hampl offers a similiar perspective when she claims: "I don't write about what I know, but in order to find out what I know" (27). Hampl freely admits that her initial attempts at recollecting her past often reel in greatly distorted memories. Partly through examining those distortions, she comes to better understand the rememberer (herself), as well as locate the subject matter truly worth exploring

(heuristics revisited). "My narrative self (the culprit who invented) wishes to be discovered by my reflective self, the self who wants to understand and make sense of a half-remembered moment" (29). Hampl's readily acknowledged, and openly embraced, imaginary slides of memory are employed to arrive at more psychological understanding, whereas Holden's more sociological memoir contains no suggestion of false memories, only memories in need of refinement. Perhaps Hampl is simply quicker than Holden (who leaves me in the dust) to pick up the pen and get started.

Hampl draws from such a variety of experiences in her search for knowledge (their meanings?) that it's difficult to imagine her ever suffering from extended writing blocks. She examines her childhood, her religious and cultural heritage, her travels, literature, her family members, and even complete strangers. Although she claims that shame has often been her catalyst, her essays strike me as being motivated by an insatiable curiosity--a need to understand--rather than by guilt or disappointment. The latter sentiments, I sensed, were often driving Holden's efforts. Through examining unpleasant situations of his childhood (e.g. guilt over his treatment of his gay brother; disappointment with his father's emotional distance), Holden manages to heal himself and create art at the same time.



The essays comprising Vivian Gornick's Approaching Eye Level also serve to adjust the writer to an unpleasant condition, this one being her chronic suffering from loneliness. While recognizing solitude as a necessary condition for a writer, Gornick also recognized that solitude's resultant despair has habitually sapped her creative energies. By accident, she discovered the relief that moderate exercise can give. In her case, a daily walk through the streets of Manhattan does the trick. As a fringe benefit, her walks provide her a fascinating view of city life, comprised of an endless string of performances which she observes, sometimes participates in, and later transforms into narratives. In the final paragraphs of Gornick's book, her impassioned voice leaves no doubt that she believes all those street performances have meaning. In harnessing her narrative urges, she sees herself raging against a world that otherwise would further degenerate into meaningless noise.

While reading Gornick, I recognized how often I, too, have used physical activity to ward off the despair from loneliness (and how, ironically, I have also courted solitude for the freedom it offers). I, however, rarely manage to follow Gornick's example of moderation in the intensity level of exercise, in order to allow for creative endeavors in its aftermath. I almost always (and nearly every day) exercise to exhaustion. The

therapeutic effects of my high-intensity workouts (I'm never depressed during them) probably result from the successful training of my body to react without thinking. I suspect that developing such a sustained instinctual mindset, however, probably runs counter to developing the power of sustained reflection required by the essayist. Oh well. Tennis, anyone?

Novelist and poet Paul Auster, in his memoir, The Invention of Solitude, examines fatherhood first from the perspective of a son, and then as a father. His meditative journey recollects his father's death; the known facts about his grandfather's murder; his son's brush with death, and themes of death and rebirth in certain fairy tales and myths. Threaded throughout his memories are episodes of incredible coincidence. A young man rents a flat in Paris, only to discover that it's the exact room in which his father hid from the Nazis. Two pianos, connected to special moments with his wife, though years and continents apart, each having the same single broken key. Chance meetings in cities and ballparks. If such occurrences were discovered in a novel, it would be impossible not to ascribe meanings to the event. But for Auster, the only realization he permitted himself (at the piano incident) was that the world "would go on eluding him forever." He goes on to remark: "The made-up story consists entirely of meanings, whereas the

story of fact is devoid of any significance beyond itself." Auster recognizes the craving for meaning that we all feel; but, to look beyond the bare facts "would be to build an imaginary world inside the real world" (146-47).

Tim O'Brien, chronicler of the Vietnam War, would likely agree with Auster. Though primarily a fiction writer, his first published book was a memoir as vivid and compelling as it was light on commentary. What attempts he does make to understand, or to generalize, nearly always produce only unanswered questions, or as he calls them, "...simple, unprofound scraps of truth. Men die. Fear hurts and humiliates. It is hard to be brave. It is hard to know what bravery is" (If I Die, 31). One chapter, "Wise Endurance," wrestles with the bravery issue, mixing war and schoolboy memories with wisdom from The Dialogues of Plato, but ultimately leaves the reader to fend for himself. His later collection of short stories, The Things They Carried, does occasionally veer off into commentary, but it's usually about the craft of writing, and most notably on the impossibility of generalizations: "You can't extract the meaning without unraveling the deeper meaning. And in the end, really, there's nothing much to say about a true war story, except maybe 'Oh.'" (77). What chance have I, then, chronicling my comparatively happy-go-lucky romp

of a life, of uncovering any truths beyond the facts (granting that I'm even capable of discerning the actual slides from the imagined ones)?

Honesty (and convenience) compels me to add one final memoir to my list of recently read memoirs, that being my favorite, My Dog Skip. Some pedantic types might argue that author Willie Morris did not aspire to reach as sophisticated or serious a reader as did the aforementioned writers. They might also note the irony in a former editor of a periodical devoted to the essay (Harper's) writing a memoir singularly lacking in gleanings derived from the recounted facts. But perhaps such an absence speaks volumes on the elusivity of meanings when hunted with nets of proper grammar.

As Patricia Hampl reminds us, the details "refuse to stay buried...[they] demand habitation. Their spark of meaning spreads into a wildfire of narrative." Details, however, are not always best served by narration. "They may be domesticated into a story, but the passion that begot them as images belongs to the wild night of poetry" (224). When those details' implied meanings, their evocativeness, spread into those wildfires of narrative, it seems that the true gets sacrificed for the understandable. This is not a comforting thought for a writer who, even in song lyrics, maintains an all-too-solid grasp on narrative (or vice versa). No,

all-too-solid grasp on narrative (or vice versa). No, not a comforting thought, but a fine (i.e. passing?) defense for insightlessness.

And yet...

...toward the end of this review, a project which on occasion has aroused resentments that recall those piano lessons of my youth (oh, to be playing a guitar, or swinging a racquet), I was browsing the latest issue of The Sun, and came upon an isolated quote by a Frederick Buechner: "God speaks to us through what happens to us--even through such unpromising events as walking up the road to get the mail out of the mailbox..." (8/01, 48). And I'm stopped cold, even though I normally recoil from one-size-fits-all words like "God" and "soul." I'm stopped cold, even though the latter half of my assembled memoirists have convincingly argued for the opposite position. Have I fallen victim to some demonic rhetorical ploy of Buechner's, or to my own wishful thinking? Can skepticism and wonder coexist? Is it possible to be, like Paul Auster, so receptive and yet of so little faith?

While still under the spell of that quote (within a day or two), I was taking my dog Maggie for her evening

our first intersection, I heard the faintest "fwooop."  
 As I turned to its perceived direction, I caught sight  
 of a home-launched firework, set off for no apparent  
 reason, a single lilac-colored bloom, with none to follow,  
 and not even a subsequent "pop" to startle my  
 sensitive-eared pooch. Had we crossed seconds before  
 or after, I would have missed it. Indeed, my impression  
 at the time was that, except for me, it had gone  
 completely unobserved, uncheered for, set off in stealth,  
 stopping me cold. A feminine firework, I noted, and  
 then realized that I'd never before attributed gender  
 to a firework. A little tug by a muse anticipating a  
 call? A reward for leaving a door slightly ajar? A  
 little joke by some sentient, all-pervasive, but  
 impenetrable consciousness, at my expense?

I see a firework, and before our walk is over, I'm  
 singing "Midnight Song," a song from my nearly forgotten  
 past, a song commemorating a walk with a previous dog,  
 a walk marked by bells instead of fireworks, bells which  
 tolled, it seemed, for the closing of a door, and in  
 tolling, reopened it:

I walk the streets I've walked so many nights before  
 in the town where I came of age  
 and learned to love and lie  
     to sing instead of cry  
     and smile as my time  
             slips away

the houses where my friends would always welcome me  
 are filled with faces I'll never know  
 it's all the same to me  
   'cause I've had all I need  
     and soon it's gonna be  
       time to go

the water wears away the rocks  
 the years have worn away the thoughts  
 I used to entertain  
   of making some changes  
 I put the dream upon a shelf  
 and suddenly I found myself  
   just like all the rest  
     left with little schemes  
       starting to forget  
       what they used to be

was there some mistake I made along the way  
 or is it just the way these things go  
   maybe in a while  
     an answer will be found  
       but more than likely I'll  
       never know

I walk the streets I've walked so many nights before  
 lately there's a dog by my side  
 and as we cross the street  
   the midnight bells  
     begin to ring  
       and you can bet  
         you won't find me  
         asking why

Like Lay's potato chips, when it comes to  
 synchronicities, no one can stop with just one.  
 Recognizing one primes you for catching the next, Or,  
 does acknowledging one actually change the world, setting  
 the wheels in motion for the next, and the next, until  
 you become the object of some cosmic conspiracy? A moment  
 ago, as I typed "I see a firework....," I was handed a

ago, as I typed "I see a firework...", I was handed a just-delivered package, which I opened before typing on. Enclosed was Telling Secrets, a memoir by Frederick Buechner that I'd ordered after reading his quote. In a vain attempt to quickly locate those vexing lines, I snuck a look at the book's final paragraphs, in which Buechner writes:

[although I have] written at length here about the way God speaks through the hieroglyphics of the things that happen to us...[I have also] come to believe more and more that God speaks through the fathomless quiet...within us all which is beyond the power of anything that happens to us to touch, although many things that happen to us block our access to it, make us forget even that it exists (104-05).

That which most often blocks our access, Buechner notes, is "the endless chatter of human thought." With that in mind, and while I'm still straddling the fence, perhaps on the cusp of some spooky conversion, I vow to cease rationalizing and commence experimenting with Buechner in a manner that Richard Geldard, in The Vision of Emerson, suggests we experiment with Ralph Waldo Emerson: proceed as if the advice is true, and see if the experiences that follow allow you to let go of the "as if." Emerson's particular advice that Geldard was



and respond when we have been called" (108-109). Called by a firework? Hmm, could be a song there.

My life, come to think of it, has crossed this paradigmatic divide a number of times, with varying degrees of volition involved. "The mind, nothing if not two-handed, says 'having killed the last god, doesn't your rational materialism find it a lonely old cosmos?'" So writes Reg Saner of the universal human need for the sacred, in Reaching Keet Seel (8). He quotes physicist Steven Weinberg, who notes that the more the universe seems comprehensible, the more it seems pointless. And pointlessness, Saner opines, runs counter to the survival of our species, and must be defied, even if by illusions (34). Saner sates his need for the sacred not with the commemoratives of Hampl's personal history, nor with the hieroglyphics in Buechner's walks to the mailbox, nor with Auster's coincidences or Gornick's city street shows. Rather, Saner's nourishment comes from the feelings evoked, and the imaginings inspired, by the Anasazi ruins of the American Southwest.

Although Saner mainly concerns himself with cultural history, and even geology, his pilgrimages bear many similarities to the memoirists' sojourns into their personal pasts. In a voice recalling Buechner's, he notes that while many simply see a vast wasteland when viewing the desert (as some would Gornick's Manhattan),

other eyes will be continually awestruck. "In some eyes, the wonders simply aren't there, because sight is equally a question of what we filter out and allow in. It's our personal way of being. As if what we see is what we are" (109). Saner also recognizes, like Buechner, that sensing the sacred is facilitated by stopping the mental chatter. The exterior silence of the desert is Saner's door to inner quiet, while I expect (upon reading all of Telling Secrets) that Buechner relies on a more conventional form of prayer or meditation. For Auster, it's the stark emptiness of a dilapidated flat. For Gornick, walking the city. For Scott Russell Sanders, the disciplined control of material desires.

Hunting for Hope, nature writer Sanders' latest book, is no memoir, nor does it directly address the issues I've been examining. But, whereas all the memoirists have influenced my "Liner Notes," Sanders has actually provided a perspective which I hope I can at least occasionally maintain in my own writing. "Commemoratives" is a metaphor I have often used to describe my songs, just as Hampl does to describe her memoirs and poems. Hampl locates the catalyst for memoir in the dual forces of despair and protest. The despair brought on by a recognition that all things must pass, and the protest, in the form of verbal memorials (i.e. commemoratives) to relieve the despair. Similarly, I

recognize that remorse is usually behind my impulses to write songs. And while I'm sure there's an inexhaustible supply of grievables out there (or in here), Sanders begins his book noting the effect that his own despairing attitude was having on his son--the father's darkened vision was casting a shadow over his son's world. Sanders concluded that "Since I could not forget the wounds to people and planet, could not unlearn the dismal numbers, I would have to look harder for antidotes, for medicines, for sources of hope" (15).

In searching for antidotes, and in sharing what he finds, Sanders turns outward to the world, and forward in time. In doing so, he serves the world and the future in a much more tangible way than do my whole collection of memoirists. Tangible service, and a bit of magic to boot. Consider: his realization that he must "revise" himself occurred while vacationing for the very first time in the Rocky Mountains, on a day that included hiking to Bridal Veil Falls, and rafting down a raging river. He was forty-nine at the time. I'd forgotten all these minor details until I reread large portions of the book today. I'm forty-nine myself, and have just recently returned from a visit to Bridal Veil Falls, also for the first time, while on vacation with my new bride. We actually got married beneath the falls, and later took a rafting trip I swore I would never take (I can't

even swim). Marvelous or discountable items, depending on your vision.

The word hope, Sanders explains, is etymologically related to hop, and derives from "to leap up in expectation". In this sense, it's almost an action verb. He cites research by Norman Cousins that documents the physically destructive effects of despair, and the healing powers of hope and the other positive emotions on cancer patients. Viktor Frankl recognized the same effects on Nazi concentration camp prisoners. Indeed, the benefits of positive thinking receive nearly universal, if perfunctory, acceptance. Sanders, however, invites his readers to consciously habituate themselves into hopeful creatures. By commemorating the abundant joys present in his life, he created for himself what he likens to a Native American medicine pouch, containing an assortment of tokens representing the various energies that sustain life: friendship, family, fidelity to a mate or to a cause, the pleasures of the senses, appreciation of the arts, the wildness of nature.

Here, then, is my own medicine pouch. Its contents differ slightly from Sanders': I've saved room for instruments, dreams, buildings, perfect strangers, bicycles, sunsets. Are these stories reliable? Well, I haven't added any "imaginary slides", at least not on purpose. Accurate? I'm sure I've painted a somewhat

skewed self-portrait, even, to some extent, by design. You don't spend a decade playing at every sleazy bar in town without succumbing to the seedy side every so often. But, if thoughts are actually as powerful as Sanders claims, I'd rather not tempt any passing readers down any perilous paths. Insightful? Probably only when I'm quoting someone else, I'm afraid. Meaningful? Depends on what day you ask me. Consequential? Ah, could any thoughts, especially those crystallized into words, those sometimes flowing, sometimes labored words then set in ink, or melded to music, could they possibly not have consequences?

\* \* \*

The replacement of vinyl records with compact discs has ushered in a golden age of liner notes. In order to offer more than just a new medium for reissued music, recordings are often accompanied by booklets containing the lyrics, background information on the musicians or the recording sessions, and whatever stray thoughts the artists feel like sharing. They're still called "liner notes," even though there's no longer any liner--the sleeve that protected the vinyl record. The first liner notes I recall were on Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band. The inclusion of the album's lyrics reflected a striving by the Beatles for critical acceptance beyond

that which was granted to Tin Pan Alley or early rock and roll. Including the lyrics quickly became a sort of litmus test for the "seriousness" of the artist. All the folk artists followed suit, with the exception of the crowned prince of folk, Bob Dylan. To my knowledge, Dylan has yet to include his lyrics on any of his recordings. His liner notes, when existent, were often comprised of unrelated poetry. He occasionally wrote liner note poetry for Joan Baez's albums as well, and one of his own albums was similarly graced with a poetic appreciation by Allen Ginsberg. Frank Zappa sometimes included his lyrics; on other albums he opted for humorous commentary: "This is what happens when you put twenty drunk musicians in a studio at midnight with a hundred instruments and no meter running." No one, however, surpassed the wry wit of Chuck Cuminale. Chuck put out a "greatest hits" album just before his untimely death. Part of Chuck's final liner notes included the musing that, "When the Colorblind James Experience [Chuck's band] does finally cease to exist, it will be quickly and completely forgotten--except, perhaps, by a few diehard idealists, who'll remember the group's weaknesses as virtues, and its failures as indicative of some higher purpose." And so, in the honorable tradition of these early and recent heroes of mine, I offer my own between-the-tunes banter, my own liner notes.

## Lifelines

one for you, before the rest  
'cause that's your place in my heart  
one to say I thank you for  
a perfect love from the start  
I know how you long for every  
dream of mine to come true  
but for now, the only thing that I need  
is to sing this one for you

seems like years since we sat down  
and spent some time alone  
we meet and pass the news, while all  
the feelings stay below  
but if you're ever feeling sad  
and don't know what to do  
give a call, tell me what's wrong  
and I'll sing this one for you

anything you need  
if it's in my power to give  
I'll always give to you  
just to make your life easier  
there's nothing I wouldn't do

so there I've finally said the words  
I hope you've known all along  
I hope they don't mean any less  
to hear them in a song  
it's just my way, I'm not much good at  
talking face to face  
so when we meet, just pass on the news  
don't mention it  
but please remember the day  
I sang this one for you

Relax, and just consider the preceding lyric to be my extended dedication page. Yes, it's hopelessly hokey; and yes, I'd have a much harder time writing such a lyric today, with all that I've learned these last few years as an English student about the makings of good poetry. It tells instead of shows; there's barely a specific image throughout. It's wordy, uncompressed, unabashedly sentimental, and probably trite. Strictly Hallmark material. So, which brave soul among you will explain all that to my mother, for whom it was a gift, one long-ago birthday? To my mother, for whom, even more than for myself, I'm attempting to write this thesis, and complete my degree, simply so she can tell her friends that her son has his masters. And while you're explaining, do so to all the other mothers who've been moved by the song that's opened each of my solo concerts since the day I wrote it. And to all who have let the gentle, sparse piano accompaniment subdue their critical sensibilities, and accept words straight to the heart. Relax, listen....the defense rests.

\* \* \*

Fast approaching eighty years of age, Mom is still the prime caretaker of our family. I tell her so today, as I greet her on my back porch. She's driven, alone,



twenty-some miles to bring me a package of homemade treats: eggplant rollettes, bean soup, tomato salad, fresh fruit, and a couple hours of motherly love and advice. I see her and Dad nearly every day, when I stop by on my lunch break. And I'll be visiting her next week on her birthday, and leave with another basket of culinary delights. And yet, here she is, because I called in sick today. Here she is, because she knows I've been fighting fatigue and insomnia, and waves of depression over one more failed romance. She hands me the package as I help her up the steps.

"Of course, dear, I'll always be the caretaker. Make sure you wash all the fruit--everything is sprayed, you know." During her visit, I'll learn how to microwave a potato. I'll let her measure my windows for new curtains, which she'll sew. I'll blab away at how I miss Theresa, how I'm obsessing over what she's doing, and with whom. Mom's been hearing it for days; she's been hearing variations for years. She listens anew each time, just as she does to her other two children, and to Dad, and to dozens of friends who depend on her ears. If time allows, and if I can shut up for a minute, she'll share a similar trial of her own, often dating back half a century. She made peace with life early on; if she's had trials in recent years, she's kept them to herself.

There are trials to come, of course, and after urging

me to get my mind off Theresa and onto my thesis, our conversation takes an ominous turn. Mom says that she's been meaning to tell me what she wants done with her most cherished possession, her wedding ring, after her death. We've all tacitly assumed that she'll outlive Dad, and that I'll handle matters concerning their estate. Brother Pete and sister Anita live too far away; besides, I'm here now, while it's on her mind. I want to stop her, tell her she's being morbid, but she really isn't. She's never more than a moment from a smile. So I listen, agree to do her bidding, and resolve to become more of a warrior of her kind.

Three hours after she arrives, she drives back home. Dad's expecting dinner, after all. She'll cook and do the dishes, and then spend the day's remaining hours in the basement, at her work table, where she makes her corn-husk dolls, a Native American craft that she has elevated to a fine art. Dolls so exquisite that they've been on display in the Smithsonian Museum's gift shop, as well as, and more importantly to her, in the homes of hundreds of doll lovers, young and old. Dolls she only began making after turning seventy. And here I worry that life has passed me by. Bye, Mom, see you tomorrow.

\* \* \*

For a stretch of almost ten years, Mom's and Dad's birthdays, both in July, were celebrated in a simple, unchanging fashion. Pete and I would drop by for one of Mom's homemade dinners, which we'd enjoy seated around the kitchen table. Even on her own birthdays, Mom did all the work, including baking the cake. She'd slip Pete and me ten or twenty dollars, and tell us that her favorite present was getting to be our mother. We'd always give Mom the sentimental cards, and she would thank us for "such beautiful words." Dad got the funny ones, and he'd always ask, "Where do you find these crazy cards?" On Dad's cake, Mom would place just one candle--a trick one that would keep lighting back up after he blew it out. Like the cards we got him, that candle never failed to get a laugh. We'd all sing, with Pete and me relegated to backing up Mom, who sang with unmatched enthusiasm, even for herself. Sometimes she'd kiss Dad. His birthdays were the only time I recall seeing him able to accept such an overt sign of affection. I can't recall Dad ever initiating hugs or kisses, birthdays or no. Perhaps to compensate, he'd always give Mom the most oversized, flamboyantly lovey-dovey cards, signed "your adoring husband."

\* \* \*

It took me almost five months to find the nerve to kiss my first girlfriend. Nothing but a kiss, mind you, and I was already a junior in high school. Each further step along the road to intimacy has been equally daunting. Through scores of partners, from one-night stands to live-in lovers, intimate encounters have induced more stress than pleasure. I've resorted to a myriad of activities and rationalizations to avoid intimacy, even while compensating in ways that recall Dad's oversized cards. Then, once my partner has given up, and the relationship is beyond repair, I become Mr. Romance, and wonder in disbelief that I've repeated the pattern once again. I think of all this now because I'm picturing my parents, the absence of kisses, and I'm wondering to what degree my own reserved disposition has been inherited, and to what degree it's been learned, and whether it can be unlearned. I think of all this also because I've just stepped back from the brink of one more breakup, promised to see a counselor, and convinced Theresa to take a chance and marry me.

\* \* \*

Dad enlisted in the Merchant Marines in 1943, primarily to avoid being drafted into the Army, and, as were many of his buddies, getting sent immediately

to the European front to die. The Merchant Marines employed unarmed crews on unarmed 'ships', which were much less likely to draw fire from the hostile forces they would inevitably encounter in their travels. Nevertheless, on July 16th, on his maiden voyage, somewhere off the coast of Brazil, Dad's ship was torpedoed and sunk by a German sub. Half the crew were killed from the explosion, and some went down with the ship. The rest scrambled on the one undamaged lifeboat. During all the havoc, Dad foolishly ran back to his quarters to retrieve some personal belongings. When he finally made it to the ship's deck, the lifeboat had been set afloat, drifting twenty feet below where he now stood. Dad had barely managed to pass the swimming test required to get into the Merchant Marines, and would never have attempted to dive and swim to the lifeboat. As he stood there, immobilized with fear, a wave swept under the lifeboat, lifted it up to the ship's deck, and allowed Dad to simply step off the ship and onto the lifeboat. This was the first of his string of miracles.

With no land in sight, and their ship a memory, the surviving crew now had to deal with the commander of the surfaced German sub, who could have easily finished them off with a few shots through the lifeboat. Instead, he grilled them for details of their cargo and

destination, to which they offered convincing, life-saving lies. They were actually returning from a delivery of rations to our troops in Africa, in violation of their non-involvement status. Dad remembers one of the sailors rudely requesting cigarettes from the German commander, endangering all of their lives with his impudence.

Miracle #2: the commander decided to neither hurt nor help them, and just let them drift away. Still, their survival would depend on further miracles. After six days adrift, with little food and minimal water, sweltering during the day, freezing at night, and being scoped out by sharks throughout, the men were finally spotted and rescued.

We'd get snippets of this adventure on Dad's birthday, when he'd reminisce, and sometimes take out the faded newspaper with his picture and story on the front page. It made a great headline, especially because he was saved right on his birthday. He was twenty-three, about half my age the last time I saw that newspaper. The last time I saw the accompanying photograph, I'd have sworn it was me at twenty-three, if not for his uniform, and my ponytail. When I was twenty-three, I occasionally wore military fatigues, an ironic fashion choice for my renegade, counter-cultural drug-hazed clique. Our parents' valor and victories afforded us the luxury of fighting our personal battles with

consensual reality (via LSD), and with a government willing to squander our lives in Vietnam. A couple of nearly fatal overdoses, and the luck of the draw in the draft lottery, were my own undeserved miracles.

Opportunities for real heroics have eluded me, as I imagine they have for most men, even soldiers. The most difficult task I have before me, in fact, is shedding the tough, independent, John Wayne-styled facade that I've erected, an artifact that surely will doom my upcoming marriage.

\* \* \*

Today I went shopping for an engagement ring. At first I dreaded wasting this sunny summer day in the malls, but in the course of exploring the unfamiliar world of precious stones, my search for the perfect ring became somewhat of a quest. Theresa has quite small and delicate hands, much like Caren's, the only other woman to whom I've ever given a ring. As I wandered from shop to shop, I recalled the circumstances surrounding that previous ring-giving fiasco. It was one of my last-ditch ploys to salvage an already doomed romance, once again of my own doing. After discovering that Caren's heart had been reawakened by the attentions of someone new, and after seeing all my verbal efforts

fall on deaf ears, I resorted to a ring. I picked out the largest, most expensive opal in the shop. It looked magnificent in the display case, but ridiculously gauche on Caren's dainty finger. She accepted it with a look just shy of revulsion, a look which shamed me into ceasing my efforts to regain her love. The only good to come out of the episode was a little song, which I wrote a couple days later, and which I found myself humming today, as I wandered from jeweler to jeweler, checking out diamonds and rubies and opals.

with this ring I say farewell to  
 the finest I have known  
 you made the leap, landed on your feet  
 and found yourself a home

echoes of your gentle voice  
 ripple through the room  
 that song about a moon so blue:  
 "does it ever shine down on you?"

I'm older, but no wiser  
 and I miss your pretty face  
 even though I said from the start  
 there'd have to come a day

with this ring I offer you  
 an everlasting hug  
 and thanks for all the love you gave  
 while you were growing up

may your life forever shine  
 and if you wear the ring  
 may you glance into the stone  
 and catch a glimpse of me



Ah, Caren, whom I couldn't retrieve, so I tried to become, by taking all the classes she took when we were together. At least that's how someone analyzed my behavior at the time. These were the thoughts and melodies that accompanied me as I wandered the mall, humming and hoping--hoping that I'm finally learning. Or, if not learning, at least not making the same old blunders. Let me commit new blunders, if only for the sake of the songs. This time, I'm determined that at least the ring will suit the hand. To make sure of this, I call Theresa from the mall and ask her to join me in this quest.

I wait for her in the mall's food court, snacking on a slice of pizza. As I sit there, a wave of poison floods my mind, as it has daily, since the day I proposed. Sometimes for a few minutes, sometimes for hours, I succumb to its effects: anger, jealousy, hurt, disgust. And, worst of all: distrust. How many people, I wonder, find out about a lover's infidelities and get engaged on the same day? Theresa confessed out of respect, and perhaps out of fear, and in hopes that we could start anew with clear consciences. What I had presumed to be merely a friendship had been much more. I proposed, perhaps too quickly, perhaps too afraid that otherwise she might slip away again, this time for good. I forgave, and promised to somehow forget. But it will take time.

So far, there's been no time to even examine my feelings, not with rings to purchase, houses to sell, furniture to move, announcements to make. So the poison comes over me when I least expect it, or can handle it. Like while I'm being congratulated on our engagement. Or during sex. Or while I nibble on my pizza in the food court, waiting for my love.

She arrives, and her smile once again cleanses me. We shop, and together we find the right ring. She follows me home in her car. Through the rearview mirror, I can see her admiring the ring at every pause in traffic. When we get home, she immediately shows it off to my neighbor, crying joyful tears, and I know I've done something special. At least for this precious moment, I am set aright again. But I have lost control; I can't even pretend I can navigate these waves on my own. Most of the time I feel like a mere onlooker in my life, as I wait for the seas to calm.

\* \* \*

A couple of years ago, as we gathered for Dad's seventy-fifth birthday, I noticed a drawing on the calendar in the kitchen. In the square for July 16th, Dad had sketched a sinking ship. I probably interpreted the drawing as a cue that he might be open to sharing

a few more details about that fateful week in 1943, so I made a point of bringing it up. Most of what he mentioned, I'd heard before, although he did share one more miraculous aspect of the episode: he was actually still just a cadet at the time, and had much homework to be completed during that voyage. If he failed to hand in his assignments, he'd be immediately dismissed, and drafted into the Army after all. Even with such dire consequences, however, he'd procrastinated until completion of the work was impossible. No excuses would be accepted, none short of the sinking of his ship, at least. By sinking the ship, the German commander may have actually saved Dad's life!

As I listened, I found myself wondering how I'd survive six days and nights, without food, protection, or privacy. About twenty men were on that lifeboat, Dad responded to my query. And of those twenty, I asked, didn't anyone just go berserk, screaming, or throwing himself overboard, to just end it all, as I could imagine myself doing at some points in my life? No, he replied, but added that when he awoke one morning, one man was gone. Gone? I almost laughed; what do you mean, gone? This was a fresh, enticing detail, and I wanted to know more. But all Dad would say was "We had to let him go." His eyes began welling up with tears. Mom put her arm around him and said something about the man being sick

or injured, as she recalled Dad telling her long ago. I knew that I too had to let it go, which made me fixate even more on the circumstances surrounding that lost sailor.

As usual, I'd given Dad a case of beer for his birthday. Watching him open some much more thoughtful presents, and having seen some cracks in the soldierly face he'd always maintained, I wished I had done more. A few days later, I was invited to my friend and fellow songwriter Chuck's home for dinner. When I arrived, Chuck was still cooking (for his three sons, his wife, and me), and needed another hour, an hour he suggested I spend at his piano. I spent the hour doodling, fighting the urge to perform set pieces for this captive audience of one, and instead just listened to all the birds that were chirping all around the house. During that hour the music for a song was born--the only time I've ever composed in front of someone else. Still captivated with the plight of that lost sailor, and still regretting that case of beer, I wrote the words a day or two later. Dad has yet to hear it.

seventy-five, a kitchen celebration  
seventy-five, a feast for all of four  
seventy-five, a single candle burning  
silent yearnings for many more

trying to hide a tear for one lost sailor  
wouldn't say why, just "had to let him go"  
"where do you find these crazy cards," he asks me  
almost laughing like years ago

the same old line--don't go buying  
I've got all I need right beside me  
when a life's been on loan for as long as mine  
anytime is fine

cutting the cake, wishing for, I wonder  
maybe a day that won't feel like a chore  
maybe a way to say to one lost sailor  
soon, old pal, we'll be all ashore

seventy-five, a kitchen celebration  
seventy-five, a feast for all of four  
seventy-five, a single candle burning  
silent yearnings for many more

## Half-lives

she left a note, said I've had enough  
she left with half a life  
an order of protection and  
the neighbors asking why  
she found a place she could just afford  
by working on the side  
bought some brand new furniture  
paid it off on time

she wrote a little poetry  
learned to play guitar  
thought of going back to school  
but never got that far  
she met a man, he was company  
but not a whole lot more  
and when a year had come and gone  
she added up the score

and if she didn't celebrate  
at least she didn't cry  
when she found out Independence Day  
wasn't the Fourth of July

how long can she hold  
dreams of striking gold  
like walking in and calling out  
"honey, I'm home"

another year, another place  
another touch of gray  
another inch around her waist  
another handsome face  
he was nice, but didn't have  
marriage on his mind  
she gave him up and bought a dog  
named him Honey Pie

and if she doesn't celebrate  
at least she do isn't cry  
and next year Independence Day  
just might...  
fall on the Fourth of July

"What I miss the most," Theresa was telling me, "is getting to say 'Honey, I'm home,' when I walk in the door." Theresa had left her husband, Jim, two years earlier (not one year, as the lyric suggests.) She'd moved from apartment to apartment, with an ever-changing array of housemates, before finally settling into a place of her own. Now, on this Fourth of July, we both had pressing home-maintenance chores, so we opted (I more willingly than she) to forego the traditional holiday celebrations, or even a quiet picnic. Instead, she stained her deck while I sealed my driveway, and we phoned each other every couple of hours.

"Dear, you couldn't stand the jerk," I reminded her, my half-disguised attempt to deflect attention away from my own role in her loneliness. I'd been her lover and closest friend for most of the past two years. "Besides, it's just another day." Holidays had meant so little to me for so long, that this one--especially this most political and least personal one--hardly seemed deserving of such wistful self-appraisals. And then it clicked: it was Independence Day--what more appropriate moment to consider how much had been lost, and how much gained, since the breakup? So appropriate (so meaningful, if you must) that I sensed a song looming.

I took a break from my chores and sat on the back porch with my Papoose, a miniature guitar with the tone

of a banjo, that lends itself nicely to writing a three-chord country tune like the ones so inexplicably dear to Theresa's heart. A connoisseur of fine wine, cuisine, literature and art, she's nevertheless drawn to a musical genre that I find almost totally lacking in merit. Consisting mostly of cheap puns, hackneyed metaphors and predictable endings, these "contemporary country" ditties were the staple of WBEE, Theresa's favorite radio station. My constant criticism suggested I could do better. And so, a task presented itself: make up for my absence on this holiday by immortalizing her with her very own country-flavored portrait.

She didn't really leave a note and, so far, she's resisted the urge to get a dog, which, if she named "Honey Pie" ("Honey, I'm home"), would only remind her of the song's not-so-subtle pathos. The rest of the song is straight-ahead, honest details, rhymed and metered to a tee. Half-life; the deterioration rate of a radioactive substance, or, in this case, Theresa's dreams.

\* \* \*

"I haven't ruled out the possibility of having a baby," Theresa confided, as she lay naked on a boulder by the shore, in a secluded Adirondack paradise, on the weekend of the summer solstice. We were on our first



date, and intimacy had developed more quickly than either of us could have imagined, thanks to the seclusion of the mountains, the unrelenting sun, the fullest of moons, the irresistible nightbreezes, and the years of living without love. In retrospect, intimacy was probably inevitable, even between Theresa and me.

We'd been at odds, you see, for the many years that we'd worked next to each other in the Post Office, two letter carriers setting up their respective routes before hitting the street. Theresa would never fail to vociferously share her opinions on each and every topic floating around the workroom. Not only did I rarely share her opinion, but I also grew increasingly irritated by the vehemence that always accompanied her words. I probably tried, early on, tactfully asking her to tone it down; but, when tact failed, I stooped to personal insults. The insults grew habitual, and probably had the opposite effect than what I'd intended. Had I known that her ranting masked a depression that left her considering suicide, I like to think I'd have been kinder. She likes to think I was just redirecting my frustrated attraction to her. Who knows? Our relationship improved only after I switched to a route on the other side of the workroom. Once out of constant earshot, I grew to enjoy, and look forward to, our less frequent, more civilized, conversations.

By chance, we ran into each other at a poetry reading, and ended up sitting together. When I asked where Jim was, she told me that she'd moved out a month earlier. I was shocked; I thought they had a solid marriage. Listening to her talk about him for so many years, I felt like I knew him. Jim says this, and Jim says that. As far as I was concerned, Jim was a dumb-ass guido. (I can say that, I'm Italian.) A dumb-ass egotistical right-wing racist chauvinist muscleheaded bully with a touch of mafia around the edges (don't tell him I said that). They met when she was seventeen, a lost little high school dropout, waitressing and living on her own. Easy pickings for a thirty-seven-year-old, handsome and huge, smooth-talking bullshit artist. It took her fifteen years to wise up, and five more to find a way out. Twenty years down the drain, and all the while, keeping up a good front.

A good backside, too, I had to admit, as I admired her body on our Adirondack weekend. Once again, our conversation turned to Jim: a few months before Theresa and Jim's wedding date, he paid for her to go visit some relatives in Colorado. He explained that this would give her time to think over whether she truly loved him. She met someone while out there. Jim sensed it, panicked, and talked her into coming home immediately. On her first night back, she got amorous in bed, but he fended

her off. Something was up--a guido never turns it down. Eventually, the truth came out: Jim was still sore from the vasectomy he'd secretly arranged to get while she was away. He already had two kids he wasn't seeing, and didn't need a third. Why upset Theresa? She was crushed, but married him anyway. She never mentioned it in their twenty years together. She also never forgave him.

Theresa was born to be a mommy, and a mother. Her own parents split up in the middle of raising six kids, leaving Theresa to take over for her own departed mother. Then she convinced Jim to re-enter his two children's lives, and became their mother as well. But surrogate motherhood, especially for children almost her own age, wasn't enough, and she hadn't merely not "ruled out the possibility of having a baby," as she phrased it that first day of summer, sitting by the water's edge, her perfect body on display for only the second man in her lifetime. And even though, just a moment earlier, when she asked if I--childless as well--ever considered the idea, and I unhesitatingly said no, for a moment, I consider.

I consider it, time and again, in the months and years we share from that moment on, neither of us able to break the bond forged on that first weekend. And if, on that first weekend, she truly had merely not ruled

out the possibility, it was only because she had just begun to allow herself to seriously consider it again, after twenty years of blocking it out, blocking it out to keep disappointment from turning into resentment, resentment into hate. Blocking it out to honor a vow, and save a marriage. I consider it as I catch the wince within the smile whenever news arrives of another's pregnancy. And each time we pass another mother pushing a stroller. And as I watch her cradle my own brother's newborn son in her arms, magically quieting his cries. As she instructs young mothers not to worry about this, and keep an eye on that. As she babies her cat, and dotes on her flowers, and dusts off her doll collection. And one night, when she's had a few too many, as she cries herself to sleep, whispering "I really want a baby, I really want a baby...." And when she's rewarded, like the purest religious devotees, with a vision, and writes of her vision in the opening lines of one more abandoned poem in a journal of abandoned poems, a journal I'm reading in search of inspiration, I consider it as I discover those lines and set to work on them, and each time I return to them and assume her thoughts, and try to draw out this most stubborn of songs, and months later, when I finally sing it to her:

I dreamed I saw my child last night  
I heard her cry, so held her tight  
and kissed away the tears  
rocked away the fears  
that's what a mother would do, I suppose  
that's what a mother would do

oh, my someday child  
my only dream  
listen for a lullaby  
and find your way  
to me

soon enough, she'd be tying her shoes  
her ponytail bouncing off to school  
but I'll always try and guide  
through all her "how"s and "why"s  
that's what a mother would do, I suppose  
that's what a mother would do

oh, my someday child  
my only dream  
listen for a lullaby  
and find your way  
to me

they say I waited too long  
they say I've got it made  
they say I'm crazy  
but I've seen you  
I've seen you  
have you seen me?

and when I watch her walk down the aisle  
I'll give a hug, shed a tear and smile  
and wish for her to hold  
a child of her own  
that's what a mother would do, I suppose  
that's what a mother would do

oh, my someday child  
my only dream  
listen for a lullaby  
and find your way  
to me

I consider it time and again, but am slower than Hamlet to move beyond considering. When she asks how I can write such a song and not feel it, I give her my pet, pat answer: I only want to be wantless. Which is mostly true, but when I do indulge in desire, I usually end up dwelling on that musical career that seemed so certain but never quite panned out. A dream with quite a half-life of its own. A career which I'm convinced requires long stretches of solitude and stillness, and the freedom to ignore the domestic side of life whenever the muse or mood strikes me. And yes, a family might just give me something worthy enough to write about, but I usually cannot see beyond the pitfalls to the bridges. And besides wanting wantlessness, I also want harmlessness--harmlessness to our ailing Mother Earth, to whom I know I've already inflicted irreparable damage, just by driving to work everyday. So the least I can do is not create another of me, until the urge to procreate is so overwhelming that it stifles all this scrutiny.

All this scrutiny takes its toll, and all the while I see her drifting away. When she drifts too far I cannot bear it, and try reeling her back in with reckless lovemaking, letting fate play its hand. I try to flip from the desireless Buddhist to the go-with-the-flow Taoist. But old Mr. Penis refuses to cooperate. He

goes into hibernation, and no amount of pills, devices, set or time changes, incantations or positions can arouse him. Age? Performance anxiety? Fear of commitment? Vitamin deficiency? Too little sleep? Too much exercise? Subliminal messages planted in Bob Dole's commercials? That persistent line from a Woody Allen film when, after sex, he supposedly quotes Tolstoy: "There goes another novel?" Whatever the source, intimacy becomes unbearable.

It doesn't happen all at once. There are the occasional glimmers, if not real fireworks, in bed. You come through just often enough to create odds on par with winning New York's Lotto jackpot. A buck and a dream. And when Theresa's period is late, even with these astronomical odds, she thinks she's pregnant. She feigns worry, but you know the truth, and even you begin to hope. Honest-to-goodness hope. But the periods--a word suddenly so appropriate--all eventually arrive. Each construction of hope ends with a period. Until the periods themselves end. They were not late, they were merely becoming sporadic, as a prelude to a very early menopause. You have used up her window of opportunity, between twenty years of Jim and the dream of a baby fulfilled. Songs will never suffice, not for her. You knew it all along, but you wouldn't get out of the way. And then even the occasional glimmer goes, and you can't even talk about it in first person.

You retreat into your tried-and-true, solace-giving activities. Some are joint efforts: camping, bike rides along the canal, movies, Scrabble. Most, however, are solo ventures, partly because you cannot look into those beautiful, innocent eyes without being reminded. Partly because you need to push yourself to total exhaustion to get those endorphins to kick in, and your super-fitness, from a lifetime of fanatical exercising, assures that no one can keep up, and becomes one more liability. And because you are a writer. You stroll your roads to solace, roads built for one, more and more often. This disappointment doesn't, and never will, turn into resentment, and certainly not hate. That would be too easy. There will be no heated arguments, no words that can't be forgiven, no storming out the door and never looking back. There have been no heated arguments ever, not since that first summer solstice weekend. Only love gone awry.

She starts taking long weekends to visit out-of-town friends. She cannot lie for long--she's actually been handing out resumes, and looking at apartments. Albany appears the most promising. Each time she goes, you panic. Who will cleanse you with her smile? Who will be your sunflower? You imagine her final departure. It's not difficult--you've packed cars for too many



departing lovers, waved good-bye, and gone inside to  
 puke your guts out too many times to still be on the  
 planet. You imagine her, and remember the others, and  
 imagine yourself, and the identities and boundaries  
 between all these lovers begin to blur as you write.

the sun is slipping through the trees  
 the wind is waving through the leaves  
 a fading blue surrounds the scene  
     like always, like always

we drifted in and out of sleep  
 I watched you wander through a dream  
 I would have granted a reprieve  
     this morning, this morning

I listened for some kind of evidence  
 all I heard was blind indifference  
 I need a love with time and interest  
 so I'm four hundred miles  
 and one last morning away

now dear, somewhere you must have heard  
 that all you give will be returned  
 so give a call when you have learned  
     if ever, if ever

I wonder if you'll see our star tonight  
 our star could always seem to make things right  
 but all the rest was either yours or mine  
 so I'm four hundred miles  
 and one last morning away

you'll linger for who knows how long  
 then blend with all the others gone  
 'til all that's left is in the song  
     forever, forever

the sun is slipping through the trees  
 the wind is waving through the leaves  
 a fading blue surrounds the scene  
     like always, like always

## Memories of Hartwell

The Hartwell bells have just tolled for three o'clock. They're off by an hour, but what the hell--it's Labor Day. Their timing was off for most of the summer, which I found quite amusing, and reminiscent of those lazy years when I called Hartwell home. I'm sitting on her park-like front lawn, facing her bell tower. Just below the tower, the clock, which I can't recall ever displaying the correct time, is right on the money today! The bells have just tolled again--fifteen minutes have passed. If I were truly freewriting as planned, making note of every passing notion and observation, I'd have at least two pages by now. I wouldn't have edited out, along with scores of other micro-events and half-thoughts, the fact that two copulating bees landed on this laptop the moment I turned it on. A breeze is wafting through this enclave of trees where I'm sitting, and where I once led morning tai chi classes for a dozen or so summer idlers, mostly journeymen dancers and musicians. All of us dancing to our different drummers, and so, in a way, in sync with each other, and with those endearingly unreliable bells. On the lam from the

nine-to-five, which, I imagine, eventually claimed us all. I held out for a decade, honoring my graduation vow. Those were my favorite years.

I've never noticed baby pine cones before. There's thousands of them on these branches sheltering me from the sun. Less than a week old, I'd say. They're so cute in their infancy, so delicate, yet not one has lost its grip, and fallen to the ground. I'd have to kill one to take home a commemorative of this day--the day I discovered baby pine cones! Ha, only in some semblance of freewriting could I admit to such ignorance, such chronic obliviousness to my surroundings. Even now--now that I'm just another stranger here--Hartwell still offers revelations of a sort: not in leaves of grass, but baby pine cones. This is my reward for observing the holiday, for loafing, and for allowing myself a skyward glance.

Ah, but I'm not really observing the spirit of Labor Day. Not like these four kids who've just arrived, frisbee in tow, heading over to a familiar patch of lawn, spreading out to occupy the patch's four corners, sending that frisbee sailing, and exposing my lie: I've come here to work, to labor over words, to meet a looming deadline. My idleness is merely a calculated means to an end. In good conscience I cannot continue. Besides, someone has to show these good-natured, well-intentioned, but nonetheless rank amateurs, how the game is played.

I spent more time on that patch of ground than I did in all the classrooms combined. We whirled and dove as though our lives depended on it. We had our special game, called "doubledisc." Two frisbees of slightly different sizes, one fitted inside the other, if tossed just right, will separate just before they reach their intended receiver. Each toss will test the limits of a player's agility, quickness, hand-eye coordination, as well as his willingness to dive head first to catch the second frisbee before it hits the ground. If the two discs descend at the exact same rate, you have to focus on one, and utilize some sixth sense, almost like catching blindfolded, to catch the other. It looks impossible, but there were days when we'd get on a roll and catch them all, acting like it was child's play. Crowds would gather, all abuzz with oohs and aahs. "No autographs, please." Women would line up... Come to think of it, my wife's caught a few herself. She's only a block away, and is always willing to humor me. Stick around, kids, for an education.

\* \* \*

A week has passed since that frisbee game. The wife had the catch of the day. I'm back under the baby pine cones, which have grown the slightest bit. The

timing of the bells has been corrected. Bells, schmells: they're really just little tines, a few inches long, controlled by a miniature piano roll on a timer, and then amplified a thousandfold. I was so disheartened when I first gained access to the tower, and discovered the truth. I was somewhat consoled, however, when I noticed the miniature keyboard nearby. A mere switch of a lever allowed a keyboardist to control the melodic output. I never did find out if anyone in the neighborhood recognized my variations on "Foxy Lady" or "Why Don't We Do It in the Road." But I'm getting ahead of myself.

Hartwell Hall, the university's original and, for many years, only building, was still home to a wide variety of departments when I first began my midnight visits. English, Foreign Languages, Sociology (my major), History, a fledgling Computer Science, and even Geography, all were based in Hartwell. So were all the administrative offices, the presence of which apparently warranted having a night watchman patrol the building every weeknight, and around the clock on weekends. From its days as the all-under-one-roof university, Hartwell also still retained a working swimming pool, a gymnasium, a cafeteria, a library, along with the main reason for my visits--a spacious, echoing auditorium, with a gorgeous Steinway grand piano.

I started taking music seriously around my junior year in college. The Music department's practice rooms were okay for scales and other technical exercises, but not for composing. The cacophony of scales and arpeggios emanating from the neighboring practice rooms made sure of that. But Hartwell's auditorium, at two in the morning, so vast, and yet so secluded, was a godsend. The room, the instrument, the hour, and the sojourner. The infinite nuances in a single note, finally brought to light! Then there were nights when I would just sit there, soaking in the hum of the silence. Years later, when I gave my first concert in that auditorium, I wanted the audience to experience that hum, and asked them all to be still for a complete minute. A train track ran very near the building, and during that moment of silence, a train roared by, and everyone listened as the silence surrendered to the crescendo of the train's approach, the shriek of its whistle, the sustained fortissimo as it hurtled through town, and the gradual decrescendo, until silence reigned again. This was not the hum I planned on sharing, but it deserved its own standing ovation, and would have received one if it hadn't left us all in one collective tremble.

The watchman crew always let their fellow nightowl in, unlocking the auditorium for me, then going back to their studies, or sleep. Soon I was hired myself, and

I stayed on for the next eight years. Within the first year, all the rest of the crew had moved on, leaving me to replace them with my own cronies. Most of these cronies had little interest in the job, and would usually pay me to work their shifts. I made ends meet for eight years just walking those halls, playing the piano, doing my tai chi and yoga, reading my books, and getting enough sleep to see me through until the next shift. It was like having a second scholarship. And actually, there wasn't even any need for a watchman: shortly after I began working there, the administrative and computing departments moved into their own new buildings. No longer the hub of daytime activity, Hartwell grew more and more marginalized during those years of rapid expansion for the campus. There was even talk of completely closing the building. The Hartwell guard became a vestige of a vestige; the role fit me perfectly. Among the real Campus Security officers, I became known as "Quasilouie," or "The Phantom of Hartwell." I almost felt duty-bound to stay on.

In order to do so, however, I had to continue taking classes, since the job was part of the college's work/study program. After graduating, I enrolled in two graduate programs, but failed miserably in both. Then I started signing up for the bare minimum: one one-credit course each semester. Sort of a tithe I had

to pay. These classes included: Issues of Nuclear Energy, First Aid, Badminton, Gospel Choir--quite the well-rounded education. I actually did go to Badminton, at least once or twice. My graduate grade-point-average hovered so close to zero that I'm surprised the English Department overlooked it when I applied for graduate admission.

Watching over Hartwell not only provided a secluded place where I could freewrite musically, beyond the range of any judging ears to hear, but also lured me into performing some preparatory rituals which I think further facilitated the creative process. There were eighteen exits that needed to be locked. I'd take the same route every night, with the lock-up chains draped across my left shoulder. I'd wrap a chain under, then over, then once again under the doors' handles, making the tightest possible fit. Along the way I'd turn off all the lights and close all the windows. Then I'd start practicing. Locking up and freeing up thus became intertwined processes, the physical preparing me for the mental. There was, of course, the occasional pool party, a frisbee session in the gym, and even a rare sleep-over with a guest. But for the most part, I recognized the opportunity afforded me, as well as my need to keep the lowest possible profile, or else the jig would be up.

In a college town, where so many of the really interesting people are just passing through, relationships



tend to take on an ephemeral hue. Endings become expected, and thereby assured. Continual upheaval can certainly provide one with a wealth of material, but to use that material, one also needs available an offsetting, steadying refuge to retreat to, and to work from. I, at least, needed such a refuge, and found one, for eight years and beyond, in the seclusion, the darkness, the routine, the work/play, the history, the stately beauty, and, of course, the regular paycheck, all owing to dear old Hartwell Hall.

early november sunday  
 foggy afternoon  
 rain is turning into snow  
     yes, the year is old  
     her stories told  
 and I am singing

my love and I in Hartwell  
 here is all I need  
 this old piano plays so well  
     and the worn-down keys  
     are part of me  
 when I am singing

thank God I'm alive  
 in this space and time  
 come tomorrow, come what may  
 but for today, here I'll stay  
 and if you want me to  
 I'll play

someday my own november  
 will take me by the hand  
 and say "the new year's time has come"  
     and I'll have to go  
     to parts unknown  
 but now I'm singing

## A Friend, a Bridge

The invitation didn't mention any dress code. It merely requested my presence at the University Club to "toast, roast, and bid farewell to Frank Petrus," who was resigning as executive director of The Center for Youth Services, and moving to Atlanta. I suppose I should have known it would be a formal affair, and that I'd feel even more out-of-place among these strangers than I had to, by dressing so casually. I should have known that I'd hear plenty of short and bald jokes, along with countless expressions of gratitude for the guest of honor's twenty years of youth advocacy. What completely confounded me, however, were the anecdotes the roasters related about him: they sounded like stories from some foreign land--a land of board meetings, politics, and bottom lines. Even his name sounded strange; I'd always known him as Fran.

Fran and I became friends twenty-five years ago, while both of us lived in Brockport. He was unemployed; I was guarding Hartwell Hall. Like myself, Fran had yet to give a thought to careers, job benefits, or retirement plans. Instead, we both spent hours every sunny day bicycling down the endless miles of country

roads that surround Brockport. We kept crossing paths at a deserted bridge a few miles west of town. Our chance meetings soon became planned meetings, until planning was no longer necessary; wherever we wandered on our afternoon jaunts, we'd make it over to that bridge by sundown.

This wooden bridge was the highest point for miles around. It connected the crests of two man-made hills, allowing a road to pass over a train track. Years of neglect had rendered the bridge unfit for car travel. About a quarter mile from either end, a massive tree trunk, sporting a yellow, diamond-shaped badge that claimed "dead end," lay across the road, blocking passage. You couldn't even see the bridge unless you crossed the barricade, but for those who ventured past, and climbed aboard, there awaited a world of woods, farmland, a pristine pond, the Erie Canal, and a tree-lined track that stretched to touch the horizon. No cars, no litter. It was all so picture perfect, except for the piano.

Buried in untraversable brush near the pond, the ruins of a grand piano could barely be detected. Before the barricades were set in place, someone must have driven the piano up to the foot of the bridge and sent it tumbling down the hill. The brush had almost completely enveloped the piano's shattered ebony body; but, like an exposed, bloodstained bone, a rusted corner of the instrument's soundboard protruded through the wooden

frame, and through the surrounding vines, to give off a slight sparkle when the sun hit it just right. It took a few visits before first noticing that sparkle, but after I spotted it, I could no longer gaze at the pond without ending up focussed on the piano. Fran and I rarely faced the pond on those late afternoons, however. We were there for the sunsets.

Sometimes the sun set right over the track, right between those two escorting lines of trees, before slipping off the world. Those green/orange/green, slow-motion embraces seemed to electrify the sky, now vibrating its way through a thousand shades of blue, and then through the violets, before fading to black. First stars faded in while, below us, fireflies flashed into fleeting constellations. Sometimes the moon would head up the east right after the sun disappeared in the west, like an actor racing off stage-right, quick-changing, and reentering stage-left as a different character. And with the quick-change came a quantum leap in the volume and variety of chirps, croaks, and cricket calls, as if a tyrant had just been dethroned. We'd stay and marvel until the bats took to flight, our cue to head on home.

I never dwelled on those sunsets back then, but Fran did. He was always trying to articulate his visions.

Sometimes those sunsets, and the need to preserve them, so overwhelmed him, that he would turn around, face the darkening pond, or down at the rickety planks we were standing on, and fumble for the right words. One night I chided him about turning away from the very event he was trying to capture. It was clear to me that words could only get in the way, that they would just end up homogenizing and normalizing each of those unique, otherworldly moments. "Soak it in while it's happening, Fran. That's all we can hope to get out of it." The next day he mentioned that he'd written about that sunset. Certain that no words could measure up, I didn't want to see them. "Save 'em for a rainy day, Fran. Let's go riding." I never did remember to ask him later.

Other than the different value we placed on words, Fran and I were as kindred of spirit as two could be. Who else could I call on at midnight, point out the full moon, and insist that a bike ride to the lake was in order? Who else would realize that not to go would be almost sacrilegious? We got back just in time for the sunrise. Who else could call for that same ride on a frigid New Year's Eve, and make me feel as equally compelled to go along? We only had one pair of gloves between us, and kept passing them back and forth. And, actually, I'm sure Fran was well aware of words' shortcomings. He just wanted some songs.

In his living room, Fran had a sweet-sounding upright piano, on which I often played him melodies fresh from my previous night's session in Hartwell. "Sounds like a song, Louie," he'd always say. And when I made my first awkward attempts with lyrics, he'd focus on the strands of worth and treat them like pearls. And when I'd get stuck, spinning my rhymes into a "my baby done left me" rut, he'd do his best to give me a push, rhapsodizing for half an hour over some well-crafted, four-minute tune, like "Martha." In "Martha," off Tom Waits' first album, a character named Tom Frost calls up his lover from forty years before, from their time of no tomorrows, their days of roses and poetry and prose, and as they talk, old Tom Frost realizes that he feels the same toward Martha as he did back then. "Forty years," Fran would whisper, closing his eyes, slowly shaking his head, his hands grasping at the air in front of him, over twenty years ago.

For the next few years, we kept riding out to that bridge, even though the "real world" was creeping into each of our lives. Then Fran moved a couple towns away, and our biking rendezvous ended. Whenever I needed a dose of Fran, I'd bike out to the bridge. It lost a few more planks each year, until one spring, it had vanished. The hills had been bulldozed; the brush had

been cleared. The pond was doing time in somebody's back yard. Whenever I needed a dose of that bridge, I'd drive out to see Fran. Through the divorces, the deaths, the lesser tragedies and the minor victories, when no other words could console, I'd hear his old refrain: "Sounds like a song, Louie."

Then, overnight, a decade slipped away. Ten years, spent peddling mail, donning the polyester U.S. Postal blues, making the mortgage, and feeding an IRA. Ten years, delivering a mind-numbing number of strangers' words, written to other strangers, who mostly toss them out unread. Fran's words, honed and true, have carried him off to Atlanta. When I heard he was leaving, I did what I always do in stressful situations: avoid the issue until it either goes away or hits me over the head. It hit me at the University Club, at his roasting. I tried to mingle, but once I spotted the piano near the podium, I gravitated toward it, until I was leaning against it. There I stood, frozen, empty-handed, speechless, for the duration. The jokes and anecdotes went on, but soon the tales from the land of bottom lines were drowned out by chirps, croaks and cricket calls.

After the last roaster spoke, Fran got up and gave us his parting words. He threw a few counterpunches for all those short and bald jokes, and then urged the listeners, from all the various agencies, to resist the crippling

divisiveness that he noticed cropping up between their agencies. He urged them to work at maintaining a vision of their common purpose. And there I stood, leaning on a baby grand.

across the county line  
beyond the dead end sign  
above the railroad track  
a bridge we used to climb  
we'd catch a setting sun  
we'd watch a train go by  
and praise our great escape  
from ordinary life

from every couple days  
to every month or so  
til someone moved away  
and someone climbed alone  
the last time that I made  
my yearly pilgrimage  
they'd levelled off the hill  
they'd taken down the bridge

someday  
I'll find the words in time  
to wish a friend a fare-thee-well  
before the big goodbye

now every forty years  
one of us will call  
and just like two Tom Frosts  
we'll talk about it all  
did ya know that it was me  
how's the wife and kids  
how's the body holdin' up  
did ya find another bridge

in every summer storm  
in every falling leaf  
on every moonlit ride  
on every new year's eve  
in every setting sun  
in every song I sing  
the magic bridge is gone  
the bridge will always be



## Hartwell Redux

I had a friend  
 we made music every night  
 in her sleeping castle  
 we would harmonize  
 she had a way  
 of singing that would make  
 the worries of my day  
 fade away  
     a warm and gentle soul  
     no one else will ever know

I had a friend  
 we would make love every night  
 sometimes I caressed her  
 til the morning light  
 I had a way  
 of setting her to song  
 I came to play one night  
 she was gone  
     a warm and gentle soul  
     no one else will ever know

there was a man  
 still a stranger to these parts  
 for a joke he raped her  
 passed it off as art  
 he didn't know  
 or else he didn't care  
 Medusa would be proud of her heir

    she was warm in her whisper  
     gentle in sigh  
         sharing her secrets with me  
 now my touch brings a shiver  
     she's destined to lie  
     somewhere in silence or screams

I had a friend  
 I still pass her every night  
 just another stranger  
 since her spirit died  
 I never stay  
 I just remember when  
 and leave a flower there  
 now and then  
     a warm and gentle soul  
     no one else will ever know

My memories of Hartwell would remain grossly incomplete without mention of the most spirited and lovely assemblage of students imaginable: the dancers. Thanks to Dance Education pioneer Rose Strasser, Hartwell was (and still is) home to one of the largest Dance departments in the country. As the other departments moved into newly constructed buildings of their own, the largest of the vacated spaces were transformed into dance studios, spread out throughout the building. How the administrators and professors managed to keep their minds on facts instead of figures was beyond me. My mind, fortunately, had no such concerns blocking the view.

I not only fell in love with every other dancer I met, but with the whole concept of dancing for its own sake. These young women were, even more than myself, living for the moment. To paraphrase a tune from A Chorus Line: what they did, they did for love. Musicians improve with age, but dancers? Let's face it: if you're going to make it as a dancer, you'd better be pretty close long before you get to college age. Professional dancers rival pro football players in career brevity. You don't start so late, and so far from the real action (New York City), without a burning, expectation-free passion for the art. Besides, those leotards...

Each new studio brought another piano into Hartwell, until there were half a dozen that I would pass somewhere along my lock-up rounds. Instead of the twenty minutes it would take when I was out to break my record, locking up started taking a couple hours, as I paused at this or that piano, seeing what each had to offer on a particular night. But the longest and most regular stop was reserved for the Steinway in the auditorium. To this day, I can think of no finer place to be.

With the studios and the pianos came a need for musicians to play those pianos--dance accompanists. Accompanists came in all varieties, from the classically trained players of sheet music in ballet classes, where most of the exercises and appropriate music could be anticipated, all the way to the largely atonal percussionists who often played a single basic pulse, nonstop, for the duration of a class (usually 90 minutes). Between these two poles, strains of jazz, pop, avant-garde, and even folk music emanated from the studios. The lure of learning from these varied styles soon had me visiting Hartwell as much during the day as the night. Then I began taking dance classes, and discovered a discipline that challenged my athletic and musical abilities together. Being a male in an almost exclusively female-populated department, I was welcomed into whatever classes I wanted to take, provided I took

them seriously. Taking them seriously included wearing the proper attire, so here's the protector of Hartwell by night dressed in leotard and tights by day. That took courage, but was liberating in a way, and led to a few years of performing more as a dancer than as a musician.

Eventually, of course, I got around to accompanying classes myself, and benefitted immensely as a musician. Composing on the spot; playing in complex time signatures; incorporating vocal techniques; attempting to play percussion instruments, and learning how to impel movement with syncopation, were just some aspects of the craft that I would never have explored, if not for those dance classes. Opportunities arose to compose ensemble music for formal dance performances, which even led to getting commissioned work in the Theater department. And finally, when that fateful day arrived, and it was realized that Hartwell no longer needed guarding, the Dance department hired me as an accompanist. Suddenly, I was on the faculty! Besides receiving validation as an artist, and the opportunity to "sing for my supper," my love affair with Hartwell was extended for another four years.

I quickly discovered that all was not as rosy as I thought it was within my new family. Discontent, rooted in professional rivalries, conflicting artistic visions for the department's future, and even disparities in

salaries and workloads, became apparent. I managed to stay above the fray for the most part, but one incident left me seething, and involved the newest member of the accompaniment staff. Arriving with all the right credentials, if not (in my mind, at least) the best accompaniment skills, Bill M. immediately assumed the top spot in our musical pecking order. He chose to introduce himself to the neighborhood by giving a full-length concert of his works. He quickly deemed the piano in the auditorium not loud enough for his style, and set out to rectify the situation. With his newly acquired authority, he employed a piano technician to insert, via syringe, a hardening agent into each of the piano's felt-tipped hammers. The harder the hammer, of course, the louder the note.

I was still making almost nightly visits to that piano. The first time I played it after "the treatment," I was aghast. The soft, whispery voice was gone. As one of my opening exercises, I used to see how softly I could depress a key and still get the note to sound. No other available piano compared to that Steinway in terms of touch sensitivity, and much of the "charm" in my music relied on that sensitivity. I'd lost a medium that I'd spent years developing; there would be no replacements, not until I struck it rich (I'm still waiting). Lodging a formal protest would have been

ridiculous: the damage could not be undone, and it would have been regarded as one of those aesthetic differences. But I had to do something to grieve, rage, and commemorate. So I wrote a little song, and submitted the lyrics to the department's newsletter staff.

The lyrics were published in an issue that came out just before spring break, and nearly all the students had already left town. The only person to compliment me on the piece was Bill, and he was relentless in asking about the source of my inspiration. I hemmed and hawed, explaining how I'd purposely left it vague so the reader could have some interpretive space, etc. But he wouldn't quit prying, so finally I told him that my "friend" was the raped piano, the "man" was himself, and no, I didn't really think his concert was a "joke." Not entirely. Well, never in my life did I see someone come so close to literally falling off his chair in surprise. We ended up talking for hours and became fairly good friends, despite our continued professional rivalry, artistic differences, and the gross disparity of our salaries.

## Sweet Dreams

Sometimes songs come in dreams. A couple phrases here, a little melody there, and once in a great while, almost completely whole. Sometimes I dream that I'm playing them; other times, I'm watching a performance. They always sound incredible, but if I manage to rouse myself out of bed, go to the keyboard, and recreate what I just heard, they're usually very simple compositions. Most of the time, I just roll over and lose them. Or I try to hold onto a fragment, humming what I can remember all the way to work, but whatever luster it had in the dream is gone by the time I get back home.

Once I dreamed I was tapping my fingers on a table, and the tapping came out as a melody. What a rush it was, even in the dream! Everyone was listening in amazement. I woke up and went right to the keyboard, played the melody, and wrote down just what had happened in the dream, which became the basis for the verses. I liked that song for a long time, probably most of all because the whole thing happened on my birthday. The story was actually better than the song. I haven't played that one for years, although I still sing the chorus

to myself from time to time:

slowly we are waking up  
only to discover  
all the dreams we've been making up  
are wrapped within another

I must have been under the influence of some Eastern tracts at the time.

I've kept dream journals from time to time, but usually after a few months, the dreams take over too much of my consciousness. They get progressively weirder and violent. When I'm really into it, I'll keep a tape recorder next to the bed, and if a dream wakes me up in the middle of the night, I'll record my impressions. Just a few words and the whole dream will return in the morning, and you don't even have to turn on a light. Use a voice-activated recorder, and you don't even have to press a button. For someone looking to spice up a lyric with surreal (some would suggest archetypal) imagery, I'd recommend the old tape recorder by the bed.

The ultimate, of course, is the lucid dream--a dream in which you realize you're dreaming. Dream journals, tape recorders, and pre-sleep mental suggestions all can get you there, if you have enough patience and courage. I've gotten there, but never without going through periods of extensive dreamwork. I think your



waking life has to be sufficiently unstructured to allow for the effects of such work; I wouldn't recommend it for brain surgeons.

Once I was walking down the street, and someone pushed a safe out the window of a skyscraper, right above my head. In the second that it took for the safe to drop ten or twenty stories, my terror turned to amusement as I recognized the cartoon origins of the scene. That's when I knew I was dreaming. I lay down on the ground, whistled a happy tune, and waited for my dream body to be obliterated by the safe. But it just hovered in abeyance, inches above my head. I started laughing out loud, and woke myself up. Another dream had me back in Hartwell, doing my nightly rounds and locking all the exits. As I walked down the final corridor, I flipped a light switch, and that insignificant act tipped me off that I was dreaming. "Oh, my God, I'm dreaming!" I tried to decide who I should visit in that dream state, but the excitement of it all made me wake up. That's the main challenge of lucid dreams--curbing your excitement so you can stay in them long enough to go somewhere.

A wealth of experiences with dreams can be found in a book called Writers Dreaming, in which author Naomi

Epel questioned writers on how dreams have influenced their work. The most useful advice for me came from Sue Grafton, but had little to do with dreams per se. Grafton suggests talking to your right hemisphere (that part of the brain thought to be associated with nonlinear, artistic functions) as if it were an actual person. Write letters to Mr. Right Brain; make specific requests. I haven't actually tried that, but I have come to rely on another of her dictums: Don't Save Anything. Sometimes an idea, a riff, or a chord progression comes that initially seems too good for whatever I'm working on. It seems to call for its own song--I worry that I'll never get such a great idea again. "The truth of the matter," claims Grafton, "is that if you give yourself away every single time, you fill up like a well. Always the water replenishes itself" (66). Or, as Tom Waits put it: "Never heard the melody/til I needed the song."

One perennial conundrum of mine arises with every forbidden sexual escapade I engage in. In my dreams, I mean. The problem is that my dream partner is never my real-life partner. Following the example of my dear, departed friend, Chuck Cuminale, I try to adhere to the tenet that to be a good songwriter, you need to live a good, honest life. Should your secret life in dreams be exempted from this rule? Well, it had to be back

when I was sleeping with a very jealousy-prone Caren, but dreaming of...of...of what's her name. I've actually forgotten her name. And I'm sure I've likewise been forgotten by Caren, that sweet young grad student who was teaching composition during our time together, and who's more than a little responsible for my going back to school.

This "other woman"--let's name her Jane--was a bit of a groupie to the band I played in. No big deal--so was Caren when we first met. Something about Jane got to me. The way she danced, or the way she sat at the bar--the little things that always meant so much. Then she actually started dressing up like Caren, and wearing her hair the same. They looked enough alike to begin with, for Pete's sake. Small wonder I started dreaming about Jane:

I'm sitting in a club, at the bar, with Jane. Our legs are intertwined, and we're smooching. But more than what we're doing, it's what I'm feeling that's so intense--this rush of love and happiness over just being able to touch her. A song comes on the juke box. It sounds like a sea chantie to me, and a few drunks at the bar immediately join in, singing and swaying to the song's 3/4 time. Soon Jane and I are being serenaded by the whole tipsy congregation, bobbing to and fro, foam flying from their beer mugs with every bob. This,

I think, used to be my idea of a romantic encounter.

I woke up, stared at Caren's sleeping, little-kid face (she was barely twenty-one, and looked fifteen at most), and was overcome with guilt. Nevertheless, the pull of that sea chantie roused me out of bed and over to my keyboard, where I played it over and over (with the headphones on, of course). I think only the "so many..." motif actually came from the dream. The rest was, at least for me, a courageous attempt at honesty, if not forthrightness. It probably hurried along the demise of our relationship. Despite the cavalier attitude of the old tar who's singing the song, I ended up spending years grieving over our breakup. How cavalier was I? When I first played the song for Caren, she tried to appreciate it objectively (it really does have great chord changes). Her only comment was: "You should name it after me." So I named it "After Me." Shortly after Caren and I broke up, Jane discovered she was a lesbian.

so many mornings beginning with kisses  
so many ending with cries  
so much about you I already miss  
as I look in those little-kid eyes

so many nights of explaining our love away  
so many wondering why  
so many half-hearted hopes and it's suddenly  
comin' around to good-bye

I've been there before  
and I'll be there again  
it's only a question of when  
babe, farewell could be comin'  
so don't play pretend  
and just let me love ya til then

and babe, forever's a word  
you'll wish you'd never heard of  
and I know one thing for sure:  
there's nothin' I'll ever be sure of

but there's only so many requests you can take  
only so many tears you can hide  
so many wishes on stars you can make  
before comin' around to good-bye

I've been there before  
and I'll be there again  
it's only a question of when  
babe, farewell could be comin'  
so don't play pretend  
and just let me love ya til then  
sweeeeet darlin', I'll love ya til then

Thanks for the Smile, Peg

like autumn and spring  
the stars and the morning dew  
it's too late for me  
and far, far too soon for you

but oh, when you held out your hand  
and called out my name  
you're too young to understand  
I'm too old to explain

but thanks for the smile, Peggy  
it pulled me through  
if ever your heart is heavy  
I'll smile for you  
I'll smile for you

She was at every one of those Wednesday night gigs that I hated playing. I had to be at the club by eight, so we could set up and sound check by nine, so the customers wouldn't be bothered if they showed up before ten. We'd finish playing around two; I'd have my gear packed up by three, and be home and unpacked by four if I was lucky. Then, somehow, I'd have to make up the lost sleep before the weekend gigs--the real gigs--came around. This was not fun, or particularly safe--I was always nodding off at work and, even worse, on the way home from work, or from those gigs. And all for sixty bucks, less whatever I blew on whatever to get me through the night.

These gigs--any gigs, for that matter--would have been jumped on by a multitude of area bands, many of whom could play us under the table. But, for some unknown reason, getting gigs had never been a problem for the Roosters, not even in our early days, back when two of the guys were just learning their instruments. Now, as we approached ten years together (ten years--the Beatles only lasted six!), we took much of our good fortune for granted. We played like we didn't have to try anymore--no new tunes, no mingling with the audience during breaks, no requests. We'd ceased hanging out together, except for rehearsals and gigs, and didn't really enjoy each other's company much anymore. The applause and the money went a long way to keep things civil between us, but both applause and money were running low. The band was well beyond old, and now, four months of Wednesday nights had brought me to the breaking point. Or the breaking up point.

If not for Peggy, that is. I didn't even know her name, but she was there, dancing away, for every one of those Wednesday nights. As often as not, she was the only one dancing by the end of our last set. Barefoot, long, flowing dresses, long, swaying blonde hair, half-smiling as she went gently twirling off into her own hazy world, courtesy of the Rooster Mystery Tour. I came to depend on her presence, even though I was too

shy to introduce myself, until we'd made it through to the final Wednesday of our contract. At that point, I had to let her know how much she'd helped me make it through, and how I'd actually miss those grueling midweek shows, because of her. So I made my move, and ended up with her name and number, and her assurances that we'd be spending time together down the road.

We talked on the phone a few times before we actually saw each other again. She was articulate beyond what I'd expected, considering the dreamy way she always danced. Born in '67, in the summer of love, she was studying in Geneseo to become a special ed. teacher, a goal she achieved before we lost touch with each other. It was April or May when I went to pick her up and head over to a bar for a drink. She lived in the back of a refurbished barn, so the Christmas tree, complete with tinsel and lights, in the middle of her apartment didn't seem all that strange. Charming, actually.

We had a beer, maybe two, before I confessed that I'd written her a little song after that last Wednesday gig. Nothing much, seeing as there wasn't much I knew about her. Which had never stopped me before, and probably actually facilitated the process. Those beautiful blank slates, you know--just waiting to be imbued with whatever attributes turn you on at the time. My repertoire is littered with countless odes to perfect



strangers, the least annoying of which opened this essay. A second debt I owe to Peggy. Thanks for the smile and the song, Peg, wherever you are.

I worry about her from time to time, but I'm married now. Happily married, I should say, since I just remembered that I was married back then as well, but separated. I worry because at the bar, after I told her about the little song I wrote, she told me about all the little times she'd attempted suicide at a college in Vermont, before coming back home, getting help, and starting over at Geneseo. She showed me her wrists in the bar that night. My eyes were tearing up as I took her arm and kissed the scars. That was definitely one of the more unusual first kisses of my dating years.

There were kisses aplenty in the months to come. I think we fell in love with each other's scars. Hers were on her arm; mine were on a tape I gave her of an old concert in Hartwell. I'd long since stopped playing those soul-baring tearjerkers in public, setting them aside during my decade-long detour into the Grateful Dead scene. A strategically-timed tape could still work wonders, though. At least for a while. Truth is, those etchings on her wrists and in my hands were from ancient lives. Clear but no longer accurate pictures, and less so with every passing day. She was on the mend, and I had a bit more descending into chaos on my agenda.

Besides a wife. So love receded into friendship, which  
never worked too well for me.

the summer of love was turning twenty  
when her daughter appeared to me  
taking me back with a carefree smile  
back to a tie-dyed dream

peg, summer's calling  
hurry home

so I fell in love, how could I help it  
we lasted til she could see  
through the mirage, the old sleight of hand  
of someone I used to be

peg, summer's calling  
hurry home

peg, you brought me back to life  
peg, it never felt so right  
peg, I hate to say good-bye  
I'll love ya til I die  
til I die

now I got a wife, I got a mortgage  
but it's somebody else's dream  
so I'm going back to the summer of love  
and by summer's end, I'll be free

peg, summer's calling  
hurry home

## Ellen and the Spacemen

Half a life ago, on a Saturday night in the spring of '76, I was practicing away in Hartwell's auditorium, where, two weeks later, I would give my very first public performance. After putting in a solid session, I took a break and strolled down to one of my favorite haunts, a makeshift cafe called The Crypt. Set up in the otherwise unused basement of a church on Main St., The Crypt only opened its doors on occasional, unannounced weekends, when sufficient funding and staff were available. When it did, you could stretch out all night on a sofa for free, or enjoy a fine lasagna dinner for fifty cents, and be entertained by whatever musicians happened to drop by. Dimly but colorfully lit with candles and strings of Christmas lights; smoke- and alcohol-free; frequented by alternative lifestylists young and old, in its brief life The Crypt had it all, including a rickety old piano that no one ever played.

I walked down the flight of steps and into The Crypt, found an empty table, sat for a while, then approached the counter, checked out the menu, ordered a juice and a piece of cake, and was struck by the counter girl's pretty face. Our brief exchange of words elicited her name, Ellen, and that, yes, she had made the "poppy cake,"

as she called it. Had they not been memorialized in a song, these sketchy details, and Ellen as well, would have soon and ever since been forgotten.

But there was a song, which I immediately began working on. Instead of smoothing out all the rough edges of my upcoming, 90-minute concert, I spent the next week frantically composing and polishing a new, three-minute ditty, which was ready to be heard by the following Saturday night. Once again, I headed down to The Crypt. Once again it was open, with Ellen behind the counter. No musicians were playing for this near-capacity and, by Crypt standards, rather raucous crowd. A seasoned act, let alone a complete novice like myself, would have had trouble keeping their attention. Nevertheless, after repeating all the rituals of the previous Saturday night, including being served by Ellen, I moseyed over to this complete stranger of a piano, hoping no one had noticed, hoping everyone would notice.

First, my fingers quickly but delicately ran through all eighty-eight notes, from bottom to top, in a sweep for any musical land mines--those broken keys whose explosions of silence no song could survive. The piano had a couple clunkers, but none that would force me to retreat, or transpose. Next, I played a few chords, which revealed an instrument sorely out of tune, not at all suited for the moody, sustained tones of my

ballads. No, this would have to be a short, up-beat, hit-and-run set. These performance preliminaries did little to ease the tremors running through my body; but, with no further stalling tactics up my sleeve, I took a final deep breath, and forced myself to begin.

I broke right into Ellen's song, but couldn't get myself to start singing. The entire tune was presented as a rather lame instrumental, and one that probably no one even heard over the revelry of a group of guys sitting near the piano. This was not a disaster, it was merely nothing--a nonevent, witnessed by no one, requiring only that my exit go as unobserved as my aborted performance. I shook my head, as if deeming the piano too decrepit for me to continue, slid off the bench, and headed back to my table.

"Don't stop, that was great," called out one of the rowdy boys as I passed their table. "Yeah, I didn't even know that piano worked," chimed in another. A few more encouraging words from around the room left me no choice. Displaying a completely unearned attitude, I responded, "Okay, but you have to listen this time." Unmiffed by my arrogance, they agreed to my demand. Back at the piano, I turned to the crowd and told the story of Betty and Barney Hill:

One night Betty and Barney were driving through New Hampshire when they spotted a UFO. The next day

they reported the incident to the "authorities," and were asked to give a minute-by-minute account of their experience. When they attempted to do so, they discovered that they couldn't recall anything for most of the night, and agreed to be put under hypnosis to aide their faulty memories. Both Betty and Barney, once hypnotized, reported that shortly after their UFO sighting, they had been abducted by silver-skinned ET's, onto a spaceship. During their abduction, they were subjected to tests and bodily probes, and then programmed to forget the entire incident after they were released. Their experiences were recounted by John Fuller in his book, The Interrupted Journey, which I had recently read.

In a spell of UFO interest, I'd also recently read other books filled with equally fascinating stories: Calvin Parker and Charlie Hickson had an abduction experience similiar to Betty and Barney's. In Exeter, New Hampshire, mass sightings of UFO's had been reported. Finally, I'd read about a man who, while sailing off the coast of Brazil, lost consciousness after sighting a UFO. When he awoke, he found a note in his handwriting which read: "Mankind must stop atomic experiments for warlike purposes. The equilibrium of the entire universe is at stake. We will remain vigilant and ready to interfere if mankind doesn't stop."

Having passed all these tidbits on to a now-captive

and silent audience, I turned to the piano and walked through a classic, eight-to-the-bar boogie pattern with my left hand, while my right hand pounded out bluesy chords on the offbeats. After an eight-bar intro, my miraculously revived singing voice took over:

if ya see me hangin' out,  
 just starin' at the sky  
 I may be practicin' my kneelin',  
 or my "I surrender" sign  
 well now you may think I'm crazy  
 but I'll tell ya if ya really wanna know  
 ya see I feel the spacemen comin'  
 and I'd hate to miss the aerial show

well they say that it would take too long  
 to get through all that space  
 but you'd believe if you could see  
 old Cal and Charlie's faces  
 when they say they was taken aboard  
 you know they're speakin' the truth  
 oh, the spacemen are comin', they'll be  
 doin' what they'll be want with me and you

waitin' for the spacemen  
 waitin' for the spacemen  
 wavin' with my white flag  
 and my "Be Kind to Dumb Animals" sign in hand  
 'cause they gotta save a few of us  
 they'll bring us back to live in their zoo

if you're skeptical  
 go ask that couple named Hill  
 who spilled the beans in a hypnotic trance  
 and if you're still not sure  
 check out the folks in Exeter  
 it's gettin' hard to hide the evidence

spacemen are comin'  
 spacemen are comin'  
 creepin' out of them black holes  
 messin' up everybody's TV shows  
 when they finally settle in  
 I got the feelin' we'll be singin' the blues

well it's true they may have been around  
 since early time and done no harm  
 they never even made too much noise  
 yeah, but that was years ago when we  
 was harmless country folk, now times  
 have changed, we got some fancy new toys

down in Brazil they left a note  
 said better cool it on the atom  
 'cause if we keep on splittin' them poor things  
 it'll start a chain reaction  
 that'll be felt even down at their end  
 of the Milky Way  
 but the generals figure if they don't exist  
 why should we do what they say

(waitin' for the spacemen...)

so there really ain't no use  
 in tryin' to get ahead  
 'cause when they see what we been doin' down here  
 we'll all be dead  
 they're gonna wait a million years  
 until the air clears  
 then they'll start us again  
 hey didn't mean to make ya worry  
 would it help to say I'm sorry  
 they're just candle-lit balloons  
 or how 'bout schizophrenic birds  
 or maybe garbage bags or swamp gas  
 only weirdos see those little green men  
 no, don't ya worry  
 'cause only loonies see those little green men  
 they're really silver  
 and only weirdos see those little green men

(spacemen are comin'....)  
 when they finally settle in  
 I got the feelin' we'll be singin' the blues

A tremolo on a C<sup>7</sup> chord, a glissando landing on low C  
 to end it, and The Crypt erupted in applause! I'd just  
 written the tune a couple of weeks earlier, and somehow  
 managed to get all the words right--a feat I've rarely  
 accomplished since. Candle-lit weather balloons and



swamp gas inversions, by the way, were a couple of the more frequently proposed "logical" explanations for UFO sightings back then.

I turned around and explained that I'd like to try my first number again. Ellen was busy with a customer and not listening, which allowed me to talk more freely about her. "I met this girl down here last week. She was nice so I wrote her a song. All I really know is her name's Ellen, and she's working behind the counter right now." This bit of information set off howls of laughter, and soon it seemed like everyone was yelling "Hey, Ellen...hey, Ellen, come over here, ya gotta hear this." I turned back to the piano. The crowd hushed. I got out the first two words of the song, "Hey, Ellen," which sent the rowdy boys into hysterics, forcing me to stop and start over. Besides the silliness, and the nerve, of the song in general, all of its details about our first encounter were being reenacted at that very moment. Between the opening and the closing choruses, I had to stop a dozen times and wait for the laughter to subside before going on:

hey, ellen, do ya think there's a chance?  
little ellen, are ya into romancin' with me?  
well, you know nothin' 'bout me, I know less about you  
yeah, but it don't matter when the feeling's overdue  
hey, ellen, do ya love me too?

well, an hour ago I was the loneliest soul in this town  
 I was sittin' in a corner by myself,  
 gettin' into gettin' down  
 then you cut me some cake, and poured me some juice,  
 I fell into your face and right out of the blues  
 hey, ellen, did ya feel it too?

hey ellen...(repeat chorus)

well I never got to tell ya  
 but that poppy cake of yours tasted fine  
 yeah, and when I left that night  
 I was prayin' there would be another time  
 another time to learn a little more than your name  
 maybe sing you a song, or just stare at that face  
 hey ellen, did ya feel the same?

(considerably slower):

well I hope comin' on so suddenly  
 won't cause ya to start questioning my motives  
 'cause the truth is just to hold you through the night  
 would do me fine  
 Ellen, whatever your description of love is  
 I'm sure it's the same, sure it's the same  
 I'm sure it's the same as mine

(back to tempo [which set off more howls]):

hey, ellen, ya got me smilin' again, ya got me  
 wantin' ya babe, and I ain't holdin' it in anymore  
 yeah 'cause when I walked in  
 and first laid eyes upon you  
 just one thought kept runnin' through me  
 there was nothin' I could do:  
 what a wonderful face.....to wake up to

if I came straight out and told ya how I feel  
 I think you'd think I was a fool  
 so instead I'll find some chords and melodies  
 and try to say it in a tune  
 and when you finally hear this  
 you don't have to take it seriously  
 if you don't want me

yeah but ellen, ya know I'm hopin' ya care, yeah  
 'cause I ain't felt like this in so long that I swear  
 it's got something to do with that moment near you  
 if I let it slip away this time I'd truly be a fool  
 hey ellen, do ya love me too?

hey ellen...(one last chorus)

As I asked for the final time whether she loved me too, Ellen was standing next to the piano. To the applauding crowd's delight, she kissed me on the cheek, handed me a rose, and went back to work. Any more songs would have been anticlimatic, so I refused the requests, and invited everyone to my concert the following Saturday. Back at my table, I felt a mixture of elation and embarrassment, both of which I hoped to conceal with my much-practiced nonchalance. I graciously accepted some last compliments, and then headed for the door.

Ellen came to my show the next week, and that's the last time I recall seeing her. Her song never went over nearly as well as it did that first time (how could it?); I dropped it from the repertoire after a year or so ("Spacemen Blues" remains a mainstay). I'd actually forgotten the whole episode until I was reviewing all my old Hartwell songs, and the stories behind them. Funny how such a sparkling moment could be forgotten. Such a sparkling, seized moment.

Well, not completely seized, or sparkling. There's always a hitch. Only toward the end of writing this recollection did one last detail float back to the surface. As I was leaving The Crypt that night, out of the crowd came Anne. Anne, the beautiful, innocent,

eighteen-year-old freshman dancer whom I adored more than any other at that time. Anne, who, a couple of months earlier, on a sub-zero winter's evening, warmed the rest of my life by inviting me to spend the night with her, which I did. The encounter proved somewhat awkward, and left me longing for an encore to get my dream back on track. It hadn't happened, but that night at The Crypt, Anne grabbed my arm, and said that what she had just witnessed was priceless. If there was ever a night when my musical talents endowed me with some sort of added magnetism, it was that night, and I must have known it. Or perhaps it was all still too new to me. In any case, the real moment to be seized was holding me by the arm. I thanked her, and then, succumbing to shyness, or to my nonchalant facade, I said I had to go. Life played on, many sweet songs, but never an encore with Anne.

## Afterword

I expect that it's obvious, but if not, I should note that these liner notes were written before the events of 9/11. In the aftermath of that tragedy, I find myself facing a dilemma as a writer: to write of the event feels crass at worst, redundant at best. What could I write that hasn't already been written? What could I write of a catastrophe that defies understanding via metaphor, when "like a movie"--like a fiction, that is--is the most apt and often heard description? And what could I write that won't be rendered dated and irrelevant by tomorrow, considering the accelerated pace of new developments? It's quite conceivable that this almost incomprehensible catastrophe will itself soon be dwarfed by its own repercussions. And yet, how do I write about anything else, without appearing trivial, escapist, or ignobly self-centered? Indeed, the declaration that all other stories have been rendered trivial by 9/11, is itself already clichè.

And yet, there's no shortage of writers out there, doing their best to console, contextualize, advise, agitate, and commemorate. Some will even make a decent

living at it. They're trying, just like those doomed firefighters tried. They mostly fail me. Still, I continue to read and listen during every spare moment, out of some combination of duty and addiction. Sometimes, the familiarity of a commentator's voice manages to soothe, even when the news is unrelentingly grim. My addiction almost drove me to violence when a cashier refused to sell me a copy of the Sunday New York Times on the following Monday, because she'd already recorded it as unsold. Somewhere in the lead story, or buried in the Living Section, there may have been a hopeful line or two--the most I can even hope for. Maybe a tale of heroism with a happy ending that doesn't sound contrived. But even this is a lot to expect, I know.

Each day, The Times devotes a page to its "Portraits of Grief," two-paragraph profiles of some of the victims. At twenty a day, even barring future calamities, these miniportraits could go on for over a year. It's a noble attempt to humanize the tragedy, by commemorating one tiny but telling detail from each of these lost lives. Within days, however, their impact was muted by the sheer number of them. I pause for the kindred souls among them, like Darren Bohan, who "crunched numbers" but dreamed of playing or teaching music full time. Or Lynee Morris--Lynee and her cat were inseparable, I'm told. She'd just reunited with her boyfriend, and was about

to get engaged. Or the firefighter who died before learning that his wife was pregnant. I pause, but each time I approach tears, I'm reminded of how callous I'd become--how I'd managed for so long to turn a blind eye to a vast and intricate tapestry of related crimes and tragedies.

I'd planned a different afterword--something that would sum up my thoughts, or tie up the loose ends between the stories. Maybe I'd explain how I eventually felt the need for more security than Hartwell could offer, and how I made a deal with the devil when it was offered--the golden handcuffs of U.S. Postal Service employment. Or, perhaps I'd offer some old, reliable adages of mine that didn't make it into the essays, like my variation on "show, don't tell": show during the verses, and tell, if you must, during the choruses. Or: if you can't imagine saying it, then don't sing it. But such an afterword would betray the honesty that I promised at the outset, and think I've maintained. I just can't focus on adages or loose ends while bombs are falling and spores are spreading. I am reminded, however, of a very silly young man who looked only to the future, and who used to think he could change the world with a song.

Now we're all looking over our shoulders, and will be for a very long time. I remember, from Psych 101, those nasty experiments on rats: they'd be given shocks for no apparent reason, at no predictable intervals. They grew listless and died prematurely. I find myself weighing the merits of anthrax vs. immolation, sooner vs. later, Ground Zero vs. the outskirts. And I find myself wondering how valid it is to blame the victim, on both a national and personal level. To what degree have my government's foreign policies, as well as my own daily habits, contributed to this tapestry of tragedies? Each time I consider my past, I'm amazed that I actually had the chance to live such a life. That lifestyle seems as bygone as those slow-moving, innocent days portrayed by Willie Morris in My Dog Skip. If I've succeeded in commemorating anything, I hope it was a time when a young adult, with modest talent and scattered ambitions, could "drop out" long enough, and often enough, to find a voice of his own.

The experiences I've drawn from are no more or less significant than those recounted in the daily Portraits of Grief I've been reading in the Times. Indeed, I scan them and hear verses of a song, days or weeks long in the singing. But I'm either too close, or too far removed. Is anyone writing songs or poems today? Not Jack Hardy, a NYC folksinger and long-time member of



a musical collective devoted to writing a song a week. Jack lost his touch on 9/11, after losing his brother, who was also his frequent musical collaborator. How about those of us who only lost our complacency, and our blinders? Who will assign themselves a desk on the 102nd floor, to hear the faint roar, or notice the shadow for a split second? Or to try getting through for one last message of love, even to an answering machine? I dreamed last night that I was sitting where I am right now, hands on this word processor, trying to finish this up. My hand brushed the wrong key, and every letter turned into an empty square. Nothing remained of my work but page after page of empty boxes.

In an essay from Writing in a Nuclear Age, on the difficulty of writing poems about apocalyptic destruction, Leonard Nathan writes: "Direct treatment of such subjects tends to be shrilly trite, hysterically accusing, and sometimes merely self-pitying, as though, in search of terms congruent with the magnitude of the unspeakable, writers pass beyond the limits of what they can control by art and intelligence" (102). For recommending specific strategic actions, the utility of the poem cannot match that of the editorial. Historical elucidations are best left to the historians. The line between making the reader (that rare reader of poetry, that is) think, and

scaring him into paralysis, or frenzy, is a line most poets will find impossible to walk. Nathan goes on to note that American poetry has come to rely on a personal, subjective stance as its authenticating credential. Generalized declarations have become regarded as "...rhetorical bluster and eloquent mendacity. With the more modest instruments of a small lyric voice, contemporary poets do what they can, but what they cannot do very well, it seems, is move into the public domain without feeling self-conscious or clumsily defiant" (103).

Luckily, songwriters don't always suffer such aesthetic qualms. Someone, after all, has to tackle the anthems. Someone like that silly young man out to change the world. Having reacquainted myself, I find I'm still rather fond of him. Besides, I have neither time nor inclination left for any but the most accessible of words. Words to serve myself, if no one else. Words that require no special interpretive skills. Words worth repeating, endlessly, with every breath, in and out, until they say themselves, and become personified in the breather. Words to supplant the news. Words that might bolster the fearful, soothe the angry, unite the polarized, and maybe even comfort the grieving. Peace. At least from within, peace is just a breath away. And who knows: thoughts might be not only consequential, but contagious. Peace. Those twin towers and all our

dead notwithstanding, my heart still can't countenance war. Call me selfish, naive, unpatriotic, or cowardly; maybe I'm already defeated. But I doubt I'll be called upon to do any of the fighting, so if I'm to die, let me at least be in the midst of a prayer, or a chant, a wish, or a simple song, in the name of peace.

rivers run from the mountains  
find a home in the sea  
    but wherever we go  
    we'll never be home  
til all men and women live in peace

some will try building shelter  
some will try weaponry  
    but whatever we try  
    we'll never sleep tight  
til all men and women live in peace

peace, peace  
    before it's too late  
peace, peace  
    what will it take

til all men see they are brothers  
and share all joy and all grief  
    when will we see  
    we're one family  
and no one is safe til all are free

peace, peace  
    before it's too late  
peace, peace  
    what will it take

some may climb every mountain  
some may sail every sea  
    but wherever we go  
    we'll never be home  
til all men and women live in peace  
    let us live, let us live  
    let us live  
    in peace

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