

Essays on the Condition of Inwardness

Essays on the Condition of Inwardness:

Pieces of Otherness

By

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PART ONE:
ORAL HISTORY TRIGGERS

PEOPLE

1. Young Professors Rehearsing for Life

Did you and your teenage friends form clubs, make up teams for sports, or bond in other kinds of group activities?

When I was thirteen or fourteen Ross, Charles, and I decided to form a lecture club. We were to meet once every two weeks to carry out club business, to feature one lecture, each time, on a predetermined topic—such as Great American Authors, or Insects in Illinois, or Oliver Cromwell. We also decided to make a record of our proceedings, and to share what we learned with the adult community. There was a job for everyone: convener for the day, who would call for comments and discuss upcoming meetings; a speaker, who would bring a typed paper with copies of his talk for the others; and a secretary/recorder, who would make notes on the meeting. We actually met five or six times, around the dining room table of my parents' house, kept careful handwritten records of each meeting, and discussed our topics whenever we met at other times, on the way to school or at sports. We were all academic children, and assumed this was the way life went. We enjoyed our roles. And in fact it was the way life went. We were all rehearsing for our future.

2. Parting from a Spouse

Have you experienced parting from a spouse, or other loved one?

My wife and I courted long-distance. I was living in America, she in Nigeria. We met as often as we could in Nigeria during the courtship. Just before Christmas, one year, I was parting from her in Murtala Muhammed Airport, in Lagos, Nigeria. We had had a wonderful visit together. It was a time when we were not in the mood for bureaucracy. However, we were facing the usual hassles of check-in and passport control, and the usual—at that time—attempts to take extra money from us for this and that bag we were checking. In the course of all this fuss, when we were thinking only about one another, the moment was approaching when I would have to enter the departure queue, and we would no longer be able to see each

other. That moment was hard. I kept turning back to wave to her, and from behind the visitor's barrier she craned her neck to see me as long as possible. We had just begun to know how to value one another. We were just becoming open secrets to one another. And here we were having to part. Soon we would be voices on telephones. Longing would replace rich reality. That was a hard moment. I walked slowly away. The trip home was hard.

3. The Rituals of a Father

Did your father show you what was inside his mind? His distress, hope, passion? Did you know him?

My father's armchair was the ultimate in professor comfort, soft leather, standing lamp, beside it a cherry side table of his own make, a rectangular ottoman. According to a pretty strict ritual, he occupied that armchair every evening. The stages of the ritual were predictable. First my father helped the dachshund onto his lap, fitting Flicka in between his legs. Then Dad settled back for the well-deserved end-of-day pleasure. During the next two or two-and-a-half hours my Dad put away a couple of Budweisers and the appropriate slices of cheddar cheese and saltines. (He would get up at least once, during the ritual, to cut a couple more slices of cheese.) While he sat in his chair, Dad read *The New Yorker* or *Time* magazine. (There was always a pile of these journals waiting for him on the side table.) There was plenty of heavy news to subside into—we're talking the forties—and he kept himself informed about the modern world he didn't much care for. But he never failed to chuckle at the name of the *New Yorker* writer Mollie Panter-Downes, which he muttered out as "pants are down." One could half suspect, in hearing this, that Dad's favorite writer was Rabelais.

4. Reading with a Mother

Have you a memory of special intimacy with your mother?

During my early teen years, my mother and I regularly read out loud to one another. The usual occasion was after school, when I got home. Typically she would be ironing, while I read to her from a comfortable chair, or I would be stretched out on the sofa, eating a peanut butter sandwich, while she read. These were unforgettable moments, for me, and they have never since been surpassed. These were moments where

mother/son sensibilities could meet freely, through the soul of a third person, and create a world of our own. That third person, the voice of the author we were reading, was an essential ingredient of these experiences, for Mom and I would not have been able to talk directly to one another about the important life issues that came up in what we read. We read Lawrence's *Sea and Sardinia*, Forster's *A Passage to India*, and *David Copperfield*, finding in each of those books attitudes and humors that brought us close together. We picked up every afternoon where we left off the day before, and I thought a lot, on my way to school and back, about what we were hearing between the pages of these masterful writers. For me these meetings with Mom in word space were life-builders, golden portals.

5. Relatives We Hardly Knew

Did you come from a robust many-child, many-generation family in which the visceral energies of life throbbed?

I had no siblings, so from the start I had neither competition nor company in my growing relation to my parents. My father had two brothers and a sister, all living in Virginia, where he came from, two thousand miles away from us. Once we visited my father's sister, an affable mid-life lady who worked in a Government Office in Washington, D. C. All I recall of her is a large box of Fannie Mae chocolates which she kept on a table by her chair, and nibbled at regularly. My mother had a dear sister living in Philadelphia, nearly as far away as Virginia. Only once did we visit her on her home turf, an upscale suburb of Philadelphia, full of huge wooded manorial houses. My clearest memory of that visit was dinner with my aunt and her husband. It was not relaxing. Uncle Joe fulminated from one course to the next against Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal. We never met my aunt and her husband again at the dinner table—though doubtless my mother continued to visit off and on with her sister. I grew up sensing that my parents were happier without much contact with these relatives. I never asked about them. They rarely entered our conversation, though what does a child know about what goes on in the parental mind?

6. A Lovely Girl

The following confession seems innocent and gentle, in present-day terms. Does the writer's self-involved romantic innocence speak to your own early experience of romance?

One afternoon, when I was in third grade, I was made to stay after school. I had talked a lot in class that day while the teacher was at the blackboard, and she had been fed up with me. So instead of going to softball practice, there I sat, a little embarrassed, reading about American Indians in the back corner of the classroom, and wondering what my mom was going to say when I got home. While I sat there and watched the clock, the teacher straightened up the classroom. Then, to my surprise I saw that the prettiest girl in the class, Mary, had entered the room and was sitting near the teacher's desk, preparing a class exhibit. A typical goody-goody, I thought, looking at Mary with scorn. But then my look started turning into a real look, and while making pretensions of reading I discovered I was doing nothing but looking at Mary. To me her dress and blonde hair and the fluid way she moved her hands were fascinating. Nothing about her had changed. But now I was seeing differently. There was infinite charm in the softness of Mary's shoulders. I loved the skirt she was wearing, and the scarf around her neck. With my eyes, as though they were fingers, I touched her. The time flew by. It was a new experience.

7. A Distinguished Grandfather

Do you/did you know your grandfather? What was he like? Did he influence your life?

The last time I saw my grandfather he was standing at the top of the steps, in my parents' house in Urbana, Illinois. He was tall—and my own angle of vision, from the foot of the stairs, made him seem immensely tall. (I was only six years old at the time.) He had snow-white hair. He was smiling. I felt his dignity and his love for me, and I have kept them in my heart. He came down the stairs slowly, holding the rail. I was only later to know something of this man, who was perhaps the only “distinguished” person in our family. He had started out as an Indiana newspaperman, then worked his way up through national charitable organizations, into the higher echelons of the then-still-small American Red Cross. It was from that position that he was chosen as Director of Relief Operations during

the San Francisco Earthquake of 1906, a position from which he went on to become Director of the American Red Cross, and to serve in many disaster relief operations at home and abroad. Of all this I was long unaware, and am still not sure how to incorporate such distinction into my understanding of life, which has always been quietly subversive.

8. A Gutsy Grandmother

Do you/did you know your grandmother? Did she teach you? Did she love you?

My grandmother loved to play Parcheesi, and sometimes we played together after supper. She was a fierce competitor, and usually beat me. Between games she told me of her travels, especially to the Gobi Desert. She would (she said) leave my mom and her sister in a hotel room—somewhere in Spain, typically—and take her own trip to the Gobi. She was fascinated with inland deserts and beautiful stones she picked up in them. While she talked to me about these things she would scrutinize the board, and then, anticipating my upcoming moves, put pieces in place for a blockade. I walked into it every time. It was the same when we played croquet, which we often did on the lawn after dinner. What I recall is not that she always won, but the delight she took in winning, and especially in capturing one of my stray shots. She would line up her croquet ball against mine, and send into me the weeds beyond the garden, from where I would have to waste a half dozen shots just getting back into the game. Victory was one thing, but victory with punishment was another, and she savored it.

9. A Cousin Who Was an Eye-Opener for Me

Cousins are different from sisters and brothers. You have more room to invent your relation to your cousins than to your siblings. Have you a cousin or cousins? What relation did you have to them?

I had one cousin. When I was fifteen my mother and I went to visit my mother's sister and her daughter, my cousin. My cousin Jean was just my age, and we were glad to meet. (She had two brothers, but I had no siblings, and was excited at the company.) We took a walk, the first afternoon, out toward the beach. To get there we had to cross a tidal flatland which was sandy and wet, slow for walking; our feet nestled into the sand and had to be pulled out with each step. At last we came to the

crashing waves of the shore. They were deafeningly loud, and on that cool gray day we could not see far out into the ocean, which was churning with spray. We had said almost nothing, to this point, but now we were unable either to speak or hear. It had been a long walk, and I know we were both tired. For a minute we just stood mutely, watching, occasionally touching. Then Jean went down the beach to pick up a large orange crab. I am not sure how she had seen it, but her step quickened as she approached the creature. I watched her bend and pick up the crab. She put it in a basket, and we walked quietly home. When we got home she took the crab out and showed it to her mother. I was glad we had gone walking.

10. Chance Meeting with a Lifelong Friend

Many have said that friendship is more valuable than love. A friend does not make as many demands as a lover. Is this true?

Friends, as it were, come out of the woodwork. Rick was putting out the garbage one morning, in the condo behind us, when I walked out onto my back porch and saw him. There he was, sturdy, five-ten, busy but friendly. We exchanged a few words, like the pretty busy people we were. The subject was the schedule for garbage pickups. Actually that subject was only the surface of our communication; as often happens when people feel one another out through idle comments. Under this getting-to-know-you process was the sense that this person before me was congenial. It was no lightning-bolt revelation, just a quiet sense. I think Rick must have felt the same. At least events, our long future friendship, seem to bear out that suspicion. Yet my mind goes back to that original meeting. What was that congenial feeling in my mind? Was it an intuition based on past friendships that had worked? Was it a rapid-fire intuition of the eye movements, body language, and speech tone of the other person? Or was it perhaps just the factor of mood, that we were both up for conversation, that we shared some ideas and experiences, and that we felt at ease with one another?

11. A Girl on a Horse

Have you ever fallen in love with a passerby, a person who is nothing but an impression for you, but who for some reason deeply catches your attention?

When I was eleven or twelve I traveled to northern Vermont, with my mother, her sister, and my cousin. Mom and I stayed in one lodge, Auntie and Cousin Jean in another. Mostly we were together, talking or eating. The air was crisp and fall-like, and we spent as much time outside as possible. But on one occasion I did what I like to do, got off on my own. I remember simply walking out the back door of the lodge without telling anyone. I walked down a long country road, tall conifers walling me in, flights of birds filling the sky, the sky brilliant. I was aware I would be missed by my mother, but for the moment I didn't care. For some time I walked, whistling, thrilled to be alone. Then I began slowly to feel I had acted irresponsibly. I looked ahead to what appeared a break in the forest, and decided I would turn back at that point. As I approached my turn-around point I saw a horse and rider approaching along a side road, entering from the break in the forest. It was a kind of apparition. A girl of my age was riding bareback, crossing my road just ahead of me, and waving. She was thirty yards ahead of me, and all I remember seeing was an independent, slim, free figure guiding her own life past me for a minute or less. I waved back. I was transported. She seemed to me to represent the freedom of life.

12. A Friend Who Opens My Eyes to the World

Do you have friends of whom you come to realize, as time goes by, that a web of intricate developments has followed from the formation of that friendship?

I met Tanure by chance. He was walking down the dark corridor of the third floor of the English-Philosophy Building at the University of Iowa. I was just stepping out of my office, on that same corridor, when I saw him passing, one of fifteen or twenty visiting writers—as it turned out—who were there for the International Writing Program. Tanure was wearing a bright dashiki. Dark browns and greens sharpened their patterns against his black skin. He was chesty and energetic, his teeth were white. I was immediately drawn to his presence. Could I have anticipated that he was one key to my future? That through him I was to discover African literature? That through him I was to meet my future wife? That through him I was to add greatly to my sense of the dignity of the human spirit? Of course the answer to all these questions is no, and yet. What is there, in our intuition, that leads us to pay special attention to certain encounters, and to give them a chance to develop their full potential? One answer might be “destiny.” I lean in that direction. Or is “destiny” just a term we

use in retrospect, when we apply terms to the accidents of our personal life?

13. Parting from a Beloved Friend

Have you experienced the death of a close friend? Did it leave you with a sense of loss, or with a sense of relief, that your friend had passed beyond some threshold of pain and testing?

Bob's daughter took me by the arm, and led me into the sun porch, where Bob lay. She left me alone there, to visit. But I was not sure what kind of visit this was. From the doorway I had seen only the outlines of a body under a white sheet, in the sun. As I went closer, I discerned Bob's to me almost unrecognizable face, shrunken and thin and sunken into his pillow. I realized he was breathing heavily and rapidly, his eyes half-closed. How was I to visit him? I spoke to him, and his eyes opened a little. He made a mumbling sound. I spoke again, about Nigeria, from which I had just returned. I told him about our house in Nigeria and the weather there. I had a sense he was listening, but I was confused about how to continue. His breathing was deeper. I reached over and touched his knee. It was hard and bony. I felt he was somewhere between life and death at this moment, and despite myself I felt silent and rather numb. All the social cues were gone, and I got up slowly and moved toward the door, looking back quietly. That was the last time I saw him.

THINGS

14. Watermelons from the North

Do simple sights in nature—animals, landscapes, fruits, vegetables—sometimes strike you with their beauty?

From my balcony in Ughelli I watch the traffic flow back and forth from early morning to late at night. Sometimes it seems as though the Federal Express is carrying everybody in Nigeria somewhere. Most of the vehicles are vintage passenger cars held together by a lick and prayer, or huge oil-rig-related pumps or pipes or drills. Occasionally, though, we see overladen and over-aged trucks carrying fruits and vegetables from the north. (While the south of Nigeria has suffered terrible environmental degradation, largely as a result of the oil-drilling industry, the distant north is still largely agricultural.) Sometimes these trucks are loaded with dark-green watermelons, which are piled up mountainously, jiggling on the brink of the truck's unsteady sides. We follow them with our eyes. They overflow from within with the promise of rich sweetness. If we are lucky we sample one of them that night. We work our way through the small black seeds to a crisp sweetness that we had anticipated with our eyes. To eat what we had seen on the truck seems a completion.

15. A Paperclip on a Mailbox

Do you think sometimes of the patient, passive servitude of things?

Our mailbox is attached to the wall of our front porch, just to the right of the front door. In that box the postman leaves our mail, and when we put letters out for him to collect, he picks them up the next day. To fasten those outgoing letters to the box is not so easy, and one wants to be sure that they will not blow away or get lost. Our recourse is an oversized paperclip which holds the outgoing mail to the outside lip of the box. This outgoing mail is thus conspicuous but safe. Once, though, that was not the case. That was when I used a small plastic clip to attach the mail. The night I did that it grew stormy, and several letters came loose, and were scattered around the yard. That's when I started using the present

oversized clip. It is made of wire, bent into two oblongs of different size, and irregular; the shorter oblong is slightly raised above the level of the larger. Into the gap between the slightly raised and perfectly flat oblongs one can slip two or three envelopes, and be sure that they are firmly clasped.

16. Blanchard's Yard

Have you childhood memories of a neighbor's yard or compound, a place you saw regularly from the windows or doors of your own house?

Prof. Blanchard's yard was across the street from our house and to the left. It seemed to me, as a child, that I was always seeing that house. Whenever I looked out my bedroom window, or opened our front door, there was Prof. Blanchard's yard. In the day we saw how neat the yard was. When leaves or twigs fell, Prof. Blanchard was soon there to pick them up. For clean-up he kept a wicker basket in a corner near his garage. It was a source of amusement in the neighborhood, I later learned, to watch Prof. Blanchard lie in wait for the falling leaf, and then scoop it up quickly into his basket. In the picture window, from which he looked out onto his lawn, Prof. Blanchard had a large lamp the shape of our globe. The globe was very large and easily visible from across the street. Prof. Blanchard used to position the globe so that every week a new continent would be displayed to the outer world. At night the lamp would be on, looking brightly out from within the globe, onto the lawn. I would see it when I went out to walk the dog. I would try to see which continent was foremost that night. The globe and the neatness of the lawn seemed to me to belong together.

17. Silverware and Money

Do you ever think of the life of the things we use to eat with—the plates, the glasses, the silverware?

In the utensil drawer in your kitchen you see historically developed eating tools; the knife and spoon having their antecedents in the Paleolithic, while the fork, which in the West first came into use in the Renaissance, had its origins in the Middle East during the late Mediaeval period. Each of these items in your kitchen has been in many mouths, many times, and has transported foods of many kinds to those mouths. It is worth a moment of silence for the quiet servitude of these utensils, and for

the radical democracy with which they serve all mouths, no questions asked. Are such kitchen utensils at all like coins, which pass across a chain of persons, and perform a variety of services for any number of people? Is money too a utensil? Does money, like kitchen utensils, have a life which it shares with the human beings who use it, and which passes, no questions asked, from the bad man to the good woman, from the prince to the felon?

18. Twenty-Five Cents

Have you thought about the existence of a coin in your pocket? How far has it traveled? Whose hands it has been in?

I have a quarter in my pocket. From a quick look I can deduce a lot: the date and place of its making; the condition of its relief design; and from an electron microscope I could determine the silver (and other metallic) content of the coin. What I cannot determine is the history of the work the coin has performed as a commodity. What has it bought? A cup of coffee for a bum? A glass of lemonade at a kid's lemonade stand? A stamp for a postcard? What kind of life has the coin had? A useful life? A life of meeting small needs? A life of vulnerability, to whatever comes? Is it to be regretted that, with the inflation of currency, the coin is of increasingly less power? That the penny is about to become obsolete? That the threepenny bit, for which a down-and-out guy begged me once, long ago in a British train station, is dead as the dodo? Is it only the sentimental, which includes this writer, who shudder at the word bitcoin?

19. Seeing an Unwell Animal

Have you ever been deeply fond of an animal and been distressed when it got sick or died?

I left the ranch house one morning, to saddle up my horse John Barleycorn for the round-up that was beginning at noon. When I got to the stable I saw that JB was standing motionless by the side of the hay barn. His head was down, his back was bowed, and he looked sick. I knew at once there was something wrong. When I got closer I saw a swelling under my horse's chin. The swelling was visible even from a little distance, but when I got closer I could see that the swelling was discolored and ugly. Worried and inexperienced in such things, I went to tell Pete, the foreman. He came over and looked, and then said flatly, "John's got bit by a rattler." I was very shocked. I had never heard of a horse being bitten by

a rattler. “Is there anything we can do?” I asked Pete, sure that the ranch vet would be called in to solve the problem. “Nothin,” replied Pete flatly. “He won’t make it through the day, once the poison gets moving.” I stared at the ground. The words were too blunt and painful. Was this situation possible? I trudged back to the ranch house. Mrs. T put her arm over my shoulder and hugged me.

20. A Cotton Golf Ball

Have you ever felt that things have a life of their own? That they are not simply inert, and without consciousness?

On many a morning, before he left for the office, my father used to practice golf in the front yard. He played with a rather firm cotton golf ball, which he bought at the Sporting Goods Store. It weighed enough to take firm flight, so that, although no damage could ever have been done by the ball, my father was careful not to hit it too hard. He would work on his approach shots, his chip shots, his putts, miming these fine-tuned strokes he hoped to make the next time he got to the golf course. As I watched him, I was always fascinated by the golf ball itself. It weighed a half pound, flew quite straight on a still day, and usually found itself on a trajectory leading from, say, our front porch to a hedge near Dr. Bowen’s drive, where it would lodge in a shrub, or nestle in a tuft of grass. The role the ball played was both fascinating and ignominious. Was the ball aware of what was happening to it? We are taught to say no. What, though, is being a thing? Is it not interacting with us? And are we not conscious? Did the ball not know that a little boy was laughing at it?

21. A Yellow Leather Welder’s Jacket

Have you ever fallen in love with an article of clothing?

Once, in Mexico, I purchased a yellow leather welder’s jacket. It was from a welder’s supply store, cost little, and fit me perfectly. I have never before so fallen for an item of clothing, and I was brimming with enthusiasm as I added it to my baggage. A few days later, back home on campus, I decided to wear my jacket to work. When I wore it to my office, at the university, I looked just as I like to look, interesting, a little off-beat, solidary with the workers, intellectual. I am not embarrassed to say all this, because for me the clothes I wear are always more or less adjusted to what I feel or suppose I am. It has taken me a long time to adopt this

realistic attitude, toward the adage that “the clothes make the man.” I have learned, however, from others’ comments on what I wear, that I often misjudge the impression I make with my clothes. The Chair of my Department, upon seeing the welder’s jacket, asked if I was going out for the football team. My next-door colleague said he had some handyman chores to do around the house; he wondered if I could come over to help. I was momentarily deflated, but my initial love for the jacket prevailed; I am wearing it proudly as I write.

22. Stuffed Animals

Things, as well as people, constitute our memories. Did you have a favorite pet toy or doll?

I had a dozen rag-tag stuffed animals, with which I used to play sports games. (They were separate from the fuzzy animals I slept with in bed, and was inseparable from.) These rag-tag animals were a diverse group: a shaggy bear, far the largest of the team, a black and very worn wool Scottie, a cat, a rabbit—all these stuffed and of varying sizes and shapes—then a number of stuffed deer with metal legs—and finally a small rubber half-ball, which I named Spalding. To make a team of this heterogeneous group required the vivid imagination of a youngster, and of one who liked nothing better than staging private sports events in the back yard. That imagination was enough to divide the gang into two teams and an umpire, to set in motion elaborate baseball games with bottle-cap bases, risky slides at third, homers into the neighbors’ yard, and a bellicose “yeereout!” at home. What but imagination motivated my elaborate score-keeping practices, and my notes on the teams’ standing in the league?

EVENTS

23. Seeing My Father Teaching

Did you ever have the experience of unexpectedly seeing one of your parents at work in their workplace?

One day I was waiting for my father in Lincoln Hall, the old-fashioned brick building in which he had his office and taught, at the University of Illinois. I was standing around looking, for the hundredth time, at the plaster sculptures of Lincoln and Douglas in debate mode, when I decided to walk down the corridor toward my father's office. To my surprise, I noted that the door to the classroom beside Dad's office was open, and I could see my father teaching in there. It was the first time this had happened, and I was fascinated. There Dad was, standing on a slightly raised wooden podium, writing on the board the names of characters in a Racine play. He turned every now and then to fill in, for the students whom I could barely see, a few details on the way Racine's characters fitted their plot. It all seemed highly organized and effective. I was transfixed. Was this the person whose house I lived in? Was this Dad?

24. A Worrisome Moment in Ankara

Have you ever been the victim of a sexual assault?

On a cold December day, in Ankara, I entered a public bath, eager for warmth and a massage. I was a male youngster from the American Midwest, and was unaware of the range of sexual issues that manifest themselves in society. Inside the bath house I showered, then stretched out on a table for a massage. The notion seemed splendid after several days of bumming around on public transportation, and staying in cheap hotels. A sturdy guy came into the cubicle, introduced himself, then stepped out while I undressed and covered myself with a fresh terrycloth robe. Then he came back in, asked me to turn onto my stomach, and discreetly commenced to massage my neck. Tired as I was, I must have fallen asleep. What followed would have been predictable to anyone but me. His hands moved gradually down over my back—it felt good—then before I realized

it had wandered into my private parts. Suddenly I was startled! Horror struck me. I leaped up, threw on my clothes, and raced out. My reflection from a great distance is that our pleasure zones are always active, but that we contrive—how? that is the mystery—to relate their availability to our notion of the pleasure-giver.

25. Undergoing a Nearly Tragic Accident

Have you ever found yourself on the brink of dying an accidental death?

During summer break from college I visited a friend in another city. We went out to his swimming pool. It was clear and attractive, the premises swept and the air fresh. We sat on the edge of the pool, with our feet dangling in the water. Then a phone rang in the house and Jim went in to catch it, while I remained at the pool side. I was never much of a swimmer. When I swam I usually began at the shallowest point and moved toward the deeper end, one hand clutching the drainage gutter on the side of the pool. I decided to get wet and have some exercise, and lowered myself into the pool at the three-foot level. Then I slowly advanced toward the deeper end, which was six feet deep. The water felt good, and I felt protected by my hand-hold. Then for some reason my grip slipped, and though I was still in water less deep than my height, I began to founder. I thrashed around, tried to touch the bottom with my feet, but they slipped and upended me, and I felt I would not get to the surface. I screamed for Jim. In a few seconds he was there. He pulled me out.

26. Reading Dante's *Divine Comedy* in the Summer

Have you ever lost yourself in a book? What kept you absorbed?

In the spring of my last semester of university I needed three more credits to graduate. A family friend and professor of Italian offered to supervise a three-credit course, in which I would read the *Divine Comedy* by myself and periodically check in with her. I would have three months to complete this work. I began my reading in early June, and rapidly assumed a reading rhythm. I would go out on our screened porch in mid-morning, before it was too hot, make myself a pot of coffee, put my feet up, and read. It was heaven on earth to be doing this. I had a good dictionary and Grandgent's annotated edition of the text, and as I read the outer world disappeared. It was not that I read with ease, for I was

struggling to catch up with the language, but inside the language I was following Virgil, then Beatrice, down and then up, and visiting along the way with vices and virtues nailed to remarkable fourteenth-century personages. I perspired, I recited to myself, I fantasized, and two or three hours later I would emerge for lunch. The meaning of the summer lay in that text, which made me sweat but took me on an unforgettably rich tour of the human condition.

27. Reading a Thoughtful Book while on Delos

Have you a favorite hideaway, far from your everyday home, where you can be comfortable and alone, either just with yourself or with another person?

In 1952 I spent three months on the island of Delos in the Aegean Sea. My wife of the time was cataloguing stamped amphora handles, which had been dug up on the island, and which contained many clues to patterns of trade in the ancient Eastern Mediterranean. For most of every day she was busy in the main excavation shed. Free, I made my way everywhere on the postage-stamp-sized island, looking for a good place to relax, read, and do nothing. At last I found a cove which was totally isolated. It was blocked from mid-island sight by a looming boulder, and I decided to make it my office. I would turn up there every morning, not far from the shore, just beside a field nibbled to the roots by goats, and I would settle down against the side of the protective boulder, my feet outstretched in the sand. I had one book with me for that trip, C.D. Broad's *The Mind and its Place in Nature*. The book still sits on my shelf, a bit battered from many a day in the sand and sea foam. I still remember some of Broad's arguments, and some daring suggestions about the mind existing separate from body. That text, and the body of land where I read it, still exist in my mind because they existed in my bodily perception. What will happen to the text and the land when my body is gone?

28. Killing a Bird

Have you had the childhood experience of killing an animal? How did it affect you?

When I was nine I was sent to a ranch in central Arizona. The purpose was to cure me of asthma, but the results were far wider than that. On the ranch I had my first genuine experiences of nature. One day I went

walking down by the small river that passed the ranch house, and meandered off into the desert where eventually it dried up. The day was hot and the cottonwoods were swaying in a heavy summer breeze. I want to say that I had no thought in the world, and that would almost be true. But not quite. I had my new BB gun with me. I had never used it, but this present from the ranch hand, Jake, made me feel like a man. I held the gun closely to my side, unused to the unfamiliar rubbing on my ribs. It was the first gun I had held and I was very aware of it. There were also many birds in the trees—small, flitting, desert swallows that shoot by and then vanish before you really see them. I saw one perch on a branch directly in front of me. I lifted the gun and shot. At first the small creature seemed not to react, to remain attached to the limb. A second later, though, I saw the body flutter down to the dry ground, motionless. It lay there in a pile of leaves.

29. Going to the Movie *Dark Victory* with My Mother

Have you gone to the movies or other entertainment with one of your parents?

My mother took me to the New York World's Fair in 1939. Because of my asthma, she had taken me to New York to visit a specialist in respiratory diseases. It was of course very exciting for us to be in Manhattan, especially at the time of the Fair, but one afternoon we decided to go to a movie, to take a rest from the crowds. We made a careful choice, from the *New York Times* movie list, and decided to go for a movie with Bette Davis, whom my mom admired. We found the theater, and entered in mid-afternoon. I was impressed by the huge dark building, and followed Mom and the flashlight-bearing usher down the aisle as though I was going to a cult ceremony. The seats were red and plush, and we sank into them. The darkness and intimacy of the moment are still with me. I can still remember the curious, comfy, and unusual situation of being there with my mom. But more important, in my memory, is the darkness of the film we watched, Bette Davis in "Dark Victory". I recall the actress standing on a staircase landing, looking out onto a landscape she could barely see. She was going blind. My mother and I were moved. Twenty-five years later, my mother was blind.

30. A Touch in the Night

Have you had the experience of a casual touch which stayed with you for a lifetime?

After several weeks of bumming around in Turkey, taking the rough with the smooth in classic student fashion, I felt it would be a great relief to get back to my Archeological Academy in Athens. I bought my return tickets in Izmir, on Turkey's Aegean coast, and waited a couple of days for departure. The boat I booked for left from Izmir for Chios, the nearest Greek Aegean island. (From there we would get another boat to Athens.) It was getting dark when we pulled out of the harbor, and an hour later it began to rain. We were some thirty or forty passengers, huddled up in corners of the deck where we were protected from the water. As it was windy, as well as rainy, most of us were holding on to guy-wires strung across the deck. As the storm brewed, and the wind grew, I had to change the position of my hand on the wire. To my surprise, on that crowded deck, I looked up to see that my fingers were intertwining with those of a tall girl. We held hands in that position, for almost an hour, until the storm subsided and the lights of Chios harbor appeared. When we landed in Chios I tried to get in touch with the tall figure whose fingers I knew so well. But to my dismay she had vanished into the crowd, and was gone by the time I stepped out on the waterfront.

31. Experiencing Rain

Does one kind of weather make you happier than another?

My favorite weather is rain. It puts me at peace with myself. (Do I hear the quiet responsiveness of the uterine I somewhere inside?) I lived in England for one year, and greatly loved the rain, which fell, usually quite gently, for months on end. It would be raining in the morning when we woke. We would turn on the electric fire, and make tea, and sit looking dreamily out the window onto the heath beside our house. The heath would be misty. In the evening it would rain. After dinner I would walk down to the local pub, through the mist, and drink a pint. Then I would walk back to the house. I would lie down with my arms around my wife, and fall asleep, listening to the rain. It was as though the whole twenty-four-hour cycle was passed in an atmosphere of gentle rain. I have never been happier.

32. Watching a Vintage Sitcom

Have you a favorite oldie TV show?

I love the old sitcom “Three’s Company” (1977–1984). Jack, Janet, and Chrissy are locked into a recurrent comedy of errors, which plays out largely in their apartment building. Mr. Furley, the severe landlord, the quarreling Ropers, and Larry the charming shyster car salesman add variety and broad humor to the actions of the core characters. Something goes wrong in each episode, usually through a slapstick mishap: Jack loses his job as a chef, to the fury of Mr. Angelino, who doesn’t appreciate Jack’s ingenious cooking theories; Janet runs into a snub in the flower shop where she works; Chrissy, the naïf, mistakes as friendship a threatening effort to pick her up. Lasting humor is derived from the myth that Jack is gay, an initial ploy by the three roommates to convince their landlord that no funny business will be going on. Funny business goes on, but the sexual transmutes at once into wit and hijinks, as in Shakespeare’s comedies. For years I drifted into delighted sleep with the dramas of “Three’s Company” in my mind.

33. A French Kiss

Can you remember the first time another person’s body made your body come alive?

It was a muggy Midwestern summer evening, and Helen and I held hands as we came back from the movie. When we got to the front step of her house we faced each other in that hard-to-define limbo young romantics know so well. It was hard to know how to say good night. Neither of us knew any rules of disengagement; although we were drawn toward one another we didn’t know what to say or do. I broke the standoff with our first kiss. Our lips met and stayed together. It seemed fascinating just to be pressing against another’s lips. The more we explored the surface of one another’s lips, the more the experience seemed a portal into unfamiliar territory. My tongue entered her mouth at that point, and, I think, her tongue began playing with mine. The sensations were fine but very hard to figure out. I later learned this was called a French kiss. I supposed that only the French could have thought of anything so fascinating. What amazed me, as I thought about the experience later, was my loss of personal ownership over my tongue. Was I feeling through her tongue or my tongue? It seemed as though, perhaps, I was her tongue feeling my tongue.

34. Helping Her on with Her Coat

Can you remember an electric moment, when your sense of falling for someone was just declaring itself? When you made a move which was reciprocated?

Eleanor babysat for us several times. I would pick her up at her dorm, and bring her back to the house. We would tuck the kids in and then go out to a movie. Afterwards I would drive Eleanor back to her dorm. One night, after we had returned from a film, I was helping Eleanor on with her coat, preparatory to driving her back to her dorm. Her coat was a light leather, not heavy, and I am not the gallant type—not normally the first to help the ladies on with their garments. But there I was lifting this coat and slipping it over Eleanor's shoulders as though I was Charles Boyer. I fitted the coat to her shoulders, as the clothing salesman does in a good men's store; patting it down, shaping it. You might say I moulded the coat to Eleanor's shoulders, as I put it on her. I felt an answer in the way the coat slipped on. Somehow it moulded back. I had in the past helped people on with their coats. But this was different. For a minute the coat was both hers and mine. You might say she wore me home.

PLACES

35. Chichicastenango

Do you recall experiencing the power of pagan culture? Of feeling you were in touch with the archaic world that underlies and precedes modernity?

In Chichicastenango, in Guatemala, I rose well before dawn and joined a small group of men and women who were climbing a hill. The path was overhung with heavy branches and foliage, the ground was stony and irregular, and I walked with difficulty, stopping every now and then to use my asthma inhaler. Already by seven o'clock the day was hot. To add to my discomfort, I felt conspicuous among the group of climbers. I was the only non-Indian, and was taller, younger, and much whiter than the Indians climbing with me. Nevertheless, we made our way slowly up through the lianas and brush until, 50 meters from the crown of the hill, the foliage began to thin out, and the path grew easier. So did the conversation, which had enlivened the ascent. A man in a robe was now clearly beginning to take the lead. He had been chanting to himself on the way up, and now, with each step toward the small stone altar which was visible at the summit, he seemed to declare himself more evidently the priest. He was carrying with him a covered hamper, from which with great ceremony he withdrew a huge red rooster. We slowly gathered around this priest until, surrounded by fellow worshippers and me, he laid the rooster on the altar, and with accompanying prayers sliced the animal's neck. The prayers went on, amidst clouds of copal incense, for a good half-hour. Then we climbed stiffly back down. We had done something to put order back into the world.

36. Viola

Are you familiar with some remote town, which history has passed by?

Viola is a small village in Eastern Iowa. For years we have gone there on country drives, and taken a quick look at the changes time has wrought

on the place. The last time we went there we here hit with the sadness of change. Viola has lost its school house; the students are now bussed to a consolidated school in Springville, eight miles away. The Post Office has been reduced to a cubbyhole, wedged in between two dilapidated houses. The streets are uneven, full of potholes, and the houses—perhaps a hundred in number still standing—are loosely scattered among the weedy gardens, old auto-equipment piles, and abandoned playgrounds. Or, that is, most of the houses. Here and there stands a two-storey, curtains at the windows, the lawn cut, a kid's swing in the yard, and an SUV around back. These are rare sights. These are the houses of farmers who survived the recent Recession, who managed to send enough corn and soybeans to the Elevator in Martelle. These houses are few and far between.

37. Rheneia

Islands are frequently private and intimate. Are you familiar with an island which has special meaning for you?

Rheneia is the larger sister island to the historically renowned Delos, in the Aegean Sea. The two islands are close together. From the shore on Delos, looking north, it is only a few hundred yards to Rheneia, yet the forgotten sister is a different world. While Delos was at times the economic and cultural center of ancient Hellas, the seat of oracles and treasures which were a magnet for Athenian societies in the fifth century B.C., Rheneia had to settle for being the graveyard of Delos, the place where the residents of Delos were buried. While Delos is today a popular tourist site—if a little difficult to reach—Rheneia is abandoned, surrounded by the spirits of the dead. There were a few houses of the living here, until the 1980s, but today they are abandoned, and there is no sound of life except the crickets. The ground is rocky, the smell of thyme all-pervasive, the circumambient sea blue and clear; on the farther horizon appear the profiles of several other islands. Along the coast grow capers. But rarely does a human foot tread there, and rarely does the tourist guide motion in the direction of Rheneia.

38. Unilateral Road

Did you ever cut up as a child? Did you break free of the family and do what you wanted, and incur your parents' anger?

When Ross and I were twelve or thirteen we used to set off on adventure walks in the fields, small roads, and outbuildings of the University of Illinois Agronomy Departments. Our parents were not too enthusiastic about these unsupervised adventures, yet though they wanted us to stop at the end of the hog barn area a half-mile behind our house, we occasionally pushed ahead to a small one-lane country road, which we called the Unilateral Road. (That was our code name for this secret area of the world.) That seemed a distant and magical terrain. One day we biked out onto that Unilateral Road, a feat not even imagined by our parents. Our excitement was high. You might have thought we were members of Shackleton's expedition to the South Pole, moving out onto the Ross Shelf Ice. We felt daring. To our surprise, though, our bikes could hardly move. We were all ready for action and then we ground to a halt. Then we realized that the road had, recently and for the first time, been tarred, and that our hands, wheels, trouser cuffs, and bike chains were covered with gluey black tar. We were unable to move our bikes. We were going to have all hell to pay.

39. A Corner by a House

Little children often find a hidden corner or attic where they can play by themselves. Can you remember such a place from your childhood?

When I was four I fell in love with matchbox toy cars. They were fun to hold, bright in color, and very maneuverable. I found a sheltered corner at the back of our house where I could play with these cars without being noticed—or at least without my noticing that I was being noticed. The sand and loose dirt, which filled that corner, and spread out for several feet toward the lawn, were perfect for making race tracks, hill climbs, hairpin curves. I guided my vehicles up and over and across this imaginary landscape, which was a version of the “real” landscape my parents would show me when we went out on Sunday drives. On my private landscape I staged competitive races, endurance climbs, solo speed displays—I set the crowd to roaring. There was never a dull moment. The small bright cars are still there on a shelf in my closet.

40. Arnold Arboretum

Have you a favorite spot in nature, to which you can, or in the past could, retreat for peace and quiet?