

uncle with a nod, and he would promptly step back onto the side porch and unplug the tree. He would draw the cord far back from the wall outlet and coil it neatly next to the tree stand.

As we talked, the setting December sun would, for a few moments, touch our faces with a pale pink light, and then the living room would ease into darkness. On the marble-topped table by the window, the homely coal plant mercifully disappeared into shadow. My grandmother shifted in her chair, folded her hands on her lap, and sighed with satisfaction. Once again, her family had been spared from the flames.



We've had an ice storm. I knew a shy old man whose long hands swung from the cuffs of his shirts like the ice-coated branches sweeping our shadowy yard in the light from the kitchen window.

He was good with machines, but when his fingers were empty of work, he had no place to hide them. They never quite fit in his pockets. For more than eighty winters, he sat just inside the loose door to the world, watching his wife work in her kitchen. His fingers brushed a table there, feeling for something that ought to be tightened.

By the light of the kitchen window tonight, I see him out there on the threshold showing his hands to his wife, how clean he's got them, scrubbing them over and over.



In the weeks just before Christmas, my father's store was busiest, its narrow aisles crowded with shoppers, its carefully arranged displays ruffled and disarrayed, and its floors slippery with melting snow. On Saturdays and when school let out in the afternoons, my sister and I helped out. She worked on the sales floor, and I made bows for the women in the gift-wrap booth.

The bow machine was set up in the furnace room. A single light bulb hung over the card table upon which it sat. Behind my chair, the great gray furnace sighed and ticked, and piles of bald and disassembled manikins watched my back with wide unblinking eyes. In the shadows, bugs rustled across the floor, and above me the footfalls of customers knocked up and down the wooden floor. There I wound green and red satin ribbon into shiny bows that I dropped into a big cardboard box be-

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side me. It was a job like those in fairy tales, in which a child is imprisoned in a castle and made to spin golden thread from flax straw.

Occasionally, my dungeon-keep would be visited by Otto Uhley, the store's janitor. He was a friendly hump-backed man whose nose was runny from first frost until after Easter, and who frequently dabbed at his upper lip with the tip of his tongue. Because the bow machine was in his basement, he looked upon the bow making as his responsibility and included me in his rounds of mop closets, toilets, and shipping room.

As if to inspect my work, he would dip his great knobby hands into the bow box and swirl them about. The satin splashed and sparkled around his thick hairy wrists. Although it was my responsibility to deliver the finished bows to the gift-wrap booth, Otto liked to do it for me. Up the narrow back stairs he'd go, the big box in his arms, his round face buried chin deep in the shiny satin.

Sometimes, his visits to the furnace room would be cut short by the appearance of my father, who occasionally fled from the crush of customers above to stand for a moment or two in the quiet warmth of the basement. Whenever he came down the stairs, Otto would hurriedly scuffle off to the other end of the darkness under the store.

My father was then in his early fifties. As much as he enjoyed storekeeping, there were times when he was gray with fatigue. He often worked ten or twelve hours a day. As much as he liked visiting with customers, there were moments when he would fall silent and stare off into space. There were evenings when he would drive the family in our old Plymouth out to the edge of town, only to get away for a few moments. There, a farmer kept a pen of sheep, and my father would pull the car off the road and stop. "See, children," he'd say, "how much the sheep look like the people who come to the store. Why, look! There's Dr. Mason's wife, and Mrs. Fitch, and, oh, there's Gladys Fitzpatrick, bless her soul . . ."

It was at such times, when the press of the store had become more than my father could bear, that he would stop in the furnace room, his shoulders sunken, his arms hanging down as if to let his responsibilities drip from the tips of his fingers. Though he would have preferred to stand there in silence, taking a few breaths, he would ask me how the bow making was going and would answer questions about how things

were going on the sales floor above. Then, as quickly as he had appeared, he would be gone.

Except for these two visitors, I was alone. As the box filled with bows, my head filled with dreams. Behind me, the furnace breathed like an enormous and motherly old woman, pleased to have a boy among the dark folds of her skirts. Above me, the footsteps resounded with the spirit of giving. I could imagine women in rich furs, smiling and chatting, their shoulders sprinkled with new-fallen snow, their arms piled high with gifts, and upon each gift, one of my beautiful bows. I could imagine the presents spread about under the Christmas trees in their houses, each package lit by the winking lights. I could hear the rattle of the colorful paper as each package was torn open, my reverie enhanced by the rustle of the insects behind the furnace.

As the days drew closer to Christmas, the store became busier, and my box of bows was whisked away up the stairs before I'd had a chance to fill it. Sometimes, one of the women from the gift-wrap booth would come running down for it, thus spoiling Otto's opportunity to bury his wet nose in the gay colors. Sometimes, my father would come for the box, having passed by the booth in his endless rounds and seen that the women were nearly out of bows. The footsteps above me flowed together into a steady rumble along the wooden aisles.

In the evening, after the store had closed, my sister, my father, and I would pass through the aisles, finding the countertops in shambles and the floors a wet black swirl of grime. At the front door, waiting to let us out and lock up behind us, stood Otto, his nose dripping, his mop bucket at the ready.

And then, suddenly, it was Christmas Eve!

Late in the afternoon, I was told by my father that I could stop making bows. My work was finished. I shut off the light, put on my warm jacket, and walked snowy Main Street down to its end and back, enjoying the rush of last-minute shoppers, the Christmas carols being piped out under the awnings of the stores. I stopped to look at the animated display in the jewelry store window, tiny elves endlessly making toys in Santa's workshop. The cold air sang in my lungs. I hummed along with the carols as I walked back to the store. Christmas at last!

By the time the store closed that day, my father's face was gray and his

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hands trembled. He walked through the aisles, absent-mindedly touching the counters, straightening the loose piles of unsold clothing. Our family was the last in the store. Even Otto had gone home before then, his arms full of packages, the floor left dirty behind him.

On the “Hold” shelf behind the counter in the gift-wrap booth would be several packages, left by mistake, forgotten, big boxes and small, all mysterious in their gift wrappings. Thinking that someone might come for them, my sister and father and I would wait an extra half hour, standing at the front of the store and peering out into the darkening street, the diminishing traffic. But no one came back. Finally, we loaded the mystery gifts into the Plymouth to take them home, leaving a note taped to the door: “If you have forgotten your package in our gift-wrap department, you may pick it up at the home of our manager.” This was followed by our address.

By that hour we were the only people in the streets, the headlights of the Plymouth searching the ruts in the snow. In every window, a Christmas tree glittered. My sister and I sat among the packages as our father drove home.

My mother met us at the door, and the smell of cookies baking poured out into the cold air. It seemed that every light in the house was turned on. The Christmas tree stood in the corner of the living room with packages spilling out from beneath it. We unloaded the strangers’ orphaned gifts and put them in the entryway, leaving the porch light on to guide their owners, should they come.

Soon, my father’s older brother, Tubby, would come to spend the evening. We would hear him coming across the snowy yard, ringing a belt of harness bells that had been in our family for many years. When he came in, the cold night air slid from his topcoat. His gifts for the family, left all day in the trunk of his car at his office, were like blocks of ice. We set them under the tree with the others and sat down together for supper.

All through the evening, as we opened our packages, strangers came to the door to claim their gifts. Uncomfortable, shy, apologetic, they thanked my father for taking the gifts home. As they stood in the doorway, snow melted from their boots onto the carpet and the cold air

flowed in around them. What would they have done, they asked, how would they have explained to their children? Each of them glowed with good luck and gratitude.

Finally, all the mysterious packages were gone and all of the family's had been unwrapped. Our family gathered in the living room, which was lit only by the tree, my uncle Tubby dozing in an armchair, my father and mother together on the couch, and my sister and I stretched out on the floor below the tree, looking up through the glittering branches. It was quiet. Beyond the window, it was snowing. In a box in a corner of the room, the used Christmas wrappings rustled as they slowly unfolded. Near me, the shining bows sat in a little pile under the tree.

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I've been watching my old dog, Buddy, as he gets ready to sleep by the fireplace. The way he turns and turns, then drops in a knot, is a lot like poaching an egg: with your spoon, you spin the boiling water, making a pocket, and then you drop in the egg, and it somehow holds together, a spiral nebula that loses no more than a few white sprays of light, just as in sleep each breath spins out and away from a dog, or from us, a slow subtraction that does not steal the peace we curl around.

I've been thinking this morning about the number of ermines you'd have to trap to trim Santa's outfit. An ermine is pretty small. The dogs killed a young one behind the barn several years ago, and it wasn't much bigger than a mouse. An adult ermine – actually a weasel in its winter snowsuit – can grow to ten inches long, excluding the tail, so after you'd cut off the head and tail and snipped off the arms and legs, you'd maybe have enough good fur to cover a toilet paper roll.

I did some fur trapping when I was a boy, and I think I'd use a small single-spring steel jump trap, baited with a piece of apple. If you tied the apple to the trigger plate with a piece of thread, you might save yourself a lot of lost bait.

You'd have to figure on losing some fur when you folded the seams in. I figure it'd take at least seven or eight of them just for the edge of his stocking cap and another couple for the ball of fur on the peak. Then you'd have to trim out the lapels and cuffs and hem of his jacket and

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have enough left to go around the tops of his boots. You might be able to get by with fifty or sixty full-grown ermine, but that could be a stretch, especially if you were tailoring an outfit for a good fat Santa. That's a whole lot of work. Even with perfect ermine habitat, you might find one or two to an acre.



The Ben Franklin Store in Seward is going out of business. LOST OUR LEASE proclaims a long paper banner taped over the windows. I was told by a woman who works nearby that the owners of the building have tripled the rent.

Where will I go to buy those red Big Chief writing tablets with the wide school-ruled blue lines? Where will women buy checkered oilcloth for their kitchen tables? And where will people like my uncle Tubby go to buy boxes of cheap chocolate cherries to mail for Christmas gifts?

Freezing rain this morning, raw and cold. I've been sitting in Tubby's recliner by the fire that's in the wood stove, remembering another uncle, Jack Mayo, as he paid his daily visits to his big white tomcat, Fluff, who'd been exiled by my uncle's second wife, Crystal, to a chicken wire rabbit hutch on the side of the garage. An old man then, Uncle Jack would totter outside in weather like this, in his flannel robe and house slippers, to feed and water and console Fluff, who would look with a cat's cold haughtiness into my uncle's soft and homely face. Fluff had belonged to my late aunt, who had died a long and painful death from cancer, and though Crystal said Fluff's exile was necessary because he shed his hair on her furniture, our family suspected she didn't want my uncle cooing and clucking over anything my aunt had loved and cherished. I can remember Uncle Jack pushing a long finger through the wire to scratch Fluff's ears and the cat disdainfully tipping his head to better take advantage of this furtive love. That was more than thirty years ago and is as vivid to me as if I had just looked up to see my uncle slowly passing my kitchen window.

Now the Ben Franklin store is joining everything that's gone.



I spend lots of winter days with books. I probably have the largest private library in Seward County, thousands of books. I can't resist them.

Writers are writers because they love to read. If I were to read two or three books every week, I couldn't live long enough to read through the books I own, but that doesn't keep me from buying more. Most of the ones I buy are from bookstore sale tables, but I've also found a number at thrift shops and garage sales.

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I was looking just now at a stack of children's books. I collect them because I like to look at the illustrations. When asked, most writers will list among their literary influences great books like *War and Peace* or *Remembrance of Things Past*, but the most important influence on my writing and life was *Lentil*, a children's book written and illustrated by Robert McCloskey. It was first published by the Viking Press in 1940, and my copy was given to me by friends of my family while I was in grade school. In neat but labored cursive, I carefully inscribed the title page, "This book belongs to the Library of Teddy Kooser." I was already showing the telltale signs of the bibliophile I would one day become.

Lentil is the story of a schoolboy who, by what we in my family would call stick-to-itiveness, overcomes an inability to fit into the life of his community and becomes a local hero. It is no surprise that I identified with the protagonist. He was a boy about my age, ten or twelve; the author's wonderfully detailed pencil drawings of street scenes in the fictional small town of Alta, Ohio, looked much like my home town of Ames, Iowa; and the problem *Lentil* had in fitting in was a problem I had.

It's a simple story. *Lentil* occupies himself in the ways I once did, walking around town, up and down alleys, thinking about his place in the world. His main problem is that he is frequently embarrassed in the schoolroom because he is unable to sing as sweetly as his classmates. When he opens his mouth, he croaks. So he saves his pennies, purchases a harmonica, and practices it wherever he goes, hoping that by the sweetness of his harmonica playing, he will be redeemed in the eyes of his classmates.

The villain in the story is an old man named Sneep, the town spoilsport and sourpuss. Sneep doesn't like much of anything, and he especially doesn't like the town's most notable citizen, Colonel Carter. Sneep and Colonel Carter are about the same age, and perhaps Sneep, who has never made much of himself, is jealous of Colonel Carter, who is a

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wealthy benefactor and noted public servant. When the news gets out that the Colonel is coming back to Alta after two years away, old Sneep determines to spoil the celebration.

The townspeople deck out the town in bunting for the Colonel's arrival, and everybody gathers at the railroad depot to meet his train. A brass band has assembled, prepared to lead a parade through the streets. But Old Sneep gets on top of the depot roof and, when the train comes in, starts loudly slurping on a lemon. As a result, all of the band members pucker up, unable to blow their trumpets and trombones and tubas.

But Lentil is miraculously unaffected by Sneep's dirty trick, and he pulls out his harmonica and begins to play. The Colonel is so pleased with Lentil's music, especially his rendition of "She'll Be Comin' 'Round the Mountain," that he jigs a few steps on the depot platform and then lets Lentil ride with him at the head of the parade in his open touring car. All has gone well. Even Old Sneep is softened by the music. On the last page of the book is a drawing of Lentil, smiling, with the single sentence, "So you never know what can happen when you learn to play the harmonica."

When I was a boy, I felt a lot like Lentil. Surely the success of a story like his – I believe *Lentil* went through many reprintings – has to do with the fact that many if not most children feel they don't fit in. At that time I was small and awkward and no good at athletics, the true measure of acceptability in those days. I tried hard. I strapped on the football helmet my parents had lovingly bought me and got run right over as if I'd been a sandbag somebody had left on the playground. I couldn't run as fast, jump as far or as high, or talk the sports lingo as well as my classmates. I knew I'd never fit in. So I decided I'd have to find something I could do well if I wanted to be loved and admired. Inspired by Lentil, I bought a harmonica and tried to learn to play it. It was one of the Hohner "Old Standby" models, and though I practiced a lot, the only tune I ever learned to execute well was "Red River Valley." This modest accomplishment was never going to get me into the big parade.

I was better at drawing pictures and writing poems and stories, and eventually I converted my aspirations to becoming an artist and author. I had teachers who understood how important it is not to discourage

children while they play with their crayons and pencils. They didn't tell me that my trees looked too much like lollipops or that my stories didn't end with a proper denouement. They smiled and patted my shoulder and ran their warm fingers through my hair. I know now that I was in the presence of the only angels we are ever likely to make the acquaintance of: teachers blessed with the love of small people who are trying to find their place in the world.

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Some years later, during the summers I worked as a sign painter, I used to drive my old pickup truck into small towns in Iowa that were much like Alta, Ohio, Lentil's town, and set about to letter the glass windows of storefronts on Main Street. Old men would come out of the taverns and coffee shops, carrying folding chairs, and would sit behind me and watch me work. I was that exotic creature, an itinerant artist, and their attention and admiration warmed my back with a kind of bone-deep sunshine. There is nothing so pleasant as to have the admiration of those people we have come to call the locals.

But it was as a poet that I would finally become my own Lentil.

Because he was interested in writing and writers, Bob Kerrey, once Nebraska's senior senator, asked a mutual acquaintance to introduce us. This was in the 1970s, before he was to run for governor. He and I became fast friends, beginning an exchange of yarns and letters that continues today. When he was elected governor, Bob would occasionally drive out to our place in the country for a visit. He would dismiss his official driver, a trooper, and would himself pilot the official vehicle, a long black Chrysler or Lincoln, I forget which. Sometimes we'd go for a drive. We'd roll up and down the gravel roads, talking books and telling stories and laughing and raising a great plume of gubernatorial dust, and it came to me that there I was, at last, Lentil, riding in Colonel Carter's car at the head of the parade. *You never know what can happen when you learn to play the harmonica.*



This is the season for getting sick, and I have a cold.

When I was a freshman in college, I came down with pneumonia following a drunken tobogganing party. I was very ill, hospitalized for ten days and out of my head with fever for the first week. The walls and ceiling of my room took on a strange, softly undulating life that terrified

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me. Once I saw glossy wet fur growing out of the grain of the wooden door. I later recalled having well-wishing visitors – friends and relatives – who in fact had never been to see me.

As my fever fluctuated, I experienced brief periods of clarity and would lie with my sweaty bedding twisted about me, reading a book that someone had left by the bed. It was the only reading material in the room, a boy's novel about a German shepherd named King. Time and again, King came to the rescue of his blundering master. I knew that it was a book my intellectual college friends and teachers would sneer at, but my illness had reduced me to childishness, and as a child I fell for this simple, engrossing story. I was twenty years old, but because I was sick, I had regressed to half that age. I was completely dependent upon the loving care of adults – my parents, my doctor, and nurses. Near the end of my hospital stay, my sweetheart of four years came to my hospital room to tell me that she had found another boyfriend; I let her go without an argument, having been beaten back into a bemused, passive, pre-pubescent state.

The story of the noble dog, King, sustained me against the billowy craziness upon which my bed floated and bobbed like a raft. His story was richly detailed and absorbing. He made his way through snowdrifts, up and down the sheer faces of mountains, through flooded, ice-choked streams. King's adventures were breathtaking, marvelous, and like the faithful dog he was, he was always within calling range when his master needed him.

When my temperature finally went down and stayed down, I began looking about the room for the book, but it was nowhere to be found. My nurses told me that I'd been given no books because I'd been much too ill to read. When my parents came to visit, I asked them what had happened to it, and they said they couldn't recall ever seeing such a book. No one could account for the missing King.

But the book was vividly impressed upon my memory. I could still feel it in my hands and see its print in front of my eyes. It had to be there somewhere. I described it in detail: it had no dust jacket and was bound in red cloth frayed by wear; the binding was slightly sticky after holding it for a while; it was a little over an inch thick and had a comfortable, serious-feeling heft to it; the pages were of good prewar rag paper and

had deckled edges; it had the good glue-and-ink smell of a book; the spine was stamped with the title in gold foil: *King: A Dog of the North*.

There were, of course, many such books in print at the time, the dog story being a staple of juvenile reading, and I had possibly read one or two of them when I'd been younger. But what I came to believe is that in my delirium, I wrote, printed, bound, and published *King: A Dog of the North*. I made it all up. Just as King, the dog, was always there when his master fell into the arms of a bear, King, the book, had snatched me from the jaws of pneumonia.

I have been a writer ever since. Oh, I'd written some poems before I got pneumonia, but it took pneumonia to make me serious about writing. The creation of *King: A Dog of the North*, a solid accomplishment of the imagination, may have given me the confidence to try my hand at letting my imagination carry me forward, toward other stories and poems and books like that one. And whatever success I've had as a writer, I owe in some part to that magnificent silver-haired German shepherd, who vanished into the frozen wasteland once he had seen me back to health. Writing late at night, sometimes I think I hear his great paws padding through the snow.



It's clear and quite cold, in the teens at daybreak, with a couple of inches of new snow on the ground. Icicles on the eaves troughs.

Because my sister told me today about a man in her neighborhood who is steeling himself for weeks of radiation of the neck, I got to thinking about a plumber I knew more than twenty years ago, a charming man who died of cancer, an inoperable tumor of the throat.

He and his wife had lived only in Nebraska for several years, having grown up in California. In their forties, they'd decided to try life in a new setting, and they'd blindly stuck a pin into a U.S. map and found Lincoln, Nebraska, where they had been very happy. I met him when I was remodeling and phoned for a plumber and liked him immensely. He was already ill and knew that he would die, but he wanted to finish his life as a plumber, using his skills.

His hobby was carving ice sculptures, and he had a part-time business making punchbowls and swans and angels for celebrations. He'd made

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arrangements with an ice company in Lincoln and could go there in his spare time to chip away at his creations, which he stored in their refrigerated vaults.

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He died the summer I met him, and a few days afterward, I began wondering what would become of his sculptures. I drove to the ice company to ask what they intended to do, but they had already dismissed my friend's work, pushing the three sculptures that remained out onto their loading dock where they'd melted in the heat. I was told they'd been horses with wings.



Because a cousin I haven't seen for more than twenty years kindly answered my letter and sent me the recipe for his mother's molasses cookies, I should be happy. I should be making those cookies, savoring the strong, black, earthy odor of molasses, pushing the gritty white sugar into the lard, greasing the black tin sheet with Crisco, smearing it around with my fingers, pleased to have rescued her marvelous cookies from time. But because of his dried-out ballpoint pen that skipped as he held down the cheap lined paper, and because of his awkward, poorly spelled words and his confusion of tenses, present and past, and because his dear mother is gone, whom both of us loved, whom both of us wished would go on laughing and baking forever, and because the words for this come hard for both of us, I have been sitting a long time alone in my kitchen, not lifting a finger, with this recipe, a little scrap torn from oblivion, folded and then folded again, closed in my hand.



More and more frequently since I entered my sixties, I have begun to see my father's hands at the ends of my arms. Just now, the left and more awkward hand lies curled in my lap while the right one massages the beard on my chin. On the ring finger of the left is the silver wedding band that my wife gave me, not my father's gold ring with its little yellow sapphire. But I am not deceived; this wearing of my ring on his ring finger is a part of my father's respectful accommodation of me and of my life and marriage. Mine have succeeded his, which is, as he would have said, only as it should be.

I recognize his hands despite the ring. They are exactly as I remember

them from his own middle age – wrinkled, of course, with a slight sheen to the tiny tile-work of the skin, with knotted branching veins, and with thin dark hair that sets out from beneath the shirt cuffs as if to cover the hand but that within an inch thins and disappears as if there were a kind of glacial timberline there. There is, as we know, a field of coldness just beyond the reaching tips of our fingers, and this hair has been discouraged and has fallen back.

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As a young man, my father had been a drapery salesman in a department store, and his hands were ever after at their best when smoothing fabric for display – the left one holding a piece of cloth unrolled from a bolt while the right lovingly eased and teased the wrinkles from it, his fingers spread and their tips lightly touching the cloth as if under them were something grand and alive like the flank of a horse. I can feel the little swirls of brocade beneath the ball of his thumb.

These hands have never done hard physical work, but they are not plump or soft or damp and cool. Nor are their nails too carefully clipped or too carefully buffed and polished. They are firm, solid, masculine hands, and other men feel good about shaking them. They have a kind of brotherly warmth, and when they pinch the selvage of the drapery fabric and work it just a little between thumb and finger, they do it with power and confidence. There are pairs of hands like these – some brown, some black, some white – in every bazaar in the world, hands easing and smoothing, hands flying like doves through the dappled light under time-riddled canvas.

I would like to be held by these hands, held by them as they were when I was a child and I seemed to fall within them wherever I might turn. I would like to feel them warm and broad against my back and would like to be pressed to the breast of this man with his faint perfume of aftershave, with the tiny brown moles on his neck, with the knot of his necktie slightly darkened by perspiration. Now he has taken his glasses off and set them on the mantel, and there are small red ovals on the sides of his nose. I reach to touch them and find them wet, as if I were touching something deep inside him. Now I hear him singing, softly singing, the words buzzing deep in his chest.

But these old hands of his are past all that. They lie side by side in my

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lap, their palms turned up as if to catch this fleeting moment as it falls away. But as I peer down into them, they begin to move on their own, to turn and shift. I watch the left hand slowly rise to place its palm against my heart and watch the right rise swiftly to enfold the other.

This book begins with an old proverb, “When God wishes to rejoice the heart of a poor man, He makes him lose his donkey and find it again.” In the summer of 1998, I lost the donkey upon which I had ridden for many years, the ability to write. It was something that had given meaning to my life for forty years, and it was gone.

Nebraska had enjoyed abundant rains throughout April and May, and on Monday, June 1st, 1998, the city of Lincoln was lush and green. The temperature was in the low seventies. Perhaps this year we’d have a perfect early summer, I thought as I drove to the dentist’s office, with enough moisture for the farmers and not too much heat for the rest of us.

The dental hygienist, a woman who’d cleaned my teeth many times, seemed clumsy and distracted that day, and as I sat back in her chair, I tried to divert my attention from the tiny injuries she was inflicting to the world beyond the picture window, where leafy treetops tossed in the breeze and above them a few immaculately white clouds loafed past, imprinted with swallows in flight.

When the hygienist had finished and I’d rinsed as instructed, she called in the dentist, a tall, cheerful, balding Nebraskan.

He tapped my teeth with his pick and peered around in my mouth.

“Could you take a look at the back of my tongue on the left side?” I asked. “I’ve had a sore spot back there for a number of weeks. It’s probably nothing at all, but I thought I’d better have you take a look.”

He wrapped a piece of gauze around my tongue, gently pulled it out, and, with his gloved finger, felt the area. It took him a couple of minutes, and I guessed he was thinking of what to say. “Well,” he said, looking serious, “something’s going on back there.”

He turned to the hygienist, who had been looking on with intense curiosity. “Call over to the dental school and see if we can get Ted in as soon as possible.”

The hygienist made an appointment with an oral pathologist while I sat there. She cheerfully kidded with the person on the other end of the line, saying she had “another tongue” that needed examining.

The pathologist was not able to see me that day or the following day, but I was able to see him on Wednesday. My wife went with me and sat through the examination. The doctor was a small, neat, businesslike man who at first seemed rather distant but who warmed to us as he got over what we later decided was his shyness. He felt around the sore area and told me that it was probably nothing more than inflamed tonsillar tissue but that he'd like to biopsy it. He called in an oral surgeon and introduced us, and we scheduled the biopsy for the next day.

On Thursday the oral surgeon, a pleasant man with large but graceful hands, anesthetized my mouth with Novocain, and, with the help of a female assistant, snipped out several pieces of yellowish tissue. “Looks just like tonsillar tissue to me,” he said, confidently. He sent me home with a prescription for painkillers.

With the help of the painkiller, I was able to get some sleep that night. I spent most of Friday in my bathrobe on the living room couch, reading a new novel written by a close friend. Then, early that afternoon, I got a call from the pathologist, whose voice was quiet and serious. I held my breath. “I'm afraid it's squamous cell carcinoma,” he said, “both pieces of tissue I looked at.”

“Oh, God!” I remember saying, in a voice that was partly a sob, partly a sigh. “What do I do now?”

He told me he'd already arranged a Monday appointment with a surgeon at the university medical center in Omaha, a teaching hospital. He said this doctor was a Sloan Kettering trained specialist in cancer of the head and neck. He'd already sent off a fax of his biopsy.

I phoned Kathleen at the office to tell her the news, and she came home early to be with me. I slept very little Friday night, sweating so badly that I soaked the sheets.

On Saturday we spent two hours with a therapist, trying to get control of our anxiety. He suggested relaxation exercises and gave me a session of hypnosis. Whenever I felt anxious or panicky, I was to proceed through a series of pleasant, orderly, imaginary scenarios. They involved

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envisioning a landscape, and I chose to imagine the scenic vista near my late grandparents' home on the Mississippi River in Iowa. It is my favorite countryside, and I have written about it all my life. That overlook, just off the highway, is probably five hundred feet above the river, and one can see upstream for at least ten miles and across into Wisconsin. There are always boats on the river, and I imagined these too, including a tug pushing a line of rusty iron ore barges north toward Minnesota. I imagined the smell of the cedars and hardwoods that grow near the overlook, of the ragweed down the side of the bluff, and of the warm limestone gravel upon which I imagined I was standing. I imagined a clear blue sky and a warm sun. On Saturday and Sunday nights I woke often but was able to get some sleep by imagining myself in that place until I drifted off. I came to rely on this scene for the next six months.

On Monday we met my surgeon, a pleasant but serious young man who examined me and asked if I did any public speaking in my work. He'd have to remove part of my tongue, and I might have a speech problem. "No speaking that I can't live without," I said. Kathleen interrupted and said, "But he is a poet; he gives poetry readings." By the time we saw him again, he had been to the public library, checked out my books, and read them.

Surgery followed. My doctor had expected the tumor to be early in its development, confined to the site, but he did a neck dissection to be certain it hadn't spread. It had, to the upper lymph nodes, under my jaw. He told me this bad news in my room at the hospital, recommended a full course of radiation, and then, when his clutch of young residents had moved into the hall, stayed behind for a moment. "I don't know what kind of spiritual life you have, Mr. Kooser," he said, "but you are about to enter one of the great life-affirming experiences."

Five days a week for six weeks I reported to a Lincoln hospital for radiation. My mouth erupted in sores that persisted for weeks after I'd completed the treatments. I could eat only milkshakes and Ensure. Each day when I came home, I stopped at the head of our lane and picked up a pebble from the road. I lined these up along the kitchen windowsill to count off the treatments. It took a lifetime, it seemed, to get to thirty. I dreaded waking up in the morning.

From the first of June 'til early winter, I was exhausted, anxious, depressed, and unable to write. I began taking a two-mile walk each morning. I'd been told to stay out of the sun for a year because of skin sensitivity, so I exercised before dawn, hiking the isolated country roads near where I live, sometimes with my wife but most often alone.

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Then, as autumn began to fade and winter came on, I began to heal. One morning in early November, following my walk, I surprised myself by writing a poem. Soon I was writing every morning. Several years before, my friend Jim Harrison and I had carried on a correspondence in short poems. As a variation on this, I began pasting my morning poems on postcards and sending them to Jim. I wrote 130 poems during that winter, and a selection from these was eventually published by Carnegie Mellon University Press.

God had taken my donkey and helped me to find it again. You never know.



Next to a country road, in January, a string of Burlington Northern box-cars stands rust red against a clear sky. At rest like this, they have a steady tension, like the long bones of an old woman's fingers. The odd car, for there is always an odd car in a string like this, like the one dark kernel in every ear of corn, is on this bright subzero day red, white, and blue. Its paint is so fresh it looks sticky. *Columbia*, it reads, a lost word from America's past, a word like *liberty*, like *republic*, a word with the smell of black powder.

This car looks restless among the others, looks as if it were holding its breath. If it were free of the others, it would fly along the tracks under its own power, clickety-clickety, bending the dry weeds back over the snowdrifts by the force of its wild, free rush.

The Czechs say, "The longest journey is from the mother to the door." At the end of his childhood, a young man breaks from the hard tears of his family and follows his own way. Wherever he goes, he carries their name. After three or four generations, all of the brothers and sisters have scattered, and the sons of the brothers and sisters, and the sons of the brothers' and sisters' sons, each following the shimmering tracks of his own fortune. And the years fly by, click clack click clack.

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In a strange city, miles from his home, a man opens the phone book and runs a callused finger over the names of strangers. If they were ever here, the people of his scattered name, they are here no longer. Over the frozen railroad yards, white whistles of distance call. And into the new year, a hard winter of glistening steel.



Life is a long walk forward through the crowded cars of a passenger train, the bright world racing past beyond the windows, people on either side of the aisle, strangers whose stories we never learn, dear friends whose names we long remember, and passing acquaintances whose names and faces we take in like a breath and soon breathe away.

There is a windy perilous passage between each car and the next, and we steady ourselves and push across the iron couplers clenched beneath our feet. Because we are fearful and unsteady crossing through wind and noise, we more keenly feel the train rock under our legs, feel the steel rails give just a little under the weight, as if the rails were tightly stretched wire and there were nothing but air beneath them.

So many cars, so many passages. For you there may be the dangerous passage of puberty, the wind hot and wild in your hair, followed by marriage, during which for a while you walk lightly under an infinite blue sky, then the rushing warm air of the birth of your first child, and then, so soon it seems, a door slams shut behind you, and you find yourself out in the cold where you learn that the first of your parents has died.

But the next car is warm and bright, and you take a deep breath and unbutton your coat and wipe your glasses. People on either side, so generous with their friendship, turn up their faces to you, and you warm your hands in theirs. Some of them stand and grip your shoulders in their strong fingers, and you gladly accept their embraces, though you may not know them well. How young you feel in their arms.

And so it goes, car after car, passage to passage, as you make your way forward. The roadbed seems to grow more irregular under the wheels as you walk along – poor workmanship you think – and to steady yourself, you put your hands on people’s shoulders. So much of the world, colorful as flying leaves, clatters past beyond the windows while you try to be attentive to those you move among, maybe stopping to help someone

up from their seat, maybe pausing to tell a stranger about something you saw in one of the cars through which you passed, was it just yesterday or the day before? Could it have been a week ago, a month ago, perhaps a year?

The locomotive is up ahead somewhere, and you hope to have a minute's talk with the engineer, just a minute to ask a few questions of him. You're pretty sure he'll be wearing his striped cap and have his red bandanna around his neck, badges of his authority, and he'll have his elbow crooked on the sill of the open window. How impassively he will be gazing at the passing world as if he's seen it all before. He knows just where the tracks will take us as they narrow and narrow and narrow ahead to the point where they seem to join.

But there are still so many cars ahead, the next and the next and the next, clatter to clatter to clatter, and we close a door against the wind and find a new year, a club car brightly lit, fresh flowers in vases on the tables, green meadows beyond the windows, and lots of people who, together – stranger, acquaintance, and friend – turn toward you and, smiling broadly, lift their glasses.

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