THESIS

Affect in Writing:
A Phenomenological Perspective on the Relation of Mood and Significance

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Abstract

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Significance is an attempt to use creative non-fiction to explore what it means to be a student in the education system through the related questions: ‘What is knowledge?’ ‘What is thinking?’ ‘What is a self, and its relation to others?’ A fundamental assumption of this paper is that the first person perspective is a necessary starting point because it opens up the possibility of understanding these impossibly open-ended questions. In the thesis which juxtaposes my experience as a young student in Iowa with that of an adult dreaming, I explore the themes of past/present, reason/emotion, individual/collective identity, and the necessary process of interpretation which all experience needs in order to be meaningful. The critical introduction attempts to delineate the same themes using Heidegger’s analysis of understanding and mood as developed in Being and Time, and current extensions of his distinction between ontic and ontological levels of significance. Ultimately, the goal of this endeavor is developing an ethical position which remains open to the possibilities inherent in the first perspective of any individual while also understanding that that perspective has its limits.
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And thanks to Iver Arnegard for his critical comments which reminded me to take my dream a little more seriously.
Dedication

For the nuclear family

That gave me so many powerful issues to contemplate.

Thankfully,

Not the least of those issues

Is the dark matter of love.
So if it is said that ‘Being’ is the most universal concept, this cannot mean that it is the one which is clearest or that it needs no further discussion. It is rather the darkest of all.

-Martin Heidegger
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Introduction

The story I’ve written as part of the requirements for a master’s degree is a memoir. In that sense, it falls decidedly into the “personal” side of the academic vs. personal writing debate as that debate was defined in the mid 1980’s by David Barholomae and Peter Elbow. But while it primarily concerns the affective elements of my “lived experience” as child in Iowa and as a dreaming adult, both the narrative’s subject matter and the reason for its composition have much to do a critical analysis of subjectivity’s affective processes in the educational setting. If it sometimes fails as a story for just that reason—it is too analytical and conceptual and lacks the cohesive emotion arc that good story contains—I would like to use this critical introduction to explain what the story doesn’t convey.

In 1927, Martin Heidegger wrote Being and Time in part as an effort to achieve an academic posting in the German university system. Although incomplete, the work has often been characterized as one of the most important in twentieth century philosophy and was a significant influence, not only on philosophers like Derrida and Sartre, but also on political theorists such as Marcuse and Habermas, and on the psychologist Rollo May. In his most important work, Heidegger asks the question, “what does it mean ‘to be’?” Heidegger asserts that while rocks, hammers, and ideas are all said to have a certain sort of existence in the world, he centered his inquiry on the being which questions the meaning of Being. He calls this questioning being, Dasein—but he might as well have called it, the Student. Heidegger’s questions concerning ontology and epistemology have a direct relationship to pedagogical questions asked by education system: what does it mean to understand something? How does a
person learn? What is an individual’s relation to others? To tradition? In the work, Heidegger raises many more questions than he answers, but the philosophical structure by which he frames Dasein can still offer insights useful to both contemporary students and teachers. In his insistence that mood is a fundamental condition to understanding, Heidegger prioritizes affective elements such as care, anxiety, and boredom over those of more conceptual, rational orientation. In both its strengths and its weaknesses, Heidegger’s phenomenological perspective can be useful in negotiating the learning process both as a student and a teacher.

In this critical introduction, I will briefly outline phenomenological perspective, then examine Heidegger and modern interpreter’s analysis of affective elements in understanding, and close by applying that analysis to my own motives in writing this memoir.

The Phenomenological Perspective

Edmund Husserl is credited with founding the phenomenological perspective in philosophy. In doing so, he “bracketed” the subject in traditional relationship of subject/object in which man as subject looks at an object and thereby gains an “objective” understanding of the world. In the transcendental reduction, or epoche, Husserl disregarded the outside world and focused on the conscious subject. He was concerned with how the world appeared in the mind, with the mental objects he called noema. He held that true phenomenological research could only be conducted from a first person perspective and developed theories of intentionality and intersubjectivity to explain the essentials of human motivation and communication. Many of his insights and methodologies are relevant today, especially in cognitive psychology but also in the social sciences. But while Husserl asserted that consciousness wasn’t something in itself but always consciousness of something, later in his career, he hypothesized a transcendental ego.
While this entity served as the unifying basis for his wide-ranging studies, it also appeared to violate his own stipulation that consciousness was not an object “in itself.”

Heidegger studied with Husserl and was greatly influenced by the phenomenological method of approaching objects in an “entirely new way.” Studying mental phenomenon like this was to “set aside our prejudices, learn to see directly and simply and to abide by what we see without asking out of curiosity what we can do with it” (qtd. in Safranski 82). The method was the starting point for his philosophy in *Being and Time* because it seemed to resolve the subject/object dilemma by opening up the interface between the two where reality was revealed.

The quality of “revealing” is important to Heidegger’s philosophy; he italicizes the line in *Being and Time*, “Dasein is its disclosedness” (171). Of course, such a premise that is buried so deeply in subjectivity is problematic because it admits that man’s “element of existence is the artificial, the mendacious, where he is already cajoled by others” (qtd. in Safranski 82). In this early observation, Heidegger opens up the question of Being to later critical theorists like Lacan and Foucault—and almost any other who ever used the word “discourse” to describe an influence on subjectivity. And for a student in the university with all its theories and perspectives on what it means to a human being in the world, the statement about the “artificiality” of existence seems particularly apt.

However, Heidegger disagreed with Husserl on a couple fronts. In the matter of transcendental reduction, Heidegger felt that while it was important to focus on the matter of subjectivity—get to the essence of perception and conception—divorcing the subject so radically from the object was to deny that subject also lived in a world. A subject didn’t just sit in a room all day examining his own mind and comparing it to the self-examined results of others like a

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1 All italicized words in quotes are those of Heidegger.
test subject in a science experiment (or a classroom). Any one individual is always “thrown” into a world. Not only is the world “present-to-hand,” or work instruments “ready-to-hand”—but “they” are always present. To be among “them”—integrated seamlessly into them—is a “primordial” condition of Dasein. Even after Dasein discovers its “authenticity” as an individual and begins to understand its own subjectivity—its processes of perception, conception, moods, desires—it is continually “falling” back into “them.” This ambiguous and ever changing relationship of the self to others is central to Heidegger’s work.

In place of the transcendental reduction, Heidegger offers the distinction between “ontic” and “ontological.” The latter term refers to the conceptual understanding that comes from a theoretical inquiry into the meaning of entities. But the ontic realm isn’t just its opposite—an unreflective acceptance of going with the flow in the midst of “them.” According to Heidegger, every Dasein already has an understanding of what it means “to be.” It “comport(s) itself in one way or another, and always does comport itself somehow” (Being 32). Moreover, any and all Dasein understands itself in terms of its existence—its understanding of the world and its own possibilities are always a function of the “facticity” of being-in-the-world. Dasein is thrown into a culture and a tradition—“their” interpretation of possibilities always precede the individual into the world of experience. Even that Dasein which has discovered its authenticity (a process discussed in more detail later) and its unique possibilities must continually decide whether to hold or neglect those possibilities as it falls back into “they.” Since this “falling” is an ongoing and continual ontical process in the existential world, to reach the ontological dimension of Being, Heidegger insists that existentiality itself must be considered beforehand.

In this, Heidegger seems to be saying that while experience is the only teacher, that teacher isn’t capable of teaching. Any Dasein always finds itself thrown into a tradition, always
sees its possibilities in terms of a culture that “precedes it” as it questions being. Dasein always has to consider its own authenticity as a continuing problem of separating itself from a “them” whom it must fall back into because “they” are what it is “proximally and for-the-most-part.” In one way, it is the problem that Patricia Bizzell saw in students of minority backgrounds, of separating oneself from home world in order to become a part of an academic one. Although reason plays a part in that process, it not something that reason can do alone, or even primarily. As will be discussed in the following section, the affective elements of Dasein’s learning process are just as important as the cognitive ones.

Beside the location of the transcendental reduction that denied the subject a world, Heidegger also took issue with Husserl’s transcendental ego. As a formerly devoted Catholic student who’d lost faith in God as the founding axiom of all philosophy, Heidegger thought Husserl’s construct bore too close a resemblance to that of “holy spirit.” Actually, anything to do with transcendence offended Heidegger because of its connotations to “spirit” and a pure consciousness divorced from the world. While many of the fundamental dynamics of Hedeigger’s philosophy—notably, the “guilt” Dasein feels as an authentic individual “falling” continuously back into “them”—do bear a close resemblance to Catholic philosophy, he goes to great lengths to simply observe and analyze the phenomenological aspects of those entities without hypothesizing a metaphysical justification for it. But as Derrida has noted, the German word for spirit is so studiously avoided in *Being and Time* that he finds it inscribed in the work.

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2 In giving the example of a student coming from home culture that might be patriarchal into a more liberal academic culture, Bizzel maintains that the decision wasn’t an either/or situation as implied by David Bartholomae’s view of a student coming to the university. This critical introduction attempts to approach the problem of world by focusing on affectivity’s role in the creation of any world.

3 Heidegger himself later developed the concept of *sous rature*, or “under erasure”, to describe a word that remains in a text but is crossed out. Derrida’s “trace” used the construct to refer to a word that is inadequate but necessary. In this sense, God can be seen as a trace—both present and absent in the text of *Being and Time*. The
Heidegger is attempting to translate traditional philosophy with its theological implications and assumptions into one that is more open to life as it is actually lived. In place of transcendent values, he stresses the fundamental importance of “temporality,” “facticity,” and “historicity” as components of what it means to Be. Thus, time—as well as the world—are existential factors more immanent than consciousness when it comes to influencing Dasein as it questions the meaning of Being.

This basic structure has relevance to education: as any student writing a significant paper knows, while there might millions of books on the subject, the defining problem is that only a limited amount of time exists to get the job done.

The Affective Elements of Heidegger’s Dasein

In his introduction to *Being and Time*, Taylor Carmen notes that the two divisions of Heidegger’s work are characterized by “ontological socialism” in the first part and “increasingly intense psychological individualism” in the second. Most of Heidegger’s close scrutiny of affect occurs in Division Two, but he does lay out its ontological dimensions in Division One. There, he asserts that understanding and state-of-mind (or mood) are “the two constitutive ways of being” and that they are “equiprimordial” (171-2). It’s not just in the realm of human values or desires that Heidegger makes this claim—even knowledge of the world is conditioned by its relation to a state-of-mind. In Heidegger’s epistemology, there is no objective knowledge of the type sometimes claimed by science—and no self-evident reality.

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4 Heidegger traces the false “assumption of Being” throughout Western philosophy—and not just that which is overtly theological. From Plato to Descartes to Hegel and Kant, he calls for the “destruktion” of metaphysics. Derrida’s deconstruction is a continuation of Heidegger’s perspective on traditional texts.
Another assertion about affect in Division One is even larger. In trying to understand Dasein as a whole—to grasp both its ontic and ontological structure—Heidegger finds one particular mood is most revelatory: anxiety. If fear is anxiety “fallen into the ‘world’, inauthentic, and, as such, hidden from itself,” anxiety as a free-floating mood without a definite object enables Dasein’s to see its thrownness and its “facticity” (234). Anxiety allows Dasein to see its authentic possibilities; “anxiety individualizes” (235). Anxiety also paradoxically reveals the fundamental being of Dasein: care. In care, Heidegger finds the “primordial structural totality” of Dasein. Care is what orients Dasein to others, to the world, to itself.

While the ontology that Heidegger lays out in Being and Time is meant to apply to any Dasein in its “average everydayness” of “Being-in-the-world,” it is a philosophy that is particularly appropriate for a university setting. In the Dasein who searches for its authentic possibility as individual, whose natural state is to be a part of “they”, and who fades in and out of “them” in that vague arena of subjectivity, one can easily view a classroom of students. Care is the fundamental reason the students are there; each is concerned with finding a life-project, an endeavor that will satisfy both their authentic need as individual and will also recognize their equally primordial state as a continuing part of “they.” In that classroom, any one Dasein will “find itself” in a mood of some sort—happy, sad, fear, bored. But learning takes place only when there is a degree of anxiety—a sort of nervous anticipation which searches for “the intelligibility of Being-in-the-world”. And when Heidegger writes that this “intelligibility which goes with a state-of-mind—expresses itself as discourse” and is “put into words,” the analogy of Dasein’s being and its world to a university setting is even more recognizable (204).

5 All italic in quotes is Heidegger’s.
But at this point, Heidegger’s liberal socialism becomes a little less intelligible. In a sense, he has embued “the word” with an almost religious connotation. In that caring subjectivity which is Dasein’s questioning Being, in that “uncovering” where authentic possibility is revealed, significance and words are almost immediately conflated: he writes, “To significations, words accrue” (204). It is almost as if he saying of Dasein’s authentic self, “In the beginning was the word . . .” But this line of reasoning is too close to both Catholicism and the transcendental ego of his rejected mentor Husserl—it prioritizes consciousness over the existential condition of Dasein as a factual entity in the world. Heidegger is determined to keep Dasein authentically in the world, so immediately after the word and significance have been revealed, he problematizes the relationship: “But word-Things do not get supplied with significations” (204). It almost like the seeker has trekked through a dark forest in fear and trembling, found the clearing and the burning bush, and finally received the word—but when he hikes back out the forest and goes to show his friends the tablet on which his authentic possibilities are written, the page is blank. This is an on-going problem throughout Heidegger’s work—he is much better at formulating questions than supplying answers.

The next paragraphs in Being and Time are devoted to a meditation on the questionable relationship of discourse, language, and significance. Heidegger’s thoughts here are familiar to any theorist, whether that theorist is Marxist, feminist, psychoanalytic, postmodernist—or any other who has tried to move beyond their own throwness to reach some understanding about what it means to be a human being in the world of others. Much of the familiarity has to do with the contorted and obscure nature of its prose, along with the idiosyncrasies of its lexicon. Since this paper is concerned with affect, I will just give a frustrating example of one of his sentences here: “If discourse, as the Articulation of the intelligibility of the ‘there’, is a primordial
existential of disclosedness, and if disclosedness is primarily constituted by Being-in-the-world, then discourse too must have essentially a kind of Being-in-the-world which is specifically worldly” (204).

But if cognitive clarity always bears a troubling relationship to language, Heidegger attempts circumvent the problem by focusing on the affective components and processes of Dasein as it questions Being. This is a legitimate enterprise because, as noted earlier, he considers “understanding” and “state-of-mind” as equally primordial in Dasein’s realizing both the world and its own possibilities.

In Division Two with its “increasingly intense psychological individualism,” Heidegger states that “in every case Dasein exists for the sake of itself” (279). He notes a quality of “mine-ness” to all Dasein’s authentic experience which reflects his determination as a phenomenologist to remain faithful to the first person perspective. He declares: “In ontological Interpretation, an entity is to be laid bare with regard to its own state of being” (275). In regard to the university analogy, Heidegger is determined to remain faithful to the integrity of a student as someone whose “lived experience” of the world is a primary factor in the learning process.

From this perspective, he takes up anxiety again for a closer look at its ontic and ontological dimensions. As he noted in Division One, the ontical feeling of anxiety is one which separates the individual from the “they” and makes Dasein aware of itself as a unique entity with its own possibilities. Joy as a mood has a similarly powerful effect on Dasein’s relation to they—but that effect is to incorporate Dasein into they. Anxiety reveals different ontological dimensions of being. As the ambiguous “threat” to Dasein’s being increases in Division Two—as it becomes increasing “oppressive”—anxiety has the effect of removing Dasein not only from the meliorating state as part of “they”, but also from the world itself. The condition is a carry-
over from his Catholicism as “the dark night of the soul.” But Heidegger the phenomenologist is not going to let anxiety slide back into mere ontical fear or make the ontological leap into faith—he’s going to analyze the mood for its ontological dimensions in the existential world. Dark though they may be, the insights gained from this state will establish affect’s importance to a person’s “Being-a-whole.”

For Heidegger, when acute anxiety is taken to its limit, phenomenology reveals that Dasein is essentially its relationship to time. Dasein is always “ahead of itself” in that its culture and its understandings of being always precede it into any experience. The possibilities that Dasein perceives for itself are always anticipation of some future condition. In addition, Dasein also always “finds itself” in a mood rather than having absolute control of it. In acute anxiety, the possibility which Dasein most anticipates is the possibility of no possibilities. In this anxious contemplation/anticipation of death, Heidegger finds that “Dasein’s existence, facticity, and falling reveal themselves . . .” (293).

For a phenomenologist who relies on a first perspective as a methodology, death is the limit of what can be known. In that sense, it can only be described from the outside. Heidegger does so for a number of pages as he considers what the death of an “other” reveals and how “they” with “idle talk” vitiate the authentic realization of what Dasein’s own death means ontologically. For Heidegger, what anxiety reveals in the anticipation of death is “Nothing.” Heidegger’s thinking here is hardly that of Leibnitz—the world which is created in anxiety is the worst of all possible worlds. Still, in the circular reasoning that is Heidegger’s hermeneutic approach, the phenomenologist maintains that “Anticipation [of death] turns out to be the possibility of understanding one’s ownmost and uttermost potentiality-for-Being—that is to say, the possibility of authentic existence” (307). After discussing the various ways in which Dasein
might comport itself after such a revelation, Heidegger finds that an authentic Dasein must be “resolute”—must carry out any possibilities it subsequently takes up “primarily unsupported by concernful solicitude, but of being itself, rather, in an impassioned \textbf{freedom towards death}—a freedom which has been released from the Illusions of the “they”, and which is factual, certain of itself, and anxious” (311).

Heidegger’s themes in this section—anxiety, death, nothingness, authenticity—will be taken up by later by existentialists such as Sartre. It is definitely a bleak world that anxiety enables Dasein to understand. But stepping outside Heidegger’s text for a moment (and the phenomenological perspective), there is a good deal of historical relevance to the darkness of Heidegger’s questioning stance as regards the individual. In Germany of the late 1920’s, the Weimar Republic was still dealing with the aftermath of WWI. The social conditions were already present that would lead to the rise of National Socialism and Hitler. What Heidegger seems to anticipate and the later existentialists try to explain in the aftermath is the kind of collective horror that repels reason. Heidegger’s focus on death and anxiety, his suspicions of “they” and the need to separate oneself in order to ascertain authentic possibility is not just a symptom of depression but can be seen as a valid affective response to an underlying reality.

But it is not just anxiety and death that fill the pages concerning temporality in Division Two. Care is still present as the ontological structure of Dasein. Heidegger analyzes the concernful Dasein as it questions Being, as it continually falls into they, and notes the appearance of conscience—which he describes as “a call.” He also describes the existential guilt Dasein feels as it attempts to interpret this calling—which unfortunately, but characteristically for Heidegger, says \textit{nothing} about what one should do to answer the call. While these are all theological constructs from former days, he interprets them hermeneutically in an existential
context. He uses the terms “they-self” and “authentic Self” in describing the complexity of the calling—and he does so in evocative, but vague, descriptions. The calling “has the character of an appeal by calling to [Dasein’s] ownmost potentiality-for-Being-its-Self; and this is done by way of summoning it to its ownmost Being-guilty” (314).

An authentic self—a whole self—sounds like a noble but difficult identity to pursue. But when Heidegger anticipates the reader’s question about who this Dasein really is, he writes, “For the most part I myself am not the ‘who’ of Dasein; the they-self is its ‘who’” (268). Identity and significance are problematized to such an extent by affectivity that Heidegger says when Dasein is most itself in an existential situation, it is “uncanniness”. At its limit, “As something thrown . . . into existence, (Dasein) exists as an entity which has to be as it is and as it can be” (321). On the surface, this kind of observation wouldn’t seem to hold much hope for educating a student.

Not many conclusions can be drawn from Heidegger’s phenomenological analysis of Dasein—indeed, it is a study of inconclusiveness. While the “facticity” of any one Dasein thrown into its world is its defining condition, he never discusses any of those facts like race or gender. We never see a body or how a particular person might actually live a life, or get an example of the way a specific discourse might influence Dasein. In equating Dasein so closely with care, anxiety, and uncanniness, Heidegger asserts that we are our states-of-mind. While the ultimate project of authentic Dasein is to overcome its continual falling back into they and their quagmire of moods, to grasp authentic possibility and hold it beforehand resolutely, he gives us no real way to do that. The most he does is exhort the hypothetical Dasein to “take over its own thrownness and be in the moment of vision for ‘its time’” (437). He doesn’t mention whether or not any one Dasein has ever done that before.
But if conclusions can’t be drawn, observations can be made which do shed light on affectivity’s influence in understanding the self and the world. In distinguishing between the ontic and the ontological, Heidegger identifies and explores useful areas to direct questioning about human being. Those areas are still being actively studied—and with application to the education system.

**Contemporary Studies of Affectivity**

In his article “Emotional Rationality and Feelings of Being,” Jan Slaby examines two current stances toward the relationship between emotion and reason. He characterizes Bennet Helms position as a “theory of felt evaluations, centered on the idea of a sui generis emotional rationality as the standard of intelligibility of affective evaluation” (1). This is an extension of Heidegger’s ontical consideration of Dasein as individual who engages in experience with an intuitive understanding of being even as the variety of emotional states occur concurrently. In this model of behavior, a human is always finding significance in the moment through a process of “emotional reason”—a process which results in “affective intentionality.” Slaby finds that—as in Heidegger—“the central idea behind this way of explaining feelings is to reject any conceptual priority of significance over the emotions (objectivism) or of the emotions over significance (subjectivism) – feelings and significance are equally primal” (9). Ultimately, Helms must admit that his theory of emotion and understanding depends on whether these feeling states are “agreeable or disagreeable”—“pleasures and pains” (10). In this, Slaby find the shortcoming of Helms approach: “Not least of all we expect a philosophical theory to inform us about the often less than ideal reality of human feeling, which can certainly run counter to the
normative requirements even of a cautiously formulated and ‘personalized’ form of emotional rationality” (11).

In contrast to this position, Slaby poses Matthew Ratcliff’s modern phenomenological account of “existential feelings.” Using Heidegger’s ontological, rather than ontical, perspective, Ratcliff considers “the background feelings” that precede an individual prior to any immediate situation. These feelings are at the basis of a “world view,” “feelings that concern the person’s relation to the world as a whole” and “constitute a sense of reality and possibility.” These existential feelings “first make possible our access to and grasp of the world” and sometimes appear as “expanded forms” of normal feelings such as a blissful sense of boundless joy or sadness so deep “the world takes on the character of an irretrievable loss” (12). In this, Ratcliff identifies the two characteristics which shape the “sense of reality” and distinguish existential feelings from other affective phenomenon: 1) they are not directed at any specific object or situation and 2) they are feelings in the sense that they are “bodily states” which function as a “presupposed context for all intellectual and practical activity” (14). In demonstrating the power of these feelings to shape a person’s orientation to the world, Ratcliff gives examples from those with affective disorders such as schizophrenia and depression. Using such examples leads to a problematic area for phenomenological investigation: they are not directly observable from the first person perspective of a rational investigor. In this, they are like Heidegger’s treatment of death—death is a state that reveals “nothing” to the phenomenological perspective. But like death, to deny that existential feelings are important and that they have an effect on a person’s orientation to his own possibilities and to the world itself is to deny some rather obvious evidence. Ratcliff can only conclude that whether a person
is healthy or mentally ill, the important feelings which orient a person to the world are not “subjective sensibilities” or “intentional states.” One can only draw the inference that, while existential feelings are directly observable even from the first persona perspective, they are “are ontologically prior to the conceptual, reflection-based division of self and world, of subject and object” (14-5). In this, Ratcliff is lead to a Heideggerian conclusion: since the existential background feelings upon which any interpretation of the moment is based are so important, human beings primarily exist ontologically (13).

In comparing these two directions which Heidegger’s thoughts on affectivity and significance have taken in the contemporary world, Slaby comes up with poignant observations. While both schools posit an area of indistinguishablility between cognitive understanding and emotion, he finds that Helms approach is somewhat superficial in that he “defines significance in terms of the felt evaluations of pleasure and pain but in turn defines those felt evaluations themselves in terms of significance” (16). In Ratcliff’s discussion of existential feelings that are ontologically prior to the felt evaluations, Slaby finds a dimension of affectivity that first makes Helms discussion of significance possible at all. The circularity of Helms reasoning about significance and affectivity can only be fully appreciated by admitting Ratcliff’s methodology which shows the significance of significance. By studying the absence of significance in extreme cases of affectivity disorder, it is Ratcliff who first establishes a world where it makes any sense at all to “talk of an evaluative perspective”. Thus, Helm’s theory falls short in this regard because it didn’t take up a person’s “lived sense of reality” (17).

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6 Thane Plantkow extends this line of reasoning more explicitly in the direction of personal identity theory.
But Slaby not only contrasts the two schools in the manner above, he attempts to reconcile their differences for the way that their particular insights can be combined. In Helm’s theory which extends Heidegger’s ontical perspective, Slaby finds a strong point in the “felt evaluations.” In Ratcliff’s perspective, the crucial area of interplay between affect and significance is prior to and, at least theoretically, cut off from the individual’s awareness in the moment; an individual simply finds itself in a mood, and often in a world which doesn’t make sense. But if Helms theory can be enlarged to acknowledge this affective dimension and its experiential reality, to incorporate more fully these “background objects” into the study of moment by moment interplay between significance and affectivity, one can enlarge the concept of felt evaluations into one of “felt preparedness” to act in accord with these background feelings. In so doing, Slaby concludes that Helm’s abstract conceptual requirement—the circular reasoning in which significance is defined by pain and pleasure, a construct which is then justified by its significance—is “thereby shown to be a lively affective background orientation” (18).

The Ethics of Affectivity

Heidegger’s *Being and Time* was seminal to so many later theorists on identity because of the depth and breadth of his questioning about what it means “to Be.” By asserting that Dasein’s primary, everyday mode of being was to be a part of “they”, he supported the views of social constructivists who emphasized the power of society to shape values and significance. In his emphasis on authenticity and Self, he was often cited by existential thinkers for whom the individual was the primary constructor of meaning. In his critique of the ontical perspective as one of science and subjectivity, he lays out the problems of cognitivist psychologists and nuerologists researching brain activity in that the questions about subjectivity in general
inevitably minimize the world any subject lives in. In his ontological considerations, he questions authority to such an extent that he calls for a “destrukion” of the Western tradition of philosophy. And over all these considerations, he places the problems of language. In this, Heidegger has anticipated many of the issues that are fundamental to debates about pedagogy in the university.

But if Heidegger takes no real position on any of these debates, what he does do is provide a prospect on how one might deal with the constant questioning. His work has been characterized as “ontotheological” and, although he rarely mentions ethics in Being and Time, the subject is inscribed in the work in the same way that Derrida found the trace of spirit. His project in Being and Time is to have “beforehand” an understanding of Dasein as it goes about questioning what it means to Be—and this is a search for an ethical stance. In his phenomenological methodology which relies on the first person perspective, in the thrownness of Dasein, he asserts the fundamental condition of human being as one of radical democracy—the fact that Dasein chooses for itself is a condition which exists prior to any tradition or discourse. Authentic being lies within the domain of an individual that realizes its unique possibilities even as it is continually falling back into they. The logical conundrum involved in realizing this desire for individual wholeness in an everyday world where one is inextricably incorporated into they, Heidegger seeks to overcome with a focus on the emotional aspect of Dasein. He wants to propose an alternative to the Nietzchian nihilism that results when a superman spurns the other as both oppressive and weak.

Heidegger’s project is ultimately an ethical one with regard to affect. In this, it is very similar to certain traditions of Buddhism in which the goal of meditation and mindfulness is to develop an attitude of compassion. Heidegger asserts that understanding and state-of-mind are
“equiprimordial”—moreover, that any Dasein already has an understanding of what it means to be and that this understanding is fundamentally established in the mood of Care, or concernful-being-with-others. In this, Heidegger asserts that for every Dasein—from within its first person perspective, in its existential facticity, this mood of caring is the foundational orientation of being in the world. This way of conceiving human being is vital to ideals such a democracy, community, social justice—and the university. Heidegger goes to great lengths to show how this attitude of care is not just doctrinal or normative, but grounded in the very nature of our being.

Of course, any discussion of Heidegger and ethics has to at least mention the fact that he became a member of the National Socialist party for a few years as a university professor. While there’s no evidence he shared Hitler’s anti-Semitic views, he did lead youth groups and—for a time—used the word “spirit” to justify the fervor of German patriotic feeling. And while this points to a limitation in the ethical foresight of one who so thoroughly analyzed emotion from a first person perspective, that limitation is one which he himself recognized. There is an important dimension of affectivity and understanding that is inaccessible to any one Dasein’s ontical perception.

**Phenomenology, Affect, and Understanding in Personal Writing**

Like Heidegger’s enterprise in *Being and Time*, the foregoing discussion of affect and understanding has been largely theoretical. Throughout, I have attempted to at least begin to outline its relation to education. What follows are a few more pointed observation on what I had hoped to accomplish with this memoir in which I have attempted to interpret my own involvement with the education system.

One motive has been that of Heidegger’s “attunement” to the background feelings which precede an individual in any situational involvement with the world. To conduct this project of
attunement as a narrative is in line with the thoughts of Jerome Bruner who identifies narrative as one of the primary modes of understanding. The scenes from Iowa are an attempt to look at the culture that shaped me. The notion that my identity is socially constructed is one that I resist—as Pierre Bordieu has noted, everyone feels their values and tastes are “natural”. But while this might be so at an ontic level, I have experienced enough anxiety to recognize that this is not the whole truth.

In a more ontological sense, one of my motives in writing this narrative is described by Min-Zhan Lu as she considers the “literate self”: to wrestle “with one’s privileges as well as one’s experience of exclusion” in order to approach “more respectfully and responsibly those histories and experiences which appear different from what one calls one’s own.” Among those histories and experiences that I thought about as I wrote this thesis were those of my students—past, present, and future. I think it important to put learning in a larger context than a pragmatic or positivistic one. While those considerations and perspectives are important, a recognition of being is necessary in that it acknowledges time and the uncertainty of the future—and the impenetrable mystery that lies at the heart of any individual encountering the learning process.

Of course, my most immanent motive in writing concerns that “authentic” aspect of Dasein. In a book about her fifteen years of teaching and her lifelong practice of personal writing, Vivian Gornick declares the subject of memoir is “always self-definition.” She goes on to describe this self-definition as a temporal progression which begins with a moral imperative: the writer must “engage with the world” because that leads to “experience” which leads to

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7 Bruner contrasts narrative with the “paradigmatic” mode—a mode that is more logically, conceptually based, and one in which time is not the basic, organizing principle.
8 Heidegger considered this aspect of being in the world as that of “ready-to-hand”—the instruments a culture has made available to Dasein in order that work can be accomplished.
9 In her article considering the “having” and “doing” modes of pedagogical philosophy, Su Ya-hui argues that a “being” perspective encourages more lifelong learning.
“wisdom.” She goes on to write that this wisdom—“or rather the movement towards it”—is the final significance of writing (Situation 14). In the terms that this critical introduction has developed, that wisdom involves an ethical stance towards the relationship between affectivity and understanding. And in a bit of a jump through the problems of reflexivity, the world and the unsurrogated narrator, and the complexities of language—I’m running out of time and space here (but aren’t we always)—wisdom can be an understanding that is most effectively expressed through an emotion. The world is precarious place—and so is the self—but cultivating an attitude of compassion is a more effective way of dealing with both. And that can be a good pedagogical philosophy when it comes to writing.

10From a deconstructive and rhetorical position, Sharon Crowley has also studied “wisdom” which she distinguishes from “knowledge.” That distinction was an important theme in my creative thesis.
Works Cited


A DREAM OF EDUCATION
We were shoulder to shoulder, a crowd trickling through the university hallway like blood cells through a hardened artery. The women and men pressing around me came from diverse backgrounds—they were all different colors, sizes, and shapes. The one thing they had in common, though, was that all were uniformly young. I appeared to be the only person over thirty walking through that hallway—and I was well above that.

The young students carried books and conversed in the confident manner of youth everywhere. I probably could have heard snatches of foreign languages if I’d wanted to listen—but I didn’t. I just wanted to make it to class on time.

Occasionally, a door opened on either side and a few cells spilled into a classroom or out. As the crowd carried me past each of those doors, I checked the number above it and then raised an arm through the press of bodies to glance at the number on the registration paper I clutched in hand.

Although I’d attended a half dozen universities in my fifty-odd years, it was my first time in this particular one.

I swear I didn’t envy the youth of those students squeezing though the passage, but I did wish I knew where I was going as well as they obviously did.

Of course, that feeling of not knowing where I was going was not unusual in itself—crowds often have that effect on me.

I grew up in a small town in the Midwest. The disorientation caused by crowds is a cultural thing. The only crowds we trusted in Iowa were green and had ears a foot long. Corny,
I know, but there it is—what are you going to do? My idea of an authentic person is still a distant silhouette on a tractor, plowing late into the evening, the field around him darkening and immense.

For some reason, the intervening years have not done much to diminish the old conception.

And that is odd because I knew very early that my future was not of that time and place. Throughout almost all of my childhood, I knew that I was going to leave Iowa. I trace that early intuition—which turned out so true—to the day I learned to read. That day was an epiphany, plain and simple.

On the day I learned to read, the immediate world around me lost a good deal of its reality.

In 1961, Plymouth, Iowa had a population of 254 souls and three churches to serve them. Our family—mother, father, a daughter, two sons (six years old, I was the eldest child)—rented the old Methodist parsonage. But since we were Lutherans, we had to travel seven miles through the corn fields to Manly on Sundays for service.

Plymouth’s block long Main Street had a hardware store, grocery, cafe, bank, and post office. At one time, the street had also featured a hotel on a prime corner lot, right beside the only stop sign on the blacktop running through town. But in 1961, all that remained of the structure was a deep hole, the sides of which were shaped by charred and jagged edges of crumbling concrete. The hole I’m not sure how long the hole had been there before our family arrived, or how long it remained after we left—but I do know that during the decade we lived there, I never heard anybody talk about filling it in.
The school sat on the southwest corner of town. was surrounded by a wire fence. Adjacent to the south edge of the property was Hodson's hog lot and dairy barn—luckily, a southeast wind was rare. Beyond the ball field and playground to the west was the cow pasture. Hodson’s cow pasture was sixty acres of hardwoods, mostly oak, scattered in clumps around a winding creek. The terrain also included a couple gentle slopes which might not have qualified as hills in other places, but in Iowa did merit that designation.

All in all, the cow pasture functioned as the primary entertainment venue for the kids in Plymouth. We fished for chubs, suckers, bullheads, and an occasional rock bass in the creek; a crowd of a dozen or so might gather on a winter Saturday to sled down the hill. A few of us exercised our more primitive instincts with BB guns, scanning the trees for feather targets like blackbirds or sparrows, or sometimes bigger game like squirrels or gophers. As long as a kid didn’t plink a cow, the Hodsons didn’t mind that kind of savagery.

The school building itself in Plymouth was a monument to education at that time. The original structure was two and a half stories tall—its height equal to either dimension of width—and startling for its lack of embellishment. It looked like a monolithic cube, so unlike any other structure in town that it appeared to be something that might have dropped from space one night in the ancient past and embedded itself in the earth. It was originally constructed of dark red brick, but decades of wind-blown loam had turned it black.

An addition was attached to the north side of the old structure. The new part was built in a more modern style out of whitewashed, concrete block. Long and low, it had large banks of windows for the two rows of classrooms on either side. Between the two rows was a gymnasium covered by a domed roof.
Either structure on its own would have been alright—two unique statements of period architecture. Together though, they had the aesthetic impact of an accident—a collision between a dump truck and a station wagon. But then, education was never about aesthetics in Plymouth.

On the day I learned to read—the day of revelation—I sat in the station wagon. Our first grade teacher stood at the head of the room intoning the words of Dick and Jane. My desk was one row away from the wall of windows, shades open to the playground outside. Second chair from the front, I was surrounded by classmates who would, with very few exceptions, be the same young adults I graduated with twelve years later.

Our class had already been drilled in the fundamentals. We had already practiced the “puh's” and “tuh's” of the alphabet, matching sign to sound with flashcards. We'd spit our way through “ch” and “th.” We'd copied the letters over and over on wide-line tablets—two lines tall for capitals, one for lower case. Then more flashcards drilled us in the painstaking process of sounding out—“d-d-u-u-h-h-a-a-w-w-g-g-u-u-h-h.” Finally, we'd gazed at lines of print and been taught the importance of a space between words—respect for the immaculate silence that surrounded the clumps of letters.

I followed Mrs. Losen’s voice with my finger. Whenever she paused, so did my finger.

“Dick... and ... Jane . . . go . . . in . . . the . . . house.”

In and out, in and out, all day long. Dick sees, Jane runs. Blue balls and Spot. The chain of words bound me to the chair. I didn't get it. This was reading? What's the big deal?
The teacher seemed fascinated, though. Her middle-aged voice filled out the sound of each word with curiously dramatic resonance. *Something* had attracted her attention.

And then it happened. As my finger tip approached the end of a line, it touched “the” as the teacher began to chant the sound of it. But my finger didn’t stop; it kept moving on to the following clump. I can still see the tip resting beneath the first printed word I read on my own: “ball.” And then my finger went to the next line and began racing across the page.

Suddenly, I was doing it! I got it! My god, these people were supposed to be having fun!

My body suddenly felt peculiar. My head seemed to be expanding, becoming lighter as if somebody had stuck an air hose in my ear. Only it wasn’t air filling me—I was being pumped full of wonder. I floated six inches from my seat.

As my finger continued to fly from line to line through the pages, letting the teacher’s voice fall farther and farther into the background, I knew that there was something special here. It wasn’t the story exactly—brother and sister, father and mother weren’t the characters to really set fire to a child’s imagination—nor did the plot line trace the type of adventure that lead to wild and dangerous territory. The narrative concerned simple, everyday family life. Still, those words on the page excited me in a way that I had never been excited before.

I didn’t have to wait for anybody to tell me what was going on inside this book, didn’t have to follow anybody’s voice. It was all right there—whole and intact—another world, a parallel universe.

God’s own whiz kid was born on that day, and it would quickly become my not-so-secret identity.
As I walked down the hallway crowded with young people, I couldn’t recall what class I had signed up for. In fact—at that moment—I couldn’t even have told you what university this was. I was so focused on finding the particular classroom on time that nothing else mattered.

I’d spent a good number of years in various universities, pursuing one dream or another. None of those dreams had been realized to any noticeable degree—although I was more than fifty years old, I had never made a single dollar as a direct result of my college experience. I wanted this time to be different. Not that I wanted to make a lot of money, but I did want to work at something I cared about, at something others cared about as well.

Exactly what that something was, however, wasn’t clear.

All I wanted was to find the room in time—and that I wanted desperately.

In 1962, any literary ambition I might have had after I learned to read was highjacked when John Glenn launched into space from Cape Canaveral in Florida. I watched the scenes play out on our tiny black and white TV in the living room. I saw the rocket and its contrail disappear into the heavens, listened for reports of the man floating above the clouds, and then waited anxiously with the rest of the country while a ship raced to pick him up in the ocean before the heroic astronaut sank beneath the waves. It was the type of true life, televised adventure that created an impression on many seven-year-old minds.

But it was another launch that same year that really captured my imagination—that one I watched in a movie theater. Disney’s Moon Pilot was a romantic comedy that featured a reluctant astronaut about to launch on a secret mission to the moon. The mission was kept secret both to avoid sabotage from the Russians and to avoid negative publicity in the eyes of the American people should it fail.
Throughout the movie, a strange woman with golden hair and a foreign accent kept appearing in places she shouldn’t—always knowing more than she should. She appeared on the same plane as the astronaut when he got leave to visit his mother a week before the launch—she knew both his name and all about his secret mission. Later, she jumped out of closet in a room where he was sequestered by the Secret Service and told him some complex, scientific stuff—that the chemical coating on his capsule wouldn’t protect him from the invisible waves that caused space men to lose their minds. The woman with golden hair—and I do mean gold, as if each hair had been electroplated with the precious metal—knew about chemistry and handed him a piece of paper with a formula that would work.

It turned out that the woman wasn’t a Russian spy, but an alien from another planet. When she appears in the capsule after the astronaut has been launched (the astronaut had finally taken her advice and passed the new formula on to the scientists in charge of the capsule coating), she convinced him to change course for her planet where there were ‘seven moons, all made for love.’

I floated above my theater seat in the same way that I had floated above my chair when I discovered reading in the first grade—my head was heating up with ideas and connections, my brain generating anticipatory scenarios like a dream machine turning the bones of my skull into a rubber balloon expanding and the rest of me just dangled as it rose. The physiology of an ah-ha moment is remarkable and memorable—I had just discovered science.

The day after watching the movie, I sat in my kid-size roll-top desk in the alcove just off the living room and began to plan my own journey. I crayoned a solar system of colorful spheres and a dotted line extending from the blue and green one to the golden one with seven moons. On the other side, I planned the journey—date of launch, arrival, chemicals to use in the capsule
coating, etc. Almost as an afterthought, I addressed the whole thing to a second grade classmate I had a crush on and asked if she wanted to come.

She said ‘yes’ and the efficacy of science was firmly established in my mind.

Time! Where the hell was that room? And all those damn young people filling the hallway with no more concern for where they were going than a herd of grazing cows. It frustrated the hell out of me but there was nothing I could do. Shoulder to shoulder, lock step—I was joined to others as completely as a snow flake in a glacier crawling through a mountain valley. Going with the flow was all there was.

Only my eyes could move freely—and my gaze zig-zagged over the crowd like a bat searching the hall ahead for doors and numbers.

That might have been one good thing about time in the circumstances—the extra decades seemed to have allowed me to grow a head taller than the young people pressing against me. My vision was unimpaired as it searched the empty space above the crowd for the door to my future.

I know that sounds a bit overblown—“the door to my future.” It was just a classroom, after all—and this was just another university among many. Twenty million people go to college every year. And while eighty percent are young people between the ages of 18 and 24, that still means that millions of old dudes are walking the halls, too. Anybody with half a brain couldn’t avoid acknowledging the fact that the whole situation was common in a way that was almost trite.

But for some reason—even though a million other men and women in their fifties were walking down similar hallways—even though I had walked through many university hallways
before—passing through that particular hallway was anything but trite.

I cared like I had never cared before.

I wanted to be in that classroom because I knew—I felt in the anxious twist of my gut—that something would be revealed there. I anticipated a future so close it could be behind the next door—a space to sit, listen to a teacher who also cared, to participate with others in a serious discussion of what truly mattered.

If walking through the hallway as terrified as a kid was the price of admission to that classroom, then so be it.

In third grade, I lost the girl I had won through science. But even though Kathy turned her affection to another—a farm kid—I didn’t lose faith in the discipline that had shown me a path to the heavens. And my belief in science was reinforced when I discovered that Plymouth had a library.

The library was a single room—a converted coat closet—at the back of the town hall. The town hall itself was a low, brick building that sat just across the blacktop from the hole that had once been a hotel on Main Street. Inside, the town hall was primarily a single large musty room with an oak plank floor. The space was mostly unused except for the once-a-year bake sale to raise funds for the volunteer fire department—their truck was garaged in an addition on the back. The room where the library was located was large for a closet, but pretty small for a library—the space was about as high as it was long or wide. A single, small window high up on the back wall provided most of the light for the donated volumes that filled the tall, dusty shelves. The hours were limited as well—it was only open on Saturday mornings.
The most unusual thing about the library, though, was the woman who tended it. Minnie Graves was just the right size to be a librarian in such a library—she was one of the rare adults whom a third-grader could look square in the eye. She wasn’t much more than four feet tall and lived down the street in a house across from the school which she shared with her sister, Lotta. Neither sister had ever married—maybe it was the names that scared off suitors. “Minnie” and “Lotta Graves” didn’t seem to bode well as auguries for the type of fruitful marriages that were fashionable around the turn of that latter century.

Still, society’s loss was my gain. On the first visit, with all that pent-up maternal empathy, Minnie directed me to a line of volumes in bright, yellow covers on one of the lower shelves. The Tom Swift Jr. series—“Adventures of a Boy Scientist”—picked up where Moon Pilot left off.

I don’t recall ever seeing another patron in the library, but I was a faithful customer. Each week, I returned for another volume and watched with excitement as Minnie slowly took the card from the pouch inside the back cover and carefully wrote my name in one column, the date on another. Then, slowly, she thumbed through a little, wooden recipe box till she found my name and filed the card. Finally, she reached the book out to me in her quavering hand and smiled her quavering smile. I thanked her, then tore out of the coat closet, ran through the big, empty room, hopped on my bike and headed home for another lesson in science.

Tom Swift and His Jet Marine. Tom Swift and His Atomic Earth Blaster. Tom Swift and His Outpost in Space, -His Deep-Sea Hydrodome, -His Electronic Retroscope, -His Megascope Space Prober. I read them all. And then I read them again to make sure I had the facts right.
Tom Swift Jr. was a boy genius, an expert in all phases of science. He and his friend, Bud, flew around the world solving humanity’s problems with revolutionary scientific inventions that Tom created—he had just created a new one at the start of each novel. The plots of the various novels always involved testing and perfecting the new device even as he used it to save humanity once more from overwhelming threat. From jungle to the depths of the ocean, from the Antarctic to space—no problem was too big or remote that it couldn’t be solved by a new invention.

On the surface, Tom Jr. was helping his father who was also a scientist and CEO of Swift Enterprises. Tom Swift Sr. was a businessman as well as a scientist—he had a global reputation for both. Swift Enterprises was based in a vast complex of buildings, each one a laboratory dedicated to a different branch of science—chemistry, biology, geology, they had them all covered. The firm owned other laboratories in a jumbo jet, one at the bottom of an ocean, and one that orbited in space.

But while Senior provided the resources, it was Tom Jr. who had the genius.

There wasn’t as much romance to the novels as there was in the Moon Pilot. Tom’s mother had died and his sister and her friend only occasionally showed up during one of the adventures. Sometimes the two girls helped. Tom’s sister was smart, but not as smart as Tom—and her friend was pretty. Often though, the two had to be saved along with the rest of humanity from whatever dire peril threatened in the moment.

Mostly though, the novels were about pure science and I read them like textbooks.

Tom Swift taught me that world which appears to the naked eye was not the real one. Anybody could see a solar system—the sun and the planets spinning in orbit around it. But it took a smart guy to know that there were billions of other such systems immediately surrounding
us—ones we couldn’t see with the naked eye, but were spinning even inside us all the time. Each atom was a star with its own set of planets—electrons spinning around a nucleus. Tom Swift taught me that world of atoms and molecules—combining and breaking apart in complex patterns—was the key to what really made the world work.

Soon after discovering the books, I gave up my childish ambition to be an astronaut and focused my eight year old’s intellectual resources on chemistry—a decision I maintained until my second year of college.

I had a peculiar ability to focus on decisions like that as a kid. Although I did the things that kids did—played in the alley with the neighbors, rode my bike, fished, and played sports—I knew very early on those were just childish diversions from my true calling.

The other lesson I took away from those novels was that I needed a laboratory. I immediately began the conversion of my bedroom. With funds raised by mowing neighbor’s lawns and a paper route, I began to acquire the things a scientist needed to do his work. Augmented by grants that came in the form of birthday and Christmas gifts, I outfitted my lab with a microscope, insect and rock collections, a circuitry board, and model rockets. The pride of my lab, though, was a chemistry set—the largest one in the Sears catalogue.

In the fourth grade, I was given a briefcase as a Christmas present and, from then on, entered every classroom ready to get down to business.

The hallway was alive, bustling with young people from all over the world—and yet I felt no connection to them. I was the old guy—as invisible to them as a ghost.

I suppose there are lots of ways to be marginalized in the world of others—ethnicity, gender, poverty, even wealth. It all depends on the context. But at that moment—in that
university hallway searching for the right room—I knew that time trumped them all.

Where the hell was that classroom? Although there wasn’t a single clock on the whitewashed walls of the hallway—not even a window to check the sun for a vague reference point—I had a strong intuition that the start was getting close.

I may not have known exactly what class I had signed up for—or even what university this was—but one thing I was sure about, I did not want to be late!

All those young people crowding the hallway were pressed so close together there was no distinguishing any single individual. They could have been cells of one animal—some lumbering beast slouching its way to an ancient cave for a nap. They all acted as nonchalant as if they’d been in this hallway for years—and had years to go.

Well, maybe they did—maybe they had all eternity to walk up and down this hall.

But not me. Even if I was the only one, I knew that the one fact which made this whole situation meaningful was the undeniable, inexorable fact that time was running out!

One day in the fifth grade, just after lunch, the teacher set a few books on my desk. Friday afternoons were usually spent reviewing lessons that had given a student problems during the week. If a kid had problems multiplying fractions, he reviewed that lesson. If another couldn’t pick out a compound verb, she studied that for an afternoon. But on this Friday, the teacher told me to go the lunchroom for a couple hours and prepare a report. The subject was the Civil War, and I would deliver my findings to the class in the last half hour of the day.

I gathered up the books without further question and left our classroom in the new addition, walked through the empty hall and down the half flight of stairs to the lunchroom in the old part of the building. Before the addition had been built, the lunchroom used to be a
gymnasium. Beneath the monolithic cube of the dumptruck, the glossy, wooden floors were still painted with the lines of a basketball court. Although the ceilings were high, I suspected that a bank shot often included a bounce off it in those old games—a fast break would have been more a matter of turning around quickly rather than actually running to the other end of the court. But on that Friday afternoon, sitting alone at one of the tables arranged in rows, the space felt cavernous.

I remember gazing at the milk machine for a few moments, realizing that nobody was around to tell me I couldn’t go grab a glass and stick it under the third rubber nipple for a fill-up of chocolate milk—but, of course, I resisted the temptation which really wasn’t much of a temptation, at all. I had an assignment, and I got down to it.

Friday afternoons were usually pretty boring, so I was glad to have the new task. Of course, the Civil War was a big topic—any student no matter what age would have been hard-pressed to sum the thing up in two hours of study for a fifteen minute presentation. The social and political factors most historians associate with the event—slavery, state’s rights, the differences between manufacturing and agrarian economies—are complex and interconnected in a labyrinth of ways.

As an eleven year old, my instinct as a scholar was natural to most scholars—I simplified the subject through a focus on my particular area of interest. I probably touched on those messy social and political aspects that most historians cite, but I know that I concentrated on the technology of the Civil War—specifically, the ships involved in the naval battles. My methodology here was directly derived from my reading in Tom Swift Jr. novels. Submarines were the new invention of the period, and I took that as a starting point for my war narrative, focusing on its problems and development through the perilous times.
I felt fairly confident as I delivered my findings to the class that afternoon. I passed around the text with the cool pictures of ships and my voice rose with interest as I discussed the discovery and development of a vessel that could hide beneath the surface of the waves and sneak up on old-fashioned ships above.

However, my confidence in the material was tested during the question and answer period that followed. It quickly became evident that not all my classmates appreciated the serious nature of the subject or my study of it. The first question—from a farm boy—was, “How many cannon balls did it take to sink a frigate?”

For a moment, I tried recalling my two hours of reading for the right answer. But then I realized the question wasn’t about the ship—it was about me, personally. What gave me the right to sit in front of the class and tell them about the Civil War?

My answer was a smart-ass defense to the smart-ass question: “Depends on where you hit it.”

“Good answer,” the teacher commented.

Thus began a dynamic that would continue throughout the remainder of my primary and secondary education.

Although I didn’t know it right away, one of the reasons I was given those books and the assignment was because of a test our class had taken earlier in the school year. Intelligence might be a controversial matter these days but, in those simpler times of education in a small town of the 60’s, an IQ test was considered to be a fairly accurate and comprehensive test of a student’s potential. I had scored a number on the one we took which indicated that I had more.
My fifth grade teacher had probably read the professional journals which recommended that “gifted” students be challenged.

But I also suspect my fifth grade teacher of other motives as well—she wanted help in the war of education. We were the sons and daughters of farmers and mechanics and cement plant workers in our rural area. Our aspirations were only beginning to be influenced by technology and its news of a world beyond the corn fields. Moreover, we were kids—and in the heart of every kid is a savage who instinctively resists authority of any kind. The potential for mayhem was a constant threat for any teacher from kindergarten to high school. It may not have been conscious, but part of Mrs. Luecht’s motive was to enlist an ally in the fight for civilization. And it worked. I became a sort of Uncle Tom to the fraternity of resistance in my peers.

The next year, when our sixth grade teacher was exercising her favorite pedagogical method—excoriating the class for its performance on a test—I was again called in for reinforcement. Mrs. Anderson was just a year away from retirement. A small woman with a scrunched up face beneath a helmet of steel gray hair, Mrs. Anderson had fought the good fight for forty years and had no illusions about it now. She was fully aware that most of her students didn’t give a damn and never would about good grammar or proper word choice. But far from being discouraged by the fact, Mrs. Anderson glorioed in it and was going out like a martyred general.

Through the years, the old lady had developed a gravitas in her bearing that commanded—if not respect—more than enough fear to get the job done. There was a force to
her presence in the classroom that could pacify any and all opposition. As she moved up and down the rows of desks, even the girls slouched lower in their chairs when she closed in. All the while, Mrs. Anderson barked out feedback that she’d been working on her whole career.

“Eddie Shackleton, what kind of score is that?” She beside stood beside the kid’s desk and made a stabbing gesture at the paper lying on top. Eddie had the singular distinction of being able to slouch lower in his seat than anybody—only his permanent cowlick was visible now. “My god, Eddie, a dog can do a better job on paper than that.” And as she moved away, while everyone else rose back up in their seats to watch the show, Eddie remained slouched as if to avoid the sulfurous cloud that hovered in her wake.

“And you, Herb Walk. You’ve got a smart tongue—is it connected to anything?” Mrs. Anderson stood over her most recalcitrant opponent and waited. For his part, Herb was not only slouching but had a hand protecting his crew cut as well. It was his signature posture in the classroom for good reason. Whenever a teacher forgot to look first and sat on thumb tack, he or she knew to grab the first hard object handy and go directly to Herb. I suppose it was wisdom passed on from teacher to teacher not to just slap that hard head with a bare hand—a book or ruler was necessary to the work.

“Answer me. Is there anything in there?” She tapped a long nail deliberately on a part of Herb’s head that wasn’t covered.

Herb was a veteran of the war between teachers and students and knew enough not to venture a reply.
“Vacuous, Herb. You know what that means?” She paused for just a second—the timing of a long practicing artist—and then continued. “No, of course you don’t. It comes from the Latin vacare which means ‘to be empty’. And that’s exactly what’s in your head—nothing. Well, let me tell you—and this goes for all of you—you’re never going to amount to anything if you don’t study. I swear, I don’t know what’s going to happen to the world if you young people go on like this.”

Mrs. Anderson stalked away from Herb, triumphant in the moment’s skirmish, and continued to lecture on the dire peril of a future without proper punctuation. The old woman was on a roll and every kid in the class knew that the proper strategy was to give her room. But as she approached down the row where I sat, I shifted the test paper to the side of my desk where she could more easily see it. I swear I only wanted to tone down the vehemence of her rhetoric—to let her know that at least I wanted a future that wasn’t bleak and empty.

However, my strategy of appeasement backfired.

Mrs. Anderson glimpsed the movement and stopped. Snatching the paper off my desk, she held it up and waved it over her head like a flag saying, “Look at this. Why can’t you all be more like Tim? Everything he does is perfect.”

Memory might be a flawed filter through which to view the past but, in this case, I know it’s transparently correct. I know those were Mrs. Anderson’s exact words because they were repeated to me in twenty-two different little-old-lady voices on the playground later that afternoon. Even LeeAnn Peashak—one of sweetest, shyest girls in class—passed close enough
to scrunch up her face and whisper, “why can’t you be more like Tim? Everything he does is perfect.”

In one way, I recognized the ribbing I took was just the innocent play of friends. But as a twelve year old with a penchant for abstraction, I still had enough common sense to know that education was about to become more complicated.

Some experiences just stand out in life. The circumstances can be so ordinary, so common—and yet, a person remembers the incident in such vivid detail that he or she can feel their body reacting, the emotions rising in the same way. That hallway was such an experience.

The setting was as mundane as could be. Still, the isolation I felt—the sense of difference from the others in the hallway—was so vivid and clear.

The degree of care I felt for the coming class was also unusual. I anticipated learning something that had evaded me for years. The feeling was almost religious, as if the hallway was sacred ground and the next moment could be enlightenment.

Time was also unusually present. Time surrounds us always—it’s as ubiquitous as skin. One day its smooth and glowing, the next it’s weather-beaten brown and wrinkled—a phenomenon we’re reluctant to accept sometimes, but only the truly crazy can totally deny. Time has been around since the Big Bang—it’s as common as dirt—a medium through which we normally move with no more notice than the air we breathe.

But in that hallway—time seemed to have a peculiar presence of its own. It was like seeing a ghost for a guy who doesn’t believe in the spirit world. I had always considered time to be an idea, a concept—but in that hallway it was as substantial as anything or anyone else present.
I suppose what I’m describing here will remind a few people of a panic attack. But that’s not quite it.

While I did feel the heightened anxiety that accompanies such a state, I was not overwhelmed by it. In fact, although I felt all the emotions that accompany that psychologically debilitating condition, I also felt a peculiar sort of calmness in the detachment. I could feel the isolation, the care, the anxiety—but there was an inexplicable disconnect of those emotions to any muscular reaction to escape or fight my way through the crowd.

For all the world, it seemed I had simply been thrown into the mysterious hallway. The least I could do—and the most—was pay attention.

In our area of Iowa—on the northern border—it took three towns and all the intervening farms to round up enough bodies for a school district. While each town had their own primary schools, the resources demanded by secondary education—labs, typewriters, table saws—made consolidation necessary. In seventh grade, all the kids in our school district were bussed to the same building for classes. Adolescents from Plymouth and Hanlantown were bussed to Manly. Inevitably, it wasn’t just the resources that got consolidated, but the native prejudices, as well.

A few days after school started that year, I was stopped in the hallway by an eighth grader as we were changing classes (another novelty of the new level—different rooms for different subjects). The big guy blocked my path and said, “Eddie challenged you to a fight. You’re not chicken are you?”

I was a smart kid and had the answer on the tip of my tongue. “No,” I replied immediately.
“Okay, the playground at noon.”

And that was all there was to it. The eighth grader turned away and blended into the crowd of students. Apparently, there was a protocol for fights at this level of education.

I continued to my next class and, during the hour before lunch, reviewed what I knew of the subject. My experience in the matter was limited, but not entirely absent.

Kids really don’t have many choices in life. They don’t choose their parents, the place they live, their school, their church. They don’t choose how long their legs are or the color of their eyes. On their birthday, they might get to decide what the family eats for supper, but that’s about it. When you really think about, childhood is pretty much a study in determinism—a kid is like water being poured from one glass to another. Even friends are just fluids swirling in the same container.

My best friend, Eldon, lived across the alley in the ugliest house on the block. His place wasn’t much more than a two-story shack, the weathered gray shakes falling off the walls in places to reveal the tar paper beneath. But that didn’t matter much—Eldon and I spent most of our friendship outdoors.

Eldon was a big kid for his age. He had a barrel chest like his dad, who managed a construction warehouse. He had a big, hard belly too that seemed part of the same barrel. The mass of his torso rode atop unusually long legs which lead to some problems with stability in neighborhood games like kick-the-can. Although his legs were strong and he could run fast enough, changing directions was not his strong suit. In the twilight, when he came running towards you, trying to avoid the tag and kick the can, he looked like a semi rolling down the highway, swaying back and forth over the center line in a high wind. More than one kid got run
Eldon was prone to accidents. Before the age of five, he had already had two memorable ones. While playing with matches, he had burned down the family garage—all that remained by the shack was a blackened, concrete slab.

The other scarred reminder of his propensity for accidents was on his person. One day, after observing his mother iron clothes, Eldon was inspired to help her out by ironing his own shirt. The fact that he didn’t take it off first created a problem that stuck with him for the rest of his life. The patch of angry, red, wrinkled skin on his wrist was forever disappearing up the long sleeves that he usually wore even on the hottest days of summer.

It probably wasn’t a coincidence that the same IQ test that relegated me to the lunch room on Friday afternoons also led to Eldon’s attending the “special” school in Kensett, a town outside our school district.

But our friendship wasn’t dependent on the classes we took—it was forged on the river and creek that flowed through the cow pastures surrounding Plymouth. His mom, Grace, often accompanied us before we were old enough to go on our own. But when we were, we fished and camped and hunted with BB guns through all but the coldest months—and during those, we ice skated and sledded. But it was fishing that truly forged our bond.

Eldon and Grace introduced me to fishing and, for that, I will always be in their debt. The perspective of years can explain some of our behaviors—shed light on the contexts of our desires and motives, make our confusion at the time a little clearer by highlighting the background upon which those motives were acted out. But the mystery of some behaviors only deepens with the years. Fishing was one of those acts—so trite at the time, but continually falling through common understanding right into sacred space.
In the beginning, Eldon and I fished with worms for carp and bullheads, chubs and suckers. As we got older, we progressed to spinning rods and lures for smallmouth bass. And in those first couple years, before we were trusted near the deep water on our own, Grace always attended our play.

Eldon’s mom was just as unusual as her only child. Most kids in the neighborhood were afraid of Grace—she did have an off-putting appearance. She was bigger around than either her husband or son, and without their long legs. Her hair was black and as wild-looking as her eyes. And the dresses she wore didn’t enhance her physical features at all. She wore cotton house dresses that weren’t much more than thin sacks to contain the flesh of her person. But like her son, it was her scars that defined Grace in the eyes of others.

When Grace put her foot to the spade as we dug worms, I couldn’t help but notice the pale, puckered scar that began just above her ankle. It looked like a zipper—a long one that disappeared up the hem of her house dress. It made her skin look like it might not be real skin, but just a covering for something else. I never knew where the scar came from, which only made the impression of a zipper more real.

The other scar, though, really made Grace scary—and I knew where that came from. The story of that scar came from one of Eldon’s cousins who lived a couple blocks away. Steve was a few years older than us, an easy-going guy for the most part who liked to tell gossipy stories. But he also had a mean streak—he enjoyed taunting Eldon by calling him a “retard.” Still, his story about Grace’s accident had the ring of truth.

Like her son, Grace’s awkwardness could make the most innocent activity dangerous. Even as a young woman, Grace liked to fish—but casting must have been as challenging then as it was now. An unusual length of line always dangled from her rod when Grace casted—often
four feet or more. She rocked it back and forth several times in lengthening arcs, gauging the moment when she should flick the rod to send the worm flying into the water. Grace had to concentrate much harder than most people on such a simple activity.

As a kid, sitting a safe distance from her on the mud bank of the Shellrock River, I could see how that fated day happened. I could see the line dangling back and forth as she tried to judge the proper moment. And I could see how one of the arcs had gone wrong, had begun approaching on a path directly towards her. I could see Grace recognizing the same thing—that the worm at the end of her line was about to hit her in the face. I could see her desperation as she thrust her wrists and arms forward—for as awkward as they were, they were still strong. But she hadn’t done it quickly enough. The worm got too close, and the thrust forward only set the hook deeper in her own lip, jerking the lip and the surrounding muscles upward into a contortion that would never leave her face.

The misshapen lip made it difficult for Grace to form words. Her speech came from her throat like a dog’s growl that was hard for most people to understand. But the main problem came from the lip’s appearance. The permanently raised corner made it look like she was always sneering at you. Along with the wild black hair and the hard eyes that never really softened, Grace had a frightening aspect.

Grace was fiercely protective of her only child, but for as long as I was his friend, I was included under that umbrella as well.

Of course, just as Adam and Eve had to leave the garden, Eldon and I eventually had to venture out from beneath Grace’s presence. We were alright through the hours of fishing in the cow pastures. We built forts out of deadfall and defended them against hordes of Indians and buffalo (dairy cows). We collaborated on the building of dams, and then picked the blood
suckers off the other’s feet. We stalked blackbirds and sparrows and gophers with our BB guns, admired and envied the other’s trophies.

Eventually though, the pastoral times gave way to modernity. And in that larger world of others, Eldon and I began to run into trouble. In the neighborhood pick-up games of baseball or football, encountering others as we rode our bikes around town, or just hanging out playing the pinball machine at the café—every situation that involved others began to provide settings for conflict.

“Retard” was a common enough epithet for any stupid behavior. If a kid dropped an easy pass or swung at a pitch out of the strike zone, he was a “retard” for letting the team down. Miss one of the stepping stones while crossing the creek, and a laughing chorus of “retard” came from everyone with dry shoes. Anything from falling on a bike to tangling a fishing line in a tree could garner the title, “retard.” Most guys just let it slide as part of the moment’s justice for screwing up. But increasingly for Eldon, it became harder and harder to shrug off the label.

His cousin, Steve, was particularly good at setting the barb deep enough to stick. Once, after a pointed series of taunts, my friend was enraged enough to charge his cousin. But Steve was big for his age just like Eldon, and the few years he had on Eldon made the size advantage too much to overcome. He caught Eldon’s charge and held him off with a hand to the head. Eldon was stuck there for what seemed like a long time, flailing arms that weren’t long enough to reach.

There were probably a dozen of us in the alley that day—a few of Steve’s friends along with a couple others our age and younger from the neighborhood. Everybody laughed. It was a classic comedy of the Popeye and Bluto sort.

Eventually, the hopelessness, if not the comedy, got through to even Eldon. He suddenly
stopped his flailing, then turned and ran towards his house, crying.

The crowd dispersed quickly after that—nobody wanted to be around if Grace came out of the shack. I felt bad for my friend, but it didn’t take a genius to know that the odds were insurmountable.

But that kind of teasing had an effect on Eldon that carried over even when the bullies weren’t around. As two fluids in the same container, the dynamics of our friendship became more volatile. Even with others our own age, Eldon could sometimes react in ways that didn’t match the circumstances—he could turn mean as a bully himself.

I could usually tell when trouble was approaching. It started with unnatural stillness. In the course of one game or another, Eldon would suddenly turn as still as a gopher, smelling the air for the scent of kids with BB guns behind a tree. Except that Eldon’s eyes weren’t looking around for his cousin—they were focused in my direction.

When he looked at me like that, I had the sense that there was something or somebody behind me. We lived in a small town, afterall. The bullies were never that far away—you could meet them anywhere.

Once when I was walking home from a baseball game at the school, I encountered a couple older boys as I crossed the bridge over the creek. For sport, they each grabbed one of my ankles and dangled me over the cement railing. I feared and resented the strength those bullies had. But as I hung, staring down fifteen feet to the rippling brown water below, I prayed they had enough strength to hold on.

But there was nothing behind me in those moments when Eldon stared at me except my own fear.

And then, the second sign of trouble: a high-pitched whine began deep in Eldon’s chest—
soft and low at first, almost plaintive. But it didn’t stay that way long. It quickly increased in both volume and location. As the sound rose through his barrel chest to his throat, it became as loud and shrill as the noontime siren over the volunteer’s fire station.

If I wasn’t already running by the third and final sign—the siren exiting in an open-mouthed roar that was synchronous with his charge—Eldon soon had me on the ground, a thick arm around my throat, his hot, humid breath on one side of my face, whispering in my ear, “Give? Give? Do you give?”

My friend never seemed to realize that if he was choking the shit out me, I couldn’t speak enough to give—which I was more than willing to do.

I was pretty sure that Eldon didn’t really want to do serious damage in those momentary rages. But he was strong—and his propensity for accidents was frightening. If nothing else, the indignity of having to go home crying was making the situation with my friend untenable.

The solution to the problem came one Saturday afternoon while I was watching TV. That in itself was unusual—my parents like many others in the small town didn’t trust the relatively new technology. Our time was limited on Saturday to morning cartoons and then the set was turned off until Jackie Gleason came on at six. Afternoons were for playing outside.

But on that occasion, my parents had taken my brother and sister with them shopping in Mason City. I took the opportunity to see what I had been missing. After watching the programming on our two and a half channels, I decided I hadn’t been missing much—it was mostly infomercials about lawn mowers and vacuum cleaners. I was about to turn the set off and be good by default when the deep voice of technology announced the coming program as, “the sweet science.”

I settled back on the couch anticipating a show with rocket launches, or maybe a
mushroom cloud. Maybe there would be a laboratory with men in white coats tending to a string of steaming beakers and flasks. Or maybe it would feature archeologists tramping through a jungle searching ancient ruins. So I was disappointed when a square of white canvas filled the grainy screen and two boxers, sitting in opposing corners.

But just the power of the word “science” was enough to keep me seated.

The program turned out to be an analysis of the sport and was interesting for the revelation that fighting wasn’t a predestined matter of getting your butt kicked by the bigger opponent. Fighting could be learned, and the “smart” boxer exercised certain techniques. A fighter could “mesmerize” his opponent by a) “dancing” and b) deploying “feinting jabs.” When the opponent was sufficiently under the spell of these two techniques, the smart boxer then executed c) a “knockout” punch with the hand that he’d held in reserve for just that moment.

The whole thing seemed a little far-fetched to me, but it was science. I filed the words away for later consideration.

Soon enough, I found myself running again. I’d paid enough attention to Eldon’s warning signs that I had a slim lead. I ran through the Clark’s yard, extending the lead by dodging in and out the trees there. But Eldon was pissed and kept coming like a bipedal firetruck. I ran across the blacktop and headed for the Wilson’s big, open yard, hoping that an adult might see what was happening and intervene before any serious damage occurred.

As I crossed the highway, I listened for the heavy slab of Eldon’s feet on the pavement behind to gage my lead. He was far enough away to create just enough space for the words of the TV program to come back to me. I hadn’t thought about the techniques of the sweet science since that Saturday afternoon—but in the desperation of the moment, they appeared like magic in my mind. I had nothing to lose, so why not?
When I reached the center of the Wilson’s immaculate yard, I stopped and turned towards Eldon. I began to “dance.”

The only dance I knew at that time was the hula. We weren’t dancers in our small town—in all my eleven years, I had never actually witnessed a person dancing in real life. The hula had made an impression from a movie about a tropical island which was threatened by the volcano that had created it. The natives appeased the angry god by sacrificing a beautiful princess. They hadn’t done the number as they watched her step off a rocky ledge into the glowing, molten hole at the top of the mountain—but they had done it through both the opening and closing credits.

The connotations of the movie for the situation at hand didn’t occurred to me at the time, I simply began the only “dance” I knew. I started shimmying my hips as if I was keeping one of those hula hoops that were popular at the time in motion.

As Eldon crossed the highway and sirened towards me, I began technique b), “feinting jabs.” I remembered that the point of the jabs was to distract the opponent from the lower hand so I aimed them well high—pretty much straight up.

The results of science can often appear like a miracle—and that day, they certainly looked like it to me.

Instead of just running me over, Eldon slowed as he approached. As I shimmied my hips and punched at the clouds, even the sound of his anger diminished. And then when he was a few feet away, he stopped altogether and stared at me silently.

He was “mesmerized”—just like the voice of technology said he would be. And before the spell was lost, I raised my lowered fist and punched my friend on the nose.

Blood broke the spell—a lot of it. Eldon raised both hands to the red gusher on his face.
and stared at me from behind them for a long moment. Then, he turned and ran towards his house.

My brother, who had been one of the younger kids nearby when the incident began, came running up. “I’m telling Dad,” he said. Then he took off towards our house.

Strictly speaking, hitting was against the rules. But as I walked after my brother, I didn’t think I would get punished for this one. This was science, after all. Even the tone of my brother’s voice seemed to recognize that—it was more like stunned amazement than the normal glee we took in getting the other in trouble.

I looked over towards Eldon’s two story shack. Grace was on the sidewalk out front as Eldon approached. “Tim hit me,” he said, just before he buried his head in her house dress.

Grace put both arms over his heaving shoulders and looked at me as she growled, “Then you don’t play with him no more.”

In the hour before lunch and my scheduled bout with Eddie, I reviewed the tenets of the sweet science. Would they work again? The test of good science is its repeatability—would those tenets carry over into different circumstances? That noon on the playground, I was to note some very different sights on the periphery of this fight.

The first difference was attendance—I discovered that fights at this level of education were much better attended. From the ring formed by the crowd, I could see they were at least five rows deep. Over their heads, another crowd had filled the monkey bars and a few had even climbed to the top bar of the swing set. It seemed that every adolescent from the three towns and all the surrounding farms was there. The eighth grader who had promoted the fight had done a job Don King would have been proud of.
That eighth grader was also serving as the referee for the fight. He stood in the center explaining the rules (which I don’t recall these forty years later) between Eddie and I. Curiously, he also seemed to be Eddie’s manager—which seemed a little unfair. He and Eddie exchanged smiling glances throughout the explanation of the fight’s parameters. But I was ready when he raised his hand and brought it down in a chopping motion to signal the start.

Immediately, I began to “dance.” By this time, I knew that dancing had more to do with “fancy footwork”, so I began a routine that resembled the jitterbug rather than the hula. I slid my feet rapidly back and forth across the pea gravel of the playground. A satisfying racket of crunching rock accompanied my movements.

And then the feinting jabs. These too had improved. I knew that their ability to distract the opponent depended at least somewhat on the threat of actually landing, so I lowered them a little. Instead of punching at the high noon sun, I brought them down more on the trajectory employed by an artillery piece. They still weren’t in any danger of actually encountering Eddie’s person, but I trusted—along with the sound of gravel crunching—in the pure fury of the feints.

As I employed the techniques of sweet science, Eddie kept glancing over at the referee. Again, the smiles. Every once in a while, he glanced up at my jabs with a smiling curiosity. I know he didn’t appreciate the science of the matter—he seemed perplexed. The arm he held high to fend off the jabs relaxed and lowered a bit. But he still kept making small circles with his other fist as if waiting for the moment.

The crowd became impatient. A few calls reached the center of the ring. “Come on, already.” “Mix it up.”

Eddie and I were evenly matched physically. We were both about the same height and build. Eddie had the lean, ropy muscles of a farm boy accustomed to doing chores every day
before and after school. But I had the advantage when it came to performing before crowds. By seventh grade, I had already spent years on baseball fields and basketball courts. I could feel the crowd watching, sense their expectations.

And when the moment was right, I scienced Eddie on the jaw and he went down.

There were no cheers—the crowd was as stunned as Eddie.

A moment later, the smile returned to Eddie’s face as he pushed himself off the ground with one hand, and waved to signal ‘no mas’ with the other. The fight was over.

The hundred or so spectators immediately began to disperse and head back to the school building. No one patted me on the back or congratulated me. It was as if the whole thing hadn’t been a fight so much as a magic act, and the audience was still perplexed about how the magician had pulled it off.

But one thing was clear: I was not the sentimental favorite. For most, my victory was synonymous with that of a teacher’s. Every kid who was ever frustrated in their attempts to diagram a sentence was now suddenly faced with the prospect that there might be real consequences in not being able to do so. It was not the kind of lesson that raised an adolescent’s spirits.

In my mind though, the fight was confirmation of the power of science. Any problem could be solved if one just exercised the self-discipline to search out the reasonable causes behind all the emotional effects.

Where the hell was that classroom? Time was running out! The feeling that I had no control over the situation—that I was forced to go with the flow even as I searched desperately for the place I was supposed to be—was uncanny. I had a body--it walked, carried a paper in
my hand, moved its head from side to. But my body didn’t seem like mine at all—my limbs were just an extension of my concern for that damn classroom.

I suppose if I had known that I was dreaming the hallway, the whole situation would not have affected me so dramatically. Had I know that in a few minutes—or half an hour, or however long it really took—I would wake in my own bed—safe and sound, but sweating and breathing as if I just wrestled with an ancient foe—I probably would have been able to put the whole situation in context better. Had I known I was dreaming, that hallway probably would not have been so memorable, so poignant, so deeply etched in the palimpsest of my brain. The hallway would have faded by now along with the 99.9 percent of experience that escapes notice in any one life.

But who can know that? Who can know that they are dreaming in the middle of a dream?

I know that proponents of lucid dreaming claim that they can. But that theory is based on dreams that recur to frighten the dreamer. That kind of knowledge depends on repetition to recognize the images as purely imaginary.

The dream of the hallway was a one-time event. It was singular and immediate—much like a child’s experience of the world. A child just takes life as it comes—each new moment is a miracle of terror and awe.

Part II

Dream or no dream—education can be confusing business. Was there really a door to
understanding?

As I walked down that hallway, I wasn’t sure. But if there was one, I was damn sure going to find it. I kept scanning from side to side, scouring the numbers above each door with my gaze as the crowd carried me along.

And then, at a certain click of time, I stopped scanning from side to side and looked down the hallway. Over the heads of the young people, I saw another wall—directly ahead—just like the ones on each side. The whole crowd was passing directly through that wall—one side disappearing into it and the other magically appearing out of it.

In eighth grade, my classmates succeeded in turning Mr. Hauser’s attention from the lesson at hand. It was a strategy so instinctual in my peers that it often worked insidiously well. I didn’t mind when they diverted a teacher like Mr. Mead into talking about his adventures in World War II. That was history class—a subject I didn’t consider all that relevant to the world at hand.

But Mr. Hauser taught algebra, a class that interested me. Math was the language of science—and it was important. I let my mind wander while I waited for Mr. Hauser to get back on track.

Very early on, I incorporated math into my daily activities. I loved to record and quantify almost everything I did. After fishing, I recorded the type and number of fish I caught along with the bait and water conditions. After a baseball game, I figured out my batting average for the day, the running total for the season, and my pitching statistics.

Math even became part of the interior chatter that constantly ran through my head during the day. Doing a task that was boring like mowing a lawn, I frequently estimated the area
completed, compared it to the total, then fractionalized it along the area yet to be done, and then converted the fractions to percentages. The habit never got boring. The denominators could always get bigger, the distinctions finer—no matter how many times I mowed the same lawn. I used the same strategy for car trips or strenuous acts like running a long race—what’s done? What’s yet to go? The quantifiability of time and space was a constant distraction for me.

Another especially important aspect of numbers were those that came with tests—and not just the ones the teacher handed back from daily assignments. I always anxiously awaited the results of standardized tests our class took, like the Iowa Test of Basic Skills. Just as numbers could give a clear significance to boring or hard tasks, the numbers on standardized tests said something beyond the small world that I occupied. My cumulative score was always in the 99th percentile and I sometimes wished the authorities took it out to a couple more decimal points for a more accurate assessment of my position in the world at large.

Even today, I think our cultural fascination with money has much to do with its intimate relationship to numbers. Money is readily quantifiable, understandable in terms of addition and subtraction, multiplication and division. It’s predictable in interest rates, can even bring risk under control through percentages. And at the higher end of imagination, derivatives take over and money goes beyond simple representation to become both the game and the wager. Numbers—when applied to money—magically coordinate a position in relation to all those otherwise ambiguous realms: a large number provides security against the uncertainty of the future, and a small one lends itself to more faith in providence.

I was probably daydreaming thoughts not unlike these when Mr. Hauser’s voice penetrated my reverie. His words were so nasally intoned it was like they were trying to take the most direct route possible from his brain—without having to wait for lungs to supply the breath
or lips to shape them. He adenoided, “And that’s why smart people commit suicide so often—geniuses just can’t understand why the people around them don’t see what they do.”

The girl in the desk in front of me turned and said, “Watch out, Wenger. That’s where you’re headed.”

The few others in the class laughed at her comment. I realized then that the teacher had probably been talking obliquely about me all along. I had no clue how he had arrived at his concluding sentence, but it was clear that at least some in the class had been paying enough attention to follow his line of reasoning.

I grinned and was flattered. It wasn’t as obvious as Mrs. Anderson’s paper waving, but it seemed to be a compliment, nonetheless. To think that I might be so smart—a genius—that I would commit suicide . . . what a joke!

I just wished I’d been paying enough attention to know how he’d set the punch line up—maybe I’d come up with a witty rejoinder. But that was unlikely. I wasn’t good at being funny—even when I was paying attention.

So I just grinned, a bit embarrassed that I didn’t understand jokes as well as I understood the day’s algebra lesson. And I was more than ready to get back to the real business of sines, cosines, and tangents.

_I stared at the wall directly ahead as the crowd slowly dragged me towards it. None of the young people ahead of me seemed worried that they were about to disappear into a wall. And on the faces of the young people coming towards me, there was not a sign that anything unusual had happened to them._

_Christ—young people! They take so much for granted. The whole bunch of them was_
passing from one side to the other of a concrete wall and not one betrayed a hint that anything unusual was happening.

All that concern I’d felt a moment earlier for finding the right door in time was gone. Why be worried about a classroom and its penny ante questions when that wall posed the biggest questions of all—where do we come from? Where do we go?

I hadn’t thought about heaven or hell since I was a kid. Both concepts scared the crap out of me—because they weren’t concepts at all. Heaven and hell were bodily states in which the molecules of my body would spread out like a storm cloud. Especially at night when there weren’t any distractions, I watched the cloud even as I knew I was the cloud—expanding, growing taller and wider—the cloud and I coming together as one. I could feel the immanence of atmospheric possibility—of wind that could blow the world and people apart without a trace of regret, of rain that gave life and hail that took it and only few degrees of difference separated the two.

Of course, as an old dude, you’d rather not give in to childish fears. But then, there’s usually quite a bit of space between what you’d rather and what actually is—and especially in a dream, that space can become a universe in itself.

All my cares for doing things properly were made ridiculous by that wall.

It was suddenly a good thing that crowd pressed so close—the multitude of heedless bodies propped me up and kept me moving toward a fate I could not understand at all.

On the last day of my freshman year, a classmate and I walked uptown for sodas. Classes were over but it would still be an hour or two until the buses left to take us back—me to Plymouth and Bruce to his farm just outside of Manly. Although we were from different towns,
our families had attended the same Lutheran church since either of us could remember.

Walking through the park on Main Street, the oaks were leafed out, the grass was thick and green, and the sun shone like a warm promise of freedom. We talked about our plans for the summer as we approached the memorial in the center of the park. The war memorial was a massive, concrete affair—the base ten feet in diameter with drinking fountains embedded on either side. On top, was a cannon—or maybe a soldier holding a flag—I’m don’t recall exactly which. But I do remember that as we got close, another classmate jumped up from behind the monument where he’d been hiding.

“You can leave, Bruce,” Dale said. “I got no beef with you.” Dale grinned like a guy who’d just been handed a long-awaited present.

I wasn’t surprised when my friend immediately turned and started walking back towards the school. I didn’t even give Bruce a look—my eyes remained locked on Dale’s as his were on mine.

It’s only the perspective of years that makes me consider loyalty a possibility in that situation. Besides going to the same Sunday school for years, Bruce and I had recently been confirmed as adult members of the congregation. But church was one of those institutions of obligation—loyalty as we conceived it was more a matter of choice than duty. In our high school, loyalty had more to do with sports participation than anything else. Bruce was a wrestler, I was a basketball player, and Dale was a fighter.

And besides, this fight was destined to happen. Its start had already taken place so many times in both Dale’s imagination and mine that its beginning now was like a rerun—the opening scenes of an old movie. Bruce wasn’t part of the script and all three of us knew it.
Dale and his brothers had moved to a farm a few miles south of Plymouth near the end of our seventh grade year. One morning, they just showed up on the bus. New kids didn’t show up very often in our area—in farm country, people tended to stay in place. With only a few exceptions, my classmates in first grade were the same ones I graduated with twelve years later. So it was difficult to tell at first if the Berding boys’ difference from the rest of us was just the effect of being new, or if there was something else at work. But that they were different was apparent from the start.

That first day, the three brothers sat in a line on the bus seat, as rigidly as totems. Their sharp features were pinched—like some giant forefinger and thumb were applying pressure to the temples of each head—into stern, wary expressions. They all wore their hair in the same odd style. At a time when most of us were trying to avoid a haircut as long as we could, they wore theirs short—combed up on the sides into a little curl at the top. Later, I’d recognize the style as that of James Dean, a movie star from our parent’s generation.

But as that first appearance stretched into days and months and years, as the snapshot became a video and then a movie, other differences took shape. One of biggest was that the three Berding brothers did not like school at all.

All of them—Dale, Duwayne a couple years older, and Darrell a couple younger—were said to be dumb as a line of fence posts. They sat at their desks like barbed wire was stapled into their sides keeping them there. It wasn’t newness, but something else that made them such blockheads. They didn’t cut up in class—they just refused to participate at all. When it came to grades, the D’s of their names was an act of hopeless beneficence on the part of teachers who collectively recognized that there was no point in trying to educate the brothers. Each teacher just gave a Berding boy the grade to get them out of their classroom and keep them moving
towards the end of their time in school. That end came at fifteen, the age when a kid could drop out without attracting the attention of the law.

One day, a month or so after the Berdings arrived, Dale rode the bus alone. Without his brothers around that day, he was a completely different person. The hardness was gone and he looked sad. If I was to assign a word from my vocabulary now, it would be “forlorn,” or maybe “bereft.” I took a seat beside him and tried to start up a conversation. How’s it going? Where are you from?

He looked at me once, with such a strange look of incomprehension that I was shaken. Didn’t he understand English? I made a couple more attempts to speak to him, but then Dale ignored me altogether and just stared out the window.

Whatever his sadness was that day, I wasn’t one who could penetrate it.

A couple years later, though, Dale began to return the favor of starting up conversations. We didn’t often ride the same bus—as a farm kid, he took a different one in the morning. Most afternoons, I had some sort of sports practice after school—football in fall, basketball in winter, baseball in spring. But on those rare occasions when I didn’t have practice—and Dale had actually attended—at some point in the ride, he’d appropriate the seat behind me.

“You wanna fight me, Wenger?” Leaning over the seat back, he always spoke the words in a smiling, conversational tone.

“Why would I want to fight you?” I asked that first time.

But he didn’t answer my question, just said, “Come on. I hear you took care of Eddy.” Dale hadn’t yet moved to the area when that fight occurred, but it was obvious he’d done his research. I studied his smiling face next to mine as he leaned close—as far as I could tell, he looked like he was just asking me to play catch or something. When I didn’t immediately reply,
he repeated, “Come o-o-n. You might win, you never know until you take a chance.”

“I don’t want to fight you, Dale,” I said in the reasoned tone that I used in class to voice an opinion.

Dale looked at me for a moment, then seemed to accept the judgment without changing his friendly expression and went back to a seat beside his brothers.

Real intimidation is a very subtle art when practiced by a master. It’s a smile in the hallway changing classes, eyes that find yours across a crowded assembly room. It’s a presence that hides in a crowd and only reveals itself in flashes of malicious intent. It is knowing how to manipulate another so that he or she feels isolated and threatened, even in the most casual of circumstances.

Of course, to be a good intimidator, one has to have an intimate knowledge of how fear and isolation work from a first person point of view. I had no idea then—nor do I now—how Dale came by his understanding. But that he was a wizard of the dark art, I have no doubt.

When Dale moved away from the monument and took his stance in an open space between the trees, I followed. I removed my glasses and dropped them at the base of an oak—I remember being a little proud of the gesture for its casualness and foresight. I walked to a position opposite Dale, and began my science of dance and jab.

When Dale first moved to the area, he was about my size. But in the interim, he’d undergone a growth spurt. He had me now by a few inches, but his real advantage lay in the composition of those inches. His long arms had filled out with muscle and his torso had thickened in the same way. Intimidation might not always be a matter of size, but it certainly helps in most instances.
He flinched at my first jab, but quickly had them measured like an experienced fighter. And then he began his own assault. It didn’t take long.

The next thing I knew, I was on my knees and watching a fist approach in slow motion. On one finger—not the ring finger, but the middle one—was huge, silver band with a red stone set in its center. I’d always considered jewelry an affectation on a guy. But at that moment, I recognized that this particular piece was not just ornamental—it had a purpose.

Then there was darkness—and out of that darkness exploded a brilliant flash of light.

I remember—very clearly—being amused by the phenomenal nature of that flash of light. Even as it happened, it stuck that it was exactly like what happened on a Saturday morning cartoon. Whenever an animated character fell off a building or a building fell on him, the next few frames shaped a pin point of light beginning the center of a dark screen, then rapidly expanding outward in jagged, star shaped edges until the whole field was full of brilliant, white light. The clarity of that observation—and the bemused irony involved—carried me through the rest of the fight.

I just watched the rest of the fight, almost as I would have if I’d been sitting in front of television. This was a performance that somebody else was acting out—my presence with its sensations and emotions didn’t matter for squat. It was just another dumb, comic show.

When the blows stopped and my head cleared enough, I got up off my knees. I calmly walked past Dale as if he wasn’t there. I went to the tree where I’d dropped my glasses at the start of the fight—and again was a little proud of my self-possession that I could remember practical details like that.

Walking back towards school, I quickly noticed that I was bleeding. I put a hand to my face and, when I brought it away, it was filled with a sweet-smelling, gooey mass. I shook my
hand a couple times to get rid of as much as possible, then pressed the hand against the cut below one eye. But that didn’t do much to stem the flow.

Then, I began a very calm, reasoned interior debate—the overriding consideration of which was to cause as little fuss as possible when I arrived back at the school building. The hand wasn’t a very effective bandage. I wasn’t carrying a handkerchief and the only other option appeared to be taking off my tee-shirt and using it.

Which would cause more notice, I asked myself—blood or nakedness?

As I passed the town library, a block and a half from the school building, I finally decided that blood was worse. I slipped the tee-shirt off as I walked, balled it up and pressed it to one side of my face.

But all my calm reasoning wasn’t going to eliminate the fuss.

The next thing I knew—or remember—is sitting in the gym teacher’s office. I don’t remember how I got there, but a fuss was definitely going on around me. The small room was filled with teachers—my father among them. As I sat on a table in the center of the room, I noticed the high school principal was there, too. And for some inexplicable reason, so was the minister of our church, Pastor Jenkins. Every so often, a crowd of gawking students had to be shooed from the open door.

Let me just interrupt the narrative at this point to reinforce its authenticity. I don’t think the fact that I forgot exactly how I got to that crowded office necessarily casts doubts on what I do remember. For me, like most people, memory is a series of vignettes rather than a continuous reel recording everything that happens in a life. There are a few odd balls with the type of memory which they can enter at any point in their past. Given a date and time, they can splice
into the reel and watch again the scene as it unfolds to the mind’s eye—they can inventory the
details of sight and sound that passed beneath conscious awareness the first time around. But for
most of us, the normal narrative of our past is a reconstruction that isn’t quite so seamless.

The fact that such reconstructions are necessary often cast doubts on the veracity of what
is recalled. Especially in cases of memory that aren’t quite so normal like those involving
trauma, psychologists and prosecutors are quick to note the unreliability of eye-witness
testimony—especially when the eye witness testimony comes from the victim. There are many,
many documented cases of people falsely accused by such memories.

But in my own case—at least when it comes down to a matter of blood and bone—those
out-of-the-normal type events are often experienced with a clarity that doesn’t fade in memory.
When the shit hits the fan for me, I’ve noticed that most of the crap flies into the faces of those
nearby. They are the ones revolted by the smell, who get emotional at the sights, who react in
unpredictable ways. But for me, I am more or less the fan. Whatever it is that powers the
whirling blades of that fan—shock, adrenaline—has the effect of blowing away all that is
superfluous and focusing consciousness in a way that penetrates down to the brass tacks holding
the moment and the world together.

And so I’m pretty sure that—as far as the brass tacks go—I sat on the table in the phys.
ed. teacher’s office as cool as a machine, my mind a blur of clarity. Outside the one window, a
line of yellow school buses waited for the students to board for the last time that year. Nobody
outside seemed too anxious to leave, though. They sat on the lawn in pairs, or stood in groups on
the sidewalk, engaged in casual conversation. Every once in a while, the collective heads of a
group would turns towards the office window and I knew that, at least in that moment, I was the
topic of conversation.

Then a voice at the door informed the group inside that Dale and his brothers were cruising the street in front of the school. The principal left to tell them to leave. Mr. Rosen was a big man in his sixties whose face was like a medieval oil painting—the gray eyes and downturned mouth fixed in an expression so eternally baleful, it was enough to keep even the teachers in line. Mr. Rosen expected the worst and was seldom surprised. The only thing scarier was when he tried to smile, as he had at me sitting on the table—it was a sign that situation was not as it should be.

When he left, our minister grabbed at the stole around his neck. “I feel like taking this thing off and teaching those hooligans a lesson,” he said. “This is the kind of thing that makes me so mad-” Pastor Jenkins pulled at his loose vestment a couple times with his right hand to emphasize the point that it was choking him. His left arm hung at his side as it always did—the result of polio at some point in his life.

“People might not expect this from me, but I used to box in the navy. I’d give those . . . those . . .” He couldn’t come up with the right word so he just went on, “a fight they wouldn’t believe.”

Pastor Jenkins was a man as habitually animated as Mr. Rosen was not. But try as I might, I not only couldn’t believe the fight he would give Dale, I couldn’t even imagine it. And I did try. As I sat on the table, I got as far as the deck of a large ship and our minister as a young man dressed in a white sailor suit. But the rest wouldn’t come.

Could he have really done a better job at fighting Dale than I had? Maybe the reason I couldn’t imagine it was because it would have opened a door to emotions I wasn’t ready to feel—shame and humiliation were inherent in the situation.
But maybe not. The attitude of bemused irony that accompanied the brilliant white light had been developing for a few years. Maybe it just took the shock of a blow hard enough to crystallize it—to create a personality that I could wear in public like a suit of armor.

Whatever the case, the attitude served me well. The whole situation was just comic, one ridiculous scene following another without any other purpose than generating a laugh.

In a flash—without pain, without having to put up with boring details—I was lying on a table in one of Doc McAllister’s examining rooms. His hands filled one side on my field of vision as he went about the business of stitching up the cut. He carried out the task with his characteristic gruff, laconic efficiency.

At the far periphery, I saw my father pacing. He was angry, and that was also characteristic for him. Dad had a reputation as a strict disciplinarian in his history and civics classroom. Older boys would relate—with a sort of awe—stories of my father’s outbursts to cut-ups who gave him lip. Even girls would twitter when they described how he’d throw a piece of chalk at a kid who wasn’t paying attention.

If Mr. Rosen’s smile had shaken me a little, Doc McAllister’s gruffness and Dad’s anger implied that everything was progressing as usual.

But then my father said, “It’s my fault. It was me that shithead was after.” The words came out as they always did when my father was angry—his face clenched so tight he had to spit them out. I don’t know if Dad ever disciplined Dale in a memorable manner, but my father was definitely one of the teachers who felt that the torsos of all three brothers should be buried in dirt, and the rest of them left exposed to the elements in a lonely place where meadowlarks could shit on their hard heads.

Suddenly, the detachment I’d felt ever since Dale popped up from behind the monument
was gone. “No,” I spoke from beneath Doc McAllister’s hands. “It was my fight.”

The tone of conviction in the words surprised even me. For just that instant, there was no irony at all—bemused or otherwise—in my mood.

I shuffled with the crowd towards the dead end wall. Not one of the young people gave any sign that it was strange to walk into—or out of—a solid concrete wall. Why is it that some people pass through experience as if it didn’t occur at all, and another gets shredded like so much cheese? I had just wanted a simple education, but what I was about to get looked to be a lot more like an accident than a rational matter of disciplined study.

As a young man in my twenties, I was involved in a series of accidents. While snorkeling in Florida Keys, I was run over by a speed boat. A year and a half later, I broke my neck in a car accident. A couple years after that in California, I was riding in the bucket of a cherry picker when the operator dumped the rig—two co-workers and I fell through a twenty foot radius down to the concrete slab. Over that five year stretch, I spent months in one hospital or another and a year recovering from various injuries.

People are often curious about those experiences—and I think much of that curiosity has to with our human fascination with death. We wonder about the light at the end of the tunnel, and whether that light can illuminate the darkness that surrounds the mysteries of life like chance or luck or why things happen as they do. In extreme moments, we wonder if there’s anybody out there beneath that light at the end of the tunnel—occupying the darkness with a comforting presence.

At least from my first person perspective, those near-death experiences don’t say squat about what the ultimate matters might be in themselves. If I saw the light at the end of the tunnel,
I don’t remember it. Maybe I wasn’t close enough because I’m pretty sure I’d remember it if it appeared. While severe concussions do wipe out the details of time a few hours before and after, the timeless stuff comes through.

After the third accident—the cherry picker incident—I remember waking for a moment and opening my eyes on paramedics attending to one of the two young men laying alongside, unconscious. I was relieved to know that someone was taking care of matters and that I could go back to sleep—which I did as easily as a boy in his bed. A peaceful, dark moment after that, I woke to find myself laying on a gurney about to be wheeled into what I assumed to be an emergency room. A crying nurse stood over me, holding a telephone. She asked me if I could say a few words to my mother. “She’s upset,” the nurse said.

By the time of this particular accident, I was familiar with hospital settings. I understood that nurses didn’t cry without reason—and I also understood the nurse’s reason. I responded that I could. While she held the phone to my ear, I spoke to my mother in Iowa.

“Oh, Tim, not again,” I heard Mom say in a voice that trembled from the other side of the line.

“I know,” I responded. “It is getting kind of old.” I assured my mother as well as I could that I wasn’t really hurt. And as I spoke the words, I felt assurance myself—the words sounded mysteriously strong and resonant. Lying on the gurney, I heard my own voice as it was coming from some anonymous stranger trapped at the bottom of a deep, dark well—the real me was just another person gathered around the opening, marveling at the courage and resilience of that guy that was way down there, way below the surface of everyday life. And then I felt the sleepiness coming on again and I told my mother I had to go. I ended the conversation as I usually did:

“I’ll talk to you later.”
The nurse was still crying as she took the phone away. But there was a difference in the tone of her tears now. I was comforted by the gentle warmth of that sound and fell peacefully into an infant’s sleep.

And if there’s anything I know about death, it’s just that—no more, no less.

Whatever lay on the other side of that mysterious wall—the origin and the end of all those young people filling the hall—I wasn’t ready to see it. I didn’t know exactly what class I’d signed up for—but it certainly wasn’t this. The sense of impending doom was everywhere.

So I was a bit embarrassed when—just a few steps later—I noticed that the wall wasn’t the dead-end I’d taken it to be. Looking over the heads of those in front of me, I saw that the young students who had appeared to be walking straight into the wall were actually taking a right turn down another hallway that I hadn’t seen before. The dead end was really a “T”—the line of students coming towards me were entering from another passage on the left.

What an old fool I was! Getting myself in such a state of dread over nothing! Nothing! Christ, maybe I was too old to be going back to school.

As I got even closer to the wall, I saw that it wasn’t even the solid concrete expanse I’d thought it was—there actually was a door in it. Nobody was going in or out, but it was there nonetheless. And just as I was making the turn with the others to the next hallway, I saw the number posted above it.

For the first time, I struggled to escape the press of those around me. I pushed my way out of the flow towards the door. A moment later, I was free and stood beside the door as the crowd continued to pass by.

I took a moment to collect myself. It was good to stand on my own two feet, to be able to
breathe. Deliberately, I examined the number above the door again, and carefully compared it to the registration paper in my hand—a match! Finally! Another deep breath and I reached for the door—then opened it and gazed inside.

I suppose it’s not going to shock anybody reading this that what I saw inside didn’t match my expectations.

Instead of the classroom I anticipated—twenty or thirty chairs seated around a few tables—the space I saw was much larger. In the foreground, occupying an area about the size I had anticipated, was what appeared to be a darkened theatrical stage. It was filled with silhouettes of props and boxes, light standards and a podium. Beyond the unlit stage was an auditorium—the semicircular rows of seats rising dramatically to a height I couldn’t see from my position.

But while I couldn’t envision the full extent of the huge auditorium, what I could see indicated that the place was filling up. Students were walking down the aisles, then squeezing past already seated young people to take an open seat in one of the rows. I could almost hear the sounds of conversation, the rustle of people settling in reached me from across the expanse.

Looking carefully, I saw that the students were entering through doors on either side of the auditorium, about midway up. That was where I should be. I let the door close and re-entered the flow of students through the hallway that veered to the left, hoping that was the way to the right door.

A few days after my fight with Dale, our class had a picnic at Rock Falls to celebrate the end of the school year. It was a beautiful day—sunny but not too hot, the humidity just to the point that the air was soft without being soggy. The Shellrock River flowing through the park
was just right too—the roiling turmoil of spring run-off had passed and the sluggish, scummy condition of its late summer course was still a couple months away.

My condition wasn’t quite as good as the weather’s. The stitches were still in, but the bandage was off the cut—it was supposed to “get some air” now. The swelling in my eye had gone down enough that I could squint through it, but I had a shiner as big and dark as the sun was bright.

Even so, I hadn’t considered not showing up. The bemused irony from the flash of revelation was back. And again, it served me well.

A little more than half our class from the three towns and the farms had come. About thirty kids were spread out among picnic tables under the oaks, eating hot dogs and hamburgers. Some splashed in the river while quite a few played softball in the open space.

Watching the others play softball was difficult. I had the instinct of a dog when it came to balls. Bouncing balls, spinning balls, high flying balls—my eye could be drawn to any ball in motion, lock on it, at which point every cell in my body would begin to resonate in time to its movement. Maybe it comes from being so left handed—my brain is just naturally attuned to visual stimuli. Whatever the reason, my predilection for balls probably explains a good portion of my affinity for sports, since most involved balls of one sort or another—wrestling and track being the most notable exceptions in high school. And fighting, of course.

That weakness for balls and sports also had a nice side benefit—it saved me from the worst of what would have been my fate as a geek. The word “geek” is still used today, but fifty years ago it was a lot closer to its original meaning as a person who bit the heads of chickens at a circus. Reading texts books for fun, getting lost in abstraction of words for hours on end—that sort of idiosyncratic behavior in a kid inspired a more visceral reaction in peers back then.
The only other kid in our class to read as many books as I did was Leslie Ray—but he was much more obvious about it. When we changed classes, he carried five times as many books as anybody else. Les had limbs that were long and thin and he wasn’t all that coordinated, so at any point in the journey through a crowded hallway he could drop the whole stack. I have several memories of stopping to help him pick them up, and several more of just letting him do it himself. The extra texts always concerned history—he had an on-going fascination with the royal courts of Europe throughout his high school years.

In the classes we took together, Les and I often found ourselves sitting next to each other. According to the physics of social interaction, geeks do have a particular energy signature that even non-geeks—especially non-geeks—recognize. Bookish people often find themselves thrust together by some mysterious force that seems to decree, ‘you two oddballs belong together’.

But there’s also a paradox at work in that energy—the same force that determines your difference from others and draws you together, also repulses you when you get too close. I couldn’t for the life of me understand his fascination with kings and queens and aristocracy—and Les would just giggle and wave me away when I tried to explain a math problem to him. So while we were friendly enough with each other, we weren’t friends. Les didn’t participate in any of the activities that saved me from the lonely fate of a geek—he didn’t play a single sport, didn’t hunt or fish.

Les lived on a farm between Plymouth and Manly with his grandparents and spent summers with his mom in Chicago. In all the years we lived in such proximity to each other, I don’t remember seeing Leslie Ray once outside of a classroom—and that’s saying something because he was easy to spot. Les was the only black kid in our class—one of only three in the whole school system.
But that was just one more thing we didn’t have in common, and therefore didn’t talk about.

It was the right way! Almost immediately after re-entering the flow of students, I found myself approaching a large set of double doors with the line of young people. I don’t remember the stairs we must have climbed to get there, or all the other turns that must have been necessary to arrive at this position. But such is the fated way of a dream—and in that, it is often indistinguishable from memory.

Everybody in line was entering the auditorium. As I filed closer, I looked over the heads of the young people into the seating area. The place was filling up. I must have signed up for one of those large lectures that freshman are required to take—I truly was starting all over in my education.

But just as I about to pass through the door, I glanced up at the number. Immediately, I pushed my way out of the line. Deliberately, I examined the number and compared it to the one on the registration paper—they weren’t the same.

I looked through the door again. I could see the auditorium seats and, down below, the stage. This had to be the right place. And yet the numbers said otherwise.

It is a possibility—always open to human nature—to look back on important experiences we encounter as one life among others and locate a turning point. That turning point often involves a decision—a conscious choice. It’s a fork in the road and we’re forced to choose one path or the other. All subsequent action depends on that choice.
In the experience of my dream of education, that door was just such a turning point. Looking through it, I could see with my own eyes, could feel in my gut that this was the same classroom I had seen from the other door. This was the place I was supposed to be! And yet, for some reason, I chose not to enter.

Why?

It’s such a small word—“Why?” It shapes the start of a child’s relentless attitude of questioning—“Why is the sky blue?” “Why is there light in the day and not in the night?” “Why can’t I have a hot dog for breakfast?” “Why this?” “Why that?” It’s the interrogative that begins a series of queries which makes being a parent so tough. Just three letters long, but the damn thing might as well be spelled “TNT” for its destructive potential. Whether a guardian’s composure blows up or a system of government, the little question “why?” is always filled with danger.

So if asking the question “why?” has the potential to be so ridiculously destructive in any context, why ask “why?” of a dream? That would seem to be just begging for a total collapse of meaning.

The only answer I can make is that sometimes the question “why?” isn’t really a question at all—it’s a statement. “Why?” can be an axiom—the essential starting point for any understanding. “Why?” can be an acknowledgement that life isn’t—in its fundamental reaches—a reasonable process. And “why?” can also be an expression of hope that there is some explanation. In the end, “why?” is a prayer that already assumes the answer exists, a mantra one mutters as they venture forward in search of that right response.

I simply had to go where I had to go—I headed back to the door where the hallway
On that day in the park, I was feeling more like Les than usual. I was at loose ends of the ropes I normally swung on to navigate the jungle of adolescent society. Not only couldn’t I play ball, I couldn’t even engage my other dog-like instinct for water because I wasn’t supposed to get the cut wet. But not being able to do what I normally did had an odd effect on my peers. Whereas Les would have just been left alone to twiddle his thumbs or read a book under a tree (identical activities to most), classmates actually sought me out and spoke to me in ways that they hadn’t for a long time.

As I was walking back to a picnic table with a plate of hot dogs and chips, a friend from Plymouth found me and said quietly, “He got me last year.”

Mike had taken Eldon’s place as my best friend for a couple years. We’d ridden our bikes fishing, played on the same little league teams. His dad was a hunter and, when we were old enough to have shotguns of our own, had driven us to places where we could hunt pheasants. We’d even built and launched model rockets together.

But as we’d attended classes in Manly, we lost some of the closeness of our friendship. There, classes were routinely assigned according to test scores—Mike and I had different abilities in that respect. Also, he didn’t play as many sports as I. When we did play on the same team, those teams were larger and we had different roles—again assigned according to ability. Meritocracy was one of those cultural forces as omnipresent as gravity—but working in an opposite direction. If gravity held us both to earth equally and assured us that we were composed of the same stuff, there was always that other force to remind us that it just wasn’t
true.

Still, I was stunned when he said, “I spent two weeks in the house waiting for the bruises to heal.”

Had we really grown that far apart? We lived five blocks from each other—I hadn’t noticed his absence for two full weeks? And he didn’t tell me about it until now?

I didn’t have time to respond, though, because another classmate—a farm kid—who’d been listening in from behind broke into our conversation. “He and his brothers stopped me while I was walking along the road out by our place. They got out of their car and circled me—pushed me around between them like it was a game or something—then they threw me in the ditch. After that, they just drove off laughing.”

“They’re all assholes,” Mike said, chuckling. “Dale wasn’t so bad when he got here, but now that he’s gotten big it’s a problem.”

Again, I didn’t know how to respond. I hadn’t known Dale and his brothers were beating up other kids, too. The bemused irony that came from my comic vision that getting the shit kicked out of you could be viewed as a scene from a Saturday morning cartoon filled the awkwardness well, though. I just smiled, slowly shook my head, and resumed the walk towards a picnic table.

Mike and the farm kid followed along, carrying on a conversation of their own, going into more detail and comparing their experiences with the brothers. It was clear that both of them had been holding those details secret ever since their fights occurred—and it was equally obvious that the secret was one they wanted to rid themselves of.

There was that manner in Mike that I recognized from a few years earlier—the easy, goofy, joking manner that made him a fun fishing partner for hours. That it was directed toward
another now didn’t matter much. Peers hadn’t spoken like that around me lately—it was just
good to hear that personal, friendly tone at all.

I would hear the easy, confidential tone often that afternoon, though—and not just from
Mike or the farm kid who’d been bullied. Sitting at the picnic table, my shiner acted like a
beacon drawing others to the table. They were guys and girls I’d known in class since
kindergarten. I thought I knew them well—but now they began to talk of things outside the
classroom.

I was surprised to learn that there was another sports league beside the one sponsored by
the school system. Apparently, fights were arranged between tough guys from different towns.
The matches took place at night, in a parking lot or a field, with car headlights providing the
illumination. Nobody was so familiar with the league that they knew who to contact to arrange a
fight or when the next one was scheduled, but that it existed and that Dale was participating
appeared to be common knowledge—common to everybody but me, that is.

Of course, that probably wasn’t true. There were probably one or two in the group that
were hearing about this for the first time, too. Still, most seemed to have heard rumors or hints
of it; a few had heard more complete versions, but those stories were second and third hand. But
as the hints and rumors wove together that day around the picnic table, a narrative took shape
which nobody doubted.

It was hard to tell if Dale was a villain or a hero in that larger narrative. What he did to
my friend Mike and the farm kid was definitely wrong—just a big bully beating up on innocent
boys who were just minding their own business. But as my classmates came out of the closet
with their suspicions—as the rumors were repeated and those nighttime fights were recreated—
the “just-ness” of it all wasn’t so clear. There was an excitement in my classmate’s voices as
they spoke of it.

At least in imagination, the fights were clearly a spectacle that everyone wanted to see. For those of us who sat around the picnic table, hearing the thud of bat on ball from one direction and the squeals of a girl being doused with cold river water from another, our attention was drawn to a place altogether different.

As the story developed in our collective imagination—as the dark parking lot appeared and the cars arrived, as the crowd of silhouettes assembled in the headlights—it didn’t matter that the whole scene was painted in the shades of our own suspicions and fears. It was no less real—no less true—for that. Maybe more so. Fear and suspicion are dark colors, but they paint a dramatic picture.

By the time that Dale arrived in that scene, those night fights were every bit as tangible as the hot dogs and hamburgers on the plates before us.

Even though he’d beaten up half of the boys present around the table, as we watched Dale in our collective imagination square off against another just like himself, the normal rules of right and wrong didn’t seem to apply. He wasn’t the bully—he wasn’t even the forlorn kid riding the bus alone—the logic of our individual emotions didn’t hold for this dramatic scene. Dale’s presence in the imaginary headlights took on an aspect that was completely different from the dumb-as-a-fence-post one he had in school. In the prospect before us, he had coalesced into a mythical figure—and was much closer to heroism than any of us watching.

If winning the fight against Eddy had alienated me from my classmates, losing the one with Dale had the opposite effect. My peers turned into friends again, and I felt privileged to be in their company that day. They allowed me to share in the lives that they actually lived, in those
personal visions which are so tenuous at that age—so given to fear and doubt. If my test scores intimidated them, my black eye was a badge that allowed me to re-enter the spaciousness of their confidence. They gave voice to the doubts they normally hid from me—and others as well. Then, they wove those doubts into a story that we could all watch together.

It’s odd to look back on that time and realize that much of the good fortune I felt in the experience was probably due to the fact that I was still concussed enough—my normal pattern of thoughts and behavior so scrambled—that I had no choice but to shut up and listen.

As soon as I made the decision to go back to the first door, there I was in front of it. Dream time—whatever the editor is, he does a bang-up job of cutting out the unnecessary details. Again, there was no going up or down stairs between the two doors, no corners to negotiate as I made my way back to the door where the hallway divided.

I rechecked the number just once to verify that it still matched the registration paper—then opened the door and entered.

When the door closed behind me, I discovered that the space was much darker than it was when I was just looking in. Also, the lighted area beyond the backstage area was much further away than it had originally appeared. I could no longer see the young students taking seats in the huge amphitheater. In fact, I couldn’t even see the huge amphitheater. Gazing in that direction, I could only make out a dark horizon where there might—might—be a faint hint of dawn.

I took a step and, immediately, my foot encountered something hard and I tripped. I fell forward—but not far. The arms I’d flung forward to brace myself quickly fell on the sides of the object that had blocked my step. Feeling around the smooth, hard surface, I recognized the
object as a box.

Slowly, I worked my foot along the side of it until I found the edge. But when I tried to take a step into the open space beyond, I tripped again. Feeling around, I discovered another box only a few inches away.

Not only was the backstage area dark, but it was filled with unforeseen—and unseeable—obstacles.

Still, I didn’t even consider turning around and going back to the door I’d just entered. The reason I didn’t consider it certainly wasn’t because I knew this was a dream—that the door had probably vanished as completely as if it was never there.

It was just that the darkness, the obstacles, feeling my way with barely a clue about what direction I was headed—it all seemed perfectly natural.

Sometimes, I wish I could have stayed concussed—I was a lot more personable when I didn’t know what I was doing.

But kids—just like adults—want to have some idea of how to act in the world. To do that, a kid needs to know what the world is in itself. He wants to see how far it goes; she wants to feel what it contains; they want to understand of what it’s made and how it works. They need/want/desire to know what’s in front of them so can they move confidently and in freedom.

The confidence to converse freely, to understand what is truly out there—that can’t just be an ideal to hold while you’re concussed.

Later in the summer following my fight with Dale, our family moved from Plymouth back to Manly. It was the fulfillment of the American Dream for our parents—to own their own
house. We left the old, rented parsonage for a modern rancher. The modular was towed in on two semi’s, the two halves slid into place on the concrete foundation and bolted together, and—voila!—dream becomes reality.

The move was just seven miles—seven frequently traveled miles. The trip took just one turn through the corn fields and didn’t involve a change in school or church. But the move informed me how even slight changes can have dramatic effects.

One of the biggest changes was that I no longer had ready access to the creek or river for fishing. I never realized how much time I spent or how important those hours had become to me until I could no longer hop on my bike and be there almost instantly. It was weird—the very same creek flowed through Manly and just a few hundred yards from our new house. But while the same water was habitat to a wide variety fish downstream in Plymouth, this far removed from its confluence with the Shellrock River, the creek was so shallow that it could only support a few minnows through the hard winters.

Water—it was endlessly fascinating for me. I spent hours, days, months, years walking along its edge, examining the flow for the size of its ripples and the shape of a backflow around a deadfall or rock, hypothesizing the location of a bass. The surface never failed to glimmer with reflections—sky and tree—or shimmer prisms of rainbow. And always, water carried with it the understanding that, just below the surface, was another world entirely. That world was darker, cooler, more fluid—a world where all life floated weightlessly, moved like shadows appearing and disappearing with ghostly speed.

In Manly, the water still flowed through cow pastures on the edge of town, but the pastures had no trees and the water no depth—the setting for an eternal mystery was gone.

However, a few years earlier one of the pastures had been converted into a nine hole golf
course. The trees were still saplings and the cows occasionally crossed the fence nostalgically to reclaim their old stomping grounds—leaving deep hoof prints in the fairways and greens along with a few smelly pies as signs of protest—but there was something about that land the proved an apt environment to work out my sense of dislocation. It was probably my longing for water that first drew me there, but my scientific ambition had much to do with my staying.

Golf was a game composed of mathematics—from yardages and trajectories to implements named by number to the relationship of angles formed by a body engaged in the act. A golf swing could be endlessly analyzed, broken down into take away, position at the top, downswing, impact, follow through—and each of those broken down into intermediate parts—and every one of those positions studied, scrutinized, examined in photographs and mirrors.

One of golf’s other aspects, though—the solitary nature of its diligent practice—probably accounted for much of its appeal to me that summer. Nobody tried to tag, guard, or tackle a guy as he took his stance. And once he’d let it fly, there was no need for another to catch the ball or throw it back. The few farmers and townsmen who played the course didn’t take the game seriously, so I had the practice range to myself. I hit the balls I recovered from the pond and the creek back and forth across the strip of land to one side of the nine holes.

On occasion, I’d venture onto the course itself, but mostly I just practiced, hour after hour. Squeegeeing the early morning dew with my foot to clear an area on the practice tee, changing one sweaty golf glove after another in the muggy heat of afternoon, searching for the white specks in the fading evening light—whenever I could work it in to my schedule with the high school baseball team and a part time job at Tom’s Damaged and Unclaimed Freight, I was there—practicing.

After the move to Manly, I didn’t recreate the laboratory that had occupied my childhood
bedroom. I no longer launched mice in the nose cones of model rockets or heated up flasks and beakers to conduct experiments with the chemistry set. I still glanced through the college texts as I had done since sixth grade—and my favorite was still a thick chemistry tome that detailed the workings of atoms and molecules coming together in circles and chains.

I still planned my future career in chemistry, but I was beginning to recognize that my burning desire to take over Tom Swift’s position as a boy genius, flying around the world from problem to problem and laboratory to laboratory, saving the world with a succession of new inventions, was probably just a little unrealistic. I would rely on my school classes to provide direction in the field.

All in all, the move from Plymouth to Manly was the end of childhood and the beginning of—if not adulthood—something else.

*The darkness was complete as only the darkness of a dream can be.* I crawled over one invisible crate after another, feeling my way towards a light I could no longer see. *This couldn’t be right.*

*If the road to higher education was supposed to lead to an increase in human dignity, this wasn’t it.* I felt ashamed, as lost as a child.

*But I kept moving, crawling through the jumble of invisible crates, simply because it was the only thing I could do—I had no choice.* I’d used up all my capacity for decision making when I chose to enter that one, particular door.

The year of my fight with Dale—the year that childhood ended—was 1970. But I still had to be home at 5:30 for supper. That meant that I usually watched at least some portion of the
five o’clock news. The images that took shape on the TV were those of a dream.

Manly was a sleepy town—almost always quiet. Beyond the town limits, miles and miles of corn stretched like a blanket to the horizon. Iowa itself was bordered on all sides by states growing the same crop. The fields were green in the summer, white in the winter. But for all intents and purposes, the land could have been as blue as an ocean—that other great insulator against encroachment by aggressive forces. When it came to the violence and dissent ravaging the mainland, Iowa was as silent as an island.

I definitely planned to get off the island but, from what I saw on TV, it looked like the world I wanted to enter was coming apart.

Formations of B-52’s dropping bombs in Cambodia, helicopters firing rockets and machine guns, jungle from every angle, bloody bandages on a leg, an arm hanging over the side of a stretcher, lumpy body bags—the Vietnam War was still going strong. And so were the peace marches—different images, but they often ended with the same soundtrack of gunfire. At the end of each news cast, numbers quantifying a body count appeared on the screen. I couldn’t help but relate those numbers to the score of a game—we were always winning by a factor of ten. But in this case, the numbers didn’t seem to matter.

City after city had gone up in the flames of a race riot in the late sixties—from Detroit and Newark to the east, Kansas City to the south, Los Angeles to the west. It appeared that a ring of fire surrounded Iowa—cars and buildings burning in the night, and shadowy anthropomorphic images running. The civil rights protests of the 60’s hadn’t slowed down at all in 1970.

The banners were just as big, the crowds just as large supporting the women’s movement.

And nowhere was the nation’s internal violence more pronounced than on college
camps. There, signs protesting all three fronts—war, race, sex—often appeared in the same
demonstration. “It’s all connected,” the young people of Students for a Democratic Society
chanted. In 1970, young people were shot and killed at both Kent and Jackson State within a
couple weeks of each other.

Walter Cronkite’s voice—the same one that so enthusiastically described the space
launches—now sometimes cracked when he said, “And that’s the way it is.”

I was a smart kid, but how was I to interpret those nightmarish images? I was good at
answering questions in school—I was getting a reputation for it. If those images posed a
question, it was “who are we?”

I was sure who “I” was—a budding scientist—but how was I to answer the question of
“we” with science?

_The logic of a dream is difficult to understand—especially when there’s nothing to see._
_Crawling through the darkness like an insect, I could have been in a closet for all I knew. If
anybody had turned on the lights to see an old man in the position I was, they would have
thought “Alzheimer’s”—“dementia”—“Parkinson’s”—“drunk”._

_But they would have been wrong! I simply wanted an education._

_And if I had to humble myself to the point of being a goddamn insect, I was damn well
going to do it._

If I had trouble interpreting those dream images of 1970, I wasn’t the only one. The
country had elected Richard Nixon—a law and order candidate—in ’68 to rectify the situation.
But that was like putting a different type of snap-top lid on a bottle filled with nitroglycerin and
hoping to contain the explosion that way—a plastic president wasn’t the solution. The fluid, social forces that had acted like a firebomb in every place that wasn’t Iowa had been mixing and quantifying for decades.

For a teenage white boy in Iowa in 1970—at least, one like me with a peculiar predilection for ideas—there appeared to be two different maps of the United States. One map didn’t change—Nebraska never swapped places with Illinois, the Mississippi never emptied into the Arctic Ocean, and Highway 9 didn’t suddenly pass through Mason City. For that map of space, the coordinates were clear—east was east and west and west, and never the twain would meet to get all tangled up like a backlashed fishing line. Nor did the coordinates ever change—a half inch always represented ten miles and didn’t one day suddenly mean ten light years. It was the map that people in Iowa had in the back of their mind when they said, “The earth shall abideth forever.”

But for a kid whose eyes were set on the future as mine were, there was another kind of map of the country—that was a map of time rather than space. That map was nothing like the other. Change occurred all over on that map. Slow and fast, incrementally and dramatically—it was a map where the coordinates were change.

Of course, there were many problems with the maps of time—among the more fundamental ones: there were an infinite number of them, they were invisible, and no human being could actually read them. On the plus side, though, the maps charted very important entities: truth, fairness, knowledge, identity, power—and you didn’t have to fold them up when you were done studying them.

In short, anything that really mattered could only be mapped in time—but only time itself could interpret it.
When I was a teen in Iowa, on the cusp of becoming an adult, the map of time which mattered most to me charted the path of education.

On a map of time, education was always a wilderness—forests of pencils and plains of paper, mountains of books and rivers of ink—and all the other features in a landscape of the mind. Teachers were guides, leading students along the winding paths of knowledge, pointing out the landmarks, the signs, the hazards to be avoided. The journey took years. Memorization was always key to navigating the forest and plains—the signs along the way were often hidden behind assumptions. And when the group came to a chasm of paradox—a student had to know where to find the axiomatic bridge. If all went well, a few hardy souls made it to the mountain top on which an ivory tower had been constructed. There they shouted up to the scholar in the clouds, and he leaned out a window and called down to them, “Good job.” Then the group headed back to the starting point where the students became teachers and teachers fell off the map.

But in 1970, the number of students going to college had increased dramatically—the baby boomers had boomed themselves—and the teachers were having trouble keeping all those kids in line on the traditional paths. The students began running amok through the wilderness. They didn’t give a damn about assumptions or axioms, or even the ivory towers. They just wanted to find a nice creek, get naked, and listen to music.

Which was just as well—the towers were falling anyway.

On the map of time, the foundations had been weathering as they always were—as they had been even as they were created. The wind of desire was always blowing a rain of discontent into the cracks of justice where it was constantly freezing and thawing in and out of words like democracy and freedom—those words forever cracking the letter of the law of which the towers
were built.

So when the bombs falling over Cambodia started landing in Harvard and Princeton, Stanford and Berkley, even Iowa City (not so much in Ames, however), the ivory towers toppled. All the great edifices of philosophy and history and law—and any other structure in a hierarchy of two stories or more that had been designed on the principle that man controlled his destiny through reason—fell even as they were falling like big piñatas among long-haired students dancing through smoke and dust.

But on the map of time, the drama of the moment was not so dramatic—for decades, other buildings had been taking shape on campuses across the nation even as the towers of the humanities constantly fell. When the rebellion of the 60’s was over and the dust of collapse cleared, the sleek, low-slung buildings of science and technology were unaffected. The research facilities, the laboratories, the classrooms cranking out engineers and technicians—those carried on as they’d done for years, based as they were on the notion that while the human heart might be too tough a nut to crack—not so, the atom.

The signs had been there on the map of time all along—big, threatening signs like The Bomb and small, intricate ones like an integrated circuit. And when the insidious signs of technology invaded every household—as they did in the form of Pringles Potato Chips—the reign of science was established. Those potato chips in a can were a miracle—every one uniformly perfect in size and shape, an aerodynamic wave that traced a line gracefully flowing as a ballet dancer’s arm, yet designed with the structural integrity of a shovel.

Pringles Potato Chips were a sign of the times just like Jimi Hendrix was. The guitarist was humanity falling, a tower that had been falling since the day he was born, who fell throughout his life until he fell forever. But Pringles stayed perfect. Consumed by the millions,
they kept popping up on shelves everywhere—irrefutable proof that if a student wanted knowledge that endured, he should study the potato chip in a can.

The map of time had been interpreting the education system all along. The curriculums were already in place in 1970 which emphasized the process of potato chips over the humanities.

And even the way that those science courses were taught was different. All those kids running amok through the educational wilderness had taught the teachers a lesson. There was no way to herd that rabble towards an ivory tower—the best a teacher could do was let them go, allow them to seek their own path through the wilderness. The education system recognized that children were individuals just as much as their parents. Students had more choices about the classes they took—and many of those classes were taught in a way that allowed them to progress at their own pace.

The “Me Decade” of the ‘70’s had begun in the schools, where the struggle was on to educate a student into a future he or she—never mind the world—could live with.

It was Babel all over again, with one exception: if a kid spoke the strange tongue of math, he needed to be encouraged towards those fields where he could run as fast as he wanted.

That pedagogy had reached even into the heart of the country by 1970. As I entered my sophomore year in high school, I didn’t have to break down any doors to get into the classes I wanted or go as fast as I pleased. It seemed as if the doors opened magically when they saw me coming. Chemistry, physics, all the flavors of math—they were available and in a new, modular format that allowed for individual study. I took to my books like a duck to water.

And if those nightmare images of 60’s were still playing in the nation’s imagination in 1970, most of the time I could barely see them through a headful of equations.
Wherever that darkness came from in the dream, eventually it faded. The backstage area again held a little glow and I could make out the silhouettes of light standards and speakers again. I could distinguish the boxes laying around, too—and even a path through the jumble of crates.

It wasn’t a big path, but at least it allowed me to glance up from time to time to see where I was going. In one of those glances ahead, I noticed another figure. But this one wasn’t a silhouette in the dark, nor was it simply an inanimate object—a man stood beneath a cone of light.

My first impression of the man was that he was one of the backstage workers testing a spotlight. As he stood in the illuminated area, he appeared to be giving directions to an unseen worker behind the lights—gesturing while saying something I couldn’t hear. The highlighted worker took no notice of the assembled students—which I assumed were still there. The house lights in the auditorium—filled with young people—remained as dimmed as if curtain of dream darkness had been suspended behind the spotlighted worker.

I continued to work my way towards the front of the stage. Although I certainly didn’t want to go near the spotlight—I just wanted to take my seat in the auditorium as quietly and unobtrusively as possible—the narrow path through the crates forced me in that direction. As I neared the man in the spotlight, I saw that he wasn’t talking to another person—he was practicing a monologue.

The man was an actor. His body movements and gestures were dramatic, theatrical, well-practiced. He often raised his head and spoke his words to the ceiling like one of Shakespeare’s tragic assholes beseeching the heavens.
But although his lips were moving, I could hear no words. In fact, the whole place was preternaturally still . . .

It certainly didn’t look like he was just miming speech. His chest heaved with the effort—his eyes registered as clearly as the muscles around his mouth his intention to make an impact with the words. He obviously took great pride in shaping those words—and yet—the whole place was fixed in a weird(expectant quiet.

I studied hard in the classroom, and still played on the sports teams in high school. In Iowa, ideals of the Enlightenment still shaped notions of a perfect student—one fit in both mind and body. I ran cross-country in fall—but mostly to get in shape for the basketball season in winter. My growing obsession with golf came in the spring and baseball filled the first month and a half of summer vacation. I still measured success in sports by statistics—points per game in basketball, strike outs per inning in baseball. By those measures, I was fairly successful as an athlete—even made a few All Cornbowl Conference Teams.

The only problem with the sports teams that I was on as a North Central Falcon was that we seldom won—in the parlance of the day, our teams “sucked.” Of course, that word never made it into the derisive cheers of our crowd as it did in other places—our rural sense of propriety didn’t allow for that. We were big on moral victories and many sincerely felt ‘it wasn’t whether a kid won or lost, but how he played the game’ that mattered—attitudes that were extremely convenient for my sense of self-worth as an athlete.

During both my junior and senior years as a pitcher on the baseball team, I averaged more than two strike outs per inning—a remarkable statistic when one reads it in a newspaper or
hears it at an awards ceremony. However, watching the actual process of those statistics in the making—while no less remarkable—certainly told a different kind of story.

Many of the guys playing on the team were farm boys just looking for an excuse to get off the tractor for awhile. They were strong enough, but never had time to practice—they never learned to anticipate a ground ball or coordinate the accuracy required by a throw to first base. As a result, if a ball in play wasn’t an easy pop up or a slow grounder to the right side of the infield, our defense had trouble recording an out. Sometimes they could do it and sometimes they couldn’t, and most often it was a mixture of both in the same play. Our right fielder once made a nice running catch on a shallow pop fly—but his throw home to head off a tagging runner—from just beyond second base—sailed over the twenty foot high backstop, and even cleared the parking lot and the street beyond.

The end result of all this misadventure was that I had more than my share of opportunities to strike a batter out. Spectators usually had fun watching the game—but that game wasn’t exactly baseball.

When I think of my high school career in team sports at Manly, my memory can work its reductionist magic on those hundred or so games on twenty or thirty different fields and courts, and come up with a single, four second incident that encapsulates the whole of my athletic career in Manly.

A good sized crowd had assembled that Friday night in the gymnasium, seeking a warm diversion from another winter night in northern Iowa. There was the usual laughter and chatter of people just glad to out of the cold. But on this particular occasion, there were even a few collective cheers and groans that had to do with the game itself.
Our basketball team won a single game that year—at least, according to the scoreboards. In the final tally of moral victories—any loss by less than double digits—we probably had another four or five.

On this particular occasion, the ball had gone out of bounds with four seconds to play. We were down by two points so our moral victory was assured—the rest of the game would play out on that line between morality and reality.

As is so often the case with that line between the two, it came into play very suddenly—and then disappeared just as fast.

It was our ball at the half court line, but we’d used up our time outs so we had to inbound it without setting up a play. The kid who’d been closest to the ball when it went out was now waiting nervously on the sideline to take it from the referee. I straddled the half court line, twenty feet away.

Our second leading scorer had fouled out. Since I was only other guy who could hit the rim with any consistency, the opposing team was playing a “box and one” defense in which one guy shadowed me while the other four played a zone defense closer to the basket. The defensive player on me was standing between me and the ball at the half court line.

For a moment, my eyes locked on my teammate’s above the defensive player’s head. The gaze between us was pure, adolescent panic—‘what are you going to do?’ his eyes asked—‘what are you going to do?’ my eyes answered—what’a ya gonna do? whatayagonnado?

When the ref handed him the ball, I made a backdoor cut towards the basket. As I moved, one of the defensive men at the top of key came forward to double team. There was a window of about five feet and a half second in which a pass might have reached me—but we were hardly that precise as a team.
Instead, the in-bound pass went to the bench warmer who had come in for our other scorer. Actually, Al pretty much ran up to the in-bounder and grabbed the ball from his hands. The crowd roared its approval.

Al didn’t get to play much—but he was a crowd favorite. Whenever he entered during mop-up time, a chant went up from the student body, “Shoot, Al, Shoot!” And shoot, he did—always with the sort of intensity that indicated he truly believed he could bring us back from whatever twenty or thirty point deficit we were facing at the time.

Al was a big, chubby farm boy—about as big as a small steer, and with a similar amount of basketball talent. But what he lacked in finesse, Al more than made up in passion. His dribbling exhibitions were a passion play itself—he bent over the ball and watched it with all the furious concentration of an explosives technician dealing with a malfunctioning fuse. Because he kept his head down throughout the dribble, he rarely knew where he was going—he ran over opposition and teammate alike. And there was never a question about getting a pass from Al.

Al was always going to shoot—and it was the style of his jump shot that really fired the crowd’s anticipation. Al had a vertical leap of about three inches. But in the space of those three inches, he managed to kick up his heels with such force that he often kicked himself in the butt and—even more remarkable as an athletic feat—was able to get them back on the floor before his abbreviated hang time was up. The shot itself was hard and flat. He never had time to get the ball above his head, so launched it from right in front of his face—a technique which made it difficult to aim. But he was strong—he could fire a shot up from half court and still clear the basket and bankboard with enough power to bounce it off the scoreboard.

When Al took the in-bound hand-off that night, he immediately hunched over the ball and set to work—furiously dribbling and spinning from here to there on the court—an armadillo
on amphetamines searching for his spot. The crowd roared, “Shoot, Al, shoot!” The opposing coach screamed to his players, “Don’t foul! Don’t foul!” The other team stood and watched, just as we did.

Finally, after using up three and a half of the four remaining seconds, Al found his spot in the corner and executed his inimitable shot. Nobody in the auditorium expected the ball to go in the basket—and nobody was disappointed. The ball ended up in the far stands as the buzzer went off.

The crowd roared its approval—a moral victory and an Al shot all in one game! It was the best of both worlds.

As our team walked off the court, a few of the guys gave Al the business—“What were you thinking, Al?” “Root, ball hog, root!” “Glory hound barks again!”

Al, walking stiff-legged like a shell-shocked soldier exiting the front line, just let the ribbing slide off his hunched shoulders along with the crowds continuing cheers and laughter.

Our coach walked ahead of us. Coach Kunz wasn’t a man given to either moral victories or laughter—he was trying to get off the court as fast as dignity would allow. But even so, he felt compelled to stop and turn around, address the guys giving Al a hard time.

“At least Al wanted the ball,” he said.

His words might have been spoken to my teammates, but the flat eyes that veiled his anger and frustration stared directly into mine.

I don’t think God from a burning bush ever delivered a more pronounced—or truer—judgment. I wanted no part of the damn ball in that situation.
I didn’t want to be a hero on the basketball court. I was just trying to get through a game without making too many mistakes—opening myself up to the abuse that was out there just waiting to rain down on any poor sucker who thought himself something special.

If I was going to be a hero, I’d do it in the classroom where it really mattered.

*I’d known for a long time that education was a strange process. But as I snuck through the backstage area towards the auditorium where I hoped to take my place among the other students, the strangeness of this particular education experience had already surpassed simply being strange—the whole situation was destined for the truly weird.*

As I got closer to the actor in the spotlight rehearsing his lines, it became obvious that he was there to address the students. *What kind of class had I signed up for? I hated drama and theatrics.*

*I didn’t want to be an actor. Acting was a profession dedicated to faking real life—just playing out a role that somebody else had written. I wasn’t going through all this bullshit just to learn how to be a glorified liar.*

*Whatever was here, though, I was going to see it through. This was my last chance to learn the truth and I wasn’t going to waste it. I’d keep my eyes and mind open to the end.*

Closer still, I recognized the actor ahead of me in the spotlight. *It was Chakotay from the TV show, Star Trek: The Next Generation. Well—actually—it was the guy who played the Enterprise’s second-in-command. Although this man had the same square face and powerful body that he did when he carried out the Captain’s orders, the actor wasn’t in character. While he was obviously Native American with the same high cheekbones and black irises, he lacked the*
tribal tattoo that his character wore on the show. He was just being himself in the spotlight—and he had the physical presence of a celebrity.

I was about fifteen feet away from the man and had a good view of him—only a couple silhouetted light standards stood between him and me. The actor had the air of a celebrity—that puffed-up, pneumatic, full-of-it look like he was almost floating.

The celebrity effect. No one’s sure what causes the celebrity effect—but everyone can recognize it. It’s as if the attention of a crowd enters a person at a level that hasn’t been discovered yet—almost like dark matter in physics. All those rapt gazes carry an invisible substance—quantum particles of desire and expectation. The particles penetrate the performer, bounce against the cells of his or her body creating a reaction that alters—not just their appearance—but the very composition of their figures. They become filled with a dream substance—lighter, almost ethereal, a Macy’s Parade balloon rather than flesh and blood. Maybe it’s just the effect of adrenalin and the superhuman possibilities the hormone engenders—even when it’s gone, memory exists at a cellular level of all those possibilities burned into an altered DNA.

But wherever the celebrity effect came from, the actor had it.

And then, one of the strangest sights in the whole, weird dream—I noticed that Chacotay was wearing a sweater just like one I used to own. The sweater was white with a blue, zigzagging line across the chest like stylized waves on a body of water.

I wasn’t all that fond of the sweater when I owned it—I didn’t like either the design or the fit. I bought it at a clearance sale because it was cheap. And then, I’d washed it in hot water and stuck it in the dryer, and when it came out only a midget could wear it. I tried it on once
after the washing, but immediately took it off. When I threw it on the bed, it retained the shape of an invisible torso still filling out the arms and chest.

The sweater looked a lot better on Chacotay, though. It perfectly fit the celebrity in the spotlight getting ready for his next act.

The girls in charge of setting up Senior Awards Night recruited me to be the master of ceremonies. “Don’t talk like you usually do,” Heather instructed me firmly. “Tell some jokes. Liven things up. Don’t be boring.”

I’d know Heather since first grade—she lived with her mom and dad in a small, immaculate house on the highway just outside the southern edge of Plymouth. Their front yard was filled with gnomes and birdbaths through spring and summer, and a Santa Claus complete with reindeer in winter—her dad even looked like a Santa Claus. Heather had been a very insistent girl, and hadn’t lost any of that quality as a young woman.

Of course, I didn’t know any jokes—didn’t even know anybody who told jokes—so I did what I always did when I didn’t know—I looked them up in a book.

I don’t remember any of the witticisms I told as I introduced the various presenters to the audience of townspeople and farmers, sitting on folding chairs arranged in rows on the gymnasium floor. I don’t remember for the simple reason that they weren’t witty and not worth remembering. They elicited far more groans than laughter—the few chuckles mostly those of sympathy for a guy who tried.

The format of the event was straightforward. The small stage was set with a podium and a single chair in a back corner. After welcoming the crowd, I settled into a simple routine of introducing the series of teachers and awards. Each teacher would then come up the stairs on
either side of the stage to take the podium while I went to the chair at the back. After explaining
the award and announcing the recipient, the presenter usually made a few more personal remarks
while the winning student made their way up from the crowd to accept a certificate or plaque.

I was the recipient of several scholarships that night. I won the George Hines Memorial
Science Scholarship—an award set up by the parents of kid who’d died a few years earlier while
he was still in high school. The kid had always dreamed of being a scientist and his parents had
figured that the memorial might at least keep the dream of their child alive. That one only paid a
hundred bucks, though, while the Kinney-Lindstrom Foundation would pay for almost half of
my tuition in the coming four years at Iowa State University of Science and Technology. I was a
National Merit Scholar—but without the big time payoff of a full ride. It did translate into a
hundred bucks, though, when I was admitted to ISU with “recognition and award.”

I won awards that I expected to win. The chemistry teacher began his presentation of the
science award with the words, “I probably shouldn’t tell you this, but . . .” He went on to tell the
audience about a test our chemistry class had taken to measure the effectiveness of
individualized learning. “I took the test with them, and Tim scored higher than I did.” I knew
how to take a test, and it was an ability that would stay with me for a long time.

I won awards that I didn’t expect to win. One presenter had to call my name at least
twice. Seated on the chair at the back stage, I was studying my notes—the jokes weren’t going
well, and I wanted to get at least one right. I was rehearsing silently the timing and inflection
needed for the next one when I heard my name called stridently. I looked up into the face of a
smiling teacher who’d obviously been trying to get my attention for a while. I’m not sure, but I
think that award was for being a model student—one who best exemplified the attitudes and
behaviors expected by teachers.
One thing I am sure about, though, is that my absent-mindedness resulted in the only sincere laugh I got from the audience.

But the biggest laugh of the evening came when one presenter near the end remarked that it was saving the audience a lot of time having me on the stage and not having wait for me to make my way up through audience—everybody could go home and get to bed that much quicker.

All in all, it was quite a coup—my CV would never again look as good as it did after that evening.

The monologue he was performing had to be from Shakespeare—something old and classic about an aristocratic warrior arguing with Fate or Destiny, challenging the Gods to bring it on, to do their damnedest on the field of battle—he would fight them to the end.

Chakotay was so deep into the role he almost seemed to be floating upward, as if he was going to take the fight up to the god’s own turf—duke it out in the clouds.

I didn’t want to go near the dream dude—he was possessed by the spirit of acting, drugged up on a performer’s high—if that was all it was. But I had to. The path through the crates would take me right by the actor in the spotlight.

I watched the actor perform as I carefully approached. I’d never been a real fan of Shakespeare. The language had been difficult and poetry itself had most often been an unappreciated genre.

I hated the way poetry played with words—made them mean something they weren’t supposed to mean. I hated the way that poetry could make words start out strong and solid—like a rock that was a real rock—words you could stand on, get from here to there on. Until you
noticed those rocky words were arranged in a circle. Take a step back, and suddenly—all because of the worthless unreliability of poetic words—the circle of rocks turns into a snake—a snake with its tail in its mouth. And then the snake starts spinning—around and around like a kid’s bicycle tire, like the rings of Saturn—faster and faster until the circle of words expands in the shock wave of bomb and—hell, it’s all over from there.

_Luckily, I could hear no deceptive, confusing, poetic words coming out of the actor’s mouth._

_Maybe it was that absolute silence that made the dream feel like it was absolutely true._

_I understood perfectly that the actor wasn’t really acting—he was just getting ready to act._

_He was preparing to address the students assembled just beyond—in some strange way, he was the teacher._

The senior science fair snuck up on me—with two weeks to go, I suddenly realized that I was totally unprepared. Each year, the high school seniors developed projects that demonstrated the intricacies of science and its usefulness to the world at hand. Only a few years earlier, I would have been working for months on that project like Tom Swift Jr.

But it was spring—and that now meant golf season. Every free moment, I was out on the course practicing. And when I wasn’t free, I still practiced. Jack Nicklaus, the leading professional of the day, had written about his habit of visualizing the golf swing in one of the many golf magazines that I studied like text books. As he sat in his office, the Golden Bear imagined his arms and legs, torso and head, moving through the ideal sequence of angles and force to produce the perfect drive—he saw the ball flying straight down the narrow fairway, he
saw the long putt break with perfect speed and topple on its very last revolution into the cup.

Just those few moments of mental practice paid off big for Jack on Sunday. It made sense to me.

All that visualization took place in same hidden, expansive territory that math did. So who was to know if I took a few swings in the precalculus course? Or played a whole round in English class? I could do all that crap in my sleep.

I still got the grades, still planned my future in chemistry. But the dream of science was losing its cohesiveness—disintegrating into little bits of nostalgia floating through the ten thousand increasingly hard, uninterpretable facts of life.

Trust the numbers I told myself. And when I did, my mind naturally settled on the test scores rather than the ten thousand things. And as long as I was there in my own mind, I could play a little golf as well.

Still, everyone expected me to enter a project in the science fair—and they expected me to win.

So I quickly cobbled together elements from my childhood dream. I took an engine from a model rocket—essentially, a large fire-cracker—and strapped it to a sled with wheels, constructed of pieces from an Erectorset. Then, I built a box out of plywood—two feet high, a foot wide, and a foot deep. I put plywood on the back and plastic on the top—and if I’d had any common sense at all, I would have stopped right there and regarded the box for what it was—a little casket for a child’s ambition.

But I had no common sense—so I rounded the inside corners with fiberboard, stuck the rocket inside, hooked the ignition wire to a car battery, and pushed the button.
If the judges could have seen the resulting exhibition of science, I might have done better than just second place. It was Bikini Atoll in the backyard—the experiment had all the smoke and incredible noise that comprised good science.

A model rocket could leave a contrail three hundred feet in the air. All that gray and pinkish smoke, now confined to a one by two box, appeared through the plastic as if it were accumulating into something solid as granite. Only a fraction leaked out—but it was an impressive fraction—snaking from every corner and edge of the casket like a malevolent spirit searching for an afterlife.

Of course, the smoke made it impossible to actually see what was happening inside the box, but the noise spoke of that. The solid propellant itself made an impressive whoosh when launched into thin air—confined as it was now in a tiny echo chamber of plywood, the thing sounded like it might be an actual jet screaming down the runway on take-off. And that sled—the metal wheels tearing around the inside of the casket like the feet of an atomic mouse scrambling to escape apocalypse—made the box shake with all the resonance of a being at the edge of life itself.

Which edge—birth or death—might have been ambiguous, but there was no question that the experiment had all the empirical dimensions—the sound and fury—of Frankenstein in the atomic age.

My downfall at the science fair came as a result of the unfortunate requirement that every experience be accompanied by an explanation of its import in the everyday world.

Again, I started cobbling—this time with the airy elements of theory. I described the concepts of centrifugal and centripetal forces, threw in a few complicated mathematical equations, tried a discussion of the chemistry of solid propellant fuels, and then said to hell with
it. I’d managed to create a Frankenstein—but while it was one that had arms and a torso, they could never be attached to the head. And never mind that it had no legs at all in the real world.

On the night of the science fair, the gymnasium was packed with folding tables, the tops of which displayed the scientific hopes of students tending them. My competitors and I wore various degrees of serious expressions. Those expressions were hard to maintain—even for the students who knew their displays weren’t pure bullshit. The aisles were filled with townspeople and farmers again seeking diversion and a good laugh. I had my reputation to prop up my bullshit, so I was doing okay in the realm of seriousness.

I’d made Frankenstein’s corpse look as good as I could—and that wasn’t bad. I’d set the coffin upright on my table. The inside was charred with impressive, black streaks circling the box innumerable times. And if the sight wasn’t enough to conjure a vision of the hellish danger that accompanied real science, the box still stank to high heaven with the residue of smoke and gunpowder—a scent which I at least associated closely with fire and brimstone.

As counter-point to the coffin, I’d written my theoretical explanations and indecipherable equations on bright orange and yellow posterboard. In a stabbing gesture at a real life application, I’d also pasted a picture of astronauts training on NASA’s giant centrifuge on one of the colored sheets. If Frankenstein wasn’t dead enough already, that had to finish him off for good.

The strain of maintaining my serious was wearing thin by the time the judges walked toward my table—I was more than ready to evacuate, go home to bed, and visualize another round of golf. Miss Utterback, my English teacher from junior high, lead the way. She was a perpetually vivacious, optimistic women—even after years of confronting room after room of
sulky adolescents—and spoke excitedly as she came close: “I’ve been looking forward to this all evening! Are we going to see this experiment in action?”

“No,” I answered with the last of my scientific seriousness. “It would be too dangerous.”

I remember being relieved that I could answer at least one of the judges’ questions honestly.

But that was the last thing I remember about the conversation with the judges. I would hope that I’d had enough sense to drop the pretense of knowing what I was doing—but I doubt it. I probably bullshitted my way through the whole thing, feeling like a fraud and hoping nobody else noticed.

I just could not accept the fact that there were things I didn’t understand—even when those dead, lifeless things were staring me straight in the face. I always felt that—given just a little more time—I could figure them out.

Jan Swartz won the science fair that year with a study of music’s effect on the egg-laying propensity of chickens. Round the clock for several months, she played three different styles of music in three different coops, then tabulated the resulting egg count. She found that Mozart was a chicken’s clear favorite. Richard and Karen Carpenter were second. Lead Zeppelin finished a very distant third.

I often suspected her of fudging the results to coincide with the judges’ taste, but I knew that I had very little room to talk in that regard.

As I approached Chakotay that night in the concentrated, echoing solitude that dreams are so good at rendering, I was at wit’s end. It felt like I’d been searching for the right classroom forever. After finding myself in that crowded hallway without any memory of how I’d
gotten there, after such a ridiculous decision about which door to enter, after stumbling through a wilderness of dark—I had no clue what an education might be. That a celebrity/Indian/actor/mime should be the teacher made as much sense as anything else in this weird university.

From ten feet away—even though he was just warming up—power pervaded the celebrity’s performance. The actor had Hollywood written all over him. He was probably in this university warming up for a political, campaign. He probably wanted to join the ranks of famous actors turned legislators—become one of the historical elite who could stump a crowd of working men and women in troubled times. There in the spotlight, the actor obviously knew how to grab attention—he knew that the secret lay in not seeing.

At that moment in the dream, I realized that I was looking at a man who couldn’t see. It was more than just the spotlight of the dream that blinded him in the present moment. He’d been in so many spotlights over so many years—flash-photographed so many times by so many people—that the world had permanently turned into a floating blue dot surrounded by darkness.

In the light of day, the dream dude was blind as a bat. He had people around to lead him constantly—they were probably out there in the shadows now, watching. He could no longer see the common sights that grounded a person to the real world—he couldn’t see a familiar park with wooded hills, or a child playing in the water. He couldn’t see the old neighborhoods, block after block of falling structures, or the old people huddled together in pews, holding hands and praying.

The celebrity couldn’t see those sights with his own eyes—and didn’t want to listen to anybody who could. And he wasn’t disappointed at all that he hadn’t been able to read for years.
As I watched him rehearse his part in the dream, I could tell he lived only for the cameras now. He’d left behind the everyday concerns that were obvious to more innocent eyes. He’d transcended concern for mere people, and now occupied himself with power on a scale that could only be imagined—power that defied any and all attempts at reason.

Approaching as I was from the backstage area, I had a unique angle on the celebrity in the spotlight. I was probably closer to him than any regular human being had been in years. I was fascinated—but acutely anxious.

The dim path through the crates forced me closer and closer to the actor in the spotlight. I could feel his power—his abrupt gestures and the tension in his body were like the whirling motor of a generator creating wave after wave of static electricity that crawled over my skin and make the hair on my arms stand on end.

I could tell the celebrity actor lived entirely for this dream world now. In this place where emotion came first and reasons second, he didn’t have to see—he’d cultivated his celebrity blindness into a peculiar form of intuition that could sense the emotions of crowd—that could sense all the separate strands of suspicion and fear, of hesitance and anger. Living so fully for so long in that dream world on the edge of nightmare, he’d become a master at weaving all those impossibly tangled, separate strands into a rope—the rope into reins—the confused crowd into a single, mythical beast.

I had no clue about where the celebrity might ride the beast—I only knew that I did not want to be a part of it.

I have two memories of the valedictorian’s address I delivered on behalf of my fifty-five classmates in the Class of ’73 at North Central. The first is a visual memory: near the end of the
speech, I looked out over the crowd seated on folding chairs and saw my aunt and two cousins enter through door at the back of the gym. Aunt Patty, my mother’s sister, lived a hundred miles from Manly—quite a distance for our family in those days. I didn’t know they were coming and felt flattered that they did. That they should be late didn’t matter. Patty wasn’t the most organized of women—that she arrived at all made me grateful.

The second memory is of a different type—though exactly what kind of memory it is remains ambiguous. During my speech, I called Richard Nixon “a cancer on the body politic.” I don’t remember speaking the words to the audience—nor do I remember the moment when the phrase occurred to me, when I wrote it down on the paper I’d take to the podium. But I know without doubt that the words were present—and that their presence then still has an effect on my ambiguous relationship to politics today.

Nixon was going through the final spasms of his death throes as a public figure. The burglary at Democratic headquarters in the Watergate Hotel had been in the news for almost a year. The role that Nixon’s administration had played in the burglary—and the president’s own part in the coverup—was apparent to anybody with half a brain. It would take a few more months for the courts to force the release of transcripts from the secret tape recordings that Nixon had made of his own conversations in the White House. Those empirical, celluloid memories would ultimately convict him and nearly every person close to the president of flat-out lying about the matter. Moreover, the incident exposed how much lying and “dirty tricks” had become a systematic part of government at the highest level—every legislator, advisor, aid, or secretary there could call the other a liar with absolute certainty that it was true at an a fundamental level, if not in the particular fact of the moment. The disgust I felt was summed up in Nixon’s final
attempt to exculpate himself by saying, “If the president does it, it’s legal”—and his very obvious belief that the statement was true.

The half of my brain that knew with absolute certainty that Nixon was guilty was the same half that did well on tests. It was the part of my brain that understood symbols and the complex patterns that related their behavior in the weird world of the cerebral cortex. I could juggle those symbols like nobody’s business—could keep them up in the air for hours in entertaining circles and patterns—two with this hand, three in that.

And it wasn’t just numbers—I could see the symbolism in baseball and basketball, in fish and fishing. I began to juggle them just like juggled “pi”. And when I threw in “I” as just another symbol, living with half a brain really got interesting.

When I called Richard Nixon a “cancer on the body politic,” I’m pretty sure I pissed-off nearly every person in the audience. They probably knew Nixon was guilty as well as I did. They were probably as disgusted as I was that lying and denial were part of every answer the government gave for problems of the day.

But the parents of my classmates had watched the news and listened to my speech with more than just half a brain. They’d lived long enough with corn and weather to understand that sometimes it hailed, sometimes it flooded, and sometimes the heat just never arrived to ripen the crop; even though he worked like hell, all a man could really do was get his chores done, then sit and watch. They understood that neither the world nor human beings were perfect, nor perfectible. And any way a person chose to deal with that—either by going to the bar or going to church—was pretty much alright with them.

As long as a guy didn’t pretend otherwise, it was all good.
It was a simple philosophy when it came to words—the whole thing could be written on a bumper sticker—I just couldn’t get the hang of it.

I hadn’t yet completely lost faith in science as a way to save the world—or myself—but, by the time I graduated, that faith was more a matter of studious habit than honest concern.

As a matter of day to day interaction with the world and the people around me, I was mostly down to pretending otherwise.

In that respect, I was a lot like Tricky Dick himself. The chief difference between us was that—while Dick wanted to stay in the White House with Pat and the memory of Checkers—I wanted to get the hell out of Iowa.

_The dream world. It is such an eerie place—irrational, illogical, irritating. It’s a universe as fluid as an ocean—shifting, shadowy, subversive. But for all that, it’s as real as any other world—as much a product of evolution as the continents or the species that inhabit them._

_As an empirical phenomenon, the dream world is analyzed in any number of theories. Freud thought dreams were a place of wish fulfillment—a place where the essential longings of libido were released from the constriction of civilized time to play in the landscape of eternal desire. His chief collaborator/competitor, Jung, thought dreams the place where archetypes dwelled—a place where those beings that shaped our notions of heroes and gods, along with the mischief makers and villains, capered with only a fake fear of death._

_In the case of this dream, my view is a combination of the two. I see the dream world as a place of both wishes and archetypes. But it’s not a place where an individual’s wishes are expressed—it’s a setting where the wishes of archetypes demand their due from the dreamer. All_
those ideals we hold on to in the waking world are suddenly freed to hold us to account in dreams.

As I drew even closer to the celebrity actor in the spotlight, I felt all the fear and self-doubt of a supplicant approaching an altar. The actor was no longer beseeching the gods with his gestures and mimed words—he had become one. The atmosphere of the dream was charged, electric. I was still in the darkness outside the spotlight but I could see that the path would take me along its very edge.

Damn it! All I wanted was to take my place in the auditorium beyond—to find a seat quietly among the young people—to study, to learn—to just be.

What the hell was the dream dude doing here in this university in the place of a teacher? A celebrity like a demigod—or was it demagogue? Whatever that figure was, I didn’t want to look at it.

But as much I didn’t want to—I had to. My attention was drawn to him as it is to all monsters.

He certainly had the powerful histrionics of a Hitler—was he here to begin a campaign, to rouse the country into national fervor? To make America great again? If so, exactly what kind of America did he envision?

And then, as I began to slide my feet on the far side of the path, around the edge of the spotlight, I noticed the demigod’s hair.

Strange thing to notice in a dream of a demigod—but what can a dreamer do but follow his attention wherever it might lead?

His hair wasn’t long and black, combed back from his forehead as it was when the actor played Chakotay on the TV show. He wore his hair short now—and there was some gray mixed
in with the darker color. The cut look casual—at least, casual in the manner of a celebrity. The style made it seem as if each hair had been cut individually and placed just so to give the impression of casual disregard for appearances.

Noticing the hair broke a bit of the awful spell the celebrity had cast—beneath the nice haircut, a film of sweat shone on his forehead. And then my gaze ventured to his eyes. A change had taken place there, too.

His eyes were no longer hard and locked on his eternal foe in anger. They weren’t glazed by blindness in the manner of one who had stared into the sun too long. That close, I could see that his eyes flickered a little as he practiced the dramatic role. The tick hinted at more than a little desperation going on beneath the celebrity haircut.

At that moment in the dream, it struck me with all the force of divine revelation—the celebrity in the spotlight was just a man.

I know that might not sound like much of divine revelation to the person reading this—who I assume is still more or less awake. The knowledge that celebrities are really just people isn’t news to anybody that isn’t dreaming. It’s just common sense to understand that they eat and breathe as long as they are alive—and when they don’t, they just die. Everybody has the wisdom of Socrates when it comes to mortality.

But as I recall that moment in the dream, I think the ah-ha part had more to do with the “just-ness” of it all rather than the fact that he was a man.

The instant held a singular flash of recognition. It was poetry personified—a sea change in the spotlight—an evolutionary metamorphosis that took place in a metaphysical moment. I saw beneath the aura of divine celebrity to the actor in the spotlight.

And then I saw beneath the actor’s hair—behind his eyes—to the anxious man beneath.
More remarkable still, the seeing didn’t just stop there—I could even see beneath the flesh and blood man to anxiety itself.

And then—in a movement that can only be accomplished in a dream—my vision jumped from the cliff of anxiety straight into history.

I saw that a man is history: I saw the dream dude as an innocent child playing on the desolate landscape of a reservation. I saw the vitality of a youthful free spirit growing up in the dry and wind-blown atmosphere of hopelessness—a culture of lost gods and failed promises—where the only work available was fending off despair and the only miracle at hand was turning water to vodka. He grew up in that place where aspiration had no object—and when he could, he left like an angry warrior dreaming of a site to fight an ancient battle. His dream was absurd and he knew it—so he went to Hollywood to become an actor.

Weirdly though—almost like destiny—the ridiculous plan worked. He stumbled into a ten second role when he met a woman at a bar who worked at an agency casting extras for a movie. He played an angry young Indian, drunk and leaning against the brick wall of an alley, watching as the star of the movie chased the villain past him. His extemporaneous, war-whooping call of encouragement for the fleeing villain got him another part—a two minute role as a drunk Indian fighting another drunk Indian while the cowboy star watched. The fight lead to longer and longer parts as a drunk fighting Indian until his face became famously synonymous with crazy anger and terrorizing villains.

He became a hero to the people he’d left behind on the reservation. He became a hero to Indians on other reservations. Sympathy for the actor who played his villainous roles so naturally and enthusiastically grew so much that sympathy crossed ethnic lines and he became a
hero to those of any culture which identified itself as oppressed and angry—which is—in essence—each and every one.

He didn’t mind the stereotyping—in fact, it suited him perfectly. When he played the hackneyed roles, he felt like was wearing a cloak of invisibility—like he was a boy again, in his secret hiding place, watching the world go on around him while feeling safe and anonymous. In those roles that cast him as the personified history of defeat and anxiety, he felt like he was acting from behind a one-way mirror—there was a freedom in those roles that allowed his spirit to expand and be what it wanted, all the while knowing that the audience would always only see a reflection of itself.

The trouble in his destined rise began when his fame spread a little too far. It got to the point where most people in the theater began rooting for the villainous, crazy drunk Indian—which led to confusion. Hollywood loved a clear winner—wanted the winner to be a hero—because that created to a star with real box office potential.

So the powers that be cast him on the other side of the great divide—the crazy drunk Indian villain became a hero for them. He was now the good guy; history was now on his side and he was responsible for projecting it into the future. The one-way mirror cracked and real problems began almost immediately.

Even though it was all just acting, he no longer free and anonymous in his roles. The role of hero didn’t suit him at all—he missed the cloak of invisibility that the villainy of being a crazy Indian had allowed him to wear. So he sought the role out when he wasn’t in front of the camera.

He’d always watched his drinking carefully, knowing as he did its effect on people like him. He watched it no less carefully now—but not with the idea of limiting it. In those nicest,
most exclusive places, he forced himself to drink. Among the beautiful people—many of whom were raised by beautiful people and were raising beautiful people themselves; who even accepted him as a beautiful person—he drank hard and fast until he felt one with his genes. And then he started scanning the room for the biggest beautiful guy in the place.

The fall was fast and hard and very complete.

When he regained consciousness in rehab—he was just another star who had fallen from the kind of heaven he couldn’t remember because it had never existed.

When he got sober, he moved to a ramshackle house on a hill overlooking the reservation where he’d grown up. He didn’t go down there—didn’t talk to anybody—just watched what he saw as the random, hopelessly dignified movement of his people. Whether an individual was drunk or sober, he couldn’t tell. His own people all looked the same to him—and it made him mad.

Everything made him mad. One day, watching TV, he threw an ash tray through the screen. The next day, he was pissed off because he couldn’t watch TV. The hot sun began to infuriate him, and so did the occasional rain. He threw rocks at singing birds and barked back at coyotes. He hated going to bed and he hated getting up.

Until one day—out of the blue—he decided to begin a training regimen. He started lifting weights in the bleak backyard, running over miles of dusty, high desert two-tracks. He didn’t know why he trained—whether to take another run at acting or a longer jump off the wagon—he just did.

As I inched my way around the dream dude in the spotlight, I didn’t see every frame of the actor’s history. But it was there, nonetheless—in much the same way that a ten foot stalk
with its waving green leaves and ears a foot long is present in a single kernel of hybrid corn.

The fulfillment of history is only a matter of time—which, in a dream, is no real matter at all.

And this points to one of the fundamental problem of dreams—a dream is not just a seed, but also the medium in which it is planted. The medium of a dream is a space so vast it is not quantifiable. Numbers—whether applied to millimeters or light-years—only exist in a dream as ridiculous reminders of where you are not. Measuring time is just as futile—there is no way to distinguish between a century and a minute. For this reason, the medium of a dream is not the realm of fact.

For the very same reason, it is a place of truth.

We all go there. For short naps or a long night’s sleep—it doesn’t matter in a dream. Strong or weak, woman or man, child or grandparent—we close our eyes on the world as it is and begin to see something else. Iowans, Floridians, Cubans, Costa Ricans, Kenyans, Italians, Singaporeans, Bikini Atollians—all seven and half billion of us do it. And we have for millennia—as have most of the other species in this world.

To go to sleep and dream is to envision beyond the parameters of our cells—whatever their arrangement was before drifting off. In a flying dream, we become the bird we’ve watched so enviously. And when we run on a dream playground and leap with graceful power—into glorious inconsequence—it’s a form of interspecies empathy that probably came from gazing at a gazelle on TV. It’s not a one-way process between humans and animals either—when my cat wakes and stares a me from the foot of the bed, I know she’s contemplating the afterthoughts of dream, wondering what that two-legged beast is doing in her sleeping place.

Given such a large and fluid space for dreams, I don’t think it any logical leap at all to hypothesize that dreams are the origin of all the ideals we hold highest—truth, equality, love. In
all their transgressive variations—which aren’t transgressive at all in a dream—those ideals are experienced as seeds in a medium of such unacknowledged power that it is difficult—if not impossible—to contain their growth the morning after.

Which leads to a second axiom of dreams: not only are dreams the site of the most radical, most encompassing truth there is, that truth always depends on interpretation for significance.

Since this is a story—more or less—that significance is rendered in words. And here, I run into difficulty. Putting words to the dream dude is like hanging ornaments on a Christmas tree. I’d like the arrangement to be aesthetically pleasing—like a painting of colorful, suspended spheres reflecting strings of light, and strands of shimmering silver wrapped around the whole of it. Trouble is, the tree won’t stand for it—won’t be bound by beautiful words. The tree itself keeps walking off, stalking back into the medium of a dream. I get the feeling it’s not a nice tree—more a killer Christmas tree than anything else. On its way back to the medium of its origin, the tree has a tendency to grab innocent little kids in its thick, prickly arms and pull them in until they disappear beneath the green surface—and there they go, innocence and significance hijacked by a dream.

The words I need to apply to the dream dude are not smooth or shiny words—a sleek new scientific term isn’t going to touch that asshole in the spotlight. I need words that are hard and primitive as the phenomenon itself. I need a word like “pathos” which the Greeks used to refer to the accumulation of life experiences that a person carried around with them—all the thoughts and feelings of a body moving through history amassing in the instant of presence. It’s the kind of word that makes your brain hurt when you really try to think it. Or “gravitas” for the Romans—a word which touched on the natural air of authority some leaders carried in their
bearing and manner. The word always seemed appropriate at the time of its application to the man at the podium addressing the assembled multitude—as long as one didn’t consider the aftermath of decadent cruelty.

Those ancient words—and the way that a mind held them thousands of years ago—are the only ones that can touch the dream figure in the spotlight. It is the mysterious meeting point of body and significance, of personhood and meaning.

But whatever it’s called—pathos, gravitas, mojo—the dream dude had it—and I wanted no part of it.

As he mimed his monologue and punched out in theatrical gestures, I saw him as a mean sucker—and vain as hell. And also, frightened—he could feel his pathos slipping away. He was still a big, solid, muscular man—there was no telling what a guy in his condition would do.

All I wanted was to sneak past him—take a place among the young people to become an anonymous student one last time—and learn what I was supposed to have known all along.

And then, I felt it—the Touch. I felt it on my person—light, but very—very—distinct.

I stopped immediately and stared hard at the dream dude. He had ceased gesturing with his right arm. Still clothed in the white sweater like the one I used to own, he held the arm quietly downward, at angle from his body. I slowly followed that arm with my gaze, followed it downward until, near the wrist, it disappeared into the darkness outside the spotlight. But that didn’t matter—I knew where the rest of the arm was.

The dream dude had me by the balls.
Back when our family still lived in Plymouth—before science become such an individual endeavor—I started a club with neighborhood friends. The four of us met in my laboratory/bedroom to discuss matters pertaining to science. We studied rocks and insects and did experiments in chemistry. A cross-discipline endeavor in which we studied the biology of mice in relation to the G-force physics of model rockets was a favorite. After a field trip to gather specimens from an old, abandoned barn just outside of town, we launched the frisky little astronauts in the payload section of our rockets to see how they reacted to space flight.

On the whole, we found they took the educational trip well—at least, when the parachute opened. After the mission took off in a whoosh and flew out of sight on the leading edge of a contrail, the ground team scanned the sky for an orange dot that signaled a successfully opened parachute. As a recovery team, we raced through the pasture towards its eventual landing zone—often, that was a half mile away. Upon arrival at the scene, the member whose rocket was launched had the honor of removing the balsa wood nose cone from the plastic tube and dumping the test subject on the ground.

Sometimes, the mouse just took off through the grass like nothing had happened. Those cases were disappointing—we didn’t seem to learn much at all. But when the mouse staggered around a little after being freed—or, better yet, when it huddled in trembling fear and had to be nudged with a foot before it started tripping in disoriented circles—there was a certain feeling of satisfaction that our efforts were more significant.

But most rewarding of all were those experiments that seemed to be failures—when the parachute didn’t open and the rocket fell from the sky like an arrow headed for the center of the earth. We ran to those impact zones with heightened anticipation. There was no behavior to study in those cases. But in our failure, we had pierced much deeper than superficial behavior—
we were getting down to the more fundamental study of life itself. In the spectacular anatomical spatter of blood and guts, we located intestines and hearts and lungs along with brains and skulls, as well as extremities like little paws and tails.

We seemed to be getting closer to the question that fascinated us—down deep, what are we really?

Of course, I was the president of the club. In those meetings at my laboratory/bedroom, I grilled the members on aspects of science. In answer to a magazine ad, I’d received from NASA a packet of glossy photographs of astronauts in the space program—which I used to help my friends identify men who were playing important roles in the larger world beyond our small one. I snagged a bunch of Mom’s unused recipe cards and wrote the chemical symbols of elements on them to use as flash cards.

But it was much more difficult to keep the member’s attention focused in those situations. They’d listen for a while—but soon enough, start burning holes in the army blanket on my bed with a magnifying glass that was supposed to be used on rocks and insects. After that, it wasn’t long until the meeting degenerated into a wrestling match.

It was a focused sort of wrestling though—we call it “nut wrestling.” In basic format, it was like the serious wrestling in high school and college—not the fake pro stuff. It was a test of strength and agility, of heart and endurance. The only difference was that the object of mastery wasn’t to pin the other’s shoulder to the floor, but to grab him by the balls until he screamed in submission.

It was an initiation rite at its purest—the way that boys become men in the world as it is. There were no prizes for the winner—no plaques or public recognition. Still, the effort put forth by the competitors was unrivaled by any other endeavor. Certainly no school activity—no
hunting or fishing trip—no basketball or baseball game—ever called for so much all out
exertion. It wasn’t about sex or religion or ethnicity—and hardly about intelligence. If anything,
nut wrestling was about the absolute absence of those considerations. Although there wasn’t
much honor in winning, nobody wanted to lose.

The dream touch was casual—almost accidental—as if the man in the spotlight had
brushed me with the back of his hand. The only problem was that the touch did not go away. I
froze—confused.

Confusion was certainly not new to my experience of the dream. Misunderstanding
characterized every phase of it—from the hallway to the choice of doors to the darkness of the
backstage area. But when a stranger has his hand on the family jewels, a theft of dramatic
proportion is unmistakably imminent—and the degree of questioning mounts exponentially.

I stared at that point where the arm disappeared from the spotlight. The difference
between light and dark was absolute—I couldn’t actually see his hand on my crotch. Nor could I
see any other part of my body—I was as invisible to myself as was the rest of the dream world
outside the spotlight.

More questions took shape in my dreaming mind: could that self-absorbed asshole in the
spotlight actually see me? Did the celebrity know I was there and where his demigod hand was
placed?

I marshalled my gaze from the boundary of light and dark, forced it slowly up the white
sweatered arm, to the actor’s face in the spotlight. He was still pounding out the silent
monologue, still gesturing wildly with his left arm even as the right remained where it was. His
eyes moved rapidly now, looking in every direction but mine. But behind all that wildness I could tell—he knew I was there. And he knew exactly where his right hand rested.

And then I saw the dream dude’s motive—I saw his intention as clearly as if it had been written in script—in a dialogue balloon floating above his nice haircut. The celebrity was on the edge of losing it—floating away into the oblivion of pointless anger—and he needed me to anchor him to the real world.

Chakotay had lost the sympathy of his fans, lost connection with the people he’d grown up with. Even as an innocent, the actor had always been on the edge—wanting to fight the good fight but never quite sure where line lay between good and bad. And so he just fought. And in that just fighting, the man had crossed the line. From a natural underdog—a fighter for justice and equality—success had turned him into a mere bully. And in the panicky moment of a dream, he saw an opportunity to get back what he had lost.

The brilliant figure in the spotlight wanted me—needed me—to jump out from my hiding place in the darkness and attack. To all those invisible young people out in the auditorium waiting for the lesson of the day, my action would look unprovoked. That crazy asshole needed me to be the bad guy so that he could reclaim his role as the good.

He needed me in the same way that God once needed man—to complete the cycle of redemption.

In fear and trembling, I stared at that desperate character in the spotlight. As I continued to glare in return, I suddenly noticed something lower in my field of vision—what looked like two butterflies were rising up through the light. As they got higher, I could see that they weren’t butterflies, but hands—my hands.
What the hell were my hands doing? I didn’t stand a chance against that maniac. But I couldn’t draw my hands back—I had no more control of them than I had over two birds flushed from a bush.

I could only watch as my hands fluttered towards the dream dude, saw them circle his neck and land there like two stupid pigeons.

And then—in a movement that felt as naturally catastrophic as the moon collapsing into the earth—I felt myself being pulled into the spotlight.

Grabbing the dream dude’s neck was my final act in the dream of education—an act as perverse and futile as an act could be. It was like grabbing onto to the docking rope of a ship headed out to sea—a ridiculous, pathetic, stupid gesture.

As much as I wanted to understand—to be smart and know what everybody needs to know—I just couldn’t let go.

I was being drawn into another fight—a fight I had no chance in hell of winning.

And then I was falling—falling into the brilliant white light again.

I doubt it will surprise anybody reading this to learn that I didn’t do well at Iowa State. I made it through the first year with my desire to major in chemical engineering at least nominally intact. My grades were okay—A’s and B’s. But the B’s stung a bit—they itched like an irritating symptom of the big-fish-from-a-small pond syndrome. The condition was easy to self-diagnose—but difficult to treat. I had to study now—and could not bring myself to do that.

The dream of Tom Swift saving the world with a new invention had little to do with science as I encountered it in college. The nuts and bolts of a career in chemical engineering was as boring as nuts and bolts.
At the beginning of my second year, I tried out and made the university’s golf team. On the first road trip, we drove all day and all night to arrive in Baton Rouge, Louisiana in the dim light of early dawn. I got out of the van and was immediately enveloped by the soft, humid air of the South. When we’d left Iowa, the corn was harvested and the dead, brown stubble already covered in a frigid foot of snow. But on the campus of LSU—even at this hour—the air was warm as Saturday night bath water.

Then I spotted the grass growing on the university’s lawn. I walked over and stood on it—just for the hell of it. Again, I was amazed. It felt like I was standing on air—a peculiar springy-ness beneath my feet. I bent over and examined the grass more closely. The short blades were unnaturally coarse and stiff, their color as much blue as green. My first impression was that the whole expanse was made of plastic rather than real vegetation.

That initial encounter with the Bermuda grass of the South might not seem like much, but I can link it to two subsequent decisions that do hold a little more significance.

The first of those decision came when I got back to Iowa State—I changed my major from chemical engineering to botany. If studying chemistry had become a hopelessly artificial endeavor, maybe botany had a little more life. Of course, it was a ridiculous line of reasoning from any number of angles—but no amount of “right reason” would have helped the situation. I simply hated school—couldn’t stand to crack a book.

The second decision came later that summer. I played a round of golf on the course in Manly with a friend from high school who’d graduated a year earlier than I. Dennis was back in Iowa for a week, visiting from Florida where he’d been living for the last year. He was a bartender at a Big Daddy’s lounge in Orlando, and talked up the area as a “happening” place. And he needed a roommate. Dennis’s hair was shaggy long—a big, handlebar mustache covered
his constant grin. He looked like he was having a good time, but I wasn’t immediately convinced.

I didn’t know what I wanted to do—except that I didn’t want to go back to school. As much as anything else, I thought about that Bermuda grass.

A few months later in the early fall, I drove past Iowa State on the way to Florida.

Obviously, I’ve thought about that dream quite a bit in the eight years since I dreamed it—or it dreamed me. I’m still not sure about that.

But one thing I am sure about: the dream counted as experience as surely as anything else that has occurred in my life. It was just as real—just as important—as graduating from high school. Despite that—or maybe because of it—the dream demands interpretation just like any other experience in order to be meaningful.

In that sense, the dream is a sort of x-ray of education revealing aspects that are normally hidden beneath the surface. Emotions are notoriously difficult to identify and pin down. They come and go, passing through an individual and into a crowd like perfume, or the stink of a hog lot. Such strange, quixotic phenomena are not as readily examined with a magnifying glass as are rocks or insects. But while we’ve discounted them as unscientific, a bathetic fallacy in logic, or useless sentimentalism, emotion still exists and affects behavior in ways that are difficult—if not impossible—to control.

A tendency exists to discount emotion, especially the negative ones like doubt and fear. Particularly in educational settings, students and teachers alike try to ignore those emotions—which are merely personal—and use the conceptual mind to come to understandings which
enable the individual to communicate with others, work together in common endeavors, see the big picture as if it were a schematic of a well-oiled machine.

I don’t argue that position. As both a teacher and a student, I believe it is the fundamental dynamic of education itself—the way that an individual develops both self-esteem and respect within the community.

But here is the difference: I don’t believe overcoming fear and doubt is the final goal. I think that the act of using a mind to overcome fear and doubt is more a heuristic technique. Success isn’t about total freedom from the negative emotions. It’s about seeing those moods more clearly for what they are—windows on what it actually means to be a human being with a limited amount of time on earth.

I’m certainly not going to claim that I know what that last sentence actually means. One of the biggest problems with knowing that kind of thing is that words themselves are symbols that necessarily incorporate fear and doubt into their being. Like all other symbols—money, clothes, cars, houses—words need that economy of positive and negative, good and bad to create meaning.

But let me say one last thing before I drift any closer to Pluto and lose all contact with earth. If this story is an interpretation of my dream of education, the text is not the end goal any more than overcoming fear and doubt is the goal of education. As a heuristic—when I look at the story I just wrote—I think its main significance lies in a metaphor near the end.

After I grabbed the dream dude’s neck and before I fell into the light—the image of holding onto the docking rope of a ship headed to sea occurred to me with more force than any other words in the text.
Just who is on that ship or where it’s headed, I’m not sure. But I do suspect that the question of holding on or letting go is one worth asking.