



shades of gray

by alan bennett lagan



PREFACE:

My greatest fault as a writer is that I do not like people. Most great writers bear a genuine affection and fondness for humanity, and I simply do not share it. People, for the most part, are upsetting and bothersome. They are an annoyance, a pesky part of life better left alone. There is so much ignorance and brutality and hatred in us, I am beyond caring. It is the death knell for a decent writer, and certainly any decent artist.

We are supposed to care so much that we have an insatiable need to make others care too, through our work and our sharing of it. But I have little faith in people, and to be a writer means having to embrace such humanity, no matter how cruel, ugly or unfair it may be. I am not sure if I am capable of that. In some small way, this collection of writing is to see whether I am.





MIDWAY THROUGH LIFE...

Is this the very beginning, or the very end?

Has the story been told, or is this the start of the telling?

It is the indefinable in-between ~ the latest of winter and the earliest of
spring ~ the dying days of summer melded with the first flush of fall

the shaded region between right and wrong

the gray area

in the middle

where artists dwell, and some intellectuals too.

There is no beginning.

There is no end.

There is just.





GRAY GHOST

A squirrel sits on its haunches, nibbling a small wild apple. The grass is high and the squirrel is half obscured. Its head rises above the blades, eyes glinting and ever-watchful.

There are hawks about.



SUMMER STORM {PART I}

It is quiet when it first comes. Too quiet to be safe. The trees shiver, their uppermost branches tremble as the breeze arrives. The birds have fallen silent ~ where did they go? What do the birds do in times like this?

Riding the crests of wind...

There is dread in the silence. Let it come and be done. Wreak your havoc and move on.

A low growl is heard ~ maybe a dog, or a hungry human. Then the first flash, at a far-off distance.

The rustling begins. Another flash, but closer. It is coming. The definitive sound of thunder, no longer to be imagined away. More flashes of light, followed by an anticipatory intake of breath ~ held...

held... before the low rumble of thunder again. A long, rolling wake of guttural moaning is heard ~ a nauseating sound, but exciting too.

Exhilaration and awe, far greater than any human creation, and then strike upon strike of lightning.

It happens quickly now, the explosive cadence of blinding light and deafening roar, a fury of nature set loose upon the land, and the rain, released at last. Sheets of it, speeding downward, descending from a dark sky. The wind is fierce and the water doesn't know where to go.

A siren wails somewhere. Someone is in trouble.



A BAGEL IN BOSTON

In the bagel shop there is an Asian woman and a young child sitting at a table across from me. “Elizabeth” is spelled out on the back of the girl’s jacket, and she is eating a bagel with the woman who I presume is her mother. Before eating, the woman makes a sign of the cross while looking around furtively. It is a gesture of pride and shame – probably just superstition anyway. I avert my eyes, shame bred from shame, embarrassed at such a show of faith. The woman and the child speak quietly. I strain to hear what they’re saying. It’s a mid-morning hour when most people are at work or school, and it is peaceful.

They were there before me, but I finish my bagel first, and leave.



AT THE MALL

Buying chocolates. A whim purchase. Annoying child ahead of me, and two smiling parents. I do not like children. The kid clearly is not in need of another chocolate, but the cashier behind the counter knows the family and gives one away for free. What about me? Insult to injury, they strike up a conversation as I thrust my bag of chocolates onto the counter with an agitated sigh. Is this a store or a social hour?

“How is your summer going?” the mother asks the cashier. She is blond, with dark streaks showing through. Her husband wears glasses and smiles kindly, occupied slightly by the child and her free chocolate truffle.

“It’s going all right now,” the dark haired cashier answers with a broad retail smile. “I had a rough couple of months,” she continues, and then in a half-whisper, “I had a miscarriage.”

Two feet from me, and not trying to hide it, she blurts this out.

“But I am over it now.” She forces out another smile. “So what brings you to the mall tonight?”

The blonde mother pauses. “The maternity store.” It seems an odd moment to reveal a new pregnancy, but she does anyway.

The cashier’s smile doesn’t waver. I watch closely to see if it does. It still looks forced, but it doesn’t break. She hands me my change and I

start walking towards the door. Out of the corner of my eye I see her walk around and give the blonde woman a hug.

In the mall I wonder which is more obscene – the cashier’s rudimentary confession ~ so casual, so flippant (but who is anyone to say), or the blonde woman’s maternity admission ~ should she have waited until a more appropriate moment? Of course none of it was any of my business, and even if it was I probably wouldn’t have known what to say.



GRAY GHOST

A rustling in the trees signals they are near. One small gray ghost lands on the fence, padding stealthily from post to post and then leaping into a pine tree. From limb to limb, sharp claws tenaciously hold the creature high in its aerial pursuit.

Another drops to the ground, this little gray ghost not much more than a puff of smoke and gone just as quickly. A bouncing tail retreats into the leaves and an acorn falls from the sky.

Silence.





SQUIRRELLY

Jeff Johnson is chasing me off the stage at McNulty Elementary School. It is the end of a rehearsal for a class play. We are about eleven or twelve years old and just beginning to think we know it all. Jeff is taller and bigger than me. I am a small kid.

Barreling into the hallway, thinking Jeff was right behind me, I run into Mr. McKnight, slamming into his torso and laughing out of embarrassment. He is not pleased. Later in the day I get in trouble with my homeroom teacher who backs up her case proclaiming, “Mr. McKnight said you had been acting squirrely lately.” So there it was, and here I am.

Squirrely. Is that even a proper word? At the time I didn’t quite grasp what it meant. Mischievous, troublesome, playful, excitable, energetic... I chatter, I chew, I run, I leap. I make far too much noise on some days and no sound at all on others. I’m just a kid.

There are worse things than being considered squirrely.

(It turns out that it is indeed a proper word. I looked it up.)





BROTHER I

Most of my childhood memories involve my brother Paul. He had a rather serious case of pneumonia when he was very young and spent a few days in the hospital. I was left alone with the cleaning lady, Deppy ~ a woman who rarely spoke, and when she did it was in a thick accent, or so my parents told me years later. I was only about four or five myself. I remember lying on the floor of my bedroom and holding a blanket or a stuffed animal out of loneliness.

Did I miss my brother, or my Mommy? I didn't know. I do remember being on the verge of crying at that moment, and then holding it in when I thought Deppy was coming into the room. Or did I let it go and did she hold me?

When my brother finally came home he had to stay in a plastic tent for a couple of days. I wanted to join him there, and once or twice my parents let me climb in through the flap and peer out of the blurry plastic. It wasn't fun to watch TV from there though – the images were hazy, and if you stared too long they blurred into oblivion – the plastic tent coming into focus and evicting all outside visions – a vague shadow of our faces, dim and non-descript. But we were together in that fuzzy world, me and my brother, in sickness and in health, bound by blood and joined in familial history.





ANDY'S MOM

Though she died a few years ago, the wound is still fresh. In happy moments he forgets, but then the happiness serves as a reminder, and he seems to hunt for why he has to be unhappy. His grief is like a severed limb ~ invisible, phantom thing of pain ~ there but not there, and, somehow, always with him.

Sometimes he is happy to remember her ~ a smile at the scent of her favorite rose, a laugh at a salty memory, a spunky phrase she once uttered ~ and then he is lost again.

He finds solace in baking her old recipes. A calm settles around him in the kitchen. Bending over a simmering sauce of tomatoes and fresh basil, or rolling out the dough for an apple pie, he is best when he is busy. He thinks she is with him then, or maybe that he is cooking for her again, like he used to do.

He sleeps late when the pain and the night conspire to keep him up. Waking, alone, he plods to the kitchen for a cup of coffee. The scene outside the window changes with the seasons ~ the light slowly shifting, shadows lengthening or shortening, but it's difficult to detect day to day. Only the occasional burst of a storm or the gray water vapor of a January thaw make any discernible difference. He draws the shades and looks out the window. The world is quiet from inside.





GRAY GHOST

What are you doing here? The fifth floor of a parking garage, caged in with the filth of pigeons and the butts of cigarettes, is no place for you. Get. Go on.

It's a sickly thing. Sluggish. Probably rabies. Get out of here.

Someone will run over it. A small bump in the pavement, a tiny crushed skull. Get now. Find your friends.



CHANGE

The wind is changing. Fall will be here soon. And Winter. A shift of seasons is in the air, always foreboding. It is the time for Night. Even the days, heavy and crisp, imbued with gray, darken and take on the aspects of eternal evening. The sun is somewhere though.



IDLE

“OBJECTS IN MIRROR ARE CLOSER THAN THEY APPEAR”

Inside the car, the rain does not matter. Sitting in a parking lot, I watch the drops land on the windshield, rivulets running down the windowpane. There is a sad sense of peace in this moment. I am alone.

A sign hangs from the rear-view mirror:

“IMPORTANT: REMOVE TAG BEFORE VEHICLE IS IN MOTION”

A parking pass for work. Green and white and checked off (by hand) to the date it expires. As if anyone would ever know. In the seat of the car I let out a sigh. Safe in a mechanical sanctuary as the neon signs blur and bleed.

“DEATH OR SERIOUS INJURY CAN OCCUR”

This spelled out on a visor. Pennies, dark and discolored, are mired in the sticky syrup of soda spilled long ago. A ghostly shoe-mark of light tan fades gently on the glove compartment. And a brown paper bag hides my poison.



BROTHER II

Once upon a time I threw a heavy metal toy truck at my brother's head. It hit him and left a mark. I think there's still a scar.



MENTAL REPLY I

“You are a selfish, self-centered bastard.”

No shit.

MENTAL REPLY II

“You are a selfish, self-centered bastard.”

At least he knows who I am.

MENTAL REPLY III

“You are a selfish, self-centered bastard.”

Are you talking to me?

MENTAL REPLY IV

“You are a selfish, self-centered bastard.”

If you only knew...

MENTAL REPLY V

“You are a selfish, self-centered bastard.”

And?

VERBAL REPLY

“You are a selfish, self-centered bastard.”

“Fuck you.”





BROTHER III

It is the first time I see so much blood up close. My brother is throwing a temper tantrum, crying and shrieking for something long forgotten, throwing himself off the couch and hitting his head on the corner of a table. Blood is suddenly everywhere and the screaming escalates. It is unbearable for me to hear, and, unless I have a child of my own one day, I will never know how much worse it is for my mother. She scoops him up and examines him before whisking us both to the hospital.

I wait outside of the emergency room door and catch a few glimpses of Dr. Miller, my father's friend who eats all of his dinner and proves an eternal example whenever my brother and I don't feel like eating. After a number of stitches later the memory dissolves.

A happier recollection takes place in the same room. We are in the toy box together. When we play I sometimes stop to fix his hair. There is a certain way it lies that I like better, and a certain way when we aren't getting along that makes it easier to hate him. He gets a kick out of this, out of when I stop to move a strand or lock. Sometimes he brushes it back, sometimes he smiles and allows it to remain.





THE MAN IN YOUR OFFICE

Nathan passed away over the weekend. He was a co-worker in my former office. A quiet, soft-spoken man, he chose his words carefully, too carefully if you wanted a quick simple answer. He was deliberate with his speech, reserved and thoughtful with his reply, but if you showed an interest he had no trouble pontificating for as long as you could stand it.

Nathan looked like Frederick Douglass. A thick mane of wooly hair in various hues of gray and white topped his head, and his beard was much the same, going in the opposite direction. He lived alone in a dilapidated building in Schenectady. It was a place he was trying to renovate, and we heard daily stories of crumbling walls, exposed plumbing, and leaky ceilings.

A scrappy squirrel once found its way into the house and Nathan managed to trap it. He brought it into work, cage and all, before releasing it into the wild. He had no heat for over a year, and, finally, in the middle of a bitterly cold winter he relented and moved out for a time to stay with a friend.

He spoke often of Southern soul food, and he especially loved all of the vegetables ~ okra, collard greens, yams, and the like. I brought in

greens one day for him and he was impressed. We talked of the various preparation methods for greens and yams.

This is what people do, I think. They talk about their lives, their homes, their family, their food. It feels so alien sometimes.

I had heard that Nathan had a daughter from whom he was estranged. I never asked why.



GRAY GHOST

You darted out onto the Thruway. You should have known better than that. Andy couldn't stop fast enough so now you are dead.

Foolish thing. The thud you made, thrown up by the tire, was sickening. Andy looked like he was about to cry. See what you did.

What did it get you? Where are you now? Silly wreck of roadkill. My heart does not bleed for you. That would be a luxury. You have already wasted enough of my time and started the evening on a sour note. Andy doesn't like blood on the car either.





UNCLE ROBERTO I

The first time I met my Uncle Roberto was at the Albany Airport, in December of 1986. He struck me at once as foreign and exotic, and extremely short. His resemblance to my father was striking, and this was startling. I didn't know anyone who looked like my father. Having been raised in a sea of white faces, it was difficult to fathom that I was anything but like everyone else. I had always assumed that my Dad was one-of-a-kind ~ an anomaly ~ yet here in the airport was a man remarkably similar in appearance and bearing. Unassuming, quiet, with a twinkle in his eyes and an occasional broad smile ~ kindness and menace in one impossible-to-fully-gauge expression.

As we climbed into the car, my Uncle looked around him with an odd, wide-eyed face of wonder. My aunt explained that it was the first time he had seen snow in his life. I fell in love with him right there. He sat in the middle seat of the station wagon, my brother and I scrambled into the back, and Mom and Aunt Luz sat in the front. I watched my Uncle as he watched the snow fall outside.





FAIRY NURSERY TALE RHYME

Drink the sweet elixir.

Swallow it all down.

Welcome numbness.

Alice was conjured by a pedophile.

Pain, pain,

Go away

Come again

Another day.

Mother Goose laid a rotten egg
and the Brothers Grimm fuck each other at night.



DEE & THE GEESE

In the harsh fluorescence of the office, Dee has tears in her eyes as she recounts the scene: Driving towards the toll booth, she saw a goose and a line of goslings walking and stopping the traffic. All the cars were driving around the birds, swerving in large and small arcs to avoid the

family. Some laughed and pointed, others looked up, annoyed, but all respected the creatures.

A truck driver barged through, beeping his horn and running over the mother goose and babies, wheel after wheel after wheel.

“I wanted to fucking kill him. He sped up and ran right over her. All the other cars were turning to get around her, and he just drove right over them.”

I don’t know which is more moving – the story of the murdered goose family or Dee’s heartbreak at telling it. Mother to mother, she shared a heartache and pain that unites motherhood, something that I will never fully understand.

“He did it on purpose.”

Neither of us knows why. We cannot access that kind of evil. It is a small comfort.



UNCLE ROBERTO II

Outside the squirrels are playing. Romping about on the grass and running from tree to tree. It is winter still, no? My brother and I accompany our Uncle Roberto while he has a cigarette away from the family. He watches the squirrels then asks if we want him to catch one for us. I look at his face for a laugh or a smile, but he’s not joking.

“You can’t catch a squirrel!” I tell him.

He looks intently at the creatures and for a moment I believe he can.



WHEN THE ROSES BLOOM...

The obituary arrived the same day as the new couch. Sitting down on the pristine tapestry, adjusting a soft pillow beneath my back, I savored the moment of holding a not-yet-opened letter from a friend. It was Lee Bailey's usual typography and return address ~ an easy-on-the-eyes elegant sans serif style, rendered in a delicate gray color and printed on fine paper.

I opened the letter, excited to read news from Lee or maybe find a party invitation, when the copy of the *New York Times* obituary unfolded in my hands, along with an explanatory note from his assistant. A black and white photo stared out.

Lee Bailey was dead. I wouldn't get to see him again.

By most measures, I didn't know him that well. When I was ten or eleven, I wrote him a fan letter, conveying my interest in gardening and an appreciation for his book *Country Flowers* ~ the book that got me through a few Northeast winters. The gorgeous photographs were a comfort, and a tantalizing promise that sun and warmth and green would one day return.

That book also got me through a number of lonely nights, when in the darkness my mind raced with worry ~ a kid with too much happening in his head, scared of what the next day would bring. I don't

recall specifics – maybe something in school had upset me, maybe the terror was all imagined – I just know I was worried and couldn't sleep.

Then I would pull the heavy cloth-bound book from beneath the bed, turn on the reading lamp, and sit silently in a small pool of light, reading about gardens and flower anecdotes and a hero who found the freedom to write about those fascinating (for me) matters. The dread lessened then, and I drifted to sleep with soft visions of undulating flower meadows, the fragrant wisps of lavender and mint riding the wind on hot sunny days.

Lee and I struck up a friendship of sorts. He was certainly a mentor, even if he didn't see it that way. He invited me to visit him in the city “when the roses bloom” and that July I made it down to meet him. Nervously boarding the elevator that took me directly up to his penthouse suite, I patted out the wrinkles in my khakis and wondered what to expect.

Coming from the hot cement bed of a New York July day, the suite felt gloriously airy. It was cool here, as a breeze brushed through open doorways and draperies, delicately tickling a palm frond and evoking tranquil vistas of islands and far-away lands.

Lee was frail. I think he used a cane to get around – I don't rightly remember. He took me on a tour of the potted roses first. A balcony ran around the entire length of the place, holding a collection of container

plants. Most of the roses had already finished their first bloom – I had come just a little too late.

We moved inside and a woman brought me a glass of water. Sitting opposite each other on facing couches, we sat and talked. It was a brief visit, and my leave-taking was quick and anti-climactic. Still, I must have impressed him somewhat. After that he regularly invited me to parties and gatherings he held for his birthday and the holidays.

Those events were glittering high-society gatherings. I would coerce one of my friends into accompanying me – Suzie or Chris – and beg them to wear something presentable. In one of the unimaginably well-appointed residences of an upper West Side building, Peter Stone would open his home up for these gatherings in Lee's honor.

Mostly the crowd left us alone, and we faded into the background gratefully. It was easier to talk to the waiters and the bartender than hobnob with the rich and the famous. The chill of discernible class difference left us a bit off-balance.

A few people did speak to us, albeit briefly. Peter Stone was always a gracious host. Liz Smith came up to Chris and me and asked what two good-looking youngsters were doing at such a party. Joel Schumacher looked right through us, not rudely (and when we saw him on the street a few years later I mentioned the party and he thanked us for remembering him).

At the center of each party was Lee himself. Escorted in later than most everyone else, he sat and received visitors and gifts, warmly and wittily. I looked for an inconspicuous moment to sneak in and say hello out of politeness, and he was always good to me ~ his hand on mine in the manner of a proper mentor, his eyes kind and sparkling. At one of the last parties he pointed out the writer Rick Whitaker, setting up a friendly introduction. Suzie and I spoke to him for a while.

There were a lot of these opportunities to network, but I never felt right about that. I was there for Lee.



SUMMER STORM {PT. II}

You are welcome now. Come and cleanse, wash away the dust and dirt of a dying summer. Capture the pollen with your armies of water droplets, hold them captive then throw them into the dungeon of muddy earth below.

Lull me to sleep as you wage your war ~ the bombardment of rain and thunder now a soothing backdrop to an otherwise sleepless night. Drown the annoying buzz of nocturnal insects, muffle the distant trucks, and tramp the trundling trains on their far-away way.

Sleep comes easier with the low rumbling of thunder and the steady light cadence of rain, marching dully onward, tapping delicately against the window, rushing down upon the roof.

By morning it is over.



GRAY GHOST

Two little ones chase each other by the pool. Alighting from the fence, they scurry through the garden, bark chips disheveled in their wake. It is summer. The squirrels seem happy.

Overhead, a hawk waits.



GRAND CHILD

A retired man at the office came into work today to see his old friends. He was a grandfather now and we had all heard of how the baby had been born missing one of its arms. The parents did not know this until it was delivered. Somehow a cord had wrapped around its arm and stopped the blood flow when it was developing.

It was difficult to fathom the sadness, shock, and horror of it – the feeling of something so unfair. And yet the creature was alive, would grow up not knowing any other way. The grandfather was sad, anyone could tell, but he beamed with joy, and the strangest mixture of shame and pride.

Will the child ever know?





UNCLE ROBERTO III

My Uncle inhabited the shady underside of American life ~ the behind-the-scenes almost-middle-class level of the mythological caste-free system of the United States. I heard him say “This country is fucking shit” one moment, then extolling the possibilities and potential the next. He worked hard for what amounted to rather little. Much of it went to his kids back home. America would never be home for him.

Until he could save up enough money and return a raging success, he dwelled in the hidden recesses of high society. He and my Aunt worked for a Senator, entertained at dinners for Hillary Clinton and the Dalai Lama, but none of it seemed to impress my Uncle. He was happy blending into the background, smoking with the servants and maids in the garage or behind the house. It was a world I found fascinating, as a child, and far more fun than the formal dinner parties and stiff adult talk that sometimes surrounded me.



CROSSROADS OF THE WORLD

Sitting in the Greenlining Institute office in San Francisco, waiting for my friend Chris, I look at a letter to the *New York Times* hanging on the wall. It was written by Chris, one of his save-the-world/people-for-change/join-the-revolution letters ~ and suddenly I feel incredibly small.

This one letter, written with such grand hopes of change ~ what did it do? It appeared for a day in the newspaper and then was gone. Did someone in a powerful position read it and change their view? Did some politician implement a policy that had any effect after reading the letter? Or did it die a quick death, read by no one of importance, no one with the power to do anything, reduced to recyclable pulp by the end of the week?

I want to believe that words and paper may not last, but feelings and emotions do, yet all I can muster is a drowning feeling of hopelessness, of not being able to affect anything so why even bother. It's the same feeling I get when I'm in New York City for longer than a few days. The masses of people, the careless way we bump into each other, looking through and beyond other human beings ~ it becomes oppressive and stifling, like all those bodies are bearing down on one another, flattening our finest edges, erasing individual identities, and obliterating our separate souls.

How do you even begin to affect so many people? Lost in crowds, swallowed by swarms, a mite among many ~ what can one person *really* do for the good of the world? It's so much easier to be destructive. A few men can take down the country's tallest buildings, but how many does it take to build them up again?

And still Chris reminds me that all change has to begin somewhere, that the greatest social movements started with a small

group of dedicated individuals, uniting and crusading until change is set into slow, but definite, motion. I want to have that faith but I don't. So I place my faith in Chris. For now, it will have to be enough.



GRAY GHOST

There – on the fence post – can you see him? The thick tail swishing back and forth, the white underside sleek and sinuous, and all of him blending into the gray bark of a gnarled tree. He jumps.

Perched on a limb, he peers down at me. His tail is a fuzzy question mark. He speaks. In his squirrel gobbledy-gook he talks to me. I do not answer. I don't understand squirrel-speak. But I listen.

If you sit still long enough, they will come. If you are quiet and respectful they will speak to you.

No one cares anymore.



UNCLE ROBERTO IV

Before one of my Uncle's visits, my brother and I found an old coffee maker in the basement, and in our make-shift room we set it up in the hopes of luring him into our company and keeping him there. He was always drinking coffee ~ black, and scalding hot. We just wanted to

be around him then ~ watching him, listening to him, laughing with him. Everyone wanted that. He entranced certain people ~ his long trail of curling smoke and a growing length of ash dangling perilously over his knee, ready to break off at any moment.

He didn't care, oblivious to so much, yet the ash didn't fall – his arm moved to the ashtray just in time, every time. I often watched that ash burn, hoping to catch it fall, hoping to see that my Uncle's apathy could be hurtful and messy to himself and not just to me. It never fell. Not on my watch anyway.

It seemed some days that the ash would get longer and longer, that his fingers would turn to ash too, and then his hand, and his arm and his body, and we would all watch ~ mesmerized, mortified, transfixed ~ and he couldn't even be bothered to care.



THE PROCESS

I've never understood those writers who could wake up and will themselves to write. Even when I've had the luxury of endless days without job or obligation, there were so many times when I simply couldn't do it ~ and wouldn't waste the time trying.

This is a difficult project. I don't like dwelling on the past or being haunted by the ghosts of the dead. It is depressing work, heavy work. I sing show tunes in the car as loud as possible to shake out of the stupor.

A silly lunch with co-workers is a welcome respite. It is easy at such times to let go and slide down that hill, and there is such a short distance from here to there. In a truly despondent state, I don't write.

I'm not there yet.



THE SQUIRREL STORY

I am rushing to get something while on a fifteen-minute break from work. The day is gray and my car is dirty. Turning right onto Route 9W, I can see there is a hold-up ahead. The cars are swerving around something in the road – a broken bottle, a pot-hole, some bit of wreckage I imagine, and then I see a squirrel there. Slowing, I can make out that the back half of the animal is flattened. Someone had run him over, only his head and front two feet and upper body were still intact, still alive. It is grotesque and cartoonish. There is panic in his jittery movements. He hops forward and to the side, but the rest of his body won't follow. He tries so hard to get out of the road as cars rush by.

I realize too late that I should run him over. There is no time to process this. I swerve at the last moment, hoping to crush his skull and brain. I don't think I hit him. I am down the road in front of other cars. There is no way to put the car in reverse and back over the squirrel. I hope someone will see the animal and run it over, end the misery. The helplessness is terrifying and I begin to cry.

Why am I crying?

Dead squirrels are everywhere, their red and gray carcasses line the roads, mounds of dusty, flattened fur dot the streets. Their stomachs have been ripped open, innards splattered and organs trampled beneath blind tires. The blood has turned dark, drying on a hot day or trickling away in a storm. Sometimes their heads are intact, with eyes squinting as though in pain or fitful sleep, or stunned and wide, the pressure of a car or truck bulging them open. We think nothing of it. The world is cruel that way.

This squirrel was struggling to get out of the road, to drag its useless body somewhere else, driven by survival or hope, and who can tell which.

On my way back the squirrel is gone.



UNCLE ROBERTO V

The world beyond the Philippines was a frightening place for my Uncle. It made him by turns bitter, angry, shy, embarrassed, boastful and despondent. There was pride and arrogance there too. In making his way to find a better life for his family, his children, he did not get the life he wanted for himself. He was fond of money, though he never had much,

and saved even less. He often claimed that with money one could buy happiness and all the worries would disappear.

At the end, his life was mostly lived in regret. Cancer and emphysema removed the last vestiges of stubbornness from him, taking away whatever it was that made him my Uncle. It is hard to recognize the small, frail old man in the last family video he appears in.

It is strange to see him that way; in his apartment the day of his funeral, the video played on a fuzzy television set as we all watched in a mixture of laughter and tears. His eyes are distant, his breathing labored. He moves slowly, unsure of himself. The fiery drive, the temper that could be so cutting and so comical at once, the caustic banter ~ they were gone. Everything had drained from him – blood, fluid, life.

The man on the screen was a shell, a sad shell of regret and ache. He looks old and childish at the same time. Once or twice the fire returns, and I see my Uncle as I knew him, in a sly smile, in the crinkling of his eyes. And then he is gone.

Now he is gone.

He died in a country that was always foreign to him, though he was as American as most people will ever get. He always wanted to go back to the Philippines, back to his home. He used to say, “You can never understand *the feeling*” when trying to explain why he liked the Philippines better than anywhere else, emphasizing “feeling” for his own inexplicable reasons.

In the minutes before we left for the funeral, my Aunt came up to me: “You know your Uncle loved you...” and I nod, folding her in my arms.

But I don't know.



A LOST ART

Writing is my refuge. It is a sacred space to be alone with thoughts and ideas and feelings that wouldn't be all right in the real world, emotions that might threaten to overrun a daily existence. Odd then, that writing has so often been a way of survival for me, a way of making it through a reckless world. It is a lost art, I fear. Everyone has ADHD these days, the kids are on medication, and where once was a quick tantrum is now an extended time-out session. No one bothers to read. One of my cousins, a girl of twelve, said that she doesn't like the Harry Potter books because they're boring compared to the movies. I felt sad, and old. Sad for what she was missing; old for pitying the young.

What must it be like to grow up without any need for imagination?





EMPLOYMENT

A man screams in the hallway. His voice echoes through the long corridor. He cannot escape.

I only work here.



BOOK SIGNING

One of my favorite authors, Gregory Maguire, is holding a book signing. I bring my ear-marked first-edition copy of *Wicked*, and the other three adult novels he's written. I love it when the writers of dark, haunting and disturbing novels turn out to be warm and friendly and full of smiles and good humor. The wit was expected; the happy countenance was not. I can understand this though.

A few people have told me that the first time we met they expected a dark, brooding, artistic figure – only to be surprised by my humor and readiness to laugh. It's better this way. Imagine the disappointment if they expected ebullience and charm, only to have some sad, serious person of cruel wit and cutting comments.

I hand Mr. Maguire a fan letter and thank him for signing the books. A few days later he writes back, honor and decency intact. Some people still care.





DIANE

The dead come to mind at strange times. Someone I haven't thought of in years suddenly sprang into my head as I drove back to work from lunch. Her name was Diane. A friend of my Mom's from Nursing school, she died a while ago from breast cancer I think. For no reason at all she was remembered. Maybe it's all this talk of shades. Ghosts can tell when they are welcome. Andy believes this.

On a summer vacation in Cape Cod, my Mom brought Diane with us. My brother and I were a handful, and Dad was long since sick of taking trips, so Diane was my Mom's escape, her hedge against excessive bad and embarrassing behavior. It worked out well. Diane took an interest in the crabs we caught and the various beach games we played, and most important of all she told me how to force paper-white narcissus.

It seemed a cozy thing to do, and in the cool night breeze of the Cape the thought of fall evenings was ever on the periphery. I asked her to repeat the process over and over again on that trip, to the point where she was exasperated and tired of my requests, but I couldn't get enough of it ~ her slightly smoky drawl, coarse from years of cigarettes, and the way she described each step so meticulously.

She grew African violets beneath fluorescent lights and on the windowsill of her apartment, somewhere in Guilderland. I didn't hear of her death until a few years after the fact.



MODERN HUMANITY

We are so careful with our cars, ironing our pants, finding cel phone reception ~ and so careless with each other. Our lives are taken up, filled in, boxed together, crowded and packed with such mean stuff. Simple human decency is lost; there is no room for it, not with the rush that is modern living. Communication is instantaneous. Information flies by at light speed, with no time to process or comprehend what it all means.

Where are we going and what are we losing?

We need to wake up. We need to slow down. We need to listen. We need to pay attention to what is going on around us, and not just with what directly affects us.

A return to manners and courtesy, nothing more.

No more tardiness, no more talking on cel phones in restaurants, no more blindly going about our business oblivious to the person behind or in front of us.

I'm no better than you on any of these counts.

We need to start somewhere.

All is not lost. And yet...



SANCTUARY

It is, perhaps, my favorite room in the house. There is a sanctity to it, a quietude and tranquility not found in any other spot. A place of repose and calm. My bedroom, with its shades of blue, lavender, periwinkle ~ no television, no stereo, no distraction, no inlets, no outlets to the rest of the world ~ it is a meditative mecca of peace, of sweet slumber.

In summer it is cool ~ a light airy space, and a fan humming in the corner, sending out billows of air molecules over hot skin. In the middle of the night Andy brings a cool glass of water, proffered without thought or request. I didn't think to ask, but it is always exactly what I want. He places it gently onto the bedside table, beneath a tissue, moving my book and my glasses. I thank him, sitting up and taking a few sips to show my gratitude. The water is cool and refreshing.

In the winter the bedroom takes on a different feeling ~ one of coziness and warmth ~ the welcoming folds of blankets, and Andy, groggy and sleepy-eyed ~ a haven of contentment, his body emanating heat and security. It is a safeness I don't ever want to leave on cold winter mornings.





NOT THE END

Is this it?

Nothing is absolute.

Is that all?

We can never know.

Sometimes, it is enough.

Sometimes it is not.





AFTERWARD:

There is a love for people, for humanity, that I've always hidden and pretended wasn't there. It's not a case of lack in feeling, but of feeling something so strongly that there is no way to fully convey it without a sense of failure. And I do love people. I wouldn't watch them like I do if there wasn't genuine enjoyment there. We are interesting creatures with infinite variations.

Apathy is our greatest enemy. Passivity and acquiescence are too often evil words. We cannot afford not to care. I tried for a while, thinking it would be easier, less painful, but it's not. A dull, nagging, relentless pain was always there ~ the hurt of guilt, the sting of suspicion, and the horrid notion that by not doing anything I could actually be doing something harmful. There is little nobility or grace in turning a blind eye. At the very least an attempt should be made.

And so I try.



