

From The Land Of The Lost

Another one for you P.Y.

**Tread Lightly,
Love Deeply**

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A Note From The Author

As I was wrapping up this manuscript I had originally planned on trying to fill this page with some deeply profound words. Then I realized that with each day that goes by the less profound my words seem to me. Besides, today's world is already dripping with profound words but no one seems to want to pay them much attention. At the great speed in which we live our lives, the amount of stress heaped upon us and with the state of things nowadays what people need most is to pause, to think and to laugh. Maybe not in that particular order.

You might be wondering why the book is entitled, "From the Land of the Lost"? Well, let's just say that sometimes it sometimes seems to me that the world has completely lost its sense of direction.

For those of you who are like me, still fumbling around, I hope that these humble words of mine are a worthy pause in your journey.

With Gratitude,



Introduction

If you're looking for something typical, read no further. What you hold in your hands is a book not easily defined, a book so different that if it were up to most publishers it would never have seen the light of day.

From The Land Of The Lost is something akin to a variety show and contains a collection of various short humor pieces, poetry, a short story and even a fable.

The works herein represent a year in the writing-life of the author. The humor pieces were taken mostly from Eric's successful blog page (www.EricVanceWalton.com). Sit back, relax and enjoy "the show".

The State of The Union

I've seen struggle
know what it's like
To be broken

It's not just a token
Of this imagination
So counterintuitive
to get up again

But I walk the grey mile
force a smile for a while
Basking in the same
fluorescent glow
you know

From sea
to shining sea
I see girls and boys
so willing to sell
Their souls
for a bankroll

what happened to
clean and tidy
God almighty
now this is democracy?

Let the beige-ness
Of our existence
leave its creamy
foam on your lips
like some scarlet letter
you'll feel better
the morning after
mocha latte tips
warm sips sway those
voluptuous hips
to get you through it all
hip-hop to trip-hop
to flip-flop and waffle
so easy to grow
thin and angry
when the deck is stacked
or fat and dumb
look out psyche
here it comes,
four more years.

The Heiress and the Pea

*Based (however loosely) on the fable, "The Princess and the Pea".
Written for the Thurber Society's 2005 Summer literary picnic
series.*

ONCE upon a time there was a prince who wanted to marry an heiress; but she would have to be a real heiress. For nowadays, with inflation and all, being a prince wasn't what it used to be. He traveled all over the world to find one, Saks 5th Avenue, the Hamptons and many other spots where heiresses tended to congregate, but nowhere could he get what he wanted. So he came home again and was sad, for he would have liked very much to marry a real heiress and have his own reality TV show.

One evening a terrible storm came on and the rain poured down in torrents. Suddenly a knocking was heard at the city gate, and the old king went to open it.

It was an heiress standing out there in front of the gate with her camera crew in tow. What a sight the rain

and the wind had made her look. The water ran down from her hair and clothes; it ran down into the toes of her Prada shoes and out again at the heels. And yet she said that she was a real heiress.

“Well, we’ll soon find that out,” thought the old queen. But she said nothing, went into the kitchen, prepared a meal fit for a royal feast but placed one single conventionally-grown pea among the organic, heirloom peas heaped upon her plate.

The meal was presented with lavish style and grace. The heiress totally ignored her gracious hosts. She talked on her cell phone, flipped her hair and admired herself longingly in any reflective surface. She was making a very good impression but the prince still wasn’t completely convinced that she was a real heiress.

All of a sudden a blood-curdling shriek broke the silence! “Ewww! You idiot! I cannot believe you had the nerve to serve me this conventionally grown slop!”

Nobody but a real heiress could be so abrasive and self-absorbed. So the prince was smitten and asked for her hand in marriage, for now he was sure that he had found a real heiress.

Moral: Given enough time, sooner or later people will get what they deserve.

Spark!

Desire, draw us ever deeper
to the keeper of our hearts
we seek but a glimpse
of timeless twilight in this long day's night

the Peace we seek begins within
and ripples forth in silent waves
bathing each and every soul with light

"the powers that be" wish us
to continue our slothful slumber
but our numbers are too great
for our hunger to be quelled

put your ear to the tracks and hear
the low rumble of our humble awakenings

take this, your first gasp of pure Truth
utter your first cry, then a long cleansing sigh
as we say goodbye
to the darkness of that world.

Quite Thurber-esque

(or What Did You Say?)

We've all heard the quote, "When life hands you lemons..". Well, let's just say that my family should rightly be the benefactors of the "Country time lemonade" fortune. I come from a long line of optimists. Down through the ages our philosophy has always been, "play the cards in which you are dealt, chances are you'll have to bluff, but try your best to at least play them with finesse."

We all are blessed with our own uniqueness. You can choose to either cover this up or display it like a centerpiece on the front table. My particular "uniqueness" has been with me since the age of five and, coupled with a generous helping of humor, I've grown to thoroughly enjoy it.

Not many people would consider partial hearing loss to be an asset. Those of you who would

take offense please suspend your judgment until you've walked a mile through these words. First, I must describe my condition. I can hear perfectly as long as there are no distractions or background noise. If either of the two aforementioned things are present what I hear is the equivalent of a newspaper article that is missing every third word. My brain works overtime to decipher what it is given and tries to pick up the slack while my ears are goofing off on the job. At the very least, this forces me to become an attentive listener.

Words and even whole phrases can become garbled and magically transformed. For example, "Would you like to eat soon?" can be heard as, "Would you like to take a trip the moon?". As you might understand, this has allowed me to become the master of two different expressions, "the deer in the headlights" and "the philosophical/inquisitive look". The first of which only happens when I have absolutely nothing to work with.

My "uniqueness" can even aid in the translation of other languages and understanding of

different cultures, taking incredibly daring intellectual leaps in the process. Just last week my girlfriend and I were in a restaurant that played authentic Greek music. I distinctly heard in the lyrics the words, "Apu" and "pimento". This gave me enough information to surmise that the song was a testament to the modern Greek's undying love of the Simpsons and pimento cheese spreads.

If I was ever invited on Inside the Actor's Studio and asked what my favorite word was I'd have to say, "What?", which would actually be a condensed version of "What did you say?". This has been my favorite phrase for as long as I can remember. I like it so much that I'm thinking of having the words tattooed on the palm of my hand. This way I wouldn't need to ask the question several hundred times a day.

Someone quite famous once said, "Life is a daring adventure or nothing at all." All I can say is you can definitely say that again. No seriously, could you say that again?

Halcyon Years

In a world of contradiction
our love is a sea of calm that drifts on
“some day” is getting ever closer
since the day our dreams set sail

Your soul and mine have intertwined,
In such wondrous alchemy combined
the sum seems so much greater than its parts

As I peer through the looking glass
of the years I still feel the thrill
of holding your hand
my still heart races
as we slow dance to a jazz band
I forever appreciate your beauty
and the passion of your kiss
as we bask in our halcyon years.

Secret Language Revealed!

A great and valuable secret was revealed to me on a recent trip to Chicago. During my first few days in the Windy City I couldn't help but notice an almost continual beeping of car horns that were sometimes combined with, what would appear to the common layman to be, obscene hand gestures. Being from a somewhat smaller city, at first I seemed out of my element and all the commotion was causing me to develop a chronic headache and a slight nervous tick.

It was only after the duration of about three days that things became much more clear. As I was somewhat assimilated into the "Windy City mentality" I discovered, almost as though through osmosis, that in the big city things aren't always as they appear to be. What at first seemed to be impatience and fits of rage was actually a complex language that seemed to be a specialized fusion of sign-language and Morse code.

This was all just another testament to the creativity of the human spirit. Although I'm trying my best to become fluent in the aforementioned language, I still have a long way to go. Compiled through careful and studious observation, listed below are some of the phrases that I've been able to decipher so far:

One short beep – “By all means, please go first kind sir/madam.”

One long beep – “I do not wish to bother you but the traffic signal appears to have turned green.”

One beep with middle finger fully extended* - Same as above only with slightly more feeling and/or urgency.

**Note the middle finger, when extended and combined with any of the various beeps, merely mimics an exclamation point.*

Two short beeps – “Excuse me, may I merge into your lane?”

Two long beeps – “Why certainly, be my guest.”

Three short beeps – “Pardon me, do you have any Grey Poupon?”

And now we will delve into the murky world of complex phrases. I’m especially proud of the following translation which I consider to be my crowning achievement thus far:

One long beep combined with the English phrase, “F-off buddy!” and the fully extended middle finger – “Forgive me if this offends you but the traffic signal appears to have turned green!”

Although, admittedly, I have quite a bit of work ahead of me I hold steadfast in my theory that the spread of this civilized form of communication has the potential to greatly benefit humankind. I will soon make another pilgrimage to the Windy City with notebook and pen in hand to further test my theories and try to learn a bit more of this fascinating native “tongue”.

All These Things

All these things I covet
all that I've loved to pieces
until they are no more
you are my greatest enigma

my touchstone, the thief of my heart
your words drip as your soul skips
through the next field of daisies

the words you've said will echo
through the ages in my head
and will wrap me in warmth
on cold days
true love is a wellspring
of patience in disguise

Are You Worthy?

As human beings all of us have a breaking point. This the magical line where civility blurs and behaving like a stark raving lunatic begins. As we age and gain some measure of self control sometimes the crossing of this line becomes a conscious, and sometimes necessary, decision. As any corporate middle manager or toddler will tell you, when all else fails, anger usually gets results. I reached my boiling point this morning while on the phone for the fifth time with the customer service department of a certain international shipping company who shall remain nameless (but whose name consists of five letters).

I recently ordered a laptop computer from a well-known online retailer and took advantage of their free shipping offer. I was very excited to get it since my home PC is five years old and due to the insane pace of today's technological advancement it may as well be

an abacus. The shipper attempted delivery on the first day and I wasn't home so they didn't deliver it. Since I live in a secure building I called their customer service to arrange them to leave the package with the apartment manager. This was the first encounter in what proved to be a long and terribly arduous relationship.

The second attempt was made the following day. I eagerly connected to the internet to track the package and it was listed as being on the truck for delivery! But alas, it was not to be. For this day, the driver totally ignored my instructions to leave the package with the apartment manager. He nonchalantly informed me on my voicemail that I wasn't home so he couldn't leave the package. Again I called customer service reiterate my instructions to leave the package with the manager. The customer service agent apologized profusely and assured me that the package would arrive the following day. With my faith already shaken and sensing trouble, I asked if there was anywhere I could just go and pick it up. I was told that

there was no location for customer pick-up of "home delivery" in my city.

Day three. I got up and logged onto the net right away, tracked the package and it was on the truck for delivery! Upon my return home from work there was no package. I called Merle, my personal customer service assistant, to discover that the home deliveries are contracted out to independent carriers and if a driver doesn't finish his route in one day it will be delivered the next day. I was also informed that after the 4th attempt the package will be sent back to the shipper. At this point I was convinced that the right hand had no clue what the left hand was doing and I could see the aforementioned "magical line" where civility begins to blur. But, I was beginning to learn their jargon. I effortlessly dropped phrases, "Tracking ID" and "Terminal Control Number" and they seemed to be slightly impressed that I was attempting to speak their language and were a little more cooperative.

Day Four. Friends and co-workers begin to smirk and ask me if I've, "tracked the package" recently. By then it was safe to say that I was tracking it at least 3 times a

day. I made it a point to call Merle to check the status. This was a weekend so I was told to stay home between 11 and 3 and it would definitely be delivered. Since I had the whole day off and I didn't want to spend half a Saturday waiting for the delivery I again asked if there was a pickup spot and was told, "Not for Home Delivery, sir". I waited the allotted time to no avail. This time they didn't even call.

Day five. At this point I truly didn't care anymore but I tracked the package merely because it now had become habit to do so. The results of the tracking stated that the package "was being held a local warehouse for customer pickup". This sparked a complex mixture of ecstasy and anger. I took a deep breath and called Merle, hopeful to put some closure on this whole experience. Merle said, "I'm sorry Sir but the warehouse isn't open for pickups on Monday. They don't post their hours until tomorrow, please call back then." It was almost as though a switch was flipped in my brain and I became a raving lunatic. I ripped Merle a new one. The line was eerily quiet for a few moments. I sensed a newfound respect in Merle's tone,

"One moment. Sir, the hours for pickup are between 10:00 and 4:00." I sarcastically asked if I needed to know a secret handshake or a special knock to gain entry into the warehouse." Merle replied with a monotone, "no". Finally, I had proven myself worthy to receive my package! All it took was a great deal of patience, learning almost a completely new language and a healthy dose of primal rage.

Full Circle

Open misconceptions
until you're safely gathered in
they will serve to dull the nagging
ache of wicked little sins

born from wondrous worlds
bathed in astral light
we grow desirous hearts
plagued by earthly plight

all appears to be Babel
to a heart yet unraveled
you will see clearly when your soul
is well-traveled

serendipitous thoughts flood
in to fuel the flame
as wisdom slowly roasts
the seeds of blame

in the middle path lies
a truth so pure

joy that can't be quelled,
pain that can't be cured

when the sun is setting
and it's time to wander home
the devil gets the flesh
and the Lord gets the bones.

Musings From The Cubicle Jungle

Working in the close quarters of the modern office environment can be more difficult than you think. Below are a few tidbits of wisdom to help navigate you safely through the pitfalls of the cubicle jungle.

Homo-Cubiclus - An often intelligent but sedentary creature who sits in a tiny three walled office for 8 to 10 hours a day. These creatures survive on various forms of fried pastry, sugar and caffeinated beverages and frequently daydream of places far, far away.

Listed below are some, but not all varieties of Homo-Cubiclus:

Besmircher - One who has mastered the art of twisting every conceivable positive into a negative. You often feel like washing up after encountering a besmircher.

Besmoocher - One who cozies up to the boss or high ranking cubicle-mate at every opportunity and then is the first to talk about him/her like a dog when he or she isn't present. Besmoochers can be nauseatingly saccharine. Try to exchange nothing but vague pleasantries with a besmoocher.

Flapper - (Not to be confused with the 1920's era cultural icon). One who will literally explode if, after being told something, doesn't repeat it to someone else within at least five minutes. Flappers have been known

to often take creative license in the retelling of said information or stories. Say nothing, and I mean absolutely nothing, to a flapper that you don't want repeated.

Stall Jockey (or sometimes referred to as the less culturally accepted, turd-bird) - An individual who disappears for long periods of time, several times a day. Stall Jockey's can be fun at parties, exhibit a lackadaisical attitude and sometimes whistle. The tell-tale sign of a stall jockey is the ever-present reading material proudly tucked under one arm or sandwiched between important looking work-related files.

Toggle-Master - One who posses lightning quick reflexes not unlike that of a ninja. They use these reflexes to their advantage by surfing the internet and reading frivolous e-mail attachments for most of the day. These adrenaline junkies are masters of using the "Alt" and "Tab" keys to toggle back to that all-important spreadsheet or work-item just a split second before the boss walks by. Exercise caution when approaching a Toggle-master (especially if unannounced) for they can be skittish and easily excitable.

Schnoozer - A true schnoozer is almost zen-like. They have one foot planted in reality and one foot in the land of dreams and can make an seamless, almost unnoticeable transition. If a Schnoozer is still for more than a few minutes chances are he/she has achieved the illusive dreamlike state.

Wishy-washer - These people, for various reasons, adamantly refuse to state their personal opinion or take a strong stance on any one subject for fear it will go

"against the grain" in a homogenous politically correct environment. Often, wishy-washers have lost all but a shred of their individuality and delight themselves in owning multiple shades of khaki clothing.

Roundabout - "All the world's a stage" and, when in the spotlight, a good roundabout can be mesmerizing! Roundabouts take pride in rarely giving a direct answer to any question. Watch for a theatrical oratory style, this will often, but not always give them away. The roundabout climbs the ladder quickly and will continue to hone their craft in the cubicle jungle until such time as they decide to move into the political arena.

Chief Time Thief – The person in the office who stealthily lies in waiting to nab you at the least opportune times in hallways or restroom areas for lengthy and often pointless conversations. Avoid this person at all costs, especially in social settings. Chief Time Thieves are almost guaranteed to make their victims sweat and have been known to elevate their blood pressure by at least ten points.

The Piddler – It's a Piddler's ultimate goal in life to one day find a way to master the laws of physics and actually suspend time. Until this ultimate goal is reached it will satisfy them to spend least ten times longer than necessary to do each and every job function. Piddlers relish in life's little details, often have very serious demeanors and appear to be very studious and philosophical.

The Whittler - One who slowly and steadily erodes the morals of the entire department by spreading rumors and/or gossip with the sole purpose of starting trouble within the work group. Whittlers are typically excellent strategists, will talk about anyone behind their backs, pit people against one another and sit back and enjoy the show. A tell tale sign of a Whittler is a saccharine sweet veneer and free-flowing compliments for anyone within earshot.

The Martyr – A Martyr will be the first to tell you, the weight of the world is on their shoulders. Martyrs can be seen sighing and shaking their heads in disgust quite frequently. Nervous ticks and soft incoherent mumblings can sometimes be observed in extreme cases.

Gigante Importante – A person who has been with the company since the dawn of time and have found a comfortable niche somewhere in middle-management. Gigante Importantes, many times, operate under the false assumption that they're indispensable and the Universe would actually grind to a halt if it weren't for their glowing competence. Be careful, Gigante Importantes are very territorial and can become argumentative if their perceived status is threatened.

Shiny-Happy-People - These people are just plain happy as hell. In fact, they can be disturbingly happy. Shiny-Happy-People can exhibit short-term memory loss, cry frequently after-hours. A good number of

Shiny-Happy-People have experimented heavily with psychotropic drugs at some stage in their lives and usually have deep dark secrets that are best left unsaid.

The Interrupter – A person who dominates each and every conversation or meeting that they're involved in. There's an unusual air of intellectual superiority surrounding an Interrupter. Usually thin, nervous with very dramatic communication styles and have a hyena-like laugh. These people clearly weren't given enough attention as children and are making up for lost time. Interrupters have the unique ability to make others feel like they do not exist. Not unlike the Chief Time Thief, the Interrupter can raise other's blood pressure significantly.

The Interceptor - One who will take another's good idea and present said idea to a manager with the intention of claiming it as their own. The Interceptor is completely devoid of a conscience or even a shred of common sense and can be found lurking behind cubicle walls, eaves dropping. Seasoned Interceptors have even been known to log onto other people's computers in their absence to obtain their valuable information.

Human Calliope - One who can make disgusting noises from each and every orifice either separately or in advanced cases, at the same time. Human Calliope's are often slightly autistic and exhibit brash, anti-social behavior. When communicating with a Human Calliope it's best to stand at least ten feet away or wear a slicker.

The One

You are the one
to whom I've
revealed my soul
and have entrusted
with my heart completely
you are the one who
gives me solace,
love and peace

Only love
can take us this far
to the edge of reason
only love gives us
the chance to test our wings
and fly high above the preconceptions
of who we thought we were,
to reveal the beauty
that has been waiting patiently
for us all along

You ask me if I can love you
for the rest of my life?
when I look into your eyes
I see pure destiny

that's why it has always
been so hard to look away

I know, without doubt,
that I will love you forever
and must answer you with the
question, "How could I not?"

INEA-da Second Mortgage

Yesterday we spent some of the afternoon in the clutches of a certain Scandinavian home furnishings store. They are eerily similar to their ancient ancestors, the Vikings of old, swooping in to pillage our wallets. Most things in this store are incredibly cheap and, by modern standards, relatively well made. So why the sticker-shock? You see, they have cleverly picked up on something that the fashion and auto industries have caught on to a long time ago, accessorizing. This is the one of the few places on earth that an item marked \$12.99 can easily end up costing you double that and leave you smiling as you pay for it.

From the smell of freshly baked cinnamon rolls to the slick room models, the store environment conjures up warm and fuzzy feelings of euphoria and not to mention a cult-like following. Theirs is the perfect formula to make you loosen the grip on your wallet. More precisely, it's a recipe that makes you

forget that your wallet even exists just long enough until your "cart run-neth over". Their sales strategy even works on me and that's saying something because I'm a tightwad from way back.

Then there is the entertainment factor. By this point, eighty percent of you know what retailer I'm talking about. Right after you read this article I urge you to log on to their website and take a look at some the names of some of their products. All I can say that their marketing department has a twisted sense of humor that never has failed to make me laugh at least once per visit. Maybe it's me? Judge for yourself.

Last but not least is the "people watching". People here are just plain happy and it's so good to see for a change, even if the happiness is induced. On this most recent trip the only exception that I encountered was the father of a highly enthusiastic teenage girl. He wore a look of stunned disbelief, almost as though he had lost ten "g's" on a game of craps with one roll of the dice. He realized full well that he was in deep. I just hope he had the foresight to bring a large vehicle and, even more importantly, lots and lots of bungee cords.

When there's this kind of money involved I can almost bet that as the months and years go by we'll see the trend of more and more retailers adopting this way of doing business. In anticipation of this, I'm not going to invest in hydrogen fuel cells or 3-g cellular phone stock like everyone else is these days. I'm putting my money into the next big thing, bungee cords.

From The Land of the Lost

This life is a freefalling dream
in which time is the only gravity
reach out, but there's nothing to cling to
until you awaken and discover your wings

these wayward wanderings will bring
may a lonesome stings
but your soul is a phoenix
and a most faithful guide

make your journey to the peaks
and take comfort in the sunrise
of each day born anew

taste the wine and know in time
that you will make your way
from the land of the lost.

Confessions

There are many modern conveniences that I, admittedly, take for granted. Among my favorites are cars, computers, cell phones, and wrinkle-free pants. When you actually stop and think about these things they are all wonderful but after a while they tend to fade into the background of our lives. However, one modern invention is such a technological marvel that it is impossible to ignore. This modern miracle is the recent advent of healthy junk food.

Being a child of the seventies, for years, I've longed for that super sweet sugar bomb cereal that made you feel like you could run like Carl Lewis, toaster pastries, corn dogs and the like but in my adult years have learned way too much about nutrition to allow myself to even think about eating them. Companies have also wasted no time figuring out that there are millions of people out there like myself that would pay a hefty price for that guilt-free stroll down memory lane.

It's amazing to me the power that the words, "organic", "free-range" and "low fat" have to completely derail our common sense. Smelling the money trail, even the big multinational corporations are jumping on the bandwagon. For example, once every few weeks an acquaintance of mine will buy the economy-size bag of the "healthy twin" of a popular cheesy snack and eat them until their fingers glow a vibrant orange.

You can now buy the healthy-twin of just about any insanely over the top food you can think of from your childhood. It was recently brought to my attention that I have practically nothing but healthy junk food in my fridge. Heed my warning, it's too late for me but still have time to save yourself. My name is Eric, I'm a healthy junk food junkie, it's been 4 hours since my last bowl of super sweet organic free range honey bombs, and I have this compelling urge to run really, really fast.

Possibilities

In my heart
you hold
a special place
a place that is
sacred and quiet,
but as wild
and free
as the wind
this place
is so alive
with possibilities
that I can't help
but smile
long slow walks
in lazy
autumn afternoons,
shared thoughts
ambitious dreams
you alone

posses its key
to hold close
and to do with
what you will.

The Flaming Coffeemaker, Corporate Olympic (mind) Games and Pitching Woo

Is it true that writers have a license to be eccentric? It's now such a widely held opinion that it's cliché but I have to agree that most of us are a little "off kilter" to some degree or another. This thrills me because I feel the world needs more eccentricity. Just how interesting would life be if everyone was "normal" by societal-standards? This leads to another question, what exactly is normal? Being eccentric can allow us to discover vast veins of humor hidden just below the surface of the mundane, adding untold layers of subtle richness to life. Maybe this is the universe's way of balancing out the fact the most writers can't even afford to pay attention? Who knows. One thing is for sure, eccentricity isn't a thing that can be forced. Either you are or you're not: it is genetically encoded like large feet or nearsightedness.

I'll give you a few examples for posterity. For instance, last Friday afternoon a friend (who thankfully happens to be eccentric too) and I got on an elevator at work. There was a woman riding up with us. I simply stated a fact, "Oh, this is the elevator that I got stuck in a few months ago". In a classic moment, the poor woman's eyes got as big around at silver dollars! My friend and I got off at our floor barely able to contain our laughter long enough for the doors to close. Voila! A totally spontaneous moment!

If you're eccentric sometimes certain things will just strike you as being funny for no apparent reason. Like the phrase "Pitching Woo". I dare you to say this more than three times out loud without laughing. Anybody who has ever watched old reruns of the Dating Game has heard the phrase before. Who exactly is this, "Woo" character and why the hell would anyone want to pitch him in the first place?

I'll give you one more example and then I will leave you to form your own opinions. Tonight I decided that it was time to clean the coffee maker because it was taking a painful 15 minutes to

brew a single carafe of coffee. Of course we were out of vinegar. Scanning my memory banks I thought up a scheme that even I realized was a little crazy from the beginning but thought it just might work. You see about a year ago I bought a bottle of Dewars that I had never really developed a taste for so I thought to myself, "as much as this stuff burns when you swallow it, it would have to clean out the coffeemaker"! So I poured in a wee bit. The coffeemaker made a disturbing sound not unlike that of an F-16 fighter jet. It was at that moment that I remembered the combustible properties of alcohol and moved back a good ten paces fearing that the contraption would burst into flames.

Being eccentric is having a great desire to experiment without always being willing to spend much precious time thinking things through. Thankfully, this time I kept my eyebrows. None of these experiences are particularly extraordinary, just a typical day in the life of me.....a hopeless eccentric.

Providence

Your presence
brings such joy
to my life,

one beautiful
mystery
I don't care
to explain away

but rather bask in
each moment
that warms like the sun
and cleanses like rain

we must've known
one another long before
in another time and place,

some speakeasy
or juke joint dive

where lives thrived
deliberately simple,

and were as full and ripe
with richness
as each second
shared with you.

Opposable Thumbs & Other Desires of Miles the Cat

This summer we had the good fortune of acquiring Miles from a friend who was moving to Boston. Having one cat already, we figured it would be no great imposition to take another on in. In hindsight, this was indeed a grievous error on our part. When I brought Miles home, he was neatly packaged (and probably sedated) in a little blue plastic carrier, complete with handle. The first thing that I noticed was how extremely heavy this cage was. I thought to myself, there was no way that a cage this small could possibly weigh this much, unless its contents happened to have the density of lead. Being a little short-winded, I sat the cage on the floor and swung open the door. We stood there in anticipation hoping to coax out our scared furry new friend. I pinpoint this as the exact moment that our lives changed forever. Out of the

little blue cage squeezed a cocky behemoth of a creature with a look of unbridled mischief in his eyes! I swear to you if he were a cartoon character, he would've been wearing a derby and smoking a cigar. Instantly, he gave us the creeps.

The next couple of weeks can be described as nothing less than a battle of wit and resolve. Proving that there's something to be said of women's intuition, Miles had turned out to be quite the hellion. A Teddy Roosevelt-esque sort of character, an avid outdoorsman. We quickly learned that Miles takes every opportunity to dart out of any open door where he proceeds to the backyard to hunch down and scratch his bloated belly on the grass. Knowing that Miles is poised, waiting for us to open the door can be somewhat stressful, considering his girth.

We must always remember to have a good firm footing before turning the key.

Being outdoors is as good as it gets in his world and Miles is very vocal about this fact. He meows a

deep bellowing meow, continuously whenever anyone's within ten feet of the door. The annoyance has been known to raise the blood pressure a few notches. We thought, for the sake of sanity, that we'd try to reach some kind of compromise. We got Miles a collar tied him up to a tree in the yard but he slipped out of it with all of the flair and ease of Houdini. To his delight, Miles has also found that if he runs, we'll give chase and sometimes even shout profanities in his direction! This provides him with hours of entertainment as he leads us on these little jaunts through the neighborhood frequently, after which he seems to smile and be quite pleased with himself.

Our other cat, Jasmine (a sweet and dainty creature) has developed a sort of tick and constantly stops to take quick nervous glances over her shoulder as she walks. Sometimes we find her sitting behind furniture shivering and for good reason; we've witnessed Miles lying on top of her napping.

Miles does seem to have a sensitive side under that gruff exterior. He's Mile's the cat feline

extraordinaire, hair designer and budding horticulturist. He perches himself atop my wife's pillow every night and affectionately grooms her hair while she sleeps. She wakes up most mornings with a set of dreadlocks that Bob Marley would be envious of. With a vertical leap that seems to defy the laws of physics (I think he's secretly developed some sort of anti-gravity device), he harvests shoots from our favorite spider plant that hangs nearly six feet from the ceiling. Miles also takes the liberty to prune any other houseplants that may be growing too quickly or disproportionately for his liking.

After many months of adjustment, we've finally come to terms. A friend's advice of holding Miles to the ground when he's particularly indignant has seemed to have a positive effect. We've also found moderate success with a squirt bottle at close range. These tools have made us feel as though we have regained some control over the household, this helps. We've come to the conclusion that Miles has been put on Earth to torment us for the strife that we subjected our Mothers to as teenagers. If our calculations are

correct and my wife isn't holding anything back, we figure that our Karmic debt should nearly be paid. Until then, we feel it wise to stay on Miles' good side. After all, we're his people and we're convinced that if Miles had opposable thumbs, he might possibly rule the world. I think he knows it too. This alone must be his greatest haunting desire.

Take a Chance

Take a chance,
any chance.

Stare down fear
and watch it unfold you

like the ribbons of the sunrise
all red, orange and gold.

The Saga of the Infamous Purple Shorts

I'm getting old, there's no denying it. How do I know this, you ask? Not because my hair is greying, or because my stomach's bulging but because with each year that passes I care less and less of what people think of me. This year I've reached critical mass and have begun to take utter delight in embarrassing my younger relatives. We've all heard of the poem, "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings"...well I'm beginning to understand "why the elderly wear plaid pants, high-waters and dress socks with shorts". It's not because they're not fashion-savvy, it's because they've discovered the "great secret". It's fun to embarrass younger relatives!

I live in Minnesota where the mercury inches above freezing only about four months out of the year and all of my other immediate family lives in the Sunshine State. When we visit, it's a given

there will be some kind of swimming involved. That's where the purple shorts come into play. During a visit last September we were all in the pool. After about ten minutes my niece looked at me, laughing and asked, "Uncle Eric why do you wear those purple shorts?" So from now on, as I'm packing for another trip, the infamous purple shorts will be the first item of clothing that will be tossed into the suitcase. Next year, who knows? It may be time for the dress socks.

The Long Way Home

Suspended in sweet lucidity
eyes opened in this dream

as relativity ebbs away from me
life is no longer what it seems

within these walls of alabaster
time is ticking ever faster

subjectivity breeds delusion
this lesson will take how long to learn?
as we stumble in confusion
it's for the same thing we all yearn

within these walls of alabaster
time is ticking ever faster

to find release from caged trinity
escape once from this head of yours
we're all our own worst enemies
I am mine and you are yours.

"You Know... Chakras Are Real, Man"

The funniest thing happened yesterday. My friend Juan and I ventured out into a night in the single digits. We were digging through the stacks of used jazz cds in a local discount bookstore when I came across something that was out of place. It was a cd called, "Roots of Awakening - Chanting the Chakras". As many of you might know, I'm into meditation so I grabbed it and thought that I'd try it out. At \$3.98 I figured, "How could I go wrong?"

We finished looking and went up to the cashier to pay. The cashier looked like he could've been at Woodstock. He had the signature wire-rimmed glasses, a sandalwood bead necklace and his long grey hair pulled back into a neat ponytail. He looked at the cd and then peered at me over the top of his wire-rimmed glasses, leaned over the counter and whispered, "You know...chakras are real, man".

I countered with a nod of the head and a knowing wink. The moment was classic, I felt as though I was in a "Cheech and Chong" movie. As it turned out the cd wasn't my thing but the experience itself was well worth every cent of \$3.98.

Wake Up!

Mother Earth sobs,
under our vanity
she struggles
to feed her children

the frigid winds
blow the whimpers
of her pain
ever-scattered

but the almighty dollar
deafens her cries
as minds are further dulled
by the distraction
of this race going nowhere

Counting Chickens

Have you ever accepted a challenge or a task thinking that it would be no problem at all only to have reality give you an unexpected left hook? Right now I'm nursing a shiner. I've probably written over a thousand poems over the last decade. Some come all at once and some take a little more work but usually they will work themselves out.

About a month ago my niece, Brooke, called me on the phone and in her shy ten year old (and I should add well rehearsed) voice uttered a whole sentence that included only two distinguishable syllables asking, "UncleEricmyteachersays someonehastohelpuswriteapoem about (big breath) theeventsleadinguptoFloridabecomingaStatewillyouhelp?"

Instantly a smug grin appeared on my lips and I agreed. Before hanging up I sealed my fate by adding, "tell your teacher to prepare to be dazzled". This was,

of course, was a joke. Our arrangement was she would do the research and come up with a list of facts and I would weave them into a poem. After about two weeks she delivered, as promised, a whole list of facts that were ripe for the picking.

To make a long story short the due date is looming and I'm in the evil grip of writer's-block and my niece actually went to school and told her teacher to "prepare to be dazzled" by the assignment. From this I've learned a couple things, never underestimate an assignment or the complete and utter candidness of a ten year old.

Dream Ultimate

A tangled web
of brilliant lies,
those insidious
lines that allow us
to keep our swagger
and artfully dodge the
dull daggers of discontent
all have walked
this road before
breathed in its dust,
kicked the stones
and in the end have found
the journey isn't what it seemed
but just some
gloriously forgiving dream
always kind enough
to give us one more chance.

Radically Deprogrammed & Slightly Eschewed

Before Sunday I had watched a total of about an hour of television since May. After being away from TV for so long and watching it again it left me with the feeling of being deprogrammed and slightly out-of-touch but in a good sort of way. I saw television in a new light. The show we were watching was peppered with an insane amount of commercials, over thirty in two hours!

It wasn't merely the quantity but the content of those ads that was so disturbing. One particular commercial made us instantly sit up and look at one another in disbelief, wondering for a split second if this was indeed a real ad or just some new form of "creative marketing". This commercial was touting a drug for something called, "restless leg syndrome" (RLS for short). Are we the only two on the planet that haven't heard of this? It showed people shaking their legs from side to side while seated or laying down.

As if pharmaceutical companies aren't making enough of a windfall, they now seem to be inventing "syndromes" and then creating the drugs to treat them. I felt as though I lost about 20 points of my I.Q. during

those two hours and I need all the smarts I can get. For the now I'll continue my hiatus from the "boob tube" as I blissfully reside in my deprogrammed state of awareness.

Crescendo

This life's crescendo
constantly on the cusp,
close as a shadow, my best friend

sadness comes only
when I forget that
it is forever with me

this portable bliss,
no one can capture
however hard they may try

it lives in the wings of the bird,
the crackle of the fire,
and the kindness of strangers

its beauty surrounds
to remind us who we are

and will keep its promise
to cradle us in its arms
until our last breath.

Green Mill

(Chicago 8-19-2004)

We took the redline to Lawrence
and checked the world at the door
in the footsteps of all those before
who found solace in sax and
draped themselves in neon dreams

I must confess
how easily I acquiesced
to the Gresik groove

hundreds moved
as broad shoulders unloaded
some say this swing-style's outmoded
it don't mean a thing

Brother, I felt the pulse
and the heart's still tickin'
after all these years
and I'm the first to say that
the I'm blown away

If relics we are, I accept it
this hurried world, I reject it
as I go back in my mind
to a simpler time
learn a new step and perfect it.

The Perfect Pause

Even in the midst of abundance, we are hungry. We will go to great lengths to try to fill the void; violence, overeating, insatiable consumerism. Minds much brighter than my own have pondered the ills and misdeeds of mankind and have wondered what could possibly be done to better our circumstances. In my heart I believe the key is right before us, echoing down through the ages in the wisdom of the sages. Lasting Peace can and will never be brought about on Earth by violence. Violence only begets suffering. Each person must make an effort to change themselves and I believe the key is what I call the “perfect pause”, the practice of meditation.

Science is catching up with the sages. Today we don't have to look far to learn of meditation's well-documented benefits; stress reduction, aids the healing process, it can even help you recover from addiction. Meditation can help with all of these conditions and so much more. You may begin to practice meditation for a specific reason but if you make it a part of your daily routine you will start to experience untold benefits in all areas of your life. I know this first-hand.

Those who knew me as a child would describe me as the stereotypical bully magnet; very shy, thin and sporting the trademark coke-bottle glasses. But I also had an insatiable curiosity and people seemed to like me so I got along just fine. My grades were stellar, practically straight A's until the ninth grade. In the fall

of 1985 I entered Eastmoor High School and everything changed. The school at that time was conducive to almost every illegal activity imaginable but definitely not to academics. It was overrun with gangs, drugs were sold openly in the hallways and violence was rampant.

By my sophomore year the situation worsened and the adults had lost nearly all control. Point blank, if gang members saw something that they wanted they took it. That included jackets in the wintertime or even the very shoes off of your feet. For the students it became the survival of the fittest. In the summer of 1986 I was determined that next year things would be different, I got contacts and started lifting weights. By my sophomore year I had gained about 30 lbs of muscle and in an attempt to fit in decided to adopt the “if you can’t beat them join them” philosophy. People I knew didn’t recognize me. By my junior year, I could bench-press nearly 300lbs and was fully assimilated. I had become a product of my environment.

Those last three years of High School I tread a treacherous path and could seem to find no way back. Towards the end of my senior year I began to experience depression and panic attacks for seemingly no reason. I began to feel heavy and macabre. A coldness had me in its grasp and I felt paralyzed, watching the world pass by. That year, I cut classes a total of 112 days and somehow still managed to graduate towards the top of my class. In my heart, I knew if something didn’t change my future would be bleak at best. So the search began. I spent countless hours reading self-help books, some of which were slightly beneficial but they were only a temporary fix.

After almost a year of searching I came across a small book on meditation and started the practice that changed my life absolutely.

In the beginning the changes were almost imperceptible. The very first thing I remember was the desire to take long walks in the woods. Since I was a product of the inner city, this wasn't easy but I got into my car and drove forty-five minutes to the nearest nature trail. It was the only place that offered me solace. Next came only what I can describe as a softening of the heart. I started feeling empathy towards others, writing poetry and devouring any book I could get my hands on. Slowly and steadily my situation began to improve.

Twelve years later, honestly, the change in me is so complete that the person I once was is a stranger. Although my life is far from a fairy-tale, I realize now that every moment is a thing to be cherished and a chance to evolve. The only thing that haunts me now, is to see how the world suffers and to know that there's a simple solution. It costs nothing and asks not a thing of you but a few minutes of your day and a little practice.

Meditation doesn't belong to any one sect or religion, it is for everyone. What would you attempt in life if you knew, in your heart, that you could accomplish anything? How would you live each day if you had no fear of failure? We as humans, have forgotten how awesomely powerful we are. Through the gift of imagination and the intelligence to bring our ideas to fruition, there is literally nothing that we can't accomplish.

The problem is that there have been many roadblocks put in our path to relearning. Belief systems and patterns of thought have been put in place down through the ages as a means of controlling us. Some roadblocks are even self-imposed. These roadblocks continually loop in our heads day after day as self-limiting thoughts. By continually thinking negative internal thoughts and comparing ourselves to others, many of us become our own worst enemies. “I’m not smart enough”, “I’m not as good looking or successful as they are”, “This certain person doesn’t like me”. We can really get quite creative with our negative thoughts!

Most of us have heard of the word “institutionalized” and know its meaning but few of us realize that we have in a way become institutionalized ourselves. As unbelievable as it seems it is common for prisoners who have been incarcerated for decades, upon their release, to find themselves unable to deal with the realities of freedom. Freedom terrifies them. Some even end up breaking the law to get back into prison. These people, who at first grieve because their freedom has been taken from them, strangely begin to find security and comfort behind bars.

The same phenomena occurs everyday in this physical world. When we’re young, most of us have lofty dreams and aspirations but if we’re not mindful, as the ocean erodes the sand, the routines of life will slowly wear our dreams away. After a few years the dreams, if remembered at all, are pushed back into the farthest reaches of our minds. As our daily routines become etched into our brains, even though we may be miserably unhappy, we lose our ability to even imagine a different way of living. We become so dependant

upon the routine itself that we forget that other options that would make us far happier exist and are just a decision away!

As you will experience, meditation is many wonderful things but first and foremost it is a process of relearning who we really are and the awesome power that each and every one of us possess. In many ways it is very sad, we are like sleeping giants that merely have to be awakened.

This modern life is like a double-edged sword. The average person enjoys a reasonable amount of leisure time and we have more information at our fingertips than any other generation in history, yet we have countless distractions. Our senses are assaulted from the time our alarm clocks wake us in the morning to the time we lie down to go to sleep at night. Almost continually television, radio, cell phones, and a plethora of other things are volleying for our valuable attention.

This makes the first step of meditation probably the most work. It is what I refer to as the “physical step” and requires you to do nothing more than quiet your mind. In a way, meditation can be viewed as us connecting to their inner-selves in much the same way that your computer connects to the internet. For us to make this “connection” we must first be able to attain a certain level of peace within ourselves.

Once the mind is still, the second step or “psychological step” begins. This is a chance to release the baggage that we’ve acquired throughout the years. We begin to gradually break free from all of the misconceptions and self-limiting thoughts and

behaviors that we've taken on in our lives. The third and final step is the "spiritual step". This is deep meditation.

The important thing to remember is that the constant practice of meditation itself will engage a natural trinity of healing processes: physical, psychological and spiritual. Meditation must be experienced to be fully believed and it's never too late.

**To learn more about the benefits of meditation please read, "The Perfect Pause – A Beginner's Guide to Meditation and Journal"*

Sedona Dreamtime

Awakened from
a cold frustration
far beyond the lull
of creature comforts
to an awareness that
is beyond the days
that stand between us
and our desert dream

Native wisdom whispers
through the cypress
as your cares lazily drift away
in the smoke of the pungent pinon
crystal clarity is born
by the beat of the Hopi drum
revealing the essence of your very nature

shamanic chants long locked

in the slick red rock
leave you whole
as you at last bear witness
to the prolific power
and beauty of your soul.

If “Wrong Way” Corrigan Had Had A Nagging Wife and A Little Less Nerve

The morning of July 17th, 1938 dawned like many others at Floyd Bennett Field in Brooklyn, New York. It was unseasonably cool for mid-July and the sun was playing hide and seek amongst clouds and a thick layer of fog. The birds chirped melodiously and people were rushing about, making their way to church. Douglass Corrigan had been up before the sun having barely gotten a wink of sleep. All he could do the long night before was lay in his old army cot, staring up at the ceiling and methodically going over his laundry list of excuses as to why he had flown the wrong way to Ireland instead of back home to California; a broken compass needle, bad sense of direction, poor light in the cabin and what ever else he could concoct.

Corrigan could wait no longer. He put on his pilot's jumpsuit and set foot out of the hanger door. It was utterly impossible for him to wipe the mischievous grin from his face when he saw the sky. This was it, the day that all his training had prepared him for. For years the government had denied giving him clearance for his lifelong dream, a transatlantic flight, and he had lost

hope that they ever would. After multiple attempts and countless miles of governmental red tape the appearance of the blessed fog was not only the perfect excuse but was an affirmation that, this time, even the gods were on his side. He took a long drink of his strong black coffee, winked affectionately at his heavily modified OX5 Robin monoplane parked on the runway and said, “There’s nothin’ they can do to stop us this time, girl.”

Corrigan had taken his first flight many years earlier when he was a mere lad of eighteen. Eagerly arriving with \$2.50 in hand, he was taken for a short flight over the city of Los Angeles in an old Curtiss biplane. He had been hooked ever since. Douglass had taken many aircraft mechanics jobs over the years and even worked on the crew that built Lindy’s famous plane, “The Spirit of St. Louis”. Ever since baring witness to that famous transatlantic flight in 1927 he had vowed to one day make his own symbolic journey to the emerald land of his ancestors, beloved Ireland.

In the distance Corrigan saw a man of slight stature quickly approaching him. His was toting a clipboard and trying his best to keep the wind from snatching his tattered fedora.

“Good Morning Mr. Corrigan.” said the thin man as he squinted over the top of his wire-rimmed glasses. “The name is Jones, Edward Jones and I’ll be the one seeing you off today.”

Corrigan took the last drink of his coffee, nodding his head, “Good mornin’ to you, Mr. Jones.”

“Hmm. It says here that you’re flying non-stop to California today. Unfortunately, it seems we have a little bit of a problem here Mr. Corrigan.”

Douglass got a lump in his throat as his heart began to beat like a drum in his chest. “Umm, what do you mean Mr. Jones?”

Jones fought with the wind to steady the checklist on his clipboard as he walked around the plane, “You see, because of this here fog rolling in, you can take off any direction but West. As you know, plane loaded with enough fuel to fly cross-country isn’t the easiest to maneuver. Are you confident that you turn ‘er around quickly enough to clear those buildings if you take off in another direction?”

Corrigan took a deep breath and felt as though he had dodged a bullet. He calmed himself as best he could. “I’ve been flyin’ her for years Mr. Jones. You have my word that I’ll be extra careful.”

These preflight inspections had always been a nightmare for Corrigan. His plane was literally a patchwork of pieces and parts. Approval was always a crapshoot and depended upon the mood of the inspector. Sensing by the furrowed brow of Mr. Jones

as he inspected the left wing, they had reached a pivotal moment in the inspection. Douglass reached into the pocket of his blue jumpsuit and pulled out a dark stogie. He decided to sacrifice one of the three cigars that he planned on enjoying during his post-flight celebration.

“There’s nothing like a fine Cuban cigar to make this harsh world seem like a more civilized place.” Douglass managed a nervous smile as he tucked the cigar into the breast pocket of Jones’ threadbare sports jacket.

The gesture seemed to have the desired effect. Jones smiled as he touched the lead of a stubby pencil to his tongue and marked off the last box on his checklist.

“Why thank you sir, it appears that everything is in order here. You’re cleared for takeoff!”

If Mr. Jones had any indication of what Corrigan was up to he either sympathized or possibly couldn’t care less. He removed the cigar from his breast pocket and sniffed it slowly from end to end.

“Oh, I almost forgot. This telegram came in for you early this morning. Seems to be from your wife back in California.”

Mr. Jones handed Douglass the thin strip of paper and

shook his hand, disappearing as quickly as he came.

Corrigan beamed as he opened that hatch of the OX5 Robin and climbed inside. After firing up her mighty propellers he absent mindedly unfurled the strip of paper and let it rest across his knee.

The telegram read, “Douglass Corrigan. Stop. Do not even think of doing what I think you’re going to do. Stop. P.S. Bring home bread and milk. Stop.”

A grimace appeared on his face as he crumpled up the strip of paper and furiously threw it over his shoulder to the floor of the cabin.

The plane taxied quickly down the runway and the wheels at last broke free from gravity’s heavy grip. Corrigan expertly cleared the tops of the buildings with plenty of room to spare, just as he had promised. When Douglass was safely at cruising altitude the weight of the moment came crashing in on him.

He mumbled to himself, “If the blasted plane doesn’t do me in, the wife surely will!”

With his head hanging low, Corrigan turned his plane westward and flew home to California to live the rest of his days in relative obscurity, forever to be known merely as Douglass instead of “Wrong Way” Corrigan.

The Greatest of Secrets

You languish, awash in worry
that time is slipping by
and all that once was
has long gone down the road
never to pass your way again

they tell you you're a sinner
and you remember
when your innocence
wouldn't allow you to believe
but time and their wicked words
have so deliberately whittled you away

it is they who tell you to keep coming back,
dangling the hope of salvation
just beyond your fervor's grasp.

But there are a few things

they have failed to tell you

you are miraculous,
you are divinity's spark
the power of your soul
is a sleeping giant, long exiled

if you only knew
the power that you possess

your eyes would stream tears of joy
as if awakened from a terrible nightmare
to realize the greatest of secrets,

you are an emperor
in beggar's clothes indeed.

The American Dream

Michael Callahan's senses were on heightened alert as he started down the well-worn path leading from the edge of the woods. Michael was by himself but his passion to wrap up this project had long ago eclipsed any fears he might have for his own safety. His instinct told him that he was being watched as he scanned the trees and underbrush for any signs that he might not be alone.

Five weeks of being on the road were starting to wear on him, especially in the damp and stifling heat of the Florida summer. Michael's once chiseled physique had become a bit rounder and he had given up shaving altogether. The reflection that now peered back at him from the mirror could've stepped right out of old Woodstock footage from the 60's. He longed for the old comfortable routines of his life but, more than anything, Michael was itching to start what would be long months of editing. The only thing stopping him from heading home was a nagging voice in his head that kept telling him he wasn't done.

Michael's eyes swept slowly and carefully, back and forth for any hint of movement. He felt a ghostly presence among the trees. Just ahead he quickly spotted

what he had been looking for. Not far down the path was a sunburned man, wearing a tattered blue Yankees hat and reflectively poking at a small fire with a stick.

Michael called out, “Hi there. Are you hungry? Would you be interested in a free lunch?”

The man seemed relaxed and dazed from staring into the fire. Not being used to visitors, the shirtless man looked up suspiciously and said, “I always heard there was no such thing.”

Michael smiled and seemed truly entertained by the homespun wisdom of this stranger.

“You’re right. I just have a couple of questions to ask you in return for as many subs as you can eat.”

The man, intrigued, stood up quickly and looked Michael directly in the eyes. “Are you a cop or some pervert?” he asked.

“No worries. The name’s Michael Callahan and I’m just a storyteller or should I say a story-gatherer. There is no pressure at all. Just follow me if you’re interested.” he said as he went up the path in the direction from which he had come.

Michael knew full well that hunger was a powerful tool and he had used it many times in the past five weeks. He walked about twenty yards ahead and the man fell in step behind him on the narrow path and called out, “My name’s Jeremy. Jeremy Schiller.”

As a dingy yellow RV slowly came into view through the leaves Michael looked back and said, “Very nice to meet you Mr. Schiller. Welcome to my humble abode,” pointing towards the old RV that was parked in a gravel lot out at the edge of the thinning trees.

Its once shiny chrome wheels were covered with dust and the cabin smelled sour from the trip cross-country. Michael unlocked the creaking screen door and held it open for his guest. As he walked behind Jeremy up the stairs he caught a glimpse of an Asian man in the distance watching intently from behind a large oak tree at the edge of the woods.

“Mr. Schiller, come right in and have a seat on the couch and make yourself comfortable.” Michael said. He was being overly attentive, speaking slowly and carefully, in a tone that is usually reserved for small children.

“I’ll get those sandwiches that I promised you but first let’s just talk for a minute. I’m traveling around this country of ours, gathering the stories of people like yourself in hopes of someday turning the footage into a documentary. Are you camera shy, Mr. Schiller?”

A hesitant smirk appeared on Jeremy’s lips as he took off his tattered baseball cap and ran his fingers through his thinning blond hair. “Umm, no. I suppose not,” he said.

Michael walked over to a small digital video camera perched on a tripod in the corner. Turning it on and adjusting its aim, he said, “Good. Just try to forget this thing is on. Now, could you please tell me a little about you and your situation?” Michael reached over and handed him a cold bottle of Gatorade from a large cooler. Jeremy stared at the bottle for a moment and then ran his calloused finger down the tiny beads of sweat that had blanketed its label. He quickly cracked open the bottle cap, took a long drink and cleared his throat.

He began to speak, softly and humbly, “My name is Jeremy. This place has been my home for close to eight years now. It’s not a bad place here once you get accustomed to it but to me it almost feels like a resting place between two worlds.”

Michael seemed intrigued, “I’m not sure what you mean. Can you explain?”

“You see, sometimes in the morning, in the hazy few moments after I wake the life I now live still seems unreal to me. During my waking hours, memories of the life I once lived drift in and out of the corners of my mind like a dream. These memories sometimes fill me with joy, most times they make me angry but nonetheless they are mine and they are all I have left. There are things I miss. Sometimes I close my eyes and swear that I can see Ashley and Genee playing on the jungle gym in the schoolyard in the thin light of March. It might sound strange but sometimes I’ll just sit among these trees and smile, thinking of something as wonderfully mundane as a trip to the old organic co-op to buy groceries or walking the dog through the neighborhood in the crisp air of fall. As each year comes and goes I’ve learned to value these memories more and more. If you’re an optimist, time has a way of polishing the bad and leaving only the good. I’m finding myself revisiting the good now almost every day. There are a couple of things I’ve learned in my forty three years on this Earth. The first is there are lessons to be learned in every single second of life, the hard part is you must be awake for them. Secondly, none of us are entitled to a goddamn thing. If life is good, enjoy it and give thanks to whomever or whatever it is you believe in. If life is bad don’t blame

anyone, just get busy fixing it. Time is most precious and too many people waste too much of it playing the blame game.”

Michael nodded, “Hmm. Very wise words indeed, Mr. Schiller. Can I ask what your childhood was like?”

“Well, I didn’t have a privileged childhood. I had two brothers, my parents were lower middle class and worked hard every day. My mother always told me I was born with a desire to chase after my dreams and she raised me to believe they were all within my grasp. Things never came easy but what I lacked in intelligence I made up for in persistence.”

Jeremy chuckled softly and continued, “I had a few years of college and was majoring in journalism but dropped out to take the plunge into the wild world of software engineering. We were smack-dab in the middle of the ‘dot com boom’. My friend Matt and I, you could say we had a fairly decent idea and just happened to be in the right place at the right time. We started our own firm and opened up shop in an old warehouse in a trendy part of town. It wasn’t long before we had a staff of ten. That’s how I met Ashley. I’ll never forget the first day she came through the front doors to interview for one of our marketing positions. She was as bright as a ray of sunshine. Lord, she took my breath away, she still does every time I think of her.”

Jeremy stopped for a moment to gather himself, his eyes began to well up as he continued.

“Those years were a whirlwind and before I knew it Ashley and I were married with a beautiful baby daughter, Genevieve.”

“What a beautiful name.” Michael said.

The grin of a proud father flashed across Jeremy’s weather-beaten face, “Thank you. The name was popular during the Victorian-era, Ashley felt an affinity towards that time. Our house was filled with all kinds of antiques. Ashley always had such a great eye for a bargain; she would always buy the pieces dirt cheap and refinish them.”

Jeremy cleared his throat and continued, “Well, after Genevieve was born we bought a house in an exclusive gated community called, ‘Whispering Pines’. Ashley never had asked for any of this excess but I felt she deserved only the best of the best, the American dream you know? Whenever I would buy her anything nice or expensive she would look deep into my eyes and ask, “Do you know none of this is necessary?””

Michael noticed an ever so subtle twitch in Jeremy’s eyelid as he took another small sip of his Gatorade and continued to speak.

“The ironic thing was, this place, ‘Whispering Pines’ was the type of place I wanted to live since I could ever remember but once we had achieved this lifestyle, it never really felt like home. It seemed to me like everyone there was in a race.”

“How do you mean?” asked Michael, as he sat back in his swivel chair. His zippo clicked as he lit a cigarette.

Jeremy’s brow ruffled as he leaned forward on the couch and looked Michael directly in the eyes, “It was more like a sickness, this endless race for more things. It was a kind of darkness that slowly eclipsed every part of your life that had any meaning. More

money, nicer things, more exotic travel destinations. People in that community had one thing in common, this tired, empty look in their eyes. You know what I mean?”

Michael squinted as he took a drag off of his Winston, “Yes, I’ve seen that look many times in my travels.”

“We were surrounded by all these nice things but weren’t fulfilled. I personally was too focused on the future to enjoy my life then. I suppose we all got caught up in the euphoria of it all. The one thing I noticed about this lusting after money was, after a certain point, it was worse than walking around hungry because this was a type of hunger that never left you.”

“I understand, please continue Mr. Schiller” Michael said.

“We lived in one of the largest houses in the community but still that wasn’t enough. We also needed to have the best vehicles money could buy, I drove a BMW 740i. The instruction manual for the damn thing was as thick as a phone book! Do you believe that? I bought Ashley a brand new Land Rover. At this point I could tell she was beginning to get a little worried we were in over our heads. She walked around in a cloud for the next few days. To ease her mind I logged onto my broker’s website and finally showed her exactly what our stock was worth. She couldn’t believe it! I will never forget the look she gave me. Her eyes were glazed, her mouth upturned in a silly smile as though she had just taken a hit of some potent drug. I pinpoint this as the precise moment she changed. Never again did she look me in the eyes and tell me the material things weren’t necessary. From that moment

on we were both spending like mad and it was my fault. All my fault.”

Michael’s leg began to bounce nervously as he pulled a small notepad from the pocket of his wrinkled Hawaiian shirt and flipped open its cover. “How were you doing financially at that time, Mr. Schiller, if you don’t mind telling me?” he asked as he furiously scribbled notes.

Jeremy hesitated and his eyes took on a look of suspicion. Michael’s expression reflected the fear his questions had dug too deeply into the dark recesses of Jeremy’s mind. He learned long ago people desperately want to tell their stories and a good interviewer knew to massage and coax, not prod and probe. He still sometimes forgot this, especially when he was truly engaged.

Although he still held a slightly guarded look in his eyes it seemed Jeremy’s memories had been locked away for far too long to be quelled. His words continued their flow, “Well, let’s just say we could’ve paid off everything, all of our bills, and lived out the rest of our days comfortably just off of the interest of what we had.”

Michael’s eyes widened as he took a sip of his coffee. “I see. Can I call you Jeremy?” asked Michael as his voice suddenly took on a more respectful tone.

“Sure you can. Does the offer of the subs still stand?” Jeremy asked.

Michael began to see beyond the tattered clothes and leathery face and saw a glimpse of what once made Jeremy such a successful business man. He had a certain “realness” about him. In the course of just

a few minutes he managed to earn Michael's complete trust and respect.

Loudly digging through the loose ice cubes in the cooler Michael asked, "Roast beef or turkey?"

"Both please." Jeremy answered politely.

"What happened next?" asked Michael as he handed him two subs, still dripping from the melting ice.

Jeremy unwrapped the sandwich hungrily and placed other down carefully beside his leg. "Well", he said his words muffled between chews. "The stock market crash happened. It was as though everything we had acquired went up into thin air. We lost the house. Shortly after we lost everything and Ashley left with Genee."

"I'm so sorry." Michael leaned forward and put his hand on Jeremy's shoulder. Jeremy jerked away but then smiled as if to say everything was all right.

"I was too ashamed to take help from any of my family. It was too much for me to deal with at once. At that point nothing mattered. I felt completely numb and the only thing I could think of to make me feel better was to see the ocean, to feel the salt breeze on my face. So I left town and drove twenty-two hours straight to Cocoa Beach with nothing but the clothes on my back and whatever cash was in my wallet."

Michael asked quietly, almost in a whisper, "What is the hardest part for you now?"

"Of course, there was the loss of my family, there was also the shame, but the most difficult part was knowing there was nowhere to go. This was such a

strange predicament and filled me with such intense anxiety. But after eight years, I've learned to come to terms with it. I've realized the life most people are living is not natural. It's simply not the way it was meant to be. Most of us have been conditioned to be nothing more than money making robots. The most difficult thing now is also the most beneficial for me. Out here, there are no laurels on which to rest, you're staring your demons in the face every waking second so you're forced to deal with them. This, I think, is what drives most people to the bottle or to madness and I came very close to both."

Michael was engrossed but looked shaken by Jeremy's words. As if they touched his soul and peeled away its many layers, exposing some of his greatest fears. He asked his next question desperately as a snake bite victim searched for an antidote, "And what was it that saved you Jeremy?"

A deep and genuine smile flashed across the face of Jeremy Schiller as he finished the last bite of his sub and crumpled up the wrapper into a tight ball, "My savior came to me."

"Oh, you mean Jesus?" asked Michael.

"Not exactly. Not directly anyway. I have to ask you something. Did you feel the presence out there in the woods?" Jeremy asked, still smiling.

Michael just nodded, not wanting to interrupt Jeremy's flow of thoughts and words.

"I had bought an enormous jug of whiskey, stumbled into these woods almost a decade ago with the intention of drinking drink myself into oblivion."

Tears began to stream down Jeremy's face as he continued.

“I was sitting out there in the dark in horrible, drunken misery when my savior came to me. He looked then just as he does now, he hasn't aged a bit in all these years.”

Michael was beginning to wonder if madness had indeed gotten a hold of Mr. Schiller. Jeremy's eyes took on a growing ethereal glow as he continued, “Through this drunken haze I remember seeing this thin, toothless Asian man. He scared the hell out of me at first. He came out of nowhere and was dressed in rags from head to toe. He had duct tape looped around both of his shoes to hold them together but something about his eyes left me speechless. This man's eyes were so humble and kind, they sparkled with so much happiness it was almost like there was a fire lit behind them. He didn't speak a word but just held out his hand. This simple moment for me was a revelation. No words were spoken but I somehow knew he was, at that moment, this stranger who had nothing was standing there offering me something which was very rare, his total acceptance and unconditional friendship.”

“I think I saw this man you're talking about at the edge of the woods. What's his name?” asked Michael.

“That was him. I have no idea what his name is, he never utters a word, he just smiles but we manage to communicate just the same. He sometimes draws pictures in the dirt. Mostly pictures of tanks and artillery. My best guess is that he is a Vietnamese refugee who has seen God only knows what horrors. He's taught me everything I know, the least among

them is survival. He delivered me from my misery, from the land of the lost. Now I am truly free.”

Michael was moved by Jeremy’s story and the power of it changed something in him. He realized once again the nagging voice in the back of his head had served him well. This interview was the Holy Grail of his documentary and was a testament to the fact that one small act of kindness, something that costs absolutely nothing, can ripple forth in waves and touch the lives of countless others.

He looked deep into this homeless man’s eyes and asked, “Jeremy, do you ever think you’ll ever want to give the world another chance?”

Jeremy didn’t even pause to reflect as he answered, “Never. Not that world. Michael, when your mind is clear you can see it so plainly. That world out there is too far gone; it is nothing but a fragile house of cards. Power and money are now the only gods left.”

As they said their goodbyes and Michael handed Jeremy all the cash he had in his wallet, about two hundred dollars. Jeremy argued but Michael insisted. Michael figured this would keep the two from going hungry for a while and this comforted him in some small way.

Michael Callahan fired up the engine of his musty RV and started on the road back home to his life. He daydreamed about how he would splice together the footage the whole trip back. The documentary that started out being about the perils of homelessness in America was transformed instead into a film about the root cause of the problem, the broken system that created it. Michael dedicated the film

anonymously to “his savior” and called it, “From The Land of the Lost” and when it debuted at Sundance the very next year it was the surprise hit of the film festival. Michael had poured his entire life savings into the project, roughly twelve thousand dollars. The film grossed one hundred and twenty-three million dollars in its first year.

Time after time it was always Jeremy’s interview that woke people up and touched their hearts. Michael went on to produce a string of successful films and acquired every single material thing he ever wanted but was very careful to live his life with a certain sense of balance. He discovered he had a wonderful knack for spreading the money around to those who needed it. He never forgot the lesson he had learned through listening to Jeremy, his savior.

Three years later Michael took a road trip from Manhattan down the coast with nothing more than his cellular phone and a duffel bag full of hundred dollar bills. During the drive, he reflected on the fact that he had met Jeremy at the exact moment he needed to and how everything unfolded the way it did for a reason. All actions and reactions are part of an amazingly complex web that can best be deciphered in reverse. If success would’ve ever come his way before, he would’ve have likely been sucked into the very same hellish world Jeremy had narrowly escaped from.

On the drive Michael entertained many fantasies about what Jeremy would do with the cash. Now that his lesson was learned maybe he would finally be ready to make a brand new start with his wife and child. Maybe he would just hide the money in the woods and live out the rest of his days in peace, never

having to wonder where his next meal would come from.

He took the Rockledge exit off I-95 and his heart thumped in his chest as he got close to the patch of woods that had served as the incubator of his rebirth. He put his Prius in park and grabbed the duffle bag, making his way down the old well-worn path. But this time something seemed different. At first Michael couldn't put his finger on it. Then it dawned on him, the presence that he once felt in the woods no longer seemed to be there. He made his way deeper down the path and noticed a bright yellow bulldozer standing motionless near a pile of fallen trees with heaping mounds of twisted roots and raw earth on either side of it.

“Jeremy! Jeremy!” Michael called out frantically. While holding the heavy duffle bag, he called out Jeremy's name a few more times. Each time his voice became progressively quieter. He sat down on a fallen tree just long enough to realize how foolish he felt being there by himself in the middle of the woods with a small fortune in a bag. He knew in his heart that Jeremy and his friend had moved on as soon as progress had encroached on their peace. Michael reached down and picked up a rock from the path, dusted it off and studied it in the shaft of intense sunlight created by the fallen trees.

In a year, when the magical patch of woods is destroyed to make way for yet another outcrop of cookie-cutter condominiums, or “yuppie-farms”, as Michael liked to call them, he would have the single stone to remind him. He felt a wave of inspiration come over him; it was probably the last bit of

inspiration anyone ever extracted from that mystical place. He pulled out his trusty notebook from his shirt pocket, a pen from his bag and quickly penned the following poem:

From the Land of the Lost

This life is a freefalling dream
In which time is the only gravity
reach out, but there's with nothing to cling to
Until you awaken to discover your wings

these wayward wanderings will bring
many a lonesome stings
but your soul is a phoenix
and a most faithful guide

make your journey to the peaks
and take comfort in the sunrise
of each day born anew
taste the wine and know in time
that you will make your way
from the land of the lost.

Michael carried the small stone with him in his pocket for the rest of his days. It served as a reminder

of Jeremy and the smiling man who never spoke, but most importantly it was a reminder not to ever forget the things that mattered most; the sunshine, birdsong, the kindness of strangers. As long as he was mindful to hold the things that truly mattered close to his heart, no matter how much success came his way, Michael knew he would never...ever find himself among the ranks of the lost.

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