I would lay siege to the truth only as animal exploration and fancy may do so, first from one quarter and then from another, expecting the reality to be not simpler than any experience of it, but far more extensive and complex.

George Santayana, Scepticism and Animal Faith

Abstract: In After Strange Gods, that notorious tract from the days when my mind first took form, T.S. Eliot makes a point of elucidating what the term tradition meant to him. He has wished, he says, “to use the word to cover much in our lives that is accounted for by habit, breeding and environment.” My people, the Volk of my provenance, were just then making ready to rush into battle as if they were the Nibelungen, destined for the conflagration in Tetzel’s great hall, Krimhilde’s bloody vengeance. Tradition – the truism took us to the point truth. Stunde Null, we said, the Hour Zero of our deliverance. Der Spuk war vorbei. The madness was over. On the morning after, the ten year-old boy who had stood through the night in the snow with the adults, watching Dresden burn, would stand alone on a pile of rubble, looking out over the devastation before him in the blinding sunlight and the eerie silence of the day. The rubble lies there still in the back of his mind, with nothing to elucidate it for him. That in a nutshell is the story of the life I’ve lived. For roughly twenty years now I’ve lived to write it, but all I’ve got so far is a pile of breakage. True enough to the rubble of origin, so why not leave it there? That’s the question I raise in these notes. It was only when cancer struck some four years ago, a rare and aggressive blood cancer, that I began to learn a hard lesson. Grim diagnosis, no cure, little chance of remission. Against all odds I’m in remission for the second time as I write. Perhaps I’ll never get a handle on the life, but the idea that the rubble of my native memory is malignant, bösertig, of the kind that is evil, that’s what the cancer disabused me of. I first wrote "Sonnenuntergang," a celebration of the beauties of a firestorm mimicking a spectacular sunset, in response to our erstwhile provost’s Sunset Project, and later substantially revised it in both form and content. In this poem I am at the door to the house of my provenance, where Emily Dickinson’s "I Years had been from Home" speaks more truly for me than any poem of mine ever could.
I Years had been from Home
And now before the Door
I dared not enter, lest a Face
I never saw before

Stare stolid into mine
And ask my Business there –
"My Business but a Life I left
Was such remaining there?"

I leaned upon the Awe –
I lingered with Before –
The Second like an Ocean rolled
And broke against my ear –

I laughed a crumbling Laugh
That I could fear a Door
Who Consternation compassed
And never winced before.

I fitted to the Latch
My Hand, with trembling care
Lest back the awful Door should spring
And leave me in the Floor –

Then moved my Fingers off
As cautiously as Glass
And held my ears, and like a Thief
Fled gasping from the House –

(ca. 1872)
Thomas H. Johnson, ed. The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson
Sonnenuntergang

_In response to a call for art to help us cultivate in ourselves the beauties of a sunset_

This is the one then, the one before whose beauties all the others within recall pale, whose name will ever be but this to me, this compound noun of origin – three words in one, three separate parts of speech inseparably unified, each with its own grammatical function to perform, of primacy, relation, time: sun first, then under, last to go – unspeakably spectacular from where I stood, a boy of ten, in silence, in a foot or so of snow, awed by the sight, aware of human forms in the night around me, all with faces turned in the same direction, looking on as just southwest of us the composite word’s full complement of shades of meaning, substantive subsumed in substantive, feminine in masculine, came minute by minute, nuance by nuance, fully to be realized, a lake of fire spread across the sky to obliterate the night, quite as if this were the Second Coming, or the consummation, say, of Spengler’s _Untergang_, a term that nothing English will do for, certainly not _decline_ – here, now, in vivid recall a going down and under in flaming surcease like none I had ever witnessed before, none I would ever witness again, the opposite of that golden afterglow yet lingering on in the evening sky in the wake of sunsets that have held me in thrall, the dying last touches of pink fading away in the eye’s delight to leave a delicate sense of promise – this now, in fiery rebirth, will not linger, will not leave any sense of promise, will only, ineluctably, strike amazement, awe perhaps, incipient terror, evoking Jünger’s _Stahlgewitter_, the sound and fury of steel, the roar of engines, the crash of bombs, _die Hölle selbst_, old Anglo-Saxon cognate hell, Blake’s Contrary, in flaming splendor in the eye’s Eternal Delight, rising ever higher, blazing ever brighter, and as marriage will, in myth, in truth, the unified field of reminiscence – effulgent in tones of orange, purple, reds of every hue, magenta, crimson, bright yellow, white-hot at the coruscant heart – brings reflection into play, the snow untouchably, in uniform compliance, converting night into day, but this is no ordinary daylight, throwing all the world into stark relief, inverting heaven to hell, Mary’s color to the devil’s own, this _Widerschein_ – the conflagration reverberant in the mind’s eye that not even fire fighting fire has the least chance to extinguish from memory.

_Dresden, as seen from nearby Pulinitz on the night of February 13, 1945_
What Pete Made Me Say

I would gladly
be the moment
of colors and textures
perfected in light,

perhaps of the setting sun,
that nobody saw,
nobody could have
found in need of being

dwelled on therefore, pictured,
remembered, much less
put into words or painted.
I truly would gladly

settle for having existed
alone, unprecedented,
ever to be repeated, singular
in hue, in cast of line, of shadow, lost
for all time, if only

I had not fallen for you,
had not come to think
you mine for the taking. This is
so unrequited, this being so
incapable, grieving, of making
my two good fists speak for me.
It's Pete, Susan's little brother, I want to start with. He is the wilderness man in the family – writing about it and teaching math and doing God knows what else – and it's him I turned to when I suddenly knew I had to make the trek to Lake Tear of Clouds, the little glacial lake that is the highest source of the mighty Hudson high up in the High Peaks at the heart of the Adirondack wilderness which is Pete's great love. Analogy, I suppose, compelled me to make the trek. The great river I had come to know so well when Susan and I lived in New York had the presence, the power, the life that to the savage mind could only have been perceived, and worshiped, as a god. The artist in us knows to cultivate that mind that is savage in the exquisite sense alone of the ever so delicate first awakening of consciousness. How much of this I can claim as true of me I would be embarrassed to say, but I know that great river, know its life, and when cancer struck some five years after moving here with Susan, I knew I had to get to Lake Tear. A year later, after six rounds of CHOP, the big guns of the first rounds of assault on my rare and aggressive blood cancer, I was in remission. I did two more rounds to nail it. Luck of the draw for sure, as is true no less of the physician who has been in charge of my treatment ever since, my expert and wholly human oncologist and hematologist Jenelle Miller, who has become a good friend through it all, and whom I wholeheartedly trust. This too is rare, and beautiful and true. As was Pete when he said yes, he would take a week out of his busy schedule and take me on the trek. He would be my guide.

The story of our trek is the pendant to the story of my fight against the cancer, and what I learned from both is the story in which they join forces to teach me what they alone could have, coupled now as they would be in what followed. I had to fight the cancer into remission a second time, and what fighting it, and then living with the damage, working through it, what the whole process mainly taught me was the importance of etiology, which of course was precisely what going on the trek to Lake Tear had been all about. Having taught me that, and thus redoubled my will to get to the source of the life I've lived, the long course I've come through the ruins of my native heritage, the cancer also taught me about evil, since the German word for malignant is bösertig, of the kind that is evil. Now böse also means angry in ordinary usage, and evil as anger is human. Anger in the blood, a mutation running out of control, turns the blood against you. There's nothing more to it than that. Which brings me to Hannah Arendt's outburst at the end of her final report on the

*Susan McGuire, Associate Professor of Dance at JCA, whom I first met in Cleveland in 1968 and married three years later.
Eichmann trial from Jerusalem. Eichmann had just been executed, and she had expressed something like clueless appreciation, if not admiration, for him, saying he had gone to the gallows "with great dignity," though with his head as full of clichés as ever. It was then that her exasperation broke the limits of her endurance and she burst out that the lesson to be learned from this was that "of the fearsome, word-and-thought-defying banality of evil." The italics are hers.

Böse, angry – sure, that's me. Has been me anyway. But here is where the analogy breaks down. Nature is nature, whether it's a little glacial lake or reception in the womb. Acts of God, sort of anyway. Phenomena of nature. Points of inception indifferent even to their own destruction. Now, to put it like that is rank anthropomorphism on my part, of course. Sentience or lack of it is hardly the issue. Indifference, after all, is only what we attribute to what disturbs us, what disturbed me about disturbing that tear-shaped little body of water which the last of the glaciers receding from that particular hollow of rock left there. As indifferent to me as the sun casting my shadow and glittering on its surface, as if to beckon me to do what I would do. This, I think, is what I am finally beginning to understand about doing what I had come to do on reaching Late Tear with Pete. I stripped bare, stepped into the shallow body of water lying so still under the sun before me, sank into its deeply silted bottom to my knees, and swam out, dove under once, brushing the silken bottom with the length of my body, surfaced and looped back and stepped out again, sinking once more into the deep silt, and sat then on a rock, drying in the sun, contemplating the tear-shaped little lake I had disturbed, and in effect apologizing to it. This too of course had everything to do with me and nothing at all with the lake. High up on the slope of Mount Marcy, the highest of the High Peaks at the heart of that wilderness, I had had my moment, had satisfied the analogy, had gone under in that ultimate source of my savage mind's mighty god.


Now I could trace the course I had come from that point of inception and draw my map. Or so I thought. The old myth of evil, of Luther's Übel, the etymological cognate, still had me in its thrall. I'm grateful to my brother Ulrich for calling attention to this. But while he may be right to caution me, he speaks from a position of religious faith, from etymology rooted in theology, not plain usage today. On that score, he admits, I am right, though some nuances of current usage may well elude me. Working this out, getting my ducks in a row, my point of view and my premise into focus, and finding a clear line through this mess, this rubble of origin, of thought and memory, has
been hard going, but I've been at it ever since. Another poem, written long before, will speak to this. Call it the annunciation of that rare, random descent of Sylvia Plath's angel in "Black Rook in Rainy Weather." The long wait is far from over.

Now, for me to wait is to tune my instrument while I'm waiting. In this too I follow Santayana. When I came across the following passage in his *The Last Puritan: A Memoir in the Form of a Novel*, I knew him to be speaking for me. "His body," he says of his alter ego, "was a sensitive instrument and his mind traced readily all the analogies of physical motion." For the first time I knew in his words what had long been my ideal. Like one of Hilary Mantel's character, I'm groping here "around possibilities." My poem of so long ago, published once in a little magazine in England, seems to me to do just that.
Passing into Brine

It has been a long journey.
I am wide at the mouth with it
like a river on a map

whose thin blue line
now strives, now meanders
toward this sea I have
wrenched myself open so far

to embrace that I am
abruptly every ocean's
coastline and no depth
is not mine, no salt-water
immensity not my own

surf-ringed embodiment
spuming on the world's beaches,
battering its headland shores.
Before me the long progression,
every point charted,
none other than a point

in passage, the falls,
the towns and woods, bridges,
dams, confluent streams
and stone embankments, remembered,
if they are, forgotten
as they will be, names,

places, all distinctly
traced back to the cool,
actual bubbling up from under
the mass of a distant mountain.
Points in passage
on a map, I am safely

unalterable. The mouth, too,
of exhaustion, belongs
to someone else already, passing
into brine behind me.
Time, time – how much have I got?

Let me take you to Lake Tear through this ruinous landscape, the wreckage of my native heritage. Pete taught me well. Let me be your guide, and let's risk laying siege to some truth on the way, as animal exploration, if you will, with whatever fancy we have for it. Risk is at root "danger or inconvenience, predictable or otherwise," as the OED says, the ultimate authority of the language. The ultimate source. Analogies multiply, they always do. So, to go on, consider inconvenience. Like Al Gore, I tend, not to say intend, to make people uncomfortable with inconvenient truths, in my case those of my native heritage. The truths of the lies people clung to, the lies from before the catastrophe of total surrender, and the lies after, the same old truths stood on their head. It's as if I could see them like that, heads in the rubble, legs furiously kicking the air.

As to myself, don't think I don't know the drill, don't know to blend in.

My inception took place in the arms of the newlyweds – the young storm troop commander and his fervent young bride, fervent for him no less than the Führer of their fancy, the avatar of Providence and Savior of the race – who as my parents would set terms for me for life. My father had fought in the brown ranks in the street battles of the twenties that brought Hitler to power the year before they were married and she was on her way to carrying me to term through the days of the Night of the Long Knives and the Triumph of the Will to follow, which Leni Riefenstahl's genius turned into the masterpiece it would be for all time. Strange to think, she, not her Führer, would come out of the catastrophe that ended her own promising career as a film maker with her reputation more or less intact, a little tattered, perhaps, a little soiled, but she would recover renown with her sensitive and technically spectacular photographs of the Nuba, still pure in their physical beauty and age-old tribal ways. Later she would descend to the floor of the sea in scuba gear and photograph creatures untroubled by human consciousness, and go on to demonstrate daredevil audacity in other ways. Her story was that Hitler had recognized her genius, had provided her with unlimited means to pursue her art, but that she had never been political, had never known about any of what came out after the war. She never relented in keeping up her charade, keeping herself in the news with one exploit after another. I take her to have been a closet Nazi to her last breath. Nobody can deny her the physical courage she demonstrated again and again in her adventures. But of moral courage there is little evidence. I can only think of her as a moral coward. But evil? Keep in mind that her word was böse. In that sense alone she knew no evil. Übel, the old cognate of evil, Luther's word, the word of his Vater unser, Our Father, she would have known only as it is in contemporary
secular usage, leached of all religious power.

A minor point perhaps, but one we had better not disregard. I knew an old man once in New York, an old German who had fought in the Kaiser's army and then become a book dealer with his own store on the K'udamm in Berlin. After 1933 the store was taken from him. In 1938, in the nick of time, he managed to buy his way out with his young wife. They had barely enough money to get to China, the only country then that would grant them visas. His entire extended family – men, women and children – ended up on the transports east and perished in the camps. No need to flesh out that story. I worked for him for a time in his German language book store on Columbus Circle. He told me that the German Government had paid him twenty-thousand dollars in compensation for the loss of his family. He was embarrassed to tell me that he had taken the money. I think his wife persuaded him. They needed the money to set up in business. So far as Adenauer's Germans were concerned, that extinguished any further claim he might have against them. Do I need to mention his ethnic origin?

I knew him as Gerard Fuchs. His name had been Gerhard Fuchs, a German patriot.

With that I've come full circle once more to my quandary. Around and around it goes, around the same old mulberry bush of origin, the past I can't stop getting drunk on, to steal from Hilary Mantel. I'd be the first to say that I'm an addict. One thing is certain. There is no AA for this, no twelve steps, no Saving Grace, no Jesus to walk with you, nothing like that. As with my cancer, no cure. Remission, that's all there is for me. Well, follow the logic. In my place, you had better drink your poisons, and deal with the damage after.

For me to say, sure, they were all Nazis in my family, and then after the war, they all flocked back into the churches and fell to their knees in orgies of atonement, the incessant Sühnezichen, Sign of Atonement, candlelight marches and vigils at those Mahnmale, memorials of warning, they put up everywhere, furiously praying their heads soft, beating their breasts, demonstrating their sorrow to all the world, sorrow they were notoriously incapable of feeling, for all the Nazis had done in their name. They, the Nazis. For me to come right out with it like that makes people uncomfortable. They don't want to be reminded that I'm one of the Nazi children. They'd rather think of me as just another German, a child of war, sure, but long a citizen, a first-generation German-American like all the others who celebrate their German ancestry at the Oktoberfest or the Weihnachtsmarkt, and who after all aren't the Huns of the First World War anymore, nor the Nazis of the Second. Besides, with that old-school education of mine to recommend me, and being so well read, so handy with tools,
nobody wants to hear about my Nazi provenance. Hell, I'm an immigrant. I know when not to show my true colors. And yes, German that I am, I'm not all that shy about knowing what I know, even if it's wrong, and when I fix things, I fix them right or not at all. Sloppy work appalls me, particularly if it's work done by a student.

In other words, I pull my punches when I have to. But not here, not now.

The Nazis were us, and not just us Germans. Shit happens.

My aim here? I'd say it's to persuade you to risk coming with me to the edge of my quandary.

To make use of this once more, and acknowledge Hilary Mantel for it, my mind is groping here around possibilities, enticing you with inconvenience, perhaps even outright danger, asking you to stand with me at the fences of Auschwitz, the anus mundi of all time – the collective term of convenience for the whole of the Holocaust, but of course there were camps like Treblinka that were far worse, killing factories pure and simple that no one was destined to survive. Now don't get me wrong, I don't mean the restored fences of the tourist attraction that Auschwitz is now. I mean the fences then, lost as they are to time, but not to memory. To go then, to imagine, is to know what is lost. To know ourselves now. All we have to go on is what has been recounted for us by the few who lived to tell what they had lived through. To my mind Primo Levi's *If This Be a Man*, as I would translate his title, comes closest. But even just to feel our way into his words is near to impossible. Still, words, exquisitely distilled (cf. his *Periodic Table*) by Levi, are all we have for solace.

If this be – to my mind the residual English subjunctive tells the whole story: what might have been reduced to a *Stück*, a piece, a thing to be counted and shipped to destruction.

Now, to be fully honest. Ruthlessly, if you will. I'm wont to bring up Jewish absurdities, as if to save myself from all-too-German sentimentality, or just for those delicate touches of sarcasm that clear the mind, absurdities as human as any, anywhere. Grist for the neo-Nazi mills, to be sure, but true nonetheless, and appalling to liberal Israelis. Specifically just now, I was thinking of Noam Chomsky, who was denied entry to the occupied territories on the West Bank where he had been scheduled to give a talk. After all, as a Jew, Chomsky has, as I understand it, an absolute legal claim to Israeli citizenship. As an Israeli, I myself would have one hell of a time with the settlements, the question of East Jerusalem, and a lot else, and I would take my stand with the author of *The Yellow Wind*, David Grossman, whose courage and integrity I have long admired. As a German, I think of Taddeusz Borowski's *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen*. He was arrested for underground literary activities and incarcerated at Auschwitz, together with his fiancee. To the Germans they were
"Aryans," then no longer destined for the gas. So he was able to bear witness for those who went to their destruction, to just one young woman's courage. We see her jump off the train on which she had come, see her straighten her blouse and ask the question to which she gets no answer, see the pretty little watch glint on her wrist, see that she needs no words to know the answer. We see her turn then and run and haul herself up over the gate into the open back of the truck just moving off with its load of women and children. We see her white blouse vanish with them all. It's the flag of her courage, her intelligence, her defiance, her contempt. We know she will help these women undress their children, know she will be the last to go in. Her example alone suffices to restore us all to a measure of our humanity.

Widely published in the after-war years and celebrated as the greatest hope of Polish literature, Borowski inexplicably gassed himself.

Inexplicably to me, of course. The details here don't help me either. He had entered into a liaison with a young woman just as his wife was giving birth to their daughter. Three days later he was dead. His great gift to us, untouched by his suicide, is that in his words we are restored to being able to speak again. To speak is human. Like this, right now. But I do not understand. Desperate enough, lost and crazy enough, I might have cheated on my wife even as she was giving birth to our child, but suicide has never been my game. Self-destructive binges of native rage have been, but not that. I fight to live, and I live to write.

I hesitate to bring Sylvia Plath into this with her "Daddy," the poem that raised such a hue and cry against her for imagining herself in it as a Jew being chuffed off to "Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen." I hardly think I would have brought it up here, if it weren't for the scandal that blew up around it. Her father was German, and whatever made her resort to the image, made her ram a stake through her father's "fat black heart" and dance and stamp on him in his grave, ending the poem on the line, "Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through," whatever drove her to resort to such extremes of language, I can only cry foul at the outcry against her for nothing more than allowing her voice to slip into that of a Jew being transported to annihilation.

Judge her poem on its merits as a poem, I say. Great crimes have been the subject of poetry. Think of Macbeth alone. The Holocaust, the Shoah, the Final Solution – no name could ever even comes close to naming what that was, what indeed was done, and done not by devils or monsters, nor done, with few exceptions, by people who were insane, but by human beings like you and me. Only a poem like Paul Celan's Todesfuge, and only in the language in which it was written, his mother
tongue, has the power to lay siege, "as animal exploration and fancy may do so," to such truths as
the rubble may still hold. May, the operative word here, may do so, may hold. Does do so, as if by
syllogistic logic, inexorably does so in this poem, which I found myself rendering as best I could in
English, though I hardly know why, since I myself have no need for the translation.

I only offer it here to indicate what can, and what cannot, speak to this, and to suggest, as
Celan might have himself, that it is what it is as a poem only in its original form.

The translation will do no more than give you an idea of what's at stake. To know the poem
you need to hear it in German, hear the funereal cadences of its lines, the solemn drumbeat of
inconsolable lamentation. My translation only manages to raise Walter Benjamin's wall that shuts the
original out. I've been too faithful to English. Too little of the source language is hauled across into
the Target language, as translators say. You may ask, by what right do I then attribute my work to
Celan? No right at all, except that I'd be guilty of plagiarism if I didn't make the attribution.
Death's Fugue

Black milk at daybreak we drink it in the evening
we drink it at noon and in the morning at night we drink it
we drink and we drink
we dig a grave in the air where no one lies cramped
A man lives in the house who plays with the snakes who writes
who writes when night falls to Germany your golden hair Margaret
he writes it and steps in front of the house and the stars are glittering he whistles his dogs out
he whistles his Jews out into the open lets a grave be dug in the earth
he orders us now strike up for the dance

Black milk at daybreak we drink you at night
we drink you in the morning and at noon in the evening we drink you
we drink and we drink
A man lives in the house who plays with the snakes who writes
who writes when night falls to Germany your golden hair Margaret
Your ashen hair Shulamite we dig a grave in the air where no one lies cramped
He shouts dig deeper into earth there you and you others sing and play
he reaches for the weapon at his belt he swings it blue are his eyes
thrust deeper the spades there you and you others play on for the dance

Black milk at daybreak we drink you at night
we drink you at noon and in the morning in the evening we drink you
we drink and we drink
a man lives in the house your golden hair Margaret
your ashen hair Shulamite he plays with the snakes
He shouts play sweeter the death there death is a master craftsman from Germany
he shouts bow darker the violins then you will rise as smoke in the air
then you will have a grave in the clouds where no one lies cramped

Black milk at daybreak we drink you at night
we drink you at noon for death is a master craftsman from Germany
we drink you in the evening and in the morning we drink and we drink
death is a master craftsman from Germany his eye is blue
he hits you with a bullet of lead he hits you dead-on
a man lives in the house your golden hair Margaret
he sets his dogs to hunt us down he gives us a grave in the air
he plays with the snakes and dreams of death as a master craftsman from Germany

your golden hair Margaret
your ashen hair Shulamite

Paul Celan (Ulf Goebel, trans.)
**Todesfuge**

Schwarze Milch der Frühe wir trinken sie abends
wir trinken sie mittags und morgens wir trinken sie nachts
wir trinken und trinken
wir schaufeln ein Grab in den Lüften da liegt man nicht eng
Ein Mann wohnt im Haus der spielt mit den Schlangen der schreibt
der schreibt wenn es dunkelt nach Deutschland dein goldenes Haar Margarete
er schreibt es und tritt vor das Haus und es blitzen die Sterne er pfeift seine Rüden herbei
er pfeift seine Juden hervor läßt schaufeln ein Grab in der Erde
er befehlt uns spielt auf nun zum Tanz

Schwarze Milch der Frühe wir trinken dich nachts
wir trinken dich morgens und mittags wir trinken dich abends
wir trinken und trinken
Ein Mann wohnt im Haus der spielt mit den Schlangen der schreibt
der schreibt wenn es dunkelt nach Deutschland dein goldenes Haar Margarete
Dein aschenes Haar Sulamith wir schaufeln ein Grab in den Lüften da liegt man nicht eng

Er ruft stecht tiefer ins Erdreich ihr einen ihr andern singet und spielt
er greift nach dem Eisen im Gurt er schwingts seine Augen sind blau
stecht tiefer die Spaten ihr einen ihr andern spielt weiter zum Tanz auf

Schwarze Milch der Frühe wir trinken dich nachts
wir trinken dich mittags und morgens wir trinken dich abends
wir trinken und trinken
ein Mann wohnt im Haus dein goldenes Haar Margarete
dein aschenes Haar Sulamith er spielt mit den Schlangen

Er ruft spielt süßer den Tod der Tod ist ein Meister aus Deutschland
er ruft streicht dunkler die Geigen dann steigt ihr als Rauch in die Luft
dann habt ihr ein Grab in den Wolken da liegt man nicht eng

Schwarze Milch der Frühe wir trinken dich nachts
wir trinken dich mittags der Tod ist ein Meister aus Deutschland
wir trinken dich abends und morgens wir trinken und trinken
der Tod ist ein Meister aus Deutschland sein Auge ist blau
er trifft dich mit bleierner Kugel er trifft dich genau
ein Mann wohnt im Haus dein goldenes Haar Margarete
er herzt seine Rüden auf uns er schenkt uns ein Grab in der Luft
er spielt mit den Schlangen und träumet der Tod ist ein Meister aus Deutschland

dein goldenes Haar Margarete
dein aschenes Haar Sulamith

*Paul Celan*
There are so many quarters, in Santayana’s sense, from which to lay siege to the truth here, so many possibilities, so many points of view, that finally all the animal exploration and fancy in the world can only cease, only fall silent, where I’ve asked you to stand with me.

"It was done." I’m quoting Yehuda Bauer. In the passive voice, the simple sentence self-destructs. Done yes, by my people. Who would dare to say more?

What am I suggesting then? Make friends with the devil? Risk the inconvenient truth?

However close I may have come at times to getting my story right, it has never been close enough. So I went back finally. To face the music, as I said. It’s just that the music turned out to be as hard to hear, and as impossible to get right, over there as it had been over here. Fostered and encouraged by my good friend John Yoklavich, who had once been my college English professor at Georgetown, and who then kept me on the straight and narrow in my work with his comments on all I sent to him over the years, particularly the long poem he called *Ulf Goebel’s Lamentation*, which I had written, under the influence of Eliot’s, as my *Waste Land*, and brought out myself as a chapbook under the title *After Caligula*. From John, my *miglior fabbro*, I then had this letter in Berlin. I waited too long to respond, and then it was too late. I had the news of his death from his wife. In a nutshell, I’d say, his letter tells the whole story.

Cabin John, April 12, 1989

Dear Ulf,

You did it. Bolted? No. Slipped away? No. *It* equals your transplantation, and that requires a verb that suggests more deliberation, calculation (and I suspect agony). But of course I can’t understand, now, any more than I did when, years ago, you first hinted . . . . threatened as I then thought..... And I begged you to go slow. And now on your postcard your word *exile*: "My exile is over." Have you discovered or rediscovered your father and mother in your *vaterland?* And your mother tongue – which lashed you into this? This removal. I suppose that you are still bedazzled by the surface of Berlin in 1989. (Last year in one day’s visit Frankfurt dazzled me). Have you already put down some tender roots? Are you writing? Lyrics? Prose? If you bolt or slip back to New York please let me know. If you don't please let me hear from you in English translation that you are comfortable. God bless you and fructify your lines.

Your old and retired but not retiring friend,

John
Funny, and finally sad, from exile to exile, in translation, I would have had fun responding to that delicate little dig of his. I wish I had been able to write to him from London then, to let him know I had slipped away again, with whatever deliberation it took, though panic was most of it. Just before the whole of what was left of Germany would be one again, with Berlin one again as its capital, Susan and I made our escape for London, where she would be directing the London Contemporary Dance School at The Place for eight years, and I would be teaching German and writing in English again, and publishing this and that in British little magazines, mainly Stand and Staple. Donald Measham, one of the founding editors of the latter, became in many ways what John had been to me. We still correspond, and he still ever again helps me fix what needs it in my work. Just a couple of weeks ago he called attention to a word that struck him as all wrong in my "Sonnenuntergang," just the one word. He was right. The word jarred, and it was superfluous. I was appalled not to have caught it myself. Needless to say, I took my ear to task and struck the offending word.

It's good to have a miglior fabbro. For After Caligula I had John, who saved me from a good deal of chagrin.
[Excerpts from]
After Caligula

_In memory of the old man_
_who joked about the accommodations_
_in the hour of his death_

1.

Do you know what you would have done, you also?

Do you see the fuchsia glow in the banks of clouds at rest against the violet edge of the hills, but is it lingering there or taking hold? Such twilight as lies on a countryside can fade and rob the woods of color, slowly grow as well and bring the harsher hues out. I want to know, is this the dawn? There's darkness yet to fall, or has it been dark already, the grey is passing? I want to know, is it dusk we face?

In the evening on his bench an old man sits before his house puffing on his pipe, musing about this and that in his life, contentedly waiting for the light to go to go in.

* * *

He said his machine had let him see into the final depths of matter, and that it was hollow there. _Benedictus est._

Who broke that seal?

The silence, fool, broke in. The firmament wasn't made strong enough, and there the beggar sits, waiting to be heard.
Petals wilt and fall
There will be dust
in the garden
brown leaves to rattle in the bird bath
by October

I've been the twig
that gives the wind appearance
and the cap of foam whipped to the wave's head
I've been moved
and I've been broken
and have carried through the brown days
and the white days
and the days of greening
when labor set in
and the tree outside my window
rustled back
to the outcries I stifled out of habit

I died alone
and the child
a little later

2.

That poor wild wreck of a man
on Broadway, screaming, screaming out at
no one in the middle of the afternoon
in the midst of the crowd moving up and down
the sidewalk blinding with sunlight
blazing from the shop windows –

bloodshot eyes
peering crazed
from the battered face,
welt and scabs,
crusts of grime,
the horrid mouth
missing teeth
spitting drool
into the tangled

filth of his tattered beard, and he struck
himself, doubled over with the force of the blow
and screamed again his savage cry
into a passage only he beheld
to somewhere else
for an answer, or was it
that a cornered quarry here
cried out for
life? He leapt
and shook himself and disappeared
into the crowd . . . . A man

stood here – it must have been
a man – and focused and framed his shot
and took the picture, yes,
the irrefutable print before me.
I might as well have been
the photographer. She tries

her best, on the very
edge of the curbstone, solely
wearing sandals, one
foot in the gutter, the other
drawn up under her,
to cover her nakedness.

On the ground, the feet, some
in the gutter, and headless
torsos of men crowd in around her,
a darkly visible face is bending
down over her, others gesticulate
with open hands as if
to invite us to join the fun, one
with his unbuttoned great coat parted
right behind her, expertly cropped
to make the candid
shot look posed,
foregrounding her
in common sport,
the composition
shows a sensitive hand.
Impassively,
this woman's
is the consolation

of having given
up all hope.
Conventionally

beautiful, her features
show refinement,
a sensitive
cast of mind, intelligence.
Her eyes look out into a passage
that is not there. Her lips

seal in what will not
form, though not
for lack of what yet might,
like this just now,
this ache of wanting
nothing, knowing
nothing to want, wildly

holding her thighs clasped tight, knee pressed to knee,
arms folded with gentle emphasis over the young
breasts, out of instinct, staring into silence, the passage –
she has imagined it all. Yes,

at the door
in line
the white
figures

waiting again
to go in.

3.

* * *

There's just no getting away from him.
He comes to stand outside my window
at night, regardless of the weather, a quiet
figure in black, of military bearing.
He never bends to knock, never
turns to address me, never moves at all,
but there are times I seem
to hear him utter low commands,

to clear all this back up,
to melt the scrap down,
strip the old bricks blasted from the walls
of their mortar and start over,
plant the garden again.

While she finds sunny afternoons
to lie in the weeds and murmur things
like how the sound of mosquitoes
attacking differs from a bee’s
working the blossoms around us,

pricked in the back of the neck
by the broken blades of grass under me,
I envy her her certainties.

This is a drunken thing
of steel. The engine has a heart.
There’s fog thick in the eye
and the slosh in nearly empty tanks,
the rush of footfalls
throughout the rocking edifice.

We have lost mooring.
No log to be found, no map.
Father, mother, child.

These are the old waters beating in the bulkheads.
Can’t you smell the rot,
the stench of dying in this sea?
The black bird on the sill has no wings to fly.
The wind blows dust from the still creature’s eyes.

4.

* * *

I hear the crash of waves at night
see the white crowns fall and break
and roll up on the beach in phosphorous tongues
lashed in the face by a gale's spray

Sand stings
Salt burns

She is a reed in the storm
bending to every assault
but lacks the roots to hold her back
Feet burrow in vain in sand
This ground is not to be trusted

Salt burns
Sand stings

The clouds are wild
The moon appears
in flight, the wet dress
flaps like a battle flag

Cries lost in the general howl
Numb with cold, the unrelenting wind
A black sea burns, I must go in
and extinguish the flames

Salt stings
Sand burns

If I were that woman
That woman is mad
If I were

Mother, because you bent with me
as a tree must to wind caught in the crown
and rustled around me full in your limbs
momentarily, was it in protest
of my entry? gently
made a seeming effort to restrain me

but shook
and parted
and let go

to make a ruffled show of closing
back up on desolation

The louder rustling of the leaves
The stronger rush of the wind

Do not cry out against me
now that this will be your last fall
that you cannot
think of wintering yet again
Am I to leave these leaves attached after they have turned color
and hardened in readiness?
As if I knew to spend myself elsewhere
for a softer approach

Mother, allow
the disrobing
I bring rain
to wash your tremulous limbs
Let the sap ease
forever into the rot
of your roots
in this tired earth
uselessly sodden
I have come to bathe the dying wood
and move in the hushed crown
whispering

relent
relent

If not *The Joke of Origin, Without Apology* might do for mine, though defiance won't really get me anywhere with any of this, nor will *After Gods Too Strange for Words*, however much truth each of these holds as premise for the narrative. Truth be damned, I've thought. None of this is getting me anywhere.

Now, to conclude, this is what my mother wrote to me in Berlin. Outraged by my daring to raise the question, she wrote back that she had never been in the Party. Nor had anyone in her family. The horror, she wrote, maybe one day she would tell me. The horror was finding out about my father, of having been seduced by him to evil. I was now the evil one, doing my father's thinking. In her will she disinherited for it. This is just to leave you with an indication of the wreckage a wrongheaded — mind you, not evil — faith can leave in the mind. I quote from letters she wrote to her mother during the last months of 1944 and the first of 1945, until the Soviet advance forced us to flee in late February. The very next day Russian troops entered the small town of Pulsnitz, where we had been living since 1943, when the cities under air attack were evacuated of families with small children.

*Wir warten nun voller Spannung auf die Entwicklung im Westen. Wenn nur alles gutgeht.*

We are eagerly awaiting developments in the West. If only all goes well.

*Die Nachricht heute über London ... war prima, paß auf, wir gehen großen Zeiten entgegen.*

The news about London ... couldn't have been better. Just wait, we're headed for great times.

*Hermi sitzt im Dreck, ist aber voller Zuversicht trotz allem. Der Russe kommt nicht herein. Wir werden es schon schaffen, besonders wenn wir niemals nachgeben.*

Hermi [my father] is sitting in hell [literally shit], but is full of confidence despite everything. The Russians won't break through [into Germany]. We'll triumph yet, especially if we resolutely refuse ever to yield.

*Der Wehrmachtbericht klingt etwas besser, vielleicht kommt ja noch alles zum stehen, u. wir gehen wieder vorwärts. Wenn erst V-2 herauskommt, dann sind wir wieder dran. Nur die Wartezeit ist eben schlimm.*

The Wehrmacht report [today] sounds a bit better, so maybe everything [along the fronts] will be brought to a halt and we will advance again. Once the V-2 [rockets] are ready, that's when it'll be our
turn again. Only this time of waiting is awful.

Wenn es nur einmal anders würde u, die Menschen sich wieder darauf besinnen, daß sie göttliche Kraft in sich tragen. Aber ein Gott muß sich schaudernd abwenden von unserer Erde, wenn er sich dies Grauen ansieht. Wie können Menschen überhaupt so etwas tun?

If only things were different and people came to think again of the divine power they bear within themselves. At the sight of these horrors now [those done by the Russian troops sweeping into Germany] any God would turn from our earth with a shudder. How is it possible for human beings actually to do things like that.

On the day it was all over for us I stood on a pile of rubble thrown up from a crater in the middle of the street, left there by the bomb that nearly killed us all, my valiant young mother and her five boys. The story of the bomb can wait. I want you to see the boy where he is standing full in the sun, shielding his eyes against the glare from the unrelieved devastation spread out before him as far as the eye can see under a haze of smoke and dust, the grey, inviolate hulk of the bunker at his back. Fires are still burning here and there in the rubble, columns of black smoke rising in the still air. The boy is wearing his Jungvolk uniform. Just ten, he was inducted only weeks before. For an hour or so more this boy would know who he was, know what to believe, what to trust.

I'll leave to your imagination for now what took place that left him fighting with himself for life in the wreckage of his native heritage.

As to Käte, Hermi's Kätchen, my valiant young mother, I have the documents now, the denazification papers she and her father had to fill out, and the records of the hearings my father faced when he got back finally after five years as a prisoner of war in Siberia, back just after we were gone, on our way to America on a tramp steamer with the American my mother would marry once my father's hand was forced to grant her a divorce. It's hard to keep the story from ever again boiling over. At any rate, she had joined the party on her own initiative in 1931, when she was twenty-two. He had already been in the SA for five years, fighting in the street battles of the twenties that brought Hitler to power, and rising quickly in the ranks. He was barely sixteen when he joined. My maternal grandfather, a Studienrat or secondary school teacher who taught both English and French and was known as an Anglophile, himself joined the SA in 1933, but was thrown back out later that year for having once been a freemason. He was an old-school nationalist who said after the war that he had only meant to do his part for das hohe Ziel der Volksgemeinschaft, the lofty aim of the community of the people. But all of this has quite a different feel in German, particularly Volks, with its racial
and tribal connotations. It's good to have come back with proof. As I said, they were all Nazis. Make of it what you will, I loved them, my mother and my grandfather most of all.

A human story. Full stop.