

Red Rock Road, Light Blue Sea

by

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"You Wanted a Moorish Palace"

You wanted a Moorish palace,
but we never did find one
open
and as we step onto this plane
out of Spain
I have something to tell you:

by the time you know you are looking for a thing,
that thing has found itself within you.
The fig on the branch has
leapt to your lips, is
even now gushing pinkly over your chin.

You wanted a Moorish palace.
Have you noticed it yet?
Spareness and rhythm and impossible ornamentation are
blocked into your bones, are
jiggling in your sunbrowned fingers, are
jazzing and bedazzling all around your quiet house.

You wanted a Moorish palace, but we
never did need to find one.

Open.

--Oiseau, November 2000

Foreword - What This Is

A novel, a poem, a meditation,
a sketch, a life-work, a painting,
a symphony, a word-jam, a play,
a rebellion, an edifice, a puzzle,
an evolution, a highway, a mountain path,
a stream, an ocean, a starry sky,
a hut, a bed, a festive meal,
a heady wine, a compost heap, a chocolate dessert, a shingled roof, a vacation, a
temptress, an invocation, a confession, a whistled melody, a flickering flame, a
conundrum, a composition in sand, a dialogue of many voices, a rustling of leaves, a
container of rendered fat, an accounting of sins and victories, a manifesto, a wondering,
an investigation, a hole in the forest floor, a leafy bower, a tent in the desert, a spray of
sea-foam, a rumble in the cliffs, a deer stepping out from the cover of trees...

To keep things simple, let's suppose that all of the foregoing might be contained
in that most versatile ark, the novel. While the narrator of the ensuing tale may at times
envision himself as an empty vessel, there are many ambitions to be satisfied in his
handling of this rocking ship. Simply said, when coming to the end of his fifty years of
struggle and pleasure, focused work and chronic diversion, sporadic success and

numerous mistakes, he found the need for perspective, a break, a fresh start. A way to make sense of it all.

Our narrator's fanciful moniker, "Jammin Fulltime Now," suggests the persona of a Rasta street drummer or rap artist, and so perhaps belies his more eclectic pedigree; but it does reflect his central value system. Let the poet claim that there are "no ideas but in things," and the philosopher contend the reverse; J.F. Now holds both correct in their own purposes, while seeking rather to find his own equilibrium in the sweet center of the moving moment.

On a small, beautifully endowed Mediterranean island, he began the story of his life thus spent...whether half or mostly done, beside his point. He knew the process that brought him to that charming haven was based on fluid motion, on sacred flow; and so even while coming to rest there with a dimly formed vision of the task before him, he knew that he would continue to sail past conventional expectations of the novel or any other genre, past all the more static and predictable literary forms.

On the surface, his quest takes the form of a hybrid vacation in Spain and Portugal--part outdoor adventure, part working holiday, part retreat. Also part honeymoon--for the quest is not his alone to undertake or enjoy. He shares it with a life-companion, Oiseau, who is also marking a new beginning, in her fortieth year. Their partnership of less than two years has arisen like a magic firebird from the cooling ashes of respective marriages decades long; and for months they have conspired, saved, and prepared for this flight to the sun.

Part One - Dinner and Dancing

19 October

"First day on Formentera...so what do we do here?"

In such a place, to pose this question is to begin a visualization exercise for living your ideal day...with everything you need, with the one you love, with no obligations or distractions, except...well, better start at the beginning.

The honeymooners arrived on the island late yesterday afternoon, took a bus to Sant Ferran, and hiked with their backpacks the last four kilometers, following directions sketched on a ragged map. Just at sunset they found their blue-shuttered cottage by the sea, with "Casa Sophia" lettered in tile on a low whitewashed stone wall. There was just enough daylight left for them to locate keys for the doors, hook up the butane fridge and stove, and prepare a modest feast of chicken breasts, pasta and cauliflower, with a dark red wine, Sangra del Toro.

"I guess we should have got the white wine," Now observed over their plates of pale food. Candles in sand inside cut-off clear plastic jugs guttered in the sea-breeze while lighting their meal on the terrace.

"No, I like this," Oiseau said. "It provides contrast."

These were not seasoned travelers, no jet-setters nor true gourmands; just simple, hard-working folks whose time had come to taste the good life. Their appearance fit their

tastes in food and lifestyle. They wore sturdy canvas hiking shoes and lightweight pants, identical sea-tone rain shells. Oiseau had straight, shoulder-length hair gathered in a purple silk twist, leaving her lovely neck exposed. She wore, as always, her large, wire-framed glasses, over a wide nose and high cheekbones. Her eyes were calm and intelligent; her lips full and sensuous. At the moment her strong jaw was well occupied, beating a rhythm with her partner's steady chewing.

"Mmm, I'm hungrier than I thought," she said between bites of chicken.

"Yeah, we didn't have much to go on during the day."

She put down her fork. "What? You've forgotten the jambon serrano we had for lunch? That bread from Denia, with cheese and avocado? Beet and endive salad, on the ferry--"

"Yeah, but that was a long time ago."

Now put down a breast bone and wiped his silvery mustache and beard with the back of a long, sun-browned hand. Over six feet and still gangly at fifty, he never could fill out his thin frame, or satisfy his hunger for long, no matter how much or how often he ate. Oiseau had more reserves to work with, yet food for her, too, was not a matter to be taken lightly.

After their hearty supper they retired to the bedroom with glasses of wine, to relax and reflect on the distance they'd come and the effort they'd expended to get here. Two long days of bus and ferry rides from Órgiva, via Almería, Alicante, Denia, Ibiza. Their skins were still sticky from the final hike to the house; but when Oiseau tossed off her

hiking clothes with the promise of a shower, she was disappointed to discover that it wouldn't produce more than a dribble of warm water. They settled for the cool comfort of clean sheets.

For now we will pass over their time in bed...noting, by the way, that this isn't a conventional kind of marriage or honeymoon. Our middle-aged lovers (think wispy white-streaked beard draped upon plump drooping breasts) have been, in fact, traveling together for the last six weeks, and living together for a year and a half. They rise before the sun to write in respective journals, breakfast on rolls and coffee, and then greet Celeste, the orange-haired French caretaker who arrives early to help them set up the kitchen hot water heater and bedroom space heater.

"What about the shower?" Now asks her.

"The shower? It's not working?"

"Not really. It just comes out in a trickle. Not really hot, either."

"Well, I tell my husband. Il va voir--he see what he can do. But please, if you want showers, we are right next door. You can come to our house."

Celeste also has brought a broom for the sand on the red-tiled terrace; she explains how to pump household water from the underground cistern to the holding tank on the roof; and right, one more thing, there's a way to shut off that irritating low-battery buzzer on the solar-powered lighting circuit.

"These facts of life are all very well," Oiseau's eyes say upon Celeste's departure, "but there is other business to attend to on a honeymoon, however unconventional it may be." So the amorous travelers retire mid-morning to bed again--only to be interrupted in their mature cuddling, by a German woman named Marta who comes calling at the door.

Gaunt and tall with graying hair and the prominent nose of a philosopher, Marta informs them in halting English that she's a friend of the house owner Sophia, and also of Ella who owns the house where Arielle, a friend from their home in Canada, is staying. Out of touch for the past month and only recently arrived on the island herself, Arielle is now reachable with the help of Marta's directions.

Still later the new arrivals will receive two visits by Celeste's husband, Jean-Pierre, who brings them larger sheets and some drinking water. He says he'll come another day to work on the shower; and if that doesn't work, he'll arrange a plumber. This new life, it seems, is as busy as the one they've come so far to leave behind.

*

Somehow that first morning I managed (let's start again; I'm Jammin Now) to squeeze in some early morning drum playing. The fresh dent in the mylar skin of my aluminum doumbek, which I'd been distressed to discover when unpacking, proved not so tragic as I'd feared. It was a dime-sized dimple, apparently caused by the pressure of a bone button from the shorts I'd packed under the drum head to protect it. Those were the

blue silk shorts with aqua trim which Pam, my previous wife, had made for my forty-seventh birthday, the last one we would share together. If this small mark was to be the extent of her presence here, I could live with it. The tones of the drum still rang deep and clear, and I found pleasure in sending rolling rhythms out over the open landscape of red rock and rosemary which surrounded our cottage.

The housekeeping chores, which included a load of laundry scrubbed and rinsed and wrung out by hand and hung to dry in the sun, were less inspiring, but were followed by a fruitful trip to the bank and grocery store. Our two backpacks full of food were covered, in effect, by an exchange rate more favorable than expected.

Is it useful to go into detail, I wonder, about the chocolate ice cream which, garnished with bits of extra chocolate, grated ginger and sliced banana, and eaten immediately upon our unpacking of the groceries, served to welcome us further into this new milieu, making up in the nourishment category what we had been compromised in attaining so far, in the area of love?

Food and sex aside, the unquestionable highlight of what we sincerely thought of as our "First Day in Paradise" was a mid-afternoon swim on the rocky yet white-sanded beach just a ten-minute walk from the house. We could overlook the plastic junk washed up here and there, and the giant rusted tank beside which we laid out our towels, because the water itself was pure, perfectly warm and inviting. Oiseau was satisfied to paddle briefly in the shallow water and then to recline on the soft sand, while I swam out toward the open horizon, with a sensation of naked clarity and joy I had never before

experienced. I dove and splashed and lolled in it, before turning back to shore. I crawled onto rocks and dove in again, exploring the light green depths and, when my exuberance was spent, simply basking in the crystal shallows. Finally I slithered up onto the beach like a creature of my own past, present, and future evolution.

On our return from the beach, we found out from Jean-Pierre that the cistern water, which we'd been carelessly drinking, and using for cooking and brushing our teeth, was absolutely not safe for anything but washing clothes and showering. When he hedged a bit on the washing of dishes, I held on to some hope that the water couldn't be all that bad. Despite his twisting gestures of intestinal pain and suffering, I felt so far unharmed. To play it safe, we arranged to buy a six-week supply of drinking water the next day, trusting we'd survive long enough to enjoy it.

More troublesome was the ache that followed this disturbing news: the pain in my brain from trying to learn yet another language, German, in an attempt to get more clarity on the water situation from the voluminous notes Sophia had written for houseguests. Oiseau's high-school German was too far gone and so I pieced together what I could with the help of a tiny German-English dictionary I found in the house. Reading finally that chlorine and lime had been applied the previous June, I was satisfied at least that we would live, and figured we could safely use the cistern water for washing dishes and even for some of the cooking.

And then...what do you do when there's nothing--and so everything--to do? In this case (isn't every case different?), on this sunny October afternoon on the terrace of the Casa Sophia, reclining on a canvas deck chair while Oiseau sat nearby knitting, I had in my lap a piece of stunning baseball prose in the international edition of the Herald Tribune, reporting on the Yankees' playoff-clinching victory over Seattle. Later, after supper, there was a rich dose of heady poetic fiction, read by Oiseau aloud from the opening pages of Edna O'Brien's Wild December. Finally, there was the simple act of heading for bed together, with our sea-washed skins, and two piles of freshly laundered clothes for the morning.

20 October

Day 2 in Paradise, lounging late in bed...and somehow the conversation got around to making love in public.

"Why," I wanted to know, "among all the rebellious and deviant acts humans have seen fit to perpetrate over the years, is that the least one known? It's just unheard of, as far as I know. So what's the story? Protectiveness of one's mate? Fear of being vulnerable?"

"What about all those orgies in the sixties--or in Roman times?"

"Yeah, but I don't mean just doing it together in a group. I mean, for public display. With an audience."

"Okay," Oiseau countered again. "What about porn videos?"

"Sure. But I'm talking about live."

"So like, performance sex? Sexual theatre?"

"Sort of. I'm thinking, more like the sixties idea, taking theatre to the streets. I guess it comes back to that question the Beatles asked for all of us: 'Why don't we do it in the road?'"

"Except you want to change it to, 'Someone will be watching us...'"

"Well, not literally, you and me. But it might make a good novel. Surely one creative couple could be devised to carry it off."

"But not us, right?"

"No, no, don't worry. Road blockades are one thing. This would be a stretch even for me. It's an intriguing concept, though."

The thread got on to my old girlfriend's visit when I was with my first wife Janine, in the seventies. The girlfriend had brought along new boyfriend of her own, and an evening around the campfire had ended with a double switch in the tent after a bottle of mezcal. The pickled worm, needless to say, had the last word. Oiseau felt more and more threatened as the tale extended through the serpentine history of my infidelities.

"But you know I'm finished with all that now," I reassured her.

"That's what you told me once, when I was on the outside."

"So fate rewarded us for our prudence. Now you're on the inside."

Oiseau's upper lip had started to tremble, just as I remembered that quirk of hers fifteen years ago.

"There's something else bothering you. What is it?"

She had to choke back the tears and then she struggled to speak. The words came out in a small voice. "It's not that I don't believe you now. I believe...your good intention. But I also understand...how hard it is sometimes...and that things just happen."

I held her close and tenderly, and felt the force of her love again just as I had when she'd first hugged me in the garden.

I played drum and pennywhistle the rest of the morning while Oiseau painted and wrote. I wasn't sure how disciplined I wanted to be with my creative energies during this retreat; but so far I was enjoying the free flow of time here, playing with the possibilities.

Drumming outside in the sunshine, I had to tone down the volume so as not to disturb neighbors who might be inhabiting the closest houses. This restraint in itself was a useful exercise. In the course of that morning's practice I also experimented rhythmically with variations on seven; then, using breaks with a three groove, I settled into a long endurance exercise, gradually speeding the tempo.

On the pennywhistle, I made good progress with the difficult progression near the end of "Le Tambourin," while improving the overall feel. I found I was opening up new areas for fine-tuning: fingering, tonguing, phrasing, breathing, timing. With time in abundance, I went on to learn some unfamiliar Irish tunes, and practiced some of the ones I'd already memorized.

Writing, I felt at the outset, was going to be more of an open-ended affair. To begin with, I would simply continue keeping a journal, as I had during the more mobile first half of our trip. As for reading, I hadn't sampled much yet from the half-dozen English-language titles in Sophia's small library, but planned to dip into more soon.

The world of literature was a potential black hole for me, and I was wary of its pull on my latent ambitions. After six weeks of walking, without books and with only casual journal entries along the way, a writing-and-reading program of any sort smacked of work--a forced march. Naturally I was hungry for the good old English language; but I still wanted to examine from a distance, not indulge automatically, these long-lived addictions.

At noon I went with Jean-Pierre in his truck to town to buy fifteen eight-litre plastic jugs of water. Our caretaker spoke a mixture of French, Spanish and English with a genial, long-toothed smile. His balding head of frizzy, gray-blond hair bobbed wildly as we rattled over the unpaved back roads, and he told me he used to live in Paris, where he worked as a prop and special effects man for James Bond movies, assorted French films, and commercials. Five years ago he gave up the stress for the good life in the sun on Formentera. Now he painted houses, worked at odd jobs, and still took on maybe one commercial a year, if a film crew showed up at the right time. His wife Celeste, once an assistant director, now works as a receptionist for a local dentist.

I asked Jean-Pierre if he missed the creative work of his former profession.

"Mais non," he said in a rumbling voice, shaking his head emphatically. "Too much stress in that world. For me, is better this way." He smiled and gestured outside at the sunny fields.

In the afternoon Oiseau and I played music together, then went to the beach on the other side of this narrow island, the Platja Migjorn. It was time to address the question of how best to make use of our time here, identifying those elements likely to be most conducive to living the creative life. Up until now we had only vague leanings in certain directions, wanting to savor the taste of true freedom more than anything else. And the freedom we had already experienced on the open road was indeed inspiring. It was just that now, with a fixed residence, more opportunities presented themselves.

There was only a scatter of other people around, sunbathing farther down the beach, strolling on the wooden walkway. I removed all my clothes; Oiseau kept her black panties on. Such was the norm on the less public beaches in Spain.

"I really want to continue exploring what I can do with watercolors," Oiseau began. "I've got so many ideas to work on. I'd like to spend at least two or three hours a day drawing and painting."

Normally I would have welcomed the chance to use the same block of time for writing, but in this case I still felt too unfocused, too deeply immersed in vacation mode, to commit myself.

Seeing my hesitation, she asked, "What about you?"

I sketched idly in the sand with a finger. "Um, I'm still not sure. I like the idea of keeping it loose, I think, for now. Yeah, I'm just not ready to take on any big project--though the thought of using this time to be productive is appealing, too. I'll have to play it by ear, I guess. I can always benefit from more time just jamming on the drum, or practicing pennywhistle. So...I don't know. The writing...I'll see what happens."

Oiseau knew me better than to let me off the hook so easily. At the same time she respected my need for a break from steady work on literary projects. In the past year I had brought no less than three dusty novel manuscripts to completion, along with a novella and collection of short stories--all old projects which I'd had been determined to complete in order to clear the decks for the one mega-project still in the works.

"You'll probably want at least to continue your journal," she suggested diplomatically.

"Yeah," I sighed. "Or, I could take a fresh stab at that Life story again. Except that everything I've already written is back home on the computer."

"I like the word, 'fresh.'" Oiseau smiled.

"Hmm, maybe you're right."

I lay down on my stomach on the towel, with my arm on my lover's warm skin, just under her cloud-white, upturned breasts.

At sunset we went walking out along the cliffs. The sea was a choppy indigo where it was deep; it was turquoise in the shallows and also farther out to sea, where it

reflected a pale blue, white, and yellow sky. We walked over rock spread thinly like pavement all over the land. Here and there odd clumps of brush broke through, and in the red-brown sand grew little lavender blossoms...no stems or leaves, just blossoms.

By the high cliffs, near where Marta had said we'd find Ella's house, we came to a large circle of small stones...then another, with a Celtic design...then a Yin-Yang symbol. This outdoor gallery, we later learned, was a source of some local controversy, on a landscape otherwise wild and barren: a question of Nature vs. Art. On several rocks were painted, in black lettering, short poems in German.

We turned back before going all the way to visit Arielle. We weren't ready to connect with our friend from home just yet. We were too busy trying to play Adam and Eve.

21 October

This morning clear skies were clouding over, and the sea was high and stormy. I found a hollowed-out half-cave in which to sit and improvise on pennywhistle, to the accompaniment of the crashing waves.

A fisherman carrying a rusty chain appeared with a little dog.

"Mal tiempo," he said, looking out to sea. "Pero no viento...que pasa?"

It wasn't windy, just rough.

Back in the bedroom where I presently sequester myself for a spell of journal writing, I open the white curtain which breaks the fresh breeze coming in. The sky is

already clearing again, from the south. The ever-hopeful swimmer in me jumps at the prospect that it may be sunny after all, may even be calm across this spit of an island. In the meantime, I wait, wondering how I might otherwise be engaged. Still a creature of indoor habits, I long for baseball news, Internet and email. I consider how I could divert myself instead by practicing flute tunes ad infinitum...treading water. Or simply beach bumming, whatever the weather brings. The sea is seductive that way.

Among the small house stash of readable books, I've discovered a great one: Iris Murdoch's The Black Prince. Inspiring in its genius of construction and characterization, it's also daunting to a fellow freshly embarked on a course of creative self-examination. The parodied narrator himself has produced but a couple of books in forty years of creative effort, and I find him speaking uncannily to my condition.

Earlier this morning I asked Oiseau what she wants for me.

She replied, "To believe in yourself. To open yourself fully to your creativity, with your whole heart."

"As to a lover," I added. I certainly had her to thank for this wisdom, gained during my two years with her and still growing in our lives together. But then, speaking more from the mind than the heart, I quoted Murdoch's narrator, "Every artist is an unhappy lover." Without endorsing this conventional opinion, I posed the question, "Do you think it's possible to do both?"

Oiseau replied without batting an eye: "How can you not do both?"

Heart-Dance, Wind and Wave

The Casa Sophia, this already clichéd "cottage by the sea," stands in humble perfection with its small whitewashed walls, its rounded edges, its blue doors and shutters, at the edge of an open field within sight of the sea. Thatch covers one terrace, red clay tiles the other. The tile roof and flat-tiled terrace floor both serve to catch and funnel the occasional rain toward the cistern. A small solar panel gamely gathers the yellow light, this dark early morning in late October, while a strong warm wind blows in from the Mediterranean.

On the way to the sea and all along the shore stretches a surface of red-tan rock, bare and smooth as pavement until, in range of the incessant waves, it becomes as gnarled and craggy as the inside of a limestone cavern. The waves wildly crash this morning, as they have for the last four days after that first day of warm and sunny welcome.

Here and now, at such a time and in such a place, there is truly for me nothing to do but write, or give voice to the constant pennywhistle tunes that ride my head throughout the day and night. To take moments of pounding wind with my drum and beat them silly, where no one can hear. To read the greatest book far into the night without guarantee that there will be any to follow it through the remaining weeks here.

More and more, I see the possibility of doing less: to sit straight up by candlelight in the predawn stillness and watch my easy breathing thoughts; to bring the mad spinning pennywhistle music to a stop--like a stuck record--then reduce it to a tiny beeping, receding into the distance. If again it intrudes, then it is something other, distant from over the hills as from a shepherd's pipe.

In the end nothing is left but to return to this stage where I can be myself without a sense of self-importance, yet also without putting on a muzzle of silence. The darkened gallery is hushed: whether empty or full of an interested crowd, I cannot tell and indeed must not consider in this moment of private performance. My attention is fixed on the moment, and what it has to offer. I listen to the wind.

*

This period of my life, in this place I inhabit for the moment, reminds me of other new homes I've had, all temporary. Beginning with the launch of my adult independence in 1972, when fresh out of college, I drove to California with \$30 in my pocket and moved into a friend's shared apartment in Berkeley. With everything in the world to choose, I roamed the city parks with books and notebooks in hand, invoking the muse: a path which has continued more or less ever since.

Next, the little trailer on Rainbow Street in Victoria, where I got free rent in exchange for feeding the cows and cleaning out the barn. I shat in the barn with the cows

and showered at the university, where I began courses for a master's degree in 1974. In my tiny cockeyed shelter I pounded away at an old Olivetti and threw I Ching coins to settle on a thesis topic.

Take three: two years later, the house in Inukjuak, northern Quebec, where I began a short-lived teaching career, in the company of a woman I'd courted at UVic. A thousand kilometers away from the amenities of "the South" (meaning civilization as we knew it), I wound up learning more from the Inuit than I was able to teach. Even so, as I wandered the tundra with shotgun and notebook in hand, I felt I was commencing the serious, responsible stage of my life. An experimental novel I'd just begun before leaving Victoria--based on Thomas Mann's unfinished Felix Krull--lived mostly in a drawer. Janine and I would marry the following summer.

The fall of 1978 found us in Nelson, B.C., in a little basement suite, painting the walls blue and making bookshelves, ready to start our formal teacher training. The sequence was a little backwards; but the school board in Quebec was paying the bill, so who was complaining? My career and marriage were now officially underway. I was in my prime at twenty-eight, with lots of time to burn. I added a creative writing course on the side, and discovered from the experience that it was time to give up the remnants of my aspirations as a poet.

1980 marked the move to yet another place of residence--a pioneer's log house owned by a Quaker boarding school in the tiny British Columbia hamlet of Argenta. This was to be my final home, the niche in the mountains I had visualized ever since those

gas-station graveyard shifts in Berkeley. Argenta had a small but educated, like-minded community, and the local school was an ideal venue for continuing my teaching career indefinitely...or at least, until literary success caught up with me.

Two years later, 1982, I had burned out from teaching and its associated small-town politics. The still-unfinished novel followed me into a tipi on a freshly-cleared homesite on the Argenta land co-op. In this rustic basket I had decided to put all my eggs, because now I wanted above all to be living on the land, building a house of my own. The process would be arduous and long but I was still young and strong. In the cold heart of a minus-twenty February, I packed out a toboggan-load of basic possessions (including most notably that unwieldy novel manuscript) and went to house-sit for a month in nearby Howser. My wife Janine, it must be explained, had already given up the back-to-the-land idea for an apartment of her own in Nelson, where she was studying midwifery and feminism and becoming active in the disarmament movement. My own interest in that last burning issue led me to publish, with some urgency, not the long-awaited finish to Felix Krull, but rather a training handbook on the subject of "Active Nonviolence." It wasn't exactly creative writing, but what could you do when the world was threatening to blow itself to pieces, any day now?

By 1984, I was living in the closed-in back half of a new house, with a new partner, Pam, and a newborn baby girl, Shira. In the early mornings I would leave the nursing-bed and type my finally (so I then imagined) finished novel. In workday hours I tinkered with a twelve-volt washing machine to get us through the diapers, earned a bit of

cash by helping a neighbor renovate his house, and managed now and then to nail a few boards onto what, by now, I could logically consider my final abode in this world.

The years after this tend to slide and bunch together more indistinctly. The world did not end as I had seriously feared by 1984; rather my new life as a family man and homesteader began. Through these two-by-two years--'86, '88, '90, '92, '94--I planted trees for my income, finished building the house, took on half the childcare and homeschooling of my daughter, and became involved in numerous campaigns of nonviolent environmental action.

Meanwhile I cultivated an active, if not always primary, interest in my writing career: editing and publishing in cooperation with other writers; revising that first novel (called, apocalyptically, The Last Book) and beginning several others; writing dozens of short stories, essays, poems and articles, and flogging them to publishers large and small. I also began to play drums and percussion, attending workshops and jams and setting up regular practice sessions with a local group.

By 1996 I was publishing a book of collected drum rhythms, beginning a business as a distributor of health foods, and designing an extensive website covering all the areas of my personal interests, arranged by chakra:

1. health, wilderness
2. alternative lifestyle

3. environmental politics
4. computer networking
5. hand drum rhythms
6. book reviews, writings
7. alternative spirituality

In 1998, this house of cards which my semi-professional life and settled domestic routine had become over fourteen years came tumbling down, when Pam moved out to live with the guy next door. We continued to split child care in half. Now I had substantial periods of time alone. I had to rethink everything: my work, my writing, my personality, the meaning of love. Of love I decided I really knew nothing: I had to start over.

Oiseau walked out of her failing marriage of twenty-two years that same spring. But I wasn't ready for anything new just yet. Besides, Oiseau was Pam's older sister.

I tossed my fate to the winds and rode with a group of friends south to Arizona for the annual Rainbow Gathering. The beautiful wide empty desert, and the music and tribal camaraderie and ritual, were all a healing balm to my bruised spirit; yet I was strangely untouched at the heart level. Instead I was undergoing a more subtle softening, in unseen readiness for a wave of love that came by surprise on my return home.

The year 2000 finds me with new partner Oiseau here in this sanctuary--in what I insist on calling "Paradise." With our two funky houses left behind, and our respective families of two boys and a daughter away in the care of their other parents, we have created for ourselves a bubble of personal, interpersonal, and creative freedom.

The wind continues to blow. Each year passes imperceptibly. I'm wary now, that when changes stop appearing even as the years pass in pairs, the changes that finally come can be soul-shattering. That's all to the good, from the perspective of a later, greater happiness. But it makes me wonder--maybe it's worth keeping a closer eye on the dynamic needs of the soul, to make sure they are being met in an up-to-date fashion, and not stored on some lower level to ferment and rot until the whole house caves in again.

It's also true that the stability which I seemed to enjoy in those indistinct dozen years from '86 to '98 was exactly what I had hoped to achieve, in the preceding stages of constant change. So there is perhaps no formula for change...just a wisdom in accepting the necessity of change in one form or other, in the rhythm that it makes if we don't. I want to learn to listen better to that inner rhythm of wind and wave, and to dance with the heart changes as they happen.

*

Our sexuality was a whole other fertile field to be tilled here, if we cared to work at it. As with creativity, however, the temptation was to let it find its most natural

expression. And as in the approach to art, there were many possible angles. One of the most intriguing concerned the relationship between love and art: between sexual and aesthetic creativity. There was the delicate matter of the replication of DNA, for instance...

"See, it can't do it directly. It has to use RNA as a template." I was trying to make some other point, and I remembered the diagram from 9th grade biology, the twisted ribbons with little ladder steps attached. "But it's an inexact replication because of the chaos factor." This final tidbit I had picked up somewhere else along the line, long after 1964.

"You mean, mutations?"

"Yeah, from cosmic rays, or chemical damage, or just plain errors in translation."

Oiseau had a faraway look in her eyes. "It's like trying to count the waves."

"Huh?"

"I was sitting there keeping my feet dry and counting the waves. Every so often a big one would come in and just about touch my boots. It seemed like, maybe, every eleventh or fifteenth one. But when I tried to count, it always came out different. And then the really big one came and got me soaked."

I laughed. "The two hundred and forty-seventh."

"Maybe," Oiseau added, "it's a kind of reminder that the tide is coming in."

It was that same genius of creation, we reflected, which determines in Celtic music that the predictable bars and phrases will develop in impetuously novel ways

through the course of the melody. Which finds endless amusement in the wrinkling of an ancient drum rhythm from tribe to tribe, so that it always stays alive, but wears a newly weathered face. Which gives us sunrise after sunrise in nearly the same spot every day, but with a soft turn of shading now more yellow, now more blue.

So our conversation turned, advancing onward with metaphor upon metaphor, as we sat in the afterglow of a lovemaking which left us pondering the open-flamed fire of life--the one element powerful enough to defeat predictable dreariness, despite our habitual efforts to stabilize happiness into fixed walls, ceilings, and marriages of everlasting comfort and convenience.

*

The project of the larger autobiography, like the project of the life which forms its subject, consists of a number of false starts rendered true in the eventual and cumulative perspective of time unfolding. There is no final plan, no fixed outline inside which the life truly lived can be made to fit neatly--whatever the desires of art to do exactly that. And art itself, besides being a container or frame, can also be live or frameless, the very stuff of life...can be defined instead by its internal consistency or truthfulness to the desired spirit of presentation. It can be a constructed unity of process as well as of form.

These interlayered, journalistic prefaces to an autobiography, flowing as they do from the current of life in the running, can adhere to the novelistic story and become part

of it; while the incidents and episodes can themselves serve as prefaces. From a life in which definitions are constantly being questioned and blurred, comes a reflection whose arbitrary distinctions likewise must be called into question. Any conventional labels, such as "preface" or "story," "nonfiction" or "fiction," "journal" or "novel," are therefore provisional. Meanwhile the attempted transmission--like language itself, or any art, our only means of replicating a facsimile of consciousness one to another--while inexact, is still necessary.

*

After making love with Oiseau one night in southern Portugal--the night, to be exact, after our disaffection on the beach and ill-fated spree in Tavira, and before the weird flap with the landlady--I had a powerful experience which gave me new insight into the course of my life as a whole. There had been a prolonged period of mutual arousal, climaxing in my case with a particularly intense orgasm. Oiseau too was well satisfied and we were both drifting toward sleep. But then, lying on my back in bed in the dark, I began touching my chakras (the seven centers of vital energy charted by Hindu explorers of the world within) with both hands folded together, palms down, fingertips sensitive to each area.

I had already become accustomed to finding my hands drawn in this way to the heart area. It happened naturally when I relaxed in bed or a hot bath, and seemed a kind

of self-healing response, which I had noticed ever since the breakup with Pam. Lately the position of my hands had migrated upward to the throat chakra, the area symbolizing creative expression.

This recent movement, I had recently remarked to Oiseau, reflected a shifting focus in my life. As emotional energy was opened and healed in the area of loving relationship, it was being freed to move upward in the form of creative energy. It seemed fitting that this shift should be happening in me around the age of fifty, a symbolic turning point, a time of transition.

In this instance I found that by touching my fingertips and palms lightly over each chakra in turn, my kundalini energy, already stimulated by a high level of sexual arousal, was further awakened and sensitized. The intensity of the feeling that lay charged in each center actually made it unbearable to continue the touch to each spot for more than a few moments. I moved my hands from the heart up to the throat, then down to the solar plexus area, to the upper genital area, to the root area near the perineum; then up again by each in turn, feeling by touch the energized life force.

And then it occurred to me in this progression, that each of the seven chakra areas, not just the heart and throat, could be seen to correspond to a period of my life in which its awakening, along with the particular attribute of life it represented in the Hindu system, was foremost.

<u>Age</u>	<u>Chakra</u>	<u>Life Focus</u>
0-12	perineum	survival
13-24	genitals/navel	sexual awakening
25-36	solar plexus	career and politics
37-48	heart	love and family
49-60	throat	creative expression
61-72	third eye	intuitive intelligence
73--	crown	spiritual growth

A life story might be conceived, I realized, as a series of such stages, through which each major lesson area is more or less mastered on the way to wholeness. Psychologists such as Erikson and Maslow outlined similar systems with the same intent. Certainly in a given life it could be said that all of these seven types of human potential are active or latent all the time. But growth through the stages of a lifetime provides a sequence of especially appropriate opportunities to explore each area fully. And the most dramatic parts of the life story are likely to come at the cusps of change, the years of transition from one stage to the next.

Perhaps I was being optimistic about the span of a normal human life, mine in particular. But true to my nature, I wanted to squeeze in as much worldly experience as possible before transcending it all in the final stage. Looked at another way, I was a slow learner: a parent at thirty-four, a self-described artist at fifty.

Beyond the details of chronology, my immediate experience, that night in Santa Luzia, gave me to understand wholeness as a full awakening of the life force embodied as kundalini energy. Kundalini was the mysterious serpent power said to lie sleeping in the base of the spine but capable of rising up through the spinal channel and transforming one's physical, emotional, mental and spiritual being with vital energy. Often confused with sexuality, kundalini could, with conscious and spiritual intent, be awakened by sexual means and could also boost the sexual experience to unimagined levels of ecstasy. Tantric practice in both the Hindu and Buddhist tradition, I knew from research and sporadic experimentation in recent years, honored the role of kundalini and of conscious sexuality in bringing us to full realization of our connection to the living cosmos. Now without being able to call myself any sort of expert or enlightened one, at least I had the evidence of my own sensations to keep me on the path--and a clearer glimpse of the path itself.

*

In telling the story of a life, why is the question "Where to begin?" so bedeviling? It is the key to my own stubborn project, and has been from the time of its inception. Do I begin at the beginning or at the end? Either one is a pat answer, quite conventional.

Another popular strategy, irresistible in its own conventional way, is to hook the reader in the middle of the action.

That would put me in 1975, caught in my first fatal menage à trois. But there, too, the question raises its multiple head.

Which to choose? Woman A or woman B?

Choosing neither never seems to have occurred to me.

Once more I shall risk pondering in public the usefulness of such self-reflective commentary. Murdoch's brooding Black Prince shows the way to solve the problem, however, as Shakespeare's own Hamlet did before.

The story inside the costumed life (and the life inside the costumed story) is fleshed out not so much to prove the protagonist's successful self-definition, but rather to portray the drama of the threatened failure of his quest. In the art of love, Murdoch's narrator Bradley Pearson manages to prove only his inadequacy. Yet nowhere is love's torment told more eloquently. Thus his quest is redeemed, as if magically, by the quantum leap to the work at hand.

*

25 October

Today Oiseau and I went to find Arielle. Approaching Ella's house along the cliffs, we saw a graceful slender dark-haired woman rise from a grassy ledge part way down the cliff itself, and emerge to walk in her flowing garments along the edge of land ahead of us, in and out of our view through the high brush. While from a distance she

looked like our friend from home, this encounter was too impossibly sudden. We thought it might be a local woman or another tourist, who may have seen us approaching and, disturbed from her solitude, be trying to walk away from us. But as we passed her at a respectful distance, we looked back and saw her stopped, staring at us. We approached, still tentatively; and then full recognition came with smiles and open arms.

Arielle accompanied us back to the Casa Sophia for a long chat about our respective outward and inward journeys, and about all our friends and neighbors back home in Argentina. Her trip abroad had begun the previous fall with a visit to friends in Barcelona, followed by a couple of months on Formentera and a short stay in Germany. Since spring she had been walking along sections of the famous pilgrimage route, the Camino de Compostela de Santiago, through Germany and France. At the point of our arrival in southern France she had been walking and camping alone, with a plan to meet us for a traverse through the Somport Pass into Spain. But two days short of our rendezvous, her knee had buckled under an accelerated thirty-kilometer-a-day pace. (Like us, she was carrying a thirty-pound backpack; only she had been doing since spring). We received an email from her just in time to learn she wouldn't be joining us when we crossed the Pyrenees. Instead, the message informed us that she planned to convalesce at Thich Nhat Hanh's Buddhist colony in France, Plum Village; she hoped to see us on Formentera in November.

Her knee was healed by now; but at this point Arielle's plans for the immediate and long-term future were still uncertain. She'd been walking so long, emptying her

spirit so completely, that she could hardly contemplate a return to Canada to live and work. For that matter, neither could she see taking on the challenge of another, more demanding winter session of "mindfulness" at Plum Village. For all she knew, the only thing left was to keep walking, to parts unknown...Tunisia, Syria, Arabia.

In the chill shade of the terrace the three of us spent half an afternoon. I offered Arielle an orange blanket from the house to wrap around her bare legs and arms. Sitting pensively on the terrace wall under the myrtle tree, she looked then like a wandering nun, a saint.

Oiseau took out the bound journal which Arielle had made for her by hand, the previous winter, and read some of the poems written during the walking phase of our journey. This performance left me fighting back the tears that Oiseau's poems invariably evoke in me. Arielle, herself clearly moved and appreciative, had nothing to say but, "I will go now."

At that point in the mid-afternoon the sun came shining through the hazy sky, and Oiseau and I went down to the still-rough sea. I was drawn with a palpable magnetism to the bright water, my first chance in a week to swim with the sun out. After some searching we found a shielded pool nestled in the craggy rocks, chest-deep and big enough for two to float around in. From this natural bath we could look the surf in the eye as it crashed and foamed about us on both sides. Playing their own inimitable rhythm, the waves found their way into our private tub with just enough frequency to

keep us alert, and the pool refreshed. At such a moment, with both of us touched by the depths we'd shared with our friend, just being there, together, was enough.

26 October

This morning on awaking, and beginning to write, there seemed at first nothing of the young day yet worthy to report...except the night's dreams, vague and specific fears and anxieties, the morning weather, what we had for breakfast. There was always "fiction," I supposed, that coy mistress from whom I might coax the imaginary stuff of dramatic interest otherwise lacking in a given humdrum day. Yet I knew, too, that mindful presence, in its own good time, is always able, if given the chance, to select the right and real material with which to form the story of a life.

From out of nowhere, actions transpire and objects appear, however small and insignificant: the errant attempts next door to start the Citroën van; Oiseau's ritual pumping of water from the cistern while reading The Heart is a Lonely Hunter; the stone "teapot" found on the beach; the carved and painted wooden sun-face in front of me, lit up and shining in the rising sunlight on the terrace.

Over a breakfast of sausages and whole grain toast with butter, honey and ginger marmalade, I noticed that Oiseau's soft fine brown hair, freshly washed yesterday, was just the length it had been when I first fell in love with her, back in 1986. I told her this and she smiled. How red and full and soft her lips, now, as then...but that's another story.

It seemed to me on this new morning that the simple phrase, "when I first fell in love with you," must be the most beautiful in the English language, because of that most precious feeling it evokes. And I wondered if, conversely, a likely candidate for the most tragic phrase would be, "the honeymoon's over." But no; this was just a stock phrase to get people to go back to work; I wasn't buying it sight unseen.

Last night I lay unsleeping for hours--the fault, I was sure, of the chocolate ice cream ball with sprinkles, which we bought at the bakery on the way home from town after another failed attempt to use the Internet.

"Next Friday," the small dark man always in the chair behind the counter, always busy with someone, told me yet again...for the third time putting me off for two days.

When I finally slept, I had to deal with a flighty Shira going off with friends when we needed to do errands in town before leaving on vacation. I picked her up and shook her like a small bad child and said, "If you don't settle down to what you're supposed to be doing now with me, you're not going on this vacation!"

On hearing about the dream, Oiseau wanted to know which part of myself this errant girl represents.

I figured, the part that just wants to play...and still gets to go on vacation.

I'm restless now as I sit tapping at the keyboard on the ugly floral plastic tablecloth on the terrace, because mosquitoes are biting my bare ankles and feet in the

cooling, clouding morning. There is plenty more to tell, of course, once you start to include all the potentially significant details of this or any night and morning, the assorted and selected sights, sounds, smells, memories, conversations. And so to claim that in the morning before "the working day" has begun, nothing happens, is to be absolutely unmindful of the fullness of life which is present at every moment.

Certainly that everyday ground has been amply covered before, by any number of talented writers each in their own way. Thoreau comes to mind as the purest example in prose. Among contemporary writers, I think of Annie Dillard, a writer devoted to what could be called the nonessential facts of natural life and observant consciousness. Natalie Goldberg preaches the quotidian miracle of the ketchup bottle and the here-we-are plastic tablecloth. There seems to me a definite limitation of "entertainment" value here; as there is in the well-made haiku. But to spurn the bending wildflower or the tacky countertop in favor of made-for-TV spaceships and speculative evolutions, high-class romantic intrigue and counter-terrorism, is a suspect alternative. On the spaceship or Lear jet or attack submarine, we still need to know what the ship's galley is like. What do those more highly evolved sailors and suitors put on their patates frites or caviar, after all, if not ketchup, sour cream?

If every day may be seen as worthy of commentary and re-creation, then the writing of it becomes problematic only when the question of form takes on too much importance. This journal, for example--or by any other name, a record of daily life--may find its truest utility as a kind of photo album, cheaper than a camera while requiring

more circumlocution. Its chief advantage is the variety of virtual lenses that can be affixed: a facsimile of a color palette, a flexible frame of scenic composition, an internal thought-microscope, a fantasy projector, a mood reflector...all accompanied by the whine of a special effects motor attached to the tongue-drive which also runs a ratchety sound track. In all, a rather complete if cobbled version of what might pass for a whole daily "reality" as lived by one or more human persons, more or less "fresh off the boat" and destined to vanish into tourist airspace again in a month's time.

27 October

I feel silly and stupid this morning, though Oiseau calls me "a grand man" in my bumbling efforts to make her happy. Looking back, I count no less than four chances, and I blew every one.

1. Yesterday afternoon, she wanted a cuddle in bed after lunch. I wanted to go to the beach while the sun was up (it was 2:30 by then, the day taken up by a late start and by visits from the plumber and caretakers to deal with the malfunctioning hot water system). We retired to the bedroom and lay together for a few minutes...but not long enough, as Oiseau felt my impatience to go. We had a pleasant time at the beach, lying together on the sand, and good feelings were superficially restored between us. But underneath, Oiseau was feeling backlogged hurt from the abbreviated cuddle in bed; and

meanwhile I had started feeling some of my old male pains about life, concerning the perennial struggle for accomplishment and success.

2. When we got back home, I was chilled from swimming and wanted nothing better than to relax in bed with a book. But since it was close to five, I also felt like starting a supper of stewed chicken, as it would take a while and I was already hungry. Oiseau meanwhile, without a word to me, had grabbed her sketchbook and run off again.

On her return half an hour later, I was still in the kitchen, just finishing the supper preparations. She prepared us a quick snack, glasses of wine with bread and honey, and served it on the terrace. I ate quickly, still anxious to grab that cozy space in bed with a book (the Black Prince, it had to be, a second time around; because nothing else among the half-dozen available options seemed to satisfy my standards).

Before I finished, Oiseau had cozied her deck chair next to mine. When I got up a moment later and moved to the bedroom, she followed. I grabbed the book from the bedside table and started reading, from the beginning. Oiseau lay down beside me, leaning close with her head against my arm. I basically ignored her, because I was feeling behind on my earlier desire for a relaxed solitude, and also somewhat jilted by her perfunctory exit with the sketchbook.

This need of mine for self-determined time was heightened by the manner in which we had spent the previous day. We had spent half the morning making love. The next four hours were given over to a visit with Arielle. Then Oiseau and I had eaten

dinner together and walked to town and back. We had also spent most of a stormy day before that in bed; though some of that time was spent reading. In any case, I felt behind on what I considered my space, my use of time on my own terms.

After a few minutes of being ignored, Oiseau got up from the bed. I had a sinking feeling then--"Oh, I should have put my arm around her, at least." But I hadn't, because another voice had warned, "If you put your arm around her and keep reading, she'll feel like an accessory to the book"--which she did now anyway, only it was worse in the absence of any affection at all. Again I hesitated too long. As if in slow motion which I was powerless to stop, she got up from the bed beside me, picked up her knitting and retreated to the porch.

A little communication, it seemed in the tearful exchange which came a short time later, might have clarified things. Instead, I was stuck in my own muddle, and Oiseau reacted by spinning off into her own troubled thoughts and hurt feelings.

3. This morning I awoke with a nagging preoccupation to improve the quality and timing of my sleep--trying to make up, again, for an insufficiency. I was tired of getting up late and poorly rested every morning, without time to meditate before relating with Oiseau in bed and at breakfast. Yesterday I had resolved, as a first remedy, to go to bed earlier and get up earlier. I had proceeded, through the course of the day, to minimize my intake of caffeine, sugar, and alcohol, so that I wouldn't be so wired at bedtime. I was tired of the mosquitoes keeping me awake, so I set up the netting all around the bed. And

I was tired of being cold in the night, so I made the bed more snugly and added our down sleeping bag as an extra comforter.

Going to sleep in Oiseau's arms, and holding her in mine, I felt the most comforting, warm, womblike bliss, as we floated together in a homey embrace of soft, enveloped love. Then a muscle moved, another limb, and gracefully we rolled apart toward sleep.

Oiseau reported later that she had peaceful dreams, or at least dreams which left her feeling peaceful and united with me. I had two long sound sessions of sleep, both full of dreams--broken only in the middle, at one-thirty, when I had to get up to pee and took a half-hour or so to find sleep again. When I awoke the second time, and got up to pee again, Oiseau followed, and she followed me back through the netting to bed. It was still too dark to see, and we fumbled with the overlapping sheets of netting to close it behind us, without bothering to use the flashlight.

While trying to get back to sleep--Oiseau dozing contentedly beside me--I was bitten on the forearm and thumb. Now I grabbed the flashlight and turned it on. "Damn! That netting wasn't closed properly. I've got fresh bites driving me crazy and more mosquitoes buzzing my head!"

Oiseau was startled out of affectionate reverie and shrank away from me. "I'm sorry, Now."

"I'm not blaming you." I checked my watch and saw that it was nearly seven.

Trying once more to go back to sleep, I knew it was impossible and decided to get up. I would leave Oiseau still in bed to sift through her dreams, as she liked to do; and I would return for an obligatory last cuddle before getting up together to start breakfast and the rest of our day.

"I'm going to go meditate for a while," I calmly announced and left the bed, closing the netting securely behind me. I lit a candle, dressed, and went into the sitting room where I sat quietly for twenty minutes or so, shooing mosquitoes and stray thoughts. Eventually, finding myself reviewing the last twenty years of baseball pennant-winners, I figured the meditation had run its course and returned to the bedroom.

Simultaneously Oiseau had decided it was time to get up, and I found her glowering at me, half-dressed at the foot of the bed. She'd been spurned again, I knew. I took her in my arms to coax out of her the sobs and tears that had to come. When some trust had been restored she was able to speak for herself:

"I thought you were just in one of your negative spaces again. Like so many times at home, when you're distracted by your work, or time pressures, or the need for your own space...and you get up and leave me in bed alone. What am I supposed to do? How do you think I feel? I didn't know what you needed."

All this reminded her too much of her previous marriage: the silences, the lack of trust, the dead love. All when a few kind words on my part, about what I wanted to do and about my intention to come back to bed, could have prevented the misunderstanding.

4. We talked it out moderately well before realizing how deep the underlying issues were, and how inadequate was our present opportunity to deal with them properly, as Celeste was due to show up sometime this morning to exchange sheets and towels. So we had an amiable pancake breakfast together and packed up to go to the beach for the rest of our usual morning activities.

On the way down the road I asked Oiseau where she wanted to go, while offering that I had my own idea of the section of beach I preferred. She let me lead, until, arriving at the shore area, again I asked what her preference was. Again she told me to go where I wanted to, and she'd be fine with it. But then, finding a nice set of smooth nooks set in the rocks on the beach nearby, she prepared to settle in there, and I asked how much space she wanted for her journal writing. She informed me that she wanted quite a lot of space, that that goes without saying when it comes to journal writing; in fact she had found it an intrusion on her space all along, for me to be asking all these questions about places and spaces, when already on the walk here she was wanting to be in her own creative space.

I took all this in as stoically and earnestly as I could--like a "grand man," silly boy that I am--and walked away further down the beach to where we'd lain together in the sand yesterday. Here I pause to write this account and so to summarize what I have learned: that when it comes to the marriage bed, nothing comes before the sanctity of the wife and her need for love. Outside the bed, it's another story, a different set of rules or

absence of rules. Except that faithfulness and fullness of love are foremost, always at the core and always ready to find new expression.

My mistake this morning on the way to the beach (trying too hard to accommodate my partner's needs) was minor, secondary. The other mistakes and omissions compounding before today were also relatively minor; but each small case of turning away from love has a primary and therefore more deeply hurtful significance.

28 October

This morning we rise at dawn and walk down to the sea to sit for an hour, awaiting the sunrise. The sea is so calm, such a contrast to its stormy counterpart of last week. These are like the two faces of love, once angry and petulant, now soothing, seductive in its lapping to the soft sand on the shore. Silvery bright is the water, lightly rippled all the way to the eastern horizon, where pink suffuses the sky and the small gray clouds give way to an unearthly peach and blue canopy stretching far away to the dark above. We sit in rapt observance, my arms snugly around my lover, in the same smooth rock cove where Oiseau sat yesterday writing in her journal.

Later we walk together back to the Casa Sophia, and for a moment stand mute on the terrace, enchanted by the brightness of the early morning blue sky above the rich and glossy green of the myrtle tree and the more muted gray-green of scrub juniper. Fluffy white clouds float gently above us; from the waking land comes the buzz of motorbikes

and chafing of distant machinery; and we drink with gladness the clear, faintly salty, lukewarm lightness of the air.

30 October

Tapping on a plastic computer by a rock pool in a Zen hollow by the rippled blue sea, I try to find again, to hold onto, the image of the experience of...so fleeting, like a Moorish palace lit up in the night...yesterday, the glimpse of golden skin in turquoise bright water, as I swam out from the shore at the resort beach. White sands stretching eight feet below me, the sun shining unhindered to illuminate the crystal water as it cascaded from my bronze fingers, hands, wrists and arms, the band of indigo in the distance drawing me on...

The colors were so shining and captivating--at once metallic and acrylic--so dazzling and quicksilver magical, that I had to return to the shallow water to show and tell Oiseau. And I was getting cold and out of breath from the swimming...

But in the shallows the lighting was different; the reflections and refractions were paler, less striking. I should have lingered there longer, I felt then, in the deep and magic water...

As I should have lingered longer and paid my ticket to enter and soak up that seductive magic of the Moorish palace in Zaragoza...until full arousal was achieved.

This pornographic approach--to want to linger with the image of desire on and on, to hold it in the mind, to return to it again and again--gradually loses its compulsion, its hold on the desiring mind. It gives way not only to the eroding force of time itself, but also to new seductions, fresh moments of arousal and magic and splendor.

Looking back on that still-tantalizing flirtation scene at the Aljafería, I chide myself for my impatience, my hurry to move on, my distraction by lesser considerations in the passing of the precious moment. Once past, it is gone forever from the live world of its possibility, its prolonging, its fulfillment. Then it is left only as an icon of desire partially fulfilled: an object of contemplation: an idol: a lesson in personal limitation.

As I meditate this morning, a space of quiet emptiness opens before me. The internal noise of thought fades away gently, leaving space for the soft sounds of the environment, the gentle rise and fall of my breath.

--Does this state of samadhi, of meditative rapture, then itself become an object of adoration, something to hold onto or recall with fond nostalgia?

--No, because the nature of the practice makes it repeatable. This is no once-in-a-lifetime travel junket or love affair; it's an everyday and momentary state of mind that can be achieved with a simple practice of breathing, whenever and wherever it is desired.

I wonder then, about the role of the spiritual teacher, who is expected to take note and comment upon such a state to the seekers who depend on its elucidation...

As indeed I must wonder at my own seizing of the meditative experience by the mind eager to make something of it, to interpret and explain and tell diverting stories in which the thing itself is held up in affectionate view, and fondled with comparable life experiences.

Enlisting to its purpose no end of metaphors whether fresh or worn, the verbal ego is a tireless beast, and even the empty plate can be feast enough to occasion its compulsive dinner table chatter.

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Today Oiseau and I walked twenty kilometers...this after a long walk yesterday of fifteen or so. Suddenly we're back into walking mode, after a couple of introspective weeks of beach bumming and relaxed home life. It feels good for the body to get in shape again, and for the mind to get free of both internal preoccupations and the walls and views of the static house. How good it is instead to come back to a cozy home after a long day of exercise out in the world!

We took the bus from Sant Ferran to the port town, La Savina, then walked along the promenade, out the length of the spit between the two long public beaches. Near the end of this crag of land was a fantastic creation of beach junk, weird rocks, driftwood, ropes and rigging, constructed in the form of a ghostly ship and a couple of cave-like huts. This ragged theme park of castaways is the culminating feature on a landscape

marked by dozens of small cairns, rocks piled and arranged as miniature stonehenges or arches or fairy circles, erected to show some desperate yet playful human presence, where it might otherwise be utterly forgotten.

At the end of the point of land is a shallow sea channel, only fifty meters across to the next island. But we had already been warned, by a fellow passenger on the ferry, of the dangerous cross currents there, and especially on this day of brisk wind and massing clouds, we were not much tempted to swim across.

Not many people were on these beaches...scattered couples, mostly Germans, riding bikes and sunbathing. The protocol for swimwear, here as elsewhere, was both casual and variable, with a predictable (roughly even) ratio of topless women to bottomless men. Taking a rest from our walk, Oiseau and I joined them for a spell; we were content to lounge on the sand, well-covered against the stiff breeze, gazing at the pale blue water.

We were both largely silent this day, still emptying of thought and language. Stopping for coffee in mid-afternoon in the deserted resort of Es Pujols, we sipped it reflectively under posters of my music idols of years gone by: Elvis Presley, Jimi Hendrix, Miles Davis, Bob Marley. The Marley portrait was composed of tiny photographs so arranged that the predominant colors gave rise at a distance to the photographic image of his face...smoking a large spliff, of course.

On the road home, we talked of the future trips we might take. We would walk even lighter than we had on this one: discarding cookware, tent, computer, musical

instruments, art supplies. But, we wondered, without the props of portable coffee and food, music and writing and art, where would we find our identity in the world? Only in the walking? In the shell of our former identities, with the substance ever draining out along the paths we trod by mountain and seaside?

Were we yet empty enough for that version of sainthood, to leave all the rest behind for even one month? How many miles, or trips would we log before we were reduced to blanket and bowl, leaving perhaps even speech behind?

That path, as Arielle confessed, might appear saintly; but it can be simply a running away from self.

Finding Water

2 September

Now and Oiseau had made a pact at the very beginning of their journey, to begin each day by finding water. Water had long held a sacred place in Oiseau's world of ritual, her inner terrain. It symbolized life, the flow of universal energy, the blood of the goddess. A few droplets of it on an anxious brow, or a few moments of fingertips trailed in a mountain creek, could serve to bestow grace and transcendence upon the most disturbed or congested psychic condition, could liberate corresponding tears from an emotional reservoir needing to burst.

In Nelson before leaving they had taken a walk in the morning down Bealby Point Road, all the way to the end. Through a crumbling rock wall they entered the woods. She cupped her hands under a trickling waterfall and brought water to his lips to drink. He traced droplets of the sacred element over her closed eyelids.

Later that day, walking in the salt-fresh air outside the Vancouver airport, already they felt the absence of the things they were leaving behind, including parts of themselves. Now had the sensation of passing through a membrane to the future. Out of reach now were children and books, friends and music, projects and jobs. They had chosen to live for the next three months with nothing but what they could fit into thirty-pound backpacks. They would compensate for a lifetime of overabundance with small bites of chocolate, moments of soft touch. Along the way they would discover Spain, southern France, and Portugal.

Dark clouds roiled the open horizon, covering mountains which loomed grayly behind. The travelers sat down with their packs, awaiting their departure, on a long green traffic island on the busy airport boulevard. They stretched out on the grass, idly reading, eating, leaning up against a big shade tree like kids out from school.

It felt to Now as if he were living out the New Age cliché, "Today is the first day of the rest of your life." In three hours he was to take off on his first trip to old Europe. His longtime dream was to cross the Atlantic by ship; but that was more for the journey than the destination. In fact he had spent most of his adult life avoiding a tour of Europe

because of the negative judgments he gave to its oppressive, imperialist history. Western civilization itself was a suspect concept; though he had long grown to acknowledge and accept its undeniable role in everyone's life in the contemporary world--whether we liked it or not, whether it was politically correct or not, and no matter how "natural" were our ideals of alternative ways of life.

The contrasting freedom embodied in North American history was deeply rooted in Now's value system and backwoods lifestyle; and so, while newly open to the possibility of enjoying a trip to the Old World, he was curious as to how he would handle the inevitable clash of values. In this respect, Spain and Portugal, and the plan that he and Oiseau had made to travel on foot through the undeveloped coasts and mountains of those countries, were well-considered choices. With such a journey in mind they were bound to feel somewhat at home, while still enjoying new vistas both geographical and cultural.

The plan was to start by washing their skins in the Mediterranean, then walking west up the height of land between Spain and France, into the Pyrenees. Hiking the dry high ground between villages, they'd be cold at night, perhaps--but not as cold as Laurie Lee who in December of 1936 took a twenty-pound rucksack with no tent: just books, a blanket, and a violin.

The poet Ryoko, their friend Dale had advised them before they left, knew how to do it: "A robe, a bowl, that's all I have."

Before boarding the plane, Now jettisoned a boring paperback book. Better nothing, he thought, than to fill one's mind with trash. Oiseau threw away her battered old daypack, and replaced a worn money belt.

In an ambience of opening, they left the ground of their old world behind. They felt themselves to be parts of a melody singing itself, a new rhythm already drumming in their moving bones.

3 September

Passing quickly through a rainy Heathrow, and over the quilted fields of France, they came to the red-brown hills of Spain. From the air they could see thin white tracks of roads and trails winding over the dry hills. In contrast to England and France, most of the landscape beneath them appeared uncultivated, even wild. This topography was rougher, less amenable to fencing and farming. The prospects for a vacation in the comforting folds of nature seemed good. Running water, though, looked scarce. They would perhaps not find it every day, after all, except in plastic bottles on store shelves.

Upon landing in Barcelona, Now marveled at the vast and roseate, polished marble floors of the airport, his first taste of the never-ending stonework which above all other features would mark the Iberian landscape. They bought bottled water from a kiosk and took a train into town, then navigated the old streets looking for a cheap hotel. Tourist crowds filled the Ramblas and spilled into the neighboring districts, and Now and

Oiseau wandered with them past churches, shops, and restaurants, keeping a sharp eye out for the pickpockets for which this city was notorious.

They found a youth hostel where they were warned not to stay out on the streets past ten. The clerk, who with his tall strong body and long black hair looked like an American Indian, spoke English and sounded as if he knew what he was talking about. He drew a finger across his throat for emphasis. The newcomers felt it was only wise to pay him heed, as they were tired from the long flight and had no special desires for city entertainment anyway. They went around the corner for a tunafish pizza and returned to the room by ten. They left the city early the next morning with their funds and heads intact.

Except--Now realized on the train north to Llança--because of a botched conversation in his rudimentary Spanish, he had managed to pay the rail station clerk double the required fare. The clerk had taken the extra money, amounting to twenty-five Canadian dollars, with hardly a shrug.

6 September

The first long day's walk with full packs took the eager pilgrims over the fire-blasted hills from Llança to El Port de Selva de la Mar. They had located a map which showed a marked trail running through and around the hills of the rugged Cap de Creus. Hiking this loop through an area which was largely protected would give them their first taste of "wild Spain." The route would allow them to tune up their hiking muscles in

gently rolling terrain before venturing inland along the spine of the Pyrenees. It would also allow them to take advantage of the balmy September weather with more swimming along the unpopulated coastline. They had already enjoyed a couple of days of blissful splashing in the Mediterranean while camped outside Llança.

As they rose higher and higher on the blackened goat paths of ancient vineyards and olive orchards, where all the vegetation was razed and scorched, the two former treeplanters both felt as if they were once again carrying treebags up B.C. clearcuts. But these hills were terraced with rock walls right up to the heights of land, and that sense of long human history lent an eerie permanence to the scene so marked by recent devastation.

A solitary hiker came up from behind, passed them with a brief "Hola," and strode ahead on a path going straight up the mountain, while Now and Oiseau stopped for lunch. They consulted their map while he disappeared over the heights. The trail they were following branched at this point and they weren't sure if they wanted to follow the young man's route. One trail marked on the map led to a monastery, but which of the actual trails did it represent? And where would they end up if they chose the wrong trail?

Rested and replenished by their lunch, they decided to take the other hiker's lead. The steep path led them up and over to a neighboring mountain, the highest point in the visible landscape. At its top was a ruined castle, which overlooked the enormous restored monastery. Both were incredible compositions of massive quarried stone, all the more impressive for their remoteness.

Everywhere Now saw questions without visible answers: When was that once-magnificent castle laid waste? When and why did the lords or slaves or monks who built these monstrosities, do so? Were the great stone buildings erected only after centuries of remaking these hills acre after acre, terrace upon terrace, rock by rock--or did the fortresses come first?

How was the countryside burned black as far as the eye could see? The lingering sharp smell of smoke and ash told of a recent conflagration, a fire evidently more massive even than the runaway wilderness fire which had peeked over the ridge behind Argenta, with glowing eyes in the night like a mad cougar, just that summer.

The two dusty travelers had no more information than what their senses gave them, and with that they would have to be content. Down from the fortified hills they came, passing a clutch of whitewashed houses nestled in a high valley below the monastery. Beyond the village they passed a prehistoric dolmen, a burial site composed of giant stones and bordered by a rock wall of more recent vintage. Here a small sign informed them that these stones were placed there some seven thousand years before. The way this hoary monument stood framed on the hillside by the blackened remains of olives and pines gave a Gothic view of a classy bay village further below: with sepulchral fingers lacing an image of white-splashed luxury by the rippling sea.

Now and Oiseau were a little uncertain of the availability of food and water in the next part of their journey around the isolated Cap de Creus, as the villages they expected

to pass through were small and far apart. One village indicated on their map proved not to be a village at all, but a Club Med resort. They chose to bypass the access road with its guardhouse, in favor of a longer walk toward the end of the cape, where there was a lighthouse and, they hoped, a water tap.

The lighthouse came with an ugly restaurant, perched together at land's end. A water truck was parked outside the restaurant filling its storage tanks through large ribbed hoses. Now took a handful of empty water jugs from their packs, and went inside to fill them from the washroom sink. As bad luck would have it, a sign on the washroom wall stated, in plain English:

"Warning: this water is not potable. It comes from a well and has been treated with chlorine, but is not legal."

His heart sank. They had an evening and another long day's walk out of here, and no other water. Well water didn't sound too bad, though, and the addition of chlorine sealed it. Legal or not, it was worth the risk. For insurance he added a few drops of food-grade hydrogen peroxide, of which he'd packed a small supply for just such contingencies, and they walked away content, if still somewhat nervous.

That night they made camp in the wild, a forbidden practice on the protected cape. Their rationale was informed partly by the general advice of the guidebook to be discreet when camping wild, and partly by common sense, given their low-impact camping style. They needed only a small bed-sized space on the ground; they cooked on a one-burner butane stove; they packed out whatever they brought in; and they'd be gone by daylight

the next day. They found a relatively level patch of bare earth shielded by brush beside the narrow, rock-paved road, a Roman byway bordered on both sides by the ubiquitous stone walls. Discreet enough to postpone pitching the tent until dark, they felt also free enough, in that isolated location, to play music under the pink sunset.

It turned out that this ancient road was popular for local foot traffic; and so the recorder and Turkish drum jam, tending naturally toward Moorish airs, attracted interested looks from assorted passersby: two small boys heading up the path, then women walking in town shoes and dresses (headed to the restaurant for cocktails?) The evening's parade ended with a man and boy, the stocky, gray-haired man barely hiding an amused and enigmatic smile.

The tired walkers slept undisturbed under a sky full of stars, and woke to a brimming red sun. The next day they walked into Roses, from the wild and undeveloped rocky cape to a sudden white city of high-rise resorts, appearing all at once around a bend of the cliffs. It was like walking through a doorway in time...except that they had some warning along the way, when they came upon a series of half a dozen strange seaside forts. These were fairly modern, identical in appearance, constructed of concrete and stone the same as ever, but in a forbidding, fascist-futurist mode. Set into the hillside, each fort offered a low, rounded profile opening outward to the sea, yet also beckoning inward to a central dark doorway behind the short baffle of a wall. The intrepid tourists

ventured into one of these mysteries by way of a rear tunnel, down long corridors of steel and stone, past chambers that yielded no secrets, whether locked, or open and empty.

Were these strange constructions built as prisons, armories, or gun emplacements, during the Spanish Civil War? The questions and answers hardly mattered any more. Now had to take the enigmas in stride, as just more evidence of architectural genes responsible for the millennia of stoneworks in this ancient land. It was the same impulse, over and over, wall upon wall, to build bulwarks against the sea and sun, against pirates and restless neighbors. Meanwhile, our naïve adventurers had a different sort of agenda to follow, on their way to the next sandy beach.

*

1 November

Oiseau and I have spent by now some six weeks walking, and two more settling into a mainly sedentary life set aside for creative and emotional exploration. Enough time, over these two months, to sort and sift through a lifetime of junk and hidden talents; time for the cream to rise to the top. I'm inclined to look for a provisional conclusion, a landmark discovery or personal watershed to mark my progress, with our adventure two-thirds done.

But there is no sudden flash of enlightenment, no tangible change of identity, in this practice. It's a day-by-day, momentary unfolding, incremental and invisible. Maybe there are changes working, which will become clear upon our return home. Maybe we

will have learned to become tourists of the world--of life itself--even in our own former home, where we became entrenched over two decades. We will have become more individual in our identities, while also more tightly bound together as a couple, relative to our community; and having learned to expect less from our given surroundings, like tourists, we will be ready to move on at a moment's notice.

Today I asked the information woman at the port if she could tell me where I might find Internet access on Formentera. She mentioned only the "P.O. Box" outlet I already knew about in Sant Ferran, and a restaurant in Es Calo. But while walking home today we found two others: a hotel on the way into Es Pujols, and a bar on a side street in Sant Ferran. The first was closed, and the second (according to the cleaning lady we asked there) had a computer which was "kaput." Yet somehow, even after two weeks without my precious email and baseball news, I'm hardly disappointed anymore. I've had much training during this trip in the old advice which I heard first when I moved to Argenta in 1980: "Hope for the best, expect the worst, and take what comes with grace."

Arriving home from our long day's walk, we found a stack of English language books from Arielle, along with a note detailing her restless state of mind. She feels compelled to leave the island at the end of the week, two weeks earlier than planned. But she's not sure where she's going. Each of the three main options--back home to Canada, back to Plum Village, or back on the road to points unknown, is "difficult rather than fun" for her to contemplate now.

Arielle's troubles cause my own concerns over Internet access to appear rather trivial. They have only the advantage of being my own, which allows me to describe them in greater (if all the more excruciating) detail. Coming through Sant Ferran on the way home, for instance, I finally connected via a computer at the P.O. Box; but it was a frustrating experience because in waiting for the hundreds of email messages to download, I tried to open a simultaneous window to baseball news at the Baltimore Sun, and the monitor locked up with rainbow fuzz and the computer had to be rebooted. Back at my email site, there were now duplicates of all the messages, and the collective weight of 526 items made the process impossibly slow. I tried to slog through the messages anyway, as I was hoping for news of my recently completed novels all currently awaiting acceptance for publication. I found instead one message from a neighbor back home stating that all the apples from our orchard had been eaten by raccoons. Another neighbor asked for permission to buy some old windows and a sink from our shed. The rest of the mail was pure junk.

I looked elsewhere for baseball news, and when I tried the Sun site a second time, the machine crashed again. So much for feeding that childish addiction. (No matter, I consoled myself: November is the doldrums in baseball season anyway). Down the street at the real post office, we checked for the parcels which we'd had mailed to us from Canada, but they still hadn't arrived. We settled for a small selection of top-up groceries: eggs, bread, butter, local walnuts, and figs. At home we found Arielle's note and the

books she brought us from Ella's house--not as exciting as my hand-picked ones still enroute somewhere, but perhaps better than nothing.

Gifts of Stories

I'm reading, again, at last, thanks to the fine books Arielle brought by yesterday: a collection of short stories by William Boyd, called On the Yankee Station; Midnight's Children by Rushdie; The Visitation by Don Cushman; and a book on rural poverty in India by an investigative journalist exposing the failures of development schemes.

Reading Boyd's simple story "Gifts" today, I'm struck by the way in which he writes so honestly, clearly from his own experience (in that story, at least), hardly different from a journal or an essay. And I'm moved to ask, what is that key ingredient, that allows a prose narrative to be called a story?

Obviously the unifying theme of his story is contained in its title, "Gifts." Yet the appearance of artifice is curiously elusive at first, and the theme is not evident until near the end. Along the way, the seemingly unconnected anecdotes pile up as they might in a journal or essay.

But "Gifts" is a story, because of its natural storytelling ambience; the confidence, the openhearted honesty. Nothing is held back and yet nothing is overembellished. The "I" who is telling the story is totally believable as a real person recalling real events. At

the same time--and this is perhaps the most salient point--that narrative "I" is totally in control of what is presented.

There is a spareness, an understated intent, in the sequence of events. A slow current of tension builds alongside the relatively superficial drama of the narrator running out of money, or wanting intimate contact with girls. This deeper tension invites meaning. Narrative method and thematic issue meet here: both are about opening simply and naturally to gifts. The narrator lives his life simply, opening to gifts; and just so, he tells his story simply, letting it (and its readers) open to this meaning.

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Last night while Oiseau and I were making love, the candle on the window table started sputtering and flaming up from within its pottery holder, a sort of terra cotta mug with a window cut out of it. We paid little attention, absorbed as we were in our own desirous dance. The flame seemed safely enough contained...but by the end there was a pool of melted wax running over the table. When I finally jumped up to deal with it, I found the holder too hot to touch; the liquefied wax inside it was ablaze. I tried to blow out the fire which now filled the mug, but couldn't--then realized I had to, or the wooden table surface now partially covered with soft wax would start to kindle. I blew again and the flame went out.

The white cotton curtain hung inches away. Three feet behind was the mosquito netting, and the bedding. I used a sock to pick up and remove the smoking candle holder outside, then returned to bed, where Oiseau had remained observing this mini-catastrophe.

We lay back down together, breathing in relief that the damage was limited to a scorched ring on the table, and reflected on the blindness of our passion. Like adolescents in the heat of a stolen moment, we had run a dangerous risk for our all-consuming pleasure.

*

Last week walking home at dark with Oiseau along the high cliff by the bay, I began to muse obsessively about what I would do if I missed a step and tumbled over the edge. Would I fold into a ball of instinctive self-protection, and thus roll and bounce my way to the bottom? Try to land on my legs to somehow flex and cushion my fall on the rocks below? Give up any hope, on the way down, that recovering from such a maiming would be worth it, and opt instead for a quick and decisive end with a headfirst landing? I decided to spare Oiseau such morbid thinking, but moved a little farther from the edge as we continued home.

Yesterday she told me that she'd heard from Arielle that a German man, a couple of days ago, had plunged to his death from the cliff at the head of the bay. His duffel bag

was found on the cliff, and his body, after some delay, was found washed up on the shore below.

*

Today I want to continue my learning of the language of melodic music--the mysterious vocabulary of the key signatures, the syntax of notation, the grammar of progressions. At this point I am absorbed by fundamentals: by rote learning and repetition, together with some structural analysis of this strange new language. Oiseau talks this morning of learning the basics of the language of drawing and painting, and how it's opening to her a whole world of perception and expression. Hearing this, I sense the deeper pleasure I want to have in mastering musical language, so that I can express my inner world of perception and feeling in the most direct way possible...perhaps even more directly than with the language of my mother tongue.

As for Spanish, by now in our final month it seems like a mere convenience, or necessary annoyance. Not a subject worthy of our primary learning energy, given these other priorities, but better confined to a narrow list of useful phrases to pack alongside map, train schedule and traveler's checks.

Oiseau is out pacing the cliffs, in the midst of some personal form of aesthetic climate change. I'm presently absorbed in another book, having whizzed through

William Boyd's short stories. Don Cushman's The Visitation is just my cup of tea: like one of Crichton's, a novel of ideas couched in a taut thriller. The style is richer than Crichton's; yet it isn't literary in terms of any fancy metafictional layering, like Boyd's finale, "Long Story Short." That capricious gem played fast and loose with narrative transparency...not only switching whimsically from first to third person points of view, but brazenly addressing the reader directly as to the believability of the fiction, calling attention to the invisible line where fiction departs from truth.

Caught in the balance between such divergent inspirations, I continue to plot my verbal voyage as from a wayward sailing vessel blown first one way, then the other, tacking in the wind. Given my potpourri of purposes and contents, I seek to give the whole a more unified texture...as with the plaster and paint that is applied, on this island, to the rough stone walls to make them appear smooth and monolithic, more pleasing to the eye. Finished in such a way, they seem composed of a single structural form instead of a multiplicity of jagged stones gathered each from its earthy and unassuming bed, from a time before time began.

Is it impertinent, then--bad for tourism--to peel away the plaster and expose the more rudimentary workmanship that lies beneath?

Henry Miller said "Forget Yourself"--but in saying so while writing prolifically about his own life, he must have meant "Forget about talking about writing; talk instead about your outer life, and the life around you. Let your inner life speak through that telling."

Every writer's (as every person's) life covers different ground. While H. Miller reveled in the night life of Paris, I find myself compelled rather to elucidate the inner side of the writing life, in a chosen setting of tranquil beauty...more in the manner of that other Henry, the one hoeing his humble patch of beans in a clearing by a pond.

Solitude

At last now the pestering dog that has been following me all morning may get bored and run off to where he came from. The skinny brown mutt has been running circles around me, restless and hungry for my companionship which I stubbornly refuse to give. I hate dogs.

Every few moments on my walk along the shore, he would come nosing up to sniff my trouser leg. I told him to go away, but maybe he doesn't understand English. I threw a small stone toward him, but he thought that was the start of a game. Now I give up...and I don't care, either, about the fishermen offshore in their same boats every morning, who prevent me from fully savoring my "time apart."

I have come down to the beach and found a suitable chair and writing table of sculpted sandstone, with the rising sun at my back to illumine the computer screen and warm the light breeze. The mutt is still sniffing around but I don't care anymore. He has taken a seat near me and is watching and waiting until I take up a more interesting occupation. I brought my flute and drum along just in case I found some true solitude in

which to find my unpolished soul-expression. The dog's not a problem as audience for that, but I'm too shy to risk intruding on the fishermen's sea-calm, or the quiet of the possible November residents of these Arabic shore houses sporadically lining the coast.

If a flute or drum sounds out in the lonesome forest of my dreams and home, I wonder, does the music exist...say, in the ears of deer?

This mongrel pooch answers with a high-pitched, impatient bark; but I just glare at him briefly and return to my work. He turns to an old black running shoe, sniffs it and then wanders off.

Finally I am left with my reflections on art. I find it curious that with music, I require solitude for practice, but an audience when I'm ready to perform. Writing can be practiced safely alone or in a crowd, and received likewise: it can be read to a large audience, or enjoyed intimately by another person in solitude. That person might only be oneself at a later point in time. It's not so curious, really, that I want to keep practice time in either art--full as it is of mistakes and experimental discord--to myself by whatever means of isolation; and to trot out my best stuff only when it's ripe enough to share.

The dog has returned to lay at my feet. Man's best friend, indeed. But what if we have our hands already full with other friends, and lovers, and a lifetime of pain and pleasure to share through our chosen art?

This morning Oiseau and I talked of loneliness...what it's like to be left behind alone when the other goes into the world, and what it's like to go into that world alone. Fifteen years ago she went to Belgium for two months to study lacemaking. While she

enjoyed the new learning and sense of independence, during the second month she endured a rising sense of panic. I recalled my own experience at Olatunji's week-long drumming workshop at Hollyhock, my first free time away from home and spouse in ten years. Though my artist self was flying, my little-boy self was crying out for new love and attention in the anonymous crowd. A brief hot romance was the obvious result.

This dog keeps coming back, looking at me and barking, then wandering off again. Neurotic.

Yet some people seem to manage to carry off mature and successful independent lives in the world. How do they do it? Only by means of carefully erected and maintained defense systems, superficial and fragile personalities, desperate co-dependent sexual liaisons, diverting and distorting addictions? More positive resources would include the genuine support and love and valuing they receive from friends, family and group associations. Each of us has a different level of childish need to satisfy, and a different conscious or unconscious strategy to find our necessary level of comfort and security.

Oiseau and I concluded that it's probably a good idea to recognize the voice and needs of that younger self, to openly acknowledge and accept the virtual child and offer it our explicit encouragement and support. Then we can enable our more worldly, adult and independently capable selves to depart for the events and locations that call us (or to survive the sameness of staying at home) without having to recruit an attractive babysitter to make us feel cared for.

The dog has disappeared. No fishing boats are in sight. My voice has been registered, and the anxious, restless need in me has been stilled. I am alone here in the warm morning sun with the gentle waters, bright dark blue and green, washing calmly into the shore.

*

Every day there is new perspective, a larger frame or vision possible, a more conscious self to write from. Always relief from the closed-world dilemmas of the previous day, always some grace even if only by the introduction of new random elements.

For illustration: yesterday there was that incident about the candle burning out of control. At the time, it was exciting--newsworthy, shall we say. So I recorded it in my journal. Though it seemed a potentially dangerous event, I felt but couldn't identify any larger significance.

While walking with Oiseau back from our tour of the monumental cliffs of Sa Punta Prima (where the proud ancient tower stood merely puny in the geological context), I remember being struck by the hidden significance of that candle-lesson, and how it fit into the larger fabric of this journal. Today, alas, I have forgotten what that significance was...but the real point is, I have faith that there is a part yet to be played (temporarily hidden once more).

Maybe I'll never realize it consciously again, but will hold to the intuitive wisdom of the role of such events in the larger story, so that readers will instead be the ones to draw an unconscious or conscious connection to the whole: to see or feel the pattern emerge. Or, my memory and intellect will conspire to make something of it, now and again: to liken the candle burning out of control, say, to the persistent but unquenched desire of this commentator to keep intruding into what otherwise might be a pleasing vacation tale, turning it from a cozy lamp of illumination, to a flaming puddle of waxing prose.

*

5 November

Last night and this morning, I was feeling sick--this time, it seems, for real. We went to town for groceries, then came back to go swimming but only waded in the cold clear water. Back at the house I made chicken Cacciatore; Oiseau went for a longer walk; and while the sauce simmered I lay down for a rest. After supper we played through our repertoire of tunes, but I quit before the end, headachy and unable to concentrate. My stomach felt over-full and my lungs so tight it was difficult to breathe. My sinuses were stuffy and I felt feverish, and I brought a bucket to the bedside because I wasn't sure I could keep the supper down. In short, I felt as if I were dying.

I asked Oiseau to lay close beside me and help me breathe more fully, but it didn't work and so I resorted to the Ventolin inhaler I carry for the occasional brush with asthma. After that, I could relax better and finally went to sleep.

This morning I got up and put on all my clothes, long underwear included, and went with Oiseau on a short walk to her writing spot on the shore. Too warm already in the 9:30 sun, I left her there and came back, feeling energetic enough to write and play music. While walking, moving the energy in my body, I felt I could happily walk slowly around the whole island. This after a breakfast of pancakes and ginger tea, a shot of echinacea and nearly the last of the Vitamin C. What a strange force sickness is, rising and falling: life and death in a small but intimate dance.

Two days ago I felt I was coming out of a similar low-energy threat to health, which I traced to a cold evening walk to the Platja Migjorn a couple of days before that, the same night Oiseau went to visit Arielle. Striding high through the Formentera dusk, I'd felt an almost superhuman energy and clarity--a danger signal I should have recognized from past experience. I awoke the next morning feeling sluggish and sniffly. Without, however, succumbing to any serious symptoms, I'd simply taken it easy that day, and by the next, felt ready for a long walk with Oiseau to Punta Prima.

On the way back at midday, we changed course and headed to El Pujols for coffee and pastry. They didn't have pastry but they did have good strong coffee. I felt I could use the boost to my already rising energy; and I figured that, with the threat of sickness already past, I could get away with it.

I hadn't yet read, in The Visitation, about the folly of pursuing the path of ecstasy, if it means leaving the real world behind. On the road home towards Sant Ferran I felt truly ecstatic. Ideas for and about my journal were sparking and firing, and I would stop every few steps to jot down notes in my pocket notebook, while Oiseau similarly sketched or made notes for her drawing projects.

It is as if, before succumbing to a viral intruder, the body arouses itself, like a cresting wave, to a full flush of apparent and desperate vitality. Again after a sickness has run its course, a rush of vitality can arise. In this case I mistook the first sort of zest for the second. Having just come out on top of that first wave of proximate sickness, I thought I was home free.

But the extra dose of caffeine in El Pujols kept me buzzing all night long. On top of it came an unusual charge in my sexual energy generated by a particularly intense and prolonged session of lovemaking with Oiseau. The ejaculation caused an upheaval in the delicate balance of my vital energy; but paradoxically, it seemed to energize rather than weaken me. Lying in bed with the caffeine still racing, I placed my hands over my upper chest between the heart and throat chakras, and felt a pulse that was neither heartbeat nor breath, but a faster throbbing of a subtle energy field, as of the chakra system itself--a sensation similar to what I had felt the month before, in Santa Luzia. It occurred to me once more that I was experiencing the palpable rising of kundalini energy.

In retrospect, it may be more accurate to say that my immune system was on red alert. The next day (yesterday) I had only a pingho of half-strength coffee to start the

day, on the hair-of-the-dog principle, and then risked a couple of glasses of wine at the beach in the afternoon. That last indulgence felt like moderation and seemed to hit the spot at the time, resolving my somewhat grumpy spirit. But it was no doubt a mistake.

With the gift of time, we can piece together the mystery of health and sickness, and place choices and causes in their proper perspective. I can learn from the chronology of events how I might have taken a more healthy road to the present.

The deeper lesson, which applies to both art and life, verges on a mystical faith which shines brightly in ecstatic realization, while also enduring in a calm presence of mind. Through this channel of bright energy, a knowledge is gained, about how intimately connected are all the seemingly disparate events and choices, characters and themes of our lives...as also are the competing selves within each of us, psychologically active or dormant as they each may be at any given moment. It might seem a bit much to hold this wholeness in our hands or minds at once--as integrated personalities, as readers or as writers--but the constant interplay of threads comprising the subplots and subthemes ought to be enough to keep us happily occupied in between the times of overarching vision.

The practical version of this mystical realization is to keep our awareness tuned to the possible impact which each of the actions, conversations, inner voices, intuitions, expressed and recorded thoughts is likely to have on the unfolding fabric...of the book we are reading or writing, of the life we are living. And then in the larger realm of life

outside us, in the social and political and ecological and even cosmic worlds of which we are a part, our thoughts and actions have a similarly far-reaching if similarly unseen effect. Both within us and around us the threads of connection weave and play, and only when we have seen the whole web can we appreciate fully the wonder of wholeness.

Now's Capsule Anatomy of Literature

Journal

Story	Essay	Emotional/Spiritual Journey	Travelogue
character	idea	self-help	setting
narration	exposition	prescription	description

(character / idea)	Autobiography	(inner / outer journey)
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(narrative / fictional distance)	Novel	(comic-symbolic-mythic)
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conventional

~

ironic

(editorial distance)	Commentary/Preface	(revision / restructuring)
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Notes:

The purpose of this map is to delineate the most important distinctions between the various forms and genres contained and discussed here. All are part of the whole...and creative variations may weave in unique ways across the dividing lines. The easiest forms in which to find our bearings (as readers or writers) are those which have simple and clearly defined territories in this terrain.

I admit of a congenital willingness to cross and expand boundaries, to take risks and commit unpardonable sins and acts of rebellion--and so I find a restful peace in seeing the field of possibilities at a glance. Likewise, the autobiographical project called Life, beyond its present state as a somewhat haphazard collection of journals, essays, memoirs, short stories, novel fragments, prefaces and commentaries, has up to this point resisted the temptation to confine itself to just one of the generic forms outlined above.

Instead, I'm mesmerized by the far more ambitious, the almost impossibly immense task, of bringing to birth a project as broad in its form as the Anatomy itself. Can a fictional work, or a life story, actually be packaged in any practical way at all, under an umbrella of forms as various and vast, as arcane and abstruse as "Now's Capsule Anatomy of Literature"? The idea has a certain megalomaniacal charm.

But a key question remains, as we ply this hazardous one-way course to the edge of the known ocean of possibility. If the drift of the life itself results in the narrowing down of focus to "the writing life," then doesn't the drift of the written form of that life

demand the choice of just one kind of writing? At least, the overall shape or appearance or working core or framework or title or subtitle or marketing angle could take on that clarity of focus, even as the genre itself remains multi-dimensional. We could, for example, simply apply to the good offices of that ever-gracious and expanding form, "the modern novel."

*

7 November

Yesterday I took a day off from writing, but stayed indoors while the wintry winds, clouds and rain blew all day outside. I spent the time profitably by analyzing and charting pennywhistle scales. Mapping out all of the keys commonly accessible to the D pennywhistle, I wanted to rank them in order of difficulty, in respect to the fingering of sharps and the troublesome C. In this consideration I included the major and minor, dominant and dorian scales of D, E, G, A, and B. I then was able to classify the dozen tunes I knew and liked the best into four primary scales: G major/E minor, A dominant/E dorian, A dorian/D dominant, and D major/B minor. Within each of these pairs, the notes of the scale were identical and, while starting from a different keynote, followed the same tonic progression. With such a foundation in hand, I was looking forward to improvising with more confidence and direction.

Today I celebrated better health and sunshine by taking drum, pennywhistle and newly created cheat-sheet to a sheltered beach. I began with a drum warmup, then ran

through a series of melodies and improvisations. My distillation of scales works remarkably well, in highlighting reference points for the notes of the chordal triads, and aligning them as downbeats by the addition of an eighth, "bebop" note to each scale. I thought briefly that I might even be able to market this method...but had to recognize that it was mostly derived from the jazz website where I first found out about dorian minors and bebop notes and the downbeat method of improvising on scales. I hadn't so much invented, as I had discovered and learned and finally understood, an easier way to improvise melodic music.

*

In the present work, as in the Life project, there is a war between the impulse to create a classic, stable and conventional architecture, and the wilder, Gothic, organic impulse to keep alive the freshness of improvisation--of ever-rebellious, even chaotic formlessness.

Mostly inner voices take sides to espouse these warring doctrines. But sometimes the tension of art in the making creates a scene in the Life itself, instead of the other way around...

Oiseau: I've kind of run out ideas for sketches now, so I'm going to want to sit down and find new ways to look at angles.

Now: Why are you telling me this?

Oiseau: I was just letting you know what was on my mind.

Now: Okay. (Pause.) What I'm wondering about is, if true art doesn't need criticism--or certainly not as part of the work of art itself. (Pause.) I guess that's as incomprehensible to you as your remark was to me.

Oiseau: (Moody silence.)

Now: What's the matter? Did I say something wrong?

Oiseau: You hurt my feelings.

Now: How?

Oiseau: It sounded like you didn't care about what was important to me.

Now: When I said, Why are you telling me this?

Oiseau: Yes.

Now: It was a kind of joke, really. Unfortunately. What I meant literally was, does this change the way we're going to be walking on this outing--will we be making more stops, for instance.

Oiseau: I didn't hear it that way.

Now: I understand that. I'm sorry. (Goes across highway to dump garbage, then returns.) So what do you want to do, go back home?

Oiseau: No. Let's just forget about it and go for our walk. I still feel bad but it's not that important. Let's not make a big deal out of it.

Now: (Breathes.) Okay...

(An hour or so later, on the way home.)

Oiseau (the daughter of a professor): I'm thinking of a quote, about how all the daughters of professors should rise up and burn all the books. To answer your question, that's what I think about theory. Not all the time, but--

Now: But don't you think that without this abstract distance or momentary removal--like the astronauts viewing the earth from space--you can't really fully appreciate the wonder of wholeness? For me it's a kind of rapture.

Oiseau: Yes, okay, maybe so. How about this? In your book, that outside perspective could be framed in a kind of sidebar. Or you could even have different columns, with different characters speaking and thinking side by side. And they might hear the same conversation differently.

Now: Right; nobody really gets the last word.

Oiseau: Except me. (Smiles coquettishly.)

Alternative Literature: a journal of theory and practice

First, to define our terms:

alternative: different than conventional; outside the mainstream, the institutional, the merely popular.

Thus, as to literature:

alternative theory includes the personal;

alternative practice includes the theoretical.

Alternative literature breaks down the walls that separate the critical analysis of literature from the literature itself, the right brain from the left brain, theory from practice, popular from academic culture. It is democratic not in the horizontal sense of the lowest common denominator, but in the vertical sense of including the abstract and theoretical with the concrete and personal, all as part of the whole. Why should the ironic, for instance, be excluded from the whole just because it wants to regard the whole from an outside view? The alternative point of view is both inside and outside at once--because this is what human consciousness brings to the equation.

Yes, there is a purity in graphic art untitled and unpremeditated, in children's poetry and rhapsodic music created in the moment, in dance around the sacred fire.

There is a purity in a radical or fundamentalist politics which defines evil and expunges it from what is allowed. But I seek a larger purpose than purity: I call it wholeness, balance, synthesis, reconciliation, a resolution of paradoxical principles. I call it a manifesto for a wider definition of human nature and for an art that reflects this widest possible view.

In this present project I am attempting to practice what I preach, and to preach what I practice (the question of how well I succeed is left to you). As practice this form is a prototype of the larger project I have in mind, Life-- particularly in the exercise of the multi-tracked narrative, story alongside commentary. It's also a reflection of the living project that it represents directly, the life itself.

As an autobiographer I must insert here a cautionary mantra, which I invite you to repeat after me: I am not an Annie Dillard clone. I am not an Annie Dillard clone. I am not an Annie Dillard clone...

Which is to say, I do not attempt to provide you with a "pure" journal of writerly reflections of nature, complete and discreet as a catalogue of descriptions, feelings, and small events. Nor do I attempt to write a textbook or how-to manual for writers; nor a scholarly overview and thoroughly objective critical analysis of all the literary forms in existence (contrary to any fearful expectations which might have been aroused by the words, "Anatomy of Literature.")

Which is to say, I attempt to do something that includes some of each of the above...but at the same time, something different.

Which is to say, alternative.

Which means, to pursue that which has not been attempted before--a new synthesis--a symbolic presentation of a certain whole person's version of reality. Which is to say, my art.

Which is to say, the dynamically changing and more or less randomly organized combination of inner and outer experience which I nevertheless attempt to shape into recognizable contours, rhythms and harmonies and perhaps a kind of body and face, complete with echoing voices and an increasingly familiar desire to continue doing just this or something like it...until it is time to stop, the formative process having reached its own optimum sort of provisional completeness.

Which is to say, like life.

*

8 September

They've arrived in the bustling tourist town of Cadaqués, former home of Salvador Dali. There's a small, pebbly public beach right downtown, not too crowded at this time of year. The water is clean and warm, Oiseau is catching some rays, and Now is enjoying a relaxed swim in the small sunny harbor, when he notices that the techno dance mix coming from somewhere on the shore has been pumped up to high volume. Peering under a pedestrian bridge where a crowd has gathered to watch, he sees bustling feet and bare legs cavorting. Getting out of the water to have a closer look at what all the fuss is

about, he sees a small square just beyond the bridge, full of dancing, frolicking bathing-suited children, with a giant cannon spurting yellow and pink suds like clouds of cotton candy all around them. This throng of kids has been energized into a chaotic frenzy of movement--dancing, hopping, jumping, running, laughing, squealing, capering full tilt with arms and legs akimbo; and their faces shine in amazement and delight at the sheer surreal spectacle of it all--and, no doubt, at the lavish attention paid to them by the ranks of onlookers in this, the very heart of the town.

Europe, our hero says to himself, shaking his head in amusement. So this is what western civilization has come to. It could be worse.

He slips back into the comforting detachment of the waves, eager to maximize each opportunity to swim in this mesmerizing Mediterranean sea, with its gentle waves, its enchanting color, its comforting and buoyant warmth. The circus scene continues but as a backdrop now, to the soothing serenity brought on by the water.

Back out of town, the refreshed travelers resumed their relentless walking over the hills riddled with relentless, seemingly endless rockwalled terraces. It appeared that every inch of this countryside was covered with them...mile after mile, as far as the eye could see. It was at once sobering and mystifying, to realize that these lands were at one time developed and worked so intensively, and now lay almost uniformly abandoned to occasional walkers on Roman roads and long-distance hiking trails. If the still-living

trees and vines were tended and harvested, there was no evidence of anyone out there doing the work.

This stone-wall culture had the effect, Now observed, of making two pedestrian tourists, and all the current works of their contemporary culture--all its words and music and media glitz--seem trivial, puny, irrelevant. Yet those stupendous stoneworks, in scale unimaginable, sculpting the whole earthen landscape whether by means of great or tiny building blocks, in turn seemed impossibly overambitious, perhaps even logically unnecessary. Was the whole vast unlikely enterprise constructed of slave labor? To this newcomer who was used to being a modest pioneer, a mere homesteader in the wilderness, all this effort of construction seemed arbitrary, or worse, obsessive; especially the castles built upon pinnacles which themselves were natural fortresses of rock.

On this day the ongoing mystery took another Dali-esque twist when Now and Oiseau followed a dead-end road to a crazy one-hotel resort where cruise ships came and went and people danced to one-man Spanish schmaltz-rock music played live on a standup techno five-instrument layered synthesizer keyboard. The swimming, as it happened, was ideal: warm and clear, with just enough wave action to be interesting, just cool enough to be refreshing.

On the way down to this carnival-cove south of Llança, they saw their first standing water, a putrid algaefied pool by a dried creek. Nearby, a green-stained bathtub was fed by a green hose dangling from an ivied cliff. Though the hose didn't appear to be running, a slick of recent runoff still wet the road.

9 September

No cyber-café this side of Figueres, the bar boy told them. But Now was still wired in, one way or another. Part of his equipment was a pint-sized laptop computer with a small but workable keyboard. As it weighted only twelve ounces and was essential to documenting the trip, it made the cut, no question. Also he carried a small aluminum drum weighing only a pound and a half--which together with an ultralight pennywhistle adequately covered his musical needs. Oiseau was packing a plastic recorder, a bound journal, a watercolor kit and sketch pad, and knitting needles. They had no books except two ebooks stored on the computer. The guidebooks they had wanted to bring seemed useful but heavy, so Oiseau had carved out the relevant sections with a razor, and photocopied whatever other pages they considered necessary.

Perched on the seaside rocks at Cap Raz, north of Llança, Now leveled his flimsy laptop with a small flat stone. The surf pounded its patternless rhythm while Oiseau played a minuet against the panchromatic water, and the sun rose sideways, from behind a jugged rock. Now turned his attention back to the dim gray screen, bemoaning in words the fact that in their haste to depart the city of Roses, he had missed a chance to browse the ruins dating back to the ninth century B.C. He was intrigued that there was a colony in Spain established that long ago by Greek explorers. And he was perturbed that he had not really recognized his fascination with the ancient history of the region, until a prime opportunity to study the evidence firsthand had passed.

But true to his innate spirit of looking forward rather than back, he was able to recover a sense of excitement about the new discoveries this day would bring. Today they were bound for France by foot, across the low Pyrenees where the mountains handclasp the sea.

The original plan to go west into the higher Andorran ranges had been scrapped, as the inland trail meant steeper climbs, colder nights, longer distances between villages, uncertain water supplies, and tight timing before the rendezvous with Arielle. The trail Oiseau and Now decided to follow instead would put them in Cerbères in a couple of hours.

Climbing the coastal hills, though, which rose four hundred meters above the sea, proved tough going in the noonday heat with heavy packs. Breathing hard and covered in sweat, Oiseau called for a break before they reached the top. "I remember now why I don't like climbing mountains," she declared in a voice that carried an unstable mixture of determination and despair.

Now soothed her by sprinkling water on her blazing face; silently he reconsidered the wisdom of their planned traverse of the eastern Pyrenees in a week's time. "We've got all day today," he said. "We don't need to push it."

Slowing to a more sustainable pace, they crowned the ridge that lay ahead of them and so finally crossed the deserted border to Cerbères, still hugging the coast. As they descended into the outskirts of this first French town by way of an old alley by the

railroad bed, Now was shocked by the sense of poverty and ugliness that greeted them there. On the hillside to their left was a long series of patched-together buildings and pens, loud with the sound of angry, barking dogs. The buildings were constructed of scrap metal and wood, tarpaper, stone and tile; the pens were fenced by a similar hodgepodge of old bedsprings and rusty wire, and covered by ragged nets. Was this unsightly jumble somehow caused by the misfortunes of the last war, Now wondered; or was it the result of some other, more personal adversity?

Maybe, on the other hand, everything was fine--and the reaction of one spoiled tourist was his own problem. But as they came into town, Now couldn't help feeling the same about the public bridges, the railway trestle, the light posts, the other buildings. It was an effect of old wrought iron; of pieced-together, obsolete equipment; of Victorian-era decay. He was reminded of that weird French video which he'd seen earlier that summer--The City of Lost Children--a macabre nightmare vision of the stealing of children's dreams.

*

8 November

Last night I read the first fifty pages of Salman Rushdie's Midnight's Children, then tossed it away with disgust...something like the disgust I felt after waiting at a bus stop in San Francisco for a half an hour yesterday afternoon, for a scheduled bus that never arrived. The post office clerk in bright yellow shirt, whom I recognized from our

visit to check for packages a half hour before, arrived on the scene and wandered around aimlessly, or as if he too might have expected a bus, then wandered away again. Oiseau and I finally gave up and walked the five kilometers home.

On the back cover of Rushdie's breakthrough novel are praises from reviewers across the English-speaking world: "brilliant and remarkable," "huge and engrossing," "important and vital," "prodigious and magnificent," "glittering and startling," etc. What strikes me in this book is certainly a prodigious imagination, whereby language and characters sprawl across the page as if unloosed by a hurricane. I think of Rabelais, or Thomas Wolfe, or perhaps, as the reviewers suggest, Grass or Irving. But this ocean of verbiage is not my cup of tea...despite its narrator's prodigious self-confidence that all will be permitted.

"Do you mind if I find you incomprehensible?" Oiseau said to me last night before I began reading.

"I don't ask to be found comprehensible," I replied.

"Only to be allowed to be as you are," she finished.

I guess Rushdie was given, or he assumed, the same license somewhere along the line. But I will prefer to go bookless now, content with the vast wordless sea, rather than allow my consciousness to be deluged with the unbridled meanderings of a massive literary ego such as Rushdie's. There is no story to be told there, no construction of art, just pure artifice, bullshitting uncomposted and unproductive of any edible crop. But it wasn't the narrator-author's up-front intrusions that were most upsetting to this reader.

On the contrary, they were the only thread of interest that kept me going, out of a certain formal curiosity. They are what this book shares with another book much higher in my personal ranking of literary value, Iris Murdoch's The Black Prince. I give the nod to Murdoch because her intrusive narrator is more clearly himself a fictional persona, than is Rushdie's thinly disguised autobiographical voice.

Murdoch's narrator Bradley Pearson, while dissembling as a "failed" novelist, proceeds to weave a taut, tight tale, a riveting plot which turns around his attempt to get away from his small London circle to a seaside writing retreat. During the course of the book, that quest for success becomes instead a quest for love. The airtight plot coexists quite naturally with periodic digressions on the nature of art, which are themselves highly cogent and tightly reasoned. In either case no action or argument, no thought or conversation is wasted; each impacts directly on the dilemma at hand. At each page the plot is advanced with heightened tension, complication, and dramatic necessity. These are the marks of a well-made thriller, mystery or romance--the stuff, ironically, of Pearson's friend and rival, the popular novelist Arnold Baffin, whose casual, formulaic fiction Pearson openly disdains. Yet despite the author's own professed disavowal of the popular literary game, he manages to tell his own tale with the utmost impact on the reader's sympathy and interest....an interest which, because of the multi-layered intention and construction of the book as a whole, is redoubled on the intellectual and aesthetic side.

Both elements, the simple dramatic tension and the higher ironic tension, woven so masterfully by Murdoch into her artful container, are loosely applied at best by Rushdie. His plot is nowhere to be found, and the only ironic interest is produced by the author appearing now and then (purportedly as the narrator Saleem Sinai) in a cameo role, as Alfred Hitchcock used to do in his films--but here there is no mystery to smile at, from under the light of the lamp post. Just words, the natural effluent of a prodigious imagination and a writerly ego coddled by the allowance of a band of reviewers who must be so starved for quantities of imaginative production that they set their literary standards on those shifting Saharan sands, rather than atop the castles of a more distinct and disciplined artistic creation. It may well be that Rushdie sweats years of blood over his occasional "masterpiece." But the effect is rather that of the rather raw outpouring of a man in a hurry to dash off his five hundred pages.

I suspect that my dislike of Midnight's Children, or of Rushdie's style in general (I couldn't finish The Satanic Verses either) is not so much a matter of literary theory as of narrative personality. I couldn't get through John Irving's The World According to Garp, either; though I enjoy Günter Grass. So maybe it all comes down to my present condition, on a desert island with only one novel left to read, and it happened to be Midnight's Children, and it just didn't turn my crank...so I was especially disappointed, to the point of stewing up a petulant, academic sort of minor rant.

But let poor Rushdie be, I say now. Do I contradict myself? Very well. I will not after all wish success to the Ayatollah's henchmen in pursuit of the poor man...nor do

I harbor ill will to the independent reviewers of The Times, The Observer, or my God, The New Yorker. We all have a right to our own taste. Now if the international postal services would just do their jobs properly and send me that handpicked set of six masterpieces with which I can happily pass the rest of my desert island days, I will simply pass off Mr. Salman Rushdie as "not to my taste" and leave it at that.

Here the farmers seem not to care about separating the sheep from the goats. Except the goats, which are more liable to try wandering over the low stone walls which separate the dry and stubbly fields, are more often hobbled with cloth ropes. These leg restraints in some cases are connected to halters which keep their heads and necks bent cruelly forward at an angle to the connecting foot, so that it appears as if the animal is cocking its head quizzically in your direction as you walk past.

We saw a strange beast the other day: whether goat or sheep, it was hard to tell, with a mane of long brown hair, and shorter, off-white hair on the rest of its body. Seeing us looking steadily at it as we departed, the animal let out a plaintive, warbling bellow. Later we passed a small stone enclosure where we heard a grunting sort of growl, and saw the top of a cloth rope attached to the wall, with an indeterminate beast--presumably a kind of lion-pig--hidden on the other end. Its guttural cries, too, increased as we passed beyond.

Today, after yet another twelve hours in bed (the house batteries haven't been charging enough to power the lights past early evening) our respective states of health are on the upswing. The moon is waxing near fullness. We have reached the halfway point of our stay on Formentera, and are talking openly now of what it will be like to be back home. Yesterday in Sant Francesc we checked out ferry, plane, and bus schedules for the trip to Barcelona, and found out from the travel agent that the Barcelona ferry was cancelled the last two days due to stormy weather. The agent refused to predict what the weather would be like in December.

Celeste came by in the late afternoon with a spare butane tank, and while commenting similarly on the "unusual" wintry weather, was noncommittal about what could be normally expected this time of year. I'm still holding out for those African winds, which Jean-Pierre says produced temperatures of forty degrees Celsius one day just last February.

On our walk along the shore this morning, the waves were glassy green and clear, playfully calm as they came into our leeward side of the island. But Oiseau and I remained bundled in synthetic fleece and wool garments as we lay on the soft sand beach, coterminous in our longing for a more genuinely beachly existence: where, as Oiseau put it, she could have me where she wants me.

I'm not arguing. The word Fiji has cropped up in our conversations at least twice in the last two days of cold, strong northwest winds.

We did the best we could today to ward off the chill of oncoming winter, by way of a lunch of potatoes and cheese fried in bacon fat, and a pot of hot decaf. But the last of that insipid brew now sits congealing in a mug on the flapping plastic tablecloth as I write. Oiseau has retreated blue-lipped to the interior of the house. And as the steel-wool sky thickens behind me like the plot of a conventional novel, I linger but for one last stray ray of sun, and follow her inside.

9 November

Attempting "to recollect in the tranquility of the moment, the overflow of powerful feelings" brought on by sensations of visual splendor, I sit nestled in an eggshell of weathered rock, looking down at clear sea water washing in to shore. Oiseau sits opposite me clothed in black and green, her face lit by sun as she rests against a concave sponge of latticed ancient sand. This rock is crenellated, pockmarked and perforated, a blonde honeycomb of geologic art on display for our eyes only, while the water laps sonorously around us, stretching away in the near distance to an impossible aqua green which we reason is an illusion of light and distance, and the clear light of momentary ecstasy shines at our feet, within our breathing reach.

I recall our conversation of last night, in which art and love were defined in a single breath from her love-red lips: not a matter of being good enough, nor even merely good; but simply open, available for interaction with beauty.

Naturally such statements appear stilted, whether formed in recreative prose or in the semblance of dialogue; for they are missing the breath of the life that produced them...the actual shining of the eyes, the gentle huskiness of voice and tangible phrasing as the words are nudged forward from throat or heart or cosmic center of utterable truth...wherever it is that words come from. For this reason I seek to go beyond the journalistic goal of accurate reportage and photography, which is not only limited but unattainable. I prefer attempting the translation of the essential live element, of actual light and movement, into a medium wholly other: a world beside the world I want to represent. I'm looking for a way inside and then a way to bring back outside, the world inside the surfaces we see so clearly but fail to depict precisely as we see them. Seeing, after all, depends on the reception and interpretation and integration of that which is perceived, and isn't simply a cut-out snapshot of the image itself, image only, an arbitrarily selected slice of pixels in a sea of swirling color.

This morning we walked over a landscape that could have been Martian, or lunar. The very light was alien, filtered by haze and casting long red-brown shadows from the weird rock formations, like sepia-tinged moonlight. The ground was a picture broadcast from space, of dry, jagged stones and abstract shapes across a sandy waste. Only a few scrub plants designated our actual, terrestrial location; and just to our left a very live blue-green sea sealed that testimony.

Yesterday in a similar spot we found a portion of overhanging rock configured as a fine lacy lattice of hardened sand. A small piece broke off in my hand for closer

inspection. Within the lacework was an even finer mesh of spider web. We wondered whether the sand had once collected around a primeval web and then hardened and thickened, over the eons; or if instead, by action of wind and surf, the sand which composed this soft rock had simply been eaten away, leaving only the fragile filigree we found. Either way, the effect of this delicate tracery struck me as more impressive, more beautiful in its inscrutable complexity, than the ornate and celebrated baroque Moslem carvings in the ceilings of the palaces of the Alhambra...which, incidentally, I was never able to glimpse firsthand, but instead knew from postcards displayed in the tourist kiosks.

The question of whether such a structure was formed by a geologic process of addition or subtraction, struck both Oiseau and me, later that night, as emblematic of the challenge facing us with an imminent return home to our crowded life. We have on this journey been subjecting ourselves to a steady process of subtraction: an emptying out, a paring away, an exploration of what it is to live without the familiar equipment and preoccupations of our lives at home. Now with the colder winter weather, and with the lack of fresh reading material, we are facing more and more time indoors with less and less to do.

And we aren't sure how to react. Is the prospect scary, or just boring?

For me it is rather exciting, to venture into this unfamiliar realm of nothingness, of darkness, of emptiness of purpose and identity. In the same breath I realize that I have enjoyed immensely finding, in the contrasting absence of other diversions, a new a

stronger, purer commitment to music and writing; and I have at the same time been filling up with the richness of my love for Oiseau: our love for each other, our comfort with each other, our ability to share in all things, our willingness to accept and embrace so totally whatever the other person finds to explore in their own path of opening and growth.

It is with these basic and simple treasures already in hand and heart, that I look with some amazement and trepidation at the cornucopia of additional freight that my life is liable to take on when I return home: walls full of shelves of unread books...unlimited Internet time...writing projects and drum rhythms and workshop ideas and editing work...videos and social opportunities and childcare and domestic duties and homesite maintenance and gardening and firewood and...the usual infinite to-do list. It seems from this privileged distance, that that way of living is rather normal where I come from, that it's just a conventional sort of worldly, materialistic existence where the consumer ethic is nothing other than a process of infinite addition.

We seem to have found here (more or less by intention), by contrast and through a process of subtraction, a more spiritual kind of existence. This emptying out of material things and responsibilities and activities, and of social and cultural associations and obligations, has left us alone in this stark world of earth-moon-mars-sun-sea, with what counts most to us: simple food, clothing, and shelter; basic tools for practicing our chosen arts; and the open territory of our inner growth as individuals and partners in love.

Naturally, it's relevant to remember that we've been able arrange such a happy circumstance by accumulating a handy nest-egg of earmarked funds, which it has been our North American privilege to accumulate and wield with all our plastic power. By the same token, it's that very world which draws us inexorably home, as the budget dwindles.

Clear water laps at our feet as the hazy sun mounts in the sky. It is still possible we may swim today, November though it may be. We live, after all, in Paradise, where anything we imagine may come to pass, according to our innermost desires. If we are empty enough, there is always room to add more of what is most essential. And if adding a hot sunny beach doesn't occur today, there is always more subtracting to do: an opening to a cold starry night, retreat to the soft sheltering womb of a bed. For now, my lover sits relaxed before me in the half-opened egg of rock, sketching. A breeze stirs at my back, but I still have a hankering for that swim...maybe later, maybe farther down the shore.

This entire edifice of lacy rock, half figure and half ground, may best be seen as yet another largish preface to a story called Life. Whether or not that story ever takes shape in a conventional form, is an open question. In the meantime, it might find itself being told by a process of subtraction: not in re-invented dialogue, nor in fleshed-out description, nor in multilinear plotting...but in what is left of the possible and actual recordings of it. Once the various (and in their own way endless) "prefaces" have scored

its outlines, the story will appear as black or clear light against them--leaving aside what I have not done or will not do...in favor of what I most simply and purely love.

Toothache in Paradise

My lover has a toothache. And so even here in Paradise, the compassionate Buddha sits watching us from somewhere over the horizon in Rushdieland, smiling blissfully as we suffer. I did go swimming today--willfully obsessed to do so, against the indications of the choppy water and the chill breeze. Indeed, despite the marginally warmer air today, the water was considerably colder than it was ten days ago when I last swam here. I plunged in hoping that my frigid thighs were premature in their skeptical judgment of the water's hospitality: but the pain that circled my chest as the cold water closed all around me only intensified the finality of that low opinion. I took a few strokes just to drive the point home, then stood and walked steadily back to shore while the silvery, icy current swept like cold liquid crystal around me.

"I thought the sea was supposed to be some vast thermal storage mass. How could it change this fast, the same as the air temperature?" I was toweling off vigorously as I shook with the cold.

My lover with a toothache had no answer. She smiled and turned to her book, The Visitation. I began one of my own: The Member of the Wedding, by Carson McCullers. I had already tried and discarded her better known book, The Heart is a

Lonely Hunter, and so at first spurned this later work; but now it impressed me with its compelling fictional characterization. I found it absorbing also in its thematic interest, and because of the stylistic unity with which the main character's consciousness is conveyed, even in third person. Yes, now another dose of pure fiction had entered the Garden, and along with toothache and icy sea it would mark a subtly but insidiously decisive change in the inner landscape of this desert island experience, as we began the second half of our stay here. Our experience was no longer swimmable, no longer empty of suffering, and no longer free of the clutches of that force which claims, by the force of its artistic integrity, the title, "true fiction."

My envy of this writer has quickly come to match my admiration for Iris Murdoch. I want immediately to write in the same way...as I was once inspired, at the beginning of what I loosely call "my literary career" some twenty-five years ago, to finish Thomas Mann's last, unfinished, and most appealing novel, The Confessions of Felix Krull, Confidence Man. That early novel of Mann's, resumed too late in his old age, leaves Felix hanging in Lisbon (in the midst of a romantic entanglement) before embarking on a journey to the New World. With my own long-interrupted continuation of the story only recently completed, and delivered into the hands of an electronic publisher, I have cast my fate to the winds with a journey in the opposite direction...in the company of a lover who, for the first time in my life, has made sense of love.

As my own main character, I am entangled more in the sea-mesh of art than of love. I am attracted first to one great author, then another...hmm, not that one. Oh, here's another. Now I want to write just like McCullers.

But no: I see the trap. This is no longer about imitation of the famous, about lusting for the aquamarine color of the near-distant sea. It is about plunging into the cold clear water of who I am now with my present voice; it is about learning my art lessons from a different master--or rather, mistress: again, my lover. For it is my lover who has taught me to trust my own voice. It is in the presence of my lover that I am learning for the first time to love myself. And it is my lover who is teaching me, day by day, that the path of the artist as well as the lover is acceptance, allowance, openness and grace. To work with, to play with what is given. To open the heart to the inner child, the inner artist, the inner lover, and say, "Yes, your needs will be met, your voice will be heard. There is no question of your needing to be good, or good enough. There is only the question of how much you are willing to open. To grow, to feel, to experience love, to appreciate beauty, and to share your gifts with the world."

After that...well, that's up to the world.

Soon enough, we will sure as hell be back in the land of dentists, hot springs, electronic publishing...where all our minor sufferings will be temporarily alleviated. What then?

The long road to Paradise still stretches before us, beckoning. For now, we just try to stay in shape, with our five or twenty kilometers a day, putting one step in front of the other.

Passing Through

11 September

Now sat with his pack beside him on a low stone wall in front of a fashionable house in Perpignan, France, while Oiseau shopped in the supermarché. Traffic pulled up to the curb to park, and people strolled and drove by, and Now watched the daily urban life proceed here as in any North American or for that matter, Spanish city, different only in cultural details like pay toilets, the ages of buildings as displayed on cornices and foundations, or the regional variety of Romanesque language. This Euro-urban culture was everywhere rather homogeneous compared to the variant he and his partner brought from the hills of either continent, with their scraggled hair and dusty sandals, eyes of the sun and sea, hearts open and therefore judged, by the hard squinty questioning eyes of the townspeople stuck in traffic, to be dangerously or at least suspiciously free...

Maybe their silent inquisitors were right. Now guessed that he and Oiseau looked the part, all right, with their trail-dusty clothes and packs, their loose-limbed stride.

They had made some concessions to the road: fresh short haircuts for both of them, and a long-sleeved blouse for Oiseau when entering towns (the guidebook warned her of the taboo against bare female shoulders). But Now's beard was still unfashionably

long and scraggly. He wasn't sure whether its silvery grayness made it better or worse; but it hardly mattered, as any facial hair was extremely scarce in this part of the world. And the trimmed hair was still shaggy by local standards.

Now's wardrobe for the trip consisted of a new pair of lightweight pants with zip-off legs, the handmade silk shorts with bone button, a beige T-shirt with Picasso-style Kaslo Jazz Festival logo, a navy-blue silk T-shirt with long sleeves, a casual coarse-woven cotton shirt and an ultra-light, blue-green fleece. He also had a sea-colored rain shell, thick wool cap, and blue long underwear bottoms if needed. On his feet he wore sturdy canvas shoes with hiking soles for daily trekking, or Teva sandals for lighter use.

Oiseau normally wore blue hiking trousers with a long-sleeved teal blouse or sleeveless silk top. She also carried a tight-fitting jacket of black velour with a row of bright buttons, a lightweight black fleece, and a somewhat sheer, short-skirted black-and-white sleeveless dress to wear over black tights and a black sports bra. She had just one pair of light hiking boots for footwear.

All in all, the pair were obvious, if somewhat offbeat, tourists--with just enough spare clothes to keep from smelling bad, and enough style to appear respectable. Not that they cared terribly much; after all, they were just passing through.

Playing drums and flutes in the park by the youth hostel later that day, they were the only ones around, except for a couple of young soccer players scooting by curiously. They sat on a bench in the soft evening light and played lively dance tunes in three and

four, but no one else appeared. The streets were empty except for cars--like Spokane, Now thought, only prettier. There was no village culture here, around the dry fountain; no evening dancers had come to the call of pipe and drum. This archaic music was likely not even heard above the hum of the automobile.

They slept poorly in their tent at the hostel, thanks to the persistent sharp barks of a dog in the police kennel next door, all night long. In the morning the beast had fallen silent, giving over its domination of the noise bandwidth to the morning rush-hour traffic.

Now and Oiseau had weak coffee and sugared milk with dry white bread for petit déjeuner, and a soothing hot shower before departing for the train station in the humid morning. They would enjoy a day off from extensive walking, with a five-hour train trip to Pau, their planned embarkation point for the Somport Pass through the high western Pyrenees.

14 September

Up into the higher mountains they went, climbing on a road with increasing grade, still a day from Col de Somport. The trails they'd been following, the GR 653 and the Chemin de St. Jacques, were more difficult to follow as they collided in the narrow valley with the rail line, the highway, and the GR 10 coming in along the peaks from the west, along with a number of more local trails.

Today our travelers started late and spent much time in the towns of this beautiful region of southwestern France, the Béarn. In Bedous they were lucky enough to come across a bustling Thursday morning farmer's market, where they bought herbed sausage,

soft cheddar, mushrooms, red peppers, almond-honey nougat, a melon, a bag of juicy fresh figs, and two loaves of crusty local bread, and were entertained by a lone standing fiddler playing classical.

They walked back out into the countryside and ate their market lunch by a huge spreading chestnut tree loaded with nuts, beside a sheep meadow. There they speculated on the historic transformation of this land, presuming that original chestnut forests had been cut down and replaced with meadows for sheep and cattle. The Visigoths (or whoever was here when such a transition occurred) evidently preferred meat and cheese and centuries of hard work over interminable eons of chestnut paste and boredom.

Meadow track and trail gave way to highway in the narrowing valley. Between villages, in the hot afternoon, an old rail station appeared. White graffiti painted on the highway had already indicated local resistance in these parts to a tunnel construction mega-project; and the funky exterior of the station, with its green paint and homespun signs, gave hints of its current incarnation as an Anarchist-Green-Rasta café. Standing on the highway in the baking sun, Now and Oiseau made the obvious decision to stop in for a cool beer.

The quartet of young men in the large, high-ceilinged room continued playing cards, hardly looking up at the newcomers. Now thought he heard one muttering a reticent bonjour, under the more welcoming sound of local folk and world beat on the stereo. The weary travelers ordered a beer and sat at an empty table and looked at the

resistance posters with hippie paint covering the walls. What a welcome change of scene this was, after a steady diet of straight-laced conservatism. It was a window back to the alternative culture they'd left behind in the British Columbia mountains. But on such a day, in such a place, the milieu wasn't exactly lively. A djembe sat unplayed on the floor; the barechested bartender in dreads stared absently and wandered in and out. Finally, bored, Now and Oiseau moved outdoors to a shaded table in the sunshine, where they quietly finished their beer before hoisting their packs once more.

There was water everywhere around them in these French mountain valleys, flowing from every hillside and in every town fountain, running full time for the taking. They'd been carrying too much of it in their packs, from town to town, not really calculating distances or counting on fresh sources.

One fountain in front of a church, like others they'd seen, brought forth running water over a planter of flowers, at the feet of a stone Virgin. Her hands were outstretched in offering, freely giving these gifts of her grace.

In the old church behind her, from the 1660's, Disney-like graphics at the altar (appealing to the public need for glitz and shimmer) presented, as a backdrop for the crucifix, a giant painting of St. Jack himself or similar hero about to hack the head off (or skewer the neck of) a hapless moor or other mortal enemy laid prone under his foot. The Lady of Mercy was nowhere to be found in this tableau, but her Son's head beamed beneficently from above it all, in gold and blue spangles.

*

Each day of our stay in the Casa Sophia, we take turns working the wooden handle of the pump, which brings water up from the underground cistern to the roof. Ten minutes a day. All of the writing and painting and reading and music aside, this has become our unspoken practice, along with our daily walks to the shore. We're still finding water, day by day.

Vortex at Urdos

15 September

After a promising pass through the town of Urdos first thing in the morning for groceries, the hikers found themselves back again via a wrong turn. Crossing the river, they became lost on looping trails and roads, and after an hour and a half, had progressed no further up the valley. Finally, exhausted from carrying heavy packs in the thirty-degree heat, and still lost despite directions from two local ladies (both claiming the way ahead was "facile"), Oiseau began complaining of severe abdominal cramps, and lay down unable to go further.

Trying to comfort her and get a sense of what the problem might be, Now feared the worst. Appendicitis? A collapsed uterus? Maybe it was just a bad case of flu, or food poisoning, or contaminated water.

While chiefly concerned for Oiseau's well-being, Now couldn't help worrying about the rest of their trip. If her condition was serious and required an operation, they would probably have to fly back to Vancouver. Even local treatment could wipe out their remaining budget, since they'd gambled and decided not to take out extra health insurance.

A half an hour of rest in the shade seemed a good idea, for starters; but it didn't really help. Oiseau wasn't hungry and already had drunk plenty of water. There was nothing more Now could do or think of, and she was still suffering. Finally he decided to leave her beside the road and walk to the highway, where he would hitch back to Urdos and try to contact a doctor.

Just then a car approached them on the road, and on an impulse Now jumped up and motioned for the driver to stop. It was a facteur, a young man driving a postal car on his suburban rounds. Now told him what the trouble was and asked if the facteur could call a doctor for them. The man agreed and drove off.

Five minutes later a stout middle-aged woman came charging down the street, huffing and puffing, asking in French if the lady was all right and what did they need. At once Now could tell that her persistent and overbearing energy, well-meaning as it was, just added stress to Oiseau's plight. But Oiseau's French was better than Now's, and so it

was up to her to explain that perhaps it wasn't an emergency. She just wasn't sure. When the woman calmed down enough to listen to Oiseau describing her symptoms, she uttered the confident opinion that the trouble must be "la chaleur": the oppressive heat.

They accepted the woman's suggestion to come rest in her cool house just nearby, and were offered there a bewildering choice of foodstuffs and drinks, which Oiseau patiently refused except for a sweet mint syrup mixed with cold mineral water. There was an older man in the house, her uncle, very short and quiet, who watched the Olympics on TV below his old stone fireplace hung with an ancient musket; the visitors were also introduced to the man's ninety-year-old wrinkled mother, also short but lively and less intimidated by this strange intrusion. Everyone hoped that the refreshment would do the trick, as the nearest doctor, back in Bedous, was deemed unreliable.

Eventually, Oiseau said she was feeling better, and they accepted a ride back to Urdos, where there was a campground and telephone. She lay there with Now under a tree in the shade, until late afternoon; and then, with Oiseau feeling considerably stronger and without much pain, the intrepid travelers hit the road again--this time choosing the unambiguous highway. They made a resolution from that moment on to avoid walking in the midday heat, having learned some respect for that subtropical custom, the siesta.

History as Geology

16 September

They rise an hour before dawn, and breakfast and pack by the light of the full moon. Once more they have transgressed the law, this time by enjoying a perfect natural campsite by a clear stream in a national park, a few kilometers from the mountain crest and a reentry into Spain. Heading up the last stretch of highway to the Somport Pass, they gape around at the pink peaks, as high as B.C. mountains and lit wondrously in the pearly high-altitude air. Knowing the history of this range from the guidebook, they can see firsthand the results of a big geologic squeeze: the Iberian landmass pushed up against Europe by the African Plate.

At Canfranc Estación, there is a Gothic railway station and massive tunnel works under construction...more of the same of what stoneworkers have been doing here for centuries. This time, crews are pounding massive curved wall forms into place. A welding team is cutting apart, meanwhile, a section of modern but now obsolete iron fencing...a change of direction.

Near the Somport Pass on the French side there is an old fort with ramparts built straight up from the formidable sheer cliffs. Vertical slits range all along the route, for guns to fire on advancing troops. And all along the cliff a horizontal trench has been cut and then embedded in the rock, providing another slim channel from which defenders could fire down upon the narrow pass.

Earlier they saw an old decayed tree by a farmyard, still green and alive in its outer branches, whose trunk was now half composed of rockwork, with carefully mortared stones replacing the rotted wood.

In the terraced fields on Cap de Creus, the aged rock walls, built of numberless reconstituted fragments and shards like those still scattered about on the ground, flow without discrimination or apology over pre-existing ledges and boulders.

In the mountains above Canfranc, there is a vast bulwark, a rampart of rock cliffs, behind which rises a formidable tower of higher rising rock. This whole geologic complex is built like a castle, with forbidding walls defending an inner building rising above, in majestic rulership over all. Such must have been the inspiration for the human attempts to do the same and more...to go the earth's constructions one better...to crown every rocky outlook and promontory with a cross, a castle, a monastery, a fort.

Are these architectural afterthoughts really as obtrusive as they seem to a person like Now, who discounts the ethics of the empires that created them along with the prodigious pride of their builders? Or are they simply--like life itself--extensions of the earth's own geologic process? Where does the inorganic stop and the organic begin? Is limestone, formed from the skeletons of microorganisms, a product of the earth, or of the

earth's creatures? What about the burrows of gophers or marmots, and the excavations of the grizzlies who eat them? The tunnels of earthworms, the growth of mosses on rocks, or of ivy on stone walls?

Is a forest of planted trees really a forest or just a farm?

A Man Without a Niche

The border station here is more lively than the deserted station on the coast. A slim woman in green fatigues and carrying a submachine gun is standing on the highway talking to the driver of a white van. She and her armed male cohort pay no attention to the hikers as they walk past with their packs. Now supposes that he and his gypsy queen don't look even remotely like the Basque terrorists the authorities must be looking for.

On the way to Canfranc Pueblo they find a forest clearing beside the trail where they sit for a snack, but the location proves evil rather than pleasant, when Now jumps up with fiery bites from a nest of red ants, stumbles over blackberry brambles underfoot, and finally is chased back to the trail by a nagging wasp.

They find refuge in the cool interior of a bar in Canfranc Pueblo, with café con leche, ice cream, journal-writing and Internet. On a shelf as on an altar in a high corner over wine-red cloth, a TV broadcasts Olympic weightlifting and riots in Buenos Aires,

while Now checks his 142 email messages from a computer set inside a partition like a confessional. Then they retreat outdoors to a picnic table outside of town, where Now can write and Oiseau can paint and write in peace, with shady breezes and privacy by the river. Now is in his element here, Oiseau observes, with this toy computer in the sun--more than he was inside with the live connection.

More and more, on this journey away from home, Now feels like a man without a niche. But is anyone else better off? Take the guy in the tangerine shirt in the bar who keeps looking at Now when he's not glued to the TV and Now's not glued to the computer screen in the corner. Take the retired man in the farmhouse where they went for succor in the heat, who did his good deed by driving them a couple of kilometers down the road when they appeared at his house in need. Now meanwhile finds himself traveling through Europe like a vagabond, without purpose or plan.

He's got a multiple agenda to fill, with many niches nagging at his id, and so he fragments his weight allowance with a little of this, a little of that: a drum, a computer, bathing suit and hiking boots; a full day of hiking most days, a full agenda always. It's a tendency, which he shares with his partner, to stay busy, to stay out of trouble; to keep from being singly and identifiably creative. To keep walking, but not to scale the peaks, or even stay the pilgrim's course to Compostela.

Like a pilgrim Now wants to keep walking but also to camp, to retain his independence and the luxury of privacy with his honeymoon bride, who is also his

walking companion. He prefers not to write too much, either, because this stage of their journey is more transparent, a finding of the way, an opening. Likewise, not to devote too much time to music, because that is potentially offensive in public space. The visual landscape full of local works can be just as intrusive aesthetically--as when they turn the corner from the pristine mountain pass and are confronted suddenly with a mountain full of ski lifts built right to the top of view--but who are they to complain? It's not their country. Now even neglects to learn more than a bare minimum of Spanish, because his plate is already full enough, and anyway it'll all be over in a matter of weeks.

So, he continues, journeying and journaling, a day, a step, a word, a meal, a view, a night, a town at a time, playing recorder, so to speak, even as Oiseau pipes sweetly in the distance, from the river beside which it is forbidden to sit, by hydroelectric decree.

To follow their impulses freely is to ask for trouble in this world, with machine-gunners at the border and in the streets of Canfranc. Their only defense? They just walk here. But they dare to hang a pair of damp black tights to dry, like an Anarchist "A" flag from a power pole opposite the tunnel authority's headquarters, while the officials there take down and fold their flags in the wind without ceremony.

Interlude: Zaragoza Station

17 September

21:45. Now sits in limbo on a plastic molded chair in the station, his lover beside him, waiting for the overnight train that departs at 22:30 for the Atlantic coast. The tutti-frutti stand is the only place open at this hour. Now mourns the untimely closing of the thousand-year-old Moorish palace, but finds some redemption in the stroll they made past a Roman wall a thousand years older, to High Mass at the baroque basilica five hundred years young. He and Oiseau walked into a sermon in progress to a packed house. The menu de la día featured first the subject of muerte; the entrée, delivered with more passion and with the help of generous helpings of marble and gold, concerned the vital role of the living church, let us pray as the tourists depart.

Oiseau called into being a pilgrim's arrow on the trail by the river. She manifested, in the station, a digital track number. The modernist fountain in the heart of the city subversively showered water over stone blocks forever caught falling...but she was not impressed.

Here, Now is discovering, the trains run on time but you can't trust the green walking lights. The telebanco on the street wasn't working--nor the automatic luggage lockers in the station--nor the telephone back in Pau, where they missed their train to Oloron by a minute: like the closing of the Moorish palace, the Aljafería, at their 20:00 arrival. They missed also their intended dessert, which would have been included with

the meal at the restaurant that turned out to be closed on Sunday. But they did get the free Mass; and a generous mezzolitro of vin tinto with the dinner they found somewhere else; and with their second café there, a pequeño chocolate. They even slipped in a second americano with a poco con leche in the station café at 21:30, just at another closing time. It's hard to be perfect, when the maps differ, and the brochure horarios lie, and the decisions are made on the run (in third and fourth languages), the first time around.

Now wonders what went wrong, missing that intriguing palace. Was it the unanswered questions, the questions every tourist worthy of the name should master--

"What is our agenda? How many ruins can we pack in the next two hours?"

It's like choosing from a lavish restaurant menu, where you can only bite off so much, though everything looks irresistible.

When he shares this dilemma with Oiseau she simply responds, "Then you owe it to yourself to chew slowly."

On the train to Galicia, they retire straightaway to their shelf-like, narrow bunks in a shared compartment, pulling tiny sheets over their clothes. The rocking train like ocean waves proceeds to lull our scribe into, at best, a kind of half-sleep, in which his and his partner's steps flow like terraced rock across the hillsides, across the centuries of this rolling land. By a stream near Jaca they stop, when the sun is still rising on this long journey of a day, and speculate how far its muddy water has come since early morning--

from as far as the high pass where, the day before, they had marveled at the view in a clear puddle of "cielo desde la terra all upside down"?

It is wondrous indeed how far our travelers have come in this day...from sleeping in a ditch, like gypsies in the hedgerows, through the ancient ciudad where the gardens grow well-tended right to the walls, down the paved strip through the flatlands where the ancient haunted inns once stood, and at last to a crossroads like Denver, gathering traffic and taxes: Zaragoza. A modern ciudad with layer on layer of history over rock, where everyone dines to TV Olympics, where the hard land and its hard history show in the hard faces and curt replies of the tightlipped people; where Now and Oiseau pass like Cocacola and Barbie on their way to the Celtic coast and its remnants of peoples gone not one, but ten thousand years before.

Part Two - Tame Lizards

10 November

Then suddenly in the white hot light of the nearly full moon he came awake with a revelation. He'd slept poorly during a restless half-night of dreamlike reflection on the wonder of true literature as exemplified by The Member of the Wedding. McCullers' genius had produced a pure and complete rendering of consciousness, character, and human experience in the fictional person of Frances/Frankie/F. Jasmine Addams. Now awoke from the swirling magic of her art with the clear understanding that the mystery of literature and the mystery of life are one.

But how to describe such a mystery, exactly? Between the cream and brown and gray and tan of the honeycombed sandstone lay its real color never to be expressed; just as the green hue of the diaphanous fabric draped over the breasts of his lover as she lay still sleeping in the bed beside him was darkened and muted by a trace of slate such that its true name might never be found--like yet different from the shifting, mesmerizing, bluish greens of the sea which so fascinated her painterly eyes.

As the mystery compounded, did it increase or lessen? Now was not sure, but as he quietly rose in the night and set about recording his moon-bright intuitions, he felt compelled to amplify rather than to reduce his attempts at articulation.

He was no longer disturbed by possible distinctions between fiction, nonfiction, the journal, the novel, the essay. Each was an incomplete yet valid attempt to translate the mystery. It no longer seemed necessary to pander to conventional taste by cooking up fantastic plots of murder and intrigue, of battles in outer space, of exotic romance...nor on the other side of literary fashion, to roam the fields in search of arty images to paint in words. Literature didn't care whether it came in the form of a panoply of characters from India, living or imagined; or of one or more real or imagined versions of lonely adolescent girls in the American South of the 1940's; or of a priest hired and murdered by a secret branch of the Vatican; or of a real or fictional narrator who was purported to be a successful or unsuccessful writer of books; or indeed, of a curiously introspective yet happy-go-lucky sort of middle-aged man on a working holiday on a modern-day desert island in the Mediterranean. It simply had to do with the attempt to render human consciousness and its particularized passage through the world, through the medium of language...even if such a rendering could never be completely accurate.

It seemed to him then that a true picture of reality could only be transmitted through a growing crystal latticework of illusion piled on illusion, until the semblance of what was glimpsed or imagined might appear, not directly, but as if by suggestion, by inference, as if through a cut-out stencil. And Now realized that if he peered closely enough, finally the screen of concepts and words and overlapping distinctions could appear to disappear, and he could see the world as it really was, past the intervening mesh.

With such knowledge so fresh in his mind, he knew that he might or might not sleep again on this bright and moonlit night, but it would not matter. It no longer mattered so much, how little of this or that design he was expected to use to make a recognizable pattern of linguistic lace. It came down to a quality of texture within the piece itself: lines of dialogue, a smattering of description, the interior thoughts and feelings of one or more real or partially real or cosmetically altered or wholly imagined human characters; what they ate for breakfast or encountered in the cafés or witnessed on their walks; what silent acts they committed in their dreams or waking fixations. It was all part of the play of light on water, of water on stone, of the wandering of a round wet stone through space, of the tracery of light in an unmistakably black, yet strangely bright sky.

The literal moon, Now noticed as he stepped outside for a breath of fresh air, was not so much honey-colored, as cool seashell-pearl. And while it waxed remote across the sky, the early-morning mosquitoes homed in on his unprotected neck and hands, contributing to an annoying sense that all was not right in Paradise. Now's inevitable lapse from inspiration into irritation also had something to do with an inkling that what readers--at least fiction readers--demanded, was not blissful pictures of what a lucky man for a time enjoyed in connubial contentment, but rather what got in the way of that contentment, or ate away at it like the sea at soft sandstone, like a rat at a round of honeymoon cheese.

Just the previous evening he and Oiseau had found, within the very love which they felt so strongly in the full middle of their vacation honeymoon, a curious willingness to consider the likelihood of unfaithfulness at some unforeseen future time. While not inviting such a fatal breach, neither could they deny its realistic potential in their lives. Yet they felt that even such an unraveling might leave them, as individuals, undestroyed because they both would have once discovered the capacity to love and be loved.

There were no literal rats or even mice in evidence here; just tame lizards fond of lazing in the sun. Nevertheless, Now's lover would be heard to say, at the far end of this long day, that his presence upon her in the downy bed was as "a thickening of shadows."

Does her trope portend an actual rival lurking in the gorse bushes, just this side of dawn? Be forewarned: no. But the moon of whatever color was going to soon wane; and as the calendar turned them around in their honeymoon bed to face the final three weeks of their stay on the enchanted island, the once-weary and now-rested travelers had to prepare themselves for the journey home, with all the psychic restructuring it entailed.

*

18 September

Being tourists is much like being in relationship. In both cases it's a gift, a portion of grace, to be settled for a time. Otherwise, there's just coming and going, with the stress of trains and buses and airports and cities and hotels and expensive food. Each

temporary stop has its orientation phase, where you buy maps and learn the new local dialect and find your way around, getting used to the place. Then for a brief time you're there, just there enjoying what it's like where you are. But that contentment passes as quickly as the fullness of the moon, and then the weather has changed too, and you're thinking about where you're going next, and before you know it, you're on your way again.

Our overnight train journey is a moving dream, into the unknown. A leap in the dark from the high country of the interior, from standard Spanish to a dialect closer to Portuguese, into new green forests with wolves and snakes and mist-cloaked surprises.

The succession of days now finds placement stone by stone into a journalistic wall through which a new history is being marked, with or without the mortar of permanence. There is, meanwhile, the recurrent matter of finding a place to sleep, a nest in the rocks and soft grass under the pines, well beyond this train-of-the-moment, where I am a too-close fit, snug like a brick in a wall.

Reflecting on our experiences thus far, I realize that this journey has become more than I forecast. I'm discovering a compelling interest in the early history of this region, of the era before the dominating figure of Christ came on the imperial and architectural scene. More and more I find an affinity for the alternative, the Moorish influence; the mysterious "dark ages" of the first millennium, and of the thousand and more years before that.

It's my pioneering counterparts that I seek out through their works, in this roughly beautiful land still so wild in appearance--if only because, like them, I built the first stoneworks in a certain corner of the woods. I continually wonder: Who terraced these hills and first planted olives and grapes here? Who cleared the forests for fields and fuel for ironworks? Who carved mines for copper and laid the first paving stones? Were these historic acts all the restless work of "man," which is to say, of males, who abandoned the search of once-abundant game as it diminished inexorably behind the successful childbearing of the other half of our species?

And meanwhile did the creative spirit of the uncelebrated women find expression not in rows and walls and towers of stone but only in sweet rosebud mouths--mouths first sucking tenderly but then voraciously, endlessly hungry for the dwindling meat and natural fruits and then scratched-in, ploughed-in crops planted on the terraced fields? At times the two sexes worked together, no doubt, in that dry thin soil, until it could be depended upon in fertility and irrigation and choice of crop and long-improving method, to provide sustenance to the growing crops of humanity itself.

Next chapter: monoculture, phylloxera and famine, exodus.

And then, a kind of turning inside out, through the magic of tourism, with its superficial admiration of these works of the past...its words that flow like water over the ancient stones.

For her part, Oiseau is looking forward to the lushness of the Galician hills, and the rugged beauty of its seacoast; to getting through the necessary transition phase of

train and city, back to the self-sufficiency of the trail. First on her agenda, upon arriving, is to find a map so we can plan our next week's itinerary.

*

When the train deposited us finally in the blustery port of A Coruña, Oiseau and I found ourselves disoriented and discouraged. Nowhere could we find a map with trails, and the city itself was a hilly maze that left us weary after a morning scouting for a bookshop that might sell us one. By afternoon the weather was turning gloomy; a wind-ruffled newspaper predicted rain.

Sitting down on a bench by the harbor, we took stock with a list of needs, keywords for improving our presently abject condition:

to cry

to get clean

laundry

food

water

private space

safe keeping

sea not city

better map

independence

plan/direction

bathroom

nourishing activity

walking

dry shelter

plan for today/tonight

find/hold our center

clarify our intentions

a settled path

giving ourselves credit for coming to where we are so far

We followed this inventory with a consideration of options meeting various
needs:

hotel...

privacy

clean

centered

rest

laundry

safety

more time for maps

more planning

train south...

away from city

walking north toward campgrounds...

away from city (but wrong way)

walking today...

sea not city

independence

hitching...

away from city

Through this simple exercise we were able to come out of our cloudy confusion
and to see our way clearly to...

A Decision:

We go for the hotel; tomorrow head south.

So much for finding water--now we're chasing sun.

22 September

Today's adventure begins on a narrow ledge, barely big enough for two, which Oiseau and I have scratched out of the dirt and shored up with rocks, in a thicket on a hillside by a Portuguese highway. Yesterday, by contrast, we rose from a lumpy mattress in a decrepit hotel in Arcos de Valdevez where, the evening of our arrival, the landlady had to hush up an old drunk singing in the bath. We took a bus from Arcos and got off at Soajo, which one map told us served as access to a national park. Few living souls were in evidence there in the hot afternoon sun. We wandered through the medieval streets, past a clutch of raised rock ratproof corn crypts which at first we thought housed bodies. Seeing no signs or other evidence of the national park or its trails, we asked a young woman in the town square for help. She was a student from France--a lucky circumstance considering our poor Portuguese--and she led us to the Café Paris, where the French owner gave us instructions to go up a narrow, unmarked stone road. He added a few sober words of caution regarding the wildlife, the legendary wolves and snakes and wild boars; but when we told him we came from Canada and were used to coexisting with cougars and bears, he scoffed at the local dangers, saying, "Ah, then you have no problem. Enjoy your holiday."

We celebrated our good fortune with a refreshing dip in a clear creek pool which appeared twenty minutes outside the village. After that long and twisting road from Soajo became a paved highway, we found the hiker's shelter advertised on our map, but it was closed tight, with a sign beside it saying no campismo clandestino.

Thus we were compelled to fight our way in the gathering dark through a burnt tangle of sticks up from a hairpin corner around a creek and onto our stony ledge, widening it somewhat with the help of large rocks from a nearby fallen wall, and squishing our Thermarests together for two tired but loving bodies, under the clear and mild, starlit night. We slept fitfully until 2 a.m. when some wild or domestic animal, on the loose in the woods nearby, interrupted my dream of being chased by a grizzly, and Oiseau's dream of a myriad of snakes. But we slept all right again until dawn, when the highway traffic began, and it behooved us to pack up and move.

We climbed steadily up a valley of Precambrian rock standing out in great megalithic humps against a dry wilderness of mountains beyond which lay interior Spain. Along the way we passed through more tiny villages, attracting mistrustful stares. The adjoining hillsides were pocked with rock huts of mysterious lineage, shaped like igloos. The people here seemed, like the Inuit, to dwell in that state of old and solid culture just bordering on the modern world but not of it, simply partaking of its satellite TV's here and there, its odd tractor and suburban car. Otherwise: otro mundo. We the foreigners tracking through...not of this place, not of these people.

Cultures may be compared at different levels not defined by nationality or border but by their ecological context, or their stage of historical development. Precambrian rock will provide a consistent backdrop whether to a Canadian or a Portuguese valley; and in terms of basic lifestyle, these hill-tribe Portuguese appear closer to the Inuit than to their own neighbors, the urban-suburban residents of Arcos a dozen kilometers away.

The village of Pendera announced itself in advance by a modernist highway sign evoking architectural visions of a futuristic mega-mall. In reality it was just another hill-town, with the distinction of hosting a bona fide cathedral.

Today, as luck would have it, was a Sunday. Oiseau and I were properly awed when we came upon the broad grand steps, built of Precambrian stone fallen from the gigantic mountain of age-rounded rock hovering above the town. And looking up, we gazed through an arch of Roman proportions to a vault of blue heaven. Our awe gave way to fascination as we proceeded up the steps, flanked by a series of Disneyesque stations of the cross--dioramas depicting variations on the theme of Christ's suffering before, during, and after the Crucifixion. During this ascent we began encountering more and more tourists, who from the top of the stairs could be seen spilling from busses lining the great plaza at the foot of the cathedral.

As soon as we attained that vantage point we saw approaching the square a pair of white-robed priests followed by a singing throng of pilgrims, celebrating a mass or festival of this Santo Año, the Holy Year. Feeling somewhat Christly out of place in

beard and backpack, I took Oiseau by the hand and stepped nimbly ahead across their path, up the final course of stairs for a glimpse inside the cathedral, then down the other side and into town for our main objective: extra food. Our rations, boosted only by the earlier purchase of half a dozen eggs and a tin of tuna from the Café Transmontana, were marginal for an additional day's walk through the national park, as the villages were few and far between, and Monday was a holiday. We managed to conjure a thin loaf of bread from a gift shop freezer.

Chill baguette safely strapped in for the ride, we set out again, tempted at the outskirts of town by those elusive yellow arrows meant to be markers for the reputed Truilho de Longo Curso (long distance trail). Our previous attempts to use this trail had proved futile as it petered out in the stony ground, or forked into a confusion of goat paths. Here where a dirt track left the road and skirted a pasture, we stopped for a lunch of omelet and bread, supplemented with handfuls of the always reliable blackberries, before giving the trail one last try. Soon enough we abandoned it to the blackberries and broom. Returning to the highway, we continued up the long valley through a succession of twisting passes which gave breathtaking views of hill villages--sometimes five, six, seven at glance, nestled into green and terraced pockets in the distant landscape.

Two hours from Pendera, at the crest of what was to be our day's twenty-kilometer walk, the valley on the other side opened to view. Swirling dark clouds filled a low sky. The landscape there was more convoluted, the mountains greener. We sensed

our crossing as an entry into another region, another phase of our trip, and stopped to play our flutes. In a short while coming down from the pass, we stopped again when we came to a grove of cedar trees shrouded in peaceful mist, a sanctuary much like the dense silent forests back home. There we took a longer rest, stretching out on the soft ground and massaging one another's sore backs.

Oiseau said, "You could play your drum here." There had been little opportunity to do so on our trip thus far, without broadcasting the sound conspicuously over the countryside. Here the shelter of the trees offered a welcoming presence.

But at that point it seemed more important to find shelter from imminent rain, as the mist was thickening, the clouds darkening by the minute. I also told Oiseau that I felt compromised in my freedom of expression by the proximity of other people, whose voices could be heard from somewhere down the road.

We got up and shouldered our packs again as the mist turned into a light drizzle. Just down the highway a white van was parked, with four people picnicking under the shelter of a raised rear door. As we approached, we were assertively beckoned over to join them, and heartily offered a variety of picnic dishes: fish cakes, roast chicken breasts, thin veal cutlets, homemade corn bread and store-bought rolls, peaches and apples, red wine. These people--a rotund man of about sixty, his wife and her younger sister and niece, all wearing glasses--knew how to picnic; and they took no refusals on our part. Speaking to us with a haphazard mixture of Portuguese and French, they told us

they had come two hours from Caminha on the coast, to the special church service at Pendera, and had in fact noticed us there, walking by the cathedral with our backpacks.

The rain started in earnest now, and as our hosts urged more meat and wine on us, they convinced us to stow our backpacks inside the van to keep dry. Finally, it seemed eminently sensible for us to take them up on the offer of a lift. Where did we want to go? Valença? Melgaço? Caminha?

The remains of the picnic were wrapped up and put away, and Oiseau and I piled into the van's rear seat, still considering our options as we drove off into the downpour. The white-haired man continued to offer a genial pastiche of conversation from the driver's seat, while the three women chatted over the various religious souvenirs they'd bought in Pendera. During a stop for coffees all around, Oiseau and I settled on Valença da Minho, our original port of entry to Portugal, and a good choice for train connections south to Porto and beyond.

When we arrived at the station, Oiseau and I took our leave with a full course of thank-yous and good-byes, embraces and double-cheek kisses all around. We complimented our new friends on their food and hospitality--nay, on their saintly charity. Expecting short rations and marginal shelter in a torrent of rain in the desolate wilderness, now we found ourselves, warm and well-fed and comforted by human fellowship, bound for a snug hotel on the coast, headed south again.

26 September

Down the coast of Portugal we go: for three days walking the sea-edge on an endless succession of smooth sandy beaches, beside pine forests just over the dunes. No rocky inlets here: it's all sand and wave and tide along a straight shoreline stretching all the way to Lisbon. Unlike the calm blue Mediterranean, the Atlantic surf is cold, gray, and rough. We keep our steps moving just above the water line, for maximum firmness underfoot.

We're not inclined to talk much on this daily trek. Instead we are mesmerized by the expanse of the sand behind us and in front of us, the simplicity of the lines between earth and sea and sky. We walk with the steady rhythm of the pilgrim, the nomad, the athlete, the monk.

Each afternoon we come to a single seaside town providing us with fresh food and water for the evening and following day. Each evening we find a spot in the dunes to pitch our tent, with only the stars for company. On our flutes we play "Blackberry Bramble" and "The Wren's Hornpipe."

Today we have passed a few scattered fishermen with upright poles stuck in the sand, a flock of gulls, a strand of dead fish, a live crab I boiled for two tiny tasty bites, a small browned man seated on the sand mending nets, a rainbow-colored Phoenician-style fishing boat. In the tourist-dead town of Torreira, the bright wide streets are deserted but for a few old men loitering by the shuttered seaside cafés. In a tiny grocery on the main

street, a Bronxlike boy in an orange "Kiss" T-shirt sells us rolls and chocolate, camping gaz and a few slices of veal, half a dozen eggs and a handful of leeks. I find the church bells clangy, my partner clingy, my skin clammy. We stop in a restroom by the beach on our way out of town to wash our clothes and hair.

The people we pass tend to ignore us, or simply stare. They offer to speak French or English, when spoken to in our minimal Portuguese. They have a curious habit of hanging out around the seafront--whether lining the wall of the crowded Sunday promenade, with their backs to the sea; or sitting alone in parked cars in the dune grass, as if at a drive-in movie, watching nothing but the westward drift of the moon.

*

At the turning of the December moon, our carefree couple would once again have to turn their attention to their children waiting to be fed, with tears to dry and tales to tell. There were bills yet to be paid, for their dallying adventures across the world.

And, if statistics and personal histories carried any weight, there were other lovers to reckon with, in the fullness of time.

How was it that Oiseau could love so well and be so wise, at the same time? How was it that being so loving and wise in her greater self, she could fear most her own jealousy in that imagined rupture of their constant love? Now returned to bed after his

night of revelations and held her warm in his arms, preferring not to think such thoughts just now, but simply to hold her closer and tighter against him.

And if readers wanted to know only one of two things: how to achieve such union, no nonsense; or what it felt like to be locked outside the gates of Paradise looking in...which is to say, if they wanted their nonfiction straight or their fiction strong and pure, but no messing around in between...well, our Mr. Now might have to dream awhile until he found a voice to tell them that it wasn't so cut and dried. That it's not always so easy as either-or. That neither a desperate quest, nor its pleasing resolution in a step-by-step manual are the whole story, by a long shot. That for him at least, a rendered reality had to include the coming together and the going apart, the bliss of being here and the dreary busy-ness of life back home, the glimpsed shape of the invisible thing itself and the webbing of colored light that only gives an inkling of where to look.

Within the limited scope of his journal, it wouldn't do to depict that crowded home life: it was too chaotic, too random, like a bucket overflowing with paint that sloshes about, coloring everything circus crazy. The journal form would only work to sketch the outline of a life, like Thoreau's or Robinson Crusoe's, that was simplified, pared down, unified in its sparseness of character, theme and setting.

Something in the chill sea air later that November day told him something else was needed: an extra layer of clothing, let us say, to keep the bare skin deeper in...a navy blue heavy fleece vest, as it happened, extra large, bequeathed by Arielle who had

already departed for Canada and her own stash of winter clothes waiting for her there. Wearing this plush gift, Now was reminded of home, of cozy winter fires and writing in his study. Home life, it was true, wasn't all chaotic. It just tended to get, we might say, a bit fictional at times--in the sense that fiction sticks our limitations in our face.

Fiction, though, was the one magic that could give him a handle, an angle whereby to tilt the thing, for a more entertaining view. Because it came down to that: in the worldly world, away from the esoteric ecstasy of Tantric bliss (which the how-to manuals amply explained how to achieve, for any who cared to go there), people just wanted to be entertained. And that meant, not just viewing pornographic videos or well-meaning instruction about how to achieve enlightenment through sex. It meant, paradoxically enough, living out through fiction the vicarious predicaments of characters bound, by fate or their own obstructing illusions, to be shut away from such states of fulfillment. We had this need to find literary company as we coped with our own dimly understood yet chronically surfacing miseries.

Death in Lisbon

30 September

The squares are being torn up for repairs. Traffic noise obliterates the sound of footsteps. Candy wrappers litter the streets. Thomas Mann is nowhere to be found, but in the place names gracing his final novel: Rua da Prata, Praça do Comércio, Avenida da Liberdade.

The chestnut vendors perhaps are the same; the great Greek statues that might once have inspired novels--but in the Lisbon of today, I have no more illusions. I am twice Felix Krull's age now: old enough to be his father. And I am simply passing the time here, on my first world tour.

There are no sights to see, really; nor time to see them. I spend my noon hour in a computer megastore, scanning 250 emails and transferring funds. The weather is sunnier where we are headed.

Last night we skipped the all-night dives with African music, to sleep safely in a windowless room. We dined on steak and suckling pig in a brightly lit tourist restaurant at reasonable prices, after the reception man at the Pensão Doque gave a repeat performance of the knife-across-the throat routine.

Now we are flush--having checked today's exchange rates--only three days over budget, a tolerable ten percent. We are bound for a sunny apartment facing the warm winds of Africa.

We'll pass no more sliding trains of paneled faces like a gallery of death, no beggars in the cobbled streets. We're going to live on the high side, in a place where camping is outlawed. We will be faithful to schedules of restaurant and shop. We will follow our inclinations within the prescribed corridors of a narrowing history--a civilization tending toward one cool vision.

We are like any other replaceable tourists: filling our chairs, keeping our silence, writing small words in the darkness. Except that we are on our way to a month of purer freedom, where we might find out who we really are.

Santa Luzia Sunday

1 October

Now that we've come as far as we can to find reliable sun, to the costly southern coast of Portugal known as the Algarve, where open camping is illegal and the commercial campgrounds are closed, we are homeless and dispirited. We've failed so far in our attempt to locate some friends of friends back home, who have an apartment we hope to rent in the tiny seaside resort of Santa Luzia.

On the edge of town is a likely style of apartment block, with the desired lot 8, and even a matching name, R. Pelita...but it's the wrong street. Asking for directions in a bar creates a dispute among those giving us advice. We take the most promising lead to a street within the town that partially matches the street name we're looking for, Rua Joaquim. And we find a house with the number eight, but it's too small and old-fashioned, not the modern apartment we're expecting, and anyway nobody's home.

We go into another bar on the main street to ask for more directions, but there's a heated discussion going on among a group of local men standing inside, and the bartender's looking surly, so we simply order café meio leite and take it outside to a table by the muddy lagoon. We sit and sip there under clouding skies, pondering our fate and hoping from inspiration from the caffeine. Oiseau suggests that we might be better off

going back to the larger town of Tavira, where we arrived by train and spent Saturday night. I'm not so sure. Tavira was a little too trendy for my taste. But I have no bright ideas for what to do next.

Finding lodging for the night is not the problem: it's finding a place we can afford for the next week or two. After some consideration we agree that, while our overall budget might permit, at most, an outlay of 6000 escudos per night for a week, we'll try to work within the more modest range of 4000-5500. After that, we'll hope to get by with free room and board at an organic farm in Spain, where we've arranged to come and work before heading to Formentera.

While Oiseau and I deliberate over our coffee cups, the Portuguese men continue to squabble in the smoky open room. The gulls on the mud flats keep silent watch as the tide comes in.

*

There were four young North American tourists, who could have been from Connecticut or North Vancouver, seated in front of us on Saturday's train to Tavira. Compared to these two couples looking clean-cut and fresh out of college, Oiseau and I felt weathered and trail-hardened. They read books while we looked out the window; they treated each other coolly while we snuggled warmly together. Upon arrival, they rode past us in a taxi while we stood on the sidewalk with our backpacks, negotiating

with an aggressive middle-aged Portuguese woman who had pegged us immediately at the station, saying, "You want room? You need place to stay? I have good rooms. Cheap. You come with me."

And what I wanted more was to head out on foot across the tidelands, the open hills, the long beaches rain or shine, but it was evening and we were tired and we'd just arrived in this unfamiliar town. The countryside visible from the rail line was well populated with what we took to be tourist properties, and we had a feeling that the ban on open camping was actually enforced here. So we joined the woman and then her wryly smiling mother who'd been waiting discreetly nearby, and walked together to their house in the town.

After getting settled in the room and dining at an English pub, we took a quick tour of the town and then returned for a reasonable bedtime. But when I attempted the simple task of updating our daily itinerary log, I became befuddled looking for a lost day. Referring back to dated journal entries didn't help much, because I discovered that my watch calendar was twelve hours behind, and my computer calendar eight hours behind; so a given date entry might be correct or not, depending on the time of day it was made. Oiseau helped me try to figure it out for a while, but soon gave up trying to make sense of it and went to take a shower. After an hour's futile research I too gave up. In the morning I awoke with the memory of the forgotten day.

It was a forgettable day indeed: in which our idyllic beach-walking down the sunny west coast of Portugal came to an end in a chill hard Atlantic rain. We walked all

morning on the highway as our clothes gradually but inevitably soaked through to the skin. It was hard to imagine getting hypothermia in Portugal, but by ten o'clock we were shivering and had to keep up a rapid march simply to maintain our basic body warmth. We were counting on a village with a hotel or apartment along the coast road, but this was neither tourist season nor tourist territory. Eventually we found a café where we warmed up with hot coffee, used the rest room to change into our last remaining dry clothes, and received directions to the larger town of Vagos, six kilometers inland. The steady cold rain soaked us again, but now we had a sure destination, an imagined hotel as alluring as any genie's palace.

*

And where is our hero now, might we ask?

He's out on the cliffs playing Irish pennywhistle jazz over a dancing Spanish sea.

Lost?

You might say so.

What is his current struggle, far or not so far from the conundrums of literature?

We might imagine them as something like the following:

"Am I going to be any good at this thing or not? Maybe I'm just wasting my time.

I made the right decision in seventh grade to give up the trumpet, since I couldn't get past the second chair. But part of me feels so good when I'm playing, at least when I get it

right. Is it only like golf, where any duffer can make a great shot or two? Even a hole-in-one doesn't necessarily make you a good golfer. Shouldn't I have figured this out about myself a long time ago? Isn't it about time I grew up and just accepted my limitations and moved on with what I can do well? Whatever that might be..."

Or, maybe he's past all that midlife-adolescent soul searching, at least for now, and has moved with a greater level of acceptance and commitment into deeper considerations of music itself, and what he wants to do with it:

"It's just that I'm impatient with all these old traditional tunes. Yeah, they're fun for a while, and good to learn from, but you gotta be willing to move on. It's like, can't anybody think up any new tunes? Or not even that. Why do we have to stick to so-called tunes at all? Why can't we just jam? Let's just throw all the sheets of canned music away and jam all the time! Now that would be a place I call really living--being truly alive to the present moment and everything it has to offer. Why should I, or anybody, ever settle for less than total creative improvisation--in music or for that matter, in any part of life?

"I know, I know, not everyone wants to. Bach was great. Maybe he still is. But there's another kind of classical, too: the classical music of India, which was based on a kind of spiritual improvisation, and which inspired the music of North Africa, which I'd be looking toward if I were on the other side of the island right now, instead of here looking toward France and Germany and all the rigid conventions of Europe. And you can say the live human element, the fluid and organic impulse, can always come in through style, interpretation and so on. But the way I see it is, the more freedom, the

better. Why not go for the whole shot--at least in music, where it's supposed to be spiritual, or at least fun. Where it doesn't matter if it happens a particular way, not like life-and-death survival. Where for once we get a chance to hear what the universe has to say for itself."

No wonder, we might observe, this piper plays alone--his only audience, the orchestral sea.

*

Hapless wayfarers cast adrift, we catch a break when Oiseau asks a shopkeeper about this mysterious Rua Joaquim. It turns out that our leads are on vacation in Switzerland through the month of October; but there is another address we can try where there's an apartment for rent. While proceeding down the street to check it out, we pass a restaurant where a notice for yet another place catches my eye. The restaurant itself looks pricey, but what the heck, no harm in inquiring.

A stocky woman with a smooth pleasant face and round glasses comes out from the back of the restaurant and takes us to see the apartment. She speaks French and keeps up a running patter the whole way, happy to find in Oiseau, particularly, an understanding listener.

It's perfect: a house on the edge of town, right by the shoreline highway. We'd have the whole upstairs to ourselves: kitchen, large bathroom with hot water, bedroom

and dining room...a twenty-minute walk from the beach. There are four big hungry red-eyed gray dogs pacing out back in a kennel, but that's not our problem: the landlady or her son will come to feed them nightly. The price? Only 6000 escudos per night.

Oiseau and I look at each other with only a little uncertainty. Surely there's a place to be had either here or in Tavira for less than that. It's October, after all. I shake my head slightly, and Oiseau tells the woman that her place is very nice, we like it very much, but it's simply beyond our budget.

Immediately the woman drops her price from 6000 to 5500.

Now we are forced to reconsider, while the woman stands by waiting for her answer. I pull Oiseau away with me at a few steps of discreet distance to confer.

"It's really got a lot going for it," Oiseau says to me. I can tell she's ready to get this thing settled before the day drags on too long.

"I agree. I'm not sure about those dogs--but, it's a good location, too. I'm just thinking, there's that one other place we could still go have a look at. It might be cheaper."

"I suppose you're right. Okay."

Oiseau tells the woman that we'd like to take some time and get back to her later that afternoon.

"Wait," she says. "5000 if you take it right now."

*

Breathless, Oiseau wondered, "What do we do with this ecstasy?"

The lovers wrapped themselves even tighter together, like the double snake of the healer's caduceus, or the rising helix of the life code itself, DNA.

And when at last they lay back content in the starlit dark, Now reflected: If this was true life and true love and it was as perfect as it could be just as it was, then all the rest was fiction--dramatic tension, the play of emotions in conflict.

He said as much to his lover, whereupon she agreed with him in principle; but then, rubbing a little finger lightly around his left nipple, she asked, "Don't fictional characters ever find themselves in Paradise?"

"If so, it's rare: kind of like making love in public. Ooh, that tickles."

"I wouldn't call that Paradise, would you?"

"Um, I'm not sure. It would be different than life on earth."

"Not so different from the jungle we came from, though."

"Fiction calls that the Garden. Anyway if your characters are living in perfect happiness, you'd pretty much have to call it religion, or self-help, instead of true literature. Fiction writers tend to take the conservative view of human nature, showing why there's always someone or some part of us that just won't allow that perfect condition to exist for very long. Characters, like most people I guess, are lucky to get a quick glimpse at the ultimate. Maybe it's just a reflection of our own mortality."

"So we can't ever really get what we want, find love on a desert island? I guess you'd call that a 'romance,' wouldn't you?"

"I think there's room for the romantic comedy. It just seems a little lightweight."

"Not like your Thomas Mann and the death of European civilization."

She was referring rather snidely to Doctor Faustus, a turgid novel I was reading for the third time and in fact had mailed to Spain so I could finish it here. It hadn't yet arrived.

"Right. I mean, how can you beat the Devil himself as the antagonist, with Adolf Hitler to carry the plot behind the scenes?"

"Hmm." She shifted her gaze out the window to the flickering stars.

I feared this conversation about bliss and fiction had sucked the juice right out of the bliss, and all I had left were the words for a possible fiction.

But Oiseau was still working on the problem. "I still think that a success story, or a positive love story, could be made interesting and worthwhile. I don't recall old Robinson Crusoe having much conflict to work out; he just made do with what he found at hand."

"Right, the problem was survival, getting rescued. And doing without civilization, that whole paradigm shift. And then there was this wild card, Friday--"

"And so if it's two reasonably mature adults we're talking about, and not just a gang of rough boys running around hunting wild pigs or whatever it was in that other book--"

"Lord of the Flies."

"Yup, grade nine. Or, Lord of the Rings, for that matter. Always guys fighting, questing, trying to make something happen other than what is."

"You're right," I told her. "There's always this need for something other."

"Something or someone."

That reply gave me pause. "But what were you saying, that it doesn't have to be like that? That there can be a state of Eden after all?"

"Hmm. I'm not so sure now. Maybe having other needs beyond 'what is,' is part of 'what is,' for us humans."

Public And Private Holidays

5 October

On the Santa Luzia beach this morning Oiseau cried in my arms, saying she hurt inside in the place where the creative self and the child self overlap. There didn't seem to be room for both in the same small space, but they both wanted to be there.

"Oh," I said. "And what else?"

A few tears came. "I don't know. It's confusing."

I held and comforted her as best I could, stroking the tear-wet hair from her cheeks, but could not get the creative self to speak past the stubbornness and old hurt of the child.

Eventually she went for a solitary walk down the beach, while I played my drum. I was going through my own stuff.

Earlier, during a joint practice of "Le Tambourin," a tourist had happened by, pausing to stand close and listen, until we flubbed it. The tourist walked away. This experience threw a poor light on my own creative self, and got me to brooding over my uncertain identity as a musician.

On a bench in a secluded corner of a formal garden by the Rio Lima, in northern Portugal, I'd sat one day playing pennywhistle tunes haltingly, in practice mode. Scattered strollers stopped at a distance, wondering what to make of this noise. I put down the whistle and begin writing in my journal, a safer occupation. The people drifted away. Later, when no one else was around, I picked up the instrument again and started to improvise on "The Road to Lisdoonvarna." This time the tune took off and I rode it where it wanted to go, my eyes on the fountain. Then I looked up to find four new pairs of strollers approaching from different paths, converging, as if drawn to my rude yet innocently charming music. Once again self-consciousness took over, and the melody trailed off into birdsong and silence.

"Maybe there's more to it than a question of talent or practice," I remarked to Oiseau as we gazed out toward the blue haze obscuring Africa. "I wonder if a person's identity or niche as an artist is really defined more by personality profile, by lifestyle values, by social group. I took a test like that, kind a career inventory, when I entered

college. It told me I should be a lawyer, which is just what I thought at the time. But a test taken at eighteen may or may not be valid at fifty. Who's to say?"

"You're not a lawyer," she'd told me, which was somehow encouraging.

When she returned from her walk, I brought my solo drumming session to a close, and we trudged home silently along the beach. I felt somewhat distant, reserved, self-conscious. Triggered by her need for space, I began to feel as I had on a hike in August with my friend David--when I'd taken as a personal affront his request for a time of meditative, walking silence. Then and now I was sensitive to my own possible dominance of the psychic or conversational space. When I stopped to take a good hard look inside, in each instance, I found I was bored with myself, and bored with the world around me.

I really had nothing more to do here in Europe; maybe nothing really to offer to the world anywhere. On the other hand, maybe I was just burnt out from traveling, and wanted simply to amuse myself with the childish pleasures of home--my old addictions turning cold turkey on me. I did have a hankering to go into Tavira, for Internet access and cheap, familiar food. I missed those baseball articles from the online sports section of The Baltimore Sun--not to mention the current playoff results. And while I was at it, I could dig into a good old hamburger and perhaps a couple of scoops of ice cream.

After an existential chat with Oiseau on the bed, back home at our apartment in the mid-afternoon, we fell into a mutual limbo of half-sleep. On arising I felt an irrational determination (the desire of my inner ten-year-old?) to go to Tavira to scratch that itch for the old home connections. Oiseau, so recently attuned to her own child-self, graciously obliged and we set off like a couple of kids on a spree.

Walking the four kilometers into Tavira, we hit the bus station first, to buy advance tickets for Huelva and Sevilla. Next, across the street to the cyber-café. I was feeling better already.

But on the window a sign, illustrated with a frowning cartoon face, said, "Fechado: closed 5 October."

What was the problem--a national holiday? My heart sank with the same childish weight it had felt at the age of six when, looking forward to my first train ride, I watched the caboose pull away from the Baltimore station. My mother had towed me by the arm through the echoing station, having promised me this great adventure, but we arrived at the track just too late. It was the same weight I'd felt when we made it back to the Moorish palace in Zaragoza, just past closing time. Or when pulling out of Roses on the bus, noticing too late the entrance to the Roman citadel.

There was another cyber-café in Tavira, we remembered. So I set off in search of it while Oiseau went to knit by the Pont Romana. A half hour later, my legs exhausted by a fruitless walk through the cobbled streets, I sat beside her in defeat, suggesting we fall back on the last vestige of Plan A: a café. Oiseau thought we still might catch the 18:10

bus back to Santa Luzia, saving us the additional long walk home; but on our return to the bus station, the ticket agent confirmed our suspicions: today was indeed a national holiday, and the late bus wasn't running.

Plan B went into effect: we found a café serving hamburgers and fries, and followed this indulgence with a stop at an ice cream parlor on the way out of town. The medieval church and the castelho were, can't you guess, just closing.

In bed that evening, I reflect on the lessons of the day and what the future holds. On Formentera, I imagine, I might not find exactly what I go looking for, in familiar forms: creative exploration, sexual healing, relationship building, career perspective, lazy time off. It might be more a scary time of cutting ties...of doing without...of waiting, past the first, the second, and the third impulses to have or do or even be whatever it is that I momentarily desire.

It might be a time of opening deeper within...to what is more than new...to what is older than the selves whose voices now bore me. Opening to the earlier child-self whose needs are more basic than the desires of the ten-year-old: the most primal needs to be nourished, to be loved and comforted. I might need nothing else, in the final month of our journey, than to know that there is someone in the world to care for me; to know that I can give that person the same care in return; and to be in the loving company of that person.

Oiseau's face, so brightly clear and softly present beside me through these days and nights together, is certainly more interesting to gaze upon than my own. Yet the acceptance and love I see there might show me the way to embrace my innermost self. Through her eyes and smile I can identify what is most essential within me, clarified even of desire and need: a self that is at the core like every other, in this democracy of souls on tourist earth. Of course, like every soul born into the world, we begin to turn from that point forward on the wheel of desire, of individual need.

I share some of my reflections with Oiseau. I tell her that in the new world I want to inhabit, there is "more than the cardboard surface of non-emotion" that constitutes public space here. I want to find sadness and joy expressed openly--or at least semi-privately, like our sharing of feelings today at the distant fringe of the public beach--without shame or undue inhibition. And still more: I want these gatherings of wanderers to abound with music and fellowship...

"Rainbow-style," she says, and I realize she's right. That's where I'm getting this vision from--the experience I had in Arizona at the 1998 Rainbow Gathering, two weeks before Oiseau and I became lovers for the first time.

"I guess that's a stretch, when you put it that way. It implies traveling in the Rainbow way, with the Rainbow tribe itself, people with that shared vision and consciousness and experience, who come with drums and flutes to play in company, who come to shout and sing and dance and create ritual together."

Only later, when my eyes are closed and the leveling truthfulness of sleep draws near, does it occur to me: maybe all those Algarve tourists so silent in the mass are not emotion-dead, after all. Maybe on that soft-sand beach, turning themselves inside out to the magic sun and gazing behind black lenses at the lulling haze of Africa, they're all just blissed out I can hardly blame them.

*

Now's mind churned all morning as he and Oiseau tramped dangerously along the four-hundred-foot sheer cliffs dropping straight down to the deep blue Mediterranean Sea. Here they looked out toward the unseen Middle East, land of eternal conflict and mother of all books. They stumbled inland through scrub and over rock, through six-foot-high heather and bull-sized rosemary bushes, through pine woods and over tumbled ancient rock walls; but his eyes were turned mainly inward, as he struggled within himself for a solution to his latest, which was also his lifelong, literary dilemma. The chief tension in his current work, he considered from within that austere and stageless setting of his own mind, lay in the play of ideas...the warring of the different parts of himself, which might be imagined as voices. But to give them costumes and such for the sake of token dramatization, that was a stretch. It was more a battle of forms, concepts, aesthetic ideologies, than of raw and interpersonal emotions.

Could such a rarified philosophical battleground by any stretch be called a novel?

Now found this very question objectionable, like the stray mutt that dogged his heels on the beach.

Just let it be, the writer on working holiday told him. Give it a rest.

On the other hand, Now found a real excitement in the whole enterprise of literary experimentation, when he recalled the inspiration he'd felt about music during and after the previous year's Vancouver Folk Music Festival. There he had seen firsthand the possibility for once-distinct forms and genres to come together in a celebration of synthesis and fusion. No longer did it matter whether one trained for or played classical, folk, jazz, western or eastern, traditional or modern, electric or acoustic or electronic or primitive instruments, blues or rap, poetry or prose or instrumental music. It was all just part of the mix. Musicians of every stripe played with each other in a constant rearrangement of personnel and styles.

Lee Pui Ming was the most notable example. A western-educated pianist of Chinese origin, she studied classical and jazz, but also recorded with a Mongolian folk artist, and made use of sounds from nature, Chinese radio, barnyards. On stage she played with a white male percussionist and ran the gamut of styles on the keyboard, but didn't stop there. She threw silverware into the works of the baby grand and plucked the strings by hand; she pounded on the polished black casing like a drum. Finally she took her voice alone to the mike and played percussive counterpoint to her accomplice. Later she played on the same stage with an assortment of other free thinkers including a soulful

woman singer, a Latin conga player, a lady with a sawed-off electrified cello, and a quartet of boyish Norwegians who tapped sticks, rocks, shells, bells, and anything else they could get their hands on.

While one could grant the possibility that musicians by nature were more fit for life on the cutting edge, than were the more staid literary types, Now still figured that it was about time, some quarter of a millennium after the adventures of Robinson Crusoe, the love letters of Pamela and Clarissa, and the scurrilous autobiographies of such young rakes as Tom Jones and Tristram Shandy, for some boundaries to get "all shook up."

Upon further reflection, he had to admit that literary history was full of innovators like Joyce and Blake, Kafka and Mann, Virginia Woolf and Gertrude Stein, Whitman and Thoreau and Henry Miller and on and on. He had to allow that in their own time, the first so-called novels were works that broke new ground as to what literary fiction could and couldn't be imagined to do. After all, what came before were "only" medieval romances, and their comic derivatives such as Don Quixote and Gargantua and Pantagruel; epic poems and stage productions; collections of tales by creative compilers such as Chaucer and Boccaccio...

Come to think of it, the whole histories of literature, music, and all the other arts were nothing but variable progressions of innovations of form and intention...

(Fade.)

They sat a little ways inland from the cliff, beside a grove of large pines giving shelter from the wind, but far enough from the trees so they could still be in the sun. Oiseau brought out a carton of leftover lentil burgers, lettuce and bits of cheese, and a few small slices of German bread. Now unwrapped the baguette they'd bought that morning in El Pilar where they'd got off the bus.

They enjoyed their lunch quietly overlooking what they could still see of the blue water in the far distance. Lounging on the cool mossy open ground, Now imagined them both in a similar scene merged from their separate pasts, as treeplanters on a cutblock in B.C., overlooking Duncan Lake, in the spring, fifteen years ago. Oiseau said she was glad that they weren't in fact doing that, but instead were enjoying lunch just as they were, on a honeymoon in Spain.

As they leaned back to reflect on their paradisiacal condition, a small thin green lizard appeared on Now's sunny pants leg. It had just caught a fly in its mouth, and was attempting to swallow it. The fly was a little larger than the lizard's sharp-pointed mouth; but finally with a series of gradual gulps the task was accomplished, and in the blink of an eye the lizard had taken a leap at another fly straying six inches away--just grazing it with the tip of its nose as the fly took off again. Finally the lizard lay contentedly on Now's leg, its flanks beating arrhythmically with its ephemeral breath, its shimmering skin brilliant iridescent green in the sunlight, its sinuous tail snaking out behind it longer than the rest of its body. Every now and then another fly chanced by and the lizard snatched

at it in a flash. These flies were always quicker, though: perhaps their lizard had lost a millisecond of reaction time, in the digestion of its current meal.

The lizard began to explore this new territory of the human body, likely never having experienced one before. Up and down and around the pants leg, the shirt; over to Oiseau, sniffing at the ends of her hair; back over to Now in a little jump onto his hand. The lizard had put out a tiny plump gray brown tongue to taste Oiseau's skin on the wrist, and now it tasted his too. It continued up, around, and over his body, explored his beard until Oiseau nudged it away, then came back up his neck to contemplate the earlobe. There the lizard paused and, taking a closer interest, began to nibble.

It tickled.

Now wasn't sure whether to worry. Did this lizard even have teeth? Could it bite through human skin, and if so, would he contract some latent prehistoric disease?

When the nibbling became more insistent, Oiseau and Now instinctively decided in the same instant, that enough was enough. They shooed their poor pet away into the rosemary bushes, and rose to go on their way.

On this walk along the high cliffs of El Pilar de la Mola, a number of mysteries baffled our intrepid adventurers. A naturalist or local history buff might have been handy to have along to help them penetrate these riddles, but as it was they were forced to accept the whole enigmatic fabric of an expanded reality unfolding before them, step by step. They wondered, for instance:

Why did flocks of seagulls follow their progress along the cliff edge, wheeling and crying in an arabesque of aerial dance and vocal percussion?

Where were the caves, which were marked on the map they were following, but didn't appear anywhere on the land?

Were the frequent squared or rounded depressions they came upon, remains of old quarries, or were they natural basins in the rock?

Where did all the small stones come from which littered the bedrock surface of this plateau four hundred feet straight up from the sea? And likewise, what made all those squiggly little worm-marks in the otherwise smooth solid rock; and why were there many small white snail shells littered about; and why was there, mingled among the innumerable small stones, a mixture of stone-sized fragments of plastic or tile, colored black and white and spray-paint orange, scattered on and on underfoot...giving way then to a more distinct but still mysterious dumping of old gray plastic tubes three inches long, and then to colored shotgun shells?

Why were there numerous ruins of cinder block, like incongruous remains of ancient houses left on the cliff?

Why did some (but not all) of the builders of the thigh-high stone walls that crisscrossed this high plateau and indeed the entire lizard-shaped island, feel compelled to carry the ends of their constructions neatly but precariously balanced right to the very edge of the cliffs?

Why did some naturalists see fit to expend vast amounts of energy and research and funding to make known to the public, in a lonely outpost such as this, the plight of the beleaguered Balearic Shearwater, an endangered subspecies of dwarf albatross who was threatened by, among other things, rats on offshore islands (which by the way set the record straight on the indigenous rat question, even as their literary cousins nibbled and scratched behind the kitchen wall of the Addams family house somewhere "in the middle of the deep South"), when every day in the Brazilian Amazon some dozens of species of known and unknown flora and fauna perished from the face of the earth forever?

This catalogue of conundrums wasn't all that bedeviled the would-be novelist that long and sunsplashed Friday afternoon in Paradise. He found himself pondering the following unsolved puzzles in his suddenly burgeoning journal, which, like the fields of Formentera, had been subjected to a veritable army of engineers threading the land every which way with threads and cross threads, solid roads and dwindling tracks, high walls and crumbling walls. When he looked from a high point at its full breadth he could almost, but not quite, hold it all in his vision at once.

Walking this island was like riding a giant camel--possible only by reaching up and grabbing onto handfuls of fur. Getting all the way up to ride solidly on its back was just beyond what was possible.

With regard to his own unwieldy work, Now had to wonder:

What's to become of this contentious I/he split, or the equally arbitrary mingling of the past tense with the present, like so many head of Spanish (not to say Israelite) goats and sheep?

Which tensions are minor (mosquitoes, rats) and which major (caffeine, sex); which not universal enough (the aesthetics of a certain novel-in-progress) and which too universal (love and death)?

To what extent would it be politic to bring in as a subplot, the creative struggles of the female lover...not to mention the more explicit sexual and psychological issues that inevitably arose within and between these mid-life honeymooners, when nothing outside themselves (except possibly the minor category of annoyances) could be rightly blamed? Or would that be crossing one boundary too many, diminishing the fullness and integrity of the life they lived here by stealing too much from it for the sake of the art?

Did he have the constitutional wherewithal, the imaginative breadth and depth of vision, the pedigree or personality profile--the right stuff, that is--to manage this wild new proliferation of themes and subthemes, threads and connections, questions and tensions, mysteries and possibilities...and could he convey a sense of it all, once clarified and focused within himself, in a manner which was at once compelling, concrete, and lucid?

Facing the challenge of the foregoing as if attempting to scale a four-hundred-foot cliff, would he abandon the enterprise and revert to the more pleasurable exercise of

sailing around the island...which is to say, writing more or less casually and spontaneously in his journal, and taking long leisurely walks with his virtual bride?

He didn't know the answers, yet. But he knew he wanted to find out. He wanted to ride this giant wild beast from one end of the island to the other: to tame it and slow its gait, and clamber up into the saddle between the humps...and so to ride it as a prince through the realm.

But an old lesson of love touched him on the back of the shoulder and said, Remember me?

Oh, right, he said at once, and immediately dismounted and let the beast graze idly by while he remembered. The way to hold the ecstasy once attained, is not to hold too tightly, as you might at first expect, but to embody the principle of openness that got you there. So instead of thinking, I've made it, I've done it, I've captured the bride, now I'm going to hold onto her and not let her go, you have to be ready to sit down with her--wineglasses in hand, even in the very middle of the honeymoon--and discuss the possibility of becoming attracted to someone else. What else could you expect if you truly remained open to love and beauty which knows no bounds or limitations?

After all was said and done, that wasn't so different from being ready for our old friend death to do us part.

But these (love, death) were themes which he had already rejected as too universal; and so he emptied his mind once again and walked on.

At a café in El Pilar that afternoon, Now hunched over an island paper carrying news of a botched U.S. Presidential election, visits by the Spanish President to this very same small and formerly isolated island to inspect the protected dune areas, and a report of clouds on the morrow, said to accompany increased winds. Then he took out his brown pocket notebook and, glancing over the amassed notes of the day which would take yet another day to compile, he scrawled the following:

"Still fresh with the naive enthusiasm of his newly adopted persona, he despaired at the sudden proliferation of narrative threads which were growing too much to look like the familiar to-do lists of the home office. What was worse, the realization dawned on him afresh that--notwithstanding his revelatory leap across the dotted line of narrative distance represented by the third person past tense--none of these new threads suggested by his day's experience, walking the cliffs with his lover, in the least fulfilled the first requirement of authentic fiction: characters in conflict. It was all very well to talk now and then about the principles of character struggle and development; but this necessity remained, in his present work at least, a theoretical fancy, a sleight of rhetoric, at best a dramatic monologue. As yet there was still precious little realistic action taking place amid a consistent setting: a stage on which our hero might succeed or fail, might experience the real play of emotions called into being by the conflicting desires and forces of other characters equally realized upon the same stage."

He put his notebook away. That was enough literary fodder for one day. The sun was still high in the sky. Oiseau was sketching the distant view to the other side of the island. There was always a simple journal to keep. There would be no harm in leaving the novelist's mantle for the return back home to his cold study in Canada, when the "working holiday" would officially end.

After the restorative café con leche, they kept the sun ahead of them in their bearings, and continued over the eastern hump of the island until they reached a beckoning beach of fine, white sand.

Enter from stage left, DEFOE, dressed in torn leather breeches, ragged goatskin cap, sans shoes, sans man Friday. NARRATOR, stage center, sits on beach facing audience.

DEFOE: I say, isn't it a bit shortsighted of you to discard so easily the adventures of a man stranded, for all intents and purposes, alone on a desert island? Is this not a fit subject for fiction; and are my own journalistic reflections on such a predicament--by virtue of which I could achieve a perspective on the human condition perhaps never before attempted with such scope--to be forgotten in so offhand a manner? I think that the fashionable romantic comedies or heroic tragedies of the London stage might not truly be deserving of the last word in the staging of the so-called "dramatic situation." Don't forget, either, the uses to which a certain helpful companion could be put, in such a

fiction as I constructed. There was, after all, an exchange of points of view permitted, and so even with such a small cast and in such unassuming surroundings...

NARRATOR: I'll look into it, Dan. Thanks for your input. (Shuffles notes on his lap.) Now, where was I...

(Fade.)

Une Belle Mystère

6 October

Our landlady rang me out of bed this morning at 8:30, and returned within an hour to confront both Oiseau and me, demanding that we vacate the house today or pay for another night. She claimed that we had already stayed six nights, beginning Saturday and not Sunday as both Oiseau and I had thought.

We stood at the door eye to eye with her--though she barely cleared five feet--and tried to think and communicate calmly and clearly. We tried to reason with her in our middling French, explaining that our memories and ATM receipts, as well as the carefully reconstructed itinerary of our nightly stays throughout the journey, confirmed that we had begun this rental arrangement on Sunday. Our daily sequence of walks on the beach since then, our meals each evening, the details of my conversation with the madame on our first night here, all corroborated our side of the story.

"You came by that first evening wondering how we were doing, and I remember asking you about the dogs, if they would be as noisy in the morning as they were during

suppertime. You told me they would be quieter in the morning, and I gave you the cash for the rest of the week."

The landlady remembered, on the contrary, appearing on the second night, asking if we had slept well the first night.

On hearing this I shook my head, no; and so she started back at the beginning. She recalled our first entering the restaurant where she worked, during a meal of grilled sardines which she "wanted to finish eating while they were still hot." After her meal she took us through her shop and house to get the key, and later she called her son to deliver a tank of butane to the apartment. She only took meals at the restaurant on Saturdays, she said, not Sundays. What was more, "They don't even serve sardines on Sundays." Finally, she told us that a call to her son after her first visit this morning confirmed that he had arrived with butane with a helper on Saturday, not Sunday, as they didn't work Sundays.

"Alors, vous vous êtes trompés." She stood impassive, waiting for us to capitulate.

What an impasse! It was unfortunate, this confusion and contradiction--bien mystérieuse. The thing was, we still had our own certainties, our own evidence. Once again we went over our beach excursions, our cash withdrawals, our log of nightly accommodations, our conversations with her. Finally I said we could check with the landlady in Tavira where we'd stayed Saturday, and the hotel in Lisbon where we'd stayed Friday.

"Oh, but that's costly"--she rubbed her fingers together, and looked uneasy.

"No problem, it's worth it."

It remained a stalemate as she went away saying she'd return at two o'clock, to settle whether we'd be staying--and paying for--another night. Oiseau and I retreated upstairs to the couch to clear with each other, at this point, our priorities and needs. For me, the challenge was how to hold this mystery in our understanding. Was it a cosmic riddle without logical solution? Had we jumped into a twilight-zone alternate universe? Or had we suffered just another temporary time-warp, an all-too-human lapse in our recall of the blurring passage of days and nights? Our predicament gave us a clear lesson, at least, about collecting lodging receipts as we go.

There was the practical question of what to do about today and tonight. We had discovered a commercial campground still open outside of Santa Luzia, but if we stayed the night there, it wouldn't be easy to make the early morning bus connections to Sevilla. Oiseau was most concerned about holding our emotional center...not being thrown off our certainty and our needs by this woman's flawed understanding, or by the unexpected change in our living situation.

We came to a provisional decision to let go of further hassle over the rent, in favor of the campground option. Just then the doorbell rang again. It was our landlady, who announced that she had talked again with her son.

She stood before us softened, humble, almost contrite. The son, upon reflection, had felt that perhaps it was Sunday when he had brought the gas, after all. When she asked if he was sure, he said no, but it was possible.

She shrugged and lifted her eyebrows innocently.

Oiseau and I expressed gratitude for this resolution, while politely restraining our delight. The landlady went away wishing us a pleasant last day and night's stay, and we retired upstairs to reflect on the sudden turn of events, over lunch.

The question of the grilled sardines was apparently put aside, as the son's vacillation had swayed the woman to the truth of our case. Or had it?

Maybe, Oiseau postulated, for the landlady this was all an elaborate game of bargaining. "And she had to find a way to save face when we refused to back down...especially after you said we could call Tavira and Lisbon to confirm our dates."

I nodded. "It makes sense, too, remembering those negotiations the first day, when she offered us a reduced price. Think about it. With the extra day's rent, she could have basically recovered the same amount we saved from her original price over the course of the week."

"Wow, that's right. Interesting. Do you want more salad?"

"Sure. Or how about this...more to our landlady's credit, though more implausible. You know this strange "calendar virus" that infected us, so that we lost

track of a day? Well, somehow we passed it on to her. Except, whereas we gained back the day we had lost, she lost the one she thought she had gained."

"Une belle mystère, eh? Let's drink the rest of that vino verde."

*

11 November

Now awoke to a cloudy day towards the middle of November. From the bedroom he could hear the northeast wind blowing the waves up against the shore. He put on the same basic set of clothes he'd been wearing for the past ten weeks: his white old-fashioned briefs, and the honey-colored T-shirt with the jazz festival logo; his hiking pants of a color somewhere between olive and tan; his part-wool and part-synthetic, sand-blond hiking socks; his cyan lightweight longsleeved fleece, and over it the heavier navy fleece bequeathed from Arielle. Thus prepared for the inclement weather, he sat down at the plastic tablecloth on the terrace to tap on his plastic computer. The wind and waves competed with the jackhammers of shorehouse construction for his auditory attention, which was distracted still further by the close buzzing of persistent mosquitoes.

As to the charge of emptiness--no, there was more to fill the daily definition of a life in the making, than clothing and shelter. The breakfast of fried white rice and chicken liver, for instance; the strong coffee with shelf-packaged milk...

And before getting out of bed, there was the conversation with his lover beginning with his comment about the ripe firmness of her "thirty-kilometer-a-day" thighs. In fact

the honeymooners had only, just the day before, walked that much for the first time; perhaps this marathon had furnished the culminating polish on the desirable muscle tone to which he referred.

It ended with her curt good-bye as she went to the shore to write in her journal.

In between, they pretty much covered the histories of their previous marriages, the social conditioning that forces women to care so much about their body image, the time it takes to get over feelings of jealousy and hurt after separation, and indeed, the nature of time itself. Can it be simultaneously true, they pondered together, that to the feeling self, all past time is present now...and that to the same feeling self, the only time with any reality is the present moment?

Maybe there's no contradiction, Now reasoned later. The feeling self brings to the present the lingering bodily sensation of all past hurts. It embodies also the anxiety that such hurts will continue into the future. And it justifies that anxiety by extending the presence of hurts even from the distant past.

Aside from these philosophical and psychological dilemmas, Now brought with him into this cloudy day a number of other residual mysteries which he pondered in his partner's absence. (She meanwhile would forge her own emblematic accounts of the night and morning, to her own music of wind and wave.)

Why had he lain wakeful in bed so long in the night, despite their prodigious exercise of the day before, the heavy evening meal of chicken and rice, and two glasses

of red wine? Was it the exercise or the wine which proved to be stimulating rather than relaxing? Or had his metabolism been hyped up by the long swim in cold water, which he'd indulged in towards the end of the walk, on the other side of the island? How much of a factor was the full moon, now waxing to its fullest? What about his recently excited sexual energy, still percolating in the background? Or the intellectual stimulation of a sudden rich diet of two books of unexpectedly perfect fiction, courtesy of Carson McCullers? Or the welter of aesthetic considerations multiplying in his conscious and unconscious mind, around the project he himself was currently writing, a journal-cum-essay-cum-novel?

Each topic was baffling in its complexity. Take, for instance, that late-afternoon swim: how was it possible for the water to be so...well, not exactly warm, anymore, but definitely swimmable, only one day after he had sworn off swimming for the season? It could have been the wide shallow water of the beach they found, stretching over fine white sand out towards Africa. That is, it could have been the shallowness, or the fineness or the whiteness of the sand. The calmness of the water or of the wind. The length and hotness of their marathon hike in the clear afternoon sun. The fact that the southern beach was sheltered from the colder northern sea. The extra day of sun under which the water could have warmed up. Or maybe, it was all just a matter of his impetuous willingness to go for it, to get that last swim in, one more time.

It was all too much to puzzle out. In any case, Oiseau returned from the shore before he got any further, and they prepared to walk into town to buy groceries.

Three items were waiting for them in the Sant Ferran Post Office: the packages they'd arranged to have mailed to them during their stay on the "deserted" island. The parcels were full of materials intended to sustain them through a month of cultural exile--extra art supplies, earrings, a necklace and scarf, a second small hand drum with a catalogue of African rhythms to learn, The Mayan Oracle consisting of a pack of image cards and a book of interpretations, and six more books to read. Now and Oiseau had waited anxiously for these parcels from home, checking the post office once or twice every week. But now, less than three weeks remained in their stay here, and it was with mixed feelings that they carried the parcels home in their backpacks along with the week's groceries.

On the one hand it felt like Christmas. But on the other hand, it felt like the real end of the beginning of the holiday, the vacation, the honeymoon. It felt in a way as if they were already home, burdened with the first wave of that lifetimes' collection of stuff--stuff to carry and stuff to do--and the emptiness they had come so far, by air and foot and sea, to achieve, was already beginning to fill up. The time would pass more quickly now, that was for sure.

12 November

In the first dream, he and Oiseau were held up by a man in the Spanish desert. Now convinced him by the force of compassionate reason to let them have their money back; then he'd turned around and given the guy a thousand in traveler's checks for his good will...

Then, he found himself in a hotel command suite with a woman and man; both seemed dangerous. There had been a confusion of paramilitary coups in the United States. The woman was heading one faction, and the man was a large brooding spy posing as one of her cops...

There was the largest black bear he had ever seen, coming out of the woods on the Argenta road, then turning back menacingly to face him...

There was his ex-wife suddenly friendly, charming, even seductive, and he had to disillusion her because, well, he had another partner now...

And finally Now encountered old Squiggles, his neighbor's long-dead weasely part-Dalmation, who was overjoyed to find herself allowed to sleep upon him in his bed...

He awoke to a tropical stew of a Sunday. Jean-Pierre was due to show up to patch the wall he'd bashed apart around the shower pipes; Oiseau was suffering from a nagging toothache and caffeine withdrawal; there were six new books on the shelf and an extra drum to play with. On such a day after such a night, how could he possibly be inspired by the challenge of picking up the narrative thread, if, indeed, there was any to be found?

There was, to be sure, his own figure poised over the plastic keys, in the bedroom at the narrow wooden table by the south-facing window. Beyond that effort of posture and practice, the most identifiable tension worth developing vibrated but dimly in what we might call the Sheherazadean mode. Sheherazade, as more modern yet equally brazen ironists are wont to remind us even as they mimic her dance of deception, bought time in her captivity by diverting her captor's interest night by night, for something like a thousand and one Arabian nights, in the telling of fantastic tales. And just so, we might add, did the Canterbury pilgrims pass the time in their weary steps to a distant destination. As fictional modes go, the novel is not far removed from the confederated concept of "a series of tales" linked one to another only by the narrative mortar between them.

With all of the foregoing in mind, Now declared himself unable or unwilling to mine the dirt of his own life merely for the sake of "dramatic tension," and so resigned himself to the chair of the literary critic and book reviewer. On the morning in question, he proceeded, in lieu of a more quotidian journal entry, to embark upon the following tangent, which, failing its suitability for novelistic purposes, he imagined might be an article he could sell somewhere when he returned home.

Six Books to Bring to a Desert Island

Which six books would you bring to a desert island, to fill your days and nights and so to help you pass the time until your deliverance back to the infinite linguistic resources of civilization?

Here were my choices, made in the moment of packing, somewhat spontaneously and on impulse:

Two from the spiritual/self-help shelf:

--Breathing: Expanding your Power and Energy (1990), by Michael Sky

--From Onions to Pearls: A Journal of Awakening and Deliverance (1996), by

Satyam Nadeen

Three densely written novels by master prose stylists:

--Doctor Faustus: The Life of the German Composer Adrian Leverkühn, as Told

by a Friend (1947), by Thomas Mann

--A Soldier of the Great War (1991), by Mark Helprin

--Going Native (1994), by Stephen Wright

A collection of short fiction:

--Stories from the New Europe (The Graywolf Annual, Number Nine, 1992),

edited by Scott Walker

The first thing that struck my partner upon perusing this collection was: "It's all male."

The thing that strikes me first is the similarity of publishing dates, bunched into what could be called "the historical period" 1990-96--with Mann's the notable exception. In fact I have read his Nobel Prize-winning book twice before, but thought it deserved another look. For one thing, I had read it in haste before, in my twenties, amid hundreds of other "great books," and so didn't spend on it the careful attention it no doubt deserves. Also, in the past winter I read a biography of Mann by Ronald Hayman, and this work placed Doctor Faustus in a critical position not only as the culmination of Mann's career, but as an ironic reflection and summation of, or capstone upon, a whole passing era of European culture and civilization. And then there was my own increasing interest in musical theory and composition, and in what Mann has to say about this fascinating subject through the person of the composer Leverkühn, and also of course through his fictional biographer, Zeitblom, the humbly learned "friend" who tells the tale.

Never a fan of fashionable trends in literary criticism, I will address neither the relevance of historical context, nor the relevance of my inadvertent choice of gender in the selected authors, much further. I am interested primarily in what the writer has to say and how he or she says it, and equally my interest moves toward the effect on the reader--this reader in particular. If I'm male and write a half-decade or half-century after

the works were written, so be it. These are accidental and incidental considerations, which have little bearing as I turn my attention to what really matters in the writing and reading of these books.

*

He stopped there. It was the question of marketing--his old nemesis--that started to get in his way now. This approach he was taking was all wrong. It was, once again, too personal for the academic journals, and yet too erudite in its diction for the popular press. No, it just wouldn't fly. But what was the solution?

To hell with it, he thought, looking at his watch. Maybe it's time for lunch.

Lying on the beach that afternoon, not even opening the still-unfinished McCullers or the freshly-introduced Nadeen, Now reflected on the many varieties with which successful novelists tackled the problem that faced him on this day, as on every day: Where was the dramatic tension to be found?

Oiseau lay contentedly beside him on the soft sand, reading The Black Prince. Fluffy white clouds hung well down in the northeastern sky, leaving the sun with full reign above.

When he thought about it, the very departure of the novel in the eighteenth century from the heroic romances that preceded it was a bold and democratic turn toward

the everyday concerns of the common man and woman. Cervantes, in Don Quixote, took the question by the horns and made a comedy out of the old stuff of epic adventure.

James Joyce split the narrative of Leopold Bloom into a surface of pedestrian urban life shot through with interior consciousness, and a subsurface of mythic significance linking Bloom with the ancient hero Ulysses. Robert Pirsig in Lila and the earlier Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance wove standard narrative, with its expected plot, setting, and characters, into elaborate philosophical investigations.

Maybe, Now considered, his own project wasn't such a contradiction in terms, after all. Maybe his daily search for significant narrative content wasn't such an empty exercise, but rather constituted the very substance of that enigma called "the modern novel." Maybe Sheherazade had the right idea, leading the way which every modern novelist could follow. It was up to the novelist, in today's existentialist chaos, to prove that in every person's life was a story worth telling. As Joyce showed by packing seven hundred pages into the space of a single day in the life of Mr. Bloom, there was an epic adventure to be found in any given day.

Holographic theory certainly supported this view, as did the related fields of chaos and fractal theory. In a mile or a foot of coastline could be discerned the entire coastline of England. The poet Blake had such powers of vision, seeing "the world in a grain of sand, eternity in an hour."

To follow the formulaic themes of popular genres, both fictional and nonfictional, which seemed largely concerned with high society or heinous crimes--the same old

melodramas with good against evil and little Nell tied to the tracks--was asking too much and too little of the talents of the modern novelist. Formula fiction still sold like hotcakes; but there was more to be done than to write for television.

Now took heart in the undeniable power of the forces of nature ceaselessly battling on Formentera, an island which at first glance seemed so serene. There was surely some worthwhile aesthetic and spiritual understanding to be gleaned from the spectacular explosions of spray against the craggy rocks on the unpolitical shore...some epic warfare to be chronicled in the ceaseless assaults of wave on cliff.

This whole dichotomy of purpose--turning toward or away from human conflict--created an interesting dilemma for Now in his quest for a compelling and unified narrative, as in his quest for personal wholeness. On the one hand was "vacation mode," which represented, on the advice of his partner, a precious opportunity to open up to the natural writing voice within him. The discipline involved was a negative one: to not struggle or try too hard to write a certain way, or to any particular audience, or in fact to any editorial standard, at least for the time being.

On the other hand was the more or less also natural impulse within him, to fictionalize, to seek out an audience and envision a publisher. His writing voice demanded it; his stubborn writer's ego demanded it; and common sense demanded that at this point in his life, there was no longer any point in writing "just" a private journal. In other words, he couldn't be content with a state of bliss, with an abstract Paradise lacking

tension or conflict. The very word journalism, he noted, conjured up not sheep pastures and pastel seascapes, but wars and revolutions, scandal and intrigue.

But if his outer life truly had become as blissful as it appeared--and if he wanted to avoid the placid boredom of what he somewhat prejudicially called "Annie Dillardism"--he would have to dig deeper to find the dramatic remedy. Somewhere within himself and his golden-skinned paramour must lie the source of conflict and tension which surfaced more prominently in their "normal" existence back home. If he could find it, he would have approached also an understanding of the basic nature of human personality, which, in the final analysis, gives birth to the core issues of the history of literature.

Flameout, Crash And Burn

9 October

Our spirits were flying when we arrived in Granada by six, after a series of flawless connections via Tavira, Huelva, and Sevilla. We checked into a cheap pensión on Avenue de Capuchinos, then toured the city streets in the evening, on the lookout for a moderately priced meal. Along the way, we merged with the crowd at a high-class wedding whose guests in impeccable black suits and fancy dresses clogged the street; we ducked through an ancient wall to enjoy a moment of refuge in a bird-sweet monastery hung with green vines; and we found a bookshop with a good assortment of maps showing hiking trails through the nearby mountains.

Trouble came from the different sequencing of our respective hunger pangs, which had played out an irregular rhythm and been satisfied by sporadic snacks throughout the day of traveling. Even while searching out a restaurant this Saturday evening, we weren't sure what we wanted. Oiseau had more appetite, but also more reluctance to spend. Her patience broke suddenly in a subfloor cafeteria; she insisted on looking no further. I acquiesced, but sat unhappily beside her in the sterile yellow room, to a tasteless dinner served in cellophane with plastic utensils. This was an airplane meal at best, in a setting that I likened to a prison.

But it cured our individual degrees of hunger, and we survived to walk the maze of streets freely again. We were even compensated for making what I still considered a mistake, by wandering, several serendipitous turns later, into an open air orchestra performance in the square of the cathedral. We sat on the cold stone steps right beside the performers' chairs, in intimate proximity to the percussion and brass sections. With quiet appreciation in the mildly cool October night, we alternately studied the drummers' technique and demeanor, and idly gazed out at the faces of the assembled audience watching from twenty rows of chairs.

Fairly chilled by the end of the first set, Oiseau and I walked off to find the better sort of restaurant for Crème Catalain and Flan Frances, with hot café con leche. We were prudent enough to ask for decaf, this time of night; but I was thinking even as I hit the thick layer of brown sugar beneath the custard, that with the multiple coffees we'd had

earlier in the day, and sitting around getting chilled, and now all this sugar, my vulnerable immune system was going to be challenged.

Back at the hotel room after the second set, we were too wired to sleep, and so stayed up till midnight gazing at the new maps we'd bought. With the excitement of entering the final phase of our walking adventure, we plotted a course along the well-marked GR 7, south from Gaudix through the Sierra Nevada. Winding westward through the remote Alpujarras range, with its quaint Moorish villages, we would come finally to Órgiva the following week, where we'd arranged to stay and work on an organic farm, minimizing our expenditures until the end of the month. Sunday, tomorrow, would be our final day in Granada; and we would have all day to explore the Alhambra. My long-lost Moorish palace at last was within reach.

Sunday found us, not surprisingly, sleeping late. We had croissants and coffee for breakfast in a shop on the avenue, and continued on foot toward the Alhambra in a pleasantly roundabout way through the backstreet warren of the Barrio Alto. Stumbling across a little archaeological museum, we spent an hour filling in gaps in our knowledge of the Bronze Age, the Neolithic, and later periods leading into colonization. We took a further detour up a dry gorge opposite our destination, hoping for access behind the palaces, but finally had to backtrack through the city to the main approach. We arrived still in good spirits at the Alhambra complex by twelve-thirty or so, with the help of a ham and cheese bocadillo on the way up.

At first, all was well: we roamed around the circular palace of Carlos V, marveling at the huge uniform columns of polished, roseate conglomerate stone. With less interest we walked past the old fortress, the Alcazar, finally realizing that the real attraction, the ornate Palacio Nazaries, required pre-purchased tickets. So we made our way back and forth through the Sunday crowds, searching for the main ticket window by the parking lot, which we had bypassed on our arrival by foot.

I sensed then that the afternoon, and our precious opportunity to see this most celebrated palace in all of Spain, was passing us by. As my frustration mounted, I began to pick up the pace, weaving a fast lane around the sluggish herds of complacent tourists choking the walkways. Oiseau responded to my impatience by bursting ahead of me at an even faster clip--and I knew then that we were becoming unraveled. Another deadly vortex had sucked us in.

By the time we reached the long lines at the main ticket counter, our blood sugar levels had dropped into the "hostile" range. Our emotions were raw and we had little desire to stand in line in patient obedience to the tourist gods. It didn't even take saying anything; we just bristled. I knew we had to take time out to reconnect, to resolve our growing disharmony, before going any further. Oiseau agreed to sit down somewhere and talk about it. We found an unused space nearby, against a wall by the parking lot, where we could sit on the concrete pavement in relative privacy.

I started: "It seemed like you were mad at me when you went charging ahead like that."

"You said you wanted to walk faster."

"It seemed like you were avoiding me."

"I guess I was. I didn't know how to deal with your energy."

"I just couldn't handle those slow crowds. It's like they enjoy just meandering along, not going anywhere or doing anything."

She started to cry.

I held her. I breathed deep and let her tears come, cradling her wet cheek beside my heart.

Over the next twenty minutes we were able to share our respective frustrations about the day. Oiseau was more or less accommodating my attachment to the Alhambra tour, and was put on edge both by the crowds and my simmering anxiety. I just wanted it all to work. I'd waited too long for this. But we had to feel good about it, and about each other.

Finally as we came to calm understanding, I suggested we retire to a nearby bench for a beer and cookies, our only available food. The can of beer had come as a "free beverage" with the dinner at the yellow cafeteria. When we'd finished that, we were still poorly nourished; but our spirits were enough improved that we felt ready, at last, to take our place in line for tickets. Though it was already two o'clock, there was still ample time to explore the Palacio Nazaries.

Just then an announcement came over the loudspeaker. Ominous enough in Spanish, the English translation in the scrolling marquee above the ticket window

confirmed the bad news: "Tickets for the Palacio Nazaries are sold out for today. Tickets for tomorrow may be purchased beginning at 8:30 a.m."

The bottom dropped out of my already testy mood, but I just let it go. I looked up into the uncaring sky. Tomorrow was another day.

"What do you want to do now?" Oiseau asked me.

"Let's get something decent to eat."

She looked at me warily as we turned to go.

We retreated to the city but couldn't find what we wanted, an open grocery or the right restaurant. At five o'clock we gave up and settled for a full-course Chinese meal: not cheap, but effective. During the meal we progressed from sullen to cheerful. This major refueling would sustain us for the remainder of the day.

After an hour's contented activity--I checked my email while Oiseau painted--we took a city bus to the bus station to scope out connections to Gaudix. Our hope was to spend Monday morning at the Alhambra (without the weekend crowds getting in the way) and then to depart the city by mid-afternoon.

Hiking in the mountains again was starting to look better and better.

We were in bed before nine, but it took me ages to get to sleep, and when the alarm went off at seven the next morning, in accordance with our plan to be back at the Alhambra ticket window at opening time, I felt deadened and defeated by the whole business. I had a dull headache and stuffy sinuses. My dark consciousness in the

dreamless night had been wide and deep as the ivy-covered ruins in the dry canyon below the cliffs of the fortress. And I emerged into the waking day as reluctantly as a large lion of stone, weighing a thousand pounds.

Oiseau wasn't so wasted to begin with, but I quickly brought her down to my level. I pretended I was concerned about how she was doing, while secretly blaming her for the emotional stress which evidently had been the last straw for my defense against sickness. Her problem meanwhile was figuring out what I needed, and how she was going to survive another day of my sullenness. Dealing with these emotions, even poorly, took an hour and a half, while we remained in bed. By then it was 8:30.

Our plan could still work, as long as we finished the Alhambra tour in time to return to the hotel for our packs by check-out time at noon. Still wanting to follow through on this agreed-upon intention, we hurriedly got ourselves up and out of the hotel, and proceeded to march along the busy morning sidewalks with a determined stride. We both needed breakfast but, in deference to my rising panic about being late again, chose not to take time even for a coffee or a bite to eat along the way. An increasing psychic distance began to come between us, as my time pressure and Oiseau's caffeine monkey danced a deadly dance.

I began to fathom in my heart a growing blackness of failure...that we should have got up earlier...that we should have taken the bus...that we should have stopped, only a few minutes, for breakfast...that we should have done it right the first time, yesterday morning, or for that matter, in Zaragoza...that I should have been more self-aware about

my state of health, before all the coffees and wine and beer and sugary desserts and stress and cold stone steps and attachments to results had piled up and ruined that delicate balance. And now on top of it all there was this strange new-old dance spinning me down with Oiseau, even as we climbed to the palace of my dreams.

Sure enough, on arriving at the ticket office at 9:00, we saw a long line of ever-patient tourists standing before the window as if oblivious to the scrolling message in stark red digital lettering: "Palacio Nazaries fully booked this morning. Tickets are now being sold for entrance after 12:30."

Oiseau was right on it, her hands on my shoulders as she looked into my eyes. I could tell she was ready to sacrifice another day if necessary, to my obsession with the golden idol, this last-chance Spanish castle. "What do you want to do now?"

"That's it," I said, already starting to walk away. "I'm finished with this zoo."

Simply done: but my unilateral withdrawal from the battle would require a final scene of reconciliation for us to come to terms with it all, my undeniable disappointment and our still-smoldering estrangement. Finding an appropriate setting for such an intimate encounter proved to be an unnerving challenge. On the tree-lined walkways back down to the city, we sought out private benches where we could safely hold and cry and talk and breathe. But we were able to enjoy such comfort only momentarily, as we were chased from bench to bench by a man with a fire-hose washing the pavement. In the end, I broke down in Oiseau's arms in the hasty refuge of a secluded, arabesque

alleyway of smooth white walls...and so at last made peace with our defeat by this enchanted city.

*

Oiseau waded out into the pale blue water, staring off at the horizon. The sea was too cold for swimming today, but refreshing up to the thighs. Now continued reading. There was nobody else on the beach today by Es Calo. In an hour they would walk home thinking about supper.

Satyam Nadeen's book, From Onions to Pearls, ploughed some interesting territory concerning the nature of conflict. In Nadeen's view, humans fall into the traps of conflict and limitation because that's the nature of the phenomenal world we inhabit, and because we are given a grasping ego as our primary tool for navigating and surviving this hall of illusions. But it is possible to experience an "awakening and deliverance"--just as Nadeen himself experienced it during his stay in a maximum security federal prison (his karmic destination after being busted for manufacturing the rave-drug "Ecstasy"). The key is realization of how the whole thing works: that "Consciousness is all there is," and that "You are not the doer."

Nadeen talks about a bell curve of human consciousness, in which a small number of people are fully awakened, a small number at the other end are unawake, and the vast majority are somewhere in between. And he maintains that it's always been like that and

likely will remain so: it's part of the cosmic balance between ultimate freedom and complete limitation.

This dualistic understanding brought Now back to the difference between popular, plot-based fiction, and the more in-depth character studies we call "literature." Naturally there were exceptions and artful fusions. But for the purposes of clarification, Now felt that popular and genre fiction tended to deal with the major dramatic tensions of the unenlightened: primal struggles for survival, sex, wealth, fame and power. These preoccupations happened to correspond also to the lower three chakras, and to the lower half of psychologist Abraham Maslow's well-known hierarchy of psychological needs. Ironically, such plots tended to concern characters who were not necessarily the "lowest" in our usual view of social ranking, but rather the ones with the most power and wealth: the ones with the most to lose.

The characters of literature, Now supposed in following this line of thought, would tend to be concerned with more advanced needs like compassionate love, creative fulfillment, intellectual understanding, or spiritual growth. But when he thought of some of the masters of the novel, this scheme didn't fit so neatly. Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky came to mind, with their full range of characters from saints to criminals, from nobility to the common soldier. And could you really call the currently popular spate of spiritual adventures "literature"?

Now realized that for a great writer, even the primary struggles of human life take on a completeness that allows for subtlety, and for intellectual and spiritual

considerations to be brought into the picture. In the hands of a master, any character is liable to contain, within the range of the portrait's colors, the potential both for absolute suffering and for the liberation from such suffering. Any fully developed literary character, no matter what his or her background or social standing or psychological profile, can thus be seen as a microcosm of human nature; and the particular struggle that a given ego is fated to wrestle with, is as good a subject for literary exploration as any other.

Still, Now was perplexed by this open-ended spectrum of human possibility. If it was possible for anyone to move to the freedom side of the graph, wouldn't everyone naturally want to keep moving that way? Nadeen warned that the ego (in the form of both the rational mind and the unconscious need for individual identity) will resist like hell, because its very existence is threatened by the possibility of ultimate freedom. True freedom, in Nadeen's terms, implies an identification with cosmic oneness, rather than the more materialistic version of freedom sought by the ego, in its endless quest for self-serving power and social standing.

In respect to his own identity as a writer, Now was intrigued by the prospect of liberation from the obstructing influence of the writing ego, with its continual hankering after fame and fortune. Yet despite the opportunity of nurturing, instead, his newly birthed, free and natural writing spirit, Now found himself compelled on a daily basis to feed that literary monkey, the ego in conflict. He could not be content with romantic and pastoral accounts of his peaceful life in seclusion from the hurly-burly civilized world; he

had always to look in his work--and so in his life on which the work was based--for instances and sources of tension and drama. From countless authorities on the art of successful writing for publication, he had acquired the fixed idea that effective writing just had to have conflict. And it wasn't just a matter of what fiction required. Even the writing of nonfiction, more and more these days, seemed to require a fictional flair, a use of all the basic elements of description, plot and character, a knack for "setting the hook" and reeling the reader in with a taut, suspenseful tale about someone in need.

Otherwise, wasn't it just "nature writing"? And who read that anymore, besides quaintly introspective fans of the long-dead Thoreau or (if you required a female voice) Annie Dillard?

*

He sat with his suffering lover and talked about what they could do about the tooth. She was so sick with the pain now that she just wanted to go home to Canada, to deal with it there with her own dentist, and to be comforted by her more familiar surroundings.

But with a little more discussion, they explored some other options for what could be done. They made a plan to go to town to phone Oiseau's dentist for advice, since he knew the history of the tooth or teeth in question. After that she would make an appointment with the local dentist for whom Celeste the caretaker worked. In the

meantime there was some Tylenol they'd brought along with them on the trip, which she could take to ease the pain.

Oiseau visibly brightened as they talked. It was clear that her spirits were lifted by having a plan to deal with this problem. Also it helped just to talk about it, to share the problem between them. Naming the suffering gave it a way out of the darkness of the silently throbbing jaw.

It was his curse as well as his gift, Now supposed, that sometimes he got this obsession, which kept him from sleeping at night or from opening his eyes clearly to the beauty around him in the day. It got to be like a tight knot of wrung laundry unless and until he aired it out...a pile of brittle bone-stuff until fleshed out in writing...a roiling black cloud, until he recorded its rain and added it to the river of his life, and to the sea-story of life itself. One way or another he had to get clear of it and be done with it, so that he could rest and then open to the slowly forming clouds of new thought and new experience, a new sense of the world and new perspective on all that had gone before.

This was a kind of blessed affliction, in contrast to (but in some ways not unlike) the cursed affliction of his wife's nagging toothache. It reminded Now of the toothache of the protagonist in Russell Banks' disturbing novel of the same name, Affliction. That very night, his attempt to sleep was dogged by thoughts of Banks's masterpiece of human suffering. Now marveled at how that writer had resolved in a single work all the false and misleading distinctions between minor and major tensions; between dramatic,

strongly plotted fiction and the higher literature of in-depth character study; between those ancient and persistent, twin purposes of the literary art--entertainment and instruction.

In transcending these dualities a novel could serve as a vehicle of higher consciousness, of nondualistic thinking, of the very kind of awakening Nadeen was suggesting in his entertaining journal, From Onions to Pearls. A great work of fiction was able to depict human suffering ironically in such a way as to illuminate it, and so to raise the awareness of the reader and writer (if not the character in crisis) beyond suffering to "awakening and deliverance."

In Banks' story, the various kinds of suffering amplify one another, resonating and increasing the tension in the protagonist until he reaches the breaking point. The missing nail in the horseshoe might be called a minor issue, but in the end the kingdom is lost. In this case it's a rotten tooth, conspiring with a domestic dispute, an estrangement between father and daughter, and a more serious case of chronic alcoholism and physical abuse in the man's childhood, that come together in a cascading series of events and psychological reactions culminating in tragic violence.

13 November

At home, Now was used to sleeping anywhere from four to ten hours a night, most often six to eight hours. Here in the Casa Sophia, with electric light limited by a small solar-charged battery, he and Oiseau pretty much kept to their camping schedule of

going to bed at dark and waking up at dawn. Candlelight stretched the evenings a bit, but still they usually were asleep by nine, and remained in bed until eight in the morning. These eleven hours were too many to sleep through soundly, however; so they both would end up spending a good portion of each night passing in and out of dreams, in a semi-conscious state of relaxation.

With the exception of the occasional nexus of ideas for the current writing project, there wasn't the usual to-do list pressing at the walls of Now's dormant consciousness. There wasn't the humming office computer just waiting in the next room to be fired up, with its menu of a dozen priority projects all needing attention...with its endless list of marketing ideas he hadn't yet implemented...with his four websites all needing updating...and with the computer itself asking for any number of new slick tweaks and "time-saving" improvements. There wasn't the wall of bookshelves overflowing with unread titles. There wasn't the baseball world online with its year-round spate of statistics and speculations. So he lay awhile longer in the deepening dark or the middle of the night or the gathering dawn, with one hand lightly resting over his chest between the heart and the throat, and the other on the thigh of his lover beside him.

With just three weeks left before the flight back to Canada, Now came awake this still-dark morning with the aching sense that their three-month idyll was just a temporary lull in the ceaseless activity that made up his normal daily and nightly life back home.

What was it all for? Couldn't he just put off doing all those things for three more months, again and again, indefinitely?

There was the money aspect. Now made his living from his online businesses: the editorial service and drum book sales, primarily, with a little more from advertising and networking with other companies. Website upgrading and promotion demanded staying up to date with a vast array of technology and marketing trends; so there were dozens of ezines to read and websites to visit, always more leads to research, more contacts to make and changes to implement.

You couldn't expect a vacation to continue indefinitely. That was like wanting Christmas to come every day. At some point the bills piling up would have to be paid. And then there were the children due to arrive back for their next shift, currently in the care of the other two respectively separated parents. But that was another issue, one that could be safely put aside for the moment.

There was another matter that occupied Now's thoughts as he awoke, concerning the curious concept of Nadeen's that "Consciousness is all there is." (Nadeen had got it from the esoteric Yogic texts he read in prison.) It seemed to Now that this kind of statement led us pretty close to the same old anthropomorphic theology Nadeen himself said he wanted to get away from. Wasn't it just a silly, prideful, or childish primitive projection on our part, to take the whole bloody cosmos forever ("All That Is") and tack on the cozy familiar concept we recognize as "Consciousness?" Now didn't want to split

too many hairs over this, nor to wind up counting how many angels could dance on the head of a pin, but really--

Then Nadeen's warning flashed through his mind: "Don't prejudge this ageless wisdom; though your ego will want to find every reason not to believe it."

"Well, sure, okay," Now wanted to respond. "But then it's just a matter of faith, right? We've heard that one before, too."

The term "Consciousness" was the real stumbling block. It was just too loaded with the brain-meat of humanity to give us an accurate picture of the infinite. And Now found that if you plugged in some of Nadeen's alternative definitions of the same old God, you weren't much better off.

"Source is all there is."

It was like saying, "What goes around comes around." "As above, so below." "In the end, as in the beginning." How could you find enlightenment through such hackneyed and self-referential concepts?

"All-That-Is is all there is."

Is this redundant or what?

"I am not the doer. I am That."

O-kay.

Now decided it must be time to get up and start doing--writing, that is. "This is what I get," he mused to himself as he dressed by flashlight, "for reading nonfiction."

An hour later, when he took his lingering philosophical consternation to the bed of his awakening beloved, she met his puzzlement with sympathy. They discussed the matter at some length, delving into the hidden truths so revered by Nadeen and his esoteric teachers.

Finally Oiseau said, "Maybe by consciousness they mean awareness."

"Same thing, isn't it? But then, animals have a kind of awareness without consciousness; maybe plants, too. And I guess even rock crystals have a kind of invisible blueprint to follow. Hmm. There might be something to it."

"Now if these guys just want to glorify Consciousness like some kind of God, as something to be worshipped apart from everything else, I don't think that's right. But maybe instead it's like this: it's with our awareness that we humans can be most in harmony with all that there is." Oiseau looked thoughtfully up at the mosquito netting hanging over them like an angelic shroud in the dim morning light.

"Ah," Now said. "I can live with that. You put it so succinctly."

And with this more palatable wisdom in his heart, he contented himself with suckling, as it were, the breasts of the Goddess. He proceeded to offer his body into the very body of the Goddess.

It was just another Monday morning in Paradise.

But of course there were more pressing questions to urge him out of bed and back to his writing desk, another hour later. Such as...

Was it necessary, in order to write popular fiction, to imagine exciting, thrilling, sensational, tragi-comic ways in which this kind of connubial paradise of theirs could come apart, through smallness or selfishness or shortsightedness on the part of either one of them? Or could one simply look deeply enough at one's actual conflicts and limitations, however subtle or commonplace or internal, and explore these as proper subjects of fiction? In such a case, what was the difference between fiction and nonfiction?

Did it boil down to a division between the expository and narrative modes, between philosophy and old-fashioned story-telling?

But no, the fiction shelves abounded with successful "novels of ideas"--Doctor Faustus, A Soldier of the Great War, and The Heart is a Lonely Hunter were three examples close at hand. Even venerable Plato (like his modern disciple Pirsig) presented his cogitations in the form of stories and dialogues.

Maybe, Now considered, this worrying over distinctions was all wrong, a mere symptom of the dualistic, busy ego wanting always some fresh bone to chew. Maybe the thing was, after all, to go with the awareness angle for a while...to just sit back, stop trying to be the doer, and let someone else run the show.

Missed Trains and Roads Not Taken

12 October

After a day and a half of walking in the clear, healing air of the Sierra Nevada, we have found more rain in the Alpujarras. The drizzle started in the middle of the night and has lasted, on and off, till late morning. We are still camped in an otherwise lovely green spot by a creek with a tumbling waterfall, beyond Laroles. Waiting for the clouds to break, and for our bedding to air out, we find ourselves already wishing for the latest national holiday to pass so we can escape by bus, it hardly matters where: to Órgiva, the coast, any old town with a hotel.

Walking into the hills from La Calahorra on Tuesday, I felt so happy, so relieved from the stress of Granada, from my stuck obsession about these silly Moorish palaces. I realized then that I live my life as a journalist writes a story: with attention given foremost to the details of who, what, when, and where. I am most happy when I have all these elements taken care of the way I want them; and so if I am to describe my happiness, it's not so much by conveying the emotion directly, but by composing in a narrative frame these factual elements which are its preconditions. The same holds true of an emotionally negative experience: I try to recollect the jarring, disharmonious details which caused the emotions to erupt or further stagnate. In this case, walking free once more into the hills with my mate, I felt like a cougar released from the city zoo to wander in my native habitat, the tawny gold and dry open hills, forested just enough for shelter.

The sky on that day of freedom was a clear blue. We had a twenty-kilometer hike ahead of us heading south to Laroles. Despite the onset of cold symptoms (my stuffy sinuses, Oiseau's sore gums, and a low level of energy for both of us), the packs felt so good on our backs, and our feet so well rested, that we began with a quick detour up the hill above La Calahorra to a massive fortress--closed, of course, during the hours of our arrival. Walking then finally out into the open countryside, far from other tourists or, in fact, anyone at all, we rediscovered the central why of our journey. Just to walk was enough--the walking in and of itself, pure and simple--through the wild and natural landscape of sunny Andalucía, in bright October.

Step by step and breath by breath, I could feel the toxins of Granada being cleansed from my body and mind. I wanted to learn from my mistakes, but also to let go of them. Once more in motion, we came each moment into new territory and new experience, which demanded both present attention, and readiness for the next decisions to be made along the way. But I wasn't quite done with evaluating our experiences to date, particularly my own--because how could I hope to do better if I didn't understand what had happened so far?

For days I had been dwelling on my sense of priorities, my weaknesses, my needs and desires, my ability to make good decisions. All this nagging self-criticism seemed to come down to a particular point outside the gates of the Moslem palace in Zaragoza.

We had four hours to kill before the overnight train to Galicia. I was intrigued by the city ever since viewing a disturbing film, years ago, based on an equally fascinating book I later discovered: The Manuscript Found in Saragossa, written in 1815 by an eccentric Polish prince named Jan Potocki. The story revolves around a series of recurrent, nightmarish visits to a haunted inn by a wayward soldier. I hardly expected the modern city to evoke such brooding visions, but still I was inspired to pay homage to its reputation by striking up a firsthand acquaintance. For this pilgrim's duty, four hours seemed adequate.

At the train station Oiseau and I picked up a tour map outlining a circle tour of the city's chief monuments. Among them, closest to the train station but a half-hour walk from the downtown loop where the rest of the edifices stood waiting, was a Moslem palace that intrigued me because it represented a different architectural tradition than that of the conventional Christian churches and monasteries. The woman at the station information desk had also steered us to this nearby district for moderately-priced restaurants. So we started there.

The Aljafería was indeed special: I could see that at once, as Oiseau and I strolled by it on our way to check out the restaurants. Four gigantic crenellated turrets dominate the middle sections of the front wall of the fortress, sixty feet high. On either end stands a truncated corner turret. The two left-hand sections of wall support a rank of battlements at the height of the corner towers; the rest of the wall features tall twin pointed arches filled in with brick, with a section between them opening to a classic Moslem double

arch. All three of these right-hand sections of wall are topped by series of simple rounded arches. Beyond this imposing front wall rises a gigantic square tower, some fifteen feet higher, with each side blocked into battlements.

In front of the building is a series of stone-paved ramps. These are divided by shallow trenches nine feet across planted with triple rows of rose bushes, and by broader sunken terraces graced by green trees and ornamental bushes.

The difference between this lavish construction, and the more familiar Romanesque, neoclassical, and baroque styles of medieval Christian architecture, was not just theoretical or technical, to be measured by angles or historical forces. There was an inner quality exuding from the structure which was palpable yet mysterious; visible yet maddeningly out of reach, almost seductive. I didn't know what kind of rulers built this place or lived here, except that this stronghold represented the furthest northern reach of the Islamic empire in Spain; but whatever their historical destiny, I could tell that it provided them with a precious sort of sanctuary, a certain serenity.

Oiseau either sensed the same spirit in the place, or noticed my enchantment with it as we slowly walked along the sunken terraces. "We could sit awhile outside on one of these benches," she said, "if you want."

I was following the mad angles of the outer mosaics, tilted under tunnels and curving back up again, a three-dimensional maze. "Well, I don't know, we were going to take in all those other buildings, and if we want to start eating by 8:30...we don't know

how long they take to serve you." We hadn't yet dined out on this whole low-budget trip, since that first tuna pizza in Barcelona.

There was a stout, blue-uniformed guard standing at the arched door of the palace: not a simple Roman arch, but what could be called a complex or double arch, pointing in by way of following the curve from the rounded top, then striking out again to continue the downward line of the open gateway it framed. Was this palace actually open to the public? Through the entrance one could only glimpse portions of the interior walls, other buildings, inner doors.

We started to walk away together, under the momentum of a plan already made. But I kept looking back at the palace, which was now lit up by floodlights in the rapidly gathering night. Before turning my back to it altogether as we approached the sidewalk, I veered off, away from Oiseau, and lurched quickly--as if under some sudden, intoxicated compulsion--toward the glass-walled booth at the edge of the terrace.

To Oiseau I said, "I just want to check out how much it costs to get in." Just curious, as it were.

We had already talked about this tourist thing. Her previous husband of twenty-two years, an ex-Briton, had liked to take in the castles he had missed seeing in his youth, whenever they'd traveled to England. She'd viewed her share of them then, and so they didn't rank high in her current priorities. I hadn't been particularly inspired, myself, up till now. And there was the point that entrance fees to museums and castles and such could add up to make an impact on an already minimal budget.

The lettering on the kiosk indicated 300 pesetas for a ticket--almost three dollars each. Not much, but something to consider. "Just looking," I indicated with a toss of my head as I hurried past the attendant sitting behind the glass with her dark, impassive Iberian eyes.

"So," I said, returning to Oiseau on the sidewalk, "do we start with the Roman wall?"

We could take a quick, free tour around the downtown streets, looking at the famous buildings, and still have ample time left over to sit down finally to a meal prepared by a chef. Our usual diet of quick-cooking pasta and greasy sausage and dried vegetable flakes on the one-burner campstove was getting kind of old by now. We were already overspending our daily budget, with all the train rides taken into account; but I felt unsatisfied in this backlogged desire, however childish or bourgeois I knew it to be. My anticipation of a classic European meal was aroused in part by Peter Mayle's gourmandizing [A Year in Provence](#), and reinforced by the relish our guidebook writers took in recommending culinary attractions in all the regions we passed through. Since before this trip began, I had fantasized particularly about my own first taste of fine French cuisine--having resigned myself to reserving Italy for another year's trip. But during the previous week's dash across France and hike through the remote countryside of the Pyrenees, the timing for a decent restaurant meal had never quite worked out. It was too bad about that last village in France...Sarrance, with its one dim restaurant and thin, zombie-eyed cook in a faded dress offering only soup and sandwiches, because it

was too early in the day. We'd declined and walked back out into the afternoon glare, leaving a lone customer sitting in the gloom with his glass of red wine.

But what was past was past. Now that French cooking was out of the picture, Spanish fare would have to do. They had these dishes called tapas, which we'd read about in the guidebook...

Twenty minutes and a couple of promising menus later, it was my irrational hunger to see what lay inside that charmed palace gateway that wouldn't go away, and so I told Oiseau I wanted to go back. Three hundred pesetas was not a real obstacle, was it?

She was not opposed; but she had a competing interest in some of these churches we were headed for. As we continued walking toward the downtown area, talking as we went, the inertia of the original plan once again seemed too strong to reverse.

"How about if we do a streamlined version of the tourist loop?" I finally suggested. "Then we'd still have time to swing back past the palace, and we could go to that restaurant we passed with the free dessert."

Great idea, in theory. But I had forgotten to notice what time the palace gates closed.

In my later reflections in the high dry hills, on this telling incident and its unhappy sequel in Granada, I recalled once more the back of that caboose pulling away from the station as I watched with my mother from the track. Another image also came to mind: the face of a pretty girl on the schoolbus, when I was thirteen, looking back at me through

the window as I walked away toward home. I hadn't taken the chance to speak to her, and after that day, as far as I could remember, I never saw her again. There were any number of these heartbreaking "Missed Trains And Roads Not Taken," if I stopped to look back at the story of my life. There was no doubt some karmic pattern or important lesson here for me, but what was it?

Maybe I was simply doomed by fate; but I couldn't seem to shake the feeling that I was simply wrong somehow, in this case of the Aljafería: stingy, or shortsighted, or too willing to sacrifice what I wanted for what I imagined someone else wanted. Am I too wishy-washy, I wondered, unable to think fast on my feet? Maybe it was as simple as paying closer attention to my blood sugar, so as to make clearer decisions. Or, more deeply, to find at each point of choice, an awareness of my most central priorities.

There was another truth, I knew, which resided in the very spirit of that palace. Something other than the actual stone and architecture--though this spirit was certainly produced, or invoked, through the building's design. It had to do with the serenity, the simplicity, the sense of sanctuary there: the successful shutting out of distraction, of public intrusion, of chaos, of threat, and even, in this example of earlier Moslem art somewhat simpler than the later overworked style of the Alhambra, of superfluous detail. This truth, once realized, made the literal palace somewhat beside the point, and an actual tour of its beguiling surfaces unnecessary.

So why couldn't I just be satisfied with finding in myself this inner quality of experience I so desired? Why did I instead insist on holding onto the hope that I could

somehow, in our as-yet unfixed itinerary for the end of the trip, return to Zaragoza in the flesh? The Islamic palace had become nothing less, and little more, than a monumental symbol of my own aspirations and limitations. In respect to a spiritual understanding, whether I ever saw the literal building again didn't matter any more. Yet, by the same token, I could always stand to learn better how to manifest what I most desired in this life.

I went so far as to imagine the circumstances of a future trip, decades hence--given a lottery prize, for instance, a professional tour, or even just the dogged persistence of a single-minded determination to make it happen. But of course, in such a case, everything would have changed. The conditions of my life would be different; at the very least, the mood of my initial seduction would have passed. On arriving I would find the palace shut for repairs, closed for the season, or gutted by a separatist bomb attack. For that matter, I might be killed enroute in a freak accident. Or I might find the building, under my eventual inspection, dull and unworthy of the imaginative grandeur I'd spent years investing in it. Finally I would discover that the original lesson, about making the right decisions at the right times, was still unlearned, unresolved.

A pretty puzzle, indeed.

A fictional solution (I went on to imagine as our feet flew over the sun-brushed hills) ultimately might find our imperfect protagonist choosing, à la Citizen Kane, to build a pleasure palace of his own. In the nonfiction version, I pass on the castle remake, and construct instead my love-tale of finding Oiseau again, after an ill-timed,

unconsummated affair a decade earlier. The title containing the moral would read, on the theatre marquee,

Art Redeems Life

True Love Wins Out

You Can Go Back

or, by way of an explanatory subtitle,

It all works out if you get in the flow.

It all depends, that is, on getting past the stuck nexi of past karma, freed of the toxic and tragic vortices laying in wait everywhere.

Getting to the right place is great when it happens in present time...but even that is not enough, because the relative paradise of there or here can always become a trap, another stuck vortex. As flow continues, ever dynamic, "there" is never here; and "here" slides always back into a succession of memories. New decisions are required moment by moment by moment, and new destinations arrive without end.

There is a break in the misty clouds before noon, and we decide to pack our damp gear and move on. Next stop: Válor.

As smoke drifts up from clay and slate chimneys, grapes and almonds are gathered and brought in by the donkey load to dry. There are also figs, pomegranates, chestnuts, walnuts, apples, oranges, peaches; and long strings of hot red peppers hung over whitewashed walls. While these ancient hill villages built by Moors overlook dry

badlands like Montana, in the upper canyons the water trickles through vine-covered crannies as lush as Hawaii.

We set up camp this time on an open hillside at dusk, in an orchard facing the tiny hamlet of Nechite. The wind is fierce but without rain. We huddle in all our clothes behind a makeshift windbreak of air mattresses, to cook and eat our pasta-and-sausage supper, and then crawl into the shelter of our tiny tent. The night is cold around the single, thin down sleeping bag we use for a comforter, and we wonder if this is the last night we'll be able to camp at all.

When I think again of that Moorish palace and what I've been seeking there--a feeling of peace or serenity or transcendence or solitude--it all becomes empty and sterile and academic. Because in the present instant I'm holding Oiseau tenderly, warm and alive, loving in my arms.

*

For hours they would sit and look at the sea. As Oiseau gazed out in rapt concentration on the shading and texture of the colors in the water, Now transduced his sense impressions into a kind of interior music. At times the serene environment simply formed a backdrop or accompanying drone for the writer's shifting thoughts about form and motion, tense and tension. It seemed to him a futile ambition to try to capture the crystal vision of the outer world in words, despite the ineffable charm of its beauty. But

how else to carry it back with them into the rest of the world, into the rest of their lives, into the world of other people?

He knew already the pitfalls of photography: from simple bumbles like forgetting the film, to the hassle of advanced settings and filters. And there was always the limitation that came from composing within a small frame.

But her watercolors...now that was another matter.

All the elements conspired here into one fluid splendor. Under the green water and the blue air were the brown rocks, and the white sand, and from such simple truths the greater complexity of the scene, and of Nature herself, might be successfully conveyed. These colors mingled in the moving breath of air into a rippling phantasm embodying the very mystery of creation. These earth and air and water elements were lit and shot through in their ceaseless dancing with a brilliant clear fire from the sun. On the surface of the water danced whole palettes of blues and greens and olive browns, and even the muted darker colors were made bright with the clarity of the sunlight. In the rolling, fluid motion of the waves was a smaller, faster, more ephemeral rising of the surface into a texture of smooth green glass dancing into tiny peaks of clear crystal, all blended with shadow and reflected colors from the rocks below and the sky above--pale, rain-washed, clean; a dry-brushed surface of pastel, baby blue.

At all of this they gazed as at a performance or spectacle, unable to move or speak. They sat comfortably enough on the gnarled flat surfaces and rounded knolls of the craggy shoreline sandstone, which offered its own strange, pale gray-brown beauty to

the sea. A strange beauty indeed, when the words and images that could best describe it had to do with rotted flesh, worm-eaten wood, or ratty cheese.

What had these metaphors to do with the sandstone itself, which had borne for millennia an uneasy marriage with this restless, warm salty sea?

That rocky shore endured with humble and stoic persistence, brooding over eons of light and darkness, immune to words while invisibly crumbling. It found itself content to catch and hold small pools of clear water from the storms of the passing night. From the pools emanated small shows of flickering reflected light which played, with equal impish pleasure, upon the corresponding hollows of overhanging rock.

*

As Oiseau cried in his arms he held her like a small child. Her body was large, an adult and loving woman, but her tears came from a place deep inside, from the small child and maybe too from the old woman still deeper inside. There were low, wracking sobs now as she lay curled beside him, and still he held her. He held her closer and stroked her gently, with his hand on her hair and the side of her tear-wet face, down over her shoulder and back, and along her hip and drawn-up legs.

Now already knew this was not about the toothache any more. Beneath the dull ache of the tooth in the back of her jaw, which was getting worse day by day, was another dull pain, a growing blackness, an emptiness. He had sensed an emotional tempest

brewing in Oiseau for several days now, as her frustration with painting and drawing had grown into boredom and then given way to a desire to return home to her familiar comforts, her cookstove, her family, her job at the post office. Some words came when he coaxed her to tell him something of her pain and sadness and fear.

"I'm afraid to look at who I am," she told him from the huddle of his arms.

"And who are you?"

"Nothingness. Nothingness. Just nothingness."

She wailed and he held her. She told him in another burst of words that she didn't know who she wanted to be; that she was tired of trying and searching for who to be. There was nothing left, when the emptying out was done; just nothingness.

He asked if there was another part of her, who was not the nothing-self, and who was not afraid of the darkness there.

She said she had thought maybe there was, during her earlier walk to the shore, but then there was this loud clear voice that told her: "There's something REALLY WRONG here!" and she had to listen.

He let this sink in, holding and stroking her, and then he asked her, "What's wrong, then? What does the voice say is wrong?"

"It doesn't know," she cried.

After a while he asked her again, "What would you answer, what would the voice say if it heard me say that there is nothing wrong, that you are perfect the way you are, just as you are?"

"I don't know," she whimpered, with the voice of the child. "I don't know."

"Well you are. You are perfect just as you are, and I love you exactly the way you are: all of you. You're not 'nothing' to me. To me you are perfectly lovable."

"Oh," she said in the small voice.

She lay in his arms awhile longer, and then she began to sob again, more lightly this time. When he asked her once more what was going on, she answered, "It feels like I've been away from you for a long, long time. And it feels so good to come back. It feels so good."

She lay calm beside him then, resting quietly, with smooth breathing broken only by the occasional hitch of a leftover sob. After a few minutes her eyes opened. She breathed deeply and said, "I've just realized: after these days and weeks of emptying myself of my old patterns, feeling more and more distance from work and from my kids...and then trying and trying to teach myself to paint and draw and write poetry and play recorder and live the life of an artist...I just have this simple desire, just to live. To be alive at home, with my children, by the cookstove with roast potatoes in the oven..." She laughed and cried a little more before finishing: "...and not to try to be anything any more. Just to live simply. And simply to love."

*

They got up from the bed and had brioche au chocolat and a pot of decaf, and then Now started cooking the chicken he had brought home from the grocery store earlier in the day. It was marinating in a Polynesian sort of sauce consisting of whatever he could find around him in the tiny kitchen: pineapple juice, soy sauce, balsamic vinegar, honey, peach jam, coconut, chopped sweet red pepper, cayenne powder, black pepper, local rosemary, garlic, some leftover yams, grated fresh ginger, a splash of red wine. While the chicken and marinade simmered with a bunch of chopped potatoes, carrots and chard in a pot on the stove, Oiseau knitted a woolen vest on the terrace. Now sat nearby, transcribing drum rhythms from his new catalogue into a form of notation that he found easier to use. By five-thirty the chicken was tender and they ate well, but her tooth was hurting again.

So they walked toward the town to phone her dentist in Canada. A light rain had started to fall, and it was a long walk to town. Maybe, Now thought, this wasn't such a great idea; maybe they could wait another day. But the tooth was acting up more and more; so the trip would still be worthwhile if they could find a pharmacy open and buy some more Tylenol or Ibuprofen. Also, Oiseau had wanted to see Celeste about making an appointment with the dentist she worked for.

They turned onto the road through the wealthy neighborhood known as "Swiss village" and found the mansion where Celeste and Jean-Pierre were staying. Celeste's car

was gone; but Jean-Pierre met them at the locked gate and led them through the courtyard, in out of the rain to a cheery fireplace with glowing logs. He sat them down on the couch and sat himself on the floor in front of the fire, removing his brightly colored sweater and pouring them all a glass of good local red wine.

"Now, tell me what you need," he said. "But please, can we speak in French."

Oiseau told him their various plans for dealing with the tooth. For his part, Jean-Pierre elaborated on the now-familiar story of how it was to come from France, with a job in cinema doing special effects, to Formentera. There were a couple of small business startups on the island, which sputtered and gave way to a series of odd jobs and, finally, "just living."

When Now and Oiseau had finished most of the wine in their glasses, their host offered to take them to town in his car; and he wouldn't let them refuse. So they piled into Jean-Pierre's battered, sand-colored Citroën, a kind of hybrid truck/station wagon/van. Now found a place in the back with the cement and tools.

"It's not a tabernacle, but--" Jean Michel shrugged with his patented rolling eyes and twisted smile and wild ragged gray hair as he jumped in the front. He chauffeured them first to a pay phone (the dentist wasn't in the office, a recording said, until Tuesday), next to a pharmacy for a dozen Ibuprofen, and finally on to Sant Francesc to the dentist's office there.

The brightly lit second-story office seemed another world, as the trio came in from the dark rain. Celeste was surprised to see Sophia's tenants: "Is it about the house?"

"No, no, everything's fine. But Oiseau has this tooth..."

Celeste fielded a phone call and then gave Oiseau her complete attention; she wanted to hear all about it.

Ah, it was indeed a problem. But the dentist was busy at that moment; perhaps Oiseau could sit and wait a bit? Tuesday was also full, but if she wanted to come back on Wednesday--

Oiseau said that Wednesday would do, as she preferred to wait until she had her own dentist's advice. So they went back down to the parking lot and were pulling away in the Citroën when Celeste came running out and tapped on the window. "The dentist can see you now. It's really better for you to see him now. You should come and let him see you now."

Oiseau gave in to Celeste's insistence and returned with her to the office. Now and Jean-Pierre passed the time in a bar across the street with a Ricard (a French anisette liqueur) and a small plate of rubbery calamares, while discussing relationships, careers, the caves on Formentera, and Jean-Pierre's favorite subject, "la vie." Now offered to pay for the drinks but the transplanted Frenchman wouldn't hear of it. "We are on Formentera," he stated nobly. "When I come to visit you in Canada, then at that time you can pay."

Oiseau emerged from her appointment reporting that the tooth was nearly dead and was going to need a root canal. Since the dentist didn't have time for that procedure, he'd settled for cleaning out under an old filling, stuffing in some medication to ease the pain, and following that with a temporary filling. He hoped these interim measures would hold up for the three weeks she'd have to wait before seeing her regular dentist for follow-up.

The weary travelers came home that night somewhat bewildered by the long and trying day.

"Tu nous as bien aidé," Now told Jean-Pierre while clambering out from his tabernacle on wheels.

"Don't thank me," his driver replied as from a script--"C'est la vie que vous a aidé."

14 November

The next morning in bed, Now told Oiseau that he felt a little saddened and subdued by the depth of the soul-searching which she had shared with him, as if some of that darkness had rubbed off on him.

It helped him to be reminded of the peace she had found after the darkness. Toward the end of that session the day before, she quoted the helpful homily, "Doubt and uncertainty aren't par for the course; they are the course." He'd thought then of the

Buddhist nun Pema Chödrön and her book When Things Fall Apart, which had been such an insightful companion to him after the devastating breakup of his last marriage. But when he tried to summarize the lessons of that book, around the same theme of embracing rather than fearing the "emptiness" of who we really are, he couldn't do it justice. It felt as if he were intellectualizing it too much, and not even doing a very sensible job of that.

In looking at the question of what the new day would hold, Now at first avoided this residual frustration, which amounted to a lessening of faith in his own powers of articulate speech. Instead he said blandly, "Oh, I might want to walk to town with you again to phone the dentist, this evening; maybe check my email while we're at it; and, uh, maybe work on a few more drum rhythms."

She knew there was more, and wisely let him come to it.

As an afterthought, Now said he still might want to try to capture something of yesterday's healing session in words, because it had been so powerful for both of them. A written record wouldn't necessarily be meant for anyone else; but he wanted to take a stab at it, just so that they could someday look back and know what they had really experienced, and not have to settle for some dim memory--"We had some really deep, some really healing experiences together"--without being able to recall anything more specific.

When Oiseau heard him come clean with this desire to write, she thought to herself, it might be time for old J.F. to do some rebirthing soon. Maybe today.

And then as if her unspoken thought had already sprung into being, they lay holding each other and breathing together, steadily and regularly and more and more deeply, until the process was underway, and they were there in it, a full-fledged rebirthing session.

At a certain point the breathing produced a tingling sensation in various parts of his body. He felt it in his hands and fingers first, but it quickly spread as he continued to breathe deeply and regularly, until his chest and abdomen felt tightly wrapped with pressure, and his head was taut and his lips were drawn tight around his teeth. His neck was arched back, and his legs straightened and throbbed.

"Keep breathing, Now," Oiseau said softly at his side. For she had eased her own deep breathing so as to attend to his needs. He was fully conscious, even talking occasionally of what he was experiencing. The tightness and tingling warmth surrounded him and intensified to the point of pain; but it was something at once less than pain and beyond pain. It might have been a reliving of his passage through the birth canal, as rebirthing theory suggested; or it might have been strictly a function of the oxygen/carbon balance in his blood, resulting from controlled and voluntary hyperventilation.

Even as the feeling of pressure intensified, he knew he was okay; he just had to keep breathing through it. He and Oiseau had both done rebirthing a number of times before. Each session offered its own challenges and insights.

"Wow," he thought to himself, "this is great. What a discovery, to know the hidden path to the primal source of our pain, and that we can overcome it simply by breathing, by trusting. This is a remarkable fact of human existence, and as such it would make an excellent subject to write about--maybe a self-help article, or part of the novel..."

It was precisely at this point that the tightness and tingling passed into genuine pain.

When the intense pressure became too much to bear, Now eased off on his breathing. He realized then that there was something more to this most fundamental pain than just a reliving of the birth experience, or the so-called hyperventilation syndrome. There was a psychological stress factor tied to it. In this case, the stress had come from the grasping ego wanting to capitalize on the experience, to capture it by the use of verbal machinery and to use it for its own advantage.

The constricting pain didn't vanish with this switch of sudden awareness. Rather, Now's body had crossed an energetic threshold from which there was no turning back. The latter stage of the rebirthing experience was in some ways the most painful, because the tingling pressure solidified into a kind of muscle lockup, called tetany. Now felt it most keenly in his fingers and hands, which formed crabbed knots of wadded joints that he could not undo but only ask Oiseau to soothe by stroking his arms from the shoulders out to the fingertips. He asked her next to stroke his tight legs down to the feet, and then all his body out from the heart area, and finally his head, from the throat over the face, and from the brow up and out the crown. He rolled over onto his side in the fetal

position. He turned back over and lay on his back and sweated, throwing off the blanket and sheet.

The pain became bearable again as he relaxed. Every cell in his body throbbed with life, full to bursting with it. He increased his breathing again, cruising now with a second wind. Oiseau stayed with him, knowing that he'd be fine as long as he continued to breathe, though meanwhile he thrashed and moaned and chanted and babbled.

"The bread of life, that's all there is, that and the necklace of beads, love beads, the beads of your tears thank you for sharing yesterday, thank you for being with me now, stroke my legs again now please down to the feet. A big soft spongy loaf of the bread of life. A necklace made of the beads of your salt tears. And it doesn't matter if we forgot to bring the necklace. It doesn't matter if we didn't bring the bread. We can have it later for breakfast. It only matters that the bread is love and the necklace is made of love beads. It doesn't even matter if the necklace is connected, it can just be in a long string, and we can connect it up and wear it around our necks and let it hang over our hearts any time we want. We don't need no books or email, we don't need no books or email; we just need the bread and love-beads, we just need the bread and love-beads....Listen to these words, I'm forgetting to breathe. We just use words so we can forget to breathe. Forget to breathe and forget to love. I'm going to shut up now and breathe. I love you, Oiseau."

And she stroked and soothed him, and his joints and limbs became loose and limber again, but only after a period of light fluttering vibration, during which he placed

his subtly trembling fingertips on Oiseau's temples so as to share with her the healing energy that coursed through his body and soul. He told her again how much he loved her, and he kissed her with electric lips.

When it was finally over and he had found his body in a state of peaceful rest, he felt cleansed and scoured inside. His breathing was full, easy, clear and free. His mind was washed like a sky after rain. His body still hummed but as with a light, clean-burning engine idling, ready for life.

Now he was ready to take on some of that bread, for real. "Would you do me a favor and make a nice breakfast for us? I have in mind some large thick chunks of that good brown bread, with butter, some slices of cheese, and apple, and pieces of banana, and a little coffee."

Amidst all the thrashing, the deck of Mayan Oracle^{*} cards had appeared on Now's chest, a gift of the moment from his intuitive guide. In due course they had been scattered about, with a few selected by feel and pasted at various locations on his body. The cards now lay collected in a two neat piles next to him as he remained in bed awaiting breakfast. Oiseau had salvaged from the operation the seven cards which--of their own accord, you might say--had found meaningful niches in the chaos. Now took these and formed them Tarot-style into a layout representing the seven chakras, as follows:

^{*} Spilsbury and Bryner, The Mayan Oracle (Rochester, VT: Bear & Co., 1992)

- 7+ Dreamer and Dreamed
- 6-7 Ahau
- 5-6 Chuen
- 4-5 Ix
- 3-4 Harmonic Resonance
- 2-3 Hologram
- 1-2 Organic Balance

Now envisioned the process of personal and spiritual evolution as an upward movement of energy along the spinal channel of the kundalini. He wasn't content merely to locate the energetic nodes of his current life-passage along the serial points of the chakras themselves. To be statically defined by a series of energy centers was too pat, too conventional. He wanted to nudge the focus upward--to put himself, every part of himself, in the transition zones. And so he saw his own centers of energy transposed, like a musical scale, a half-step up from the usual points of reference. This schematic arrangement extended the approach he was already taking in the heart-throat area, where he found himself dealing not strictly with issues of love and relationship or issues of creative expression (the traditional themes of chakras 4 and 5), but rather with the transformation of energy from loving relationship to creative expression, from one chakra to the next.

The cards Ix, Chuen, and Ahau were arranged in the sequence according to the chakra locations in which Now had intuitively placed them during the rebirthing session-- over heart, throat, and forehead. The card called "Dreamer and Dreamed" had found its way under his body, and so belonged, Now decided, in the space beyond the crown chakra, from where it would offer a kind of overview or commentary on his whole evolutionary process at this time.

The other three cards had appeared face down in various spots on and around him on the bed, and were distinguished mainly by their isolation from the rest. To place them in the chakra sequence was then an arbitrary decision, but one made easy by the figures appearing on the cards. Organic Balance represented number six and so had a bar and single dot, after the Mayan numbering system. Harmonic Resonance represented number eight, with a bar and three dots. Simply considering the dots, these belonged in the first and third spots in the lineup. The remaining card, Hologram, fit neatly in the remaining second place, with its striking image of two purple triangles meeting at their apexes, against a background sun.

Consulting the interpretations in the book for the various cards, Now discovered an immediate confirmation of his intuitive placement of the primary series Ix, Chuen, and Ahau, as these were symbolically associated with the heart, throat, and crown chakras, respectively. As he went on to read each of the interpretations he was struck by the deep correspondences between these pages of crystallized wisdom, and the issues currently in

process in his life. Of particular interest was the centrally located Ix, in the place between heart and throat, love and creativity.

This retreat with his partner, their "working-holiday-honeymoon," presented the perfect opportunity to nurture these areas. This was the time in Now's life when he wanted to find resolution for these lifelong struggles; and the same was true for Oiseau in her own way. It was time for both of them to celebrate recent success in their love life, and to use some of the energy and inspiration and support and learning from that part of their lives, to heal and grow and come more deeply to a peaceful state of productive ease with their creative potential.

The design on the card was entrancing, unique, with an array of white and silver disks and bluish dots on a background of swirling rainbow colors. When Now stood back he noticed that this design was actually only framed within a card-shaped outline, and that this virtual card was superimposed upon another, larger, circular silver disk; with this disk in turn superimposed upon a thick, vertical, glowing cord running from the top to the bottom of the actual card's border.

Ix, he read from the book, was the card of the magician, the shaman, the torch-bearer, the night-seer, the jaguar. The shadow wisdom of this card spoke directly to the primary issue he had been grappling with, consciously and unconsciously, throughout his creative life: the need for approval and recognition. Now at last he could find clear counsel (to complement the sage advice his lover already had offered) which addressed this issue directly:

"Develop a clear connection with divine will and your Essence Self. Be transparent, innocently allowing magic to come through you rather than needing to create it. Open to heart-knowing and limitless possibilities."

This perspective explicitly reinforced and echoed the message of Nadeen's book--"Consciousness is all there is. You are not the doer."

This card's reading was a mini-manual for the stance of the creative artist in direct touch with art's magical potential:

Resplendent mysteries do I carry

in my magical dream-coat.

I am the shaman priest, the geomancer,

the mystic builder and adapter of materials,

the chameleon shapeshifter.

Effortlessly do I slip between worlds

with the graceful power of a jaguar,

beyond the four winds of many universes.

Step into self-empowerment. When you align with what gives you joy, expressing your beauty and power, your energy naturally expands to include more of who you are. Nothing and no one outside yourself can give you real power. Empower yourself by directly addressing the

situation at hand. Act with integrity, and magical outcomes will naturally blossom!

Reading further into the interpretations, Now found increasing confirmation of the validity of his current approach to writing, using the journal as an art form. There was no need to create fantastic worlds, characters or plots any different or more exotic than his own actual life experience--as it was unfolding day by day, for instance, on this unassuming desert island.

"Magic's dimensional doorway opens through simply being. It appears to be extraordinary, yet it can often be found within the ordinary if your eyes are open to seeing it."

The presence of magic causes the appearance of the ordinary to be charged with something other...to glow with the hidden power of correspondence between all things, all possibilities. What appears even as the simple relation of facts, when infused with the magician's connection with the creative source of Creation itself, can inspire wonder and transformation. The ordinary becomes a window to the extraordinary.

Of course, part of the shaman's magic lies in his craft: the ability to shape and structure those appearances in just such a way that the play of light and dance of forms can give way to the surpassing vision. The deceptive design on the Ix card lent itself to the same purpose.

Shapeshifting may be seen as doing what is required in the moment. It is the act of changing of masks or appearances to serve the intentions of the Divine. Ix has the ability to move with silent ease through the dimensions, slipping like a graceful jaguar, unnoticed, through the "hole between the worlds."

The interpretation of this card gave special meaning to synchronicity--the occurrence of meaningful coincidence such as Now had already noticed in the correspondences between the cards and the chakras. He was further inspired to read that the color associated with Ix was akin to the sea colors that had so mesmerized Oiseau and him throughout their stay here: "If you wish to access the qualities of Ix, focus on translucent opalescence or the iridescent, multicolored dream-coat." It was not only the shapeshifting sea which fit this description, but also the island's most ubiquitous form of wildlife, the darting, shimmering-skinned lizards, as they displayed their magical dream-coats every sunny day.

In the "Harmonic Wisdom" of Ix, Now discovered pointed advice as to the ongoing construction of his literary work. The operable metaphor here was melody--which also pointed to his other main area of current creative exploration, learning pennywhistle tunes and key structures.

"Melody," the Oracle informed him, "is to music what story line is to a story. Utilize the elements you have chosen for exploration in your life--your gifts, talents, abilities, motivations, circumstances, and the other characters in your play. Orchestrate

the most interesting and growth-engendering story line from this combination of possibilities. Understand that you are the player and the played in the melody in your life."

Player and played, dreamer and dreamed, doer and done, creator and creature, there seemed to be a theme running through these messages he was getting. But through it all, he had to remain humble. Even with this new and clearly articulated apprehension and confirmation of divine power and potential, to get puffed up about it or imagine that he or his life or talents were unique or above anyone else's, was to fall into an ego trap that would then block access to those very riches.

The text gave pointed advice in speaking to "the issue of ceremonial leaders who separate the ceremony from its participants by implying that they have superior status or knowledge. Everyone has direct access to divinity. Does the wearing of your "robes" or magician's cape represent status or authority to you? If so, set this illusion aside! The real magician's cape is transparent to the will of the Divine!"

Now recognized a real danger, for example, in his "natural" writing style, which at times became too academic, or too abstruse. He tended to use too many high-faluting words like "abstruse," as well as an arcane sentence construction that was too complicated to follow and too outdated to be appreciated. There were altogether too many unpredictable twists and turns of the narrative cape. Through such faults of pride and vanity he was cutting himself off from ever having a large readership.

But the democratic concept of everyone sharing a piece of the magic had a double edge. If everyone had the right to call themselves an artist, did the term have any meaning left? To deny the role of the ego, with a full retreat into humility, could stunt the creative spirit with all-too convenient self-criticism.

Succumbing to both extremes could leave a person in a manic-depressive limbo...

Grandiose and worthless. Tuned in but tapped out. So much to say but no way to say it. In the presence of a bliss that cannot be communicated.

*

In the afternoon Now walked with Oiseau to the other side of the island, where the sea rolled in under a southern sun, and the smooth beach was lined with classic island palms. He followed her footsteps in the sand. As he did so, the words formed in his mind: "He followed her footsteps in the sand." And his thoughts turned from the blinding, silver-burnished sea, to more familiar literary matters, to the endlessly nagging inquiry into the possible distinctions between fiction and nonfiction.

To describe their movement along the beach, or the scenery through which they passed, or the words they spoke, in straightforward prose and with the purpose of painting a true picture, was clearly the very stuff essential to fiction: an objective narrative comprised of action, setting, dialogue. Thoughts were also permitted as part of the mix, if they contributed to a sense of character or the movement of the story line. The

aim of fiction, whether working with real or imagined characters and scenes, was at least a lifelike (if not absolutely true and accurate) representation of reality.

So what distinguished fiction from its logical opposite, nonfiction?

To discourse at length about ideas and speculations and complexes of abstract thought, was the stuff of what usually passes for nonfiction: academic prose, philosophy, expository essays, organized information and theory. Yet how unreal that whole enterprise was, in the light of the Formentera sun, under the tropical palms and in the face of the roaring waves! This mind stuff, far removed from the objective world, seemed rather a rarified species of unreality, or fiction.

Now's speculations came to rest on that paradoxical note; and he turned his attention back to the rhythm of the sea. In that muffled pounding, that insistent swish and slap and sweet lapping, was no rhythm the human understanding could ever fathom, let alone notate and reproduce.

*

The challenge of communicating bliss was an especially tricky one. Now and Oiseau wound up discussing it that very night, over second helpings of macaroni with chard and cheese sauce, by candlelight in the second bedroom.

"Why is it," she wondered out loud, "that no one ever talks about being in bliss, or having blissful relationships? Is it that they don't have them, or they don't talk about it?"

Everyone seems to go around either complaining about how bad their relationship is, or how comfortable and ordinary it is. But never ecstatic or blissful!"

"Well, I guess if you were are part of some special spiritual community, with your own teacher and agreed-upon method of attaining bliss, and vocabulary for discussing it and so on..."

"But a spiritually-oriented group like that probably wouldn't even be talking about blissful relationships, or sexuality, except in terms of avoiding it."

"No. For that you'd need to get into the Tantric circles."

"They do Tantra in circles?"

"Some do."

They smiled at one another, eating delicately and sipping wine. It was clear to both of them, by direct experience and frequent commentary, how blissful they were--during this honeymoon at least--in their relationship with each other and also in their individual lives here. So what happened to them when they were at home?

It was obvious that work and kids and all the competing distractions got in the way; but there was more to the picture than that. The denial of bliss involved a whole mind-set, a cultural orientation, a materialistic worldview.

Now considered the stance of most of his men friends. "There's this default way of talking with each other that's basically just cynical. Bliss isn't a part of the vocabulary, unless it comes to making fun of anyone who dares to raise the possibility of it. Even for people in general, it's as if bliss is outside the range of our experience, except in brief

flashes, through sex. And so it's hard to trust anyone's description of bliss, because the attempt to describe it comes across as an advertisement, as a kind of proselytizing for the benefit of whoever's pushing this or that method of attaining it. Blue-green algae, Hare Krishna, Rebirthing, whatever it is. All snake oil. Fleecing the wishful to line the pockets of the silver-tongued gurus."

Oiseau nodded. "It's a system of one kind or another, which you have to buy into."

"And with some of them you have to give up junk food too--but this leaves aside, of course, the question of bliss from chocolate."

She smiled. "That's not negotiable."

"At least not while we're in Europe. When the cocoa content drops back below 45%, though..."

"Hmm. There's a point. When the bliss is compromised..."

"Move on to the next. Now if you could just find the perfect system--the unending supply of primo chocolate--no more compromises. But the usual price for these total packages is, you also have to give up your ego, erase your identity. Most of us aren't willing to do that. The ego is our suit of armor and we can't really imagine doing without it."

"I can."

"You can? How's that?" Leave it to the goddess to figure out how to shed the very figment of maleness, Freud's spoiled brainchild, the ego.

"I just don't buy into this whole unquestioning philosophical scheme which defines the primary human personality as this single limited personage we call the ego."

"So you're already enlightened, then." I didn't mean to sound mocking; I guess my ego just couldn't refrain from an edge of sarcasm, despite my better intentions.

She brushed the remark aside. "No, but it's just so arbitrary. It's like the way we divide what we see into land, sea, and sky. Doesn't it make just as much sense to divide things differently--into moving and unmoving things, for instance, or dark things and light things..."

I saw her point but felt compelled to observe--"But of course if it came to fishing for your next meal, it might help to know whether to cast into the blue below or the blue above."

"But why do we have to depend so heavily on this negative view of the individual human person? There's nothing inherently wrong with any one of us, limited as we might be in our own unique body and personality. We are also connected with everything and everybody else. We were all divine and individual, both at the same time. We don't have to feel separated from each other or from the rest of the universe. And so we don't have to try to detach from any part of ourselves, including the ego (whatever it might be), in order to experience bliss, with is really a reunion with the divine."

Now was left speechless, without further argument in defense of, or in opposition to, the ego. He smiled sheepishly and gazed at the empty plates and wine glasses on the table between them.

"What's going on with you now?" Oiseau asked him.

"I'm waiting for the next useful thought to come along."

Weather Reports

15 October

We have reached the turning point into the second half of our trip. I begin the day typing with cold fingers in a kitchen in the mountain village of Bérchules, where we've rented a whole suite for twenty dollars a night. Even here in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada, the houses are unheated, and so we are barely comfortable even indoors, making do with heavy wool blankets and warmish water. The sky is filled with gray soft cloud as we prepare for a day hike to Cádiar: something to do, while we make plans to move on to some place more promising of a real change from Canadian October.

Oiseau makes sandwiches for the day, then writes a postcard to her boys while I mend a bramble-torn cotton shirt. Waiting for November, when we can try the sea-level version of the Mediterranean winter, we find nothing more pressing now than the strange new (yet all-too familiar) business of keeping warm, whether huddled in cold stone walls, or walking the terraced hills. It helps, I find, to do an active form of Tibetan yoga in the mornings. We eat a hot breakfast and watch the sky, and count our money to make sure we have bus fare to the next town. We're still thinking we might farm for a week or two near Órgiva; or we might test the guidebook promise that the sea at the Cabo de Gata is warmer in November than in June.

Moving energy up the chakras, from the heart to art, is all very well. But right now, survival mode is taking over. Trying to keep warm, and the anxiety about not being warm, is tying up nearly all of our physical and psychic energy, so there's not much left for romantic or aesthetic considerations.

*

15 November

Now didn't want to have to resort to reporting on the weather in his journal, because that would make it more of a personal diary, just a recording of data. He recalled how his mother faithfully kept a diary in which she included, among other details of daily life, what she made for supper each day. She took her cooking seriously--a trait which Now learned from her and later regretted, in those years of domestic duties when his daughter was growing up. He liked to cook when it was a free and creative act of inspiration. But he hated to cook when it was his job--part of the household chores which he had agreed, out of a spirit of fairness, to share equally with Pam. In that marriage which was less of a marriage than an ongoing arrangement, he had agreed to an arbitrary fifty-fifty split of everything, from childcare on down to washing windows, dusting, stacking firewood, cleaning the greywater screen...

All of this domestic detail was a far cry (he realized as he followed the thread of association in today's journal entry) from reporting on the day's weather as he had perhaps intended. Weather wasn't the world's most fascinating topic, but as an icebreaker

it was undoubtedly the most popular. Meanwhile, this other running commentary of indeterminate content, as it breezed through his psyche and passed through fingers to keys and into digital print, could be considered a kind of internal weather. And who knew where or when the connections might suddenly become meaningful--as in chaos theory, where the butterfly in Hong Kong creates, through a long chain of extension between small and otherwise unrelated events, a tornado in Des Moines.

As for Formentera, the weather was different enough from what he was used to in the interior rain forest of British Columbia, that he felt compelled finally and unequivocally to report on what it was doing. Today, for instance, it was cloudy, cold, rainy. Yesterday it had been sunny, clear, cool, washed clean after a night of drizzle. The previous day had begun hazy, cloudy, tropical-warm, then had cleared to an almost hot sun still filtered through warm haze.

It was always unpredictable, from night to day and hour to hour, and it ranged through every variation imaginable, short of frost and snow.

So what? he thought. But he wrote it down anyway. You never know.

*

In order to fill more of the day with the warming activity of walking, we embarked on an arduous circular day trip that would carry us through Cádíar, Tímar and Juviles. Cádíar was attractive to us by virtue of its cash machine, which on this overcast

Sunday would provide us with the means of our escape by bus on Monday morning.

While we lunched in the park there, a small bearded man with a backpack came up to us and began a friendly conversation in English. Lorenzo had just returned from a year in Australia, and was on his way home to his holiday house in Alcútar, just outside Bérchules. This world traveler, a veteran of the Alps and Himalayas, was German-born and now based in England. He told us of the coming of hippies to this area twenty years ago. He had later trained and now worked, sporadically, as an anaesthesiologist. He'd bought his house nine years ago, for five thousand pounds, together with a woman who was now in Switzerland. With both of them gone for the past two years, he was worried today about the deterioration of their clay roof.

All of the houses here had flat slate roofs covered with clay. We'd read in the guidebook that according to tradition, the best time to lay new clay (besides during rainstorms when leaks would appear) was during the waning of the moon, when presumably the clay would shrink tight. Lorenzo was unaware of this practice, but glad to realize that his arrival at this time of the month came at the perfect time for a roofing job. He would have to spend some days arranging help, however; as the work required lifting dozens or even hundreds of buckets of fine clay dust up to the roof. He wasn't much good for it himself, as he had injured his left wrist falling from a horse in a rocky creekbed some years ago.

We told Lorenzo of the appearance of snow on the nearby peaks, and of our plans to move on in search of warmth.

"Yes, it is unseasonably cold right now," he agreed. "But as for snow, these villages used to see two or three meters a year, and now just a few flakes. The constant snowpack in the mountains has greatly diminished and remains now only on the highest peaks. The climate is drying out so badly, in fact, that some of the creeks and fields are dying."

For the continuation of our hike Lorenzo suggested a shortcut from Cádiz to Tímar and Juviles over a little-used secondary road. This was a welcome option, since the GR route Oiseau and I had planned to use looped around to the south for nearly ten kilometers before arriving at Juviles, and we weren't sure we had enough time or energy to go that way and still get back to Bérchules by dark.

It became even more evident during our hike that day, that our jaunt through the Alpujarras was finished, after just one week. The high elevation, untimely winter weather, and lack of warm accommodations were conspiring against us.

We had already made the decision to move on to Órgiva; and if the farm option fell through, there was always the southeast coast, where Lorenzo had spent half of the previous night sleeping comfortably enough between two pieces of cardboard. He told us that Formentera would be cold in November. If it was warmth we were after, he recommended the Canary Islands--specifically Geroa, "where hippies still sleep on the beach," or another one whose name he couldn't remember, "long and thin and full of sand dunes."

As Oiseau and I kept moving over the cold hard ground in the pale sunlight, we tried to consider how we might muster some extra budget for such a sunny side trip. Two weeks remained before our month's rental began on Formentera. If the farm option didn't pan out, and the weather in this region remained cold, we would need either to get to a warmer place where we could camp again, or to seek out a heated pensión.

Being at the mercy of our environment and the weather was psychically as well as physically taxing. Oiseau at least was stoic, if at times desperate. I was less forgiving of our own responsibility for this predicament, constantly wondering, "Where did our planning go wrong? How could we have ended up stuck here on the verge of hypothermia, when the whole idea was to vacation somewhere warm and pleasant?"

Such complaints, when I voiced them, didn't make Oiseau's coping any easier, as both of us were implicated in my charge of poor decision-making. But at length my reasoning led me to some small consolation. "We made the right choice of time and place, in theory, but were just foiled by the fickle weather, an untimely cold front. Even if you do everything right, the breaks don't always go your way. As my old friend the I Ching would say, 'No blame.'"

There was another phenomenon at work, too, which helped us get through that final day in the chilly mountains: the finding of grace. Through Lorenzo's intervention we'd discovered a perfect compromise for our walking route, as well as a chance to enjoy the simple pleasure of meeting and conversing with a fellow-traveler. There was the welcome comfort of a café in Juviles where we are able to sit at our leisure, even after

finishing our coffee, and write in our journals, with a background of upbeat music and lively Spanish chatter at the bar. There was the clarifying focus of our plan to catch the bus to Órgiva early the next morning. Finally there was the sheer surviving of another day, and the moving into another small phase and larger cycle of our journey.

*

16 November

Two weeks to go. The days marched in on our wayward Canadians with solemn regularity now, like a countable procession, each to be witnessed and dismissed in their turn. They beat against the foundations of Now's creative aerie with the persistence of waves upon the shore, and he was powerless to stop them or alter their flow, until the day would come when he would cease resisting. He'd be pushed out and finally away into the air, to the sound of the sad refrain, "The honeymoon's over."

Oiseau's dreams were no longer weird or bizarre as they had been, but rather obsessive in replaying and compounding the tedious trivia of home life. She still awoke every morning with a knot of tension in her stomach; and she realized that these hopeless situations she somehow survived, night after night, were "just how it is at home."

She was standing by the sink facing a load of dishes, layers of muck and leftover mess. Shira had already done more than her share, so Oiseau let her go and got busy herself. There were beet scrapings and globs of hardened grease and grimy plates and

pots, and a lizardy thing she felt with her hand but wasn't sure she wanted to see...and somewhere in there, she discovered also her rain jacket wadded up and beet-stained, and it was vaguely Now's fault, but then there was his jacket too, and she wanted to take these out first and clean them. But then Jason appeared and she realized, "Oh, you need to do some of these dishes, you haven't done your chore yet for today. And you need to have a snack." And when she looked at her watch, it was quarter past ten already and she said, "And you need to go to bed--right now!" All of this was impossible enough, but on top of it she realized that she'd forgotten to give Jason any insulin at suppertime, and--

Oiseau laughed to tell Now all this, and she laughed again when he shared with her his dream which supplied a similarly impossible vision of their life at home. Dour old Mavis Bloomfield had borrowed their car, a red Mercury, and they had borrowed hers; both cars were going to town at the same time and pulled out together from Mavis' driveway, and they had to watch out for Mavis as she tried to pull forward past them cutting them off from the right, and they slowed but still inched forward, and she refused to back off but continued trying to cut in front, even though she was running into an abutment in the process and could no longer turn past it--but still she wouldn't back up, she kept pressing and grinding forward, now crunching the corner of the Mercury, collapsing the front end accordion-style; and it was sickening to watch her do this right in front of them but still she kept on, hunched over the wheel as the car compressed further...

Their laughter faded into Oiseau's soft tears and fast breathing, and Now put his hand on her chest and told her to relax, and to keep breathing. She said it was better not to have the pressure of his hand there, as she needed more room to breathe. She told him she wanted to make room inside for her baby self, because with the cluttering visions of all the things there were to do at home, and all the stress that came with them, and her two boys also wanting to get back inside her, there wasn't room for her own small self.

So Now lay beside her and helped her remember to breathe deeply, to make more room at the top of her inside space by breathing up and out the top of the chest, and also in and out through the mouth as her nose was plugged from crying. And Oiseau coughed and sputtered and tried to fill her inner space with breath, and at times she started to cry but remembered to keep breathing through the tightness and fear, and in time her tears and scrunched painful face gave way to a stronger, more regular, continuous breathing.

As he lay breathing with her, Now's own inner space cleared. Words came into that peaceful place, and passed through him to his partner like an incantation:

You are open and full now with your breath

You are open and full now with me beside you

Safe and relaxed now with me beside you

There is room enough inside you now

You are open and full with your breathing

The space inside you is free and full
Empty and full with your breathing
Open and full with the love
The love in us, the love in our hearts
Open and full for whatever you need.

And she felt the space grow clear and large within her, until the baby self could wriggle in like a large familiar lizard, finding its way up even past a temporary barrier in her chest, to work its limbs into her limbs, and finally even (after some hesitation) into her head. And now she relaxed and breathed easy and free and said she felt whole again.

It was strange, she said, to experience every night and day the full stress of home, here in this vacation retreat where none of the external causes of that stress were actually present. But maybe she could find a way to deal with these issues while she was here. She could practice consciously for what it was going to be like in less than three weeks when the dreams became real again. For a start it would help to identify with this more expansive sense of her larger adult self, rather than with the inner child who was locked in perpetual competition with the actual children hovering beyond the horizon.

While writing in his journal, later that afternoon, about Oiseau's dreams and the ritualistic aftermath, Now recalled a strange set of dreams he'd had the previous night. In one episode, he'd come upon a group of Hare Krishna devotees with shaven heads and

orange robes, jumping up and down chanting and singing and playing drums and bells and tambourines. The celebrants invited him to join them and he thought, "They look like they're having fun, why not?"

Except--did it mean that he would have to, like, join them for good?

He called himself Jammin Fulltime Now, after all, and that sure looked like what these folks were doing. Here was his chance to live up to his name.

But something held him back. What was it? His older brother, mocking? The fact that they all looked and acted and sang and danced the same? That he might not be able to get out, once he got in? He decided to pass, and found himself in another dream.

He was scanning a set of menus at the local restaurant, a sort of take-out place that also had rooms to rent upstairs. The menus featured pictures of all the dishes, mostly variations on smoked meat. The woman who ran the place came out and recognized him and said oh, he might be interested to know that Thomas Mann was staying there.

Now was excited to hear this, wondering whether he could meet the great man, but a little anxious about what he might ask him. He'd have to make a good impression right at the start, but the famous novelist would be bored by the standard comments..."I'm such a fan of your work. Tell me, where do you get your ideas?"

So just what could he make of this opportunity, in practical terms?

These questions passed through Now's mind in a flash, giving way to a realization which he voiced to the woman: "Thomas Mann, the novelist, staying here? You must be mistaken, because Thomas Mann has been dead for a few years."

When he awoke he realized that he had almost accepted the great man's near presence as a possibility...as if the years since his death were not that many, so that in fact in the recalculation, Mann had not died at all. But in the cold light of day, when Now considered the facts of the situation, he realized that a full forty-five years had passed since Mann's death in 1955.

On that same rainy Wednesday after awaking from these seemingly prophetic dreams and telling Oiseau about them, Now had settled in with her after breakfast for a day of reading in bed. It seemed natural enough to follow the dream of Thomas Mann with a selection of his actual writing, and so Now had read a chapter from Doctor Faustus aloud to her. They both found the prose almost incomprehensible, as if the English translation had only given a different color or texture to what was still a foreign tongue. Considerable commitment was required on the part of both reader and listener to follow the long convoluted sentences, the twists and turns of intellectual embroidery. Now found it hard work for the mouth and voice as well as the brain. Oiseau was exhausted from the furious knitting that this reading produced as she listened.

The chapter in question dealt with Adrian Leverkühn's decision at the age of twenty to forego a career in theology for the life which would distinguish him forever, that of a composer. Oiseau's comment to Now upon the completion of this performance was that if Thomas Mann, inasmuch as this sampling was indicative of his narrative voice and style--albeit ironically masked in the person of the fictional narrator, himself

somewhat candidly apologetic for any encumbrances in the reader's understanding which might be the result of his own excesses and syntactical idiosyncrasies--was indeed still Now's narrative role model and virtual mentor (as Now often claimed, notwithstanding the passage of that half a century and, along with it, countless intervening and counterindicatory fashions in both popular and academic taste), then perhaps he had better give some thought to, say, a career in theology.

*

It was curious, Now thought in looking to the approaching boundary of his holiday, how the future, normally considered rather vague, formless, and insubstantial, could sometimes be prefigured in as much detail and with as much relative realism as that history to which we give such objective credence, the past. Certainly an argument could be made that the past, having occupied only one set of possible permutations and arrangements of events, had a greater claim to the term "reality" than a future whose final configuration was yet to be determined out of an infinite welter of possibilities. And yet, so far as truly present human consciousness was concerned, the speculation was moot--as both past and future were unreal in comparison to the undeniable imagery of the moment. If one recalled the past through the archives of memory, and laid beside this gallery the snapshots we created of an imagined future, who could tell the difference?

There was Barcelona, for instance, looming up at them from over a stretch of sea, under a blue Spanish sky which might or might not turn to December gray...that sensuous city with its broad tree-lined Ramblas and its tortuous streets and elaborate churches and tawdry newsstands and fragrant cafés, and its train ride whisking them back to the airport, like newsreel footage run in reverse...likewise Heathrow and Vancouver and Castlegar and Nelson and finally the long stretch of winding road home, like the route of the night bus from Bérchules but in this case, they'd be hitching, likely in snow, home to a darkened house and a cold woodstove and an empty bed. All of these things of the approaching future were prefigured by their familiarity from past experience; and who could tell if they would in any way be different, or just the same as they were remembered?

Was Oiseau's dream-footage of home life taken from the past, then, or the future? Once we were removed wholly to that future, would this honeymoon have mattered, have existed at all? Or would it slip like a page of holiday photos into the binding of an old dusty album, to be shelved and forgotten until some future dream came calling to refresh itself with images it vaguely remembers once having lived?

*

Now showered and washed his hair and then took a pair of scissors to the mirror beside the pump. He proceeded to cut his overgrown mustache, which showed him for

the first time, in its bristly midst, definite instances of red hair, the only red hair on his head, the red hair he must have inherited from his mother and, never before over thirty years, noticed. Had it only recently become red, amid the gray and white of his advancing age? Or was it just a trick or--what was the word, *chiaroscuro*, something Stravinsky had used for one of his compositions? Oh it didn't matter, call it a flourishing play of the red-rocked Formentera light; and in any case he went on to trim nose hair and bangs and eyebrows and long gray tangly beard, and then walked down to the sea.

There the waves were putting on a grand display of crashing spray all along the shore. It was good to be by the sea today, with the sun out again after a whole day of rain in which he and his partner had stayed inside the white stone walls. Now likened their confinement to the indoors (without electric light because the solar cells weren't charging in the gloom) to being in a prison--with the difference that here they could do whatever they wanted. Today while he gazed at the sun-burnished sea, Oiseau was busy back at the house with her daily session of painting.

Every day was precious for this humble yet fundamental freedom--regardless of the weather. There was nothing they had to do that they didn't want to do. Oh, there were the dishes and dirty clothes to wash, of course, and meals to prepare and the bed to make...and did anyone really positively want to floss teeth--even dentists? So it was with a jaunty step that he had carried with him from the house, a small sack of garbage and empty plastic water jug to the bins at the highway, and returned by way of the sea.

Standing there close to the pounding surf, he could smell the salt air and was vividly reminded of his boyhood on the Atlantic beaches of Delaware and New Jersey, in summers when he was four, six, eight, ten...and of his first visits to the Pacific coast, when he was twenty-two. In this moment, with the sensations of surf and salt air strong in his being, was he here or there or was it all somehow wrapped up together? Was he in past or present or a sensory mixture of both? In the future when he stood by this or another shore and recalled this time, perhaps this very moment, would the moment then be said to be past or present?

Could you be selective in bringing up past memories, so that your reality included a sort of fond nostalgia but left behind the vague misgivings? Could you be as selective in your future thinking, so that you envisioned and affirmed, and so possibly manifested only the images and events and feelings which you desired, thereby managing to leave the usual stresses and accidents and anxieties out of the equation?

Nadeen's book took issue with that whole New Age approach to creating one's own reality, stating unequivocally that the whole thing was out of our hands. Nadeen's own process of psychic purification left some room for conscious meddling, however. A period of experimentation with lucid dreaming, for instance, helped rid his dreams of their habitual nagging negativities. But even here his role changed from that of a film director, to a mere watchful presence. Nadeen concludes that the overall shift in his life happened to him, rather than because of any directed effort on his part. In either case we could say that he was ready.

So the future was indeterminate, the past was past, and that left...What was that word of Stravinsky's again? Well, whatever it was...Right! That was it--capriccios: the caprices, the fanciful improvisations, the lively and irregular sketches of the present.

*

They walked along the cliffs toward town, to place another call to Oiseau's dentist in Canada. They could see the white dabs of buildings on the coast of Ibiza, the neighboring island outlined clearly in the distance. Ibiza was noted for its lively club scene. Ibiza was where the money went--the jet set, the party crowd, singles looking for a good match in the fast lane.

Now and Oiseau were not going into town (nor over to Ibiza) for dinner and dancing this evening. They were going to use the pay phone and see if the Internet place was open and buy a package of decaf. This vacation on Formentera was a low-budget affair that allowed them to live by the same means and in the same style to which they were accustomed in their mountain hamlet in rural Canada. Now accepted the reality that his novel about this vacation would not be much like the screenplay about the young rich glamorous couple honeymooning on Ibiza...full of live bands, cocktails until the wee hours, jewel thefts and extramarital flirtations, at least a couple of guns and car chase scenes. No, readers of this lower-key adventure would have to satisfy themselves with word-dinners and wave-dancing.

The Internet place was closed again, despite the persistence of its sign posting evening hours. After a series of such disappointments Now had learned not to expect to make that connection. No email, no big deal. Oiseau made her appointment with the dentist and they bought their package of decaf, along with a half dozen eggs and a package of minced ham which could be split between breakfast and a simple supper of Spanish rice.

Oiseau was asleep beside him when Now finished reading The Heart is a Lonely Hunter. She had ended her day ploughing into the middle of A Soldier of the Great War. Now removed that book from where it had fallen on her chest, turned out the fading electric light, and lay in the dark, feeling a vague unease. It was a depressing book he'd just read, with not much hope coming out of a succession of lifelong disappointments for each of the characters.

Maybe that's just what life was like, he considered, in that time and place, the South at the end of the 1930's--for black and white alike. Or maybe it was just the slice of life McCullers chose to portray. We didn't get to see the party crowd, the high rollers, the upper echelon in their pursuit of expensive pleasures, power and privilege.

But given McCullers' unique vision and style, even a more wealthy cast of characters would have been portrayed living out lives just as sordid, and doomed, and full of bitter disappointments. Such a fate wasn't the fault of that society or system, of prejudice or oppression, but just the way it is with the inherent limitations of human

happiness. We are dim to the potentials within us or we are unable to communicate our truths clearly. We are capable of love but unable to manifest it in our relations with others.

Such a darkly realistic view fit perfectly well inside the bell-curved jar of human nature as depicted by Nadeen. Now's most recent chapter in that book featured a discussion which paralleled a conversation in McCullers' novel, along the lines of "What if you were appointed Creator of the planet?" The gist of Nadeen's treatment was, that if we were able to carry out fully our vision of perfection for this earthly home, then it would hardly be a functioning planet at all. Resolving all limitations and separations leads inevitably to perfect oneness and peaceful rest--a condition Nadeen reserves for the Creator or Source energy itself. Perfect freedom has nothing to do with this inbreathing, manifested universe we love and hate, but resides in the alternate, unmanifest universe which, according to the Bhagavad Gita, occurs only on the outbreath half of a 622,080,000,000,000-year cycle.

So where does that leave us?, Now wondered. Whether groveling in the pre-war South or cavorting at a high-class Ibizan resort, were we condemned to suffer (as the Buddha warned) no matter which island of earthly heaven or hell we chose for this vacation called life?

Now had spent many years of his life facing what appeared to him at the time as systemic evils, political oppressions, and planetary doom. He had done his part to help

solve these problems for the sake of life and health, joining various campaigns for disarmament and pesticide-free zones and protected watersheds. These movements, ranging in scope from local to international actions, even achieved some small victories, qualified successes. But despite the personal sacrifice required to keep volunteering for such work--time, stress, risk of fines and imprisonment--still there was no end in sight, no final victory which he could see that would ever come within reach. And through it all he never felt the satisfaction of true peace or personal fulfillment. He and his comrades were always compromised by the continuing threat, the unstoppable forces on the other side of the struggle...which, when you got right down to it, meant the neighbors on the other side of the road.

For the last five years he had withdrawn from the ongoing political battles in order to pursue business interests, personal development, relationship growth, and creative endeavors in literature and music. With the old struggles behind him, it was easier to see the world from Nadeen's cosmic perspective, where conflict was couched in terms of inherent limitation and freedom, of universal contraction and expansion.

Meanwhile the low-key Formentera lifestyle, like the low-consumption life at home in Argenta, made Now feel relatively immune from feelings of guilt or complicity in an economic and political system of privilege/oppression. Yet he couldn't help appreciating, after experiencing McCullers' darker vision, how lucky he and his partner were, vacationing here among the rich Swiss and Germans and British, and going home

to the social welfare state of abundance they were privileged to enjoy in twenty-first century Canada.

To their credit, they had managed to manifest this "good luck" by their own share of hard work and frugal patience. Before coming to Canada, Now had no savings and was working at a gas station. His college education eventually allowed him to land a lucrative teaching job, but then he'd given it up and spent the money building a house with his own hands, on land he'd cleared himself. When the money ran out, he planted trees for a living, and worked as a carpenter, and even sold hand-cranked ice cream which he and Pam made in their home and carried to the village center on the back of a donkey. Since retiring from the brutal work of treeplanting he'd received a modest inheritance which now earned him a little investment income; he'd moved in with Oiseau and was able to rent out his own house for a little more; sold a few drum rhythm books; ran a small business distributing nutritional blue-green algae. More recently he had set up electronic shop as a freelance copy editor.

Oiseau had also pulled herself up by the bootstraps. She and her previous partner James had endured a couple of long, grueling seasons of treeplanting to finance the purchase of her house. Later she'd worked at a printing press, an apple orchard, an organic market garden, a ski lodge, and the Argenta post office.

Now and Oiseau had both made a special effort to set aside money for this trip, and had followed a fairly strict budget of fifty dollars a day in order to make the money last the full three months. If sometimes this meant sleeping in ditches, showering outside

in the cold, or doing without ice cream, well, they'd both had plenty of practice in cutting corners.

Going over all this history in his mind, to look at the question of guilt from all sides, seemed to Now a kind of tangential exercise until he realized that it illustrated Nadeen's main point. There was a purpose to each of our personal brands of limitation, to the particular pattern of struggling which we chose or were chosen to manifest on this earth. To live out such a pattern wasn't just negative, as we often tended to experience it; nor was it negative in the sense that we might be "better" if we only knew how or were awake enough, if we could only find our way to a state of political or economic or environmental or spiritual correctness. It wasn't even negative from the point of view of Source; there was no problem, really, about our interfering with, or getting in the way of, or clouding in any way, a Divine Plan of Perfection. No, it was just in the nature of the inbreath, in the very nature of manifested reality, that we experienced limitation, poverty, disease, anxiety, guilt, selfishness, shortsightedness, frustration, toothaches. This world of limitation was not our fault and it was not our "karma." It was merely the stage upon which the ego--always in need of more security, fame, love, wealth, power--acts out its contractual suffering. From a perspective outside that narrow frame of reference, the drama of suffering and limitation was only that--a play: an extended amusement or "Leela" on the part of Source.

As individuals we did have one meaningful choice. We could stay within the framework of limitation and uneasiness and dissatisfaction as defined by and for the

ego--or whatever name you gave to that closed-minded, anxious, critical, fretting, fearful self. Or we could choose to experience life from the expansive view of all Creation, which included necessary limitation but also the freedom of perfect wholeness and rest. From this widest possible view, the individual was nothing other than a role to play in the drama, a channel of Source energy making itself manifest in this world. So we may as well sit back and enjoy the show.

With this resolution of understanding brought on by Nadeen's vision of cosmic equilibrium, Now finally could put to rest the feeling of vague uneasiness which had arisen from the reading of McCullers and all her doomed dreamers, and he fell into a belated sleep. But when he awoke the next morning he felt a heaviness in his chest, a difficulty in breathing easily, and an almost feverish flush to his skin. All was apparently not well in the paradise of this body, at least not for today. After all the theoretical liberations of the night, Now dreaded spending his last two weeks here laid up with a case of asthmatic bronchitis.

The Vitamin C was gone and the echinacea was running low. The weather today, November 17th, was cold and raw--not the wet and blustery sort of raw you might expect in B.C. in mid-November, but more like a piece of fish you took out of the refrigerator, chill-white and gelatinous, clammy against your cheek.

After a trip to town with Oiseau for groceries and--at last--a processing of some 271 backlogged email messages, Now spent the rest of the afternoon relaxing with

Nadeen's book...first in the deck chair outside while there was some warm sun to enjoy, then in bed with the heater on. He drifted in an easy state of acceptance and care for himself with this sickness, beginning to see Nadeen's persistent point about the wisdom of not resisting what is.

This was an unusual attitude for Now to take, because normally any challenge of sickness made him rage at himself for doing something wrong, for abusing his body with too much sugar or coffee or sex or work, and not enough sleep or relaxation or preventative medication. In this case it might or might not prove to be too late to fend off a serious illness; but either way, he could appreciate the usefulness of "not-doing" on a day when his body could benefit from rest.

He read a little, drifted a little, let the concepts sink in. It felt as if, in the course of this past night and present day, he was starting to understand the message Nadeen was trying to get across; and he was beginning to feel what a big difference it might make in his life. There was no big bang of revelation, no flashing light signaling what Nadeen referred to as the "wake-up call"--just a growing recognition of the truth and wisdom of Nadeen's radical philosophy.

No longer did it seem important to quibble over the semantics of the term "Consciousness." Oiseau had already resolved that philosophical dilemma for him. The larger "I," with which we could identify by means of our consciousness, was nothing less than Consciousness itself. The point wasn't whether or not the universe was "created in our image." Rather, it was useful to recognize that to know the universe as a whole, we

had to use our whole consciousness. The potential totality of our consciousness was nothing less and nothing more (and so in effect nothing other than) the totality of the universe itself.

In this way Nadeen's view matched up well with that of the quantum physicists, who presented a vision of the cosmos as a swirling flow of matter-energy, wave-particles, matter and anti-matter...winking and blinking in and out of existence perpetually, and impossible to pin down with any single set of measurements or fixed locations. Whatever we humans managed to make of it, whatever form or formless tracks it left in our apprehending consciousness, had less to do with any intrinsic shape or size of the universal stuff itself, than with the apparatus or understanding we brought to the lab for making our observations. Material reality was nothing and nowhere but in the instrument recordings, and so ultimately in the mind of the beholder. The human mind was simply the most complex of all recording instruments.

Everything seems to exist as "matter" or "energy"--as "beautiful" or "ugly"--but only because we are conscious of it as such. Thus everything as it appears to us is a creation of our consciousness--a picture, in effect, of us as much as of the world we seem to perceive.

There is nothing left to know, without the knowing.

This was all very satisfying, Now thought; but the neat philosophical solution, however logical, was somewhat counter-intuitive, and therefore a little suspect. Wouldn't

there still be rocks and trees, without humans? Wouldn't dogs still find trees to piss on, and wouldn't fish still swim in the sea? The esoteric niceties of Nadeen and the physicists were all very well for us humans, but did we really have the last word, and couldn't we imagine a world free of our imaginings?

Can a novelist or a journalist be truly objective, painting a world free of our particular bias even as we select and shape the words of its representation?

If we could imagine a world without human imagination...

No, we are caught in the contradiction already.

But the geologic record...

The result of our observations and classifications.

But the light of stars long dead, only now reaching Earth...

Through the lenses and filters of our telescopes, eyes, imagining brains.

Maybe logic carried more weight than Now gave it credit for. The bottom line of quantum physics ("Observations depend on the perspective of the observer") amounted to the same as the core assumption underlying Nadeen's ultimate "pearl" of spiritual truth ("Consciousness is all there is"). These two systems of human understanding, the scientific and the spiritual, could actually be joined sensibly in the single statement:

The only thing we can be conscious of is consciousness itself.

So, Now told himself, we could put these angels to rest again, tucking them into bed on their infinitesimal head of a pin. And while we're at it, we don't have to quibble over Nadeen's use of the word "Journal" in the subtitle of his book. From Onions to Pearls was not a journal in the usual sense of a daily recording or chronology of events. Its presentation took the form, rather, of the personal-spiritual story, blending philosophy with illustrative narrative and autobiographical summary. And how better to embody the conjunction of universal consciousness and personal journey?

Without serving as an example of finely wrought literary art, Nadeen's journal nevertheless brought into focus the function of art: to particularize experience so that it can be accessible to our limited understanding. Just as consciousness is our only means of apprehending the world, so art and language are the only means of giving shape to our consciousness, to our version of reality. Without these playthings we would be in the same position as the Source Creator, with nothing to do with all that cosmic potential. Sheer understanding and awareness--consciousness without expression--is pure but ultimately insufficient. Art, then, is not just a passive mirror but an active process. By projecting back out into the world our imaginative creations, we are reenacting the process of Creation itself. Each step, from Cosmos to Consciousness to Creativity, is a distilling into more human terms, a refinement into more digestible form, for our edification and amusement.

Nadeen's philosophy was radical in that unlike other systems of spiritual understanding, this one required no disciplines, practices, sacrifices, or austerities. In the practice as well as the theory of this philosophy, there was literally "nothing to do." And yet Nadeen continued, after his "awakening," to meditate every day, out of a simple desire to enjoy more purely the bliss of conscious existence.

Now was coming, day by day, to realize that for himself, this attunement with the state of bliss meant the practice of writing: and not just the kind of daily journal writing that Julia Cameron recommends in her inspiring handbook, The Artist's Way. Her "morning pages" were fine for most people as a direct way to get more in touch with the universal spirit of creativity. But Cameron herself cautions that people who think of themselves as writers are going to have trouble with this spontaneous approach, because they'll always be finding a potential product in that material, trying to make out of it some kind of artifact of "real writing." Cameron's intention is to provide, by contrast, a true spiritual practice--a disciplined yet free outlet and exercise of the creative spirit itself--without thought of material result.

So far as his own practice was concerned, Now had taken to wearing the magical robes of the novelist while faithfully writing in his journal. Coincidentally he had discovered that this identity shift allowed him to achieve the essential distance from conventional self required by Nadeen's philosophy. The daily jump into the narrative

driver's seat allowed him automatically to identify himself with a larger frame of consciousness than that of his smaller "real" self, himself as mere character.

The resulting process of creative production was an act of playful manifestation which echoed Source at play in the world of appearances. (Did God create Man or was it the other way around? Did the novelist create the character or did the character create the novelist?) The journalist as narrator of his own life story had the freedom to decline answering such serious questions, or to demonstrate the complementary truths of the answers, as it suited his mood--and his mood was as fickle as the weather and the state of his health.

Aside from times of sickness, Now had experienced most strongly the wisdom of "not-doing" around the time of his baby daughter's birth. He recalled the glow of Pam's pregnancy, her prolonged labor and delivery, and their cozy nest at home after the birth. There was still a lot to do, of course, during this whole time; especially as it was a home birth at a friend's house in town, and the house back in Argenta was only half finished. There was a washing machine to fix, there were meals to make for Pam, and there was another construction job to go to. But Now remembered that the predominant feeling of this time was one of going way beyond or deeper inside his former frame of reference, to sense what life was really about.

Thinking back on it now, he could still feel that golden-orange glow in the bedroom where Shira nursed. Pam stayed with her, breast-feeding, and Now hung out

with them for long timeless hours during those first precious days and nights. The glow was about nothing else mattering, really, but the new life in their presence. The baby's consciousness had enveloped theirs, or theirs had incorporated the baby's--either way, it filled the room and that's all there was and that's all that mattered. Life from the uncrowded, simple and infinitely abundant point of view of babyhood; life in the fundamental process of renewing itself; consciousness starting again as wholeness.

Even as he still lay in the deck chair under clouds chasing clouds across the sun, Now could feel the symptoms of the encroaching cold--the congestion in his chest and sinuses, the fatigue, the need to keep warm--all beginning to lessen and ease. This was the way to health, it seemed clear. To allow the body's own healing energy to flow freely, by relaxing, by allowing the breath to come easily, by keeping warm, by not demanding anything extra. Maybe this sickness would persist, after all--but why resist it? It was happening now. To fight it would only impose additional stress that would make it take hold and get worse.

Now's predominant weaknesses showed themselves clearly today: his propensity for sickness, and his dislike of cold. The two were related, as keeping his thin frame warm was always a challenge. His immune system was disadvantaged from the very beginning of his life when, premature by three weeks, he was separated from his mother and thus denied the health-giving properties of natural breast milk. He was then shunted into an incubator, where he had to cry with no relief for the warmth and close comfort of

mother-love. That hot July in Baltimore, of course, was a long time ago; but Now still imagined the incubator as cold. It was followed (with no essential improvement) by the crib and the playpen and TV and school. In his adult years, Now was driven to compensate for this early isolation by means of a tendency to overwork, to throw his whole lonesome self into the hopeless fight against time--with the inevitable result that he never felt satisfied with the level of income or approval or success he managed to achieve.

Related to this work addiction was the relief Now had sought, in varying degrees over the years, with the compensatory addictions of caffeine, sugar, alcohol, drugs, and sex. These in turn all affected his immune system and dragged him, at the end of each cycle of self-abuse, into weekly or monthly bouts with the nearest cold or flu bug. The pattern was most pronounced in fall, when the colder season coincided with the extra demands of life on the land.

Since he'd discovered blue-green algae to boost his immune system, and the timely use of echinacea and vitamin C for the same purpose at the critical times of first infection, he'd come to have a pretty good success rate in throwing off these virus attacks after a day or so of preliminary symptoms. But the stress he felt when dealing with the challenge made him irritable, self-judging, and small-minded. At such times he was grim with self-recriminations for his foolish excesses in all the known unhealthy habits, and bleak in his outlook for the near future when he was faced with the prospect of achievement-threatening downtime.

This time was definitely different, thanks to Nadeen's enlightening perspective. Now forged ahead in his book, reading through a dozen chapters, confident that he was integrating the material and that he was ready for more. Maybe his wake-up call was here, and he wouldn't ever have to go back to that stressed way of life that had so often dogged him into ill-health and bad humor!

Of course, truly following the spiritual path would mean giving up what he thought of as his positive attachments, to things such as career success, travel money...

Another little voice chimed in at this point, saying, "Hold on a minute. Before chucking the idea of future vacations, have you considered how going to a place even warmer than this might benefit your health and address your primal needs?"

The sun moved behind another cloud bank, and Now retreated to the bed and crawled under the down sleeping bag. It was true; he felt these baby-needs for warmth and rest as pretty basic, still very much alive, yes indeed primary. He'd pared down quite a number of so-called needs already during this extended retreat from his former life, but these last few were ones he didn't want to compromise.

That night, Now suffered through one of his two recurrent nightmares, and so was reminded that his prevailing life issues weren't simply confined to the need for warmth, food and rest, or that persistent itch to record his life experiences faithfully. While one set of nettlesome dreams brought him into conflict with his teenaged daughter and her unruly gang of friends, the other concerned his struggle with acceptance as a musician.

In the latter, he always found himself on the outside looking in...playing at the edges...wondering if he was or could be part of the performing group.

This latest version featured a drum and percussion group from Nelson. Now knew some of the people involved, including some good friends he'd played with before. Walking beside the group as they marched through the streets, he played along a little, but kept getting vibes from some that his participation wasn't welcome. He asked one of his friends about this.

"No problem, we like you."

But a little later he heard, from someone else--"No, it's not working. They wish you would just go away."

These mixed messages were confusing and hurtful. By the end he was running up and beating this last messenger on the shoulder, demanding, "Just tell me what's going on. Am I allowed to be part of this or not? What's the problem?"

When Now shared the dream with Oiseau in the morning, she probed to uncover the root of the issue for him. Now explained that this feeling of being an outsider had plagued his musical efforts consistently over the years, ever since the F.E. Bellows elementary school band, in which he'd been stuck behind suave Morris with the golden trumpet. But this was about more than just music. Now was always the new kid in town, always stuck on the fringes of the "in-crowd."

It came to a head one day when he was ten or eleven, with two friends playing marbles. At one point the other two went out of the room to do something else, and then told him they didn't want him to be part of it. "Buy why?" he'd demanded.

"Just because."

"But why?" he persisted in a rage. "Just tell me why!"

He ran home bitterly to his mother, who tried to comfort him with the wisdom that, sometimes, there isn't an answer.

As Nadeen would put it, you just have to accept what is, as is.

Oiseau added the observation that, as far as musical acceptance goes, anxiety occurs on every level, right to the top of the profession. Music is one of those things that always demands your best and always teaches you that there's still room for improvement. And improvement is more than a matter of technique.

Now recalled the wisdom of his longtime jamming buddy Walkin, to relax within one's best capabilities and enjoy the results whatever they happen to be. Walkin's motto: "It's all good." This belief, identical to Nadeen's, also echoed the great jazz trumpeter Miles Davis who said, "There are no mistakes."

Oiseau jumped out of bed saying, "You'll eat the French toast I'm going to make for us, even if I burn it?"

"You know me. I'll eat anything."

Now's cold symptoms were noticeably reduced this morning, and he felt full of anticipation for the new day, as he lingered in bed awhile. There was so much he wanted to do with his renewed energy: writing, reading, transcribing more drum rhythms, improvising on pennywhistle, going for a long walk by the sea in the bright sunshine. He looked forward to more cuddling with Oiseau, further conversation, making love. He welcomed all of these possibilities with a feeling of excitement, and without any sense of time-pressure, duty, or obligation.

He began by reviewing his schematic charts of pennywhistle scales and anchor notes, while Oiseau completed the spiritual exercise of preparing a perfect breakfast. But before it was ready she called him outdoors to look at the sunrise. The brilliant golden ball was just coming up over the sea, lighting the sky in flaming orange.

They oohed and aahed and then, unable to repress himself, Now threw his hands up into the air and started jumping around on the gravel walk chanting, "Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna..." Suddenly he paused, as if under the spell of conventional inhibition.

"Don't let me stop you," Oiseau said.

"You wouldn't want me wearing those orange robes, would you?"

"I just don't like wearing orange on myself."

"Or if I shaved my head."

"Hmm. You could be right, there. But maybe Krishna would make an exception, for you."

In the afternoon, the honeymooners took off by foot across the island to one of the few remaining beaches they hadn't yet visited. It was a twenty kilometer walk, but Now felt his health had returned sufficiently to attempt it. Fortified by a café con leche in Sant Francesc, and periodic snacks of mixed nuts, bread and butter, chocolate, and oranges, they set a smooth, relaxed pace down the ancient rock roads, finding the groove they'd enjoyed on the mainland.

Oiseau talked of her burgeoning plans for a fabric design business. They shared their mutual frustration with the dilemma of getting so many new ideas during these long walks; there just wasn't enough working time left to process them all and bring them to fruition. Yet they both still appreciated the value of the walking itself, the free flow of unharnessed ideas, the companionable exercise in the fresh air and beautiful countryside.

Now's stride lengthened, and he was glad to be healthy enough to be cruising out on the open road again. It seemed that the day of rest (or Nadeen's philosophy--or the echinacea and blue-green algae--or simple grace) had been enough to lift him over the hump once again. This cycle of sickness and health had become a weekly affair, beginning with their stressful exodus from Granada to the foothills of the Sierra Nevada. On that occasion, with both of them on the brink of a debilitating cold, they'd put in a twenty-kilometer day and, in effect, walked right through the cold. In the present case Now wasn't quite in the clear yet; it could still go either way. But he felt confident that

when this day's journey of twenty kilometers was over, he would suffer from nothing more than weary legs.

The surge of excitement, freshness, and freedom that he felt that sunny Saturday afternoon took him back to his boyhood again. This time he was eight or nine, when his family lived in a small town in western Maryland, and he was riding his bike alone out of town on a country road to visit a friend. The friend was watching *Casper the Friendly Ghost* cartoons on TV when he got there, and they went out and hunted for crayfish in the creeks. But what was better than all that, in Now's memory, was the rush of the wind in his hair as he rode out into a new world, with the splash of sun all around on the dusty road and fields...

When he and Oiseau reached the beach at the end of the road, the waves were breaking straight into shore with a west wind. They could look straight out across the water to see the craggy, volcanic island just off the coast of Ibiza, with its cliffs and spires rising fifteen hundred feet or more, straight up out of the sea. It was a vision in present time of the prehistoric past: the island of King Kong, or the Lost World still ruled by dinosaurs. This utterly uninhabitable shaft of hardened fire formed a monument to the four elements, mocking man and woman and proudly proclaiming "I am That."

The travelers walked home along the red rock road as the sun began to set. The morning's transcendental gold-orange glow was repeated in the western sky. They saw the green pines beside them light up in splendor. They held up their own hands to the

light, and Now glimpsed once more that vision which had so captivated him while swimming out from Es Calo the last day of October, with his hands and wrists and forearms absolutely golden, shining in the sunlight and the clear clear water. Here, in place of the water was the clear clear air, and still his hands and arms, as he raised them up to catch the light, shone supernaturally golden.

The splendor increased all around them, in field and wood and barnyard. A pile of stones came alive like rocks in a sweatlodge pit glowing red from the fire. They both stopped to take notes--Oiseau in her sketchbook, Now in his trusty brown notebook. He observed and wrote: "golden-tinged white doves perched in olive tree's dead top." This image reminded him to take retrospective note also of another dead olive trunk they'd witnessed on another road, days before, "painted red growing through electrical tower from middle of rock wall."

On the final stretch toward home they talked once more of life back in Argenta. That end-of-the road, end-of-the-rainbow community was an endless enigma, containing extremes of socialites and hermits, hippies and rednecks of every stripe, high and low culture from the opera to the sweatlodge. Like any small town, it had its share of gossip-mongers whose stock in trade was a complete range of moral topics ranging from sex and drugs to the ethics of using telephones and plastic. Now found it remarkable how many of his neighbors he had alienated over the years, in his evolving role as a rebel with too many causes.

Oiseau helped him add to the list of transgressions until it seemed that perhaps he'd better not return home at all. The dossier contained so many counts against him that, had he come from a medieval town (or even an early North American one), he would have been first in the queue to be pilloried in the town square.

Maybe he should consider--like a terrorist at large--an alternative landing location, perhaps Turkey?

Over the course of two decades, this reprobate had...

- consummated two unlawful marriages
- had an unspecified number of affairs
- driven his first wife to lesbianism
- replaced his second wife with her sister
- had only one child, and aborted another
- refused to allow his daughter to go to public school or be vaccinated
- quit teaching in the local Quaker school after one year
- before quitting Quaker meeting, consorted with Buddhists, psychics, astrologers, and other pagan types
- sponged off government unemployment compensation and child care benefits
- joined that nefarious anarchist institution, the Land Co-op
- bought a brand-new truck
- charged truck rental to friends and neighbors who wanted to borrow it

- refused to rent his truck to more than five friends and neighbors
- commuted to Nelson every week, just to play music
- drove his truck indiscriminately on Land Co-op roads
- spearheaded a Land Co-op committee to build a new road (and failed)
- spearheaded a community zoning initiative (failed)
- spearheaded a road blockade against a local logger (failed)
- exposed local political conflicts to wider scrutiny in the press
- shot local deer and bear, ate meat
- watched videos and TV baseball
- spearheaded the annual Fall Faire, attracting droves of young hippies for loud all-night drumming
- went away during the fall instead of winter--thus missing the Faire, community work days, and assorted weddings, funerals, and birthday parties
- regularly boycotted community Christmas dinner and caroling
- boycotted group skiing, skating, tobogganing
- posed for years as a writer (convenient excuse for antisocial tendencies) but failed to produce any conclusive proof

From the varied nature of his transgressions, one truth emerged: it was impossible to please everyone. Just by taking risks and doing what you felt like, you were bound to

alienate somebody--whether on the conservative, old-family side of the community fence, or in the camp of the ultra-organic, self-sufficient purists.

Now recalled the more circumspect social strategy of his upwardly mobile, middle-class parents: "There are three things you don't discuss with company: sex, religion, and politics." He had to admit, on the evidence before his partner and recent accomplice, that he was "just a regular, all-around shit-disturber."

As the conversation lapsed into silence, Now realized that they had only scratched the surface of his history of sexual transgressions. He thought of all the women--what, a dozen, two dozen?--he had loved and left with their inevitable tears of disappointment. But he didn't want to get into that now. That was another story, a confession already made, which now repeated would puncture the buoyant mood he was enjoying with his present partner.

The past was or wasn't relevant, depending on how far you wanted to go into it, to dredge it up. It could be educational or entertaining, or both--if you cared to find out. Or, you could just take a deep breath and blow it away from the palm of your hand--poof!--like a deleted computer directory, like dandelion fluff.

The only honeymoon that counted was the one he and Oiseau were on now. And who was to say how long honeymoons had to last? That glow of attraction, which was supposed to fade over time, they found day by day was increasing.

They both recognized that sexual novelty would fade over years with the same partner. But they were aware of so much else in their relationship that was growing, that they were building and uncovering, that could serve to sustain the relationship in the long term. As sexual novelty diminished, a larger affinity would remain: full and easy communication, the sharing of basic values and outlook, an appreciation of each other's personal styles and artistic paths. All of these vital qualities were missing from their previous marriages. And who knew where the conscious exploration of sexual energy would lead? Awareness was the door they opened to mutual self-discovery, and communication the hand that opened it. Inside was the fire.

The sun went down that day leaving a pastel legacy across the cloud-streaked sky: from yellow and gold to red, pink, violet, purple, charcoal gray. Now and Oiseau observed it all with a kind of rapture, awed and humbled, burned clean by the transformative colorings of fire. When it came right down to it, the earth and air and water they found so nourishing on this trip, were not the whole equation. Fire was the one essential, the often invisible factor that made all the rest come alive. It might be only a candle or two in the evening by their supper plates or beside their bed. It might be the gas furnace warming the room at the coldest times, so they could relax and be comfortable there together. Finally, it was the breath that made their bodies move slowly together and brought sparks of light to their eyes.

They spoke with reverence about this dynamic element within their love that gave them the confidence that it would continue. And yet, they had also enough experience in life to know that fire was unpredictable, whimsical and arbitrary, with no rules to follow but its own nature. Now observed that it was this wildness, this untamable cosmic laughter in bright dancing form, that scared civilized societies so much--so that fire was outlawed, for example, throughout Spain and Portugal. Instead it was captured and put to work for human comfort and convenience, shut behind furnace grates and within the straining pistons of internal combustion.

When the lovers looked at their own situation with clear and open eyes, holding that sacred element in a special place of honor and respect, it seemed they might benefit from its proximate energy for quite some time to come. And what more could anyone ask or expect?

*

17 October

We are bound to Formentera suddenly, following two decisive phone calls from Órgiva. The people at the organic farm have informed us that finally, the timing isn't right for us to come and work there. Luckily we have connected with a call to Germany, however, and Sophia, the owner of our Formentera cottage, has generously agreed to let us have it for two extra weeks, at winter rates.

Between us and our destination lies a day-long bus ride on a winding highway around the rocky southeast coast of Spain. On our left, sun-bright desert mountains; to our right, a beckoning expanse of light blue sea.

Readers are like tourists, I suppose, wanting monuments to plan for and signposts to mark the way, photographs and postcards to take home as keepsakes. Thus: Benidorm, arising out of nowhere on the road to the ferry port of Denia. What it lacks in history it makes up for with location. A Fistful of Dollars was shot in the badlands just over the hills. On the sun-splashed coast, proliferating high-rises proclaim the pull of people to other people, who clump together like a determined bacteria colony amid a vast wasteland of arid rock and scrub, with a view to the sea and a lock on year-round sun.

Unclouded sunlight--it is apparent here by the direct competition between resort hotels and sprawling plastic greenhouses, which between them cover every inch of flat land between mountain and sea--is the world's last great diminishing resource. Here the containers of souls and the containers of tomatoes sit side by side facing the sea. The souls are determined to turn their bodies tomato-red, while the tomatoes are bound to be transformed into human soul-flesh. Oiseau and I gaze out at the passing show, bound up in another, more private symbiosis.

Part Three - Capriccios

Showtime

"No more notes?" She sounds somehow hopeful.

"It's showtime."

"Which means...?"

"Content is finished. It's all style from here on in."

"You've figured out the Big Questions."

"Just time to do it now."

"Well, I hope you remember." She arches an eyebrow, the left one, somehow expectantly. "To keep it simple. Very simple."

"Very. So simple. A child could read it."

"Not that they would."

"Hey, we're not being cynical anymore, right?"

"Sorry. Is there any more coffee?"

I gulp the last of mine and say, "No. I mean, it's all grist for the mill, but the mill has to grind smoothly."

"I get it. So all this novel-of-ideas stuff, content-is-king sort of thing, is passé?"

"Not entirely. It's the Information Age, after all. It's just that, well, people still need to be entertained."

"So on the back of the cereal box--"

"Or think they need." I get up and take our empty muesli bowls through the hanging strings of turquoise beads into the kitchen, and return with the coffee pitcher to dribble the last few drops into her outstretched cup. She smiles. Her brown hair now shows strands of gold in the rising light of the sun. I stroke it gently with the third and fourth fingers of my right hand, lightly touching her head with the empty, shiny white ceramic coffee pot balanced between thumb and forefinger.

"Your hair looks nice when it's washed."

"Is that a compliment?"

"Absolutely. Keep it simple, right?"

She arches her neck and presents her lips to be kissed, and I oblige, thinking, "Right! So that's what Thoreau meant when he said, 'Simplify, simplify, simplify.' He wasn't talking about beanfields or forest ponds at all. He was talking to writers, or to himself, about style. Though wouldn't it have been simpler to say it just once, or twice...?"

"What are you thinking?"

"Oh, how much I love you." Honeymoon, remember?

"You had that faraway look in your eyes."

"And you?"

"Oh," she says with a dreamy toss of her head, "I'm remembering that seawater we were looking at yesterday. It was so clear--or at least, we imagine that it's clear."

When actually all we ever see is the color in it, the colors of whatever we see through it or reflected in it. The greens and olive browns of the rocks below, the white sand, the blue sky."

"Hmm, you're right. It's like consciousness, isn't it? Nothing to it, really--empty and full at the same time. All we can know of it is what it contains, or reflects."

"Watch out. You remember my limited tolerance for philosophical abstraction."

"But it's not abstraction. I was drawing a parallel to what you were observing in the ocean."

"It's not really an ocean, is it?"

"A sea by any other name..."

"Wasn't that--?"

"Hemingway's friend?"

"Uh, well, you don't have to put it like that."

"Stein. Gertrude."

"Yes. A rose..."

"No. Another guy."

"Oh. Figures."

"The buzzer!--Shakespeare. But what it really reminds me of is Buddha--you know, I must have told you this before--what we call the rain is not really rain, it's just what we call the rain."

"Uh, is it going to help if I ask you to run that by me again?"

"Maybe not. What are you up to today? More greens, blues and browns?"

"That store in Sant Francesc still doesn't have any red acrylic."

"Everybody's trying to render the rocks."

"I guess." She drains once more her empty cup, stands, and presents her full figure to me for a fond embrace. We part with another kiss and a mutual smile, and she wanders off into the land of her dreams, where paints and colors soothe her spirit into shapes and sizes that will help remind her of who she is and where she's been.

Untitled

I held her in my arms; childlike she was with her peaceful smile. Loved she was linked to me, well formed her woman's body. Then how was it she was revealed to me as a child?

Innocent in the first, unknowing of where the road led. Vague stirrings...fantasies...tender feelings. There was always play. Brother, sisters, friends...books and the sky and sea. She sailed a dream boat nightly and woke up with stars in her eyes.

A young woman, then with children, now she wonders: where did it go...that fresh innocence, that gleeful play? She was happy once, now troubled. Boys to feed, bills to pay. Too many years he, he told her: forget it, babe. It's happening my way.

Sister, mother to a silent tiger-child.

Then, now, an opening. Wider, a seeing...a coming forth. There are colors within, a rainbow of heart blossoming, a world to sail. Come fully into me and out of small cave, goddess and grandmother give her, her welcome. You can always go back, we promise. For now we feed and shelter. You are our she. We are yours, hers. Come visit anytime. Take care of your him, he's yours now too. Remember us. Take care.

Now child again, her black eyes sparkle like stars. She holds me close, no pressure. I fill her arms, her legs. She tells me, I am yours.

And I say, I accept this gift, most graciously.

Camino Real

Later we're walking through the picturesque, windmill-studded countryside beyond Sant Francesc. Long out of service, the ancient vanes are now tied down against the wind.

As usual my thoughts are whirling around internal matters, milling details of literary structure and style. "So I'm thinking, it's present tense from here on in."

"Uh huh. Like TV."

I grimace, but she's got a point. "Whatever. More or less."

Suddenly Our Mister Sun has been blotted out by a large, lizard-shaped cloud in the south-southeast.

Oiseau: "Why are you telling me this?"

Her voice is perfect: I have no idea whether she's being sincere or ironical. Maybe she resents that I've interrupted an important flow of reverie she's been enjoying, along the same lines as mine but more outward-focused, referential always to shade and shadow, outline and texture, angle and line--which is to say, wall, road, house, field, tree, light, color. Which is to say, in simplest terms: green, brown, blue. The reds, a dance of flames, will have to wait their turn before rising up to claim their rightful place in the ranks of the elementals. Still, meanwhile, there are those sunrises and sunsets, to remind us...

The truth is, we've begun our daily walk perilously close to lunch, without bringing any. Communication could suffer from here on in.

I answer as straight as I can: "I'm always glad to have your input, you know that."

She replies in kind. "All right. I don't mind giving it, for what it's worth." And then she picks up the thread of my thinking for me: "So, something new, a change of pace. Is that what you're after?"

I still can't quite delineate the tack she's taking, though she walks the edge of the road right in front of me in the broad daylight. So I take a chance. "Yeah, that's it. Making it more authentic, more up to date. Sort of like the sexual novelty thing."

She stops dead in her tracks, and turns to me with tears welling in her eyes. I find myself thinking, are her tears green, like the seawater at least appears to be, if you collect enough droplets together? But then I realize it's all wrong, and I hold her tightly, and I

remember we haven't cried with each other in a week, we haven't made love in three days, and it's close to the end of the month again...

And we kiss and make up, and apologize for our misunderstanding, and trace the mitigating causes as outlined above, and smile again as the sun sheds the lizard clouds or is it the lizard clouds shedding the sun, and continue walking down the road.

Mick Jagger and Bob Marley conspire in my brain as my feet pick up the beat, and I find myself silently humming their hymn to my private I:

Keep on walkin

Don't look back

And it's more than just me they're crooning about; it's the small and the large of the I and I, and the I and I of Oiseau and I walking side by side, and the I and I of You and I, and the You and You of Oiseau and I when we are face to face and tongue to tongue, and the I and You of writer and reader, and the He and He of Buddha and Shakespeare and Henry M and Henry T and Bob and Mick singing eye to eye...

And I can't help wondering, as more ancient red-rock, thatch-roofed Don Quixote windmills come into view ahead on the rocky hill, above the fields of red-brown soil and young green wheat, resting still now for millennia under the clear blue sky--who were those guys so into stones?

The Lady and the Dentist

"I don't want you to get the wrong idea," I tell her in bed that night after reading her parts of the novel.

Maybe that's not the best time and place to discuss literature. But what do I know? I'm an amateur lover, after all these years.

My red-haired and Scotch-blooded mother was a cigarette-puffing rebel in her youth but a mother to the end. Had she known I would end up dabbling in the black arts of literature on the side, on the other side of my mid-life crisis, she would no doubt have agreed with Oiseau in saying, "Why can't you just leave out these insinuations of violence, and the gratuitous references to extra-marital sex?" My mother, it should be noted, would have added, "And why can't you two get married like normal people? What kind of honeymoon is this, when you've already been together for two years and never had a ceremony?"

"Actually a year and a half," I'd retort, "and I gave her a ring--" But it wouldn't do any good. Besides, my mother is dead.

So I say to Oiseau instead, for better or worse: "It's just like what you said. People nowadays need it to be recognizable, like TV."

"Always more sex and violence--like that book you're reading." She's referring to Stephen Wright's Going Native, a surrealistic smorgasbord of suburban hell, urban sleaze, and every other variant of contemporary American depravity.

"It's better than Doctor Faustus. You told me so yourself."

"I was talking about style, not content."

"I know; but the styles are actually not that different, when you look closely.

Wright makes more use of concrete imagery, whereas Mann is concerned with music theory, cultural evolution, things like that. In terms of syntax, though, sentence structure and actual, you know, flow of the voice, or whatever you want to call it, both writers..."

But I can see she's tuning out.

"Okay, now I'm lost. Help me out here. I'm supposed to write for TV but I can't use sex or violence. I'm supposed to write simply and concretely but it has to be nice things, like music and poetry, brown rocks and green trees and the deep blue sea."

She's shaking her head, no, no, no.

And yet, would she prefer that I not voice all of these riddles of the literary seascape? Suppose I were a dentist--her own dentist, say, back in Canada. Suppose further that the lady and the dentist in question were, in fact, lovers, even newlyweds. I would find myself saying to her, in such a situation, "Look, you've already made it clear that you don't want to hear me talking about my patients' teeth. But certainly I can attempt to write an interesting novel about being a dentist--"

"It's just that you don't have the help as a writer that you have as a dentist."

"You mean the skills, the talent?"

"No--or, maybe, but--like, you can't strap the reader in the chair until you're finished with them. You don't have paid assistants to keep them entertained when you step out of the room."

"That's where commercials come in. Advertising. The publishers handle all that stuff. Keep them salivating for my next release."

"But you need to hold their interest to the end of your first release."

"True." And I think, now who's making the sexual innuendoes?

That night I find myself in a dream standing outside a hotel or dormitory room, in the tentative embrace of another woman. Her appearance in my arms is sudden (I haven't seen her in years) and I can feel the heat of our mutual desire. I say that I was on my way out but am reconsidering. She says that's good because she really needs to talk with me. I can feel the pressure of her breasts urgent against my arm and chest, and her obvious attraction to me has caught me off guard. It's a difficult feeling to resist, this sudden heat, though I know I don't want to take this very far because it's not going to work, given how Oiseau and I feel about each other, only newly committed and strong in our own primary and loving relationship. So I'm relieved when another woman comes by and starts talking with the first woman and they decide to go off together with a plan for their children to play together.

In another dream I'm standing by an open window in a house looking out at the sea. The window is set in a stone wall and the house is built on rocks on the shore, with

waves coming up just below the house. Then there is a stormy wind, and the waves rise suddenly high and strong and break against the stone wall of the house; and higher and higher they come until I can see a great wave rushing toward the window, and I close it just in time and am just able to hold it closed against the force of the water thrusting upon the pane. To my relief, the waves subside. Cautiously I watch as they fall to their former level below the house, finally lapping innocently at the rocks on the shore.

In the Dying Light

They sat eating cold muesli with milk and bananas on the terrace, looking out at the cold day with its static sky of streaked and mottled gray cloud. The new sun was filtering through with a silver sheen, coloring to yellow-gold farther back across the short path it had come. Now was struck with the sense he sometimes had, of absolute newness and freshness in the present moment, in this day which had never before come into existence. It was so easy, he knew from a lifetime of experience in the world, to go blindly from day to day in the settled routines of one's life, from one set of duties and preoccupations to the next, without this awareness that at any given point, you could look out at the world and realize: everything is changed. Whatever the similarity, in appearance, to previous mornings, this one is unique and unprecedented. The deck has been reshuffled, and anything is possible. The past, everything that has gone before, is

now irrelevant. It's like roulette, or the perpetual coin-toss where even if you've had 2,998 heads and only one tail thus far, the odds on the next tail are still only fifty-fifty.

If I then proceed, he wondered, to write in my journal a narrative of yesterday's observations, conversations, ideas and events, isn't it all beside the point? Wouldn't it be better to continue describing what I see and feel and think, what I am doing or what is happening in the world right now?

But this is little better: because no sooner has the idea or observation crystallized into words and begun its journey into recorded form, and it too has joined the other irrelevancies of the past, falling away forever. The only way to keep newness alive is to walk out into the world absolutely open to it--without thought or hope of capturing, recording, holding onto, saving, profiting from it. How could you ever expect the fixed and framed result to be a fair facsimile of the vanished original?

Following Now's stumbling attempt to share something of these thoughts over breakfast, the lovers parted to follow their respective leanings for the rest of the morning. Oiseau took her journal and sketchpad down to the shore, and Now sat by his empty bowl and began to write.

*

A full plunge into the flow of time was exactly what Nadeen had stressed in his discussion of an awakened life. He called it "living in the fourth dimension," though he

didn't exactly equate the fourth dimension with time. For Nadeen the state of thoughtless, hopeless, effortless bliss was called the fourth dimension because of the quantum difference between this state and the familiar world of three dimensions--just as the three dimensional world is incomprehensibly and radically different from the two-dimensional, and in turn, the one-dimensional world it contains. And so to live truly and completely in the world of the present was practically incomprehensible, from the point of view of our habitual life of routine, expectation, memory, fear, regret. The world which we created in our minds from our past experience coincided perfectly with the three-dimensional world from which Nadeen had awakened.

While expanding our familiar boundaries of space and time, Nadeen's identification with universal Consciousness represented a quantum leap from our normal individualized consciousness. This psychological aspect of "awakening and deliverance," it occurred to Now, corresponded with the literary leap from a character-I, caught up in the drama of life, to a narrative-I relating that fictional drama. A similar shift could be signified by moving from past- to present-tense narrative.

The correspondences between the third and fourth dimensions might be summarized as follows:

<u>Third Dimension</u>	+ >	<u>Fourth Dimension</u>
limitation		freedom
spatial reality		transcendence, time
past, future, linear time		present, eternal time
individual		universal
character in drama		narrative self
illusion		truth

It's perhaps misleading, Now realized, to use the loaded terms "illusion" and "truth." In fact all these definitions and boundaries are arbitrary structures set up for convenience in understanding possibility. Illusion and truth are relative terms.

When living in the third dimension, everything seems real and true enough: the space around one, the past and future, one's own identity, one's own drama; it's all relatively true. But once the larger perspective is gained, with a greater scope of consciousness, space, and time, then a look back at one's former self and former life exposes its relative smallness of view. What once seemed true no longer stacks up to the new definition of truth.

Still, the left side of the ledger is absolutely necessary. This more limited aspect of reality is not bad; it just serves a different function in the universal balance. As Nadeen puts it, limitation and freedom are simply different sides of the cosmic coin, different phases of being, inbreath and outbreath, play and rest.

*

"So how's your dentist doing?" She looks at me across the table as we sit with spoons poised over quick leftover soup consisting of mashed potatoes, rice, chickpea curry with carrots, and diced thigh meat from the previous night's Maryland fried chicken.

"I've decided to drop him," I inform her.

"Already? That was a brief affair."

"It wasn't going anywhere."

The air is clear and mild, with a light wind stirring. The scavenger cat lurks in the bushes, pretending that he isn't watching us eat. Do cats eat lizards? Maybe lizards are quicker: as quick as flies.

A ditty flits through my mind--"There was an old woman..."

Later, we walk to the beach for obligatory sunbathing, though it's a winter sun and we keep three layers on. Somewhere over the rocks a bare brown body stretches, reaching arms up to the sky, and stands looking out to sea.

It's a day of catching up, taking stock: on sleep, on emotions, on connection with each other. I hold Oiseau while she sheds premenstrual tears...then she probes the wrenched muscles in my right lower back. We gaze into each other's eyes. Her eyes,

highlighted by the chartreuse sweater given her by Arielle, are as green as the waves that break from blue to aqua to olive brown.

We take turns reading to each other, from a small red book called Fremdsprachentexte: Short Short Stories Universal, in English but for German students, with glossary entries for such parochialisms as "mini-mart," "dump-truckful," "planetesimal," "dusky," and "roach." The first five stories are from "Kanada," and they're all funny-weird, in one way or another.

Is it Kanada, or the genre?, we wonder. Then the entries from Great Britain come in, disturbed-disturbing. It must be us.

On the way back from the beach we walk stumbling into the blinding sun. It helps, we discover, to weave back and forth over the craggy ground, tacking like sailboats into the wind.

We make love that evening in the dying light: a good time because it's unusual, when normally we're busy with supper or dishes, or we're coming home or finishing work or tidying up. This time it's for us. Later we eat and read and sleep and dream: and I want her then harder and harder and more and more until she tells me, "That's enough. I just want to relate to you now."

So when we finally awake in the pre-dawn dark, and hold each other close again, my hand is the only part of me to know her for sure, and only by hand-sized flashes of warm smooth touch. But for those sensations which are basically mine, she has

disappeared. I tell her this and she says, adding a little more evidence to my impressions, "And you thought non-doing was a challenge."

"Right. Welcome to non-being."

And though her voice and her touch give me a bare reminder of the person I imagine is beside me, I realize then that of myself I have no clues at all. That sensation of touch, of sound: they are not me. They are only what I experience. And so if there is, at the bottom of it all, no her and no me--yet there is this curious consciousness--maybe consciousness truly is all there is.

Then two consciousnesses meet, or consciousness meets itself, and there are sparks of recognition to light the dark. Our lips meet and our brains go dim and even before the sun appears we know: this is real.

This is Real

They rise and breakfast on polenta and cheese and coffee, and then she is down to the beach in the dark, under a sharp crescent moon whose rounded backside appears, even in shadow, with a ghostly light from the stars. And with just that sliver of moon and dim starlight she finds her way step by step along the shore, over the smooth rocky ground always opening up before her, until she is standing on sand and the water is lapping softly at her feet.

She sits there under the sign of Akbal, the black water, the dreamspace, the silent one. When the air has lightened with the approach of the hidden sun just up to the lip of the horizon, she turns to go and finds herself walled in craggy rock, amazed at how she got down there.

He's in his own cove of rotted-rock-like-boiled-brain, sitting at the feet of the rising sun, stilling his thoughts to the harsh and sweet tones of the black pennywhistle. Then the sound escapes him and he is left in Lovecraftian silence, the brooding shapes around him content to allow his presence or not, in their planetesimal indifference. He takes some small comfort, in this moonscaped alienation, that he is facing northwest, in line with both his near and farther homes, miming the triad of earth-moon-sun.

Empty of ambition or strategy, plot or even voice, he rises and sets out for home. The muscles stretch and say yes. The walking path is the sure thing. A second cup of coffee, a good bet. And she will likely be there, his ultimate insurance against the non-beingness of this day, which persists like starshine upon his well-rounded emptiness. Does this condition have words?

"Working-vacation-honeymoon. Ah, right. Three intentions are better than one. And yet--"

Click.

His long shadow stretches out before him on the red sandy flat rock plain. The Arab house stands highlit golden in the sun, its palm stem cockeyed, its scrub pines stunted just so. Something has just happened; it's hard to describe, but now his stride is lighter, quicker, and he suddenly feels he has much to say.

Click.

"You just need a form, to put that spirit into," a voice is saying. Her voice?

It hardly matters. And yet it does matter: everything, after all, does. And so he hears her and replies, "A slide show."

"A webpage."

"A contract."

"A body."

She means, of course, not just any body, and of course she is right. She is always right.

Click.

He is playing in a band on stage at the Civic. It's not a jazz crowd, but they're starting to catch the groove, and he's put down that blues riff on the black tin whistle and taken up the small aluminum drum and started a rolling staccato beat called "Formentera Rock," which goes something like this:

D g d G d g D - d g d g D - d g d g D - d g d g

And when the rhythm takes off he lets Richard carry it on the congas with Dick backing up Lars' bass with some otherworld techno percussion, Walkin meanwhile hackin on the acoustic strings while Rowin croons, and then he's got the mike and going into a rhymeless rap called "Otro Mundo," a title stolen from old William but what the hell--

Click.

A square frame. Bold bright acrylics: your face, close-up, from slightly above. Upper left, baby blue sky. Lower left, chartreuse sweater, your shoulder. Then towards center, the right lens of your glasses. Above it a lock of hair, parallelogram of forehead, dash of eyebrow. Below it, the lovely curving bulge of your cheek, down to chin cupping lower lip, perspective-widened nose. The left side of your face in shadow and misty peripheral vision. Back to that smaller rounded frame of a lens, the focus of interest. Inside, a smaller and offset reproduction of: sky blue, wedge of chartreuse. Then the cheek again, this time framing an eye, itself framing iris not chartreuse but seaward green, lightly lashed. And here, center of the center of interest (though still offset above-left in the composition) is the magic slice of sky-reflection shining from but also through lens to overlaid cheek, a clear blue-white light shimmering--how else but with acrylics to hold this transparency in view?

Click.

"So, no plot then."

"Just what is, as is."

"Do you quote that, when you write it?"

"Not any more."

Click.

Chakra 3-4. Harmonic Resonance:

"Sound the resonant tone of the one heart!"

Wasn't there hidden somewhere within all the variations of rhythm, a most basic or universal beat, from which all the others were derived? He'd heard the radio voice of "The Mighty Sparrow," the Trinidadian Calypso king, proclaim that Calypso was "the mother of all rhythms." That statement might still bear some looking into. In the meantime in his own research it had occurred to him that the rhythms based on a meter of three and those based on a four were fundamentally related. In a 4/4 rhythm the hinge was the so-called swing feel, whereby each pair of sixteenth notes could be nudged far enough apart to make room for a silent third. Further, Now saw that the chief motion of most rhythms of whichever meter was a firm downbeat anticipated by a shuffling or delayed lead-in just at the end of the previous measure. That Da, da Da, da Da feel could

be likened and traced to some primal roots, which all shared that same motion: heartbeat, walking, galloping.

All very enlightening and satisfying, as far as the investigation went. But reductionism, if that's what this exercise was, only carried you so far. Then what? Everybody's got a heart. But it's pretty hard to love everyone all at the same time. When it comes right down to it, you have to play them, as the baseball guru says, one at a time.

Click.

Chakra 2-3. Hologram.

"The changes needed to bring you into alignment with your wholeness are mirrored in your external reality. What reflections are presently being provided for you in the people and processes in your life? What you see around you is your 'homework' in the process of spiritual evolution. Become aware of the gifts being offered in these reflections. There are no mistakes or failures in your life: there is no way to do your life 'wrong.' Take a deep breath and relax."

Click.

In the dark one evening after supper, Oiseau went walking out by the cliffs and nearly blundered off into the sea.

Click.

Click.

Mosquitoes Abuzz

Freedom. That's what Nadeen calls it.

I sit at a squared-off, three-foot high, whitewashed chunk of timber with checks through the ring-growth. It's 6:00 on a Thursday morning, with a week to go on a honeymoon you've heard all about. The plastic chair I'm sitting on is molded just the wrong way for my aching back, so I'm forced to sit up meditation-straight, except for the forward lean of my head to discern more clearly the words in the making. For the light is dim overhead, twenty-five watts at twelve volts and falling. The wind is whistling outside this kitchen, where I sit because it's warm from the propane refrigerator at my back. Morning mosquitoes, sharing my shelter and drawn to my warmth, are abuzz all around me.

This tiny cell some eight by eight is even smaller than the dormitory room I called my own as a sophomore in college when I first really tasted this elixir called freedom. It reminds me also of Nadeen's prison experience, the paradoxical condition of his "awakening and deliverance."

Before enlightenment, just be yourself. After enlightenment, just be yourself.
Can you see the difference? Unlikely. Can you feel the difference? It's all the difference in the world.

As simple as a "click": sometimes as simple as that. Once you get it. Like those pictures that look like a chaos of random colors and dots--until you see the clown face, or the two elephants dancing.

Or maybe it's the face you think you see first: Bob Marley's, or your own. Then you step closer: album covers, concert posters, pimples and pores. Until it's a moonscape, nothing left but the world around you.

In the gray screen before me, superimposed over the charcoal words, my face looks out at me, waiting patiently.

The Spiral Staircase Sweater: a mystery

"Flashbacks," she says firmly. "You can always try flashbacks."

For a chilling moment I think I might be in one--or maybe it's just that I came to this same great revelation sixteen years ago when I was stalled in the middle of what has laughingly been referred to since as "my first release."

For my part in the daily game of "Sixteen Tried and True Techniques for Mutual Creative Stimulation," I've suggested the Spiral Staircase Sweater, latest in her new line of designer garments especially targeted to the "disposably incomered, or is it the

disposable incomely" semi-resident Germans and Swiss on this island of flesh-colored, rotted rock, or is it--but never mind.

She sends a strong volley back my way: "But would it go across the arms? What about the arms?"

"I don't do arms. Just take the sweater idea for what it's worth, and see what you can do with it."

"Do you have any idea how long it takes to do one of these sweaters?"

And I know already what she's fixing up to serve me next. The Spiral Staircase Sweater: a mystery.

It's an interesting title, I tell her. I'll work on it. And whenever the creative juices begin to ebb, yep, I'll remember...

"He had a really exciting dream once. There was a big wooly thing in the corner of his bedroom, and..."

She laughs. "But you also have to remember with flashbacks, especially dreams, they have to be present tense."

"Don't you think the rock around here looks like rotted flesh?" I say, changing the subject because we always talk too much about writing. Not enough about, well, life and death.

She looks at me weirdly. "I wouldn't know. But I was noticing how your skin is the color of those reddish rocks over there." She takes my hand and peers at the back of it closely. "The hand's a little grayer, though."

I yank it away, then look closely, myself, at the skin. The tendons and veins are prominent, all right, but I see no trace of corpse gray. "I'm not dead yet, thank you very much."

Flashbacks are all very well, I think. But what can you do with flashforwards?

I thrust the offending hand in my pocket as we walk along the shore, holding Oiseau's hand with the other. In my pocket I feel the ferry schedules we've brought home from town. We're leaving, I remember, a week from today.

Homecoming: flashforward

"I know it's going to be hard for you to work full time when you have your kids. I just don't know what else to say, how else to help. I'm not their dad."

"No. You're not." Her eyes, large and wet, look right through me.

"We've been through all this before. You can make free time for yourself if you choose."

"You don't understand!"

"What don't I understand?"

Her eyes squeeze shut, and she bites her lip. I try to soothe her with a hand on her shoulder, then by smoothing her hair. Her breath catches and she starts to cry.

"Oiseau, what are you feeling right now?"

Though finding words is difficult, she knows she has to tell me. "It feels like there are parts of me, or my life, that you don't like. I feel split into these two halves, one bright and one in shadow--"

"And the dark half is unloved."

"Unlovable."

She clams up again and turns away from me, hugging her knees to her chest. I try to comfort her by pulling her close in my arms under the covers. But something's bothering me now, and she feels it and draws away, turning back to look at me with her wet face scared, her hunched body lonely. Then in a moment she is up and quickly dressing.

"Wait, Oiseau--I need to tell you something." I know my words are going to fall flat, but I can see where this is headed and I don't want us to go there. I take both of her hands and look directly at her. "You know, I do accept you as a whole."

Somehow the truth behind my simple words sinks in, or she knows she doesn't really want to leave, and so she comes to sit beside me on the bed again and sobs in my arms, long and deeply.

When we are able to talk again, I tell her, "Sometimes it seems that no matter how much I love you, it doesn't work; it's not enough. It was the same thing with Pam, and Janine before that. No matter what I did, it just didn't work for them, in the end. My way of loving just wasn't good enough. It makes me feel hopeless, that all the love I can give will never be enough."

I find my own tears now, and Oiseau comes out of her lovelessness to hold me tenderly. The sorrow in my soul pulls me back to the pillow. Oiseau asks me to describe what I'm feeling now.

"I feel like a squashed frog covering a deep tunnel or well or shaft of cold air sucking down, infinitely down, over this black hole of love. The vacuum holds me down, flat on top of the hole, and a rip in my heart is leaking out all my love and life energy. It's all disappearing with no effect, down this bottomless hole."

"What would, how would this frog like to be?"

"I want to be hollow, to stand up and breathe so that the love energy can come down through me and into that hole at my feet, so that I wouldn't have to supply it, but it can come from outside and through me. I could be a crystal cylinder, a channel for love energy to flow through as inexhaustible as the need that sucks it down. But I can't be that cylinder, because I'm just a frog, just me." This abject condition causes me to shed more tears of self-pity. To rise out of it I add, "But if I could stand and then walk freely away, that would suit me too: freely walking, freely loving."

I can see that these last words have once again alienated Oiseau, pushing her from a support role back into that of the unloved, rejected one. But she stays this time to work out the emotions I've triggered.

By helping each other express our feelings in turn, we come to recognize the childish aspects of our needs for love and acceptance. In a kind of spontaneous self-help exercise, we visualize ourselves in a daycare center. Oiseau cradles her inner child as

well as her two sons; I cradle my own child-self along with my daughter; and at the same time, Oiseau and I hold each other in mutual support.

That afternoon at the Platja Migjorn, the sun sets behind a thick blanket of fog over a southern sea as dully and thickly bright as acrylic paint. As Oiseau and I turn for home we are still talking about the emotional issues raised in the morning. But I'm feeling fatigued with the weight of it all, and request a break. That evening we retire calmly and quietly to bed with books for two hours of relaxed reading together.

As I start to fall asleep I'm troubled by visions of the upcoming trip to Barcelona, and another matter still unresolved. I have this lingering urge to find a practical way to return to the Moorish palace in Zaragoza, before we leave Spain. Is this really such an outlandish and indulgent fantasy? Maybe it involves only a single day's excursion there and back, which I can get out of my system while Oiseau does her Christmas shopping in Barcelona.

But no, that won't work. She'll feel abandoned and unloved and alone and unsafe without me there. It's a foolish thing even to consider leaving one's wife or lover in a situation like that.

On the other hand, if I'm capable of undertaking such a journey alone, why shouldn't she as a competent adult be able to fend for herself for a day in the city?

Then there's the option of going to Zaragoza together. But the extra travel and expense are a bit much to ask of her--especially for such a questionable purpose as to

satisfy this childish fixation of mine upon a lost vision, a merely architectural sensation. Besides, with our luck the Aljafería will be closed again, and the trip and the hassle will all be for nothing. Or, the palace itself will be less inspiring than I have imagined: just a bunch of stone buildings, mute and unfeeling, dead to the world these last thousand years.

When Oiseau awakes beside me in the growing daylight, bright and refreshed and ready for a relaxed and normal day together before packing tomorrow, I have to tell her I'm still not quite finished looking at our relationship stuff. She's already put on her tights, her black and white dress.

"It isn't that I want to go into it all again, or have the energy for it, because I don't; it's just that I have this leftover feeling of confusion, or limitation, and I need to deal with it somehow." I'm not even clear that I want to bring up the side trip to Zaragoza. But sooner or later, before we got on that plane to Canada...

"How do you want to deal with it?"

"I don't know."

Oiseau sits beside me on the bed. "Can I suggest that you breathe into the feeling?"

"I'm not sure I want to." My chest is so tight I'm not even sure I can.

"Just breathe through it, gently..."

"The thing is, I don't want to just breathe through it, I want to find out what this feeling is really about."

Maybe, I consider, it is all about this silly palace; or it's about everything in our relationship, with all the complications of dependency and freedom, and the difficulty of clear communication, and it has to start somewhere. I want to share my dilemma with Oiseau in a way that isn't going to hurt her, or give her the idea that I don't love her or want to continue being in relationship with her.

She appears comfortable enough in a support role, meanwhile--radiating a calm clarity that invites my trust. So I fill her in on the whole twisted issue, confessing at the end:

"It's hard even to bring it up because I'm afraid of going into another black hole with you over it all. I don't even know how to be in relationship without getting sucked into these heavy exchanges of feelings. And so often, between you and me, when we do that it seems more destructive than constructive. The same thing used to happen between Pam and me." I knew that such comparisons were threatening to Oiseau, but it was true and it had to be said.

She accepted it this time because she had something else to add. "Do you want to know what Pam told me? That one reason your interactions didn't work so well was that you always got sucked into her stuff. And it works much better with her and Chad because he refuses to buy into it."

"Well that's great. But I don't see how I can avoid being sucked in, when what's being said to me is that I'm unfeeling, uncaring, unloving."

Oiseau smiles as she strokes my fingers. "Actually, I don't think you're unfeeling."

"I've learned a lot from you." I smile back at her briefly. But the black confusion wraps itself around me again when I think of the times when Oiseau and I have spent hours, days on end in labyrinths of emotional torment, despite our better judgment and intention. Now the end of our so-called honeymoon finds us perched on that familiar abyss, and it's only by trading off the lead of this deadly dance that we're still clinging to solid ground.

I succumb to another wave of despair; Oiseau's present support allows me to cry and sob and moan as if we're in a full-fledged rebirthing session. It's as if the session I did a few days ago, in which I didn't reach any state more profound than the desire to throw a party, was merely a warmup. Eventually I'm calm again, but still troubled, unable to see the way clear of our usual emotional traps.

"Try contacting your shaman self for guidance." Oiseau speaks from her intuitive strength as ritual priestess of the inner world, and I trust her guidance absolutely.

Lying quiet for a few minutes, I'm able to imagine a solitary figure, whose role in life is to help release and activate love, without being able to feel it himself. He gives me the choice between the two extreme conditions I experienced yesterday: being either the abject frog flattened over the vacuuming black hole of another person's love deficit, or a crystal cylinder, a pure channel of love positioned over that hole and able to pass infinite

love through to the other person. But neither feels satisfactory as a viable choice for being fully human.

Oiseau sits patiently beside me, lightly stroking my face. Gradually I begin to sense another way, which Oiseau embodies in her present support role. I open my eyes and see her looking at me with no agenda of her own: her sea-green eyes open clear and wide behind the large round glasses, her full lips set together with calm resolve, her high cheeks and broad forehead smooth and relaxed.

"Have you found any answers yet?"

"Yes, but only now, when I look at you. I feel such absolute acceptance and care and love from you right now. You're showing me how I need to be, to love you well in return. When you're having your own hard times, playing out your own internal drama, even if I'm a part of that drama, I can stay outside of it in my own approach to you. I don't have to identify with whatever roles you project on me. I can just be there for you, until you find your own way to realize what you need. It's not about arguing or getting caught up in each other's stuff, or confusing the issue by adding my feelings on top of yours. We each can have our turn to explore, to feel, and be heard. It's about just listening, until the words and tears are all spent and there's nothing left but the love we share."

I embrace her in gratitude, and the tears come streaming down both our faces.

An oracle card appears in her hand. "Here," she says. "This can help you remember what you need to bring to the next situation when you are confused about how to love."

Lamat portrays a striking vision of the stars, through a blue frame with convex corners. The book tells me that the card represents the rabbit, and the rabbit hole into the earth. But in this image the rabbit hole (the frog's well) is not merely a black dead end in the earth, but rather a cosmic vista. And I can see that my hypothetical tube or channel of love energy isn't just a one-way portal. It opens through the frame of Lamat to a starry blackness at both ends. Love doesn't flow through it just one way, but coexists on both ends, through and through and everywhere.

In the afternoon we walk along the near shore, and back via the meadow path alongside clumps of purple heather, talking of Oiseau's plans for work and childcare and artist time and time with me. These practical issues are still unresolved and so it's my turn to lend a listening ear again. The conversation continues into the bedroom.

Tearfully Oiseau brings her exploration to a head. "So then it's nine o'clock, and I finally have time to be with you, to talk and cuddle in bed and make love, but by then you're too tired--"

"And you have to get up early to go to work."

We both take a deep breath here, recognizing the old abyss opening before us.

"I think we'll manage somehow," she says, as if to forestall disaster, but then she starts crying again.

"So what is it now?"

When she doesn't answer but just looks up at me with those rabbit eyes I know.

"You want to make love."

She nods. "Soon. It doesn't have to be now."

"Later would be better for me. Let's make a date. Honestly I'm feeling a bit short of psychic space for myself, these last few days. I just had time for a bit of journal writing today, for instance. Otherwise..."

"All right. I know. So tonight?"

"Sure."

I take my precious space in the form of an early evening walk along the cliffs, to return the books Arielle brought from Ella's house. It's near dark but I manage to find the house. A German woman named Adriane is staying there now. I remember that she's the one responsible for the stone circles displayed over the nearby landscape.

A slight middle-aged woman with black frizzy hair and wearing a brown dress, she greets me amiably, and we discover quickly that we are both writers. Adriane's recent work is poetry of a spiritual and religious nature, which she sends for regular publication in a German magazine. She speaks a little about God, and I want to ask for

her definition, but she beats me to it by asking me, in halting English, "Why you are living?"

In that moment I feel like a college kid put on the spot in philosophy class. I giggle nervously. "Oh, uh, I dunno. To have fun, I guess. To enjoy life."

She eyes me carefully. I'll have to do better than that.

"And also, um, to be a channel for universal energy...as I feel clearest to express it...through things like walking, writing, drumming, playing flute...loving Oiseau."

"That's very interesting. For me it is different. More, to express the good instead of the bad in my nature."

Uh-oh, I think. The curse of original sin. "Could you say more what you mean?"

"It means becoming more attuned with the plants, with animals and with other people. Do you know, this cat of mine, she and I have this, what do you say, psychic game we play together. If I have forget to feed her, only by one hour, then she comes to me, and looks at me, and I know she is telling me something. But she doesn't say anything. Then she goes to the dish, over there, and comes back and looks at me, then goes to the door. She sits looking at the door with her back to me. Just waiting. You see? Anyway now I talk too much--"

"No, that's okay."

"But it's getting dark. You have a flashlight?"

"No, but I think I'll be fine."

"Here, you must take mine. It is dangerous out there."

I find Oiseau in meditation on the terrace. At a glance I know this unfamiliar pose means she's worried herself sick with my twenty minutes' delay in returning home, fearing that I've gone off the cliffs in the dark. As she woodenly confirms this impression, I do my best to stay clear of the underlying emotion, simply apologizing for my lateness and hoping to leave it at that.

Oiseau sheds but a few tears as we move on to the supper which has been cooling in the kitchen. Evidently she's still leery of taking up too much of my "psychic space." And indeed, after supper I find myself needing still more neutral time together. So we read in bed for an hour or so, before the scheduled session of lovemaking.

But it doesn't go smoothly. I'm there for her but not wholeheartedly; because it's yet another occasion to be "on" when I'm really ready for a break, for things to be simple and easy and free again.

Finally she realizes it's no use. "What kind of space are you in, Now?"

"I guess I'm feeling a little withdrawn still, from all the energy I've been putting out. I know it hasn't been all one-way; I've been going through my own stuff and getting support from you, too. I guess I'm kind of burned out from it all. It's not that I don't want to keep giving you care and attention; it's just that I'm not able to do it very well anymore."

"Okay, okay. I mean, not okay. I don't know what I mean. Shit, I don't know what to do. This just doesn't stop, does it? You keep saying you need 'space.' Well, how much do you need? What am I supposed to do? Go away and leave you alone?"

"No, no, it's not like that." But I feel as if it is like that. The pressure's just too much, and I, too, don't know what to do.

Then the image of Lamat comes to me, opening up a starry space within my heart. I remember to breathe, and right away begin to relax. It doesn't matter what Oiseau is saying to me or about me; I need simply to allow her to feel whatever she's feeling, and to encourage her to express it.

This retreat into my own calm refuge is seen by her as intentional distance and further withdrawal, instead of support. Oiseau's reaction is not voiced but I see it in the blaze of clear, hard fire in her eyes as she looks at me. This is new from her but I know it as hatred, because I have seen it in Pam and before that in Janine, when I no longer worked for them as a romantic partner.

I tell Oiseau what I'm seeing, because now there is nothing left to lose. At the same time, though I sense our relationship may be finished, I feel the strength and clarity of who I am, because I have been true to my feelings. I have reached the limit of what I can give, and there is no blame attached to that limitation, because it is the natural boundary of who I am. If Oiseau truly needs more than I can give, she will have to find her own solution without me, or in some way that doesn't demand more from me.

Fortified by this independent source of strength, I go on to tell her, "I see a purity and power there for you. I think you need that fire, to balance all those watery emotions of yours." She looks at me with calm attention now, recognizing the truth of my insight. "Maybe," I add, "it can help you gain a sense of standing strong in who you really are."

In the morning it's easier because we both have managed somehow--perhaps by sheer emotional exhaustion--to sleep fairly soundly, waking around five. Oiseau is turned with her back to me, but I reach out for her, and I tell her that I still want her in my life if she can still find a way to have me, as I am. I tell her that I want for us to walk away from here side by side, the way we came.

As she turns to face me and we hold each other, still at a little distance, I can sense there's still anger in her, and I encourage her to show it to me openly, directly, to let it out.

"It's hard," she tells me, "because I can see the other side of what I would say."

"That's okay. I need to hear it the way it is. You need to tell me how it is."

I can see it's going to take a concentrated effort on her part, going against a lifetime of conditioning against the expression of anger. I goad her, "Come on--you're angry at me for a reason. It doesn't have to be a good reason. What does that anger say?"

Finally she gave in to it. "You left me. You left me behind to go on that hike by yourself. You weren't ready to live with me, or to love me. You needed more time. You

needed your own space. You needed to go see Lana. You left me...you left me...you're leaving me..."

"No, no, I'm not leaving you."

"But that's how I feel!"

"All right, all right. Now I know how you feel. Thank you for telling me. Now can I tell you how I feel? Oiseau, I love you. Oiseau, I love you. Oiseau, I love you..."

And the tears flow and flow, until all the anger is gone and the love comes flooding in again to fill the empty space left behind.

As sunrise comes upon us we are able to go hand in hand to the sea, to watch the burning ball rise above La Mola. Oiseau turns to me with a fiery radiance on her face, and with a bright smile says, "I don't need you any more; I just want to continue sharing my life with you, so that we can spark each other with new inspirations and adventures, and the joy of living each new day together."

"That sounds good to me."

The Haunted Palace: flashforward

Inside the palace there is a garden consisting of terraced brickwork, a long rectangular pool, and, among an array of exotic flowering shrubs, an orange tree that gives the impression of always bearing fruit. Around the garden are various courtyards and open chambers framed by the classic ornamental arches of the Moorish heyday. A

second floor features blue and gold and red inlay and sculpture and painting on high ceilings which are also remarkable for their broad spans of timbers some sixteen to twenty inches in depth.

A corps of guards fulfills the ancient duties of the caliphs and kings and queens of Aragon--keeping the riffraff of tourists like me under watchful eye and moving through, moving through. Restless and bored they pace, they pace, eyeing us, checking us out, staring again and again at the same walls, and appraising one another by walkie-talkie of our movements through the rooms. One guard in particular, a baldly bullet-headed sort with black eyebrows and misleadingly soft dark eyes, has spied us moving against the flow of a large tour group, and glides quickly through the crowd to cut us off at the rear door before we can slip through to the upper story. I try to explain our intention but he shushes me with a decisive shake of his head. So we go back down and around the way we came, puzzled and frustrated at the apparently arbitrary restriction of our access to the upper chambers of the third floor. As we loiter in the ground floor garden, then, I notice him eyeing us from the balcony above.

Across the garden another stairway appears and so, eluding our personal sentry, we manage to find our way to the forbidden upper chambers. They are worth the effort, austere and intimate with their low-ceiling, whitewashed walls graced by borders of fanciful red Arabic lettering. These chambers, divided by arches of both the simple and compound styles, admit light through four-foot thick walls by means of thin sheets of translucent quartz...a light as pearly and mystic as that which, in other window-ways in

the lower chambers, filters through a filigree of lacy carved stone. The ambience is altogether meditative, until another guard appears, evidently alerted to our dangerous presence. This one, larger yet gentler of demeanor, patiently stands vigil while Oiseau attempts to sketch. I hover self-consciously nearby, feeling the weight of the imagined terrorist bomb in my daypack. Finally Oiseau loses her artistic cool and says, "I can't do this here."

So finally we retreat outside, exiled to the fate of the peasantry, who must gawk and sketch and write of this powerful place now from a respectful distance. We have been granted our brief attendance in the royal presence and now we must take our peace from without, under the bright cold December sun.

I have now performed, with Oiseau's midwifing support, that essentially touristic indulgence, the satisfaction of the particular desire that has dogged me for the last ten weeks. I have had on this trip, after all, my Moorish palace; I have entered the mystery of that forbidden castle of Aragon; I have, to put it more crudely, blown my wad. In violating the sacrosanct impenetrability of a fantasy, I have brought into being the birth of a banal touristic reality.

And what do I have to show for this all-important "experience" of entering and being inside her, of knowing her on intimate terms? Vague and fleeting imagistic memories, even now as the train pulls out of Zaragoza station...memories mingled already with the highlights of the tourist brochure and the art book on Islamic

architecture; memories clouded by the emotional experience of fighting the crowd, avoiding the guards, and feeling Oiseau's discomfort. The truth is, our long-awaited return to the Aljafería was ultimately a public and not a private experience. In this perhaps more than in any other aspect of its realization, my encounter with the object of my desire was flawed in comparison to the elevated status it held in my imagination beforehand.

The once-pure vision is lost and replaced by the slide show of the incidental: the eating of a sandwich in the garden; standing with hands in pockets over an annotated gallery of stone fragments. And along with the diminishment of a most private pleasure comes a certain materialism inherent in the presentation of a scene a thousand years dead...a discovery that the ornate carved friezes were largely a work of restoration in plaster; that the mystical glow shining through quartz windows and stone filigree emanated from concealed electric lighting.

I already knew that in the imperfect translation of vision into reality, I risked disappointment. So why did it seem finally so important to make this long, quixotic side trip from Barcelona on our last full day in Spain? I could have had the breathtaking photographs, unchanged and unchanging in the art book I bought in Barcelona, regardless; and I even might have managed to keep, in my psychic archives, the visions I first conjured from the interior mystery of this place. Was it a good decision, in the end?

Not necessarily, I am tempted to say. And yet there is this: that in the larger context of the experience of my life as a whole, there is now a richness of another order.

There is a certain satisfaction in the very satisfaction of desire. Not so much for the thing itself but for the act of attaining it--an act symbolic of a kind of personal power in the world. In stepping blindly through that high, arched gateway, I have entered a more complete stage of adulthood. In seeking an elusive quality of sanctuary and repose, I have found my roundabout way to a more dynamic prize, the freedom to choose.

The train rocks on its rails, and I can enjoy at last, here and now, that reflective space in which to make sense of it all. A casual missed opportunity gave rise to a galling obsession that took on the significance of a compound personal lesson. The first iteration could be stated, "Pick the apple when it's ripe and ready."

I turned it over in my mind for weeks until the dilemma was finally resolved: I didn't actually need to enter the palace, because I understood the lesson. This higher understanding formed lesson number two: "Picking the apple is beside the point."

Eventually, it proved not only possible but practically reasonable to "go back again," though doing so would seem contrary to the spirit of the lessons just learned. Thus I learned a third lesson: "You can still pick the apple if you like."

After the actual visit to the forbidden palace, a fourth lesson came into play, because the place wasn't all it was cracked up to be. "See, you didn't need to pick the apple after all."

No, but as need gave way to choice, power shifted from my unconscious to my conscious desire. The lizard-man was left at the garden gates, and we walked free into the world.

In retrospect, the actual conditions of that charmed realm are beside the point. No matter how exalted and perfect the edifice might have appeared to me during my brief conquest, I would still have left it behind in Zaragoza for the next thousand years; what remained with me would still have been but the silver ash of a golden memory. I would still be riding this train back through the plains of Aragon, under a pale blue December sky, with the snowclad Pyrenees seducing my present attention. Oiseau would still have in her pocket the watercolor vignette she managed to produce outside the fortress walls, and she would still be knitting beside me now...patterning new vision into wooly flesh, stitch by black and white stitch.

The Spiral Staircase Mystery

Words come like dreams in a night when sleep at first seems distant, elusive.

The breath is automatic...then it is willed, allowed consciously, and thereby freed.

Your love is with me constantly, he said, and mine with you.

But she needed more. She needed for him to show his love for her, every day and with affection. No, even more: with live and breathing passion.

As I sit writing, the "I" I describe moves away from me into a night of inky blackness, and then into the illusion of day.

This I is not me, but the me I call myself, made not-me in the calling. The "I" I am rides always forward, unnamed, unnamable.

There is a world to write, and when that's exhausted, there is much else to be mined: the storied past, the unimagined future of distant worlds, other selves, the microscopic detail of what is.

For now the single candle burns small, bright and steady, until the white bare walls come shadowy to life with light blossoming through the window.

The creative force is always dynamic, always waiting to be put in motion; yet it must never be taken for granted. It's elusive, invisible, unnamable--yet all-powerful.

Whenever this or that consciousness asserts itself, and claims authority, the creative force is not exactly that. Yet it must speak through that individual effort, or else it remains utterly voiceless and unknown.

If Doctor Faustus described the end of history as it was then known, it also culminated a peak of ironic form, whereby the implicit narrative "I" took on a particular kind of anonymously characterized persona. Now in a post-historic, post-ironic era, we realize that history is all around us, waiting to be rewritten in present time. The "I" telling the story is neither the "real" historic doer or actor or witness of that story, nor the invisibly omniscient observer, nor the characterized person of said observer, but rather,

we might say, the fourth dimensional possibility, which includes all of the previous three and goes beyond. The strange and subtle thing is that going beyond means coming back to the start...but not so much in a circle as in a spiral, because now we're at the same place higher up, as an overlay, looking through a clear lens.

So, the basic story might say "I came, I saw, I conquered." The next step might take us to "He and she breathed deeply and then kissed passionately." With a third step we come to "Forgive me, dear reader, for my intrusive remarks, but as a humble monkish scribe and con-man, I must confess a not unnegligible fear that I am ill-equipped to give justice to the tale I now set before you--that awkward word (if it is a word) 'unnegligible,' for instance..."

No, we can move past all that and back around to:

"Dawn rubs its tawny puma-gold shoulder at my window. I prepare to rise from my monkish study and walk out across this richly barren island with my lover. She has just returned from her private morning walk to the sea. She begins every day by descending a spiral staircase cut into the rock of the cliffs."

What distinguishes this last narrative voice from the most simple, nonfictional account?

How closely it matches the facts is irrelevant, because it's all the same to the reader. Both fiction and nonfiction have to achieve verisimilitude, that famous and still-necessary (even under the exposure of the stagelights of irony) "willing suspension of

disbelief." No, the key quality of the post-ironic voice is its subtle transparency, identical to the presence of infinite divinity in each of our limited human personalities.

The actual narrative "I" which tells the tale is never the apparent "I" of the telling, because for as long as the telling continues, there is a movement of narrative I-identity beyond what has already been told. And as the tale becomes a kind of recorded history, the tale forms the costume of that invisible stage presence. Always out of reach is the teller of the tale yet to come, the speaker of the words yet unspoken. The breather of the next breath...the lover who has not yet delivered the next and necessary kiss.

We set out once again on a marathon trek to a far corner of the island...this time to Cap de Barbaria, the only limb of this strange sea-beast we haven't yet stroked with our feet and eyes. We stop in Sant Francesc along the way to boost our engines with café con leche and pastry, then soar down the highway with lightness in our steps.

On a wall outside a house with a sign saying "Achtung Katze" is a basket with two loaves of bread--or is it? On closer inspection, the sandy-brown loaves are not bread at all, but smooth oblong stones.

The plot of this larger mystery unfolds step by step, breath by breath...day and word and kiss by day and word and kiss. The action is of self-becoming; but in the telling it consists of familiar fictions of convenience: the third person, the past; events,

dialogue. Meanwhile my identity as character and as narrator of the self-becoming journey is likewise conveniently chosen: "walker," "writer," "musician," "lover."

Like caffeine, all of these fictional conveniences are unnecessary but helpful, to boost the little engine over the next grade in the road, the next hump in the way to becoming new. To take on a human personality is to prime the pump of divine manifestation. To tell the tale of all there is to tell, we follow the single thin black typewriter ribbon of road south as it heads to the end of land, where no one else appears to have passed in the last five thousand, or one hundred thousand years. Except, along the way, there is a rough circle of stones, and at the end, a lighthouse containing--it must be presumed--a spiral staircase.

Time is On Our Side

Now, against the savage beauty of this stony wilderness, we can only assert a provisional destination, a plan for the day. These intentions we sow like seeds in the chocolate-brown fields we pass...or leave like threads to take up in the next day's knitting.

We carry with us in daypacks slung from our shoulders on single straps, the makings of an ample picnic: bread and cheese, carrots and tomato, peanuts and dates, yogurt and chocolate. We also carry water, maps and windbreakers, notebooks and pennywhistle--and an awareness that this is our last long day's walk of the entire journey.

When we stop for lunch, we add to our sandwiches bits of wild rosemary picked from where we sit. Resuming our walk, I observe the sage expression of a bearded brown goat who turns to watch us over her shoulder as we pass, and recognize an old affection I have for goats. I resonate somehow with the size, intelligence, and demeanor of goats, cats, and ducks.

These are all "left-handed" species, Oiseau remarks, contrasting with the more standard varieties of barnyard fauna: cows, dogs, chickens.

One day when I've outgrown my ambitions as a writer and musician, I tell her, I'll settle down to a nice simple homestead life raising goats, cats, and ducks.

"I won't hold my breath," she says.

And then I realize, I already went through that cycle of self-becoming twenty years ago. We're into new territory now.

Here and now we dance to the music of the elements--no one else's tune. We improvise on their melody, as we will. In my notebook I make marks of observance, practicing for a later performance in which I will attempt to convey this roar of the south wind around me, a new warm wind from Africa.

Rolling like sea-smooth stones across the desolate landscape, Oiseau and I approach the impending end of our footloose lifestyle with an almost urgent inquiry, about what is it to live so freely here, and how different is our pattern of life at home. The difference revolves around time. At home we are constrained and stressed, both of

us in our different ways, by the alarm clock waking us for work, the school schedules of our children, the appointments and events that crowd our calendars. In an open field one small section of fence goes up: and with the next snowfall, wind drifts snow against it. There might only be a single post sunk in the ground; but more and more snow is piled against the resulting drift, until it looms mountain-large.

For Oiseau, night is a clear channel of space that allows her to move freely in time, like wind past the drifts. For me night is down-time, time when I cannot be doing. The difference is that she works more consciously with her dreamtime: attending on its messages, collecting its imagery before coming fully awake, recalling it in depth and detail, recounting it to me in the morning, exploring in her journal the implications it has for her life. This kind of conscious dreaming is like the consciousness brought to breathing, loving, and writing. We can do these things automatically, or with greater consciousness; but only with consciousness can they bring us to freedom.

It occurs to me that the timed agendas in our "normal" lives represent what Michael Sky, in his book, Breathing, calls "contracted energy." In his view, stuck and shallow breathing represents a contraction of life energy around past emotional hurt, beginning with birth trauma--especially if our first breaths were driven by panic from our umbilical cord being prematurely cut.

In our adult lives we voluntarily set up these appointments and schedules for "convenience." But our breathing tends to constrict as the free flow of energy adheres to

these obstacles. Only when the appointed time arrives, and the event is lived and breathed through, can the energy can flow freely again.

Here we have the sea to remind us of time's clear presence...so much time that it doesn't seem like time at all: just endless space.

Forty days and forty nights we will have spent on Formentera, riding a flood which has swept our old world away. Forty days and nights in the wilderness: with visions of divinity, and earthly magic working in our bones. Will we be at all the same when we return? Are our fears now just leftovers, dreams, recycled visions of the way we were? Time will tell.

Pleistocene Flashback

From the end of the Cap de Barbaria, we can see clearly to Ibiza. Beside it a prehistoric monolith stands out of the sea--the island I've come to call Skull Island, movie home of King Kong. Thanks go to Steven Wright for supplying the name of the mythic island, from the chapter in Going Native that's set in Borneo. Maybe the film crew really went to Borneo, and maybe Jack Nicholson (as Wright playfully suggests) did too; but I still prefer to imagine that the distant approach to Kong's home was shot from the vantage point we presently enjoy.

Meanwhile, to the south facing an unseen Africa and its barbarous shore, the sea is molten silver. Waves sweep rippling across it, but this is no passing illusion. The

longer I look, the more I am taken into its spell...a mirror that can hold no face but the shattered, spilled and splashed plasma of the crucible sun.

Red Road Rock

"It must be hard to be famous," I say.

Oiseau looks at me with one eyebrow raised. Is it this old tired theme about ambition, fame and fortune again, or--

"I'm just thinking about Jack Nicholson, whose photograph appears between Christ and the country's president, in the house of the chief of the village in Borneo where these characters go in that book I was reading last night. And I'm wondering what it must be like to go through life with a face like that, recognized everywhere, even in sunglasses, so that you can't even walk down the street in New York City without everyone coming up to you and saying..."

"Right," she cuts in before I can finish, "like being an ape in New York City and everybody says, are you King Kong?"

"Ha! Ha! Hey, I mean, that's really very funny. I didn't know you were so funny. But seriously, below my casual wondering about poor, rich Jack is the deeper, more existential question of what it's like to be yourself, to live your life from the inside, when your outer life is composed of a series of scripted parts. You come to be typecast in a

certain kind of role; and then, after so much heartfelt practice, it must be hard to see yourself in any other way."

"I see what you mean. I'm not envious at all. New York?"

"Well, probably Beverly Hills. But he gets to go on vacation in Borneo."

"In a wacko novel."

It all gets me to thinking again, on the long walk home that day from the Skull Island vista, about the four dimensions of consciousness. You could actually start with unconsciousness: K. Kong or real-life Jack (né Tobias Larsson), or you or me at square one. From there we move to stage two, the active consciousness of the actor. Stage three is the self-consciousness of the famous actor: identity crisis on top of the world (Empire State Building). In the fourth stage comes liberation from the previous state, to a freedom inclusive of all three previous stages. One can be simultaneously naive and unpretentious, skilled and purposeful, even comfortably famous, all at the same time. Jack, are you there?

The self-conscious third-dimensional state recalls the previous discussion of literary modes, and corresponds to advanced narrative irony. The narrative role itself is cloaked in the guise of a fictionalized persona, "a friend" of the protagonist or one who, like Bradley Pearson or Mann's last hero Felix Krull, purports to relate his own exploits from a comfortable distance along life's evolutionary path.

The fully conscious stage is the fourth, or post-ironic. Here the evolutionary distance from character to narrator may be collapsed into a single instant in time. Like the famous actor who can dare to be himself, or to play the next role as he sees fit, the narrator can be so close to the character he describes that they are virtually indistinguishable, one from the other. Journal passes to essay to novel and back to journal again...or to a form which encompasses all three, while seeming to be one or the other at any given time.

We arrive home exhausted from our thirty-kilometer jaunt across the length and breadth of Formentera. At least, our legs are beat. Our spirits are high and our very beings are energized by the workout, by the scenery, by the sun and wind, by the heady conversation. My notebook is full of fresh insights. I finally have a title for this curious work. Oiseau has enjoyed a day blessedly free of her usual painterly preoccupations. We have one thought upon our return to the Casa Sophia: ice cream!

There's half a litre of the stuff waiting in the freezer compartment. I knife it in half and dish it up, sprinkle on some shredded coconut and grated chocolate, and complete the walnut-flavored delicacy with a drizzle of Amaretto.

We are reborn again--in a manner of speaking. Actually, as we have taken the ice cream to bed where our bodies collapse, it's only a short time before our steady breathing gives way to the regular deep panting of the rebirthing breath, and we're on our way to an inner journey as challenging as the day's trek across Formentera.

The anxieties that press against my lungs are the familiar ones of the looming home life: chiefly the endless to-do list of the Internet entrepreneur. But I manage to breathe through these fearful distractions to the lighter side of our imminent homecoming--an idea for a great party for all our friends. The ice cream may be having some effect here, because the party features all the food we've enjoyed on this trip: many breads and cheeses, the obligatory chorizo, olives, pasta, Spanish rice, chicken, biscuits, free-flowing wine, and oh yes, finally as much ice cream as we can stomach. We'll read from our poems and journals (audience members can request entries by date); we'll display our art work; and we'll perform the pennywhistle tunes and drum rhythms that we've mastered. We'll regale the assembled masses with our tales of adventure. We'll wear the same clothes we wore for three solid months on the road. And then we can catch up on all that we've missed in our absence, as everyone else shares their stories and excitements and creative productions of the time.

The idea grows and expands, and for the life of me, I'm unable to shake it. Is that going to be the most profound revelation of this particular breath-trip? ("Bummed about going home? Lighten up--throw a party!")

Oiseau meanwhile is journeying (she tells me later) through her own complex of issues involving her baby-self and creative-self, her past and present relationships, rage and safety, and her own breathing process. We are conscious enough of each other's

close presence throughout, to offer help to one another if needed. But so far we're journeying through separate worlds.

My breathing keeps on at a furious pace after Oiseau's has subsided, and finally she asks if I need anything.

Yes, I reply, and I tell her about the party idea, so that it doesn't get lost in the psychic shuffle. "But now I need you to help me get past that idea. It's like I'm just stuck on that party train and can't get off."

She hands me the one Mayan Oracle card I have already chosen during my session: The Language of Light. It's an image of a sun, perfectly unitary and simple in its design, and as I lay it over my face I am able to focus on its light and simplicity until the party debris is swept away, and I'm breathing peacefully again.

The image conveys its meaning to me just the same as the card's interpretation I will read later in the book: "Fly into the pure state of consciousness where there are no words. Open to receive your native tongue, the galactic language of light."

From this peaceful state of reflection I am still able to consider the value of human thought, placed within the same conceptual framework of four-dimensional evolution that I've been working with lately.

1. Start with no thought (unconsciousness).
2. Next, to have one thought is to be simply conscious.

3. To have many thoughts leads to thinking too much, to being stuck with thought; just as being too conscious can lead to being too self-conscious.
4. In the fourth dimension we can have all thoughts, all possible thoughts, without confusion or conflict. We can even entertain the conjunction of all-thought and no-thought. We can consider all-thought and no-thought to be the same as one thought.

These concepts in turn bring to my opened mind the fundamental maxims people have used over the centuries to guide our process of self-becoming. Before history there were no maxims: it was just "Be yourself." Then came social roles, and the conceptualization of role-playing in ritual and drama: thus the possibility to "Be someone else." With the Greek philosophers consciousness came to be the hallmark of human being, and so their maxim was the famous "Know thyself," whereby we mark the difference between being oneself and being something other. Now we know there is somewhere else to go, beyond all conventional limits of selfhood. Mr. Miller has wisely supplied us with the fourth-dimensional mantra, "Forget Yourself."

Fourth World Light Blues

On awaking the next morning from a long sound sleep, I am surprised and disappointed to discover that I'm still struggling with concepts, personal issues, vague

understandings. How is it that I felt such affinity for Nadeen's version of permanent bliss, yet still can't quite seem to put my finger on what it means or why I haven't attained it? I could sit down with pen or computer and try to puzzle it all out, but I sense that it has to come from somewhere deeper inside. As Nadeen says, you can't just get it by trying; you have to be ready to accept to as a gift of grace.

Meanwhile I have a second Mayan Oracle card to mull over, drawn after yesterday's rebirthing session to help crystallize my dilemma in dealing with a troublesome unfinished writing project waiting for me at home. I've outlined a book, to be called Four Men, which involves transcribing a series of taped interviews. The basic problem is that I've completed the tapes for three of the subjects, but have lost my enthusiasm for taping the fourth man's tall tales--let alone embarking on the endless tedious hours of transcription which the whole project requires, for no certain reward or result.

Naturally the card I have drawn for this issue is the card called "Men"--the Mayan word, but no matter; synchronicity honors no boundaries or borders. The reading is ambiguous, pointing out both the positive aspects of selfless service, and the shadow side, taking on too much. Both are true for me in this case, and so I'm left still unsatisfied as to a clear direction to take.

As I struggle mentally with all these questions, the left brain tires and the right brain takes over. Concepts, ideas, words, images, memories, and dreams all flow past...and in watching the flow, I find a solution.

I will let the fourth man go, dropping him from the project without further taping. In his place I will become, through my implied and editorial presence, the virtual fourth.

Mine will be the invisible role of the listener. The asker of questions. I am the inaudible conductor of this symphony of human speech; the scores and instruments are not of my devising.

As more than one somebody has said, the best solution is the simplest. Aside from the Four Men predicament, there is this larger question of enlightened bliss which remains outside my grasp. But I am inspired by the resolution of the smaller issue to apply a fourth-dimensional key to the more fundamental puzzle. I know enough now to tell myself, "I need to stick with this process of flow..."

And suddenly from out of the closet of metaphysical costumes and masks comes tumbling the very agent and essence of flow: Time itself. The realm of bliss--the fourth dimension, beyond the visible world we normally experience as our own--might be no more simply defined, than by its familiar association with time. Time is the dimension through which our world of problems and thoughts and emotional issues and conflicts and contractions and illusions still manages to move, despite its own ponderous weight.

To live in time is to live at once free from, and free to move within, the limited world of matter and what we think matters. The time machine is here and now, and it's made of free energy. When we ride it we can go to any other time we imagine, because

in the fullness of time, going is arriving; and arriving is always, no matter who or where
we think we are, here and now.

The builders of the megaliths, right over here...a step away, within our reach.

The colonies on Mars, just over there. A small step, in the fullness of time.

For me to live in the fourth-dimension I have only to live, I know now, inside this
name I call myself:

Jammin--because that's what you do when the ride is free and you're on for life;
you hear the beat and step with it, always forward.

Fulltime--because why bother stopping, when you can rest on the fly, and the
planet itself is the joyride?

Now--because when else is there? Tomorrow's just another song.

The southern wind has brought us, in the end, a bright hot sun. And so I take my
lover in hand, and we set out walking one last time for a swim, down the red rock road to
the light blue sea.