Missing the Minor Period:
A Widower's Reflections

For my mother

1. La Nostalgie de la Boue

The French have a saying, la nostalgie de la boue ("nostalgia for the mud"), that has resonated with me ever since I heard it from my mother, many years ago. It refers to the kind of nostalgia that looks back on bad times, times of adversity and suffering, and kind of misses them – kind of likes them, and kind of misses them, too. I have found this to be so true. It's not that I really want to go back to the hard times – the time, say, when I was getting teased throughout much of seventh grade, and would often wake up early, with a feeling of gnawing dread in the pit of my stomach; or the time of my first prolonged depression, when I was 26, and had just moved back home to L.A., in retreat from four years in New York City, and was unemployed and living with my parents again, in the house where I had grown up (during this time, I recognized again that same early-morning dread, which I hadn't felt for 13 years, and which brought me back to that earlier time); or a later time, in graduate school, one fair May morning not

long before Memorial Day, when I flunked my PhD orals and was totally humiliated and humbled. I left the graduate English seminar room, where the exam had been perpetrated, feeling like I'd just been run over by a truck – by a whole fleet of trucks, whose drivers all held PhDs -- and wandered around in a daze for a week, continually playing over in my mind the worst moments of the interrogation.

It's not that I have any real desire to go back to any of those bad times again. I've never wanted to go backwards in my life, no matter how unhappy I happened to be in the present, and no matter how attached I felt to the past. I'm glad those days are over. But I'm also glad that they happened. I think back on them with a complex kind of proprioceptive fondness, if you will -- as for old, familiar scars that remind us of injuries we have sustained and survived. They are part of my story, after all; they helped to form me; they schooled me in what Keats called, in one of his great letters, "the vale of soul-making", in which an "individual intelligence" is transmuted, through painful experience, into a "soul".

But there is something more than just autobiographical attachment at work in these memories of hard times; it is something akin to a visitation. A wind coming from somewhere else, bringing with it, as a couple of other old

English poets wrote, "something rich and strange"; "fallings from us, vanishings". A chill wind emanating from outside of me, outside the warm room of self, blowing through me, changing me a little, making me have to move from where I am, from the comfortable room I've gotten settled in, and into a new place not my own. This wind is bracing. I gather myself and prepare to leave the warm, familiar bed. I don't want to leave, but I recognize that I have no choice in the matter. It's like the first day of a new school, or summer camp: you wake into the dreaded recognition that the foreseen time of reckoning is suddenly upon you. It's the moment of "no more time". What was only going to happen for so long is now in fact happening; the horrible imagined thing is now on the doorstep, knocking on the door. You react to this realization with a momentary feeling of panic: surely it cannot be; surely you can go back in time, or maybe just not answer the door. But nooo… (as the comedians say). The dearly familiar past – the world of only yesterday -- now trails in the wake of this sudden, strange new fact in your life (perceived all at once as a whole new era), which makes the dear familiar things of yesterday take on a weird new aspect. These old friends, now unexpectedly and rudely transformed, seen in a new light – posters on the walls of your room, stickers on

your door, mementos on your desk and bookshelves – now take their places, without your even being fully aware of it, in the harsh new light. And that new light, the transformer of the dear old objects of your past, will gradually grow more familiar (though at the moment, you cannot conceive of that ever happening), and be itself in turn transformed, by an as-yet-unimagined usurper, into the light of the "olden days", looked back upon from the vantage point of some future time. As Wordsworth tells us, "So feeling comes in aid/Of feeling, and diversity of strength/Attends us, if but once we have been strong."

2. Self-Pity

But we were talking about the mud – "the nostalgia of the mud." My mud – the mud that most concerns me here – is the mud of widowerhood. The mud of loneliness. Sadness. Mourning. Depression. The mud of my hope-in-the-face-of-despair, which was the curious kind of hope I used to entertain during the 12 years of my Minor Period, after my wife died.

It was also the mud of self-pity, that most unfashionable of emotions. It may seem peculiar to admit, but I miss feeling sorry for myself. I miss that whole

period of my life when I felt sorry for myself. I have the nostalgia of the mud of self-pity. Ah, but it is a strangely sweet emotion, self-pity. A very underrated and much-abused emotion, now fallen into bad repute. But was it ever in good repute? I think not. Self-pity was always highly suspect, held in low esteem, considered weak, unmanly, pathetic. Unworthy of indulgence, or of any kind of attention, really. Simply dismissed out of hand. Self-pity, you might say, is the smoker of the emotions: shunned, ostracized, totally unacceptable and inadmissible. A pariah. And therefore, in my book, deserving of serious consideration and regard. For my purposes here, self-pity may even be considered the master emotion. Because to have a regard, a fondness, for my widowerhood, my sadness, my loneliness, my hope-in-the-face-of-despair – to look back on the mud of my days, weeks, months, and years after losing Diane – is to remember myself as a sad, lost soul. An object – I'll just say it -- of my mother's sympathy. (And my mother's powers of sympathy were well-nigh infinite. She was an empath of a high order.) To remember that period of 12 years after Diane died – the time of my life I call the "Minor Period", to contrast it with my "Major Period", which was that stretch of time almost exactly twice as long, the 23 and a half years that Diane

and I were together – is to feel, or at least have an inkling of (because we are not talking about Proustian "involuntary memory" here; though sometimes, if I hear the music of Rameau by chance on the radio, a whiff of my depression in the summer of 2009, five years after Diane died, will come back to me, and remind me of those long hot summer days when I did not write, could not write, felt I might not ever write again, but only reread the sad, lonely, beautiful novels of Anita Brookner, as I did all that summer long) – to remember the Minor Period now is to recall an enveloping atmosphere of somehow comforting sadness that is fixed very deep inside of me. It is also to see that time again, and myself in it, as if through the eyes of my mother. It is to see myself as though it were she who was seeing me, regarding me, with her own special and instantly recognizable brand of sadness, sympathy, and fellow-suffering. My mom was big on all of those feelings. She was a sentimentalist. She was big on losers. She saw herself, Scranton-born and -bred, as a loser, and she tended to see the ones she loved that way, too. I believe she couldn't have loved them if she hadn't seen them as losers. She couldn't ever have loved a winner. (No doubt this peculiarity was largely a case of retroactive revision on her part. It was inconceivable to her that anyone she

truly loved could, by that same token, not be a loser.) This was part of her Irish Catholic heritage, as she saw it. Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan once said, "To be Irish is to know that sooner or later the world is going to break your heart." Sing it, Danny Boy. My mother cherished that sentimental pronouncement.

So I see myself, in looking back over the Minor Period, through my mother's sentimentalizing eyes; and so I become an object of sweet pity to myself. And this whole thing gives me some sort of strange pleasure.

Sick, I know. Sick, pathetic, and a total waste of time. Get a life, Josh. Get out of your mind, and the past, and get a life. Well, I finally have. After 12 years of the Minor Period, I have finally gotten a life. I have met the woman I am going to marry. And it is precisely this fact -- of having finally gotten a life again -- that makes me look back on the time when I didn't have a life, when I had lost the life I used to have, and hadn't yet gotten another, with an abiding, inalienable fondness.

Of course, not having a life – being lonely, and feeling self-pity, and looking on myself as an object of pity in my mother's eyes, even through my mother's eyes – through the imagined eyes of my sentimentalizing mother

(whose sentimentality is also mine) – all of this was itself a kind of life, too. I was aware of this even at the time; and was, at the time, even rather fond of it, this half-life. But I knew it was only a half-life. And I accepted it as such, for it was my half-life. I told myself I wanted a full life again; yet until I found it, until I somehow made that full life again for myself, I would accept my half-life, my "little life", and would see it in such a way that it would even become dear to me. More sentimentalizing, I know; I am, in all things emotional, my mother's son. She taught me well.

3. Modes of the Minor Period

This attachment to my half-life – an attachment that I realized was rather pathetic even as I was feeling it – entailed various modes, as follows:

1. Talking out loud to myself. This included talking to and about Diane's stuffed toy frog, Debbie, who I kept in bed with me for at least two years after Diane's death. What I said directly to Debbie was usually limited to "That's the way of the world, Debbie – just the way of the world." But sometimes I would remark, out loud, of her, in the third person, when I was in the bedroom (which was

where Debbie was kept, propped up on my grandmother's old cedar chest under the window, facing the bed): "Debbie is silly"; "Debbie is being rather quiet today"; "Debbie is withholding comment for the moment"; "Debbie is funny; she makes me so bad laughing, ha ha, ha ha." This last was always said in a serious voice. In fact, all of my comments to and about Debbie were delivered in a serious voice. This was part of my

2. Self-conscious humor regarding my acknowledged weirdness. This seemed necessary in order to reassure myself that I wasn't going insane out of loneliness. Self-consciousness and humor, after all, were both signs of sanity, were they not? So to combine them was to administer to myself a double-dose of sanity. (Because who else was going to do it? Our son Zack had left for college in 2006, two years after his mother died. That last sentence, "His mother died", or worse, "Zack's mother died", strikes me in a way that is very different from "Diane died." It is much, much worse – partly no doubt because I cannot help hearing it through my own mother's ears.) Less dramatically, the self-conscious humor was also a way of maintaining distance from what I knew to be the pathetic, self-pitying sadness of my half-life: if I

could comment on it with a wry knowingness, I could remain somehow above it, and not be its victim.

Part of this self-conscious humor consisted of the 3. Phatic greeting. This was invoked every evening when I came home from work, and entered the cold, dark, silent house. The first order of business, before even turning on the lights, would be to utter the phatic greeting. This would usually be an out-loud continuation of whatever train of thought I'd been having as I entered the house. It didn't matter what it was; all that mattered was that it be uttered out loud – with the self-conscious humor, of course – in order to banish the iron silence. In fact, the phrase "in order to banish the iron silence", spoken out loud, is a good example of the kind of phatic greeting I might have uttered as I came in the door. The phatic greeting was meant as a (poor, cold) substitute for something that might have been said to a real, living person, such as Diane or Zack: "Hell—oo", or "Honey, I'm home!" (the latter, of course, would have been said ironically in any case). As a matter of fact, the phatic greeting was also said ironically, and meant to fill the silence of the empty house until the introduction of

4. Music. An essential, indispensable ingredient of the Minor Period. Nietzsche's statement, "Life without

music is just a mistake", was, in fact, sometimes pronounced out loud. The turning on of the radio, if it was after eight when I got home, was the third order of business, after the phatic greeting and the turning on of the lights. If it was before eight, and the public radio station I listened to's classical music programming had not yet begun, I relied on my iPhone and Bluetooth speaker to provide music to accompany my solitariness. Basically, music was continually playing in the house during the Minor Period, except while I was sleeping, and shortly before, when I was reading in bed. And much of that music became possible because of my

5. Attachment to my devices. (Often pronounced out loud to myself as "dewices", in imitation of one of Dickens' Cockney characters – Sam Weller, I think, in The Pickwick Papers.) The pairing of my iPhone with my wireless, portable Bose Bluetooth speaker was an important part of my musical life during the minor period. Indeed, it would not be going too far to say that my life – my half-life – changed the day I brought home the first (non-Bluetooth) speaker that allowed me to listen to music through my iPhone. The "niftiness" of this set-up – music mysteriously coming out of what I called my "magic box" – became even more pronounced when I purchased the wireless

speaker. To these devices must be added (a little later) my iPad and my MacBook Pro (with Retina Display).

If this enumeration of my devices makes me sound like a spoiled, acquisitive, materialistic and trivial consumer, that is correct. I accept those labels. Not proudly, but I accept them. And I am not the only one who can be so labeled. We are a nation of spoiled, acquisitive, materialistic and trivial consumers. That is not all we are, but we are certainly that. And when I think of this, I sometimes also think of the people – adults and children – in Sierra Leone with their hands and/or feet cut off. Their lives are very different from mine, and this thought does not make me feel good. I'm not really sure how it relates to my reliance on and attachment to my devices, but I'm sure that it does, and that it occurs more than occasionally. Perhaps it has to do with how pleased with myself my devices make me feel, and functions as a kind of corrective to that feeling. Whenever I am feeling too pleased with myself, I think of the handless and/or footless children and adults in Sierra Leone. It seems necessary for me to remind myself that horrible things are happening in the world, every minute of every day, if you stop to think about it, and also that I am not part of the

solution. Does that then mean that I am part of the problem? Yes, it does.

This thought process then leads directly, of course, to

6. Guilt. This pretty much speaks for itself. I feel guilty for having so much, when others have so little. I have felt this way since childhood – since the three months I spent with my parents in India, when I was seven. Guilt for living in the lap of comparative luxury, and certainly privilege, when children around me were begging, starving, cold, homeless, destitute, sick, or otherwise wretched. To this guilt of wealth and privilege was added, a little later, the guilt that came from being seen by some of my friends and acquaintances as a "spoiled only child" – the former ("spoiled") apparently understood by them as a natural consequence of the latter ("only child").

My mother, when I would tell her about this, would of course try to reassure me that it was not really so: that I could only be spoiled if I acted spoiled: and I did not act spoiled. Acting spoiled, she explained, was a question of acting greedy, and ungrateful, and never satisfied with what you had, and always wanting and demanding more. In other words, for my mother, being "spoiled" was a matter of attitude, outlook and comportment – not simply of

possession, of how much you had. It was your attitude to what you had that determined whether you were spoiled or not. I found her reassurances gratifying – but deep down, I think I did not really believe them. I was more troubled by my friends' opinion than I was reassured or relieved by my mother's explanation. I knew I had a lot of toys, and that I basically got whatever I asked for; therefore, it seemed to me, I must be spoiled. And because I felt I must be spoiled – my mother's reassurances to the contrary notwithstanding -- I carried the guilt and shame that went along with that label.

Gradually, as I came of age, the guilt of being spoiled morphed into the guilt of the knowledge of inequity in the world -- the inequity of birth, of having been born into privilege, and of having never really paid back the debt I owed for that good fortune (except by feeling guilty, and later writing about it.) What should I do to correct this inequity? What could I do? Should I give money to various charities? I did that. Should I join a worthy organization, like Amnesty International, and write letters to government officials on behalf of political prisoners? I did that, too. Should I volunteer to tutor kids and adults in the East L.A. barrio? I did that as well. Timmy, one of my tutees in Ramona Gardens – one of

the toughest neighborhoods in East L.A. – had joined a local gang when he was 12. His initiation into the gang was to shoot and kill a rival gang member. He passed the initiation. Timmy used to call us "the odd couple". He once told me – out of protectiveness, I think – that I smiled too much. When I asked him what he meant, he said that in his neighborhood, if you smiled a lot, it either meant you were weak or gay. Either way, it meant you were a mark. I asked Timmy if he thought I was a mark. "Not if you hang with me," he replied.

I'd like to think that my tutoring at Ramona Gardens was about more than just me trying to allay my guilt of privilege – that it was a way of bridging worlds, and maybe making it a little easier for people like Timmy to get out of the world of the barrio, if that was what they wanted. But there is little doubt that it was partly my guilt that brought me to Ramona Gardens in the first place. And that guilt never really went away. Indeed, none of my early-onset guilt has ever really gone away. My guilt, I find, is not commutative, but compounded – like interest. And to that longstanding, compounded guilt is now added a more recent incarnation: the guilt occasioned by the particular kind of writing I am doing right now. Specifically, my writing about the Minor Period, and how I sort of liked it

when I was living through it – and still do, even more so, now that it is over. And most specifically, the guilt engendered by the following question:

If the Minor Period was caused by the death of Diane, and if I sort of like the Minor Period, and am sorry in a way to be seeing it come to an end because of Julie, then does this mean that I am in some way – in any even infinitesimal way – grateful for Diane's death? Has Diane's death made possible for me some things that would not have been possible without it? Can I be seen – can I see myself -- as taking advantage of Diane's death by having (that is, creating) a Minor Period that I am attached to, and then writing about it? If writing about the Minor Period, and all of the feelings and thoughts and new habits ("solo patterns of the Minor Period", I call them) that Diane's death made possible – if writing about all of this gives me a kind of pleasure (and it is undeniable that it does), then is it not also true, in some sense, that the death of Diane, whatever else it has meant to me, has also resulted in, or at least made possible, some kind of weird pleasure for me? And is this not a monstrous thought? Is it not monstrous to even have such a thought? How bad should I feel for having such a thought, and thoughts like it? Or is it just a case of, "If you

have a lemon, make lemonade"? Is that what I am doing here – just making lemonade? Or is it something else?

I think what is going on here is not that I am feeling gratitude for, or any kind of pleasure in, anything connected with Diane's death, but rather that I am conscious of an opportunity created by her death that wouldn't have existed otherwise. Her death, for one thing, has made it possible to write about her death. And in being able to write about her death, and the things connected with it, I have been given "material" that I wouldn't have had otherwise. I have found, as a result of Diane's dying, the subject of my life – in a couple of senses. I have found my autobiographical subject in her death, and I have also found a once-in-a-lifetime subject. If Diane had not died, I never would have discovered my loneliness, or the possibilities of both despair and hope-in-the-face-of-despair, in quite the way that I did. Diane's death was a catalyst for my writing, as well as an opportunity in my life: it unlocked powers that I didn't know I had – or maybe that I actually <u>didn't</u> have, until I had to create them in myself.

And it seems to me that this is horrible. It is opportunistic, and exploitative, and selfish, and self-serving, and callous. And perhaps worst of all, it reveals

a lack of depth of feeling in me. In writing about Diane's death, and what it means for me, I am trying to "master" it, and thus showing that I think it is a thing that can be "mastered" – that can be rationalized, and understood, and used. I am using Diane, in death, to advance my own life-writing interests.

And did I perhaps foresee this in the months before she died, when I knew she was going to die? Did I foresee, at the time, that I would be writing about this one day? Was I conscious of gathering "material" as she was dying? These are all rhetorical questions, because I know that the answers to them are all varying degrees of "yes". I believe that not for one waking moment, in the months leading up to Diane's death, was I ever completely able to turn off my consciousness that these were the final months of her life, and that I would always remember them as such. Not for one moment was I able to turn off my own self-consciousness; and if I was not always overtly aware of it – of the fact that she was going to die – it was at least a kind of submerged awareness, ticking away deep down inside of me. None of this, I told myself, would be "wasted". Her death would not be "wasted". (As if it needed me, or my writing, to confer significance and meaning on it.)

4. The Observer, the Potential Old Man, The Widower, and Boketto

As I say, I don't think I ever allowed any of these thoughts to surface to full consciousness; they existed, at some level in my secret emotional life, as a sort of pledge -- to Diane, and to myself. It wasn't enough just to be living through this horrible time, the time of her sickness unto death; I had to be storing up the experience, too. Storing up the days of suffering, and sadness – as well as the occasional joys, and the special closeness we now had, the three of us. (Zack was 13 when his mother was diagnosed, and 16 when she died.) Storing up all of it, for future use. Wordsworth writes, "Our meddling intellect/Mis-shapes the beauteous forms of things: --/We murder to dissect." My meddling intellect was indeed a killer, murdering the life whereon it fed.

No, that is to formulate things too neatly, too literarily. (And that penultimate sentence is warmed-over Coleridge, anyway – an alexandrine from his poem "Psyche": "And to deform and kill the things whereon we feed.") What was going on with me was maybe something simpler, and also messier, than these literary allusions can capture. I just wasn't really all there with Diane in her final months. A

part of me was already removing itself, for its own reasons. One time, when we were embracing in the kitchen, and I knew she wanted to kiss me, I turned my face away from her mouth, and over her shoulder. When we broke our embrace, I could see the hurt in her eyes: "You don't want me anymore." I couldn't answer that look, so I turned away again – which of course was its own answer.

The part of me that wasn't all there with Diane – the part that was removed; that wouldn't kiss her in the kitchen; that in our last year was always conscious of her death, waiting just up ahead (and conscious also that it would not be "wasted") – this part of me I call The Observer. It has always been there, in one form or another: measuring, weighing, judging, reacting in secret. In grade school, The Observer noticed people's physical imperfections or oddities: Skip Lane's high coloring, and his readiness to blush; Sally Ward's toe walking, and her resultant pronounced calf muscles; Lina Baldecchi's strange, strained rocking motions in her chair, sitting across from me, which I thought at the time might be bowel-related, but which I recognize now were probably a form of masturbation. The Observer also operated on an emotional level, and had a special eye for weakness and vulnerability – no doubt because I sensed those same things in myself. I

was a sensitive child, and always, it seemed, prepared to be teased. It was as though I wore this readiness on my face, as a kind of ammunition for potential teasers to seize on and use, ad libitum.

This negative awareness did not change in junior high and high school; I just got better at concealing it, and The Observer became more analytical and self-conscious. Which is to say that he – I – began to turn my eye on myself. When I found something I didn't like – a particular fear, say: fear of girls; fear of sex; fear of losing my virginity – I would turn myself into a somewhat clownish character: a kind of humorous old man. Let's call him the Potential Old Man. The Potential Old Man was pipe-smoking (this was borrowed from my father, who smoked pipes continuously until his heart attack at 51, when I was 16); Latin- and Greek-studying; and an eccentric pursuer of rare excellence (the two – rarity and excellence -- seemed synonymous to me then). It is no accident that one of my favorite quotes is Spinoza's "Omnia praeclara tam difficilia quam rara sunt." ("All things excellent are as difficult as they are rare.") The Potential Old Man was both hyper-refined and above it all ("it all" being, during my entire adolescence, the fraught business of craving girls and pursuing them). My fear of rejection – another

form perhaps of the old fear of being teased and made fun of – was transmuted, through the alchemy of my false refinement and sincere intellectual strivings, into a fragile sense of superiority (resting, as we know it usually does, on a more robust conviction of inferiority).

I was, simultaneously, even more afraid of not being rejected. I was afraid of succeeding with girls to the point where I would be sexually put to the test, and would then lose not only my innocence, but my familiar self-image. I was afraid, I guess, of growing up (a fear somehow not incompatible with wanting to be already an old man, with my battles and uncertainties finally behind me), and of the loss – the various losses – that went with it.

The old man that I had in part always wanted to be – old age seeming to me a kind of refuge from, or rather termination of, the kinds of anxieties that beset me in my youth (teasing; sex; competition, and not making the grade) – became a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy after Diane died, and I became, in my own eyes (again, the eyes of The Observer), "The Widower": the solitary at social gatherings; the fifth wheel; the unmated (or de-mated) one. The Widower was a suitable object of self-pity, and the self-conscious humor with which he was so regarded – that is, with which I regarded myself in this new instar – made

it perhaps easier for me to grow into the role. The Widower at his solitary meals, on his solitary, contemplational walks, at his writing desk, reflecting on his altered status, became a new fixture of my self-regard, a new role for me.

It was a role that, if I did not exactly embrace it, I at least did not have all that much trouble adapting to. The earlier role of the Potential Old Man had prepared me well. The Widower was a sort of realization of the Potential Old Man. (Accent on the word "potential" here, because when I became a widower, I had only just turned 50.) Ah, but you see, on the other hand, I had long been a Potential Old Man; the pipes, and the Latin and Greek, and the carefully cultivated veneer of eccentricity in my adolescence had all been first steps in that direction. Presenting myself as a Potential Old Man had been a ploy to forestall, or avoid altogether, the passionate torrents of youth: the sweet bodies of girls that I so desired and feared, for they threatened to remove me forever from the familiar and comforting orbit of my only-childhood. And now, in my incarnation as The Widower, I had in a way achieved the refuge I had for so long sought and imagined for myself. It seems terribly sad and pathetic to admit this; though it has the undeniability of truth – and truth,

after all, is what I am after here: the truth of my old life. I welcomed The Widower, for I had, in a sense, been preparing for him for a long time as the Potential Old Man.

Loneliness – solitariness – seemed a natural habitat for the widower/old man. There was undeniably something in me that had long been envisioning the refuge of widowerhood/old manhood. If it would be going too far to say that I embraced it, it is certainly true to say that there was something in my new solitariness that was not unwelcome – that "did not exactly displease me", in the words of La Rochefoucauld. ("In the misfortunes of even our best friends we often find something that is not exactly displeasing.") It was something I had been imagining for a long time – since before Diane had even been diagnosed. Maybe before I'd even met her. The refuge of widowerhood/old manhood was not, in its way, unlike the refuge of only-childhood. Plenty of time to dream – to indulge in "dreamery" – to "contemplate about" various things. The Japanese have a word, boketto, that says it perfectly. According to Ella Frances Sanders, in her wonderful book Lost in Translation: An Illustrated Compendium of Untranslatable Words from Around the World, boketto can be not quite translated as, "gazing vacantly into the distance without really thinking about anything

specific." Sing it, Ella Frances. Plenty of time, in the Minor Period, for boketto-izing – which is something you can only do alone.

The loneliness experienced over the 12 years of the Minor Period brought its own sweetnesses, too: the sweetness of solitary contemplation, rumination; the solace of reflection; indeed, the consolations of philosophy. The endless series of "contemplational" walks I took through the neighborhood during the Minor Period will always be cherished in memory. They are an object of fondness, a source of quiet pleasure and reflection. And the memory that cherishes them is perhaps also the memory that cherishes the feeling of self-sufficiency in sadness.

I wonder if there is maybe not more than a little bit of solipsism in all of this. The pleasures of self – of the only child's particular sense of self. The pleasures of autonomy, perhaps. Though autonomy is a very different thing from solipsism. For one, autonomy connotes power, whereas solipsism connotes weakness, maybe even sickness – mental illness, perhaps. There should be a word that emphasizes the pleasures of solipsism, but without the morbidity. Perhaps there is such a word, in another language; but it is not in Ella Frances' book.

5. The Fear of Happiness; Emotional Meteorology

Now, though, with the advent of Julie, and what I call the "Julistic Period" (in which my main focus will be on "Julistics", or the systematic study of Julie, and everything relating to her), the pleasures of solipsism, and solitariness, and loneliness, and all the solo patterns of the Minor Period, are a thing of the past. For even though she lives in Seattle, and I on Long Island, Julie is in my thoughts most of the time, and I no longer feel alone. And so, really, I am no longer alone, because – as they also say about aging -- you are only as alone as you feel. The widower/old man is not a role that answers any longer to what I feel inside, and so I have cast it off, "as morning throws off stale moonlight and shabby sleep" (Wallace Stevens). I have cast it off, this major mode of the Minor Period – and I already miss it. And not only miss it; I am also afraid of what losing my loneliness, and all that went with it, may mean for me.

Because loneliness – my loneliness of the last 12 years – has meant also a kind of depth. Suffering, reflection, patience, a turning inward, a "turning towards the pain", in the words of the Buddhist nun, author and psychotherapist Pema Chödrön – all the things that are

associated with my loneliness also, perforce, connote depth to me. Now maybe I am romanticizing suffering – just like my Irish Catholic mother. For she held it on trust that the reward for suffering is depth of character (not strength of character – though this may also be true – but depth of character). There is surely some truth to this -- even though it is a romantic truth. Which is to say, there is some emotional distortion going on here: a favoring of solitariness over companionship, for one. And man is a social animal; prolonged solitude is unnatural and unhealthy. I agree. I had three serious romances during the Minor Period. One of them lasted, off and on, for seven years; another progressed to engagement (before it spectacularly imploded, after eight months). But none of these romances ever put an end to the Minor Period – nor did I want them to. For I had found that I could continue to mourn for Diane during all of these relationships. (And it was mourning for Diane, in various phases and permutations, that constituted the essence of the Minor Period.) None of them touched the place in my heart where Diane still lived, even in death. Especially in death? Perhaps. Solitariness, loneliness, sadness and contemplation formed the particular habitat of my heart that nourished the memory of Diane, and kept it a living

force in my life. Not all beneficent influences are happy ones; this is something that our happiness-centered society doesn't seem to get.

So there is a sense in which my heart – or at least that part of it that is consecrated to Diane – fears happiness. It fears the disruption to its accustomed habitat that happiness represents. For happiness represents a different culture of the heart than that cultivated during the Minor Period; in happiness, a different emotional climate prevails. The climate of the Minor Period was one that was hospitable to contemplation; which means, meteorologically, that it was a climate of overcast skies, encouraging thought: low clouds, bracing winds, dark gray horizons containing challenge and mystery. The skyscape and landscape of the Minor Period were brooding and suggestive – friends to rich reflection. Bellow, in Herzog I believe, has a phrase that goes something like "the dark gloom of deepest thought". And then there is the beginning of Emerson's famous "eyeball" passage in Nature:

> Crossing a bare common, in snow puddles, at twilight, under a clouded sky, without having in my thoughts any occurrence of special good fortune, I have enjoyed a perfect exhilaration.

Me too. Sing it, Ralph Waldo. In my view – through my own transparent eyeball – it doesn't get any better than that. Overcast sky, cold weather, walking along a suburban Northeastern street with bare trees and unexceptional suburban houses (my twenty-first-century version of Emerson's town common), in desolate February, and nursing one's own precious musings about nothing in particular – musings all the more precious for being vague (more in the way of Wordsworth's boketto-ish "intimations" than any specific ideas) – this is my own perverse paradise. The Widower's Paradise. (A fool's paradise? Maybe. But in, say, Dostoyevsky's world – and also Lennon's and McCartney's -- fools are privileged persons.) For 12 years, this has been my chief form of happiness – the happiness of solitary contemplation, under an overcast sky, on a cold, gray winter afternoon, with an area of dark mystery on the northern horizon, over Long Island Sound. And maybe a small plane heading off, lights blinking, into that dark horizon. Connected with such a scene – that may seem not only gloomy, but dreary, to many – there has been also for me a kind of hope – a quirky, beleaguered kind of hope, but hope nonetheless; what I have called "hope-in-the-face-of-despair". A hope that consists mostly in seeking out the grounds for hope, that is interested in the

possibilities of entertaining hope from within a seemingly hopeless situation.

Now there are those – and reader, you may be one of them – who would say that I am just playing the game of a dilettante here – a dilettante in despair. That the true voice of despair is silent. That privilege, a child of privilege such as I am, cannot really conceive of true despair. That true despair is just not in a privileged person's ken – or at least experience. And you may be right. The despair of the Minor Period – based on the grand triumvirate of bereavement, loneliness and depression (the latter, albeit, in my case, medicated) – is mere child's play, compared with the suffering of Syrian refugees, or the mutilated victims, civilian and military, of the many horrors of war around the world. That is certainly right. I am willing to accept the discrediting and demotion of my own privileged brand of suffering. But it is, nevertheless, my own suffering – my own perverse happiness-in-suffering -- and I am loath to abandon it for a cheerier, sunnier brand of happiness.

Julie understands this. She too is a lover of overcast skies, and bracing weather, and the "dark gloom of deepest thought". She is a fellow-traveler on that "bare common, in snow puddles, at twilight, under a clouded sky."

She gets it. (After all, she moved to Seattle from New Mexico.) And she also understands my fear – perhaps just as perverse – of happiness itself: my fear that the happiness that comes from true love, and complementarity, and perfect companionship – will destroy the kind of depth, and abiding love for the dead, that I cherished, and relied upon, during the Minor Period.

Accompanying this fear is yet another one: that if I lose my qualified unhappiness (which is to say, my happiness-in-suffering, happiness-in-loneliness, etc.) I may also lose my desire to write. Writing, for the past 12 years, has been a pressure-valve for my loneliness. No more loneliness, no more writing, the theory goes. It's probably a deeply-flawed theory, but I still believe in it. It's worked for me so far. I really have no idea what the future holds for me as a writer. It may be that happiness may be as rich a source of material for me as sadness has been. I rather doubt this, but it is possible. "It is possible, possible, possible; it must be possible." (Stevens again.) I don't pretend to have any insights into the springs of inspiration. But neither do I think that my nostalgie de la boue for the Minor Period will be affected by whether or not I do any decent writing in the Julistic Period. If my inspiration, or whatever it is, dries up in

the Julistic Period, I will of course look back on the Minor Period, on its skies and moods and overall climate of hope-in-the-face-of-despair, with a special pang. And if I continue to write successfully (never mind trying to define that adverb; I really have no clear idea of what my criteria of "success" are, except that they do not include publication), I will still look back on the Minor Period as constituting its own irreplaceable habitat – almost as irreplaceable as the person whom that habitat was constituted to memorialize.