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The Poet Gives Voice to the Landscape

The house of Simon Perkins, Akron's Founder, still stands. Each year until junior high-- by which time they figured immovable cynicism had set in-- our teachers made us pilgrims to that shrine. We witnessed life and luxury in the far-off days of the Connecticut Western Reserve, where Greek revival farmhouses and the Imperial ideal flourished side by side, where midway through the eighteenth century the insatiate colonies of the seaboard reached as far as the British crown, Virginia and Carolina colliding, on paper, with the great Bourbon expanse of Louisiana. Connecticut claimed the wilderness south of Lake Erie, a land cut by narrow rivers and haunted by the ghosts the cultured Eries, the Cat People annihilated by their North American brothers before Europeans had a chance at them. One found arrowheads in stream bottoms, barrels of muskets rusted thin as paper in the middens of vanished farms. It was black, glaciared, watered ground reclaimed each spring by forests of oak, maple, chestnut which, reborn, covered and forgave all. It was so rich that during the infamous Hinckley hunt settlers piled slaughtered wolves and bear and deer fifteen feet high against their sheds for almost a generation, until the land was "tamed."

It was not always the mid-, but once the far west. Between 1789 and 1807 the sunset boundary of the United States was Portage Path, now in Fairlawn where the rich kids live. In a meadow on the flat river plain stands an ancient triple oak, trained by Indians into a trident to mark the point at which one carried one's canoe up the portage around the rapids of the Cuyahoga. Here you began your portage from the Cuyahoga to the Tuscarawa, using the Portage Lakes southward to ease the way. To go from the Cuyahoga to the Tuscarawa is to shift from the watershed of the Great Lakes and the St.Lawrence to the watershed of the Mississippi-- a crossroads in pre-Columbian times of unparalleled significance, the Suez of the Delawares and the Iroquois.

I forget why Simon Perkins built a city on our spur of land rising sufficiently above the surrounding plains to justify the Greek name akros, the high place-- but it must have had something to do with money. The town of Middlebury-- long vanished but for a tiny park beside a fire station that was once the Middlebury town square-- materialized first. As a kid I scooted under the fence of Middlebury cemetery sometimes to look at tombstones whose eroding inscriptions bore birthdates in the 18th century.
For a boy hungering after antiquities weighed in the scale of Nineveh and Troy, this was a disappointment. Resenting the newness of our history, I made my own, imagining a tumbled wall or a weedgrown arch a remnant undiscovered civilizations. The ridge between lawns marked an imperial parade. White stones taken from a tumbled Temple were worked ignominiously into a Savings & Loan facade. Had I been less ignorant I would have known of the Moundbuilders, the mysterious predecessors of the Eries and other woodland tribes, whose antiquity and engineering skills were very nearly of European stature.

Middlebury and Brittain and Cascade and other hamlets swallowed by the growing adolescent Akron gave their names to housing developments and parkinglots or were forgotten. The town fathers dug a canal to link us with the highways of commerce to the northeast and the southwest. A riverboat took six hours to pass through Akron, which was by the standard of the day, I suppose, greased lightning.

The Civil War, elsewhere a disaster, enriched the canalmen's pockets and the conscience of local abolitionists; Simon Perkins' neighbors were stations of the Underground Railway; Sojourner Truth raised her voice from the vanished Akron Opera House. Industry followed, and Seiberling and Firestone, and bitter labor disputes cited by Steinbeck in The Grapes of Wrath as the beginning of American blue-collar consciousness. In the wake of all of this we had become so important that my mother bragged that Akron was, after New York and Detroit, third on Hitler's list of American cities to be bombed.

"I suppose the Stukas will fly over Pittsburgh and Philadelphia and DC in their hurry to get here," I scoffed, "and then over Cleveland to get to Detroit." Mother's civic pride remained undaunted by my superior knowledge of geography.

In her time the city divided into neighborhoods along lines of ethnic origin. This tended to divide people according to religion as well, and there were recognizable Catholic and Protestant neighborhoods. One could burn a cross on North Hill and be sure that Catholic eyes would see it. Shouting "Hunky" or "Hillbilly" from a corner in our neck of the woods would get a volatile reaction. Out towards Fairlawn blood grew bluer, and the white spires of solvent Protestantism punctuated the elms.

Our neighborhood possessed a special kind of chaos. By that I imply not disorder, but an order deriving little from what would a few blocks away be thought of as reality. We were the blue-eyed strivers. In this we were most like the blacks downtown, whom of course we most mistrusted, wanting the same things as they, fearing there wouldn't be enough for everybody.

Getting ahead was the goal, though no two people agreed on what getting ahead looked like, and for every one
that said the key was education, another said it was money or who you knew or the sort of luck that rains on the adaptable. We were Machiavellian out of ignorance rather than intention. If someone else wants it, it must be good. Never be content. Join. Test. Discard. Try everything, and if something works, go with it hell-for-leather.

I wish I'd kept track, to see who made it.

The Ice Age is recent geological memory, and more frequently than people understand an element even of human memory. Across from the apartment house where my parents lived when I was born lies Blue Pond, a glacial remnant over part of which some entrepreneur had built a dance hall on pilings driven into the mud. A trolley line ended at the dance hall, and of a Saturday night the area was busy with sheiks and shebas and the young in all their finery. One night the trolley overshot and instead of stopping at the end of the track careered into the dance hall, throwing it from its pilings and sinking all into the depths of the pond. I tell this last part having heard it many times and hoping it is true. What is verifiable is that at the edge of Blue Pond among the cattails and blackbirds are rotting stumps of pilings. It would be well for the glacier to have this triumph after all the years.

Goodview Avenue, the first home I remember, perches on the side of a moraine rucked up by the Wisconsin Ice Sheet. In winter we saw through bare trees to the warehouses and quonsets of the railroad. The thunderous coupling of engines was the lullaby of our infancy. Beyond the railyards tossed lights of Ellet and Mogadore and lands southward. We could stand on the muddy ground of the development and behold in the distance Akron's first McDonald's, a thrill impossible to convey now that 15 cent hamburgers and 10 cent fries-- tickets more than twice a year out of our yellow kitchens into the sophisticated milieu of public dining-- have vanished from the world. Only one side of the street was good for building, the other essentially a cliff wall, and those who came a little later than we and had to perch on the cliff served as a sort of geological underclass. Left on its own, nature would plunge their houses to destruction a millennium or so before ours.

Adelaide Hill drops down gently on the southeast corner. Pilgrim Hill on the northeast, however, is a sheer drop, a glacial convulsion, an asphalt roller-coaster lined with jumbly stairstep houses like pictures of villages in Tibet. Steep, windy, black, it formed the principle event of the walk home from school. You could make the ascent less grueling if you stayed to the ditches on either side, open storm sewers that gave the option of a broken landscape of rock and hollow instead of the implacable macadam climb of the pavement. They provided not greater ease, but greater interest. One's parents warned
incessantly against the ditches, for reasons unclear to me still. Certainly one was safer there than in the street, where in winter even skillful drivers squeezed their wheels and tapped their brakes in time to the terrible dance of ices. Perhaps it had something to do with the Visibility Syndrome that pervades parenthood and to which the rest of the world is generally immune. The Visibility Syndrome dictates that a child must be physically visible— or at the very least audible— whenever a parent's anxiety level reaches a set but ineffable point.

You remember your mother's voice over the rooftops, just loud enough that the matter could not be discerned, only that unmistakable note of adult hysteria. You run. You arrive panting on the doorstep, only to hear, "Just checking," she oblivious to the humiliation of being summoned from games by one's mother.

Parents cherish this power, like so many Fausts able to sorcer demons from the air with a word.

The Pilgrim Hill ditches made it necessary for adult eyes to shift to the left or right to find us. They wanted us straight ahead, on dead level, at high noon. We were firmly admonished to keep to a pre-selected route between home and school, without short-cuts or deviations, so in case there were an emergency we could be located quickly. I don't know what they expected. That was the age of duck-and-cover, so perhaps they wanted to gather us in their arms in the last instant before the white blast of the Bomb.

Pilgrim Hill could not be avoided. For a while big boys from the neighborhood lingered in ambush at the bottom, like lions at a watering hole. Their torment seemed pre-ordained, a rite-of-passage like wearing a tie or having to go to church. Certainly their attitude implied they were perfectly within their rights. I did not yet recognize their identity with the trolls and black knights lurking at bridges and crossroads to exact indignities and thwart the way. I believe, however, that I forgave them even then for their archetypal stature. Their attacks frightened us, but they never seemed unfair or unexpected. Oh yes. We were wondering when this would happen. They gave you the choice of outrunning them or of carrying them up Pilgrim Hill on your back. I couldn't outrun anybody, so I chose to bear, amazed and relieved at being able to do so, step by step up the endless asphalt.

It truly did not occur to us to protest these things. The world was the world.

Like all isolated hills, ours tended to develop its own biota. My family formed its own tiny variation within the subspecies. We were Protestants in a heavily Central European Catholic quarter. My father was an immigrant from Pennsylvania in an area otherwise West Virginian— a distinction probably lost now but of moment when it
mattered what line of gouged-out hills your starving ancestors stumbled from. My father was an office worker packed in among truck drivers and tire builders and a surprising percentage of honky-tonk musicians. Sometimes at night the twang of the steel guitar drifted from the Stewart's house next door; Mr. Porter down the street put on a tuxedo and a pink ruffled shirt to play "The Tennessee Waltz" at high school dances.

That Goodyear Heights was a tough neighborhood didn't occur to me until we moved to one more homogenous, suburban, and safe, where I found myself regarded as a tough interloper. We'd always compared ourselves to the Seiberling boys, who were really tough. There were no blacks on our side of the hill, and their legendary status made us think that white boys who went to school with them were a breed apart, fashioned especially to meet the mysterious circumstance of interracial contact.

We were Akron's Celts, pushed to the rim, repeated defeat giving us-- incredibly-- an ineradicable sense of superiority. Our pre-fab houses clung to the steep eastern slope of the moraine, refugees pushed to the edge of the habitable environment. We skirmished strenuously, if indecisively, with the boys in the neighborhoods spread over the gentler south and west sides, where the shaded brick houses seemed huge and ancient and the streets bore names out of exotic geography, Sumatra and Malacca and Congo. It was a class war, and we were the plebeians. We were also smaller, younger, and less honorable, little guerrillas striking hard and low against power we couldn't meet head on.

We called each other collectively after the schools we attended, and individually after our mothers' names, a practice both universal and inexplicable. The Seiberling boys-- Nancy and June and Mary and Solange-- had air rifles and fathers who would chase you in defense of their sons and properties. We Betty Jane boys-- Ethel and Marion and Evelyn and Leona-- had only our cunning and our willingness to slink by night into enemy garages to chalk mark the walls and stuff the barrels of airguns with soaked sugar. We never won, exactly, but sometimes we could make their victories costly.

I saw the differences between the other Heights families and us, but didn't think of them as invariably in our favor. Most of my approved playmates were quite violent. Our games were war and cowboys, which was war in ten-gallon hats, or Lost Civilizations, which was war in imaginary Trojan helmets. I think the violence sounded well in our parents' ears, for it was the American and Christian violence of good triumphing over evil. Hitler had been dead for less than a decade, Stalin still lived, and righteous force had acquired no taint in the nostrils of Goodyear Heights.
The Heights families were not lucky. They married at eighteen and in their frenzy to keep their kids from the same mistake, drove them to the altar at sixteen. Many of the children were maladjusted in some way, impeded, anti-social, loose-bladdered. The scent of urine mingled perpetually with flower beds and scorching asphalt. They were the sort that went to carnivals, and if I seemed sufficiently unenthusiastic, just politely acceding to a friend's invitation, I'd sometimes be allowed to go along. I usually had to throw up after the rides, and they were good at finding places to do that without being in the way. Throwing up was a big deal at my house, and someone held your head. But the other families took it in stride, growing impatient if you made a production of it. The daughters had assignations with carnival workers with a frequency that made me think that's why they went, to give their mothers the opportunity to bray, "... and with a carnival barker. The scum of the earth!" I was on the daughters' side, though they were too high-and-mighty fifteen to care.

I admired the Heights families for their vulnerability to things that were no threat to anyone else in the world.

Left to our own devices, we played Civil War or Iwo Jima. Playground snowforts were not mere architectural projects, but the Walls of Troy from which we sallied with a clash of imagined bronze. Perhaps all children are bloody. A trip to the toy store confirms this.

It was an attitude our elders did not discourage. For many in my mother's generation World War II, with its shared dangers and unity of purpose, was the most wonderful of memories, so keen and present that under their influence I grew up thinking that "The War" was a perpetual state, a locality more than an event. One could visit The War and witness danger and heroism first hand. I had dreams about "Going to the War," in which it was found through an extension of the house, a long corridor one followed until one heard bullets.

Saturday war movies at the Linda Theater intensified this. Where else could they have been filmed but at The War? Grandfather gave me a book of unused ration stamps and novels whose covers boasted that they were made of the worst paper, to conserve the best for the war effort. My uncle passed down a coloring book of famous combat airplanes, from which I preferred the camouflage planes and the Flying Tigers, which could be colored most variously. We dreamed of the War, not wicked dreams but heroic ones that inspired the exultation sexual dreams would inspire a few years further on.

Our enemies at play were still Japs and Krauts. Commies have never replaced them in the bloodier passages of juvenile imagination. I believe this is because the atom
bomb taught even children something about uncritical enthusiasm in war. Never again do we dare hate an enemy so purely.

If we had believed our history was as good as anyone else's we might have paid it closer attention. Mother was born in the Western Reserve. She had two brothers. In old photographs she's blonde, like me, and full-faced, though by the time she reached adolescence her hair had darkened to deep brown. When it's cut straight across she looks like Buster Brown. She holds her cat in her lap, an old stray called Randy-cat. Sometimes Randy-cat is dressed in doll clothes, his gaze shot into the upper distance, loftily refusing to acknowledge the humiliation. The light in the pictures is always leafy and dappled, as though she lived in a garden. An orchard comes closer to the facts—apples, cherries, plums, creeping moonflowers. In the last picture in her back-home album, she holds a baby in the shade of a plum tree, the leafy dapple thrown on a stuccoed plane I know to be the wall of her father's garage. The baby is me.

I am trying to remember what she said about her childhood. Much of it was spent in illness, much more in the idle convalescence medical wisdom thought necessary back then. But was it happy? If she told me, I can't recall.

I knew two of mother's childhood friends, Eleanor and Lillian, both maiden ladies abiding on the street where they lived as girls. For a time they made an effort to stay together. They took up hobbies they might share one night a week at each other's houses, embroidery or Turkish toweling, for instance, that were fine to look at but couldn't be used unless the preacher were coming to dinner.

Mother admonished me not to make fun of Lillian. I never saw a reason to. Her vaguely crooked mouth and steady silence seemed majestic to me. It was years before my growing intellect passed her stalled one and I recognized that Lillian was retarded. In her father's front yard lay a bed of hybrid iris, neglected since his death and slowly vanishing in a thicket of weeds, the gold and purple heads still fighting through in summer. In the foyer of the house someone had built a fountain out of brown and pink tile. Water spurted from a smiling brass dolphin. If one called for her, she stood behind the lattice door long enough for one to contemplate the splashing water. Only when she was sure you'd seen your fill would her thin shadow would move behind the marbled glass, that crooked smile appear, ready to be escorted.

Eleanor wore deep green silk and was the sort of person who corrected your grammar. No, that's not quite accurate. She was the sort of person whose rectitude so radiated that one corrected one's own grammar, stuttering so anxiously after perfection that at last one preferred to say nothing at all. Some sense that children have for such
things told me that Eleanor loved mother more than mother loved Eleanor. I thought this gave mother power, gave her something to parry the extended, expensive education which Eleanor wore without modesty.

Mother retained her past naturally, remaining in contact with it while moving forward. Living your whole life in the city where you were born helps. Periodically I return to Northeastern Ohio to gather fragments of myself, and of her. I remember things by standing where I stood when she told them to me. I'm brought up short by a street name she mentioned, or a house where she once attended a party, or the glare of the windows of the hospital where I was born. I have her high school graduation picture with the names written carefully on the back. Someday I'll dial a phone, knock on a door--

She'd have talked more about her past had she thought of it as completed, as something filed away and requiring particular effort to retrieve. She did not seem to cherish her history until it occurred to her, quite late, that it could be lost.

The rest of us had our sense of history pounded into us both by environment and by teachers who seemed different than now, more intense, at once free-hearted and inflexible from the conviction of right, unburdened by the avalanche of paperwork and legal culpability that makes teaching today a partially clerical, partially disciplinary trade. I intensified this historicity by becoming a bookworm, one of those children who infuriate company by sitting in the corner reading the encyclopedia when they should be affecting an interest in adult conversation.

The life of books is not necessarily more interesting than daily life, just bigger. It supplied the windy mountainsides, rain forests, and talking animals that were in short supply in Akron. Most of what I prized was in short supply in Akron.

Our teachers shepherded us to the local branch of the public library, got us our first library cards in heavy yellow paper printed with the image of the winking owl of wisdom. This was our first assertion as individuals. It was not my father's name on the card, not my mother's, mine. God bless the child that's got his own. Anything.

We learned the card catalogue, and Dewey, and to go to the bathroom before going to the library, for there it was kept locked against unnatural assignations, and even to ask for the key involved one obscurely in what one did not understand except that it was too distasteful to be explained. Prizes were given for diligence, worlds opened, alternatives suggested.

The first book I chose on my own was The Iliad. People don't believe me when I tell this, but it's true. I remember the day and hour. Spring, when light soaked through the windows of the Ellet Branch Public Library in a
color between jade and khaki, mother said I could choose whatever book I wanted. I bounded through that light with library card clutched in hand, the intellectual indenture of childhood over. Deliberately passing the thin bright volumes one knew one was meant to choose, I went for the Classics Shelf, where a single red-bound book had called to me for as long as I could remember. What Classics were I didn't know. Just that I wanted that book.

Pulled from the shelf, it revealed on its cover a majestic bearded man leaning out of clouds, head crowned by rays of light. Zeus, of course, but then a glimmering mystery. The title said Tales of the Trojan War. You opened the cover onto a plate of Odysseus plowing the shore, the squalling form of his son tossed under the hooves of his horses. Another plate showed Achilleus sorrowfully lifting the Queen of the Amazons from the dust where he had laid her. Another, Priam bent like an old root in the lamplight of Achilleus' tent, begging the body of his child. I read the book a dozen times, besotted, mesmerized. I hid it in my closet so I wouldn't have to return it. I might have it still if my parents hadn't received a call from Miss Apple at the library, at once scolding and understanding. The word "renewal" shouted redemption in my ear. I could keep the book many times, return it, come the next day and have it again. My daydreams filled with warriors on a windy plain, with the clash of bronze on bronze. My sights were set high. I wanted to be a god, a radiant Olympian, their imperfect but certainly sufficient abilities seeming the answer to all of boyhood's difficulties.

The Tales of the Trojan War gave me a mythology in which loyalty, courage, cunning, desperate hope had prominent places. So also, unfortunately, had deviousness, brag, and violence. It gave me a place where neither my parents nor anybody I knew had ever wandered. The empire of the past was mine. I chose to live there as often and completely as possible. That this choice could turn out to be a disaster could not have been foreseen. Then it was salvation.

Weekly I paced the library aisles filling my arms with mythologies, paleontology and archaeology, lumbering folios of Sea Life or the Animals of Africa, moving through the green light like a merchild at the bottom of the sea. The library smelled, like the school, of chalk, and one came to associate that smell abstractly with Learning. The floor tiles, which except for the lower shelves were the architectural feature most apparent to a small boy, repeated the jade of the light, alternating it with a foamy cream that showed scuff-marks and which therefore one avoided, hopping like a bird from green square to green square. In this way I meant to pass unmarked into the adult stacks, having been warned against precocity, believing anything delicious must be in some obscure way illicit.
Before turning eleven I felt the possibilities of the children's shelves dwindle to the point of desperation. I read everything, reread favorites, resignedly took up unpromising material I'd scorned before. I'd been caught hiding Black Stallion and Bomba the Jungle Boy books behind the furnace so no one else could use them. I continued to keep rare finds weeks overdue, believing I wouldn't love them so much if they weren't meant to be mine. I glanced furtively across the room to the Young Adult section. Some of the titles I could make out, A Tale of Two Cities, The Lord of the Rings, The Snows of Kilamanjaro, names that filled me with inexpressible longing, names off-limits until Miss Apple extended the invitation to cross over, until the owl-less drab of the Adult card lay crumpled in one's pocket.

The To Be Stacked cart was sometimes left in a place that could not be seen from the front desk, and on it might lie refugees from the Adult section, page after pictureless page, enticing highways of black print, adventures, whole worlds unfathomed. The fatter the book, the more alluring. I felt free to open the covers of To Be Stacked volumes, but wouldn't actually read more than a word or two, sure that by some librarianally radar Miss Apple would know.

One had to pass through the Adult section to get to the check-out desk, over which Miss Apple presided with two-colored wall-eyes that caught one in a cross-fire of accusation should one's own linger too long on forbidden bindings. Nobody minded a glance, as long as it were idle energy and not the premature curiosity children were warned against when they wandered from their Dr. Seuss. I managed to appear to be walking with head straight forward time after time, Miss Apple arranging her wrinkles in approval, until one afternoon when I was arrested irresistibly by a beautiful face.

It was a sad, pale countenance, its hair wild, its mouth so small it might make for singing the singing of a bird. Its enormous eyes possessed a hint of mirth at odds with fatality, amused by, superior to, damaged by all fate. The face comprised the cover of a book on the New or Recommended table. I put down my selections and, for once oblivious to Miss Apple, picked up the book with the sad face on it. Across the spine shone SHELLEY. A girl's name, though the face was a man's. I thrilled at the ambiguity. Through the bindings I felt the vibration of something provocative and intricate, something infinitely remote from the lumpy, familiar horizons of Akron. I opened and read:

"... One, pale as yonder waning moon/ with lips of lurid blue;/ The other, rosy as the morn/ When throned on ocean's wave/ It blushes o'er the world;/ Yet both so passing wonderful!"
I put the book down. With one finger of my right hand I traced the outline of the beautiful face. With one finger of my left hand I moved across the contours of my own face, comparing, believing that if like a blind sage I could read them out they would be the same. Certainly I was to be a poet. Shelley shouted confirmation. I left my Golden Book of Minerals on the table, approached the check-out with SHELLEY clutching to my chest.

On that day of miracles there was to be yet one more. Miss Apple did not scold or take the book away. Those librarianly arms uncrossed. Those virgin lips labored into a smile. So radiant was the joy in her skim-milk eyes that I thought she might shout out loud. Perhaps, like Merlin burying the sword in the stone, she had planted SHELLEY as a beacon to the right soul.

For a year I loved Miss Apple fiercely. We ransacked the shelves for books about Percy Bysshe Shelley. Though Miss Apple enlarged my reach through inter-library loan, still there was not enough, and weeks went by without undeveloped material. I was reduced to fingering the indexes of other books, looking for the magic name, satisfying myself with a line or a chapter or a passing reference. In this manner I discovered Byron and Keats. I discovered atheism and tourism. I discovered the mother of Frankenstein.

Though I couldn't recall mentioning my obsession, it must have seeped into my speech and carriage, for my classmates, with an indivisible mixture of homage and cruelty, began to call me "The Poet." Eddie Morrison in particular couldn't let me pass without using those stinging words, at once so sweet and so humiliating. I had no feeling that my friends knew what a poet was, except someone romantic and withdrawn. Fine with me. I affected a distracted air, gazing into the treetops when a bird sang or the first star glimmered over the ballfield at dusk. From the corner of my eye I saw girl lean toward girl, making words behind her hand, "He's a poet."

Not until after my reputation as a poet had been established did it occur to me actually to make a poem. I knew how to rhyme conventional emotions so to gain praise from my teachers, but had never attempted true poetry. It took grief. It took falling in love for the first time.

It was August. The moon flowed on the dusty grass and through the lace of the Chinese elm. I was lonesome and disquieted and bitterly in love, and lacked even the word for what ailed me. I sat in my room praying nobody would knock on the door, a volume of Arab poetry open over Millay for inspiration, Lady Khansa's lament for her dead lover. The exhausted green of summer bleached white in the moon outside the window. Slowly, agonizingly I wrote. I'd never before felt the power I felt then. I used words that nobody on that street, maybe nobody in the neighborhood ever had
since the glacier's had retreated.

Before midnight I'd created a poem. It lay on my desk, white in the migrating moonlight. I wanted to go to sleep and dream of the poem, of my hopeless love, of all that would be available to the tongue of honey I put on that night. I felt the spirit of Lady Rain enter me, as though she'd hovered over the world in the time between her death and my birth, impatient to be reborn. I had given her the vessel. I had given her myself.

It was a putting away of former things. I had a calling. It was a crucial moment in the myth I told myself since the first moment I remember. No, more than that, it was the moment when that myth became visible to the world. If I stood forever outside, this was why. If I was awkward and unkempt, this was why. If I had no place and no goal, it was because I had been waiting for this place and this goal to be announced. The poem on the paper said, as nothing had in all my life, Here I am. Think what you will.

When I am very drunk I will still recite that poem.

That one becomes one's parents is a fact one accepts after long struggle. The mirror says it, the phrases you hear escaping after you swore a hundred times never to let that pass your lips. One is an ambulating compendium of one's heritage. That my grandfathers and their grandfathers live in me is, now that I am reconciled to it, a comfort. I want to know, would the lovers of their youth know them in me? Would they recognize the touch, the turn of phrase? Do I lie the same lies, kiss with the same intensity, sleep with the same soundness? If so, good. The first blood still runs. The paradisal DNA uncoils, a sinless serpent in a sinless garden.

Yet here also is a singular responsibility, one invariably botched before quite recognized. My parents and theirs before them back to Eve stood looking over my shoulder that summer night at a halting poem, saying with me, Here I am. Think what you will. I too became a founder, though of what will be known only after every particular, including my name, blurs into the Universal Story.

Under the pressure of such expectations it's important to remember that one need not be triumphant, only faithful. Only willing.