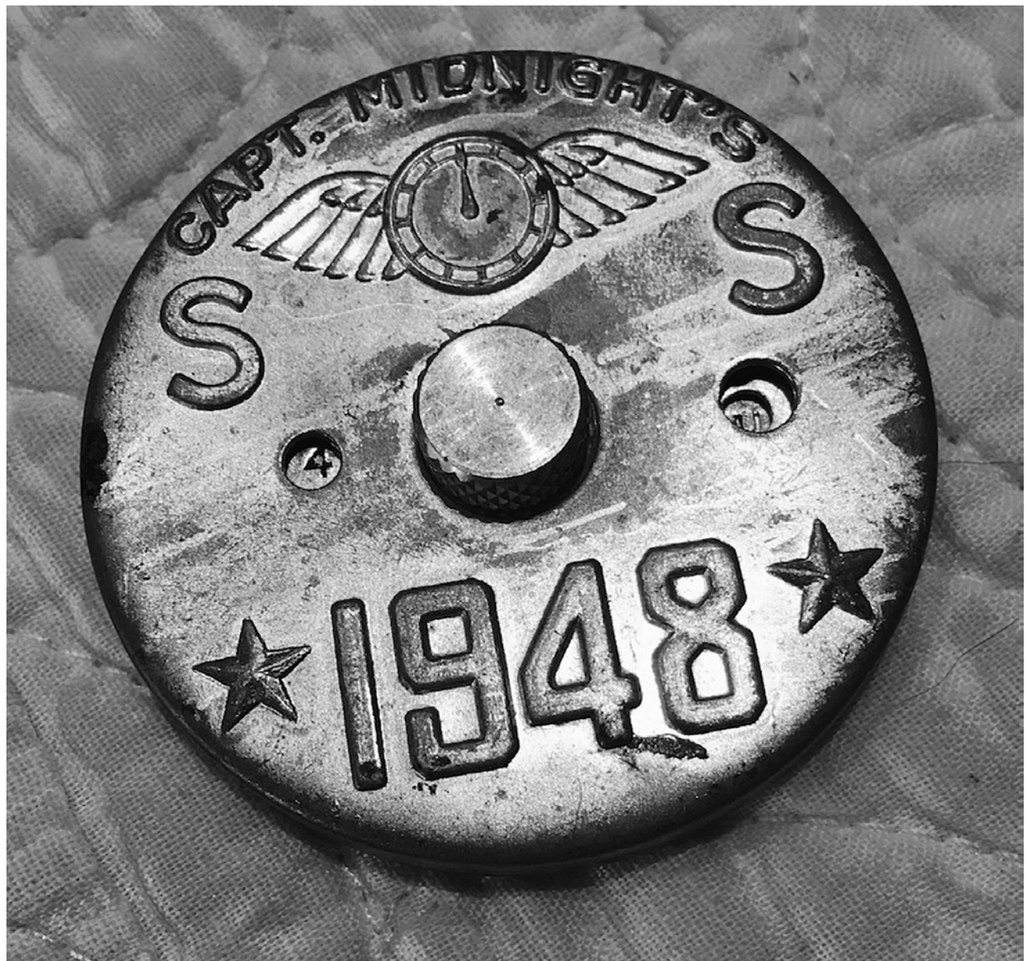
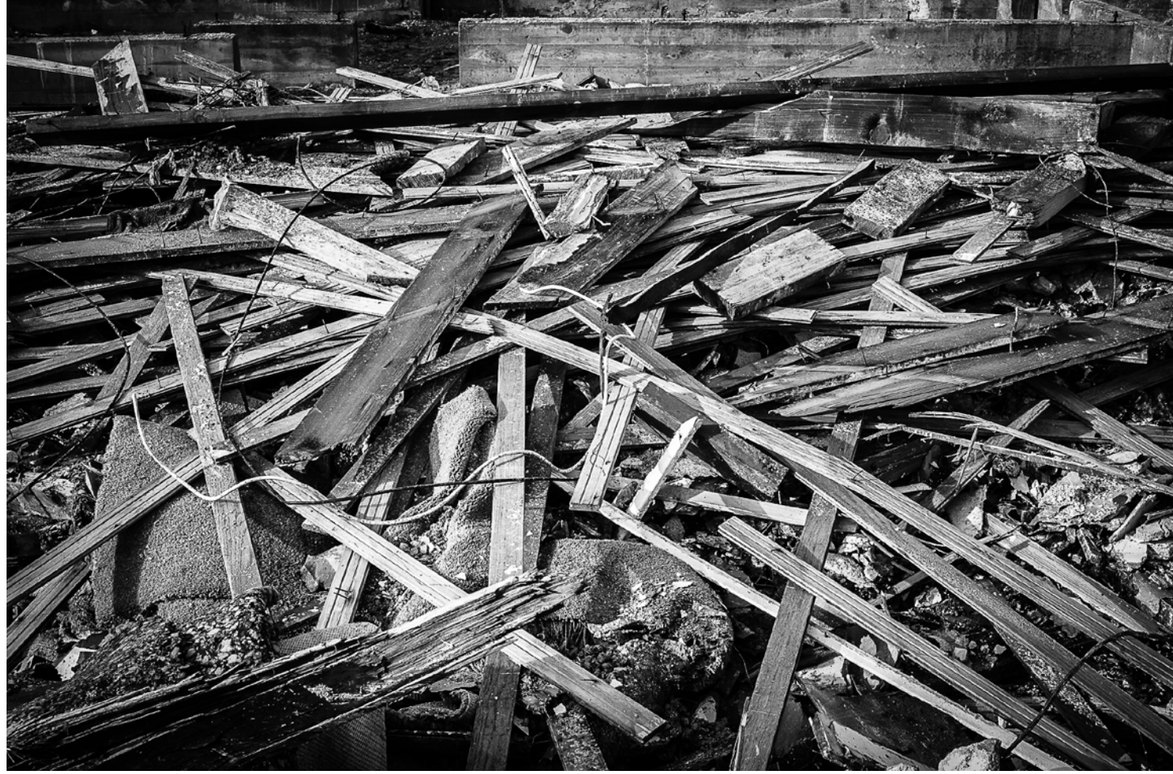
NEAL SNIDOW

Decoder Ring: Photos and Prose in Five Parts

Childhood memories examined through places and images





The Lewis Porch

There was a house I wanted to photograph. It was on my commute down the ridge, in a small Northern California foothill town improbably named Paradise, though from time to time, in certain weathers and seasons, with its ponderosa pines and dogwoods and mountain air, it could be Edenic enough, I suppose. I drove through Paradise on my way to the valley where I taught near a college town and then returned up the ridge to the rural hamlet where we had a home.

At first the house's age and symmetry were what caught my eye as I passed. It looked to date from the 1930s and had been a small ranch. I thought of my relatives in the Middle West and the homes they had known. The house was one story, simple like a Monopoly token, with a chimney and fireplace of brick on the wall facing the road and blind picture windows on each side of this faded red boss that darkened against the sheath of clapboards covering the building. On each shoulder of the fireplace sat a stone urn out of which, depending on season, weather, or care, might come lilies, or more likely rusting lilies drowning in rainwater, or just pine needles from the ancient ponderosas that shaded the yard and kept it from thriving. There was a familiar story in this old home, the inhabitants aging and the property seeming at first barely cared for, and then, on being empty, kept up by a third party, like me, someone's grown-up child, inheriting this unpromising thing.

For some reason I found the urns on the chimney interesting, their symmetry perhaps, the rust of mold and lichen growing over their carved surfaces. I thought they would make good subjects in black and white, overlooked and self-sufficient, with a patina that could respond to the digitized version of their own modest light admitted to a bed of silver nitrate, caressing and relentless.

However, a few years passed and my interest in the place fell idle. But one day as I went by, there was a man working in the yard, and on impulse I stopped and spoke with him. His ex-wife owned the place, he said, and he gave me her number. I called and she kindly arranged to

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meet me at the property that Saturday morning so I could take some photos.

I should explain that in the years between my first impulse to photograph the place and this moment of opportunity, several things of importance had happened. For instance, I was now retired, no longer a commuter. Our daughter had grown up, had a baby, and moved in with her partner in the town in the valley where I used to commute to. My mother had passed on, and I'd finished a book and seen it published. But most significant to me, in the sense of a certain shaded and pregnant atmosphere in that nearly unmanageable cloud of self we pull around with us, was that a couple of years before, after months of slow decline in mood, I'd lived in great fear for about three weeks that I would make an attempt on my life.

Early in this process, a long-buried inner landscape had appeared. This was a black-rock country of megaliths and striations jutting to a long, dry, and bare horizon that I began to see had been mother's home ground for all my growing-up years, surveyed by her in her early morning vigils in our small house while father and I slept on, a landscape behind the pleasing but untouchable scrim of our Southern California world, the birds of paradise and jacarandas crowded at the den window, the FHA brick patio and rectangle of damp green grass shaded by pepper trees just beyond, even the magnanimous ocean a few blocks farther, just past all this stretched an angry and frightening place, a lonely, ochre-and-dust-colored range of scarp and wind scour where mother contended and prayed.

Later, as the crisis worsened, reasons and moody inner spaces seemed less important. There's this promise you seem to have made, and the pressure to honor it and put into practice the erasure to which you've agreed, the blank and general worthlessness of whatever you seem to have been or become, despite all the depression and lowered spirits and muffled affect and general unhappy shuffling along, this promise is rising in a sort of manic expectation, an excitement inside a sleeve of cotton wool or felt that often has you walking rather erectly as if on your toes in an anger at your own reluctance to complete the covenant whose necessity is becoming so obvious, and it's very wearying to live like this and to try to sleep, and perhaps sleep only to get up in the bright morning with another day of it—this was tough and alarming.

As I consulted the web, searching my pension funds website for the death benefit I was certain was there, the morning light glanced off of the sleek metal edges of the computer; that metallic shining had an inhuman and yet slightly dental feel, a hard, bright, and painful smile at which eyes had to blink. In the meantime, all the suffering this is bringing others means very little and at any rate, you are convinced, will be over soon since in a triumph of enlightenment disenchantment, no romantic soul-making even conceivable, life is clearly transparent, statistical, and blank. Emerson broken not just at the death of his son, but at the knowledge of how even his most vivid grief would eventually dissolve under the blind flooding in of life, at Frost's ever-filling "dent in dough." I'd taught a thousand students, been a husband, father, and so forth, supposedly, but all this was nothing anyone else couldn't have done in what felt oddly like the conversion from analog to digital on the innermost derma, the self's great rolling cloud condensed into binary and predictable as a point on the rise and run.

So I sat often in my chair during these days, working out many calculations. Of course there was no such thing as a death benefit, but I calculated anyway, on my face as I pondered, the studied, concentrated scowl of hard work.

Fortunately, in this wilderness I was not alone; across the room from me my wife held her ground, sitting in her captain's chair at the dining table where after her work shift she sewed, did needlework, sudoku, crosswords, and jigsaws, and watched me. As time went on she seemed to sink, not in a defeated way but settling down more deeply onto the chair, her toes in their weekend moccasins turned flat against the floor, biding her time and caring for her husband and daughter as she grounded even more deeply down through the tile and subfloor and joists and crawl space and grade and deeper. She'd been raised in Illinois, then Redondo Beach, following west the endless thirst of her father's decline to the Pacific but never forgetting her mornings in Downers Grove, reaching through these bad days with a stubborn tenacity until somehow to her quiet, saving delight she could feel herself in Illinois on the small hillock beside the horse barn, within sight of the back door where her mother puttered with sweet ineptitude in the kitchen, the boxer Doche coming across the yard to sit with her, the Midwestern prairie grasses waving between his calm and superb paws. She would be seven, the light blowing through the daisies and prairie flowers and Doche's breath whistling in his complex boxer's nose, a moving of the spirit and blue prairie air. The little bluestem, and soft fox sedge, all waving, their lights of shimmering green the jewel in the heart of the lotus of DuPage County, and reaching this she held on, labored quietly toward the point her husband would see himself in the mirror one morning and say, *Just take the pill, you poor, broken thing.*

So this ordeal had finally passed, but in its own time, followed by a slow and reluctant ebbing out. I can certainly sense its crosshatched presence, for instance, as I contemplate the house I'm finally to photograph, the Lewis house, it turns out. In my shadowy state of recuperation, there are new elements of interest to me in the scene. I notice now how light falls on the house and its smaller outbuildings with a Hopper-like study and knowingness, a certain fatalistic hanging of tracery, of how hedged in the buildings are by the wild, untrimmed rows of kiwi vines that fill one corner of the lot, and of how in the mornings as I drive by the shadows of tree branches on a smaller structure's white-painted board-and-batten wall suggest the cold light of early spring in William Sidney Mount's *Long Island Farmhouses*, the image on the cover of my beloved copy of F.O. Matthiessen's beautiful *American Renaissance*. The dwelling is itself square, fenced off, isolated, stately, and poignant in its rectitude despite its worn and humble sidings. I wanted to photograph these walls across a forming moment, one after another, so that as I worked, the rough sawed planking and its gathering white tones and the tree shadows all made a space and then a clearing of light and so became imminent and declared themselves.

However, this was not to be, or at least not as I'd imagined it. Mrs. Lewis, a slim, neatly dressed lady about my age, was only going to be there for thirty minutes; I'd have to hurry. I hustled around, first making the pictures I had thought of in my early enthusiasm for the place, the front windows, the chimney, and the intriguingly symmetrical urns. But the minute I got the camera set up, it was clear these subjects had lost the urgency they'd once had. To satisfy such a long interest, I took the pictures, but I knew they were hopeless. "There's an antique horse trough down here," Mrs. Lewis said briskly, thinking naturally but incorrectly that I was interested in the local history aspect of the place, "you'll probably want to photograph that." I dutifully trooped after her and made a quick image of this dusty, foxtailed oasis, but with little attention.

In the meantime, I had found something more promising, not visible from the street: a porch, three steps up, neither homey, nor cozy, nor inviting, the wood losing its paint, warped and checking, and an impromptu locked storage bin added on later underneath. When I got home and reviewed the images, I felt drawn somehow to this porch, the stoa: the Lewis Porch.

Everything is digital now, of course, no baths or chemicals needed, and no manipulation of light itself, except as it is rendered in binary values, so that relatively unskilled people like myself can still develop images. In the development software, I cropped the porch a little to accentuate the geometry of the railings, doors, and stairs and made more adjustments. But the storeroom door at the bottom of the image still seemed undone, in the RAW file blank in a way that felt false, too easy a cover for what lay behind it. I began to make passes over it with a spot tool and then could feel a certain concentration begin: with each pass the textures became more detailed. As they rose out of the blankness of the original capture, I saw them become tactile, a lived surface attractive to life, pocked, grimed, and striated.

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It was a simple panel that had articulated from blank to mildly expressive, soiled and corner nailed, but these were the moments I had learned to look for finally, a potential generative of vision and then of words, and those words of sentences, the sentences of skeins, webs, and lines of stories. As a teacher of the pedestrian survey course, I'd taught *Beowulf* many times—could anything be of less use to us? And yet this old thing held on in my reflections in its promise of a story that might form a vanguard, a pennant, a going forward in day figured for me in the blissful morning crisscrossing of riders and paths in the light that holds the center of the poem and filigrees the monstrous void beneath. In photo development, carried over from its chemical days in the darkroom and the literal pouring on of light, this attentiveness to and working of surface, like dressing soil, is called burning.

Some months after my visit to the Lewis house, I happened to drive down to Chuck's, a rural one-stop near our home, for gas. Firewood bundles sat on the front porch, where local church people spent weekend afternoons giving out pamphlets and talking religion to whomever might want to listen. On the gas pump keypads, the numerals of our local, low-income zip code were grimed, worn, and paintless.

I had often disliked this country town where we'd chosen to live despite its beauty, and the beauty of our home there. During my episode especially, I'd thought of it as a rural slum, a loser's roost of double-wides, meth cooks pulled up at shabby intersections with their flat, wide-eyed courtroom gaze staring from their dinged and black primered Hondas.

But today I felt, as Mother would have said, some better. Filling the tank, I looked over at the property to the rear of the station, where behind a row of straggling birches stands a large prefab steel building of butter yellow. On this wintry day, the rain-darkened birches in front were sagging but, being non-native, had clearly been planted in some aura of hope. Living only on what they get, wet winter or drought, and through the un-birch-like hot summers, they are scrawny and blackened at their odd joints where branches have been lopped or lost, but at their tops, leaves still move on the air, and in the fall they are bright yellow after a spring and summer of unobtrusive, sallow green. Behind this row, and behind the chain-link fence that marks the property line, a large pickup with open driver door and raised hood was parked beside the shop.

Two big men were bent over the engine of the truck. Though it was cold out, they wore T-shirts and ball hats, and I could hear their voices float down the brief grade, past the line of trees and the bare ground around them scattered with last year's yellow leaves to where I stood by my car. Next to them, between the truck and the fence, a girl of five or six amused herself while the fellows—a dad and uncle maybe—discussed the engine. The girl was dressed all in red, bundled and cozy in the bright aniline scarlets of Kmart or Walmart polyester. She said something, nothing I could make out, but in a light, brighter weaving of sound addressed to herself, a birdlike note among the lower tones of the men. One of them looked at her and said something that made her laugh. Then steady and poised in her scarlet, she balanced on a parking berm, put out her red arms to steady herself, walked to the end, turned, and still talking, walked back.

Gray Oasis

In our apartment in Los Angeles, 1956, music as I recall it came from the television. The earliest memory would be the hot-lit, raw and grainy black-and-white presence of *The Hoffman Hayride* with Spade Cooley, his pained, wife killer's smile and the blithe, light-blasted all-white faces of his audience seated at picnic tables at whose feet drifted sawdust glowing like snow and their own bright store-bought teeth under the arc lights.

Next in memory is the sleek, beautiful, self-effacing Nat King Cole, who, due to his color, could not get national sponsors and so was relegated to a local fifteen-minute show of quiet, ecstatic musical cashmere. We lived at the beach, itself lonely and beautiful in the way Nat seemed to be, in a postwar settlement of apartments a block from the ocean at the southern end of the Santa Monica Bay, at the foot of the Palos Verdes Peninsula.

Actually making music we do at church, or occasionally we sing in the car, or "up the hill" at Aunt Nancy and Uncle Bob's house, in a newer, upscale subdivision with views of basin and sea, where Nancy has a piano. She and my father are from Virginia, and they love to sing their old favorites, "Bye Bye Blackbird," in which the lyric "Make my bed and light the light, / I'll be home late tonight" always gives me a lovely sense of warmth, and James Bland's sweet and obliviously racist "Carry Me Back to Old Virginny," "where the cotton and corn and taters grow," brother and sister smiling fondly as they sing in their new home on the West Coast while the sentimental old chords settle across the room like autumn leaves and Sunday bells. Once we even recorded this on a borrowed Ampex reel-to-reel, a miraculous machine with tiny numbers rolling in the counter and blond, nubbed, curtain-like material covering the oval speaker. "Go help your father sing," Mother commanded, but halfway through the song, embarrassed

at our moaning and keyless rendition, I began to whistle and ruined the tape.

In the apartment, however, as I said, music was left to the television since we had no piano, even though I was taking piano from the formidable, birdlike mother of a friend three blocks or so distant. These were group lessons and great fun as we all went to the same school and enjoyed the humorous Mrs. Headley and her cozy living room crowded with a spinet and two baby grands. I recall that occasionally we had small plastic recorder-type instruments to play called tonettes, which made us laugh since this sounded a lot like the Toni home permanents that were marketed to elementary schoolgirls at the time. But mostly I practiced on a fold-up cardboard keyboard I could carry home, where I would tap out C scales and dutifully press down on phantom I and IV chords while sitting at the dining table in the lovely silence of our beach neighborhood. Far, far later and many miles distant, teaching of all things a course in existentialist literature, I learned that the history of the word *absurd* itself runs back into medieval France and has to do with a muffled quality, as bells unheard, baffled, or silenced, a trammeled melody, or an inability to grasp concert or harmony, and as I think of my seven-year-old self in deep concentration while my hands exercised silently along the surface of that flat foldable four octaves, this seems just.

Still, this also feels rather simple and lovely, practicing in silence as that endless well of light, the ocean, radiated its presence at the end of the street, palm trees waving so slightly and the scarlet bougainvilleas in the apartment planters nodding through the quiet. But during this time, Mother was also working full-time, or very near it, so for many of these afternoons I was by myself. Some days this was all right, going to my room to play with Dinky Toys or blocks or to read the Disney comics of the divine Carl Barks, but essentially, I was alone in the apartment. It was quiet, fog outside the windows often, the apartments with their blind windows and shadowed entrances, the secret stairwells rising to the hidden upper floors lining the streets, the hushed insistence of the ocean a block distant—all this could build on a small person. Years later, teaching Joyce's lovely and heavily anthologized story "Araby" in high schools, I always felt oddly at home in the isolation of the narrator as he moves from one bare space to another, contemplating the emptiness and filling it with his small, plangent desires: I felt a great unarticulated connection to moments such as "The high cold empty gloomy rooms liberated me and I went from room to room singing." Perhaps this offered my adult self a pleasingly constructive filling of those lonely moments, a strategy I was unable to supply for myself at age seven. Temptations from the refrigerator often were overwhelming—meat loaf leftovers, perhaps, although this left Mother high and dry for an entrée that evening, or more shamefully, Hershey's Chocolate Syrup. This last you could pour right on a piece of white bread and make a reasonably satisfying if humiliating treat. Mother had no sympathy for these lonely urges. "You're the kind of little boy who gets into the refrigerator, aren't you, Neal?" she said tautly, surveying the interior of the cold white box. I had to admit that this was the kind of little boy I seemed to be.

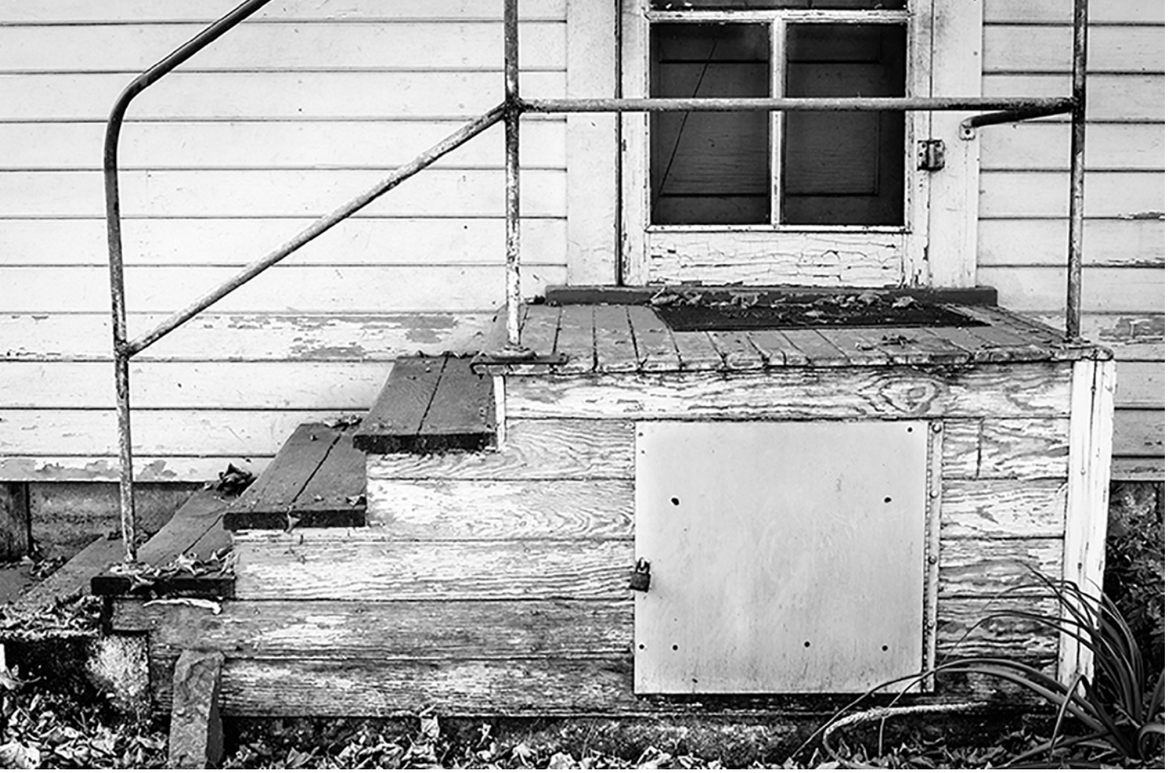
But keeping an even keel through these afternoons wasn't easy, especially on the day of piano lessons. It was precisely four-tenths of a mile from the apartment to Mrs. Headley's house on Avenue H, and I'm sure later on as I became a bike rider and more comfortable in general with going about on my own, this was a simple and frequent trip. But in the era of the long, gray latchkey afternoons and watching the clock to make it to piano on time, telling time not quite yet a certain science, and hearing the emptiness gathering in the apartment, and trying hard not to open the refrigerator, this felt like a long, uncomfortable trek.

One afternoon I got myself outside at what seemed like the correct time, carrying music books and folded keyboard, but just past the back gate leading to the large apartment rear yard, a fenced, blacktopped space anchored with a brick incinerator, I stepped on a sandy spot in the parking edging the street and felt a small but vivid prick on the bottom of my foot. Looked carefully and found a nail—was it actually in the rubber sole or was it on the sidewalk? I can't remember now, except that the sidewalk was overcast and deserted. The sandy vacant lots that had punctuated the neighborhood, filled with ice plant and foxtails, were now filled with new postwar construction, smelling of raw lumber, two-story dingbats going up in the vacant spaces between the older apartments, and nails were common. What I do recall is a great dilemma—is it a rusty nail? It doesn't look exactly new and shiny. I know that rusty nails are dangerous, that if you step on one you will get tetanus, *lockjaw*, which is a much more vivid name, one I can easily visualize. But is the nail really rusty? Should I walk on to piano? Should I call Mother, or the doctor? Neither of these last two choices seem wise somehow. But I'm also very conscious that I've been presented with an *excuse*, a grand reason to do exactly what I most want to do—not go to piano and stay in the apartment, lonely as it is. So this is what I do, go back inside and busy myself, gather my slim righteousness about me, and when Mother comes home, there I am.

When she's angry, as she is now, finding me here, her brows knit, and she is disgusted and uncomprehending, presented as she is with behavior so ridiculous that it insults common sense itself, an attitude I always come to associate with her family and the Middle West in general in its wintry sulks and rages. "Why didn't you go to piano?" she demands, looking appalled. I pull out the nail story, which quickly falls to tatters. I certainly can't produce a wound. She's mad, I see now, as an adult myself, because she's already paid for the lesson when we have so little money, has written the check or sent the cash along with me in an envelope for Mrs. Headley with one of her friendly, straightforward notes in her legible, trust-inducing handwriting, studded clove-like with strong, cheerful exclamation points of clear intent and good feeling. But to occupy the place of no defense with Mother was to imagine yourself in one of those empty rooms under construction being hammered up around us, smelling the astonishingly lonely creosoted odor of unfinished lumber, rough two-by-fours with their red-dyed mill ends, sills and joists creaking as you stepped, exploring, over the plywood subfloors mottled with flaws and ghost prints of work boots after the crews have gone home, the overcast darkening to a vignette through the unglassed window openings to the west, the odd lunch hour wrapper left in a corner, stepping through walls and around the stark galvanized, fog-gray uprights of the stubbed-in plumbing, the dwelling's tiny private places for the moment all open to view. There being no help, time simply swallows this up eventually. But I recall one night around this time Mother waking me excitedly to tell me about the "red tide" she and Father had just seen breaking phosphorescent green over the night beach at the end of our street, how pleasing and beautiful this was. "Yes, ma'am," I said sleepily, happening to have recently read up on this phenomenon in one of my library books, "it's called plankton." Mother, always delighted with a new anecdote, passed this precocity on to her friends; and thus did I ransom my way back in.

But to occupy the place of no defense with Mother was to imagine yourself in one of those empty rooms under construction being hammered up around us, smelling the astonishingly lonely creosoted odor of unfinished lumber, rough two-by-fours with their red-dyed mill ends...the dwelling's tiny private places for the moment all open to view.

Whatever harmony could be found was counterspell to the absurd and the lonely. Sitting in a theater hundreds of miles from the beach sometime in the 1980s, I am pinned to my seat in sadness, watching the worn and beautiful face of Dexter Gordon discussing the evolution of his



music; we began to use, he says, "the four, the nine, and the flat five." And so we did. In the shifting color tones of the shore's white noise, pausing on the apartment steps and even in its pitches of light, the fog, the overcast, the whole sound bending slightly to enter the stuccoed alcove of porch and planter box, just outside but so near those still interiors—there you could listen in that gray oasis for the flatted fifths of the air.

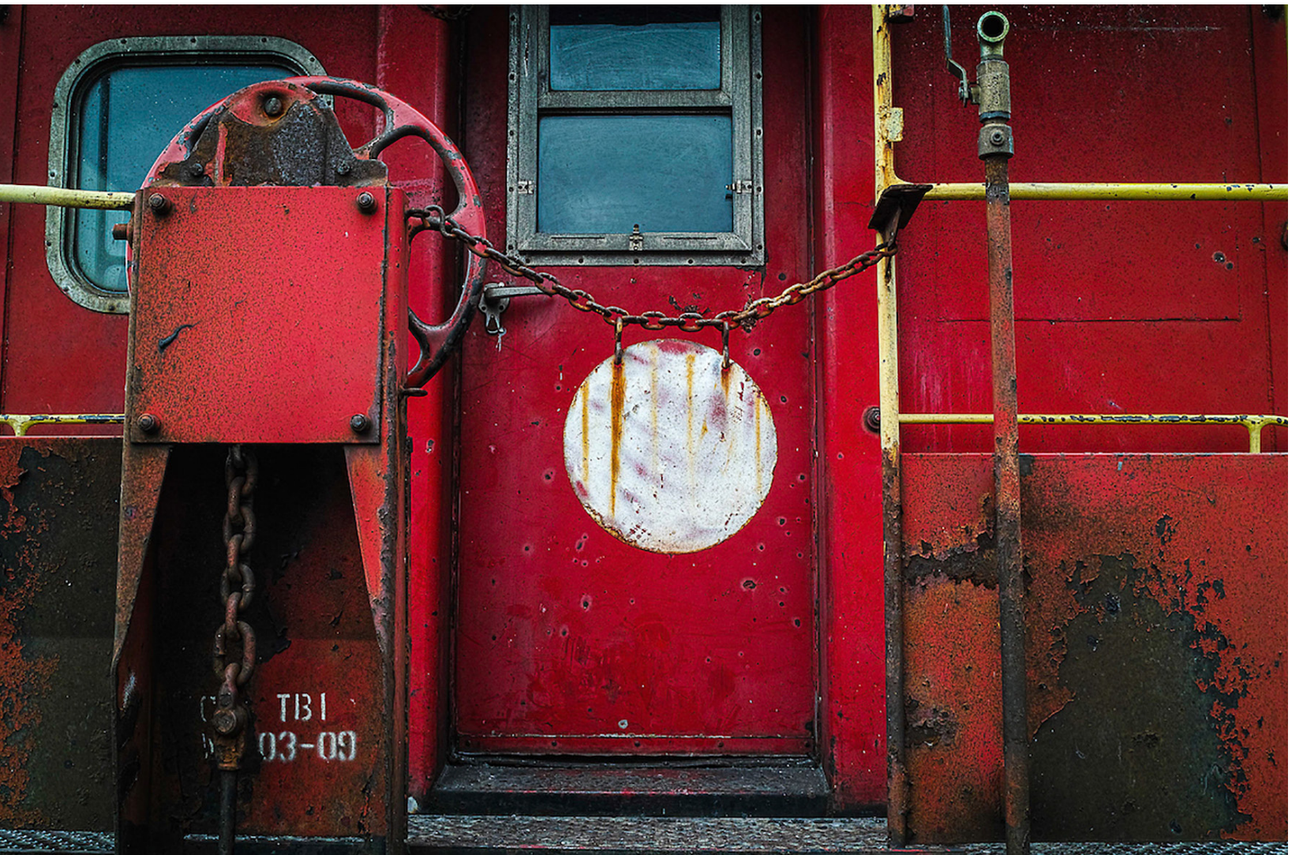
Theophilus

Theophilus, "friend of God," my ancestor, son of Jacob and Elizabeth Snidow, was born in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, in 1761 and not many years after traveled on the wagon road to York, to Gettysburg, to Maryland, to Winchester, then following the Shenandoah south, the boy with his mother, bundled with his several brothers and sisters in an oxcart, or walking paths along rustling walls of sumac, of pine, stepping the wet frog-colored limestone shards along creek paths, the primroses along the river, stock shaking their great heads, palisades of cloud rising in the wide blue over the track, axles groaning, a small figure in hand-loomed cloth, linen and osnaburg, hard to see, his time breathing around him. Somewhere on this trek his father died, cause and burial site unknown, his mother, Elizabeth, bringing them onto the land, following kinsmen. Then, in his thirteenth year, now along the New River in southwestern Virginia, on a still and dappled Sunday afternoon August 7, 1774, at the mouth of Sinking Creek with the other youngsters in the shallows, the river running west-northwest to the Kanawha and then two hundred miles on to reach the Ohio, but here broad, maternally curving, placid, reflective of the limestone towers of his new home, birds scattered and skimming at its surface, on that day taken by Indians, a Shawnee raiding party come south. Lord Dunmore's War, an agitation to open inconveniently treatied lands in Kentucky. Gunfire, the shock of sound over the riffle and hum of the river, drifting powder smoke from the palisades too slowly dissipating against the fury of what's happening on shore, men running, shouts, a Shawnee man rising suddenly from the water on the north bank as in a nightmare, seizing the canoe's wale and then clubbing the smaller children to death in their boat swamped near the low-spined rocks, on his face the studied, concentrated scowl of hard work. Theophilus and two other boys were seized and carried to the south bank, across the broad meadows of Eggleston, and deep into the mountains to camp the night terrified at Pipestem Knob with the raiding party.

Boiled corn, the men sniffing the air, watching. As the camp quiets, the two older boys, Jacob and Thomas, murmur to plot their escape. But when the night deepens and the August insects hush as the dew point comes on, they can't wake Theophilus, younger, his stilled weeping face of dust and tears, made to run in terror the hunting trails of Spruce Run and Buckeye Mountain and now lost in sleep, mouth open, stubbornly unconscious. They touch him, prod his shoulder, stop without breathing to stare and listen at the dark sleeping head of their guard. Then making their agonized calculation, they give up on Theophilus and creep off to hide in a hollow log. In the morning, one of the Indians stands on the same log and calls out to the forest, "Come back—get lost!" But the boys hold their breath, and when the party leaves, dragging Theophilus along, they come out of the log and start home. Along the way they meet a militia of thirty men chasing the raiding party, and this party, buckskin shirted and wearing tomahawks in their belts, hearing their story, gazes across the misted ridges, looking uncomfortably at one another before making their own agonized calculation: *We cannot reach them. He is lost.* They take the boys home.

But Theophilus, "beloved of God," whose story holds firm but whose dates never quite line up, radically out of time but also folded within it like a seed to end up displaced, beloved and unexplained, was taken by the native people into Ohio and in that region lived, like not a few whites at the time, the *inzwischen* life of the captive, lingering near the frontier bourse and hostage bartering centers of Kaskaskia and Chillicothe. Possibly he lived with a Shawnee family, perhaps as a substitute for a child lost to frontier violence, the "mourning wars," for there was so much mourning, skirmishes, grudges, and of course fevers and sickness, the first wave of Palatines on the way south in their oxcarts passing whole deserted native towns emptied by disease or the campaigns paid for by French or British or settlers and the revenges sought by tribes hired to the other side. Two sources speculate: In the first, Theophilus is described as "suffering greatly as a slave of the Indians." In the second, "he was looked on as a trusted member of the Chief's family." At any rate, he would live in a patchy network of captives listening for news of family, of efforts or rumors of efforts at his redemption, of family friends, itinerant ministers, or negotiators for hire come into the country to set up shop at an inn or tavern and wait for word of subscriptions raised, the wealthy and powerful petitioned, while in the meantime through the seasons and the years slowly weaving themselves into the interstices of Shawnee border life, living with a family, pointing at this or that, fumbling over the big Algonquian words, the rills and freshets of soft endless syllables, hunting and trading, scratching up a little ground, jerking venison, peddling melons and squash. Smoke filled the village when they burned slash and trees for potash and pearl ash to sell for lye to men passing through on horseback. Grinning shorthair dogs cracked bones in the last firelights. Perhaps his adopters were Christians, who said he was "right blessed by the loving side wounds." He took warnings from his pious adopters against witches, against old women who kept besoms, wooden poppets, and totems to which they might whisper in the night, against the whites who had killed innocent Shawnee and then been captured and were now beyond mercy or hospitality, some wretch bound like a sack over a horse walked through a village at dusk, roped, painted black, destined for torture and burning. There were deep-voiced group sings, the green mosquitoed languor of full summer in the camps, then snow sifting in at the smoke hole as they rode out storms huddled under buffalo robes in the lodges two or three or four days at a time in the Hunger Moon. He is beaten, he is loved, he is too ill to care about. One spring several years on I see him hollow eyed and lightly bearded in a thin shirt of butternut and slouch hat with a woman and baby outside a grog shop of split logs shaggy with bark near Kaskaskia while great gessoed clouds haunt the sky above a road of muddy ruts that shine like tin in an explosion of rainwater, apple blossom, and cold freshening wind. A dozen years after his capture he came home to die of tuberculosis. He returned alone, but I have always wondered whom he may have left behind in the watershed of the Ohio.

On the night he was taken, relatives said Mrs. Snidow and Mrs. Lybrook had "walked the floor . . . weeping and wringing their hands, and saying that 'they knew where the dead children were, but their hearts went out for the little boys, captives.'" Now, unredeemed, set free from his adopting family by war, illness, or indifference, he had walked back down the Ohio, the Kanawha, the Pipestem, crossed the New just below Narrows on his own family's flat-bottomed ferry, the oxen turning the windlass on the home shore getting larger and a boy, a relative likely, switching at their flanks and then hearing the halloo over the flat water who it was coming and scampering barefoot down the ox road in front of him and just past Castle Rock, announcing him into the settlement, the thin, stooped man, hollow eyed, coughing, easing himself into the dim cabin to kneel in his deerskin leggings by the old woman rocking at the embers: "Mother, it is Theophilus."



Folly and Time

When my mother moved upstate to be near us in the last eight years of her life, I grew reacquainted with her narrative practice. Brief visits of two or three days hadn't brought out the curatorial rigor with which she managed her canon of seemingly endless anecdotes, but over visits, dinners, or drives to her various medical appointments, this all came back to me until I had a fantasy that I would make a large chart, big enough to hang on a wall and ruled off in divisions, maybe geographical, maybe chronological, maybe thematic, carefully subdivided into genres and specific stories. At times I thought such a thing might come in handy and be amusing as an example when I taught the developmental mode of division and classification in my freshman composition classes, but I never got round to it and stayed instead with Linnaean taxonomy or the periodic table as examples of totalizing schema until modes themselves went out of style.

One of the more personally important genres in the collection would have been the one I thought of as Accident, Folly, and Ruin. On the milder end of the spectrum, these were essentially anecdotes of mishap and slapstick, often small, situation-comedy-like disasters involving poorly closed paint cans, clogged InSinkErators, and exploding cans of biscuit dough. In my middle school years, there was a box of kitchen matches overlooked in a lighted oven so that as they ignited, the door belched open, smoke billowed memorably and evenly from all four of its edges, and the dog ran coughing through the house. I myself found I had a predilection for this foolishness and its tiny, Mithridates-like homeopathy against the burden of the mortal. I was especially drawn to the subgenre of folly, over the years even creating incidents of my own through poor decisions or lack of foresight that made a kind of gallery of the fatuous for which I had an odd fondness.

For instance, as a young newlywed in the mid-1970s, "feathering my little nest," as a smirking and attractive female colleague called it in the school hallway where I worked, I had taken my Volkswagen to a hardware store at 190th and Hawthorne to purchase a five-by-four panel of perforated pressed wood from which to hang tools in our garage. In the parking lot, I realized that not only would the panel not fit in the car but that I had nothing with which to secure it and so decided instead to drive slowly while holding this flimsy item on the car roof with my hand, since after all it was very light, and I got into traffic, gingerly shifting and steering with my knees and right hand while my left stayed clamped to the panel on the roof, only to have the first gust of breeze catch the board, flip it straight up against the wind, crack it neatly in two, and blow the loose half into the street. There was a freedom about seeing this newly purchased item blow past in the rearview to land at the curb, and a sense of liberating foolishness to imagine how I looked scampering down the street from the fast food lot where I'd parked to retrieve the item, which with its twin, in a Buster Keaton moment of triumph, gaiety, and idiot's luck, now fit neatly into the car.

Some of these stories were less cheerful. Later in her life, Mother began to tell a new one about her eccentric Aunt Susie's first husband, who died of TB during the Depression. Speaking with my grandfather sometime in the early 1930s, this kindly man had ruefully pondered his fitness for his current job, a Lancaster County, Nebraska, deputy sheriff, now that his troublesome croup had hardened into a diagnosis of consumption: "I'm a poor excuse for a deputy, need a dern good bustin' out." Mother would repeat this punch line twice with a storyteller's gusto. Did he cough roughly into a handkerchief, spot it with blood even, or am I just thinking of Keats? In one version I believe he did. And indeed he did succumb not long after but left behind his wry self-dismissal among the chorus of the ancestors who now follow me forward, or perhaps even watch me advance.

Except for the occasional joke of his own making, so witty that it entered legend, stories tended not to attach to Father. My typical memories of him, with few exceptions, are more like suspensions, colloids of melancholy bound in an unexplainable precision. During more nest feathering after our wedding, he'd helped me pick up some lumber in a friend's small handyman's pickup. In the cab on the way to the lumberyard, my age had come up somehow, twenty-six or so, and this small moment had acted like a spell on the day. On the way home, he volunteered to sit in the back of the truck and weigh down the lumber as again we had no rope. I drove carefully, watching him framed in the rearview, an unusual angle—it was overcast at the end of the beach day, the traffic steady on Del Amo as we made our way slowly west, he calmly seated on the lumber, one hand on the truck's tailgate through the long wait at the left turn arrows, dressed neatly in his weekend work pants, worn Purcell tennis shoes, athletic socks, and an old errand-running V-neck sweater, while a light rain, a delicate beach city rain, just drops here and there, began to dot the windshield. I glanced at him again on the rear of the truck, kindly but unforthcoming, accident prone, a surprisingly aggressive driver, a tailgater and last-second applier of the brake, with his stubborn southern eating habits, his butter on his hash browns and secreted sweets, his heart troubles and gout. And yet the breeze caught gently at the full white hair he had inherited from his mother's distinguished father, a Virginia judge and large landowner, lifting it in a handsome wave against the gray backdrop, which I could see quite clearly, as he, framed in the rearview at a low, leonine angle, mildly surveyed the traffic

around him. It was folly to ask him anything, really—facts could be evasive and memory deceptive—but somehow he still inhabited a profoundly known world where everything necessary to life was palpable and self-apparent. *What was it like to learn to fly, to meet mother, to fire the .50 caliber at gunnery school, to have me, to work at your desk under the fluorescents just off the selling floor pressed against a wall of cinder block and studying proofs of merchandisers for the next day's* Times? His eyes would blink, he'd start with, "Well," launch into a word or two, pause, wink at you, smile, shrug a little, and say, "you know."

Years later, in my own late sixties, Father gone for a quarter century, on a visit downstate, the joke was on me. Eating lunch with a friend in my hometown, we thought afterward we'd swing by to see my old apartment building on our way back to his elderly mother's place, the home she'd occupied since the 1950s. We turned one corner, then another, and there to my astonishment was the apartment house, focus of so much of my thought and memory over the years, now utterly demolished into piles of rubble with a new-looking bulldozer gleaming at one corner of the lot and the wreckage surrounded by nylon fences on which signs announced luxury condominiums coming soon: in other words, a slapstick moment of reversal as the Southern California inevitable had finally come to pass. "Are you okay?" my friend asked. I had noticed many times over the years how kind those of us who grew up in these light- and sea-haunted blocks were to each other. And I really had taken many pictures of this place and had written about it quite a lot.

"I am," I said, "it happens. I'm amazed it lasted this long." Later that afternoon, in a mood of bemusement, I brought camera and tripod back to the site and took shots through the fence, one of which showed the demolished wood of my old bedroom, after years under inexpensive carpet, still showing its original postwar varnish of shoe-polish brown.

I recalled an incident in this room from my sixth year: I'd been sleepless, planning in the dark how I would go to a bank and borrow one hundred dollars to buy Father a new Jeep, khaki with white military stars, its windshield thrillingly laid flat. I can even recall the visual fantasy that accompanied this scheme: this jaunty vehicle parked at our curb, and Father happily in the driver's seat, waving. At this time, and for years after, he drove his Buick up Sepulveda every day to Westchester to work in a department store. In the room that had now disintegrated into the planks over whose image I lingered, in an example of the conflation of two story genres, both folly and ruin, I had imagined getting him this thing from his past so that he would be happy.

At any rate, even Mother ran out of stories at last. In another act of folly, I took her back East to her sister-in-law's for her ninetieth birthday, and on our drive from the airport she became very confused, which was understandable. We'd risen early, driven a long way to a California airport, flown across the country, and now were driving through a darkened, frost-hard January landscape in northern Virginia. State troopers there use exceptionally bright, almost strobe-like lights on their cars, and these pulsars of hard bright lumens would burst out of the void at one turnout or another, as if at the birth of a galaxy in some alien void, so it was a disorienting scene at best. But even I was surprised when Mother suddenly asked, "Neal, who are these people we're going to see?"

"Your sister-in-law Helen," I said, and named her three daughters, Mother's most favorite relatives, their husbands, and children. This didn't register. "I don't know who that is," she said quietly. So starting with her birthplace in Buffalo, Wyoming, in 1919, and covering her parents and the places she'd lived and her jobs and her marriages as well as I could, I spoke her life story out into the dark.

A last related entry in Mother's canon occurred in the 1980s when I was living far away. My Aunt Nancy, Father's sister, was in her final illness and frequently in the hospital. Father, Mother, and Nancy often made a trio at these crises—the ambulance would bring Nancy to the ER unable to breathe, and then after some treatment she would feel better and be more like her old self, and they would sit in her room and talk. So her steady decline, from which there was no recovery, began to be routine. One evening at the Harbor City Kaiser facility, Father took advantage of one of these lulls to step out for a piece of pie in the cafeteria—he admired their chocolate cream, his favorite. When he got back, Nancy asked casually from the hospital bed where he'd been. "Well, honey," he said, "that pie they have down there is awfully good." She smiled indulgently. In two months she would be gone, the Virginia accent, the

freckles, the suave crossings of the legs, the low thrilling laugh of her younger self, in later years so susceptible to fits of unstoppable coughing, the most loving childhood permissions, *Yes, honey, of course you can*, the sweetly inept Christmas trees, the *Lordy!* and *Honestly!*, and "Tennessee Waltz" by ear, all gone. "Why, Willy," she smiled at Father, "on my *death bed*?"

Radford

Last year I was back on the New River. I'd had a small reading in Charlottesville, visited relatives in Winchester and Staunton, and come to Giles County, where Father had been born and raised and, although he'd lived his life elsewhere, was now buried. Driving along the lesser routes to his hometown, I had a familiar rising feeling, a jagged, uneven elation helped along by Pharrell Williams's "Happy," which had first come up randomly, and then settled, unguided by myself, into endless replay on the rental car's Bluetooth—"if you feel like a room without a roof."

I just decided to leave it on. The music beat against the dark and riverine folds of Father's mountainous home, the obscurities of creeks and hollows opening now and again into views of the far, dominant peak Angel's Rest, or Flat Top Mountain, as it was known to the less sentimental settling generation, its sublime, lofty blue-black and cloud-scattered summit the cynosure of all postcards in my lifetime, floating in an eternally splendid distance. Poplars, pines, hemlocks, black walnuts, sycamores, and maples spun past on the hills. On the Eggleston Bridge, I could look over toward the mouth of Sinking Creek, an unprepossessing thread running through a gloom of spindly trees and limestone hollows to the site on the open water

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where the Indian attack took place, where Theophilus had been taken and the little girls killed—they were buried, it was said, on a nearby property.

In Radford, where so many relatives had gone to college, I was early for a lunch date with my cousins, so I went into the dead quiet and deserted Sunday train yard off of the main street and began to take pictures. Stepping over the tracks, I was thinking of this tightness in the chest that always seized me in this locale. It made me think of many years before, in my midtwenties, visiting in Edinburgh and walking one afternoon through a park there, the Meadows, on my way to Marchmont Road, where college friends were putting me up. It being the style at the time, I'd gotten mildly stoned and hiked to the Museum of Childhood, where, as the single patron, I'd wandered up and down the narrow building crammed with astonishing, ineffable toys. Then, after picking up a loaf of bread on the way back, I found myself half wondering if I should return to the bakery and ask the quietly beautiful red-haired girl behind the counter if she'd like to go out. But instead, as usual, I walked on, resigned apparently to the company of the Everett Sloane character in *Citizen Kane*, who, having seen a girl in a white dress on the Jersey ferry, thought of her for the rest of his life. In my slightly muzzy head as I strolled the park, also randomly in those pre-portable-music days, spun the song "Ventura Highway," that early 1970s paragon of cascading, perfectly tempered harmonies. This was very white music. Clarence Carter could find one hundred years, maybe even two, in a single rising note, but in this hit by the group calling itself America, there were no wavering lowered sevenths or textured inflections, only the angelic, propulsive, and endless. High and tight out of Jordanaires, Delmores, Louvins and Everlys, out of Pied Pipers, Four Freshmen, out of Fleetwoods, Four Seasons, and Beach Boys, this was the music of an out-of-body, Platonic longing, the harmony of America indeed, like the sky and light as you drive through Malibu, not the western sky where the sea has variegated the dome with whites and mist, but to the east, the desert sky toward Santa Clarita, cerulean and enameled. I felt this song impel me by the top of my head and to my alarm walked around the park a long time in this state, tight in the chest and wanting somehow to weep, not over the girl certainly but just at a young man's restlessness, gyroscopic and humming. Now, years later in Virginia, time had soothed this feeling, worn it and warmed it to something burnished, but being in this river valley still tended to leave me bound and breathless in the same way. "Come on," sang Pharrell, "bring me down."

The day before, I had photographed Father's grave, and his father's, a simple family plot at the nicely tended end of a modest lot on a side street, over the years small homes having grown around this cedar-shaded place of the ancestors. Now before me in the train yard were cars and equipment of the Norfolk and Western line, the staple of Father's childhood, that brought wonders from larger places into Giles. One of these cars was a caboose in beautiful weathered red, and under the overcast sky of late March, I could see these might make interesting photos. I busied myself along the side of one car, capturing images of arcane markings and odd industrial geometries, and then came to the rear where to my delight I found this white disc hanging from the rolling bedroom's little porch. It was a safety device apparently, a signal to reflect light, but lovely and mysterious. I made several photos, and when I returned to the West Coast, it was one of these that quickly became my favorite.

Contemplating this photo, I sensed the "punctum" Barthes speaks of in his book on photography, the puncture, poignancy, or tiny wound of interest and search, even an opening step of pilgrimage into the frame where a miniature gravity exerts a pull on the eye, for me at least, in the pipe opening at the middle top right. I had only noticed it in the framing, focused as I was more on the colors and the floating oddness and patina of the hanging disc, something white and numinous to which the periphery details are all in service, though gravely, quietly, with a powerful sense of their own reticence and decorum, the precise clearances of their design and manufacture. But once in development and cropping, and then printed, this pipe diameter began to grow in its effect until I experience it now as an immanence, visual or oral, almost ready to speak or see in the picture's frozen state. "I'm loving this yellow and red," says a photographer friend, and I agree, thinking for some reason of an imperial court, temple interiors, rich and slowly decaying, a splendor behind gates. But the anticipation at the pipe seems to bind me to thoughts of my own work as well, over years and decades a struggle toward vision and sound but for so long to no avail until finally a thread of some promise began to appear. So in this image I began to figure the long-remembering reach of the late writer. I confess I now find beauty in all of it—the deep color, the unreadable windows, the grimed road years showing and the great chains in their dark recesses, and then the eye drifting up to the small round anticipation of an opening at the edge of what is after all but a place from which to watch, a limited space, standing room only, this observation platform and its saturated reds, its pale and blissful guardian disc, the stoa from which we, memory bound, attend in quiet to the receding landscape.

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