

Whence and Whither

On Lives and Living

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Movable and Steadfast Feasts

My old dog Bill will be dead by Easter. God knows, he should have been dead before now. The now of which I write—the moment to hand—is that no man’s land of days between Christmas, New Year’s, and the Epiphany. I’ve gone beyond fashionably late with this essay which I promised for the twelfth day of the twelfth month of the last year—an essay on Easter with an Advent delivery. I’ve promised it now for little Christmas, hoping that like the magi of old, I’ll come to see things as they are.

A member of the reverend clergy told me that the formula old preachers used to prepare their homiletics included three points and a poem. Montaigne would string his essays on a filigree of Latin poets. He worked in his library and when stuck for some leap into a fresh paragraph, he’d often quote Virgil or Catullus or Lucan and carry on as if the poem were an aperitif readying the reader for another course.

Which puts me in mind of the twelve days of Christmas I spent downstate being paterfamilias for our yuletide observations. This poem came into being in contemplation of a carol we always sing this time of year.

TWELVE DAYS OF CHRISTMAS

Some pilgrims claim the carol is a code
 for true believers and their catechists,
 to wit: four colly birds, four gospel texts,
 eight maids a milking, the beatitudes,
 and pipers piping, the eleven left
 once Judas had betrayed the lamb of God—
 that partridge in a pear tree, the holy one
 and only whose nativity becomes
 in just a dozen days the starlit eve
 of three French hens with their epiphanies
 huddled round the family in the manger,
 tendering their gold and frankincense and myrrh.
 The whole tune seems to turn on “five gold rings”—
 the Pentateuch, those first books of the Torah
 in which ten lords a leaping stand in for
 the ten commandments cut in loaves of stone
 which Moses broke over his wayward tribesmen.
 Two turtle doves, two testaments, old and new.
 Six geese a laying, creation’s shortened week,
 the swimming swans, gifts of the Holy Ghost
 whose fruits become withal nine ladies dancing.
 Twelve drummers drumming, the Apostles’ Creed:
 a dozen doctrines to profess belief in.
 Still, others say it’s only meant to praise
 fine feathered birds and characters and rings,
 our singing nothing more than thanksgiving
 for litanies of undeserved grace,
 unnumbered blessings, the light’s increasing,
 our brightly festooned trees bedazzling.¹

Montaigne, the father of all essayists, himself a sort of preacher, to four centuries of readers and counting, was anxious to understand the human being and condition. It was, thanks be, his lifelong study. In his marvelous essay, “Of

Repentance,” a Lenten read and Easter anthem, he wrote in French a point that “Englishes,” “In every man is the whole of man’s estate,” by which he meant we are all at once the same but different; to know the species, know a specimen. To understand the Risen Christ, we’d better reckon with the wounds and miracles, betrayals and agonies. Study the Scriptures and the poems.

The men in my Bible study took the day off after Christmas last week, but we met for the day after New Year’s today, in the early morning dark at the funeral home, as we have been doing now for years. The price is right, the coffee’s free; it’s quiet in the early o’clock. Except for the ones gone to their time shares in Florida, or the ones homebound with the seasonable woo, the turnout is a good one and we’re glad to have survived into another year. We read from the twenty-fourth chapter of Matthew when Jesus is giving the disciples a list of the signs that the end times are nearing. Wars and rumors of wars, false prophets, nation rising up against nation, earthquakes and famines in various places.

The sky has been falling through most of history. And for everyone predicting doom, the doom is certain. Whether we die en masse, in cataclysms of natural or supernatural origin, we die in fact, 100 percent.

Possibly this is why one of us eases the talk around to declaring a win in the “War on Christmas,” reporting that people are saying “Merry Christmas” now in a way that political correctness prevented up until now. Another fellow heartily agrees. I mention that the War on Christmas was invented by a cable news host to divert attention from the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, which were coming, alas too late, under scrutiny in the middle noughties. I suggest they go home and Google “Barack Obama and Merry Christmas.” And I wondered aloud, it being the feast of the Octave of Christmas, which used to observe in the Christian calendar the circumcision of Jesus, why these old, white, male, and much-aggrrieved Christians weren’t willing to serve

in the “War on Circumcision.” Why should we wish each other “Happy New Year” when “Happy Circumcision” is the more Christian, more religious greeting? They tilted their heads at what I was saying the way that Bill does when he hears an oddly pitched noise. But I digress; I was trying to relate Easter to Bill’s slow demise. This is not about birth and circumcision and magi, rather betrayal, passion, death, and burial, and then the Easter we claim to believe in.

He’s lived well past the expectations—Bill, the dog—half again beyond his “use by” date. These latter days have all been bonus time and have taught me gratitude in the stead of the “poor me’s” and the “why me’s” and the “give me’s,” which have always seemed my usual nature. I’m easily beset by resentments and begrudgeries—a character flaw from which I’ve achieved irregular remissions over the years, occasional dispensations. I’m living through one such dispensation now, watching old Bill in his withering and bewilderments as the mightiness of his shoulders and hindquarters, the deep menace of his guardian bark, and the fathomless pools of his big brown eyes have given way to lame waltzing on his “last legs,” a kind of castrato’s cough at threats he senses but cannot see through a cloud of cataracts, nor hear in the dull chambers of lost itching ears. His nose still works its cold damp magic. He finds his food and good places to squat to the duties of his toilet. His soft black curls of fur are full of dander and dry skin beneath, despite a designer mash of essential oils and my wife’s tender correctives. So long as he eats and craps and can be medicated against the pain, I willn’t exercise the lethal dominion over him I wish I did not have. Yes, dead by Easter I’d wager, or sooner, much sooner, as the gyre of demise works its tightening, ineluctable damage.

Back when I was researching his breed, the Bernese Mountain dog, or as I joked when he was a puppy, “an AKC-registered Pain in the Ass,” the Wikipedia on my old

laptop promised six to eight years of life expectancy for dogs of his prodigious size. All to the good, I remember thinking, at least I'll outlive him so. I was fifty-seven years old that late winter I got him, now twelve years ago. I was well into my last trimester of being. My father, my grandfathers, the men in my line had all died in their sixties, of broken hearts: a bad valve, clogged arteries, congestive heart failure, some embolism—quick, convincing “failures,” or “attacks,” or “infarctions.”

Bill's gone half again older than we expected. And even that might have been a miscalculation. My wife never really wanted a dog. After the kids were grown and gone and out on their own on automatic pilot, throwing in with partners of the same species, taking mortgages, signing leases, making plans and car payments, after we breathed the sigh of relief that they all seemed poised and provisioned to outlive us, Mary settled in with *Law and Order* reruns and I kept to my old customs of splitting my time between the day job undertaking and the preoccupation with language, writing, and words.

I remember sitting with her one Sunday afternoon, watching the episode where Lennie and his estranged daughter, Cathy, meet up for lunch—she keeps her distance because of his drinking, and the two failed marriages, one to her mother. The episode, “Aftershock,” involves Lennie and Rey Curtis, his young partner, along with Jack McCoy and Claire Kincaid, the legal team, witnessing an execution of someone they put away. Lennie's life was always complex. And I was thinking what a good thing a dog would be to get me out of the house and walking on a regular basis and I said, on one of the commercial breaks, “What would you think about my getting a dog?”

“Are you out of your (expletive deleted) mind?” she responded. “Finally we have the place to ourselves, we come and go as we please, we've got some peace and quiet, and you want a dog!” I took this to mean she didn't want one.

In those days I would occasionally write a poem that borrowed from a famous poem for the kernel of creation that brought it into being. This is how I'd come to write a poem called, "Corpses Do Not Fret Their Coffin Boards," which borrowed unabashedly from William Wordsworth's sonnet, "Nuns Fret Not at Their Convent's Narrow Room," which I'd encountered that morning, possibly on the radio, listening to the voice of Garrison Keillor who used to do "The Writers' Almanac," a five-minute diamond of daily bits and pieces that ended with the reading of a poem. Wordsworth's sonnet is in praise of sonnets, in observation of the truth revealed to him, some centuries back, that formal constraints—"the narrow rooms"—often produce an unpredictable freedom. The sonneteer knows all too well the work in words to make a sonnet is but fourteen lines of ten or so syllables, organized to rhyme in some predetermined way—a code which poets map out as AABB or ABAB, or maybe, as Wordsworth did for his wee sonnet, ABBA, with the twist that the sound of A in lines one and four, repeats itself in lines five and eight. There are other embellishments of sound and sense to bring it to an end in line fourteen, but what I can say is that one comes to the close of a sonnet with a sense that it must have been a loving God that brought old Wordsworth into being to speak to me years after his demise in a different century, millennium, and nation.

Wordsworth affirms the snug hugging and liberation of the sonnet's terms in the last half of his, to wit:

In truth the prison, into which we doom
 Ourselves, no prison is: and hence for me,
 In sundry moods, 'twas pastime to be bound
 Within the Sonnet's scanty plot of ground;
 Pleased if some Souls (for such there needs must be)
 Who have felt the weight of too much liberty,
 Should find brief solace there, as I have found.²

My own sonnet, while crediting Wordsworth, albeit subtly, has less to do with space and nature than with time and money, preoccupations of my advancing years.

CORPSES DO NOT FRET THEIR COFFIN BOARDS
after Wordsworth

Corpses do not fret their coffin boards,
nor bodies wound in love their narrow beds:
size matters less to lovers and the dead
than to the lonely and the self-absorbed
for whom each passing moment is a chore
and space but vacancy: unholy dread
of what might happen or not happen next;
this dull predicament of less or more's
a never balanced book, whereas for me,
the worth of words is something I can count
out easily, on fingertips—the sounds
they make, the sense, their coins and currencies —
these denouements doled out in tens, fourteens:
last reckonings tapped out on all accounts.³

Fresh from its typing, this is the page I posted to the fridge with a kitchen magnet back in the day before stainless steel appliances made magnets redundant, the better for my missus to see it in her own good time and possibly ink some edits in as marginalia. I loved it when she read my poems and commented for better or worse because it sang to me a song of hope beyond the everyday desolation of long consortium, often marked by romantic indifference and connubial blahs in the stead of bliss.

But days after I'd posted the draft, alas, no corrections or comments had appeared. No cross-outs or smiley faces, no affirmations scribbled in passing, no nothing.

It was another Sunday afternoon when, being as I am a man of habits, I said into the general silence of the day that was in it, "What would you think about my getting a dog?" To which she replied without enthusiasm, "Maybe you could name it 'Wordsworth.'"

My heart leaped inside my bosom. I couldn't believe my ears. What meaning ought I take from this expletive-free and contingent utterance? Surely, it seemed, she had read my poem, or at least the title and citation line. Was this some signal of approval, some sign that my efforts had not been for naught? At the very least it was not disapproval, no rhetorical about the state of my (formerly expletive-ridden) mind. No, this was, if not full-throated approval, a willingness to consider the prospect, a nod toward tolerance if not the full embrace of the notion. I moved, immediately, into my office, where my computer, ever at the ready, soon had me Googling for "Bernese Mountain Dogs, Michigan." Two days later I was driving up the highway with my middle son, to mid Michigan, where a man claimed to be weaning a recent litter.

"What about 'No!' didn't you understand?" she said, when I brought the puppy in the door. "But honey," I coaxed her, "we can call him Wordsworth! Just like you said. William Wordsworth."

"Let's just make it 'Bill W.," she said insinuating the name of the founder of the fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous, a fellowship to which we both belonged. Was she insinuating that the puppy might shake the serenity that our long sobriety had produced?

It is hard to know, but "Bill" it has been ever since—from the eleven-pound puppy he was that Ash Wednesday of 2006, that first of March I brought him through the door on the day of my only daughter's birthday, to the hundred-and-ten-pound giant of kindness he in time became, to the withering, arthritic, ninety-some-pound geriatric pooch snoring on the floor next to my shoes as I type these truths into the computer.

In the twelve years since, so much has happened. If I take stock, it is an inventory of losses. My daughter, now in her middle years, has disconnected from her family. She is estranged from her mother, my first wife, and from me, her stepmother, her brothers and her brothers' families, her aunts and uncles and cousins, everyone from her family of origin. In the email asking us to keep our distance and not to initiate any contact with her, she said she was going out West for therapy to treat what she called her codependence. She said that she felt that she never got enough time as a child, that she had to grow up too soon, what with the divorce between her mother and me when she was nine and ten years old. I wrote back saying that such insights were hard got and that I supported her eagerness to get right with herself and would follow her directives and stood ready to assist in any way I might do her some good in her efforts. Except for the occasional text message, to wish happy birthdays or best for holidays, we've had no substantial communication since. Her family of choice, near as I can figure, includes her husband, her horse, her dog, some friends?

Before this happened, I spent two years in weekly therapy with her in an effort to discern what might be done to let this cup pass. The shrink thought we'd arrived at a plan for what to do to keep us in each other's futures. But soon after that, my daughter wrote to say her well-being required that she keep her distance from us all. I said I wanted her to be well. It feels like a death without any of the comforting, buffering infrastructure of mortality—a known cause and certification, ceremony, a grave, a place I can go and weep. There's none of that. Her absence, her choice of absence, her riddance of us all is everywhere. On holidays and birthdays there's a text that comes more or less as a proof of life. For years it seemed I was left with a choice between assigning this sadness to evil or mental illness. I chose the latter. There is no succor in it.

Whether this grief is coincident with, correlated to, or the cause of our lackluster marriage—the second one, or

maybe the first—I do not know. But what I do know is we’ve lost our way. We live, for the most part, separate lives and have slowly ceased to share our lives, our dreams, our meals, our bed, our whereabouts, our hopes and fears, our plans for the future. The desolation is as palpable as our bliss once seemed. All of this after many years of joyous intimacy, shared purpose, real partnership makes it more the pity that we both live now like widowed people, bereft of a spouse that, though still alive, is gone from us in measurable ways. We share bank accounts and an estate plan and rise to the occasion for holidays, but otherwise are in every meaningful way alone, and what has grown between us is what Heaney called a “silence beyond silence listened for.” It seems I’ve ended up like Lennie Briscoe—a two-time loser at marriage, estranged from a daughter who chooses to remain out of contact with or from her family of origin. We text our affections or proclaim them to anyone in earshot but it makes no difference. When I compare my lot to men I’ve buried, whose flaws and imperfections seemed amplified compared to mine, and yet whose wives still went along for the ride, whose daughters doted on them till the end, like a hurt dog howling at the emptiness, I shake a fist in the face of the God I don’t quite believe in anymore.

The poor me and why me lamentations, variations on the book of Job, leave me with a choice between hurt and anger. I tend toward the latter and fear the worst. I keep working the program, the fellowship, and twelve steps of AA, because it keeps me from adding a class A depressant to the gathering sadness, the tears of things. I do not want to live in fear.

My pal, George, is what we call a “sponsor”—someone in the fellowship to reach out to when the ways of things threaten to overwhelm. He’s been sober longer than anyone I know. And he’s bookish and very well educated: he’s a JD and CPA, and for a good few of my books, was the proofreader I sent the roughest of drafts to. He’d fix the

spelling and punctuation and errors of thought and construction. We've been friends and neighbors for decades now. For years he's been losing his short-term memory. The arc of his infirmity has been slow but steady. Dithering gave way to a sort of discombobulation, which in time gave way to chronic disorientation, which became what seems now a cruel advancing dementia. Beyond the indignities of age, his condition rightly frightened his family. They got him into assisted living. Attendant nurses see to his meds and meals. There are bingo nights and socials. I call and visit when I can. I live upstate now, three weeks out of four, at a lake house with Bill for whom the remove and the quiet are like balms. He doesn't have young suburbanites to bark at out the windows as they stroll by with their toddlers, infants, and designer dogs. Downstate, my wife occupies the house next to the funeral home where I lived for forty-five years and into which she moved, when my sons and daughters were school children or teenagers and I was the family court's designee as the "more fit" custodial parent—all of us hobbled some by the end of the marriage that brought them into being.

I call George a couple times a week to see how he's doing. When I asked him how he was adjusting to living there he told me what I guess I needed to hear. "I'm doing fine," he said, "you can't be angry all the time." It makes me believe in a loving God when deep in my resentments about living alone I hear my sponsor, though addled and beset, bewildered really and yet making perfect sense to me. Good to have just such a sponsor. You can tell him anything and he'll likely forget. Sometimes I think it might be a gift except when I see the thousand-yard stare he sometimes gets, like combat soldiers who have seen too much, or keep getting a glimpse of what they can't remember anymore. I took him to the movies a couple months ago. We saw *Dunkirk*, ate popcorn and Milk Duds. It was fun. On the way out of the theater he quoted some lines from Churchill's speech to

Parliament regarding Dunkirk, “*We shall* defend our island, whatever the cost may be, *we shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight* on the landing grounds, *we shall fight* in the fields and in the streets, *we shall fight* in the hills; *we shall* never surrender”; something he’d remembered from his lifelong studies and erudition. By the time I dropped him back to his quarters in the care facility, he could not remember what movie we’d seen.

Surrender’s a big part of staying sober. “Let go,” we alxies often say, “let God.” LG, LG! Or, “not our day to watch it,” meaning we are not in charge. It’s why I address my supplications to Whomever’s in Charge Here, because the article of faith I hold to is provisional, to wit, if there’s a God, it isn’t me. The fellowship has ruined my religious certainty—that One True Faith-ism we all are raised with. But the fellowship of wounded, variously damaged goods who’ve shared their experience, strength, and hopes with me have illumined for me, however dimly, a life of faith. It’s made me wary of certainty and open to hopes and loves I never before imagined. It’s made me grateful and rheumy eyed so that I find myself weeping at the ways of things, *De Rerum Natura* Lucretius called it—the glimpses of godliness we sometimes get in the otherwise quotidian, dull happenstance of life. Lucretius was a disbeliever, whereas I’m a happy ignoramus. In either case, we do not know.

The things George still remembers best are often things that happened years ago, like the woman who told him at his mother’s funeral how his mother “understood life’s higher callings.” He remembers that as the high praise it was of a woman who took to heart the hardships of others and did what she could to make their situations better. I tell him I think he has that too, an understanding of life’s higher callings, how he’s been a source for me of good orderly direction, if not the voice of God, at least a goodness in him that is undeniable. He looks out the window at the birds in the snow—chickadees and nuthatches, titmice and

a cardinal—and asks if I believe it means an angel is near, to see a bright red cardinal in the chill of winter. Perhaps, I tell him, it's his mother, or mine. He looks away; I'm getting rheumy eyed.

I had Bill's grave dug two years ago, fearful as I was of getting caught by frost deep in the ground, with a dead dog on my hands in Michigan's winter. And I started collecting the soup bones, littered everywhere over the yard, which he had worked the marrow out of over the years. It got to where I'd have them custom cut at the butchers, a few dozen at a time. I found a couple hundred of them and strung them on a line of rope and wound some solar-powered lights around the rope and hung the whole assemblage from the fulcrum that overhangs the water's edge and by which the former tenants' dock was swung out into place each spring. The bone rosary is what I call it, this blinking string of bones and lights that's meant to mark the spot where Bill will be interred sometime in the coming spring, I reckon, when his age and infirmity come to the certain end all living things come to. I've even written a brief lament and asked my son to have it cast in bronze so I can bolt it to a stone over his grave.

LITTLE ELEGY

for a dog who skipped out, and after XJ Kennedy

Here lies loyal, trusted, true
 friend for life, Bill W.,
 named for Wordsworth and the guy
 by whose twelve steps I've stayed dry,

sober even, these long years,
 like the good dog buried here
 who could bark but never bit;
 never strayed too far or shit

indoors; never fell from grace.
 God, grant him this ground, this grave,
 out of harms' way, ceaseless rest.
 Of all good dogs old Bill was best.

They laugh at me, of course, my sons, for all the planning for Bill's demise—the hole at the corner of the lot, the rosary of bones blinking in the dark over the water's edge, the stone, the little poem. Preparing for Bill's death, they figure, is a way of preparing for my own or diverting my attention from fears about what lies ahead, in the way that Easter has, for true believers, been a blessed assurance of eternal life; a contingent balm, in its alternate narrative, in the gaping maw of mortality.

I've a friend who says we've lost our "eschatological nerve," the certainty that heaven awaits the good and perdition, the evildoers. With the loss of a sense of eternal reward or damnation producing justice in a world so often unfair, we've begun to uphold the so-called prosperity gospel, to wit, success is a sign of God's favor, as if grace was deserved or earned like the poverty the poor are said to have coming to them. The good news formerly proclaimed by the evangelists has been replaced by their enthusiasm for Donald Trump and his zero-sum, winners-and-losers agenda.

This year Easter falls on April Fools'. Some feasts are movable, some steadfast. It'll also be, if my friend George remains, as he has since April 1, 1974, quit of the booze that made him crazy, his forty-fourth AA birthday, proving, as he often says, that any fool can get sober if he or she works the program. Whether March Madness or April Fools', Easter is for those who believe in second acts and second chances, another go, mulligans and do overs. Easter is for repentance and forgiveness, amends and abundant life. Easter is when the lost are found and the dead arise, transfigured, glorified by what is possible. The Easter I believed in as a boy was a sort of zombie apocalypse. It never mattered much to me

whether Jesus was really raised from the dead. Like Lennie Briscoe, I was damaged at the specter of the capital punishment. The broken, bloody body of the Christ that hung center stage in Catholic churches was more a spectacle to me than narrative. Perhaps that's sacrilege. Maybe not. Nor have I much interest in whether the moral influence or substitutionary atonement models of redemption most apply. My faith in a loving God, keeping a count of the hairs on my head, comes and goes with changing realities. It is as if I blame every outrage, every evil not averted, every sadness that might have been undone, on the God I hardly believe in anymore. Some days I see the hand or hear the voice of God implicated in the things that happen; others not so much. Begrudgery and resentment are the crosses I bear and I find them much heavier than just giving thanks. This Easter I'm not looking for an empty tomb, triumphant savior, or life eternal. Rather, some spiritual progress, instead of perfection; a little repair if not redemption, some salvage south of full salvation. "No appointments," an old timer used to tell me, "no disappointments." No expectations, no vexations.

Truth told I see sufficient triumph in the way that Bill still makes the climb upstairs at night, despite his sore hips, cloudy eyes, and the withered muscle mass in his shoulders and hindquarters. It comes with age. Is he driven by loyalty or an old fear of sleeping alone? Is it love or fear of loss? Impossible to know. He carries on but does not speak.

I see an Easter in George's getting through another day of his assisted but nonetheless bewildered living, in good humor though utterly out of sorts. I sense it in the texts I get from my long-estranged daughter, those proofs of life; the flickering of tenderness I still feel toward my distant wife, our genial courtesies.

The meeting I go to on Sunday nights up at the lake is in the basement of Transfiguration Church. And that's what I'm after this Easter, I think. That's what I'm after most of the time, the momentary radiance of the divine beaming out

of God's creation. Old dogs can do it, old friends, old wives; old sorrows borne patiently, old grievances forgiven, old connections restored.

New ones too, like the other night at the meeting when Lilah was talking. She's the youngest pilgrim at the table. She's paid her dues and is working on sobriety. She's talking about how she came to know that she was beloved, when her girlfriend, noticing how badly sunburned Lilah got when they were gardening one August afternoon last summer, did not scold. Rather, she carefully peeled the dry shreds of skin off of Lilah's reddened shoulder, bent and tenderly kissed the spot, and held the desiccated remnants of her darling's flesh in the palm of her hand, like viaticum, a sort of holy grail which she brought to her mouth, ate, and swallowed.

Her sharing this intimacy and its intelligence quickened my breath and then caught it up. Gobsmacked is what I was, my mouth agape as if trying to hold my breath and let it go. My eyes were getting red and rheumy yet again, welling with a glimpse of the divine, the beautiful, the redeemed and atoned for, manifestly forgiven beings, all of us assembled round the table, we had shown up broken and bewildered and disconnected and were suddenly beatified, illumined, and made new, transfigured in the shimmering moment; my catching breaths were shortening and I was fearless suddenly, cavalier about the scene I was on the brink of making.

It was then I was remembering that Jesus wept.