



# Naperville North High School

## AP Language & Composition Summer Reading Assignment

Welcome, future AP students! We are all very excited to meet you and to begin our exploration of language and literature. We're sure that you are JUST as excited to begin your journey! All AP Language teachers request that you complete the following assignment over the summer and be prepared to discuss the texts at the start of the semester.

Read closely and **annotate the selected essays** from the [memoir/biography \*One Long River of Song\* by Brian Doyle](#). Copies of the essay packet are outside of the Communication Arts department and/or have been distributed in your Communication Arts classes.

**Annotation** is simply noting words on the page that strike you, phrases that confuse or thrill you, or places where you want to talk back to the speaker or [author]. Your goal is to record ideas and impressions for future analysis. Why bother to do this? Here's what well-known scholar and avid reader Mortimer Adler says in *How to Read a Book*:

Why is marking up a [text] indispensable to reading? First, it keeps you awake. (And I don't mean merely conscious; I mean awake.) In the second place, reading, if it is active, is thinking, and thinking tends to express itself in words, spoken or written. The marked [text] is usually the thought-through book. Finally, writing helps you remember the thought you had, or the thoughts the author expressed.

So whether you use sticky notes, highlight passages, or write comments directly in the margins, annotation helps you become a better reader. There are no hard-and-fast rules for annotating properly, but the following approach is a good way to get started.

**\*Through your first reading, circle or highlight words or phrases that are interesting or unfamiliar, as well as any language choices that stand out to you. Note in the margins or on a sticky note why you are circling or highlighting these words. If you just circle, or just highlight, you will soon forget why you did so. Note words that stand out for their beauty or oddity as well as words you need to look up. Don't hesitate to make an educated guess at their meaning. --*Language of Literature* Shea, Scanlon, Aufses**

| <i>One Long River of Song</i> (Essays by Brian Doyle)<br>Read the twelve essays and perform a first read annotation for each essay. |                                     |
|---|-------------------------------------|
| 1. "Joyas Voladoras"  | 7. "The Greatest Nature Essay Ever" |
| 2. "Leap"   | 8. "Lost Dog Creek"                 |
| 3. "[Silence]"  | 9. "Dawn and Mary"                  |
| 4. "The Old Typewriter in the Basement"   | 10. "His Listening*"                |
| 5. "Brian Doyle Interviews Brian Doyle"   | 11. "The Tender Next Minute"        |
| 6. "The Way We Do Not Say What We Mean When We Say What We Say"   | 12. "Heartchitecture"               |

**Happy Reading! Happy Summer! We look forward to meeting you in the fall!**

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## AP Language & Composition Summer Reading Assignment

A playful and moving book  
of essays by a "born storyteller"  
(*Seattle Times*) who invites us  
into the miraculous  
and transcendent moments  
of the everyday

When Brian Doyle passed away at the age of sixty after a bout with brain cancer, he left behind a cultlike following of devoted readers who regard his work as one of the best-kept secrets of the twenty-first century. Doyle writes with a delightful sense of wonder about the sanctity of everyday things, and about love and connection in all their forms: spiritual love, brotherly love, romantic love, and even the love of a nine-foot sturgeon.

At a moment when the world can sometimes feel darker than ever, Doyle's writing, which constantly evokes the humor and even bliss that life affords, is a balm. His essays manage to find, again and again, exquisite beauty in the quotidian, whether it's the awe of a child the first time she hears a river, or the grief of a widow who misses seeing her husband's whiskers in the sink every morning. Through Doyle's eyes, nothing is dull.

David James Duncan sums up Doyle's sensibility best in his foreword to the collection: "Brian Doyle lived the pleasure of hearing daily witness to quiet glories hidden in people, places, and creatures of little or no size, renown, or commercial value, and he brought inimitably playful or soaring or aching or heartfelt language to his tellings." A life's work, *One Long River of Song* invites readers to experience joy and wonder in ordinary moments that become, under Doyle's rapturous and exuberant gaze, extraordinary.

### *Joyas Voladoras*

Consider the hummingbird for a long moment. A hummingbird's heart beats ten times a second. A hummingbird's heart is the size of a pencil eraser. A hummingbird's heart is a lot of the hummingbird. *Joyas voladoras*, flying jewels, the first white explorers in the Americas called them, and the white men had never seen such creatures, for hummingbirds came into the world only in the Americas, nowhere else in the universe, more than three hundred species of them whirring and zooming and nectaring in hummer time zones nine times removed from ours, their hearts hammering faster than we could clearly hear if we pressed our elephantine ears to their infinitesimal chests.

Each one visits a thousand flowers a day. They can dive at sixty miles an hour. They can fly backward. They can fly more than five hundred miles without pausing to rest. But when they rest they come close to death: on frigid nights, or when they are starving, they retreat into torpor, their metabolic rate slowing to a fifteenth of their normal sleep rate, their hearts sludging nearly to a halt, barely beating, and if they are not soon warmed, if they do not soon find that which is sweet, their hearts grow cold, and they cease to be. Consider for a moment those hummingbirds who did not open their eyes again today, this very day, in the Americas: bearded helmetcrests and booted racket-tails, violet-tailed sylphs and violet-capped woodnymphs, crimson topazes and purple-crowned fairies, red-tailed comets and amethyst woodstars, rainbow-bearded thornbills and glittering-bellied emeralds, velvet-purple coronets and golden-bellied starfrontlets, ferry-tailed awbills and Andean hillstars, spatuletails and pufflegs, each the most amazing

thing you have never seen, each thunderous wild heart the size of an infant's fingernail, each mad heart silent, a brilliant music stilled.

Hummingbirds, like all flying birds but more so, have incredible enormous immense ferocious metabolisms. To drive those metabolisms they have race-car hearts that eat oxygen at an eye-popping rate. Their hearts are built of thinner, leaner fibers than ours. Their arteries are stiffer and more taut. They have more mitochondria in their heart muscles—anything to gulp more oxygen. Their hearts are stripped to the skin for the war against gravity and inertia, the mad search for food, the insane idea of flight. The price of their ambition is a life closer to death; they suffer more heart attacks and aneurysms and ruptures than any other living creature. It's expensive to fly. You burn out. You fry the machine. You melt the engine. Every creature on earth has approximately two billion heartbeats to spend in a lifetime. You can spend them slowly, like a tortoise, and live to be two hundred years old, or you can spend them fast, like a hummingbird, and live to be two years old.

The biggest heart in the world is inside the blue whale. It weighs more than seven tons. It's as big as a room. It is a small room, with four chambers. A child could walk around in it, head high, bending only to step through the valves. The valves are as big as the swinging doors in a saloon. This house of a heart drives a creature a hundred feet long. When this creature is born it is twenty feet long and weighs four tons. It is waaaaay bigger than your car. It drinks a hundred gallons of milk from its mama every day and gains two hundred pounds a day, and when it is seven or eight years old it endures an unimaginable puberty and then it essentially disappears from human ken, for next to nothing is known of the mating habits, travel patterns, diet, social life, language, social structure, diseases, spirituality, wars, stories, despairs, and arts of the blue whale. There are perhaps ten thousand blue whales in the world, living in every ocean on earth, and of the largest animal who ever lived we know nearly nothing. But we know this: the animals with the largest hearts in the world generally travel in pairs, and their penetrating moaning cries, their piercing yearning tongue, can be heard underwater for miles and miles.

Mammals and birds have hearts with four chambers. Reptiles and turtles have hearts with three chambers. Fish have hearts with two chambers. Insects and mollusks have hearts with one chamber. Worms have hearts with one chamber, although they may have as many as eleven single-chambered hearts. Unicellular bacteria have no hearts at all; but even they have fluid eternally in motion, washing from one side of the cell to the other, swirling and whirling. No living being is without interior liquid motion. We all churn inside.

So much held in a heart in a lifetime. So much held in a heart in a day, an hour, a moment. We are utterly open with no one in the end—not mother and father, not wife or husband, not lover, not child, not friend. We open windows to each but we live alone in the house of the heart. Perhaps we must. Perhaps we could not bear to be so naked, for fear of a constantly harrowed heart. When young we think there will come one person who will savor and sustain us always; when we are older we know this is the dream of a child, that all hearts finally are bruised and scarred, scored and torn, repaired by time and will, patched by force of character, yet fragile and rickety forevermore, no matter how ferocious the defense and how many bricks you bring to the wall. You can brick up your heart as stout and tight and hard and cold and impregnable as you possibly can and down it comes in an instant, felled by a woman's second glance, a child's apple breath, the shatter of glass in the road, the words *I have something to tell you*, a cat with a broken spine dragging itself into the forest to die, the brush of your mother's papery ancient hand in the thicker of your hair, the memory of your father's voice early in the morning echoing from the kitchen where he is making pancakes for his children.

## Leap

A couple leaped from the South Tower, hand in hand. They reached for each other and their hands met and they jumped.

Jennifer Brickhouse saw them falling, hand in hand.

Many people jumped. Perhaps hundreds. No one knows. They struck the pavement with such force that there was a pink mist in the air.

The mayor reported the mist.

A kindergarten boy who saw people falling in flames told his teacher that the birds were on fire. She ran with him on her shoulders out of the ashes.

Tiffany Keeling saw fireballs falling that she later realized were people. Jennifer Griffin saw people falling and wept as she told the story. Niko Winstral saw people free-falling backward with their hands out, like they were parachuting. Joe Duncan on his roof on Duane Street looked up and saw people jumping. Henry Weintraub saw people "leaping as they flew out." John Carson saw six people fall, "falling over themselves, falling, they were somersaulting." Steve Miller saw people jumping from a thousand feet in the air. Kirk Kjeldsen saw people falling on the way down, people lining up and jumping, "too many people falling." Jane Tedder saw people leaping and the sight haunts her at night. Steve Tarnas counted

fourteen people jumping and then he stopped counting. Stuart DeHann saw one woman's dress billowing as she fell, and he saw a shirtless man falling end over end, and he too saw the couple leaping hand in hand.

Several pedestrians were killed by people falling from the sky. A fireman was killed by a body falling from the sky.

But he reached for her hand and she reached for his hand and they leaped out the window holding hands.

I try to whisper prayers for the sudden dead and the harrowed families of the dead and the screaming souls of the murderers but I keep coming back to his hand and her hand nestled in each other with such extraordinary ordinary succinct ancient naked stunning perfect simple ferocious love.

Their hands reaching and joining are the most powerful prayer I can imagine, the most eloquent, the most graceful. It is everything that we are capable of against horror and loss and death. It is what makes me believe that we are not craven fools and charlatans to believe in God, to believe that human beings have greatness and holiness within them like seeds that open only under great fires, to believe that some unimaginable essence of who we are persists past the dissolution of what we were, to believe against such evil hourly evidence that love is why we are here.

No one knows who they were: husband and wife, lovers, dear friends, colleagues, strangers thrown together at the window there at the lip of hell. Maybe they didn't even reach for each other consciously, maybe it was instinctive, a reflex, as they both decided at the same time to take two running steps and jump out the shattered window, but they did reach for each other and they held on tight, and leaped, and fell endlessly into the smoking canyon, at two hundred miles an hour, falling so far and so fast that they would have

blackened out before they hit the pavement near Liberty Street so hard that there was a pink mist in the air.

Jennifer Brickhouse saw them holding hands, and Stuart DeHann saw them holding hands, and I hold on to that.

## [Silence]

For several days when we were young, my sister stayed silent. She was perhaps twenty, a student of spirituality. I was thirteen, a student of surliness. She announced that she would be silent for a while and then commenced to be so. My parents were gracious about it. Seems like there's a lot more room in the house now, said my dad. We should applaud and celebrate this form of prayer, said my mom. Coool, my brothers said. Is this permanent?

Eventually my sister spoke again—to yell at me, as I recall—but I never forgot those days. I was reminded of it recently when she emerged from a very long silence at the Buddhist monastery where she now lives, and I asked her what her first words were when she emerged from her silent retreat, and she grinned and said, “Pass the butter,” which I did, which made her laugh, because those actually were her first words after the retreat.

I really wanted that butter, she says.

Is it hard to be silent? I ask.

In the beginning it is, she says. Then it becomes a prayer.

I contemplate snippets of silence in mine existence and find them few; but I find that this delights rather than dismays me, for the chaos and hubbub in my life, most of my sea of sound, are my children, who are small quicksilver russet testy touchy tempestuous mammals always underfoot in the understorey, yowling and howling and weeping and chirping and teasing and shouting and moaning and laughing and singing and screaming and sneering and sassing and humming

and snoring and wheezing and growling and muttering and mumbling and musing and so making magic music all the livelong day. Which is pretty cool; though it will not be permanent.

But sometimes they are silent and I am a student of their silence: my teenage daughter absorbed in book or homework, curled in her chair like a cat in the thicket of her room; my sons asleep, their limbs flung to the four holy directions, their faces beatific, their bedclothes rippled hills and dells, their beds aswarm with socks and shirts and books and balls; or all three children dozing in the back seat of the car as we slide through the velvet night, their faces flashing cinematically in my mirror as streetlights snick by metronomically; or the way they sat together silently before the silent television one crystal morning, four years ago, and watched two flaming towers crumble down down unto unthinkable unimaginable ash and dust. Silently the towers fell, and silently my children watched, the twin scars burning into their brains.

I ask my sister questions:

What did you do when you were silent?

I listened, she says. I listened really hard.

Did you make any noise at all?

Sometimes I found myself humming, she says, but it wasn't any music I'd known before. Which is pretty interesting. Where does music come from that you never heard before?

Good question, I say.

And I found, she says, that it is relatively easy not to talk to other people, but much harder not to talk to animals. Isn't that odd? Why would that be?

Another good question, I say.

We had peacocks and guinea fowl at the monastery, she says, and I was sort of in charge of the birds, which we had for two reasons. The peacocks someone gave us, which we thought was a generous if unusual gift until we had them for a while, and we realized what loud

vain foul mean evil creatures they are, at which point we all thought, *What sort of sick human being would deliberately give a peacock to another human being?* It's a punishment to have peacocks around, they peck and screech at you and make your life miserable, but the guinea fowl, now, they're not mean, no, that's not their problem, their problem is that they are without doubt or debate the most unbelievably stupid creatures ever to walk the earth, so incredibly stupid that you wonder how in heaven's name they ever managed to survive as a species, and the times I really *really* wanted to talk had to do with those guinea fowl, who were so mindbogglingly stupid I wanted to shriek. I mean, if they were three feet away from the henhouse, and somehow got turned around so they were facing away from the henhouse, well, rather than have the inclination or imagination to turn back around, they'd stand there sobbing and wailing, as if utterly lost in the wilderness. Ye gods. You'd have to physically pick them up and turn them around toward the henhouse. You could almost see the light on their faces as the henhouse reappeared. *There it is again! It's a miracle! Ye gods.*

Let us consider silence as destination, ambition, maturity of mind, focusing device, filter, prism, compass point, necessary refuge, spiritual refreshment, touchstone, lodestar, home, natural and normal state in which let's face it we began our existence in the warm seas of our mothers, all those months when we did not speak, and swam in salt, and dreamed oceanic dreams, and heard the throb and hum of mother, and the murmur and mutter of father, and the distant thrum of a million musics waiting patiently for you to be born.

I rise early and apply myself to my daily reading. Ferman Melville: *All profound things and emotions of things are preceded and amended by Silence, and Silence is the general consecration of the universe.* Thomas Merton: *A man who loves God necessarily loves silence.* Jorge Luis Borges: *Absolute silence is the creative energy and intelligence of eternal being.* Book of Job: *I put my finger to my lips and I will not answer again.* Melville once more, poetically pithy in the

mist of the vast sea of his sentences: *Silence is the only Voice of our God.*

To which I can only say (silently): amen.

It's harder to be silent in summer than in winter, says my sister. It's harder to be silent in the afternoon than in the morning. It's hardest to be silent when eating with others. It's easy to be silent in the bath. It's easy to be silent in the bed. It's easiest to be silent near water, and easiest of all to be silent by the lips of rivers and seas.

The silence of chapels and churches and confessionals and glades and gorges, places that wait for words to be spoken in the caves of their ribs. The split second of silence before two people simultaneously burst into laughter. The pregnant pause. The hot silence of lovemaking. The stifling stifled brooding silence just before a thunderstorm unleashes itself wild on the world. The silence of space, the vast of vista. The crucial silences between notes, without which there could be no music; no yes without no.

I study the silence of my wife. Her silence when upset; a silence I hear all too well after twenty years of listening for it. Her riveted silence in chapel. Her silence rocking children all those thousands of hours in the dark, the curved maple chair murmuring, hum of the heater, rustle of fevered boy resting against the skin of the sea from which he came.

My sister was loud as a teenager, cigarettes and music and shrieking at her brothers, but she gentled as the years went by, and much of my memory of her has to do with her sitting at the table with my mother, the two women talking quietly, the swirl of cigarette smoke circling, their voices quick and amused and circling, the mind of the mother circling the mind of the daughter and vice versa, a form of play, a form of love, a form of literature.

I rise earlier and earlier in these years. I don't know why. Age, sadness, a willingness to epiphany. Something is opening in me, some new eye.

Brian Doyle

I talk less and listen more. Stories wash over me all day like tides. I walk through the bright wet streets and every moment a story comes to me, people hold them out to me like sweet children, and I hold them squirming and holy in my arms, and they enter my heart for a while, and season and salt sweeten that old halting engine and teach me humility and mercy, the only lessons that matter, the lessons of the language I most wish to learn; a tongue best spoken without a word, without a sound, hands clasped, heart naked as a baby.

## The Old Typewriter in the Basement

Once again a student asks me how I became a writer, and this time I say, Because of the staccato staggered music of my dad's old typewriter in the basement. Because when he really got it going you could listen to it like a song. Because after a while you could tell if he was writing a book review or a letter just from the shift and drift of the thrum of the thing. Because it sounded cheerful and businesslike and efficient and workmanlike and true. Because a bell rang when he came to the end of a line, and you could hear him roll sheets of paper in and out of the carriage, and you could imagine him carefully lining up the carbon sheet to the face sheet, and he typed with two fingers faster than anyone we knew could type with ten, and he had the professional journalist's firm confident knowledgeable hammer-stroke with those forefingers, as if those fingers knew perfectly well what they wanted to say and were going about their business with a calm alacrity that you could listen to all day long. Because his typewriter had dozens of deft machined metal parts and they had cool names like *spool* and *platen* and *ribbon*. Because his typewriter was a tall old typewriter that he loved and kept using even when electric typewriters hove into view and tried to vibrate onto his desk. Because if you stared closely at the keys, as I did quite often, you could see which letters he used more than other letters. Because the typewriter was him and he was our hero and we loved him and we wanted to be like him which is why we all learned to type. Because you would daydream of writing a story on his typewriter but you would never actually do so because using his

typewriter would be like driving God's car. Because his typewriter stood proudly in the center of his desk and there were books and magazines and dictionaries and neat stacks of paper and manila folders and newspaper clippings and rulers and erasers and pencils and pens and a jar of rubber cement and not one but two X-acto knives sharper than a falcon's talons, and above his desk was a shelf crowded with dictionaries and catechisms and manuals and other books of all sorts, many of them bristling with bookmarks and scraps of paper marking particular pages or passages of heft and verve and dash and wit. Because when he went downstairs to his desk you could be in any room upstairs even unto the attic and hear the first hesitant strokes as he began typing, and then the sprint and rattle and rollick as he hit his stride, and then an impossibly short pause between the end of one page and the start of another, a break so brief that you could not believe he could whip one sheet out and whirl another in so fast unless you saw it with your own eyes which we did sometimes peeking from the door of the study into which no child was allowed when Dad was typing for fear you would interrupt his thoughts which were no kidding. Putting Food on the Table, you will not under any circumstances interrupt your father when he is in his study, if you are bleeding come upstairs and bleed, and inform me of the cause of bleeding, and if you cannot find me find your sister, and if you cannot find either of us stanch the bleeding with a hand-towel, not a bath-towel, and go next door and ask the neighbors for assistance if necessary. Because he had been typing since he was a boy, and because all the love letters he wrote to our mother when he was far away deep in the tropics in the war were meticulously typed, and the poems he sent were meticulously typed, and because he told me once that he had several times in his thirties tried to rise before dawn to type a novel, even as the house was filled with small children and he was due on the early train to his press job in the city, but he did not have the energy to invent and embroider, and he would fall asleep with his head in his arms on the typewriter, and startle awake after a while, and never finish his novels. But I have written novels, and there are times, many times, when

I think that I have done so in large part because of him and his old typewriter and the sound of his cheerful efficient staccato typing in the basement. Because he is still our hero and we love him and we want to be like him more than ever. Because maybe my novels are somehow the novels he started to write and could not finish. Perhaps somehow I have finished them for him and he startles awake and grins ruefully at his old typewriter and pads upstairs to wake the kids and I am typing these last words with my forefingers and with tears sliding slowly into my beard.

## Brian Doyle Interviews

### Brian Doyle

What writers have affected and afflicted you most?

With awfulness or awe?

Either.

Jesus, make up your mind.

Both.

In English? And awful? Well, there's Jerzy Kosínski, and then there's everyone else. *Blind Date* is a book so bad I couldn't even bring myself to prop up a gimpy table with it. Wouldn't insult the table.

Anyone else?

Jerzy fills my mind to brimming at the moment. My God, the culmination of the book is a murder with an umbrella. Where was the man's editor? Talk about professional negligence. Who was responsible for marketing that book? Where are they hiding? How can they face their children? Or librarians? Or the children of librarians?

You're fixating:

I know, I know, but life's so short, and I blame Kosinski.

For the shortness of life?

Hadn't thought of that, but yes, now that I think about it, why not?

Let's change the subject. How about superb writers?

Writers or books?

Either.

Not again. Piss or get off the pot.

Okay, both, writers first.

Well, Blake, Conrad, Orwell, Twain, Stevenson, I could go on.

Go on.

I can't go on.

You must go on.

I'll go on.

Go on.

Elwyn Brooks White, Li Po, Joyce Cary, Barry Lopez, Bernard DeVoto, John Updike when he's being a literary critic, in which guise he might be the best America ever made, all due respect to Edmund Wilson, who couldn't hold Updike's jock when it comes to literary

essays, and you know, while I am on the subject, I have to say that Updike's *Poorhouse Fair* was a perfect little book, and all his famous novels after that weren't as good.

Heresy.

Yeah, I know. But c'mon. The Rabbit books are Great Novels? No way. *Rabbit Run* is a very good novel and then old Rabbit gets his pecker pulled through three more. Not worth it.

You were talking superb writers.

Frank O'Connor, Patrick Kavanaugh, Wallace Stegner, Raymond Chandler, Halldór Laxness, Tolstoy, Beckett, Czeslaw Milosz, Georges Simenon, Homer. Did you know there is a strain of scholarly thought that says Homer was a brilliant young woman?

No. But you were going on interminably about great writers...

Horace, Gabriel García Márquez, Jorge Amado, J. F. Powers, Seneca, Cervantes of course, Chekhov, Dostoevsky, Edward Hoagland, Tom Stoppard, Andre Dubus, John McPhee, and, my God, I nearly forgot Jorge Luis Borges, one of the greatest writers in history. Nor to mention Plutarch, who might be the greatest writer in history.

No women?

Sweet Lord yes, dozens. Alice Munro, Mary Lavin, Flannery O'Connor, Virginia Woolf, Elizabeth Bishop, Patrician Rogers, Muriel Spark, Margaret Atwood, who wrote one of the best essays I ever read in my life...

Brian Doyle

Which was?

"True North." Oh, God, it's terrific.

Others?

Jan Morris, Jane Austen, Marguerite Yourcenar, George Sand, Isak Dinesen, Eudora Welty, Nuala Ni Dhomhnaill, Nadine Gordimer, Annie Dillard, now we are getting into books, because Annie Dillard is a tremendous essayist but better known and justifiably so I guess as a maker of books. And there are many men like that too, Ken Kesey and Walker Percy spring to mind, who wrote well short, as essayists, but their hats rest on their books. People are always ragging on Kesey for writing crap at the end, and it is crap, but my God, the man wrote two classics, and Percy, who wrote some meandering crap too, wrote *The Moviegoer*, a classic, and a couple of perfect lesser books, like *Love in the Ruins* and *The Thanatos Syndrome*. And who am I to criticize?

Good question. Who are you to criticize?

I'm a small man who writes small essays about small matters.

So who made you god of literary criticism?

Well, first of all, you're the one who drove all the way out here to interview me, the good sweet Lord alone knows why, and second of all, you could say that criticism isn't fair unless you're John Updike or someone, that only another fine writer can accurately judge if a book is good or bad.

Would you say that?

*One Long River of Song*

Nah. It's bullshit.

What would you say?

That readers are very good judges of books read, for the most part. You recall what Samuel Johnson says in his *Life of Gray*.

Ah, no, not right off the top of my head.

"I rejoice to concur with the common reader; for by the common sense of readers, uncorrupted by literary prejudices, after all the refinements of subtlety and the dogmatism of learning, must be generally decided all claim to poetical honours."

That's well said.

Johnson was an eloquent bastard, by all accounts, when he wasn't swilling tea and lurching around London in one of his fics. Or guzzling port at such an alarming rate that Portugal was thinking of taking over the world for a while.

But what did he mean?

That every reader is a judge, and then the years of readers add up after a while, and the Hilaire Bellocs of the world fade and the Stevensons rise, and there, after a while, and with some discounting for fashion, you have a canon of writers who did things of grace and substance.

Are you one of those writers?

Nah. But writers are the worst judges of their work, in some ways.

High hopes?

Wicked high. There's a peculiar hope, or expectation, in writers that they will be able occasionally to make a piece of writing that is shapely, clear, direct, vigorous, witty, substantive, piercing, penetrating, astonishing, pointed, no fat, no posturing, no indulgence, something that matters greatly to the reader, something that pushes the world forward slightly, rather than just being the usual jesting in place and dancing aimlessly for the sake of entertainment in the shapeless void.

Does this happen much?

Nah. Even the best writers slump, stumble, stutter. Consistency itself isn't hard—hell, look at Jerzy Kosinski, he was consistent, all right. But consistent quality? Not even Twain or Stevenson could pull that off. Not even Shakespeare or Homer. Maybe that's why we're so dazzled by the writer who makes one perfect book and then never another word, like Harper Lee. She sure was consistent—every novel she ever made was a masterpiece, and that one novel will be in print forever. Lately I have been thinking this about Frank McCourt. *Angela's Ashes* is near perfect, and 'Tis isn't, and whatever else he writes won't be *Angela's Ashes*. Although, Jesus, what if Stevenson had stopped after *Treasure Island*, and never wrote his essays, or *Kidnapped*? God, what a loss. Great book. Which brings to mind poor Stevenson's *Weir of Hermiston*, half-finished, the poor bastard died in the middle of it.

Speaking of books...

Oh, yes, great books. Well, the King James Bible, of course. You know the poor man who translated the Bible from its original Greek and Hebrew was executed for his pains? God forbid the Bible should

get into the hands of the dirty-necked man in the street. William Tyndale. Guy was a saint.

That's it?

Nah. *Moby-Dick*. *Ulysses*. Cary's *The Horse's Mouth*. Marguerite Yourcenar's *Memoirs of Hadrian*. But, see, even Joyce, a hell of a great writer, wrote some crap. Did you ever read *Chamber Music*? The ravings of a sophomore. Or *Exiles*? Timmy stuff, third-rate summer stock. And *Finnegans Wake*? Listen, I read *Finnegans Wake* at the rate of one page a day for more than a year and when I got to the end I was impressed with the effort, which was herculean and admirable, but the book itself, as narrative of substance and verve? Awful. Which reminds me of Marcel Proust, the sickly bastard, and *Remembrance of Things Past*, another book I waited all my life to read. Read it. Awful. And speaking of awful, that damned James Fenimore Cooper was awful. Although, come to think of it, Twain wrote a terrific essay about how awful Cooper was, so Cooper was good for something.

You sure have a lot of spleen and bile for an essayist.

Well, I hope to work up to the spleen and bile of a novelist. Really, though, I just get annoyed at bullshit books.

Proust is bullshit?

Yeah. Face the facts. Ever read *Remembrance of Things Past*?

Yes, I did, and I found it a monumental accomplishment.

Interesting?

Pardon?

## The Way We Do Not Say What We Mean When We Say What We Say

Of late I have been ever more absorbed by the way we do not say what we mean when we say what we say; we use all sorts of codes and keys, hints and intimations, signs and signals, to such a degree that even the most blunt and terse remarks, such as *yes* and *no*, quite often do not at all mean affirmation or negation, but rather suggest routes of negotiation, or carry loaded messages having to do with past events and discussions, or are comments on matters of a wholly different import than the one at hand; so that, for example, a quiet *no* means one thing and a loud one another, and a muttered *yes* one thing and a whispered one another, and so on in that vein; and this is not even to enter into conversation about body language, and facial expression, and eyebrow elevation, and percentage of pique, and amount of amusement, or the way that some men, and it seems to be mostly men who do this, pretend to be hard of hearing when they hear something they do not want to hear or respond to or be lured into; so that pretending to be hard of hearing turns out to sometimes be a way of saying something without having to use words, which are so often misconstrued, misapprehended, misused, or miserable altogether.

We say *yes* when we mean *I would rather not*. We say *no* when we mean *I would say yes except for all the times yes has proven to be a terrible idea*. We say *no thank you* when every fiber in our bodies is moaning *o yes please*. We say *you cannot* when what we mean is actually *you can but you sure by God, ought not to*. We say *no* by staring directly at the questioner and not saying anything whatsoever. We ask

I am fascinated by how language is a verb and not a noun. I am riveted by how language is a process and not a preserve. I am absorbed by the way that we all speak one language but use different tones and shades and volumes and timbres and pronunciations and emphases in order to bend the language in as many ways as there are speakers of the language. Perhaps every one of us speaks a slightly different language even as we seem to be using the same words to one another. Perhaps all languages are like this although I know only this one, and this one not so well even after swimming and thrashing and singing in it since I was two and three, and learning to make sounds that turned people around in the kitchen and made them laugh or occasioned sandwiches and kisses or sent me to my room ever since I was four and five, and learning to pick out letters and gather them in gables and march them in parades and enjoy them spilling down pages and into my fervent dreams.

Perhaps languages use us in ways that we are not especially aware of; perhaps languages are aware that they need us to speak them, or else they go flailing into the dark to be forgotten except by stones and the oldest of trees. Perhaps languages invent themselves and then have to hunt for speakers. Perhaps all languages began from the music of insects and animals and wind through vegetative creatures. Perhaps languages began with the sound of creeks and rivers and crash of surf and whisper of tides, so that even now, eons later, when we open our mouths to speak, out comes not so much meaning and sense and reason and clarity but something of the wild world beyond understanding. Perhaps much of the reason we so often do not say what we mean to say is because we cannot; there is wild in us yet, and in every word and sentence and speech the seethe of the sea whence we came, unto which we will return, which cannot be trammelled or corralled or parsed, no matter how hard we try to mean just what we say.

## The Greatest Nature Essay Ever

... would begin with an image so startling and lovely and wondrous that you would stop riffling through the rest of the mail, take your jacket off, sit down at the table, adjust your spectacles, tell the dog to lie *down*, tell the kids to make their own sandwiches for heaven's sake, that's why god gave you *hands*, and read straight through the piece, marveling that you had indeed seen or smelled or heard *exactly* that, but never quite articulated it that way, or seen or heard it articulated that way, and you think, *man, this is why I read nature essays, to be startled and moved like that, wow.*

The next two paragraphs would smoothly and gently move you into a story, seemingly a small story, a light tale, easily accessed, something personal but not self-indulgent or self-absorbed on the writer's part, just sort of a cheerful nutty everyday story maybe starring an elk or a mink or a child, but then there would suddenly be a sharp sentence where the dagger enters your heart and the essay spins on a dime like a skater, and you are plunged into waaay deeper water, you didn't see it coming at all, and you actually shiver, your whole body shimmers, and much later, maybe when you are in bed with someone you love and you are trying to evade his or her icy feet, you think, *my god, stories do have roaring power, stories are the most crucial and necessary food, how come we never hardly say that out loud?*

The next three paragraphs then walk inexorably toward a line of explosive Conclusions on the horizon like inky alps. Probably the sentences get shorter, more staccato. Terse. Blunter. Shards of sentences. But there's no opinion or commentary, just one line fitting into

another, each one making plain inarguable sense, a goat or even a senator could easily understand the sentences and their implications, and there's no shouting, no persuasion, no eloquent pirouetting, no pronouncements and accusations, no sermons or homilies, just calm clear statements one after another, fitting together like people holding hands.

Then an odd paragraph, this is a most unusual and peculiar essay, for right here where you would normally expect those alpine Conclusions, some Advice, some Stern Instructions and Directions, there's only the quiet murmur of the writer riptoeing back to the story he or she was telling you in the second and third paragraphs. The story slips back into view gently, a little shy, holding its hat, nothing melodramatic, in fact it offers a few gnomic questions without answers, and then it gently slides away off the page and off the stage, it almost evanescens or dissolves, and it's only later after you have read the essay three times with mounting amazement that you see quite how the writer managed the staggercraft there, but that's the stuff of another essay for another time.

And finally the last paragraph. It turns out that the perfect nature essay is quite short, it's a lean taut thing, an arrow and not a cannon, and here at the end there's a flash of humor, and a hint or tone or subtlety of sadness, a touch of rue, you can't quite put your finger on it but it's there, a dark thread in the fabric, and there's also a shot of espresso hope, hope against all odds and sense, but rivetingly there's no call to arms, no clarion brassy trumpet blast, no website to which you are directed, no hint that you, yes you, should be ashamed of how much water you use or the car you drive or the fact that you just turned the thermostat up to seventy, or that you actually have not voted in the past two elections despite what you told the kids and the goat. Nor is there a rimshot ending, a bang, a last twist of the dagger. Oddly, sweetly, the essay just ends with a feeling eerily like a warm hand brushed against your cheek, and you sit there, near tears, smiling, and then you stand up. Changed.

## Lost Dog Creek

Our creek rises at the top of a serious little hill to the west and slides all the way down into the lake below. In the summer it's a trickle and in the winter it's a bigger trickle. Only once that I remember did it get big enough to drown anything, which it did, a beaver, although I think maybe the beaver was hit by a car first, as it was not only bedraggled when we found it but much flatter than your usual beaver. My children and I were going to bury the beaver but by the time we came back with beaver-burying implements the beaver was gone. I think maybe it washed down into the lake, which feeds a massive river to the east, which feeds a massive river to the north, which feeds the Pacific Ocean, which is really massive.

No one knows what the Tualatin people who lived here called the creek, and the white people who lived here didn't write down what they called it until 1974, when the mayor, my friend Herald, had to file a resource inventory with the state of Oregon, which he did, naming unnamed or lost-named features like little creeks where beavers occasionally get drowned. Herald used to lose his dogs there so he called it Lost Dog Creek, which is its official name on maps and such now, but I have small children and they like to name things and at the moment one son calls it Squished Beaver Creek and another son calls it Found Dog Creek and my daughter calls it Not A Creek because most of the time it doesn't have water in it.

The thing is, though, that when they ask me what I want to name the creek I don't have words for the names I want to name it. I want to name it the way it mumbles and mutters in late fall. Or the gar-

gly word it says after a month of rain. Or all the names of the colors it is. Or the deer-language names of the two deer we saw there once. Or the *bip-bip-bip* sound the deer made when they bounded away. Or the sluggish murkish sound of people dumping motor oil in it. Or a really long name like how long it's been creeking. Or the first words of all the prayers prayed there. Or the plopping sound chestnuts make when they rain into the creek every fall. Or the sound of the barn-boos sucking creek water day and night like skinny green drunks. Or the whirring song of the water ouzel we once saw there. Or the wet scuttly sound of crawdads tail-flipping away from kids wading and the screechy sound of the same kids scurting away from the crawdads. Or the whinnying of the million robins there. Or the name of the first human who ever drank from the creek. Or the proper word for the prickly pride of the old lady who lives in the moist basement of the cement house above the creek who says her husband's on vacation but he's actually been gone for ten years. Or the sound that the creek doesn't make when there's no water in it. Or the sound that a kid down the street made right after she learned how to walk and she wobbled all the way down the street holding her mama's pinky and when she teetered past the creek she looked at it amazed and said an amazed word that no one ever said before and maybe no one ever will again and the word fell tumbling end over end into the creek and away it went to the lake and to the river and to the next river and to the ocean where everything goes eventually.

But I bet someday the word will come back. I bet one day a woman will be walking along the creek and when her child asks the name of the creek the mother will open her mouth and inside her will still be the kid down the street she once was and out will come the name of the creek again, salty and wet and amazed.

## Dawn and Mary

Early one morning several teachers and staffers at a Connecticut grade school were in a meeting. The meeting had been underway for about five minutes when they heard a chilling sound in the hallway. (We heard pop-pop-pop, said one of the staffers later.)

Most of them dove under the table. That is the reasonable thing to do, what they were trained to do, and that is what they did.

But two of the staffers jumped, or leaped, or lunged out of their chairs and ran toward the sound of bullets. Which word you use depends on which news account of that morning you read, but the words all point in the same direction—toward the bullets.

One of the staffers was the principal. Her name was Dawn. She had two daughters. Her husband had proposed to her five times before she'd finally said yes, and they had been married for ten years. They had a vacation house on a lake. She liked to get down on her knees to paint with the littlest kids in her school.

The other staffer was a school psychologist named Mary. She had two daughters. She was a football fan. She had been married for more than thirty years. She and her husband had a cabin on a lake. She loved to go to the theater. She was due to retire in one year. She liked to get down on her knees to work in her garden.

Dawn the principal told the teachers and the staffers to lock the door behind them, and the teachers and the staffers did so after Dawn and Mary ran out into the hall.

You and I have been in that hallway. We spent seven years of our childhood in that hallway. It's friendly and echoing, and when someone opens the doors at the end, a wind comes and flutters all the paintings and posters on the walls.

Dawn and Mary jumped, or leaped, or lunged toward the sound of bullets. Every fiber of their bodies—bodies descended from millions of years of bodies that had leaped away from danger—must have wanted to dive under the table. That's what they'd been trained to do. That's how you live to see another day. That's how you stay alive to paint with the littlest kids and work in the garden and hug your daughters and drive off laughing to your cabin on the lake.

But they leaped for the door, and Dawn said, *Lock the door after us,* and they lunged right at the boy with the rifle.

The next time someone says the word *hero* to you, you say this:

There once were two women. One was named Dawn, and the other was named Mary. They both had two daughters. They both loved to kneel down to care for small beings. They leaped from their chairs and ran right at the boy with the rifle, and if we ever forget their names, if we ever forget the wind in that hallway, if we ever forget what they did, if we ever forget that there is something in us beyond sense and reason that snarls at death and runs roaring at it to defend children, if we ever forget that all children are our children, then we are fools who have allowed memory to be murdered too, and what good are we then? What good are we then?

## His Listening\*

Among the many things that my father was very good at was this: **A** when you said something to him, anything at all, anything in the range from surpassingly subtle to stunningly stupid, he would listen carefully and attentively and silently, without interrupting, without waiting with increasing impatience for you to finish so he could correct or top or razz you, and he would even wait a few beats after you finished your remarks, on the off chance that you had something else you wanted to add, and then he would ponder what you had said, and then, without fail, he would say something encouraging first, before he got around to commenting on what it was you said with such breath-taking subtlety or stupidity.

And he did this not once but many thousands of times, not just with me but also with my sister and brothers, and his lovely bride, our mother, and daughters-in-law and grandchildren and colleagues and friends, so that the number of times he listened patiently and attentively and scrupulously, and then politely waited a few beats to give a speaker a chance to dig deeper into or clamber hurriedly out of the hole he had just dug himself, and then said something gentle and encouraging before tacking finally toward the subject at hand, surely was a million or more, especially given the fact that he and our mother had many children together, and we are American Irish Catholics, which is to say

people soaked in three garrulous cultures, each one entranced by story and legend and myth and the tallest of tales.

I well remember some of my own remarkably ill-considered remarks to him, as a surly teenager, as a headlong young man, and as a formerly cocky middle-aged man, and in every one of those cases he was wonderfully consistent in his patience, his calm, his gentleness, his genuine absorption in what I was saying, even though what I was saying was sometimes the most arrant glib foolish nonsense and flippery. I would conclude my burble and babble, and watch him lean back to consider what I had said, and then after a moment he would say something quietly encouraging, and then often he would say several more encouraging things, and then he would finally gently comment on what it was I had said, but never with the slightest sneer or sice, though much of what I said surely deserved to be dismissed out of hand. There was a pace and a rhythm to his listening, it seems to me, such that the listening was far more important than anything else; in so many people the answering, the opinionating, the jockeying, the topping, the shouting of self, the obviation of the other, is the prime work in conversation, but this was not so for my dad, the best listener I have ever known.

His listening is now largely a thing of the past; he and his ears have achieved a great and venerable age, and his hearing is a shadow of what it once was. His mind is as sharp or even more so than it ever was; his generosity and grace remain oceanic; and you could search whole galaxies, to no avail, for a gentler, wittier man. But this morning I find that I very much miss that one little thing he did so well, that was not little—the way he stared at your face as you spoke, with all his soul open and alert for your story, and how he would wait a few beats when you were done, in case there was a coda coming, and then he would lean back and consider what you had just said, and then finally lean forward again and say something gentle and encouraging. That he would often then add something wise and piercing is true, but that is not what I want to leave you with; I want to celebrate his listening, for it is now nearly gone from this world, and it was a rare and extraordinary and unforgettable thing.

\* This is the very last of the 173 consecutive "Epiphanies" columns that BD published in *The American Scholar*; "the longest tenure of any blogger by far," the editors noted, "and we hope his columns have enchanted, delighted, and enriched you as much as they have us."

## The Tender Next Minute

One time when we were kids my two younger brothers  
And I were absorbed with ropes and climbing and what  
Heights could be scaled by intrepid adventurers like us,  
And we scaled the garage, and then we scaled a massive  
Sweet gum, and then we tried to scale a neighbor's shed  
But he glared and roared and we escaped into the hedge  
Riven with tunnels and lairs that only we knew, and it's  
That moment in the lurch of the hedge that I want to sing  
Here for a moment. We huddled, panting, at the second  
Turn, under the iglooish canopy of the forsythia bushes.  
I had the rope, and my next brother had our kid brother,  
Actually holding him by the hand, and we were smiling  
And thrilled and frightened and sunlight rippled through  
The tiny yellow flowers of the bushes and not far away  
A robin inquired as to just what was all this hullabaloo?  
You were there too, remember, in *your* childhood cave,  
The moist soil, the laboring beetles, the unwritten poem  
Of the lost leaves, the duff, the thin spidery bones of old  
Twigs. Once in a while we all stopped sprinting and just  
Stared at what was there all around us, the wealth of dirt,  
The sudden green, feather about to adorn its second wild  
Animal, the tender next minute waiting for us to emerge.

## Heartchitecture

Let us contemplate, you and I, the bloody electric muscle. Let us consider it from every angle. Let us remove it from its bony cage, its gristly case, and hold it to the merciless light, and turn it glinting this way and that, and look at it as if we have never seen it before, because we never *have* seen it before, not like this. Let us think carefully about the throb of its relentless tissue. Let us ponder it as the wet engine from which comes all the music we know. Let us contemplate the thousand ways it fails and the few ways it does not fail. Let us gawk at the brooding genius of its architecture. Let us consider it as the most crucial and amazing house, with its four rooms and meticulous plumbing and protein walls and chambered music. Let us dream of blood and pulse and ebb and flow. Let us consider tide and beat and throb and hum. Let us unweave the web of artery and vein, the fluttering jetties of the valves, the coursing of ions from cell to cell, the sodium that is your soul, the potassium that is your personality, the calcium that is your character.

Consider the astounding journey your blood embarks upon as it enters the pumping station of your heart. In a healthy heart, a heart that works as it has been designed to work over many millions of years by its creative and curious and tireless and nameless holy wild silent engineer, blood that has been plucked and shucked of its oxygen by the body straggles back into the right atrium, the capacious gleaming lobby of the heart.

This tired blood, dusty veteran of an immense and exhausting

journey, shuttles forward to and through a small circular door in the wall, a door with three symmetrical flaps: the tricuspid valve.

This circular door opens into another big room, the right ventricle, but at the very instant this ventricle is filled to capacity with tired blood the entire ventricle *contracts*, slamming in on itself, and our tired heroes are sent flying through the pulmonary valve and thence into the pulmonary artery, which immediately branches, carrying the blood to the right and left lungs, and there, in the joyous airy countries of the blood vessels of the lungs, your blood is given fresh clean joyous oxygen, gobs and slathers of it, o sweet and delicious air!, as much as those heroic blood cells can hoist aboard their tiny cellular ships, and now they resume their endless journey, heading into the marshlands and swamps of the lungs, the capillary beds, which open into the small streams and creeks called venules, which are tributaries of the pulmonary veins, of which there are four, the four magic pulmonary rivers carrying your necessary elixir back to the looming holy castle of the heart, which they will enter this time through the left ventricle, whose job is to disperse and assign the blood to the rest of the body, to send it on its quest and voyage and journey to the vast and mysterious wilderness that is You, and to tell that tale, of the journeys of your blood cells through the universe of You, would take a billion books, each alike, each utterly different.

But so much can go wrong. So much does go wrong. So many ways to go wrong. Aneurysm, angina, arrhythmia, blockages and obstructions, ischemia and infection, pericarditis and pressure problems, strokes and syndromes, vascular and valvular failure. The ways that hearts falter and fail are endless. They clog and stutter. They sigh and stop. They skip a beat. They lose the beat! Or they beat so fast and madly that they endure electrical frenzies. One electrical frenzy is called circus movement: the electrical impulse leaves the rhythmic world of contraction-and-rest and enters a state of essentially continuous beat. A heart in circus movement may beat five hundred times a minute for as long as ninety seconds before it stops altogether and the person wrapped around that heart dies.

Consider those ninety seconds. A minute and a half. The fastest an last minute and a half of that one life. A minute and a half tippe forward into relentless irretrievable headlong final free fall. The heart sprinting toward oblivion, unable to rest, revving into chaos; achieving, for the last ninety seconds of its working life, a state of such intense beat that it comes as close to beatlessness as it ever could while beating: until it ceases to beat.

Or think of the heart as a music machine—not a far-fetched idea, for the heart runs on electric impulse and does so in a steady 4/4 rhythm. A musician friend of mine maintains that the 4/4 rhythm, standard in popular music, feels right, feels normal, because it is the pace of our hearts, the interior music we hear all day and all night. We are soaked in the song of the heart every hour of every year every life long.

Fill my heart with song, sings Frank Sinatra, and is your heart filled with pain?, sings Elvis Presley, and my heart will go on, sings Celine Dion, and open your heart, sings Elton John, and open your heart, sings Lenny Kravitz, and he had a heart of glass, sings Blondie, and I've been a miner for a heart of gold, sings Neil Young, and don't be blind heart of mine, rasps Bob Dylan, and why does my heart feel so bad, moans Moby, and put a little love in your heart, sings Annie Lennox, and everybody's got a hungry heart, roars Bruce Springsteen, and my heart still beats, sings Beyoncé, and Lord with glowing heart I'd praise Thee, sang Francis Scott Key, and stop draggin' my heart around, snarls Tom Petty, and I got them broken heart blues, moans Sonny Boy Williamson, and I canna live without the inarticulate speech of the heart, sings the genius Van Morrison, and this is the last chance for hearts of stone, sings Southside Johnny Lyon, and unchain my heart, sings Joe Cocker, and what would rock and pop and blues and gospel and jazz and soul and rap do without this most necessary musical organ? Would there even be such a thing as music if there were no hearts to break and fill and unchain and hijack?

It weighs eleven ounces. It feeds a vascular system that comprises sixty thousand miles of veins and arteries and capillaries. It bears a

hundred thousand times a day. It shoves two thousand gallons of blood through the body every day. It begins when a fetus is three weeks old and a cluster of cells begins to pulse with the cadence of that particular person, a music and rhythm and pace that will endure a whole lifetime. No one knows why the cluster of cells begins to pulse at that time or with that beat. These cells undergo what is called spontaneous depolarization. Channels inside these cells begin to leak sodium and the wash of sodium sparks the trading of potassium and calcium back and forth which inspires an electrical current which, augmented, is the beat of your heart. These cells are infectious, as it were: if you put them alongside any other type of cell in the body, they make the other cells beat to their beat.

The heart is the first organ to form. It is smaller than a comma when it begins, and ends up bigger than a fist. Every cell in it is capable of pulsing. No one knows how that could be. The pulse begins when a baby is about twenty days old. No one knows why it happens then. The pulse then continues, on average, for about two billion pulses, and no one knows why that many, or that few. Why not one billion per creature? Why not twenty billion? Mayflies to mastodons, beetles to bison, prophets to poets, infants to infanticides, all are issued the same number of pulses to do with what they will. *Tell me*, asks the great quiet American poet Mary Oliver, *what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?*

Consider the engineering of the heart. It begins life as a primitive hollow tube of tissue which bends and loops and twists and turns and envelops and overlaps and intricately creates itself as a heart, the wings and tendrils of tissue advancing and retreating, holes and spaces appearing, walls and valves constructing themselves according to a mysterious and extraordinary command and design, all this infinitesimal heartchitecture bathed in the one fluid in the ancient universe that can sustain the new wet machine: rich fresh blood from the mother, which she sends through the placenta to her developing child in oxygenated bursts to the new brain, the new heart, the rest of the new body.

Here are some magic numbers: all mothers at all times past and present to all children developing under their hearts send 62 percent of placental blood to the new brains, 29 percent to the new body, and 9 percent to the new heart. Hitler and Ho, Gandhi and Gautama, Mohammed and Maimonides, Mao and Moses, the Madonna and her mother, the Madonna and her Child: when they were fingers of flesh floating in their mothers, new ideas clinging to uterine walls, they received blood from their mothers in exactly the same doses.

In America these days one woman dies every minute of every day from a failed heart. More women die of failed hearts than men. Failed hearts kill more women and men than the next seven causes of death combined. The highest rate of death by failed heart is in Utah. The lowest rate is in Mississippi. More than four hundred babies are born every day with flawed hearts. One percent of all babies born all over the world are born with flawed hearts. Twenty percent of all babies born with flawed hearts will die before their first birthday.

Our body fluids contain about one percent salt, nowadays—very likely the exact salinity of whatever ancient sea we managed to crawl out of, a sea we could leave because we had learned, first of all, to contain it; and that sea is contained and remembered most crucially now in the heart, where salt sloshes back and forth between cells, forming the first thrum of the heartbeat, first hint of the absolute and necessary note from which comes the salt song of You.