

A Grammar Is

a book by Bill Young

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A Grammar Is

AUTHOR

Bill Young

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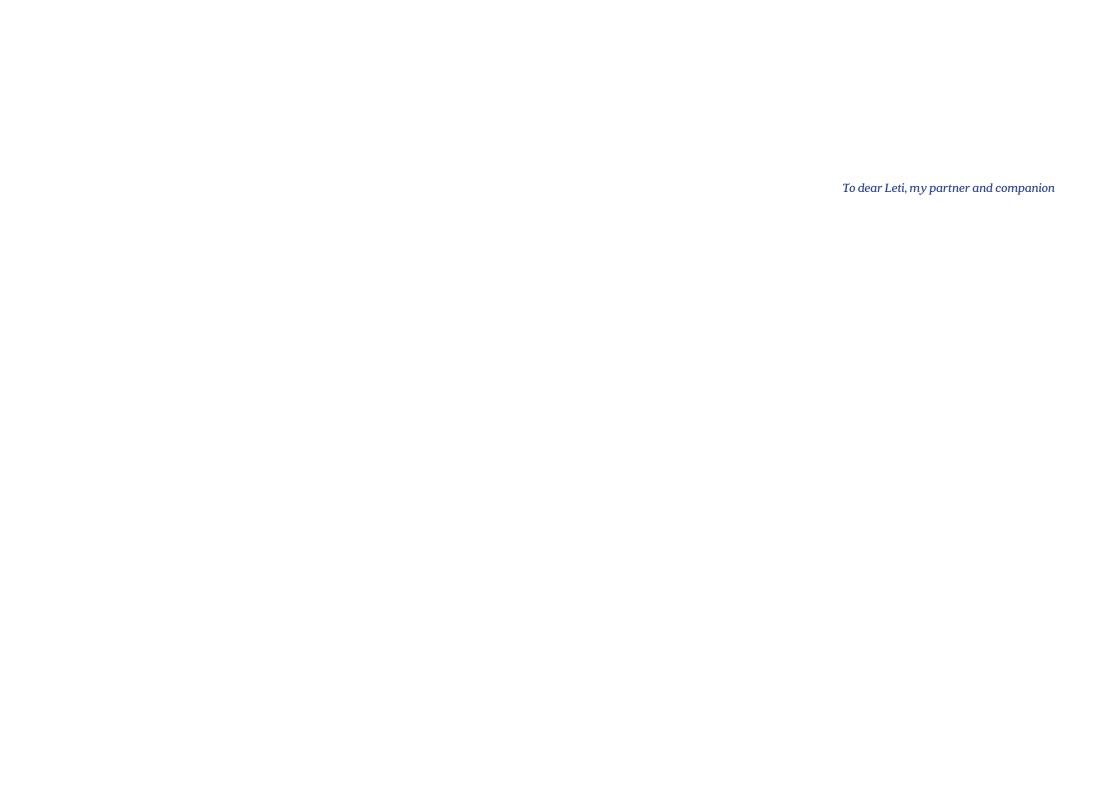
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I can think of no knowledge more sacred than this:
That you must become one who begins.
One who writes the first word behind a century-long dash.

Rainer Maria Rilke

Preface

I have lived an engaged, privileged life. All of what I think and write is in response to the impulse of any given moment. "Right now" offers each of us an opportunity to entrust our unrepeatable life to the world, so others might benefit and grow from the experiments energizing our personal adventure.

For quite some time I considered putting together a book of poetry. I am in my late 70s. Lingering thoughts comparing my poetry and short stories to examples I considered noteworthy kept holding me back. It took me years to develop a reliable process for objectively reading what I had written.

I ended up simply asking myself if a poem or a story still made a lively, spirited connection to the initial source as I remembered it. The poems are presented chronologically, beginning in 1972 until the present.

The prose includes short stories and historical documentation. All of what you will read shares two common elements: change, and the unique pleasure of crafting words. The direct influences on my points of view include: three decades working in theatre; 10 years writing a series of linked poems with four other poets, styled after Japanese haikai; untangling the mutual dependence between commerce, politics and art; and September 11th, 2001.

The primary motivation for putting this book together was to influence you, my reader. I encourage you to explore your own life story with a spirit of inquiry. Reinvestigate the formative events that started you on your individual path. Discover those points that meant something to you, and to those around you. Contemplate what you find.

Those first experiences evolve and mature, joining other meaningful events. Enable what you encounter to intersect, work together, and open into a creative process energized by curiosity. The process simply requires staying with it. With perseverance you will find what can only be called Openness: a continuous, creative space not defined exclusively by your ego.

Put your memories in writing, or record a spoken rendering. Bring into being images of what you've seen. Talk to others. Keep coming back to what you have created. Work it and rework it. Be generous with yourself. Craft your own forms, allowing yourself the freedom to produce a personal record, a work with unique integrity.

We can all learn from your experience.

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Poetry

Two of Us

Old man and I Greet each other Downstairs

In the passageway Separating our house From the next

What's Left

Jenner

What remains after you've left are papers

What remains after you've left is a smile for two tea cups

What remains after you've left are two empty teacups some papers and a smile

Light approaches Darkness the way a Bridge seen

Far off Marks its way Across black water

In the east Red eyes hold Close to the ground

Illumined In reflected Last light

South Vultures hang over Brown's Mountain

Solemn Graceful Winged cinders

Soaring Circling before Night

Silence Waits Impatient

Woman in Her Garden With a Walker

for Janie Cooper

Silence waits impatient Expecting Stretched tight

The only companion That can make it last Is on its way Leafy trees Lean down Deciduous giraffes

Lift long necks Out of the pool Curious about a

White-haired intruder Clad in lavender Mimosa sprays shooting out

Of her head Rocket halo green In blue space

Filling her eyes Japanese silk trees Fresh April

Lilacs dangling Nudged by a soft breeze Out of the west

She glides over grass
Pushing then lifting
Then pushing then lifting

Tethered to her Mobile trellis A giant

Orchid Reigning supreme In her garden

A Grammar Is

a grammar is hidden in shadows and buds and melted snow and waterfalls

sound rounded by orbit's curves and solar flares and love making and sweet odors

wind rhymes through bleached ribs one trout leaving a pool for faster water

Ansel Adams Wilderness

Winter
Banner and Ritter
Brittle
Black terrain
White fog
Igneous patches
Ignorant of cold
Smudge
New snow

Harmonic Convergence

Madness, or the magic, that makes a poet a tree Resided that evening in a shallow wash Coming off the east side of an aging Sierra snowfield.

A black shadowed wall to the west rose several hundred feet Ribboned by wispy, transparent, falling mist White and feathery and vague.

I prepared a bowl of hot soup, some tea, Laid out an opened wrapper protecting a Flat rectangle of black, bitter chocolate.

Slipping my gloved hands around the copper cup Warming my fingers as I began to: Look. Smell. Feel. Listen. Drift. Disappear.

Outer edges of slippery stones Click, colliding rhythmically, while water's Contrapuntal currents modulate light.

South, the now orange picket fence Of spires poked purple by night Embrace dusking west.

Slowly I set my cup down Walked to my tent Crawled inside. Undressed.

Like my father's hands massaging my Aching legs when I was a little boy Something familiar took my life and ...

Gave it over to sleep.

(August, 1987)

Ecotopia

Southern Mother Lode's Green settlement Named Snake Slides along the hills Like small children and its namesake This morning pictures of Australian sea orchids Arrived by email from tomorrow To be studied and filed For class this afternoon On grass slopes below a high ridge Soft brown swings of breasts and hard arms Stop and lean as Blue Canyon black bear's gaze Rolls after two girls Splashing in the pond Beside watermelon vines and raisins

Naturalists Built The Estuary There

for Tom Prentice and his grandfather, John Euless

arcadian dreamers for years marveled at their own work

surprised how the saline crust gave way first to brackish water then to clear or

how the debate on where the well should go drew such wet abundance

naturalists saw dawn crack there spread tedious angles across the desert basin then disappear

sundays they'd congratulate themselves arriving early to hear green ducks

with iridescent necks skid in on the pond quacking like laughing drunks

in tangled cattails lessons from predawn glow

whisper the still hour when imagination teaches new morning's

imperceptible geometry of moving air on water

Canada Geese Calligraph

Scribbling black wings cross
November rice paper skies
Honking as they fly over a
Small memorial baseball field
On the other side of the railroad tracks.

Grays shift places Invisible eighteen-wheelers Whip up aching air Freezing it hard.

Quiet as an eyelid Mist floats past A miniature tractor Padded in blankets Wrapped like a baby's tooth Folded in silk Tied with ribbon Forgotten.

North Disappears In white fog.

The Junction

Orient Point

I walked past a footpath as I continued south

Lifeless dry grass on an endless plain slowed me to a crawl

Coming to a standstill much to my surprise I turned back to the fork

East a flight of bright-colored birds invited my curiosity

Far ahead stood two parallel lines of leafy green trees

In cool shade pungent vines of spices scented sweet counsel

Dialects of aromatic wisdom released intoxicating advice

Take the long road it will lead you to the high country

Magritte light time is time it takes a descending

propeller drone to hum west between Polaris and faded pink-blue-white

fire flies mark up the night like jazz players smoking in between sets

birch and cherry leaves hang still etching edges on the glow

night throws stars across the inside of its skull

last light curves ungraspable indigo

Brooklyn Christmas 2002

A Seminar's Ancient Modesty

North snow White screen **Drifts** horizontal Blows easy as smoke. Orange contrast Candle on the table Street light outside Promenade washes out Gray, cold, translucent. Christmas works its way Through the day Howls into night Chorusing leafless trees. Black silhouettes Like medical drawings Brains with a cortex Clusters of neurons whipped Side by side by windy spasms. Manhattan disappears. Tall buildings gone. In a fishing village Somewhere across The East River People marooned Sit around tables Talk about war **Smallpox** Wish each other Goodwill Peace on Earth.

Behind a name tag, bottled water, Holiday Inn note pad, an agenda for the day, a single pencil placed in a prefabricated box, hid the spectacled narrow face of Xiaomin Zhou from Chengdu; pharmacist by education, picked for his potential. Xiaomin sat uncomfortable waiting for his turn to tell us what he does, how he does it, and why he wants to be here.

Desirous of the opportunity to learn The most effective way to say What others want to hear.

When his time came A long pause preceded his words. He stammered. Apologized.

> Every listener fidgeting In the fragile Courtesy of embarrassment.

Once started He faltered. Started again.

Placing carefully wrapped vowels In soft rhythms:

"I come from a city three thousand seven hundred years old.

```
People there walk slowly,
drink tea,
play majiang
and sit together
to talk."
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Cézanne's Apples

for Mike Dainard

"This is this because that is that"

Simple origin: dark to light.
Fabric spilled across a table.
Contrasts: reds, golds, leafy tops, wood's grain.

The space around Cézanne's apples: There, stubborn layers of rosy pigment Assert their prophetic influence.

"You can almost see around them" Thought Picasso. "Be an apple, be an apple" Said Cézanne.

Transparent departure flounders
Expanding in ten thousand directions
Until it becomes two dimensions.

"Likelihood lingers outside the frame"

Gifts, left to be found To be seen around Beyond the going.

A Place For Things At The End

All that has Brought me To where I am

Can finally rest A place I know I can return to

If I need Reminding A gracious altar

On which I can put Things that are At the end

Galileo's Garage

Reason has been shattered exploded from hitting the street after a long slow fall out an open window blaring loud music flying flags of drying t-shirts and stained underpants. Time is all one color. A bombed car heaped in a pile like burnt books: or, melted-down razor wire shredded for suicide bombers to dissect their brothers and sisters. Duration is for sale. A timeshare for those who can afford it: or, for those with the taste for it this moment can be simply contemplated on the breath; or, the unencumbered pondering of a Master's Degree project featuring sprockets and spring driven wheels circling around a low-lighted lava lamp in Galileo's garage on Staten Island.

Lady Sings The Blues

for Billie Holiday

Looking into the dark a ring of soft ashes defines an image which glows.

Oracle sings the blues long vowels cut deep while rhythm waits to find what is.

Down so long down light hovering 'round light doesn't try to explain.

Beaten flat blood from the sky stains her face until it sings.

Remember return to those who sing for those they've never known waiting.

Moving into Summer

days last longer people talk on bridges quays by the river host picnics guitar music and laughter mix streetlights take over

men and women alone la Seine's changing colors flow out of the sunset offering assurance tomorrow will arrive

old couples look at each other wordless memories say nothing agreeing on answers to forgotten questions wearing sandals they wait dressed in linen confident how far they've come

night's glow belongs to lovers young girls curled around hard boys sagging against stone bridge railings

surface of the river's gliding wrinkles flash gold blues too quick to catch interrupting everyone

Flamenco Rain

for Daniel Staffler

Arid perplexity impedes each note each silent space

liberated rhythms whip winds making rivers of torrential resonance

flying perspiration forces moisture into dry thirsty places

raw momentum modulates sound drawing rayas de tonalidad filosófica

disciplined hands tormented tempos whirling dancers

Arabic echoes liberate the heat of an Andalusian summer

Patters of Light and Time

Get up in the middle of the night to finish a poem on empty raku kilns and clusters of cherry blossoms

First light accompanies a haiku whose link smells of spring rains arriving as a woman glues a broken vase

Summer bedding gentles sleep in dark lightness as a painting dreams its untangling from the Largo's fountain

To bed late mildly disturbed by unanswerable questions waking in cool darkness moving air comes through an open window

Largo light at night rises like bloom beams just breaking the surface of clean black Earth after a rain Look up at the evening sky hosting les merveilleux nuages slow floating and patient in their graceful passing

Through holes in black foliage cascaded galaxies of stars, planets, asteroids smiling I heard my silent voice say and you wish you could see something?

Now you are gone your image curled over the keyboard intervals of a classic jazz ballad blend unexpected harmonies

Without exception including these dutiful markings is an exquisite metaphor unlocking the middle some say is excluded

Our bodies softened around each other while night foreshadowed sublime blessings in verses of silent dreams

Darkness swirls around us imagined cardinal points disappear direction is a fantasy of where we think we are going

Perfect Blue

Maybe after We'll find We were planing Air currents Across the sky Listening to Coltrane Looking down On white clouds Then up A snatch of Moon An opaque reflection Brief icy contrail A trace Tracks through an invisible passage Beautiful debris Rhythm Blur Soft sounds Blown on planetary winds

Haiku

First growth nibs appear, small droplets under the ice; spring begins to move

> On the fish pond's still surface, each falling blossom meets its reflection

> > From the balcony in the lilac-filled morning a sheet stirs softly

> > > Cassiopeia reclines in Sierra night, Central Camp summer

Standing motionless in front of a tall bookcase she looks for the poem

With brushes in hand he blends amber hues of the late afternoon's glow

Bright fiery top
of the flower has darkened;
it is colder now

Earth raises its voice demanding its right to live; vengeance with wisdom

> Bougainvillea in the soft bronze light of morning; he without his brush

Fall's tremulous glow shivers in yellows and reds; listening to Bach

Snowfall at twilight softens the hill's silhouette; old dogs walk with care

Stretching between the weather-beaten bones of a sheep, frozen spider webs

O Corvo's silent no sound but splashing rain; winter is early

Waka

Far off shadows mask
sturdy oaks scattered between
wind-burned arroyos.
Along the golden ridgeline
a dust devil swirls skyward.

In warm sheltered shade
hollyhocks and foxglove
attract hummingbirds.
Nearby in the sun, an old
black cat cunningly stretches.

Bitter autumn winds
send ripples across Jake's Pond
rocking a moored skiff.
Two loud mallards honk their way
south along the Delaware.

Glowing stalactites
drip icy water onto the
spelunker's face.
In a flash a shaft of light
engulfs an underground tarn.

Springtime's almost here:
in spite of the sun a tear,
missing my old friend.
Where there used to be his poems,
now I must keep writing mine.

Haiku and Waka are dedicated to John Givens, Leticia Maura Constant, Madeleine Cannon, Richard Meux, Cathy Flanagan, Jeff Young, Richard Yurman.

Prose

The Heron and I

On a cold misty day ambling a trail behind Basel, along one of the canals coming off the Rhine near Saint-Louis, I came across a large gray heron. It was moving slowly through an open field 50 meters away. As the slender, long-legged bird picked up each foot and put it carefully back down again, I decided to take on its step and pace. Tai-chi led by an avian master.

Straightening its great S-shaped neck, taking full notice of my presence, immediately the sharp-beaked bird stopped. So did I.

We stood motionless, the heron and I, for what seemed like three or four minutes. As the cautious inquirer began to move I continued to mirror its bearing. A few feet away I noticed on my left a bench. Slinking with the rhythm of my escort I made my way over to the seat and sat down. The heron paused, not moving a muscle. When it eventually started ankling its way along the alternating weed-covered ridges and dirt depressions, it would look over in my direction every few steps. At one point, moving much closer to me, it came to rest. Then the bird turned, slowly walking straight toward me. It got to within 15 meters and abruptly stopped. The heron and I stared at each other, or so I thought, transfixed.

In a flash, its head went into a depression and came back up with a small field mouse wiggling in its bill. With blurring speed, the gray and white bird lowered its head, using the hard ground as a surface to put pressure on the neck of the helpless creature. As quick as the attack, up came the heron's crown and in one gulp the still-writhing

small rodent disappeared down the long, feathery gullet. I sat still ... watching.

In slow motion the hunter continued to prowl. In a few minutes it once again speared another resident of the field. I sat there for at least half an hour not taking my eyes off the ethereal being before me.

Well fed and satisfied, turning its back on me completely, the heron walked in no hurry to the other side of the field.

> Still against winter's sky a hunting heron waits for its guileless prey

Ernest's 43rd Box

"Eleven years seem like they went by in a flash. Maybe they didn't happen at all." Ernest talks to himself, out loud, all the time when nobody's around.

He read somewhere that in the early development of a child, the kid likes to talk to himself. Youngsters teach themselves what they are doing when they hear their own voice trying to make sense out of what's happening. They think it sounds like one of their parents, somebody with authority and experience, so they listen.

It always seemed cruel to Ernest to tell a child to stop talking to himself. Stupid too. There would be far fewer screwed up kids if the parents would let their darlings explain their experience to themselves in their own terms. So Ernest exercises authority over himself by responding to the sound of his own voice. It works pretty well. As an adult, it gives him a chance to practice saying what he thinks is important and might bring some favorable attention to him now and then as well.

With one swing of his arm, the translucent manufacturing tape whanged out its plaintive cry as it curled across the back edge of the cardboard box, completing its angular orbit.

"All the time it's taken to get this place together," he thought. Looking around for the scissors, his attention drifted out to the East River in front of his apartment and the Wall Street skyline on the other side. After a long, lost gaze across the Upper Bay, past the end of Manhattan, over to Lady Liberty holding her torch, Ernest shook himself

out of his rapture when he heard a voice, his own voice, mumble, "Most people would die for a place like this."

Sometimes he nearly whispers to himself. But since it's harder to hear, he reminds himself, without saying anything, to speak up.

At last count there were forty-two boxes taped up, marked for the room most anticipated to house their contents.

"Forty-two boxes ... it all went by so quick," the final consonant coughed into the room.

Ernest was reminded of his pal Milt when he inhaled a fruit fly as they rode together on Hawthorne bicycles at sunset along the vineyard roads back home.

"How in hell am I supposed to know where any of this stuff is gonna go?"

Ernest saw seven pictures of his future home online. Outside of that, he hasn't got the slightest idea where the next few years of his life are going to be spent.

Through the slightly open window, Ernest could see from a distance a man walking down the passageway. Another scream of the industrial tape shattered the nearly empty room, its howl shadowed by an eerie echo. The warmly dressed fellow snapped his head up, squinting hard at the third floor. He appeared alarmed by the rasping screech breaking the relative calm of the Promenade.

"Hmmm. I bet that guy thinks I am torturing some poor creature up here."

A faint smile turned the corners of Ernest's mouth. "It does sound ghoulish, that's for sure."

Frowning as he looked out the window, he spoke quietly to

himself in an inquisitive tone. "Maybe this guy's a veteran visiting the War Memorial down the street and thinks I'm draining the blood out of a live dog, like the Koreans do."

On a camping trip Ernest's cousin by marriage, who fought in the Korean War, told him how horrible the marketplaces sounded in small rural villages north of Seoul, where apparently people like to eat dogs.

Ernest has a habit of repeating to himself, out loud, what he just thought in the silence of his mind. It's a way of making everything he thinks important, important.

"Like to eat dogs ... fffffffah." Lots of air passed between his lower lip and upper teeth before the vowel.

"Damn. I bet she'd be down there in a flash, getting our gray-haired corporal to sign a petition," he mumbled, surprising himself.

As the tape screeched for a good three seconds, Ernest drifted back to a time nearly forgotten. He wistfully remembered an attractive woman he met in Switzerland who talked, at least, like an animal rights activist. The encounter happened in an art gallery in Basel one afternoon when he got off work early.

Standing in front of a Rodin female nude, showing a model with her sex blatantly opened by the compromised angle of the perspective, Ernest was admiring the details when a woman, standing next to him, said to herself in a muffled voice, "Disgusting."

"Sorry, what did you say?" Ernest asked, sincerely thinking she was talking to him.

"What?" she quipped, snapping out of her revulsion.

Ernest repeated himself much slower this time, making certain not to begin with "sorry." "What did you say?"

"I said disgusting," reiterated the woman. She matched Ernest's measured cadence, exactly.

"She has a familiar accent," he thought to himself. "English, maybe ... Midlands, around Chester."

Slightly embarrassed, he countered, "I saw a whole show of Rodin's erotic drawings in Paris. If you see a few of these drawings at the same time, you begin to realize Rodin had a sense of how raw nakedness was like a magnet. You are just drawn into what you are seeing."

"If you're a repressed megalomaniac, you are," she said crisply.

"Well, that should have been expected," he thought, keeping his editorializing under his breath. "She is from England after all."

Ernest stepped back in his mind. In a moment out of time, he could see the intelligence of the woman's face and eyes. Attractive. Early middle age. She dressed well. Her coat open, he could see the start of the shadow between her breasts disappear into her white blouse. Around her slender neck was a delicate gold link chain, on which were hanging a small skeleton key, a minuscule Buddha, and a thin totem pole.

"Klickitat probably," Ernest recalled silently. He used to go to Canada with his parents when he was a boy. Ernest owns a miniature Klickitat totem pole, a carved Thunderbird standing on a Bear. While on a trip to Victoria for his eleventh birthday, his father bought it for him,

"Do you like art?" Ernest asked, putting a strong emphasis on "like."

"I adore art, but I am not crazy about looking at a disturbed man's neurosis."

Finally surrendering, he had figured out a long time ago not to argue with someone when they feel strongly about something so personal. He learned to hold his tongue. Besides, he was quite infatuated looking into her defiant eyes. Ernest felt like saying to her, "You're not looking at an artist's neurosis, you're looking at a woman's vagina." But wisely he didn't.

"Maybe you'd like Modigliani's nudes. They are filled with love he obviously felt for the model." Added as an after thought, "Modigliani clearly had great respect and admiration for a woman's body."

There, he'd done it again. He didn't think about that last pompous remark before he blurted it out. "Surely this woman is going to feel like I'm hitting on her." "Damn!" he thought to himself.

"The woman laying down with her left arm behind her head," she said with obvious forethought. "Those little wisps of black hair in her armpit ... she is glorious." In an instant the woman's face was filled with radiant abandonment.

"Yes," fumbled Ernest. "Yes, I know the one you are talking about."

Realizing he was talking too loudly, he brought his voice down. "She makes me ... nervous, she's so ... so beautiful."

"Oh, oh!" Ernest heard himself say silently again, "That might have been a bit too blatant."

"If it wasn't for the fact this jerk told me how much he worshiped Modigliani's women, I'd have paid no attention to him at all," she said.

So sudden was the change of tone, Ernest went blank. "What an awful man!" she repeated.

"Where did that come from?" Ernest thought.

What an abrupt confession to make to a total stranger. He didn't say it, however. He kept his bafflement to himself, even though it seemed to come out of nowhere.

"Modigliani you mean?" he finally asked.

"No ..." she said with a kind if radiant displeasure. "This laboratory biologist I used to date."

As if Ernest was supposed to have known that.

"He dissected animals for one of the big drug companies around here," she added.

Ernest acknowledged in the spirit of complete sociability, "My uncle was a doctor and my cousin, his son, is a surgeon. It must be very interesting work, looking at all that ..."

"Being a doctor is one thing," she interrupted. "Being a butcher for the company's shareholders is another thing all together."

Moving away from the paintings, trying to keep his voice down, hoping she would follow his example, Ernest sincerely questioned the woman.

"How else can we make progress curing cancer and the like, if we don't experiment on the effects these compounds have on living creatures?"

"These compounds?" She looked betrayed. "Are you a scientist?"

"No, but I do work with scientists sometimes," Ernest said in a slightly defensive tone.

"I can't believe it. Everywhere I go, I keep running into people who make their living throwing the ecology of the planet out of balance, pretending to be saving people's lives."

"I am a commercial illustrator," Ernest said with a sense of being taken off the hook.

"Oh, is that why you were staring so hard at Rodin's girls?" she said with a sly wink of an eye, setting the hook even deeper.

"Look, I don't mean to argue with you, honest. Actually, I'd like to look at some more paintings with you." Ernest was taking control of the situation at last.

Just to finish up the conversation about dissecting animals for medical science, he added with a ring of chivalry, "I admire your commitment to protecting creatures that have every right to exist and can't defend themselves from the scythe of progress."

He thought to himself, "God how old fashioned, that was pretty lame."

Ernest's recollections of the repartee that afternoon in the gallery were so real he could feel a slight longing in his heart.

"Sure it's awful," she said, "and we need to develop ..."

The tape let out another tortured screech. Then all fell silent. A quarter of the way around book box 43, the tape ran out.

Ernest let out a snarling growl as he was untimely ripped from his tender reverie.

Autobiography of Flypaper

It was hot. I remember the morning I was born.

It happened before I had any idea I was I. I didn't want to move. It was Sunday and I had in mind an easygoing, dreamy afternoon. Didn't sleep very well for the past few weeks. Kept getting awakened by gurgles from the inside and muffled noises from the outside. Fresno in August any time is hot! In 1943 it was hot but not so humid as you would find these many years later. Felt pretty good in the warm darkness. That's another reason I wanted to lay around and not do much. Just thought it would be nice to hang in there and feel good for a little while longer.

I knew all along the actual reason I was resistant to coming out, or falling in, depending on how you looked at it. From the outside it looks like someone comes in, from the inside the experience is falling out. "Coming" is what those on the outside like to call anything heading in their direction. I didn't know this at the time. I didn't have a vocabulary yet, so I was not able to describe to myself my experience of what was happening, even though I was definitely there when it did. Frankly, the main reason I wanted to be lazy was I had just finished being somebody else and was hoping I'd get a rest before becoming somebody different than Who I Was Before.

Sometime in mid-November of '42 Who I Was Before got shot down over Germany. Who I Was Before was a twenty-two-year-old fighter pilot in the Luftwaffe. An American P-39 got the best of Who I Was Before while engaged in a low altitude dogfight near Munich. The Yanks used to call the P-39 the Air Cobra because it had a lot of firepower

and it was highly responsive to a good pilot. It was a fine aircraft below 15,000 feet, but above that altitude it just didn't have the horsepower.

Unfortunately for Who I Was Before, the encounter happened at 2,230 meters. That's 7,317 feet, a number with an indelible presence. The altimeter was the last conscious visual contact before two white-hot projectiles ripped Who I Was Before in half, igniting the fuel tank, causing a bright yellow-orange fireball to light up the early morning sky over Holzkirchen.

Well, I was no longer Who I Was Before. Whatever I immediately became is A Mystery To Me. All A Mystery To Me remembers is a jangled feeling of tumbling out of control, falling away from a center that had no gravity. As dawn began to glow, paralyzed by a rising prism of harmonies sung by the Purity of the Elements Wind, A Mystery To Me began to flail into ice particles and disappear.

Fiercely disoriented, A Mystery To Me panicked, terrified by a sudden, brilliant, piercing green light. A Mystery To Me didn't realize that the green, piercing, clear light was Wisdom. Tenderly, a spacious and peaceful surrender began tumbling away from Nirvana into a place of no light, beyond time and space, whirling through a rhythmic magnetism until Bingo!

I was spawned.

It was a lot of work taking on all those cells and attaching them to the sticky liquid I was at the beginning. Now I was almost whole except for a link in my brain between my parietal and frontal lobes. That connection would take more time when I am on the outside. Before that can happen I have to be pointed in the direction of abstract thought. I didn't know any of this at the time, of course. But 58 years later I will read about the various connections in the brain that happen after birth.

So I would have hung in much longer, but that morning was different. It was noisier than anything I'd ever heard: hollering and vibrating, bucking up and down. All that turned out to be my Mother. The usual muffled sounds and gurgles were amplified out of proportion.

Something else was making a lot of disturbance too. Some evenly timed clanging going on in the distance. Years later I found out the accompaniment to Mother's noisy exertion was a bell ringing in the steeple of Saint John's Cathedral just east of the hospital on Mariposa Street.

What I thought was my resistance to falling out was in fact our resistance — Mother's and mine. Mother was 44 years old when I entered the world. She had a similar experience almost 16 years earlier when my brother was born. He was very sick for the first three years of his life. I don't think she wanted another go-round.

Aging cellular walls, which I was wedging myself between, were getting weaker with each undulation. The passage out of which I was sliding opened into a blinding expanse, spilling clear fluid of the future into the present before me. There was nothing I could hold on to anymore.

After all that was only water, blood, slime, contraction, release, cord, thighs and smells and gasps and choking asphyxiation. Burning in my virgin lungs a sharp sting and screaming, "Help, help, help!" so that's what I would learn later all that sound meant.

The only other noise, outside of my wailing, was someone saying over and over, "It's a strapping big boy! He's a big fellow, alright."

As it turned out, A Big Fellow is Who I Am Now.

Ja-Da

The long side of the piano paralleled a large bay window. The combination of these two well-defined lines, running from the molding of the front door to a set of built-in bookshelves on the east wall, made the room look larger than it actually was. The window frame's lower ledge was several inches below the casing of the instrument's cabinet. Light slipping behind the piano made a soft luminosity, barely visible under the soundboard. In late afternoon coming into the front room from the kitchen, one had the illusion that the grand piece of furniture was floating in a forgotten memory of Victorian serenity. No matter the time of year, sun or no sun, the folded down shiny wooden cover on the Chickering Five Foot Grand Piano reflected the quiet world coming through the big rectangular portal.

When I was a kid, reflections of skinny trunks from tall palms swaying back and forth, especially in the early spring winds, always added a little incentive to practice the piano a bit longer. Not that the songs I was working on were any less boring, it was just that one of the disproportionately bulbous tops of the staggering palms would surely break off someday, and I wanted to be there when it crashed down on our neighbor's green 1949 Plymouth parked in the street in front of their house.

The neighborhood in which I grew up was filled with California bungalow-style houses. Most of them were built right after the First World War. This style of building was based on a sturdy four-room structure with a front room, dining room, kitchen, and bedroom. At the juncture of two short hallways, one connecting the kitchen and

the bedroom, the other leading from the living room to the back of the house, was the bathroom. The hall wall outside the bathroom had a telephone firmly anchored to its surface. The dim light fixture in the hall made the large black box, with a stringy chord connecting the receiver to the casing, ominous and unpredictable. The simple design of the house allowed each room two windows facing outside. When these spacious openings were unlatched during a hot summer night, they allowed whatever breeze there might be to pass through all the main rooms. In the calm movement of air, hosting an occasional distant train horn, sweet dreams of a peaceful small town welcomed gentle sleep.

Some years later another bedroom was built, and in the early 50s, a rustic den was added onto the back of the house, and became my father's painting studio. Descending two steps down into my dad's universe, I could count on a warm fire in the fireplace in the winter. The strong smell of turpentine and oil paint permeated any season. To get to the den, a passerby had to navigate the initial bedroom of the original bungalow's design. As it turned out, that meant walking through what had now become my bedroom. I got to know a distinct part of my father's personality from that passage which served as a conduit between two distinct worlds: his and my mother's.

Dad would walk through my room to get to his studio. Often as he passed through, he'd say "Come here I want to show you something." He especially liked painting the Sierra Nevada whose rolling foothills were only a few miles from our house. His invitation would bring me before a canvas he was working on at the time.

"Look at the slide I have of this sky." He'd lower the light and turn on the projector facing a small screen. "What do you think if I change the way these clouds here bring your attention to that horizon," pointing to the photo he was using as a reference, "and highlight this perspective to bring your attention to these peaks, rather than the ones over there?"

I was not very old when he started making these kinds of inquiries. At first I didn't really know exactly what he was wanting by seeking my opinion. However, as these queries became more frequent, I understood he wanted me to concentrate on what was before me, and give him my opinion. If I'd generalize my thoughts, which was always my inclination, he'd ask again, gently, but with more insistence, "What do you see?" I'd look carefully, but again my confidence always made me wonder if what I was saying was what he was asking me for. "Just let your eyes guide what you see, and answer my question."

That insistence, "Just let your eyes guide what you see," ended up being a simple mantra for what I began to do a couple of years later. I started to draw and paint a lot. I had real talent. Eventually I went to public school art classes in the summer. My eyes and my sensitivity to the details of what I saw was the direct result of my father's insistence. After a recess of 30 years, I started painting again 17 years ago. Following my father's lead, I start with what I see, not with what I think I see. There's a big difference.

The simple design of the house inevitably led to the living room and the immovable presence of the Chickering by the window. Music was my mother's world. I learned from my grandmother that mom was a very good pianist by the time she was 10 years old. She later played for silent movies at the Kinema Theatre, which used to be at 1211 Fulton Street in Fresno, California. It's been torn down for 70 years. Before she married my father, mother worked at Cooke's Music Store sight-reading sheet music at the piano for people looking for the most popular songs of the day.

Mother was like many middle-class women born at the

end of the 19th century: eager, curious, and frustrated. She was smart and had a sense of style, was pretty, and a real talent for interpreting music. Mother played Chopin and Schubert. She also played George Gershwin and Jelly Roll Morton and everything in between. Mom was the classic "life of the party." Before I was born, she taught piano and was often requested at "society events" to sit and play some popular songs for the guests. Her sister told me, "Helen seemed to have an endless repertoire of tunes she could play until the last person bid a sleepy good night."

Mom was in her mid-forties when I came on the scene. Much of her public music life also came to an end with my arrival. When I was old enough to begin to have a sense of family and community, she was tired and quite content to spend long periods of time alone. When my father was away at work, mom would read for hours, talk on the phone to her mother or her sister, or simply have a smoke and stand looking out the front window for a long time. In the late afternoon mother would prepare our dinner. Then she'd settle back to a quiet evening, often joining my father for a highball before supper.

As I got older, the post-World War II culture began to change traditional patterns of everyday life for everyone. Fast cars, 25-cent movies on Saturday morning, phonographs capable of playing stacks of 78 records; these mass-produced products, combined with the radio, became the cultural mainstay of my early life. My older brother would turn on the RCA record player and listen to Stan Kenton and Dave Brubeck for hours as he polished his downhill racing skis. I'd sit at the end of his bed and watch him turn the bottoms of the two boards into mirrors. Our time together was punctuated by rhythmic, vertical structures of woodwinds and brass propelled by the driving rhythm of an acoustic bass, drums and piano. Modern jazz saturated my world.

By the time I was ten, a special obsession began to emerge, bringing mom and I together: our shared love of playing the piano. Apparently, before I can remember, I was playing by ear. I'd listen to a song on the radio and go over to the piano and work my way through the broken fragments of remembered melodies. By seven years old, I could play well enough that when visitors came to the house, mom proudly asked me to play something for her friends.

Mother had good enough sense to not be my piano teacher. She arranged for me to have, at various times in my development, solid instruction around harmony and chord structure. Other piano players she knew from her past musical exploits provided these basics. Eventually, while my friends were ballroom dancing, I became one of the guys in the band providing a melodic pretext for my comrades to snuggle as close together as the army of parental chaperons would permit. At university I studied music, and my first job out of school was as a professor of music at a small Bay Area college south of San Francisco.

Frequent visits to my hometown provided many years of pleasure being around mother as she grew older. After my father's passing mom lived alone. Her coterie of old friends slowly became fewer people as the years passed. On mom's ninetieth birthday my brother and I arranged a party to be held in her home, where, by that time, she'd lived for 68 years. Relatives, and what older friends still remained, came to the celebration. That night her vitality and generosity were mixed with a sweet haze of recollections and a slightly faltering memory.

The inevitable finally happened. "Helen, please play something for us." Mother walked confidently to the piano by the window, which by this time was the stuff of legends. She sat down on the creaky swivel chair, looked at the keys, and brought up her hands. Mom began to play

"Ja-Da," a hit song written in 1918 by Bob Carleton.

The lilting rhythm of her medium-tempo "stride" underscored the utility of simple harmony. Two measures of gentle preparation, then the opening intervals of "Jada, Ja-da ... Ja-da, Ja-da, jing, jing, jing. It's the sweetest little melody, it's so soothing and appealing to me." As the song flawlessly drifted along, we all stood in the presence of a Grand Lady.

Years later I wrote a short synopsis of my life with Helen, my mother. The last part contains these recollections and images:

You'd sit in the chair grandma used to take when she'd come over to visit, and have a cigarette in late afternoon. Sun, coming through a dusty window behind you, filtered again by barely moving patterns of smoke, floated beams around your head the way clouds split light on the horizon, when storms loom huge and the observer far away. Face in shadow, a dark eyeless silhouette released tiny puffs of drifting white, looking out into the quiet hours before it got even quieter. Other times (the best times) how beautiful the piano sounded as you played Chopin, Beethoven, and my favorites, Teddy Wilson or Jelly Roll Morton. Or "Ja-Da," the sweet anthem that danced off the ends of your fingers long after you'd forgotten names, faces, births, deaths, roses, patterned wallpaper, faithful friends, divorced daughters-in-law, garden parties, your age, and me.

Disintegration

August 1991, on a sweltering, humid day before moving from Manhattan to Brooklyn, my wife and I walked along the Brooklyn Heights Promenade, a several block long ambulatory extending like a wall shelf over the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway. As we looked across the East River she and I literally stopped in our tracks. That day we could see the Verrazano Bridge to the south, and through the latticework of the Brooklyn Bridge north, the Empire State and Chrysler Building in Midtown. Straight across the East River we looked up the narrow, dark slit of Wall Street. On a clear day you can see up Wall Street to the steeple of Trinity Church on Broadway. Toward New Jersey, on the other side of the Upper Bay are the Staten Island Ferry Terminal, Ellis Island, and the Statue of Liberty. Just to the right of Wall Street are several classic needle-tipped skyscrapers that you always see in grainy black-and-white movies or newsreels from the 40s and 50s.

The Twin Towers of the World Trade Center were two of the numerous sights that made us realize this was where we wanted to live. Standing there that day, a good mile and a half away, the Towers rose two inches above the rest of the skyline. The slender outlines looked like a couple of gigantic streamliners standing on end, or perhaps the aluminum fuselages of twin rockets being readied for a long intergalactic journey

We eventually found a place right on the Promenade. There was nothing between our view and Manhattan but the water. From our windows the city lit up at night like Tivoli Gardens. Many evenings, during the summer storms that would suddenly break loose, we'd watch as lightening flashed out of the dark, striking for several seconds at a time the antenna on top of the North Tower. Time passed quietly, as we'd pick out features of a face outlined by a pattern of lights sparkling in the bitter cold darkness of winter. In the morning, getting ready for work, eating breakfast at the table by the window, buildings across the East River mirrored orange sunlight, making the water's surface a rippling golden bridge extending halfway between the Financial District and the Heights.

September 11th was the first day that year that let one know autumn was near. The air was especially clear with a little nip just behind the soft gentle warmth of the morning sun. It was Election Day, a fact that played a big part in keeping many people away from their workplace that morning. They were off voting, or having an espresso with a loved one, or simply using the civic excuse of "duty" to prolong the pleasure of a change in the daily routine. Brooklyn Heights is convenient for the young and upwardly mobile professionals because it is fifteen minutes by express subway to the heart of the financial reactor: The Street. Wall Streeters are early risers. Mayoral elections or the morning after winning the World Series make no difference. These fast-moving barkers start their buying and selling before daylight, when European markets are humming and Asia is monitoring trends to start its trading day. Lots of people were already at work.

The last eleven years before leaving New York I directed the communications department for a small, prestigious executive development firm in Midtown Manhattan. I was conducting a meeting in my office with four people who worked in one of the financial service companies located in the South Tower. My assistant buzzed me to say, "A plane just crashed into the North Tower." She didn't have any more information than that. I suggested we stop the meeting and reschedule another time. My clients quickly left and I went up to another floor where we had several

offices. One of them offered an unobstructed view of the south end of Manhattan and the Twin Towers.

When the elevator opened on the 16th floor, everyone was quiet. The only sound was the treble squawk of a small video monitor reprogrammed to receive local television coverage of events on the south end of the Island. A couple of talk show hosts were trying to get their heads around what was happening. All they knew for sure was an aircraft hit the North Tower around 8:45am. Beyond that, nobody knew what was going on. The airplane that struck the Tower turned out to be American Airline Flight 11.

I called my wife to see if she was aware of what was happening. After a couple of rings she picked up the phone. I asked her if she could see anything. She couldn't and told me she would get back to me on her cell phone from the Promenade. I didn't hear from her. After a few minutes had passed I called her back. She started talking so fast, and louder than I'd ever heard her speak. "My god this is the worst thing I have ever seen it's horrible just horrible my god." She clicked off the phone without another word. I called her again. She continued on with her tone of voice as if we'd never stopped talking. I asked her if she was all right, but she just kept repeating, "My god, I've never seen such a horrible sight. Come home if you can. Papers and debris are floating up in the smoke. It's just horrible." She clicked off.

I started to feel sleepy. I always withdraw into a kind of sleep-like cocoon when I find myself in a vulnerable or unexpected, threatening situation. I kept looking at the North Tower. A wide column of smoke billowing from a gaping hole near the top held my complete attention. Out of nowhere, just after 9:00am, the second plane, United Airline Flight 175, flew straight into the South Tower.

An expanding, bright red and yellow inferno gushed from the northeast corner of the building. One of my colleagues

standing next to me just kept repeating, "Jesus Christ. Oh my god. Jesus Christ." The television went silent. Eventually one of the voices mumbled some words of disbelief.

In the middle of this disorienting vision the news broke about the Pentagon. Sometime around 9:30am, American Airline Flight 77 slammed into the west side of the nation's military headquarters.

"What is going on ... what is happening?" I thought.

The interoffice phone buzzed and I was told someone was coming up to see me. I could not think of who would want to see me. It was impossible for my wife to get from Brooklyn Heights to Midtown in such a short time, and why would she want to come into Manhattan at a time like this, anyway?

The whoosh of the elevator door turned everybody's head and standing there was one of my clients from a firm housed in the South Tower. He didn't move. He just stood there looking at no one in particular. I was afraid the elevator door would close on him and he'd disappear. I reached toward him as he slowly walked out of the elevator and into my arms. We embraced for quite some time. Everybody did whatever he or she could to help him. Someone brought a telephone, another person some water. He still didn't say much of anything. He just kept a blank expression on his face and mechanically accepted whatever was given to him. Later we found out he was trying to get to Penn Station so he could catch a train to be with his family in New Jersey. Everything got shutdown so fast he couldn't make it and didn't know any other place to go. He ran fifty blocks from Liberty Street at the south of the Island to Midtown and 41st Street.

While trying to comfort my friend, someone said loudly, "Listen!" Each of us stopped and turned toward the tele-

vision as one of the show's host announced that just a few minutes after 10:000m, another plane crashed into a field outside of Shanksville, Pennsylvania. Later, as details began to come in about the downed aircraft, it turned out the passengers on United Airline Flight 93 died while attempting to subdue a team of hijackers who had turned around the San Francisco-bound flight. The courage of these people brought down an aircraft destined toward an unknown target on the East Coast. Their sacrificed lives saved how many people? Fortunately, we will never know.

I thought I was witnessing the beginning of World War III.

In Brooklyn Heights, I found out later, my wife was standing on the Promenade with two women strangers, looking up at the horrific sight of the Twin Towers burning: detritus floating everywhere, people falling or jumping to their deaths, and a column of smoke filling the entire western sky. Eventually she talked about a noise she heard, but she never knew what it was. The unimaginable spectacle of a catastrophe so large kept leading all who saw it back to silence. She later told me, "This must have been what it was like to stand at the feet of Jesus as he was being crucified," standing there with two women she did not know, holding on to each other, crying in disbelief. She also said that there was no frame, as in a television or movie screen, to mask-off the horror; no limitation, no ending time, it just kept going. It would not stop. Later statistics revealed over 200 people fell or jumped from the Twin Towers to their death.

By 11:00am both buildings had collapsed. The structures melted from the inside. They folded in on themselves to spiral down into a heap of steel, concrete, trapped people, and burning flesh. The television footage of those falling towers will be burned into the memory of everyone who lived in New York City that day.

The south part of the city started to become congested. People from the far end of the Island were hustled across the Brooklyn Bridge. Manhattan was systematically evacuated. I started walking from Midtown around 2:30pm in the afternoon. With the exception of fire trucks and emergency vehicles directing people through loud speakers, no sound could be heard. Nobody was talking. Now and then someone would mumble a barely audible thought. Silence had countless dialects in those hours as we all slowly walked south down Fifth Avenue. All of us were shuffling straight toward the most ugly, immense column of smoke I had ever seen, or ever seen since.

Coming Uptown, an apparition frosted from head to toe with dust, passed by going north. Everyone stared at the strange being, an unknown form of life from another region: raceless, faceless, completely beige. I began to hear some people crying. I turned and saw a man and two women, tear stains streaking their faces. They'd stop, look up at the smoke, then down again, then mechanically resume walking. By the time we reached 14th Street, the crowd was so dense it could hardly move. On my own, I cut across New York University Village, a large resident complex for faculty and students working and attending NYU. I went from chaos to total isolation. It was all evacuated. Nobody was near me.

The smoke was getting larger and more ominous the closer I got to the epicenter. I could hear the smoke. I stayed on Mercer Street, moving east of the southbound exodus as long as possible.

Eventually, a mild-mannered police officer told me I had to turn back into what was now a flooded river of refugees flowing out of the city. After being turned away from the passageway onto the Brooklyn Bridge, I was directed north and joined thousands of people slowly, quietly walking across the Manhattan Bridge.

Epilogue

Walk awhile, then stop. Walk and stop. Turn around ...

Enormous brown cloud billows out of the crater. Cannot see the extent of its width or height. Walk awhile, then stop. Nauseous smells fill the air. Walk and stop. Even a mile away from the site, you can hear the hiss of all that is burning. Periodic counterpoint to the rumbling miasma is the futility of the torrent blasting from the water cannons. Turn around ... ubiquitous floating paper pockmarks the funneled shroud. Walk and stop.

Thousands of dead people, burning in a hole. There is no longer any ... cohesion.

Walk awhile ... then ... stop.

A Week After September 11th

Bottom Broken cables

Between bent beams Snapped jagged We keep A pungent vigil

Smoldering wires

Over finger parts Ankles

Ear lobes

Earphones

Panty hose

Cuff links

Dried snapdragons.

A narrative of tears Takes us further from the Moment of awakening.

Blessed rats Go about their work While autumn foliage Spirals around an Invisible center Falling slow as Golden rain.

The dead ventilate Float up chimneys Negotiate voids, rise Find Escape in the Ingenuity of Disintegration.

Just Say Obrigado

I always have the impulse when taking in the golden vibrancy of hot dry weather, to peel off all my clothes and allow the unencumbered beneficence of the sun to embrace my naked body.

It is August in Lisboa. I like reading in the morning while sitting in my semi-private enclosed patio. How I'd love to be basking in the buff. I do realize, however, that my neighbors would have a slightly different point of view.

After sizing up the alternatives, I decided to buy a nice lightweight cotton bathrobe. I wasn't confident where to start, so I called my friend in Paris who knows Lisboa much better than I. In an instant she recommended El Corte Inglés, an elegant department store, fully branded with all the trimmings. By email, she suggested that I go to the Shopping Center Colombo and I'd find the nearest branch there. With her usual care, she called to tell me it was open on Sundays from 10:00 in the morning until 8:00 in the evening.

Lisboa's morning sun in the summer is exquisite. It's an idle walker's paradise.

"Place, lift, place, lift."

The mantra drifts effortlessly on the warm diffusion of light. Walking down the hill to catch a taxi, I met two new acquaintances from the neighborhood. Stopping for a moment, they asked if I was comfortable and if I needed anything, both of them knowing that I was a total newcomer to the city. After our chat and best wishes, I continued on.

"Place, lift, place, lift."

At the bottom of the hill is a popular taxi stand near *Praça* da *Figueira*. There, any time of the day and well into the night, one can be sure of getting a ride.

When I got to the stand, in a second, three men who had been talking together went in separate directions. One fellow in a denim shirt and wearing a denim hat, pointing to his taxi, gestured for me to get in. He slid into the driver's seat. When I sat down in the back seat, he looked at me in the rearview mirror with a universal glance that asks, "Where do you want to go?" I told him, "El Corte Inglés at the Shopping Center Colombo."

"Why do you want to go there?" he asked abruptly, the sound of his voice exuding some knowledge I didn't possess.

He told me there were lots of stores there but, "El Corte Inglés? No!"

I took out my Blackberry to re-check the address sent to me earlier. Sure enough: "El Corte Inglés in Shopping Center Colombo."

"No. Either you want to go to El Corte Inglés or Colombo, which one?"

By this time the driver was a little pushy. His English wasn't great but his mood was precise.

"Well," I said, "I need to buy a bathrobe and I was told I could find one at El Corte Inglés."

"There is a *El Corte Inglés*, but it's just a big store. I'll take you there."

Off we drove. He headed north on Avenida da Liberdade.

When we got to *Praça Marquês de Pombal*, we pulled into the right lane onto a large, multidirectional roundabout. Just as we changed lanes a crosswind gusted into the taxi, blowing the driver's hat off. It flew to the back seat and hit my head, then bounced onto the floorboard in front of me. I picked it up and returned it to him. He apologized for his flying hat. He even smiled. In a matter of seconds, a dark dirty car shot past us going very fast through the last second of a stoplight before it turned red.

"Jerk!" blurted the driver. Then, in an almost timid tone of voice, he asked, "Jerk? Is that right?" sincerely wanting to know if his choice of insults was appropriate.

"Right. Sure, that's right," I said. "It is an international word for an idiot."

"Idiota," he repeated in Portuguese. Some joviality at last resonating between us.

We drove a number of blocks up *Avenida António Augusto de Aguiar* without talking, the wind blowing in the car, the taxi driver's hat on the seat beside him, me imagining the perfect bathrobe. Suddenly a car in front of us, full of confused rubberneckers, stopped without warning, prompting another epithet into which I didn't inquire and he didn't explain.

When we got to *Avenida de Berna*, the driver said, "This is Sunday, store is closed, probably. It's a Spanish store," shaking his head. "They have hours different from ours." As he started to slow down he repeated his opening observation, "It's like a big house, this store."

He clearly wasn't an admirer.

"It's closed," he said as we approached a multistory, marble-surfaced building. My first thought was that that's probably why my friend in Paris made such a point of me going to the Shopping Center *Colombo*. As we got closer, though, I saw somebody moving around in the store, so I told the driver, "I think it's open." He turned into the driveway leading to the store. The doors were open for business.

My driver once again reminded me, "It's a Spanish store."

Acknowledging his final warning, I paid him. I quickly got out of the taxi and he drove off. His denim hat was still on the seat beside him.

It was a beautiful upscale department store. I wandered down the wide aisles looking for an escalator. After seeing, in English, that the Men's Department was on Floor Two, that's all I needed to know. Like the BHV in Paris, the escalators have their own logic. What looks like it should go up, goes down, and then you realize it's your disorientation that makes everything look like it should be doing something other than what it's doing.

Finally I got to Floor Two. After walking in a straight line past shirts, shoes, suits, and sport jackets draped with bright-colored neckties, inhaling the starchy fragrance of virgin cloth, I interrupted a young woman putting stock on the shelves.

"I am looking for a bathrobe, can you help me?"

"Yes, by the elevator, straight ahead, turn left and you'll see a room right next to it," she said with a smile.

"Thanks," I said.

I walked confidently now, knowing where I was going. Just as she said, I saw the elevators in front of me on the left side of the wide aisle. "WC," the sign read. I looked around, thinking probably the bathrobe department was

close to the elevator, maybe not right next to it. I didn't see anything except a young salesperson in a suit, standing alone.

"I'm looking for a bathrobe, I said," gesturing how it might hang off of my slightly forward-tilting body.

"Right there," he said, pointing to the bathroom.

Ah! Eureka. I got it. Both of the salespeople thought I was asking for ... yes, the bathroom. In many places across the planet the bathroom is called a WC. The letters stand for "Water Closet."

"No, no," I said slowly, yet emphatically, with a smile on my face. "A bath-robe," articulating the final syllable with precision.

Like a sprinter off the blocks, he went ahead of me, pointing to a distant aisle. He stopped, turned, and gestured, using the same slouched posture I used to dramatize gravity's force on my misunderstood request.

"You'll find a bathrobe right there."

Finally made it. Behind the counter was a smiling young woman who asked me in clear English, "Can I help you?"

I thought I'd try one more time just to say the word.

"I'd like to buy a bath-robe."

"We have several kinds. How long do you want it?" She spun off the comment and question, mindlessly tidying the already neat counter top. We were obviously communicating.

"I don't really know. I'd like to see what you have," I said.

I swung my canvas man-bag off my shoulder and set it on the counter. She showed me several styles. After looking at a couple I thought I might like, I asked if I could try one on. She pointed the way to a dressing room with a mirror. As I walked away, she said, "You should take your bag with you. It's better that way." I agreed completely.

I went to the mirror, but didn't like the way I looked. It looked like I was wearing a big T-shirt, with a fishing creel hanging over my shoulder.

"No. What else do you have?" I asked.

"This one is shorter," she said, "but I like it very much," pointing to a black and white crisply plaid cotton robe.

"Shorter, true, but kind of sexy," I said.

Exactly what I wanted, if they had one that fit me. They did. It fit. I paid the woman and took my bag, along with a green and white plastic sack containing my new delight. Quickly, I was in another taxi heading back to my neighborhood.

As soon as I got in the car, a round-faced, cheerful woman turned to me and asked, in accented but clear English, "Where would you like to go?"

"To the Mouraria," I said with flare. I even gave her my address in my distorted Portuguese.

"You speak a little Portuguese," she said, with an encouraging melody.

"Not really. I speak a little Spanish though, "Yo hablo Español," I whipped out.

"Yes, people here will understand you if you speak Spanish. My name is Ana. Here's my card. I can take you anywhere you wish, just call me. My brother is on the other side," showing me the back of the card. "He drives at night. He speaks English too."

By the time I got back to the taxi stand where I had started, we were talking about all the beautiful areas surrounding Lisboa within an hour's drive. She made it clear she'd like to take me to all the aforementioned places.

"Thank you, Ana. You'll hear from me." I paid the tab, reassuring her I would take her up on the offer.

After a hot, steep climb I was home in a few minutes. Peeling off all of my clothes in an instant, I took out the new robe from the plastic sack. I walked into the kitchen, carefully lifted some scissors off the rack, and cut off the fancy little plastic button inscribed with the creator's signature.

On went the robe. Into the bathroom I flew to check out the image. Fabulous. My wanting-mind was temporarily satisfied. I walked barefooted on the cool floor into my bedroom to call my friend in Paris to tell her about my adventure. I dumped my canvas bag to get my French phone and my Blackberry.

I didn't see the Blackberry. I checked my pants flopped over the chair behind my desk to see if it was in a pocket. I knew it wasn't, because the pants are very light and I would have noticed immediately. I went to my desk. Again, I knew it wasn't there, but it had to be, but it wasn't. Just as I thought.

"Oh shit," I mumbled. "Where is the damn thing? Oh no!" "Where in the hell can it be?" again quarrying myself as if being interrogated for a capital crime. "Where is it?"

I advised myself to stop thinking for a moment. "Stop identifying with your thoughts," I thought. "Calm yourself.

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Be mindful. Feel the cool air coming in and the warm air going out." Then I started again, obsessively bellowing my futile question, "Oh please, where in the hell is it?"

"Hell! The flying denim hat." With a snap of my fingers I remembered the glaring eyes in the rearview mirror as my denim-capped pilot asked me, "El Corte Inglés or the Shopping Center Colombo?" I took the Blackberry out of my bag to check the address my friend sent.

"Shit! I left it on the back seat of the taxi."

Off with the bathrobe. On with the still-damp clothes, sweaty from walking home in the heat. I stepped out of my apartment, turning the key only once, not wanting to waste a second.

I walked quickly back to the taxi stand hoping to see the driver with the denim hat sitting in his car. Of course, he wasn't there. But Ana was and I heard her say, "Hi Bill!" I told her about my lost Blackberry left in the back seat of another cab. She started looking in her cab. I didn't want to embarrass Ana by reminding her that it was in the other cab where I had left my digital identity.

"Damn, what am I going to do?" I said, mumbling to myself.

Two drivers underneath a small shade tree looked at me curiously as I sighed my dejected mewl.

Then I remembered that I had my French phone with me, a cheap little old-fashioned Nokia Flip that I used when I made calls in Europe so I wouldn't have to pay the outrageous roaming fees on my Blackberry. A pang shot through me as I silently pronounced the name of my old virtual pal, affectionately called The Berry.

"Probably gone forever," I thought.

I called my Berry. Several ringtones, then my voice began to clearly articulate all the necessary instructions so I could be located anywhere on the planet. How ironic. The Berry sounded like it knew where I was and it was telling me how I could find myself. I didn't want to hear my voice. I wanted to hear the guy who blurted out "Jerk!" as the dirty black car shot by. That, of course, reminded me of "idiota." which was a little too close for comfort.

"Shit." This time murmured in a much quieter voice.

Several more drivers were under the small shade tree now. It was getting really hot. I walked up to the group and asked if anyone spoke English. A tall, tan, white-haired fellow pointed to a young man smoking a cigarette. I walked over to the young man and told him what had happened. He seemed genuinely sorry to hear my story. He asked me if I had tried to call my Berry using another phone. Maybe someone would hear the ringtone. I told him I did. Even in my despondent funk I thought, "Wow, this guy's pretty sharp."

"Did the phone ring? Anybody answer?" he asked.

"Yes, I did ... I got my own voice."

"You should try again." He took a long drag on his cigarette and nodded his head.

"Yeah." I started to walk away. Turning around I said, "Thanks." He pushed his chin out quickly a couple of times as if to say, "Get on with it buddy, call the guy again ... now."

The sun was so bright I couldn't see the instructions or the numbers on the phone. I had no idea where the redial tab was. I walked a few meters away to some stairs descending into a parking garage where I could see the phone's menu. In a half-hearted way I redialed the number I had called a

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few minutes earlier. The ringtone began. I waited for my voice to repeat how I could be contacted anywhere on the planet, then somebody picked up the Berry.

"What can I say?" I thought. "I don't speak any Portuguese at all."

"Hello. Hello. Bom dia," I said. "My name is Bill. You have my Blackberry?"

The person on the other end made it clear he could at least hear me.

"Espere, por favor. Vou chamar meu amigo que fala Inglês." The guy didn't hang up ... so far so good. I dashed out of the parking garage. My confident advisor was still under the tree getting some shade and puffing on his smoke. I asked him if he'd talk to the other person on the phone.

"Yes," he said. I handed him my phone, my hand shaking slightly.

I looked so intently at the young man in front of me, I realized I might scare him with my pleading glance. I said, roughing up my tone of voice, "Tell the guy I will pay him whatever he wants if he will return the Blackberry." I felt for a moment like I was doing an international kidnapping negotiation. By this time, another driver got very interested in what was going on. He nodded to me reassuringly as he listened to his comrade talking to the other person on the line.

"Good," said the young man in assertive English. He told the other driver, who was now really psyched, an address, and calmly said to me it was about 10 minutes away.

The fellow on the other end had my Blackberry.

The cliché, "Have you ever seen a grown man cry?" almost became a reality that moment. The second driver, now fully involved in his mission, started to take me over to his car. I stopped. I thought I was going to run up and suffocate the young man with effusive hugs as he took a long final drag on his nearly finished cigarette.

"Thank you. Thank you so much. *Obrigado*. Thank you." He got my point and was magnanimous in the face of my mindless deluge of gratitude.

Off we went to another part of the city. When we arrived, a man in a white shirt and tie began walking toward us. He knew I was there to claim my Berry. He told me in very clear English that the denim-clad driver delivered it around lunchtime. My driver, looking through the rearview mirror, told me in broken English this was a place where many of the taxis gassed up for the day. I assured the well-dressed gentleman that the Blackberry was indeed mine. He had no doubt, only a pleasant smile of sympathetic joy on his broad face. He handed me my treasure.

With great composure, I simply put my hand out the window, shook his hand, and said once, "Obrigado."

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Bill Young

Bill Young is an artist who is an incessant talker.

After a short stint as a music professor in a small college, he spent more than 30 years in theatre as a composer, voice coach, actor, teacher and international vocal director. He is a recipient of the National Society of Arts and Letters Award for Music Composition and winner of the Paul Masson Award for Music Composition. For two years he taught at New York University in the Graduate Studies Department of the Tisch School of The Arts.

Beginning in the mid-90s, he joined an executive development firm in Manhattan, eventually becoming Executive Vice President and the Director of Communication. This work lead to years of international travel. He has been living in Europe since 2006.

Bill learned compassion from his grandmother, music from his mother, visual art from his father, and life's hard lessons from his brother.

General Advice: If possible sometime in your life, move to a country you have always wanted to see. Then ... let go.

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