Serendipity

By Paul Edward Johnson

I learned . . . that inspiration does not come like a bolt,
nor is it kinetic, energetic striving, but it comes into us
slowly and quietly and all the time, though we must
regularly and every day give it a little chance to start
flowing, prime it with a little solitude and idleness.
I learned that you should feel when writing, not like Lord
Byron on a mountain top, but like a child stringing beads
in kindergarten, happy, absorbed and quietly putting one
bead on after another.

- Brenda Ueland
from *If You Want to Write* (1938)

The real benefit, to me (or to anyone who writes a poem
that goes where it wants to), is that I feel I have been
given a gift; I have taken a journey I hadn't known was
available to me. These gifts renew the faith that I, at least,
find necessary. Not faith "in" something, exactly. Just
faith: the boundless curiosity for the next day.

- Patricia Hampl
from *25 Minnesota Poets #2* (1977)

It is the library that preserves
the wine of passion
that was spilt in haste,
and the rippling flow of youth
that might go to waste
if it had no place to pause and be fruitful.
And that is the way of it,
because no individual passion lasts long,
and yet in the hands of the librarian
the passion that lasted not
does survive the voiceless tomb.

- Christopher Morley (1939)
honoring the fiftieth anniversary of the
Minneapolis Public Library's opening

The time between my bedtime prayers and sleep is when I choose someone to visit in my dreams. Sometimes an old friend. Sometimes someone I seldom hear from anymore. Sometimes, when choosing's difficult to do, I imagine myself standing under the light of a corner street lamp, waiting for someone special to appear.

Last night, a Cadillac limo stopped at my street corner and a back door swung open. I entered the limo, settled into a soft leather seat, and Frank Sinatra poured me Jack Daniel's on the rocks.

We toured Manhattan, talked about race tracks, his music, and other important things, enjoying a few more drinks while listening to a recording of Billie Holiday songs.

When Frank's chauffeur returned us to my street-lamped corner, I stepped out of the limo and into the light, saying, "Thanks again Frank; good night."

Frank looked up at me, grinned, and said, "Sleep warm."

He said it the same way he always did at the end of his old radio and television shows, as though he honestly meant it. I have that same dream several times a year.

In another recurring dream I'm leaning against a lamp post in Amherst, Massachusetts.

A horse-drawn carriage stops. Inside's an old friend, a neighbor. She's Emily Dickinson. I usually get to enjoy that dream after an evening of savoring her poems and published letters.

Whenever I get involved in her writing, I feel as though her spirit is paying me a neighborly visit. And so why shouldn't she pay me another visit in my dreams?

During a recent dream, after Emily had again so kindly stopped to offer me a ride in her carriage, she took me to her home and led me upstairs to a sitting room, where I'm afraid I made a fool of myself.

I presumptuously asked her something about one of her most anthologized poems, one that has lingered with me ever since high school; ever since my prim ninth-grade English teacher read out loud, "There is no frigate like a book," and all us guys in the back row tried to keep from ripping out in laughter.

"Em? Can't you find another word for frigate?"

"Why?"

“Well, Em, isn’t there perhaps a better metaphor for books that transport us?”

“What's wrong with frigate, Paul?”

“Nothing really, I suppose. Most guys know a frigate’s a fast-sailing warship. But they’re still gonna laugh at the sound of that word, Em. Trust me, a lot of high school kids just won’t know any better. So how about maybe using *vessel*, instead?”

Failing to help her understand, I tried to assure her that *frigate* wasn’t all that bad; told her that some of my favorite books, especially autobiographies by adventurers, transport me to lands of wonder and hidden treasure, and captivate me with their tales of courage.

Grasping for a metaphor that might impress her, I said, “Good books are treasure maps to riches buried near and within us.”

She agreed, and said, “Adventure and hidden treasure, Paul. That’s what pirates and poets are all about.”

As I grew to feel more and more comfortable sitting with Emily in her home, I began telling her one of my favorite stories.

It’s a story about serendipity, that gift within us for discovering treasures not sought. It’s a story about how I once discovered a person who sometimes described herself as being a nineteenth-century spirit. To me, however, she seemed fit enough to be a spirit for all centuries. It’s a story about how she helped me draw my own treasure maps. One, to a most cherished treasure. The story goes something like this :

Tracey and I had been spending autumn evenings searching for a new apartment. We had been living together in an apartment near the University of Minnesota. When the lease expired she wanted us to move into southwest Minneapolis, a district I had once upon a time called “my neighborhood” (between ages nine and nineteen). I had been avoiding the Linden Hills district for about twenty-five years. But Tracey was enchanted by the lakes, especially Lake Harriet.

One Sunday evening we discovered an apartment building less than a block from Lake Harriet’s western shore, set at the end of a street, close to an old fire station and shops selling aromatic coffees, teas, Asian food, and exotic ice creams. There wasn’t a vacancy sign.

But the fragrant shops and the remembered scents of lake breeze made me slip a note under the caretaker's door.

We received a call that night.

A week later we moved in.

Our new apartment was on the third floor, facing south.

While unpacking, we sometimes paused to stare out from our floor-to-ceiling windows. We could see down into the hedged yards on the other side of our alley.

Fitting snugly between openings in the clustered oak tree tops were puzzle pieces of Lake Harriet, sailboats, and shoreline.

At nightfall we gazed down upon the lighted rear windows of the white house across our alley. A wide, uncurtained window framed silhouettes of two cats sitting on a sill. Beyond their arched backs, near the middle of the room, reclined upon a sofa below the light from a table lamp, a gray-haired woman turned a page in a book upon her lap.

We put up our draperies before going to bed.

About a week after we had settled into our small apartment, I walked down to Lake Harriet, found a bench along the shoreline, and wrote in my journal:

> September 20, 1984: It's been 25 years since I've allowed myself to sit here along this path and feel the warmth of the afternoon sun upon my shoulders. I'm inhaling the spiced September air and reproducing memories, magically.
>
> More than 25 Septembers have passed me by since I last sat here and labored one entire bright blue Sunday afternoon, trying to describe with ink from a fountain pen that autumn oak tree down there by the shore.
>
> My description was only a paragraph. I doubt I could do better today. But ever since that September Sunday afternoon, I've been perplexed when trying to describe the sight of an autumn oak tree as it stands high against a blue afternoon's sky. Sometimes I see the knotted branches when I'm eating a bunch of grapes. Sometimes I see them when I behold the veins

on the back of an old lady's hand. Someday I'll get it right. And when I do, should I present it to my old English teacher, Black Bart, just to let him know how long his writing assignment has bothered me?

Seeing with words. If a picture's worth a thousand words, why don't I just take five or six Polaroid shots? Right now. Right here. Paste them on a page, and get on with enjoying this afternoon. It would only take minutes. But I know the pictures won't show and say what these words might.

As I sit here looking north toward the other side of Lake Harriet, about the only thing that's obviously changed in maybe twenty-five years is the distant downtown skyline.

When my friends and I searched here for sun-tanned girls during the summers of the Fifties, some of us would sometimes remark that we could see the tip of the Foshay Tower beyond the northern shore's tree line. The Foshay's shape is the same as the Washington Monument's. This thirty-story building was then among the tallest in the entire Midwest. Once, it was the tallest west of Chicago. Now it's dwarfed by the tissue box shaped buildings that surround it.

Oh, but as I change my focus and behold her green and golden shores, Lake Harriet still remains in my heart as a refuge from unwanted change, as a place for preservation, as a place for regeneration.

Fragrant autumn leaves sail upon lemon light, making remembrances smell as apples sliced upon a picnic table, turning brown before I bite. My shadow grows on the tar path before me. A black ant has found shelter from the breeze in the fold of my lap.

Recollections of friends, of family, slowly approach. They seem as real as the shoreline and the sky. But somewhat distorted, wavering,

a lot like the mossy boulders are wavering beneath the water's rippled surface. I wonder how far ice from twenty-five winters has moved all those sunken boulders since my boyhood summer nights, when last I crept down here around midnight and waded naked to the drop-off, where a man and a woman now fish in a green boat, casting lazy lines toward shore.

I lived only two blocks up that hill behind me. Walks and bike rides were with friends or family. Often we'd walk the mile to the bandstand near the other side, where we could get fresh popcorn and ice cream tasting a whole lot better than homemade. The bandstand, where Dad sang bravely in Gilbert and Sullivan operettas on summer nights, it seems now a monument to the summer of my life.

A bee is nudging me off my bench. I'll walk the western shoreline and find another place to sit.

While walking closer to the old and now vacant bandstand, I beheld another tree remembered. How can I remember a tree?

The tree's now more dead than alive. As I sit here looking at her (yes, the tree's a she), only a pebble toss to my right, I remember her as the first in her family to bend herself upon the water. Two of her long branches arch in low and drink, looking like the necks of sister swans. (When I was a boy they reminded me of the long necks of drinking dinosaurs. Now, as then, proud ducks stand upon these two branches).

I was maybe about age five when I first met Lake Harriet. At this very place! On this same expanse of grass between the path and the lake. I was then the summer guest of my grandparents, my mother's parents, Nana and Babu, the names I gave them when I was maybe two.

They rented the top floor of the Tudor duplex down the street, the one at the bottom of the hill on Upton Avenue.

> I'm proud of the fact that I still remember Nana taking me to this spot for picnics and feeding the ducks.
>
> It's growing somewhat cloudy now. My shadow crosses the path. Two women hike by for the second time, puffing about the increasing value of the lake-side condominiums. When friends Mike and Mart and Jim and Paul and Bob and Wayne and Jerry and Ben, when we walked this path, we never heard talk about condominiums. And except for maybe those speeding roller skaters, and those beet-faced joggers, and maybe those kids with earphones straddling their heads, except for them, thank God not much else has changed here since then. I'm sure that old lady over there, the one who's swinging her cane at those joggers, I'm sure she agrees.

Whenever I read that journal entry, I see that day as one that was not only filled with remembrances, but also as a day that I had memorialized. I had finally made my visit to that lake too long avoided, that place that had become as haunting and as sacred to me as maybe a cemetery.

During the previous 25 years I had actually driven by Lake Harriet at least a dozen times and walked near with a lady or two.

But since 1959, I had never gone to stay awhile, an afternoon, to commune, to come home and personally greet her face-to-face.

Until that bright September day, Lake Harriet had been a lot like a former classmate whom I've sometimes looked up in the Minneapolis phone book but always failed to phone, fearing our conversation would become less than what I've dreamed, fearing it would end with the discovery that the gulf now between cannot be bridged by the fact that once upon a time we were wonderfully at one.

As with old friends at class reunions, I needed to see, accept, and admire how much Lake Harriet had changed and remained the same; admit how important she had been to me.

What someone once wrote about living in Africa, I now say to myself when I'm near her shores: “Here I am, where I ought to be.”

One cloudy afternoon, instead of meditating at the lake, I reclined upon our sofa while listening to recorded lecture tapes. I had enrolled in a correspondence course about journal and memoir writing. The course included tape recordings of lectures and discussions conducted by Patricia Hampl, a poet I have admired since 1976. Her course stimulated my appetite for writing about my memories.

While listening to a tape recording of Patricia Hampl speaking evocatively about the nature of first memories, I drifted into a daze, almost dozed. I heard Patricia say she was about to read a description of a first memory from a woman’s autobiography written around 1939.

As a droning mantra sound from a monoplane made its lazy way through a white cloud above our apartment building, I tried to bring into focus one of my first memories: a child of three (or maybe four) running upon a wooden porch that seemed then to me as if it were a pirate’s ship at sea. I felt so courageous that I dared shout swear words at passing strangers. Bold words like *hell* and *fart* and *grunny*.

I’d duck down behind the porch wall and peer at my targets through the small slats by the floor. The slats were there for my cannons, and to allow the water to wash off the deck during high seas and hurricanes. Then I’d lie on my stomach, squint through the slats, sight unsuspecting strollers, shout out a volley of terrible words, and then laugh in high delight while they turned about on the sidewalk, unable to see the source of the blasts of profanity.

All was fine until one such afternoon I looked up and beheld my mother standing above me with a bar of soap in her hands.

The details of that moment on that porch were included in my one-and-only autobiography, a sixth-grade writing project constructed the night before it was due only because of help from my ghostwriter mother. We titled it *Me.*

Patricia said the autobiography she was about to read from was simply titled *Me.*

I opened my eyes and sat straight up.

Patricia started to read the author's description of her first memory: she saw herself as a child running upon a porch!

I felt pins-and-needles goose bumps moving from the back of my neck to my shoulders.

The child saw her long porch as "the deck of a vast, wooden, feeble ship."

Her ship, as was my ship, a first memory.

We both remembered what we wore. She, a white dress. I, a red wool suit knitted by my mother's mother, Nana.

When Patricia finished the reading, I felt as though I had been transported, almost levitated, above my sofa.

I came down, however, when I remembered that Patricia had said the book, written by Brenda Ueland around 1939, was, unfortunately, no longer in print.

About a week later, while browsing in a shopping area down by the banks of the Mississippi, I wandered past store windows and happened upon a book cart near a bubbling fountain. The entire cart was full of books by Minnesota writers. Under one pile I discovered a thick blue and white paperback: *Me*, by Brenda Ueland.

I felt as though I had stumbled upon a treasure map and cursed the fact I didn't have enough money on me to buy it. But instead of stealing the thing, I read the first chapter until the book cart attendant grew audibly impatient. He told me the book had been recently republished, and that I might be able to pick it up at the library.

The next morning, at the Linden Hills Library, two blocks down the street from our apartment, the librarian grimaced and said, "We don't have the book, but we should. Did you hear it being read on the radio this morning? Two other people have asked for it in just the past hour."

This neighborhood library has the look of a Tudor hall. It's set back a bit, at an angle from a residential street, shaded by tall elm trees. It looks as though it belongs on an English estate. It hasn't changed at all since I checked out my first book there in 1952, when I was in sixth grade.

It was an autobiography by Charles Lindbergh titled *We.*

The oak tables with their slate smooth aquamarine tops and matching aquamarine leather chairs are still there. At the end of the long, beamed ceilings are tall

leaded windows. Below the windows are smooth wooden window seats.

I sat upon one of the window seats and wriggled when sunlight warmed my shoulders, as it had at Lake Harriet several days before. Lake Harriet and this library are just the way they should always be. May the lake and may the library never outgrow me.

I wondered if my old library held some secrets about Lake Harriet's past. So I asked the librarian if she could help me locate some books about the lake district. She was still in a fuss, complaining loudly to her nodding assistant that they had somehow neglected to get Brenda Ueland's republished book.

She found a book full of old pictures of Lake Harriet and gave it to me. I opened it at a table near the library's fireplace. The book reminded me of family photo albums: pictures of nineteenth-century youths fishing along Lake Harriet's shoreline, young ladies wearing bulky dresses that were actually their swim suits, gentlemen wearing spats and straw hats. They looked as though they could be pictures of my deceased grandparent's peers.

Near the end of the book was a chapter about Lakewood Cemetery, whose hills roll between the southeastern shore of Lake Calhoun and the northern shore of Lake Harriet.

As I read my way through captions below the old photos, I came upon a picture of a magnificent white house with a porch.

I rubbed the smooth table top.

There, upon the page, indented and in smaller print, was an excerpt from Brenda Ueland's book, *Me*, describing the rutted dirt road, her lake-side home, and how their carriage horse pulled her and her family to town before the turn of the century:

> When we drove downtown, we went down our long dirt driveway to Richfield Road and then turned into the pretty boulevard that led around the lake. We wheeled slowly down the drive. Mother had to tell me again to be careful not to stick my legs out and touch the wheel, because it was not safe.
>
> Now just where the boulevard came to our land and had to turn off toward Lake Harriet,

there was the Big Rock. That is, it was about as big as a trunk, and here was an open sandy beach with yellow sunbeams moving in dancing network under the water.

We would drive Lady and the carriage right into the water, and she would put her head down and dawdlingly drink, or pretend to drink, looking up at the horizon after soaking her nose in it, the water sluicing out around the bit.

"Oh, she has had enough. She is just fooling," we would say tenderly, and wheel in the water (look! it comes way up to the hubs!) and drive out and on our way again.

The librarian's assistant approached with a stack of folders and he said to me, "We've collected old newspaper articles about the neighborhood, articles you might like to read, perhaps copy on our copy machine."

I felt he was treating me as though I were lord and master of the library. Most of the newspaper articles he gave me were written during the nineteen-fifties.

As I was reading the newspaper advertisements, recalling all the neighborhood shops I once bicycled to with my friends, one article stopped me cold. Its headline recalled a chapter in the photo book at my elbow: Cottage City "Lost" But It's There.

Centered below the headline was an old nineteenth-century photo of a noble fearless face. The caption identified the man as Andreas Ueland. The article described him as a pioneer resident of the Lake Harriet Linden Hills neighborhood, an area that gradually became a district of cottages, turn-of-the-century retreats for city folks wanting to be near lake breezes during the humid summer months.

Some of these cottages were still standing in 1956, when the news article had been written. One paragraph confirmed that this pioneer was the father of Brenda Ueland.

I made copies of the article, checked out the photo book, and walked back to our apartment, wondering about the mysterious nature of pleasant coincidences.

When I approached our apartment building's mail boxes, a mail box near ours caught my attention. Taped above its lid was a blue slip of paper with this name printed on it: UELAND.

That night I showed Tracey what I had discovered at the Linden Hills Library and told her about the name Ueland pasted upon the mailbox near ours.

She opened the phone book to the *U*'s.

There were only a few Uelands. None listed at our address. We supposed the Ueland on the mailbox downstairs must have recently moved into our building. But while checking other Uelands listed on the page, Tracey spotted a Brenda Ueland. This Brenda lived just one street away.

We went to our living room window, drew open the curtains, and looked down at the lighted windows of the houses on the other side of our alley. We wondered which house it might be. We wondered if she might be related to the writer. We wondered if this Brenda Ueland in the phone book could actually be the author of *Me*.

If she was, she would have to be at least 93.

Moments later we were standing on a dark sidewalk, in front of a high hedge surrounding an old white house that looked like the cottages in the 1956 newspaper article I had read in the Library.

When we stepped back to get a better view, we saw, beyond the steep roof, our lighted apartment windows. This was the house directly across our alley, the very same house whose lighted rear windows held our gaze as we put up our draperies during our first night in our apartment.

The next morning we searched a book store near Lake Harriet. We found her autobiography and another treasure, a book she had written in 1938, *If You Want To Write*.

I said to Tracey, "Look! This is just what I need!"

The book's jacket featured a picture of her taken within the past year.

Her face looked as though it were one of those faces Mother Nature carves in rock with centuries of wind and rain, one of those rock-formation faces tour guides love to point out to groups as they are traveling through mountains.

"Coming up on our right, about 150 feet above us, is the Old Man of the Dells."

The paragraph above her photo contained this information:

> As a reader of *Me* would know, Ms. Ueland is an avid, even a passionate, walker, many miles a day.
>
> She lives now a block from Lake Harriet in Minneapolis where she is visited by her large admiring family and many friends, in a house full of books and several well-loved cats. And she continues to write and to help other writers in the troublesome business of putting words on paper.

I spent the next afternoon sitting upon a bench on a knoll that overlooks Lake Harriet, less than a block and within eyeshot of Brenda's hedged front yard.

Each time an old lady passed, I studied her features and looked again at Brenda's photo on the book jacket.

Never, though, did anyone ever come or go through the narrow hedged entrance leading to the stairs of what I hoped was still Brenda Ueland's front porch.

During another similar afternoon about two or three days later, at the same location, while I continued reading her autobiography, cold sheets of wind and rain started to blow in from across the lake.

I said to myself, "This is ridiculous," and headed for warmth, for home.

But when I approached Brenda's high hedge, I stopped, peered up through the hedge's withering leaves, and peeked up at the porch of what I wanted to believe was still her home.

Upon the porch an old lady wearing a tattered raincoat struggled to push a tubular frame that was supporting her bent figure. Thick flinty hair blew across her face while she leaned forward into the slanting rain.

She made a short step, then rested against the support, a handle barred thing commonly called a "walker."

When she wiped her wild wet hair from her face, she didn't look much like Brenda's photo. But she sure looked like her writing: fierce and bold.

She had to be Brenda. And I couldn't help but remember one of her first memories, how she described herself as a carefree child, running upon her front porch.

Reluctantly, I walked up the hill. I wanted to go back, ascend the steps to her porch, boldly stand before her, and say, "Brenda? Why are you walking in the rain?"

At the top of the hill I turned and walked back.

But when I reached the opening of her hedge, she was in the middle of a turn, her back to me. She wasn't moving. She just stood there, staring down at the small pile of firewood next to her front door. Fixed. All that moved was her flinty hair, blowing straight and stiff across her hunched left shoulder.

She looked as though she were a pirate in a gale, determined to sail on, no matter how stormy the sea. Though she could hardly move, her courage strolled freely.

I couldn't approach her from behind. So I walked down to the bottom of the hill, pretended to be looking across the lake, and listened to carpenters pounding nails into a nearby house.

I wondered how to introduce myself to someone who might be unable to hear me or remember her past. Old people almost always frighten me whenever I say hello to them and all they do in response is gaze past me, as though I were not alive.

When I returned a few minutes later and peered up through her hedge again, she had not yet made her turn.

So I walked away, deciding to return home, happy to know she was still alive, unhappy that I hadn't talked with her.

But as I walked home, I felt fifteen again, and recalled when Toni, my high school "crush," would radiantly greet me every morning as she walked past my porch on her way to school.

Each morning I waited on my porch for Toni to pass. Waited to hear the melodic sound of her greeting.

All Toni said when she walked by each morning was simply, "Hi Paul."

I know you can't get much of a melody out of that, but it sounded prettier to me than any song ever sung by Doris Day.

I never found the courage to join Toni on our way to school. I'd always wait until she was about six houses past mine before I followed her the half mile to Southwest High School.

Sometimes I'd walk to school about six houses in front of her, always pleased with the notion that she was at least noticing me for perhaps as long as fifteen minutes.

And now I wondered why a 93-year-old lady could create the same spell and evoke those feelings I had about Toni. It bothered me that I could allow myself to feel and act so stupidly. Was it because her descriptions of her youth in her autobiography seemed somehow to almost match my own? Was it because our spiritual beliefs seemed to correspond? Because she wrote so poetically and moved me to laugh and sigh, even sometimes cry? Was she really who she seemed to be? Could she be as flat-out honest, perceptive, and jovial as her writing?

I've always been a hopeless romantic. A genuine sap. While looking at a Minneapolis midnight skyline, I once wrote a poem about my first romance:

The moon is colored orange.
The sky is colored black.
The red dots are tower tops
Below gold spots, for stars.

It's like kindergarten art,
When I shared crayons
With a brown-haired girl,
And all was so clear to me
Even femininity lacked complexity.
Til once, after school, I followed her,
Blocks, and blocks, and blocks,
To her white house,
Into her aqua wading pool,
Where I fell afraid of deeper depths
In her eyes of vertigo blue.

Her name was Nile.

She colored the land with flowers
While I filled the sky with bombers.

We shared the crayons purple and yellow
As Roy Rogers rode his palomino pal in a rodeo
And sang songs with Dale Evans on the radio.

I stayed til sky grew gray,
Way past time to go.

Then walked lost,
Toward street-lamped corners,
Kidnapper stories, wrong ways home.

The crayons, colors, pictures, she,
Still stick to the palms of my memory.
I wonder now if she sometimes fills a space
With crayon colors recalling my face.

When I returned to our apartment, I sat down and continued reading Brenda's autobiography.

Before going to bed I read about Brenda's father's final days. Her description of her father made me think about the spirit of my sister-in-law's father. My brother Larry's wife, Hita, her father was also was an immigrant. I marked the place in Brenda's book so that I could copy the page and send it to Hita, so that Hita could behold this eerie resemblance between Brenda's father and her father, especially where Brenda described her father trying to fight off death as though he were playing a game of bridge, one by one playing his cards, but saving his best trump cards for the end. Hita's father played bridge passionately, as if the game were as important to him as life itself.

I placed the book down by the phone, shut off the light, and went to sleep.

The next morning I was awakened by a phone call from Hita. She said she had flown in from her home near Seattle and had spent the previous night with her hospitalized father. Hita said she wanted to see me.

We met an hour later at a deli and talked. Eventually I told her about Brenda and showed her page 300 from Brenda's book, the page that had brought Hita and her father so near to me the night before.

When Hita finished reading the page, she reached across the table, placed her palms upon the back of my clasped hands, and said, "Paul, look into my eyes. You must meet her. People like her are rare. Pay attention to what is happening now, and learn what it means."

Hita's eyes are the eyes of a wolf and cannot be ignored.

Hita's father died several days later.

When we gathered with relatives after his death, I asked her where her mother was.

Hita said her mother made a toast to her departed husband with a Manhattan, their favorite drink, and then

she told her sons and daughters she was going into the bedroom to sleep, to dream, to join her husband's spirit, and never again awake.

Hita said her mother believed that she would die soon after her husband's death.

As we sat in the living room that night, we tried to joke about how disappointed Hita's mother might be to wake up and to find herself still being alive.

Her mother awoke the next morning. She told her nurse to ask her children if it was now okay for her to join her husband. Within hours she fell into a coma. Within a couple of days she passed away.

About a week following the funerals of Hita's parents, on a bright blue October afternoon, Tracey and I were wading through the yellow leaves carpeting our alley.

I was telling Tracey how the alley was once a railway where yellow streetcars carried me to my grandparents' place. During 1950 they lived in the apartment building just three doors down from the building in which we were now living.

I told her how the streetcars took my younger brother Larry and me to downtown Saturday matinees, and it was at this spot on our way home from downtown that they would finish their journey past Lake Harriet.

As I pointed toward the arched bridge the streetcars once passed under, I saw Brenda standing below the bridge's crescent curve. She was alone, bent and braced against the support of her walker. It was a fine day for a walk.

While we stood motionless, she inched toward us and I felt an old emotion from my teenage days returning, something I had tried to describe in a recent journal entry:

> I had just turned sixteen and it was less than an hour after the broadcast of the Brian London-Floyd Patterson fight. Floyd, my idol, was soft spoken, shy. But in the ring he was like a panther and his fists moved as fast as hummingbird's wings.
>
> After Floyd held his hands high in victory, I ran out into the clear June night and jogged down the dark sidewalk. I was out to do

roadwork and pretend I was Floyd.

As I jogged past Toni's home, throwing out left jabs and right hooks, I heard her voice saying my name, stopped, looked down, and beheld Toni sitting there on the edge of her front lawn, next to my feet.

After I had caught my breath, I wheezed, "Did you see Floyd tonight?" As though he had just jogged by.

Toni replied, "Yes." And told me, her wide eyes turned up to mine, how she admired him. Then her eyes sparkled as her voice seemed to sing, "Aren't the stars clear tonight?"

I didn't reply. I was lost in the stars in her eyes. My voice wouldn't carry past my teeth. After I tried saying "Good night," I ran toward the far end of the block.

When I thought I was out of her sight, I stopped and stared up at the stars. They were clear, alright. But they were pulsating, they wouldn't stay still.

When I returned to Toni's lawn, she was gone.

But Brenda was continuing to inch her way toward us in our alley where the streetcars once sped as fast as my adolescent emotions. I knew if I did not take this moment to talk with Brenda, I might never take the chance, and worse, might always regret it.

I tugged at Tracey's hand as we began to approach her, me not knowing how to begin.

So I smiled my best smile and said, "Hello. Are you Brenda Ueland?"

She looked up at me, at Tracey, brushed her hair from her face, and opened an almost toothless grin.

"Yes. How did you know?"

Her voice was shrill, high, almost sounding like a streetcar squealing around the bend.

I tried to introduce ourselves as her new neighbors who were reading her books, and said something about how much I admired her writing.

She looked at her jogging shoes and muttered, “Oh, that stuff.”

And I felt I may have embarrassed her.

But she stiffened, locked her eagle eyes into mine, and said, “Are you a writer?”

I shuffled my feet in the yellow leaves and said, “Sometimes.”

“Then come on over some afternoon. And Tracey? You too. I’ll give you lessons. We shall write sonnets. One a day.”

We thanked her and I said, “We’d love to.”

And we quickly went on our way.

It wasn’t until a few days after Thanksgiving before we walked across our alley for a visit. I didn’t feel ready. I had seldom pretended to be a writer before. And I had never written a sonnet.

Brenda had phoned us on the Saturday after Thanksgiving, at the same moment I was awakening from a dream about a sonnet I had recently written to her.

Tracey had been up for hours and was in the living room. She answered the phone. It was already afternoon. I heard Tracey sing out, “He would love to talk with you.”

And right away I knew it was Brenda who was on the phone.

I leaned into the living room at about a 45-degree angle, my right hand extended straight out before me. Tracey’s wide smile and blushing face confirmed my premonition. She nodded and gave me the phone.

I said, “Brenda?”

She said, “Paul?”

Our voices sounded like train cars coupling.

Before I could form another word, she was perking like a coffee pot about the letter and sonnet I had delivered to her home Thanksgiving morning, before she had been up and about.

Brenda explained how she had been unable to call us during the past two days. She said she wanted to be my writing coach. She wanted to meet with me. I asked her when.

She said, “Three-thirty. You and Tracey.”

My mind was mush. Tracey and I had been up until three in the morning with two friends and had too much to drink.

I wanted aspirin, coffee and said to Tracey, “I must get ready.”

I thought about how to present myself. Except for that one brief encounter in our alley almost a month ago, she had not before or since seen either of us.

Brenda knew nothing about the serendipity that had brought us together. Except for my expression of admiration in the letter and sonnet I had placed in her mailbox on Thanksgiving Day.

During the week before Thanksgiving I must have written ten versions of a sonnet expressing how I admired her life and how she wrote about it. I couldn’t choose which one I liked best. I hate those choices. I finally narrowed it down to two and held off deciding which one I would present until Thanksgiving Day.

She received the first version. At the time I thought it was the best. They were all pretty much the same. And yet, after looking at them longer, I now wish I had sent her the second version, instead. And maybe the others, too. This is the one she actually read:

To Brenda

When last we met walking in our alley,
I was a stranger who said, “I know you.”
You then said to neighbors Tracey and me,
“We shall write sonnets!” (as if dreams come true).

I met you first upon Patricia’s words:
Poetic praise for your clear melodies
Sung as remembrances, now in me heard
As hymns praising our heartfelt rhapsodies.

As melody moves measure to measure,
So too your true words, singing page to page
About adventure and hidden treasure
Within all spirits, no matter what age.

If this Thanksgiving song brightens your cheer,
Then thanks be to God for bringing us near.

How would I best present myself to Brenda? I wanted to be receptive, relaxed, charming. I wanted to be warm, wise, refreshing. But I hardly had time to shower.

I couldn't help recall something I had recently written about how I was once called upon to give a speech to my classmates on one morning in the high school auditorium:

> We had all been up the entire night, mostly writing campaign slogans on brightly colored posters for the senior class presidential election, and before we had succumbed to the ether scent of our Magic Markers, before the dawning of what would be the long-awaited election day, Mike Daggett asked me if I would give a speech before the election, for my friend Mart who was one of the two candidates for president. I felt honored and could not decline.
>
> After a short snooze it was suddenly morning, and we all, about one-hundred-eighty of us, sat groggy in the dark cavern of the school auditorium. The candidates, Mart and Don, they sat on the harshly lighted stage with their campaign managers.
>
> Mike, Mart's campaign manager, moved to the lectern and adjusted the microphone. Then the loudspeakers blared, "Paul Johnson will now give a speech on behalf of Mart Aldre."
>
> I felt numb. Dumb. My mind was more rumpled than my clothing. I hadn't thought about what I would say.
>
> I was afraid, angry. And my classmates were waiting.
>
> With my stinking shirt untucked, I dragged my body up toward the stage.
>
> Then, upon the stage, I stalled by pretending to have a problem adjusting the microphone, squinting into the spotlight, praying to be persuasive, to show them all how Mart was the best of friends and must be the best

choice for president, even though most of us admired Don, too.

But I wasn't ready. I felt as though I were about to give a choir solo and didn't have a single word of the song in my head. Not even someone at a piano to help me begin singing. I had no note card. Nothing.

As I prepared to go over to Brenda's home with Tracey, about all I desired was to simply *be* with Brenda, in the same place. To just sit with her and feel at one together. The way I feel when I am reading her books. She had already given me so much through her books. She was a giver of treasures. I could only give my gratitude, which she already had.

I wanted our conversation to move as naturally as lake breezes. I feared I might not be honest; that I would start reaching for thoughts beyond myself, too far above who I am. With Brenda, as with Tracey, I wanted to be who I am. No lies. Avoid exaggeration. Avoid attempts at profundity. I wanted to feel in conversation with Brenda as friends do; that as we gave our honest thoughts and feelings, we would, as friends do, separate wheat from chaff, and then, as a poet once wrote, gently blow the chaff from our palms.

A gray-haired woman met us at Brenda's front door. Her eyes and smile showed us we were welcome.

She introduced herself as Brenda's daughter, Gaby, and led us toward the rear of the two-story house, past antique furniture, walls of old books and large portraits, through a dining room door where she stopped, turned, extended her arm toward a steep, narrow staircase and said, "Go on up. She's waiting for you. Turn right up there and go on back to her bedroom."

Brenda was sitting on the edge of her bed, her handle-barred walker in front of her. Sunlight cut through the narrow north and west windows. A green, heart-shaped lamp lighted her pillow.

Through the back window I could see across the alley to our apartment windows.

A small, straight-backed chair was beside her bed, near her knees. She was wearing a dark rose gown and her jogging shoes.

I held her hand for a moment when she extended it to me. She was radiant, regal.

She told us to pull over another small chair, insisting we both sit close to her, but the two chairs would not fit side-by-side, so Tracey sat a bit behind me. This was not a good start. I wanted to be able to see Tracey's eyes, to calm me and keep me honest.

Brenda's face was fierce. Something between a pirate's and an eagle's. Her nose, long, beaked, and narrow. Her light-brown eyes alert, focused, intense. When I looked straight into them they reminded me of the deep pot holes sunk in glacial rock up near Taylor's Falls.

I wanted to spend a moment looking about the room, at the many portraits and old photographs hanging from the light green walls. But Brenda was crackling out her gratitude for the thoughts expressed in my letter and sonnet. Mostly about the letter, I think. And she was objecting to some of the compliments I gave her in my letter.

Still nervous and adjusting our chairs and wary of the cat sitting beside me, upon her bed, I interrupted her and asked her the cat's name.

She said, "Duster."

Duster had large patches of long black and white hair and round eyes in a round head that he kept close to the gray and burgundy bedspread.

Brenda said Duster was once an Egyptian pharaoh. I couldn't doubt that. I wanted to pet Duster but cats sometimes want you to wait awhile before you pet them. At least mine always have.

Brenda went back to talking about my letter I had written to her and said something about understatement.

I said "What?"

She shot back loudly, "Understatement!"

I didn't understand what she meant, and, flustered and nervous, I didn't want to start things off with confusion. I swear, if she had a ruler in her hand, she might have leaned forward and smacked me upon my knees.

It bothered me how she may have discovered that when I express my feelings about someone, I've a tendency to exaggerate. Sometimes transforming the power of light-hearted fabrication into the poison of exaggeration. But I had not exaggerated. I had been careful about that. Perhaps she was suggesting I had understated my praise.

So I asked her why she showed me a look suggesting humility, almost modesty, for what she wrote in her books.

She would have none of that. Insisted.

She said, "I don't have as much regard for humility and modesty as I do for letting it be known that I'm special. Although the recent republication of my books has brought me a spurious fame, I'm still proud to have written them."

She asked us if we would like to have a drink. She said she had a bar in another room.

"The house drink is Manhattans."

My head was still suffering from too much to drink during the previous night. My stomach felt as if it were a volcano I dared not provoke.

I declined for both Tracey and myself. It probably would have been considerate had I asked her if she wanted me to fix her a Manhattan.

While we continued to talk I felt the frustration I often feel when I'm involved in conversation about writing. I'm not sure what I can compare it to. It's just that there is so much to discuss. So much to taste, chew, digest. It's much like beginning a Thanksgiving dinner.

She told me that as her writing student my first lesson would be on the subject of making choices.

She said she would give me something she had written on the subject.

I said to myself, "Ahh-ha! Great! I can say something smart about that!"

As if I were a rookie member of a wine tasting club who had just learned how to use words for describing wine. Words like *fruity* and *nose* and *impertinent*. So I launched into a lecture about something Henry James once wrote on the subject of making choices.

Was I succumbing to my desire to both please and impress? Sure. But I was telling myself I wanted to share something and let her know I felt the subject of making choices was at the heart of art.

So I said, "Henry James believed that art is simply the process of making choices."

Her silver eyebrows arched in response to the word *simply*.

Using my teacher voice I said, "James believed that whenever we're engaged in selecting something, say spices, or maybe material for making a dress, or colors,

notes for a melody, words for a poem or a letter, we're involved in art or at least being artis . . ."

"Science!" she interrupted.

It sounded as if she had shouted "Silence!"

I squeezed my hands together. And we sat there, silent.

Waving her long fingers over her head Brenda said, "What does he say about inspiration . . . or imagination? Without inspiration or imagination there is no art."

I became more inclined to listen.

We heard her speak about some of the ideas she expressed in her books. She talked about form in poetry and painting, about how so many writers and painters today are not what writers and painters were in the nineteenth century.

I was having less to say and feeling much better.

She said Fitzgerald was a wizard with words but not a great man. And "Hemingway was also good with words but was not as good with God's creatures. Too much killing."

She talked about abstract art. How she could not warm up to it. And she spoke glowingly about a statue of a woman holding a child in Lakewood Cemetery.

She said, "The sculptor got the woman's lips just right."

Then she gave me advice about writing honestly:

"When you write, spew your words all over the page. Be daring and rollicking. Then sometime later, write about it all again. But, when you're writing it again, don't be alarmed if you discover you're writing less and less. You are probably writing truer and truer. If you try to write truthfully, your writing will be more eloquent than if you try to write eloquently."

Brenda spoke about her religious beliefs, about how she is a Unitarian, yet not too comfortable with them. About how she respects Catholics. About a mouse and a centipede, "Each important."

And how she was struck with horror upon learning that a baboon had been slain so that a child might live longer.

And about reincarnation. How some of us have mysteriously lived more lives than other humans or creatures. "Some of us are in fourth grade while others are in first or sixth. We are all in school."

And about how God is a person. "We cannot love an abstraction."

It was too much to digest in one visit.

Then she gave us "Lesson Number One," an essay she had written on the subject of making choices, and asked if we had brought something for her to read.

We offered her a few of my poems and a prized piece Tracey had written about a person she works with at the Star Tribune newspaper.

She told us to put them on the bed, which was covered with stacks of books and cardboard boxes containing some typed and handwritten things. It was from one of the boxes that she produced her essay on choices.

I apologized that my stuff did not have much form. I was glad that at least a few lines rhymed.

As we stood up to put on our coats, she asked if I had written anything about my family. I had something with me in my journal I had written about my father and she asked me to read it to her:

> We had just finished another dinner featuring Mom's thick beef stew and our exaggerations of our day's triumphs. And after we finished doing the dishes together, Dad was the only one sitting in our living room. I'm not sure where Sue, Sylvia, Rick, Larry, and Mom had all gone to in the house. Most of us did our homework in our bedrooms.
>
> Resting my elbows upon the top of the wide back of his leather chair, I looked over his shoulder at what he was reading. I don't remember what it was. It could have been the newspaper or a novel. It was before Sputnik, before we started subscribing to *Newsweek*. Before he started reading those Thomas Wolfe novels.
>
> It doesn't matter. What I remember is how he smelled: a blend of the oil from his dark porous skin, aftershave, Lucky Strike tobacco, and cigarette smoke. He was the smell of a man.
>
> I admired his thick neck and his wide shoulders. His righteous jaw, his full lips, his noble nose and brow. His clear sky-blue eyes showed a lazy gaze of meditation. They were the barometer of his moods.

He had loosened the collar of his white shirt and had thrown off his size-twelve shoes, and was reading.

All I wanted, leaning over behind him at his shoulder, next to the warmth of the radiator and lamplight, was to remain close to him. We enjoyed being together.

I was fourteen and just starting what would be a seven-year war with him, remembered now more for the many truces than the short blazing battles.

Our first battles were about time. I had stopped going to bed at nine. Not because he was now letting me stay up late. It was because I was beginning to defy him. I was now sometimes going out after dinner and not getting home until after he had gone to bed.

I was his oldest child. His "number-one son." But now, when he came into my bedroom to shut off the lights and say good night, he no longer knew if I would be there in bed, waiting for him to share our short prayer.

Instead, as he once admitted to me years later, I was then compelling him to remember when he was a happy high school kid.

I had made plans this night to leave right after dishes and burning the trash. I had been eager to walk up the alley and join my best friend, Mart.

What makes this all so vivid to me is the long reluctance I felt and the desire to linger, leaning my arms on the back of his chair, looking over his shoulder, smelling his scent, gazing upon the black hair bearding the edge of the back of his hands. Hands that once helped me understand multiplication tables, spelling words, and the joy that can be brought from a piano keyboard. Hands that gave meaning to the words *sensitive, creative,* and *calm.* Clean, compact hands.

In that moment I didn't want to go anywhere, didn't want to leave him that

> night. It was the first time I remember feeling that way. Perhaps that's why I remember it.
>
> And why I remember in a moment later, outside, in the glow of the winter night air, while walking up the snow-packed grade of the alley, while walking to Mart's house, a biting regret. A bite in the soft part of the back of my mouth, as acrid as the taste of smoking alley trash cans.
>
> As I walked I thought upon his death to come, pondered its inevitability, and felt the pinch of the thought in the back of my mouth, felt a sting in my forehead, and felt it spread between my eyes.
>
> I now remember despising myself for thinking about this. And in that moment, so damned proud to be his son, to be able to say to my friends, "He's my father."

The reading done, Brenda said, "Don't change it; not a word."

I doubt I'd have changed it regardless of what she might have suggested. But I would hear her the next time I worked with words.

After Tracey and I said good night and while we walked across the alley to our apartment, I thought about something Brenda had said earlier: "Let it all flow out naturally. Let it come from your center. Don't research or prepare."

And it struck me . . . that's how it happened when I stood there upon my high school's spot-lit stage, afraid, and unprepared to speak.

When I turned to my friend Mart, wanting to apologize for not having prepared a campaign speech about him, it was as if an angel softly whispered to me, "Tell him."

As if the angel said, "Tell Mart how important he is to you. Tell him by telling them how he helped you be a better person. Tell your classmates how he helped your friends. Tell about how he worked to save the high school YMCA club when it was in financial trouble. Tell your classmates about how he has made a difference in our lives. Do it from your heart. Now."

I did. And as I was telling them, I felt released from my anger and anxieties for my failure to prepare a speech.

As I gave my speech to my classmates, I saw through the glare of the spotlight upon me, I saw in their eyes an understanding and appreciation for who Mart was to me and to them.

Most of them would vote for Don. But as I gave them my speech about Mart, we all began to know more. We all had more of a sense for how we felt about my friend.

I thanked God I had not prepared a speech that would have been simply filled with high sounding slogans for their ears. Instead, I gave my classmates a truth for their hearts, my truth about Mart.

I can't explain how it happened, or how happy I was that it did. I certainly was much too tired to claim I was thinking fast on my feet.

The best explanation I can give is that perhaps I was blessed that morning by an angel. Perhaps by the spirit of Mart's father, whose flesh and bones we saw buried earlier that week. Maybe I was inspired by the courage Mart displayed as he faced his father's death.

The speech I gave them was for me a miracle, a miracle of our friendship, a miracle of the magnitude of our friendship.

As Tracey and I walked back to our apartment we talked about our first visit with Brenda, and we doubted that I would ever again go to Brenda's home asking myself, "How shall I begin?"

That night I had a dream that brought me awake.

I got up and walked into the other room to the ironing board. Upon its surface was my journal and pen:

> Awakened by a dream, I now stand here at the ironing board, trying to show on paper how my nocturnal imagination brought me here. As this pen moves too slowly across this page, my dream's images turn to white faster than I can write, and wash toward the sound of bubbling drains in the soft 4:00 a.m. rain.
>
> It's still Brenda whom I think upon, who's come into sight brighter than my bathroom light switched on tonight. It was you, Emily, who said,

Tell all the truth but tell it slant.
Success in circuit lies.
Too bright for our infirm delight
The Truth's superb surprise.

If ever there was a bearer of truth brought into my life, I swear it's Brenda. Now let's see if I can tuck away this dream and be back to bed.

I dreamed I was standing naked inside a glass house. A Christmas tree, undecorated, stood over in a corner. And a window was wide open in this house that was itself all windows.

Then I saw Mom drive up to the house in her car. So I dropped flat upon my stomach and crawled under the Christmas tree, feeling as if I were hiding someone else, another me.

As Mom was stepping through the open window, I swayed up toward her, feeling outraged, and drove her out upon the yard.

Suddenly I awakened, feeling shamed, soon realizing I cannot keep myself a secret to my mother . . . . I, who was once her Great Secret.

Then, perhaps half awake, perhaps half adream, I thought about Brenda, who writes with ink as clear as spring water. Thought about how she admires clear people, honesty, kindness, her father. And thought about how we are all spring-fed ponds. Some of us, too few, sometimes remain still long enough to let particles of dirt settle, so that others may then see down into us before we stir again and muddy up the whole works.

To me Brenda is a spring-fed pond, a pond with calm still water along the quiet curves of her shoreline. She has invited me to drink her clear visions. She has let me see into her,

straight down to her bed of silt.

> Brenda knows the silt is there in each of us. "Be still," she says, "and it will settle. Accept it. Let it be. Let it fall. Be not ashamed of the dirt in your water. We are each both dirt and water. Let us allow the dirt to settle to the bottom, so our friends and family may dip a cupped palm and drink confidently and freely, knowing we are sharing the best we can be."
>
> Thank you, Brenda. The rain is prancing upon window panes, upon the soft yellow leaves spicing autumn lawns, sidewalks, streets, and alleys. I'll have a drink of water . . . and go back to sleep.

Brenda phoned me several days later. She said she had enjoyed what Tracey and I had given her to read and wanted to meet again.

She laughed and said, "I'm feeling so good if I felt any better you'd have to visit me in jail. If you ever need bail, send up a flare."

I was thrilled by her offer of friendship and by the prospect of being again in the same room with her.

We hurried across the alley with a beautifully bound book of Emily Dickinson's poetry.

After I had mixed us all some sweet Manhattans, I read the comments Brenda had written along the margins of my poems. She wanted to talk about the one I had titled "To Aunt Helen, For Ever and Ever." I was afraid of that. The poem contained a vulgar four-letter word, right in the middle, and she had circled it.

She said, "This poem has an endearing title and it's about the mystery of death and regeneration. It's about my next great adventure. It's addressed to your father's sister, to a beloved relative. It's a result of your imagination and transcendental inspiration. So why did you spit on your poem with this ugly word? I know you're expressing that we all eventually become compost. A democratic and poetic thought. But you must always remember that poetry's like music, it's not only for truth, it's for beauty. That word is not beautiful. You can find a better word than that. When I see modern writers use it, especially when it doesn't fit into the context, I feel sad for

them. They just don't seem to know any better. Think about it . . . as a suggestion."

Brenda asked me if I had written anything about my mother.

I was afraid to show her that recent journal entry about my dream. So instead, I pulled out a short piece describing how Mom and I had worked together one night until midnight to somehow put together my sixth-grade autobiography.

I told Brenda, "One of my mother's friends wasn't impressed by the piece and said it was flat."

When I finished reading it to Brenda she said that the sketch idealized my mother.

Brenda reminded me that while we all have our virtues, we also carry our faults.

She said, "We are, each one of us, paradoxes, contradictions. As much as I'm a pacifist, there's always been something about a sword that I admire. I suggest you show your reader some of your mother's human qualities; some of her faults, foibles, frailties. Show her as three-dimensional."

For several days later I put it off. Didn't write a thing for days. I couldn't bring myself to dwell upon Mom's faults or foibles. God knows she has her share. But must I write about them?

She was always ideal to me, adventurous, unconventional. Sometimes on special spring days she would let my brother Larry and me play hooky from school with her, and take us down to the banks of a wooded stream, where we floated paper boats and bombard them with pebbles.

On winter mornings when temperatures were twenty below zero and we couldn't see through our frosted windows, she would keep us home from school and we'd begin the morning drawing or painting, and move on to making paper castles. By around noon we'd be launching loud invasions upon "the Kingdom of the Persian Carpet" with our armies of buttons and fleets of Popsicle sticks.

One spring morning we sat together upon a green knoll overlooking Lake Harriet, clutching old photograph negatives, while anticipating the moment we would hold them before our eyes, and see, for the first time, something called an eclipse of the sun.

Though I would fly kites with my father, help him change a flat tire, gaze upon his smiling Santa lips while

he shaved white foam from his face, and skip to his rolling laugh and outstretched arms when he came home at sundown, my mother was my sun in the springtime of my days, and she held me in the orbits of my play.

She was Wendy, while I, being Peter Pan, attacked pirates and crocodiles in our Never Land.

As I eventually stepped past the castles of my childhood and boarded the boat heading out toward Life's high seas, I always knew her port was a good place to return and rest concerns about things I doubted in Sunday school, problems with friends, and later, problems with girls.

She would help me make repairs and see me off singing, sails full, on my way toward a place my father called Manhood. While I always seemed to be drawing closer to my father, I was, from my beginning, a part of her.

> December 16, 1984: For whatever reasons, mysterious or clear, it's easy to write about my father's faults. I somehow accepted them. Maybe it's because he died when he was only 45. I have been able to understand and forgive his occasional infidelity to his wife, my mother. I respected and forgave his self-righteous wrath whenever I fell below his high standards, standards that often seemed higher for me than for my younger brothers and sisters. I accepted his dominating will, even when I fought to make my will prevail. I feared and forgave his death-wish behavior, often manifested in the way he recklessly drove his sports cars.
>
> Whatever faults my father displayed to me, no matter how angry we became, no matter how many spankings or loud fights, no matter how much he embarrassed me in restaurants with his loud laugh and his ability to make a waitress blush, we both always knew we loved each other. He was essentially kind and never afraid to show his gentle ways. His faults had always been in front of me to see for as far back as I could remember him in the careless happy

childhood he made possible for me.

It was not until they divorced, when I was around age 23 and married, that I began to spot a flaw or two in my mother. Oh, we all knew she had a few. She was a terrible housekeeper. I hated to bring friends over for fear they would learn what slobs we were.

All I can remember about her cooking are the parakeet portions of the burned hamburgers, stale potato chips, the soggy fish sticks, leather beef stews, and bland hot dishes. After such dinners Dad would exclaim, "That was great! What there was of it." And then at around midnight Dad and my brothers and sisters would all secretly meet in the kitchen for junk-food treats, and quietly joke about what she might try to make for our next dinner. It never occurred to us that the time we spent in the kitchen at midnight could have been better spent around five in the afternoon helping Mom prepare the dinners.

Housekeeping wasn't important to her. Her zest for life was important to her. And her life was, and still is to a great extent, serving children. Sometimes she would create a day school for toddlers, as she did a few years ago around age 65. Sometimes she taught kindergarten. Sometimes she taught deaf children how to read. Or she works for the Humane Society and shows children how to properly care for their pets.

It wasn't until my mother and father divorced that I became aware of increasingly serious problems: her constant need to acquire more and more furniture; her need to increasingly possess her children whenever she learned about enjoyable moments they spent with their father; her inability to stay in one dwelling or one job for more than what seemed brief moments, and, perhaps worst of all, her long droning stories that always went relentlessly on and on about the tedious

details within what seemed to be every detail within every occurrence within every day since last we met.

By the time I was 25 and had joined the Air Force, Mom and I seemed to have lost our desire to ask each other questions or listen to our answers to questions whenever we were in a conversation. I was still feeling the grief and anger and pain of my father's death, and was now knowing a growing ache, a growing sensation of alienation from my mother. She had always had a few faults, but never it seemed the ones I recount now.

As I think about us now, the problem, it seems, is that I never wanted Mom to change. I wanted her to always remain the same. To be like Lake Harriet and the library, to be a sanctuary, a place where I could always go to find the spent passions of my lost boyhood. I wanted her to be forever Wendy.

I've refused to let her be simply a human person, let her change; almost not allowed her to feel or express pain. Sometimes complained that she sees me only as her little boy. If I were honest, however, I'd admit that when I'm with her, Peter Pan's about all I want to be. The other self, the adult in me, is too dull and spiritless for one as wonderful as Wendy.

She now lives on an island. Near Seattle. Our most recent conversations have actually been conversations. We're growing, after twenty years, closer.

Not long ago she wrote a poignant poem and she gave it to me:

What's my name?
Mary Jane, puddin and tain.
Ask me again, I'll tell you the same.

A childish game?
I'm not wearing a mask. So why do you ask?

Who am I? I'm a twinkle of a star,
The green of grass, blue of sky.
One day a bird. One day a fly. I'm I.

Now you need not ask
Why I don't wear a mask.

What am I? I'm a girl. I whirl and twirl.
I'm songs and dance, pretty and slim,
On a whim.
Coy and naive, wear my heart on my sleeve.

Now that you ask, yes,
Sometimes, I wear a mask.

What did I do?
I'm the lady who lived in the shoe.
Had so many children
I didn't know what to do.
A teacher, a mother, a wife.
I loved. Led a full life.
If you must ask -
I was too busy to wear a mask.

Where am I from?
From Nowhere and Everywhere:
A happy/unhappy home,
Society, propriety, desertion,
Disillusion, death, confusion.
And if you persist to ask, yes, I wore a mask.

All my feelings I tried to hide.

What will I do? I'll be happy and free. Me.
Just made up my mind.
There's not much to it.
Just to do it.
So, go ahead. Ask. I took off my mask.

No more questions? What a surprise!
Do I know you? What's your disguise?

> Must she stop being Wendy? Must I just be me? Will I ever see and accept her as who she must be? Does this sound like a soap opera?
>
> Now, as I sit here pondering her human qualities, I'm trying to accept her as a person who grows and knows new destinies. And I now know better how important she is to me. She's actually, in many ways, no different than Brenda. My mother is treasure given to me and yet also a treasure to rediscover continually.
>
> I'll bring this to Brenda. Or has she brought this to me?

About a week before Christmas, I asked Brenda to autograph a copy of her autobiography. Told her I wanted to give it to my mother as a Christmas present. Their spirits seem so much alike.

Brenda, reclined upon her bed, her shoulders propped up by pillows, adjusted her reading glasses on the tip of her long nose, opened the cover of her autobiography, reached for her pen on the lamp table, lowered her sharp chin, and peered at me over the frames of her eyeglasses. Her eyes played from my face to the page, back and forth. I felt as if I were posing for a portrait.

She put the end of her pen between her lips and smiled the smile of a child eager to give away a secret. Then she puckered her lips and began to write.

Brenda didn't seem to write line-by-line. It seemed as though she placed each word on the page as carefully and as deliberately as a child piles building blocks. One block at a time.

She'd write a word and bring her pen back to her lips; write a word and touch the pen to her nose; write a word, maybe two or three, then hold her pen to her cheek.

As she continued to move her pen from face to page and back again, it seemed as though her pen became a paint brush moving from palette to canvas. She held her pen in the manner an artist holds a brush, and moved it with short, deft strokes.

When she finished, she turned her face and the page toward the northern window light, and looked at her words like a painter stepping back from a canvas.

She said, “There. Let me read it to you.”

Dear Mary Jane,

Paul loves you astonishingly.
A rare, transcendental sign.

I have a good prayer:
Give me flawless courage,
wild, reckless generosity,
and a light heart.

Say out loud three times a day.

Merry Christmas,
Brenda Ueland

I then said to Brenda, “My mother will love what you wrote.”

“It is a wonderful prayer, Paul. Courage comes from love, and so does generosity. And when you give away your last nickel, Paul, you're going to need a light heart.”

When I pray I say her prayer, sometimes adding a few words. I’m never able to leave things well enough alone.

Sometimes, when praying seems difficult to do, I say to God that we are all spring-fed ponds, dirt and water, each blessed with serendipity. Help Tracey, friends, family and me dip our cupped hands confidently, trusting we share the best we can be. Thanks for the treasure and beauty of Brenda. May her spirit forever flower, and may she always be friend and neighbor to all.

And now to you, my dear reader, good night, sleep warm, and pleasant dreams.