Then Here You Are

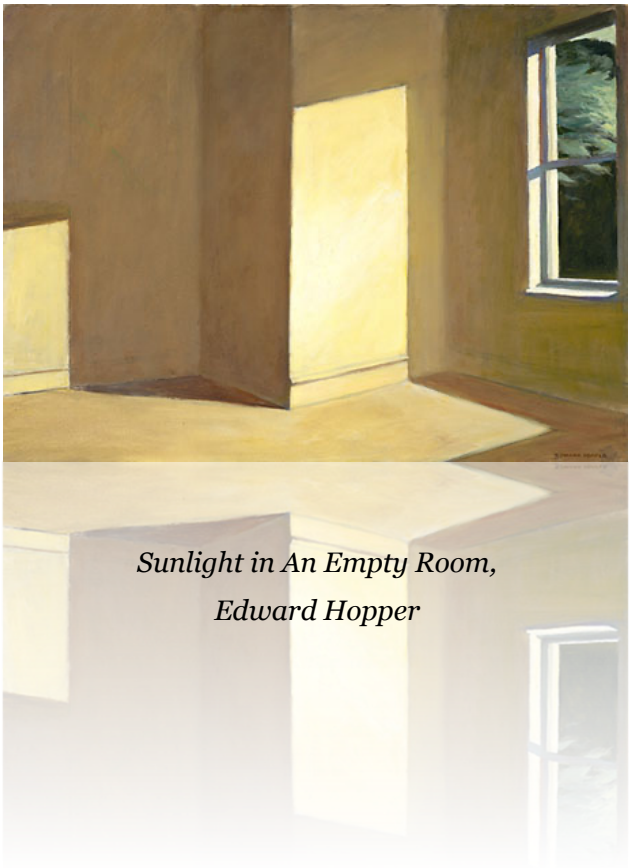
Tom Litster

Photo: W. Eugene Smith

"What a strange thing to happen to a young boy."
—George Oppen, on growing old

Windows

WINDOW: originally a Norse word meaning "wind's eye." The eye ventilated the longhouse, and when it let out too much warmth, or let in too much cold, people filled it in with oiled paper and translucent slices of animal horn. Romans filled their windows with glass; glass windows outlasted their empire. In cathedrals, stained glass signified a threshold between the earthly and the sacred. For the wealthy, glass windows signified separation from the unwealthy—more windows meant more money. When glass became industrial and everyone could afford it, there was a democracy of windows.



Sunlight in An Empty Room, Edward Hopper

In a time of democracy, I have lots of windows. Tudor leaded glass windows, eight panes apiece and nearly floor-to-ceiling along three walls of two front rooms in a second-story flat. I think of them as a fraternity of windows. Everything does well among them: plants, cats on a window bench, friends with cups of coffee, and me, often nearly drowsing in creative inattention.

Windows tell us stories. In Vermeer's painting, a young woman stands at her sunlit window reading a letter. We can guess it's a letter from an absent lover. Rembrandt's young girl leans out of her window, arms resting on a stone ledge. We wonder what her story is. Edward Hopper painted sunlit rooms with solitary figures at a window; sometimes the room was cleared of everything but light. In those paintings, he said he was looking for himself. In Jacques Tati's movie

"Playtime," whole buildings are a window. No one inside can avoid being seen, waved at, and scrutinized. There are too many windows.

Looking out of a window can be dangerous. Tennyson's Lady of Shallot is warned against it. Subject to a curse, she is instructed to only gaze at a mirror reflecting shadows of the world. One day bold Sir Lancelot rides by and the lady gazes out her window. She follows Lancelot with her eyes, and then by boat. Her story turns tragic. In Hitchcock's movie, Jimmy Stewart looks through his rear window and thinks he sees a murder in an apartment across the courtyard. We are left to guess if it really was a murder. A detective comes to investigate, and tells him he shouldn't be looking into windows because they reveal a private and secret world.

A turn of the twentieth century idea was that windows provide well-being, especially for the ill or the economically deprived. Ample light, air, and openness would improve the outlook of tuberculosis patients in sanitoriums, and the labor class in their dark homes and grimy neighborhoods. Expanding on that notion, various 'ologies'—gerontology, sociology, psychology—promote windows as "vital as a way for the elderly to access the world without having to literally be in it." With a window, they will have a "neighborhood zone to quietly watch ordinary human activities and changes—changing seasons, arriving storms, even roadwork will interest them." What they see will "back up what they have heard on the television or radio, and will help older people understand life better."

A disappointing notion, if you ask me. A hardening of the boundaries between 'outside' and 'inside,' as a final boundary moves relentlessly closer? A solitary confinement, and left to invent a life outside of life? My windows are a place to sharpen the contours of growing old. I can decide what to tell my bones before we show ourselves to the tomb.

Donald Hall, one of our poet laureates, was a decade older than I am now when he wrote "Essays After Eighty." He sits in a blue armchair looking out the window of his farmhouse. He surveys a sagging barn, juncos, chickadees, and finches. He looks at the old barn and remembers a winter when he thought he would lose it as "a yard of whiteness rose on the old shingles." He tells us, "New poems no longer come to me, with their prodigies of metaphor, and assonance. Prose endures. It is a pleasure to write about what I do."

DAYS UNFOLD SLOWLY at my windows. In a changing choreography of light and shadow the wheels slow down and move to the side of the road, the spirit changes its means of transportation. I rummage through the artifacts of a life—the chaos, the delights, and the weary sadness of it. I explore, digress, and acknowledge uncertainty; evade, embrace, and contradict. I reconsider and correct. Awareness of shrinking time has a way of clearing the mind. We aging ones feel some urgency to let things drop away: emotional, physical, and intellectual baggage. It's a natural attrition that we hope will simplify. I remember what I want to leave behind, which is not the same as forgetting.

This kind of remembering is fragile, changeable, formative, impermanent, haunting, and seldom orderly. It brims with feeling unrepeatable by anyone other than me. It is an instrument of consciousness, and not interested in the past as a luminous presentation, or a tepid brew of nostalgia as easily rummaged through as a photo album. It regards delights with suspicion and calibrates the blows. It can be the loci of disturbance. Looking back is not always tranquil.

Michel de Montaigne recommends solitude for the twilight of my years. In a dying of attachment to the world, I should withdraw back into myself "like an animal removing its traces at the opening of a lair." I should present myself to myself for questioning. "It is a tricky business," he acknowledges, "to follow so meandering a course as that of our mind." Without true solitude, "We clutch at everything, but clasp nothing but wind." Easy enough for Montaigne to follow his own advice. He was a middle-class lawyer from a wealthy family with an estate and a chateau he could withdraw into.

Solitude needs a place. Montaigne had his chateau, Thoreau his cabin. This sunny flat with big windows will do. Quiet tales can be told in the mind as I meander and wander corridors that do not seem to be necessarily linked. There are hauntings and moments of recognition. If I am tempted to determine causes and consequences, a touch of doubt will be added to any conclusions.

Solitude is discipline, a habit of concentration that allows another kind of thinking. I relax a mind too purposive for too many years and wait to be caught off guard, half-aware and half-awake, somewhere between the dental bill and the dream. If I am fortunate, there are moments of something rich and strange; or

more straightforwardly, I discover what some of the questions are. I pair things up—like grief and joy, ambition and humility. However transitory, it's the closest thing to grace that I know.

I relish the hours at my windows. They are as they have been for ninety-five years, and yet something they have never been. They have never been my windows, never my way of looking. There are moments when the looking is as ambiguous as Phillip Larkin's high windows, which are possibly transcendent, or just as possibly bleak: "deep blue air, that shows / Nothing, and is nowhere, and is endless." Something might still come out of the blue. If it's an understanding that's larger than before, I'll know it's still wrong, or imperfectly partial.

IT'S WINTER, and the branches are still bare on the old cherry trees along my side of the street. In the spring there will be another unreserved blooming. By the grace of windows, a muchness of pink of cherry blossoms will be included in my front rooms. In the fall, the tulip tree at the corner, which has a plaque telling me how old it is, will once again turn brilliant yellow. I think of a passage from a Rainer Maria Rilke poem about autumn:

> "Whoever's homeless now, will build no shelter;
> who lives alone will live indefinitely so,
> waking up to read a little, draft long letters,
> and, along the city's avenues,
> fitfully wander, when the wild leaves loosen."

Getting old doesn't happen all at once—then here you are. There are a lot of 'maybes.' Things can turn out badly, as they often do in Greek tragedies, but may just as well turn out favorably, for a while at least. Ralph Waldo Emerson said it may come down to the condition of the liver.

I need a new account of myself. So far, I am doing pretty well. If nothing else, I find meaning in the attempt. I will keep my pencil moving against the paper.

Journey to the Interior

YESTERDAY MY MIND WAS UNQUIET, out of place with the places around me. Hoping for a still point, I read Theodore Roethke's poetry. "I dream of journeys," he writes. I thought about journeys, and about old men.

> "Old men should be explorers?
> I'll be an Indian.
> Ogalala?
> Iroquois."

Photo: Jeffery Conley

Roethke's old man, like the poet himself, has undertaken a "long journey out of the self." The journey is taken alone: "I was always one for being alone, / Seeking in my own way, eternal purpose." Movements are fragmented, not always forward, and without any certainty about the destination. "A perpetual beginner" who "learns by going where to go."

A Roethkean journey is always in two movements—backward toward the past, then forward to the present—as if one movement. It can be as harrowing as it is hopeful. Progress is seldom continuous. Toward the past, landscapes are desolate and dangerous; slippery downhill places, crumbling soils, hissing snakes, and slag heaps. There is a "kingdom of stinks and sighs," and a "bleak time" when

"trees no longer shimmer; / Not even the soot dances." His old man seeks a spiritual salvation as he rehearses himself for "the stand at the stretch of death."

There are passionate utterances of despair, and distress over a spirit's movement that seems no better than a snail's or a slug's. The sustaining hope is that in a far field there will be a renewal.

In the fleeting moments of renewal, the landscapes are verdant. Small drops of water cling to grasses, and the heart rises with the grasses. Fat meadowlarks sing in fields and greening figures walk in gardens. Wild roses bloom near seashores and intrepid shorebirds walk next to the water. If a curtain falls over insight, it's backward toward the past in order to go forward again toward beatitude, and a harmony with the motion of the natural world and all that transcends stupor and sensual emptiness.

An old woman, also facing her death, acknowledges "I have gone into the waste lonely places / Behind the eye; the lost acres at the edge of smoky cities." She searches through memory for a childlike freedom from a "dreary dance of opposites." She exhorts those younger, "the self-involved: / The ritualists of the mirror, the lonely drinkers," to "flame into being." Of her, Roethke said, "Is my old lady tired? The hell she is: she's tough, she's brave, she's aware of life and would take a congeries of eels over a hassle of bishops any day." (If you are a literary insider, that was Roethke's jab at T.S. Eliot's "The Four Quartets"—Tiresome Tom, he calls him.)

Barely twenty years old when I first read Roethke's poems, they took hold of me with their rhythm and music, and integrity of vision. Their voice is Roethke's voice, the imagery his own experience. Nothing is lifted from another text; nothing is outside the poem. I had scant thoughts about how to be old, but his old explorer and his old woman had a curious power. Their pilgrimages and the allegorical landscapes stayed with me as if waiting for me to catch up.

It seems I've caught up: a conspicuously aging man is undertaking his own journey to the interior. Whatever the metaphorical landscapes, they are not as full of vivid details and tangible places as Roethke's. I cannot tell you about it in the rich and masterful voice of an aging poet concerned with his own immensity,

but I am learning to speak of it in my own voice. The hope is the same: to lose an old self and become something else. How strange to be a beginner.

Self-conscious remembering is my way of pilgrimage. *Self-conscious*: conscious of one's own acts or states as belonging to or originating in oneself; *also*: presenting yourself to yourself as the most important subject (it seems I have taken Montaigne's advice); *also*: looking before you flush.

In hours balanced between concentration and creative inattention, in dreamlike and fragmentary sequences, the familiar can turn up in places unfamiliar and strange. Glimpses, images, and other bits float up as reminders of what was not forgotten but had become unavailable. They have a power to leap out. I can be caught off guard. Memories appear and disappear as if at the corner of the eye. They are not "really how it was," but also not falsifications. They become windows through which something too opaque for words can be seen. This kind of seeing does not so much interpret reality as contribute to it.

If you ask me, is your journey a rescue effort? I will tell you it frequently is. I have questions about what happened and why. With such questions, a journey to the interior can hardly be undertaken without probing the long ago of childhood. The child wants to know how to expand in the world; to know how to speak to the world about what is happening to it, and what the problems are. The child wants to get a grip on things: what is a mother, a father, and what secrets do they conceal? And what is life and why will it end? Hard things to speak of.

Roethke too returns to the child. It is an aspect of the spirit that neither his old man or his old woman scrap as inconsequential in transcending their malaise. In his father's greenhouse, a son among "cut stems struggling to put down feet" and shoots "lolling obscenely," is confused by male and female fecundity. He does not fully understand "the vice of flesh." In later poems, "the lost son" is still trying to overcome the austerity of his German American father. He has grown more optimistic about "the high noon of thighs," but his despair of sensual emptiness awaits. It is an agony of the soul of one particular life but speaks for many of us.

No doubt there are consequences of the past. Chroniclers of childhood interested in them are often determinists; they like to generalize. I'm not keen on

determining where to place such burdens. I'm not investigating a crime that has been committed, nor am I looking to get even. I want to know what an aging man can believe about himself. It seems like a good idea to let deep thought and memory pass over a lifetime.

MY FRIEND, O, came by to sit at my sunny windows. She brought figgy buckwheat scones and we talked about journeys. On my journey, I told her, I hope to unravel as much as I can of what constitutes the original project of me, and then leave things behind. It's unlikely anyone will notice when I leave or when I return.

O is patient with my metaphorical excesses. She laughed and asked, "Can I help you pack?" I told her that I have already left; no one was there to see me off.

"At least watch your moods," she said. "I know how moody you can get." I reminded her of an old poet who watched his moods as narrowly as a cat does a mouse. Some days I'm the cat, some days the mouse. I watch my moods.

"Will you come back?" she asked. Yes, I told her. Since you never get there, there is only the traveling back and forth. You don't put down feet.

In one of the last poems, Roethke's narrator ends up at the seashore:

> "As if I swayed out on the wildest wave alive,
> And yet was still.
> And I rejoiced in being what I was:
> In the lilac change, the whit reptilian calm,
> In the bird beyond the bough, the single one
> With all the air to greet him as he flies,
> The dolphin rising from the darkening waves;
> And in this rose, this rose in the sea-wind,
> Rooted in stone, keeping the whole of light,
> Gathering into itself sound and silence–
> Mine and the sea-wind's."

In spite of a struggle with bipolar disorder and a couple of famous breakdowns, Roethke wrote that "in spite of all the muck and welter, the dreck of these poems, I count myself among the happy poets: I proclaim once more a condition of joy."

After reading Roethke, and eating figgy buckwheat scones, my mind was quiet.

A Change of Mind

> *St. Augustine said, if you don't ask me about time, I know what it is. If you ask me about time, I don't know what it is.*

TIME IS THICK WITH THEORIES, rich with metaphors—most are spatial, which is the easiest way for us to apprehend unfolding time as central to the human adventure. In many minds, time can be many things; my time is not your time. I've changed my mind about time, which is the only way to change anything about time.

Arriving at the Mind's Door,
Laura Perry

When I was Olympian young, time was a medium to move through, with only one way to go—forward. I laced up my shoes. I was eager to try out a distinguishing human characteristic: imagining possible futures, even mutually exclusive futures, and choosing which one I wanted (with an option to change my mind later). I never imagined that one day time would rush toward me.

The dawning of human consciousness probably *was* the dawning of time—at least time conceptualized over long temporal durations as a discrete past, present, and future. We speak of a continuity of things and people. We realize there are lessons to be learned from the past, and we organize the present accordingly as we plan

for possible futures. We bid a fond farewell to friends we expect to see again, make arrangements for a future with each of us in it. The being of such time is the being of me, which it is not for other creatures—butterflies, for instance, who know when to congregate, and which way to fly, depending on the wind, but do not, we presume, know anything about Mexico. Bears know spring has come and berries are ripening for eating. We, the homo sapiens ("wise ones"), learned to plow a field and plant a seed, and we expect our food to come later, at a time certain and in more or less certain quantities, even in preferred colors. There is a time to sow, and a time to reap.

To not wander alone looking for berries, and to believe we can collectively shape a different future if Mexico does not suit us, is a gift of mind.

It's a hallmark of modernity that we have clocks everywhere—devices that measure the passage of time for us in discrete increments. Our clocks synchronize time in order for us to cooperate and coordinate, sometimes in very large numbers. A clock at hand is necessary to plan a future and wisely use time in the present toward that end. Except for madmen, reason will have it no other way.

We expect time to unfold like sentences, the previous one making sense of the one before, almost like a plot. We want a reasonable plot, don't we? A through line, a string to hang it all on. "Don't string me along," we like to say, but that's precisely what we want—to be strung along through time, to see a shape to our life. We prefer a simple determinism of causes and consequences, but if cause and effect are not necessarily to be trusted, there are general facts and principles.

Plots depend on time; they can't happen outside of it. Plots can be broken: a peripeteia, a character suddenly turns against you, catastrophe strikes, an unexpected grief arrives. Time can be broken: if what you thought the last sentence predicated does not come there is a temporal rupture. You feel outside of time. This timelessness is hard to speak of, and to theorize about.

We might think of time as a river. Marcus Aurelius in his mediations: "Time is a river, a violent current of events, glimpsed once and already carried past us, and another follows and is gone." Leonardo Da Vinci puts us on the riverbank, our hand in the current: "The water you touch in a river is the last of that which has

passed, and the first of that which is coming. Thus it is with time present." Jose Luis Borges puts us all the way in: "Time is a river that sweeps me along." Ursula Le Guin, lets us float on it: "Story is our only boat for sailing on the river of time."

There are divisions of time on our river. "Befores" and "afters" are chained together like barges, back to front, behind a tow-barge pulling along a chain of events. Chains, like plots, can be broken, leaving barges grounded on the bank. Rivers no longer feel quite right to me.

We might think of a movie. A continuous *flow* of instants inside frames. The unblinking brain, 'the organ for paying attention to life,' processes them as a succession, one frame causing the next and adding continuously to a repertoire of images. From a narratological position in our present, we see our 'life experience,' even anticipate what the next scene might be. We enjoy the cinema. We don't notice the flicker between frames.

Enlarge a few frames, post them on a billboard as a kind of outline of your time. Past and present are together all at once (not necessarily in order of before and after). Pick a frame as a single poster epitomizing the fullness of your time. This can be a hard choice. Do I choose the joys, or the blows? The ascent, or the decline? These are narrative choices regarding the passage of time inscribing itself on you.

In a dreamlike phantasmagoria, gnome-like figures have carried posters past me like placards on sticks, a kind of funhouse review of my life—recognizable, but somewhat grotesque; not quite as I remember it.

There is an arrow of time. Between fletching and point, it carries me forward, which is the only direction an arrow flies (this is not something that needs to be explained). The present shifts forward every day, the past accumulates in a place I cannot go (arrows do not fly backwards). If I do not like what has accumulated, a gift of mind is my belief that it can be transcended. The future remains a place I cannot know, which does not prevent me from trying to predict it. Human consciousness has that as a primary purpose: look forward to a future and try to predict it. It's how we survive in our time on Earth.

From my cosmic arrow I notice systems that can just as happily run backward as forward. I am not one of them. I am a subjective subset of big processes where things do not run backwards. Collapsed buildings do not uncollapse, melted ice cubes do not unmelt. This is so because the universe is so. Once cosmic inflation started, it would inevitably continue. The Second Law of Thermodynamics says that entropy increases with time, it doesn't decrease. Even 13.8 billion years, it turns out, is only temporary. The good times don't last forever.

Trying to run my life backwards would make no sense. Look at pictures of me twenty years ago, ten years ago, and then just last week, and you will see my entropy. My collapse cannot be uncollapsed.

The block universe puts a temporal lid over everything, boxes me and everything else in. I perceive the ordinary passage of time, my arrow flying forward, my plot unfolding, but borrowing the lyrics of a famous song, it ain't necessarily so. For eternalists (as they are happy to be called), the temporal structure of everything is already written—past, present, future. They strangely co-exist at the same time, which is all of time. Everything is relative: what is past to you, will be a future to someone else. Time unfolds, then might fold back on itself.

Apparently, I am a point in the block with a present but could be any other point and the temporal structure would be the same. What I do tomorrow will make tomorrow the way it always has been. What I do in the past—where I can, in theory, travel to—is part of a past that has always been. I cannot change anything. Antoine Roquentin, protagonist in Jean Paul Sartre's novel *Nausea*, perceives the congealed block of time as just irreducibly there. He wants to be done with it. Too much time brings on acute waves of nausea.

Vladimir Nabokov sees a sphere: "I have journeyed back in thought—with thought hopelessly tapering off as I went—to remote regions where I groped for some secret outlet only to discover that the prison of time is spherical and without exits." He does not care about time, "a series of spaced images, with the intervals between them gradually diminishing … affording memory a slippery hold."

Physicist Carlo Rovelli says time is a gravitational field. Quantum uncertainty means I can't know where I stand. The Second Law of Thermodynamics may account for what I *perceive* as time, but I and my time in mind are only subjective features of a universe where past, present, and future cannot be safely assumed. I can't be certain of anything. Time does not fly like an arrow, rather as a sparrow that might fly off in any direction. Maybe I am just in a bubble, resting in field after field of uncertainty in a temporarily preferred state. Tightly folded dimensions could come unfurled. As consolation, Rovelli offers mind and memory as a personal time machine.

Nabokov says memory is "conclusive evidence of my having existed." For him, memory is the instrument of an assiduously trained consciousness, selecting parts of a life to be polished into art. He suggests that probing childhood "is the next best to probing one's eternity."

Philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty: "It is the essence of time to be not only actual time, or time which flows, but also time which is aware of itself … *the relationship of self to self."* This is "the flesh of the world," a body crossed over by many times, by many experiences. Past and present are ambiguous. The one seeing and the one seen are as two hands in a handshake, both experiencing at once touching and being touched.

Fleshy time can be *felt*. For a depressed person, the hours between 3 am and 4 am—'the dark night of the soul'—and 8 am and 9 am are not the same hour. When it's a time of grief, we wish it was a time *before* and not this time, or we wish to hurry forward to a time *after* this. When present and the future feel like too much to bear, it can be an hour of nontime, far removed from our normal grasp of time. Nothing seems predictable, and assumptions about affinities and continuities are in question. Sentences do not seem to slope into a future. We want to be able to discuss this, but there is no adequate grammar or theory.

AFTER AN UNEVEN SUCCESSION of time that never felt the same, shaped as it was by my mind, it's duration that I care about. An ancient water clock drips its water into a bowl—how much remains in the bowl is how much remains of what was allotted. I know where I stand. Henri Bergson said *la durée* ("duration") is

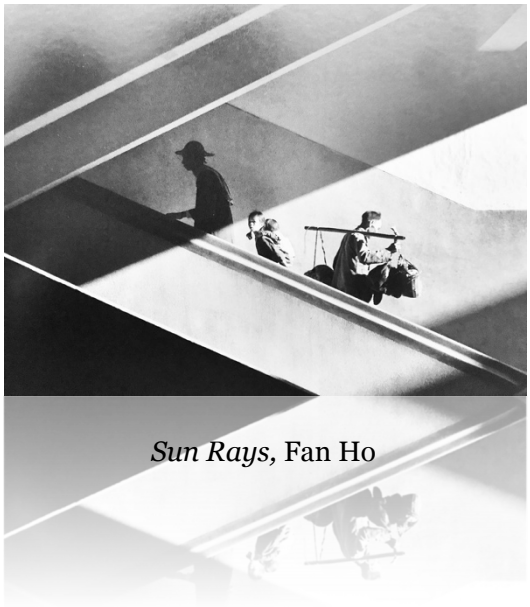
the second face of time. It is "lived time," the time of our inner subjective experience. Bergson observed that we don't pay much attention to *la durée* because objective time is far more useful. I don't find objective time, or incidental clock time, terribly useful anymore. I pay a great deal of attention to duration.

Time is carving me like a glacier carves its canyon. Underlying rocks, bearing the burden of ice that grows thicker with each year's snowfall, are slowly carried along, gouging and scratching; erratics are left behind and moraines pile up ahead. A whole geography is altered. Beneath, in the dark and cold, in the lost light, are populations of microbes. I have covered my distance slowly and felt every gouging as I settled into the rough and irregular particulars of my canyon. Look at a glacier and you will see a frozen past and a limited future. Everything taken in will eventually be released.

Vagaries of the Body

> "The spirit is willing, but the body has gone against it."
> — Diana Athill, *Somewhere Towards the End*

THERE ARE VAGARIES to being embodied in an aging body. It's the corporeal space I occupy. The body's awareness of itself begins to feel alien, as if an earlier version of itself is being deserted. Does it even represent me? I make an ontological claim: I am this embodied being.



Sun Rays, Fan Ho

This face has a history. Friends who have known it for decades might see younger versions of me, a composite image made up of fragmentary photographs taken over the course of our changing ages. Together, we have sailed far away from the shores of our younger selves, and far enough from

our middle age to finally agree we are 'old,' just not decrepit old. We keep a distance from unwanted futures (only a temporary refuge). We remind each other that surfaces do not reveal the entire inner being.

One day they will stop seeing the younger me, and I the younger them, and see the inevitable capitulation of a body at its defenseless end. Perhaps we will flinch. It's a natural struggle to accept any confusion between the body of others and our own. We will endeavor to reject the flinch, and yet it may be this disassociation of the person known and loved for years from a decrepit and probably diseased body that will help us care for each other. Robert Kastenbaum suggests it this way: "Death? See old age. Old age? See death." That's how death appears among the living.

At a favorite café with my aging friends, someone tells someone they are looking great. If they tell me that I have not really changed, they mean well (God forbid they should ever catch sight of my naked body). O, who brings scones and sits at my windows, tells me I have withstood the test of time, I am aging well. Is that a required test? Like tests given to cars and airplanes to determine if they are road and air worthy? What happens if I fail the test? Do I take it again? Cheese, wine, and cast-iron skillets improve with age, but simply to grow old, whatever the vagaries, is enough for me. I'll decline the test.

A barista at the cafe once commented on my good posture as if it was a surprise. Surely, she sees the surface of me as unlike herself, a calculus of difference that is neither surprising nor careless. In the ordinary continuum of embodiment, I was her once, a younger self. When I see the young ones, there are sensory memories (I have not lost these senses). I remind them of nothing (what memory of being old can they have?).

There is a story about Siddhartha before he was Buddha. He saw an old man for the first time and remarked to his charioteer, "It is the world's pity that weak and ignorant beings, drunk with the vanity of youth, do not behold old age!" Buddha recognized his own fate when he saw that old man. One day (I don't recall which day), I passed a storefront window and saw a stranger reflected.

Roger Angell, known more for writing about baseball than about being old, wrote a lovely essay at age ninety-two, "This Old Man." It begins: "Check me out." In economical paragraphs he presents his misaligned knuckles and fingers, twists and jogs in his spine, failing eyesight, pains from nerve damage, stents for a ragbag heart, and panoply of pills. He walks outdoors with a cane. His late wife implored him to "Stop brandishing!"

"Friends in great numbers now" invite him to dinner, the opera, a Yankees game, a wedding, or to "dine with their kids at the East Side Deli." They tell him, "How great you're looking! Wow, tell me your secret!" while a little balloon over their heads reads, "Holy shit—he's still vertical!" But Angell tells us it's generally okay. He recalls Casey Stengall saying, "Most of the people my age is dead. You could look it up." He hasn't "forgotten Keats or Dick Cheney or what's waiting for me at the dry cleaner's today." He has felt deep love and loss, and has outgrown most of his ambitions.

Roger wants us to know, "We elders have learned a thing or two, including invisibility. Getting old is the second-biggest surprise of my life, but the first, by a mile, is our unceasing need for deep attachment and intimate love."

CORAL BRACHO, a Mexican poet, watches her mother losing sensory memory on her descent into Alzheimer's disease (from Old French *desaise*: 'lack of ease'):

> The house revolves
> and each room is new
> when she enters. She knows
> —or pretends to know—that those rooms are hers, and that she's
> the hostess who must show them, again
> and again, so they can be shared, touched,
> and freshly forgotten: again
> and again.
> —translation by Forrest Gander

Many would feel as if Bracho is speaking for them. They are watching, or have watched, someone close in on themselves and disappear. Words get discarded

like scrapped tools. Questions once answered with ease go unanswered. The family dog keeps a distance. Each new day arrives at a border that moves back and forth; whole villages can go astray. The body's inner experience is a mystery, just this side of, and then beyond, the pale of personhood. "Will I end up like my father?" a friend asked me, aware of the ease with which we can disappear.

There is fear in the air over this gradual extermination of the person *as person*. Sometimes it comes disguised as nervous laughter about 'senior moments,' and as self-deprecating 'getting old sucks' jokes. There are more violent expressions: 'Take me on a long walk off a short pier!' or 'Just shoot me!' A grim prospect seems to deserve a grisly response. Other times, it's a dark reckoning: 'It's the worst thing that can happen to a person' or 'It's worse than death.' There is a supporting language of 'stealing,' 'robbing,' 'hijacking,' and 'husks.'

Witnessing a disappearance, we try not to flinch when they ask what they should do, or stare at an object in their hand as something they have forgotten how to use. We try to muster a counter-narrative to the negativity of 'victim' and 'sufferer.' We quietly look for information, question our genes, and worry about the ultimate control over our lives. Surely the fear experienced as the one left behind on the island of dementia, a lonely and hostile reality, is greater than our dread of it lying in wait.

The friend who watched her father disappear asked me, "What was I supposed to do? He and I were on two sides of an invisible boundary." There was nothing more to do than what you did, I told her. Maybe your father was simply floating somewhere above the earth, across a border between bodies.

I HAVE CROSSED THE FRONTIER from late-middle age to conspicuous onset old. The crossing began slowly and then picked up steam. I am an alert patroller of boundaries: old age, illness, disappearance, death.

Neural pathways are holding fast. I still know where the rooms are. Each day, I look forward to sitting at my sunny windows, rummaging through a life with a self-conscious remembering. The 'person in question' is still my person. I decide what to keep and what to discard, which parts of a personality to unravel. I place myself in my own narrative. Without losing track of my place, I expect one thing

will contract, and another expand. I will accept the contractions and enjoy the expansions. One day there might only be contraction. I might close in on myself like Bracho's mother and lose my place again and again each day. Such a possibility is in my cells, as the very matter of life itself.

I am an old skin. I assess and reassess what that signifies to others, and what it actually feels like, which are not the same thing. O tells me that we may be old meat suits, but our meat is still lovable. I ask her which part I should love most. Should I pick a favorite? Maybe one easily spotted, or maybe a part only I know of. Maybe it's the bones. What should I say to my bones? I will tell them there is no remedy for time, only release.

If the Stone Sinks

> "How many several ways has death to surprise us?"
> —Michel de Montaigne

THE BLACKFEET OF MONTANA speak of Old Man, who traveled the land arranging things. "He came from the south, traveling north, fixing up the world as we see it today." He made mountains and prairies, rivers and waterfalls, birds and animals. He went to a hilltop to look things over. It occurred to Old Man to make a woman and child.

Photo: Tom Litster

"You must be people," he said as he made them from clay and covered them over underground. After three days he uncovered his people and told them to rise and take the breath of life. "I am *Na' pi,* Old Man," he said. This is a story of beginning.

Old Man told his people to walk with him to the river. A newly created woman asked, “How will it be? Will we always live, will there be no end to it?”

Old Man answered, “I have not thought of that. We must decide.”

The woman said, “I will throw a stone into the river. If it floats, we will always live. If it sinks, people will die, that they may always be sorry for each other.” The stone sank, as stones do.

“There,” said Old Man, “you have chosen. There will be no end to the endings, only additions.” He offered his people made from clay simple terms: if you want to live, you have to die. The breath of life is also an exhalation, a leaving.

The people were alive but had no habits of living. There was no lost home to remember, no promised land to go toward. Nothing connected their beginning to an incomprehensible end. The people would need to fashion a story of themselves and acquire a sense of living. Old Man was not helpful.

And so the central problem of life remains: it will end. People will always be sorry for each other and talk among themselves about life and death.

WHEN DEATH OFFERED HIM A CROWN, Abraham of the Bible shouted, “I will not go with thee!” Christianity, following after Abraham, rebuked Old Man by offering to lift the stone. The end of living will no longer be dying, it can be life eternal. Inside a church you can hear voices joyously sing: “The redeemer has risen!” Outside the church, a sign: DEATH IS DEFEATED, VICTORY IS WON.

Freud, on the other hand, saw the bare underbelly of human: “It is not for us to confess that in our civilized attitude toward death we are once more living psychologically beyond our means.”

Modern biology muddied the waters and covered over the stone. The story of the beginning and end, of life and death, is a story of happenstance, catastrophe, good and bad fortune, and extinctions on shifting continents and in changing climates. We humans, currently the most abundant large animal, are an outcome of a struggle for life over billions of years. We and salamanders and leaves on a

tree will die in our struggle. Darwin assures us “death is generally prompt, and that the vigorous, the healthy, and the happy survive and multiply.”

Death can just as well be nearly impossible to face in its coarseness. If you have lived at all, you will have witnessed a coarse dying. It is seldom prompt.

Yet life can handle at lot. It’s hard to get rid of once it gets started. On terrestrial parts of the planet, it follows a gradient: less dense as heat rises and water becomes scarce. The Atacama is 40,000 square miles of Earth’s oldest desert. In some places it so devoid of life the microbe-per-inch count is similar to hospital surgical suites—yet there is life.

William James was the pragmatist’s philosopher. He entertained new ideas, frequently lonely and even gloomy ones, as his body endured afflictions. Death, he decided, was “the worm at the core” of our pretensions to be happy. Asked if life was worth living, he said maybe—it depends on the liver. But he reminds us we don’t have a clue about how other people experience the meaning of their lives. Albert Camus, on the same basic question: “Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy. All the rest comes afterwards.”

Blaise Pascal insisted we do not really like to think about ourselves, we “cannot stay quietly in our own chamber.” We especially do not like to sit with our mortality, which is “so miserable that nothing can comfort us when we think of it closely.” We welcome distractions. We set goals, regard our experiences as meaningful, and find ways of putting off self-consciousness of our death.

Jean Paul Sartre recognized that we, like Old Man’s people of clay, are condemned to live freely and fashion ourselves—"sculpt our own statue”— and then die. “It is absurd that we are born; it is absurd that we die.” Nevertheless, proper attention should be paid to the inevitability of death, but not too much attention. Death is not an essential source of meaning. It is the Other who wants us to think it is. It becomes something in *their* life, not in *our* experience.

Simone de Beauvoir was Sartre’s semi-detached lover and intellectual companion. She watched the coarseness of his decline over ten years: memory lapses, food hanging around his mouth, a damp patch left on the chair after he

rose, lying blind drunk on the carpet. "I wanted to help you die cheerfully—I thought that was what you wanted," she wrote as she lived on another six years in her apartment and drank the whiskey she once drank with Sartre, and kept writing. "His death does not separate us. My death will not bring us together again. That is how things are. It is in itself splendid that we were able to live our lives in harmony for so long."

My mother lasted into her 90s. She saw no real design in living to such an age. All of her siblings, her old friends, the men in the glee club she accompanied on piano, were gone. She had accumulated a directory of the dead. In her last years she asked me why she was still living, as if I could possibly answer a question turned back on itself. In her last weeks she made a request: would I deliver a eulogy at her memorial service?

It was a gathering of Others intended to give objective meaning to her life and death. In her way of being in the world such a memorial was part of a process for conveying souls from heaven to earth and back again to heaven. Ceasing to be is no more tragic than closing a book and leaving it behind for others. On that day it was my task to tell a story that would belong to those hearing it and propel this one dead woman onward among the living. I did not say much of what I knew of my mother's subjective life, the life that belonged to her, not to them. I was commended for my excellent eulogy.

THERE WAS A WEEK OF GRIEF at the café where O and I circle a table with our aging friends. Caroline, a music teacher for whom Christmas was more about Handel than Christ, beat cancer once but not twice. "Well, I aced *that* test," she told us after the second diagnosis. The one at our table who is the longest in tooth, and has fondness for saying old saws, remarked that Caroline's departure was something unexpected. I told him there are no unexpected deaths at our age. If nothing else, we'll die of exhaustion. I and each of my aging friends have a directory of the dead. Soon enough I will be added to someone's directory.

So I come now to my own dying.

I consider Phillip Larkin, who started to say "A quarter of a century" / Or "thirty years back" about his life. He wants us to know he has come to terms with what happens next:

> "All that's left to happen
> Is some deaths (my own included).
> Their order, and their manner,
> Remain to be learnt."

We must learn to die.

That is all of life.

I try to imagine the manner.

A straightforward manner—befitting literature or theater—might be: "As we were. As we are no longer. As we will one day not be at all." (Joan Didion coming to terms with her husband slumping forward in his chair with a single-malt Scotch in his hand.) It could happen—and I hope it will—in the choreography of shadows and sunlight of my apartment of twenty-five years. The wheels have already slowed down and moved to the side of the road. An ordinary instant on an ordinary day—'it just came out the blue.' A sudden clutching then motionless. Permanent temporal rupture.

In that instant I might try to straighten out in my mind what happened, and what could happen next, or think of something that will be found that I did not want found (a foolish thought among many about death).

Or an early autumn evening. From front room windows I see signs of life in every direction, other windows full of light. A young woman moves from a kitchen window to a living room window carrying a plate of food. A middle-aged couple is seated in front of a television screen half the size of a wall—it broadcasts pictures without sound to anyone walking by their window. A cyclist passes by in the street, highlighted by small lights fore and aft, and a dog on an evening walk leads its human along the sidewalk. A tree still holding onto leaves is illuminated by a

streetlight. It arranges a choreography of light and shadow on the pavement, kept in motion by a breeze. I sit down to dinner, and then gone.

Outside my window, lights and shadows come apart and go astray. I was what held them together.

Not infrequently I fall asleep with a fleeting premonition that I will wake up cold and unable to move. Outside my windows the neighborhood is waking up. Dog walkers pass by—maybe the young woman with the English Mastiff I have watched grow from a puppy and must surely outweigh her now (she is usually one of the first out in the morning). The skinny guy who always wears a beanie cap comes outside with a coffee cup and a cigarette as cars begin pulling away from curbs. A garbage truck grabs blue bins, raises them overhead with mechanical arms, and noisily empties the contents (why not on garbage day?). No one will call the ambulance to come swiftly. My body will have to wait, but I will not be waiting. The grammar of me will have changed. “He is dead” is an odd syntax for one who no longer is.

Unremarkable circumstances in which the unthinkable occurs.

Rainer Maria Rilke watched a gondola float through foggy Venice. The barcaiolo called out to be granted passage at a corner of a canal and “received no answer, like in the face of death,” Rilke wrote in a letter. “And the bells that I had heard in my room only moments before (my room where I have lived a whole life, where I was born and where I am preparing to die) seemed so clear to me; those same bells dragged their sounds like rags behind them over the swirling waters only to meet again without any recognition.”

Of course it might be nothing like bells fading away in a fog. It could be the kind of dying my neighbor who has lived thirty years of her life in the flat across the hall is having. Her metastatic cancer each day builds on the day before. The vagaries of the body have become an inner conflict between cells: some nourish the killers and others rush out to defeat them.

In this long-ripening dying there is a turning point. I am spirited away to an underworld of machines and tubes and mechanical beds with guardrails. The pieces are coming apart. A tube, a wire, or a fluid is fitted to each part, but there

is nothing to put them all back together. A few loved ones wearing the prescribed open gowns surround my bed and rest a hand on the guardrail. Before entering the room, they told each other to try not to be shocked. I am half dead now, but they wonder which half is which. They trust that a guardian in this underworld will appear to unveil any remaining mysteries.

He appears in a long white coat with a name tag worn over dark pants, as unmistakable as an angel's robe. He has already scrutinized me down to my constituent parts.

He speaks, "Let me prepare you for what might happen."

The ones gathered answer, "We have his directive. We know what to do."

Until now, nothing in life had really prepared any of us for leaving it.

The medicalized death is unnatural, seldom prompt, and usually more humiliating than it needs to be. In this realm apart, mine will stand out from the others as mine only because it compels me to endure it.

Whatever the manner, death will one day remove me and take me away. I will cease to exist, a simple fact. My death will be important in front of others. They will lay a kind of claim to it because it serves a purpose: if I somehow live on, so do they. They will remember and recite what seems most striking about what they thought happened within their observation. There will be a few details someone especially wants to tell. I hope it will all fold nicely into what the old Romans would say on the occasion of a death, "Such a one has lived."

Someone might want to offer a lesson. I should have protected myself from it—it was a preventable death—such a waste of remaining good years. Perhaps they wanted a bit more raging against the dying of the light. What nonsense is this? A life is not wasted because it cannot be kept. Death is not preventable. The manner of dying, and the exact moment, can possibly be altered but what difference does it make what kind of snake it is, or when it strikes. It's a difference to them, not to me. I owe no further explanations.

Unlike Quetzalcoatl departing in great sorrow, I will not burn my dwellings and bury my treasure. I have the documents in order: the advance directive to avoid heroic interventions and a simple will with a letter of instructions regarding certain possessions and the disposition of my corpse. There is a special spot in my apartment where I keep these papers, along with whatever pages of writing I would like to fall into someone's hands who might share them with a few others.

O, my dear friend who brings the scones and sits with me at my sunny windows, knows the spot and will see to the details and directions. She will go through my apartment doing the important work of depersonalizing.

For now, my life is in a balance between relative health and relative absence of sickness. On most days, I avoid a self-consciousness of what's left to happen. I distract myself, maybe a little less now. On a few days I try to prepare. I try to cut loose from any fixed ideas about illness and death, about probability and luck and good fortune, about temperament and situation—all the ways in which people do not deal with the central problem of life: it will end.

Rilke heard the barcaiolo through the fog. I imagine sitting on a low rock next to a stream, watching for a salmon tired from swimming upstream. It will swim past branches broken off in a storm and past the plastic bottles and colored bits of whatever has been thrown in, and ease into an eddy where leaves circle slowly on the surface. From there, the salmon can see the river with a clearer eye. In the shallow water, swimming close to stones on the bottom, it goes on to where it's going—toward its past as a small fry, and toward its end. I would be happy among salmon, leaping for low-flying insects. A moment of pure presentness.

HE WAS TERRIBLY ILL. John Keats asked, "Is there another life? Shall I awake and find all this a dream? There must be, we cannot be created for this sort of suffering." He was dead from tuberculosis at the age of 25.

The dreaming part of a brain does not align itself with the waking part that commends itself for carefully considering the likely outcomes. If life is a dream and our future doom is to awake, it is probably best we leave as much as possible

to the stuff of dreams. Next to dying, dreaming is the most human of the things. We dream alone. As mortality accumulates, we can be left very alone.

> "Like a shipwreck, we die going into ourselves,
> as though we drowned in the depths of our hearts,
> as though we lived falling from skin into soul."
>
> —Pablo Neruda, "Death Alone"