2003

Wild Rides, Wild Flowers, 41-50

Scott Abbott, Utah Valley University

Sam Rushforth
FORTY-ONE

Driving off the Spleen
1 February 2002, Provo, Utah

"Scott," I say at lunch, "Why do you suppose anyone is interested in what we've been writing?"

"Sam," Scott answers, "I've been worrying that question from the other side: Why do we ride and write in the first place? Yesterday I picked up a copy of Melville's *Moby Dick* and found at least a partial answer:

Call me Ishmael. Some years ago - never mind how long precisely - having little or no money in my purse, and nothing particular to interest me on shore, I thought I would sail about a little and see the watery part of the world. It is a way I have of driving off the spleen, and regulating the circulation. Whenever I find myself involuntarily pausing before coffin warehouses, and bringing up the rear of every funeral I meet; and especially whenever my hypos get such an upper hand of me, that it requires a strong moral principle to prevent me from deliberately stepping into the street, and methodically knocking people's hats off - then, I account it high time to get to sea as soon as I can. This is my substitute for pistol and ball.

"Well, we don't write like Melville, that's clear," I say, "but we know about depression, about that urge to get into a fight. And we keep asking those knotty questions: What has meaning, what doesn't? Why is intimacy important? Why do men seem to hide behind a palpable "mist" of testosterone. Why do we compete and form hierarchies? How does one stave off sadness and a bleak existence. How does one escape from mundane living? How does one avoid deadly obsession?"

21 February 2002, Great Western Trail, Mt. Timpanogos

CONGRESSMAN JIM HANSEN ANNOUNCES HIS RETIREMENT: AT THE CONCLUSION OF THIS TERM, I WILL HAVE SERVED IN THE UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES FOR TWENTY-TWO YEARS. PRIOR TO THAT, I SERVED IN THE UTAH HOUSE FOR EIGHT YEARS, THE LAST TWO AS SPEAKER OF THE HOUSE. PRIOR TO THAT, I SERVED 12 YEARS IN THE FARMINGTON CITY COUNCIL.

"Scott," I pant as we climb a steep reach on the trail we have not been on for four weeks. "We have been derelict in our duty to our readers not to announce one of the most important events in recent Utah history. Jim Hansen is retiring!"

"Imagine that," Scott replies. "The guy must have been in office for a hundred years. Didn't he sign the 1872 Mining Act? Getting rid of Jim Hansen is like getting rid of the environmental and social equivalent of bubonic plague. And it doesn't matter who replaces the guy among the repugs. The new kid will have no seniority, will have no potential to screw things up nearly so badly."
"Couldn't be better said," I reply. "The only good thing about Jim Hansen is there was never a more ineffective Representative in the history of the House of Representatives of these United States of America."

1 March 2002, Central Utah

An aging man helps his friend over a barbed-wire fence as Sam and Nancy, Melinda and Jim and I drive up the gravel road and park next to a big Ford. By the time we're out of the car the two of them are loading an air mattress and towels into their trunk. One of them looks at me curiously, then looks again.

"Are you Scott Abbott?" he asks.

"Yes," I answer.

"I thought so," he says. "We went to high school together. You look just like you used to back in Farmington, New Mexico."

"I didn't used to have grey hair," I say, "but it's great to see you."

"No use walking out to the hot spring," he advises. "It's infested with chiggers. We're driving west to another spring."

They drive off, and we carry towels and coolers out through the swampy cow pasture on one of god's grand days.

"Sam," I ask, "what do you suppose those bugs are the guy is talking about? They're sure as hell not chiggers. Chiggers are southern beasts. I made the acquaintance of plenty during my seven years in Nashville."

"Whatever's in the spring won't be chiggers," Sam says. "But I'm not very good at aquatic invertebrates."

Jim suggests they sound like water mites, no problem there. Sure enough, when we get to the spring we do find some of these critters, but we coexist nicely. They don't bite us, we don't bother them. We spend a sublime afternoon – chasing clouds with the sun breaking through, long vistas and the odd snow flurry – up to our necks in perfect, warm water in a beautiful natural pot. One of those days that comes along once in a while unexpectedly.

20 March 2002, Orem, Utah

To: Sam_Rushforth@uvsc.edu, Scott_Abbott@uvsc.edu
From: Jim_Harris@uvsc.edu

I was checking some plant records this morning at the NY Botanical Garden web site and came across this entry. Take a look at the collector's name in the 5th line. This is a 1916 collection.
Looks like the second coming's come and gone...damn, I missed it!

Jim

Name: Brassicaceae (Mustard Family)
Arabis drummondii A. Gray
Image: Not Available
Collector: J. H. Christ, 2817
01 Aug 1916
Description: Fruit.
Habitat: Sagebrush.

To: Jim_Harris@uvsc.edu, Scott_Abbott@uvsc.edu
From: Sam_Rushforth@uvsc.edu

Nah, the second coming hasn't come and gone. I met this guy on the desert last year, still collecting plants. Sage seemed to be his favorite. He looked pretty hungry and thirsty but refused my offer of water. He said something about wandering in the wilderness and couldn't find a better place than Utah since everyone was shooting the joint up at his home. Said something about being out to break his 40-day record. Said Ariel Sharon better watch his ass...

To: Jim_Harris@uvsc.edu, Sam_Rushforth@uvsc.edu
From: Scott_Abbott@uvsc.edu

Do either of you biologists know where the “H.” comes from in the name Jesus H. Christ?

No, I didn’t think so. But if you’d think for a minute virgin births and then about creatures with only half the normal number of chromosomes, you’d realize it stands for “habloid.”

Scott

7 March 2002, Great Western Trail, Mt. Timpanogos
"This will be a short ride," I remark hopefully as we head up the road from Sam’s house. "Too warm for the mud to be frozen."

"Still," Sam says, "high time for us to get our sorry asses back on the saddle."

It's indeed muddy, but what we haven't anticipated is the gravel ground into the dirt road for the trucks burying the green pipe. So up we go, short of breath and weak of leg.
"Lyn and I were in Ely, Nevada over the weekend," I tell Sam. "We drove out into the Steptoe Valley to see the charcoal ovens, big 30-foot-high beehive-shaped domes constructed in 1873 by Swiss-Italian charcoal burners (carbonari) to make charcoal for the silver smelters. What a strange sight that was, a stately row of huge empty rock domes nestled up against the eastern slope of the mountains. They looked like they might have been dropped there by Trent Harris's feminist Mormon aliens from Plan 10 From Outer Space."

"I've seen them," Sam replies. "That austere series of basins and ranges across the center of Nevada is some of my favorite country anywhere on earth. Highway 6 is my drive."

"On the way home we stopped outside of Delta to look at the Topaz Mountain Detention Center," I continue. "What in the world did the Japanese-Americans from the California coast think when they arrived on that flat arid piece of ground with desert mountains standing sentinel in the distance? Asphalt roads, ditches, a few foundations, the outline of a camp that held about 8000 of our fellow citizens for several years during the hysteria accompanying World War II. We stood in front of a little memorial, its brass plaque blasted by some idiot's shotgun, and thought about the so-called Patriot Act passed almost unanimously by our representatives in Washington after the terrorist attacks in September 2001. We're so damned predictable, so cravenly racist, so smugly patriotic."

By this time we've reached the top of the climb, the last of it over a couple inches of snow and ice, and we stop, sweaty and cold, to look over Utah Valley.

"And here's a deal that makes me melancholy every time I think of it," Sam says, wiping sweat off his forehead with his do-rag. "When they dismantled the camp at the end of the war, sending the inmates back to the ruins of their former lives, they took a bunch of the barracks to BYU to use for student housing and temporary academic buildings, quarters for the young men and women returning from the war."

"I'll be damned!" I interject. "Weeks after I was born in Greeley, Colorado, my parents took me to Utah to live in one of those buildings while my father used his G.I. Bill money to finance college. If that doesn't close a circle somehow for me! Gives me the shivers."

16 March, 2002, Utah Valley Regional Hospital
To: Sam_Rushforth@uvsc.edu
From: Scott_Abbott@uvsc.edu

Sam, my son Joe and his wife Tracy had twins today, two little six-pound girls, Ciara and Regan. Long dark hair and angelic faces. The proud papa was glowing, not to mention the grandpa. While Tracy and Joe passed the new girls around, Tracy's mom held little Jacob, born and adopted last November. Twins and a half! With my daughter Maren's Kylie and Kadon, that makes five. Please remember my burgeoning progeny.
next time I fall behind on a trail. I'm a swiftly aging man. And I expect Joe will age a little himself over this next year.

23 March 2002, Great Western Trail, Mt. Timpanogos

Woke this morning to the sound of two dozen Canadian geese flying north over our house in a beautiful fluid wedge. This is always a sight and sound that thrills me deeply. I spent an important piece of my youth in the marshes west of Kaysville listening to and watching those geese.

Juices flowing from the geese, I start calling Scott early for a ride but he is on the web reading the Sunday Times. When I finally get through, I tell him to get his ass over to my place and we head up the mountain. Halfway up, deep in conversation about work, we are startled by a meadowlark. It makes us both stand off our bikes and listen. Those liquid notes are a balm in a crowded and busy world.

"You been followin' the gov's Legacy Highway stuff?" I ask Scott at the top. "I've never seen anything like it. Those guys have little legal right to begin construction, start anyway at the peril and deep risk to some of the most important wetlands on Earth, and then have the balls to blame delays on the green community who all along stated they would challenge the freeway in court."

"That seems so typical," Scott answers. "I have never lived anywhere where the legislature and the executive branch were so one-sided, mean-spirited and dead-set certain.

"Yea," I reply, "but in the end, what are a few hundred thousand birds and the continuation of a millions-of-years-old flyway in comparison to a faster commute into Salt Lake for the thrifty citizens of Davis County and the accompanying McDonald's and Home Depots that will line the fine new freeway? 'Legacy Highway' is a fine name for this piece of ill-conceived shit. I just hope some day Leavitt is remembered for this freeway and it does become his legacy. The time will come without question when this project and others like it will be seen as stupid and evil."

We swoop off the front of the hill, finally dry enough for our bikes, bump across the construction site in what used to be an orchard, and pass several new trophy houses (honest to god-they are so advertised on local signs). Scott is commenting on the ugly faux shutters on a just-finished half-million-dollar mansion as we descend.
"These new homes, as ugly as they are, remind me of the seminar on metaphors of standing, on Homo erectus, you gave last week," I say to Scott. "Remember the lines from Rilke you quoted from the Eighth Duino Elegy that so impressed Nanc?"

Und wir: Zuschauer, immer überrall,  
Dem allen zugewandt und nie hinaus!  
Uns überfüllts. Wir ordnens. Es zerfällt.  
Wir ordnens wieder und zerfallen selbst.

And we: spectators, always everywhere,  
Turned to the universe and never escaping!  
It fills us. We order it. It crumbles.  
We order it again and crumble ourselves.

"Aren't we all trying to erect something that won't crumble? That will keep us standing. Or at least as a bare minimum that will stand after we fall? Nanc thinks this is the central task of humans. After we came to stand (and, of course all that comes with that, including speech), we have been working ever since to create edifices of religion, art, architecture – in word, in paint, in stone, even offspring – that will convince us of our immortality and standing, that will help us believe in our immortality and importance. But, such a stance can also rob us of the value and beauty of the moment. We have to make the most of what we have because it's all there is. And some days I think it is enough."
FORTY-TWO

Draw Me No White Dresses on Corpses
28 March 2002, Springville Art Museum

Surrounded by colorful landscapes painted by Utah artists, Jed (Sam and Nancy’s youngest) and Zara celebrate their wedding. Two talented and goodhearted young persons looking to share a future together. Nancy is beautiful in crushed velvet and Sam resplendent in a tux. Sam reads a Mary Oliver poem asking “What will you do with your one wild and wonderful life” and then, with only an apparent contradiction, relates his father’s last piece of advice to him: “I’ve learned over my life that there are no utopias. Don’t waste your life looking for them.”

I try to remember the last advice my father gave me and come up with three candidates: “When you go off to college have an open mind, but not so open your mind falls out”; “Don’t rev the engine so high before shifting up, this isn’t a VW”; and “Do more than you’re being paid to do and you’ll do well.” What will my children remember of me?

4 April 2002, Provo Canyon

Lyn and I ride up the beautiful but busy trail along the Provo River. Near Bridal Veil Falls we’re passed by a recumbent tandem bike pulling a trailer. What an outfit! It can only be Randy, I tell Lyn, owner of Mad Dog Cycles in Orem, with his wife and little boy. From Randy’s flushed face, I figure he’s doing most of the pedaling.

5 April 2002, Logan, USU

e-mail from: scott_abbott@uvsc.edu
to: sam_rushforth@uvsc.edu

Sam, if only you could have been with Ben and me tonight!

As you know, Ben will be a student at USU next year, studying in the College of Natural Resources with a marvelous scholarship provided by the Quinney Foundation. Tonight was the School’s awards banquet. I picked Ben up at three for the drive to Logan. There was my handsome boy, dressed in suit and tie – his head shaved except for a ragged Mohawk running front to back and an even more ragged strip slanting down behind one ear.

“What the hell?” I asked gently.

“Like it?” he asked in reply.

“You’re going to accept a major scholarship in the College of Natural Resources looking like an alien?” I asked.

“I asked Nora to the Prom by writing on the back of my head,” Ben explained.

That was hard to argue with.

Ben drew a lot of attention at the reception, but his moment of true glory came
when the four Quinney Scholars for the year were introduced. Elegant and cultured, Ms. Quinney read Ben’s biography while he stood resplendent next to her: “The first Quinney Scholar is Benjamin Abbott from Orem High School. He’s a drama student,” she said, “and I’m sure he has an explanation for his hair, but I’m not going to go into that.” When she finished with all four students, the cowboy-booted representative of the alumni association stood and summed up before announcing his scholarship: “The last scholarship was for best hair-do, ours will be for. . . .”

Ben and I shared a table with Ray Dueser, associate dean of the School. He’s a biologist with ongoing research on the Barrier Islands off the Virginia shore, a project you’ll be familiar with: The shore birds on the islands are severely threatened by red foxes and raccoons and he and his students are following the situation closely. I mentioned the morning Jerran Flinders took us out to the sage grouse lek and about the foxes there. Turns out he knows Jerran. He also said that the connection with the Quinney Foundation, which has benefited the College of Natural Resources immensely over the years, was forged when Joe Quinney read a piece written by Thad Box, the former dean of the College, and printed in the Salt Lake Tribune.

Perhaps we should make a plea to our readers for scholarship funds for UVSC students!

7 April 2002, Great Western Trail, Mt. Timpanogos

Easter morning. Sam and I head up the steep hill at the mouth of the canyon. The familiar winter landscape is altered only by the first green grass and by the low little clusters (or umbels) of yellow flowers that are always the spring’s first wildflowers: Cymopterus longipes (spring parsley). “We’re aging,” I tell Sam at the top, “and our rides are growing less and less wild; but there will always be wildflowers.”

“Yeah,” Sam replies, “unless we destroy the planet. Let’s ride down where they’ve been working to bury the green pipe and see what damage they’ve done.”

The trail leads along a rocky cliff, a precarious ride for old men balanced tenuously on two-wheeled contraptions. Sam rides confidently, but I tighten up and slow down and make the ride even more precarious than it is, remembering the incident years ago when Sam, swatting at a wasp on his arm, lost balance here and tumbled down the slope between two cliffs. By the time I get off the cliff Sam is sitting on the long dry matted grass of a sloping meadow. We bask in the sun, passing the time, happy to be alive. Then we’re off to see the construction site.

Again Sam is more confident down the steep trail, and by the time I get to a little meadow where the main branch of the trail is blocked by tree branches and gathered rocks and a NO TRESPASSING sign, he’s nowhere to be seen. I stop to reconnoiter. Where did Sam go? There are no tracks, so I have to muster everything I know about Sam to infer where he might be: 1. A trail we’ve ridden for years, “our trail,” 2. A NO TRESPASSING sign put up on that trail by the people who have ripped up this little valley. I skirt the rocks and branches and trespass down the trail toward the new
mountain of dirt filling a ravine. Sure enough, there’s Sam. We walk up and down the concrete covering the new pipe, amazed at the scope of the project, dismayed by the destruction. Development trumps nature every time.

Still, the ride down to the river, sunlit and quiet, and the prospect of more spring rides restore the pleasure of the morning.

8 April 2002, SLC, Salt Palace, NRC Hearing on High-level Nuclear Waste
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Lyn, Larry Harper and I are just back from the demonstration against bringing high-level nuclear waste to the Goshute Reservation and the three-hour hearing that followed. Besides Mayor Rocky Anderson’s speech against the plan and Chip Ward’s eloquent and damning statement to the effect that the NRC had already decided and the hearing was a sham but they had better listen anyway, my favorite moment was when the demonstration ended and a woman handed Larry a sign. “I have to go,” she said. “Do you want my sign?” Larry looked at it – MOMS AGAINST NUCLEAR WASTE – and said, “I’m not a mom.” “Neither am I,” she said. So there he was, handsome and hirsute, carrying his MOMS sign from the Gallivan Center to the Salt Palace.

15 April 2002, Slate Canyon
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Sam. As you know, these last couple of weeks have been tough on me. Depression worse than I can remember. When the snow preempted our first planned bike ride in a week, needing sunlight and exercise desperately, I put on my hiking boots and climbed high into Slate Canyon, just east of my house. The sweat was good for me, and between melting islands of snow I saw the yellow blooms of spring parsley, dark purple astragolus blossoms, and a few tiny lavender storksbill flowers. Perhaps I can remember those colors bright against the snow when it’s dark.

19 April 2002, Great Western Trail, Mt. Timpanogos
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Okay Sam, another e-mail, which means we’re not getting much riding done, especially with you on the plane to Washington, dead set on raising money for the College. But today the young turks of the Philosophy Department decided to try our section of the Great Western, and I tried to keep up with them. I thought yesterday’s snow might save me the embarrassment, but the trail was dry enough, so off we went. As you know, Dennis Potter and Jeff Bulger are members of the team sponsored by Mad Dog and Trek (will this count toward tenure?), and Brian Birch is a former rock climber. Chris Jones, the guru of outdoor recreation went along, as did Phil Gordon, of the Communication Department. I figured I was as old as any two of the other guys put together. Dennis and Jeff didn’t even break a sweat. I almost kept up with them. The
rest labored. And we all had a great time on that familiar trail.

“How many times have you ridden this?” Brian asked me at one point.

“Maybe 500,” I guessed.


e-mail to: scott_abbott@uvsc.edu
from: sam_rushforth@uvsc.edu via Washington Kinkos

Sorry to miss Friday's ride with the Philosophy group. Nanc and I have been in town for a couple of days to see the art museums and I am going to lobby for some UVSC stuff on the Hill on Monday.

Get this, I'm going to be in Cannon's and Hansen's office. I carefully explained to our lobbyist who I am and what my wilderness and other green issues have been across a quarter century. I suggested perhaps it would be better for anyone else in the country to do this. He still though I would work out well and to come ahead. So, this could be interesting. I hope the Cannon and Hansen people haven't been reading Catalyst.

Here's the damndest deal. Coming in on the express van, our driver, a big guy named Eugene, told us about the Israel/Palestine protest march today. We stayed near DuPont Circle in the Marriott Courtyard and walked down 16th street toward Pennsylvania Avenue. We hadn't gone 5 blocks until we had reached the march.

It was splendid – hundreds of thousands of people marching for peace. Palestinians marching with signs asking for peace now. Protest banners stating “Occupation Is Terrorism.” Children in strollers, old women using walkers, teenagers, middle-aged white middle-classed Americans united in protest against the violence shown by the Israelis toward the Palestinians.

The Park Service has officially stopped counting protesters these days, but if I am any judge, there were several hundred thousand people in the march and rally. By the time we got to the mall, we couldn't move, shoulder to shoulder with people who shared our concern.

One sign that resonated with me read "Israeli aid to Congress: $34 million / U.S. payback to Israel $10 billion. Another said that the "U.S. Congress is an Occupied Territory."

Felt pretty damned good to Nanc and me.

Then an amazing, disturbing, complicating event. The protest parade was followed up by a group of Black Muslims shouting "Death to all Jews." "America is the Great Satan." "Death to Americans." "One, two, three, four; kill the fuckers like before."
"Whites and Jews are all the same, Cut Their Throats, getem outta the game."

Very, very scary stuff. And all the while, the cops kept a pretty low profile and though they were certainly present, they were non-confrontive. Even when the Black Muslims came past and the crowd was upset, the cops kept their cool and kept the groups apart without a great deal of rancor. You know I'm no great fan of the cops, but most of these guys did a good job today.


e-mail to: scott_abbott@uvsc.edu
from: sam_rushforth@uvsc.edu via Washington Kinkos

Spent a couple of hours in the Phillips Gallery on DuPont Circle. They had a fine show entitled "Corot to Picasso." It was a set of paintings loaned from Smith College to the Phillips showing the transition from the Barbizon School through Impressionism to Modernism including Cubism and Abstraction.

I was especially taken by one painting I have read about in the past, Courbet's "Preparation of the Dead Girl." This struck me hard after our reading last month of Richard Ford's fine but dispiriting A Multitude of Sins and our conversations about how close the final curtain is.

This painting originally depicted a group of somber women preparing a dead girl for burial. The main character was naked, her head flopped to the side and her arm dangling. She was being attended to by several people and it was altogether a somber and thoughtful piece.

But in the early 1900s, the painting was coming up for auction and someone thought the public could not deal with the subject of death. So they painted a white dress on the corpse, straightened her head (though she still has the expression of a dead person), lifted her arm and placed a mirror in her hand. The title of the painting was changed to "Preparation of the Bride." A blatant switch of the end of a short life for the beginning.

Somehow the attempt to deflect our thinking from finality, death, the ephemeral nature of our existence is wrong-headed. As I see it, our lives are like the wildflowers we enjoy so much. They can be beautiful and wonderful, but they are, naturally, short-lived. And to deflect our attention from the ephemeral nature of our lives is wrong – it robs us of the beauty of the moment. This Earth and our time here are not trivial or everlasting. They are a finite gift meant to be savored and contemplated. What we have, all we need.

So for me, don't pretend this life is not important because the next life is more real. Don't diminish the beauty of a relationship, the glance of a dear friend, the explosion of some unexplained event that creates love and beauty, even if temporarily. Especially, draw me no white dresses on corpses to pretend they're brides.
22 April 2002, Provo, Utah

e-mail from scott_abbott@uvsc.edu
to: sam_rushforth@uvsc.edu

One last email before you return from Washington. I rode alone today, one of those blessed rides we sometimes get, the Great Western firm and damp from the Saturday rain and snow. I rode slowly but surely, strengthened by the philosophers’ ride last Friday. From Canyon Glenn to the meadow at the top of Frank, I touched down only when I wanted to, to look through binoculars at a pair of redtails circling over me, to examine the leafy spurge with its yellow-green reptilian blossoms just after the beginning of Frank (remember the spot?), to lift the little yellow petals of the year’s first Nuttal’s violet to find the purple secrets underneath, to watch a herd of twenty elk move like royalty through a hundred mule deer, to stand, heart pounding, while a ring-necked pheasant (*Phasianus colchicus*) slipped into the leafless oakbrush, to admire the first pink phlox I’ve seen this spring, and to wish you back from the big city for a spring and summer of shared rides. Fly safely, my friend.
FORTY-THREE

Who Has Once Met Irony . . .
23 April 2002, Great Western Trail, Mt. Timpanogos

A quick and dirty ride, remarkable mostly for sighting the first barn swallows of the year, those forked-tailed brightly colored darting little beauties back from several months in Argentina. What manifold visual and aural and gustatory experience these birds must have!

24 April 2002, Great Western Trail, Mt. Timpanogos

Another philosopher’s ride, and this time Sam’s along as well. Dennis and Jeff are again every inch the racers, leading us up the first two killer stretches into Johnson’s Bowl. David Keller has joined us today, his gaunt 6’6” frame folded over his bike, with Brian Birch making four philosophers. Danny Horns, a geologist, is along as well, and as we stand blowing he explains how the strange hole was formed by slumping strata. There’s a jeep road leading straight up out of the hole, and I mention that Sam and I have tried to ride it any number of times. “It kills us every time!”

Off Dennis goes, good enough to show us a new class of riding. He does well, making it half way up before slowing to the inevitable halt. We cheer him, impressed that he would even try. Then, inexplicably, Sam rides toward the hill. It’s a slow methodical approach followed by a slow inexorable climb. Without a waver Sam climbs up to where Dennis stands, passes him, advances, climbing that far again to where the road flattens a bit before he steps off. We’re dumbfounded. I look around at the whistling, cheering young riders and hope they realize that I’m damn near his age, that the old bastard can ride, that I have his experience. Jesus, just every once in a while it’s kind of nice to be an old guy.

26 April 2002, Utah Valley State College

Lucille Stoddard, Vice President for Academic Affairs at UVSC announced her retirement six weeks ago. This is a huge blow for me – since I came to the college to work for Lucille, not the institution. I have known her for many years, but from afar.

Today is Lucille’s last convocation and commencement. The good news is I have put my bid in first and for at least the morning I have convinced Lucille to come to our exercises. This is perhaps the first time I have been happy to be a dean since I started this damn job – I have the pleasure to speak a bit about Lucille to my faculty, graduates and others in attendance.

Higher education is a funny business in Utah – perhaps everywhere. Stakes are so low and territories are so fiercely defended, walking on any campus in the state is like entering a mine field. But this has not impacted Lucille. She has always realized the stakes were high indeed – the minds and hearts of students – and damn the petty politics.

Dr. Stoddard is universally recognized as the best academic officer in the state. And everyone with any vision knows she should have been president of a Utah college or university years ago. She has the foresight, compassion, leadership and intellect to
have been the best president in the system. What she lacked was a Y chromosome and a good 2-wood drive.

So, the systemic stupidity of higher education in the state has created UVSC’s biggest gain. For 20 years, Lucille has been the intellectual architect and soul of a growing institution that has become one of the most exciting learning environments in the state. And, as the man says, “you ain’t seen nothin’ yet.” So while Lucille leaves, she has established a system that will perpetuate and nurture itself and grow into something close to Lucille’s vision. The better for everyone in the state in spite of those who were convinced they knew better.

1 May 2002, Great Western Trail, Mt. Timpanogos

This is an exciting time of year, with wildflowers bursting into bloom everywhere. For the first time this year we come across evening primrose, the big fourmerous formal white flowers elegant against the fresh green grass.

“Sam,” I say as we puff too fast up the hill, “look at the paintbrush.” I jump off my bike and head up the hill to where the muted orange-red flowers nestle among silver-green sage. Further up the hill we stop to look at a bright yellow composite. “I’ll ask Renee VanBuren about this one,” Sam says. “I’m not smart enough to tell most of the composites apart.”

At the top, overlooking Utah Valley, I tell Sam about a few lines from a poem I read earlier in the day in a review in the New York Review of Books, a translation of a poem by Polish poet Adam Zagajewski:

. . . Who once touched philosophy is lost and won’t be saved by a poem . . . Who once learned a wild run of poetry will not taste anymore the stony calm of family narratives . . . Who has once met irony will burst into laughter during the prophet’s lecture. . . .

“I’ll be damned,” Sam replies, “that’s pretty spectacular. And what a splendid discussion of why an ideology can’t bear true education. Remember the 30-year-old ‘boy’ who came to you at BYU and said he was not paying tuition to have you spout your academic-freedom arguments but to reiterate what he already knew?”

5 May 2002, Great Western Trail, Mt. Timpanogos

A beautiful Sunday morning ride. Sam, after daily work in the gym all winter, is still stronger of leg than I am, and I follow him up over the quartzite. On the ridge above Johnson’s Hole, we ride past a deer skull, stripped white except for a hairy toupé, lying next to the bright purple flowers of an Astragalus, locoweed. Today the death camas
are blossoming, their lily stalks rising up from long thin leaves.

“Look at the oak brush up the hill,” I tell Sam. “The strip at the top has brand new leaves, still rusty brown. Below, the oak leaves have turned green. Why is that?”

“When the leaves first unfold,” Sam answers, “they don’t have plentiful fully-formed chlorophyll. This allows pigments such as anthocyanins and others to give that brown-red-purple cast to the young leaves.”

We top a steep reach amidst wonderful bird songs.

“Have you noticed, “Sam asks, “this year the spotted towhees are beginning their songs with two-note calls, followed by a trill? Last year it was almost always a three-note call followed by the trill. I wonder why.”

As we climb, we pass through a field of the composite we saw a few days ago and didn’t recognize.

“Renee says this is most likely Balsamhoriza hookeri,” Sam says. “It can be difficult since it hybridizes with Balsamhoriza sagittata which we also often see.”

7 May, 2002 Great Western Trail, Mt. Timpanogos

We’re in an environmental ethics seminar all week, but squeeze out time for a late afternoon bike ride. The weather is perfect – one of those late spring days when everything clicks, the low sun slants over the Great Blue Limestone and the world seems right for a minute.

11 May, 2002 Ouray, Colorado, Columbine Internet Café
From: scott_abbott@uvsc.edu
To: sam_rushforth@uvsc.edu

Sam, wish you were here at the top of the world for a bike ride. The only kicker is that it snowed hard this morning and it’s cold as hell and there is no oxygen at this altitude.

Yesterday morning Lyn and I rode for a couple of hours with my sister Carol just outside of Dolores, Colorado. You remember Carol’s near-fatal car accident last August and my trip to Grand Junction to be with her? She has healed wonderfully, although her broken ankles and feet and hip and elbow still hurt most of the time.

She drove us up onto the mesa to Boggy Draw, where a single-track bike trail begins under big Ponderosa pines, a park-like atmosphere with most of the underbrush burned out by a quick fire several years ago. Carol wasn’t really clear on the gears of her Specialized Rock Hopper, but the gently winding trail was made for practice and she’s always been a great athlete, so no problem. No problem, that is, until the trail turned down quickly over jutting rocks and there Carol was, flying over her handlebar to
land spreadeagle on her front. She lay there sorting out just what had happened and I had visions of re-broken hips and elbows and ankles. But she was fine, other than a big knot on one knee. Lyn explained about keeping your ass back while descending (the first law of mountainbiking) and on we rode.

Sam, it was a beautiful ride. Soooo good to see my sister healthy and alive!

12 May 2002, Leadville, Colorado, Public Library
From: scott_abbott@uvsc.edu
To: sam_rushforth@uvsc.edu

Sam, another message from above 10,000 feet. Yesterday we drove north from Ouray to Paonia, Colorado. You probably know the place as the home of the High Country News, one of our favorite environmental publications; but I was there in search of memories. When I was three years old, my Dad took his first teaching job at the high school in Paonia. His subject was Vocational Agriculture. My memories from my third and fourth years of life have been limited to an image of the front of our house, the thrill of a sled ride down an adjoining hill, and a dark warehouse where migrant workers were in some kind of need.

I nosed the car through the little town, feeling my way toward a little child’s memory, easing toward a little hill on the south side of town. Then there it was, a little log house on a stretch of grass on the corner of 2nd and Orchard Streets. Up Orchard Street was a steep little hill, and across the street were new fruit warehouses. A railroad track I didn’t remember angled behind the house (“you don’t remember the railroad track?!!!” Lyn opined), but everything else fit exactly.

Driving out of town, up through coalmining country into the high mountains, I had a new sense for my past, for the landscape that shaped me; for who I am.

Why do you suppose events like that are so important?

13 May 2002, Leadville, Colorado, Public Library

Just back from a great bike ride, Sam, nearly 13 miles on the Mineral Belt Trail. Given their history of mining, given the realities of this landscape, torn and ripped and blasted and left a wasteland of tailings and poisoned pools and twisted iron and broken timbers, the citizens of this town nestled between some of Colorado’s highest peaks, have decided to make the most of the history of the region, a decision that included building this splendid trail right through claims like the Swamp Angel, the Dead Broke, the Modest Girl, the Last Rose of Summer, the Star of the West, and Blind Tom. Oxygen was not as plentiful as we’re used to, Lyn called my parentage into question while we climbed to 11,000 feet, but what a great ride!

We visited the National Mining Museum this afternoon, to see how history is presented by mining companies. The answer came in the form of a sign we saw four times at different locations in the museum: EVERYTHING BEGINS WITH MINING,
EVERYTHING!!!! Lots of interesting stuff about mining engineering and tough men. Not a word about environmental degradation and human casualties. Reminded me of the exhibition in the Mormon Church’s Museum of Art and History that glories the pioneers without a single reference to polygamy.

18 May 2002, Valencia, California, California Institute of the Arts

Graduation day at California Institute of the Arts. Nanc and I have flown out for the festivities. Our daughter, Sarah Jane, is graduating with an MFA in Creative Writing. The late afternoon graduation is a wild and raucous event. Not a cap or gown in evidence, but the place is replete with costumes, formals, Levis, African music, flame eaters, dancers, parents, dignitaries (I suppose) and graduates of all stripes.

It’s a wild party filled with celebration, accomplishment, hope. Singers, writers, musicians, animators, painters, dancers all mix, all feel apprehension at the new step ahead.

“Sarah, I ask, “how many of these folks do you suppose will end up working in their areas of training?”

“That’s not the important issue,” Sarah suggests. “What’s important is that they still follow their dreams – year after year. We have to find some better way to live and these are the people who question everything – who push the limits and expect more. And who just might find something we have missed. I admire them deeply.”
FORTY-FOUR

A World of Yellow Scent
3 June 2002, Great Western Trail, Mt. Timpanogos

“My brother John’s birthday,” I tell Sam as we leave his house on our bikes. “He would have been 51 this year. I miss him.”

“Wish I could have met him,” Sam replies, “and wish you could have known my sister. We just don’t get enough time, do we?”

At the Canyon Glen trailhead (major construction on the green pipe by the wrecklamation people has blocked our normal route), Sam turns up the sudden trail and I follow him. We’re sucking air and ignoring burning legs when a brilliant blue pocket of flax flowers, *Linum perenne*, alters everything for a few seconds. After the sharp switchback that Sam rides but I don’t even attempt, another flash of blue interrupts the pain again. It’s a male lazuli bunting, bright blue and orange and white and black and it trills us up onto the first level from a boxelder perch.

Up another level, riding the ridge that curves around Johnson’s Hole, I jump off my bike to look at a carpet of dusty orange globe mallow, *Sphaeralcea coccinea*. The orange flowers are punctuated by white blooms I figure are sego lilies but that turn out not to be lilies at all. “Those long stamens and cross-shaped style remind me of evening primroses,” I say, “and some of the flowers are turning from white to pink like primroses, but they’re along these stringy stems and not rising out of a rosette of leaves.”

“They’re probably pale evening primrose, *Oenothera pallida,*” Sam replies. “And what a pretty sight, the white flowers among the orange in the openings between the stands of scrub oak.”

At the top of today’s climb we reach the fire road and follow it toward the mouth of the canyon. Lazuli buntings sing from the dead branches so plentiful above the oak brush, victims of the fire that burned through here a few years ago. In places, the oak that sprouted from roots that next spring is already as high as Sam’s shoulders. Coming out of the canyon, we drop precipitously down a jeep road through colorful yellow Dalmatian toadflax and purple sweet vetch and finally into a wave of scent, billows of sweetness that would be cloying if the plants giving off the generous odors weren’t on this spare, clean desert hillside. Surrounded by the yellow flowers of cliffrose, *Purshia stansburiana*, a member of the rose family, we step out of time and motion (if there’s a difference) and into a world of yellow scent.

“The Swiss pastor and physiognomist, Lavater,” I tell Sam, “speculated at the end of the eighteenth century that our spoken language, because of its arbitrariness, its abstraction, can’t possibly be the language of heaven. Instead, he suggested the direct language of scent as divine.”

“Can’t say I would argue with him right now,” Sam replies, “although I see heaven as an abstraction and smell this cliffrose as earthy.”
“Tell me more about the cliffrose,” I ask.

“It has superabundant yellow pollen centers,” Sam begins, “which explains why it’s one of the sweetest scented of all Southwest plants. The genus is named after Frederick Pursh, the guy who got first crack at the Lewis and Clark botanical collections. ‘Stansburiana’ comes from Howard Stansbury, early 19th century explorer and naturalist whose name you know from Stansbury Island on the Great Salt Lake. Shut me up if I telling you more than you want to know. These are some of my favorite plants.”

“Mine too,” I say. “And as for the lecture, it ain’t your personality that lures me to ride with you, but what you know about plants. Go on.”

“You asked for it,” Sam says. “Smell the tiny leaves. They’re acrid, a little like quinine. Later they’ll have seed-bearing plumes. Cliffrose sometimes hybridizes with its close cousin *Purshia tridentata*, which has always given me fits. I actually don’t know which of the two these are. And shall we throw in the names *Cowania mexicana*, *Purshia mexicana*, *Cowania stansburiana*?”

“Okay,” I say as we climb back on the bikes, “the careful descriptive language of science and the divinely earthy language of scent. We’ve got all bases covered.”

7 June 2002, Great Western Trail, Mt. Timpanogos

“Sam,” I say while we’re greasing our chains before today’s ride, “take a look at this list I found on an internet site. It was longer, 83 plants in all, but I just copied the names of plants we see often and may or may not have taken a liking to:

*The State of Colorado Noxious Weed List*

Absinth wormwood (*Artemisia absinthium*)
Bull thistle (*Cirsium vulgare*)
Canada thistle (*Cirsium arvense*)
Chicory (*Chicorium intybus*)
Chinese clematis (*Clematis orientalis*)
Coast tarweed (*Madia sativa*)
Common burdock (*Arctium minus*)
Common mullein (*Verbascum thapsus*)
Common teasel (*Dipsacus fullonum*)
Dalmatian toadflax, broad-leaved (*Linaria dalmatica*)
Dalmation toadflax, narrow-leaved (*L. genistifolia*)
Field bindweed (*Convolvulus arvensis*)
Houndstongue (*Cynoglossum officinale*)
Leafy spurge (*Euphorbia esula*)
Poison hemlock (*Conium maculatum*)
Puncturevine (*Tribulus terrestris*)
Rush skeletonweed (*Chondrilla juncea*)
Russian-olive (Elaeagnus angustifolia)
Russian thistle (Salsola collina and S. iberica)
Saltcedar (Tamarix parviflora and T. ramosissima)
Scotch thistle (Onopordum acanthium and O. tauricum)
Spotted knapweed (Centaurea maculosa)
Wild mustard (Brassica kaber)

“Okay,” Sam says after reading the list, “I hate Tamarisk as bad as the next guy, and I know how Spotted knapweed can take over a field of wild flowers, but what would our section of the Great Western Trail be like without the yellow flowers of Dalmatian toadflax and mullein and the purple flattops of thistles?”

Thinking of thistles, we stop when the first bunch of them appears beside the trail. “Are these bull thistles (Cirsium vulgare) or Canada thistles (Cirsium arvense),” I ask Sam.

“Hell if I know,” he answers. “Or maybe they’re Scotch thistles (Onopordum acanthium). Ranchers see them all as a weed problem. I was reading recently that Scotch thistle was first found in Utah in 1963. In 25 years it had spread to cover tens of thousands of acres in 22 counties. A single thistle plant can produce 40,000 seeds.”

“They also seem to be amazingly attractive to insects,” I say. We look carefully at a thistle flower which has dozens and dozens of little black bugs, just larger than gnats, burrowed down between the purple flowers. A single black bee, back legs heavy with pods of yellow pollen, works the flower as well. A neighboring flower has dozens more of the little black bugs along with a copulating pair of dark-colored wasps, the female mining the flower, the smaller male atop the female. A third flower sports a pair of copulating black bugs with red corners on their wings. “Red-winged black bugs,” I joke.

“Those are true bugs,” Sam says.

I look up at him and ask “as opposed to plastic bugs?”

“No, you idiot,” he says, “if you had ever studied biology you would know that there are several dozen families of insects, one of which is true bugs, or Hemiptera. These little fellows aren’t beetles or wasps, but bugs.”

“Okay,” I respond. “Whatever they are, they are clearly excited by the juices this thistle is producing. And we know that once the seeds appear, goldfinches will appear for a feast of their own. Wish we could get our minds around the whole complex of relationships between these non-native thistles, the native plants they displace, the bugs that feed on them and pollinate them and the birds that eat and spread the seeds. I could care less about how thistles inhibit sheep and cows from grazing – they’re grazing on non-native grasses anyway – but I’m interested in the whole complex web that even includes mountainbikers.”
“Me too,” Sam says. “We make ‘management’ decisions based on incomplete pictures that come around to bite us in the ass. By the way, why don’t you get yours in gear and let’s get up this mountain!”

12 June 2002; Great Western Trail, Mt. Timpanogos
Scott and I get away from campus at 4:00 in the afternoon for a hot but much needed ride. We ride fast and hard up and down our steep front trail, a bit pressed for time.

An hour later, we are standing in my kitchen, both still wearing our do-rags, a rather unusual event since we generally take them off as soon as we get home.

“Take your do-rag off,” I suggest to Scott. “You’re running sweat in your eyes.”

“Nah,” he replies. “You take yours off.”

“Well, I think I’m pretty comfortable,” I suggest. “Maybe I’ll just wear mine for a couple of weeks.”

“Yeah?” Scott asks. “What happened to you?”

“What happened to you?” I ask in reply.

“I stopped off this afternoon for a trim. The barber got just a bit carried away and cut it short. But then she nicked it and had to start over. When she was finished, I didn’t have a whole lot of hair left over. I look like a 20-year-old kid with grey hair.”

“Lemme see,” I say.

“Nah, not until you tell me what happened to you.”

“Well, a couple of my kids wanted to see what I would look like with dark hair rather than the silver I have had for a decade. So I had my damn hair colored. I look like shit,” I say as I pull off my bandana.

Scott chuckles and allows as to how it is something of a change—something one could expect from an aging scientist. “Goethe has a great story,” he says, “about a man who turns 50 and buys a whole case full of hair coloring and cosmetics to try to hold off the inevitable. And there’s always Thomas Mann’s Gustav von Aschenbach in ‘Death in Venice.’ If your vanity leads to a little makeup in addition to your hair coloring and you die in all that glory on the mountain, I’d write my own story called ‘Death on Timpanogos.’”

“Wait a minute,” I call as Scott heads for his car. "Lemme see your missionary haircut."
“Not a chance, this is why god made do-rags,” he says as he hops in his car and drives away.

15 June 2002, Great Western Trail, Mt. Timpanogos
Scott and I sneak out early for a morning ride. The sun is a quarter of the way up the eastern sky and the light and shadows are different from what we’re used to in the afternoons.

As I climb, a grasshopper jumps from a yellow sweetclover and lands on my nose. It reminds me of the wonderful poem by Mary Oliver, “The Summer Day”:

The Summer Day

Who made the world?
Who made the swan, and the black bear?
Who made the grasshopper?
This grasshopper, I mean--
the one who has flung herself out of the grass,
the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,
who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down--
who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.
Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.
Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.
I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,
which is what I have been doing all day.
Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn’t everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?

21 June 2002, Great Western Trail, Mt. Timpanogos
This afternoon’s ride is a study in yellows. Escaped wheat is gold on the west-facing slopes, swaying in the gentle movement of the afternoon breeze. Yellow Prince’s plume is in bloom everywhere, tan-yellow buckwheat is more abundant than we have ever seen it. Dalmation toadflax, yellow sweetclover and one or two goat’s beard punctuate the landscape.

As if to accentuate the yellows and golds, Canadian thistle and sweet vetch scatter among sagebrush. All in all, this is a wonderful study in soft colors—a dreamscape of a sort on a fine, tired Friday afternoon.

22 June 2002, Brighton
From: Sam_Rushforth@UVSC.EDU
To: Scott.Abbott@UVSC.EDU

Marie and John are marrying today. As you know, I am the minister, thanks to the $25 internet ministerial certificate I procured. I’ve never done anything like this and it is pretty interesting. Marie is my oldest daughter and is perfectly beautiful in her white beaded gown. John is dressed in black formal pants with an ivory shirt. They are as handsome a couple as I have ever seen.

The ceremony is on the deck attended only by immediate family members. It’s a wonderful sight, the men and women all in black and John and Marie in white. The sun is chasing in and out of clouds, throwing long strips of light on the mountains across the valley and making the deck a panoply of color and shadow. Nanc is standing closeby and discusses beautifully the history of marriage with Marie and John. She looks more like Marie’s sister than her mother.

But the interesting thing to me is performing the marriage of my own daughter, an adult who is wiser in most instances than I am and who has thought through her life, made decisions and come to this place of her own volition. And, by damn, it’s a pretty fine place for her. Her new husband is a fine man, thoughtful, kind, and deeply in love with my daughter. Who could ask for more?

23 June 2002, Great Western Trail, Mt. Timpanogos
The pungent little yellow flowers of the cliff rose are shot through their centers by fuzzy tendrils, four, five, six, or seven of them curling up out of the flower’s cup like insect antennae feeling an inch-and-a-half into the universe. If you tug at one, it comes away from the flower with a little green foot of a seed. “Sam,” I say, “imagine a hundred thousand of these corkscrewing down into Utah Valley on a stiff breeze, tough hybrid little bastards looking to colonize a domesticated landscape.”

“Imagine,” he answers, “the intoxicating scent of a valley bursting with yellow cliffrose. Whole new religions would arise out of the rumors coming back from the place about explorers who entered but, having found paradise, refused to leave.”
FORTY-FIVE

Happy Hour/Under God
1 July 2002, Great Western Trail, Mt. Timpanogos
It has been unbearably hot for nearly two weeks. So we ride at 7:00 in the morning. We’re in something of a hurry this morning and choose a fast ride up the front of Timp, a very sudden altitude gain and a good quick workout.

“Nanc is headed for Dublin this morning,” I mention as we climb. I don’t know what I’ll do for the couple of weeks before I join her. I am glad as hell she’s going but it’ll be a shock to my system. We talk about everything every day. It’ll be a quiet house for sure.”

“At least Kiva will be home,” Scott replies.

“Yea,” I answer, “but the damn dog has a pretty limited vocabulary.”

7 July 2002, Great Western Trail, Mt. Timpanogos
“How long can the plants on this mountainside survive without rain?” I ask Sam as we race the early morning sun to the ridge above Johnon’s Hole. Brown fringes on the scrub oak have caught my eye.

“They’re all suffering,” he answers, “but just like they are adapted as species for fire, they’re also adapted for drought. The real question is how long the human species can mess with natural waterways in the desert southwest and still survive.”

We’re battling a stiff canyon wind that angles in at 90 degrees and threatens every second to shoulder us off the ridge, but I’m anxious to continue the conversation. “I’ve been thinking about water in the desert since David Cassuto’s lecture on campus last week,” I respond. “Wasn’t that a remarkable statement he made about California?”

“Yeah,” Sam answers minutes later when the trail finally meets the fire road and the wind is at our backs. “More water goes to grow alfalfa in California than is used by humans in the state, most of it provided by outrageously expensive and destructive “reclamation” projects in deserts. And the profits from the so-called ‘public works’ go straight into the pockets of the wealthiest.”

By this time we have reached the trailhead for Frank and stop to consider the shape we’re in and the challenge ahead.

“What do you think?” Sam asks.

“I dunno,” I answer, “what do you think?”

“Guess we better give Frank his due,” Sam says, “there will come a time soon when we’ll just have to wave when we ride past.” He kicks off, snaps his loose foot onto the pedal, and up he goes.
I've been struggling the whole ride, sluggish in the early morning, needing calories or will or muscles or something, and I follow only reluctantly, slowly, blocking out every thought of keeping up with Sam, focused only on finding the easiest line and keeping upright and moving forward. I make it to the C turn and swing up and around ready to capitulate, but there I am, by some quirk of momentum or luck, still on my bike and still moving. Riding at a snail’s pace (and snails don’t have to balance on two thin wheels), I reach the S turn, make its twisting climb, and face the rocky double chute that is Frank’s *piece de resistance*. Since I’m still on the bike, I give it a half-hearted try, sliding and bouncing up the first chute, finding enough energy to speed up my cadence slightly, summoning up some scrap of will and there I am! safe on the somewhat flatter piece of trail between the chutes. The second chute isn’t as difficult or long as the first, and I attack it with more vigour, riding it well till I’m one crank from the top and lean back with satisfaction and up comes my front wheel, gift of the bike hubris gods, and I’m lying in the oakbrush. It’s not a bad place to lie on your back, your bike still between your legs, looking up at a brilliant blue sky, the dusty scent of oakbrush sharp in your nose, grateful for a minute to fill empty lungs. But Sam’s waiting somewhere up the trail, so I pull myself out and ride on, slow in the morning’s gathering heat, up the ridge Frank follows, past dry grass, milkweed pods growing fat, sunflowers celebrating their namesake, through a little grove of overhanging maples, up the last technical climb before the meadow (how is it possible that my tired legs and heart are still pumping?), and into the meadow at top of Frank.

What a sight! A sea of blue lupine flowers punctuated by thousands of yellow toadflax. A riot of reproduction even in this drought. But where the hell is Sam? This is the top! I ride on up the meadow, climbing out of it onto “Nude Knob,” where I find Sam sitting on a rock overlooking both Provo Canyon and Utah Valley.

“You sorry son of a bitch,” I pant. “You couldn’t stop in the meadow, could you?”

“Glad you could make it,” Sam answers. “I saw vultures circling and figured maybe I would inherit your bike.”

**15 July 2002, Dublin, Ireland**

Nanc and Anita drop me off in O’Neils Pub while they go to the Irish Tourist Board nearby. It’s a fine Irish pub—interesting people with stories.

After an hour, a man my age sits nearby at the bar and orders a whiskey. He shakes hands and introduces himself as Alex. He has a beard much like mine, but he is wearing a working man’s coat and has strong, working hands.

We talk for an hour. I ask him what he does for his keep and he says he’s a welder. But what he really does is fish and, bending closer and lowering his voice, he gives me a knowing nod: “I work to keep the fookin’ Brits outta me homeland.”

“Two years more and I’ll leave the job,” he says, “and I can fish the day through. And one more thing. I’ll listen to Bob Dylan all day too by God.”
I tell him I am going to see Dylan the end of August and he lights up.

“A whiskey for me friend here,” he speaks to the keep. “Powers.” Then he bends closer again and sings Dylan’s “Forever Young” through his beard low and well with a strong Irish accent,

May God bless and keep you always,
May your wishes all come true,
May you always do for others
And let others do for you.
May you build a ladder to the stars
And climb on every rung,
May you stay forever young,
Forever young, forever young,
May you stay forever young.

May you grow up to be righteous,
May you grow up to be true,
May you always know the truth
And see the lights surrounding you.
May you always be courageous,
Stand upright and be strong,
May you stay forever young,
Forever young, forever young,
May you stay forever young.

May your hands always be busy,
May your feet always be swift,
May you have a strong foundation
When the winds of changes shift.
May your heart always be joyful,
May your song always be sung,
May you stay forever young,
Forever young, forever young,
May you stay forever young.

“You ‘tink of Alex now when ye see Dylan. You taste the Powers, started in 1791 it was. And maybe we’ll see one another again some day.”

I go for a pee and Alex is gone, cigarette smoke in a slow curl out of the ashtray.
he was using.

16 July 2002, Dublin, Ireland

Spent the evening in the Bleeding Horse Tavern, built in the late 1100s. It has been rebuilt and renamed several times and is full of nooks, small rooms and seats in odd places.

The name of the pub is curious—it reaches back to the great famine. Turns out prior to the potato famine, food grown in Ireland was diverse and relatively plentiful. With the potato famine, several million people died with the potato blight taking nearly all of the crops. Some people survived by bleeding a vein in a horse or a cow and drinking the blood. This practice remains today in parts of northern Africa.

18 July 2002, Dublin, Ireland

Bus downtown at 1:00 in the afternoon. Nanc has an 8:00pm reception with the ambassadors from the countries represented in the program she has taken at University College. So we have a full seven hours to wander, chat, eat and drink.

We start with lunch at the Mssrs. Maguire Brewery Pub. They brew some unusual ales I haven’t seen anywhere else. And the smell of the mash is sharp as we enter. The food is good and we spend a pleasant hour in conversation.

Heading to the Temple Bar section, we stop on the sidewalk for a look at the map. A handsome young man in a two-thousand-dollar Armani suit riding an electric bike powers off the street and stops beside us.

“Are you lost?” he asks?

“More or less,” we answer, “but we know about where we are.”

“What are you looking for?” he asks.
“Early music in Temple Bar,” we answer.

“You know, I think the Auld Dubliner has afternoon music.” He directs us to the pub and welcomes us to Dublin with a smile. “The Lord Mayor at your service,” he says as he powers his e-bike back into deadly traffic and is on his way.

The Auld Dubliner does indeed have fine afternoon music and we listen to fine whistles, guitars, hornpipes, and a squeeze box as the afternoon lengthens.

We walk to St. Steven’s Green and find Nancy’s reception. I wait for her for an hour in a corner pub, Alphie Mulligan’s. The place is mostly empty and a radio plays low in the background.

“This is 106.8 FM on your dial” the DJ says. “The finest country-western day and night.”

“Sugar in the morning, sugar in the evening, sugar at suppertime” floats through the tables followed by “Better Think Twice,” I’ll Go On Lovin’ You,” “Lady Lay Down.”

The pissoir downstairs smells like piss and each urinal holds maybe 30 cigarette buts. The whole arrangement is a lash-up with PVC pipe connecting the urinals terminating in a sewer line. It’s depressing as hell and the smell won’t leave my head.

The barmaid is a young woman of maybe 17 years going on 45. She is not busy but works slowly to tidy up the place. She has sad eyes and walks like a young woman who knows her future all too well. Her left arm swings behind her in a curious mannerism in rhythm with her melancholy, slow shuffle. I want to tell her to get out of the place. To run. To turn off the goddamned radio and find a proper life.

Nanc and Anita rescue me from myself and we head for the Brazen Head, a pub that has been in existence since the 1100s. It has a wonderful history of intrigue, conspiracy and murder. But tonight it is full of tourists with barmaids and barmen serving pints of Guinness, Bulmers, Harps, and Carlsberg as fast as they are able.

Supper at midnight in Temple Bar. Good food and we’re all hungry. Live music has stopped all over town, but we find an open pub, the last one in the district, and go in for a look around. The place is packed, upstairs and down. And the Guinness is flowing.

It’s impossible to hear past the roar of the contemporary music and we are simply watching for a few minutes. A fine looking young man approaches Anita, kisses her full on the mouth and says, “You’re the best-lookin’ woman in the place.” Anita grins. As we leave, the same young man approaches, kisses Anita again and says “Travel safely, Princess.”

19 July 2002, Great Western Trail, Mt. Timpanogos
An early ride this morning with my son Ben, he of the rubberband legs and iron
lungs and, lucky for me, patience beyond his years. It’s possible I’m still a better technical rider than he is, but he has power and stamina I can only remember. Just inside the mouth of the canyon, Ben stops suddenly and points to a big hawk, maybe a redtail, landing on the limestone cliff above us. While we admire the dark head and powerful breast through binoculars, two vultures, and then two more circle into sight above the perched hawk. Behind us, from the thick growth along the river, we hear the varied calls of a yellow-breasted chat.

At Canyon Glen we turn up the Great Western Trail, Ben ahead with his quick cadence, bird feathers rising from the holes of his helmet. I follow him on up to Johnson’s Hole, up the ridge and then back toward the canyon’s mouth on the fire road.

Ben points out a spotted towhee, then another. We’re looking for a lazuli bunting, which I’ve told him about but he’s never seen. Perhaps we’re too early this morning, with the cloudy sky, or maybe it’s just too damn hot and the breeding season is over. Whatever the reason, we wend our way toward the mouth of the canyon without a single sighting. A quick ride up an arm of the Great Western brings us up to an overlook where we stand and talk philosophy, about whether metaphysical certainty or grounding is necessary or even helpful for human society. We pretty much agree that it’s not necessary and perhaps counterproductive as religions and nationalisms run amok. Ben cites the recent flap over the words “under God” in the pledge and I describe for him the New Yorker cartoon that puts the patriotic pietism in its true political/economic perspective: A picture of Eddie’s Bar and Grill with a sign in the window announcing “HAPPY HOUR / UNDER GOD / 4-7.”

While we talk, a bird lands in a dead tree in front of us, the blue bird of heaven we’ve been looking for, a male lazuli bunting in all its glory, fat and blue and orange and black and white, radiating neon-blue flame in a sliver of morning sun. A couple of red-headed finches join the bunting in the tree, then a female bunting and another male. Just down the hill a colloquy of magpies engages in its own raucous black-and-white debate. And Ben and I roll off the hill burning with a distinctly non-metaphysical presence.

20, 21, 22 July, 2002, Great Western Trail, Mt. Timpanogos

A string of early morning rides, inspired as much as anything by daily reports from the Tour de France. As I ride up familiar climbs I imagine I am Lance Armstrong attacking the mountain with steely resolve and unlimited strength. If Sam were here our conversations would keep me from such silly fantasies. Doesn’t a man ever grow up? Will I go to my grave still thinking I am as talented as the author whose book I’m reading, as handsome as the actor in the film, as immortal as a child?
FORTY-SIX

Canvas for Paint, Paper for Ink
7 August 2002, Great Western Trail, Mt. Timpanogos

Scott’s full of news about his and Lyn’s trip to the East Humboldt Range in north-central Nevada, a place I’ve often visited to collect water samples.

“We camped near Angel Lake at about 9000 feet,” Scott pants as we rise rapidly along a ridge, “Hiked around the end of the mountain one day for seven hours and didn’t see another human being.”

“The last time we saw another rider on this trail was three rides ago,” I add. “The West is big and open and still not as claustrophobic as it will get.”

“One day we hiked up to a waterfall in the cirque above the lake,” Scott says as we stand overlooking Utah Valley, hazy with smoke blown in from Oregon fires. “After a good snow year, there were wildflowers everywhere! Monkey flowers, elephantheads, red and yellow columbines, purple and yellow asters, a rainbow of yarrows, green gentian, horsemint, goat’s beard, coneflowers, sunflowers, curlycup gum-“flower” (Lyn’s particular favorite), goldenrod, lupine, sweet vetch, larkspur, toadflax, bind “flower” (delicate plants like these surely can’t be called weeds, Lyn argued), wild geraniums, mustards, penstemons, paintbrush, masses of fireweed, bluebells, monkshood, shrubby cinquefoil, and on and on.”

“What a place,” I say, “the opposite end of the world from urban Dublin where I was a month ago. And damned different from what the Wasatch Front is and is going to become. And the deal is, if we cared to, we could still engage in planning that would make the future such a better place. But somehow, that never seems to happen and we’re simply going to see the Wasatch Front become like Los Angeles.”

11 August 2002, Great Western Trail, Mt. Timpanogos

Sam and I greet the Sunday morning on our bikes, riding east up Provo Canyon into the sun just risen in the canyon mouth. Quickly we leave the river and swing up the Great Western, up the trail that so routinely strains our hearts and lungs and wills, the trail that acts almost like canvas for paint, like paper for ink, that affords us a medium for conversation. Standing at the brink of Johnson’s Hole after the first two scrambles, we reflect on a decade of riding together.

“We’ve never regretted a ride,” Sam says. “Not the Moab slickrock concussion ride,
not the boulderfield shoulder separation ride, not the bloody oakbrush slash-across-the-brow ride, although that one took a long time to heal.”

Standing exhausted above the meadow at the top of Frank, we’re again reflective.

“How many more times will we be able to ride Frank?” I wonder.

“We’ll be riding Frank when we’re beyond seventy,” Sam figures. “There’s really no other alternative for guys afflicted with as much piss and vinegar—aka testosterone—as we are.”

“We haven’t heard a single bird today,” I note.

“The annual August silence,” Sam says. “Breeding season’s over and the songbirds fall silent. Remember reading Lisel Muller who taught us to notice this?”

“Sure I do,” I say as we start down the hill. “Some writers teach us new things, others say better what we already know. If we get down alive, I want you to read a passage from a book I’ve just finished, Charles Bowden’s *Blues for Cannibals*.

We in fact speed down the flank of Timpanogos without serious incident and I pull out the book. “This guy,” I tell Sam, “has a hell of a knack for writing what we’ve been talking about for years. Thinking about the death of a young artist he knew, Bowden disparages religion and pop psychology and writes that he doesn’t trust the answers or the people who give me the answers. I believe in dirt and bone and flowers and fresh pasta and salsa cruda and red wine. . . . As I sit here, Chris is to the south, Art is to the west, Paul is back east and Dick is in the backyard by the fierce green flesh of the cactus. These things I know. The answers I don’t know, nor am I interested. That is why food is important and plants are important. Because they are not words and the answers people offer
me are just things they fashion out of words. A simple veal ragú is scent and texture and color and soft on the tongue. It is important to cut onions by hand.

The power of the [cactus] flower at night is frightening, the lust floods the air and destroys all hope of virtue.

There will be more blooms this spring, the cactus grew at least ten feet last year. They will open around nine in the evening and then close at dawn. I’ll sit out there with a glass of red wine and the lights out.

When I tell people about the blooms, about how they open around nine and close before sunrise and do this just for one night, they always ask, ‘Is that all?’

Yes. That’s all.

“We’ve talked about such things often,” Sam agrees, “about a thick dark stout, about fine friends, about what matters. But we’ve never said it that well. Nanc and I just went to Salt Lake with Frank and Lucille to tour some of Frank’s buildings—Abravanel Hall, the Delta Center, Gardner Hall. We spent an hour in the Eccles Genetics Laboratory at the U and ended up in the auditorium. I sat there in that wonderful space after wandering through the research labs with Nancy and our fine friends and realized this is what I believe in—the best effort in architecture or science, beauty, friendship, touching. Sitting in that auditorium filled me with longing and love for the human condition and a feeling for the shortness of life when there is so much to know and so much to do.”

17 August 2002, Great Western Trail, Mt. Timpanogos

Just time this morning to squeeze in a ride before the deep heat. We start up a steep reach after having just climbed another. We meet a rider coming down and scramble to get out of his way. He is a square guy of our age or older, weighs maybe 250 with calves the size of quads. He is friendly in conversation, of European extraction and wears a giant, grey moustache. He is riding an ancient heavy bike and neither of us can figure how he made the ride.

“Ah,” he says, “I push my bike some and I can’t ride like the kids. But I sure love the trail and what I see. And I like it that I’m not done yet.” He shoots down the steep trail, shirttail flying.

18 August 2002, Great Western Trail, Mt. Timpanogos

Another Sunday morning ride, and again we relish the familiar trail. Our gears know to gather momentum and yet give up just enough power to avoid spinning in the thick late-summer powder gathered on the trail. Our fat tires recognize the quartzite slide and respond with hard air to keep rims off tubes and soft air to prevent bouncing. Our brakes guide us forward over sudden turns and pedals act as counterweights on ridges. Contoured seats are steering devices and handlebars carry our weight.

“Amazing inventions, our mountain bikes,” Sam comments. “Think where they get us!”
Where they have got us today is high on the mountain, poised to ride Frank again, although it’s clearly too hot for such foolishness. Up Sam goes, and I follow. As always, Frank’s a tough, relentless foe; but by hook and crook and a little luck Sam and I both ride the C turn and the S approach and the two successive chutes and the steep meadow and the rocky stretch under the maples and the sudden rise into the burn and then we’re at the top admiring a remarkable vista while our hearts gradually slow their hammering.

“Just read a report about the effects of the drought on sage and black brush and other shrubs,” Sam says. “There’s a lot of die-off.”

“Isn’t that a natural cycle?” I ask. “A constant change as the climate ebbs and flows.”

“Sure,” Sam answers, “although there’s been a lot of human intervention, most of it through sheep and cattle. There’s hardly a stream in the west that hasn’t been stripped of vegetation by grazers and left to dig deep into the earth. That speeds up runoff, changes the water supply to the surrounding vegetation, dries springs, all of which make the effects of drought more severe. Look how even the oak brush is shriveling at the edges.”

I look around and find every clump fringed with dried-up leaves.

At home, curious about the hardy scrub oak that has greeted so many of our falls with welcoming arms, I do a little research. The scientific name is *Quercus gambelii* (Gambel's Oak), named after William Gambel, a 19th-century collector of western plants and the Assistant Curator of the National Academy of Sciences.

The male pollen-bearing catkins produce lots of yellow pollen to pollinate the female, acorn producing parts on the same tree (oaks are "monoecious"). Wild turkey, deer, bear, and squirrels all eat and spread the acorns, as do various birds. The extensive root system spreads stands of oak brush by as much as twelve inches per year, and accounts for quick recovery after a fire. As Sam has pointed out before, the new spring leaves are rust colored because chlorophyll has not yet masked the original colors. In the fall, the chlorophyll fades and the reds reappear.

Kevin Simonin, in a long article published in 2000 by the U.S. Forest Service’s Rocky Mountain Research Station, points out that Gambel oak occurs in New Mexico, Arizona, Nevada, Utah, Colorado, Wyoming, and in isolated patches in Texas. In northern Utah, scrub oak stands host to quail, pheasants, scrub jays, magpies, chickadees, and rufous-sided towhees as permanent residents. Mule deer and elk browse scrub oak, especially in the summer and fall. That the oak brush does so well in dry conditions is due to morphological and physiological adaptations to drought, Simonin reports. Deep roots, xeromorphic leaves, and efficient water transport all keep the plants alive in conditions like this year’s. In a chemical analysis, he writes that the plants are very high in tannic acid.
Later, talking with Sam about my findings, I wonder about the tannin: “You know how the scratches we get on arms and legs from oak brush fester? Remember that slice across your forehead and around to your ear? I wonder if it healed so slowly because of the acid.”

“Could be,” Sam answers. “The scrub oak obviously produces some sorts of pathogens to protect itself from insects and browsers. You can tell that just by looking at the leaves. We rarely see damage.”

20 August 2002, Great Western Train, Mt. Timpanogos

Scott and I head up a west exposure of the Great Western in the late afternoon heat. Below us the orchard is filling with trophy homes, two of this year’s Home Show homes in fact. One looks exactly like a mausoleum, the other simply run-of-the-mill neo-ostentatious.

Fifty small lots fill the space where three years ago deer were browsing and foxes were denning. “Saved the Best for Last” says a conspicuous sign, “Prestige Living in Trophy Homes.” Melancholy stuff for us who ate sun-warmed peaches here while watching Western tanagers and saw apples and plums ripen in their seasons.

We’re both in a hurry and ride fast and hard. We’re burned out after a two-mile sprint to the top, wet through from sweat. But standing in the stiff afternoon wind with the sun on a silver – turn golden – turn blue Utah Lake rewards us for the effort. And above, a vulture circles, leaves, turns back again low, eying us with calm expectation.
FORTY-SEVEN

Perhaps Typology is the Offense
3 September 2002, Great Western Trail, Mt. Timpanogos (Two Hundred Miles East of Ruby Marsh, Nevada and a Hundred Miles South of Rozelle Point, Utah)

Slow flat ride today. I mention to Scott that we drove out to see Robert Smithson’s *Spiral Jetty* at the tip of Promontory Point yesterday. “Smithson made the Jetty in 1970 at a time when the lake was very low. Built it of black basalt rocks found in the area.

“Now the lake is low again and the jetty emerging, white now with salt crystals, quite different from its original form. The white jetty is all the more dramatic because it’s emerging from water colored red by a microscopic alga, *Dunaliella salina*, a green alga loaded with red pigments.”

“I love that piece of landscape art,” Scott replies. “And I love the whole idea of how isolated it is.”

“Well, that’s the thing,” I answer. “I’ve done research on that part of the lake for many years. Never saw more than a couple of cars there. Yesterday we must have passed 300 cars. It’s a phenomenon.”

“Can’t wait to see it,” Scott replies. “Smithson must have known the sculpture would change dramatically with time. And, of course, there’s the irony that he was killed just the next year or so. What an example of impermanence and change.”

We’re not climbing much today, so there’s breath for a lot of bullshitting. Scott continues: “Sam, while you were braving the crowds at the edge of one receding lake, Lyn and I were at Ruby Marsh on a remote Nevada flyway looking at birds in the remains of another ancient lake: great blue herons, great-, snowy-, and cattle- egrets, cormorants, pelicans, snipes, white-faced ibis, sandhill cranes, northern harriers, red-tail hawks and ducks aplenty. Nature is an inventive and imaginative creatrix.”

12 September 2002, Orem, Utah

TO: Scott_Abbott@uvsc.edu
FROM: Sam_Rushforth@uvsc.edu

Scott—I saw this critically important article in *New Scientist* yesterday that was astounding in its implications. I immediately thought of you and knew I should make certain you had access to this.

Agence France-Presse
PARIS (September 11, 2002 2:02 p.m. EDT)—American researchers say they have grown penis parts in a lab dish, offering hope for men who are less than well endowed, *New Scientist* reports.
But before anyone reaches for the phone, there’s a small caveat. The technique has only been tested on rabbits, and it will be a while before it can be tried with human tissue.

“The penis is more complex than any of the organs we have engineered so far,” Atala told the British scientific weekly.

Atala’s team has grown corpora cavernosa—the spongy tissues that swell with blood during stimulation and makes the tissue erect.

After letting this culture grow for a few days, Atala removed the exterior part of the penises of 18 luckless rabbits, leaving the nerves and urethra intact.

He then replaced them with the engineered erectile tissue—and once the rabbits had recovered from the surgery, they started to behave... well, like rabbits.

If, eventually, the technique proves suitable for humans, it could be a boon for children born with genital abnormalities or for men who have suffered a penile injury, for instance from a botched circumcision.

But the most lucrative market of all would be for men who want a bigger penis. At present, desperate males often turn to prosthetic implants or injections of fat cells, which are expensive and prone to infection and failure.

The average size of the erect penis is much smaller than most men think. According to a 1995 study quoted by *New Scientist*, it is only 12.8 centimeters (just over five inches) long.

In a sign of male sensitivity, an Italian study this year found that of 67 men who sought enlargement, all had penises well within the normal size range.

I think this is crucially important, Scott, and not just for you. Think of the implications. What if Dubya was altered before he thought of going to war with Iraq? Suppose we made such operations free to all male world leaders? This might be the biggest boon to world peace since the beginning of patriarchy. It could usher in an era where “who’s got the biggest” no longer influenced world posturing and politics. Whaddya think?

13 September 2002, Great Western Trail, Mt. Timpanogos

It’s a beautiful morning after weeks of rain. The trail is hard-packed, which is good, but rutted, which is bad, so the storms have brought no net gain to bikers. The vistas, however, feel different. “Everything feels softer,” I tell Sam, “even the dry grass.”

“Is it softer,” Sam asks, “or clearer? Seems to me the rain has washed months of dust off the scrub oak, off the grasses and the blue limestone and out of the air. The colors are brighter for sure.”
“Perception is a tricky business,” I add. “It takes a lot of thought to figure out what it is we’re seeing. And that works with other kinds of perception as well. You remember Laraine Wilkins, one of my grad students in German? She wrote a great thesis on the grotesque woman’s body in German cinema, then headed to Harvard for a Ph.D.”

“Sure I remember her,” Sam says, “and her daughter Lena.”

“I had lunch with Laraine last week,” I report, “and she asked me if I had changed since leaving BYU. I said I hope so. She said she had heard someone claim that I had undergone a radical shift in personality, a change evident in our Catalyst column. I pressed her for details, but she left it at that. What do you think? Have I changed radically in the last 4 years?”

“Not radically enough for my taste,” Sam answers quickly, “but it’s interesting the question would come up in that form. You have certainly fought through some depression, especially after your divorce. You don’t church or tithe any more – maybe that’s what they mean. When I look at you I see the same person, the same moral commitments, the same basic goodness, the continuing fight for justice, for economic fairness, not to speak of the recurrent bad taste, stupid sense of humor, and loud mouth. Naw, Laraine’s friend is full of shit. You’re too old a dog.”

20 September 2002, Great Western Trail, Mt. Timpanogos

We squeeze a ride into the only hour free on a Friday highlighted by the visit to UVSC campus by Laurie Anne Whitt, a philosopher/poet visiting from Michigan Technological University.

“Sam,” I puff, “remember Laurie’s poem about the fox?”

“Sure do,” Sam replies. “What about it?”

“I’ve been thinking about her fox in terms of our discussion of personality change,” I explain. “Like all interesting creatures, it lives in various habitats, crossing lines drawn to separate.”

Fox Trots

through nameless places
where many languages
will not go and
edges meet. Fox

trots across lines
separating habitats:
forest & field
town & country
barn & woodland
yard & thicket
always slipping into the
‘&’ between margins & words. . . .

She confounds the point of
borders by inhabiting them. . . .

“An exception and offense to typology”
scholars claim, when
sentences cannot hold her.

Perhaps typology is the offense
Fox thinks

eye-slits expanding,
knitting together
day & night.

21 September 2002, Great Western Trail, Mt. Timpanogos

“Sam,” I wheeze, “I’m too old for this, too fat, too lazy. More and more often, the
trails are riding me rather than the other way around.”

“Quit your bellyachin’,” Sam replies sympathetically. “Greta pays you good
money to move your ass off the couch onto your bike seat. Still, I’ve been thinking that
maybe we’ve shot our wad. We’ve written about biking and getting old for The Salt Lake
Observer and the Catalyst 46 times now. That’s more columns than either of us has
words, more words than we have sense. It’s time to hang up the bike shorts, don’t you
think?”

“I guess I hope the riding never stops,” I answer, “but it’s probably time to quit
repeating our old stories. Are you going to tell Greta, or shall I?”

“You do it,” Sam replies. “Let’s write for November and December and then slip
into the sunset.”
FORTY-EIGHT

God Stories
“Scott,” I say as we slowly work our way through a newly destroyed homestead orchard from the late nineteenth century, hundred-year-old trees (our plum trees!) bulldozed helter skelter and cute little park pavilions peppered throughout. “I’ve been having a helluva time figuring something out. Nanc and I were married many years ago. We both wanted to work hard to create a religious home. It was something we had in our generational blood and seemed the right thing to do.”

“We come from the same background, Scott replies, “and making a religious haven was on my young mind as well.”

“Well, what I have been thinking is why it didn’t work in my case. I read all the sacred texts of my childhood, some many times. I went to church, said my prayers, and did everything I could think of. I remember sitting around a radio listening to religious speakers pontificating in that sing-song pseudo-reverential voice, trying like hell to get into their frame of mind, trying to see their world. I wanted to fit in, to believe in a sweet hereafter. But nothing ever worked. And the harder I tried, the less happy I became. In fact, I became convinced that trying as hard as I was actually became harmful, robbing the present of its beauty and honest-to-god substance. It’s lousy to spend your time between fear and bullshit.”

“Yeah,” Scott responds. “There was a moment for me when belief fell away and the contradictions gradually became too odious to bear. You remember my ecclesiastical leader saying the trouble with the women in our church is they are not ‘priesthood broke,’” and then trying to priesthood break me, threatening my BYU joi?

“Yeah, I sure do. I remember teaching a class at BYU with Reba Keele. We had our students read the major sacred texts of the eight prominent world religions. I remember concluding that these texts more or less outlined some sort of right-living, but were nothing special. They all seemed to suggest they were the one and only—even the Dhammapada that held the most hope for me. And I remember the smug attitudes of my students—they had it right and these other poor bastards were about as full of shit as a Christmas goose.”

“So what did you conclude?” Scott asks?

“Well, I remember one of my former students phoning at two in the morning, apologizing, and asking if he could talk to me. He went on to say he didn’t believe in any sort of god any longer and didn’t know what to do, he was afraid and said I was the only person he could think to call. I asked him if he wanted to live any differently, raise his family in some other way, leave his spouse or if his conclusion would change his way of life. He said he didn’t think so. I went on to say his revelation might even be elevating, maybe he would now be able to become who he was meant to be. And I told him being afraid is a pretty sane orientation toward this life.

“Scott,” I go on, the destroyed orchard long behind us. “Don’t you think fear may
be the key to the whole deal? Aren’t we all afraid in the end and some of us are willing to believe anything in order to lower the anxiety, to make some sort of way in a fucked-up world?”

“It’s apt to be more complicated than that,” Scott answers. “Guilt may play an important role as well. And in the end, don’t you think a million reasons exist for a million people for whether to believe or not?”

“That’s just what’s interesting to me,” I suggest. “Do people make a decision to believe and then just do it? I could never get myself to do that no matter how hard I tried. I believe, it turns out, in friends, love, truth, straight-up conversation.”

“Do you suppose we are better off now or before?” Scott asks.

“Now,” I say. “But the costs have been high.”


Sunday 20 October 2002, Great Western Trail, Mt. Timpanogos

Under a shockingly blue sky, with oakbrush patches of green, red, rust, brown, and grey carpeting the hills, the air crisp against our faces and legs, we head up the hill at a brisk pace, riding easily, strongly, confidently.

“Sam,” I say as we climb up a short-cut through a steep and newly-green meadow, dodging chunks of blue limestone covered by the long grass, “I’ve been thinking about our conversation last Sunday about religion and how to live a life. The conference on ‘Narrative, Character, and Virtue’ at UVSC on Thursday, put on by some of my philosophy faculty members, brought me up short a couple of times. Susan Meyer, for example, from the University of Pennsylvania, used Plato to talk about how the jobs we do structure the way we ‘lead’ our lives.”

“Sure,” Sam replies, “My job as dean gives me a chance to do some things I want to get done for my faculty, but by damn it leads my life rather than the other way around. What else struck your fancy?”

By this time I’m having trouble keeping up with Sam, who rides along comfortably in his middle-chain ring while I’m panting along in my granny gear. “My favorite was the story Duke theologian Stanley Hauerwas told, a story attributed to him but which he claimed was apocryphal: A guy walking across Harvard campus stops someone and asks ‘Could you tell me where the library is at?’ ‘This is Harvard,’ comes the response, ‘we don’t end sentences here with prepositions.’ ‘Of course not,’ the guy says, ‘Sorry. Could you tell me where the library is at, asshole.’”

“Good story,” Sam says from where he’s climbing the next hill at a rapidly growing distance from me.
“But where Hauerwas got my goat,” I holler, “was when he claimed that only god stories had the power to inspire commitment, only stories that started ‘In the beginning. . .’ I pressed him on the issue, claiming that plenty of atheists live strongly committed lives.”

“What did he answer?” Sam yells back from high on the hill. (Why, after all these years riding together, is he still so much more powerful than I am?)

“He’s a hell of a smart guy,” I answer, “so I’m not sure exactly what he said. I think I partly misunderstood his original point, and I think he said that like you and me, he sees human existence as absolutely contingent. But that god stuff confused the issue for me.”

By this time we’re at the top of the climb, headed now on a flat trail toward the mouth of the canyon.

“Those god stories,” Sam says, “those stories I tried so hard to believe, have turned out to be as destructive as they are enabling. And for my money, they’re the stories that don’t at least have the humility to know they’re human constructs.”

At the mouth of the canyon, Sam dives off the hill at breakneck speed. I follow at the same speed, thrilled by the motion, the air, the light. We sweep past sage and oakbrush and blue limestone, the cold air whistling past our ears. Inexplicably, Sam turns off the already steep trail onto a suicide cutoff. “I get your bike,” I shout, just before he loses his line and hits a stump with his front wheel. Over the handlebar he flies, smacks his ass on a flat rock, then rolls awkwardly down a grass-covered decline, coming to a rest fifty yards below his bike. Not until I see him get up and take his first tentative steps do I shout down: “I think Hauerwas underestimated the commitment potential of stories that end with death!”

Wednesday 23 October 2002, Great Western Trail, Mt. Timpanogos

Riding in front of a fast-moving approaching cold front. The sky in the northwest is black and threatening with occasional lightning. We shoot up the steepest and fastest of our routes to try to beat the storm as it chases us faster than we can ride.

Still some hold-out blossoms. A single dalmation toadflax blossom on a dessicated stem, three sage plants with waning flowers, a handful of purple daisies on flattened stems. One single blazing star on an aged stalk. I have an affinity for this melancholy beauty: black ominous sky, hopeful old blossoms, sun streaks across the golden, dried grass. Makes me realize how close the final curtain is and how wonderful the trip has been.
FORTY-NINE

A Trillion, Trillion, Trillion Years
Thursday 31 October 2002, Great Western Trail, Mt. Timpanogos

Late afternoon ride on Halloween, a Celtic holiday celebrated on the New Year (November 1) ending the "season of the sun" and beginning the “season of darkness and cold,” the season the “sun passes and the darkness begins.” Jesus, it’s a metaphor for every fall of my life. I try to be cheerful—my colleagues and acquaintances, I suppose, never guess how dark I feel—just a few intimates who notice or talk late. Even so, every fall I wonder if the sun will come back or if the gloam is irrevocable, deepening into final darkness and cold.

In Latin America, the holiday is Los Dias de los Muertos, the Day of the Dead, the day the monarch butterflies return to the sheltering fir trees of the Mexican mountains for the winter, bearing the spirits of the departed. The spirits of the departed—what in god’s name does that mean? When I am departed how will a kindred monarch find me? How will I be recognized? And what happens when the fir trees that shelter our sister monarchs are chopsticks and toilet paper? Where will the butterflies go then? Where will the spirits go?

“Spirits?” Scott asks.

We’re riding with Jed and Paul, riding fast up the front of the mountain racing the departing sunlight, cresting our climb as the sun disappears west of the lake. It’s cold and growing darker. The valley slips deeper into twilight as we head down the steep trail. All the way, as so often, I wonder about the meaning of my life. Have I made any difference? What is a simple life worth? Who decides? Who remembers?

Scott and I have ridden together for a dozen years in these mountains. We have ridden through my sister’s death and Scott’s split with his wife. We have ridden in brilliant sun and horizontal snow. We have survived frightening falls and testosterone-laden races. We have worked through the mean-spiritedness of BYU, the stupidity of the Gulf War and the Balkans debacle. We ride now with an incompetent, silly president threatening world stability and we can’t stand it. We have ridden melancholy and quiet or filled with the ebullience of novelty and sudden, unexpected grace. But we have ridden—day after day in the same part of Earth and we have seen and listened and smelled and remembered. And we have found pattern and order. We have seen the resurrection green of spring and the dying umber of autumn. We saw the entire mountain burn and rode the next day through smoke, ash destruction and finally, months later growth and regeneration. And it has mattered, or at least seemed to matter.

Sunday, 10 November 2002, Provo, Utah

Sitting by my cozy fire, I watch the snow spit outside, think about a bike ride to loosen tight muscles and an anxious mind. The morning stretches into afternoon, the snow turns to rain. We won’t ride today, I finally tell myself. Mud on the Great Western Trail makes short work of our derailleurs. The afternoon lengthens.
The weight of undone work is heavy on my mind, discontent gathers. I stare fixedly into the still crackling fire. Its meager comfort has dissipated. The grey light begins to fade into evening. I lean my aching head against the chairback, close my eyes; Sam and I turn up the trail into Provo Canyon.

“Colder than a well-digger’s ass,” Sam exclaims. I stretch stiff legs, try to warm my arthritic shoulder. Near what used to be the old homestead we stop and pick the last of the pottawatomie plums, shriveled by the cold, still sweet and tart. My camelback bladder swells with memory, grows heavy. Sam’s potent plum mead flows through the mouthpiece, filling my mouth with the heady taste of fermented honey flavored by these very plums.

Sam leads us up the dirt road. Our fat tires bite into a dust of snow over a thin layer of mud. “Remember the cougar tracks we saw here two winters ago?” he asks.

“Sure do,” I answer, feeling warmer by the minute. “And fox, skunk, raccoon, and magpie tracks here too.”

We climb steadily, turn along the green pipe, follow it up canyon to where it dives into the earth and the Great Western snakes up over the quartzite. I’ve been nipping at the mead and am starting to sweat a little, so I stop to unzip my coat. “Sam,” I say, “is it just me, or is the weather changing? We’ve lost the snow, the mud is drying as we climb.”

“Probably the mead,” Sam replies, and powers his way up the switchback, over the quartzite slide, onto the bench. I follow him into Johnson’s Hole, where I stop again and shed my coat entirely. A flash of yellow and black flits from the top of a thistle.

“Wrong time of year for a goldfinch,” I note. “But then it’s entirely wrong for sego lily and death camas too, and look at them, flowering all the way up the ridge.”

“I’ll be damned,” Sam says, spits (as he’s wont to do), and sucks mead from his mouthpiece. “When you first wrote about the death camas for the Salt Lake Observer you misspelled it. In my editing I changed it from death camus to death camas. You had the final edit and changed it back. So we ended up with a column about an existential lily.”

“What’s wrong with that?” I ask.

We’re higher now, a spring sun is shining, and from a branch above the soft new leaves of oakbrush comes the trill of a lazuli bunting, then a flash of neon blue. Our old friend Frank welcomes us up his serpentine reaches and steep chutes. In a high meadow we stop to admire a field of lupine, to watch a small herd of elk melt into the maples, to talk:

“We’ve had some mishaps,” Sam remembers. “My separated shoulder, your
knee operation -- that whole summer you rehabilitated the knee on the Great Western while your doctor thought you were riding a stationary bike.”

“Don’t forget our rides after your colonoscopy and lasik surgery,” I add, “or your carpel tunnel syndrome and that strange growth we used to watch slide up and down the side of your knee every time you pedaled.”

“Wonder how much blood we’ve shed on this trail?” Sam asks. “Riding these two-wheeled contraptions on a hiking trail has got us some amazing places, hasn’t it.”

We ride on up into the unfolding summer, past spring beauties and perfect little steersheads. Yellow violets mark the way to the saddle of Little Baldy. Monkey flowers and elephant heads nod close to a snow-fed stream. The trail leads us up over the saddle between Big Baldy and Mt. Timpanogos. Utah Lake sparkles far below. We wind through flowering sage, past tall green gentian, around the point of the mountain into American Fork Canyon, up to the ridge trail at the top of the Alpine Loop.

Without stopping for breath we turn north on this stretch of the Great Western, Mineral Basin to the west, Heber Valley to the East, riding now into deep summer. Sam’s mead sustains us, lends fire to thighs and calves, makes routefinding child’s play. The Ant Knolls flash past, as do sheepburned hillsides populated botanically only by the poisonous larkspur the sheep have left, and then we’re nearly flying up the last sheer climb to the sharp ridge that looks down into both Little and Big Cottonwood Canyons.

A cold autumn wind whips past our ears and I slip my coat back on. The plum mead warms from within as we spin past Brighton and climb toward Guardsman’s and then Scott’s Pass. Sam picks a fat Boletus edulus and tucks it into his pocket for dinner. Sailing along the Wasatch Crest Trail, we’re forced to dismount several times to cross snowbanks, duck under trees to escape a severe winter thunderstorm (“Quit whining,” Sam commands, “Our rubber tires insulate us from the lightning”). A pair of noisy Clark’s nutcrackers squawks at us from a limber pine.

“Pinus flexilis,” Sam reminds me with a grin. “Remember all our conversations about the horny goat weed ads I get and your prostate-saver saddle? About penis size and testosterone poisoning?”

“Yeah,” I answer, “and we’ve talked a lot about love and intimacy too. These bikes have carried us far and high, separating us from our everyday lives. Below blue limestone and above cottonwood-lined rivers we’ve talked about anything and everything. I’ve learned a lot from you about a lifelong love, that rare marriage of passionate equals you and Nancy are involved in. And maybe you’ve learned a few things from me as well.”

“Sure have,” Sam answers, a bit slow for my taste. “But best of all, our readers have read generously. One of my favorite responses was the rumor we heard from men
and women in the gay community that we were lovers."

“I was flattered by that too,” I respond as I turn off the ridge, heading west down into a darkening Millcreek Canyon, the cold sun setting ahead of us. “Friendship between men, even banked and buffered by gruffness and insult, isn’t as common as it ought to be. We’ve been lucky, my friend.”

“Lucky, my ass,” Sam shouts as he passes me in a mad rush, risking certain death on the icy trail.

The fire is cold when I wake up, and my neck is stiff. But the ride, as always, has cleared my mind and eased my body.

Monday, 12 November 2002, Late Evening, Orem
The End Game
From: Sam.Rushforth@uvsc.edu
To: Scott.Abbott@uvsc.edu

Scott. It’s deep night and I’m awake, obsessing again about the End Game. As a biologist and melancholist, I swim in the past, dwell on the future. We are the only animals on Earth who do this. I have begun wearing my dad’s ruby ring after 30 years, trying to conjure his memory. I have spoken with his friends and loved ones. I have begun looking for his stories.

In great detail I examine the early photographs of my mother—trying to see the character deeply ingrained in her face that would come out later at difficult times in her life. She is beautiful in her youth – haunted, trusting eyes, auburn hair, head tilted slightly sideward as if trying to figure something out, something just beyond her brilliance.

Mom and Dad, both of them wondering about their own relationship, puzzled about why they can’t make it work, trying to make relationships with their children, wondering about their own lives and what they mean and have meant. Two people unprepared to live together, lovers who were beyond the hard tasks of living together in deep love and mutual concern. But trying to figure out still how to deal with a brilliant clutch of children that appeared along the way. And how to have a life.

And this afternoon a phone call telling Nanc about her mother’s death, Vera’s leap into the abyss. Leaving us as the elder generation—older and now wiser.

I find myself examining all the potential endings of the future. I live in this state constantly. How can I understand that our god, the sun, will run out of hydrogen in 4.5 billion years and swell to the size of the orbit of Mars? What does it mean that Earth will be evaporated when this happens, that Earth, our home is middle aged? No wonder the ancients worshipped the sun, I do too. Everything depends upon the sun, even the future. And in the middle of all this, I am so happy to have this moment now, in the
middle of Earth’s life.

And it’s more and more clear that the end of the Universe will occur in a cold, meaningless darkness, structureless, void of insight, meaning, stories. All data point to this unexpected emptiness, this dark abyss, endless expansion into nothingness. A trillion, trillion, trillion years from now, the universe will be gigantic beyond comprehension, featureless, cold, atoms the size of solar systems. Not a spark of warmth, not a shred of sentience, not a speck of light.

So what does this leave us? It leaves us so much, more than any of us can comprehend: the now of our lives. It leaves us friends, autumn, the haunting eyes of a stranger passing in an airport, a few more autumns, the wan smile of a lover. We have dawns, storms, the sound of wind at night, rain in the desert, dark-roast coffee, good wine. We have revealing, late night talks with our loves, the gift to understand and covet our momentary consciousness, our short and everything lives. We have consciousness and memory, past and future, gifts of Nature.

I am so happy to have this moment. To have had a time, this time, on Earth. How wonderful to have such incomparable friends and deepest confidants and loves in the midst of coming winter. What a gift of warmth and meaning, of love and care.

And hell, it’s been interesting and fine to write these words with you these past years. To share our thoughts and feelings with each other, with friends, strangers. What a fine thing to see, to really pay attention, to write, to share. And the past month has been wonderful, dozens of Catalyst readers posting and speaking, asking us to keep writing, suggesting our column has somehow made a difference for them. Makes a guy smile, reach for a beer, think about what else there may be to say, certainly something more for someone.
FIFTY

Not the End, Yet
Postscript
25 October 2003, Great Western Trail, Mt. Timpanogos

Sam and I head up Provo Canyon just before noon on a clear, cool Saturday morning. We’re feeling good as we turn up the dirt road that takes us to the big green irrigation pipe, bracketed by heavy equipment. By next summer it will have disappeared into the ground. Things change.

“How’s the eye,” I ask, wondering about the outcome of Sam’s surgery on Thursday to have a plastic lens inserted.

“Feelin’ pretty good,” he says, “although everything I’m seeing has a blue tint.”

“That could be a hangover from your last Viagra pill,” I assert. “May have nothing to do with your new lens.”

“Jesus, do you always have to be jealous about my natural prowess,” he asks. “But one operation after another, a colonoscopy here and a skin cancer treatment there has left me feeling more mortal than usual.”

“We’re aging fast,” I agree. “Just getting up in the morning is more of an adventure than it used to be. I wake up with a stiff shoulder and a tight bladder and can barely totter over to the toilet.”

“Big deal,” Sam says. “We’ve complained like this for years.”

My sphincter is tightening as we approach the demanding Great Western Trail, and it has nothing to do with age.

As so often before, we make the familiar but still tricky sharp turn off the dirt road onto the trail that climbs steeply up toward Johnson’s Hole. It’s loose and rocky as always after a dry summer and heavy use. I’ve got good momentum heading through the first turn, get lucky when my wheel bounces between two babyheads instead of over one of them, have enough power left in my legs to force the bike up over the protruding root, teeter over the quartzite slide and make a last scramble up to where the trail levels off for a few yards.

“Good ride,” Sam shouts from where the root has dislodged him from his saddle. “Damn good ride.”

“Sometimes you get lucky,” I say, wary, as ever, of the bike-hubris gods.

We ride past Johnson’s Hole, up the ridge, through oakbrush (Quercus gambelli) still rusty-colored with late leaves, and fight up the series of sudden hills that have for years tried our strength and balance and endurance. At the top of the last one, I look back and don’t see Sam. When he joins me a minute later he’s got dust on his back.
“Taught that hill a lesson,” he grumbles. “I whacked it good.”

From here it’s an easy, winding ride back toward the mouth of Provo Canyon. Our conversation is easy and winding as well. We note deer trails, the silence, our efficient, well-balanced bikes, a wary herd of mule deer. Coming out of the canyon, we stand for a moment overlooking Utah Valley, happy to be here, today, in the morning sun. The smooth lake perfectly reflects the bright sky and surrounding mountains. So beautiful! I drop off the hill in high spirits, hardly touching my brakes, feeling young and strong, seeing the trail well, sensing the sharp turns through the precise mechanisms of my bike. I slow a bit and Sam passes, shouting with the same exuberance.


I follow him down the steep switchbacks and watch him shoot faster than usual over the lip of the steep chute above the new houses that have replaced our orchard. We stood at the top of this shortcut twenty times before finally daring to launch ourselves down the short but nearly vertical drop. Since then we’ve taken the route a hundred times. Just before gravity grabs me I slam on my brakes. Sam lies twisted at the bottom. Dust settles around him.

“Sam,” I call. “Sam! You all right? Sam!”

I’ve seen him like this before. He always stretches gingerly once he’s got his breath back. When he lost the trail and rode into a boulder field half a mile east of here, separating his shoulder, he was stunned at first, but eventually got up and rode home. And rode again the next day. Another day, just above those boulders, when he teetered off the trail and over the front of his bike into some oakbrush, he rose out of it with a veil of blood over his face, wiped off the streaming blood with his do-rag, retied it over the ten-inch gash from his forehead back to one ear, and finished the ride.

“Sam!”

By this time I’ve reached him. He’s lying on his side in a fetal position. His left leg is twisted awkwardly, still attached by the cleat to the bike pedal. The bike’s front wheel is crushed. Sam is breathing – I can tell because of the bubbles in the blood his face is lying in. But he’s not conscious. He doesn’t respond to my shouts. I should move him. Has he broken his neck? His back? He’s sucking blood into his nose. I don’t want to move him. So much blood.

He’s a pile of meat.

I’m turning Sam’s face out of the pooled blood when he groans. He turns his head more, raises it. He pulls his leg, still attached to the bike. I lift his heel, push hard to disengage the cleat from the pedal. Has he broken his leg?
“What happened?” Sam asks, trying to get up.

“Don’t move,” I say. “You crashed your bike.”

“What happened?” he asks again.

“You crashed,” I answer. “Lay back on my camelback.”

“Where am I?” he asks, raising himself.

“Don’t move! Sam! You’ve hurt yourself. Lay back.”

“What happened? Where am I?” Sam asks, grasping, fighting, wrestling for clarity. I’ve never seen him like this before. People lean on Sam for clarity, for insight, for information, for support.

“We’re at the bottom of the hill. You went over the front of your bike. You’re hurt. I’ve got to get help.”

“I don’t need help,” Sam says.

“You need help,” I insist, “but I can’t go get it until you tell me you’ll lie here. Do you know what happened?”

“I crashed my bike,” he says. “Let me up.”


He lays back on the camelback, blood oozing through his beard, back through his hair. I run toward a house under construction maybe a hundred yards away. A young man hands me his cell phone. I call Nancy, leave a message that we need her to come fast. I call 911 and direct an ambulance. I run back to Sam, who is still lying with his head on my pack.

“I’ve called an ambulance,” I tell him.

“I don’t need an ambulance,” he says. “Get me home.”

“I’ll get you home,” I say. “I’ll get you home. But we’ve got to get that cut fixed. And check your head and neck.”

“Where’s my tooth?” Sam asks.

“Looks like you’ve still got your teeth,” I say. “But you’re still bleeding.” I take off my do-rag and press it against his forehead, just above his left eye where blood runs
from a deep cut. “Hold this,” I tell him, and he does.

The ambulance arrives, accompanied by a fire truck and a rescue truck. Sam answers questions about where he is, where he’s going. He tells them he’d rather go home and have a beer. They strap him onto a board. Nancy arrives, white-faced. She leaves with Sam in the ambulance. I put our bikes in the back of her car and meet them in the emergency room.

Over the course of a long Saturday afternoon, Sam lies on the hard board. He’s wheeled into x-ray, into MRI, into who knows where. He drips blood into the evening, leaking slowly while an IV drips at about the same rate. Nancy and I learn, as the hours pass, that his neck isn’t broken, that his brain doesn’t seem to be injured, but that all the bones in his face have been smashed: the orbitals around his eyes, his nose, his cheeks, his upper mandible, his left eye socket so that his left eye has fallen deep into his cheek. The thick smell of blood fills the room. I fight a recurrent need to gag. There is no attempt to clean Sam’s face or head, matted with blood, hair, dust, dead grass.

I hear a doctor tell someone on a phone that the patient had done a “faceplant.” I have an overwhelming urge to grab his shirt and tell him to use respectful words.

Sam is drugged with some serious painkillers; but he is also mostly conscious. “Go home,” he keeps telling me, “no reason for you to waste your Saturday.”

“I figure you’ll be fine,” I answer. “I’m here for Nancy.” She’s calm, but white-faced.

The day stretches into night. They take Sam off the board. He looks like he was in a bad bar fight. I’d hate to see the other guys.
25 October 2003, Great Western Trail, Mt. Timpanogos

“Some son-of-a-bitch is gonna ask me if I was wearing a helmet,” I remember thinking on my way to the ground. Then, as I hit, “Good god, this is harder than I thought.”

I am wearing Sarah Jane’s Cal Arts ball cap. I am worried it will be lost, ruined or stolen. But I have no power to make this known. Scott will not take me home—I do have a slight memory of my request. The ambulance shows up with a bunch of tough EMTs.

“What day is it?” they ask. “Where are you?” Where are we going?”

“Look,” I respond, “I’m in an ambulance because of that damned Abbott. You are takin’ me to some hospital. Suppose we stop off for a beer? I’m buyin’.”

Nanc is reassured. I am acting as bad as ever. In fairness, I have only the slightest remembrance of any of these events. For the next several hours, I can only remember the occasional view of the emergency room full of blood and mud. I wonder what poor bastard has been there before me.

“Well, his neck is not broken,” I remember them telling Nancy. After seven hours they take off the neck stabilizer. Later, “Well, he doesn’t seem to have any brain damage.”

“How would you decide?” I ask.

Friends start coming by. I have no idea how I look except by the mirror of their faces and I conclude I have probably hurt myself. The docs tell Nanc, “This is not life threatening. We can rebuild him as long as he has an intact spine and no brain damage.”

But at the same time, they also start coming in with, “His nose is all over his face.” “Both cheek bones are broken.” “His upper mandible is broken badly.” “His eye sockets are both broken, the left in several places.” “His zygomatic arches are both broken.” “He has several crushed sinuses.”

I am irritated as hell. There is no need to make this a big deal to Nancy. I can get by with repairing all of this shit and there is no need for her to worry. After several hours, we are moved upstairs to an intermediate care room. Friends continue to come. I am embarrassed over the attention, and the obvious worry I have caused Nanc. Eventually, she sleeps in a bundle of lumpy white blankets on the floor. I spend most of the night awake, worrying about her, my friends, Kirk, my kids—you name it.

Jeff Tayler, a physician and a dear friend of mine, hears about the accident and, as a physician-cum-CEO of a major medical corporation flies into action. I have access to the best care in Salt Lake City. I have an appointment with David Thomas, one of the best plastic surgeons in the west. He doesn’t have time to do the surgery and so calls
two of his colleagues I also know are superb. They don’t have time either.

In the end, I suggest to Thomas, “Surely a face like mine is more interesting than a steady diet of tits and noses.” He agrees and schedules surgery. I overhear him on the phone, “I’ll need a bone saw, a bone drill, a set of wires, a full set of face plates.”

He does the surgery and hands me a mirror. “Shit, doc. I just gave you several thousand dollars and this is the best you can come up with?” Actually I am pretty pleased—my eyes line up—he has brought up the left eye ¾ of an inch, my deep cuts are all stitched shut and I look more or less human. And the promise is even better—time will heal.

Ok, so what have I learned? Friends matter. Jobs don’t matter except for the necessary income. When given the chance, it’s better to be alive than dead. Family matters. Colleagues who care matter. A beautiful day matters. So many people care—people you didn’t even know about. A moving locust tree in the wind is exceptional. A kind word is inestimable in its worth. Some people don’t care—fuck ‘em—life is short.

And Jesus, a good friend will save your life. And retrieve your best Cal Arts ball cap (even though it is muddy and bloody) and put it in your garage on your over-the-handlebars, twisted bicycle so you can find it and quit worrying when you get your ass out of the ER and find some wits again…