

And We Were Young

DENNIS DRAKE

*Life, to be sure, is nothing much to lose;
But young men think it is, and we
were young.*

—A. E. Housman

I WILL TELL YOU NOW THAT WORDS come hard for me. Perhaps that is why I value them so highly. And I make no apology for being simple where most men are complex and complex where many men are simple. I am wholly mortal, trying to be a holy mortal and failing badly. In short, if the Second Coming occurred this instant, I wouldn't know whether to cheer or cut my throat.

So here I sit, secure in my ambivalence and this fold of February snow, surrounded by pines, nourished by well-water in a \$50-a-month home. The hardwood floors are hard, the walls breathe, the wiring is suspect. It is a good place to live. The trees are pruned, the garden plowed and lying fallow. Together we are resting and waiting for a green time. High on a bluff our yard runs down to the river. I can see up the bend and down, a mile and a half. About fifty ducks just glided out of the grey sky onto the water. Yesterday I watched a crane wade along the bank, and I thought: nothing could be lovelier than this. As usual, I was wrong a dozen times before dinner.

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I came here not because I was possessed of a vision to be different, but simply to escape smog and traffic signals and the crowds that cause them. And, however trite it sounds, to get Chris and Brand and Sean-Adam back to the land; to let them know wood stoves and clear water and seasons. They have loved it from the first. My own lessons come harder. I am trying to believe that all days are good days, to overcome frustration and chronic mistrust, to find that feeling is a kind of meaning. And while I am not celestial stuff, I am at least a counterfeit Frost capable of simple verse and farming, and I am learning.

*God bless the Ground! I shall walk
softly there, And learn by going
where I have to go.*

—Theodore Roethke

Up out of dirt, like Adam, cut from clay. I share the sacred soil with you, the strangers. For two days I climbed north from Yosemite to find a private place, a high quiet communion far from the clamor below. When I reached the summit I found a clear blue lake hung between the peaks, with evergreens and a soft meadow surrounding it. I also found two dozen people who had come south on horseback. And I found another reason to leave California.

It's too bad. God was there but so were gawkers. They came *en masse*, not to observe and enjoy, but to perform noisily for each other, to sit in tents and play cards and litter the air with profanity. Their mere presence was a desecration. They polluted the clean beauty of it all. So I discovered that this Creation we inhabit, like any worthy creation, demands respect and appreciation and receives instead thin vacant stares and canned applause. Three weeks later we packed our belongings and drove north.

*And the Lord said in his heart, I
will not again curse the ground any
more for man's sake.*

—Genesis 8:21

Much of the Pacific Northwest is wilderness, either by official designation or tacit implication. The distance from our previous home in California to our present one is about 800 miles, 25 years, and 20 million people. I only wish it were further.

Still, somehow I have stepped backward and forward at the same time. All my life I have consciously maintained a deep, respectful feeling for the past two hundred years—the people who shared that time, their achievements, their failures. I somehow feel deprived of new and unfamiliar land, the gold rushes, trappers and surveyors, thirty years of real cowboys, the savage who, if never noble, was considerably more than what civilization made of him. Indeed, the whole westward movement stirs my romantic sensibilities as it did those of young men during its evolution. I yearn for a quenchable thirst like theirs.

This country is not quite so large and wild as they knew it, yet even now

it spreads towns far apart. And many of them, old mining towns and ranching communities, are collectively diminishing; in Frost's phrase, "not much to begin with and every year beautifully less." It is in this context that I recently followed the Lewis and Clark Trail. The surprising thing is that it has changed so little. But one hundred seventy years must make some changes in the land, in the people.

Captain Lewis recorded in his journal that buffalo, elk and antelope were so gentle they frequently approached the men to discover what they were, and sometimes followed them for miles with that apparent objective. Clark mentions one herd of buffalo numbering ten thousand, and in the same area Lewis found grizzlies so numerous and troublesome that he did not think it wise to send a man alone on an errand. Although at times the ticks and "mosquitos" were irritating, there were ample compensations. When the small party had passed the Great Plains and the buffalo meat was gone, they caught 528 fish in two hours, most of them large trout. Clark reported that the waters of the Columbia were so clear salmon could be seen at a depth of fifteen or twenty feet.

Clearly, their rivers are not ours. The great falls of the Missouri and the wild rapids of the Columbia are gone. Gone too are whole tribes met along the way, and the openness and warmth which they exhibited has vanished from their remaining brothers down a trail of broken treaties.

Progress usually entails a loss of one sort or another. Sometimes the loss is senseless and irretrievable. Notwithstanding central air and flush toilets are wonderful inventions, I am born out of my time—probably not a valid complaint, but a common one, and that means something. The endless waves of buffalo on plains still vast but noticeably empty, the going of the grizzly, the addition of dams to rivers, of freeways to primitive areas and chemical waste to water and air—all these diminish my earth and my pleasure in inhabiting it. They diminish me.

*You shall ask
why must summer end
And I will tell you
So that the leaves can die.
—Nancy Wood*

It was said of the early settlers that the cowards never started, and the weak died along the way. The West was vast and wild, and required strong and rugged men to measure its mass. But a clouded sky stretched over those people, that land. As in all human endeavor, strong men can survive, but it takes a good man to live.

There were good men, but not enough. The West was not won so much as it was simply overrun, eroded, corroded. Men may tame the land a little, and then only temporarily, but the land can change men radically, forever. Ask a farmer or a miner if all his labor makes much difference to the land, but it places an indelible mark on him. Environmentalists talk of raping the land, yet the land remains, a bit despoiled perhaps, but not displaced. Its inhabitants have been less fortunate: the beaver, buffalo, Indians.

We killed Indians because we were more and better armed, and because we believed in Manifest Destiny and a Christian God. We penned survivors

like we do our convicts, our cattle, even our grass. When homesteaders cut trees and ranchers grazed herds and prospectors found gold on reservation property, we killed more Indians, drew more treaties, and moved the fences. Our world never shrank as small as theirs, or changed so fast. They were only here first, and were not strong enough to stay.

So they fought and rested as we do: a war to end all wars, then peace as long as grass should grow and water flow. No need for editorials here. Men will be what men have been. As Black Elk said, "it is not the grass and the water that have forgotten."

*It does not matter where his body
lies,
for it is grass; but where his spirit
is, it will be good to be.*
-Black Elk, speaking of Crazy Horse

I am a frequenter of graveyards, or what my three-year-old calls "dying gardens". Rarely will I pass by a wilderness cemetery without checking whether the old wood markers are still legible. I have knelt at babies' graves dug a hundred years ago and still felt a slow, strange grief engulf me. And I have known the warm, friendly feeling of sharing space with Port Rockwell, Golden Kimball, David McKay, and all that hardy stock under Salt Lake soil. I guess I just like continuity, hints of eternity, large lawns. Nothing morbid about it; I like graves.

My most recent grave-sitting was done with Chief Joseph. I have read of his epochal march—loving peace first, fighting for his feelings, accepting the inevitable gracefully: "I am tired; my heart is sick and sad. From where the sun now stands I will fight no more forever." He too had a fondness for earth and sky, for ancestors, for graves: "I buried [my father] in that beautiful valley of the winding waters. I love that land more than all the rest of the world." He longed to be buried in that valley close to his father. But Chief



Joseph died on the reservation, a two-hour drive from Spokane.

Still, his bones remain in the Northwest, and the land stays Indian to this day. Spokane means "Children of the Sun". I hope for symbolism there. A poet writes about the sound of *Wallowas* driving men crazy. Chewelah, Inchelium, Issaquah, Klickitat, Lilliways, Peshastin, Skamakowa, Snohomish, Snoqualmie, Steilacoom, Tillicum, Tonasket, Wenatchee, Kooskia, Kaniksu, Skipoose, Samamish . . . names that provide language the pleasure it deserves. May celestial speech prove so satisfying.

One-hundred-twenty years ago Brigham Young gave to my great-great-grandfather the title "Apostle to the Lamanites". And what grandfather began out of love for the Lord and his servants evolved into a lifelong love of the Indian people. That feeling has proved hereditary. Mae and I agreed that heritage should figure in our daughter's name, so when I walked out of the delivery room of a small mountain-community hospital where she was born, I looked for a Running Rabbit or a Bird That Flies By Water. But all I saw was a spring morning, liquid-green, budding, blossoming, throbbing with the secret wonder of new life. Because it was the fourth month of the year we called her April. And because it was early morning full of the freshest light, we called her Dawn. To others, April and Dawn are two common, pleasant-enough girl-names, but to her mother and me, April Dawn will always be a proud designation of much, much more.

*Nota: man is the intelligence of his soil,
The sovereign ghost. (1922)*

*Nota: his soil is man's intelligence.
That's better. (1947)*

-Wallace Stevens

The poet stands alone, eye of the hurricane. He is insular, even backwards, perennial spectator. Yet in his silence he is neither composed nor apart from all that goes on; indifference is the other end of the spectrum. Friends see him as a kind of pretentious failure because he works so hard at it. He burns his bridges before they are built; buries his talents and forgets just where. But he must live close to the earth, and most kinds of performance loosen his adhesion.

So it is. I am not up to living more than a simple life. I can see now that my pilgrimage here was no escape—I was running *to* something, full of hope and anticipation. My exodus to isolation is more reflection than rejection of conformity, does not assume but hopes for better performance. The attempt is pure, not innocent; genuine, not original. I am sensitive to the indulgent smiles and knowing nods, but this is for my life, not theirs. I search for self, the me that is becoming.

I bleed that my family must do without all the conspicuous acquisitions I could so easily get for them, but if I keep a cow, said Emerson, that cow milks me. I hope to resist the temptation to spend a portion of eternity cleaning my castle, polishing three cars and a boat, and tuning myriad snowmobiles and motorcycles, and I do not want to confuse who I am with what I own. This is not an easy posture to maintain, but I am self-centered enough to manage, with effort, rather nicely.

My family is my heart. I cherish them beyond a bachelor's ability to comprehend. They are beautiful, bright, and—aside from their own reasons for living—plentifully rewarding for me both as participants in our shared life and as objects of my vision. But they have a corporate interest to clog my life with daily ritual and responsibility, and although they do not intend to usurp, only to share, occasionally I must sneak some solitude, a serene and secret place.

My wife knows nature is my best companion. These mountain meadows accommodate my whims, and the hushed hills I walk on damp and dreary mornings shrug off daily grief and glory with equal ease. The earth and each other: it's all we have, and that's good.

*For all there is to give I offer:
Crumbs, barn, and halter.*

—Dylan Thomas

Food, shelter, and friendly persuasion are all we require; why then do we look beyond them? Our homes and stomachs are larger already than we need, and our direction is a suspicious one. Yet a discernible sense of deserved modesty combined with thirty years' defiance against endemic greed (also known as Nephite disease) preserves my integrity. Do not, therefore, include a pedestrian economy among my legion failures. I am poor by promise to myself, made and kept. No apologies tendered.

I cannot, however, help but notice how Zion congregates beneath the windows of heaven, pushing and shoving for a fairer share, the tired acquisitive relay with the Joneses, the casual accumulation of debt, the much-preached motherless homes. I hear leaders assure the saints that a rich man can accomplish more good for the Church, all things equal, than a poor man, camels and kingdoms notwithstanding—as if the argument that ten percent of an empire is worth more than the widow's mite had not already been debunked. And even though affluence for the money-minded via "scriptural" formulae smacks of Calvinism's righteous rich, I can easily accept a God who rewards both the Lehis and Labans of our land with that which they feel rewarded.

But I resent the implication that a carpenter's son might have accomplished more good if he were wealthy, and I sense that money occasionally impedes the Lord's will—only because we remain selfish and fail to progress spiritually past a physical sacrifice—and more often precipitates empty actions than good works.

I find myself repeating the question posed by an old tract, "Are Mormons Christians?" It is enough commentary to say we are invariably surprised to come across an honest man, a guileless woman, a truly fair proposition, which is why we prize them, like diamonds, for their quiet brilliance and scarcity. Where boors and billboards are concerned, more is always less.

The best men have somewhere, somehow overcome pride, envy, fruitless yearning and senseless show. They have reduced life—or raised it—to simpler yet more satisfying terms. Often reserved but usually gracious, occasionally eloquent, they are the true aficionados of life. Muir knew we required beauty and bread and not much else. The Indians lived modestly, by design so as not to steal from the earth and their future. They maintained

a healthy reverence for their kind of life, and they *expected* to be happy. Likewise Huck Finn was “free and satisfied” with elementary raft and river, and properly despised and rejected much of what is “sivilized”. Me too, Huck; “I been there before.”

*Earth's crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God;
But only he who sees takes off his shoes—
The rest sit around it and pluck blackberries.*
—Elizabeth Barrett Browning

People say, “But you don’t see the spectacular every day.” Precisely wrong. The everyday *is* spectacular. To extend a thought of Emerson’s, if flowers bloomed in only one garden of rural France on the 30th of May each year, travelers from around the world would annually converge to view the miracle. Or if there were only a single deciduous tree in America, imagine our mass marvel at its explosion of color. Tourists would stealthily pluck its leaves to prove they saw it (would they see?) and someone would build a fence and charge admission and scientists and mystics would write books on how it came to be just there. So what of birds and butterflies, geysers and waterfalls? May Sarton writes of forgotten bulbs left in a cellar which push up pale white shoots, trying to grow in darkness, dying for lack of light. Those who possess eyes without vision suffer the bleakest kind of blindness.

All of us admire and appreciate the Earth to some extent. A few of us even choose where we live for reasons other than convenience—proximity to jobs, friends, relatives, shopping centers. This Earth, after all, is more than background. When we were children romping through sagebrush and timber, we used to feel that we were part of the earth. We belonged to it; we were one. With effort, one can regain that feeling, in the forest, the desert, at the ocean. But we lose it at home, in the city, sometimes for years, sometimes for life. Our walls shut out the light more ways than one.

I suppose I stop short of pantheism, but I’m not sure. If I can see God in people and art, I daresay I can perceive Him in nature too.

*where's your proof?
You who never venture from under your roof
Once the night's come; the blinds all down
For fear of the moon's bum rubbing the window.*
—R.S. Thomas

This winter of contentment is a closed and comfortable stillness. The icy wind and that bare, desperate consciousness of precarious survival too seldom with us anymore are tempered by the fire. We maintain a moderate supply of food, clothing and fuel, but a lot of nature pushes on these walls. Even though I generally oppose confinement on principle, I am grateful for their shelter. Warm and full, I wait for dawn through nine Beethoven symphonies. Let lean wolves lean against the glow (on any level of the metaphor); there are worse ways to get through the night.

Morning is such a soft awakening. Quietness (kids still in bed), steam rising off the river, trees becoming visible shadows against the skyline. There is a strong feeling of movement, of taking shape, of a slow birth into being. And there is a fullness and union of time and place, of centuries and stars. Eternal vision lies just beyond the grey veil, vanishing into the emerging landscape.

This is about as close as I come to grasping the situation. I'm glad we're staying here. All this green country and I share a strange and special peace. We are much alike—aloof, uneven, given to extremes. It helps to draw sustenance from surroundings, to hope this shell may know a new and deeper light than it has heretofore discovered.

Mae finds me vaguely antisocial, and friends pass me off as foolish and romantic. They are right of course. But I have dreamed a long time of this feeling. I won't have it ruined by a few minor flaws.

*To be born woman is to know—
Although they do not talk of it at school—
That we must labour to be beautiful.*

—William Butler Yeats

I am sitting in my bed writing at two a. m. when my youngest boy enters the room. "Son," I say in my most officious adult voice, "it is time for people to be asleep." And this beautiful girl beside me, sleeping like a stone, senseless, bursts into laughter. "You're funny!" she says. This somehow irritates me, because I am seldom funny at two o'clock in the morning. "I'll file the divorce papers tomorrow," say I, "and when I meet your new husband I'll have just three words for him: 'You'll be sorry!'"

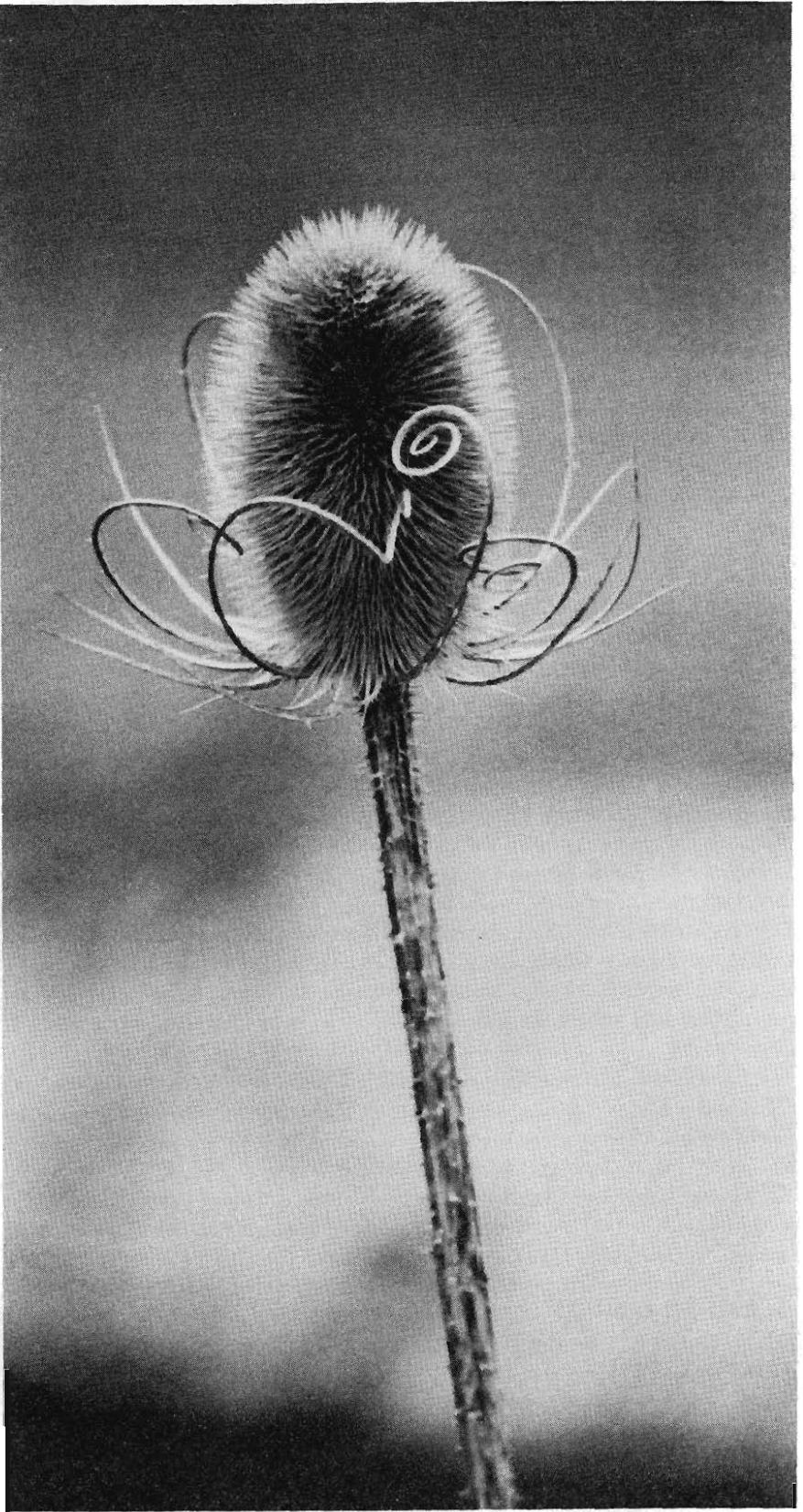
"When I meet your new wife," she instantly responds, "I'll have just three words for her: 'You lucky bum!'"

Well, I pass it off like I always do, never acknowledging how gratifying and humbling her words are to me. Yet I recognize this is diplomacy our statesmen never have: the ability to change the tenor of an argument so completely that the other side simply has to capitulate; moral persuasion raised to art.

I have known a woman or two with a soft, low voice that somehow conveyed a history of tears and laughter, a cumulative experience equal to my own, and I at once credited her with empathy and insight and a deeper beauty than she showed. My Mae is one of these.

I do not know how a girl becomes a woman. I cannot even tell how she communicates it or how I perceive it, yet I understand her distinction is earned. In the lesser lights only can I separate the dancer from the dance; the truest women have melded the movement into one. Like Yeats, I am suspicious of those who learn to trade on their looks, who "consider beauty a sufficient end," and let it be. I am too vulnerable to eyes that smile, to eloquence and charm, to a lady "lovely in her bones" who, when she moves, moves "more ways than one." So I reserve my greatest admiration and my deepest affection for those few who extend their femininity past the common discoveries.

President McKay implied that while our ability to choose our face at



twenty is negligible, everyone has the capacity to be lovely at eighty. We could reflect long on that observation, but even superficially there is a circular sense to all of this. A face is flawed or free, elegant at eighty or a wasted, sour shell—and its owner an angel or a shrew. Something is here about agency—discriminating, sensitive intelligence at work turning action into behavior, behavior into character, character into action until a woman is made and a fair, singular face is constantly refined. This is too simply stated, but the fact remains we grow wise in work, and while we are sometimes blessed with leisure to “look” lovely, we know it is a built thing.

*All we learn from experience is the way from
simplicity back to simplicity.*

—Patrick Kavanagh

I am not sufficiently naive to think I can live completely my Thoreauvian dream, or even to prompt perspective in a peculiar people gone genteel. It is remarkably difficult to live simply in a land where a surfeit of luxury and leisure is ours for the taking, and all our energy is directed toward taking it. Yet I believe we *can* find the light in our upward struggle through the thicket of our days, and as we cut away the complexity of it all, our paths not only run simpler and straighter, but are usually better illuminated.

Perhaps my barren personality makes it easier for me. I, after all, receive home teachers by invitation only, prefer solitude to Church socials and frequently endure meetings in patient resentment. But though I value the sanctuary of soul only purposeful meditation discovers, I desperately need your communion, your encouragement, your balance. We were friends when we were younger; we should be so now.

If only that our space is shared, we should perceive that space and each other with a higher respect. And as people have a place in our world, so the world should have a place in its people. The healthy individual knows how expertly nature can renew not only itself but us as well; how it helps us define ourselves and our place within it. I think of Muir, high on a Douglas fir riding the wind all day, gazing down on a forever green wave, lost for a time to human contact, feeling exactly like a tree. Or Thomas Wolfe entering a grove of Sequoias for the first time, throwing his big arms wide on a wider trunk and looking upward without speaking for an hour. Or my three-year-old son balancing on a basketball and whispering through his concentration, “Look, Dad, I’m standing still as a stone.” Ah, my son, I thought, you too love words already, and the quiet equilibrium of nature.

Whenever we seek a worthy goal we favor ourselves wisely, even if we come up short, for we inevitably meet other seekers like us, and thereby gain assistance, compassion, dialogue. Then, at the very least, we can sit away the gentle evenings oblivious to our real and imagined hungers, content with ourselves and God’s good company and this world around us, secure in the knowledge that every life-support system should have its share of sunsets, as ours does. Lord, how I love it.

*As for the people
I’ve found my rock
Let them find theirs.*

—Robinson Jeffers

My orchard sits on a rock quarry; I have spent the last week pulling tree stumps and removing stones. If I had a convenient ocean in which to dump them we could form a new state. So far our property is still rocky, but several inches lower. And I brought in a load of fertilizer from the dairy farm. One of the workers told me they have milk there also. Everyone is so versatile these days; the conglomerates are taking over.

The Bishop called Mae and me over after sacrament meeting. He presented an all-star award from the area tournament in Seattle six months ago. This ward is the only thing moving slower than Spring. I suspect the Second Coming was scheduled early last year and they just haven't gotten to it yet.

Spring will come of course, with all its green beginnings, but I can wait. There is something about a cold, crackling night that aids lucidity. I suspect the summer smog hides God from us as much as anything. Perhaps He cannot abide pollution in any guise. And yes, I confess I write for apology. I have stained the stillness from time to time. I do not absolve myself, or even plead criminal company.

It's just that I envy most the man who rolls out of bed with a child's enthusiasm, delight in his eye. I am trying to find that fire, to view each day as a dare—something to be enjoyed and achieved happily rather than as an exercise in drudgery, fighting a rearguard action, catching up with yesterday's accumulated problems. This is my moment; I am young yet.

*But what I am saying over the fields'
Desolate acres, rough with dew,
Is, Listen, listen, I am a man like you.*
—R. S. Thomas

Lastly, and most candidly, I write for none of the reasons that generally motivate the moving finger. I worry always, for myself, and then for you. Our lives converge and separate and reunite. We are close cousins (brothers and sisters!) who permit the darkness of our minds and the distance of a turbulent world to disjoint our familial bond. Too many things between us remain unsaid; too much inside us is never shared.

Essentially we make a real and durable impression only one life at a time. We invest ourselves in each other to the extent we care, and that, I suggest, is a true measure of our Christian belief. Moreover, if the investment is genuinely born of love and sacrifice, the resulting joy is both liberating and lasting. May such feeling fill your days.

I say simply a gracious Father directed the creation of our common home. To some of us it is an ungreen tangle, a birdless world, and the high burning light is dimmed to meaninglessness by the intervening, pervasive smoke. But to others the earth is a provocation of beauty, a physical vision that spills opulently into every day of our lives and spurs us to gratitude and good works.

And I say we should never be appalled by purple thunder or the still pause that follows floods, however small, the saffron sun falling through a prismatic sky. We will be the richer for our regard, and I will be content knowing you reside in this abundant world, a calm space, a spot of peace, a quietude, attending the days when we were young.

