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Footprint: In Lieu of Life Story

Abstract
This essay both reflects on and dramatizes the propriety of life story and the very idea of transgressive autobiography, through a pastiche of anecdote and critical commentary: on narrative, aging, nature writing, technology, travel, the example of Thoreau, and especially shoes.

Key words
Autobiography; narrative; Henry David Thoreau

Any autobiography is a moment of the life that it recounts…
(Gusdorf 1980: 43)

A grabber introduction for a life-writing piece: I've just read where a famous comedian got busted for groping a nightclub bouncer. How does that grab you?

How might this episode, this irruption, affect the comic's life story? Does the bouncer, anonymous, now have a life worth recounting? How does the accident of my reading this item nudge the current of my vita once entered in something in print?

The sociologist Erving Goffman wrote of what he termed *underlife*, the alternate, even aberrant roles social actors assume to show they're not circumscribed by their professional estates. The student bridles at lectures, the teacher conceals a tattoo, the priest ogles leather while the stripper makes a bid for office. Transgression is proper to identity and so to life story. Life: a succession of grabber intros.

A bid for attention is transgressive in any case – puncturing of a bubble of self-possession. The bubble reforms at once, its surface resolving as a membrane, the

grabber no more than a prick: an injection perhaps, introduction of a meme with recombinant upshot, a psychic helix recoiling.

* * *

What grabs me has long been aging: I mean that aging grabs me, that it has done so since I was young, and that my fixation on aging grows old. Here's what I used to do at school, while class swirled vaguely about me: draw a face in profile (male) in pencil on lined paper, then sketch in changes. I'd enter hairstyles, spectacles, configurations of whiskers, but mainly marks of aging: wrinkles, furrows, receding and graying in hair. The page's surface would wear in like fashion, abrading and pilling as I erased and reentered effects. I'd imagine changes in life circumstances, a developing life story for the cropped-off head and neck. Only now do I remember making up lives: I'm used to recalling just the drawing, the rendering of years.

What obsessed me was the face changing – the change incipient in how features are disposed, as die-stamped cardboard is disposed to fold in shapes. Creases arising between mouth-ends and cheeks, concentric furrows of forehead broken by upstrokes at the bridge of the nose: these elements and others inhere in flesh stretching and folding over a set dispensation of bone, a musculature, so that the young face harbors a face in waiting, a teleology of lines, toward which one lives. Of course I wondered what face awaited me. It wasn't clear. In mirrors I'd study the hair-fine tracings in my adolescent pan, thinking to calculate which would get iterated through use, deepen and ramify in mature expression. It was like reading tea leaves. My soothsaying was troubled in that the upshot seemed skewed, the fledgling lines out of whack. The sides of my face didn't match. My whole head was askew, seeming to have been grasped from above by some cosmic thumb and forefinger and given a sharp twist, such that the hair flipped up on one side and turned under on the other, its peak at the nape of the neck thrown well off center to the left. This spiral twist along the axis of my skull inclined my face to set in asymmetry, a tuck at the left lip unmatched by a right-cheek fold. Suspecting that features don't just fable but presage outcomes, I was troubled. I felt for myself. At that age when I filled pages with aging faces and in the margins of class notes made drawings of wingtip shoes, I figured there could be no place for me, no role or function I could discharge, no condition toward which to advance, no compensation. My only life would be an underlife – a homeless moper with a lopsided face.

Someone dabbling in the reading of palms read mine. The left one parsed normally, yet the right took the reader aback. There the life line and heart line are fused – a solid crease bisecting the palm. A symptom of birth defects, she said. Defective thus special – that ratified my sense of fortune. Mismatched hands, off-kilter countenance: my physiognomy confirmed a presaged transgressing of such norms as I rehearsed in drawn faces, whose bearers (I imagined) strode forthright into estates, into activity, accomplishment and death, through a succession of facial hair choices.

These faces I drew in profile: I saw just one side. What's transgressive, I see now, shows mainly that the system is working. In self-absorption, in mirrors, I came into a lineage, rehearsed unwittingly for an estate I now hold. I thought to be distinguished by aberration – singled out. I see now how I'm directed, an attention-seeking device.

* * *

In lieu of life story I grasp my formulated role, an ordained aberration, which has kept me from indigence thus far. I profess, puncture and implant, make points:

When people jeer Get a life!, what they mean is Get an underlife. Show that you outstrip a sole concern, which must appear limited and equivocal from without. Observe how you're yarded; turn yourself out. Make a mismatched face, one side of the mouth curled up. Make a double helix of attention and affairs. Get an autobiography.

Autobiography is ipso facto transgressive. This is so historically (I've read) as life-storying, with Augustine, irrupts into notions of self and social estate. And it is so by logic, a logic of temptation and resistance, of infraction succeeded by confession: a logic of conversion. Transgressive forms redouble originary gestures of transgression, recapitulate a core temptation to confound iteration, to be singled out. They double back in resistance, not just to a conceit of linear existence (as with a face aging on predetermined lines) but to presumptions of what counts for recounting. Yet forms of transgression are contained in this logic and history, which they observe and deepen even in presuming to outstrip.

What's transgressive within or toward autobiography may turn out to be resistance to storying a life at all. It may come to hinge on propriety. From perspectives proper to some dispositions and roles, fixation on life story can seem improper to life pursuits – incidental, impertinent, impolite. Nature writing, for instance, intent on exteriors, can evince resistance to life storying. There's Mary Austin in the California desert, evading bad marriage and retarded child, gazing on vultures, tracing water trails, her personal history wildly beside the point: "Of no account you who lie out there watching …" (1903: 8). There's Thoreau (1854) compressing two life years into a single cycle of seasons, presuming not to journey through but to angle within time's current ("but a stream I go a-fishing in"), his aspiration to arrest and dwell in vagrant moments: "We should be blessed if we lived in the present always." Proper to regard of nature is a turn away from culture, a resistance to its temptations, as culture is lodged and exemplified in oneself: that's the logic, the conversion that nature writing enacts.

To note that life writing enters history contingently – that its advent was not inevitable or foreordained in human affairs, that its standing is equivocal in species and deep time – is to suggest its status as instrumental, as beholden to and attendant upon devices. My fable of face-drawing depends on some main ones: pencil, paper, eraser. Mirrors, too, for as George Gusdorf notes, this technic was revolutionized toward the end of the Middle Ages, with silver supplanting metal-

plate backing to glass, the upshot transforming our manner of self-regard ("Nature did not foresee the encounter of man with his reflection. …" [32]). There's the camera incipient in a snap-shooting view of the past, an episodic form. There are shoes for diverse pursuits and durations. There are lights on all night, on demand. Superintending, there's transport: the headlong tenor of our vehicles.

* * *

The Futurists (I've just read) were obsessed with speed, which they deemed redemptive. Transgressive as can be, entire iconoclasts, they advocated the razing of libraries, museums, institutions and strictures of all sorts. They meant to live in the present always, to be so blessed: die young, leave an uncreased corpse. They turned out to be fascists – was this incidental or proper to their stance?

Here's Marinetti, their maestro of manifestos:

> Futurism is grounded in the complete renewal of human sensibility brought about by the great discoveries of science. Those people who today make use of the telegraph, the telephone, the phonograph, the train, the bicycle, the motorcycle, the automobile, the ocean liner, the dirigible, the aeroplane, the cinema, the great newspaper (synthesis of a day in the world's life) do not realize that these various means of communication, transportation and information have a decisive influence on their psyches.

This was 1909!

The Futurist was twisted but he had this straight: our psyches are decisively influenced by our devices. And this influence must extend to our sense of what it means to make a life, out of what elements, presuming what substance, what modes of relation.

For instance: in nature writing one contemporary canonical work – *Refuge*, by Terry Tempest Williams – differs wildly from Marinetti's screed in style, temper, and ideology. Its author, a naturalist in Salt Lake City, recounts her mother's and grandmother's deaths from cancer in conjunction with flooding in the Great Salt Lake which occasioned a die-off among wild birds. It's a work of autobiography transected with natural history, presuming to meld and so transgress genre boundaries. It stresses family, ancestry, home place, allied with and configured through attention to natural process – values the Futurists disdained. It favors institutional transformation but does not espouse fracture and upheaval; its sympathies are preservationist, its primary concern with loss. It does not worship speed. Yet at every juncture it depends on speed – assumes and indulges in it, takes it profoundly for granted. Its opening section recounts the car trip from the author's workplace in town to her object of study (and desiderata), the Great Salt Lake – in essence, an account of her commute. It conceives of home as the whole of the Great Basin, an immense geographical entity the area of which exceeds by far the combined areas of the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Austria, Hun-

gary, and Croatia: a conception of home that presumes routine use of conveyances whose speed and sway the Futurists could only (and did constantly) dream of. Further, the author's family's fortune, derived from construction, underwrites a lifestyle of discretionary jet travel – Manhattan shopping trips, a foray to Mexico where the author goes native at the Day of the Dead. "Secrets hidden from interstate travelers" (Williams 1991: 109): that's what *Refuge* portends. Yet that promise is predicated on interstates, on chronic flight, mounting mileage, such that transgressing toward secrets depends on that presence, a fixed condition of motion.

That this author leads a life of some privilege is unremarkable, plain enough. I mean further to observe that her very sense of life-leading depends on devices so routine as to recede to the background, out of focus; and further (the crux) that these turn out to spell *formal* devices as well, engines of life unfolding such that episodes irrupt successively like airplanes touching down or car doors opening at scenic turnouts. As Futurists foresaw, the influence is decisive. The book's conceit of episodic shuttling – between wilderness, household, hospital, and vacation locales, let alone disjunctures of recollection and dream – is our present given, our default condition. Far from transgressive, it enacts what it presumes to contest. This is observation, not indictment. I can't imagine what else it might do.

* * *

Thoreau made pencils – the best in the land. Drawing on technics of German pencil makers (which he studied methodically like the Harvard grad he was), he innovated with mixtures and extrusions of graphite and clay for lead, his methods eventuating in the system of graduated hardness – like the default number 2 – we assume today. With pens still dependent on ink wells and blotters, it's by dint of good pencils that field notes became feasible and a life of writing in situ conceivable. The ready nature of on-site inscription, in turn, must surely have informed the desire he expressed for a device that would transcribe thought directly, converting language from mind to page. This is the hope, the trope, the reduction to absurdity of his writing's presiding conceit: his maintaining a meteorological journal of the mind, every gust, ripple and ray there registered. Its impossibility keeps the prospect desirable, notwithstanding that if realized, the transcript would be horrible to read, unendurable from at least two views: unbearably tedious and shapeless (like watching a surveillance camera); unendurably overlapping and encroaching on an auditor's lifetime (like watching a surveillance camera). The auditor of first instance is the one audited, whose weather is tracked.

In a lineage of transcription in which Thoreau's pencil figures, we've come to a point where this measure, this nightmare, can be contemplated. Video recording of an event in its entirety takes the duration of the event to play back. A life, in principle, can become a half-life, each recorded stretch matched by an equivalent stretch of viewing – and is further reducible through re-viewings and re-recordings, a Zeno's paradox of self-regard.

Yet is this the import of Thoreau's desire? Not really. He brings a mirror to Walden but fixates rather on the pond's mirroring the sky. In words of his successor Frost, he seeks not echoes but "counter-love, original response" in registering the tremors of moments. The mind's meteorology is not copy-weather but upshot and analog; the auditing creates turbulence itself. Weather is not metaphor but metonymy for sensation – part of that whole and vice versa.

Thoreau had pencils for copy-making. He was subjected to daguerreotypes, no more. His discursive forms are like sketchbooks, mosaics (as Margaret Fuller complained), excursions, not snapshots. He doesn't crop up all over at once, however *extra-vagant* his expression. Locomotives, not SUVs, run on the track by his door.

* * *

We see that habits trope lives, so that with action (per Hannah Arendt) consisting of life lived toward retelling, we figure retelling after the manner of potent devices. I am a camera, says Christopher Isherwood – a posture of passive recording, meteorology of mind, inconceivable a century before. His friend Stephen Spender expostulates on writing a life:

> We are seen from the outside by our neighbors; but we remain always at the back of our eyes and our senses, situated in our bodies, like a driver in the front seat of a car seeing the other cars coming towards him. A single person, instead of being a tiny little automaton in a vast concourse of traffic that is the whole of humanity, is one consciousness within one machine confronting all the other traffic. (1980: 118)

This metaphor of perception and self-possession is inevitable. Who having experienced the piloting of a car can fail to figure their own careering after that manner? It's precedent, exemplar, and condition for our sense of encapsulation in time.

I've spent my life (I tell myself) under the aegis of the auto. Its motion is my locus of temptation and resistance. Life events – road trips, relocations – are nodes in its overwhelming prosody. It does not haunt my dreams, it drives them.

In second grade, Miss Dickinson's class, I pasted together a wee auto from paper scraps. It delighted me. Proud, I showed my teacher. She tore it up and threw it out. Miss Dickinson, always saying, Wake up and smell the coffee! I hadn't smelled the coffee. I hadn't been authorized to make that paper car; I'd been pasting away while class swirled vaguely about me. I was crushed then and am still not reconciled. I've got work to make up. I mean to make something of whatever comes to hand, delight in it and pass it off.

* * *

I'm a teacher myself now, a professor, and in my department we are hiring professors, hosting candidates at dinners. At one the talk turned to libraries,

the changing dispensation of book storage in stacks: how computerized filing by volume size, prizing efficiency in space over topic, precludes an eventful stumbling over titles in proximity to what's sought. Call number contiguity, the researcher's mystical experience, gets lost. I weighed in with my own version of such providence, how at seeming random I've pulled books from shelves and opened them to just the spot needed to spur a piece. Another bookworm at the table – a deeper digger – allowed as how what I reported is not rare, is rather a prevailing trope in reading: the heat-seeking hand, the magnetic tome, drawn together by magic, like halves of a split coin in an old plot. It's Augustine's story, among others. But I had a different valence in mind. Not just any passage but any *number* of passages would suit my purpose, would *conjure* a purpose, in any such case. Thus an assignment I imagined (as talk turned to teaching): library blind man's bluff. Blindfold students in the stacks. Spin them and release them to find three volumes each, by chance or touch. The task: in an essay, to connect these works. If knowledge is not progressive but rhizomatic (as somewhere in French it says), you can tug at a tag end and send shivers through the network. No intention but no end of sense. Nothing doesn't fit. What's most transgressive is a sense of direction.

Yet there's a doubling back on the scattering always, with transgression redoubled recursion. My conceit takes place at a table, among peers, in the context of a search, between hires and retirements. Curriculum vitae: amber for repartee.

* * *

Thoreau's evasiveness. He would gladly tell all he knows, he claims, and never post No Admittance on his gate – then he turns at once to the most cryptic, riddling, pseudo-allegorical bit of reportage in all of *Walden*, saying he lost a hound, a bay horse, and a turtledove and has sought them ever since, a search that's sent packs of critics baying down the same faint trail. We can't deem this a false lead, for that would suggest we've discerned some right track, some solution or direction he'd divert us from. It's an evasion so pronounced it's a taunt. Yet its aspect of gravity and yearning seems unfeigned, and the confession, as it were, comes at a key juncture – *creates* that juncture – where the writer asserts a life role. We sense that this unbreakable fable stands in for episodes the writer can't bear to transmit – not through enormity but through humdrum shortcoming, humiliations ineffable yet routine. He has never known a man so bad as he is, he claims – yet such men must abound, since this confessor, though transgressive, is unexceptional. He's a neighbor addressing neighbors. He requires this rhetoric of heroic evasion to confess middling failure against a field of private sensation so intensified as to shake him – a realm where he claims full success. His facility with sensation, he contends, is so signal as to warrant recognition for a role socially assumed: inspector of snowstorms, crafter of unsold baskets of such fine weave they bear nothing but air. He presumes an estate comprised wholly of underlife – a castle in air for which to contrive foundations. His life story's impact hinges

on this sense of withholding as momentous and exemplary as tangible acts – an evasion undertaken for us all.

"I fear chiefly lest my expression may not be *extra-vagant* enough, may not wander far enough beyond the narrow limits of my daily experience, so as to be adequate to the truth of which I have been convinced. *Extra vagance!* it depends on how you are yarded" (Thoreau 1854).

* * *

Here's what Saul Bellow told the critic Wayne Booth about revising: "Oh, I'm just wiping out those parts of my life I don't like" (2005: 77). It's a novel that Bellow was revising (*Herzog*), yet Booth avers this is something we do in nearly all we say and write, and that wiping out or masking over is no flaw, rather a condition of social comity and ethical counsel. Not the fact but the manner of masking is what counts: There are good and bad maskings, and ability to tell the difference determines our credulity and credibility, how we're hoodwinked or edified, the ways we're swayed.

I've just read Booth's article for my class in narrative theory, to which I assigned it though I hadn't yet read it. A confession. What do I lay open, what wipe away in professing not to master my class?

The comedian commits to his fecklessness – perfects it and sends it up. He's two-faced, wholly partial, a maestro of underlife.

On the radio in this café: "I fought the law and the law won."

I seek without striving to be comic in teaching – to make a virtue of evident scriptlessness. I want to pull that off without even trying, as if the manner weren't betrayed by the intent. Scriptlessness is evident: it may be actual, it may be feigned. It may be hard to say. The mask I revise for is of one who treads lightly, underlife overweening. The mask I wipe out is overbearing, heavy-treaded, a footprint with institutional weight. I wipe out that the law won; affecting heedlessness, I imply that I fought.

* * *

I was blessed to remember dreaming I took the stage as a comedian in a standup routine. I approached the microphone but addressed it with my back to the crowd. I realized I'd forgotten my notes. What will I say? Where are the quips, the comic observations? I am funny, I know I am, let me come up with something! But with my back turned.

* * *

I go looking for an essay that's informed my thinking about life story. I open a file cabinet. What bewilderment! Literal layers of takings and leavings in sheaves I recall as dreams – a compounding of loose ends. They are not sedimented, which

would suggest a progression; they are heaped, lumped. My ruling passion is to evade embarrassment: I can't linger in this midden of my efforts and effects, which impress on me how a career is a careering, a careening, though conducted at seeming snail's pace. If career is what it does: rev and idle, more nearly, a rhetoric of stripped gears.

A key juncture in my development (if that's what it is) was the time I learned that the verb *entertain* extends from the French *tenir*, i.e. *to hold*. That was a grabber: I've clung to it since. My files embarrass with what I've grabbed and can't hold. This confusion of effects entertained in a present head: it's not to be borne.

What I like is ticket stubs. I leave these in the pockets of dress coats; I salt them away in drawers and tuck them in books I read briefly and put aside usually for good. I like to match colors of stubs and covers, so when I find a book later having forgotten what I read, I'll be entertained by this gesture of attention. Some people paste tickets in scrapbooks so a life coalesces from attendance. I know the dates are collatable, but I like stubs speckled and stray, so they grab me again, at points I provide for but don't plan.

* * *

I drew shoes in the margins of notebooks. What was this fixation? I've always been tall, and by adolescence my feet had outgrown the shoes sold in stores. Just one outlet existed for outsized feet: King Size Catalog, quartered in Brockton, Massachusetts, a shoemaking town in pre-sweatshop and container ship days. Options through mail order were limited: dull versions of current styles, others wholly out of date. I was a craving teen; I hadn't learned Thoreau's abstemious criteria for consuming: cool shoes spelled dreadful longing. Ineluctable penny loafers, coins glinting through leather straps. Wingtip imperials, elegant epitomes, their curved stitching with ellipses of fine-punched holes. In time the shoe scene changed: larger sizes crept into stores then web commerce conjured a bounty. Yet like a Depression child reared in scarcity who hordes canned food, I retain the fixation, such that at size 16 (Euro 49) I'm loathe to pass up a sale-priced pair, as if each were a meal before famine. There are stories I tell about bargain shoes I've found, among the best stories in my repertoire. One pair of black referee-style Reeboks from a shop in San Francisco comprises an episode more momentous than any enacted in the wearing – and I wore them through the soles.

No wonder I'm taken with the metaphor of ecological footprint, as elegant and expressive as dress shoes. We are enjoined to tread lightly, all of us, yet none touch down with less than our full weight. Further, we step with texture: lug sole, hobnail, suctioned rubber, eraser-like crepe, and perennially the polished obdurate hides of cows, slick on waxed dance floors in dim light. I think of Bigfoot, aka Sasquatch, largest of putative humanoids and most furtive, least storied. I recall a report by a scientist in Japan (teeming with tininess) which contended that larger people, so resource-intensive, do not as it were make environmental sense – that we ought best to evolve toward diminution. The logic is airtight, and

since I'm big I'm chagrined. I'd starve, I swear it, but I get so hungry! The story of my life: eating when I please. Taking to my feet. Stray redeemings of dance. How little to report beyond footprint.

I'm musing again on the comic and the bouncer, offender and enforcer, transgressor and violated soul. Comedians are occupationally aggrieved; it's weird how the bouncer is victim in this episode. The bouncer's the one who ejects the obstreperous drunk; biggest of men, his booting is professional and prodigious; it's the drunk, not the bouncer, that gets bounced. But say bouncer is construed as one bouncing, bounding, parabolic. How sublime! I used to figure existence (stereotypically) as billiard-ball caroming, comprised of chance yet mechanical impacts and tangents. How much better, while comparable, is bouncing – decisive and weightless, eventful yet ineffable. One vacillates between figuring life as succession of impacts and as recurrent apogee, dependable weightlessness. One discerns that one's bouncing does not come to a close but is arrested. One careers through the motion of the spheres.

Big as I am, that's the bouncer I'd be. Not footprint but bounceprint: that's what I'd like to exert. Sensibility's Sasquatch. Big feet like punctuating wingtips.

* * *

"The autobiography is lived, played, before being written; it fixes a kind of retrospective mark on the event even as it occurs" (47). That's Gusdorf again.

What I like in traveling is to write my life right now, by myself in restaurants, on train cars or park benches – the writing a stand-in for companionship (no companion so companionable as solitude, per Thoreau) yet not its double. I rarely reread what I write. When I do I'm recalled to an occasion, true, but one made over by the aspect of inscribing, made *up* that way, what's otherwise less than incidental. It's not that I don't write to remember; it's that I mean to remember *right now*, this instant. A "retrospective mark on the event" – yet retrospection *comprises* the event, lived as though it cannot be recounted. Such inscribing is momentous, however trivial its gist, yet uneasy to report – baskets of indifferent weave, unprocessed percepts, uncarded strands of duration. The dinner plate comes, the train reaches the station, I retie my shoes, I'm walking away…

* * *

"Our whole life is startlingly moral," says Thoreau (1854) – "never an instant's truce between virtue and vice." Startlingly prosthetic, I should say, the prosthesis attendant to morality. I dramatized this to myself while afoot in Prague. Walking west from Hradčany along the ridge through a string of parks, near the end of the mile-long lawn at Ladronka I was struck with a recognition. I envisioned my ambulating self as a congeries of devices – all that I carry, wear, bear routinely, simply to walk – and felt impelled to send up this condition, make it comic and schematic. I sat on a bench and drew a stick figure, headed thus:

Praha – ridgetop park
ME WALKING

On the facing page I made a key to my diagram:

> hat, glasses, open mouth, blown hair, lungs, heart, limbs, more limbs. pocket 1: keys, pen, wallet, change purse. pocket 2: cell phone, flash drive, bandanna, blank book, passport. bag: camera, knife, map, pocket dictionary, jacket, bottle. guts. problematic shoes.

Problematic in that they never wholly fit or work; with shoes always there's impinging or slack, excess of protection or porosity, wobble in ratio of content to vessel such that vagaries of one shade into shortcomings of the other. And this ratio governs the outfit. Travel light, be prepared: twin imperatives, mutually flouting, reach a truce, the settlement I sketched: never weightless, never enough.

Every item registers and ramifies in a rippling ineffable yet momentous in sum. Our metonymy for chaos – a butterfly's fluttering that institutes a storm – is a fable, I believe, for the trains of our own devices. This is figure and ground for life storying: what's taken as background gets flipped into focus and consequence.

The blank book I sketched in is before me: price six crowns, made in Slovakia, corners bumped, cover rumpled and rubbed smooth. It pictures a bicyclist action-canted downhill, poised in space, superimposed on a stopwatch – a portent, if I say so, of this floating life of devices, the discrepancy between longing and use. I keep portents in my outfit, too.

* * *

"How many a man," asks a bookmark before me, "has dated a new era in his life from the reading of a book?" How many have dated from the reading of a bookmark? Or from a stray ticket stub?

Augustine did this – restarted his life from a book. I guess I did too, from Thoreau, though I never entered the date ("time is a stream"). But here's the catch: not just the dating but the very notion of an era in a life is traceable to reading, the technology of the intellect, the device of books. What possesses me now, the recognition I date from, is how of *all* devices – auto, mirror, myriad shoes – writing itself is most decisive, if transparent. It's the broad bright ground on which our lives *as* lives must figure. Ostensible transgressions are repelled from its margins, as if magnetically; the field of letters contains them. It hasn't always been so: humankind thrived (I've read) for millennia before the present interregnum of print. A literate condition is not inevitable to our kind. But it's hard to spot lenses you wake up in.

Among things you grasp only if you're a reader is this: how it's become the case that there's such a thing as history, and further, how *within* history there's a *shift* toward history, a shift in perception, from sacred history, with origins bent

on endings, toward scientific history, deep time, the perennially floating world. Modernity (as it were) entails both randomness and selection, such that we're all chosen people, just chosen from below. Yet scientific history, apprehending natural selection, suggests that we're selected for sacrality. That we survive through a taste for telos breeding purpose. That life story is adaptive manufacture, manufacture the issue of life story.

Thoreau is mystic *and* modern in that his sense of progress (the age's stock in trade) is sublimated in a passion for *internal* improvement such that the telos of humankind gets focused on the present instance. "To affect the quality of a day: that is the highest of arts" (Thoreau 1854). That's his quarrel with his elder Emerson, who envisioned human striving as a set of concentric circles, continual outstrippings, and in eulogizing Thoreau also faulted him for opting to serve as captain of a huckleberrying party rather than engineer for all mankind. The eulogist's auditors would have nodded in rue, this obvious failure an aspect of what they mourned. Yet we readers today may hold otherwise, on accounts both factual and philosophical: factual in that Thoreau proved the superior engineer (that thing with pencils); philosophically in that, for *all* mankind, we had better not have engineers. We have seen what issues from such designs. We are tempted to make life stories of the comprehensive sort – *adapted* for this, chosen to feel chosen – yet it's a temptation we're advised to resist. Thoreau resisted: that turns out to be the source of his sainthood.

He was tempted to a trajectory of achievement in profession, the village boy chosen for Harvard; he resisted and rambled and surveyed. He was tempted by the railroad, trains laden with goods he lavishly describes; he resisted and kept what he could move fast or leave behind, some furniture spread on a lawn. He was *sorely* tempted to travel, a junkie for travelogues who knew Frobisher and Lewis and Clark by heart, who worked that genre himself repeatedly through Massachusetts and Maine. Yet he resisted: it was "internal latitudes" he lit out for at last, and when memorably he asserted "it is not worth the while to go round the world to count the cats in Zanzibar," (Thoreau 1854) he said so having *read* that Zanzibar explorer's exploits; he knew in detail what he eschewed.

Yet I confess I want to count those cats – go round the world, number my days in transit. In lieu of life story, I crave semblances of eventfulness in travel. In this I'm not transgressive but typical. I'm an instance of a type, the aging American, deskbound and death-rattled, grist for a genre and industry. My contrails girdle the globe. This essay is a ticket to Brno.

* * *

The moral philosopher Alisdair Macintyre has a view of life story which the critic Geoffrey Galt Harpham recaps and corrects. Recollecting the ethos of heroism in ancient Greece, Macintyre sees discrete life events as rendered meaningful by assimilation to a unified life story, recounted to but not exclusively by oneself, to which death makes an ending. A successful life gets comprised in composite

as taking a course toward a telos socially countenanced; tragedy is the genre of life gone off course, derailed or run aground. By this standard, Harpham notes, few lives are successful even faintly (86–88); most founder and fail to cohere, are "such miserable failures" as Thoreau said we feel ourselves. Yet a conception of a life lived in narrative, as comprised through ascesis, through temptation and resistance, must prevail all the same. We may be tempted, it's true, to comport ourselves in manners conducing to a view of ourselves as heroic, as spelling a trajectory bent toward eulogistic retelling. Yet we may *resist this temptation*, embrace an existence that's episodic, peripatetic, buffeted, occasional, stray. I am deader than you, boasts one monk to another; I make less sense, the modern ascetic crows. But I am storied still.

Now I've come to that state I used to wonder about when I sketched faces aging, that condition I projected – in face and estate. The upshot is equivocal still, off kilter, out of round. My face hasn't settled into mismatched creases, though its sides, as foreseen, don't sync. Rather it's gone puffy and vague, not sharply lined but crinkled and sagging. I didn't see that coming. So it is with the presumed accumulation of days, imagined as the progressive deepening of well-formed lines: this turns out patchy and slack. Days don't add up. I have no life worth recounting this way and I suspect and resent those who do. They are a source of temptation, like a woman's face out of chador: how dare they flaunt their imitable, continuous lives.

If I could draw as I used to I'd render faces left behind, extrapolate past features like scientists who project colors and striping on sauropods. I've just read where they train lenses on drab fossils in which traces of ink sacs and feather scales remain, identical to contemporary birds, from which glorious plumage is inferred. *That*'s an underlife.

> The iniquity of oblivion blindly scatters her poppyseed and when wretchedness falls upon us one summer's day like snow, all we wish for is to be forgotten.
> (Sebald 1998: 24)

* * *

Extra-vagance. It depends on how you are yarded. There's a park near my house I start out for on walks, and today I resolved to stay within its bounds, not pass through to the strip malls and subdivisions beyond. I traced the raggedy creek that bisects its lawn, and at its tag end at the park's edge I paused by a thicket, eyeing a viaduct – and flushed a hawk. A wingspan away, closer than ever. Then a chickadee near the hawk's takeoff, calling away, the hawk still nearby. Stock still, I entertained the tangle of calls around me – birds of all colors and stripes passing word of what flushed. Caught on a twig at waist height was a tuft of down, breeze-shivered. Beheld with a eye to recollection, tucked away at once.

Tracing the brushy rivulet backward, at a trampled spot was a crumpled white patch, a vinyl banner, table-sized, with grommets at corners for tying off to a wall. It contained a text: "Landmark Urology." Indeed I could view this as landmark; as an aging male, I promptly had to pee. Its phone number an area code away – as far as a hawk that sign had blown. Beyond use but not trash, poised between landmark and landfill: I dislodged it and toted it home. Tucked that away, too, stray thing. I'll invite my son to mark up the blank flip side, rope up the grommets, hang something nasty and sharp for graduation, something that grabs – transmit that impulse to transgress.

Footprint is everything. Dross is subjective. Nothing doesn't fit. It depends on how you are yarded. They transgress best who feel how they're confined.

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