

"My Special Place"

One of my favorite assignments to give my writing students is the "special place" assignment, in which they write about a place that was, or is, important in their lives. I ask them to describe this place in detail, and to explain why it is important to them. Ideally, this last request should be unnecessary; the specialness of the place should be self-evident from what they write -- implicit in the description itself, and the sentiments evoked. But I have learned from experience not to apply "shoulds" to freshman writing. Besides, the students are grateful for any explicit directions I can give them; and since specificity and reasoning in writing are two of the main things I am trying to teach them, I have found the more specific I can make my prompts, the better the results. In the teaching of college composition, you never can be too literal.

Do I practice what I teach? Yes and no. I know that in writing, significance should speak for itself, and do so in the voice of "felt life" (to use a Jamesian term), and I try to follow those precepts as best I can; then again, it is the essayist's job to comment as well as evoke, and I admit I enjoy this reflexive hermeneutical freedom. In college I had an English professor - the redoubtable Thomas Flanagan, also a historical novelist of distinction - who

once told me, facetiously, that he never let his lecturing style get in the way of his prose style. This seems like a good idea - but easier in the practice for a novelist, perhaps, than for an essayist. The voice of the essayist is tethered differently to the ego, and the unconscious. And the essayist who undertakes to write about his dreams finds himself in a kind of double bind: he runs the risk of crushing the ephemeral in the mitts of the mundane. To grasp the wings of Psyche without damaging her requires both the delicacy and the finer vision of the poet, along with the patient persistence of the novelist - qualities hard to combine in the homelier medium of nonfiction prose. But it's a poor workman who blames his tools... Some of the theorists say the unconscious is structured like a language. If this is so, then the dream-essayist must somehow find a way not to lose the poetry of his subject in the process of translation.

For some time now - since my first wife died, over 14 years ago - I've been dreaming regularly about the house in Pacific Palisades where I grew up. The dreams used to recur almost nightly, sometimes for a week or two at a time; and even now there is rarely a week when I don't dream about the Vance St. house at least once. These dreams have become so expected, so much a regular fixture

of my dream-life, that I am surprised - and somewhat relieved - when I don't dream of Vance St. But this is usually because I dream instead of the apartment on Winona Blvd., in East Hollywood, where Diane and I lived for almost 12 years. We were living on Winona when our son Zack was born, and for seven years after that, until I got my first full-time teaching job in Massachusetts, and we moved back East. It is, in fact, rare that I have a dream not set in a house - or in some dream version of a house - that the three of us lived in together, either in L.A., Massachusetts, or - later - on Long Island.

Though we never actually lived in the Vance St. house together - except for a week or two at a time, before Zack was born, when my parents were away on a trip. But Vance St. was always a part of our family life, from the time I first started going out with Diane, in January of 1981, until she died, in June of 2004 - only a month after my father. (My mother had died - in their bedroom -- nine years earlier, of a rare blood disease). I think Zack came to love the Vance St. house where his grandparents lived almost as much in his first seven years in L.A. as I had in 40. Seven years, though, isn't 40; and much as he loved that house, I don't think it could ever mean to him what it means to me. In the words of that great bard of childhood, Neil Young, "all my changes were there". Zack's changes

were in the two houses we lived in in Massachussets (when he was almost seven through nine), and then on Long Island (nine through 19). But I spent the years from five to 18 on Vance St. After four years at Berkeley, and then four more in New York City, I returned home in 1980 to work out a six-month depression I was going through, that ended (more or less) when I met Diane. We were married in 1983; Zack was born in 1987. We moved East for my teaching job in 1994.

Of course I must have dreamt of Vance St. during those intervening years, but I don't remember any of those dreams. It is only the dreams of the so-called "Minor Period" - the 13 years between Diane's death and my marriage to Julie in 2017 - that carry any weight with me now. And weight they do carry. I don't rightly know why; but I suspect it has to do with the weight carried by the Minor Period itself.

The Vance St. dreams of the Minor Period were saturated with the general atmosphere of that time. It was an atmosphere of baseline sadness and loneliness -- and yet also of a certain kind of hope: hope-in-the-face-of-despair, you might say. It amounted, I suppose, to a sort of muted but persistent faith - a faith not incompatible with loneliness and sadness. The kind of faith that makes sad things precious -- that trusts in the power of

imagination. Wordsworth is key here: "But we have known that there is often found/In mournful thoughts, and always might be found/A power to virtue friendly" ("The Ruined Cottage"). I think it was with something like those "mournful thoughts", and that mysterious "power to virtue friendly", that my Vance St. dreams of the Minor Period were tinged. The faith of the Minor Period surrounded those dreams, and gently suffused them. It wasn't a religious faith - though spiritual, in its way. It was a Wordsworthian faith, a "power" that "sees into the life of things" ("Tintern Abbey"). And the things whose life the faith of the Minor Period saw into were very much connected with death, with loss, with the specter of possible hopelessness and despair that was always playing about the fringes of the Minor Period - the hopelessness, and despair, that always remained a possibility during that time. But not really for me. Never, quite, for me. Perhaps it was a case of the "power to virtue friendly" holding the "mournful thoughts" in such a way that they did not spill over into frank despair.

Now I know that to hear about other people's dreams can be extremely boring. But I don't propose to recount any dream-events or dream-plots here; it's only the atmosphere of the dreams - their soul, if you will -- that interests me. "The soul - remembering how she felt, but

what she felt remembering not..." (Wordsworth again, in The Prelude). It's how the soul of the dreams of the Minor Period felt to me that I'm after.

And that dream-soul (so to speak) seems inseparable from certain memories of the Minor Period - or more precisely, from the surrounding atmosphere of those memories. Melancholy memories, they were (and are), whose lonely atmospherics to this day draw me in, and did so even at the time of their formation, with a kind of proleptic nostalgia - an anticipatory nostalgie de la boue, as the French say ("nostalgia for the mud"). As though I knew that those memories-to-be - memories-in-formation, the memories of hard times -- would someday be dear to me. I have a number of these memories, and they went to form the embryos, so to speak, of my dreams during the Minor Period. Here then are a few of those embryonic memories, suspended in the amniotic fluid of the Minor Period environment:

-- Walking back to Penn Station through a stretch of Central Park from the Todds' place, where I'd just had a light supper, and tea. (The Todds were the parents of an old friend of mine, who had then become my friends, too.) It was a mild fall evening, a few months after Diane had died. I was a little nervous walking through the park after dark, though the stretch I was on closely followed Central Park West, and was well-lit. I still remember the

yellowish light of the old-fashioned street lamps on the leaf-strewn pathway. The atmosphere was a little spooky - as so many things during that first year after Diane's death seemed spooky and vaguely threatening to me. It was a kind of "loneliness visible", like Milton's "darkness visible". In fact that phrase strikes me as an apt description of the atmosphere of the early Minor Period in general (2004-2010), where things were saturated with the eldritch light of my new and unfamiliar singletonian loneliness. It was a long walk from the Todds', on East 95th Street, to Penn Station; and after that, I knew there would probably be a wait in the disagreeable and sobering waiting room of the station, always a place of sadness, both in its clientele and its general, dreary Dasein; and then, the hour-long train ride back to Huntington. It was a Sunday night, and I still had much to prepare for classes the next day. Adding to the usual sinking-dread feeling of Sunday was the thought of all that work still needing to be done, perhaps late into the night (which I have always hated). If there had been music to accompany my feelings on that long walk to the station, it would have been spooky music.

-- The peculiar loneliness of New York City itself during the Minor Period. Meals there alone, in diners and coffee shops, and - sometimes -- the underground

international food court of Grand Central Station. The haunting of used bookshops, especially The Strand. (Where I would spend an hour or two at a time, perusing the lofty aisles, loading my backpack with books to be savored on the ride home.) Also, the Met Museum and its bookstore, at night. (These last two locations the public domain of the singleton par excellence.) I would load up on tea beforehand and then cruise the museum galleries - especially Tapestry and Decorative Arts. On those evenings, it was possible to imagine myself as a "Master of Consciousness" - as though I were somehow inhabiting a poem by Wallace Stevens (the poet laureate of singletons). The Caffeinated Attention (capitals here denoting something particular and unique) became extremely focused - focused, more than anything else, on its own acts of consciousness. In this case, on its appreciation of the ornamental: the patterns on antique china; the decorations on the borders of tapestries; the designs of oriental rugs. In fact, for a year or two in the Early Minor Period I became obsessed with oriental rugs, and dropped a pretty penny at ABC Carpets, just off Union Square, where it was sweet to contemplate all the rich patterns as the rug salesmen, purveyors of delight, would rifle through the weighty rugs, pulling and spreading out the ones that caught my fancy.

(Here too, at ABC Carpets, it was possible to become a Master of Consciousness.)

-- The craving in general, also during the Early Minor Period, for pattern, ornament, decoration and design. Perhaps this desire was a kind of reaction, and antidote, to the dominance of words and texts in my life: the preparation of readings for classes; the grading of papers; my own personal reading and writing. Textiles as a relief from texts (their etymological descendants). In fact, a big and maybe even life-changing event for me during the Early Minor Period was the Met's exhibit "Tapestry in the Baroque: Threads of Splendor", in the autumn of 2007, whose promotional banners I first saw when I was walking past the museum on my way to a dinner party at the Todds'. The next week I went (alone) to the show, and was spellbound -- transfixed in a kind of contemplational stupor of pattern and design. The regal richness of the figures on the tapestries themselves, in all their color and detail; but no less than these main figures, the ornamentation on the borders: a gratuitous profusion of decoration, a cornucopia - literally, with garlands and festoons of fruits, vegetables and foliage spilled, as though from a horn of plenty (and these were sometimes also represented), into the frames depicted on the tapestries. A banquet for the eyes, and for the mind: a necessary respite from purposive

thinking - from work and relevance. I spent well over an hour in those high-ceilinged tapestry galleries, drinking it all in, and went back a second time. I couldn't get enough. This was contemplational rapture on a grand scale -- a more extreme version of what I had experienced in the Decorative Arts galleries. I remembered now that I had been to an earlier tapestry exhibit at the Met, "Tapestry in the Renaissance: Art and Magnificence", to which "Threads of Splendor" was the sequel. But that earlier exhibit, in 2002, had not had nearly the impact of the Baroque show. This was probably because it had not been viewed during the Minor Period, and so the need for its powers of visual consolation was not nearly as great. For it was not being viewed by The Widower, from his vantage point of sadness and loneliness. Diane was still alive in 2002. In fact, I had probably seen it with her. 2002 was a year of remission. The cancer came back in 2003; she died in 2004. 2007, then, was in the heart of the Early Minor Period. Splendor in bereavement; pearls in the mud. Garlands and festoons to decorate my loneliness.

Yes, reader - you have perhaps correctly discerned a certain tendency to wallow in my grief. This has always been a problem for me, even before Diane died. The invention of the persona of The Widower, as a humorous way to objectify my self-pity, was just one instance of this

wallowing. The nostalgie de la boue was another. The whole idea of having a Minor Period was yet a third. It seemed necessary to devise various semi-facetious reconstructions or re-framings of my sadness, in order to be able to handle it with the requisite perspective of objectivity and detachment. Requisite for what, and for whom? you may ask. For the writer, of course - the writer in me, who was observing the Minor Period that I had thus identified and denominated in order to be able the better to bear it. It was necessary to have a companion in my loneliness. This companion was both me and not-me, and was called The Widower. He was also the protagonist of an unpublished autobiographical manuscript I wrote mostly in 2011, titled "The Widower: An Afterlife" - a sequel to Failure: An Autobiography (New York and London, 2007), and a prequel to "Shame: A Transgression" (2015 - also unpublished).

But even before his literary incarnation, The Widower was already an alter-ego I had created for myself, as a wry acknowledgment of my singletonian state. By objectifying my self-pity as a character I could distance myself from it, control it, and comment on it - all of these strategies constituting a kind of pre-emptive strike against the self-sentimentalization of my state that I both feared and exploited. (Enjoyed exploiting, to tell the truth.) The

tragicomic character of The Widower was a sort of "inoculation" against the realities of widowerhood. The more I invoked him, the more I could seem, at least to myself, to become him; and the more I could seem to become him, the less naked I would feel. The Widower, you could say, was the clothing - maybe even the uniform - I wore during the Minor Period.



These, then, were some of the affective lineaments of the Minor Period, out of which the dreams of Vance St. during that time arose. As I mentioned before, those dreams seem to me to carry the soul of the Minor Period. And yet in my memories of the dreams of that time, many of which took place in and around Vance St., I am temporarily freed from the need to play The Widower. The profound sense of loss is still there, but in the dreams it is not embodied in a character. There is only the scene - the many scenes and settings - of Vance St. itself. In my dreams, Vance St. is remembered as I knew it when I was living there; though the dream-person remembering it is someone else again. Not my waking self, certainly; but not exactly The Widower, either. The rememberer who is dreaming of Vance St. is remembering it through a kind of scrim of loss - of something almost entirely vanished, gone, irrecoverable, but still slightly vestigial. What is lost, what is

missing, is of course mostly Diane; but not entirely.

Diane herself did not often appear in the Vance St. dreams. They were dreamt in her wake, as it were - in the emptiness her death left behind: the sense of emptiness that lies all around the dreams - a vast sea of loneliness surrounding the little island of Vance St. The island I keep coming back to.

The house itself lay below street level. Because of this it was not on the city's sewer lines, and had a cesspool instead. This fact became connected with a recurrent dream in which the toilet of my childhood bathroom had been ripped from its gasket, and the bathroom floor was covered in shit. This did actually happen a few times (minus the gasket part) - as it happened to all of the bathrooms in Vance St. when the cesspool became clogged and backed-up, and had to be pumped out. A slight asphalt hump in the lower driveway would have to be opened up, and access to the cesspool was thus gained. My father was on a first-name basis with the cesspool guy (whose name I should remember, but don't). I do distinctly remember, though, that his olive-drab work trousers sagged a little, and he was splay-footed. In my dreams, though, the overflowing toilet is a frequent rather than occasional problem; it is, in fact, the default condition on the dream-bathroom, and a source of shame, helplessness and dismay.

A more salubrious dream-venue is the kitchen of Vance St., and its adjacent walk-in pantry. These rooms are scenes of celebration rather than chagrin. Many happy meals (of the non-McDonald's kind) were prepared here in real life, and my dream-life reflects this fact. Usually, in my dreams, the kitchen is the source and conduit of dinner parties set in the small dining-room that doubled as my mother's "office", where she sat at the old plywood Eames desk in the corner to pay bills, write cards and letters, and make phone calls. (Our black rotary phone wasn't replaced by a push-button model until around 1968 or 1969 -- maybe even later.) In my dreams, the dinner parties are invariably scenes of hilarity, in which my father holds forth, the witty center point the evening revolves around (as was the case in real life, too). And in these dream-dinner parties, my father and I are reconciled - a welcome development that does not usually obtain in other rooms, nor at other times, of my Vance St. dream-life.

Because mostly, in the dreams, my father and I are pitted against each other, and often not even on speaking terms. This requires some background.

During the three years after my mother died and before he remarried (1995-1998), my father and I were closer than we had been in many, many years - perhaps since the camping

trip we took together in the summer of 1970, when I turned 16. On this trip we drove his convertible '65 Mustang up through Nevada, Utah, Idaho, Wyoming and Montana, all the way to Glacier National Park, on the Canadian border. On the way, we paid a surprise visit to our family doctor, Doc Beck, who had a cabin on Lake McDonald, inside the Park. It was the only time my father and I had ever spent an extended period of time together, just the two of us; and over the years that followed, he would occasionally refer back to that trip with an understated fondness. Understatement was always my father's way in matters of the heart. He felt things deeply - but never, God forbid, explicitly. As was appropriate for the master of the dining room, food invariably played an important part in his memories - even of that camping trip. He liked to recall the steaks we'd grilled over the campfire, and the local melons we'd bought at roadside stands and then cooled in mountain streams. After that trip, we'd refer to rugged mountain landscapes as "good melon-cooling country". I think we both considered that camping trip a high point in our relationship, to be cherished - and never, alas, repeated. (Which of course made it all the more precious.)

Three years after my mom died he married Chun Ling, a doctor of Chinese medicine who'd been treating him for walking- and balance-related issues at a clinic in Irvine;

and that fall, she moved into Vance St. My relationship with my father was never the same. We had a huge blow-up that Thanksgiving, and sometime after that he told me I'd "disappointed" him - but refused to say how. I flew out to be with him when he was dying in Santa Monica Hospital of congestive heart failure (for which Chun Ling had been treating him, devotedly). Chun Ling and I took turns spelling each other at the hospital. Back at the house, I found a photo of my dad and me sitting (at his feet) on the porch of Doc Beck's cabin. I brought it to the hospital, and put it on the table by his bed. "Good melon-cooling country," he remembered. Late that same night, he died.

Earlier in the day, Chun Ling had left the hospital for a few hours to get some sleep at home. Before she left, she told me explicitly that under no circumstances should I let the nurses give him any medication, since something they'd given him before had apparently hampered his breathing. Later that afternoon, while Chun Ling was still gone, my father grew agitated, and was barking at the nurses and picking at his bedclothes (in the way, they say, of the moribund). I hated seeing him like that, and so - either forgetting or subconsciously deciding to disobey what Chun Ling had told me not to do - I asked the nurses to give him something to calm him down. It worked, and he settled down; but that night, after Chun Ling had returned,

he started to have trouble breathing, and then began to struggle for breath. I held his right hand as he struggled; Chun Ling held his left; I kept urging him to "keep on fighting", as was always his way. He rallied for a minute or two, and then he stopped breathing, and died.

When Chun Ling learned that I'd asked the nurses to give him medication to calm him down, she basically blamed me for his death. The plan had been for him to die peacefully at home (like my mom), under her ministrations; but now she came to think I'd deliberately hastened his death in order to put him out of his suffering. She told this to my father's best friend, who believed her, and later told me so. It was a blow I've never quite recovered from, and don't think I ever will. Bad enough that both my father's wife (and doctor, and primary care-giver) and his best friend should believe - and still to this day, as far as I know; I am no longer on speaking terms with either of them - that I deliberately euthanized my father; worse still that my habitual and constitutional self-doubt will not allow me to dismiss - nor ever to forget - their suspicions. I tell myself I know I did nothing to knowingly hasten my father's death; he was a fighter, and wouldn't have wanted to die any other way. But what if I am wrong in what I tell myself? What if I don't know my true motivations? Having talked it over with Zack - and

others - in the years since my father's death, this question tortures me less than it used to; but it has never completely left my mind, and it never will. In my heart I have forgiven Chun Ling and my dad's best friend for thinking what they thought - and probably still think; but I cannot quite forgive myself for maybe making the wrong decision that day in the hospital - the last day of my father's life. No doubt it is this sad story, and all the feelings and questions around it, that is at the root of my recurring dreams of my father, and the poisonous and unspoken thing that lies between us in those dreams.

Though I did recently have a dream where the love between us was restored. For I do still dream often of Vance St. - and I suppose I always will. But what I now refer to as the post-Minor-Period dreams have a different atmosphere: less haunted, less suffused with loss. The sea of loneliness is gone. But if I am to be completely honest here, I would also have to admit that the post-Minor-Period dreams are much less dear to me. Dreams of Vance St. were something to hold on to during the Minor Period - a life-raft of sorts, to keep me above water in the sea of loneliness. But the dreams no longer serve that purpose; now I have Julie. Yet I still dream of Vance St. Julie, who is in psychoanalysis, says there's obviously still

something I need to work out. No doubt. No doubt there are many things I still need to work out.

And one of those things, probably, is my inordinate attachment to the dreams of the Minor Period. They are like precious relics of another time to me. I miss them, deeply. I feel guilty about this when I recount my recent dreams to Julie, and confess to her that they are missing the je ne sais quoi of the Minor Period. The truth is that I miss the Minor Period itself. I miss its dreams, its atmosphere - its Dasein. I miss the whole shebang.

Is it just a case of the aforementioned nostalgie de la boue - the French term for a sentimental attachment to the memory of bad times? There is no question that nostalgia plays a part in my feeling for the Minor Period - including the Dasein of its dreams. But I am not convinced that this peculiar kind of nostalgia forms the whole of my feeling of regret - of attachment to what is missing, to what no longer is. What I miss also is a certain quality of hope - of what I called, before, "hope-in-the-face-of-despair". The island of faith, surrounded by the ocean of loneliness. (Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach" is relevant here; he too was a Wordsworthian.) Another image for this feeling might be that of a small plane flying at night, wending its way through the inky darkness, its wing lights flashing white and red. The earthbound observer tracks its

slow but determined progress, and feels a rise of curious hope, of cheer, at the sight. The sensation is one of mild expectation; it is what I call an "expectational" feeling. A similar sensation is produced at the sight of storm clouds massing on the horizon, over the Sound. (During the Minor Period, it was the Long Island Sound. Now that I have relocated to Seattle, to be with Julie, it would be the Puget Sound. But no, actually, it wouldn't. Because that "expectational" feeling, that peculiar kind of hope, of faith, was very much an artifact of the Minor Period, never to be recaptured - which is why I miss it.) I miss not having the thing I now have. I miss not having a life-partner. I miss wishing in vain to have Diane back again. I miss the feeling of wondering whether I would ever find someone again -- and knowing I would never find another Diane. Julie is a godsend; yet I miss the feeling of not knowing, in my loneliness, whether God (or whatever) would ever send someone my way. Now I have, and no longer want; and now I miss wanting, in the particular way that I did. I miss the feeling of the rough grain of solitude, the way it grated on my soul. Lord Byron, promiscuating in Venice, began to study Armenian because, he said, he felt the need for something rough and craggy to break his mind against. Senator, I am no Lord Byron; yet I feel a similar need for something sad and lonely to rub my soul against. Sandpaper

for the soul? Something like that. Julie is my safe haven; but I remember the sea, and my soul likes contemplating the memory of its vast darkness. The remembrance of loneliness visible. For a long time I used to go to bed alone. No longer. Now the bed is warmed by another body; the Widower's Bed (which was the title of a chapter in "The Widower: An Afterlife") is no longer.

But even though I'm married to Julie now, I sometimes find it difficult to entirely doff the persona of The Widower. The identity took, and is hard to get rid of completely. And there is that in me that does not want to get rid of it, either - that remembers The Widower with fondness, and nostalgia. Remembers my sadness and loneliness of 13 years, and misses it. What is this, exactly?

I said before that it is more than just notalgie de la boue; it is also a kind of hope and faith that I miss. A kind of emotionally pared-down living; emotional subsistence living, you might say. The kind of life in which my dreams played an important part - more important than the part they play in my life with Julie. In the Minor Period, I escaped into my dreams. They formed a large part of my emotional life during that period. It wasn't that I didn't have any romantic relationships during the Minor Period. I did in fact have three - and one of

them lasted, on and off, for seven years. But I did not live with anybody. Which is not to say that these were not serious relationships at the time. I even got engaged in the course of the last one. (Not the seven-year one, though; she was still married; her husband still lived in Taiwan, and she would not shame him further, she said, by divorcing him. She was the only one of the three that I was in love with; but not even she could compete with the ghost of Diane.) I think that was why I never lived with any of the women I was involved with over those 13 years of the Minor Period - because I was already living with someone: the ghost of Diane. I did not know this consciously at the time; but I felt it and observed it on a deeper level than conscious thought. It might have seemed, to an outside observer, that I was living alone in that house in Huntington Station (except for the times Zack came home for the holidays, and the one summer, after his freshman year in college, that he spent at home). Yet that outside observer would have been wrong; the spirit of Diane was living there with me. And that was just the way I wanted it. I was not yet ready to let her go; for 13 years I was not ready to let her go. Although we never lived in that house together - I bought it two years after she died - she inhabited it nevertheless: she lived in my thoughts and feelings; she kept me company in my loneliness; it was

her, more than anyone else, that my memory turned to. She was my companion in sadness. (This was only fair of her, for it was she who had caused that sadness, by getting cancer and dying.) It was her afterlife that reverberated and lingered and endured -- transmogrified, but not estranged. The sunroom was full of her watercolors; and the framed collection of vintage postcards of Worcester, MA that I gave her one year for her birthday hung there too. (We had lived in Worcester for three years, when I was teaching at Holy Cross - my first full-time teaching job.) Worcester had been our great adventure together. That may sound kind of pathetic, since there are those New Englanders who consider Worcester to be something of a shithole. But it was never that to us. It was where we went when we changed our life together - when we got out of L.A. and moved back East, to a place of seasons, and winter, and snow, and then spring. The longed-for New England spring. A new life. Together we changed our life.

The phrase reminds me of that beautiful and strange passage at the end of Malory's Morte Darthur:

Yet some men say in many parts of England that King Arthur is not dead, but had by the will of our Lord Jesu into another place; and men say that he shall come again, and he shall win the holy cross. I will not say it shall be so, but rather I will say: here in this world he changed his life.

To me, this strikes the sublime note, and I can never read it without getting goosebumps. But what can it possibly mean? That King Arthur is somehow still with us, only in a different form? But the text does not quite say that; it says, "here in this world he changed his life." What does that mean -- that he became someone else? Exchanged lives with someone else? Our Lord Jesu would hardly approve of that; it is not an idea that comports very well with the pursuit of the holy cross. (And there is that phrase again, so reverberant for me in my own life; though I never taught Malory there.) And what about the usage of the word "had" in place of "was taken" or "was brought"? Did Malory, in his translation/ adaptation of the French material, leave out a word or words here? Not that I would change anything; the strangeness of "had" is perfectly appropriate to the enigmatic quality of the passage - an apt description of the sublime mysteries of life and death. Of how the dead remain with us. I will not say it shall be so...and yet, so it is. The dead will not be expunged, but had by the will of us into another place. And Malory seems insistent that this other place is not the afterlife, but rather "here in this world".

Perhaps Arthur found what I call a "habitat" for himself - somewhere he could be while he healed him of his grievous wound to "the tay of the brain". (That was where

Mordred wounded him - a wound to the lining of the brain. The dura mater. Or was it the pia mater? No matter - Malory says "the tay of the brain", and that is weird enough for me. I cherish the weirdness of Malory.) As I cherish the idea of a "habitat" for King Arthur, "here in this world" -- and yet not, exactly. In this world, but not of it. And I think that's what my dreams of Vance St. provided for me during the Minor Period - a habitat, an environment, a hideaway I could go to in my loneliness. A refuge for my loneliness, that was also a product of that loneliness. I carried my loneliness with me into sleep, where it changed its life, if you will, into dreams. Dreams that retained the peculiar atmosphere of my waking loneliness - the loneliness that pervaded my waking hours. But this loneliness was not utterly transformed, just slightly altered, so that it possessed a somewhat different quality from my waking loneliness. How can I describe this difference? My dreams made my loneliness stranger, unfamiliar. That which (it is said) literature does - makes the strange familiar, and the familiar strange - dreams do also. In that sense, dreams are a kind of poetry. But of course we have always known this. It is a sublimer variant of what the aforementioned theorists also tell us: that the unconscious is structured like a language. I will not say it is exactly so; but rather I

will say, here in this world the unconscious is structured like a poem. Like a poem without the explication. Like the poems we all make when we sleep. My dream-loneliness of the Minor Period was not like my waking loneliness. It was set mostly in Vance St., in the place where I had always been happiest - but was happy no longer. None of the Vance St. dreams could be described as happy. That is to say, they may have contained happy moments, but those happy moments were set in an environment, a habitat, a dream-atmosphere of sadness. The absence of Diane permeated that environment, in a different way than it did during my waking life. A way that was stranger, more alien, disguised, and tacit. It was as though there were a tacit understanding between me and myself. I (the "me") understood that Diane was gone, but myself refused to dream explicitly about this. Myself dreamed instead of when I had been not lonely, when I had been, on balance, not sad, but happy. In this way, perhaps, Vance St. was Diane, recovered.

But that sounds too much like an attempt at an explication - an explication de rêve - and I don't want to do that. I take my dreams, my unconscious poetry, too seriously to want them explicated. I leave explications to the theorists. The essayist comments, yes, but doesn't

explain. The essayist only explores. Explores, and attempts. Il essaye.

* * *

Zack and I went back to Vance St. last October, with Julie. Julie and I had flown down from Seattle to be with Zack on his birthday. We had all gone together to visit old friends of my parents in the Palisades, and afterwards decided to stop by 234 Vance St. and see if we could meet the new owners. Not the kind of thing I would normally have done (I'm very much of the "you can't go home again" school - dreams notwithstanding), but Zack and Julie were curious, so I went along with it.

The new owners had put up an automatic gate - horror of horrors! -- at the top of the driveway; though I was pleased to see they'd kept the old barn mailbox and wagon-wheel lamppost. There was a car at the bottom of the driveway, so we figured someone was home. We rang the buzzer by the gate, and when a woman's voice answered over the intercom, we identified ourselves as the previous residents. The gate rolled open, and we walked down the driveway - the first time I'd done that in 14 years, since packing up the house after my father died. A blonde, fresh-faced woman in her 30s greeted us pleasantly at the front door (now painted white, over the natural redwood it had always been), and introduced herself as Erica. Her two

toddlers, a boy and a girl, tagged along as we made the tour through the house. I had already determined to steel myself against the shock of the changes, whatever they should turn out to be - and they were considerable. The painting of the front door was replicated everywhere inside; the natural redwood ceiling beams and planking were now bright white, making the interior much lighter than it had been when we lived there. I remarked on this with a series of bland, positive-sounding murmurs that I knew to be disingenuous even as I made them: how could they have painted over the natural look? Granted, the dark wood beams had made the interior look dark as well; but to us this relative darkness came to feel cozy and refugal. The white interiors now seemed garish. The garden-room - or lanai, as my mother always called it - was gone. The space was there, but the old room was gone. No more tropicals - bromeliads, philodendrons, elephant ears, coleus - along the planted perimeter; indeed, no more earthen perimeter at all - and no more polished-pebble flooring, either. The lanai was now the master bedroom, and my bedroom was the little girl's. They'd painted the Dutch door here white as well, along with the wood of the ceiling. The kitchen had been expanded and modernized. No more old O'Keefe-Merritt enamel-and-chrome gas stove (which had always seemed to me

kind of like a '57 Chevy, or a spaceship of 50s vintage). The walk-in pantry was gone, too.

As Erica and I chatted, it transpired that she and her husband weren't the new owners after all. In an email exchange I had later with her husband, I learned that they were only renting the place while the new owner - who'd also bought the three other houses in from the corner of Chautauqua Blvd. - was preparing to raze all of them and build his own Vance St. compound. Oddly though, this news didn't really upset me - nor did it even surprise me. What would you expect of someone who painted natural redwood white?

My parents' bedroom was the last room we visited; now it was the little boy's. They'd taken out the skylight my parents had put in, and once more painted the natural-wood ceiling white. It may have been the cumulative effect of all this sanitizing whitening on my memories of the homely past that now prompted in me a perverse and apparently uncontrollable urge to undo it all by spilling my guts, because I suddenly whispered to Erica, "This is the room my mother died in."

For a moment, she looked horrified; then she closed her eyes and shook her head forcefully. Clearly I'd gone too far - especially in the presence of her children. I immediately felt stupid and ashamed. I didn't know this

woman at all, and no sooner had I invited myself into her house than I'd dumped this weird piece of too-much-information on her. How wildly inappropriate and totally out-of-control of me. What had I been thinking? I saw now - but too late! - that a fact of the utmost importance to me could mean nothing to her - or worse than nothing: it was unwelcome, infelicitous, and creepy.

I apologized to Erica several times as we were leaving. She shrugged it off; but it was hard for me to, and the dissonance remained with me for the rest of the day. Why couldn't I have kept my mouth shut - kept this most personal of secrets to myself, where it belonged? But apparently there was an imp in me - the imp of the perverse; how apt that title of the Poe short story was! This imp could not refrain from sharing this bit of personal history -- so momentous to me, so totally undesired by her. Undesired? But how could that be? How could she not know that she needed to know that a lady she didn't know from Adam had died in her son's room? That lady was my mother - the most important person in my life until I'd met and fallen in love with Diane, and then we'd had Zack. The thought that the news of Mom's death at 234 Vance St. could be unwelcome - and also unpalatable - to its current resident was both totally understandable and yet also, on a deeper level, incomprehensible to me. But

mostly I just felt foolish - as though I had squandered something precious that might lose some of its value by being unthinkingly shared. Yeah, I should have just kept my mouth shut.

Julie pointed out afterwards that Erica must know that older houses have a history, which includes people sometimes dying in them. True enough; yet the confiding of this particular information - and in front of her children, no less - must have seemed particularly gratuitous to her. And it wasn't just that I was ashamed at how readily I had volunteered such an intimate detail - and to a virtual stranger; it was also that the divulging of such a personal matter - the location of my mother's death - seemed to me like a betrayal of her. She had a right to have such a thing kept secret from strangers, didn't she? Not proclaimed to someone whose only response could reasonably be - and indeed had been - one of visible distaste. A violation of boundaries, clearly. This was ironic -- and also apt - since my mother's own boundaries had never been exactly the firmest, either. She confided things to me concerning her relations with my father that she probably shouldn't have. My mother had a confessional streak. She used to tell me that one of the best feelings she ever had was the feeling she got, as a child, leaving the priest's

confessional. And it would appear, now, that in this regard at least I was my mother's son.

Except I didn't have a good feeling at all; I had a feeling of violation, and - as I mentioned before - squandering. The squandering of a precious secret. Indeed, there was much - all? - about Vance St. that was precious to me, and my recurring dreams testified to that. The difference, though, was that there was no squandering in my dreams. The dreams were distilled essences - of Vance St., of the Minor Period, of my loneliness and bereavement, which had been changed, in this life, into pearls, into gold. My dreams were a kind of transformation of my past, of my life, into something rich and strange - as strange as Malory, almost. Something "had", by the will of whatever, into another place in this life. What was most important to me, as my tactless remark to Erica had revealed, was something that had happened in the past - in this life, but in the past. "The past is another country: they do things differently there." (The famous first line of "The Go-Between", by LP Hartley.) True enough. But there is also a continuity, in this life, between past and present. Certainly not a perfect or seamless one, to be sure. The present has its whitewashings of the past, as well as its dark, obscure passages. Darkneses visible. And dreams, whatever else they are and do, are also the

conduits between these different times and "countries". Our way of living with the past, in the shadow-world of the present, which is sleep. To say that my special place is Vance St. is to say that I have somewhere to go in this life that is neither here nor there, but in-between. My Vance St. dreams are my go-between. The dreaming mind, in these matters, knows best, because it does not really know at all. It only remembers, and imagines, and transforms. We are had by the will of our Lord Hermes into another place. Hermes, whose magic wand - the caduceus - holds the power to summon sleep, and the spirits of the dead, and restore them to life:

But first he grasps within his awful hand
 The mark of sovereign power, the magic wand;
 With this he draws the ghosts from hollow graves,
 With this he drives them down the Stygian waves;
 With this he seals in sleep the wakeful sight,
 And eyes, though closed in death, restores to light.
 (Vergil, Aeneid 4.242-4, trans. Dryden)

I will not say it shall be so, but rather I will say: here in this world I changed my life. I am with Julie now. But my special place abides, in sleep and dreams, and its habitat of sadness is still sweet to me.