

# *Personal Essays.*

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## **McSweeney & Antman's Ultimate Update**

I'm extremely gratified to report that, as of August 1st, I've joined FCStone Group (NASDAQ: FCSX), [www.fcstone.com](http://www.fcstone.com), as Vice President, Marketing Communications, after more than 20 months of serving the firm as a marketing consultant. It's a great company and a great job, and I couldn't be more pleased.

As a result, this sixteenth edition of McSweeney & Antman's Occasional Update will also be the last. I'll continue to be reachable at [michael@mcsweeneyantman.com](mailto:michael@mcsweeneyantman.com), at my FCStone e-mail address, [michael.antman@fcstone.com](mailto:michael.antman@fcstone.com), or by phone at 847-636-2715.

I will keep my business website, [www.mcsweeneyantman.com](http://www.mcsweeneyantman.com), active so that I can continue to post occasional articles on marketing topics. This and all previous issues of my newsletter, along with my other articles on marketing, also will continue to be available on the site.

Because I've been in the marketing communications business for more than thirty years, I thought I'd use this final newsletter as an opportunity to be a little self-indulgent (or maybe a lot self-indulgent) and take a personal look back at some fun moments from my career.

Marketing tools and techniques? Client conflicts? Lessons learned? Eh, those can wait for another time.

What I want to focus on instead is one of the wonderful side benefits of the marketing communications business – the opportunity it provides for learning about other businesses and ways of life to which I otherwise never would have been exposed.

Over the years, I've learned, through client projects, about such varied human pursuits as hurricane chasing; professional softball; liquor distribution; vitamin manufacturing; construction management, sausage making; management consulting; milk production; insurance underwriting; personal-injury law; asset-based financing; aircraft leasing; seafood importing; lingerie sales; Catholic healthcare; data warehousing; debt collection; mass commercial printing; climatology; chaos theory; health insurance; tire manufacturing; emergency call-center management; futures and options trading; equities trading; CAD-CAM (computer-aided design and manufacture); Rice Krispie manufacturing; and laser-aided manufacturing.

I've set up and staffed focus groups for health-insurance salespeople in California, liquor-store and bar owners in Chicago, human resources executives in Chicago, reference librarians in New York, cardiologists in Toronto, and day traders in Las Vegas.

I've interviewed hedge fund managers, currency traders, options traders, bankers, insurance executives, mortgage traders, and a host of executives in various other industries.

I've toured a storied old hospital in Greenwich Village where over the years survivors of the Titanic and 9/11 were treated; an emergency medical call center near Denver while an operator was attempting to direct police to a woman who had just attempted suicide; and a tree nursery, a house on stilts, a church rectory, and several other homes and businesses from New Orleans to Slidell, Louisiana to Dauphin Island, Alabama that had recently been devastated by Hurricane Elena.

I visited fishing-tackle manufacturers across the Midwest, and thirty or so English-language schools in Iwata, Kurashiki, Fukuyama, Kobe, Fukuoka, Tokyo, Nagoya, Osaka, and various other cities throughout Japan; participated as emcee in a Shinkansen (bullet train) recruitment tour of job fairs in Western Japan; toured liquor warehouses, credit-card printing plants, hospitals, pharmaceutical firms, water-treatment facilities, church offices, debt-collection agencies, laser-guided electronics fabricators and a baseball museum; and adopted a kitten I found on Elvis Presley's grave while in Memphis, Tennessee to conduct a hedging seminar.

I "themed," planned, and marketed symposia in Toronto, Paris, Louisville, Ky., and Chicago; gave tours of the floor of the Chicago Board of Trade; and wrote magazine articles, annual reports, and speeches.

I met (at separate client events) two of the three members of the original Apollo moon mission, Neil Armstrong and Michael Collins; got a batting lesson from Johnny Bench; and worked with dozens of talented actors, newscasters, journalists, photographers, directors, film and video producers, musicians, writers, academics, and illustrators, not to mention one of my childhood idols, the radio pioneer Ken Nordine.

While working in Japan, I recorded English-language instruction tapes and CDs, albeit not in a voice like Ken Nordine's; wrote children's textbook materials; conducted cross-cultural training classes; taught English to schoolchildren and "salarymen"; and researched public relations firms in Tokyo.

I attended a convention of carwash owners and operators in Disney World; a trade show for toy makers and marketers of children's furniture in Atlanta; the National Restaurant Association show in Chicago; the National Association of Television Programming Executives annual meeting in New York; the All-Candy Expo in Chicago; Futures Industry Association meetings in Boca Raton; and various other trade shows, seminars, and conventions.

I scouted or worked on film and video productions and still-photography shoots in a housing project in Poughkeepsie, New York; on a bridge above the Charles River in Boston; in an S&L off Rodeo Drive in Los Angeles; on a large cattle operation in the Midwest; in a fashion-design house in Amsterdam, the Netherlands; outside of Okayama Castle in western Japan; in a huge printing press outside of Paris; in a gigantic tire factory in Monterrey, Mexico; in a shopping mall in Mexico City; on a bridge in La Defense, just outside of Paris; in a trailer home in the Florida panhandle; in the World Trade Center; on the roof of a barn in a horse farm just outside of Lisbon, Portugal; and in a sausage factory, also outside of Lisbon (the horse farm and the sausage factory were two separate businesses!)

I worked on a “same-as-live” video production backstage at a convention hall in El Paso, Texas that wrapped just seconds before the curtains were raised and the star of our production was due to step forward to the podium and deliver an address to an audience of hundreds of investors.

I spent many hours in editing suites, at auditions, and in screening rooms, where I felt shut away from the world, and loved it.

I enjoyed, most often while traveling with video crews, red snapper Veracruzana in Juarez, Mexico to the accompaniment of a mariachi band; a bottle of vinho verde (“green wine”) and a soft white cheese with a wonderfully subtle flavor eaten with a tiny spoon in Sintra, Portugal; the barbecue at the little joints I visited with a video crew in the South; the mounds of steak tartare at a Farm Bureau convention in Wisconsin; the rijsttafel – the traditional Indonesian meal featuring a dozen or more different dishes – in Amsterdam...

...Durgin Park and Legal Seafoods in Boston; a little Italian restaurant in south Philadelphia; the oyster po boys I had at a roadside stand while researching a film project in Mississippi; crawfish and etoufee in New Orleans; the sno-cones sold at a colorful, ramshackle stand called “None in Hell” on Dauphin Island, Alabama; the hazelnut-and-chocolate crepe I ate at another tiny stand in Paris while hiding out from a rainstorm after a symposium; the oyster soup in Mexico City; and katsudon, robatayaki cuisine, tempura, bento boxes, and pretty much everything else I tried while traveling around Japan – the only exception, in that country, being the raw horseflesh someone offered me once...

...and, most of all, I enjoyed two food items that introduced me, after a childhood of cereal and burgers and a young adulthood of dorm food, to the possibilities of cuisine: The pressed duck at an old Chinese restaurant called Yee Wall, across the street from the Chicago Board of Trade, where I had my first professional position; and the roasted giant shrimp wrapped around a piece of sugar cane I ate in a Vietnamese restaurant in Georgetown, on my first business trip ever, to Washington, D.C.

I wrote a story for a textbook about a monkey who worked in a hotel in Bangkok; worked on a photo shoot with a real live Capuchin monkey; and, in a somewhat-related story, was the subject of many photo shoots for magazine ads on behalf of the language school where I worked in Japan...

...and I also worked on a photo shoot for children’s furniture featuring my daughter as one of my models, the first and only time in my career I’ve committed an act of nepotism...

...and I was planning a photo shoot with a colleague in a restaurant in River North when I brought up a photographer who specialized in surrealistic montages, but my colleague said, “forget it. The guy’s a real loner, he never leaves his studio, and he’s impossible to track down.” Just at that moment, we both happened to glance up for some inexplicable reason, and we saw, behind the window of an office building across a very broad street, the pale and ghostly face of the photographer staring intently at us, as if he’d been listening to our conversation – and determined to prove just how surreal he was.

I served as the subject of an Associated Press article on the strange terminology used in the futures industry (the main focus of the article being all of the dumb mistakes I made when I first started at the Chicago Board of Trade; for example, on my second day of work, after spending the first day learning abstruse terminology like “blowing out the shorts” and “reverse crush spread” and “the bulls are covering,” a secretary rushed in and said, “there’s a bomb in the soybean pit!” and I said, “does that mean prices are going up?” and she said, “no, that means there’s a bomb in the soybean pit! You know, ‘boom,’ a bomb!”)...

...and, incidentally, I managed to intuit at the same time that “evacuate the building immediately!” does NOT mean “wet weather in the Midwest is likely to put downward pressure on corn futures.”

I worked on many video productions and live teleconferences from the floor of the Chicago Mercantile Exchange during and after trading hours, back in the day when the trading floors were deafening, crowded, and chaotic (on one occasion, a cleaning crew had helpfully swept up the thousands of pounds of trading tickets and other detritus left at the end of each day of trading, and we had to re-empty the bags all over the floor in order to preserve the scene’s authenticity for a mock trading session we were about to film).

Along with my partners at the time, I rode the ups and downs of the dot-com boom and bust, and (years earlier) worked with a movie producer on a television pilot only to discover after the pilot was completed and being marketed that he was a notorious con man.

I wrote a bi-weekly column for a Japanese business magazine; served as a stand-in and bystander in countless photo shoots and video productions; did live radio reports and weekly radio wrap-ups on the markets; and recorded a number of scratch tracks and the fast-talking disclaimers at the end of a couple of radio commercials (at one point I had an ambition to become a voice-over artist, but lacking acting skills, I discovered that talking really, really fast was my only skill).

I had countless taxi-related adventures and misadventures, such as the time I took over for an elderly taxi driver who kept on skidding off the road while trying to drive my partners and me during an ice storm in Carmel, Indiana, and so I drove him to his next destination, the Indianapolis airport, so he could wait out the storm (and yes, I paid the fare and gave him a nice tip).

And then there was the time, more than thirty years ago, on my second business trip ever, when I ran out of cash (this was before ATMs were in common use), and in order to get to the Boston airport, I had to pay the driver with a loaf of Boston brown bread and tip him with a can of baked beans, which he gladly accepted, probably so he could tell the story to his buddies.

I attended seminars and classes on futures trading, speechwriting, teaching English as a second language, graphic design, annual report design, accounting, search engine optimization, and many other topics; and trade shows for the futures industry, options industry, grain-farming industry, and restaurant business; and countless after-work networking events.

I taught classes on public relations and advertising; teaching techniques; presentation skills; and Japanese culture, Japanese business culture, and basic Japanese language; and trained dozens or hundreds of interns and young associates in copywriting, time-recording and client management.

I staffed an interview with the legendary industrialist Soichiro Honda, founder of Honda Motors; conducted a photo shoot with actor John Mahoney; wrote scripts for the late Louis Rukeyser, actor Robert Guillaume, and irascible CNN anchor Lou Dobbs; and took other CNN anchors and reporters to Chicago's Second City and White Sox Park.

I learned to deal with crazy deadlines, like the time I was sleeping late in a hotel near the San Jose airport after a two-day focus group when the phone rang at 9:15 a.m. I growled into the receiver, "my wake-up call was for 9:30," and slammed the phone down. Two minutes later, it rang again, and I discovered that the caller was one of my favorite clients. Oops. He said, "have you finished the testimony yet?" I had no idea what he was talking about. Gradually, we figured out that more than a week earlier, he had told one of my partners, who had subsequently neglected to inform me, that I needed to write some testimony that the CEO of the organization was scheduled to deliver before Congress the very next day, so...

...I told my client that I was headed for the airport, but if he could very quickly fax me some background information, I could write the presentation longhand on the airplane. By the time we were done talking and I had hurriedly showered and dressed, the shuttle bus was about to leave for the airport. I couldn't miss my flight because I had an urgent meeting in Chicago, but the fax was taking forever to come through, so...

...I hopped up and down at the hotel's front desk, literally willing the fax to arrive and then, as it did, practically pulling the long sheet from the machine (back then, faxes came out in one uninterrupted sheet, like paper towels.) The shuttle driver was honking the horn, and the other passengers were getting upset, so I eventually ripped the half-transmitted sheet from the fax machine and ran to the shuttle with the long strip of paper fluttering behind me, and still more pages, never to be read, inching out of the machine behind me; I finished the testimony later that same evening.

And indeed, I spent many hours writing on airplanes and in the back of taxis, and countless late nights at the office as well, writing and rewriting scripts and marketing audits and videotape scripts and ad copy and brochures and presentations and new-business proposals.

And I bought a "silk" tie from a Manhattan street vendor five minutes before a major client presentation, and a pair of shoes just before a big interview because I realized that my current pair was scuffed beyond repair.

And I chased a UPS truck down an icy, wind-whipped street at 10:00 one night during a nasty winter storm to make sure a package was delivered the following morning.

And I once bowed out of a late dinner at the Palm with a famous television personality and my client when, over post-dinner drinks, the personality casually mentioned that the script I had written needed to be in all caps for his Teleprompter, forcing me to race back to the office and work until 3:30 a.m. retyping every word.

And on vacation with my wife, Susan, in Paris, we went out one evening to a nice restaurant, ate too much food and drank too much wine, and walked very slowly back to our tiny hotel on the Left Bank at around midnight. As soon as we walked in, the desk clerk, very agitated, said, "Mr. Antman, you have an emergency at your office." This, of course, was in the days before cellphones...

...so I staggered up the old wooden staircase to our minuscule dormer room with too much bearnaise sauce and Burgundy sloshing around in my belly, and called Chicago while my wife got ready for bed. It was just before 5:00 p.m. in Chicago, but my then-boss, and later partner, wasn't at his desk, so I had to wait another 45 minutes, perched uncomfortably and dyspeptically at the edge of my bed, until he returned my call...

...to learn that the emergency, in his words, was, "Just wanted to make sure that you thought of a good title for that brochure you're writing - maybe you can think of something on the plane ride back." Incidentally, the brochure copy was due two or three days after my return. I thought of some things on the plane ride back, but a brochure title wasn't one of them.

And I died a thousand deaths when the President of the New Orleans Commodity Exchange, reading a speech I'd written for him - and, indeed, the very first speech I had written in my career - stopped in the middle of his talk because a page was missing, though he improvised the missing section and later acknowledged that he had dropped the pages in his hotel room and lost one page under his bed.

And, more than anything else, I spent countless hours in offices in Chicago and New York, working on client projects that aren't the subject of quirky anecdotes or funny memories, since one's own office is quite possibly the least quirky location on the planet...

...But nonetheless form the core of my career, because it was during those times in front of a typewriter, and then a "dedicated word processor" and, eventually, a computer, that I was making mistakes and learning from them, and writing draft after draft of client projects...

...and reviewing hundreds of takes from photo sessions, and reading background materials, and doing research, and reviewing resumes, and polishing scripts, and editing press releases, and looking at tapes, and evaluating metrics...

...and figuring out what works and what doesn't in marketing communications, and learning how to deal with difficult colleagues and clients, and learning how not to be difficult myself, and figuring out how to defeat procrastination and writers block, and how to deliver projects on time and on budget, and, in short, developing the skills I hadn't learned in college (where I'd majored in 19th and 20th Century American and British literature and minored in goofing off, playing touch football and Frisbee, and, oh, you get the idea)...

...and indeed, developing those skills, and continuing to actively apply them and to witness the positive results they bring to clients, and learning and applying new technologies and new marketing techniques from SEO to social media marketing to webinars, to working with wonderful colleagues and friends then and now, are the best thing of all about this career I have chosen.

## **My Father, In The Days Before His Death**

As everyone knows and fears, our final days resemble our first, in their helplessness, in their inadvertent comedy, and in their nearness to an unknowable existence. I am reminded of these patiently waiting realities every time I visit my father, now 95 years old, at the nursing home, and slowly convey to his mouth quarter-teaspoons of pureed rye bread, carrots, ham, and vanilla pudding.

Taste and touch are his only remaining senses. He has been deaf, or close to it, for about five years now. And he has lost nearly all his sight due to an untreatable form of macular degeneration and the residual damage caused by an accidental splash of acid at the factory where he labored most of his adult life. This happened when his first child, my older sister, was a toddler, and I am told that he cried in the hospital, thinking that he would never again be able to see her. Interestingly, the first sign of dementia that he displayed, a few years back, was his sudden and puzzling inability to remember or recognize her.

From what I have been able to surmise, his sense of smell is gone, too. As a result, his sense of taste is blunted, but he nonetheless wrinkles his nose when I (or to be more accurate, the aides at the nursing home, since I rarely feed him myself) give him something he doesn't like, such as pureed peas.

If I were to define my father solely in terms of his relationship with food, I could nevertheless draw a fairly accurate portrait of his life. As a child in Europe, he and his siblings survived, in part, by stealing fruit and bolting down raw potatoes right out of the ground. He mimed for me, once, the way he'd brush the dirt off the potato before crunching into it.

He expressed for me his feelings about escaping to this country as a teenager in terms of the puzzlement and joy he felt at America's bounty, even in the depths of the Depression. At his first meal in an American café, he recounted, he was served a half of a canned peach in syrup and thought how strange it was that in this country people ate raw eggs with a spoon. He also was served his first ham and cheese sandwich at that meal, and remembered it fondly for decades thereafter.

In his early twenties, he took an extended trip to Latin America after a failed romance with an artist's model (he was a lifelong and highly accomplished Sunday painter of Impressionist-style landscapes, portraits, and nudes.) While in southern Mexico, he contracted dysentery, and forever after hated Mexican food because he associated it with his illness. Nonetheless, in later years, when my sister and brother and I were arguing about where to go for dinner, and "Mexican" won out as it often did, he would shrug in his usual diffident way, and take us there, and eat the food himself. Needless to say, it wasn't until we were much older that we realized that he'd been doing so solely for us.

We didn't go out to eat very often, and sometimes missed meals entirely, for complicated reasons. It is sufficient to say that, on the frequent occasions when there was a gap in our meals, my father often stepped in after work and made us chicken soup that was dense with egg noodles, or thick hamburgers, or skirt steaks, or brought home sacks of Chicago-style hot dogs and Italian beef sandwiches.

When he finally retired from the hellacious aluminum smelting factory where he worked, he painted every day, and made himself modest dinners, almost always accompanied by coffee and raisin bread, which he loved. The day we decided to put him in a nursing home was the day he put some raisin bread in the oven, forgot about it, and started a small fire that filled the entire floor of his apartment building with smoke.

Up until about two years before he went into the nursing home, he shopped on his own, walking slowly up the steep stairs to his apartment with his few small bags of groceries. He'd had a temporary paralytic condition called Guillain Barre Syndrome in his late seventies, and the shopping was good therapy for his leg muscles. But near the end, when it got to be too much for him, I would take him to the supermarket, and get far more frustrated with his slowness than he ever did with mine, back when I was a toddler.

Now, his days revolve around his beyond-bland meals, sleep, and visits from my sister and me. A couple of years ago, when his dementia was medium-bad, he was given to making florid statements after a meal. One time, he announced to the entire dining room, "Thank you all for this wonderful banquet. I can assure you all that I don't deserve it." Another time, he declared, "All of this food is so aristocratic. They must have a kingly chef here. Even the water tastes aristocratic!" It isn't hard to imagine that these statements were a remnant of his raw-potato past.

These days, he is mostly silent. Today at noon I will visit him for Father's Day, and thank him for those meals he cooked at home, and the Mexican meals he consumed without protest, and the way in which, through all the obstacles of an anti-Semitic Europe, and a global Depression, and a terrible marriage, and a miserable job in a factory, he still managed to give my brother and sister and me a life that was better than his.

At today's visit, he'll eat as an infant eats, and will not understand our Father's Day wishes, but I would like to imagine that the pureed ham will stir a distant memory of that first American feast, when he was happy, and on the brink of a new existence.

## Nighthawks

The poverty-stricken urban malcontent Marcovaldo, in Italo Calvino's suite of stories, Marcovaldo, or The Seasons in the City, "possessed an eye ill-suited to city life: billboards, traffic-lights, shop-windows, neon signs, posters, no matter how carefully devised to catch the attention, never arrested his gaze... Instead, he would never miss a leaf yellowing on a branch, a feather trapped by a roof-tile; there was no horsefly on a horse's back, no worm-home in a plank, or fig-peel squashed on the sidewalk that Marcovaldo didn't remark and ponder over, discovering the changes of season, the yearnings of his heart, and the woes of his existence." Though I myself love illuminated signs and the urban energy behind them, I have a certain sympathy for that Italian dreamer, even though Calvino's descriptions of him are tinged with mockery. I often find my gaze drifting below the clubs and shops of the city, to whatever can be discovered buzzing or scampering in the scraps of un-mowed green between the buildings, and above, to the sky that streams all day and night above us like an unpopular movie with muttered dialogue and a mystifying plot that no one is bothering to watch. But the other night, I heard and saw something up there on that immense screen, above the rusting railroad trestles and impassive brick buildings, that brought me instantaneously back to my own story's beginning.

It was one of those warm and windy early evenings after a rain, when an occasional gust tosses a few already-fallen raindrops sideways at your face. I'd had a late-afternoon meeting in the city and was standing on a platform waiting for a train back to the suburbs when I happened to look up at the still-disgruntled clouds and the sky that was brightening even as it was darkening. A few nighthawks were wheeling around the sky in that peculiar flittering flight they have, where they float around aimlessly in the air for a moment, then veer off with stunning speed. As they flickered through the dusk, they emitted their distinctive sweet and sharp cries – a kind of "pweet," like the sound you can make by sucking air in hard through barely opened lips and tightly clenched jaws.

But that's not quite it; the sound is so clean and sharp that it sounds almost electronic – like a digitally recorded version of itself.

They make another sound that's even weirder. During courtship displays, the males dive headfirst toward the pavement and, when only a second or two away from smashing into the cement, extend their wings to stop instantaneously, whereupon they soar back up into the sky. This sudden stop makes the air vibrate against their wingtips, producing a loud thrumming sound vastly out of proportion to their size.

When I was a little boy, lying awake at night in the summer on my sweaty sheetless bed, I would hear this sound ten or fifteen times every night, and not know what it was. In fact, for those who have never heard it, the easiest way to describe it is to say that, for much of my childhood, I surmised that what I was hearing was the telephone lines and power lines in the alley outside my window being plucked, like the strings of an immense cello, by some mysterious force. Of course, these wires were far too slack and heavy to be plucked at all, but I was too young to understand this, or to develop a better hypothesis.

Once in a while, after one of the booming thrums, I'd overcome my drowsiness and dash to the window to investigate, but it was hopeless: the mysterious sound marked the end of the event, not the beginning. There would have been no way to associate it with these little birds that, at rest, had the size and coloration of a tossed-away glove.

It wasn't until I was much older that I figured out the source of this mysterious sound, but by then, air conditioning had closed all my windows at the very time of year the birds were most active, and so the thrumming went unheard. As the years passed and I moved to the suburbs and began driving everywhere, I no longer even saw the nighthawks – in the part of the country where I live, they apparently prefer the flat roofs of city apartments.

So the other night, standing on a train platform on a rare early evening in the city when I wasn't hermetically sealed in an office or car or restaurant, was the first time I had seen nighthawks in many years. And it struck me at that moment that, because I was born in April, and because nighthawks begin putting on their courtship displays in the spring, that some of my very earliest memories as a newborn must have been of their twin strange sounds.

And I suddenly wondered if in my early infancy, and at some primitive and pre-verbal level, I had associated this warm thrumming sound with the booming and blooming of blood in the womb.

The "pweets" were another matter, because they were too alien to associate, at any level, with anything. By the time I was old enough to understand that they issued from the sky, I was like a little Marcovaldo myself, looking for fleeting natural consolations in an ugly actual world. Hearing those alien cries cutting through the muffled sounds of television and adult argument in our crumbling railroad apartment, I think that I must have thought of them as signals from a more-advanced race.

## Poetry, patience, and rage

I discovered a magazine review of one of my poems for the first time this week, nearly twenty years after the review was published. It was like coming across a \$10 bill crumpled up in the pocket of some long-ago thrift-store corduroys that had not only been forgotten, but had slipped to the bottom of the closet and been buried under sedimentary layers of old sweaters and worn-out shoes. What happened between the review's appearance and my discovery of it is a small story of failure, rage, and acceptance.

Two or three decades ago, I had no idea that becoming a poet was in some ways no different than becoming, for example, a marketing executive: To be successful, one had to build a career, and to build a career, one had to be a "careerist," something that involved infinitely more effort than merely studying the great poets, composing good poems, sending out manuscripts, and waiting for the inevitable recognition. That, unfortunately, and lacking a mentor to tell me otherwise, was the tack I took. I floated my poems out there like little paper boats, and most of them came drifting back to me on the next incoming tide.

What I'd needed, if I'd really wanted to establish a name for myself, was an armada of influential friends and fellow poets, and perhaps an MFA from Iowa State. But I was too prideful, and too dumb and stubborn, to take that route.

But when three of my very smallest and least ambitious poems (haiku, as it happens, among the most delicate of poetic crafts) were published in a literary magazine back in the mid-eighties, I was inordinately pleased. I vividly remember going out to a bar called Four Farthings that evening with my friend Julie, and in an ostentatiously ironic display of faux exuberance that concealed my actual exuberance, of which I felt a bit ashamed, I offered to buy drinks for everyone in the bar.

Everyone accepted.

The magazine paid one dollar a line, and the drinks cost me around \$50. A haiku, of course, is three lines long, but the \$41 deficit was well worth it for the loopy stupidity of the moment, and for the success, however pointless and sophomoric, of my misdirection: My temporary friends in the bar thought I was mocking the triviality of my accomplishment, whereas in fact I was loudly but secretly celebrating it.

The truth, as Julie alone understood, was that this rare publication meant more to me at the time than all of the rewards, and awards, my advertising and public relations career were gradually beginning to accrue.

A couple of years after this, an editor sent me a letter and a contract requesting my permission to reprint one of the three haiku in an anthology. "Payment" would be two copies of the anthology. I signed the contract with a flourish, and returned it the same day.

Well over a year went by, and I hadn't heard a word about the anthology, so I sent the editor a brief and neutrally worded letter of inquiry, along the lines of "Just wondering when..." I was busy enough in my non-poetic career at this point that I barely had time to dash off this note, and yet unsuccessful enough in my poetic non-career that I was anxiously awaiting those two gratis copies.

A short time later, the editor sent me a postcard that read, in its entirety: "Still in process. Patience is a virtue."

Would it be possible to describe the rage, the fury, the sense of thunderous injustice, I felt at this editor's condescending reply? Was I being impatient? Of course not! I had waited patiently a year without hearing, or asking for, another word about the book!

So why did this schoolmarmish remonstrance upset me so much? Because (though needless to say I didn't understand this until many years after receiving the card), few things anger us more than when we think we've carefully hidden an emotion that is shameful to us, and someone else nonetheless casually and devastatingly points it out.

This editor halfway across the country had struck to the heart of the matter: I was, in fact, deeply impatient, and not only about this minor anthology, but about the whole hopeless project of becoming a published and established poet.

I felt even more angry about the various rejection slips that floated back my way. It wasn't merely the rejection itself, but the manner in which it glaringly illuminated the contrast between my overt pride in my poetic skill and my carefully buried insecurities that I wasn't quite good enough, or perhaps (looking at Auden or Wilbur or Jarrell) nearly good enough.

Back in those days, I was always overreacting to slights and insults, which I had aplenty in my twenties. (They mysteriously disappeared, the casual insults and my brooding or volcanic over-reaction to them alike, somewhere in my early thirties.) Some of those slights were genuinely slight, but my outraged reaction to them were inversely related to my deeply buried acknowledgement of the grain of truth they usually contained.

The anthology eventually arrived; it was nicely designed and edited; it was quickly consulted to ensure that my name had not been misspelled nor my haiku hacked up; it was promptly filed away on my bookshelf. Like the scattering of literary magazines containing my other poems, some of them with idiotic names and all of them with vanishingly small readerships, it was immediately forgotten.

I never again contacted, or heard from, the editor, and gave no more thought to the other poets in the anthology than, most likely, they did to me; poets are unique among literary writers for their ability to project a kind of grandiose spiritualism and misty-eyed adoration of the universe while nonetheless maintaining a steely and unshakeable self-centeredness.

And thus her postcard still rankled. In my actual career, I had occasional disagreements with the CEOs of major corporations that usually didn't bother me too much, because I had a broader base to stand on, and because my only purpose was to help the company succeed, whereas the very insignificance of the publication, and my embarrassment over the not-insubstantial ego-centered pleasure it had fleetingly afforded me, made this obscure editor's tritely patronizing note perversely that much more painful.

A word now about rage, which isn't precisely the opposite of patience, but is certainly bitterly opposed to it.

My anger over my failed efforts to become a successful poet was not so much inappropriate as misdirected and unproductive. I had once submitted a rather long and very ambitious poem that I had spent, literally, years in composing (I wasn't impatient when it came to the writing process itself) and received, in response, a rejection slip that said, "I loved your poem – in fact, I read it to our staff at our weekly meeting." Again, this was written on a rejection slip; I wasted many months brooding over what the hell it possibly could have meant.

Granted, like most twenty-somethings, I was an angry young man, but if I had applied that psychic energy to making connections (I could have just called that editor up and asked why, if he'd loved the poem, he hadn't just accepted it and, by the way, would he be interested in a shorter piece) I would have, perhaps, accomplished something substantial.

Now, fast forward two decades to earlier this week. Through the miracle of Google Books, I discovered the brief reference to my poem in a review of the anthology, which had appeared back at the time of the anthology's publication in a small literary magazine (not the one that published the poem originally.)

The opening lines of the review, containing my poem in its entirety, read as follows:

"Any book of poems that starts off with an invocation so prevailing, as enriching as the following...

**What is lovelier  
Than this glass of cherry pop  
In the summer light?**  
Michael Antman

...has got to be special."

My initial thought upon reading this was a kind of mild gratitude for the kind words – apparently, I'm perfectly fine with damp-eyed effusions when they apply to *me* – followed quickly by an equally mild regret that I hadn't encountered it two decades ago, when I could have used the encouragement. (Anyone who buys drinks for the house after publishing three tiny poems is badly in need of some kind, any kind, of encouragement.)

But then I read on, and discovered that the editor had "spent months reading through hundreds of journals and books. From among thousands she eventually chose only about a hundred (poems). Then, as difficult as it may seem, letting these 'settle' for approximate (sic) two years before returning."

(Upon taking the now-faded anthology off my bookshelf today, I discovered that the editor had made this very point in her own preface which, in my self-absorption at the time, I hadn't even bothered to read.)

Suddenly, once again, I felt chastened. Her words had been an admonition not only to me but, I suspect, to several of her other impatient contributors and also, perhaps, to herself. Let us imagine, for a moment, that I had taken her postcard to heart instead of boiling over at it: It is entirely possible that I would have stopped wasting my energy getting angry with editors, who after all were only doing their jobs, and applied my youthful rage and boundless energy to, instead, patiently building a poetic career.

Oddly enough, the little poemlet (which, by the way, isn't even a true haiku, but that's another story) at the center of all this holds its own buried admonition.

When I first wrote it, I meant it on a conscious level as nothing more than a sort of pocket-sized and deliberately childlike (in the most positive sense of the term) *ars poetica*, a distillation of my conviction that beauty is absolute rather than relative, that the side of a worn brick tenement in a certain slant of light can be more inexplicably affecting than an Eero Saarinen or Frank Lloyd Wright, and that the illuminated liquid in a glass of soda might, for a fleeting moment, be more scintillating than a ruby, even though on a relative basis the ruby is priceless and the sugar water worthless.

But years later, with the help of a friend, I realized that in a sort of semi-conscious way I had written the poem not merely as a comment on relative aesthetic worth, but also as a miniature disquisition on evanescence and mortality.

Living things sparkle for a moment in the sunlight, and what indeed is lovelier.

And then, with the dying of the light, they disappear.

The “cherry pop,” in this case, being the blood that courses through our veins; as the sun and the season fade, we stop sparkling too, and it is our knowledge of this that makes the sparkling all the more precious while it lasts.

Or, as Wallace Stevens said, even more concisely and certainly more memorably than I had, “death is the mother of beauty.”

A poem, a postcard, and an obscure review. All of them contained buried meanings or lessons I was either unaware of or incapable of absorbing in my twenties, and this lack of self-knowledge, in turn, was created by my impatience and my anger and my lack of perspective.

In fact, looking at the hard numbers today, I realize that I actually published 20 poems and made, in total, no more than 120 or so submissions – a not-so-bad-ratio, as an author friend of mine pointed out years later.

In any event, over the years, all of my misapplied anger was replaced by a kind of resignation or enforced patience – enforced, that is, by my relative lack of success - and though this was somewhat better than my earlier anger, it wasn't really the right way to go either. But in recent years, I think I've discovered, in my emotionally slow way, a middle ground between patience and rage.

It's called persistence. Or, to be specific, persistence combined with passion.

Persistence was certainly the method I applied to my “other” career, paradoxically because of my initial lack of passion for it. But when the passion came, too, some years later – I have come to appreciate and love my marketing career, and now actually look forward to its challenges every day – the combination made me better at my job than ever before.

Realizing the way in which this “passionate persistence” truly works, and how it is a sort of synthesis of patience and rage, neither one at all satisfactory on its own, but powerful when combined intelligently, is something that took me many decades to achieve.

But note that I'm saying “many” decades. Not “too many.” It played out, probably, the way it was meant to, and fortunately while I'm still full of fizz, and more committed to literature than ever before. I understand better now than I used to how the system works and how, perhaps, to find my place in it.

Part of this understanding is knowing how to await what may come – including even tiny surprises like today's discovery – and how also to accept what may not ever come before the sunlight fades.

It is a realization that is, in every way, more precious than rubies.

## **Eliminating tension headaches**

I suffered gladly from tension headaches for many years. Why gladly? Because I was grateful they weren't migraines. My headaches, by comparison, were pretty mild, and I always assumed they were the price I had to pay for being a writer — a kind of "background noise" to my life.

As I noted in a previous post, I write all day long in my role as a marketing consultant and, after work, I spend a substantial percentage of my time researching and writing books and book proposals; literary essays; and art, film, and book reviews (most of which are collected here.)

Not to mention the odd blog post.

All of this requires a great deal of reading and sitting in front of a computer. This, of course, was at the root of my problems — or so I assumed.

But recently, my headaches had been getting worse.

This despite years of consultations and treatments with a physician, physical therapist, craniosacral therapist, chiropractor, dentist, acupuncturist, two optometrists, and many, many massage therapists.

I'd adjusted my computer display, raised the level of the monitor, lowered the level of the monitor, changed my glasses, changed the lighting, raised my chair, lowered my chair, bought firmer pillows, bought softer pillows, did stretches, went for walks, got massages, exercised.

I spent a good part of every evening kneading my shoulder and the base of my neck, and, especially, my left temple, where the pain and muscle-knotting was the worst.

I sometimes wore heat wraps during the day, and often used ice packs at night.

I also cycled through various combinations of Tylenol, Excedrin, Advil, Aleve, aspirin, Xanax, muscle relaxants and more. The only drug that ever seemed to work was Excedrin Extra Strength, but the caffeine in it made it feel like I was jumping out of my skin.

The odd thing about my headaches was that they were at their worst in the early morning hours, as I was gradually arising from sleep (sometimes, they'd awaken me at 4:30 in the morning, but never any earlier than that.) And as bad as they were, they often would disappear immediately upon awakening, or as soon as I'd stepped into the shower, only to gradually creep up on me again in the late afternoon or early evening.

I knew there was some significance to this, but never could quite understand what it was — nor could any of my doctors. Instead, it took an outre alternative medical practitioner who calls himself an "energy worker" to finally diagnose my condition, after all these years.

After our first consultation, recounted in my previous post, he'd told me that he had a vision of my being shot in the base of my neck with an arrow in a previous life. I don't believe in that kind of nonsense, but the odd thing was, during the consultation, I had experienced (but had not mentioned to him) the distinct mental image of a wooden dowel being extracted from the base of my neck.

Coincidence? Most likely. But regardless, the next morning, I awakened without a headache for the first time in a long time.

We've subsequently had several telephone consultations and, yes, energy workers can do whatever it is they do over the phone as well as in person. In our first phone chat, in any event, he got down to business. No more nonsense about arrows and past lives.

Instead, he said, very simply, "you're clenching your jaw."

I said, "yeah, maybe, but that can't really be the problem because I've checked with my dentist and there's no wear on my teeth."

"No, I didn't say you were grinding your teeth. I said you were clenching your jaw. That's something that no dentist would ever be in a position to know."

"Well, my teeth do feel misaligned in the mornings, but a couple of different doctors and massage therapists have told me that this was the result of the muscle tension in my neck and shoulders and head, not the cause of it. Besides, the pain is in my temple, not my jaw."

"I think they're wrong," he said. "I think the jaw clenching is the cause of all of your problems. And don't forget that the muscle in your temple controls your jaw. Put your thumb on your temple and bite down. Feel it bunch up?"

From that moment forward, I began to focus on my jaw, and the thing is, he was right. Every time I sit at the computer and write, I realized, I “work” my jaw. Sometimes I clench it and sometimes, when I’m really concentrating, I find myself jutting my chin out like some pugnacious bantamweight boxer.

I’d do the same thing in the early morning hours, as I arise from sleep and begin, somewhere below the level of consciousness, to worry about the day ahead, and all its challenges. I know this now because, in the past few weeks, I’ve started to make a special effort to awaken myself the moment I feel the pain begin to gather in my left temple, and to focus on what I’m doing with my jaw at the time.

What I’m doing is clenching my teeth together hard enough to snap an electrical cable.

And why would my headache begin to disappear as soon as I awakened? Because that’s when I began to eat and talk — in other words, to loosen up my jaw.

After this realization, which took me years to arrive at (because the clenching had been so much a part of my life that I thought it about and noticed it no more than I did my breathing) things gradually began to change. I learned about a few simple exercises that I now do every day — moving my jaw gently as if I were chewing a piece of imaginary gum; pressing my forefinger into my jaw muscle as I slowly opened my mouth; and pressing my jaw downwards against my thumb. I also focused on keeping my jaw slack by being careful to keep my teeth apart at all times when I’m not eating.

Ultimately, what I’ve learned, as my headaches gradually become less frequent, is that tension headaches don’t have to be an occupational hazard, and that I can write and read as much as I want without having to have any pain at all in “exchange.”

(Incidentally, whether or not my condition could be technically described as “TMJ,” or temporomandibular joint disorder, is of little interest to me. All that matters is results.)

I have no explanation for how the energy worker was able to diagnose my condition over the telephone when doctors have been unable to do so when seated across from me. Nor do I fully understand the long-distance “energy balancing” work he does, though I feel distinctly better and refreshed after one of our phone sessions.

But I do, at least, have some advice for others who suffer from tension headaches: Check what you’re doing with your jaw.

Let’s assume that 1,000 people suffering from chronic headaches read this post. Maybe the vast majority have a vascular problem, or eyestrain, or muscle cramps from bad posture.

Maybe only 50 out of the total have headaches because they’re clenching their jaws.

But that’s 50 people who can start to feel better tomorrow.

Two final notes: After my first consultation with the energy worker, I was so amused at the notion that I had supposedly been shot through the neck with an arrow in my previous life that I pictured myself as a grizzled old prospector or muleskinner who had been ambushed by Indians, and gave this character the comical name of Cletus. Hence, the jocular title of my earlier post, “My name is Cletus and I have an arrow in my neck.”

But subsequently, I’ve learned a bit more about blogging, including the fact that Google searchers are more likely to come across your post if you title it with something sensible instead of silly. Thus, in the interests of helping others with the same problem, I’ve set aside my smart-ass sensibilities for a moment.

But the odd thing is, I’d named myself “Cletus” at least a month before I, and the energy worker, had come to the conclusion that the problem was in my jaw. Once I did realize this, it suddenly occurred to me that there was a perfect cartoon mascot to tape onto my computer monitor as a reminder to keep my jaw loose.

Cletus Delroy Spuckler, aka Cletus the Slackjawed Yokel, from the Simpsons.

Another coincidence? You be the judge. (But I did have to restrain myself from titling this post “Dr. Cletus S. Yokel, M.D., Ph.D.”)

And, finally, if you have an unresolved medical issue of your own and are willing to set aside your skepticism about alternative therapies, the energy worker’s name is Bill Farber, and his website can be found here. Full disclosure: I know him only very casually, through a mutual friend, and have no connection to his business, except as a gratified and mostly pain-free patron.

## **Siskel and Ebert and goodbye to all that**

There is a characteristically gracious tribute by Roger Ebert in today's Chicago Sun-Times to the memory of his colleague, counterpart and rival, Gene Siskel, who died ten years ago.

Part of what makes this encomium so affecting and sincere is that Ebert makes no secret of the fact that he and Siskel fought constantly and pretty much hated each other, though they genuinely loved and respected each other as well. They were like ill-matched brothers.

I was a witness to the "hate" half of the equation, having taken a couple of classes from Ebert in the early 80s, one of them on the films of Hitchcock and his imitators, and the other devoted entirely to profoundly esoteric and unclassifiable movies that Ebert was smart enough, and brave enough, to champion. During the classes, during the breaks, and even once while he and I were at adjacent urinals, Ebert compulsively uttered nasty but very funny cracks about Siskel that struck at the very core of Siskel's personality and his predilections.

Ebert rarely alluded to what I suspect was his real objection to Siskel: While the two of them were for many years yoked together in the public eye as the pair of bickering film critics on their TV show "At the Movies," there was nothing symmetrical about the relationship whatsoever. And I don't just mean this in the clichéd sense that Ebert was "the fat one" and Siskel was "the skinny one."

Ebert was, and remains, one of the best short-form essayists in America today, on any subject. The quality of his movie reviews over the years — written, remember, on a very strict deadline and in response to movies that are, in a few cases, literally beneath comment — has been close to miraculous.

Siskel, on the other hand, was a terrible writer. I used to know a Chicago Tribune reporter who would say, "you think his stuff is bad? You should see it before the editors get ahold of it."

Siskel came across as a bit dimwitted, as well; I once saw him on stage with the director William Friedkin, introducing one of Friedkin's films, and witnessing the two spar with each other about the movies was as painful and perversely entertaining as watching Don Knotts go a couple of rounds with Joe Frazier. When he delivered brief movie reviews on the local news, there was one newscaster who used to delight in flummoxing Siskel in the brief "happy talk" interregnum after Siskel's report and before the commercial; Siskel's responses were inevitably late, and lame.

I'm not stressing this point in order to disrespect Siskel's memory, but rather to do my small part in decoupling his reputation from that of the vastly superior Ebert, who, despite a series of serious health problems that have rendered him mute, continues to write wonderfully.

At the same time, I should point out that, with all of his faults, Siskel was legendarily hard-working and ambitious and, even more important, clearly loved the movies. Given a prominent public platform, he communicated that love, however imperfectly, to a much wider audience than any Internet-only critic that I'm aware of.

It's frustrating to me sometimes, as a writer, to see how little we appreciate our journalists. Journalism, as a serious profession, may well be dying, and the lack of energy and near-acquiescence with which journalists and readers alike have greeted this prospect has been appalling.

My previous post on this issue may have left the impression that I'm concerned only about print journalism, and while it is true that I am unashamedly a lover of print, the fact is that creeping digitization represents just as much of a threat to television news.

This may seem less alarming to many, given the remarkably poor quality of network and local news broadcasts. I virtually never watch either. But professional journalists of all types have an incredibly important job, and society is much better off when there is spirited competition among competing TV stations and print outlets, and among bloggers as well, as part of an information ecosystem. If and when print and television journalism disappears entirely and only unpaid bloggers and other online commentators are left, that ecosystem will be very barren, indeed.

(I suppose I'll feel better about the prospects of an all-online future when the blogosphere begins to produce journalists who are paid for their efforts and/or write as consistently well as Ebert.)

Coincidentally, the same issue of the Sun-Times that contained the Siskel tribute also contained a brief report about another professional journalist here in Chicago who has departed the scene, though thankfully not in the permanent sense. Amy Jacobson was an on-air reporter for the local NBC station who was fired in the wake of her videotaped appearance, while wearing a two-piece bathing suit and while in the company of her own children, at the house of a man whose wife had mysteriously disappeared. Today's news was that a Cook County judge had ruled that Jacobson's defamation suit against a rival TV station for airing the videotape could proceed.

And good for her. The entire so-called scandal had always struck me as being badly overblown. She had been covering the missing-wife story from the beginning, and stated (and I believed) that she was on her way to a swimming pool with her kids when she was alerted to an opportunity to mingle with the missing woman's husband and relatives and perhaps get a scoop. There were no allegations that she was engaged in any kind of improper personal relationship with the husband. Her greatest sin, other than daring to be attired casually, seemed to have been an excess of ambition.

But ever since then, she has been unable to find another television job, and her reputation has been besmirched. To add to her travails, her husband divorced her.

I happen to have known Amy Jacobson about 12 years ago, back when my wife and I and our then-infant daughter were living in a condo about a block from Wrigley Field and Amy was our upstairs neighbor. She would chat with my wife and me in our backyard, and she would attend our condo board meetings. I even went to a couple of parties at her apartment, though anyone who knows me well won't be surprised to hear that I didn't last long. And she would on occasion engage in the kind of babbling baby-talk with our daughter that babies always seem to encourage in even the chilliest and most distant of adults.

But Amy wasn't like that at all.

To this day, I remember her as being one of the most genuinely warm and down-to-earth persons I've ever known. Maybe this was just one of those tricks she'd cultivated as a reporter, to make every person she spoke to feel as if she really cared about what they had to say.

But I don't think so. I think she really cared.

And yet, reading some news reports about her travails, one might get the impression that she was some kind of ultra-competitive, heartless harpy. I know very little about the legal merits of her case, but I do know that her on-camera demeanor struck me as unfailingly professional. It didn't hurt, as well, that she was one of those women who just light up the screen. Her fate strikes me, as it has a few other commentators in Chicago, as being terribly unjust.

But the point is not my personal regard for Amy Jacobson. The point is, how many online journalists in the future will be willing to accept the kind of calumny that she has had to deal with in pursuit of a story, when they get neither pay, nor hope of a future paycheck, in exchange (unless online publications somehow figure out how to get readers to pay for content)?

And, for that matter, would we even care about the manner in which a blogger chose to cover a story? When there is no professional (which is to say, paid) journalism, there are no professional standards. Granted that these standards were in my opinion unfairly applied to Amy Jacobson, but at least there appeared to be an effort to protect the station's and the public's interests.

And when there are no standards, however imperfectly applied those standards might be, then there is no trust.

There are great writers, like Roger Ebert, and aggressive reporters, like Amy Jacobson, and enthusiastic advocates, like Gene Siskel. But whatever sets them apart, they all have something in common: They all are, or were, professionals who loved what they did and added to, rather than detracted from, public discourse.

For all its tendentiousness, manipulativeness, arrogance, and inability to accept stray facts that don't fit into its preconceived notions of a story, the mainstream media, and the dwindling band of journalists who maintain it, perform an indispensable service. It's a service that too many of us will likely fully appreciate only when they are, all of them, gone, with nobody left to write their epitaph.

## **Obama honors the legacy of Lenin**

For several months now, our television has been displaying those “closed caption” subtitles even though we don’t want them. We just can’t figure out how to turn this feature off (we’ve tried all the obvious stuff on all of the menus, but nothing works.) It can be annoying, especially when I’m watching my beloved UFC (mixed martial arts) on Spike TV, because the subtitles run across the top of the screen, inevitably cutting off the head of a fighter at just at the moment he gets clobbered with a spectacular spinning back fist. So when Joe Rogan yells, and the screen displays, “WOW! Did you see that punch!”, I tend to yell back at the screen, “NO! I DIDN’T!”

But there’s a benefit to closed captioning: the hilarious errors that the computerized transcription system generates. Tonight, for example, on the 10:00 news, there was a feature on President Obama’s tribute, earlier in the day, to Abraham Lincoln on the occasion of the 200th anniversary of Lincoln’s birth. Except that, at the moment the announcer said, “today, President Obama honored the legacy of Lincoln,” the closed-caption subtitle read, “today, President Obama honored the legacy of Lenin.”

I suppose that this could have been something other than a computer error. For example, there may be a real live person who’s responsible for typing in the transcription, and he could have been spelling-disabled (which reminds me of the joke: “Two dyslexics walk into a bra...”)

Another possibility is that the transcriber is unhappy with what he considers to be the socialistic implications of the Wall Street bailout, and, in the grand tradition of the Boston Globe staffer who inserted the headline “Mush from the Wimp” over an otherwise sober editorial about Jimmy Carter, was committing a nasty little political grafitto. If the latter is the case, I suspect he’ll be getting a bit of a spinning back fist of his own from his bosses tomorrow morning.

## Is print really dead?

I went to a mixer last night that was, according to the invitation, to be on the topic of “publishing,” and brought along a friend, a publicist for a boutique publishing house in the Chicago suburbs, who was looking to do some networking and meet some of her peers.

As it turned out however, two of the three advertised speakers (the third didn’t show up) were members of what I like to call the Screen-Based Community, which is to say professional bloggers, and the discussion was entirely about online publishing, micro-blogs, corporate blogs, and the like.

Attempting to be a devil’s advocate and a mild-to-moderate pain in the ass, I tried during the discussion session that followed the presentations to question the largely unquestioned assumption by at least one of the presenters that, as he put it, “print is dying a slow and painful death.”

It is inarguable that many print publications are exhibiting these days all of the signs of “cachexia” (wasting away), and it is equally inarguable that, if present trends continue, we may sooner or later be left with only a handful of print newspapers – the Wall Street Journal, USA Today, and so on – and few if any of the traditional city newspapers. Here in Chicago, in fact, there appears to be a spirited race between the Chicago Sun-Times and the Chicago Tribune to see whose pulp incarnation will disappear first.

Magazines, most of them anyway, would appear to be in trouble too, as their lifeline, advertising, slowly bleeds away to the Web.

But, as I pointed out during the discussion, “present trends almost never continue.” The reason is that technology trends, and trends in general, rarely if ever move in a straight and predictable line, and are instead subject to reconsiderations, reversals, and revivals of older and seemingly abandoned methodologies.

As an analogy, I pointed to an area of particular interest to me – food. (I’m somewhat obsessed with food, having had little of it in my childhood.) Beginning in the days of Charles Birdseye, inventor of frozen food, and some of his colleagues, there have been predictions that food will become increasingly standardized, technologized and packaged. And these weren’t just empty prognostications; at its nadir, food culture in America did in fact consist mostly of frozen, canned, and fast food. If “present trends had continued” we all would, as many very seriously predicted at one time or another, be dining primarily on pills.

But there have been a number of countervailing trends, as there almost always are with any new technology. Many people got fed up with the tasteless, overly processed, deracinated, and mind-numbingly dull cuisine of mass-produced hamburgers, microwaveable burritos, Campbell’s soup casseroles, Twinkies, and Banquet frozen dinners, and began turning to other, older alternatives.

Here in America, Alice Walters and her Chez Panisse restaurant were pioneers in the welcome return to an emphasis on fresh, locally sourced ingredients. Today, most of us take for granted the value of farmer’s markets, organic produce, local food specialties (including, even, high-quality fast food such as, in Chicago, the Italian beef sandwich), and food that is free of excessive additives and genetically modified ingredients.

At the same time, there also has been a blossoming of interest in new comestibles, such as unusual ethnic foods that, a generation ago, most of us would have been afraid to eat, as well as in radical experimentation that attempts to return food to its basic building blocks and then reconstruct it in new and mind-boggling ways, as in the molecular food movement. (Few of us have the money these days to eat at the temples of molecular food, but the more-successful and tasty of the techniques these restaurants are pioneering will inevitably work their way into the mass market.)

Then there is the “slow food” movement, which values above all the sensual pleasure of cooking and eating food, and here, I think, is the clearest way of connecting the food business to the publishing business. For some people, at least, there is a sensual pleasure, too, in leafing through a glossy publication, or even a newspaper, and even more so in relaxing in an easy chair and reading a beautifully printed book. (Even the more-hostile of the two panel members generously allowed that print books are likely to remain around for a while, despite the best efforts of Amazon and its new Kindle book reader.)

So I think it’s possible that people will get tired of doing all of their reading off of one or two flat screens (their computer screen and their mobile device.) I also think that, if all publications are online, there will be a “flattening effect” in which they all begin to look alike and seem equally valid, and thus equally invalid (what future is there for the Chicago Tribune, say, to go completely online when a half-dozen independent operators could start a website called “The Chicago Chronicle,” that utilizes a mix of original and borrowed content, and that, at first glance at least, might look almost indistinguishable from the Trib’s operation?)

The extremely low barriers to entry on the Internet – no heavy printing presses, no paper, no cumbersome delivery mechanisms, and so forth, not to mention the ability to imitate the look of more-substantial publications with a few inexpensive fonts – mean that virtually anyone with a small bankroll can launch an impressive-looking website, and certainly anyone with a computer can now start a blog. This, combined with the fact that virtually no one is willing to pay for online editorial content, and, accordingly, that most successful online operations are supported by advertising only, creates two disturbing possibilities:

One, because they are almost entirely advertising supported, online publications would appear to be even more vulnerable to advertiser-influenced editorial decisions than their print counterparts, which at least have the offsetting influence of paid subscribers, not to mention long-standing traditions and prestigious reputations to uphold (even if those aren't often well-supported in practice.)

And two, because very few online publications can afford to pay their contributors, and as print publications that do indeed pay, however poorly, are beginning to die of starvation, we may be witnessing the disappearance of the professional journalist and the professional editor. This is not to say that there aren't many superb online editors and writers, only that they, including the professional bloggers at the presentation, may find it difficult to sustain a career solely online, merely because they have to pay the bills.

And this, in turn, means that it may be more difficult than ever to find dedicated journalists willing to spend months pursuing a major story, or years following a particular beat. (I don't deny that there are some who in fact do just this solely online, but the concomitant lack of professional editors – and of a professional and institutionalized journalistic culture that at least attempts to hold both journalists and their editors to high standards – is likely to result in an even-greater dumbing down and trivialization of news and cultural commentary than we have already witnessed to date.)

Add to this the undeniable reality that far more online writing than print writing is amateurish and borderline unreadable – the literary equivalent of, at best, a Campbell's Soup tuna casserole made with canned mushroom soup, peas, and crumbled potato chips on top – and we all have real reason to worry about the future of written discourse.

This isn't even close to being an original observation, by the way – there are a great many people out there concerned about the death of professional journalism, though their voices are being drowned out, I fear, by the overwhelming tide of interest in the volunteer-based electronic version.

While perhaps somewhat more original, my food analogy is also undoubtedly flawed, as some at the presentation pointed out. (My definition of "analogy," in fact, is "a comparison that's somewhat useful, but has something wrong with it.") And in fact, I could be entirely wrong and indulging in nothing other than wishful thinking and rationalization. It may be that ten or fifteen years from today, we will be affixed, Cyclops-like, to a single, all-consuming screen or, just as likely, Argus-like to a half-dozen different mobile electronic delivery systems of unimaginable cleverness and sophistication.

But it's also possible that, as in the slow-food movement, people will begin to rediscover the tactile, three-dimensional pleasures of print. And that print will, itself, discover new and creative ways of presenting itself, as we see, for example, in Mcsweeney's literary magazines, which despite their extremely uneven content are incredibly clever in their design and presentation.

As someone who spends a good part of his day online (not only reading online publications and blogs, but contributing to several of them, including the great PopMatters and the equally great When Falls the Coliseum, and also creating other online content for clients of my consulting business) I'm not trying to argue that there's anything inherently wrong with online publishing, nor that all of it is equivalent to the canned, frozen, or inorganic. Some of it, in fact, is incredibly fresh and creative.

Indeed, blogs, Twitter, and other electronic media are beating print media to the punch on a lot of major stories these days, providing alternatives to the sclerotic practices and prejudices of over-rated, moribund, and increasingly mediocre institutions such as the New York Times, and creating the opportunity for many previously unheard voices to join the cultural conversation. And it isn't all just intellectual "fast food" online - some of it is exceptionally well-written and carefully reasoned, and much of it is fast in the best sense of the word, providing us with scoops that print publications can't match.

I'm merely pointing out that, as a part of a balanced intellectual diet, print has an important role to play, too, and those that would cavalierly consign it to the recycling bin of history or, worse, attempt to hasten its demise, are not doing our culture or our society any favors.

My friend walked away from the mixer somewhat disappointed that she hadn't been able to meet any colleagues in the (print) publishing business. Several other attendees, who hadn't spoken up in the question-and-answer session, sidled up to me later and said that I had made some good points (along with some, I don't doubt, stupid ones, as I am wont to do.) But I left the get-together feeling encouraged to some degree that there is a continuing interest in print and that, despite the expectations of some, it's going to be around in one form or another for a long, long time.

Then – because we'd missed dinner – my friend and I stopped at a 24-hour diner nearby and had some eggs, hash browns, waffles, and orange juice. All of it was fresh, and made from scratch by people who knew what they were doing, and all of it was good.

## **John Updike**

It's an unfortunate fact of life — or, rather, of death — that it takes the passing of a great artist for many people to first become acquainted with his work. So be it. If you haven't yet read any John Updike, or know of him primarily from his somewhat, though not entirely, unfair reputation as a horny chronicler of suburban marital disfunction, you owe it to yourself to discover what an effortlessly insightful, memorable, and clever (in the best sense of that word) writer he was.

Fortunately, it isn't difficult at all to make his acquaintance, because he was at his best when his writing was most compressed. The Rabbit novels had their moments, but for pure spine-tingling genius, there is no substitute for his short stories.

I discovered just how amazing his short stories are when I was a freshman in college. I was majoring in psychology at the time, for reasons I no longer can recall, when I happened to read one of his stories in a beat-up paperback collection. I also can't remember the story's title, but there was a paragraph in there — something to do with a brief encounter between a man and a woman in an apartment doorway — that contained more insight into human behavior than all of my psychology classes put together.

Within days, I'd switched my major to English.

Since then, I've read almost everything he's written, except for some of his lesser novels (and there were a few too many of those, unfortunately.) Second only to his short stories is his incredibly generous literary criticism, which cast its glow over some of the greatest writers of our time, including some that you and I would otherwise never have heard of.

It's sad, in a way, that there is nobody like Updike around today to write a proper appreciation of Updike himself. But at least we still can savor Updike's appreciations of his fellow writers — even if, in most cases, his genius far outshone theirs.

## **My name is Cletus and I have an arrow in my neck**

Let's begin with what may well be the most awkward line of supposedly realistic written dialogue, ever, in any published book from any legitimate publisher:

"The lecture I had from my boss sure tightened my sphincters!"

I'm not going to name the book or the author because it wouldn't be kind: The book in question is a practical guide to pain relief, not a novel or work of literary non-fiction, and the author is a compassionate professional healer, not a battle-hardened professional writer.

So why cite this bizarre bit of dialogue, which sounds like it was badly translated from Hungarian into Esperanto into Turkish into English, at all? Because it's one of a series of equally ponderous "common expressions," along the lines of "I'm experiencing such unusually high levels of stress these days it could very well be that my head is likely to explode!", that the book lists as examples of how our words and our thoughts not only express, but actually affect, how we feel physically.

(Incidentally, I say "along the lines of" because I didn't actually buy the book, and the only line I jotted down verbatim, as I sat in a Barnes & Noble flipping through it, was the one about "sphincters," and then only because it was so unintentionally funny. I mention this — and, specifically, the fact that I was sitting rather than standing — for reasons that will become clear in a moment.)

In any event, according to the book, if we say "she's a pain in the neck" often enough, sure enough we'll soon get a pain in the neck, which in turn will lead to chronic headaches.

But how this theory applies to chronic knee pain, for example — to the best of my knowledge, there are no common expressions to the effect of, "the busy traffic flow in this morning's rush hour is really causing my kneecaps to ache" — isn't at all clear.

Furthermore, most expressions of this sort are "dead metaphors," because we don't give much thought to their literal meaning. We say "pain in the neck" when we're in polite company; otherwise, we'd be more likely to say "pain in the ass," without any intended change in meaning. Does that mean that when we leave work, where we have to be businesslike, and have a beer with our buddies, where we can speak more casually, the ache in our neck will suddenly migrate to the location of one of our sphincters?

Needless to say, no.

More important, this glib explanation for chronic pain minimizes the host of physical factors, from injury to illness to overuse, that can cause pain, while at the same time giving readers the false hope that by editing their metaphors, they can take a short cut to improving their health.

Worse, the author's theory also trivializes the far-more-subtle and mysterious psychological and, for that matter, spiritual factors that cause us to feel and behave the way we do.

To be fair, the book did contain other theories and treatments. As for why I was reading it to begin with, let me put it this way: I am a marketing consultant by profession, and spend 60 percent or more of my working hours writing and editing advertising copy, brochures, annual reports, website copy, press releases, marketing audits, e-mails, memoranda, and marketing plans, and when I'm not writing or editing, I'm peering at PDFs in my role as a creative director working with designers.

In my leisure time, I write books. I've published one novel, and am at work on a second, and a non-fiction book I wrote two summers ago is currently being marketed by my agent. I'm also working on a new book about the relationship between clients and their agencies.

In addition, I write book and DVD reviews and essays on the visual arts for the (wonderful) pop culture site PopMatters, and, of course I post to When Falls the Coliseum whenever I get the chance. The book reviews require me to read many books rather quickly, and whenever I have a free moment, I'm reading still other books, especially contemporary novels, for pleasure. Sure, I walk the dog, and play basketball, and shovel the snow, and travel, but otherwise, it's all words, all the time.

What all this close work adds up to is a constant, nagging tension headache, always in my left temple. I wake up with one virtually every morning and, though my mid-day is blessedly pain-free on most days, I go to bed with one virtually every night.

I can't lie down on a couch with my head propped up or I get a headache. I can't work in front of the computer too long or I get a headache. Needless to say, I do both, anyway. (Work too long, and get a headache.) I can't turn my head to the left for more than a moment, or I get a headache. And I can't, ever, read standing up, as one would do in a bookstore or at a magazine rack, or I get a truly fearsome headache.

Hence, the reason I was reading the pain-relief book, and the reason I was doing so while seated.

My skepticism about this particular book notwithstanding, I'm more than willing to try alternative as well as mainstream forms of relief. In addition to the usual regimen of acetaminophen, hot showers, cold packs, massages, physical therapy, and stretching, I've tried, over the years, chiropractic, acupuncture, Chinese herbs, and meditation.

(One thing I haven't tried is simply not working in front of a computer, because with a 95-year-old father, an 88-year-old house, a 13-year-old dog, and a 12-year-old daughter to provide for, not pursuing my chosen profession in these painful economic times simply isn't an option. Besides, I love marketing communications, and I love to write.)

Of all the alternative therapies I've tried over the years, the one that worked best is, at least in my mind, the weirdest one of all: Something called energy therapy. I encountered it for the first time at the end of 2008, at a New Year's party, when a casual friend who moonlights as an "energy worker" asked if he could try his hand at relieving my headaches.

I said sure, and he proceeded to wave his arms around behind my neck and over my head in slow and mysterious ways, resembling, a bit, a mime pretending to swim through a murky stream. At no time during this did he touch my head or neck. At no time did I turn around and look at him, and except for peripheral glimpses was only aware of his mysterious arm motions from the subsequent descriptions of my wife and some other friends, who were sitting across from me.

As my friend performed these seemingly nonsensical actions, I felt curiously relaxed, as if my body was collapsing in on itself, but in a good way. Even more curious, I had a distinct mental image of a thin wooden dowel being vertically extracted from the base of my neck on the left side, just above the shoulder joint.

I said nothing about this as he did whatever it was he was doing.

When he was finished, my friend informed me that he, too, had experienced an odd mental image. He had envisioned me, he said, in a previous life, being shot in the back of the neck with an arrow and, with his odd motions, had been "extracting" the shaft.

Remember, I hadn't told him of my own image until he told me of his. As a result, on the ride home from the party, I couldn't get out of my mind the thought that in some previous life I had been a scruffy prospector (whom I named Cletus just for the hell of it), who had been killed by an Indian's arrow.

Ridiculous? Well, of course. I know few people who are more skeptical than I am. I don't believe that we have had past lives, and thus I certainly don't believe in something called "past life regression."

And yet, the following morning — call it power of suggestion, or placebo, or what you will — I woke up completely headache-free for the first time in months, and felt energized for the entire day.

What, if anything, this all means, I can't pretend to say. I do know that I will make a formal appointment with the energy worker when I get the time (which unfortunately and needless to say probably won't be any time soon.)

And I do know that while traditional Western medicine — analgesics, physical therapies, surgery, and all the rest — only go so far, the same is true of non-traditional therapies, and in particular those of the glib and metaphorical sort. I suspect that our knowledge of the human body and psyche is akin to the knowledge our human ancestors had of the world beyond their little villages, and that there are enormous mysteries still to be explored.

In the meantime, I am grateful that I have only tension headaches and not migraines, and that I get these headaches as a result of reading while standing up rather than reading while sitting down.

I'm also grateful that there are those who, at the risk of ridicule, are willing to explore the farther shores of human experience in search of better lives for all of us.

And, most of all, I am grateful that my name is not Cletus and that I don't (at least not in my current incarnation) have an arrow sticking out of my neck, nor, for that matter, a pain in any of my sphincters.

## **The sushi apocalypse creeps ever closer**

Speaking of sushi and regrets, as I was on this site just yesterday, Jeremy Piven probably regrets ingesting those massive amounts of tuna sushi, since according to widely circulated news reports he's now suffering from acute mercury toxicity, leading to neuromuscular problems, extreme fatigue, and dizziness, and making him more vulnerable to kidney failure and heart disease.

There is considerable skepticism, particularly among those closest to him, that Piven actually has mercury poisoning. As to where this skepticism comes from, let's just say that, reading between the lines of some of the news reports, it would appear that the Ari Gold character that Piven plays on *Entourage* may not be too much of a dramatic stretch for him.

However, Piven's peccadilloes don't change the fact that mercury can be present in very high levels in tuna sushi, something that I'll bet most sushi eaters aren't even aware of. Add that to the disturbing ubiquity of sushi in restaurants, grocery stores and other locations that are far from the ocean and in other respects utterly unqualified to be serving the stuff, and the impending sushi apocalypse I spoke of a while back may be creeping ever closer.

My advice: Get the salmon sushi instead of the tuna. (And, while you're at it, avoid any and all sushi from overfished species.) Make sure your sushi chef doesn't have any prison tattoos on his forearms. Eschew delivery sushi, especially in the middle of the summer. And if the restaurant you're eating at is more than 200 miles from the nearest ocean or international airport, consider getting the tempura soba instead.

## **Regrets: I've had a few**

I was having sushi with a business associate the other day when the subject of regret came up.

My colleague, who is much younger than me, said, "I really don't have any regrets. It's not that I haven't done things I wish I hadn't done, it's just that I made the best decisions I could at the time based on what I knew, and what I was capable of, at that moment.

"And besides, I'm in a good place now, and maybe I wouldn't be here if it weren't for the mistakes I made earlier."

There was something oddly familiar about her comments, and then I remembered that I used to say almost precisely the same thing when I was in my twenties.

But I haven't said it in years.

Suddenly, a wintry image, or rather a progression of images, appeared before my mind's eye: I pictured myself speeding down a highway through a very light and whirling and intermittent snow, so light that I couldn't be bothered to turn on my windshield wipers.

For the first few miles, the feathery flakes just blew away in front of my advancing windshield. I felt vindicated, in an odd way, in my decision not to use the wipers.

Clearly, they weren't needed.

All along, of course, a few random flakes here and there would stick to the glass, and a few droplets of mud as well. But it didn't make any discernible difference.

Even after 25 miles or so, though the windshield could have been cleaner, I suppose, the view remained completely unobstructed.

But somewhere around the 50-mile mark, though the snowfall wasn't any heavier than before, I realized that some terribly important line had been passed, though I hadn't at all noticed it, many miles back.

The line, of course, was the one between clarity and confusion.

The windshield was no longer perfectly clear.

Nor, for that matter, was it kind of dirty but still more or less clear enough to see through.

No, it was utterly begrimed with a thick layer of snow and melting snow and ice and pulverized road salt and sleet and mud thrown up by the wheels of the cars and trucks in front of me, so much so that, very suddenly, I realized I had to turn on the windshield wipers immediately to avoid veering into an oncoming lane and crashing.

This all flashed through my mind in just a fleeting second or two, but after my lunch, I spent some time thinking about this series of images.

Or, I should say, this spontaneously generated metaphor, in which the encroaching grime represented the accumulation of regrets and mistakes and missed opportunities, and each mile a year of my life, and the instant when I was forced to turn on the wipers that chilling flash of insight when I first realized that "I don't have any regrets because I did the best I could" was, although a perfectly reasonable thing for someone in their twenties to say, an utterly inadequate and pointless one for someone in their forties or fifties.

Regrets, needless to say, reside in the past. But because there are no U-turns allowed anywhere on this road, the past being unattainable, regrets only matter so far as they affect the future.

That's why the view out of the front windshield matters so much more than the one out of the back: We begin to discern patterns in our past behavior, and find ourselves avoiding, or fearing, similar situations going forward. We peer around the huge dark and messy areas that we don't want to gaze upon because they're too painful, and look only through the few remaining clear spots.

Pretty soon, we can barely move at all.

Here, of course, is where the metaphor breaks down. Because there are no "wipers" that I can think of that can instantaneously clear the view, the way that real windshield wipers can.

In fact, I believe it is probably impossible for any reasonably intelligent person not to have accumulated a number of regrets, because intelligence implies an ability to consider alternatives, and going down one road instead of another means you'll never know what that other road could have been like.

And of course, that “other road” leads to other paths, and those to still others, into the millions. Over the course of a lifetime, the ratio of roads taken to roads untaken becomes almost agonizingly small. The one road, and the one view, that our existences narrow down to, may be perfectly pleasant, or even wonderful.

But it’s only one.

And everything else, every other prospect, and every other view, is dark.

Back in college, my very first car had been a sky-blue 1965 Ford Mustang with so much rust that it was almost more brown than blue. I had purchased this classic car for 50 bucks from my then-roommate and still-best-friend.

The Mustang had worn-out wipers and a malfunctioning heater, and I drove around for a week or two in the middle of a brutal Midwestern winter hunched over and peering out of a tiny crescent of windshield just above the steering wheel that remained clear thanks to the feeble bit of heat thrown off by the engine.

Finally, I accumulated enough money from my job as a busboy at a local restaurant to buy a new heater and some replacement blades, and pretty soon I was driving in high style, and not long after that, it was spring.

The car I have now, on the other hand, has pretty much every accessory I could ask for, including some that are so advanced, I’m not even sure what they’re there for.

So — to examine this metaphor from another angle — I’m better able to deal with disappointments and regret because at this stage of my life, I have more resources at my command.

And the reason I have more resources is because — beginning with that minimum-wage busboy job — I took action.

I took some good roads, and I took some bad ones, but I kept moving forward and all in all, I arrived at a place where, even though I couldn’t wipe away past regrets, I could at least balance them out with some present accomplishments. I’ve had a good life, and, despite a rather bad upbringing, a pretty fortunate one.

Nonetheless, I have failed to reach some of my most cherished goals, particularly as a writer.

And so, as we approach the end of the year and the beginning of the season of resolutions, I choose to make this one: No matter what regrets I may have accumulated, I will continue to move forward.

To take action.

And to pursue accomplishment, no matter how difficult or distant it may seem.

It’s the only thing I can do.

It is, I believe, the only thing worth doing.

## The Oiliest Little Auto Scam Ever

A few days ago, I had to drive through the night to get from a client meeting in one distant city to an early-morning meeting in another city hundreds of miles away. (It was a little too close for flying.) It was about 9:00 in the evening and, because I was driving through farm country, it was pitch black, with hardly any other cars on the highway.

I love the peaceful feeling of driving long distances alone at night, and I was listening to the Pretenders; all was right with the world. Until the bright red “Oil Warning” light popped on.

This is where the scam began.

As most drivers know, the Oil Warning light is not something you ever want to see. As I’ve always understood it, it doesn’t mean you merely need to add some oil, or change your oil; it means that due to a failure of the oil pump or a punctured oil pan, you have no oil pressure at all, and if you don’t stop the car very soon, the engine could seize up and be ruined. In fact, the light on my dashboard didn’t just say “Warning.” Under the icon of the Aladdin’s Lamp-shaped oil can with a single drop at its tip, there was a bold black statement that commanded me to “EXIT NOW.”

So I did, after about ten anxious minutes of searching for the next highway exit. And found myself in a nearly deserted hamlet called Prophetstown. The only businesses open were a convenience store and a tavern, so I pulled in to the parking lot of the store and popped the hood (although, because my car was a rental, it took me 20 solid minutes of hunting to find the hood release latch, recessed so far back under the steering wheel that I had to get on my knees to locate it in the dark.)

Then I went into the store and borrowed a flashlight so I could locate the oil dipstick. Naturally, the weather was near freezing. Meanwhile, the helpful clerk behind the counter was nice enough to look up the roadside assistance number for my car rental company.

While waiting for her to find the number I double-checked the owner’s manual to make sure I wasn’t over-reacting. Not at all, according to the manual: It confirmed that the light didn’t mean merely that the car was low on oil, but rather that catastrophic engine damage was imminent and that the car had to be towed to a repair shop immediately. In fact, the manual explicitly said not to attempt to drive the car under any circumstances. I began contemplating finding a Motel Six somewhere in the area and missing my meeting the next morning, which was still hundreds of miles away.

After talking to the roadside assistance guy, however, I began to relax. “Oh, those lights go on all the time.”

“So how do I know if the engine is about to fail?”

“Was the car driving normally before the warning light went on?”

“Yes.”

“Was the engine overheating?”

“No.”

“How was the oil level?”

“A little low, but normal.”

“Ah, then I wouldn’t worry about it. Sometimes if you’ve just filled the gas tank and you don’t replace the gas cap tightly, it can trigger the warning light.”

That didn’t make any sense to me, but I let it pass. But I didn’t want to take the chance of totaling a rental car, even though I had purchased all the coverages, so I reminded him of what the owner’s manual said.

“Ah, I wouldn’t pay any attention to that. That’s just one of those things they have to say for legal reasons or whatever. I would just get back in the car and keep on driving. Wait a minute. Was your car making a lot of clicking noises after you turned off the engine?”

“Yeah, I noticed a lot of clicking.”

“Well, that’s not good. That could indicate you really do have a problem.” He paused. “Ah, don’t worry about it. Just jump back in the car and odds are you’ll be fine.”

So I did what he said, and he was right. I’d lost about 50 minutes fooling with the car and then trying to find my way back to the highway on the dark gravel roads of Prophetstown, and ended up having to stay in a motel about 30 miles outside my destination because it was close to midnight and I couldn’t drive anymore, but I woke up early the next morning and made my meeting in plenty of time.

When I returned my car to the rental place near my house, I told the assistant manager what had happened. He seemed incredulous about what the roadside assistance guy had told me, and I thought he was about to lecture me about ignoring the warnings in the owners manual and continuing to drive the car for hundreds of miles more.

Quite the opposite. He was indignant on my behalf that I had believed the owners manual even for an instant, and thereby had lost nearly an hour out of my trip. He said, "there's no way that not tightening the gas cap could make the Oil Warning light go on. The Check Engine light, maybe. The oil light? Never."

Then he looked around to make sure the manager wasn't in earshot and leaned forward. "Listen, the only reason that light went on is that (insert name of Huge Non-U.S. Car Company here) programs some of their new models to have the Oil Warning light come on automatically at specific intervals, every few thousand miles, even if there's nothing wrong with the engine."

"Why on earth would they program their cars to do that?"

"Oh, it's just to remind you to change your oil."

"But why wouldn't they have a simple "Check Oil" light come on instead of that big scary Warning light? And why would they program the Warning light to come on automatically instead of when your oil pressure is actually low?"

"Because they want you to panic, and bring your car into the dealership immediately to get an oil change. It's a big source of revenue for them."

"So some people might actually take the owners manual seriously and interrupt their trip and drive straight to the dealership, or in some case even have their car towed in to the dealership, when all the car needs is an oil change at some point in the next few weeks or months?"

"Yeah, like I said, that way they're sure to get the oil change business instead of it going to a Jiffy Lube or whatever."

I took a moment to absorb the profound cynicism of this.

"So does that mean any time the Oil Warning/Exit Now light comes on in the future in any rental car I can just ignore it?"

"Oh no, absolutely not. Only some of the new models from (Big, Cynical Car Company) are programmed to have the Warning light come on automatically. With most cars, the light means what you think it means, and if you keep on driving..."

"Let me guess. Your engine will seize up and you'll have to replace it."

"Exactly."

The lesson to be learned from this oily little scam? The next time your Oil Warning Light comes on, you can safely ignore it.

Or you can't.

You can keep on driving and not worry about it.

Or you should pull over immediately.

You can prop a CD case in front of your dashboard so you don't have to look at the red Warning light, and continue to enjoy your cross-country drive.

Or you should cancel your meeting or vacation plans, call for a tow truck, eat a crappy dinner at a Waffle House, and then find a Motel 6 to spend the night.

You can check the oil at your leisure, and if it's time for an oil change, you can spend 30 bucks, or change it yourself whenever you have a free hour or so.

Or you could foolishly shrug off the warning and then, fifty miles down the road, watch as your car throws shredded bits of overheated engine onto the highway behind it, and then take \$6,000 out of your already-shrunken IRA to pay for a new one.

How will you know which road to take? Not being a car expert, I can't tell you. But I suppose the first thing to do is to find out if your car, rental or otherwise, is manufactured by an oily, greedy, and manipulative auto company, and then proceed accordingly.

That's the path I'm going to take, even though there might be a chance the guy at the rental place didn't know what he was talking about. I'll soon be in the market for a new car, and will consider a model from the cheesy bastards who manufactured my rental car about the same time I consider eating a bowl of nails for breakfast.

## Tennessee's Tragic Muse

Here in Chicago, the Steppenwolf Theatre Company is currently mounting a well-reviewed "Young Adult's Production" of *The Glass Menagerie*, which raises the question, "what production of *The Glass Menagerie* is not for young adults?"

I don't mean this at all facetiously, because there is no more poetic and poignant play in the American canon, and its status as an American literary classic is very much merited.

But when I saw a production some years ago at the Stratford Shakespeare Festival, it struck me that, as gloomy as the play's portrait of the repressed and crippled Laura Wingfield might be, it represents a kind of wish-fulfillment on the part of Tennessee Williams, a determinedly brave and poetically false obscuring and softening of a much darker reality that might have been difficult for 13-year-olds to absorb or accept.

After all, Williams' sister Rose, upon whom the character of Laura is based, was crippled much more severely than Laura. A schizophrenic from early adulthood, Rose was lobotomized against her will, and the guilt experienced by her younger brother Thomas (he changed his name to Tennessee in college) after failing to stop his mother from authorizing this primitive and pointless operation is said to be one of the reasons he was plagued by severe insomnia, depression, and drug and alcohol problems throughout his life.

Williams dealt directly with lobotomization — not to mention cannibalism and similarly unsavory subjects — in other plays, but *The Glass Menagerie* is, like the play's metaphorical glass collection, itself something of a fragile fantasy. Interestingly, I saw the play myself as a teenager, and in my early twenties as well, and greatly enjoyed both productions. But it wasn't until a decade or so later in Stratford that I fully understood that Laura, as lonely and hopeless as she might have been, was actually Williams' idealized dream version of how the real-life Rose (who was, incidentally, born 99 years ago today) might have lived under better circumstances. Like most "young adults," I hadn't been ready, back then, for the ugly reality.

The night of the Stratford production, I woke up abruptly in my hotel room, and, disoriented, thought for just an instant that I was in my childhood bedroom. I was probably disturbed by the play's dark undercurrents, and likely had had a bad dream about the play, or my own past, or both. Not long after this slightly unsettling night, I wrote the following poem, which isn't about the play itself so much as Williams' painful and beautiful fantasy, with a bit of my own family history mixed in, and which I offer now as a modest birthday gift to the memory of Rose Williams:

[ continued on next page ]

**A Memory Play**

(After seeing a production of "The Glass Menagerie")

Later that night I'd lifted up from sleep –  
My body obeying my baffled head –  
And thought I was back in the bed and room  
I'd shared with my brother when we were young.  
Though certain I was grown, I couldn't say,  
In the billion-dotted darkness, where I lay,  
The real walls receded, crayoned, changed.

I searched for the sad door I hadn't seen  
Since seven other homes had intervened  
And thought I could limn the dim, familiar lines  
Of wavering walls descending out of time  
Like the stars you know you see but then you don't  
But only sense at all because the sun  
Has deferred before their feeble lights again.

I'd lifted up from sleep and fallen back  
Into a crack between the bed and the past,  
And, seventeen years since I'd left my home,  
Again in my sleep I wandered those halls  
From which the souls I'd left behind emerged  
And, stirring to a deeper dark than mine,  
Helped to make a memory play begin.

With the houselights down, in a scriptless scene,  
My cast had mingled out of sense and time,  
Their day-diminished stars allowed to shine.  
So my wife at her breast had nursed, say, Rick,  
Who after school I'd scouted gutters with  
For interesting trash when we were six:  
All my pals, and the odd adults we'd be

And all my family spirits but for one,  
Mingling, for an act, in the happy gloom.  
And seconds before I'd awakened to dawn,  
My brother appeared through the scribbled scrim  
To join us in our early lives again:  
Made better in my mind, and whole in his,  
A child again, and seated beside me.

The way you'd once dreamed your sister could be:  
Not happy, but, in the candlelight, alive.  
You turned around and looked into her eyes  
Back when you still could sleep. Before all the lights.  
Before the substances and sun that lightened  
And faded everyone you wanted to see.  
Before the first act. Before you were Tennessee.

## **Cold Weather Pleasures: The Good, the Bad, and the Gloppy**

### **Activity One: Make Lamb Stew, Rake Leaves, Eat Lamb Stew**

Details: On late autumn/early winter day of November 12, while wife and daughter are at rehearsal, make from-scratch lamb stew in totally disorganized and improvisational fashion, using no recipe. Rake wet leaves in front yard, and drag to curb. Eat stew.

#### Ingredients:

Two large lamb chops, salted and broiled until very rare, then cubed  
12 tiny potatoes, halved  
5 small turnips that have been in refrigerator for month, cubed  
5 stalks of celery, chopped  
2 large white onions, cut into large chunks  
7 carrots, peeled and chopped  
7 large bags of wet leaves

1. Place all ingredients (with exception of wet leaves, which you will rake later; the third of one of lamb chops you've already eaten right out of broiler; and the two bones, which you've gnawed on like starving coyote and then given to dog to finish job) into crock pot.
2. Wonder if you should have used lamb shoulder, leg of lamb, or "lamb stew meat," if there is such a thing, instead of lamb chops. Wonder if lamb chops are effete. Muse on superior manliness of venison or bear stew.
3. Wonder if turnips are too old. Wonder what pioneers ate all winter, hunkered down in sod house in Nebraska. Think of "O Pioneers," and "My Antonia," other Willa Cather novels featuring starving homesteaders. Decide turnips are okay.
4. Add, for some reason you're not sure of, splash of olive oil to assembled vegetables waiting at bottom of crockpot, and half bottle of cheap red wine, because you never drink red wine and want to get rid of it. Throw in couple of teaspoons of crushed garlic.
5. Take lamb bones away from dog because you're afraid he'll choke on them, and place in garbage. Wonder what dogs in wild do when they're choking. Wonder whether Heimlich maneuver can be adapted to dogs. Wonder if wild dogs have evolved wild version of Heimlich; if not, wonder if dogs have evolved to resist choking on dog bones. Cease worrying about dog. Add whatever's left in bottle of parsley you never use. Add equal parts white pepper and black pepper to taste, which is to say in excessive amounts. Salt liberally.
6. Uncover crock pot for a while because you think you might have added too much red wine, and wait for some to boil off. Pluck out a couple of wine-soaked lamb cubes and give to dog to replace bones you stole. Watch dog carefully for signs of drunkenness. Wonder how it would be possible to tell.
7. Add half teaspoon of sugar to offset overwhelming red wine flavor. Add few dashes of something you find in cupboard called "Emeril's Essence" spice mixture to offset sugar, cross fingers it isn't Cajun spice that will ruin stew.
8. Wonder if tarragon is good with lamb stew, shrug, add a few dashes. Wonder if tarragon can go bad. Wonder what tarragon is, exactly. Shrug again, add some more. Cover and continue to slow-cook.
9. Go outside and rake leaves. Feel virtuous. Look up at Norway maple and realize it is preparing to dump new load of leaves as soon as you're finished raking this batch. Feel discouragement begin to curdle virtue. Look at neighbor's lawns to see how many of them haven't raked leaves yet. Feel chagrined to discover that you're last on block to rake leaves. Consider possibility that rotting leaves will "fertilize the lawn" and therefore don't need to be raked. Weigh this against what is likely to be diametrically opposed opinion of neighbors. Continue raking until you feel ravenous and a little lightheaded.
10. Eat stew. Wonder why very hard turnips and much softer potatoes seem to have cooked to exactly same consistency. Note that lamb cubes seem to have disintegrated into thin, but very delicious, shreds. Overall, decide stew is a little oily, but quite tasty. Reflect that food always tastes better after outdoor exercise. Remember that you always think same thing when eating after outdoor exercise, then promptly forget it.

**PLEASURE RATING: 8 OUT OF 10**



21. Someone says, "See you in hell." Curse unreliable friend. Mutter under breath, "No, see you in hell."

22. Improbably happy ending with audience expected to believe that repressed accountant and beautiful, manipulative woman can not only fall in love with each other but escape punishment for their many crimes, including murder in broad daylight and unauthorized multi-million-dollar electronic funds transfer, and live happily ever after.

23. Feel relieved that movie is over. Open one fortune cookie, read pointless and poorly written fortune. Throw other cookie in garbage. Place leftover mabu tofu in refrigerator.

**PLEASURE RATING: 2 OUT OF 10.**

Conclusion: Remind yourself of what you remind yourself at beginning of every winter: Alone, or with friends, or with family, and no matter what the weather, it's always more pleasurable to do something active (sled, shovel snow, rake leaves, make something from scratch, play basketball, go to the movies, take a trip, walk the dog) than to stay indoors, watch a video, watch mindless television programs, surf the web, and eat prepared food, delivery food, or take-out food.

As soon as it gets really, really cold outside, promptly forget this.

## **Comma Chameleon**

Here, taken verbatim from an obituary in the Chicago Sun-Times, is the amazing story of a woman who succumbed in old age to a terrible disease, then by some mysterious agency was given a second chance at life, and took full advantage of it by enjoying another 79 years:

“Born June 18, 1929 after a long struggle with Alzheimer’s disease, departed this life on Saturday, November 7, 2008.”

Good karma? Nah, bad comma.

## **Crapitulation, Culture, and the Wall Street Journal**

After a break of about a year, I started reading the Wall Street Journal again just this week, and promptly encountered the following rather disturbing passage, in a page one feature article about the 300th and final bout of a British boxer, Peter Buckley, who'd lost 256 out of his 299 previous matches:

"With five seconds left Friday night, Mr. Buckley unleashed a wild swing for the last punch of his professional career. It missed.

"The bell rang. The crowd rose. Peter Buckley's name filled the air of a boxing arena for the first, and last, time.

"The judge's decision came quickly. The score was 40 to 38 points. A tattooed arm was held up. The perennial loser had won."

I'll explain why this particular passage bothered me so much in a moment, but first a word about a word: "Crapitulation."

Crapitulation is a collective shrug in the face of incipient failure, an apathetic acknowledgment that there's no reason to care any more because no one else cares either. It is the process by which seemingly minuscule defects are allowed to creep into heretofore unassailably excellent cultural institutions; then, when no one notices or objects to these minor faults, the institution, in effect, capitulates and ceases to do the incessant hard work necessary to uphold its high standards. The tiny cracks then spread throughout the institution and, even as everyone continues to pretend that it's still standing, the entire edifice collapses into a sad pile of sorry crap.

Now, back to the Wall Street Journal article. The potential crapitulation I'm referring to is not Peter Buckley's: On the evidence of this article, Buckley is a relatively skilled fighter who most of the time simply wasn't good enough, and who certainly never capitulated — he was swinging up until the final bell of his final fight which, after all, he won. As a huge boxing fan myself, I have at least an inkling of how superbly skilled even supposedly "bad" boxers must be to survive in the ring.

No, I'm referring to the Wall Street Journal itself. Read that passage again and ask yourself where you've encountered this kind of prose before:

"The bell rang. The crowd rose... The score was 40 to 38 points. A tattooed arm was held up. The perennial loser had won."

The Weekly Reader? A third-grade textbook? Highlights for Kids (you know, that children's magazine that can be found in pediatricians' offices everywhere?)

The Wall Street Journal has (had?) always been one of the best-written publications in America for a general readership, rivaled only by the Atlantic Monthly in its consistent excellence, and the front-page features were particularly fine. The split between the Journal's liberal reporters and its steadfastly conservative editorial team was a continuing source of fascination to regular readers, of course, but the paper had always been united in its commitment to the crafting of first-rate prose. And, of course, its coverage of business, finance, and the markets remains essential.

But it's hard not to worry about those flat, ultra-short, declarative sentences that have all the impact of a lazy jab, the lame attempt at generating suspense, and the puzzling reference to Buckley's name "(filling) the air of a boxing arena for the first... time." Wasn't his name announced before all of his 299 previous fights, and after the 40-plus fights he'd either won or drawn? Or perhaps what the writer means is that, for the first time, the fighter's name was chanted in unison by an admiring crowd, though to make this point crystal clear would have required an additional clause, and perhaps six or seven more words, fancy footwork indeed for a story that otherwise would appear to be aimed at plodders and palookas.

I don't think the problem is with the writer, either. I Googled some of his other stories, and he clearly can write. More likely, the new Murdoch regime is beginning to enforce a "dumbing down" regimen, and the limitations of this article are the result of some sort of explicit or implicit executive mandate. Maybe Murdoch's minions convened a focus group in which some random attendee, lured by the promise of \$50 incentive and feeling obligated to say something in recompense for this payment, complained that the Journal contains too many compound sentences and "big words."

Or this article could be nothing more than a minor aberration.

But I've seen other such "minor aberrations" in the past spread faster and more destructively than an airborne virus in an elevator. I remember, for example, a ghastly afternoon back in 1981, when I first heard Lionel Richie and Diana Ross ululate their way through a song called "Endless Love" and wondered how such a tuneless and in every other respect utterly worthless song could possibly have made it onto the radio. At the same time, however, I had a terrible foreboding that this was to be the future of commercial music.

And I was, regrettably, right: Not only did the song infest the Number One position in the Top 40 for 9 endless weeks, it ushered in a joyless era of manufactured music that remains to this day. From adult contemporary pop to hip-hop to punk to electronica to metal to country to contemporary R&B, once the music industry realized that melody no longer mattered, and that a song that sounded as if the singers were making it up as they went along could be an enormous hit, there was no point any more in crafting indelible melodies.

That's crapitulation.

For former fans of poetry like myself, the dominance of free verse is a kind of slow-motion slide into crapulence, a sort of Gresham's Law in which bad verse invariably drives out the good. There probably was a time when a person who couldn't employ meter and rhyme would have been ashamed to call himself or herself a poet at all. Now the only qualification is to be a ragged obscurantist; hardly anyone bothers any more to craft memorable poems because hardly anyone cares.

For the record, I continue to have faith in the Wall Street Journal. If it truly is dumbing itself down, print and online journalists everywhere might as well all pack it in and leave the arena. But I'm holding out the hope that this particular article was, as boxing announcers are wont to say, an accidental slip rather than a knockdown, and that it'll be back on its feet in no time.

## By Fork Through New York

Of all of the qualities that make New York the world's greatest city, my favorite is its sheer profusion. There may be a few cities that are more ethnically diverse (though I'm hard-pressed to think of one) and certainly a few, like Hong Kong or Tokyo, that are even more crowded.

But none possess the overwhelming and intensely satisfying variety that characterizes New York. And that sense of sensory overload is never more apparent than in its food. Here, a couple of days after returning from a week on business there, are some thoughts about the state of New York cuisine. First, the good news:

1. Those mobile carts selling awful rubbery hot dogs in a slimy stew of slithery onions and tomato sauce seem to be disappearing from New York's streets, replaced by larger carts selling fresh-looking halal meats with lots of vegetables.
2. Hill Country, on West 26<sup>th</sup> street, serves barbecue that's not only authentic, it's better than the Texas original (better, at least, than any I ever had there, although I lived in East Texas, near the Louisiana border, so I might not be the best judge of the matter.) I've often read about barbecue that was so flavorful it didn't need any sauce at all, and I never believed it — until I tasted Hill Country's brisket and pork ribs.
3. The Grand Central Oyster Bar, one of America's great cultural institutions, is as good and as crowded as ever, with a menu listing 31 varieties of fresh fish and 36 different types of raw oyster, including the gargantuan Hama-Hama from Washington State, so big that you need a knife and fork to eat it.
4. New York is one of the few places in America where you can get Japanese robata cooking, a kind of charcoal-grilled cuisine that's much tastier than the better-known yakitori, and is perfectly suited to the American palate. In fact, it could become more popular than sushi if any savvy restaurateur ever figured out how to market it to the heartland.
5. The touristy Little Italy is still hanging in there, and a walk through the adjacent Chinatown, the largest in America, is an incredible experience, unless you're a duck.
6. For years, I've been mentally collecting the funny signs I see on New York restaurants. My favorite: "Hair & Nail Deli Salad," which sounds like a dish Marcel Duchamp might concoct.
7. Most of the old-line delis selling enormous slab-like corned beef and hot pastrami sandwiches have been replaced, especially in the Times Square area, by restaurants serving salads and other healthy fare.

Now, the bad news:

1. Most of the old-line delis selling enormous slab-like corned beef and hot pastrami sandwiches have been replaced, especially in the Times Square area, by restaurants serving salads and other healthy fare.
2. The spread of the bagel through America's heartland in the past decade or two not only transformed it into a gummy simulacrum of its former self, it eventually compromised the original article. I saw signs on a couple of delis proclaiming that they sell real boiled bagels, a distinction that years ago was unnecessary to make.
3. One of the things that once made a stroll through New York in the autumn so enjoyable was the hot roasted chestnuts the sidewalk vendors used to sell. They're still available here and there, but much less common than before.
4. Out of some misplaced sense of cultural chauvinism, many of the vendors that once sold those horrible hot dogs have failed to replace them with the infinitely better-tasting Chicago-style dog. This is almost as bad as the cultural chauvinism that prevents Chicago pizza joints from replacing their doughy deep-dish gut bombs with the infinitely better-tasting New York-style slice.
5. Many years ago, a friend and I were in a taxicab stuck in traffic on the way to La Guardia. Both of us happened to glance at a souvlaki vendor, then at each other, and a second later we dashed across the street, purchased two gyros with extra sauce, two orders of fries, and two Cokes, which we inhaled as the taxicab raced through the Holland Tunnel. This is something I'll never be able to do again — though not, come to think of it, because of any shortage of gyro vendors, but rather because in those days I was unacquainted with my cholesterol level, and had never heard of heartburn.

## **A Three-Dimensional W Being a Brief Review of the New George Bush Biopic**

Josh Brolin portrays George W. Bush in Oliver Stone's new biopic, *W.*, as a bandy-legged welterweight who is, in his earlier years, frequently drunk and, as President, seemingly punch-drunk as he staggers his way to the end of public utterances he never should have started.

It's a brilliant portrayal that rarely gives in to the temptation to caricature the President by taking his public persona and blowing up its least attractive characteristics. As foolish as Bush often looks in this film, he resembles the actual Bush that all of us know, rather than the cartoon version that most of his critics have endeavored to draw.

Throughout the movie, Brolin doesn't impersonate Bush as much as he embodies him. And the embodiment is psychological as well as physical. As few of his legion of critics have ever managed to do, Stone and his screenwriter Stanley Weiser attempt to actually get inside of Bush and understand what and who (principally his father) has motivated him throughout his very curious life.

Sure, Stone and Brolin accurately portray Bush as an undeserving child of privilege and a slightly dimwitted frat boy. But *W.* also acknowledges that Bush is something more than that. The Dubya of this movie is also a genuinely repentant sinner, a loving husband, a man of iron will and unwavering certitude, a mostly dutiful son who's haunted by his father's legacy, and an uncynical believer in the power of human liberty. In Stone's telling, there were no "lies" about WMDs because everyone in the White House really believed Saddam had them, and the Iraq war from Bush's perspective was genuinely (mostly) about defeating an axis of evil rather than ensuring access to oil.

It's a surprising stance for a filmmaker who indulged in wild conspiracy theories in his last movie with a President's initials in the title, *JFK*. But anyone who saw Stone's more recent movie *World Trade Center*, which thankfully avoided the temptation to blame 9/11 on anyone other than the actual perpetrators, Al Qaeda, won't be surprised by the evidence in *W.* of Stone's maturation as a thinker.

Among its other virtues, *W.* is brilliantly cast, beginning with Brolin, who is impeccable; Jeffrey Wright as Colin Powell, who is positioned as the movie's genuine hero, at least until he buckles under and makes his infamous UN speech; Dennis Boutsikaris as Paul Wolfowitz; and Richard Dreyfuss as Dick Cheney. The only false note is Thandie Newton's Condoleezza Rice, who is portrayed here as a frail, toadying simpleton — the kind of cartoonish portrayal that the movie otherwise successfully avoids.

*W.* is ultimately a fairly minor movie, and doesn't come to any resounding conclusions about Bush's presidency or American society. (Bush's vow, after losing his first electoral contest, to never be "out-Texan'd or out-Christian'd again" is the closest the movie gets to peering into the heart of the American psyche.) There's nothing in the movie about any of Bush's siblings other than Jeb; the events of 9/11 itself and its direct aftermath are never shown; and there is nothing whatsoever about any of Bush's activities as President other than those related to the war in Iraq.

Ultimately, that may be the way it should be — pretty much everyone agrees that Bush's legacy, for good or ill, will be defined by Iraq. And certainly there are few people other than steadfast Republic ideologues who would rate Bush's presidency a resounding success. Stone certainly would not.

But in this surprisingly sympathetic movie, Oliver W. Stone at least grants George W. Bush what he's deserved all along — an effort at understanding. Ironically, if more of his critics had approached him as Stone does here, as an actual human being, they might have been more successful early on in convincing the American public that he was far too much of a lightweight to be the President.

## Skunked

I was bicycling the painfully quaint streets of Wilmette this past weekend (painful in the sense that the cobblestone lanes, originally constructed to give horse hooves better traction, deliver juddering jolts to the drivers and bike riders of today) when I came across this recently expired creature: [ [link](#) ]

I think I've seen a live skunk only once in my life, and I had skirted her by a wide margin, although, to be fair, she had avoided me every bit as assiduously. But this fellow, who was thoroughly dead though not yet decomposed, gave me an opportunity to investigate up close what a skunk really looked like and smelled like.

Though not, I should add, felt like — I'm neither a scientist nor a taxidermist, and although I'm curious about wild creatures, I thought it best to leave the up close and personal stuff to the few early-arriving flies already busily doing whatever it is they do to flattened, car-killed carcasses.

And yet this one wasn't flattened at all. There was no blood to be seen, no odor in the air that would suggest a failed attempt to ward off a predator, and no other clues as to his untimely demise. His luxurious-looking white stripe on full display, he was stretched languorously across seven rows of paving brick, although his legs were tucked in fairly tightly as if he were braced for a fall from a long distance. Do skunks, like cats, always land on their feet? It's probably impossible to know, because no one, upon spying a skunk about to leap, would ever stick around long enough for the landing.

And even if skunks did possess this useful ability, it would hardly matter as regards their larger reputation. Like virtually all of the wild creatures who invisibly surround us, skunks have been given only one notable characteristic — and landing on his feet ain't it.

Like a one-dimensional, poorly written pulp novel character or a sub-Superman comic book hero (you know, the Flash is fast, the Incredible Hulk is angry, Plastic Man is impressively flexible, etcetera), the skunk has been reduced to one easy-to-remember super power: He really, really stinks. Possums play dead, raccoons wash their food before eating it, squirrels hoard nuts and filch seeds, armadillos roll up into a ball, skunks have notably bad B.O.: One-trick ponies, every one of them.

A dozen or so times a year ever since I was a child, driving cross country or even in the northern suburbs of Chicago, I'd detect the scent of skunk, always from what I surmised to be a long, long distance. You may have seen the recent news report that up to one out of every four mammal species may soon be extinct: For most of us, given how rarely we encounter them outside a zoo or a video, they might as well already be. And yet the skunk is different; though he skulks around in the dark just like the foxes and coyotes we also never see, he manages to make his presence known. Even from the other side of a forest, he's got a kind of primitive communications protocol that announces his presence, and the fact that he was recently displeased.

To tell the truth, I never thought a skunk's odor was particularly unpleasant. To me, at least, it smells a bit like crushed lemons with a coppery tinge. While other people may find the smell a lot less pleasant than that, I suspect that the real issue, for those who got too close, is the intensity and ineradicability of the odor, rather than its intrinsically disgusting qualities.

I got off my bike, snapped a memorial photograph with my cellphone, and stooped over the skunk's body. I put my face as close as I could to its fur without coming into contact with it and, sure enough, there was a very faint lemony smell.

And nothing else.

The fact that skunks, and so many other creatures, possess only one notable characteristic each isn't just a human construction; it's the way it really does seem to be. After all, why aren't skunks, while still maintaining their distinctly skunk-like essence, also able to play dead like opossums and roll up into a ball like armadillos and tunnel instantly underground like shrews and slash predators to ribbons like badgers and plot raids on bird feeders like squirrels — in addition to stinking up the joint?

To this layman, at least, it's as if there was a great evolutionary tournament in which every creature was granted a single frail lance with which to contend with his competitors for territory and food, and with his predators as well.

Though if this is the case, the experiment may not be working out as well as it could for all concerned. Consider that there is, in fact, one creature that, like Superman, possesses a whole host of super powers instead of just that one gimmick. I think it's safe to say that our multifarious abilities — big brain, opposable thumbs, and all the rest — are what have allowed us to claim a resounding victory over our fellow creatures through extinction or alienation and, in the process, to also claim defeat.

## The Sun Also Rises

Among all of the other market meltdowns last week, the Japanese stock index Nikkei suffered its worst one-week loss in history, shedding nearly a quarter of its value — this, after a long and painful recession. So, in the spirit of anachronistic contrarianism, here's a souvenir in verse from late in 1991, when I was living in Japan and it appeared to be on the verge of conquering the world economically.

I remember being skeptical about the Japanese “threat” for a long time, but eventually, like everyone else, I succumbed to the “madness of crowds” and wrote this poem. As it turns out, it was almost literally at the peak of Japan’s dominance — its economy started to sputter almost immediately thereafter.

But it works in the other direction, too; often, at the very moment when the majority of the investing public is convinced that a given market or economy is in permanent decline, it begins to recover. The sun also rises — in the U.S. and Japan alike.

Incidentally, one explanatory note: The last stanza refers to the massive green nets that were draped around buildings under construction in Japanese cities, as well as to the controversy over the Japanese hunting of whales and the other forms of environmental despoilation they committed. I suspect Japan, like the United States, has since become more conscious of environmental stewardship, and hope that this attitude, as well as our industries’ investment in solar energy technologies, bio-fuels and other alternative energy sources, will survive both the hard times we’re experiencing now, and the next wave of prosperity as well.

### **Expatriate, Waking** (Japan, 1991)

The rising sun assembles itself in the East  
With matches, scraps of silk and kerosene,  
And, hot off the line, lacquers our door before  
The pale plodders stateside even dream it.

Like all we consume, sunlight is made here,  
And in its export West, warms only those who work.  
Witness these pigeons, diligent at dawn:  
Setting the tone from below, they’re selecting

From a soggy salad of string and twig  
Sufficient bits from which to build a home  
Across the yard from, and a comment upon,  
In its sense, and compact cleverness, ours.

Outmanned in every sphere is how we feel:  
We’ve the better materials, not they!  
But across from my office has materialized  
A nineteen-story tower in the time it took me

To skim three magazines and eat a bun.  
I swear, an hour ago, it wasn’t there:  
Just a lot of rubble, flattened sacks of rice,  
And a crumbling cistern choked with twiggy moss.

Now, nearly done, its bloody beams are dressed  
With massive, block-wide, kelp-green drifting nets  
That sift the swimming breeze and hide the doomed  
Whales, spirits, haunting its empty halls.

## Hail Fellow, Wilmette

There's a big empty lot a few blocks from my house in Wilmette, Illinois, and all summer long, Seamus (our dog) and I have been watching a couple of kildeer hatch their eggs.

You've probably seen kildeer, even if you don't recognize the name — they're the diligent-looking, stilt-legged little birds that are usually found on the shoreline, playing matador with the incoming tide, darting in daringly to peck at some kind of minute crustaceans dumped on shore by the waves, then racing away frantically as the the next big wave bears down on them.

What these kildeer were doing in Wilmette, a mile away from Lake Michigan, I didn't at first understand, not, at least, until I learned on Wikipedia that they often nest far from water. Thinking them lost or out of their natural range, I spent the summer rooting them on, because the empty lot wasn't completely empty — there's a big sign advertising a new condo development at the front, and a single backhoe parked ominously at the back, very close to where the unprotected kildeer's nest lay on the flat ground.

The kildeer, however, seemed less concerned about this real estate development than about Seamus, who unleashed an obligatory yelp in their direction every time we walked past. When Seamus came too close a couple of times, I actually got to see one of the adults enact the pantomime that's the species' greatest claim to fame: She (he?) raced away from the unprotected nest, peeping piteously and holding one wing stiffly, as if broken. The idea, apparently, is to pretend that they're injured and easy prey, thereby luring a predator in their direction, and away from their vulnerable brood.

This marvelous altruistic display wouldn't work all that well against a backhoe. But in one of the few positive local outcomes of the current frightening financial crisis, construction on the condo complex appears to have been delayed. And so, a few weeks back, the young kildeer hatched and flew away.

Wilmette, their new home, is as good a place as any to raise a fledgling family. It's the kind of town where people drive four miles below the speed limit; keep their cars a foot behind the crosswalk when turning left instead of pulling into the middle of the intersection, as drivers everywhere else in the world are wont to do; and keep a discreet distance between themselves and the person at the counter not only at banks, so as not to see the details of your sensitive financial transactions, but at Italian take-out places, so that they won't offend you by inadvertently learning of your stunning preference in pizza toppings. (This, I have to say, is even more profoundly irritating than the inability to turn left properly; last winter I was forced to wait out in the cold because the person in front of me at a little pizza place was maintaining a discreet six-foot distance between herself and the customer at the counter.)

In any event, I fervently hope that our current financial crisis ends as soon as possible, and that construction on all sorts of projects picks up immediately thereafter; but this isn't entirely an unconflicted hope. Even in Politenessville (the largely affectionate term I've begun to apply to Wilmette) there is no one, I don't think, willing to relocate next season's brood of kildeer before the next big wave of development arrives, and the backhoes begin their work. And where else, in any event, could they possibly go?

## **The Impending Sushi Apocalypse**

I found myself in a mini-mall in Des Moines, Iowa earlier today and happened to notice the following hand-lettered sign in the window of a Thai restaurant:

We Now Offer Sushi! Delivery Too!

As someone whose definition of happiness is sharing a large platter of sushi and a couple of Sapporos with one or more good friends, this sign bothered me for any number of reasons.

First, people, it was a Thai restaurant. Would you eat sushi at a German restaurant? Then what is it that makes a Thai restaurant any more plausible as a vendor of raw fish, seaweed, and rice, other than the fact that Japan and Thailand are both in Asia, albeit many thousands of miles and radically different cultural and culinary traditions apart?

Second, the sign was scrawled in black magic marker. At restaurants that specialize in sushi, the chefs train for years. For some reason, the unwillingness of this restaurant to invest 29 bucks in a professionally printed sign suggested to me a rather shorter training period, and a decidedly less rigorous dedication to quality.

Third, the sign's "now," in particular, raised my hackles, because the opportunistic and yet extremely tardy me-too-ism implied by its enthusiastic proffer of a product that has been popular in America for about three decades somehow implied an equally crass and laggard approach to quality.

Fourth, the restaurant was in Des Moines. This is not a criticism of Des Moines, which is a sprawling, prosperous, and surprisingly sophisticated city, but rather a commentary on its geographic status, to wit: Its location thousands of miles from any available ocean.

Fifth, this particular Thai restaurant was in the middle of a mini-mall in the middle of a middle-American city many miles away from any actual source of seafood, and yet it was proposing to attenuate this supply chain even further by placing the sushi, many varieties of which depend heavily, remember, on raw fish for their gustatory effect, into the back of a van and delivering it, sooner or later, to your house or office where it might, or might not, be consumed every bit as soon as it should be.

And it was, by the way, an extremely and unseasonably warm day.

All in all, as a recipe for painful food poisoning or a long-term parasitic infection, this scheme would seem to have few equals. Sushi has been part of the urban American scene for around three decades now, but as stragglers like this Thai restaurant, some of whom may not be quite as careful as they should be about proper preparation or pre-freezing, get into the game, it seems increasingly likely that someone, somewhere in America, is going to have a very bad lunch of it.

Nor is this a concern only to those less-painstaking restaurants and their patrons. As we've seen with so many other food-poisoning cases in recent years, the health consequences of a single dicey California roll or bad batch of maguro could become gut-wrenching for an entire industry.

The sushi business faces other serious problems as well, most notably the greedy and short-sighted plunder of our fisheries, resulting in sinking stocks of some of our most popular fish. True, if raw fish continues to be peddled, in effect, out of the backs of overheated vans, the resultant problems, while bad news for someone's digestive tract, could eventually be good news indeed for the dwindling schools of fish that continue to wriggle in our coastal waters.

But it seems to me that a responsible industry would be doing as much as it possibly could to preserve the health of both. I'll do my part: I'll never order green curry with shrimp at a Japanese restaurant, and I will definitely never order an inside-out salmon roll with ikura in a Thai one.

## **The Worst Actor of Our Time, Part II**

### **Part Two: The Dead Return**

A week ago, when I posted the first half of this reminiscence of my very brief career in my twenties as a performer, I had intended the follow-up to be a light-hearted account centering on one of my two objectives back then in pursuing acting: meeting girls.

But every time I tried to write that story, the face of one actress in particular, and her unimaginably horrific story, kept materializing like an admonishing wraith, and I realized that this instead was the story I needed to tell.

I had noticed this young woman, whom I'll call Laura, in the opening moments of the first day of a weekend workshop in dramatic improvisation, and thought she looked distantly familiar. But I was caught up in the demanding class, which focused on "mask work," or the use of masks to allow actors to temporarily efface their own identities and get in touch with deep emotions without dwelling on their appearance or image, and so I instantly forgot about her.

The German poet Heinrich Heine makes reference in his writings to maskenfreiheit, or "the freedom conferred by masks," and within the first minutes of this class, I began to grasp the effectiveness of this technique.

Though as an actor I was hopeless, I had some minimal ability as an improviser, and, from behind the safety of my mask (an eerie, completely blank white visage) I improvised a monologue that, for the first time in my performing "career," seemed to be capturing the audience to some very small degree.

The other actors, behind their identical expressionless visages, were equally impressive, and some, in the intensity of their emotion, a little frightening. As each of us finished our monologues, we removed our masks and watched the next performer in line. At last, near the end, one young woman, the one I had glanced at and thought I recognized at the beginning of the class, removed her mask, and seeing her face revealed so abruptly, I suddenly remembered who she was:

It was Laura, who had died many years before.

Laura had, almost literally, been "the girl next door"; she lived two or three houses over (I can't remember exactly) from my own childhood home in Chicago. I used to talk to her a bit when I was perhaps twelve or thirteen and skateboarding on the sidewalk, and she nine or ten, playing with her own friends a few sidewalk squares away. After that, my memory goes blank, until, shortly before I left home to go to college, I heard that she was killed in a terrible car crash on a family trip to Champaign-Urbana.

And now, here she was again, back in the world of the living.

Within one second of her removing her mask, I blurted, "I thought you were dead!" She took a moment of her own to stare back at me and then turned...well, I was going to say "as white as her mask," but that wouldn't really be accurate; her face, for an instant, actually flushed, because, of course, I had embarrassed her in front of the class, and then turned grey and slack. She laughed uncomfortably and said, "no, that was my best friend. I recognize you now; your name is Michael, right? Don't you remember? Everybody in the neighborhood used to talk about how she and I looked alike."

And then I remembered. Laura, the woman I was talking to, had lived across the street from me, not down the block, and in fact had looked enough like the dead girl that in my memory I had somehow conflated the two into a single person. Nor was that my only mistake; when Laura and I went out for drinks after class, I discovered that the car crash hadn't occurred in Champaign-Urbana (where I'd gotten that idea from, I have no idea) but rather on a busy street just about a block from our respective houses.

There was much more to the story I hadn't known about. Laura and her friend had been invited by some drunk teenage boys who worked at a local service station to go for a joy ride. There was a crash; Laura's lookalike friend had gone through the windshield and was decapitated. And here was the part of the story that was difficult enough to hear, and unimaginably more difficult to have lived: Laura, seriously injured herself, lay in the street and, unable to move, was forced to look upon the head of her doppelganger, her look-alike, her best friend.

I suppose it is possible that Laura was embellishing or exaggerating; obviously, I had heard nothing in the neighborhood of the details of this horrific accident. But her description of those long moments on the street waiting for the ambulance to take her, and what remained of her friend, away, seemed utterly desolate, and beyond all pretense.

We talked for a bit about the old neighborhood, and I recalled a time when I had seen her walking home from a grocery store loaded down with an overstuffed grocery bag and a gallon of milk. I had come up behind her and offered to carry the milk for her, but instead of talking to her, I had, like the gauche fourteen-year-old boy I was, loped ahead to her front door and, gallon of milk in hand, waited impatiently for her to arrive.

But mostly we talked about her life after the accident. She had, she recounted, been hospitalized, had also spent some time in a mental facility, had abused drugs, had struggled to find herself. She'd even lived, for a couple of years, with a very well-known rock star, and now she was trying to create a career as an actress.

I thought then about her performance from a couple of hours before. Like mine, it had been suffused with a very personal brand of emotion — this was, after all, a class in dramatic, rather than comedic, improvisation — and obviously her wells of emotion were much deeper than mine; I had never, thank God, experienced personal tragedy at a level even remotely comparable to hers.

I have no idea how much, if any, success she ever experienced as an actress; I have forgotten her last name and have no idea how to find out what she's doing now. But if she did experience success, I don't for a minute believe that this well of emotion, this tragedy, would have been what made the difference. Acting is about insight and instincts and technique, and without a command of all of these skills, and for that matter considerable charisma, the ability to access and express deep trauma or other profound emotions, while perhaps necessary, is not at all sufficient.

For my own part, I wonder if this brief incident (brief, that is, from my perspective, not Laura's) revealed something about my own inability to build a convincing character on stage. Creating a character is about individuation and observation, which is to say looking very closely at a real or scripted individual and faithfully inhabiting and replicating the external and internal behaviors and motivations that make this person different from every other person who has ever walked the face of the earth.

As a writer, I detest cliché; but as an actor, I was perhaps too tolerant of "type." I looked at Laura and thought I knew what she was, when in fact, even though I had lived across the street from her as a child, I didn't even know who she was. She was an individual with an amazing story to tell, but in my conflating of her appearance with that of her best friend (the fact that they looked alike was only a partial excuse) I might as well have been gazing upon a featureless white visage.

To the very large extent that I was unable to see the real person behind the "mask" in the characters I had been granted to play, I was a failure as an actor. There, in my early twenties, I already knew that acting was not for me. Writing was still something I hoped to pursue, and one of the measures of my capability in the regard would be the extent to which I would be able to cast off my own masks, and those worn by others (the "maskwork" that we had been practicing that day being, after all, only a crutch, or a means to an end) to see, and faithfully recreate, the real human beings that breathed behind them.

## The Worst Actor of Our Time

### Part One: Bury The Dead

My recent post on this site entitled “Robert De Niro’s Ugly Mug: A Roundabout Review of Righteous Kill by Way of a Long-Forgotten Horror Flick Called *The Flesh Eaters*,” prompted a number of complaints (the number, to be precise, was one) that I had no right to mock a once-great actor like De Niro — an Oscar-winner, no less — when I myself had never personally experienced the challenges of creating a character, the terrors of facing a live audience, or the trauma of encountering witheringly negative reviews.

All of this is utterly untrue. I have known terror. I have felt trauma. And not only have I experienced the challenges of embodying an onstage character, I have failed in every conceivable respect to meet those challenges.

In short, I do indeed have a background in acting, and one that is not without an interesting parallel to De Niro himself. Just as De Niro, in the years between *Mean Streets* and *Meet the Parents*, once was widely considered to be the Greatest Actor of His Generation, I once was regarded in certain very narrow circles as the Worst Actor of His Time.

To be fair, I never had any ambitions to become the next John Turturro or Jeff Goldblum or even Harold Ramis (the actors I physically most resembled in the years before the years, er, plumped out my features a bit.) When I was in my early twenties, I got into acting for only two reasons: First, to gain a better understanding of how plays were constructed from the inside out, because I wanted to write a play myself (and indeed, if my goal were to write several obscure and unproduced plays, one could say that this purpose was manifestly and gloriously fulfilled.)

And, second, to meet girls. More on that goal, and its ultimate success or unsuccess, in Part Two of this post, a few days from now.

I was cast in my first professional play, a satirical revue called *Saturday Night Special Edition*, because a young woman in one of my acting classes recommended me to the director, and he, in turn, hired me on the spot. At the time, I thought this was because he immediately recognized that I was perfect for the role, that of an eccentric scientist, but later realized that he was one of those low-energy people who tends to select the first thing placed in front of him — in this case, me.

There’s not much to say about this play, which was amateurishly written and directed, except that I transcended the production in every respect, specifically as regards the amateurishness. I was asked, for example, to create my character as a German émigré, but unable to even distantly approximate a German accent, nor for that matter any other known variation on standard English, I eventually declaimed my lines in a Chicago accent because that was the only one I could credibly carry off, having been born with it.

My second — and, as it turns out, last — professional play was entitled *Bury the Dead*, and while I probably should take the advice of the title (as the critics at the time didn’t hesitate to do), a brief post-mortem on this infamous production would not be out of order.

First, the director was a terribly nice and well-meaning young woman who didn’t believe in preparation. The play, by the well-known novelist Irwin Shaw, was set in World War I, and at various points in the proceedings most of the characters were called upon to whistle the tune to the song “I Can’t Give You Anything But Love, Baby.”

But there were two problems: First, the song was written after the end of the First World War.

Second, and more substantially, the director neglected, at any point during rehearsals, to bring in a recording of said melody, and so (as one of the reviews acidly noted) every character ended up whistling a different tune, some of them not only non-existent but musicologically impossible, and all of them, without exception, anything but “Love, Baby.”

As far as the play’s storyline, without going into too many gruesome dramatic details, it concerned a troupe of slain soldiers who refuse to be buried, arising instead from the dead to declaim upon the horrors of war.

Fair enough; but there were seven or eight reanimated soldiers in the script, each of whom was dragged one at a time, slowly and awkwardly and with many painful-sounding thumps as their elbows and heads banged against the stage, into the burial “trench” at the foot of the stage as they succumbed; each of whom came back to life individually and arose out of the trench, with more slow and painful banging that echoed in the profound silence of the auditorium; each of whom was examined one by one by a doctor (the character I played) both before and after their deaths; each of whom delivered a bitter soliloquy about the war; each of whom was implored by a hometown honey to just stay dead so she could marry someone else; and each of whom slowly shuffled off the stage at the end of the play, one by one, like the wise and gentle zombies they were.

And each of these actions were performed in the same order, from stage right to stage left, every time; these soldiers might have been pacifists, but they were practically fascistic about maintaining a strict sense of order in life and in death. The effect of all this on the audience was a sense of overwhelming doom and dread; as Soldier Number Two, for example, was dragged, thumpingly, into the trench, or clambered stiffly out again, or launched into his anti-war soliloquy, all the audience could think was “oh dear god, there are six more to go.” And, with every such action, and for nearly two hours, this mind-numbingly predictable countdown, and the dread it engendered, was repeated.

Though the play was intended as an anti-war treatise, it functioned instead as a sort of anti-theatre statement; it actually drained from the audience any desire to ever see another play ever again.

Perhaps it would be an overstatement to say it drained them of the will to live as well, but if an audience member had happened to pass away during the performance, I don't think he would have, as the stubborn soldiers did, made any kind of special effort to return to this vale of tears.

The acting wasn't all bad, and in fact there were a couple of performers in the huge cast (18 or so) who went on to some well-deserved success in the business. I was easily the worst actor in the production, despite the fact that I studied my lines and rehearsed diligently; though my role was to examine the stiff, I was in fact the biggest stiff of all.

Exactly what was the nature of my bad acting? Though well-spoken, and not particularly prone to stage fright, I was worse than wooden; I was utterly unable to access my inner emotions or to call upon them in service to the lines that Shaw had written. When asked by the director to scream in unalloyed horror at the sight of a soldier, grievous wounds still gaping, who had just clawed his way out of a shallow grave, my throat and my emotions were so constricted that the best I could manage was the wheezy caw of a melancholy crow.

My fellow actors knew from the first rehearsal that I wasn't one of them, and made sure I knew it as well. But being ambitious actors mired in an atrocious production, they were just as nasty to their more-talented colleagues, specifically for the crime of being talented.

Talented or not, every actor in the cast except for me was counting on bigger and better things. All during the production, there were rumors that the great Chicago radio personality and author Studs Terkel would show up, because many years ago he had reputedly acted in the American premiere of *Bury the Dead*. All of us hoped against hope and reason that he would say something positive about our production on his radio show or in the newspaper.

Every night from backstage, we scanned the audience for his crusty visage, but — as in a real-life version of *Waiting for Guffman* — he never arrived. Why we imagined that it would be a good thing for this discerning and intelligent man to show up and excoriate our desecration of a once-respectable play is hard to understand at this juncture. But the expectations of success, whether by way of Terkel or the critics, and then the inevitable disappointments that they engendered, only served to make the actors nastier.

There were only two actors in the entire production, in fact, that were genuinely warm people, and one of them went on to substantial success. I'll mention his name here — Michael Rooker, who co-starred with Sylvester Stallone in one movie, and has had large roles in any number of other prominent films, including *Mississippi Burning*, *Sea of Love*, and *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer* — only because I don't think he would mind being held up as an example of how nice guys sometimes do finish first.

Nor would he mind, I don't think, being reminded of just how far he has come in his career.

How far? The play was held in a small upstairs room at a ramshackle rock club on North Clark Street in Chicago that was reached by a rickety set of stairs. The plumbing was bad, and everything else was worse. One night there was a gas leak, and some of the members of the cast got sick to their stomachs; though I felt okay, I lobbied fervently for that evening's production to be canceled so I could escape from my self-imposed hell for one night. But as we had already sold three tickets, my request was ignored. My final memory of Rooker, in fact, is of him leaning out one of the upper windows of the club, moments before the curtain would rise, and barfing into the filthy alley below. A few minutes later, the show, and Rooker, went on.

My girlfriend at the time came all the way from Michigan to watch me in one of my performances (on a night when our audience was unusually large, i.e., more than six) and afterwards, she told me, bluntly but not unkindly, to "stick to writing." I took her advice, and never acted — if, indeed, acting was what I was doing — in another play.

I did achieve three small triumphs in this second and final production in my acting career. First, and most notably, as I was walking home one night down Clark Street after a typically poor performance, a car with a couple of audience members in it drove past and someone yelled out the window at me, "Hey, Doc!"

Not, bear in mind, "Hey, Doc, you suck!"

Or, "Hey Doc, you're the worst actor of your generation!"

Or, "Hey Doc, we'd better not catch you pontificating some time in the future on something called the 'Internet' about Robert De Niro and the craft of acting when it is quite obvious to us that you, yourself, cannot act a lick."

Merely, and thrillingly, "Hey, Doc!"

I waved back to my fans as the car sped off, and reveled in my success for weeks to come.

My second victory? Though one of the reviews made reference to the "large, and largely amateurish, cast," I wasn't mentioned by name, so that no one outside the handful of audience members would ever know of my utter failure as an actor, at least until this blog post.

(Further, the non-specific reference allowed me to surmise, or pretend to surmise, that I was not among that majority of the cast that had been evaluated as amateurish.)

My final triumph concerned another bad actor in the cast — second, perhaps, only to me in that regard — who had taken it upon himself to harass me throughout the rehearsal period; we nearly came to blows on a couple of occasions. What, exactly, was the source of his enmity? I was never quite sure — especially because it never seemed to have anything to do with the production or our respective performances — but as a writer, I have trained myself to never settle for approximation and speculation, instead attempting always to locate the one word that fits precisely, so let me attempt to do so here.

He was a dick.

This bad actor and very nasty man played one of the un-dead (though clearly the “peace-loving” part of his character was harder to pull off than the “zombie” part.) Just before intermission at every performance, after I had laboriously examined the last of the zombies and feigned in my inimitable fashion shock at their revivification, I was to slowly remove my stethoscope and, as the light dimmed, toss it offstage. At the last performance, however, I flung the stethoscope, hard, towards where I guessed the previously-dead dick was standing, and, even though the lights were almost completely down, managed to hit him with the metal part square on his nose.

As an acting success, it doesn't quite measure up to an Oscar or an Emmy, but all things considered, I'll take my triumphs where I can find them.

## **Robert De Niro's ugly mug: a roundabout review of Righteous Kill by way of a long-forgotten horror flick called The Flesh Eaters**

One of my earliest movie-going memories is of being dropped off at Chicago's Nortown Theatre with my friend Saul when we were nine or ten years old to see an ultra-low-budget horror movie about microscopic monsters called *The Flesh Eaters*. Some promotional genius at the studio had come up with the idea of offering all attendees one free packet of blood per ticket.

The packets, which were handed to moviegoers along with your ticket stub, were similar to the ones used for soy sauce in carry-out Chinese, and contained some sort of viscous red liquid that must have been edible. As idiotic, tasteless, and utterly inappropriate promotional gimmicks go, this one was bloody brilliant — at least in the sense that, to this day, I can still remember it vividly.

Although my memory doesn't extend far enough to recall if Saul and I tore open our packets and attempted to swallow the contents, I wouldn't be surprised if we had. We had no money for anything other than our tickets, and before the movie started, we had loitered around the concession stand disconsolately running our fingers through spilled salt and licking it off, until an elderly gentleman took pity on us and bought us each a bag of popcorn and a Coke.

What an old man was doing at a flick like *The Flesh Eaters*, and why he himself was lurking near the candy stand and giving gifts to little boys, were questions that we never thought to ask. Instead, we innocently sipped our soda pop, even during scenes like the one where a character quaffed a beaker swimming with the eponymous miniature killers — described variously by *All Movie Guide* as "aquatic flesh-munching amoebas" and "sparkly little death-blobs" — and suffered for his efforts a gaping hole in his stomach, through which gushed several gallons of blood — fake, like the stuff in the packets, but nonetheless terrifying to a little boy. For many years afterwards, I associated the greasy odor of melted butter and salt with the smell of blood (though that didn't stop me from enjoying popcorn whenever I could scrape together a quarter for a bag.)

What does this have to do with *Righteous Kill*, starring the great Al Pacino and Robert De Niro and the gorgeous Carla Gugino? *Righteous Kill* is an urban crime drama that isn't especially bloody as these affairs go, and certainly isn't a horror movie at all, unless you are as freaked-out as I was by coming face to face with humankind's inexorable forced march towards mortality as inadvertently exemplified by the dessicated Pacino, who resembles nothing so much as a curled-up slice of ham that has been forgotten at the bottom of your refrigerator since last spring.

Despite his ruined face, Pacino is, at least, still an energetic and interesting actor, unlike his castmate De Niro, whose immensely expressive dramaturgical repertoire has lately been reduced to a single, endlessly repeated facial expression. You know the one: That bulldog grimace that looks like an illustration you might find in a child's encyclopedia for the concept of "frown."

The movie, as it turns out, is as lazy and bloodless and by-the-numbers as De Niro himself. It concerns a series of brutal killings committed by...oh, never mind...and the leaden feeling I had as I exited the multiplex probably is what made me want to remember what it was that made me love going to the movies in the first place.

Back then, there were sometimes variety shows on stage between the two movies of a double feature, and those mysterious glass-globed machines in the lobby that dispensed red-hot cashews, and ushers in braided uniforms, and an endless variety of comedy and drama and horror (sometimes in the audience as well as on the screen), and Ju-Jubees that, using thumb and forefinger, you could fire at the napes of the people in front of you — our very own "neon-colored little death-niblets" — during the rare dull stretches of *Godzilla vs. Mothra*.

I can't travel back in time to when I was nine years old, but if I could, I'd be willing to bet that what I felt when I staggered out into the sunlight after *The Flesh Eaters*, or *Jason and the Argonauts*, or *The Disorderly Orderly*, or whatever, was pure unadulterated (and un-adult) happiness.

As I got older, my taste improved a bit, until that day in high school that my buddies and I saw Stanley Kubrick's mind-blowing *2001: A Space Odyssey*, and left the theatre dazed, in awe, and forever in love with the movies. From then on, it was a race to see every movie ever made, good, bad or indifferent, because some of them — Sergio Leone's movies, for example, and later Zhang Yimou's — were amazing, and nearly every one, even the dumb ones, had something interesting to recommend them.

When I was in college, I worked nights as a typesetter for a publisher that distributed television programming guides, and part of my job was to type in the descriptions of old movies. In the off hours, usually around three or four in the morning, I would count the movies I had already seen, and even then my list was more than a thousand movies long. I can only imagine how long it would be today, if I had the time to count.

But lately, I'm starting to fall behind in my movie-going. The predominance of CGI, the utter falsity of emotion on display in most Hollywood product, and the joyless, stultifying sameness of scripts (thanks to those screenplay consultants that tell you every movie "has" to have three acts, and must have a precipitating event on page 17) have taken most of the pleasure out of the movies, as have the soulless multiplexes where they're shown. If I were a nine-year-old kid today, I wouldn't even bother flicking Ju Jubees at the necks of the automatons in front of me, watching Matthew McConaughey and Kate Hudson play-acting their way through whatever detestable nonsense they're getting paid millions for; I doubt they'd feel a thing.

This growing distaste for the movies is not a function of age, I don't think, though I'm not precisely young, and I'm aware that this complaint could be interpreted as one of those wearisome "everything was better when I was a kid" whines that I, too, dislike. It's the flicks that are sliding rapidly downhill, not me. (Okay, maybe I am too, to some immeasurably small degree.)

Nor is my complaint a function of satiety, even though I have by now many thousands of movies and a few too many tubs of popcorn under my belt. Because the fact of the matter is that movies like *Righteous Kill* are infinitely more ancient and cynical in spirit than I am or any of my friends are. I still love the movies; it's just that ugly bulldog grimace I hate.

## **Let's Take a Flying Leap Into the Freedom New World**

I was at an enormous Asian supermarket called Super H today and I saw, among all the shelves of miso, tofu, and kim chee, a new kind of iced coffee from Japan called "Let's Be Bitter." (There's a companion brand called "Let's Be Mild.") Although I resisted the impulse to buy either variety, I was inspired by the names to dig up some old files of strange and astonishing "Janglish" I collected the last time I was in Japan. All of the following are real, as hard as some of them may be to believe:

On a sweatshirt worn by a six- or seven-year old girl: "He illegal did autopsy on dead body and removed the head. This was in 1962."

On the inside lining of a windbreaker: "It was in the arid hills of a Southern California desert that the nudist colony flourished. In the clubhouse — perched high above. The bitter punishment that these great American political symbols took is now making each wince with pain at the slightest wiggle. Tension people. Tension people."

On a package of snack cakes: "We Fujiya would like to give new image to confectionary which is as a dessert, the reason is that the dessert is one of the most important things to keep your life style which is most abundantly, more rich, more happy, more beauty, more tasty, and more funny. Experiences of new "House," "Family," and "domesticity" are memorized by the dessert. In other words, dessert means, Love itself. Please leave a tasty affection of Fujiya's dessert "Farm" "Farm" is just for healthy family. Please come over and try "Farm."

A sign above a bathroom in the Mt. Fuji area: "Ravatry."

And a notice on the front door of a bar in Okayama: "The nudest club. Welcome to the freedom new world. Let's throw off your clothes. You'll be take freedom in our place. But if you make disagreeableness things you are drived this place."

I entered that bar with high expectations, but found no "nudest" people (nor wiggling politicians, for that matter.) As I eventually learned, in some cases the Japanese use English language purely for its decorative effect, with no regard to its meaning. So the manufacturers of that windbreaker probably weren't trying to make some kind of political point, nor did they have any intention of "making disagreeableness things."

In other cases, as with the "Let's Be" brand of iced coffee, they're after an actual meaning, but don't care if the words don't quite mesh. I had a personal experience along these lines a few years ago when I encountered a stock exchange (in Korea, as it happens, not Japan, but I think the approach to using English is similar) that employed as their slogan "Take a Flying Leap into the Korea Stock Exchange." When I pointed out to a marketing person at the exchange that the phrase had unsavory connotations, she said, "but we looked up 'flying' and 'leap,' and both of them were appropriate."

I should note that, in pointing out these odd bits of language, no disrespect is intended. After all, at least the Japanese make the effort to study our language in school. If Americans were suddenly to start using Japanese or Korean as a decorative element in our products, does anyone doubt that we'd screw it up a whole hell of a lot worse?

## The Last Political Post

The pop-culture columnist Richard Roeper once said something to the effect that wearing a baseball cap backwards lowers the wearer's apparent I.Q. by 15 points.

I think the same principle applies to using e-mail to forward unfounded, out-of-context, or patently absurd political rumors to your friends in order to terrify them into voting for, or against, a political candidate.

I've sworn off reading these e-mails — I don't think I've seen a single one so far that I felt added to, rather than detracted from, the human condition. They're worse than spam, because they're from your friends, so you feel as if you have to read them, and then, having read them, you sometimes feel obligated to reply. Especially if the e-mailed rumor is particularly illogical or unfounded, in which case it becomes a delicate matter indeed to point out just how benighted it is without at the same time seeming to criticize your friend, who after all (probably) didn't write the original e-mail and, caught up as they were in the pleasurable process of flexing their forwarding skills, perhaps didn't even read it all that carefully.

So from now, I'm going to avoid the "reply" button just as assiduously as I've always eschewed the "forward" button.

It would be nice if I could rely instead on more "official" forms of punditry, but I've sworn off pretty much all political commentary in general, because (unless I've been looking in all the wrong places) it is literally impossible to find any that can't be characterized as polemic, jeremiad, screed, snark, doctrinaire hectoring, screechy partisan propaganda, panicky hyperbole, ugly personal attack, lumpy masses of malignant rumors, embittered excoriation, or funhouse mirror distortion.

True, if you decide to wade into the the smeary, bleary world of ink- and paper-based reportage, you can find a different kind of political commentary, which is to say the bland, balanced, fair to both sides and interesting to neither wallpaper paste known as the "editorial."

But between these two extremes, there's only a yawning gap. If there's a political commentator out there who's well-informed, tough-minded, provocative, and informative, with a distinctive point of view but at the same time completely unpredictable and unclassifiable — so that you literally can't tell at first glance or even second glance if the writer is a liberal or a conservative, a Democrat or a Republican (in other words, not Frank Rich) — I'd love to know about him or her.

In the meantime, having stopped reading about politics, it wouldn't make much sense for me to write about the topic either. So when it comes to posting on this site (this is my first post), I think I'll stick to my other interests — great music and books, retro and roadside Americana, food in all its forms, Japanese culture, certain sports, the business world, advertising, marketing, the movies, and so forth — pretty much anything but politics.

Although...before I leave the topic entirely, I found the following inexplicably hilarious item in today's paper, from a gossip columnist named Bill Zwecker:

"George Clooney's deep interest in world conflicts is leading him to put together a new film about Iraq, about a secret U.S. Army unit that attempts to create soldiers with paranormal powers."

I think, if Zwecker and/or his editor hadn't fallen asleep at the switch, that this item should have read:

"Although George Clooney claims to have a deep interest in world conflicts, his new film about Iraq will nonetheless focus on a secret U.S. Army unit that attempts to create soldiers with paranormal powers."

And let me close by saying that not only will I never again post on a political topic, I will never, ever, ever, ever, ever, post again on the topic of George Clooney.