

Seasons: a Meditation

He sits at his desk and looks out the window of his study. The sky is clear and blue and the occasional bird flies from one side of the frame to the other. Because the house rests on the side of a small cliff and he is on the third floor, the tips of the highest trees are at eye-level, their buds full to bursting with incipient leaves. After a brutal winter, spring finally seems to be on its way. His 69th spring to be exact. Such a number is difficult for him to contemplate.

He recalls a photograph of Wallace Stevens on the back of a collection of his poems, taken when he was vice-President of the Hartford Insurance Company. Given the retirement age during Steven's heyday, he had to be in his early sixties, though he looked much older. Grey-haired, jowly, no exertion on the tennis or squash courts for many years. Of course he wrote great poetry until the end, so what did physical fitness matter? Apparently his sharp mind was enough to deal with death's relentless approach. No shallow victories over a weaker opponent were necessary or worries about sagging pectorals or arm muscles. The idea of order at Key West, or anywhere else for that matter, kept Stevens in shape.

Speaking of order, the tree-top study is in reasonable condition. There are many items disposed in the small space, pictures of family and friends, framed documents, and all the books. There, almost twenty-five years ago, are his three sons sitting with him on a windsurfing board at the rented cottage with the floating raft offshore. Once they'd watched quietly as a mother loon led her four offspring through the water and up across the raft in clean, precise formation, looking like an Andrew Wyeth painting in motion as they splashed down on the far side and resumed their nest-ward journey. Later he swam out to find the weathered boards speckled with droppings melted into indecipherable patterns that favoured Pollock abstraction over Wyeth realism.

On one wall of the study is the big Robert Capa photograph of Hemingway and his youngest son Patrick who, like his father, married four times, but who, unlike Papa, tried to deal openly with his sexual insecurities, cross-dressing and eventually having gender reassignment surgery, in his last days calling himself Gloria. When Capa snapped the shutter the world-famous writer was resting on a wooden bridge in Idaho, Patrick and their bird-guns lying against the log parapet, gazing into an arranged distance. The barefoot boy has a Tom Sawyer look about

him. Hemingway seems to have grown old too fast. Still in his early forties, he's already turning into Wallace Stevens.

On a smaller scale there's the 5x7 picture on his desk that he took of his wife and their youngest son just off the Sea-to-Sky Highway south of Squamish. No guns or pose for posterity, just mother and child in a happy moment with snow-covered peaks behind. His son is wearing an Expos baseball cap and has now lived nearly as long as the franchise in Montreal.

At the other end of the spectrum is the photo of his great-grandfather and great-grandmother with their seven children taken in 1892. They are gathered in the garden behind their Yorkshire house staring directly into the lens as instructed. He never met any of them, not even his grandfather who is only eleven years old on this day, but he's trying to write a novel based solely on their appearances and their names his mother taught him when he was a boy. That's not quite true, actually, as he knows his great-grandfather and one of his great-uncles were Methodist ministers, a fact that oddly instils a bit of pride in him—oddly because he's an agnostic and rejects all forms of religious dogma and regulations. For some reason he feels he owes them all a hearing.

Despite these distractions—well, solidities, really—he turns back to the issue of the relentlessly passing seasons. Unlike Stevens, he still plays racquet sports hard and fast, and his toned body holds out a promise, if not of immortality then of a slow and healthy decline towards a dignified end. Just before death's arrival, he likes to tell himself, he will be moving and thinking with undeniable grace. The thinking part will be bolstered by the voluminous amounts of reading he has always done and by the mental exercises with which he tests himself nightly before dropping off to sleep. Who were the four members of ABBA? Name the 50 U.S. states and their capitals. Who were all the girls you dated in high school (and, if pushing himself, what colour were their eyes)? The other night he got hung up on the title of a Strindberg play and finally got it before drifting off. The next morning he remembered it had been written by Ibsen. What you win in Boston, you lose in Chicago as Papa always said.

He's lived in this province for forty-two years, arriving as a graduate student in the early seventies with his first wife. They'd rented a Cape Cod cottage outside of town at the head of a sea-bay, their cats running free in the woods like smaller versions of fiercer feline cousins; ospreys and eagles circling overhead, bird-of-prey instincts displacing perceptions of autonomy and beauty; the pipes freezing

and the winter winds whipping through splits in the shingles; feelings of isolation during blizzards replete with myth-making and fears the firewood would run out. No matter their self-reliance and seemingly unbreakable bond, after several years there were only embers left in their relationship and the move to town preceded their inevitable separation. Now, in another province, she is about to turn seventy. Even though he is almost two years younger, it doesn't seem possible they have grown so old.

The books are everywhere, a tiny percentage of what filled his office at the university for three decades. Novels mostly, but also poetry, biographies, and art histories. They are, he supposes, his religious texts, though certainly ones his great-grandfather would not countenance, works by Durrell, Lorca, Patrick White, and a host of lesser-known authors whose narratives and styles have lasted despite the paucity of critical acclaim. Solid on shelves, chairs, and the window-seat, they form palisades against encroaching doubt or in opposition to the ordinary world caught up in its quotidian grind and so lacking in imagination. Like any good fortress wall they are not piled or scattered helter-skelter but layered and tucked tightly together, thick enough in their arrangement to stop metaphorical bullets and filter out thoughts of misgiving most of the time. On his e-reader he has almost a hundred volumes and room for another three thousand, but somehow virtual pages do not provide the same sense of security.

You work with what you have has always been his motto. But what happens when these tools and attributes run out or down so far that you can only stare in frustration and anguish at the growing chasm between then and now, unable to bridge it and the shrinking gap between now and silence with words? Each of his writers, at least the ones who lived long enough, must have asked the same question. Hemingway, who died so young and old at the same time, endured the decline of his creative powers until he blew the pain away in a single moment. Do you ever reach a stage of acceptance and accommodation? Dancers and opera singers, after all, have to stop doing what they do best long before they garner their first old-age security cheques. When you can no longer leap or hit the high-C consistently is that akin to laying language to rest and staring at the empty page? Perhaps so, but in all cases, unless you die on stage or in front of your computer screen, there will always be that disturbing span of days or months or years when body and mind simply can't perform anymore and you glimpse the curtain descending on your vulnerability.

Travel helps in the short term. He first went to Greece in 1971 and has returned half a dozen times, always to the same island and village in the end, despite several trips around the Aegean. Things haven't changed much in the village because it's built on the side of a mountain and car traffic is severely restricted. Yes, there are more tourists, but he always goes in the off-season, spring or autumn months, and in the back streets the ambience is timeless. There's the doorway where the old schoolmistress, jilted by her lover, used to sit, and the baker's shop that still offers fresh *mavro* loaves each morning. The tavern with the balcony overlooking hundreds of square miles of ocean and a coastline marked by promontories and bays has changed hands more than once, but he can still order strong Greek (really Turkish) coffee and meld into the distance as he did so long ago. The teacher and the original tavern owner are gone, and the bakery now has its modern ovens hidden in the back so he can't see the loaves slowly turning brown or the baker reaching in with his long-handled paddle to bring them out and set them on the cooling pan. It's memories of the place and his time in it that sustain him, his breath a little more rapid now as he climbs the steep steps from the stony beach to the *agora*, then higher up to his rented room, and he realizes that's what he's been doing all along here and elsewhere—renting shelter for those thoughts of the past as they accumulate, accrual that somehow measures up to the centuries and aeons behind him and the seemingly inestimable distances above his head.

Perhaps it's not so much where you actually go but the cerebral movement involved in getting to and fro that matters. If you remain constantly in motion through consciousness, the connection between you and the basic particles of existence (of which you are made) is not only symbolic but real in a way that transcends any three score and ten limitations. Thought and imagination are as much a part of the universe as a light-year, thrown into the vastness of the heavens to become part of the infinite, and like the infinite they will not disappear. This comforts him, although he is prepared to admit it could be an illusion that does so. But why should a chimera be any less at the heart of perception and awareness than a factual truth just because the meaning of life is at stake?

He has lost several close friends over the years, two of them artists who left significant bodies of work behind. Because of their art they will outlast others who depend on personal memories to keep them alive. Children and friends hold you close for as long as they can, but eventually they join you and become memories themselves. Your blood is passed on but inevitably thins or spreads out to become

part of the whole chain of humanity, which is where it came from in the first place. Centuries from now, even decades, no one will speak of you unless you possess an element of lasting not ephemeral fame, the kind that at first glance rests in books or paintings or some form of enduring impact on the world. Far enough down the line, of course, even these tangible references will disappear. Babylonian Ur texts, the Bible, classical Greek tragedy, Giotto frescoes and Monet water-lilies will all vanish, along with ancient Chinese scrolls and digital recordings, and it is questionable whether there will be human life, and accounts of it, left on this planet at all. Is it not possible, however, that all the energy involved in the creation of masterpieces of one kind or another is ultimately more important than the works themselves, a force that, like its counterpart in physics, cannot be destroyed?

This form of human energy has its own unique characteristic within the already-formed universe (until we know other life forms exist with the capacity to imagine and reason) in that it can be created in the first place. Maybe that's why so much emphasis has been placed on God's gestures in the first seven days. Maybe, with His eternal energy and works that will eventually fade away—our sun in just five billion years—He (or She) is just one of us. Perhaps that is what we can and must believe in: our being part of a perpetual pattern that includes Eden, quasars, nebulae, black holes, and 'endless' expansion, yet distinctively contributing to this great unfolding that on an individual level squeezes us all into oblivion while allowing what we *represent* to live almost forever.

Part of that belief might involve seeing martyrs like Jesus as artist-figures who, according to scripture, gave their energies to humankind, dying so that recognition of this gift would live on and inspire others to follow their leads on earth without necessarily ending in immolation or crucifixion. But if there is a holy residue left from biblical parables and actions then there is a similar sublimity in the creative efforts of the devout Bach and the atheist Shelley, take your pick. Of course, there are still the dark energy figures that go along for the ride—the Hitlers, Stalins, and so many more, who will not disappear either and may end up as formless denizens in a bifurcated universe like the one Milton imagined in *Paradise Lost*. The mathematical equations that are a complement to blank verse and could formulate the ongoing struggle between good and evil as well—resonances of the *Cello Suites* and *Adonais* versus reverberations of the Holocaust and the Gulag—have not yet been worked out.

The weather has changed, and fog has cut visibility outside the window to almost zero. Everything of consequence is now inside this 8x15-foot space, including his thoughts and feelings. When he is writing or thinking about writing the fog doesn't matter. When he is not, the shroud takes precedence. Grey ghosts whirl in its insubstantiality, not the ones he celebrates because he knew and loved their corporeal predecessors but those marking his shortcomings and failures. It is a sealed window, but on days like this if he could open it and step through he would not fall dramatically to earth, just drift outward and unnoticed into inconsequence. So he clings to the life raft of his study and its collection of artifacts, the oldest of which is a small reddish shard of pottery from the Roman occupation of Crete, over two thousand years ago. The day he picked it up he had been to the cave where Zeus was supposedly born above the plain of Nida. There is a depression in the shard into which the tip of his thumb fits perfectly, and he sees it now as shaped like the entrance to that hollow where a god was called from darkness. Creation out of creation, endlessly, a lifting veil.

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April, 2014