

"The Four Mornings"

A Poetic Contemplation

For the Mysterionists

Ye are all the children of light, and the  
children of the day: we are not of the night, nor  
of darkness. Therefore let us not sleep, as do  
others; but let us watch, and be sober.

St. Paul

I

In Wordsworth's 1799 ballad "The Two April Mornings", the speaker tells the story of his older friend Matthew, a character who recurs in several other poems in Lyrical Ballads. The sun has just risen when the two set out hiking together in the Lake District, "to pass/A day among the hills." Matthew is holding "a bough of wilding" (a wild plant or tree), presumably to use as a walking stick. All of a sudden Matthew stops, sighs, and declares, "The will of God be done!" When the speaker asks him what's wrong, Matthew replies that the sight of the sunrise reflecting off the clouds in the distance reminds him of a similar April morning 30 years ago, when he set off to go fishing. On the way, he stopped to visit the grave of his daughter Emma, who died when she was nine. Matthew remarks that as he stood at his daughter's gravesite, he loved her more at that moment than he "e'er had loved before". Then, leaving the churchyard, he meets a "blooming" young girl

carrying a basket on her head. (Such figures, appearing so suddenly and unexpectedly as to seem almost spontaneously-generated, are emblematic in Wordsworth's poetry - though exactly what they are emblematic of is never quite made clear; this one recalls another girl, carrying a pitcher on her head, that the protagonist of The Prelude also sees at a key moment in the poem.) Matthew tells the speaker that he was struck by the girl's fresh beauty, which reminded him of a fountain, or a wave "that dances on the sea." And then, in one of those sudden changes of mood that are so characteristically Wordsworthian, Matthew concludes his story:

"There came from me a sigh of pain,  
 "Which I could ill confine;  
 "I look'd at her, and look'd again:  
 "And did not wish her mine!"

The poem ends rather abruptly in the next stanza:

Matthew is in his grave, yet now  
 Methinks I see him stand  
 As at that moment, with a bough  
 Of wilding in his hand.

"The Two April Mornings" is both haunting and baffling, and raises a number of simple questions that never get answered - and that seem, moreover, unanswerable: What is the girl doing in the churchyard? Why is she carrying a basket on her head? Why did Matthew look at her twice, and then "not wish her mine"? Why does he tell this story in the first

place? And why does the speaker pass it on to us? What is the point of it all?

The poem takes the form of a "frame tale" - in this case, a story within a story within a story - though I confess I only noticed this recently, when I reread it in the hopes, and perhaps also with the hunch, that it might help me - as Wordsworth's poems often do - with something I am writing. It's an essay about morning - two mornings, actually: a real one in Seattle, where I moved last year, and an imaginary one in an unidentified location that bears a close resemblance to Worcester, MA, where my first wife Diane and I lived with our young son for three years in the mid-1990s. But I seem to have reached an impasse in the essay. I don't quite know where I am going with it. What I've written so far seems inadequate - wholly inadequate -- to the idea I had, or thought I might have, when I started writing it. This is perhaps not surprising, given the subject matter. I am not by nature or persuasion a "morning person", though I have become one by necessity this past academic year because of my teaching schedule, which begins at 8 AM, five days a week, at a community college south of Seattle. It's about a 45-minute drive to campus. I hate getting up so early - I have to be up by 6 at the latest, and leave by 7, if I want to avoid the worst

of the Seattle traffic and make it to school in time for class. But once I'm in the car and on the way to work I usually start to feel better about things, especially now that it's full-on spring, and the gloomy Seattle winter is behind us. Furthermore, my teaching day - two composition classes, plus a daily office hour - is over by 11, and if I can catch a nap right after I get home (since I can never manage, because of my bedtime reading habit, to get a full eight hours at night), I can still squeeze in some writing time in the afternoon, before Julie comes home and it's time for dinner, followed by the evening prep for classes the next morning.

The problem right now is that although I think I have something to write about - I feel that familiar urge to "get something down on paper" (writing for me, real writing, is very much a matter of ink and paper) -- I don't quite know what I'm doing, and I'm not sure how to move forward. It doesn't exactly feel like writer's block; it feels more like writer's bafflement -- like the writing version of the feeling I get when I read Wordsworth.

But I shouldn't complain. I know I have much to be thankful for. To have gotten another teaching job at the age of 63 (after the college I taught at for 19 years went bankrupt and belly-up); to have fallen in love and gotten

married again, to Julie, after 13 years of widowerhood (Diane died of cancer in 2004); and to know that Zack, our only child, is happily partnered now, and gainfully employed in his chosen profession (law) - all these things are gratifying to contemplate as I drive to work through the early-morning traffic. I am glad, also, to have a new city to get to know, in a part of the country that is also new to me. (I grew up in L.A., then taught for 23 years in the Northeast - 19 of those at the college on Long Island that went belly-up.) I am aware that the writing impasse I am currently experiencing is but a little stumble in the larger movement forward I am making in my life. Leaving behind the old life and moving into the new, "as morning throws off stale moonlight and shabby sleep".

I love that line from Stevens (my other poetic master). I love the images - the simple verb and nouns; the adjectives, too -- and I love the way it sounds. But the thing is, the action described by the simile, fine as it is, isn't really true for me. I would very much like for it to be true for me; and it may even be that, inasmuch as I deeply respond to the line, it is true for me. (I still remember the message I once saw on a sign in front of a church in San Francisco 35 years ago, the spring just before Diane and I got married. It was something to the

effect of, "To sincerely want to change your life is already to have begun to change it." It sounds to me now like a paraphrase from Kierkegaard; maybe it was.) But the poetic gesture that the Stevens line describes - the "throwing off" of "stale moonlight and shabby sleep" that is the quasi-heroic action of waking up in the morning - is not how I operate. Maybe that's another reason I like it so much. I am more a creature of the night. I am the sort of person who has to get pulled into morning. The sort of person who tends to hold onto moonlight and sleep - stale and shabby though they be. Who drags last night with him, blinking and bleary-eyed and woefully underprepared, into the prospective morning light. That is even, perhaps, why I respond so strongly to the Stevens line: it describes so vividly what I would like to do, who I would like to be - not who I really am, and not what I actually do. Ah, the inadequacy, the deplorable inadequacy of it all! It's no wonder I'm having trouble with the essay on morning; it's a subject that seems to lay bare some of my own incapacities.

And yet - to echo another couple of lines from Stevens, from the same poem ("Notes toward a Supreme Fiction": "It is possible, possible, possible. It must/Be possible"; "And not to have is the beginning of desire") -- I desire it. It is possible, and I desire it. I want to

be a Citizen of the Morning (instead of a Creature of the Night), and I want to write an essay about wanting it, because I do not have it -- do not have the knack of morning, as it were - and also because my wanting it makes it possible, or seems to make it possible, for me to have it. The alien strangeness and difficulty of morning - its various challenges -- are surely part of what makes it so attractive to me.

Wordsworth's Matthew told the speaker of the poem that as he stood before his daughter's grave, he loved her more than when she was actually alive - or "so it seem'd" (note the slightly-deflating qualification here, also so characteristic of Wordsworth). This makes perfect sense to me. I mentioned earlier that before I married Julie, I was a widower for 13 years. And those years of widowerhood are very dear to me. Maybe too dear, in the sense that I am holding on too tightly to them, and not willing to let them go, and be pulled into morning. Maybe they are sort of like my own bough of wilding - whatever that means. Holding onto the past, to memories of the past? Memories of memories, of memories - like the speaker's frame-memory of Matthew's memory of remembering his daughter, and of realizing, too, that he loved her more after she was dead than "I e'er had loved before". A memory triple-distilled.

For Wordsworth is, pre-eminently, the poet of memory - perhaps more even than he is the poet of nature. In the poetry, the two are often combined. Memories tend to be memories of nature; and nature is where memory gets established and disciplined, as it were. "The Two April Mornings" is a textbook case of this. Its "frame-tale" structure reveals the various layers of memory that are the poem's material: the speaker's memory of a spring morning when Matthew, now dead, remembered remembering his dead daughter on another spring morning, and then, immediately afterward, remembered seeing a suddenly-materializing girl who reminded him of her. His memories - the way he holds Emma in his memory, as if in his arms again -- seems to make him love her more than he ever did before. More than he ever loved anyone before.

Why should this be? Characteristically, the poem offers no answers to this question, either. But it may be - moving somewhat outside the poem now; though it was the poem that started this movement -- that we can apprehend a loved one better - that is to say, take them in more wholly, more totally, more comprehensively - in memory than in life. I believe this is true for me, regarding Diane. And I don't think I am the only one to have experienced this strange phenomenon. After death, love abides ("And

now abideth faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love"), and maybe even grows -- as Matthew affirmed -- as we come to possess the loved one in a way we never did when they were alive. We have them -- finally -- all to ourselves. They are now a part of us, as they never were in life.

It all sounds so terribly self-centered, though. Possessing the beloved, processing and absorbing them, turning them to your own account, your own purposes. Erasing them, in a sense, and replacing their full, separate, distinct reality with merely your own version of them. So cold, really -- so intellectual and reductive. The warm, living totality of the other, superimposed by the cold, convenient abstraction of one's own mental appropriation of them. So easy for a writer to do -- to convert the reality into a mere idea, a straw man: something dry and sterile and insubstantial, like the Hollow Men of Eliot's poem. Alas! All the more easily to be manipulated, altered, and fitted to one's purposes -- whatever those may be. (And the writer's purposes are never wholly benign.)

Yes, there is something unseemly in what the memory does to those it memorializes. Its transformations are

ghastly, in a way - not unlike those wrought by its  
 compadre, death:

Full fathom five thy father lies;  
 Of his bones are coral made;  
 Those are pearls that were his eyes:  
 Nothing of him that doth fade,  
 But doth suffer a sea-change  
 Into something rich and strange.

The lines are beautiful, but the images and their  
 transformations are also rather creepy: bones into coral,  
 eyes into pearls. "Rich and strange", though, is a perfect  
 way to describe the changes wrought by memory. For all its  
 sometimes cold abstraction, there is indeed something both  
 rich and strange about the process of recollection -  
 something enriching and nutritive and accreting, but also  
 altering and alienating: the deposits of memory, layer upon  
 layer, enhancing but also slightly changing and distancing  
 the image of the love object. The embedded, nested frame-  
 structure of Wordsworth's poem is perfectly apt, too, for  
 the process of memory that it describes. So often, it is  
 not the thing itself that we are remembering, but the  
 memory of the thing. Memory as the remembering of  
 remembering.



I long ago lost a hound, a bay horse, and a turtle-dove, and am still on their trail. Many are the travelers I have spoken [to] concerning them, describing their tracks and what calls they answered to. I have met one or two who have heard the hound, and the tramp of the horse, and even seen the dove disappear behind a cloud, and they seemed as anxious to recover them as if they had lost them themselves.

Thoreau, Walden

## II

The particular morning I have in mind, though, is not exactly the memory of a memory, but rather the memory of a vision, a vision that I have been chasing for some time - visions themselves being the visualizations of our desires. It's a vision based in natural reality -- the reality of the weather today in the place where I am living now: Seattle. Today is a Saturday, and the weather is suddenly magnificent: clear skies - the cleansed, clear blue skies of a Seattle spring - in the middle of May. Julie says it will be like this now until October. The mountains of the Olympic Range to the west, whose peaks are still snowy on their uppermost slopes, tower over the hills below, which run above the little sliver of Puget Sound that we can see from the deck of our new house. The cherry tree, the lilacs, and the camellias in the back yard are just past their prime - the camellias a little more so than the others (they came out much earlier -- the first harbingers

of spring); none of them quite so full or gorgeous as they were a week ago, but still admirable in the late morning light, speckled with sun and shadow. The Seattle spring, as I am learning, is long and slow and cool enough that these blooms will be pretty for at least another week or so, before they fall into disreputability. The leaves of the trees in the neighborhood are still fresh and new; and one of the trees in the back yard - I don't know its name; I am still a newcomer to this clime, and we only moved into the house last December, a week before Christmas -- is just now showing its tiny green buds. A latecomer, apparently.

All of this is new to me. The fair, fine glory of the Northwestern spring morning, all the new life of tree, shrub and flower -- "the glory in the flower"! -- the brightness of the light, after the darkness of the Seattle winter; the freshness of the air, which was still a little bracing when I went out walking earlier this morning - all are new to me. The stringency of the morning air is a reminder that I am far north of L.A., where I grew up; north even of the latitude of Long Island, where I lived for 20 years. This far-northernness - Seattle is exactly the same latitude as St. John's, Newfoundland - this too is new to me. The bracingness of the northernness. The Idea of North. (This was the title of a radio broadcast by the

Canadian genius Glenn Gould. I have never actually heard it, only heard of it, but the title beckons deeply to me. It's like I can have the idea all to myself, in all its rich suggestiveness, if I know only the title.) The spring here is so different from spring on Long Island, which comes later and is over earlier: a short, intense, abrupt spring, too soon morphing into the hot, humid density of the Long Island summer. "The Gladsome Time", I used to call the arrival of the warmer weather on the Island -- so welcome after the snowstorms of winter. Not that I ever really minded the snow. As someone who has spent over half his life in the meteorological wasteland of L.A., I never took the snow - or any evidence of winter - for granted. A part of me always reveled in cold weather, and does still. It was always a novel event, an occasion to be duly noted and appreciated. Yes, the severer rigors of January, February and March back east could get old; but they were never, even in their tediousness, to be taken for granted. And The Gladsome Time was always a rich reward for the wait.

This time now in Seattle is something else again: splendid, perhaps (to borrow again from Wordsworth): The Splendid Time. But it is really too early - my time here still too new, too recent - to assign it a title.

(Julie likes to tease me about how attached I am to titles. And it's true. For me, titles are clarifying; and there is much that is in need of clarifying. But not too much. Never too much clarifying. For I propose there is such a thing as The Clarifying Fallacy; there is an elemental elusiveness at the heart of things, too deep for our poor powers of perception. Consider, for example, the particle physicists' "Spooky Action at a Distance". Our entire technological universe runs on fundamental principles that are patently wacky.) So let me focus rather on the thing itself: the bracing quality of the air in early morning, when I must rouse myself, rise, and drive to class; the physical facts of morning. It pleases me to be up and about betimes in the day -- to have work to do that does not involve sitting at a desk in a small room, alone, writing, but rather standing and teaching in a classroom full of students (though at 8 AM, it is all too often only half-full). The dawning clarity of the sky, most of these May mornings; the growing brightness of the light; and the western starkness, jagged and clearly defined, of the still partly snow-covered Olympic mountains, seen under that light. All of these things please me.

But the particular brightness of the light in Seattle, when the clear weather finally arrives, does not always

please me. It reminds me of the bleached light of L.A., the whiteness of the smoggy sky, and contains memories of days that in the recall have a tinge of depression to them. Maybe they even had a tinge of depression at the time. I think they did. The slight depression I felt on days of that smoggy-white light, the baseline depression that I could not name, was too young to name, but later was old enough to recognize as a familiar consort -- another compadre. But the ability to name it, to assign a title to that white light, did not make it any easier to deal with.

Now I know that Seattle, Senator, is no L.A. The air here is almost always fresh and clean; but there is a bright harshness to the light that is definitely reminiscent of L.A. I think it is a Pacific, West-Coast light, as opposed to the gentler, yellower, goldener light of the Mid-Atlantic Coast. The light of Long Island springs and summers is softer than the Seattle light at that time of year, as I am coming to know it; and the sight of the Olympics, the snow-capped Olympics, under that harsher, brighter, clearer light is sometimes hard to bear. You have no Hudson-River-School light in this Northwestern clime, no softening, goldening light; all is stark, bright clarity. (And remember: there is such a thing as too much clarity.) It chills me slightly. The atmospheric

equivalent, perhaps, of the infamous "Seattle Chill", where people are superficially very nice, but underneath, elusive. And the same could be said of the bright, hard, Nordic, somewhat detached cheeriness of their light.

Which is why I turn inward, to my desirous vision. The vision of another spring Saturday, much like this one. Perhaps identical to this one. Identical, but in another universe. Another universe of the infinite multiverse the cosmologists tell us we are living in. (Ah, to be a cosmologist! To meditate, scientifically, on the sublime Origin of It All! The intellectual Masters of the Universe!) In this alternative universe, I am a younger man - myself, as a younger man; but not quite myself, either. The myself of the envisioning of myself. Younger, and less depressive. (Maybe not depressive at all!) A father, a younger father -- a young father, but with a difference here too. The father of two young children. Instead of my only child, Zack, I now, in my vision, have Zack and his younger sister, Zoe. A different version of myself, in a different version of parenthood. Not that I would want Zack to be any different than he is. But I would want myself to be different than I am. Better than I am. Not a lot, maybe only a little. But better. A better version. Josh 2.0, in Universe 2.0. Not only younger, but

more active. Less depressive, and more active. More handy, too. Working on the house in the morning. Up betimes, in the honey-clear morning, and working on the house, because it is a bright spring Saturday morning, and what else does Josh 2.0 do of a bright spring Saturday morning? Fixing the rain gutters. Mowing the lawn. Tending to the garden. Usefully engaged in the tasks at hand. Doing it, instead of writing about it.

Ah yes - but if I were actually doing it, instead of just writing about it, being the vision, instead of just imagining it, it wouldn't be ideal. And it is the ideal that I really love. The ideal, in place of the reality. Over and above the reality. The realm of the Platonic Forms. The Form of a Seattle spring Saturday, wherein I am effectual. Taking care of business. A younger man of action. Married, and the father of two. Married to whom? To Julie, still - a slightly different (cosmologically different) Julie? Or to Diane, again? But a cosmologically different Diane, without the terminal breast cancer? (Maybe there is no cancer in Universe 2.0.) No, I think it is someone else - not somebody I already know; at least not in this universe. I cannot quite picture her. The vision here is not too clear. (It obviously does not

partake of The Clarifying Fallacy.) But certain things are nevertheless apparent in the golden light.

It is a New England house, barn-like - white clapboard, dark trim, with a gambrel roof. ("The gambrels of the sky"!) Like the houses in Worcester, MA, where Diane and the young Zack and I lived for three years, and where I had my first teaching job. Is this vision then taking place in Worcester? The house sure looks like it. You don't see those gambrelled houses much in Seattle; here it is mostly Craftsman Bungalows, and the like. But what do I know? In my alternative-universe vision, there may very well be no Worcester, and no Seattle. Or there may be either, or both, except they are different. It hardly matters. It is, after all, a visionary location - something that cannot be, yet is. A particle physicist's improbable reality; a cosmologist's conjecture. A vision based in a reality that surely cannot exist, but does. And in this visionary reality of the multiverse, I am working on my barn-like house with the gambrel roof, of a fine spring morning in the middle of May, somewhere between Worcester and Seattle. Or somewhere that is both, yet neither. (No Principle of Clarity for me!) And I am happy, not depressed. For it is good to be elsewhere, and

yet here. It is good to be in both places at once. It is good to be participating in Spooky Action at a Distance.

My vision has a history. It goes back to another period of my life, and another essay I was writing then that I also had trouble with, and never finished. The essay was titled "The Possibility of Morning". Stevens was a tutelary genius of that essay, too, whose epigraph was: "It is possible, possible, possible. It must be possible." But that essay, which also tried to convey the vision of a fine, fair morning (that one though in summer, not spring), was coming from a very different place of the imagination. It was written during what I call "The Minor Period", after Diane had died, and before I met Julie. (The Minor Period lasted from June 2004 to September 2015.) Much more precisely, though, "The Possibility of Morning" was written in September of 2013, towards the end of The Minor Period. But of course at the time I had no idea it was near the end of The Minor Period. I was back on Match.com, after the unhappy ending of an unhappy relationship (which itself had begun on Match.com). I was glad the unhappy relationship was over; but this did not make me happy. Though it had made me relieved, very relieved, when it had ended. But the prevailing feeling of relief I had enjoyed that summer - the summer of 2013 (the final breakup happened on the

Fourth of July - Independence Day!) - had passed by September, and I was once again feeling lonely.

But this feeling of loneliness was not entirely unpleasant. Not at all. Because the loneliness made me feel connected to Diane. It came from having lost Diane, therefore it was connected to her. But that was not the only reason it was not entirely unpleasant. It was also not entirely unpleasant - which was another way of saying that there was something in my loneliness that pleased me - or perhaps more accurately, did not displease me. ("In the misfortunes of even our best friends, there is always something that does not exactly displease us." La Rochefoucauld.) - it was also not entirely unpleasant because of something inherent in the loneliness itself. The loneliness brought me to myself - brought me to an elemental place of contemplation and, in a way, of purity - the purity of sadness - that I never would have known if I hadn't lost Diane. At that time, the only other thing I had was Zack - and Zack was across the country, in his first year of law school. I mean, yes, I had friends. I certainly had a few people in my life who cared about me. But I lived alone, and slept alone. The house was cold and dark when I came home from work in the evening. Most meals were taken alone, with only the music on the radio to keep

me company. It was, admittedly, not much of a life. I didn't want to be living this way for the rest of my life - and frankly, I didn't expect to be, either. I didn't expect the rest of my life to be like The Minor Period. (There is much to be said also about my classification of my life into different "periods", but I will spare you that for the moment.) I knew The Minor Period would come to an end sooner or later, because I am not by nature or persuasion a loner any more than I am a morning person; and therefore I could be nostalgic for The Minor Period even before it was over. It was a kind of proleptic nostalgia, if you will. An anticipatory nostalgie de la boue, where you imagine looking back upon a time of sadness and tribulation with fondness. I know that is weird, but I also know I am not alone in this.

But The Minor Period was not only, or even primarily, a matter of proleptic nostalgia. There was also, to be honest, some pleasure in feeling sorry for myself. (I think self-pity is a underrated emotion, and unjustly reviled.) But mostly it was neither of these. It was a time, actually, of considerable depth of feeling and spirituality, of soul-searching. Indeed, of soulfulness, and what I will call "contemplationality", which is the state of being "contemplational". (Being contemplational

is different from being contemplative. Being contemplative is more of a mood, and does not go as deep or last as long as being contemplational, which is more theoretically-based. That is to say, contemplativeness is part of the larger, more basic field of contemplationality. Also, contemplationality can be applied to other subjects. For example, one can practice what I call "contemplational geography", which is the experience of letting your mind wander over - "contemplate about" (note that there is a difference between the transitive and intransitive verbs here) - maps and charts. Or, one might indulge oneself in a little "contemplational botany" while on a walk, where one speculates on what the different shrubs or flowers or trees could be, without having any precise knowledge (Avaunt, ye Clarifying Falsifiers!) of, or even any real desire to know, what they actually are. Contemplationality can be applied to any number of fields or interests. Finally, one is contemplative by default, in one's "bye times", so to speak - one's breaks from being intentional or industrious -- whereas one is contemplational by design. One is contemplational in the same way that one is creative - intentionally, yet also instinctively, naturally. By nature.) It was, in any case, sweet - bittersweet - to contemplate during The Minor Period about how much I missed

Diane, and how empty I felt without her. And in that emptiness I constructed a kind of shrine to her in my heart. I held her in memory, and came to understand more fully how much I had loved her, and how much more, in the manner of Matthew, I loved her now that she was gone.

My life in The Minor Period was pared down to two things: Diane and Zack. Both of them were gone: one permanently, one temporarily. But in another sense, Zack's gone-ness was more than temporary. First there was college (2006-2011, the extra year because of his double major - his "Axis Major", I called it - in German and Italian). Then there was his year in Italy, 2011-2012, on a Fulbright Scholarship. 2012-2013 was spent working for a cookie business in Ithaca, NY, where he'd gone to college, and then studying for the LSATs. And then there was law school, 2013-2016. Every year now, it seemed, he needed me less and less. It was sweet - not bittersweet, but heart-breakingly sweet - to have him home for the holidays; but it was also, I came to recognize in those years of The Minor Period, a little discomfiting, too. It was hard for me to adjust from the default state of loneliness to having him home again for a couple of weeks. The transition was hard, and I began also to experience something very strange during his visits. I found myself missing him while he was

still there. It was not just that I missed him proleptically, in anticipation of his imminent departure; I missed him while he was still with me. I missed him because I could no longer look forward to his return - he was home now - and also because the person who was here was not the creature of my imagining. He was who he was, not who I imagined him as, and this recognition created a feeling of loss, which made me miss him even more. I missed the idea of him, which was so different from the reality of him. I missed his childhood. I missed the little boy that he had been. I missed his needing me. I had spent the months of his absence missing him, wishing he were there, and then when he came home, I missed him again, or rather I missed him still, though differently. I missed what I could never have again, and I felt also - or so it seemed to me - the inadequacy of what I had when he was home, which fell so far short of what I had imagined in his absence. Shades of Matthew again: in a way that seemed to me both sick and sad, I loved him more when he was gone than when he was home. I wanted to possess him in a way that I knew was impossible; and this unrequited - and unrequitable - longing made me miss him, too. I missed him because I was not able to overlay the reality of him with my vision of him.

This may all have been partly due as well to the fact that we would inevitably clash and fight after he had been home for a few days. My eccentric solo habits, acquired during the singleton life of The Minor Period, annoyed and bothered him. He felt I was becoming too set in my ways; and no doubt he was right. I loved him more than anything, and that love, in its insistent intrusiveness, got in the way of my being able to enjoy him when he was home. And doubtless too, he felt this, and it was another one of the things that annoyed and bothered him.

But then, after a few days, things would settle down between us. We would adjust to one another, which also involved our partially retreating to our separate spheres - he upstairs in his hidden study, behind the secret door flush with the wall and wallpaper of his room; and I in the living-room or sun-room downstairs, reading. He would sometimes come down and join me in these rooms, bringing his laptop with him. Never was he without his laptop. But his mere presence was gratifying to me - even though, as I say, I also missed him when he was there. Sometimes, in the winter evenings, we would have a fire going in the sun-room; I would be reading, and he would be on his computer. And I would feel a secret combination of happiness and

sadness and missing him while he was there. And of course I never told him any of this; it was my sad little secret.

And always, when he left, I would feel a combination of desolation and relief. More desolation than relief always, and then, gradually, less of both, as the return to normalcy asserted itself. And the thing of it was, the normalcy felt austere, and that austerity was very welcome. After the welter of complicated emotions when he was home, the emotional austerity was now welcome. The stripped-down austerity of January and February, after the initial grief of his absence, was welcome. Because I came gradually to recognize that this austerity, this loneliness, this relative emptiness, was somehow essential to me - not just essential as in very important, but also essential as in fundamental, inherent. I came to understand that "it was better to go to the house of mourning than to the house of mirth." I understood this implicitly, even though I would have had - and still have - difficulty explicating the proverb itself.

All of this is now gone from my life. The Minor Period is over and done with. I now live in Seattle, and Zack lives in L.A. I see him more often now, either in Seattle or L.A. He is only a two-and-a-half-hour flight away. I am married to Julie, and he has a serious

girlfriend, and also now a stepmother and two stepsisters (Julie's daughters), and many other step-relations as well: Julie's sister and two brothers, and their children, and Julie's four young grandchildren. After just the two of us for the 13 years of The Minor Period, there is now an embarrassment of family riches. The years in the wilderness are over.

And I miss them.



It can never be satisfied, the mind, never.

...

It is possible, possible, possible. It must be possible.  
Stevens

### III

In Notes from Underground, Dostoyevsky defined man as "the ungrateful animal." That is so right. Never satisfied, and never grateful enough. Perverse, too - impossibly perverse. (Dostoyevsky devoted his career to the study of man's perversity.) The Underground Man, out of self-spite, likes the fact that there is something wrong with his liver. He wants it - dares it -- to get worse. Now I myself am not self-spiteful, but I am perverse. I miss my son when he is present - more than when he is absent - and

I miss feeling lonely and empty and in mourning. I feel the embarrassment of family riches, and I miss the salutary austerity of desolation. ("It can never be satisfied, the mind, never." Stevens.) Nor the heart either, ever. Julie has rescued me from my little life, and given me the fullness of love once again. My life is rich now, filled with family and relationships and purpose. And I miss that anterior, impoverished life.

Why? However can this strange thing be?

Perhaps for the simple reason - not so simple at all in the acquisition, but simple in the result, as all deep things are simple - that the relational impoverishment of my life in The Minor Period was rich in other ways: in appreciation, in contemplation - in contemplationality, if you will. I had very little emotional sustenance to live on in The Minor Period -- and I made the most of that little. I made the most of my hope - which is to say, of my determination not to despair, not to be bitter, not to look on things, as Wordsworth said in another poem, "with an unworthy eye". My determination to try to practice what the Buddhists call "right vision", "right feeling" and "right thinking". Was there something a little - or more than a little - religious in the faith of The Minor Period?

I think there was. I have been affectionately accused, by a friend, of being a masochist, and I believe there is more than a little truth to this. I look on suffering as something that is good for me - as something that will protect me from superficiality and unworthiness. As something that will allow me to live down having grown up in ease and privilege in L.A. Something that will school me in the rigors that lead to wisdom. That will rescue me from meaninglessness and emptiness. It is, in fact, another kind of emptiness - the greater emptiness of loneliness - that will rescue me from the lesser emptiness of ease, of having too much. And from the spiritual emptiness of ingratitude. Having too much can make you ungrateful; having very little tends to make you more appreciative. (This is the Spoiled Child Syndrome, with which I was all too familiar, growing up.)

These are probably over-generalizations, I know. Of course it all depends on the person themselves. The worthiness depends on the eye that looks on it. "Right seeing" proceeds from an organ in good working order - not only the eye, but the mind behind the eye. And loss is a great teacher - as long as the vessel of suffering is prepared to learn. My time in the emotional wilderness of

The Minor Period was a hard but necessary schooling. There comes to mind in this regard an old book of photographs (published in 1967) by Eliot Porter, with text by the literary-critic-turned-naturalist Joseph Wood Crutch, entitled Baja California and the Geography of Hope. My parents, who had a copy of this book, built a weekend house in Baja, less than an hour south of Ensenada, and I spent a good bit of time there in the 70s, 80s and 90s. I went down with my parents, with friends, with Diane, and then with Zack as well. The summer after Diane and my father died - within a month of each other (my mother had died nine years earlier) - Zack and I went down to Baja to scatter my parents' ashes in the tide pools below the house. The landscapes in the Porter/Crutch book are, on the whole, much grander (though not much more austere) than those around the area where my parents' house was located. Just south of the house there is (or was) a stretch of coast that was uninhabited and primeval, for as far as the eye could see. I used to go for short hikes there, and the Baja wilderness depicted in the book reminds me a little bit of that coastline. And the book's title, and the "geography of hope" that it explores, evokes also the rich austerities and blooming desert emptinesses of The Minor Period. The Baja landscapes in the book, and those I used

to see on my hikes, are dear to me in the same way that The Minor Period is dear to me. They both speak - in their very different ways -- of the sublimity of certain kinds of deprivation and desolation. I am reminded of Shelley here, at the beginning of Julian and Maddalo:

...I love all waste  
 And solitary places, where we taste  
 The pleasure of believing what we see  
 Is boundless, as we wish our souls to be.

It may seem odd that the desert should instill and evoke hope; and yet the Bible, with all its harsh and hopeful sublimities, arose out of the desert, and the peoples of the desert. The desert is nothing if not contemplational. And being so, it is also a place of writing - a "scene of writing", as the literary parlance goes, and as the authors of the Bible well knew. They came from the desert, and so they set their stories there, and thereabouts. There is clearly something in the desert that inspires the imagination: the desire to fill the emptiness, the barrenness, with meaning; and also to see meaning precisely in that emptiness and barrenness. This is what I was experiencing in The Minor Period - so empty, so barren, and therefore so rich in thought and soul. The faith of The Minor Period - the faith that did much to sustain me during that time - was like a desert bloom, cultivated in very

little soil; in next to nothing. But next to nothing, the desert teaches us, is where a vital something lives - something that is determined to survive, to endure, and to prevail over the next-to-nothingness that is its closest neighbor, its compadre. Not exactly a spontaneous generation - in nature there can be no such thing, though it may sometimes appear that way; call it rather a desert growth - improbable, seeming to arise out of nothing. The emblematic figures of Wordsworth come to mind once again; so do the theories of the cosmologists and particle physicists: quantum fluctuation, and the vagaries of deepest thought. The spontaneous coming into being of energy - which is to say of matter, of material, from the void. But the void is not entirely nothing, as we are coming to learn; it is also potential - potential energy, potential matter, potential material. And the particular universe of creation that we know came out of this void. (I am speaking not of scripture, but of science; but the informal affinities between the two are striking. Nor is this a sop to the creationists; I hold them in abhorrence. But it is, perhaps, a nod to the Mystery, and those who investigate it. Can we call them The Mysterionists?) And The Mysterionists know this. I think I would not be the writer I am without the desert of The Minor Period.

Perhaps that is why the landscapes of Baja, the geography of hope, are so dear and speak so deeply to me. They are that next-to-nothing, that austere wasteland, upon which I can project my sadness, my loneliness and yearning - my love for Diane. There I can have it all to myself.

I am not living that life anymore - that life of loneliness, austerity, desolation and yearning - that life of the desert - that life of The Minor Period. I am in Seattle now. It is green. It is spring. I love Julie. But I cannot forget the desert, my desert, and how, in all of its barrenness, it once bloomed for me. Something once came for me out of nothing, or next to nothing. And I remember it with fondness. And it is possible, just possible - it must be possible - that like Wordsworth's Matthew, I love it more in its loss than I ever did love before.