

The Art of Dying

Lung cancer, rampant. No surprise. I've smoked since I was sixteen, behind the high-school football bleachers in Northfield, Minnesota. I used to fear the embarrassment of dying youngish, letting people natter sagely, "He smoked, you know." But at seventy-seven I'm into the actuarial zone.

I know about ending a dependency. I'm an alcoholic twenty-seven years sober. Drink was destroying my life. Tobacco only shortens it, with the best parts over anyway.

I got the preliminary word from my doctor by phone while driving alone upstate from the city to join my wife, Brooke, at our country place. After the call, I found myself overwhelmed by the beauty of the passing late-August land. At mile eighty-one of the New York State Thruway, the gray silhouettes of the Catskills come into view, perfectly framed and proportioned. How many times had I seen and loved the sight? How many more times would I? I thought of Thomas Cole's paintings, from another angle, of those very old, worn mountains, brooding on something until the extinction of matter.

Patsy Cline was playing on the car radio: "Walkin' After Midnight." Not a great song, but performed in Cline's way of attending selflessly to the sounds and the senses of the words. Showing how art should be done. She was thirty when she died in a plane crash, consummate.

I was at the wheel of my first brand-new car since 1962, a blue Subaru Forester that I dote on. I wanted for nothing. I want for nothing. The other night, I dreamed that I fetched the car from a parking lot only to find that it was another Subaru Forester, with two hundred thousand miles on it, dirty and falling apart. (That's diseased me now, I suppose.) But the real one sits gleaming on East Seventh Street today.

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Twenty-some years ago, I got a Guggenheim grant to write a memoir. I ended up using most of the money to buy a garden tractor. I failed for a number of reasons.

I don't feel interesting.

I don't trust my memories (or anyone's memories) as reliable records of anything—and I have a fear of lying. Nor do I have much documentary material. I've never kept a diary or a journal, because I get spooked by addressing no one. When I write, it's to connect.

I am beset, too, by obsessively remembered thudding guilts and scalding shames. Small potatoes, as traumas go, but intensified by my aversion to facing them.

Susan Sontag observed that when you have a disease people identify you with it. Fine by me! I could never sustain an

expedient “I” for more than a paragraph. (Do you imagine that writers speak “as themselves”? No such selves exist.) Playing the Dying Man (*Enter left. Exit trapdoor*) gives me a persona. It’s a handy mask.

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I’ve lost the scraps of my aborted Guggenheim memoir, but I remember that it started something like this:

” On September 9, 1956, in the very small Minnesota town of Farmington, my family of seven settled in, as we did every week, to watch “The Ed Sullivan Show.” We had the living-room lights off because we were still confusing TV with film. Elvis Presley came on. My grandmother said, “Disgusting!” My parents made discontented sounds. When Presley finished, I left the house and started walking over to my friend Richie Sievers’s house. Autumn leaves covered the sidewalks and ground. I met Richie coming the other way. One of us said, “Did you see that?” “Yeah, what do you think?” “I don’t know. What do you think?” “I don’t know.” We stood silent, kicking at leaves. Something had happened.

I thought I’d braid my life into cultural history. That went nowhere.

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Death is like painting rather than like sculpture, because it’s seen from only one side. Monochrome—like the mausoleum-gray former Berlin Wall, which kids in West Berlin glamorized with graffiti. What I’m trying to do here.

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Swatted a fly the other day and thought, *Outlived you.*

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I grew up in small-town Minnesota being regarded as the rich kid, because my father’s firms (first manufacturing plastic bags, then engineering inventions including the NASA Echo 1 and Echo 2 Mylar-balloon satellites) were the biggest businesses around. I had no sense of this, thinking that the kids who sucked up to me and the others who bullied me were reacting to my true self. This left me deeply confused. Years later, I asked my mother if she had been aware of the pattern. She said yes. I asked why she hadn’t said anything to me about it. She said, “Because people shouldn’t be like that.”

The Midwest!

My mother was a prairie princess, the only child of a school superintendent who doubled as a postmaster, from a tiny town in North Dakota. My father was a railroad worker’s son from another. I was born in Fargo. In the summer of 1945, when I was three and a half, alone in the kitchen of my great-uncle Martin’s farmhouse—water by hand pump; chamber pots and

an outhouse—a grizzled man came in and tried to grab me. I ran screaming. It was Dad, home from the war.

The author (right) with the Schjeldahl family at Christmas in Minnesota in 1967. Photograph courtesy the author

My mother maintained a peaceful home, and neither she nor my father was ever physically abusive. But they were wrapped up in themselves and each other to the extreme of being jealous of their five kids, of whom I'm the oldest. From my father's point of view, God forbid my mother should waste affection on me that could go to him. Zero sum. Everything that he had went into his work, and everything that she had went into him. The one and only way I could attain his attention was to be insolent, to make my mother cry. Then he'd rage but at least make eye contact.

I grew up with a craving for and a resentment of authority. This bedevils me still.

In love letters, my mother addressed him as the President, and he called her the Student Body.

What my parents were doing having children mystifies, beyond the given, during the Depression and the war eras, that marriage required it. My father was a self-made extraordinary inventor and engineer and a successful but credulous—i.e., exploitable—entrepreneur. He may have suffered lifelong post-traumatic stress from his ordeals as a grunt in the Battle of the Bulge. He wouldn't talk about it except in bursts now and then. But he had nightmares.

My father's fragmentary stories from the war left big gaps in time. Here's what I can piece together. He was a private in a division, the 84th, that helped to roll back the German advance. He was hunkered down in snow on the day that my sister Ann was born, two days before Christmas, 1944. His infantry units would creep to the edge of villages to suppress any anti-tank fire ahead of armored advances. Once, one of our own tanks churned across a foxhole he was in, burying him and killing the man, a close friend, next to him. My father was a radio operator until, ordered to take a radio to a cutoff platoon, he and another soldier came under mortar fire. They dived into a shell hole. The mortars zeroed in, "like someone bouncing a basketball around the hole," he said. A near-hit wounded his partner. Making a break for it, my father helped the man and lugged the radio, which, when they reached the platoon, was found to be wrecked by shrapnel. He was awarded a Bronze Star and spent the rest of the war as a rifleman.

I have a photograph of him with some of his comrades outside a battered church. He grins rather maniacally and holds a lectern—inexplicable loot from the church. He brought home a German helmet and uniform, a German rifle-cleaning kit, a piece of transparent plastic from the cockpit canopy of a downed Messerschmitt, an artillery-shell casing, a large fragment of an exploded grenade, and a steel ammunition box on which he had painted, in his elegant engineer's hand, his

division logo and the names of the places where he had fought. I played continually with those objects as a boy, fantasizing about military glory.

Once, he spoke of being under artillery bombardment in a forest. It frightened me. His tone hinted at still-unrelieved, helpless terror.

Late in life, going dotty (or dottier than usual), my father contemplated returning to the battle zone of the Ardennes and seeking out German privates who had fought on the other side. He wanted to test his theory that they had hated their officers as much as he had hated his—whose sole aim, from his perspective, was to squander the lives of their men.

I recounted this plan to the German painter Anselm Kiefer, who was born in 1945. As I recall, though he doesn't, he said, "Don't tell your father. Our men loved their officers."

I was friends with Kiefer for a while, as I was with many artists over the years, until about twenty years ago. The friendships fell apart. Closeness is impossible between an artist and a critic. Each wants from the other something—the artist's mojo, the critic's sagacity—that belongs strictly to the audiences for their respective work. It's like two vacuum cleaners sucking at each other.

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My father was on a cutting edge—quite literally, as one of the first to discover how to simultaneously cut and seal polyethylene with a hot knife, experimenting in the basement of our modest house. He invented the plastic-lined paper sickness bag for airplanes, for which he received a dollar. (The patent belonged to the company he was working for.) What remained of the family fortune when he died has all but gone to the care of my mother, who is chipper at the age of a hundred and two.

Too much about my dad? Exactly! His charisma bleached the identities of his five children. I spent years of my childhood trying to win his approval and years of my adolescence trying to provoke his disapproval, until I had to accept that he didn't care either way. When I told him on the phone, in 1998, that I'd been hired by *The New Yorker*, there was a long silence. Then he said, "Oh, you kids!"

Too little about my mother? Exactly again. My memories of her from my childhood amount to a uniform haze of bland niceness punctuated with flares of incomprehensible anger or tears and almost no sense of emotional connection. She was, and remains, a constant reader without a trace of intellectual curiosity. She tells everybody that she's proud of me. I'm a credit to her.

I was set up to be the tower-of-strength big brother, a surrogate parent, and my three younger sisters and my younger brother bought into it. But my heart was a loveless void. I broke free at the cost of hating myself for letting my siblings down. Estrangements ensued that now, one by one, are healing. Ann, Don, Peggy, Mary, and me: an accountant, a geographer, a

message therapist, a chef, and an art critic. We've done all right.

Still, people I know will roll their eyes—same old Peter!—at how little of their deserved shrift they're receiving from me here as, alone, I linger again with my lifelong lover: you, reader.

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I was a kid crazy about language and an omnivorous reader. At breakfast, I'd pore over every word on a cereal box as if it were holy writ. The first poem I remember writing was at a class picnic on the last day of sixth grade. I lay back on the grass, looking up. A hawk soared overhead. This wasn't unusual, but it gave me an odd feeling. I rolled over and wrote what I knew was a poem because it looked like one. All I recall of it is a chorus: "Winged avenger from the skies!" I'm not sure that I even knew what an avenger was. I took the poem to my teacher, who said, "Peter, this is very unpleasant." That smothered my literary drive for some years.

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In a car with high-school classmates after a picnic party somewhere in rural Minnesota—a bottle had been passed, and I would have proof that Cheetos were on the bill of fare—I said to stop. I tumbled out and barfed beside the road. The vomit was bright orange. It puddled on bright-green grass. The summer sky was bright blue. I thought I had never seen anything so beautiful.

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My rags-to-riches-to-fewer-riches father decided that his children should make their own way in the world, as he had. So no financial support beyond college and such emergency aid as was required to pay a fine, say, rather than have me spend a year in jail (pot bust in Maine) and, oh, yes, the funds for the little yellow Austin-Healey Sprite in which, dropping out of college in Minnesota, I drove east on a slim chance. That was in 1962. I was twenty.

I had wanted out of school and, after a landlocked upbringing, yearned to see an ocean. In those days, cities of any size had dailies. I sent letters to papers in small cities near big ones, three on the East Coast and three on the West. Only the *Jersey Journal*, in Jersey City, replied, offering an interview. I drove through a day and a night, my tiny car drafting behind barrelling trucks, to Journal Square, which glistened in the sun after a night rain. An editor asked where I was staying. I think I mumbled something. He said, "You don't have a place to stay, do you?" Then he said, "Oh, hell, take a desk."

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Hudson County, New Jersey, was epically corrupt. Several Jersey City mayors have gone to jail. One day, in 1963, a reporter hung up the phone and announced, "Tony Pro is having another press conference." Mysteriously, everybody laughed. "Let's send the kid," someone said.

At the Teamsters headquarters in Union City, Tony (Pro) Provenzano sat behind an immense desk, flanked by central-casting bodyguards. Other reporters lounged and smoked. Only I had a notebook ready. Tony Pro told a series of obscene jokes about Attorney General Robert Kennedy, who was crusading against the Mob. And that was that. Tony Pro stood at the door shaking hands with us. *Crinkle*. In my palm was the first fifty-dollar bill I had ever seen. I said thanks, but I really couldn't. I set the bill down when he wouldn't take it back.

Staring eyes greeted my return to the paper, and the editor-in-chief called me into his office and shut the door. He said, "I don't know what you did or what you said, and I don't want to know. Never do it or say it again."

Later that year, when Provenzano was on trial in Newark for extortion, he sat down beside me during a break and chatted amiably about something, maybe baseball.

I acquired the most useful writing discipline of my life from fat, cigar-chewing *Jersey Journal* copy editors—burned-out reporters—at desks in a half circle facing the city editor. With No. 1 pencils, like black crayons, they'd eviscerate my copy. I'd rewrite, and they'd do it again. Finally, they sent it down to the Linotype—the old racketing, reeking contraption for setting type from molten lead. Those men still sit by as I write, pencils in their itching paws.

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"Sleeping the big sleep." Raymond Chandler proved that the American form of Montaigne-grade aphorism is the wisecrack.

Wisecracks in Chandler are existential rescues of imperilled self-possession. Worth the risk to the detective of a punch in the gut. And conserving calm for noticing the world.

"A slanting gray rain like a swung curtain of crystal beads."

"A few windows were lit and radios were bleating at the dusk."

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I lost my interminably heavy-petting virginity with the recently graduated fiancée of a college friend who was still at school, a senior. I had been invited to my friend's parents' penthouse on Sutton Place South, an apartment that was deluxe beyond my dreaming. A spotlighted Willem de Kooning painting stunned me: wild but somehow purposeful, clinching an unstated argument. The woman and I left together and fell to making out in the elevator, then proceeded to a cheap hotel on Lexington Avenue. We had a frenzied affair, only about sex. It was what's now termed empowering.

The author (right) with family and friends at a baseball game in September, 2019. Photograph courtesy the author

I went back to college in Minnesota for a year, dropped out for good, returned to the Jersey City job for three months, unwisely married, spent an impoverished and largely useless year in Paris, had a life-changing encounter with a painting by Piero

della Francesca in Italy, another with works by Andy Warhol in Paris, returned to New York, freelanced, stumbled into the art world, got a divorce, which, while uncontested, entailed a solo trip to a dusty courthouse in Juárez, Mexico, past a kid saying, "Hey, hippie, wanna screw my sister?," to receive a spectacular document with a gold seal and a red ribbon from a judge as rotund and taciturn as an Olmec idol.

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When I started writing criticism, in 1965, in almost pristine ignorance, I discovered that I was the world's leading expert in one thing: my experience. Most of what I know in a scholarly way about art I learned on deadlines, to sound as if I knew what I was talking about—as, little by little, I did. Educating yourself in public is painful, but the lessons stick.

In 1966, after a few months of writing mostly one-sentence reviews for *The Art News*, I was hired as the art critic of the *Village Voice*, for the first of three stints with the often marvellous weekly. (The others spanned 1980-81 and 1991-98.) I had a problem besides inexperience: a question of priorities, between meeting deadlines and doing lots of drugs—a no-brainer in more than one way. I lasted in that job for only a few weeks. Meanwhile, the poetry scene, centered on St. Mark's Church, was both expanding and unravelling, as rock songs displaced poems as soul food for young hearts and minds. But the art scene boomed. Art parties were immeasurably more fun than poetry parties.

Starting in 1967, I began writing regularly for the *Times*' Sunday Arts & Leisure section. The section's editor, Seymour Peck, a flinty New Yorker, had me write columns on movies, theatre, rock music, and television as well as on art, extending my capacities, while cracking down on my flakiness. He practically invented me as a functioning professional.

My uptown feats didn't impress people whom I looked up to in the downtown art scene, where anti-bourgeois hardheadedness and minimalist disdain for the "literary" reigned. They were contemptuous of the *Times*. I was Peter the poet, a relative nobody. Advice to aspiring youth: in New York, the years that you spend as a nobody are painful but golden, because no one bothers to lie to you. The moment you're a somebody, you have heard your last truth. Everyone will try to spin you—as they should, with careers to think of. For about a dozen years, I hung out, drank, and slept with artists who didn't take me seriously. I observed, heard, overheard, and absorbed a great deal.

One drunken night, a superb painter let me take a brush to a canvas that she said she was abandoning. I tried to continue a simple black stroke that she had started. The contrast between the controlled pressure of her touch and my flaccid smear shocked me, physically. It was like shaking hands with a small person who flips you across a room.

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At a time, in the early seventies, when I slept a lot, I kept track of my dreams, writing a book distilling some of them. For

example, "Conceptual Art":

” I am in Cleveland on a sort of official art junket. With the head of the local museum—a handsome, dapper black man—I visit a young artist in his new loft. The loft is large and sunny; facing its dozens of windows are dozens of old, uncomfortable-looking armchairs.

Jokingly, I suggest that the artist could create "a terrific Conceptual art-work entitled 'Golf'" by placing a golfball on each of the chairs, then, with a golf club, hitting it through a closed window.

To my surprise, I am taken seriously. The artist agrees to perform the work the very next day.

As for the police, who will obviously be called when the street below is showered with golfballs and broken glass, the museum director has a plan. There is a secret passage from the loft to a building next door, he says, and in that building a large sum of money is hidden that we can use to finance our escape from Cleveland.

We all agree that "Golf" will be an event of tremendous artistic importance.

That prose-poetic experiment ended when I entered Jungian therapy and presented my dreams for interpretation. They all made abundant sense, which was entertaining but not terribly helpful. My problem was not a lack of connection with the collective unconscious. I was a fucking poet. My problem was getting out of bed in the morning.

The birth of Brooke's and my daughter, Ada, on St. Patrick's Day, 1976, saw to that. When your baby cries, you're out of bed before being fully awake.

Ada was present when my oncologist, at Memorial Sloan Kettering, gave me six months or so to live. Ada asked me what I wanted to do. Revisit Rome? Paris? I would forget that I said, "Nah. Maybe a ballgame." She arranged it, with family and friends: Mets versus Braves, at Citi Field. Glorious. Grandson Oliver caught a T-shirt from the mid-game T-shirt cannon. Odds of that: several thousand to one.

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Writing consumes writers. No end of ones better than I am have said as much. The passion hurts relationships. I think off and on about people I love, but I think about writing all the time.

Writing is hard, or everyone would do it.

You're reading an exception, which is pouring out of me. It's the first writing "for myself" that I've done in about thirty years, since I gave up on poetry (or poetry gave up on me) because I didn't know what a poem was any longer and had severed or sabotaged all my connections to the poetry world. An

impermeable block has crumbled, my muse being, I guess, the grim reaper.

I'm given pause here by my unreconstructed reverence for extreme states of mind and feeling. Think William Blake and Edgar Allan Poe. Huysmans. I've often quoted Baudelaire: "I cultivated my hysteria with terror and delight." But I also thrilled to the august sanities of Paul Valéry ("Stupidity is not my strong suit") and Auden ("Poetry makes nothing happen"). Another extreme.

Extremity was the spirit of my drug-using, which I never really enjoyed: pot, acid, DMT, and downers taken pragmatically, in service to "systematic derangement of the senses" (Rimbaud). Did the drugs help? I don't know. The acid taught me things about the mind by making all of its workings simultaneously perceptible, though to no one—ego dissolving like Alka-Seltzer in warm water.

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I dodged the Vietnam draft by staying awake for three days and nights on speed, taking any other drugs that came to hand, rolling in dirt, presenting myself at the induction center on Whitehall Street, and trying to cooperate. The draft officials discarded me like a used condom. I felt guilty. I brooded that some guy would have to go in my place. I had faked psychosis so well that my sanity teetered for months afterward.

Baudelaire wrote of having been "brushed by the wind of the wing of madness." I have felt that breeze at times, though not in a great many years now. I still have the occasional thought that what is commonly deemed sanity is absurd, but I let that slide.

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I met Susan Sontag once, at a party. She came up and praised something that I had written. Thrilled, I began chattering about I don't remember what. Sontag froze. She retreated, taking backward steps before turning away. It dawned on me that receiving her blessing was supposed to have been enough: a solemn initiation. I had presumed on it.

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At the end of my multi-drug sixties, I figuratively put all the chemicals in a funnel, and they came out bourbon. Jack Daniel's-on-the-rocks, with a splash, except when scarce funds reduced me to Heaven Hill. Alcohol was liberating for me at first. A standard progression: great, good, fair, poor, bad, very bad, and then a phase for which any word but "Hell" fails. Halfway through the second drink, there may be a flicker of the old euphoria, quickly snuffed. You chase it in vain for the rest of a wretched night. It's over for you. A line has been crossed. Yet you cannot imagine yourself not drinking. The obsession is at one with your core sense of self.

Brooke drinks. We keep a full liquor cabinet. I mix drinks for guests without a qualm. The booze is a different chemical in their bodies from what it would be in mine. Pleasant for them, poison for me.

Free. Sort of free. Who's free? I can see the paragraphs I'm writing as little jail cells, penning me into perspectives, conceits, ideas, jokes, and memories—stories! Not an original type of anxiety, for a writer.

Writers can be only so conscientious about truth before becoming paralyzed.

I remember thinking in the sixties that becoming emotionally paralyzed could be cool if one were in an interesting enough position. Coolness was the holy grail then. I was hopeless at it. Sincerity is my accursed default.

I had a rage of ambition and an acrid dissatisfaction that, along with a love of the world, were bound to come out somehow. The self-centered motives have waned. It's harder to pitch into writing with less to prove or avenge. To start a critical essay, I must prod myself until the old mesmerized flow resumes.

When I finish something and it seems good, I'm dazed. It must have been fun to write. I wish I'd been there.

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In my drinking years, I took to saying, for a laugh, "The only thing I want in life is a written apology from everyone I've ever met." Arrogant! But, truth to tell, arrogance—as a placeholder for confidence, of which I had none—enabled me to brave the world when I was young.

The same goes for snobbery, a necessary stage for the insecure until we acquire taste that admits and reflects the variety of experience. To limber your sensibility, stalk the aesthetic everywhere: cracks in a sidewalk, people's ways of walking. The aesthetic isn't bounded by art, which merely concentrates it for efficient consumption. If you can't put a mental frame around, and relish, the accidental aspect of a street or a person, or really of anything, you will respond to art only sluggishly.

I like to say that contemporary art consists of all art works, five thousand years or five minutes old, that physically exist in the present. We look at them with contemporary eyes, the only kinds of eyes that there ever are.

I retain, but suspend, my personal taste to deal with the panoply of the art I see. I have a trick for doing justice to an uncongenial work: "What would I like about this if I liked it?" I may come around; I may not. Failing that, I wonder, What must the people who like this be like? Anthropology.

I assess art by quality and significance. The latter is most decisive for my choice of subjects, because I'm a journalist. There's art I adore that I won't write about, because I can't imagine it mattering enough to general readers. It pertains to my private experience as a person, without which my activity as a critic would wither but which falls outside my critical mandate.

"Another great thing about believing in Santa—no thank-you notes!"

Cartoon by Barbara Smaller

I write for readers and not for artists, who can buy the magazine and read me like anyone else if they're interested. I didn't always. When I was young, I had personal and coterie loyalties. Then I decided to see how responsible a critic I could be, open to ideas but never prescriptive or proscriptive. By academic measure, this makes me not a true critic at all. I can live with that.

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Family and friends are being wonderful to me in my sickness. I've toiled all my life, in vain, to like myself. Now the task has been outsourced. I can't go around telling everybody they're idiots.

I always said that when my time came I'd want to go fast. But where's the fun in that?

True story: a friend received a preliminary diagnosis suggesting advanced breast cancer. Normally shy, she took this as license to tell or show everyone in her circle how little she liked or respected them. False alarm. It was cat-scratch fever. She moved overseas.

"When a man knows he is to be hanged in a fortnight, it concentrates his mind wonderfully," per Samuel Johnson.

"Why isn't Schjeldahl's copy in?" "He's dead." "Uh, O.K., then."

The best excuse.

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The most delicious poem about someone dying is Auden's "In Memory of W. B. Yeats" (1939), with these lines:

” But for him it was his last afternoon as himself,
An afternoon of nurses and rumours;
The provinces of his body revolted,
The squares of his mind were empty,
Silence invaded the suburbs,
The current of his feeling failed; he became his
admirers.

The poet Ron Padgett pointed out to me the technical shrewdness of the compound last line: the all-time best use of a semicolon in place of a line break. Then there's the sterling "became": nothing is left of Yeats but others' thoughts of him, and the thoughts of him enhance the others, like badges.

We wear as many such badges as there are dead people we admire. The Shakespeare badge. The Jesus one, though he cheated on Easter morning. At what hour did the Saviour reopen his eyes? At dawn? Before it, with time to kill?

Seeing Hans Holbein's "Dead Christ" (1520-22) shook Dostoyevsky's Christian belief: a two-days-gone corpse in a warm climate, a *thing*.

Simone Weil said that the transcendent meaning of Christianity is complete with Jesus' death, sans the cherry on top that is the

Resurrection. I think so.

"I believe in God" is a false statement for me because it is voiced by my ego, which is compulsively skeptical. But the rest of me tends otherwise. Staying on an "as if" basis with "God," for short, hugely improves my life. I regret my lack of the church and its gift of community. My ego is too fat to squeeze through the door.

Disbelieving is toilsome. It can be a pleasure for adolescent brains with energy to spare, but hanging on to it later saps and rigidifies. After a Lutheran upbringing, I became an atheist at the onset of puberty. That wore off gradually and then, with sobriety, speedily.

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I had a moment, while anticipating my diagnosis, of feeling special. But what's as commonplace as dying? Everybody does it. I also had an instant of fancying that I could drink again. That evanesced in a flash. Fellow-alcoholics know that the beast, though out of mind, survives. My thought was a foul little burp from a cave.

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Life doesn't go on. It goes nowhere except away. Death goes on. Going on is what death does for a living. The secret to surviving in the universe is to be dead.

Self-knowledge! Almost better never than this late. (I don't mean that at all. But I enjoy the sound of it.) I am endeavoring to practice self-forgiveness. I believe it's recommended.

As for folks out there in resentful and envious circles who will be glad to have me out of the way, they, by their pleasure, afford me a bonus credit for increasing human happiness.

"Everyone, it seems, loves Peter Schjeldahl," an art Web site opined recently. I know for dead sure that's not so. To the extent that it's plausible hyperbole and because I believe in a balanced universe, the people who hate me do so with enough intensity to square up the sums.

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I think of righteous nonsmokers "in the hospital dying of nothing." That's a line for a role that Brooke played, as a chain-smoking coroner, in a not-great movie, "Just Cause" (1995), with the great Sean Connery, who may or may not have had a say in cutting the line from the released film because it stole the scene. Soon after that, she proved her ability, which I've lacked, to break habits by quitting both smoking and acting. Her subsequent enterprises have ranged from an antiques-and-whatnot store, Brooke's Variety, to a spectacularly unusual mini-golf course on land that we own in the Catskills.

Nicotine stimulates *and* relaxes. Beat that. I understand that it teaches the brain to prefer it to a natural neurotransmitter, acetylcholine, which, among other boons, promotes mental agility. Nicotine does the same, better. How many quitters never

miss smoking? (Liars line up on the left.) The times I tried to stop, I wondered what writers do.

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L., who is no longer alive, became pregnant on our second date, in 1963. A backstreet abortion in Chicago left her sterile. I married her out of guilt mixed with infatuation. (She was wild and adored me while sleeping around, as I did, too, but I couldn't keep up.) We lasted for most of five years, possibly because a man I disliked had said that he gave us three months.

Lee Crabtree. Jairus Lincoln. Jeff Giles. You don't know about them. They were friends of mine who died young. I'll get over Lee's suicide, in 1973, only when I've joined him. I was harsh the last time I saw him, hiding my love.

Lee was the pianist and musical arranger for the Fugs. One night after an awful fight with L., in which for emphasis I punched out a window, I showed up at Lee's, bleeding. He bandaged and calmed me. He had a big plastic toy horn that I started to toot on. Lee sat at his electric keyboard, and we jammed. Later, he showed me sheet music that he had printed of our improvised creation: "The Red Horn Polka." We collaborated on a song, "Police State," that became the Fugs' first-act closer but isn't on any album, perhaps because it was too dirty, even for them.

Lee was the gentlest, most generous person amid a prevalence of shithheads, who, at the worst possible moment, included me. I knew that he was struggling with his repressed homosexuality. Having been so good a friend, he sorely needed friendship.

At a temporary job on the twelfth floor of a building in midtown, he was seen, at a window, to wave affably to a random person in another building. Then he climbed out the window and stepped into space.

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"It's a new signal to specify that we don't need Robin."
Cartoon by Paul Noth

Bury me. Nix to cremation. I want an address that people know they can visit even if they never do. Phooey to dust on a random sea breeze or strewn on a field of unoffending vegetation. Or in a jar? Think about it.

Though cemeteries waste real estate. Better a Walmart parking lot?

Really, do as you please with the corpse—not me, not mine. I believe in earnestly agreeing to deathbed wishes and then forgetting about them, unless it's to satisfy those among the living.

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Between bulletins from my body that say this isn't so, I still feel like a kid inside. Four and a half years ago, while rushing to

catch a bus ("Don't run for a bus" was a rule for longevity in Mel Brooks's "2000 Year Old Man"), I tripped trying to leap, gazelle-like, over a chunk of broken asphalt and must have caught a toe. When I came to on the street, surrounded by strangers, I had no memory of falling or of much else (who I was, where I was). There was blood. My glasses were smashed. I said, "I'm O.K." The strangers strenuously disagreed. An ambulance had arrived.

I was mostly conscious when wheeled on a gurney into an emergency room in Greenwich Village. A scrawny old-time Village-hipster type was driving the nurses crazy about something, likely trying to wheedle drugs. Strolling past and glancing down at me, he said tenderly, "Die, baby." That didn't seem like a terrible idea, right then, and it struck me in a remote sort of way as the funniest thing I'd ever heard.

A CAT scan to check out a suspicion that my neck was broken (weird story short: my neck was found to have broken and healed sometime in the past, unbeknownst to me) incidentally discovered a spot in my left lung. This later led to hospital visits for scans and tests, including a needle biopsy (ouch), all of them inconclusive. Fed up with the rigmarole, I refused further investigation. Shouldn't have? Live and learn.

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Shakespeare wrote of "desiring this man's art and that man's scope." I find this comforting. But who was he thinking of? Marlowe? Someone forgotten although evidently fucking incredible?

Originality is overrated, except by people who have it. It's like an untamed, ungrateful beast you're trapped with. If people praising you knew the half of it, they'd think twice.

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I think of Lee Crabtree and of all suicides. What happens? One night in the early seventies, I perched on a tenement-roof edge despite my fear of heights, legs dangling, and ordered myself to let go. It was amid a love disaster. I truly thought I'd jump. But something inside me laughed derisively. Who was I kidding? Humiliated, I went downstairs. Some, in a crisis, must lack the laugh or muffle it for long enough.

Twice I've been to Oaxaca during the Day of the Dead, when the departed members of families have their favorite food, drinks, and perhaps cigarettes set out for them at meals. It's understood that, at the table, the dead consume the immaterial goodness of these things. The families visit them overnight in graveyards. I was deeply moved by the implication that death may be a major life event, such as birth, confirmation, and marriage, but that it doesn't mean you're *gone*. We spare the dead a bit of the life in us. I shuddered suddenly during my second walk among placid, candlelit groups. It hit me that the dead were reciprocating: a bit of the death in them for us. Never fully dead, never fully alive.

I may have this wrong, but I'm savoring the idea. Today, the little bit of death in me has sat up in bed and is pulling on its socks.

I remember arriving in an Italian village by train after midnight and walking past a cemetery where candles burned at every grave, with no one around. Or I think I remember it.

We have lousy memories. Proust had a lousy memory. (There is no "little patch of yellow wall" in *In Search of Lost Time*.) Memory is a liar. It's a heap of dishonestly revised fictions. The stories make us a break, conjectures—of our lives. This is O.K. because it had darn well better be.

Who's "we"? You know.

Meaning is a scrap among other scraps, though stickier. Meaning is so much better than nothing, in that it defines "nothing" as everything that meaning is not. Meaning prevents nothing from being only nothing. The "nothing that is not there and the nothing that is," Wallace Stevens noticed. The same nothing, but a difference of attitude.

A random shame: I was visited in New York by P., a soft-souled, brilliant friend from high school and college, a concert pianist. High on speed, I was arrogant and callous, watching the effects on P. with cold-blooded detachment. Finally, he said in a hurt tone, "I always thought you had a modesty about you. But not so." I could have said something, admitted my drugged state, made amends the next day. But a devil in me exulted.

Years later, a scene occurred that might work well in a novel set in the early seventies, in case you're writing one. I was seeing a terrific artist, H., at least as prone to defiance as I was. I saw that P. was giving a concert. I asked H., my not-really, because she was so independent, girlfriend to attend with me. She got the message, which was not fully conscious but true: besides wanting to make up with P., I relished the prospect of showing her off. Usually downtown casual, she showed up in heels, a stunning dress, diamonds or what looked like them, and a mink coat.

After the terrific music, especially Liszt, we joined P. and some other people in champagne toasts. P. facilitated introductions by asking the men—only the men—to say what they did. H. let that develop for about half a minute and detonated, "Let's start this over! Let's play *What do the women do?*" The company gawked. She was magnificent! With a flourish, she left the theatre. I tagged along moments later, stricken. Out on the street, she was gone. I limped home. I saw her only in passing after that. I didn't try again to reconcile with P.

The shock of feminism came none too soon for guys, including me, who had lorded in a sixties bohemia that mandated women be doting helpmeets to their entitled—because genius—men. Those domesticities went down like a row of dominoes at the first breath of female revolt. With no new model for relationships, libertinage reigned. I guess it was fun for some people, but it piled up emotional wreckage left and right.

The art scene was always a third or more gay—often the best third. My chief poet heroes were Frank O'Hara and John Ashbery. John complained to me that he had thought that with success he'd have his pick from a meat rack of young poets. "How come you're all *straight*?"—stretching out the last word to sound like something nasty going through a mangle.

How straight was I? I'd always been nervous about homosexuality. Didn't that mean I was repressing it? Given that everybody seemed to be having sex with everybody, not to mention being soused or stoned nightly, I decided to face the facts. A gay friend I approached would have nothing to do with me in that way. Well! I hooked up with a bisexual friend, but too much to drink made whatever happened a blur. So I seduced a straight friend. It was interesting. Nice, but obvious. I didn't rule out doing it again, but I never have.

There were brief affairs that I think neither the woman nor I really wanted; but this wasn't an adequate excuse then. An entropy of the heart grew in me, as did, which I didn't suspect, a yen for monogamy.

My last bachelor fling was semi-scandalous, in the art world, and volcanically erotic. I like to say that it burned the carbon out of my cylinders. She broke up with me on a street corner, denouncing me and storming off. I stood there for a spell grinning from ear to ear. I figured that I had mastered swinging singledom. Then I met Brooke.

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I remember, in rehab, on the Upper East Side in 1992, an alum of the place, a tough guy from Queens, addressing the nightly A.A. meeting. He told us of once showing up at some clinic, drunk and filthy and soiled with his own diarrhea, and throwing a fit because the doctor was ten minutes late. "If you're a real alcoholic," the guy said to us, "no matter how low you go, you *will* have an attitude." He added, "If you're a real alcoholic, you will never feel quite right. Whatever you want will be a little bit out of reach. Can't handle that? Get the fuck out of here and get drunk." I went up to him afterward, in tears, to thank him. He said, "You heard me?" I said yes. "Good," he said, turning and walking away as if from some crap on a sidewalk. Saved my life.

The rehab was crowded with crack addicts, some of them felons. I was the rare middle-aged, middle-class white man in the joint. It was loud at all hours. Scared, I couldn't sleep. I told Brooke, on the building's pay phone, that I had to get out. She said, "Cope," and hung up. Saved my life.

See, Brooke is a child of alcoholics, as I'm not. I grew up and became one. She grew up and married one. She knew I was a mess but thought the drinking part was normal, until she got wise and kicked me out of the house. (Note to anyone who knows an active alcoholic: never, ever sympathize. If you suspect you're going to, shut your eyes, plug your ears, and hum.)

I bottomed out in the rehab, where I had gone as a condition for being allowed back home. I thought I was serious. I always had been when, previously, I was dry for periods of up to thirteen months: going to meetings at first, dewy with pity for people who plainly had been far worse off than I was. I wouldn't admit that we shared the identical fate, wherever we ranked along its descending scale.

On the third or fourth of my twenty-eight days there, I was climbing stairs and paused, too exhausted for another step. I harbored a nebulous conviction that I could tolerate only so much pain, short of a red zone in which I would go mad or die or something terrible would happen. And that anyone should see as much and want me to do anything—have a drink or a drug, for starters—to make it stop.

I thought, They say one day at a time. How about one second? I stared at my ticking watch. A black abyss opened. I was numbly aware that I wasn't insane. I wasn't dying. Reality was droning on as usual, with impartial sunlight streaming through a nearby window and picking out swirls of dust motes.

A perfectly demented thought blazed up. Roughly: What if they find out I'm not really an alcoholic and throw me out of here? I need this place! I believe it was the last, deepest rootlet of my denial, expelled. Not an alcoholic?

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My daughter, Ada, has told me that in her childhood she spent years trying to interest me. I hadn't noticed. She was sixteen when I got sober. She said, "Let's see if I get this straight. *Now* you want to be my dad?" It took a lot of time and change and is still under way. I don't know if it's a consolation prize for Ada, or what it is, that she turned out to be fantastically interesting.

Meeting Brooke, having Ada, and getting sober are my life's top three red-letter days.

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Cigarette brands I remember smoking for at least a few months running: Alpine, Salem, Newport, Camel, Lucky Strike, Parliament, Kent, Gauloises, Benson & Hedges, Nat Sherman. Finally (and I do mean finally), Marlboro Gold (formerly Lights), the crack cocaine of tobacco products, containing all sorts of cunning chemicals and a somewhat insulting whisper of sugar.

Doing the math, I reckon that I have smoked about a million cigarettes—and enjoyed every one of them, not that you care.

Tried gum, patches, and e-cigarettes. Not the same. I use nicotine lozenges to not be twitchy on airplanes, while driving with family, and indoors anywhere except in my offices in our city apartment and country house, with exhaust fans in opened windows—challenging during summer heat and winter cold. Smoking today requires grit.

Quit now? Sure, and have the rest of my life be a tragicomedy of nicotine withdrawal.

Mishaps. I had polio when I was eleven, in one of the last big epidemics before the Salk vaccine. I remember riding my bike home from school, every bump like a knife through my brain. Rushed to the local hospital for a spinal tap—every bit as horrible as you may imagine, but the one sure means of diagnosis then—and throwing up in the back of the family station wagon on the way to the polio-specializing Sister Kenny Institute, in Minneapolis.

I had a bed, but there were too many kids, so some were laid out in halls. Screaming all night. Dying. And always the mechanical sucking noise of iron lungs. I had no paralysis, but I was much weakened, spending seven weeks in the hospital and subject to physical therapy for months. Meanwhile, my family was quarantined at home. Food was left at the doorstep.

For a summer just out of high school, I worked at a resort in Glacier National Park, in the Montana Rockies. I hitchhiked on days off with a copy of "On the Road" in my back pocket and a big jackknife that I practiced opening in a flash in preparation for the lethal fights that I fantasized about. I told one truck driver, in what I imagined to be the right accent, that I was from Lexington, Kentucky. He said, "Lexington, Kentucky, boy, my home town!" I feigned sleep.

Another time, I climbed a manageable-looking mountain, setting out at dawn with pockets full of candy bars. It became steep, then close to vertical. As I clung to a rockface, an eagle launched, shrieking, from a ledge just above me and sailed into the blue distance. Higher up, there was snow, and there were bear tracks in the snow. I thought the mountaintop was a sloping ridge. I crawled up it and found a sheer drop facing the inaccessible summit. Had I had acrophobia before, or did my subsequently lifelong case of it begin then and there? I hugged rock and sobbed. The next thing I remember is striding and tumbling down a side of the mountain covered in deep gravel, grabbing bushes to slow myself. I alighted in brambled woods, disoriented. I had the sense to follow a trickling stream, and I was kept on course by the feel of the water as night fell. I emerged, a tattered scarecrow, on the park's one highway. Cars sped up at the sight of me in their headlights until one stopped.

I'm not in physical pain as I write, though I tire quickly and nap often. I have been receiving, every three weeks, an immunotherapy infusion—not chemo, and not a cure—which, at the outset, the doctor said had a thirty-five-per-cent chance of slowing the disease. (At those odds in Vegas, you're broke within an hour, but in baseball you're a cinch for the Hall of Fame.) A recent scan shows marked improvement, likely extending my prospect of survival. But I have to wonder if, whatever betides, I can stay upbeat in spirit. A thing about dying is that you can't consult anyone who has done it. No rehearsals. No mulligans.

At a bar when I was first in New York, I smirked dandyishly at my reflection in the mirror behind the bottles. I looked handsome! I was stirring my drink, Scotch-on-the-rocks, with my right index finger, which in the mirror became my left one. The moment seemed ineffably cool. Clown!

I ordered coffee at a diner. The guy said, "Regular?" I said, "Well, sure." Surprise: milk and sugar. In the Midwest, coffee was black, no sugar. Brooke remembers being a Texan newbie in New York and seeing a store sign that read "*COFFEE RICE & BEANS*." Fascinated, she asked for a pound of coffee rice. You get to be clueless in a new place only briefly. Don't waste the chance to have truths, great and small, burst upon you.

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Brooke was an actress and standup comic from Dallas. Introduced at a Whitney Museum opening by A., a woman connected to both the art and the entertainment worlds, we despised each other immediately. I deemed Brooke a bubblehead, and she noticed that I was a jerk. Then she attended a poetry reading I gave, which, whatever its quality, turned out to be the best of my life, because she liked it. Next, A. invited me out to dinner and then, perhaps getting cold feet at what it implied, asked if she could bring Brooke. I said something like "Sure, why not?"

It's forty-six years later. Brooke is in bed rereading "Pride and Prejudice," as she does two or three times a year, with a Mets game muttering on the radio. I have no doubt that our two cats cuddle beside her. It's night at our place in the Catskills, moonless and clear. I could turn off my office light and look out a window at the sky choked with stars.

Brooke has Texas grit: respecting everyone and taking no shit from anybody, least of all her spouse. When she's mad, it's scary, tapping a rage that once fuelled her escape from an awful family. There's no recourse but to duck and wait for it to pass, which it does. The sun began to shine on my life when I gave up arguing with Brooke. She is also very funny and brings out the fun in others, her spouse not excluded.

Ada asked her mother how to stay married. Brooke said, "Don't get divorced." If you don't divorce, you are a hundred per cent married no matter what's going on. I am so glad we stayed together that, for once in my verbose life, words to express it fail me.

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Oddly, or not, I find myself thinking about death less than I used to. I thought that I might be kidding myself in my explorations of the subject while my life stretched ahead of me to an invisible horizon. But no. The thinking cut channels in which I now slip along. They involve acceptance. Why me? Why not me? In point of fact, me. Dying is my turn to survey life from its far—now near—shore. These extra months are a luxury that I hope to have put to good use. "To have put." See? While here, not here. Like a camera situated nowhere and taking in every last detail of the pulsating world.

God creeps in. Human minds are the universe's only instruments for reflecting on itself. The fact of our existence suggests a cosmic approval of it. (Do we behave badly? We are gifted with the capacity to think so.) We may be accidents of matter and energy, but we can't help circling back to the sense of a meaning that is unaccountable by the application of what we know. If God is a human invention, good for us! We had to come up with something.

Take death for a walk in your minds, folks. Either you'll be glad you did or, keeling over suddenly, you won't be out anything. ♦

NOTES

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oh wow omg