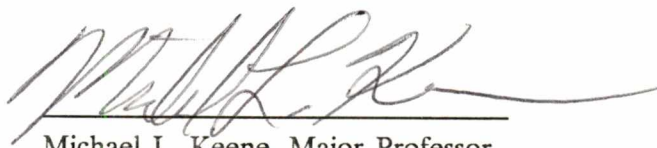


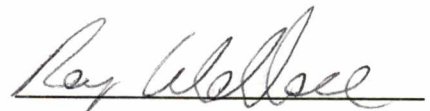
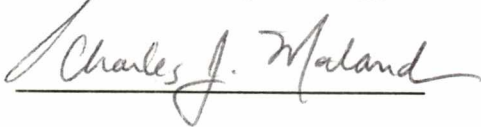
To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Judith Adams Aebischer entitled "An Essay on the Essay." I have examined the final copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.



Michael L. Keene, Major Professor

We have read this thesis
and recommend its acceptance:

Accepted for the Council:



Vice Provost
and Dean of The Graduate School

AN ESSAY ON THE ESSAY

A Thesis

Presented for the

Master of Arts

Degree

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Judith Adams Aebischer

May 1990

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ABSTRACT

In this creative exploration of the contemporary essay, the author offers a brief history of the development of the form, samples the literature on the essay, and takes a critical look at six examples, diverse in subject matter and style, focusing on how these examples reflect the many ways in which the essay has been characterized in several centuries of popularity, as well as how they reflect the demands and expectations of good writing and clear thinking today. The major essays are taken from literature, science, and the visual arts, but also include reflections on contemporary issues; additional essays are referred to in support of a particular style or theme. The writing is conversational in tone and personal in approach.

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INTRODUCTION

Much of what I have done and cared about in my work on a Master's degree has centered on writing. Indeed, my decision to pursue a Master's degree was based in part on my love of good writing. My goals were to achieve a deeper understanding of the writing of others and to improve my own, and I was able to pursue these goals through internships and through course work in literature.

When the time came to choose a project with which to bring these studies to a close, I looked for a vehicle that would reflect this emphasis and test my skills. It was not a difficult decision. I have chosen the essay, both as subject and as form, because it is a genre that I particularly enjoy; because it represents a flexible, yet challenging kind of writing; and because it is particularly well suited to life in the last half of the twentieth century. The complexity of the world and its problems requires writers who think about things in broader contexts, who make connections among seemingly unconnected things, who synthesize events and ideas in creative and interesting ways, who bring old solutions to bear on new problems, who ask questions that challenge by their very asking the horizons of the readers, who think out loud and draw the reader into the debate. The essay, at its best, lends itself to these tasks.

One writer on the subject of the essay suggests that it should attempt to "say something" about the subject at hand – not be an exhaustive treatment (1). Following this good advice, I will (1) offer a brief history of the development of the form; (2) sample the literature on the essay, extracting definitions, thoughts, and guidelines from literary practitioners and appreciators from the past; and (3) take a critical look at six

examples, diverse in subject matter and style, chosen (subjectively) on the basis of excellence, and focus on how these examples reflect the many ways in which the essay has been characterized in several centuries of popularity, as well as how they reflect the demands and expectations of good writing and clear thinking today. The major essays will be taken from literature, science, and the visual arts, but will also include reflections on contemporary issues; I will refer to other essays in support of a particular style or theme. My writing will be conversational in tone, personal in approach, and as disciplined and polished in form and style as I am capable of making it, choosing as my model the best of those works about which I write.

The essay is not unlike Walker Percy's "message in a bottle" — news from across the sea — to be evaluated, then accepted or rejected by the hearer (2). I intend to fish a number of these messages out of the sea and use whatever gifts I have as a writer to present them for evaluation. It is my hope that this project will then most nearly reflect the essence of what I have learned about literature, about writing, about the world, and about myself in my years of study at The University of Tennessee.

I

I have decided to write about the essay. The basis of this decision is simple. I love to *read* essays. And I thought that if I wrote about them I might discover *why* I love to read them. So this will be a journey of discovery, and, as with most such journeys, I don't know how or where it will end.

It might be this:

My grandmother used to make piece quilts. Today you can go to a quilt store and choose from hundreds of enticing patterns created especially for quilters, but my grandmother made hers from the useful bits of cloth left over from Aunt Signe's favorite dress or Russell's Sunday pants. I was the youngest of her 13 grandchildren — she was nearly 70 years old when I was born — so her legacy of quilts was well on its way by the time I came along. When she came to visit, she would sort through the pile of worn-out clothing and household castoffs my mother had put aside for her. Her eyes would sparkle as she assigned the pieces to one or another of her special piles, decisions made on the basis of texture or color or pattern. More quilts would be made, and I would scan them eagerly for familiar pieces. Yes, there were the pajamas I had outgrown (the pencil marks on the inside of the pantry door indicated an inch since summer), the skirt that had been passed down through several cousins (I wasn't sad to see that go), my dad's work shirt (he thought there was more wear in it, but mother said no — I remembered how soft it was to hug and how much it smelled like him), the kitchen curtains that had gone to pieces in the last washing and had to be replaced. History, biography, sociology. It occurs to me that one way essays work in my life is in

the way I discover bits of familiar material in them, as I did in my grandmother's quilts.

Or this:

I love good conversation, the kind where you can hardly bear to move from the dining room table to the more comfortable chairs in the living room for fear of disturbing the flow, or the kind that spins out on long walks in the rain or in late night telephone calls. I mine conversation for ideas and perspectives and answers to questions, and I line them up against my own ideas and perspectives and unanswered questions and have difficulty sleeping for the sorting out that goes on in my head. But who has time for dinner guests these days or long walks in the rain or uninterrupted telephone conversations late at night when the world has gone to bed? (The world doesn't really go to bed anymore. Kroger's is open 24 hours a day. David Letterman has an audience of millions. When *do* these people sleep?) Leslie Fiedler describes the essay as that "brief piece of discursive prose, whose intimacy of tone and relaxed approach to its theme make it the next step beyond intelligent conversation: a printed conversation between our best 'I' and an ideal 'you.'" Maybe this is the way the essay works for me, connecting "I" and "you."

My personal library yields dozens of volumes of essays, which I find I have been "stacking" in rather creative ways, sort of like hiding the chocolate eclairs in the bathroom closet, an addiction you don't want others to discover. Essays by novelists end up with the novels, further classified by country of origin, American literature, English literature, South American literature — you do it, too. The small section on scientific literature shelters Lewis Thomas and Oliver Sacks and Stephen Jay Gould. John McPhee becomes more and more difficult to pin down; the same is true of Edward Hoagland.

They have a section of their own. I find Susan Sontag and Ellen Goodman in something I call American nonfiction. Pulled together, these collections make an impressive pile. Some have already been sifted and sorted, though much good material remains; others, like bolts on the shelf, wait their turn. I dip into them freely and often, never without a feeling of satisfaction — not the feeling you get from reading a richly populated, complexly plotted novel; not the feeling you get from discovering a poem that seems to speak from your very own heart; but that small sense of satisfaction, like eating a meal in which all the colors and textures and flavors are perfectly balanced, and you can't remember when anything ever tasted so good, and you come away neither hungry nor full; or the feeling you get watching a child who is totally absorbed in a task or a book, oblivious to surroundings, completely happy and at peace, and you, watching, feel that way too. You will get hungry again and the next meal may or may not be as special; the child will tire, cry or fuss; but you remember that momentary sense of perfection.

I'm not in this alone, you know. The bookstores are full of collections of essays, and bookstores are never full of things that people are not buying. Why are essays popular? Well, for one thing, they're short. You can read one in an evening or an hour, and even if it comes in a collected volume, you feel no guilt if you don't read the whole book. Pick and choose.

And they're handy. There they are, in with the other stuff, in *Time* or *Harpers* or *Scientific American* or the evening paper — right there in the periodical where they've been since Addison and Steele.

There certainly are more significant reasons for their popularity. Maybe it's just that they represent an opportunity to read something elegant and clear and whole, an

antidote to the news of the day — in whatever form — or the bullet prose that overwhelms you at your desk (or in the supermarket), or the memos, the flyers, the computer printouts, the financial statements, that plead endlessly for your attention.

Sometimes I dream of peaceful, seamless days, days in which events flow effortlessly, one into another, in logical, meaningful ways. It is a pipe dream. Relationships, work, even leisure — all compete for our time and attention, and the media and friends and our own expectations make us aware of the ways we fail in each. Real life is punctuated by the strident ring of the telephone (we can no longer even be decently not home but must be accessible by answering machines with self-conscious messages of apology for not being available on demand, and, even when we answer, our conversation is held hostage to call-waiting) and the ceaseless blare of the television that brings every imaginable degree of cruelty, deception, and pain into our living rooms or our kitchens, served up with the soup or the oatmeal. And activities flood the calendar. How to get Johnny to soccer practice at 5:00 when Suzie must be at ballet across town and Dad is out of town and the car pool isn't functioning because Janey's mom had a baby, and what of dinner and homework and PTA — and what of "how was your day" or "may I rub your back?" Well, maybe one little essay can't handle all of that, but a "momentary sense of perfection" can go a long way toward putting a day into perspective.

I first read William Kittredge's essay "Home" one Sunday evening in early fall. It was the first cool night, and I was feeling that tinge of sadness that always seems to accompany Sunday evenings in the fall. As the darkness gathered outside the living room windows, the light by the couch grew stronger and I felt as though I were living, briefly, on a private island of time. It took less than an hour to read the essay; pre-Monday

chores were waiting. But, for that hour, I read about Kittredge's roots and remembered mine, went back with him to the places of his childhood and wept sentimental tears over mine, appreciated the way he had integrated these experiences into his life and reflected on the ways I might do the same for mine.

So. Essays are like familiar quilts and good conversation; they are short and handy; occasionally they rescue us when Life gets too overwhelming; and reading them makes us feel and think and remember.

It's time, I think, to establish a base for these musings, to probe the minds of those who have devoted some thought to the art of the essay and who have taken the trouble to write some of these thoughts down. I will, however, keep in mind the words of J. B. Priestley: "Literary historians spend too much time investigating the origins and early examples of a literary form; they are so interested in the roots that they have little time to spare for the fruits."

II

Scholars date the essay from Montaigne, while Bacon is known as the first English essayist. Not all would agree that the two should be given equal weight. Priestley: "the note of intimacy which marks Montaigne's best work was lost among the grave and weighty aphorisms of the Lord Chancellor."

Although others followed in the footsteps of these two men, Priestley points out that the major contributions to the development of the essay in the 17th century came, not from the essay writers themselves, but from the writers of three other types of prose: the aphoristic writers (e.g., Ben Jonson and John Selden); the character writers (e.g., Bishop Hall, Sir Thomas Overbury, John Earle), paving the way for the character sketch as an acceptable essay form; and the meditative prose writers (Drummond, Burton, Sir Thomas Browne). The latter, according to Priestley, had the greatest influence on the essayists of the romantic period, with their "richly-imaged and very musical style."

There is general agreement that the next major period in the development of the essay came in the 18th century with the periodical essay, epitomized in the *Tatler* and the *Spectator*, with Joseph Addison and Richard Steele. Thrall and Hibbard in *A Handbook to Literature* characterize the periodical essay as "briefer, less aphoristic, less intimate and introspective, less individualistic, less 'learned,' . . . more informal in style and tone, making more use of humor and satire, and embracing a wider range of topics." Leslie Fiedler says: "The magazine (along with the circulating library the chief bourgeois device for diffusing culture) was invented to make the essay not only respectable but

commercially rewarding." Priestley speculates that this ready market, with its financial security, also gave the essayist a sense of confidence and freedom, which resulted in an easier, less formal product. "He comes to feel that he is among friends and can afford, as it were, to let himself go, and the secret of writing a good essay is to let oneself go." Joseph Epstein adds: "Where Addison and Steele mark an advance in the form of the essay over Montaigne is in their taking for their subject their own thoughts as well as the world around them in all its variety, delight, and absurdity."

Before the century of Addison and Steele was over, however, the essay nearly sank under its own weight, with the production of over two hundred Tatler-type imitators. Priestley explains the decline this way: "These writers denied the essay the quickening breath of personality, and so it died. . . . But they never wrote as individuals, they frowned away the wilful, freakish 'I,' and wrote as if each one were a kind of composite man of the world."

With the beginning of the Romantic period, Priestley continues, "The essay is ready for its masters, and its masters, Lamb and Hazlitt, are here." Thrall and Hibbard say that Lamb and Hazlitt "modified the Addisonian essay by making it more personal, longer, and more varied in theme, and by freeing it from the stereotyped features of the earlier form." Priestley adds: "These two, with some assistance from Leigh Hunt, made the essay as easy and familiar as talk, and yet made it by turns humorous, moving, polemical, richly descriptive, fitting all their moods like a magical coat."

The essays of Lamb and Hazlitt are particularly familiar to students of literature, and we all have our favorites. (One that I frequently return to is "Old China," but having said that, I immediately think of "Mrs. Battle's opinions on Whist." It is rather

like choosing your favorite hymn, which, in my case, is usually the one I happen to be singing.) But the more formal essays, critical book reviews, and treatments of a wide variety of subjects by Macaulay, DeQuincey, Scott, Carlyle, Arnold, and others made their appearance in this century as well.

Priestley says:

After Lamb and Hazlitt, a history of the essay is hardly anything more than a succession of names. There have been new developments, but only comparatively small ones, for these two great writers made the essay into an instrument of power that any man, if he had sufficient art and individuality, could take up and play and so renew its old enchantments. The remaining history of the essay is hardly anything more than a succession of new personalities, new temperaments and new styles. As time wears on, the names grow thicker, but the winnowing is more severe, and only the masters of the strange craft remain.

Do Priestley's words hold true for the contemporary essay? In his foreword to *The Best American Essays, 1988*, Robert Alwan says:

As they stretch the limits of the form, today's essayists are developing a prose that lives along the borders of fiction and poetry. . . . They have even begun to blur the boundaries of criticism, biography, and expositions.

Annie Dillard echoes this feeling in her introduction to this same volume. She says that the essay

is, and has been, all over the map. There's nothing you cannot do with it; no subject matter is forbidden, no structure is proscribed. You get to make up your own structure every time, a structure that arises from the materials and best contains them. The material is the world itself, which, so far, keeps on keeping on.

Do these statements signify new developments in the basic form? I prefer to believe that they only represent creative extensions of the form, extensions made possible by the flexibility and point of view set forth by the early masters. You are free to disagree.

III

A definition is harder to come by than a history. Thrall and Hibbard say: "Because of the wide application of the term, no satisfactory definition can be arrived at." Joseph Epstein takes a stab at it: "For myself, I hold the essay to be a piece of writing that is anywhere from three to fifty pages long, that can be read twice, that provides some of the pleasures of style, and that leaves the impression of a strong or at least interesting character." But he also called it a "pair of baggy pants into which nearly anyone and anything can fit."

For Virginia Woolf "the principle which controls it is simply that it should give pleasure. . . . Everything in an essay must be subdued to that end."

Hilaire Belloc echoes my own feelings about the connection between the essay and conversation:

These modern essays of ours may be compared to conversation, without which mankind has never been satisfied, which is ever diverse (though continually moving through the same themes), and which finds in the unending multiplicity of the world unending matter for discussion and contemplation.

Leslie Fiedler carries the idea one step further:

Randall Jarrell and D. H. Lawrence, George Orwell and W. H. Auden have discovered anew ways to translate the speaking voice and the living self into printed prose; to achieve on the page the lucid, direct, orderly and vivid flow of conversation, which conversation itself, interrupted and half-heard, seldom attains.

As Fiedler is suggesting here, this is not the kind of conversation you have on a bus. We're not talking about "Do you think it will rain?" or "Who's going to win the World Series this year?" Translating this "living self" into printed prose is personal. It is what Joseph Priestley is talking about when he refers to the essays of Charles Lamb as

"not merely the expression of Lamb," but the "essence of Lamb." In fact, says Priestley, an essayist may contrive "to be more himself in print than he is in his own person and talk." Fiedler agrees: "The essay reveals, not only by the facts it alludes to, but by its rhythms, its metaphors, its very language, which are also aspects of the self, sometimes more truly the self, it would seem, than remembered details of a life."

One final point must be made when speaking about the essential elements of an essay. It must be well written. For no matter how "conversational," how "personal" the essay is, no one will care and no one will read it if the style does not match the substance.

Virginia Woolf puts it plainly in "The Modern Essay." "It is only by knowing how to write that you can make use in literature of your self." And when she goes on to say, "the essay must be pure — pure like water or pure like wine, but pure from dullness, deadness, and deposits of extraneous matter," she becomes her own best example.

Carl H. Klaus tells us that essayists themselves

are careful to make clear that they consider the essay to be a highly disciplined form of writing. Indeed, their insistence on its freedom from conventionalized form and thought probably makes them all the more intent on dispelling any notion that the essay is a free-for-all form of writing.

Then Klaus directs us to E. B. White, who says it even better:

And even the essayist's escape from discipline is only a partial escape: the essay, although a relaxed form, imposes its own disciplines, raises its own problems, and these disciplines and problems soon become apparent and (we all hope) act as a deterrent to anyone wielding a pen merely because he entertains random thoughts or is in a happy or wandering mood.

There is a danger, of course, that style will overwhelm its subject, become the controlling force. Epstein provides a warning to those who might fall into this trap:

However much art there may be in his writing, the essayist cannot hide behind the claim to be an artist. He must stand and deliver. He must provide

instruction, entertainment, persuasion, or the reader, like the young woman in the joke about the seducer who took the time to put shoe trees in his shoes, will be gone.

IV

The best way to understand my own fascination with the essay is to look more closely at a few of the ones that have meant the most to me, ones I carry in my head the way I carry pictures of my children in my purse — so I can look at them occasionally and feel whole. The ones I choose to focus on include:

An essay from “Talk of the Town” by Susannah Lessard;

“Emerson and the Essay” by William Gass;

“In Plato’s Cave” by Susan Sontag;

“Warts” by Lewis Thomas and “Semiprivate, Female” by Richard Selzer;

Chapter 10 from *Court of Memory* by James McConkey; and

“The Artist as Historian” by Barbara Tuchman.

*

Susannah Lessard wrote a lovely essay for the “Talk of the Town” section of *The New Yorker*, so lovely that it was chosen to appear in *The Graywolf Annual Three: Essays, Memoirs & Reflections*, where I found it. I have read it many times; in fact, after I had read it for the fourth time I began to think seriously about why the essay has become such an important part of my reading and of my life. The occasion for the essay is a public relations luncheon at a “venerable masculine lunch club” on Wall Street. The focus is a conversation the author has with a “man of eminence” who speaks in an unembarrassed fashion about the love he felt for a certain man upon reading about his suffering. The author is “triply” amazed by his use of the word “love”: the “full-bodied meaning” that survives by virtue of the candid, unassuming way in which the man used

the word; the fact that the man felt love "upon reading about a fellow-man, now dead, who had suffered"; and the use of the word "love" in such a social setting. The conversation "seemed at home in the room; and why it should have seemed at home I couldn't say, because the people there were strangers gathered for a public-relations event. It was a spectacular little miracle."

This conversation immediately becomes contrasted with the way the butler, "an elderly figure in a black tie," directs her to the telephone in the hallway: "The author observes the controlling way he stood at the door to see that I went to the right place, and did not stray." She adds:

It brought home the archaic exclusivity of the club, not only socially but in terms of male/female. It made me uncomfortable, and when I came back to the room it seemed to me that the civilized sociability was little more than a phantom borrowed from another century's habit of institutionalizing the abyss between man and women.

The essence of the essay becomes then an exploration of the relationships between men and women in the context of these two experiences; and the exploration is based, not so much on the wrongness of the overt discrimination, embodied in the elderly figure in the black tie and epitomized by the very existence of a "masculine lunch club," but on the sadness of it. The reality of the discrimination becomes merely the framework on which is built powerful feelings of loss, for men as well as for women. Lessard comes to the conclusion that there is a

perverse law of modern life: that the deeper the connection the more inevitable its breaking, and that the relationships between men and women must be a special target of this law. And it seemed to me that this target is not so much our relationships as lovers, where we can meet as opposites and from opposite ends of the earth, as our relationships as brothers and sisters, our relationships based on our sameness, our relationships as allies against the darkness in our common nature, against isolation, futility, and death.

The imagery that Lessard chooses perfectly reflects and supports her observation. Every sentence, every word counts, right from the opening paragraph. The sound of the "jungly music" set against the church bells as she emerges from the subway and the sight of the "narrow, lumpy street into the depths of the financial district" offer an appropriate contrast to the "hugely brass-knobbed door" and the atmosphere within the club, "like a stew cooked over a low flame for a long time." A quick sketch, deftly done, is provided of the gathering: burgher-like characters straight out of Rembrandt (looking well today), artistic persons, and "a variety of female persons, including some who had not camouflaged themselves as natives."

Her description of the man of eminence and the details of her conversation with him establishes a position of distance and authority for him. She is not diminished by this; it is a position accorded by virtue of his accomplishment, not by virtue of his sex. She describes him thus: "His eminence seemed to have risen up underneath him until it became a cliff top, on which he dwelt, cordial, alert, and unrivalrous. He seemed to know about but be strangely protected from the emergencies of the world." I was reminded of the pictures taken of the earth by astronauts: a rare but exceedingly useful perspective. She lingers on the color of the man's eyes "a dark, hot, tropical blue" which she first describes as "empyrean," but later more as an encompassing space within which we might all take refuge. The use of this deep blue is particularly effective in contrast to the blacks and whites and shades of gray with which the rest of the work is colored, and it provides a focus of light and sharpness upon which her thinking seems to turn.

She makes a special point of a masculine imagery, easy to find in this setting. The brass knob of the door, the flavor of the atmosphere, the watchful, almost

condescending, behavior of the butler, the very maleness of Wall Street all match our concept, if not our experience, of the place. But this impression is underscored and greatly enriched by her description of two churches and in her reaction to them. Trinity: "very black — the absorbent black of night. It seems to be sucking all the light out of the air. It looks like a witch crouched among the skyscrapers — a witch with a pointy hat. It looks as if it were about to spring." And Grace: "a frosty gray that gives off light. It looks like an angel, wings barely folded. It looks as if it had alighted on the earth just a moment before." Both are visible from the entrance to the club, and as she writes, she remembers what she felt, standing on the street looking at them after the luncheon: "To me that day, they were masculine. To me that day, they were also clues, strewn along the historical way — apparitions, both slightly eerie, of the light and the dark in our nature."

Equally effective is her use of the snow. It originally serves as a way of defining the warmth and welcome of the room and the event itself, an event that briefly transcends public relations, because the room feels good and she has experienced this lovely encounter with a man who is not ashamed to express feeling. "I looked out the window and saw snow falling. Time drew in thick and close, like a nurturing cocoon." After the telephone call, when the shift of feeling occurs, within her and within the room, there is a poignant line: "But it is always sad to look again and see that it's no longer snowing." The sadness of that line echoes the sadness of her realizations about the distance between men and women, a distance created by a society that can tolerate masculine lunch clubs and patronizing butlers.

Later, as she thinks about the churches, she thinks again about the snow and about the fact that it has stopped: "In this the day seemed stingy, and the season choked up, incapable of a full statement." Finally, however, the snow becomes the image for a time when we will talk with an

open civility that is not at odds with private experience. As we talk, it will begin to snow, and the mood in the room will change to a richer key. The snow will fall thickly, and then more thickly, until there is no doubt about the fullness of its arrival. The reciprocal hospitality in the room will deepen further, and time will gather in close around us, like a cocoon. I saw myself afterward, alone, in the street, in the snowfall. The snowflakes would land on my cheeks with the lightest touch on earth, then turn to tears, unaccompanied by sorrow — cool tears that would remind me of another time.

Lessard says at the beginning: "The winter that has passed now was just beginning." I assume, therefore, that this essay has been written after a winter of thought, that this particular conversation and the treatment of this particular butler against the background of this particular event triggered connections and feelings that simmered in her mind, until the connections and implications became clear enough to write about. I imagine her saying, "Something happened to me that day. It has taken me awhile to sort it out, but this is what I think it was." And I feel honored that I may share in her thoughts and grateful to add them to mine. It has become an opportunity for a writer and a reader to share an experience and, indeed, draw from it some of the same benefits one might draw from a good conversation — perhaps more, better, in that her thoughts have been allowed to evolve over a period of time until she knew how she wanted to put them down. Perhaps there are times when these sentiments *are* more easily written down than spoken aloud, unless one is very sure of the company, or unless, as for the man on the cliff top, the company is not intimidating.

And the reader responds to an essay like this with a sense of recognition. Yes. That is what it feels like when prejudice raises its ugly head, in whatever disguise. That is what it feels like to sit in the back of the bus or at separate lunch counters, or to lose a job for which one is qualified in all the important, necessary ways. The world becomes black and white and cold.

* *

Essays like the one by Susannah Lessard are becoming increasingly common at a time when relationships of all kinds are being explored in a more open way: relationships between men and women, between generations, between races and cultures, between religions. More and more people are sharing their thoughts and feelings on these and similar topics, and society is infinitely enriched by their efforts.

But one of the characteristics of an essay is that, no matter what the stated topic, personal feelings are allowed, encouraged, and expected to enter in. So an essay about whales or quarks or democrats could and probably will prove to be equally illuminating on some aspect of the human condition. This is true even of the literary essay, though writers of the more formal type may make you hunt for the connection; I choose my illustration from among the less formal types.

My library provided an abundance of literary essayists from whom to choose, both of the formal and the informal type: T. S. Eliot, Lionel Trilling, John Updike, R. P. Blackmur, Joyce Carol Oates, Cynthia Ozick, E. B. White, Alice Walker, Annie Dillard, Joan Didion, to name too many. I admit to being especially drawn to the use of the essay on Emerson by William Gass because it provides me with the delicious opportunity of using an essay on an essayist in my essay on the essay. The choice proved not to be a

compromise, however, as his essay is truly rich in all of the ways in which one can choose to talk about the essay.

Not only does the piece itself represent an excellent example, but in it he contributes in a significant way to our expanding definition, our understanding of what a good essay is, what we can expect from a good essay.

My first reaction to the essay by Lessard was to the material; I was immediately caught up in her experience and in her response to that experience. My initial reaction to Gass on Emerson, however, was pure pleasure. All of the elements, not only of a good essay, but of wonderfully good writing, are present: shape, style, pace, variety, information, personal engagement, conversation, stimulation. One could make an entire quilt from this material alone!

Lessard's essay is beautifully shaped, delicately balanced: outside against inside, cold against warmth, misunderstanding against communion. Gass is equally well shaped, but in a less formal way. Reading it, I felt as though I were walking down a wide, wonderful hallway, with doors opening out on both sides all along the way, and we would stop several times to peer in through these doors and take in the scene before continuing on our way. A pleasurable journey with no specified arrival time. Gass puts it better: "What is a stroll without a stop, a calculated dawdle, coffee in a cafe we've surprised, some delicious detour down a doorway-crowded street, the indulgence of several small delays?"

What is the occasion for this writing? "Some suggestion from a friend, a few fine books sent in the mail, an invitation to speak, an idle riffle through a few sheets of a stale review, the name Emerson, an essay, an open hour." Later he says, "The essay

imagines a situation in which it would make sense to say what it will say." The time has come for Emerson and Gass to get together.

Gass's special style is established from the first paragraph:

Our oblivion has been seen to . . . and unless we write as though the ear were our only page; unless upon the open slopes of some reader's understanding we send our thoughts to pasture like sheep let out to graze; unless we can jingle where we feed, sound ourselves and make our presence heard; unless . . .

We are instantly drawn in. Oblivion! — that which we fear most, that we will disappear without a trace and nothing will be left to note our passing. (Not even Kilroy is "here" anymore.) ". . . unless . . ." We read on. Unless? But we must wait, for there are other themes that must be introduced.

Emerson next. And how does Emerson begin?

"I read the other day some verses," he will say, perhaps, or ask, "Where do we find ourselves?" (strange question!), and he knows he is up to something different and possibly enduring — a pose his immortality may assume. He is giving definition to his Being. He is waiting for himself to sail from behind a cloud.

Rescuing himself from oblivion. And Gass — and all who "essay?" Waiting for oneself to sail from behind a cloud.

Then, Gass himself. Beneath the public image:

Life is not all eloquence and adulation: life is wiping the baby's bum; it is a bad case of croup; it is quarrels with one's spouse; it is disappointment, distraction, indignities by the dozen; it is the death of friends, wife, son and brothers, carried off like fluff in the wind; it is alien evenings, cold stairwells, frosty sheets, lack of love.

Yet "we are nourished by our absences and opposites; contraries quench our thirst."

(Quilts require harmonies and contrasts.) A dialogue takes shape — between author and

author, between author and subject, between author and reader. Then Gass returns, to gather up the threads of his beginning:

Unless the "unless" like a ransom note is met — I shall be gone for good
If no one pronounces us . . . If no one finds for us a voice . . . says: "In this refulgent summer, it has been a luxury to draw the breath of life." Well — to go wordless is to go without a soul to shit with. It is but to go.

Reason enough to speak! Small wonder, as human beings appear on the endangered species list, that folks will "essay."

The pace of Gass's essay continues with just the right balance of Emerson, Gass, assorted scholars, you, and me; just the right proportion of information, observation, and meditation.

The language is dense and poetic ("My mind was bookbound and mist-mixed"), but the tone is conversational, and his sentences march to a marvelous rhythm. Some are long and complex, great chewy chunks that go on and on with commas and semicolons and parentheses and asides, with wonderful words like yawp and whoop and wahoo, and one begins to hold one's breath to see how and when the period will come, and, when it does, you let out a breath as if you had just reached the top step of a long climb and need to rest. These magnificent sentences are not at all Faulknerian, but more like a pressure cooker building up steam:

The constructive posture of the self-defining self, the freedom which the crude new nation offered it, the implicit promise of democracy to exalt mankind, to praise as well as work the earth; and, above all, the gift to that emerging individual of limitless opportunity — breathing space — space for rebeginning — space to the edge of every coast — space to infinity: each required the resettlement of language on the page, an equalitarian diction, a pioneering line, the big book, the great theme; each asked for energy and optimism; each egged American authors on to annex, plunder, quote and cite, to wahoo and yawp; and none of these conditions would be realized without the lush entanglements of complete speech: the voyages of discovery, exploration, and conquest, which made it possible, the personal tone, the pied variety of voice, the ebb and flow, the strut, the brag and ballyhoo of talk; for it would take the flabbergasting

virtuosities, the visionary range, the gumptious reach, the raw muscularities, the baroque vibrations, yet the flat, irregular Patersons of prose; and nearly all the best American poets do write prose: Melville and Faulkner and James, Robinson, Thoreau, Eliot, and Frost. I mean that they remained in the service of the sentence. I mean that they sought "the poem of the idea in the poem of the words."

We note the point and counterpoint of syllables and phrases and thoughts, the strength and variety and delight of the words, the craftsmanship of the punctuation — then those two quick parallel sentences at the end that finish off the rhythm like an ice clears the palate after a heavy meal.

He has the poet's gift for alliteration: ". . . how the present was put beneath the past, power placed next to poverty in this thought of his, paucity measured against what is prolific — arrangements which argue the poet"; "a metaphysics was a metaphor made from a mood; it modeled the world for a moment"; and small, sneaky ones like "the hall of the whole body." Likewise a gift for onomatopoeia, the "knicknackknocking passage of the pinball," and for rich and effective imagery.

Emerson had the gift as well, Gass tells us:

And in the ring of these words, "aqueous," "terraqueous," "ethereal," and "aerial," the sound of both the metal which makes the coin and its value as money are intimately mingled, with the sign and its sense not separate and confused as they are in the unsatisfying albeit sublime light of night, where nature grows gravely over him.

It would be an easy thing to center wholly on the style of the essay, but Gass contributes in a very substantial way to a definition of what an essay is. In other words, he not only shows us, he tells us, both in what he says about Emerson as essayist and in his commentary about the form itself: "For the hero of the essay is its author in the act of thinking things out, feeling and finding a way; it is the mind in the marvels and

miseries of its making," (there he goes again), "in the work of the imagination, the search for form." And again:

Our concerns collect like pigeons, and anxious men and women, such as you and I and Emerson, interpret the world in order to make a home of it, even if our image of ourselves is of Prometheus bound to a rock where an eagle feeds serenely on our liver, as Hobbes writes, devouring in the day as much as we manage to repair during the night; because our agonies are at least grand and romantic; because replenishment is equal to decay and balances the books; because then, at least, we know who and what and where we are.

Several years ago I read an essay by Joan Didion in which she says:

I think we are well advised to keep on nodding terms with the people we used to be, whether we find them attractive company or not. otherwise they turn up unannounced and surprise us, come hammering on the mind's door at 4 a.m. of a bad night and demand to know who deserted them, who betrayed them, who is going to make amends.

I copied this thought out in the front of my journal notebook, where I see it and read it often. It applies equally well to what motivates us to write essays, as Gass is saying.

Gass speaks also of the presence in the essay of skepticism and truth, endorsing the first and hedging on the latter ("The essayist speaks one mind truly, but that is far from speaking the truth") and reminds us of the need for natural courtesy (as would be true also of conversation):

Good manners are not merely reflections of a more refined and leisured life; they signify, here, equality and openness, a security which comes to a mind which has been released from dogmatism. If there is too much earnestness, too great a need to persuade, a want of correct convictions in the reader is implied, and therefore an *absence of community*.

Gass addresses himself to this last point in a way that is especially useful for an analysis such as mine. Almost anyone who has ever written about the essay reminds us that it is of the self that the essayist speaks. But Gass breaks this concept down in a way that echoes my own dimly realized feelings about how an essay functions for the reader.

He speaks specifically of the manifest self, the representative self, and the private self. Because this sense of community between the writer and the reader is inherent (I believe) in every essay, it would be impolite, as well as ineffective (as, again, in conversation) to keep the self hidden, but for Gass, each of these levels contributes in a special way to the total impact of the work.

The manifest self merely represents the kinds of things we learn when we first meet someone, facts available to anyone, the way one establishes a friendship. It is knowing that Susannah Lessard lives in New York, is impressed with eminent writers. It is reading about the accumulation of events that persuaded Gass to write about Emerson. Facts quickly dispensed with, but necessary as a base. The representative self is the self the reader needs to identify with, to enable the reader to come on board. It is the woman in Lessard that speaks for the woman in me when she is patronized by the butler. It is that part of Gass that thinks about the meaning of events, of ideas, as I do. It is that part of Gass that must deal with the "dailiness" of life, the disappointments, the small victories, the losses and the gains. It is that part of Emerson that was disappointed in not being a better poet, or that was ill and tired and still gave his lectures. It is the universal in the particular and it is these initial levels of revelation, through the manifest and the representative, that serve as credentials, permission, as it were, to go deeper, to establish a stronger bond. It is, in fact, the revelation of the private self that makes the essay powerful, cuts to the bone, and lifts all that has gone before and comes after to a new level of attention; it is this revelation of the private self that makes the essay available to us as material for the creation and discovery of our own selves. It is that part of Lessard that she was willing to reveal to us (as the

man of eminence was not ashamed to reveal to her), her deepest feelings about love and relationships as they sorted themselves out in her mind and in her writing. It is that level of willingness to reveal the private self that allows Gass to say in response to Emerson's "universal impulse to believe" that this concept, to him, was as positive in (Emerson's) time as it is negative in ours, because beliefs are our pestilence:

But pots of poison are served at the last supper now; the crank may control an army; ideas carry bombs in their briefcases; every sector of society, every sexual preference, every whim, has its own banner, banner holder, hubbub and hoopla; every nation, race, and trade, hobby and sporting club has its own sword-rattling simplicities; there's a lie on the tip of every tongue like a bubble of spit; while the urge to permit some grand marshal of opinion to advance one's cause or determine one's fate has never been stronger, and no mind is safe which has let that yearning in its door.

Here is Gass engaging with Emerson, and the reader engages with Gass.

It is this combination of "selves" — the manifest, the representative, and the private — in addition to the elements of style and pleasure and content, that I bring to bear on these essays, there where the writer will most truly "essay to be," there where the "I" touches the "you," there where I gather my material and begin to fit the pieces of my quilt.

* * *

I have always been fascinated by photography. I own several books on the subject: three devoted to essays, several books of photographs, and my late father-in-law's collection of books on photographic technique. I am the most amateur of photographers and sporadic in practice. I've been known to pack the camera, bother traveling companions into making inconvenient detours off interstates to secure film, and forget to take a single picture. I treasure family pictures, of course. How to forgive the developer who destroyed the film on which I had recorded my husband's fiftieth birthday and the

christening of my grandson? But the interest in photography that prompts me to buy books on the subject is something more than family records. I have always been drawn to photographic exhibits, caught by unusual or arresting photographs in books and magazines and newspapers, intrigued by the circumstances under which certain pictures were taken, fascinated by the image itself, its composition, its contrasts, its selectivity. Not long ago, on the television program *Sunday Morning*, Charles Kuralt interviewed Eudora Welty. The interview was prompted by the publication of a book of photographs that she had taken in the years following the Depression. Pressed by Kuralt, she was nevertheless reluctant to speak about them at length, only to say, "Yes, I remember that day. Yes, I remember that lady." And I was sympathetic. The pictures spoke for themselves. Not knowing the circumstances of their taking in no way detracted from their quality or their effect. I will probably purchase that book and linger over those images, inventing my own circumstances. As with essays, one is allowed to do that.

The first book of essays I bought was *On Photography* by Susan Sontag. Apparently, her interest in photography is as difficult to explain as mine. From her brief preface:

It all started with one essay — about some of the problems, aesthetic and moral, posed by the omnipresence of photographed images; but the more I thought about what photographs are, the more complex and suggestive they became. So one generated another, and that one (to my bemusement) another, and so on — a progress of essays, about the meaning and career of photographs — until I'd gone far enough so that the argument sketched in the first essay, documented and digressed from in the succeeding essays, could be recapitulated and extended in a more theoretical way; and could stop.

It appears that there is nothing neat and tidy about the world of the essay. They seem to thrust themselves on the writer, sooner or later demanding attention. So with Gass, so with Lessard, so with me.

I eventually purchased two more volumes of essays on photography, one by Robert Adams and one by John Berger, but only recently did I discover that one of the essays in the book by Berger was written in direct response ("For Susan Sontag") to Sontag's book. Conversation!

Sontag's essays helped to clarify my own mysterious attraction to photography, to explore that feeling that has existed somewhere in my consciousness that photography is a more complex, more artistic, more representative, more self-revealing activity than the mere recording of state occasions (family or otherwise).

The first essay in the book, the object of my attention here, is titled "In Plato's Cave." It is neither as artistic in the writing, nor as personal as those of Lessard and Gass. The primary appeal resides in the power of Sontag's thought, the connections she makes, the ways in which she applies the world to photography and photography to the world, not setting photography apart as something special and particular, but integrating it with feelings, ethics, artistic theory and practice, social values and institutions, making the reader aware of the place that photography has assumed in all of these areas.

The essay is useful first as a catalog of roles that photography fills, a catalog more extensive than I had imagined. Initially, I suppose I saw photography as craft, as technique, as technology. Gradually, I came to see it as art. I understand how it functions as record keeper, memory bank, identification, how it contributes to history. But I was not so aware of photography as an instrument of sociology or psychology; of photography as power, as a force; of photographer as player, not merely as spectator.

Photography as an ongoing record of family life is the role we are most familiar with. But even family pictures are placed by Sontag in a sociological rather than a merely social context:

As that claustrophobic unit, the nuclear family, was being carved out of a much larger family aggregate, photography came along to memorialize, to restate symbolically, the imperiled continuity and vanishing extendedness of family life. Those ghostly traces, photographs, supply the token presence of the dispersed relatives. A family's photograph album is generally about the extended family — and, often, is all that remains of it.

Sontag goes on to examine the role of photography as a definer of experience, with an unusual, unexpected perspective. A camera is surely as necessary to a vacation as toothpaste, but, says Sontag, "by limiting experience to search for the photogenic . . . travel becomes a strategy for accumulating photographs." Is the camera serving the traveler, or is the traveler serving the camera? Think about that the next time the couple next door invites you over to see their latest slides.

Ah, but there's more. "Using a camera appeases the anxiety which the work-driven feel about not working when they are on vacation and supposed to be having fun. They have something to do that is like a friendly imitation of work: they can take pictures." Men in particular (sorry, but that's the way it seems) seem to be guilty of this, clearly uncomfortable in "vacation" clothes, the sneakers and crew socks self-consciously new, taking pictures for all they're worth. These pictures, a record of important things seen, also put the trip into the "educational" category, a geography or history lesson for the kids, material for a school report, further justification for what might otherwise be mere idleness.

As Sontag explores other arenas for photographic activity, the imagery and the metaphors become more disturbing and more powerful. She refers to the camera as

aggressive and predatory, comparing it to other instruments of power: the gun (loading, aiming, shooting) and the car (automated, ready to spring). Her use of sexual imagery is also very powerful — not rape, but intrusion — catering to the detached perversions of fantasy and desire.

Equally disturbing is her perception of photography as anesthetic, particularly as it applies to war and suffering, but also as it applies to pornography. The process is the same. That which initially shocks becomes dull with repetition:

An event known through photographs certainly becomes more real than it would have been if one had never seen the photographs — think of the Vietnam War. (For a counterexample, think of the Gulag Archipelago, of which we have no photographs.) But after repeated exposure to images it also becomes less real.

She makes her position even stronger. “In these last decades, ‘concerned’ photography has done at least as much to deaden conscience as to arouse it.”

In all of these areas, there are implications about the role of the photographer as spectator that are inherent in the taking of every picture. By choosing to be behind the camera, the photographer is choosing not to participate in the action or the scene. The person who chooses to take a picture of violence or suffering is not in a position to participate or intervene in that violence or suffering. But what about the kinds of events that take place because the camera is present? Is the camera taking pictures of the demonstration, or is the demonstration taking place because there is a camera present?

The elements of the self explored in the essay by Gass are no less apparent in this essay by Sontag, even though Sontag seems less personally involved. She is thoroughly engaged with the subject matter through her expertise in researching and organizing relevant material, in the way in which she has brought her intellect and creativity to bear

on the subject, in the way she applies new ideas to old perceptions; our shared recognition of the more familiar roles of photography and the ways in which they are played out establish her role as universal or representative self.

Compared to Lessard and Gass, however, but for one paragraph, she would seem more detached. It is that paragraph, however, that gives power and authenticity to the essay:

One's first encounter with the photographic inventory of ultimate horror is a kind of revelation, the prototypically modern revelation: a negative epiphany. For me, it was photographs of Bergen-Belsen and Dachau which I came across by chance in a bookstore in Santa Monica in July 1945. Nothing I have seen — in photographs or in real life — ever cut me as sharply, deeply, instantaneously. Indeed, it seems plausible to me to divide my life into two parts, before I saw those photographs (I was twelve) and after, though it was several years before I understood fully what they were about . . . when I looked at those photographs, something broke. Some limit had been reached, and not only that of horror; I felt irrevocably grieved, wounded, but a part of my feelings started to tighten; something went dead; something is still crying.

Everything that precedes this has prepared the way, created a framework that is strong enough to sustain this revelation. Credibility and trust have been established through the common ground of the representative self, making it possible for her to say that photography affected her, personally, in a significant, formative way.

This negative epiphany, as Sontag names it, is not unlike the moment when Susannah Lessard realizes her "place" in the all-male club on Wall Street, or when Gass talks about pots of poison at the last supper. Deep feelings, which may feel like they have been uncovered in the very process of writing or have perhaps been a part of the motivation for the writing, reach the point where it seems natural to say "pots of poison," "I remember the photographs," "the room seemed cold." These feelings have

not been applied to the essay, they have been discovered by it, and, in the process, feelings and memories are revealed to the reader as well.

There is a moving scene in the film *Beaches*. The character played by Barbara Hershey is dying. In a close moment between mother and small daughter, the daughter looks at her hand against her mother's and says softly, "same hands." The mother, moved, nods agreement. In the next scene she is obsessively, desperately searching through boxes of old photographs and mementos, inefficient and ineffective in her frenzy. The character played by Bette Midler finds her. Hershey cries out as she continues her frantic search that she can't remember what *her* mother's hands looked like. It is a matter of urgency, life and death, to find a picture, a record of those hands. Midler finds it. "Here." And the dying woman is calmed, comforted by the memory restored, by this image of her mother's hands. We are reminded in this powerful scene of the continuity and the fragility of life: from mother (now dead) to daughter (now dying) to daughter who saw the resemblance: "same hands." And I, watching this scene, thought of Sontag's essay and wondered if this aspect of photography had been an important enough part of her catalog: recovering that which is lost.

We have all seen pictures that have become a permanent part of memory: the picture of the burning child in Vietnam to which Sontag refers, an indelible part of the record in my mind of that time and place; Ansel Adams' magnificent photographs of the West, taken in majestic black and white; the pictures of everyday people in the midst of their everyday lives, taken by Welty or Walker Evans or Alfred Stieglitz. These photographs represent a special vision, apart from that of the painter or the sculptor. And the pieces of these visions are worked into my quilts, just as are the words of

Sontag and Berger and Adams — the quilts that have to do with the ways in which we look at the world and the people in it, the ways in which details matter, become clear, when those things we pass by are frozen and held forever, to be returned to and studied and mined for meaning.

* * * *

Essays that may be classified as “nostalgia” operate in much the same way that photographs do (especially in their role as family record). In recovering and reflecting on a piece of the past, they make available to the writer, and the reader, material that is useful for the present, may in fact enable one to make sense of the present in new and important ways.

A book that I have cherished, increasingly so as I get older, is *Court of Memory* by James McConkey. In it McConkey thinks about his life, meditates on the meaning of events, makes connections with people, with memories, with moments of pain and moments of pleasure. It doesn't matter to us that we don't know James McConkey; it isn't autobiography. It is rather a marvelous model, showing us a way to make whole the scattered fragments of our lives. Each piece in the book is numbered as a chapter but functions as a stand-alone essay. Chapter 10 is my favorite.

This particular chapter is written in January of the year in which McConkey will turn 60, and is motivated by the experience of attending a 3-hour retirement seminar with his wife Jean. The seminar, and finding himself in the role of student, rather than in his accustomed role as teacher, reminds him suddenly of what it felt like when he was being inducted into the army many years ago:

I felt the seminar to be an initiatory rite into the secrets of old age, a rite as disquieting to me as the first orientation lecture I had attended as a private in an Army reception center during the Second World War. A sense of an

unavoidable future violation of my freedom and dignity linked the present orientation to the earlier one.

The essay begins with a description of a rather unusual postcard he has had since he was very small. It is a picture of a street scene in the early 1900s, with people and vehicles going about their business in front of the imposing structure of the U.S. Mint. The card is unusual in the sense that it consists of two plies of cardboard and is constructed in such a way that colored bits of cellophane are inserted at certain places in one of the plies to focus color and light on particular objects in the picture. The postcard brings back pieces of his childhood; just as the seminar evoked 35 years of shared history with his wife; just as, later in the essay, the drawer in the dining room buffet yields photographs and mementos that are bittersweet. The intensity of the essay is echoed in and prefigured by the way he lingers on the details of this postcard, and we realize that that is the way we examine the past, looking at it first one way and then another, in this light or that. Events fade or become more prominent as the light of memory plays on the past, altered by layers of time and circumstance.

So, with the postcard, begins an intricately woven tapestry of memories and connections and relationships. And again, as with Lessard and Gass and Sontag, through layers of revelation, the reader is allowed to share in the experience. The manifest self is given to us through the simple details: McConkey is a professor at Cornell University and he lives in a comfortable old farmhouse with his wife of 35 years, two of his three sons, and his 98-year-old mother. He becomes a kind of representative self as he experiences the kinds of things that are common to us all. Even those of us not yet old enough to attend retirement seminars are conscious of the radical changes it could bring about in our lives; indeed, we plan for retirement from the very first day we take a job,

with every financial decision we make. We also know that January Saturdays can jangle the nerves and oppress the spirit. We identify with him in many other ways as well, but in many of these ways, the representative and private selves intermingle. Our memories are not his memories, but they may be triggered in the same ways; we have children and are children; we have suffered disappointments; not all of our expectations have been met; we are not ready, will never be ready, for old age. The sharing of his private self is a gift he is willing to give, both because it is important to him to put his memories into a meaningful perspective and because he suspects that, if he leads the way, we may be able to do that, too.

Lessard talked about relationships, but in a more universal way. For McConkey, specific relationships are the focus, while the universal is powerfully implied. The essence of the relationship between McConkey and his wife Jean is defined by moments of connection: the feeling of shared memories at the retirement seminar; the embrace given, later returned, in response to the same set of unarticulated, yet perfectly understood feelings (and not even the understanding is required); the "I love you, be careful," whispered from the window, privately, words of "magical protective power" with which husband covers wife as her car disappears over the crest of the hill.

Other relationships are sketched out in this same way — a single phrase or a small story that encompasses the whole: the strained connections with a stepmother, sketched briefly; the love of a father for his children evoked by the photograph of Larry at a piano recital, by the memory of a trip to Montour Falls with Cris, by the rush of love triggered by the tears of grown son, Jim, briefly overcome by the hardships of life on a January Saturday; the complicated relationship between McConkey and his own father

— concentrated in the memory of a single event, a memory that was in itself triggered by a memory — that of the trip to Montour Falls. Delicately, skillfully, these relationships, these memories, these connections represent 60 years of living and feeling and trying to make sense of pieces of experience.

It is important to note that throughout the essay, McConkey's use of time, and the way events relate to each other in time, contributes to the feeling of wholeness, of seamlessness, that is necessary in any work that attempts to connect the present to the past. This effect is difficult to achieve. McConkey handles it with great skill and a subtle but effective artistry — measuring how he felt when he was entering the Army against the feeling of entering old age, measuring father-son feelings with himself as father against father-son feelings with himself as son, seeing the postcard at age 60 and remembering the postcard and how it affected him at age 5.

This sense of time, and the way it functions in this work and in memory, is beautifully illustrated in the concluding paragraph:

Today is one of thin gray clouds, with sudden cascades of snow giving way to bursts of light. Whenever the sun shines, the windows of the Mint respond as if an electrician in its basement had flicked on the master switch. My childhood wonder at those golden bars is one with my adolescent happiness in Oregon, one with my middle-aged happiness in Montour Falls, and is a quality or state that never can change into a baser form through any reverse alchemy of the human spirit. For I have memories of two sorts of happiness, only one of which is the food of present discontent: the other is its antidote. The first is based on events leading up to actual moments of fulfillment — Larry at the piano — whose remembrance tells me of times and conditions lost; the other, like my response to the Mint, is separate from reality. Based on imagination and desire, immune to time and vicissitude, it is the happiness we sometimes hear in music and find in certain books and paintings, even though we can discover no particular melody or words or images that convey it. At the very least, the recognition of this kind of happiness within his own life reconciles a man in his sixtieth year to the child within him, enabling him to join his wife in sifting through memorabilia in order to move a buffet and varnish a worn floor.

This paragraph is almost a tapestry in miniature. All of the elements of the essay, all the considerations of time, all the themes of memory and definitions for happiness are gathered together and given meaning within these few lines, lines that lead inevitably back to a buffet full of photographs and a floor in need of varnish on a January Saturday in his sixtieth year.

This essay, and the postcard, helped me recover and integrate a piece of my own childhood as I realized how true it is that objects take on a meaning totally out of proportion to their value because of an event or a person to which or to whom it is tied. I own a child-sized, chipped teapot. I bought the teapot for 25 cents at an "auction" in Orfordville, Wisconsin (population 510), the summer I was eight years old. It is an ugly teapot, but the day I bought it was magical. I was staying with my grandmother for two whole weeks, alone, no parents! Everyone in town knew my grandmother — she had lived there her whole life and, though now a widow, had been the wife of the town's most prominent citizen — and she had great faith in the common sense of little girls, so I was free to go wherever and do whatever I pleased. This included visits to her brother's funeral parlor, to the diner for butterscotch sundaes, to the fire station (upstairs!), and to the general store (run by two more of her brothers) for penny candy. (The penny always came back with the candy, since I was Barbara's granddaughter, but the protocols were scrupulously observed — I would never have dreamed of asking for candy without that penny in my hand.)

The objects of the auction were just the pitiful effects of a very old woman who had died with no heirs. There were some dishes, a few pieces of furniture, a handful of books. But the attendance was good, curiosity greater than greed, I dare say. My

grandmother and I arrived hand-in-hand. We had walked the short distance, swinging our arms and singing little songs. It was a clear, bright, glorious day to be 8 years old. She gave me a little money and told me I could bid on something by myself. How important I felt as I sized up each item on the long tables, and, when I had made my choice and had successfully bid, even more important as the auctioneer gravely handed me my teapot. He seemed to be congratulating me on my excellent taste and shrewd business sense.

I loved my grandmother, and when I clean out the cupboard and come upon that little teapot, I experience the complicated mixture of joy and sadness that McConkey is struggling with in his essay. My memories of her are all happy, but it's hard to get old and that was especially true for her. She lived so long (two months short of a century) and stayed so well that no one knew what to do with her. Well into her 80s, she sold her big, wonderful Victorian house with its wraparound porches, its massive oak doors, its magnificent staircases with landings and benches and hat trees, its built-in sideboard with drawers and shelves and mirror, and its lovely sprawling yard with huge shady trees — sold it to a company that turned it into rental property, removed the wraparound porches and added unattractive, utilitarian stairways to the outside for easy access to upstairs rooms. Grandmother tried living with offspring, but it didn't work and we knew it wouldn't. She was too independent and so were those she had raised. She went, finally, to an "old people's home." She outlived all of her friends, one by one. She told me once, "There's no one left who remembers the same things I do." She died of loneliness. But her sparkling laugh and her bright eyes live on in my teapot. And I

remember what it was like to be eight years old. When I see the teapot, I feel as I felt when I saw the pieces of my father's shirt in my grandmother's quilt. Connected.

The story about my grandmother and the teapot functions the way McConkey's essay does though on a less complex scale. But in linking the past to the present, looking at relationships in the context of those linkages, exploring the role of memory, and reflecting on the elusive quality of happiness, both writer and reader are enriched.

* * * * *

Science, in its broadest sense, is the subject of many of the essays being written today. The volumes in which they are collected frequently climb to the best seller lists. Names like Stephen Jay Gould, Lewis Thomas, Richard Selzer, Oliver Sachs, and John McPhee are well known to the public. (These names are relatively new, but Loren Eiseley began writing this kind of essay over 40 years ago, and "The Star Thrower," while not one of the earliest, is a classic example of how scientific knowledge and imaginative prose can be combined in effective and compelling ways.)

Essays written about natural history and the life sciences seem to be the most popular. I suppose this is because they offer such useful metaphors for the human condition, and, self-centered as we are, we do like to read and learn about ourselves. But in light of our recent and apparently still growing national preoccupation with health and fitness, there is a strong emphasis on topics especially related to medicine, both to medical theory and to medical treatment. It is nearly impossible to pick up a supermarket magazine these days without finding an article about diet or exercise or how to lower your cholesterol (do *you* know what your numbers are?), but essayists are exploring the more complex areas of holistic medicine; newly defined doctor-patient

relationships in which patients assume responsibility for their own care in previously unheard of ways; connections between research and treatment and the implications of these connections; and the potential power of the mind to control the body. Norman Cousins, prompted by intensely personal experience, has made a significant contribution in opening up the latter subject to the public. Although not primarily an essayist himself, his writing and his lectures on the effect that the mind can have on the body — in the form of laughter, in the form of hope, in the form of positive thinking — have provided models and inspiration for those who wish to explore these topics in thoughtful ways.

I have known all along that the essay I would choose for this section would be “Semiprivate, Female” by Richard Selzer. It is emotional and powerful and exquisitely written. Then I realized that, for the sake of contrasting approaches and styles as well as for the challenge of making some initially obscure connections, I wanted also to write about “Warts” by Lewis Thomas. Readers might question my judgment in pairing an essay about something that seems as trivial as warts with an essay about cancer. Read on.

Selzer’s essay is a deeply moving, intensely personal commentary on the reality of disease and death. It simply describes what happens in a particular hospital room for female cancer patients over a small space of time. The prose is rich and vivid, the imagery as dense and rich and overwhelming as the hospital room he describes, but he doesn’t flinch from the truth; we are not spared. The graphic description of medical procedures is almost more than we can bear. We turn away.

Cancer is something most of us prefer to curtain off; we want it kept clean and neat and under control. We hesitate even to enter an oncology ward at a hospital, as if

there were a "No Admittance" sign or "Trespassers will be Prosecuted" (or infected?). We want the ugly parts kept from us; we don't wish to hear the cries, witness the metamorphosis of bodies, hear the facts. Take care of it, Doctor. Give her something for the pain. Cover it, remove it, fix it. Selzer, in a way I couldn't have imagined possible, sweeps aside the curtain (literally as well as figuratively), exposes the reality, yet still manages to preserve the dignity of both the patient and the care giver. Selzer is not writing "about" cancer. He is simply, powerfully, allowing us to look. And it is his style, the delicacy of word choice, the appropriateness of image, the exquisite accuracy of the metaphor that gives it that power and transcends the ugliness.

This style, and the power it imparts, is exemplified in his descriptions of four "representatives": the nurse, the doctor, the patient, and the patient's family. Each is portrayed with honesty and with sensitivity.

The nurse will keep disease and death at bay in the only ways she knows: with soap and water, light, good cheer, determination, and dedication. The reader feels her urgent need to briskly open the curtains and let in the light, knowing that it is for the reader, as well as for the nurse, that the light is needed. She moves, with her aide close at hand, to "bathe and powder and cream," to "extricate wet yellow sheets and lay new resentful ones," to brush "old dry hair that at any given cough might be dislodged from her head." And Selzer says, "Just so, these nurses repeat over and over the simplest tasks, faithfully trimming toenails, and wiping the matter from eyes, never voicing their love, but storing it up in the bodies of these others until, one by one, they should burst into flower."

The doctor "like a rock falling into moist earth," arrives, and, in a few brief sentences, appears before us as a whole human being whose struggle with rooms such as this has exacted its price:

He is a big man, a surgeon after all, with a clumsy face rescued by pale green eyes and by a mahogany voice which any number of nurses have said is a powerful therapy in itself. Years ago, he had not hesitated to lower his voice even further at the bedside of a patient he had diagnosed as being susceptible. But no more. The green eyes have long since been weakened, made more permeable by the sights they have seen. He has lost an entire dimension. He has forgotten himself.

The patient, in her terror, is mute. When she had first arrived in the hospital, she was a

timid, powdery woman who seemed to perch alongside her body lest she be overly identified with something that might not really be hers. Then, she had answered his questions vaguely, disremembering events, losing track, evading, because what she feared more than anything else was becoming trapped in this capsizing body and never being able to get out.

Now, her mouth "is crammed with words that she does not know how to speak." Now, "all at once, she knows that she will go no further than this, that she will stop here at this hole in her abdomen."

The husband and the son are extras in the drama that plays itself out in this room, helpless bystanders, mere spectators. The doctor, unnoticed, watches Tom, the husband, in the solarium as he "waters the artificial plants with real tears." When the woman cries out, a name other than his, he knows that she has kept a secret. "He wrenches his gaze to a distant place somewhere above the bed, looking after something slippery that he had once held but that had suddenly spurted from his hands." The son "cannot pry his gaze from his mother's face. Nor would he ever be rid of it. Years later, in these

deep breaths, one after another, rolling in, rolling out like the sea, in the deepest of them, he would locate his own most painful memories."

The emotional impact of Selzer provides sharp contrast to the work of Lewis Thomas. Thomas begins with information. We learn that a wart is "the elaborate reproductive apparatus of a virus"; we learn about their structure; and we explore the curious but observable connection between the mind and a wart. People seem to be able to make warts go away. It isn't just that the wart has outlived its usefulness and was ready to go, although that does happen. Experiments using hypnosis have shown that warts can be made to disappear. The essay is fueled by his curiosity. "Now how in the world does it do that?" we imagine him saying, and we watch him pick his way through the possibilities, imagining the kinds of specialized intelligence the body would need to switch this, cut off that, notify, receive, act. He creates miniature experts and outlines their job descriptions, putting his own knowledge of medicine at the service of clarity, creating a set of circumstances, of possibilities we can respond to. He speculates about the nature of the unconscious and how it relates to all of this:

This is not the sort of confused, disordered process you'd expect at the hands of the kind of Unconscious you read about in books, out at the edge of things making up dreams or getting mixed up on words or having hysterics. Whatever, or whoever, is responsible for this has the accuracy and precision of a surgeon. There almost has to be a Person in charge, running matters of meticulous detail beyond anyone's comprehension, a skilled engineer and manager, a chief executive officer, the head of the whole place.

Just as it is Selzer's style that lifts his material out of the realm of exploitation into something almost sacred, so it is that Thomas's style turns a commonplace subject into a fascinating one. His prose is spare and linear — the scientist writing up laboratory experiments or case histories — but there is elegance and wit in his simplicity and the

slightest touch of self-mockery, as if he were saying, with a shy duck of the head, "Well, you know how we scientists are. We do look at things in odd ways sometimes." This style comes through as he personalizes the problem:

If my unconscious can figure out how to manipulate the mechanisms needed for getting around that virus, and for deploying all the various cells in the correct order for tissue rejection, then all I have to say is that my unconscious is a lot further along than I am. I wish I had a wart right now, just to see if I am that talented.

This is the way he makes us feel at home in his world.

Why have I paired these essays? Why match the urbane, dispassionate prose of Thomas against the intensity of Selzer; why dare to talk about cancer and warts in the same breath? In part, I hoped to demonstrate the wealth and diversity of styles available to the essayist, even within a given discipline. But there is a more important reason, and that is the natural connection that already exists between the two subjects. Research and experience are beginning to tell us that there is as much potential in the mind for fighting cancer (or a host of other diseases) as there is for making warts go away, and if we can learn why and how warts come and go, maybe we can figure out how to make other things happen. Thomas says:

Just think what we would know, if we had anything like a clear understanding of what goes on when a wart is hypnotized away. We would know the identity of the cellular and chemical participants in tissue rejection, conceivably with some added information about the ways that viruses create foreignness in cells. We would know how the traffic of these reactants is directed, and perhaps then be able to understand the nature of certain diseases in which the traffic is being conducted in wrong directions, aimed at the wrong cells. Best of all, we would be finding out about a kind of superintelligence that exists in each of us, infinitely smarter and possessed of technical know-how far beyond our present understanding. It would be worth a War on Warts, a Conquest of Warts, a National Institute of Warts and All.

Seeing this, believing this, Thomas is not so very different from the doctor, who, as he returns to his home at the end of the day “turns the key in the lock, opening the door only wide enough to let himself in. But it is no use. Like an unwanted homeless dog the [hospital] room follows him into the house, demanding that he step into it and do *something*.” This is not the place to speak of manifest, representative, or private selves. They are all one here.

* * * * *

The works that I have chosen to write about so far are essays that were already special to me for a variety of reasons. Each has its own appeal and each speaks in its own voice. But it is also true that in every case the basis for that special appeal is the quality of the writing. I love good writing. I am as delighted by the discovery of a talented writer as others are by the discovery of a new artist or sculptor or composer. I study the work of these gifted people, and I long to uncover their secrets. What do they have that I haven't got? And where did they get it?

It is not surprising then, since I have already confessed and given evidence to being a collector of other people's thoughts and opinions, that I own a sizable stack of books containing essays about writing. I want to know how writers write, what their desks look like, what rituals they observe, what their habits of research and organization are, if and when they get discouraged (and what do they do about it!), what they read when they are writing, and what they read when they are not writing. I'm not talking about “tips” on developing plots or realizing characters. These can be found in any good manual. I'm looking for magic and I want some of it to rub off on me.

I have been reading books by Barbara Tuchman for many years and with something close to awe. Quite simply, I don't know anyone who writes nonfiction better than she does, and writers of fiction (with whom it is unfair to make a comparison given the inherent limitations of each discipline) could learn much from her style. I was particularly excited, therefore, when Tuchman published a book of selected essays called *Practicing History* in 1981. Here would be the kind of "inside information" I craved and from one whom I considered a master. I bought it immediately, read it from cover to cover, and was not disappointed. Since then I have reread some of the essays several times, particularly the section on "The Craft." From this section I have selected an essay for special consideration, revealing, as it does, many of the kinds of things about her style, her approach, and her philosophy about writing in general and about writing history in particular that *make* her the master and me the disciple.

The essays I have discussed to this point have all contained an element of reflection, a means of locating oneself (writer and reader) within a context of past and present, within a context of relationships, changing perspectives, and growing awareness, discovering pieces of the self within other people's quilts. The essay by Tuchman serves more as a source of inspiration, on one level, and as invaluable instruction on another; no less personal, but personal in a different sense: an artist, a professional, a craftsman generously sharing those secrets I so eagerly seek. In it she seems to be saying "This is how I feel about my work. I take pride in it. I want it to be good. I want it done right. Are you interested?" As a writer and as a reader, I say "Yes, I am interested" and am grateful for her generosity.

Anyone who has read Tuchman's books cannot fail to be impressed by her ability to find exactly the right detail to bring a scene, a character, even a concept to life, and be able to cast those details into fresh, vivid prose. She calls this process (and the essay) "History by the Ounce," and stoutly defends the concept on definitional grounds:

I am a disciple of the ounce because I mistrust history in gallon jugs whose purveyors are more concerned with establishing the meaning and purpose of history than with what happened. Is it necessary to insist on a purpose? No one asks the novelist why he writes novels or the poet what is his purpose in writing poems. The lilies of the field, as I remember, were not required to have a demonstrable purpose. Why cannot history be studied and written and read for its own sake, as the record of human behavior, the most fascinating subject of all? Insistence on a purpose turns the historian into prophet — and that is another profession.

She could have written an instruction manual, a teaching guide for writers of history: "Ten Steps to Better History Writing." Instead she chose to "talk" about it, have a conversation with the reader, share her thoughts as she would over a cup of tea, with excitement and enthusiasm and friendliness, using her own experiences as a resource. As I read I take pleasure in hearing about her discoveries, occasionally recognizing from my own reading a passage or a paragraph from one of her books. I imagine her sitting at her desk with her 3 x 5 cards, sifting and sorting, waiting and watching, looking and listening for that special something that will lift a page of prose to perfection.

I love reading about her successes, the times when finding exactly the right piece of evidence makes everything fall into place. Here is her favorite:

The best corroborative detail I ever found concerned Lord Shaftesbury, the eminent Victorian social reformer, author of the Factory Act and child-labor laws, who appeared in my first book, *Bible and Sword*. He was a man, wrote a contemporary, of the purest, palest, stateliest exterior in Westminster, on whose classic head "every separate dark lock of hair seemed to curl from a sense of

duty." For conveying both appearance and character of a man and the aura of his times, all in one, that line is unequaled.

I also love knowing that her delight in details is such that she occasionally must find the history to support them:

My favorite visible detail in *The Guns of August*, for some inexplicable reason, is the one about the Grand Duke Nicholas, who was so tall (six foot six) that when he established headquarters in a railroad car his aide pinned up a fringe of white paper over the doorway to remind him to duck his head. Why this insignificant item, after several years' work and out of all the material crammed into a book of 450 pages, should be the particular one to stick most sharply in my mind I cannot explain, but it is. I was so charmed by the white paper fringe that I constructed a whole paragraph describing Russian headquarters at Baranovici in order to slip it in logically.

But what I love most is her willingness to share the unsuccessful experiences.

Comparing someone's looks to Karl Marx seemed like a clever idea until she saw the puzzled look on her editor's face and realized he didn't know what Karl Marx looked like. A particularly revealing detail about the personality of the German Kaiser marched through her file of cards from Chapter 1 to "Unused." She even confesses to the experience of creating a memorable bit of prose only to come to the sad but necessary conclusion that it must go, simply because it doesn't serve the material:

Recently at the start of a paragraph I wrote, "Then occurred the intervention which irretrievably bent the twig of events." It was intended as a kind of signal to the reader Unhappily, after finishing the paragraph, I was forced to admit that the incident in question had not irretrievably bent the twig of events. Yet I hated to give up such a well-made phrase. Should I leave it in because it was good writing or take it out because it was not good history? History governed and it was lost to posterity (although, you notice, I have rescued it here).

What fun to discover that, not only does that happen to the likes of a Barbara Tuchman and, artist that she is, she is loathe to let the good ones go, but that she found a way to rescue it by using it in this article and pokes fun at herself for doing so.

I am a bit of a pack rat (you never know when such-and-such will come in handy!) and appreciate such solid evidence that not even words should be thrown away.

It is no surprise to hear her speak of language with love and respect, for it is so evident in her work. And she admits that she is as conscious of her writing as she is of her history:

For me the problem lies in the fact that the art of writing interest me as much as the art of history. . . . In writing I am seduced by the sound of words and by the interaction of their sound and sense. . . . Words are seductive and dangerous material, to be used with caution. Am I writer first or am I historian? . . . In the long run the best writer is the best historian.

I share her appreciation for the lovely phrase originally belonging to General Sir Douglas Haig, "a camel laden with claret." As I said earlier, my delight in the writing of William Gass stems in part from his ability to create phrases as lovely as that. Tuchman herself is not particularly given to alliteration, but if I could construct just one clear, clean, lyrical line to equal hers, if I could make just one scene come alive in the same way hers do, I would die a happy woman.

An essay of this kind is of real value to a great many people: writers, historians, readers (real readers). She talks about the "excitement, the built-in treasure hunt, of writing history," and I see, not a suave, sophisticated professional, but a woman, curious, eager, impatient, just like me. I am comforted and encouraged. If enthusiasm counts, I am on my way. Maybe, if I read her often enough, I will acquire just a little of her magic.

I realized as I went about the difficult task of choosing only six essays (and, you'll notice, I cheated in science and used two), that one could do this again and again, weaving essays together time after time in new and exciting combinations. Next time I might choose a political essay, perhaps from among the many that appear in the form of editorials on the inside pages of our newspapers every day. Some of them are very good, amazing really in their concise appraisals of situations in progress, their ability to put fingers on pulses and translate the beat. But so persuasive and urbane are they that you must read with care and know what you are about lest you be led down someone's garden path, for far too many become exercises in smug, self-fulfilling prophecy. "I knew it would happen, I told you it would happen. Now it did. You heard it here." The essays that appear in so-called "magazines of ideas" are better. The ones by Elizabeth Drew in *The New Yorker* are excellent: thoughtful, well-reasoned, fair, but honestly and openly informed by her own points of view. I have always depended on her to present the several sides of any issue clearly and articulately, and felt free to engage her in debate. I will use one of hers when I do this again.

Essays on religion have a tendency to become preachy or detached from reality. But some writers, like Martin Marty, who writes in the *Christian Century* and more extensively elsewhere, is one of the best, most able to put religion into a context of social issues and cultural questions. I would choose one of his next time.

Sports writers are a breed apart. There are true essayists like Herbert Warren Wind, who writes elegantly and thoughtfully about tennis and golf in ways that transcend (may

even lose track of) mere winning and losing. And there is Roger Angell, who writes intelligently about baseball, again putting it into a broader, if no less self-congratulatory context.

(Baseball fans tend to see their sport as somehow nobler than the rest, a vision that is enhanced by the fact that it seems to have acquired a literature, both fiction and nonfiction, all its own.) But, for the most part, sports is a language I do not understand. I will leave it to others.

There are wonderful essays about art and architecture, music and movies, the ballet and the theater, fashion and food. M. K. Fisher writes about food in ways that turn eating and the appreciation of fine dining into an art form. There are those who do the same for wine. How would I choose from this wealth?

People like Edward Abbey and Wendell Berry sharpen our awareness of the world around us. In the tradition of Joseph Wood Krutch and Rachel Carson, they keep our feet to the fire about the ways in which our lifestyles affect our environment, and their warnings haunt our dreams and people our nightmares. It would be a challenge to focus on their fears.

Tillie Olsen, Adrienne Rich, and others write about issues of special importance to women. Alice Walker (and others) extends that attention to women of color. I would need an entire essay for these alone.

And what of John McPhee and Edward Hoagland, whose works have been an endless source of delight for so many years? Perhaps I would write about McPhee's encounters with bears and Hoagland's preoccupation with turtles. On the other hand, there's McPhee on oranges and basketball and art. And there's Hoagland on the circus.

And what of all the wonderful essays by Annie Dillard and any number of elegant pieces by John Updike and the marvelous commentaries on popular culture by Tom Wolfe? My head is beginning to ache.

But I have a promise to keep. I began this essay as a journey of discovery, and now I must share what I have learned. My original instincts are confirmed. It is the quality of good conversation, the best "I" meeting the ideal "you," and the revelation of self (as revealed through the several selves to which Gass refers) that bring me back to the essay again and again. In every essay I looked at, it was this personal, open approach that drew me in and carried me along. It was the willingness on the part of the writer to say "This is how I feel, this is what I think, these are the things I struggle with" that allowed me to look at what *I* feel and think and struggle with. But I understand this on a deeper level than I did when I began.

A friend of mine recently completed a "challenge" quilt. She explained the concept. Each of the quilters in her group was given the same six lengths of cloth, in sufficient quantity to complete a quilt. Each length was of a different pattern, but the colors and scale of design were compatible. The challenge was this: each quilter was told to discard two of the lengths and replace them with two of her own choosing, then produce a quilt of her own design using the new combination of patterns. All was to be kept secret. The other day she showed me photographs of the results. Each of the quilts was beautiful, each unique, each an individual, creative expression, though all of the quilters had started the project with the same materials. Looking at the pictures, I was as excited as she was. And I knew that she had provided a place for my journey to end. For here, within the concept of the challenge quilt, lies the secret of the essay.

Everywhere we go, everywhere we look, we are confronted by collective voices: the voice of government, the voice of the media, the voice of the church, the voice of the company, the voice of the union, the voice of tradition, the voice of society — I've only scratched the surface. The essay is an individual voice, a challenge quilt, the work of one who uses the materials available to all of us, plus a few lengths from her private store, and combines them on the basis of her own special vision — of past, of memory, of circumstance, of creativity — and makes something personal, something unique, something she is willing to share with me. And I treasure that individuality in a world where so very little of that quality exists. I look at her quilt and I see things I recognize: Signe's dress, Russell's pants, the kitchen curtains. They make me feel at home. But some of the pieces are new and different and she has combined them in unexpected ways. I look at them as McConkey does his postcard, this way and that, letting the light of curiosity and understanding play on the patterns. And if my mind is open and receptive, I find that the new pieces are interesting and stimulating and they don't look so bad against the pieces of my daddy's soft old shirt.

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VITA

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