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A Note on the Type

Aa Bembo is named for the Venetian poet and historian Pietro Bembo (1470–1547), because the roman on which it is based was first used in Bembo's book De Aetna, published by Aldus Manutius in 1496 with a typeface cut by Francisco Griffo one year earlier. Monotype recut this version in 1929.

Aa GillSans was designed by British typographer Eric Gill for the London Underground in 1927. The face was cut by Monotype in the same year.

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OF ALL THE EPIPHENOMENA YOU WERE MY FAVORITE

Flynn Eckenrode

It seems like everything nowadays has something to do with eggplant. Not that I’m against this. I’m a product of it. First, of course, a system was Erected, which was brash and had lots of thought behind it. Several of us planned to put an end to it, but we were Neglected by the wealthier peasantry, who were quite pleased To see an infrastructure spring up overnight like that. Then Came the pleasantly cool complications of Aftermath, which will long be associated with a collapse of the fathers. Finally, the system produced ‘children.’ I think that’s What they were called. Others have called them other things and I would not be the first in a long line to call them pernicious. They infested us with their systematics and put us on the maps They were writing. From down there, of course, it all looked very similar To another system I’d heard of, and I don’t doubt that the two Are related somehow and could probably even be triangulated With the help of some new third system that is still In its operative stages and hasn’t been translated yet. Alas For the slowness of language to create the bigness of systems. We all live in your lack, back to back, castigating our homelands, Finding for every correspondence something that responds Inadequately and makes matchsticks of our elegant Strictnesses. Belatedly we recognize our eggplant discoveries, After years of eating nothing but cheerios and Corn-on-the-cob. My daughter likes to say things now like, Isn’t that wildebeest coming too near us father? And when I Remind her of principles like Zeno’s paradox, she just shrugs her shoulders And gets carried off to the wildebeest festivals, where everyone Seems so ‘in the know’ all the time. I guess that’s youth for you. It creates boredom out of things you thought were pleasurable, Like wildebeests and their grazing patterns. But then, of course, It also fills you with a glow of self-satisfaction that looks a lot, I’m told, like the glow of self-radiation. So there’s another bell jar for you. It’s a variation on the funnel effect that’s been setting outside My window for hours now. Tomorrow I will go to school all day and learn algebra.
ONE SOLUTION

I try the threadbare twine of this stiff knot and wonder how it came to be so tight and tangled, dread-lock and relentless clot. A marling hitch or carrick bend tied right performs its task steadfastly, but comes slack with little protest when I tug the bends. But this! The cord slips through, above and back and through. Still, I suppose this tough snarl lends itself to some reflection on my life: Because its ductile threads so often kink, I learned to make decisions with a knife – as Alexander drew his sword to think, then brought the blade-edge thundering to the spot that marked the shake-split of the Gordian knot.
THE TIME OF HOPE
Adam Chanzit

Finney the Fat was falling up stairs, next to Harry the Fool, his partner in jest, while Horace the Great, a lover of baths, soaked his kingly body. The Countess Luenden, in her maiden chamber, heard the noise from the courtyard, and so she picked up the Royal Rocking Chair and heaved it through the stained-glass window. The glass shattered. She picked up a blue shard and pressed it against her thumb until she bled. She looked at the hole and screamed, "Orifice! My orifice!" then laughed, realizing it was no worse than getting pricked in the forefinger. When the Countess screamed, Horace the Great burst out of his lavatory, shot her a proud smile, tipped his bald head in somber salute, and dove determinedly out of the window. When the Countess laughed, Horace the Great became concerned. He could swear the Countess had screamed, "Horace! Die Horace!" But now this laughter? What could it mean? He considered asking the Countess for an explanation. Then he hit the marble floor of the courtyard next to the Royal Rocking Chair. Finney still fell up stairs to the crowd's delight.

Ishmael the Wise, standing pensively in the courtyard, looked at the dismembered body of Horace the Great. His disciples begged him to speak. Ishmael threw his hand across the sky, motioning for silence, and silence he received. He stroked his red beard once, twice, and a third time, finally speaking thus: "Though Horace the Great lies here before us, we must not omit today's lesson. There are four periods in the history of the Castle."

A few disciples instantly objected: "There are only three periods, Ishmael the Wise: The Time of Dread, the Time of Peace, and the Time of Mourning."

"I'm pleased you remember, my dears. But as of today, we have entered the fourth period: this is the Time of Hope."

"Ah!" said the crowd.

Then a young lady stood up and said, "I don't feel very hopeful." Ishmael stroked his chin once, then scoffed at her. An angry disciple smacked her over the head with a leg of the Royal Rocking Chair.

Ishmael peered up towards the Countess, who leaned out of her window.

"How are you, Countess?"

"I'm bleeding."

"So is my heart." Ishmael's disciples rushed to him, but he motioned them away.

"I understand." She swayed her hips. The disciples let out a sigh. Ishmael could barely contain his lust, so he stroked his chin six times. She spoke again: "There's a body in the courtyard."

"I believe he fell," reasoned Ishmael the Wise, regaining his bearings.

"Like Rome?"

"Yes," answered Ishmael and paused. "He was your husband." His disciples nodded.

"I've heard that zillions of times!" responded the Countess. His disciples gasped.

"Well that makes sense," spat Ishmael. His disciples applauded.

"He sure loved baths, didn't he?" she sighed... and fell out of the window. She would die next to her lover.

But a disciple ruined everything by catching her, placing her on her feet, patting her Countess-like head twice, and saying, "there, there."

"Thank you," she said, moving towards the stairs.

"Yes," said Ishmael to the Countess' back. A question was never allowed to go unanswered in the Castle. The King said it would be a sign of ignorance. And a lack of communication.

"Communication is Life" was the King's slogan and the first tablet. The three tablets were placed above the courtyard for all to see. The second tablet stated that everything and everyone in the Castle had to be labeled. A green oblong once appeared in the marketplace, and no one knew what to call it. The Constable arrived, put on his gloves, and threw it over the Castle walls. The third tablet said something, but no one could decipher the handwriting, so everyone acted cautiously in fear that they would violate it.
The King was rumored to have taken over forty-thousand baths. No one knew what was so kingly about that or how it related to communication, but no one could ask the King because no one had seen him until today. He had been very powerful, but even more shy.

On her way back, the Countess passed Finney the Fat and his partner, Harry the Fool, who danced in the nude, rubbed his buttocks, and contorted his face. She shook her head and moved on. But the crowd went wild and was growing quickly. Even some of Ishmael's disciples deserted him for the Fat Man and the Fool.

Meanwhile, in a musty room of the Castle, Simion the Somewhat Evil wanted to be Simion the Extremely Evil. He smoked a cigar and limped around the room, devising his master plan. It was a huge firebomb, hanging above his room, and with a single spark, the Castle could be in flames. Then he, Simion the Extremely Evil, would perish in joy. He puffed once on his cigar in some kind of supplicant salute before pressing the tip to the fuse of his master device. Then he had a terrible insight. If everyone died, who would be left to call him Simion the Extremely Evil? Simion began to cry, then exploded.

The Castle roasted well. Fire warmed cool corridors, flashed across gardens, and lit dark rooms. Panic spread faster than flames. “What do we do now?” screamed a bearded man to a tiny lady. “Yes, I suppose so,” she retorted. “That’s beautiful,” said a child, pointing towards the rising colors. “What is it?” asked an old man. “Orange,” the child said. The Constable attempted to throw the unnamed flames over the Castle walls. He found that they burned his gloves. Ishmael the Wise told his disciples to remain calm while his disciples remained calm. Horace the Great did nothing because he was dead. All the rest were soon to follow. Almost all. Fat and Fool ended their popular skit to leave the Castle. “What are you doing?” a young lady asked. They walked out the huge stone doors and into the meadow. It was the first unanswered question in the history of the Castle.

People began to doubt. “Horace was not so great,” a gentleman said. “And that Ishmael was no wise man!” screamed Franny the Temperate. “What exactly is a Constable?” a blond woman wondered. “Was the Countess a countess? And the King! Where is he?” a boy asked. “If only we had learned to speak!” a burning woman moaned. A few people wondered if Simion was evil at all.

Harry the Fool and Finney the Fat strolled arm in arm through the meadow. The green stretched out until it met the sky.

“It’s quite apocalyptic, don’t you think, Fat Man?” pondered the Fool, pointing towards the burning structure.

“Certainly.” He paused. “Lord, I’m fat!”

“You most definitely are. And I am foolish.”

“No lie there.”

“Would you like to dance with me, Fat Man?” invited the Fool. Answer was not needed. The two held hands and danced in the meadow as the Castle burned.

A prospector appeared and the couple stopped. He was well-dressed, carried a pencil in his ear, and held a rolled-up blueprint in his left palm.

“I have a plan for a grand new structure,” he grinned at them.

“We’re not interested,” spoke the Fool.

“We’ll have none of it,” finished the Fat Man.

“But, gentlemen, what will you do out here?”

“Look at us!” laughed the Fat Man. “I’ll be fat and he’ll be foolish.

“But who besides a fool will call you fat? And how will you be foolish without anyone to laugh at you?” Harry and Finney turned around. The burning Castle was gone. The ashes were nowhere to be seen. The prospector unrolled his blueprint and showed it to them: “It will be a great society. Well-ordered and prosperous.”

“No sir, we aren’t interested,” Harry said.

“We’ve seen the faults of such plans,” Finney added.

The prospector leaned forward: “Plenty of people to feed you, plenty to laugh at you. Everyone will know who you are! Forever!”

Fat and Fool glanced at each other. Their lips bent into smiles that looked much like the smile Horace flashed as he dove out the Countess Luenden’s window. ♣
JULY AFTERNOON
Rebecca Armstrong

Today, desire is the black snake
in the swift waters under this path’s bridge,
an arrow to protection under rock;

the slow cloud of gnats
obsuring the surface, forcing
upstream; or the emerald reflection

of the forest’s stillness on the waters’
swiftness. It is the hands of dead
trees, grasping at shaded air;

a premature yellow leaf turning over
under the surface, which stops on stone
then finds its path around it.

The desiring is the inexplicable wetness
on all the tall grasses; a man
who leaves a building, skirts it

and is gone. It is the cloud shadows
on the mountains, their dark weight
and their constant moving.
LETTER TO THE ARCHITECT
Rebecca Givens

Not even you can keep me from mentioning the fish, their beauty of scaled brevity, their clipped-swishing tails funneling in everything animal. Wintertime when I saw them, their pursed old ladies’ mouths, gaping under pooled clarity to share some gulled-up gossip. Their bones, pure equilateral, poked stripes at base and height, bereft of architects’ errors or human compensation. I remembered then your last letter; you wrote you couldn’t cut another miter, solder another joint, peel another bit of glue from between your fingertips. I’m going to crack soon, you said. There must be a structured perfection in this grasping for centimeters. The stick will stay straight, the model be done, edges finished and beveled someday. I wrote back – I know only the perch with their paling rib bones, their geometry unwarped by cold. I know their tunnels dug frost-time underwater, their crossings of snowflake symmetry. When thaws come, their finned bodies filter the halfway ice like clean spectra. You must know – the sight is exquisite. If only I could give the gift of fish-making in as many words as this.
(sīm-pōˈzē-əm), n., a collection of opinions delivered, or a series of articles contributed, by a number of persons on a special topic.

Topic
In his essay “Making, Knowing, Judging,” W. H. Auden offers a model for the developing writer’s relationship with his early influences:

A would-be writer serves his apprenticeship in a library. Though the Master is deaf and dumb and gives neither instruction nor criticism, the apprentice can choose any Master he likes, living or dead, the Master is available at any hour of the day or night, lessons are all for free, and his passionate admiration of his Master will ensure that he work hard to please him.

Who were your Masters and why? What did you take from their projects, and how did you learn to leave those voices behind to create something distinctly yours? When you write today, are you able to read your Masters without their styles creeping back into your own?
RICHARD WILBUR

The salient difference between Auden’s words and your subsequent questions is that he says “Master” and you pluralize it. Of course, Auden puts it in the singular because he is using the metaphor of apprenticeship; one is not apprenticed to a number of masters at once. Perhaps, setting aside the metaphor, he would agree with me that it is a dreadful and paralyzing thing for a would-be poet to have one master only. That can result in inauthenticity of feeling, inappropriate style, and much fumbling delay in the discovery of a true voice. To discover a true voice is to find out what one means, to shuck off the phony borrowings which obscure that meaning, and to learn what one’s technical powers are. I was lucky enough, in my early poems, to be under a good many influences at once – Hopkins, Eliot, and Moore being among the most conspicuous – so that I was not overwhelmed by any one example and could soon extricate my own way of writing. To be sure, I am always in danger, even now, of succumbing to Robert Frost. And I am still wary of reading Yeats, who at one time spoiled a number of my poems by inclining me to vaticinal bluster. ♦

RICK MOODY

I love the high-art certainty of Auden, as quoted in your question. His libraries and his would-be writers. He reminds me of the forlorn scholars in Borges’s “Library of Babel.” I like the simplicity of striding around empty stacks, pulling down volumes. While this formulation accords with my experience up to a point, it has its limitations too. Some of my own apprenticeship, I’m happy to report, was very much in the actual company of several teachers of creative writing, most importantly John Hawkes and Angela Carter. I don’t think I would have amounted to much if not for this tuition, wherein I found that I wanted what my teachers had, their grace, their brilliance. With this experience as my model, I could argue for a theory of apprenticeship that is quite different from Auden’s, a theory that’s old-fashioned, classical even, viz., the theory of mentorship. Since this mentorship depends on actual human contact, it should follow that I don’t find myself particularly influenced by either Jack Hawkes’s voice or Angela Carter’s voice, at least not his or her written voice (I am indebted, however, to their teaching styles). And thus I have no problem reading their works while remaining uninfluenced, as a writer. Mentorship tells us something about literature, in a way, about its values, by suggesting that admiration for human beings, for writers as people, can instruct too. Thus, literature becomes work about human psychology, about human emotions, about human relationships, not just about word choice and prose rhythm (although these things are essential).
To put it another way: I only learned to write prose after I had learned how to read lives.

I also have some resistance to the idea that influences, for an apprentice, should be strictly literary. While there were very powerful formative reading experiences for me (I’m thinking of Samuel Beckett, whose every work I read in the Rockefeller Library in the winter of 1981, but also of Thomas Bernhard, Stanley Elkin, William Gaddis), there were also for me very formative listening experiences. Music was as much an influence on me as an artist, when young, as reading was. The Velvet Underground, for example, Public Image Limited, Laurie Anderson, the Mothers of Invention, Brian Eno, and so forth. It would be simpler if I could make the argument that no “low” art was a feature in my development, because this would stoke some conventional notions about writers, but it would also be a naked falsehood. The aggression and noise of a Velvets song like “Sister Ray” was essential to what I thought I wanted to do. I didn’t only want to communicate with readers the way John Barth did, though I admired what he did. I wanted to reach people. And I still do.

To take the argument further: visual art was also really essential to my training, work by Stuart Davis, Max Ernst, Marcel Duchamp, because of the playfulness and originality of their art. And one might also speak, I think, of being influenced by cinema (Fellini, Bunuel, Buster Keaton, W. C. Fields), and even by television, although I didn’t have a television after I was thirteen. I guess, as an apprentice writer, the whole of Western culture was my library, its politics and injustices too. That’s why my favorite Auden poem was always “September 1, 1939,” a response to geopolitical upheavals at the commencement of the Second World War: “I and the public know / What all schoolchildren learn, / Those to whom evil is done / Do evil in return.” Be sure to get out of the library, that is, and look around a little bit.

Meanwhile, as to where my voice came from, I suspect it came from the same place as my freckles.

WILLIAM LOGAN

If only Auden were right about the Old Masters being deaf and dumb. They’re deaf, thank goodness; but they’re yakking all the time. Any young poet who doesn’t face his masters directly is only going to inherit their influence second- or third-hand. Many young poets don’t want any influences. They want to be philosophers without reading philosophy.

Poetry is a craft, like violin playing (or violin making, for that matter), and it requires practice and failure. It’s done best as an apprentice, with guidance; and it doesn’t much matter whether your master is breathing or in the grave. There may be a rare poet who can reinvent the language without reading poetry; but our anthologies are the technical reservoir of the language, and a poet is a fool who doesn’t want to know what other poets have done and how they’ve done it.

I read many poets before I was prepared to be influenced, and little that I wrote was much good until I was influenced. I used early
Lowell for a certain compactness and thickened line, Bishop for moral sweetness, Auden for what sheer cleverness could do. I have been haunted by a dozen others. I have written under the influence, against the influence, in translation and in imitation — influences are no fun at all if you can’t change the rules. A little later, if you’re lucky, you get to write some of the rules. At that point you don’t leave your influences behind — you become yourself, and they are your ancestors, doddering, evil-tempered, and incapable of shutting up. 

HENRY HART

Learning the “language” of poetry is like learning any language. Although it’s important to be suspicious of words like “masters,” I suppose the poetic masters resemble the parents, teachers, friends, and others who first taught us to speak and to write. We can trace our language skills back to their sources, but the search is made difficult by the sheer number of those sources and by the fact that we aren’t (thank goodness!) omniscient.

As for my poetic masters, I read the obligatory Frost or Whitman or Sandburg or Dickinson poem when I was in high school in Woodbury, Connecticut, but I didn’t really concentrate on poetry until I went to Dartmouth. I had the great good fortune of taking a freshman English class my first term with Robert Siegel. I had no idea that Siegel was a poet when I signed up for the class, and it probably wouldn’t have mattered if I had known. One of his assignments was to write a paper on Robert Lowell’s “For the Union Dead” (Siegel had studied under Lowell at Harvard). I trace my interest in poetry back to that poem.

Before long I was reading Siegel’s poetry with relish (Siegel published The Beasts & the Elders in 1973). In class or in the library on my own, I studied many of the poets he admired: Dylan Thomas, Robert Lowell, James Dickey, Ted Hughes, Sylvia Plath, Seamus Heaney, Richard Hugo. I liked poetry that drew its imagery from the natural world, but that had a powerful emotional charge. I was attracted more to the sublime than the merely beautiful. I admired formal dexterity, but what really counted was a style full of clanging syllables, chiming vowels, and startling metaphors — lines like “Yellow dinosaur steamshovels were grunting / as they cropped up tons of mush and grass / to gouge their underworld garage” or “Everywhere, / giant finned cars nose forward like fish; / a savage servility / slides by on grease.” I used to check out records of Dylan Thomas reading his poetry and listen to them over and over again.

I liked poetry that worked on a literal level, but that sent depth charges into the political, religious, and literary past. Partly because of my undergraduate work on Joyce, I developed a keen interest in myth and “the mythic method” that sought to narrate contemporary experience through the filter of ancient, archetypal stories.

It wasn’t until I was a graduate student at Oxford that I began to write poetry with any confidence. I read Elizabeth Bishop carefully, as well as Geoffrey Hill, and I read dozens of other poets, pilfering a little from one and a little from another. Bishop’s themes of travel and home, and Hill’s preoccupation with historical traumas helped me write about my own disorienting travels, my backward glance toward home in a small New England town, and my experiences growing up during the traumatic sixties. When I return to the poems I wrote during my seven years in England (1977-1984), and to the poems I’ve written since, I can hear the echoes of the many poets I esteemed.

I’ve always believed that, whether you intend to or not, you impose your fingerprint — or, more accurately, your soundprint — on your poems. But at the same time I regard my poetic voice as a kind of echo chamber of other poets’ voices. My preoccupations probably “print” or identify my poems as much as any-
thing else. The styles of "masters" still influence me, and I can certainly detect them in my poems. But now they seem more deeply ingrained in my unconscious—or my decaying neurons—than they once were. Although some anxiety over influence is unavoidable, in general I go to other poets—say Charles Simic, Louise Glück, or Charles Wright—out of a desire to be influenced and a hope that the influence will be enabling rather than defeating. I don’t think it’s possible to write without letting all those cherished voices, whether past or present, creep into your poems. I don’t worry too much about sounding derivative because I remind myself that all poets beckon the great dead and imitate their peers. Originality is, to a certain degree, illusory, and has something to do with the ability to cover one’s tracks.

HELEN SCHULMAN

My father’s mother was from Russia, and although she spoke several languages—Yiddish primarily—she could not read nor write in any of them. I have in my possession a get-well note that she sent to me as a child when I was quite ill. She had asked her daughter, my aunt, to write out a message in Yiddish, which she painstakingly copied onto a store-bought card. In English, the sentence reads: “I ask God that you should be healthy.” It seems that this was one of the few instances when He listened to her.

Although she was illiterate, my grandmother was the greatest storyteller of all time. She could tell a story like nobody’s business. The trouble was, she invariably told them in Yiddish, which aside from a few expressions and epithets, I do not speak. My parents would often laugh until tears sprang into their eyes when she arrived at some punch line, while I grabbed at their clothing ever eager for translation.

Why did it surprise me, when I became a writer, that I often was grouped with other Jewish writers, in anthologies, on panels, when it came time to review books? I am secular; I was brought up in an irreligious household, by two confirmed atheists. And while my characters were often Jews, they almost as often were not. Still, there was something about my voice, people said. My voice. It had a “certain ring” to it. When I started to read, I mean really read, to read as a writer, in my early twenties, I searched for something similar, for a
similar sound to the one I heard inside my head. I read Grace Paley and Stanley Elkin until I had whole passages memorized. I read I. B. Singer. Now I think, how obvious! I was reading my grandmother! I was reading her inflections transliterated onto the page. And when I brought pen to paper myself, my English was often infused by the music of a language I have never spoken. Yiddish. It is still the music that I hear when I bother to string words together.

My other masters were William Faulkner and John Cheever. Faulkner gave the gift of language to the inarticulate, so this makes sideways sense. Cheever? Because I admired so the way he wrote about the weather.

ANTHONY HECHT
My early literary heroes were Eliot, John Crowe Ransom, Hardy, Auden, early Robert Lowell, along with John Donne, Marvell, and Yeats. Of these, I personally knew only Ransom; the rest I studied and emulated at a distance, receiving, as Auden says in your quotation from him, “neither instruction nor criticism.” The apprenticeship of a young poet is often a matter of servile imitation; and this is not a bad thing, if it can be controlled and overcome. Keats started out writing imitations of Spenser; Robert Lowell was imitating Milton and Marvell; Eliot imitated Laforgue; Shakespeare, in I Henry IV, in the great scene (II, iv) in which Falstaff “plays” the King, imitates these lines of Lyly’s Euphues: The Anatomy of Wit, “Too much study doth intoxicate the brains, for (they say) although iron the more it is used the brighter it is, yet silver with much wearing doth waste to nothing; though the cam-

mock [a crooked staff] the more it is bowed the better it serveth, yet the bow the more it is bent and occupied the weaker it waxeth; though the camomile the more it is todden and pressed down the more it spreadeth, yet the violet the oftener it is handled and touched the sooner it withereth and decayeth.” There cannot be many poets of any merit who have not seriously apprenticed themselves to masters of their own choice, and often those among the illustrious dead. There was a time when I wrote too much like Lowell imitating Milton. One gets over these early crushes. And I can now read almost any poet without danger of infection from their style. It may be added that sometimes one wishes deliberately to sound like a certain poet other than oneself, especially when translating. I have, for example, (and not in a translation) tried to write a poem that resembles the verse of the Old Testament.

JOYCE CAROL OATES
The image of the Master is rather repellent if not slightly comical. My first great influence was Lewis Carroll’s Alice books in all their irreverence & originality, and I wouldn’t doubt but that the influence persists to this day.
My Master is language.

Because my Master is language, I acknowledge no other.

I choose instead to call those I admire my Essentials.

Because I am young, nearly all of my Essentials are older than I am. Older or dead. They beat me to it, they beat it out of me.

The dangers of influence are less dangers than opportunities: opportunities to test oneself and one's language against what occurred before, to expand what requires expansion, to narrow what requires more focus.

The danger of influence is allowing a writer, or several, undue entry into one's consciousness or personality, into one's style.

A quick list of my Essentials (in English) would have to include (at various points and to various degrees since I started writing with determination) (and with the caveat that I swallow nothing whole, always choose what suits, soothes, or unsettles at the time):

- Faulkner
- Shakespeare
- Stevens
- Hopkins
- Joyce
- Dickinson
- Ashbery
- Melville
- Stein
- Yeats
- Eliot
- George Gascoigne
- Beckett
- James Tate
- Carruth
- Simic
- Ammons
- Frost
- W.C. Williams
- Berryman
- Cormac McCarthy
- David Foster
- Wallace
- Chaucer
- Poe
- Pound
- Muldoon
- Frank Kuppner
- Pynchon
- Hart Crane
- Hemingway
- Roethke
- Bishop
- Charles Bernstein
- Koch
- Simon Armitage
- Auden
- John Forbes
- Ciaran Carson
- Plath
- Strand
- Rich
- Milton
- James Dickey
- Ralph Ellison
- Donne
- Blake
- Andrew Zawacki
- Kevin Hart
- Medbh McGuckian
- Peter Richards
- Karen Volkman
- Gig Ryan
- Charles Wright
- Hawthorne
- Bronk
- Edson
- Creeley
- Feinman
- Galvin
- Michael Palmer
- Soin
- John Kinsella
- Levertov
- Dubie
- Lewis
- McGough
- Susan M. Schulz
- Mark Wallace
- Kleinzahler
- H.D.
- Ann Lauterbach

I do not distinguish between Major and Minor because that distinction is too frequently made in bad faith and with extra-literary and -textual concerns in mind. Witness the near extinction of Gascoigne from academic discourse, anthologies, and bookstores; the difficulty of finding books by Kuppner and Forbes in this country; the unwillingness of publishers to turn down weak books from their staple authors; the lame categories and divisions based on misunderstanding, misreading, and misappreciation; the growth of identity politics, a dehumanizing trend that pushes aside what, in the end, cannot be pushed aside: the individual effort to make art through, and despite, language.

I do not care to narrow to one, or one dozen, Essentials because each of these writers, along with some others, have strong and distinct presences in my mind. I return to them often and without diminishment (though not without surprise, awe, re(new)ed insight and intensity).

Because I read 150-200 books of poetry each year, along with several dozen books of fiction and non-fiction and thousands of poems in magazines and for a magazine, and because I absorb most of it and teach or write about some of it, my mind does not have time for single obsessions (except for sex). It does not make the time (except for).

This approach to reading is similar to my approach to writing: I want to give each poem its own style, its own form and approach and speed and attitude toward language. To dwell in a single style is, for me as a writer, boring; it means defeat for the individual poem, which can (and, I believe, should) simultaneously establish and exhaust a style.

I resist a single style as a type of marketing; visual artists feel obliged to dwell, but then they wish to sell. Poets peddling the same style for too long are as artistic and exciting as a photocopier.

If style is a manifestation of personality, as Carruth has said, a single style can signal inner consistency; but because all interesting minds contain multitudes, it seems like an imposed-from-without consistency. My stylistic shifts and turns, false starts and finishes are more true to the ever-changing creature I am. I do not believe in perfection, the perfection of a poem or type of poem.

The risk of my approach, aside from refusing outside readers a convenient point of entry - one angle - is that it could reduce me to mimic, imitating Sobin or Stein in one poem, Frost or Keats in another. I hope this is not the case, that what I have learned from all these writers is, above all, angles of entry and exit into and out of ideas, emotion, forms. I strive for plenitude and variety but also for recognizability; this is the paradox I seek to solve in each poem: to make it mine but to make it different in as many ways as possible from every other poem I've written.

I say "as possible" because of the consistencies that arise from my limitations and habits, limitations I try to push past, habits I try to break. But the limitations must first be engaged, the habits recognized. Soon after that occurs, I'm elsewhere.
I am at the point where I have answered some standard questions so often I have come to doubt the truth of my answers. I read James Thurber, Robert Benchley, Agatha Christie, Ellery Queen, and John Dickson Carr as a boy with great happiness and total immersion in the text: does this make them Masters? At college — another than Yale — I majored in English and specialized in the poetry of the English Renaissance, including of course the plays of Shakespeare, but also was grateful for courses in the Romantic poets, the modern poets, George Bernard Shaw, and Tolstoy and Dostoevsky: does that make these masters my (your, and Auden’s, cap.) Masters? To this day I don’t read a book without finding something in it to admire and covet. (While James Joyce was going blind, I remember reading somewhere, he read Gentlemen Prefer Blondes, by Anita Loos.) But, when asked this question, I generally name two writers I took to after college — Henry Green, whom my then wife and I discovered in our year at Oxford (1954-55), and Marcel Proust, whom I began to read, in my wife’s sun-lotion spotted copy of Swann’s Way, in New York City in 1955. Both quite bowled me over, showing me what words could do, in bringing reality up tight against the skin of the paper, and I credit their examples with a considerable expansion of my literary ambitions. But in fact I had become a published writer (in The New Yorker) before I read either, so it wasn’t as if I were totally comatose while waiting for the kiss of Mastery. As to their styles creeping into mine, I would welcome it, and indeed did welcome it. My homely American material is so different from their vistas that I felt no danger of duplication. ♦
GEORGE BRADLEY

I suppose I ought to preface my remarks about poetic influence by saying that in general I am impatient with such talk. One sees the subject discussed all over, and it usually amounts to blather suitable for framing. Surely if a poet writes well enough to make his or her influences of interest, those influences will nowhere be more apparent than in the work itself. It's the poetry that counts, and we in contemporary America ought to read it more and chatter about it less.

Pet peeves aside, the quotation from Auden regarding "passionate admiration of his Master" who is "hard to please" (as so often, there is a whiff of sexual subjection in Auden's words...must be that early training in British public school) does provoke remark. First off, Auden says that the apprentice poet may choose any Master, "living or dead." Masters are much better chosen dead, I think. They're so much harder to please that way. Second, about this choosing of any Master, the choice will not feel free to the apprentice. Auden is speaking of obsessive imitation, and although commitment to the exemplar is in some sense aleatory, an election as accidental as marriage, say, i.e. a matter of which compelling poet the apprentice happens to encounter at the moment when he or she is ready to be mastered, still the obsession will seem deeply fated to the devotee. Also, note that Auden does not suggest that the apprentice will end by becoming the Master. Eventually, the indifferent beak will let the victim drop (to move from one notion of compulsion to another), and anyone so released will find that he or she has gained individuality by the experience rather than lost it. Thus, both James Merrill and John Ashbery tried very hard to write like Wallace Stevens early in their careers; both were transformed in the imitation, but of course they didn't turn out like Stevens or like each other. Influence is not a matter of cloning.

One last point: to say that one has been transformed by an obsessive imitation of poet A is not to suggest that one could safely ignore poets B, C, D, etc. It's a long shelf, but anybody who wishes to participate in the quasi-talmudic commentary that is poetry written in English will sooner or later have to read it all.

J.D. McClatchy

Any true accounting for myself would probably be as thick as a Norton anthology. There were early passions — Marlowe, Donne, Keats, Whitman, Hopkins, Eliot — whom one might only adore, not presume to emulate. As a young reader, I wanted gods, not golden calves. Fortunately, that changed. Other poets came along to glitter and prompt. The high-water marks, in approximate order: Roethke, Stevens, Crane, Lowell, Hecht, Merrill, Hollander, Auden. That last name has been the more abiding because he has provided me a model for the kind of poet to be, not just for a kind of poem to write.

There was, first of all, an instinctive appeal at work. These were poets whose writing made me want to write. Their buckets drew up whatever muddy water was in the shallow well. Inevitably, in
the process, the water is for a while bucket-shaped, at least until sloppily poured out. These poets were ledges on Parnassus. The point was never to ape a manner, or borrow singing robes many sizes too large. It was to learn what those poets argued with and how, how they lined their silver with cloud. Howard Nemerov, wisest of poets, knew the point was never to worry about having something to say. "Writing," he once observed, "means trying to find out what the nature of things has to say about what you think you have to say." Masters are precisely "the nature of things."

"To write well," said the French poet Jean Jouvet, "one needs a natural facility and acquired difficulties." All along, masters are the difficulties I've sought to acquire, trying to set the pole higher, making the task more puzzling.

**One last word.** This business of cat-scanning a poet for influences can be both a smart and a lazy way of reading. Smart, because it sees through to skeletons buried in the flesh's closet. But lazy as well, because it only recognizes what it knows—so that upstart young X will invariably sound like familiar old Y...until the day, years later, when Y begins to echo X. Originality takes a while, both to hear itself and then to be heard by others. But it can, it does, it will. ☺
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Zak Kushing / This is a Picture about a Little Man Who Lives in a Little House
JONATHAN'S MONHEGAN ISLAND LETTER

October here, the ocean is choppy; I've been fiddling a lot.
There are sounds here that I'd lost:
wind crashing through pine trees, shells dashed on granite. Some nights
I lie for hours on a boulder underneath the biggest pine. Wiry branches crisscross the sky — their patterns break its expanse, needles fringing each angle.

Carpets of pine needles buffer my jump when I leave the perch and wander back to the house. I warm up my fingers with 'Blackberry Blossom,' beginning a round of fast dance tunes. Then the 'Lament' and 'The Nobleman's Wedding' — both end with dead brides — and 'Give Me Your Hand' at the end.

Playing alone, I sometimes forget the beginnings of things, and walk through the house begging the doorframe or heater for clues. Let me know if you remember how 'Kelly's Waltz' starts — I miss that one lately: the slides, the feet dancing.

I played 'Whiskey for Breakfast' tonight, and it warmed up the room, Gwen — the double-stop richness, a two-stringed bagpipe drone. The chords clash and resolve, then sever again. I lose you sometimes, like the songs; you disappear from view and the time outside at night is hard, thinking about driftwood and geometry.
I didn’t weep when you skipped out on us.
It wasn’t I who called you names. My eyes
were steady on the waterline, were dry
and smiling at the smoke-blue clouds.

I knew all along your pirate-fate, your peddlar-quest.
I grew to girlhood on the prow of that small boat
which waited darkly, most days, in the garden shed
weighted with potted earth, and jugs of turpentine –
but sometimes, in the afternoons, sought islands
on a glass lake as your oar disturbed the surface.

I learned it early — long before my mouth fumbled on syllables,
before my fat fist and a crayon learned to carve a name
against your sketchbook’s empty page. You painted it
in the tangle of lilies over my cradle, buzzing
with dragonflies. Everything you made was winged:
the stenciled bluebirds, in their dizzy flight across my white wall.
The cranes. The white bird in its cage, the red claws
curling round the bar. And the low-hanging dragonflies,
twisted monstrously from paper, painted green.

I was an island.
I was a rest-stop — and when the wind changed,
or perhaps the light paled, and the trees burst
into leaf, I woke to a small thunder, to a flurry of bright feathers.
I nodded, left my bower, noticed
everything. In your wake — birds, flowers.
And the patterns, the deep footprints, spelled
the story of the art in leaving.
THE LAST NORSE OF THE GREENLAND SETTLEMENT

When Europeans finally began again to visit Greenland in 1577, its Norse colony no longer existed, having evidently disappeared without any record during the 15th century.

Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs, & Steel*, 1997

Wind-stripped shelter at her back,
she strains the sky for masts.

She walks, her clothes unravel,
her steps turn to snow behind her.

Last night she dreamt of vanished paths,
awoke to the sound of no one beside her.

The muffled theft, her sister’s departure –
They mistook this land.
First, she tried the cabinet above the coffee maker — chinaware, measuring cups, no filters — then the drawer directly below — silver, wooden spoons, the smaller of the knives; no particular arrangement. Mary opened the entire kitchen.

At last: the filters. She found them by accident, stacked inside the coffee maker, slightly stained. She lifted them out, all but one, and left them on the counter. A pair of expectant cats began to slink around her ankles, making it difficult to walk.

She went back to opening and shutting. This round was more successful: Folgers — in with the flour and sugar, next to the spices, in the upper left-hand cabinet. Mary poured grounds into the filter. She filled the decanter and dumped the water in, topping it off with another couple of servings (some of it always disappeared in the brewing).

She wondered if, weeks from now, she would still be the first one up on a Sunday.

A gurgling filled the kitchen with morning, and Mary returned to her husband in the guestroom.

Coming down the stairs, Estelle could smell the coffee. So she's been up already. Estelle moved directly to the cabinet below the stove top, gathered two cans of cat food and a plate. Removing the pull-off lids with a flick of the wrist, she scraped out the food with her index finger and set it on the floor next to the oven. Any minute, the fur-balls would come prancing in, as they did every morning, though they lagged a bit today. Perhaps because the dog had died — no more competition. The empty cans went into the trash compactor and it shut with a bump: concluding a series which had seemed just one grand and fluid motion. Estelle turned the water on with her elbow, rinsed her fingers, and reached for the towel that hung below the counter top.

Removing the warm decanter from the coffee maker, nearly full, she held it up to the window. Like mud, she thought. She replaced it, moved to gather the kettle to make tea.

Mary warned her husband that the coffee was brewing: "I feel like we should get an early start."

"Mary, honey, she really doesn't care."

"I just think we should be up is all. Just in case." She moved from one side of the room to the other, folding the same T-shirt again and again.

"In case?"

"Yes: in case your mother wants to talk to you, in case she needs to go out or something. I don't know. There are only two cars."

"Do you need to go somewhere?"

"No."

"Well, I don't need to go anywhere. In fact, I'm still in bed. And Dad doesn't need to go anywhere; he's in bed, too. And I seriously doubt my mother will just run out on us the first morning we're here."

"Your point?"

"Two cars should be plenty. It's the day of rest." Jason was smiling, not quite mocking his wife. Normally, she would have been amused.

Mary stood still, faced her husband. She put her hands up in surrender. "Fine. You're right. I'm getting back in bed. We can sleep all day."

"No, no. I'm up." Jason pushed himself onto his elbows, groaned.

Upstairs, Walter had propped himself up on his pillow, having managed first to recover the remote from his wife's bedside table. He muted the thing as soon as Estelle returned from the kitchen, more politely to endure her conversation.

"But coffee, Walter?"

"People do drink the stuff."

"Yes, but not pregnant people. And she didn't even think to feed the cats."

He peeled back the covers, "Maybe not, but you had better get used to it."

"To them? Don't I know it. What did I do when he lived here, Walter?"

Walter stood and stretched: side to side, forward, backward. Roll the neck, "You were
young," and crack the knuckles.

"Young?" Estelle stopped moving, faced her husband. "And what is that supposed to mean?"

Estelle did not sit down all morning. Between bites of cereal Jason carried on with the update: the new apartment, the furniture on order, Mary's gallery, Mary's opening, Mary's cooking.

"So I think we'll be around all day," he finished. He thought he'd make his mother happy.

"Actually, I was going to go into the studio, Jason. Get some work done." Mary set her mug on a place mat. "Just a couple hours' worth. I can take the train."

"All the way to the city? No... work here today, Hon. Can't you? Mom, we can stay around." Estelle was at the sink with her son's dishes.

She turned to face them. "No, Jason. Let her go. Mary, go ahead."

"Oh, that's all right; I can stay. Whatever you want, Jay." Now he was bound to excuse her. But Mary paused, put down her toast, took a nice deep breath. "Actually, you're right, Jason. I should do some work here anyway. I looked around: it's really lovely, Estelle." Mary's voice rose awkwardly at the end of the word. She swallowed. No one spoke. "I like to do at least a little something everywhere — well, anywhere I stay for very long." Estelle scrubbed away. "I did some good work at my aunt's place in New Orleans, just after graduation. I was there for the summer, before I came to New York." Mary was rambling. *Rambling is a function of effort,* she thought. "I can..."
just start making notes, if you know what I mean."

It was the most his wife had said since they'd arrived yesterday evening after two days of frenzied packing and putting things straight. Caught off guard, Jason checked his mother's expression to see if she knew what Mary meant.

Mary stood in front of the mirrored bureau, fixing her hair.

"I'd actually like to draw you, I think, if you've got enough of those numbers to warrant sitting relatively still for a few hours." She called to Jason in the adjoining bathroom, but-toned her shirt over the evidence — so this was halfway, she thought, piece of cake. She had decided to feel better. Jason hesitated to respond.

"Oh, really? Me? After two years you decide I'm ready for a picture?"

"It's not a big deal, Jay."

He emerged, dressed, and tossed a towel onto the bed. His hair was combed straight back, white scalp showing through in rows where the teeth of the comb had passed. She could see him in the mirror, milling around behind her.

"You just start thinking about someone." Mary secured a barrette to hold the front section of her hair, waited for her husband's reply. She was trying to be playful.

"Who starts thinking about whom?"

"You know what I mean. Being here. You here."

"It's just a house. And they're just my parents, Mary. You've met my parents. They've given you household appliances, for god's sake,"

"It's your house." She turned to him, no longer interested in explaining. "Now bring that brief-case into the living room where there's some light."

The living room was modern — not like an old woman's living room. Mary's mother's house had dried up and died long before her body had. It must have happened as soon as Mary left.

Jason hovered over the desk in the windowed corner of the room; Mary sat across from him. She used pencil, and the medium-sized sketchbook that she took everywhere she went. He had managed to forget her eyes on him. It was easy, in fact — to forget.

And she marveled. At the place, the sound of water running, footsteps through the ceiling; was it jazz drifting through the vents? At him, absorbed. He had heard it all so often.

And now she was his wife.

She looked at the page in front of her. His head was large. She thought she'd done him a favor in her rendering — shrunk it down a little, evened him out. But there it was in front of her — the real thing — dark hair still clinging to the shape of the comb. Gel.

Her head was relatively small. What was the size? Six? Is that how hat sizes go? Sixteen? She couldn't remember.

But the child would get the best of it, a medium-sized head, and a singing voice somewhere in between. His was rich, interesting (as they say about good wine); hers was plain, but there was something else about it. Her sense of pitch — there was something compelling despite an average tone. The child would be a singer.

And she hoped it would not be born here. All of the homeless cabinetry, and the overhead lighting, and the sinks and stoves and bathroom counters would just have to find their ways to their appropriate walls and ceilings and their appropriate bathrooms before this child could be born. Four months — this would not stall for a contractor's delay.

A cat sauntered in, jumped onto the desk beside the stack of papers. Mary swallowed tears that had been far too quick to come of late. Jason was settling in, piling file upon file in a house frill of family, full of Billie Holliday and dirty filters and keeping up with the times.

She turned the page. He turned around.

"How's it going?"

"All right. You've got a big head."

"So I've been told. Are you okay?"

"That cat is going to knock over your coffee."

"You want to dislike her?" Walter reclined in the love-seat under the bedroom's eastward facing window, basking. He had been up here all morn-
ing. On days like this — holidays, lazy days — Estelle wondered why they even had the rest of the house.

“I feel like I should. Like that’s what a mother-in-law should do. Like I should go out and buy vitamin supplements and make her swallow them for the baby’s sake.”

“What?”

“You know, treat her like a baby machine. Like a grandchild-producing cog.”

“That’s poetic.”

“Walter, how old is she?”

“How old? I don’t know. Jason’s age. 28? 29?”

“You think? She seems young. And why don’t we know? I guess it’s just the long hair.”

“How old were you when he was born? Hardly 21 if I recall.”

“Give me a break. I’m not moralizing. Asking, Walter, asking.”

Estelle crossed the room and closed the bathroom door behind her. She took a toothbrush from the canister — the blue one — and ran it under the tap. She didn’t use toothpaste. She had read somewhere that it didn’t really help, that it was the actual brushing that did the trick. She still used some a few times a week, partly because she liked the taste, partly because she didn’t like to think that she believed everything she read.

Again closing the door behind her, Estelle emerged from the bathroom and gave her husband a good glare of reproof.

“Television? Really, Walter.”

“It’s the news.”

“Whatever you say.” She shuffled around in the closet. “We should take them out to lunch,” she called over her shoulder.

“Sure. Fine. Later — it’s not even 11:00.”

Estelle emerged wearing a dark green blouse.

“Exactly. What kind of news is on at not-even-11:00 on a Sunday? At least you’re dressed.”

“Leave me alone; it’s on. And I’m showered, I might add.”

“Fine. We should leave in an hour. I’ll go down now. I don’t want them to start thinking they own the place.”

As Estelle headed for the stairs, Walter took up the remote and resumed his channel flipping.

It was nearly 6:00 when Mary came in from her jog. She would have called it a run, but she had begun to feel “run” was too strong a word for her attempts at exercise.

“I’m glad you’re back; Mom’s been waiting to start dinner.” Jason surprised her on the other side of the front door. Mary had hoped to have a moment to herself. To let the muscles relax for a minute or two. To cool down.

“I apologize. You can advise her against it in the future.” Congeniality no longer prevailed. Mary forgot about the glass of water that she had been dreaming of since five minutes into her excursion and headed straight for the bedroom. She repressed her yearning for ice. “Whatever happened to ‘How was your jog?’” she remarked over her shoulder.

“You’re right.” Why was he smiling? “How was your jog, Mary?”

“It was hot and it was slow. Thanks for asking.”

She was facing him now, red-cheeked, hand on one hip. “I’ll be out in a few minutes. Don’t tell me she whips up a meal faster than I can wash my hair.”

“Take your time.”

Jason watched as Mary’s spandex-clad thighs disappeared down the hall toward their room.

“They said you’d get moody,” he called after her. From the back, her shape hadn’t changed at all. She certainly hadn’t gotten fat.

“It’s worse than the coffee thing.” Estelle sat at her desk, along the bedroom’s western wall, about to open a cookbook for the first time in 20 years.

“Weren’t you the one ready to force vitamins
down her throat? It's good for her, Estelle. You should be glad. You've read the magazines."

"Walter, a baby needs protein. Does she make Jason do it, too, do you think?"

"Vegetarianism is not something someone makes you do, as far as I understand it. I don't know. What did he eat at lunch?" Walter got up from the bed, where he had been leafing through the Sunday Times, and came over to his wife. He read over her shoulder. "Where'd you find this?"

"The shelves in the den."

He took the book from in front of her, turned pages.

"There's a 'dinners' section—" his wife began.

"Here, mushroom stew. It's just like beef stew, but with mushrooms." And he looked at her so earnestly that she could not contain her laughter.

But when Estelle caught her breath she turned serious, "You know I don't believe the things I say. They're just, they're just things I could believe. Things someone must believe."

Estelle looked at her husband severely, as if to convince him by her eyes that the two of them were not, in fact, different.

"But you know better."

"Yes, I know better. But I can't just let it go, can I? I can't assume there's no validity to it."

"It?"

"Whatever it is, whatever my mother would say. Or maybe not my mother, but someone's. Someone's mother who probably read it somewhere and passed it down for years to come."

"You hate people who read it somewhere."

Walter wandered back to his paper.

"I know I do. But everyone else — there's no instinct anymore."

He sighed. "Estelle, I'm sure you're right. But I'm hungry."

"Can I come in?"

"Jason, I'm in the bathroom."

"I know, I want to see."

"You want to see? No, you cannot come in here, Jason. I'll be out in a second."

He was quiet for a moment. "Mary, is something going on?"

"Going on? What's going on is you're acting like a 14-year-old."

Mary heard her husband approach the bathroom door. It rattled in the jamb as he leaned up against it.

"Honey, I just want to see. This doesn't happen everyday."

"I'm dressed, Jason. There's nothing to see. I don't understand."

"You should be flattered."

"Flattered? I don't even know who I'm talking to." She opened the door to face him, wearing a yellow robe. She walked past him into the bedroom and went to her side of the bureau, where she had tentatively arranged her wardrobe until the closet could be relieved of its winter coats for their convenience.

"Come on." Jason sat down on his side of the bed and removed his shoes. He patted the mattress, summoning her.

"I don't get it, Jason." As she said it, Mary went to the opposite side of the bed and perched on the edge.

"I'm sorry," he said in his most reassuring tone of voice, "I know this is a little—just lie down a minute." She did, all the while questioning Jason with her wrinkled forehead, tight lips. He put one hand on her thigh, the other on her stomach.

"I missed you today." He looked like a bad version of Tom Cruise: awkward rather than heartening.

"Jason. What the hell?"

"A long time? A few days? Jason, we, we just—" She stopped to hold the tears; she did not know what was happening.
Jason didn’t speak, but she knew what he was thinking. Why did she have to act like this? Would it really be so bad if they had to stay a month or two? Could it really be so bad?

Dinner wasn’t served until 9:00. Stew takes longer than you’d think.

"Really, Mary, you don’t have to." Estelle took a plate from Mary’s hands.

"No, I want to," she took another from the pile next to the sink, began to scrape it, "I’m not going to act like a guest for two months."

"Oh, is that what they said? Two months?" Estelle asked, picking up a dish towel.

"Oh, no. They don’t know. They said 8 to 12 weeks, I think. But they’ll say anything."

"Yes, I imagine you’re right." Estelle’s eyes were on her daughter-in-law’s hands: she wore her wedding ring to do the dishes.

"Well, for however long it turns out to be, I don’t want to be a burden." Mary had rehearsed this speech. She had rehearsed these feelings.

"Of course. But, we wouldn’t have offered." Had they offered? thought Estelle. She resumed her drying, making circles on either side of each plate and then stacking them, neatly, in the cabinet overhead.

All of a sudden Mary dropped her washing job and splashed a cat that had made its way onto the kitchen table. "No!"

Estelle jumped, caught her breath. "They get up there all the time." She managed to keep irritation out of her voice. Estelle would not have guessed that Mary had had cats, that she might have developed cat habits.

"But if you let them up, they’ll never learn." Mary said.

And certainly not cat opinions, cat maxims at that. "Really, is that so?" A sort of towel-clad face-off had begun.

"I mean, if it doesn’t bother you."

"No, it really doesn’t."

"I don’t mean to—"
“No, of course not.” They stood a moment in silence. “You’re right, anyway. They shouldn’t be up there.”

Guns back in their holsters.

“No, no. They’re your cats.”

Peace on either side.

Mary watched the 11:00 news with Jason and Walter, then watched her father-in-law climb the stairs slowly.

And now they were alone. “Bed?” Jason said softly.

“Are we all right?”

A pause. “Of course we are.” Jason stood awkwardly from the depths of his recliner, and helped Mary up from hers. He couldn’t imagine what it was like, that belly.

Estelle had never let Walter fall asleep first. Every night for 34 years she had gotten into bed and flicked off the light (in a couple different beds and with a number of different lights) and then begun to chatter.

“Honey, I’m tired.” Walter pleaded.

“It’s just that she told the cat to get down.”

“The cat?”

“Which was fine. She splashed him with water. I don’t do that.”

“So?”

“So, I remembered something.”

“And you’re going to tell me, I presume?”

Walter sat up a little, trying to stay alert.

“When I lived alone, before I met you, no, we were dating, I think — 1963, Walter.” She paused to let it sink in.

“When you lived alone what?” It hadn’t.

“I was in the bathtub and my kitten jumped in. What am I saying: my kitten? It was Sammy,

Sammy when Sammy was a baby, before he was our Sammy. He was our first joint pet, remember? You know, Walter, that was a big deal to me. Even after the wedding. We were married, but it seemed so much stranger that you took care of my cat.”

“So?” Walter was perched one forearm, poised to roll over. “It’s probably strange being raised by a member of another species.” His body hit the mattress solidly.

Estelle paused. “You know, Walter, I don’t think I’ve ever heard you use the word species.” She rolled to face the opposite direction and she, too, slid down in the bed.

“Something new everyday, that’s how it is with me, babe.” Walter added, his voice muffled in the goose down.

Estelle craned to look at him. From his position on the pillow, Walter faked running a comb through his hair, straightening a greaser’s collar.

“Oh, Walt-ie, how can I resist?” Estelle flopped over and grabbed his shoulders from behind, shaking him gently and laughing.

They laughed until they were asleep.

She could not help it. Jason’s hand on her was not the same tonight. It was loose. It was childish. Or perhaps it was the same.

Either way, Mary could not be sure of him tonight. She could not place him.

The next night, Jason did not come through the guestroom door until 7:30. Mary was on the bed, looking at a magazine. She’d arrived at a little after 6:00 — hadn’t wanted to keep her husband waiting.

“Where have you been?” she asked. She’d heard his car door slam some ten minutes before and had listened to his voice and his mother’s in
the kitchen ever since.

"Work. I went in after lunch."

"To the city?" Suddenly, Mary felt a wave of sadness. She'd been at the studio all day, just blocks away. She'd been alone. But it should not have felt lonely. She had lived there by herself until she'd moved in with Jason, for 4 years, give or take. It was the first place she'd had in New York, nicer than a first place should have been, because her father had insisted that there was no reason she should live in a cell in New York, rather than a mansion back at home. He'd been exaggerating. It was no mansion. At the time, Mary had taken her father's declaration to mean get on the next plane to Kansas City, but instead she'd found herself expecting monthly checks to supplement her meager earnings. Mary's father seemed to have forgotten her transgressions since her mother's death. Or forgiven them. Now, they had become victims of the same crime, one greater than all of her petty sins combined. At the time, Mary had been waitressing at Broadway and 51st. There was a diner that took in hopefuls — artists, singers — and let them do their thing while they bused burgers and Snicker's Crunch pie. The painters took turns with their pictures on the walls and got to pocket the cash if anybody placed a bid. Susie, the manager, said the owners were rich enough; they didn't need a 10% commission on 80 bucks to get their kicks. Perpetual karaoke — all show tunes and only show tunes — was the forum for the future Frank Sinatras and Ethel Mermans of the waitstaff. Mary had enjoyed the job: constant entertainment and a better 'peer group' (that's what her father would have called it) than she might have found elsewhere. She sold more work than she expected, too; tourists hardly noticed another $65 after paying as much as four times more to take the wife and kids to Cats.

Mary didn't keep a phone anymore, didn't like distraction when she worked.

"Called home or something. If you had warned me I would have checked." Their answering machine was the one item they had left in their apartment to fend for itself during the renovation. It was no use trying to tell everyone where they would be. The message was something like 'We're not here, and we won't be here, but we will call you back.' They had found it funny.

Mary wondered what the workmen thought.

"Yeah. I didn't think of that."

Left alone by her son in the kitchen, Estelle went back to puzzling over recipes: considering substitutions, omissions, oversights. If they couldn't see the meat, could vegetarians really tell that it was there? She sat down at the dinner table with The Joy of Cooking. She leafed through the book, ran a finger down the index in a cursory search for the word "vegetable." "Broccoli" kept catching her eye — "eggplant." Estelle shut the book. She looked up, breathed in, and went to the base of the stairs.

"Walter?" She called. He offered something unintelligible in return. "Come down here, already." She was impatient, although she had just now realized that she'd been waiting for him. Barring any breaking news (which would not allow him to leave his place in front of the television), Walter stayed with Estelle every night while she cooked. He'd clean up here and there: dishes that had been left out during the day, bags, wrappers, and the rejected parts of vegetables and meats that would accrue as his wife worked. They both enjoyed that time. They worked together. It was hard to be at odds while preparing for a meal.

Walter came stiffly down the stairs carrying a
tray, which supported the empty teapot and dishes from the morning’s breakfast. For some years now the two of them had been in the habit of eating upstairs, combining all of the morning activities—waking, dressing, drinking tea, and getting the gist of the news before coming down to the day and heading off to separate offices and separate minds. Walter set the tray on the island, picked up a leftover bite of lemon bread he’d been eyeing on the way down, and put it in his mouth.

“Stale,” he said, chewing.

“What did you expect?” Estelle was at her cutting board.

“I expected stale. What’s for dinner.”
"Lasagna."

"Hmm," he seemed contemplative. "Good solution. Do we have cheese?"

"Of course." Estelle replied, immediately doubting herself and going straight to the source. She rifled through the lowest drawer of the fridge, then the next one up, then the next. Walter was about to offer his advice when she pulled out a bag of pre-grated mozzarella.

"Eureka," she said.

Jason headed for the shower, stating that he hated sitting in traffic; it made him sweat. Mary continued to flip through her Mademoiselle for a few minutes until she could take no more of 16-year-old starlets with boob jobs. It's horrible, she thought. But she knew that she was jealous.

She set the magazine on the nightstand and sat up, stretched. She was more tired than she should have been. Her shoes were waiting patiently on the floor next to the bed, side by side.

Mary heard the shower shut off as she passed by the bathroom on her way to check out the action in the kitchen. She paused in the hallway, before she arrived. She heard her parents-in-law giggling, chiding each other sympathetically, laughing out loud. It upset her, made her queasy.
That was not a room she could enter. They were happy and she had nothing to add.

She turned back just as Jason streaked his way out of the bathroom. There he was again. This man. He feigned embarrassment and scampered into the bedroom. Mary wished she were attracted to him at that moment, exactly at that moment.

And then, again, they were convened at the dinner table. Salt was passed around on the tails of Estelle’s apology for her lasagna’s lack of taste. “It’s good, Mom,” Jason said in earnest. “It’s fine,” his mother corrected. Their silverware clinked on the ceramic plates.

After a moment, Jason ventured a course for their mealtime discussion. “Andy pitched a new campaign today, to that software company I was telling you about.”


Mary listened. Almost doubted that she heard correctly. Substitute ‘a perfect game’ for ‘a new campaign’ and there you had the opening of a ten-year-old’s dinner conversation. Andy pitched a perfect game today, against that team I was telling you about.

“Have you checked in with Steven, Mary? How are things selling?” Jason thought she should have her moment in the familial spotlight, but Mary did not want it. In a mad rush, she had attempted to complete 18 new works (they were hardly finished when she’d signed her name to them). The pieces now hung at Steven’s SoHo gallery. With her first couple of real shows, she’d gotten the gist; after the opening, which usually saw a few good sales, the small ones would go for small canvas prices, and the large ones would be admired from afar unless the prices came down. She wondered why she even painted large anymore. Money aside, no one had a whole wall to spare.

Mary forced a smile. “I didn’t. Never got down to the pay phone.”

“Well, it’s a good show.” Jason had said the same thing at the opening, had said he liked it. Couldn’t believe he had a wife so talented, he’d said. Which is not to say that he wasn’t an intelligent critic. He knew good art from bad. He could sense when an artist had manufactured material, had tried to trick the audience. At times his taste was even subtle.

“Jason, she doesn’t have a phone?” Estelle asked.

I didn’t have a corsage for the prom, either, Mary thought.

But this entire situation was manufactured junk. How had her suitcases ended up in Greenwich? And how did she expect to live out of them for two, three months? This was Mary trying to trick herself. Trying to convince herself that she had changed. Trying to trick Jason into believing that the two of them had been on the same path all along, had lived in parallel, that they were destined, that they were alike, when in fact, there had been a dramatic and calculated convergence at some point.

“I don’t need one,” she asserted. “It would be more of a nuisance than a help.”

Soon enough they were in bed, and the crickets had resumed. Mary could hear footsteps through
the ceiling, running water, the fluctuating hum of a television set. The city noise had never bothered her. *How many?* she would challenge, after whatever it was that sounded like machine gun fire (usually the garbage truck) had quieted below. *I'd have to say that's at least four down,* Jason would reply.

But now she couldn't sleep. The humming, the buzzing. Mary rolled over and stared at Jason's back, examined hair follicles and moles. They had hardly spoken as they'd brushed teeth and washed faces. Jason had not wanted to read before they turned out the lights.

Finally, she got out of bed quietly and left the room.

In the darkened kitchen she sat at the table and listened. It was not the crickets that bothered her, she decided, but the silence underneath. It was the stillness, the calm. Night here lacked introspection. Being in the house was no different, no more alive, than staring at it in Jason's baby pictures. She wished it could have remained a photograph for her, a snapshot and not a life.

This moment, this point lay on a certain plane on which she'd never cared to travel. Perhaps she had thought she'd like to visit, to play at this life, but that had been a youthful sentiment, and if there had ever been a time at which she might have smoothly entertained it, that time had past. And this past was where the two of them diverged. They diverged in retrospect. Suddenly, tragically, it was not enough that they were here in service of the future.

But sleep came and then the morning, with all the birds that morning tends to bring. The alarm began to buzz and Jason silenced it. He was going in on time today.

"You want first shower?" he asked, as Mary opened her eyes. She was silent.

She felt like a homesick camper, about to tell the counselor that she wanted to go home — finally fessing-up — all the while knowing precisely how little power she had, and how little the institution cared for desperation.

She wanted evenings in the city. She wanted business lunches with Steven that dragged on until 3:00 in the afternoon. She wanted to see at least 10 breeds of dog in a given day and at least two different piercings. She wanted to have opinions about things and to offer them to as many people as possible, and she wanted New York morning light — that early inspiration which she could not transfer and could not share. She wanted to continue to know exactly how she was not like him. That was how they loved.

"No. I don't."

"Oh, come on, Mary." Jason sat up quickly. This time he had no trouble matching his wife's antagonism.

"Come on what? You shower." Mary turned away from him.

"Just say something, damn it. I can only put up with this for so long."

Then she sat up, as well. "You can? Huh. Do you know what I'm putting up with?"

"Yes, Mary. I'm quite sure I do. You haven't exactly been subtle."

Mary knew that she should not have been surprised at her husband's jab. She deserved worse. But nonetheless it caught her off guard. Her lip began to twitch. "It's not fair, Jason. It's not equal," she said.

There was a silence. And then Jason's voice, "I know."

"I wish I could tell you I'd get used to it but—"

"I know."

"I wish I didn't care about, about—"

"Soon. We'll try to go soon."

And so a new problem stretched before them, a wonderful problem: where to stay, whom to bother, how to explain, and Mary's mind began to wrap around it.
AFTER THE TITANIC

Alexis Jones

The waters are all charted; must we dwell
Upon the past? she asked, getting up
From the tea-table, hair gold-haloed,
A narrow scratch still healing, half-concealed
With powder, humorously sketching a seam
Across her face.

She could not like the poet.
Was he so superior to the day
He could dismiss the windchimes' sunlit silver
Wavy signatures upon the walls?
She imagined his domestic life:
"My dear, I can't be bothered, not until
I straighten out these lines about our love."

And she! She was on fire every noon,
Throbbing love each night in the quadrille.
It was so urgent; she was spurred on, frantic,
Pillaging her drawers for her good pearls,
Striding headlong on the deck, boots clicking,
Seeing who she could see, past the poet
Hunched over a book like a reproach.
Would he commit her beauty to a verse?
She made a face.
There was nothing more alive than her
In all the wide deep-fathomed span of ocean.
Here, here! she wanted to cry, is the tremor!
(Where, he'd wonder, is the seismograph?)
But it was sunk. The green urge and the pen,
This song and lips could meet only estranged,
In that echoing workshop where the days
Hang drying on the line, and human pain
Is buckling slowly down to ballad meter,
Each body raised punctually and probed,
Every passion justified by its jingling harness,
Every impulse wedded to the metronome.