

CHIMES

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Chimes by Adam Fieled

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CHIMES

#1

I remember chimes. They were a swirl and eddy above a yellow door. Swaying happened and a noise and a rocking of wind; I was alive to light. I did not say, but was; I was not is, but being. There was a window opposite that was a rectangle and a flood of blue. Light was piercing it in beams and it was a movement and a lingering. I noticed the music of things, even then. I noticed that there was music not only in the chimes but in colors set against one another, yellow and blue and the white arms of the crib and in a moment I could taste them all together. I experienced moments as a kind of eating: I was hungry and I did.

#2

An iron on my feet was a big burning; a TV was a big noise but my noise, my burning noise, was bigger. My Mom rocked me in a small kitchen that was a mess of edibles, non-edibles, things that were there because we could use them. Soon there was a scar and it stayed there for a long time, I would look at my foot and remember the burn and be pleased; in the scar I had kept it, I had encased it in my flesh, it subsisted. Continuance was an excitement and a way of still existing. Sudden balloons of joy erupted often from faded pain.

#3

Tookany Creek shone of moonlight lavished on it from a sky that stretched over our big backyard. I stood at the window and it was late and I looked at the creek and it was a kind of song. I thought it was a dream and I thought that this was dreaming but I stayed there at the window and there was a shed in the backyard, it was blue like our house, but with white shutters and it was there for no purpose but as something between me and the stream that shone white and black from the moon. I stood at a level with my window and the stream made a rushing rustling noise and it was speaking to me and I listened.

#4

Father, my father, was there and he was fixing my window with special nails and I said I didn't like them and he said *they don't like you either*. First my father was there in the house and he was picking up a spilled scrambled egg with his foot and saying *handy foot* or then he was at a picnic table in the yard with lots of big people on a sunny day and much smiling but that was soon over. Much was soon over and I knew what over meant in a young way and I sang into a tape recorder with over happening in the background. There was still hearing after over was over and after everything was over I went back to a room inside myself meant for continuation and continuing continued, and had not to ever end or be over.

#5

I was in my room that was a world and that looked out on Tookany Creek. What I heard listened to, playing my father's records on my turntable, was the sound of the sun coming through the window. The scene was set to a place that was not world, was entirely of itself, was a piece of another world and yet was in my world whenever I wanted. I wanted and wanted the music, and the sound was all around me and I wanted things that would let me sound like this world in my world, which was of me. I began hearing what I saw in Tookany Creek and eating moonlight in my ears.

#6

We had to go to an ugly place to see Grandma Bubba: a big dirty street with no trees. There were people beaten and bloody and there were policemen but still I would leave Bubba's house and hang out in the lot with dirty children. They had firecrackers and they accepted me because I did not judge them but still I was me and they were who they were. Once one of them came to Bubba's door to ask for money and Bubba said no and Bubba was blind and poor and her sisters were poor too. Bubba was blind and smoked cigarettes and made dirty jokes that I didn't understand. Bubba was proud of being Jewish and so we celebrated all the Jewish holidays with her: I liked the presents best, not the principles. The ugly place was there and never changed.

#7

Our house on Mill Road was a two-story wooden twin painted sky blue, placed on a curving block on the bottom of a steep hill, and was itself on an incline. The wide backyard, where was a large wooden shed also painted sky blue, and which fed onto a gravel path and then down another incline into Tookany Creek, was set sharply lower than the front door and then Mill Road beyond it, while across the street shone the side face of another hill, on which began the houses on Harrison Avenue. The effect of this portion of Mill Road was seclusion, intimacy, and rusticity— it looked very much like a nineteenth, rather than a twentieth century innovation. The moon above Mill Road was secluded along with us, coaxed into a space privatized by immersion in a world apart from the rest of Elkins Park, Cheltenham Township, Philadelphia, and the wider world. That emotion, of being apart from things, was blended into harmony or moodiness, exultation or melancholy, by the song of the creek and its currents. Though my block eventually intersected with Church Road, where there was more worldliness, traffic, and a general sense of movement, what echoed in me on Mill Road was a way of being alone, of being private. I had no siblings. No surprise that the house was haunted by strange ghosts, strange ghosts and echoes. I awoke once covered in spiders and they were dancing and I couldn't get them off. Also a big round white light came into my second floor window, it shone there and dazzled me and screamed and my Father told me it was a police searchlight and I believed him but he was wrong. I can see the light today and what it was doing was charging me and I was being prepared to serve in a kind of army and I am serving in a kind of army now: the light knew. I screamed out of pained recognition when I saw it and that was a spirit that haunted the house. Other echoes shone off the surface of Tookany Creek, which soothed but was itself of another world that was faraway and deep and that I couldn't reach even when I waded in it.

#8

What drew me both to play baseball, and follow professional baseball, was an instinct. The drama and excitement of the game was enticing to me. When you play a game, you become more-than-you; you turn in an engine which develops into more than the sum of its parts. The kings of baseball were masters of a certain kind of reality, bearers of a certain kind of wisdom, and holders of a certain kind of knowledge. The trick was a simple one: to face confrontation boldly, no matter what. To dare yourself, also, to understand, that a life with nothing risked is no life at all. So, as a little prince of CAA baseball, I dared to face whatever pitcher was at hand, bat in hand. It laid down a gauntlet for the rest of my life: when you reach a precipice, if you have the nerve, jump. And I did.

#9

What I found in school was a world too slow, too drab for my tastes. What it meant to have a teacher was to have an adult standing over you, directing your actions, playing to be obeyed, and obeisance did not come naturally to me. The corridors of Myers Elementary School were long, high-ceilinged, and oddly shaped; Myers itself was odd, as a labyrinth of weird spaces, and in my moments of freedom there I communed with a structure which was to my taste. In class, I vented a sense of pent-up rage by making jokes, and when other kids laughed I found myself riding a high I later found in baseball, music, theater, parties, girls— anywhere ordinary consciousness could be raised above average, where you could transcendentalize past norms. It was a way of being on fire. I got used to disciplinary action against me, to being a semi-reprobate; but the high I got from class-clowning, and from wildness in general, was potent, fiery, and high-ceilinged in and of itself.

#10

I brooded through summers of playing ball and lemonade and behind Mill Road, behind Tookany Creek was a Little League field, and I would play there. I would play and bigger kids would come around on bikes and I would be threatened and there would be a few others with me. We would play until we were too spooked to play, because the teenagers were acting funny and we didn't know then what pot was or about strange peppery smoke or about what happens to people on drugs, and we were scared of the noises and the smells and the cars and the headlights at sunset when playing stopped being fun anyway because the ball could hit you on the head.

#11

O what does the music mean but not mean when you are so small that you have no defense against it? Riding in a car and a voice said *touch if you will my stomach, see how it trembles inside*, and it was strange but more violent than a body of water, even one that moved, and the voice was of me but not yet, because there was something in the voice that knew me (and anticipated me) without me knowing it, and it was a voice that danced and it meant heat hot heat hot heat.

#12

I was in the bathtub and I said my name over and over again until I forgot myself. The lights in the bathroom were on but I went deeper and deeper into darkness, and an empty void, and I heard my name as a something foreign. I heard my name, and I truly was not, I was a null and a void, null and void, and I had no self to be. Then, slowly, I regained myself, but I did not forget the essential emptiness, the uncompromising NO that I found behind the quotidian YES of selfhood. This happened also riding in a car to Aunt Libby's, and listening to the radio I thought NOTHING ANYWHERE until NOTHING got so big I shut my mind down in fright, and my consciousness streamed mellower.

#13

My father was then in an apartment. I loved the apartment because it was small and different from the house and I could listen to cars late at night. I could listen to cars after watching baseball on a little black and white Panasonic and I was on a couch and it was comfortable and different and I loved my father for being apart from the house and what usually was. There were Steak-Ums in the apartment and a china bull and many times we went to see the Phillies play because it was important to have fun and for my father to be my father and do what that meant. I even once rode on a motorcycle driven by my father's friend and held on tight but the wind was almost too much. My father was almost too much too because he was so apart from the much that always was in me.

#14

There was decay so that my Mom and Dad could not even talk. I met people in suits that were called lawyers and who had cold offices downtown and who asked me questions about what I wanted. I had no choice but to choose so I learned that life was about choices that you can't look back from, can't take back, can't do anything about except to move fumbling forward from, and I moved fumbling forward from choices. Now there was another Mom and Dad to go with the first two, but there were too many Moms and Dads and I was too alone and when I stared into the bathroom mirror, or any mirror, I saw that I was very far from what I had seen in the creek, the moonlight, the night, the stillness.

#15

O, for American summers of ice cream, basketballs, hot dogs, softball fields. On three special weekends a summer, day camp became sleepaway camp, before I had been to sleepaway camp. We sat on picnic tables on Friday afternoons, after the rest of the camp had departed, waiting for the fun to begin, and our sleeping bags had been deposited in the Rec Hall. It was in the air then for me, and on the sunny Saturday mornings that followed: a sense of absolute, boundless freedom. Looking out over the fields, the archery range, the equipment shed, and back up to the rock path at the foot of the Rec Hall's steps, the day glistened inside and around us, a feast of gracious gifts. If we could inveigle a counselor to supervise, we could use the swimming pool, maybe (if he or she were mellow enough) for hours. The pool itself was up and around the corner from the Big Top pavilion, where the other counselors fired up tunes on their boom-boxes and gossiped about the night before, less ecstatic than us to be here in Norristown. Many times, I claimed the equipment shed as a personal fiefdom, so as to organize massive, junior-professional softball games. Everything was trundled out to one of the two fields which was separated only by a wire fence from narrow, curvy Yost Road, and more empty fields on the other side of it, which I often stared at, entranced at a young age by nature spirits without being consciously aware of it. Counselors played with us, including CITs (Counselors-in-Training), and the context required us to cut heads— if you weren't good enough, you couldn't play. Later, down all the fields I ran, shirt tucked into shorts, playing capture the flag. Or, there I sat at the campfire, being told scary stories, feeling the magic of a small clan huddled, marshmallow soft (as the smores we cooked) in that realm: *camp*. Eventually I discovered sex, my sex, through the knowledge of a little girl who saw a big man in me. She held my hand and kissed me, and it was a deep wave of knowledge that left forever aftershocks rattling my walls with fire and thrill, frisson. Those lips were tender, were fevered, were forever cleaved to me in my imagination after that one night outside the Dining Hall, which was suddenly far away as Neptune. There was a brooding and a bittersweet and a knowledge of what can be achieved when two poles of being meet in the middle to kindle sparks. I held on to it.

#16

Suddenly there was a school that was a bigger school. There were lockers and a sense of importance; a combination to remember that was only mine. There were faces that were unfamiliar and a feeling that things were forming. I was always on the telephone because real dialogue happened on the telephone away from the presence of intercessors. I was always on the telephone because what was forming was a group that was not for everyone and I was in it. The group of us that was not everyone had rules that must not be spoken. What must be spoken was all the ways in which we were all moving forward. Moving forward meant being big and bigger and bigger, knowing more secret knowledge, occult practices of the teenagers we were trying to be. It did not mean the fullness that I still saw in Tookany Creek. Now, every day was regimented around who could talk to who, and how. The new school, more straightforward architecturally than Myers, had long narrow hallways with uncarpeted linoleum floors, and tended to be dimly lit. The journey from class to class was an adventure of seeing what new faces there were and discovering what they meant. My new friends would talk to me and not others. Alex, especially, formed myself and others around him as though we were a shell. Once the formation was established, as I was encouraged to dress how they dressed and say the things they would say, I understood that a kind of circuitry around us was closed. Tookany Creek ebbed and flowed, mutated, gurgled, or froze, given what the weather conditions were, but we were more hardened. In the parlance we used then: we were cool. Alex was tall, medium build, and imposing. He had been around Europe and Puerto Rico and was worldly. He knew how to be and stay cool. We talked on the phone every night. I was being cultivated. The clique was Alex's fiefdom. I had none. When I was over Alex's house, I picked up his white Fender Stratocaster and remembered all the records I used to listen to, how I'd wanted to play music. I wondered if I ever would. My problems with obeisance showed up again: I could not obey Alex, or the rest of the clique, the right way. I wanted to be more free. But it took time, the length of an entire year at Elkins Park Middle School, for this to be acknowledged and assimilated. For then, I held the axe, postured, and let an enormous question mark sail out of my consciousness and off into the air, before making my way down to the party in the unfinished basement, where Alex held court.

#17

Hypnotized by the wholesomeness of what had come before, I couldn't relate to being cool. I saw through what I saw through, I couldn't articulate it but I tried, and because I tried they called me a fool. I was a fool for caring and wanting to share and thinking that everything should be spoken out loud. I was a fool for being awkward when I should've been confident and confident when I should've been awkward. I kept trying to keep up, I wore Benetton and Ton-Sur-Ton, I wore a blue and pink Swatch, I had parties, but still it was all wrong, wrong for me, wrong to have my mouth forced shut by cool protocol. I was an artist, before I was an artist.

#18

I fell in love with one who symbolized my struggle with “cool.” I was a slave to her gaze, which went many ways, and was a burr in my side because she had no mercy. It was not to be. I was in love and it gave her an excuse to taunt which would relieve her pain, which was not an artist’s pain and unacknowledged, and so taunts became the taut tensions of my everyday existence, and I bore up as best I could but I was only considered cool “in a way.” Because I had not formed, I wanted what was outside of me; I needed my own help. I coveted her surface patina of blood and chocolate: that ooze.

#19

On a soft green spring day, I found my father at my mother's house. Bubba was dead, had jumped head-first from a second story window. She jumped because her partial blindness had become total. She had given many warnings which were not heeded. I looked at April blooming on Mill Road and thought of this and could not locate a center. Grass was green and the sun shone and I felt nothing even as I reached for a feeling. Suicide means you can't blame people for feeling nothing, though I did not think her culpable then or now. How I sat and listened to my father was by looking at his red Chevette and mystifying myself.

#20

We were moving. This was to be the end of Tookany Creek as an active presence in my life. I felt Mill Road move into a new space in my mind for things that no longer subsisted, like Bubba. The new house, like Mill Road, was on a street that curved, and unlike Mill Road was of red brick. The houses on the opposite side of the street, which varied architecturally, formed (as was later grateful) a wall so that you couldn't see it, but Cheltenham High School loomed behind them, a humongous parking lot flanked on a far side by the building itself. When the CHS marching band practiced in the lot that autumn, I heard them, boisterous and bumbling. It went with the smell of red and yellow leaves burning. I had no presentiment at that time what CHS would wind up meaning to me. I had a new room on the second floor overlooking the street, and one streetlamp which looked haunting at night. As with Mill Road, few cars passed. The house had a second floor porch we didn't use much, and a stone slab first floor porch where we would sometimes eat dinner when the weather was clement. Mom threw parties there too, sometimes for new neighbors. This was a neighborhood she would be a part of, even if there was (it turned out) no special place for me. The bathroom was a special shade of yellow, as was the basement where the washer and dryer were. I didn't like the new house at first because it was new, it didn't look like Mill Road and my room was painted aqua like toothpaste and had a funny smell. The night we moved in I gorged myself on sweets and lay awake in pain for hours, the same that had happened at Bubba's wake. Then I became adjusted and Old Farm Road had its own place in the hierarchy of places that were, or were to be, more or less numinous, lit up with the religion of music and harmony, in my head.

#21

For a long time there was no sound that was my sound. Then one night, I was at my father's house, which was not Old Farm Road. Glenside, this Glenside, was posh, luxuriant. On the radio I heard a sound that I knew instinctively was my sound. It was resonant, sharp, and had echo; it sent reverberations out to the four corners of the earth; it would not be denied. The music began with a short phrase, a riff, played on a hugely fuzzed electric guitar. The riff, allowed to reverberate and fill a large, studio-generated aural landscape, was a thunderbolt shot down from Olympus. It tugged, as baseball did, at everything in me which was masculine, courageous, outrageous even, daring. When a human voice was heard, filtered in, intoning a harsh reprieve to an errant muse (*You need coolin', baby I'm not foolin'*), it could be heard as vibrantly raw or merely shrill, singing in a very high register. My own consciousness perceived nothing but the vibrancy of power: extreme, uncompromising volatility and nerviness. The drums filled out an expansively drawn landscape with even more authority, as though a tribunal of Greek gods had converged and were sending secret messages to me in Glenside, ensconced with headphones while my father watched TV impassively across the room. When the guitar spoke for itself, above the fray and accented by space made for it, it was a form of blues made sophisticated beyond blues I was familiar with: all the agony and bravado of blues guitar pushed into a space where more eloquence was required, to achieve a necessary release past overwhelming tension. The cascades of notes were not just a release: they were a hint and a missive sent to me about the possibility of ecstasy on earth, achieved nirvana, release from karmic wheels. The aural landscape was rocky, mountainous, and allowed the listener to climb from peak to peak with it. In short, it was a place I'd never seen, a miraculous place, with landslides clanging over other landslides so that no stasis or silence need be tolerated. I had to merge with the landscape, join it, become it. I would not be able to sit still unless I became one with this sound, until I could similarly reverberate. I needed to reach the four corners, the mountain peaks, along with it. This sound that began with a loud guitar, played hotly, showed me the world seen through an auditory prism of light and shade.

#22

Things shifted. I went from cool to killed-by-lack-thereof. In a period of isolation, I learned about reversals, about temporality and its ruthless one-handedness. I faded into a kind of wallpaper; the kids around me did not, perhaps, see me at all. Then, as winter changed into spring, things shifted again: friends appeared out of nowhere, I had a role to play that was substantial, exterior blossoms and blossoming things had an interior echo in my consciousness. I learned thusly how one must wait to be blessed, that patience is a virtue close to heaven, that all things are eventually answered by their opposites, if the soul is maintained closely. I learned that seasons have each a particular flavor and shape, like candy and snowflakes, and that each season must have a slightly different meaning.

#23

My first guitar was sleek and black and an Ibanez Road-star; my amplifier was small and black and a Peavey backstage. These were my appendages and I treated them as such. A day without substantial exercise was unthinkable; every new musical phrase was a mountain to climb and a chance to demonstrate the doggedness of an artist. I was dogged and I could soon make many noises that had the robust quality of reaching the four corners; what was important was that this was a kind of marriage. I wedded my guitar without ceremony because every moment was a ceremony that was holy and part of me. I was soon a musician and I could know no other way to be because this was ordained and my destiny. I had found one key to Tookany Creek, and it was in the process of moving my fingers artfully. As they moved, my heart beat in rhythm, my brain facilitated this and all things were joyous.

#24

Now I had a sister who was half my sister, who was a baby and who I played with. My time was divided so that I was a brother half the time, when I was with my father and my other mother, who was not my mother. My life grew to have many compartments and I lost the cherished sense of continuity I had had, because things never continued. My life was splintered and I had more life then I should have had, and my world was an overcrowded subway car. All I could do (having chosen to be splintered) was ride the variegated waves as they broke around me, and my half-sister was a big wave and called me *Amio* and there was a big house they lived in that I was a visitor to and that was not mine. All the same it was a big house and I had many friends that visited me at the house and there was a stimulating festive atmosphere that did continue for a while.

#25

Being splintered, I did things that were not of me. I went to Florida to visit my other mother's family, with my father and the baby. They were wealthy and lived in a wealthy house with a dumbwaiter and antiques and a screened-in swimming pool. To them, my father was working class, a thug, and me even less than that, being of him but small and only half-formed. I missed my guitar and watched palm trees and one night I drew a constellation on the beach in the sand, I was alone and it was my happiest moment in this place of privilege. I did not earn it or greatly desire it or even understand it, except to know that I was being condescended to, except to realize that these were would-be Mandarins, who hovered around the fringes of high society hoping to get in. I knew this by instinct.

#26

A new school year was a new way of seeing and a new chance to move forward. I was sitting in a new class and on the other side of the class was a new girl. She was olive-skinned, had a dainty mouth and lustrous long black hair. Our eyes shot into each other and intermingled. I was aware of something changing and something moving and before long I had her number (and she mine) and we were confidants and romantic dialogists chatting away afternoons and evenings. Over the phone I played her the song called *Faith* that went *well I guess it would be nice if I could touch your body* and this had instant mythological significance as being a consummation of everything that subsisted between us. She cherished drama, in her Scorpio way, and so there were peaks and valleys of understanding and frequent miscommunication, but the feeling of a continuous humming presence between us, of which we could partake, went on.

#27

Ted was a foil who could be leaned on and who liked to play straight man. I was a loon who needed a straight man, who would plan gags and make general mischief for teachers and those innocent enough to be duped. We wanted it to be atmospheric and ambient around us and we would burn my father's dhoop sticks and listen to rock music. This music came to symbolize the playfulness and the whimsy and the innocence and the elegance of what we imagined. The overabundance of my life seemed rich at this time: there was continuance.

#28

Through music, words emerged in my consciousness as another thing. There were musicians who used words and they showed me. I saw that combinations of words could be molten and that the fires they ignited could be contagious. They could be a door that one could break through into another reality: a place hyper-real, full of things that had the palpable reality of what is called real, but were nonetheless better than real: voices channeled from ether, expounding heroic worlds of oceanic expansive experience. This was another way of moving fingers artfully; more subtle and durable, yet so much harder to do because so stark: mere imitation would get you nowhere. I was on the bottom of another mountain that would take me where the creek ran effortlessly.

#29

I saw a movie at this time (*Apocalypse Now*) that had a powerful effect on me. It was all about one man's interior world. This world had a cohesion made of short-circuited dynamism and it meant that green jungle, severed heads, napalm memories and the poetry of endings (bangs, whimpers) would have to be preeminent. I learned how internal cohesion is rare and a magnet that others are drawn to: the more coherence (even if it happens to be irrational), the more magnetism. Yet being a magnet meant drawing good and bad together; internal levels had to be minded, picking and choosing was not an option. Life and death were seen to be flip sides of a coin, here on a dead man's eyes.

#30

Images were entering my mind and leaving seeds. I saw a man dangle with hooks stuck into his chest. He was looking for visions and to become a channel for voices that would take him and his people forward. It was a ritual called *Sun Dance* and it was a kind of extremity. I learned that mortification of the flesh can be a boon to spirit and that valuing spirit can be more than an act of volitional faith: it can be a pact with another world. It was not volitional that I witnessed it but it was volitional that I believed and that a chord was struck within me. The receiver of visions could hold a place of honor; whether I saw what I saw in a creek or an Ibanez or a pen, the kind of seeing I was attuned to could move people from where they were to another place.

#31

I liked the festive aspect of celebrations, and the little adventures one could set loose at a party: throwing glasses off buildings, smashing things, drinking forbidden alcohol. Driven by a delirious continuance, I put my hands all over girls' bodies. I prodded, pinched, teased, prolonged the experience any way I could. My will dovetailed with a wonted continuance and I was precocious: jacket off, tie loosened, a little wolf. I learned how to ride a high and how to direct cohesive energy into a palpable magnetic force.

#32

I was in a train riding to Mahopac to visit relatives. It was an endless classic day in the endless classic summer of '89. The train broke down and I was sequestered in it for hours. There was no one in my car; I took out my guitar and began to play. I had a sensation of Otherness from being in an unfamiliar place, a place strictly liminal. I learned for the first time the magic of places that were not my home, were not destinations, and were in the middle of something. Though I couldn't feel the sunlight directly, there was warmth and a charm to the circumstances that I appreciated. Travel could help me to channel; Otherness could rejuvenate one's interior world; mishaps could be gateways to other realities.

#33

I did not belong at camp anymore but I was still there. There were few happy moments but they all involved solitude. One night everyone had gone to a dance but I stayed behind. It started to rain furiously, a preternatural pounding such as you find in the mountains in summertime (and these were the Poconos). The rain was coming down and lit me up with magic. I put in a cassette I liked. The music was thick, viscous, gothic, and had rain and woods and darkness in it. Everything coalesced and my solitude in a wooden cabin in the rain was perfect. A British counselor heard the music and stopped to commiserate and someone foreign affirming my taste was good, added to the ambience of the moment. I saw that perfect moments must be self-created to stick. What would be generated for me (dances, sports, entertainment) would not suffice.

#34

The final insignia bequeathed to me by the camp realm: our bunk went camping, a few hours from the camp, deeper into the Pocono mountains themselves. We set up our sleeping bags in a secluded campground area. After a few cursory, desultory attempts at lighting a fire (our counselors being no more advanced at this than us), and long after sunset, we went to sleep. In the middle of the night, I was woken with a harsh push. Baptiste, from France, had a pack of Gauloise cigarettes. For us men of daring, it was now or never. Baptiste laughed at our stunted attempts at sophisticated inhalation— yet it didn't matter. For me, my first cigarette was an extension of acting, playing my guitar or baseball, and all the class-clowning I had down in school. I joined a continuum larger than myself, into a consciousness of bigness, expansiveness, largesse. I had accepted a token the universe (and Baptiste) had offered me, to reiterate what I already knew— somewhere out there was a real life waiting to be had, and the life was mine for the taking, if I dared.

#35

I often remembered kindergarten: we would nap on the second floor of a two-story schoolhouse, and every day I would be unable to sleep, hoping to fall through the floor and land on ground level. On the last day of kindergarten I thought to myself, *this is the last chance, if I don't fall through today I never will*. I didn't, and it was my first experience of imagination being disappointed by concrete reality. Now, with words and music, I saw that I could build an imaginative world in which I could always fall through the floor. It would be a place of light and laughter and play and others would be invited in. I was aware of a new hunger for which this world was the only appeasement, and the world of sports and grades and television that surrounded me was but a dim reflection of it. My guitar and my books had grandeur that cast a shadow over everything and everyone that was ordinary or broken.

#36

In Woodstock, New York, I met a writer, relative of a family friend. I sat beside him and listened to him discourse: drunkenly, cynically, and brilliantly. He took me on a tour of an imaginative landscape that he had created; it was all music and language and he had been rewarded with some fame but no money. I saw in a flash that to build the world I envisioned, I would have to give things up. The practical world could be a problem; as with this livid specimen, my giant wings might keep me from walking. My vision, if it was to continue, might take away evident signs of success and accomplishment, outward significations of approval that most people depended on. Not being normal would be a blessing and a curse.

#37

I got a high from theater and from being onstage and I did many theater things in school. I was given starring roles because I was able to self-transcend and be other people effectively. Sometimes, in rehearsal, a mood would overtake me of complete giddiness, which was like being on a magic carpet. I was so completely beyond myself that I had ceased to be myself; a solid Otherness cohered in my consciousness. It was a way of flying and of being in an enriched world that had safety and surprise, stability and excitement, in it, simultaneously.

#38

On the way to London I picked out a book to read. The flight was red-eye but I began to read and couldn't stop. I was reading a story of myself, of another me who was magically on a series of pages. The protagonist, Holden Caulfield, was me, and his words were born of something that I could rightfully call my own. Oppressed by phoniness, harangued by clueless authorities, spinning through a maze of arbitrary circumstances, we flew over the Atlantic and were together. For the first time, a book had given me the gift of myself, and I found myself closer to me. I read straight into my hotel room, straight into a dream-extension of what I read, and words had demonstrated to me again their coherence and potentiality for continuity. Maybe I, too, could give people back themselves.

#39

Cheltenham was a creepy town in the Cotswolds, but I had to go there to see a special grave. We stopped for tea at a teashop called Sweeney Todd's, and they were playing the song that went *stop dragging my, stop dragging my, stop dragging my heart around*. The graveyard was by a big old Gothic-looking church. Cruel April had abated; the sun shone. I could not give a dead man back to himself but maybe if I tried he would listen. *There might be another world*, I thought this as I wrote a poem and placed it by the headstone. Words could be a source of continuance between our world and the land of the dead. They could have timeless life.

#40

As I walked around London, I had a camera on my person. We walked through Hyde Park; paused on a spot overlooking the Serpentine Lake. It coalesced into my brain—the word composition for such things not being in my head yet—that the way the lake looked in the mid and foreground, people seated on benches behind it, then more lawn, had a splendor or grandiosity to it, a sense of higher balance. I snapped the picture, and was initiated into the cult of the visual. This was mostly unconscious; only it turned out to be the universe's way of telling me that pictures and images, not just words and music, were to be part of my destiny and inheritance, too. For who I was at fourteen: my first work of genuine art.

#41

Words about music were another kind of music that could reinforce the ethos, pathos, and logos of the music. Music and words became indissolubly combined in my mind, and thus they have remained.

#42

N was the girl with the olive skin. We continued to dance around each other, loving but not committing ourselves. At a party at someone's house in Elkins Park, we went outside together and my hands were gripped by something and they went all over her. It was a big wave and it was coursing through me into her skin. I had no me, I was permeated by the feeling of two-in-one; the third that walked beside us took over. Yet, when I called the next day, N would not commit to it ever happening again, or even to continue going out. I had an intimation that this was to be my life: full of beautiful, difficult women. N was the first and an archetype that remains visible to me when I mate, or even meet, another beautiful, difficult woman that is for me. I have a muse, she is like this: recalcitrant and blue.

#43

A kind of madness would not let me focus only on N. There were other parties and other girls: always the same wave, frisson, feeling of two-in-one. It would take many years to learn that this wave, powerful as it was, was short-lived. But contact with the feeling of this wave had so much of bliss in it that I sought it out at every opportunity, and grew petulant when forced to live without it. It only seemed to work on girls that were beautiful; otherwise I felt nothing. Lack of control was desirable but led me into non-continuity. What echoes of Tookany Creek were in this feeling created a hunger that was not to be assuaged; unlike music and words, this wave could not be relied upon, and the focus I felt for music and words was dissipated here. It was my misfortune to learn that continuance, as applied to art, could actively detract from continuance in other situations and on other levels.

#44

That year, N wrote a long letter in my yearbook, that ended with *I love you*. I could sense, even then, that this *I love you* came from a much different place than other kids' effusions; this was a bittersweet testimony, not to placid or innocent attachment, but to strife, hardship, misunderstanding, piercing ecstasies and equally piercing sorrows. It was from an artist to an artist; it bore the stamp of aesthetic appreciation. N had reached down into the depths of her soul and her words had the weight of big breakers. I felt them land on me even as I tried to avert them. Yet, outwardly, we still wrestled; attaching, detaching, attaching again. What we wanted was freshness all the time, and each seemingly permanent detachment made coming together again more piquant. It was the friction of hard sex prolonged over time; we were more perverse and more subtle than we knew.

#45

N and I found ourselves involved in something a little evil. N introduced a third party into our equation, specifically to heighten tension, underline drama, mix things up. He was innocent of our perversity and did not know he was being used. N took great pleasure in playing Catherine Earnshaw; we were to fight fiercely for the honor of her favor. This we did; however, I turned the tables on her by withdrawing my pledged affection. I did this purely to add interest to a scenario that was too soap opera even for me. Blood had been spilt; the third party was wounded by all of these intrigues. Somehow this blood stained us, and we were left with stricken consciences. The total effect was to cut off the continuance of the pure waves that passed between us. The construct of our togetherness vanished for the time being, to be returned to (necessarily with less perversity) later.

#46

Through a strange process of mirroring, my Dad, also, found himself in a dalliance marked by perversity and thrill-seeking. He was disgruntled, living in a big house with a woman who had ceased to turn him on. The house was splintered; what began festively had now been abraded into a mere veneer of bourgeois success. Dad was on his own, pursuing a woman ten years his junior. She was married with two children, and she would bring them over and the pair would fondle while we all looked on aghast. This took considerable time to pick up steam. Initially, it was easy to sweep under the rug; these visits were infrequent. Yet, seeds of discontent had been planted; my Dad smelled new blood, and it drove him into despairs of sensual avarice. I was too young to see the storm-clouds for what they were; I did not understand adultery, what it meant, how it could destroy lives. What was brewing made the games I played with N look very tame indeed.

#47

There was Ted and I and even though we were not of the same family somehow we shared blood. We each rebelled against our father by being like the others' father: mine was brutally masculine, gross, muscular and gruff; Ted's was literary, effete, effeminate, cultured and flirtatious. When Ted stayed over the doomed festive house, which was every weekend for two years, my Dad abused him mercilessly and Ted enjoyed it. Dad made Ted call him *your highness*, picked on Ted for getting rejected by popular girls, lectured him on sex-smells at midnight when we tried to watch *Saturday Night Live*, and made his own supremacy clear at each available juncture. He was feeding Ted's soul with the stuff of animal strength and it was a kind of intoxicant for Ted to imbibe; Ted was my straight man but was being fertilized for a kind of rebirth as an unrepentant, square-jawed jock. Thus, our blood was crossed.

#48

We had many adventures, Ted and I, but the roles we played were always the same. I was Quixote to Ted's Sancho Panza. If we were pelted with snowballs or pelting others with snowballs, staring at girls or being stared at by girls, making prank calls or getting calls from friends, always it was my job to instigate the action, be a man of daring, direct our movements. Ted would consolidate our activity, provide focus. He was the solid man. When I would push things too far, he'd reign me in. We grew into adolescence as an odd couple par excellence; Ted quiet, me raging, Ted pliant, me baiting. However much of my father's dominance Ted internalized, I was still able to steer things when I wanted to. Unlike N, Ted had no taste for self-made drama; things (me included) came to him. There was a long time in which neither of us could imagine a withdrawal for any reason.

#49

There was no reason for me to be at camp anymore: it was all sports, ball-sweat, and male camaraderie. I had become an artist and needed to be nurtured. My cabin was full of jocks and I was victimized and it was a nadir in my life. Yet I was tough enough that they couldn't beat me up and so physical abuse never happened. My only relief was a stage in a Recreation Hall on which I set up my gear and I would press the distortion button on my Peavey and empty myself completely. There were bats nested in the ceiling and a battered piano and it was the only congenial place on the camp grounds where my solitude was real. Random kids came in to listen and it might as well have been an activity that could be signed up for like volleyball or kayaking. The kids got a taste of continuance (stinging phrases, over and over) and I was shadow-bracketed.

#50

Dad was becoming unsettled and unsettling. Frequent inexplicable rages degenerated into depressions; fits of distemper gave way to a kind of ecstasy, self-contained and silent. Had I been an adult, the situation would've been obvious to discern; Dad's got a new girlfriend. Responsibilities had been put on the backburner; two children and a wife had been secretly toppled in favor of fresh, feverish fucking. The mood of the house became bullet-riddled; everything he did was a shot, a substantiation of newly kindled potency. I was starting high school and do not remember feeling sanguine. There was an excitement to Dad's new heightened sensibility, but it was the excitement of grasped-for risk; it had no stability in it, and as I walked the halls of this new school I had nothing to hold onto. I tried to mirror Dad's excitement but my own potency felt shrunken by pain and the usual frustrations of being a freshman.

#51

We had gone, briefly, to Disney World. Dad's ferment was obvious, but he muzzled it. One night, we were about to go to Epcot and I had the TV on. I saw a picture of a downed plane and the name of one of my then-heroes. I thought, of course, that he had been killed, and I entered a strange zone. I was sucked up into what felt like a void: my senses, materially unaltered, felt spiritually different, as if I was disconnected from the jubilant scenes that passed before my eyes (babies, families, six foot smiling rodents). Though it later turned out that it wasn't my hero who died, the other world I had entered, a void world, impressed me with its force and negative vivacity. Negativity, where this realm was concerned, was not the same as emotional depression; it was alienation from the condition of bodily awareness, and a realization of fluidities amidst seeming solidities. It was a taste of real death.

#52

A superficial calm held the tenuous balance of things for a while. I went on long walks to buy guitar strings. One morning I overslept and was late for science class. I did not realize it, but I was afraid to wake up. There were too many changes in the air and I could not rest. Ted was not in any of my classes; neither was N. I felt deprived of security and safety. My youth assured that I did not realize, or half-realized I had these feelings. I imitated Dad's gruffness; I sneered like he did; I had a hard shell. I played so long and so intensely that my calloused cuticles bulged. This was when I finally got the hang of finger vibrato, the stumbling block that stops competent guitarists from becoming good. The sound of a sustained, vibrato-laden note was my sound: a cry in the dark.

#53

One night, Dad came into my room later than usual. It was his habit to discourse, and I was his captive audience. He was bright; I listened. Tonight, he openly confessed to having a new girlfriend. She was “a little magic”. She was younger, had two kids. She was the woman he’d been groping over the summer. I was left to piece these things together. Dad insinuated that a move was imminent; as things developed, this woman’s magic would permeate, transform, and refurbish our lives. What could I say? Dad was eager for me to meet this magician, this enchantress. A date was set; we would have dinner, and I would see. There was no room to argue or maneuver, to dissuade. This was a fait accompli, a springboard to a higher level, rather than a descent into cruelty and greed. I wanted to believe Dad’s rhetoric rather than incur his ire, so I acquiesced. Things did not feel very magical.

#54

Our dinner with the enchantress had the feel of a covert operation. We snuck out when no one was looking. It was a brisk night in early autumn; all light had vanished as we pulled into the parking lot of a Friday's-type joint. By this time, I had been allotted the role of father to my father; I was to oversee his actions, approve them, endure his impetuosity and confer forbearance on his enterprise. She was there; a slight, pretty lady in her early thirties. Her mouth, I noticed immediately, never closed; not because she was talking, but because she was perpetually startled, innocently shocked by everything. Just as I was overseeing Dad, he was overseeing her; manipulating her innocence into compliance, overwhelming her insecurities with certitude. He sat in the booth next to her, rather than across from her, and his hands weaved a determined path over all her pliant skin. He was playing to win.

#55

Now all pretences of normalcy and calm were dropped. Once I had conferred my (suddenly papal) blessing, my father's dynamism was terrific. We would move, he and I, into a new house with the enchantress and her two kids. Before I knew it the thing was arranged; a new house was waiting, of the same design, and right around the corner from the old one. The enchantress left her husband and my dad left his wife and their baby. This cyclone of activity insured that Dad and the enchantress never really got to know each other. The enchantress and I barely spoke at all. She was not bright; her lure was all physical. She was afraid of me like she was afraid of everything else. Dad held me to my paternal role. He professed to need me and I rationalized everything. Festive had given way to festering.

#56

In the new house I had two small rooms: a bedroom and a “playroom” that I used for music. I had a Les Paul and insomnia and I would pace and play with no amp into the wee hours. It became known at Cheltenham that I was a guitar player and soon older kids were interested in me. Before long I was in a band. The other guys were older and had cars. I was a freshman and looked even younger. Yet I became more or less the leader. As with Ted, I became the Quixote, mad musical scientist. This was my first band but I knew instinctively our time together wouldn't be long. I learned that not everyone who plays has any real commitment to playing; some just do it to be cool, or because it's there, or to feel special. So I decided to give them only half of me; that's what I did.

#57

A sense of things not being right manifested in the new house immediately. I had nothing to say to the enchantress or her children; they had nothing to say to me. Dad's gaiety became shrill and forced. I had no good advice for him; he had given me a role I could not begin to fulfill. Within six weeks, the enchantress and her children were gone, back to the husband and father they had abandoned. Dad and I were alone in a creepy house, a shadow of the one we had so lately left. Dad's reaction to this stunning failure was to ape superiority; that though everything had gone wrong it was not his responsibility. Others had let him down. He had always been flinty; he became flintier. I was overwhelmed by the feeling of having been involved in a spectacular mess; I felt and shared Dad's criminality, which he himself had (to and for himself) abjured. I bore the burdens that he would not.

#58

Ted and I went to see *Dead Again* in Jenkintown. Continuance had been broken; we were in high school and had no classes together and did not see each other every weekend. Dad picked us up from the theater and tried to establish some of the old master/slave rapport with Ted. It didn't work; Ted played along, but the charm of the festive house had been overtaken by general creepiness and the feeling wasn't the same. Once we were home for the night I could see that Ted wanted to leave. There were ghosts and echoes here but not like Mill Road; these were ghosts created by lust, inconsideration, precipitance, and madness. Dad's new thing was to posit the whole experience as having been "no big deal"; he had no notion that others had been forced to experience anguish, on his behalf and at his behest.

#59

Dad had a brother who was not significant, to him or me. He would show up for short periods of time: six months here, a year there, and then disappear again. However, he came to the new house with a prophecy. He had been to a psychic; the psychic had guessed my name, and predicted that I would soon reject Dad forever, and that if he wanted to salvage anything, he had better hurry up. It took a lot of nerve for my uncle to say this with both Dad and I sitting right there, but he did. Dad shrugged; I said it was bullshit; but it hit too close to home, and I made quick to leave the kitchen. I went down to my room and turned on the radio; it was New Year's Eve, 1991.

#60

By February, Dad and I were in an apartment a half-mile from the two houses. It was a drab space with low ceilings, narrow windows, and wooden floors. Dad slept a lot. Though I never saw her, the enchantress made frequent nocturnal visits. Catastrophe had left Dad's libido intact; she was apparently similar. One night, Dad had a friend over and they commenced to make fun of my musical aspirations. If I followed music through, they said, I'd wind up working in a gas station. This was said as a quip and caused great hilarity. I was devastated, not realizing the incredible cowardice and cruelty of disappointed men. I was not prone to tears but I wept bitterly. I felt like I'd been hit by a typhoon, and I had. In a way, though, this was good. It gave momentum to something that was building inside of me. I saw the absurdity of being my father's father and his whipping boy as well. Something had to be done, but I didn't know what. Winter slogged on.

#61

It was around the time of Dad's birthday: April 28. I asked him what he wanted; he said he didn't know. He suggested we go to a bookstore and he'd pick something out. We went to a bookstore and he didn't pick anything out. The next day was April 28 and I didn't have a present for him. He flew into a rage; I was hit with a typhoon again. *You make me feel like shit*, he bellowed. Only, rage made him happy and secure. He was fine. I was the one who felt like shit. I was a father who couldn't please an adolescent son who was my father. Things were nearing a peak of misery; for the first time in my life, I was hitting a wall that I knew I could never get over. Something major had to change, or damages would start to become irreparable. How could I play, develop, grow, in an atmosphere like this? Dad would be in my face, willy-nilly; my guitar needed to be actively courted, continually pursued. I would either be abused or leave. The path of my departure was free.

#62

Ted's birthday was in early May and he had a party. Ted's house on Woodlawn Avenue had a front façade of windows which ran the length of the house, which was not set on a hill but also had a large white shed attendant on the backyard. It was my fate, in a year's time, to smoke pot there for the first time. Woodlawn Avenue, as privatized as my stretch of Mill Road which was not far away (though Mill Road was only a memory then), did a rustic trick, inside and outside of Ted's house, of making everything crepuscular. A sunset realm. N was there, in shorts and a tee-shirt. Everyone was watching *Die Hard* but I put my left hand on N's bare right knee. It was very forward and she didn't resist. The spring twilight had enchanted us. The creek ran. Fate had decreed, in N's acceptance of my hand, that I would gain, finally, a girlfriend, and lose a father. The party would end but she was mine. I decided; I would never go back to Dad's apartment again. My Mom had been waiting patiently for me to see through his posturing; now, I did. I knew all this while everyone watched the movie and N smiled in her Scorpio way. That Sunday, Dad called to ask when I'd be coming home, but it was too late. The next time I entered Dad's apartment, it was to collect my stuff; he wasn't even there. I was ready to live on Old Farm Road with Mom, ready to be young again and to live however I wanted, without fear of random senseless typhoons blowing me over. The credits rolled; Ted shot me a look of clean dirtiness. This was the end of my beginning; in my beginning was no end.

