

Unnatural Acts:
A Journal from the First Year of Retirement

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“Fair quiet, Have I found thee here?
And Innocence, thy Sister dear.
Mistaken long, I sought thee then
In busy companies of Men.”

--“The Garden,” by Andrew Marvell

On my last day at work, a man in his 60s or perhaps 70s whom I had seen from time to time in the hallway stopped by at my office. He glanced at my empty desk and me, staring blankly before the computer screen. He took it all in and then gave me a Gioconda smile.

“Retiring?” he said.

I nodded.

“Congratulations.” He smiled again. “Good luck.”

Then he laughed a small, older person’s laugh.

“I lasted 5 months,” he said, and disappeared.

I felt a chill. I had announced my retirement twice—first, a year earlier after my father had died, and then again when a buyout too small to make any real financial difference to me had been made available. But I had been thinking about it for years, with trepidation and with longing.

The trepidation came from thinking of other women in my family who had worked in offices. My aunts, for example. One had made all the plans to retire, which in her case included moving out of a women’s residence in mid-town Manhattan where she had felt comfortable for many years to another residence uptown where she feared she would not. Just before retirement, she fell dead (in the street?) of a heart condition she had never bothered to mention to anyone. My other aunt retired to rural New Jersey, where she spent the days complaining to anyone willing to listen.

“All those gray heads!” she would wail as I wheeled the cart down the aisle of the local supermarket. “All those gray heads! And look—they don’t move when they’re in your way and you shout at them!”

She turned glared at me as if it was all my fault.

“I never thought I’d get *old*,” she said, frowning in disgust.

It had come upon me slowly but unexpectedly, the decision to retire. After my parents had died, I had expected life to return to “normal.” Instead there had been a series of odd but not unserious health ailments that arrived without warning or cause and, after considerable expense of time and money, went away. With the recession, my companion took a job that meant a considerable amount of international travel; slowly, and with pain, I learned once more how to live alone. Suddenly the work that I had been doing for many years seemed as tedious as it was tiresome. More and more, hope that my former strength and sense of resolve would return faded. When had it happened, that the sense of the future as a realm of unlimited possibilities, or even a field in which one could set goals, had dissolved? Retirement, which so recently had seemed far off, now felt inevitable.

In the last days of working, I had thought often of the retirement seminar I had taken some years earlier. It had dealt with all the usual practical topics—cash flow analysis, the need to max out retirement account contributions, arguments for and against annuitizing one’s life savings—but the only part I remembered was the session on the emotional aspects.

The seminar leader had given some cautions and some rules. Don’t take on more than one project in the first year, he said. It’s OK to enjoy the initial euphoria of not having to work, but don’t be surprised if sometime down the road—six months, maybe a year—you feel depressed as the realization sets in that you are, once and for all, out of the game.

And expect relationship issues, he had said. With retirement, all the accommodations and arrangements negotiated so long ago no longer apply. He told of a couple he had known where the husband wanted to live in North Carolina and go fishing while the wife wanted to stay in Washington D.C near the grandchildren. With his help, he said, they could have reached a resolution in less than the year that it had taken. A year! To me at this age, a year was as long as it had been when I was twenty-one.

But I felt paralyzed, totally unable to plan for the days ahead. In the months before my retirement date, I would wait in the evening for the phone to ring with the news of the day from wherever my companion happened to be. Was it Delhi, Paris, Manila, Guangzhou? There were apparently many differences in their transportation systems—of great importance to my companion—but they were all the same to me. If I was no longer working, I could travel some of the time to all those far-off unknown places. A commitment to any kind of routinized activity that could involve other people—volunteer work, say, or adjunct teaching—would mean less time together. And once I was no longer working, not just the evenings but also the days would be lonely. Very lonely.

I began to observe others who had moved into this new—this last—stage of life. I noticed that I never thought of a friend’s husband as “retired” although he had taught high school history for decades before setting up a very successful accounting business. I observed with envy some I knew who just kept on working, waiting for what the retirement literature euphemistically calls “the health shock.” Some of these of course had retired in place. I did look down on a colleague who had once been very much respected and now was best known for being unable to make a decision—a management failing that affected everyone around her. Some retired from one organization and went to another, reducing the demands on themselves or, in some cases, increasing them.

Still others I heard about, formerly hard-driving executives, retreated to their living rooms after retirement and would not come out. To the puzzlement and annoyance of their spouses, they refused lucrative job offers. They watched daytime tv. They played video games. Were they grieving? Did they have Alzheimer’s? None of these were people I actually knew, so there was no way to find out.

And still others—seemingly, the majority—loved retirement, as had my father and mother, who golfed their way through old age. At a party I met a new retiree who beamed at me radiantly.

“But what do you do all day?” I asked.

“*Do?*” She looked at me with incomprehension. “*Do? Why, I just live.*”

2.

The next day—the first day—we had tickets to go to Stockholm, where my companion was to speak at a conference. This was to be the first of many trips in which I would be exchanging a lonely day in my house for a lonely day in a strange but, I hoped, interesting far-off city.

As I went about the final packing in the morning, my heartbeat, which for some years had had a tendency to go its own way, refused to normalize. No matter how irritated I became with it, it just went faster.

“Why don’t we call the doctor?” said my companion gently.

Always a believer in data, he went upstairs and dug out the blood pressure monitor, which had been lost for some years.

The emergency room was filled with bright lights and busy, bustling people radiating hypercompetence. I had taken care of both my parents when they had heart problems so all of this was, in one way, familiar. Still, it was an odd sensation to look up at the irregular beep and the jagged red line on the monitor and realize it

belonged to me. Pulling the heated blanket around my shoulders, I tried without success to meditate.

A pleasant woman in pale blue scrubs—it was impossible to tell who were the doctors and who were the nurses and techs—watched with attention the red line gyrating unpredictably on the screen above my head. For the first time in—how long?—I could feel myself relax a bit. It was at least clear that for the time being I wasn't going anywhere.

"Hmmm," she said. "Looks like you need to return your heart beat to normal."

And so in that moment I did, and it did. Just like that!

I toyed fancifully with the idea that autosuggestion could help address the problem of ever-rising health care costs, a subject to which I had devoted a not inconsiderable part of my working life in recent years.

My companion was hunched over his computer as he ate in an uncomfortably small chair. He seemed pale but calm. The clock on the wall showed that our flight would leave from Dulles Airport in twenty minutes.

"Can we re-book the flight to Stockholm for later today?" I asked.

"Don't know," he said. "Do you want to?"

I paused. Then I shook my head.

Next thing I knew we were in the taxi heading for the airport.

Retired life had begun.

3.

In the summer of 1968 I was twenty-one. I was working as a typist at a publishing house for textbooks in south Berkeley. It was my first year away from home and I trying to make some money to help out with the first year of grad school that would soon begin. The publishing house didn't pay very much, and when the boss dropped off our checks each Friday, he would tell us how long we had to wait until we could cash them. Each morning and afternoon I had to punch in and out on a time clock—the only job I would ever have where I had to do this.

In the sweltering heat of the unairconditioned room, we would type a line of the textbook, count up the space taken by the letters, and record the count at the end of the line. Later we would use the count to retype line on our IBM Executive typewriters so it would be right justified. There were 10 of us, all women, all young.

The graphic artists were in the next room and they played their radio loud. They took drugs, went to the nude beach in Marin, and got tear-gassed at demonstrations. I admired and was a bit afraid of them. At the end of the day, more bored than I had believed it possible to be, I would rush out into the sunlit smog of San Pablo Avenue, eager for my real life to begin.

“In the Midnight Hour” by the Chambers Brothers was my favorite of the songs the graphic artists liked to play. It is the kind of song gets into your brain and makes it impossible for you to read or study, almost but not quite as bad as the Beatles’ “Hey Jude.” Just before the end the music stops abruptly and there is the sound of a pendulum. At an unpredictable counterpoint to this sound the Chambers Brothers begin to chant in unison. The chant goes on for what seems like a very long time. You want the chant to end and you don’t. The chant is simple: “TIME” [tick] “TIME” [tick tick] “TIME.”

That was what changed in retirement. Time. Before, it had always stretched out as an infinite vista, infinite and beckoning. Overnight it became a space at once constrained, unwelcoming, unmapped, and vast. Each day felt as if I were struggling to traverse the Empty Quarter of Saudi Arabia without a map or water. Each day a new plan had to be made—worse, the elements for the plan had to be invented without precedents or criteria, without models. In strange cities, there were museums, walks through cobblestoned streets if it wasn’t raining, cups of tea in the mid-afternoon, shopping. (Never before had I thought of “shopping” as an activity rather than an annoying chore.) At home there were books and music and all the domestic tasks that one means to do on the weekend and then puts off for “later.” To my surprise, I found I still wanted to put them off until later.

In the first weeks I learned and did many things, some old and some new. I baked bread—a rye bread scented with orange, molasses, and fennel that I had not baked for thirty years and that now seemed to me wondrously like the breads we had eaten in Stockholm. I rearranged my books into a semblance of order for the first time since moving 15 years earlier. I cleaned my house. I learned how to make slide shows of photographs from our trips and posted them on Facebook. I took classes at the Apple store. I e-mailed early and often. I read novels.

I spent hours going through French pronunciation tapes I had done twice before in the past twenty years. By the time I finished them I could pick out phrases in French radio when I listened to it and sometimes whole sentences. I was excited about this until I remembered I had no plans to visit France.

I had lunch with friends. I cleaned my house again. Hours were passed doing the wash and even ironing, a task I had learned only when I had gone off to college and been happy to unlearn in later life. Desperate to have something with structure and intellectual content that could be done in hotel rooms anywhere in the world, I signed up for an online course in German translation, a subject I had once taught but

had largely forgotten in over 30 years of disuse. It turned out to be ridiculously easy but I kept on with it anyway.

As the weeks wore on, I found it was taking twice as long now to do virtually everything as it had before. By mid-afternoon I was exhausted. Often I simply tuned out and forgot what I was doing. Some days I watched reruns of “Law and Order” all the way to the end even when I remembered the ending. It began to feel odd to be with people. Even when companioned, I found myself dissociating in the middle of conversations the way I did when I was home alone day after day. How could it be that so recently I had been productive, busy, respected? It was amazing how little I could now accomplish in a single day.

When there was somewhere I had to go – to meet a friend, to the cleaner’s – it was with a feeling of pure elation that I got in my car and fired it up. Once more I felt part of the flow of human life, surrounded by those still in the world, happy or grumpy but in any case preoccupied as they moved quickly through their working day. Despite the fact that even in the moment I knew this to be merely an illusion, I felt I was waiting for something to happen that would magically return me to that life—real life.

In other, worsen moments, as the plane was circling above Dulles Airport and the latest trip was coming to an end, I would allow myself to pretend, just for an instant, that at the end of the jetway I would be magically returned to my old life.

This was all troubling. Was I losing touch with reality? At the same time, these moments of illusion felt necessary. For without them, panic loomed. Before, I had thought of myself as a reasonably stable person. Now, my inner life resembled a series of typhoons.

It did not help that I seemed to be the only one. Friends reported no problems with keeping busy, with structuring their day, with useless regrets. They visited the grandchildren. They did volunteer work. They walked their dogs. They bought RVs and roamed the heartland, marveling at its beauty.

“Oh, you’re just having trouble adjusting?” they would say, I thought with a trace of condescension.

Adjust to what? I wanted to scream.

To being old and useless? To being outside the world? To waiting for a death that, if I lived to be as old as my parents, might be another thirty years in coming?

No, no, no! said my friends. Adjust to exotic travel! Adjust to going to Sweden, Switzerland, the Philippines! Adjust to being able to spend more time with your husband! Adjust to not having to drive through traffic every day for an hour in

order to do work you don't like! For heaven's sake, what is your problem? If only we could be so lucky!

One night, while I was holding a baking sheet over the sink with one hand and using the other to scrub vigorously at it with a brush, the brain shut off and I forgot that I had retired. Once more it was just another harried night in the kitchen after dinner when everything had to be done as quickly as possible to make what little space in the day could be made for still being awake and not working. The only thing holding me back was this bit of black encrusted re-heated pizza crust—that or an old-fashioned insistence on my part on perfection in all things. I rinsed the pan off neatly with the water spray, soaped and scrubbed one last time. Still not satisfied, I put the brush down and scraped with my fingers.

“Good enough,” I thought as I gave it one final rinse. I was pleased now; glad to be done. I moved the griddle over to the stove where it could dry. And now I could do off to—to what?

In an instant the feeling of being me, the old “me”—vibrant, in control, competent in the world, needed by others—this feeling dissolved. It was over, the momentary little unplanned flight from reality.

I dried my hands on a dishtowel, folded it carefully, and hung it back on the cabinet door where it belonged.

4.

In the next months, I began to read voraciously, not to divert myself, but with the eclecticism and desperation of a seeker.

I read Hesse's novel *Siddhartha*, which chronicles the stages of life as understood in Hinduism. In the Hindu religion, I read, there are five four?? stages of life. In the first stage the child becomes an apprentice. He or she learns the tasks that will be their life's work from a teacher or mentor. The tasks are determined partly by caste but also by dharma,¹ which is one's personal life task, flowing from past lives and the uniqueness of the individual. In the second stage, the young person experiences the sensual and sexual pleasures of life, marries, and founds a family. The third stage is that of retirement. Power and responsibility are gradually passed to the next generation. Those who are older begin to withdraw from active life and household responsibilities in order to contemplate and prepare for death and rebirth. In the fourth and last stage, the human being—and I think here “man” is

¹ Erik Eriksson defines this as “a consolidation of the world through the self-realization of each individual within a joint order.” See *Gandhi's Truth: On the Origins of Militant Nonviolence* (New York: Norton, reissued 1993), p. 37.

meant, not woman—becomes an ascetic, perhaps a hermit: a wanderer dependent on others for food and sustenance. Is there growth from one stage to another? I was not sure. For there is little or no continuity between the stages of life: a person may change entirely from one stage to the next.

Siddhartha is a young man trying to find Enlightenment. When young he apprentices himself to a Hindu Brahmin who teaches meditation. But he becomes dissatisfied, rejects his teacher and his family, and wanders off into the world. There he falls in love with a hetaera, becomes a successful businessman, only to reject this life too. Once more he seeks enlightenment, this time not through meditation but through contemplation of the created, ever-changing and changeless physical world. He simplifies his life. He becomes a boatman ferrying others across a river.

During this last stage of his life—a form of retirement and withdrawal in order to contemplate the approach of death—Siddhartha scorns those who are still in the world. For him those who are still in the flow, the cycle of life (samsara), are foolish and childlike. What makes them different from him is that they still have goals they are trying to achieve. It is their passionate attachment to those goals he sees as foolishness.

It is precisely this desiring and striving and achieving and failing and desiring again in a world composed of others doing the same that is supposed to come to an end when, in the modern West, a person “retires.” King Lear stepping down from his throne tells his daughters that now “we unburthen’d crawl towards death.”

But what Siddhartha discovers is that there can be no unburthened crawling toward death as Lear imagines, his most foolish imagining. As long as you are alive, there are feelings and strivings and desires and goals that must be acknowledged lest they surge forward in some disguised, destructive way.

It seems there is no way out as long as you are breathing.

As I read *Siddhartha* in a dual-language version, some of the translations seem wrong to me. I tell myself that this is because I know so little about professional translation.

5.

Following its adventure in the ER, my heart had kept on its old, only mildly erratic course, but after consulting various doctors, I agreed to the minor procedure they recommended. My fear of the procedure, however, was only equaled by my fear of going to the hospital where it would be done. This was where my father had gone for open-heart surgery at what we did not then know was the beginning of his long decline. As I drove to the hospital, memories surged up from this earlier phase of

my life when sickness and dying had seemed to pertain only to others, not to me or anyone I knew.

Having arrived at the hospital, I unexpectedly found I felt better than in some time. Suddenly I was fully in touch with earlier versions of myself. When last I had been in these drab and Spartan halls, I had been respected, needed. My role had been clear: I was The Daughter," as in "The Daughter is waiting outside" or "We need to talk with The Daughter."

As I now watched the doctors, nurses, lab techs go about their work, I could see how their superficial and impersonal kindness overlay a fierce concentration and desire to do their best. I felt envious and reassured. It was precisely this kind of stress and being with others that I most missed.

At last one friend said quietly, as if confessing a dark secret, "You know, it took me three years to adjust. Actually, I may not have adjusted yet."

Another friend who had been a successful computer programmer voiced with some hesitation and ambivalence a desire to do paid work again.

"I've even thought of trying to get a job at Trader Joe's or Williams Sonoma," this friend said.

Why, I asked.

She thought on it.

"To have a sense of achievement," my friend answered. "That's what I miss most."

6.

In the late autumn I went to New York, where I was born and lived until I was seventeen. Always I had intended to return, but things happened and I never did.

On a day warm as summer, as the rays of the sun filter down into the man-made caverns, I walk slowly and with delight through the streets of Midtown. Then south to Union Square; I drift lazily through the aisles of the Strand Bookstore. At night, I lie back among the pillows of the tiny, modern, comfortable, Chelsea hotel room feeling the rattle from the 1 train fifteen stories below. It comforts like a lullaby.

I thought of my Irish grandfather who had lived nearby in the Lower East Side as a young man, clawing his way out through hard work and a personality that endeared him to all. I thought of my German grandmother waiting tables in her parents' bakery-restaurant across the street from my grandfather's fish store, carrying all

those schnitzels and sauerbratens and pieces of apple streudel watching and waiting for my grandfather to finally pay attention to her.

Images of the old neighborhood flew through my head, vivid and comforting. On impulse I downloaded, free, Whitman's 1850 *Leaves of Grass* onto my Kindle and read 2 percent before falling asleep. I decided I would buy an apartment in New York and live there part of the year. I was so happy I hardly missed not having the page numbers I had in my non-electronic, so-much-less-portable books.

In the morning I realized that no way did I have the money to live in New York and in any case I had no idea how I would spend my days there if I did.

But with each successive visit the fantasy persisted.

For even if the problem of Time and the problem of the emotional typhoons remained the same when I went north, at least in New York I knew who I was. I was the daughter of Dorothy and Charles, the granddaughter of Mathilda and Jim, the niece of Winnie and Jimmie and Elizabeth, the cousin of Janet and Bonnie. I was the friend of Myra and Rebecca and Dick and Fran and Andrea. I was the little girl who won the spelling bee of P.S. 89 two years running and got a brown-and-gold Paper Mate pen and cried when she lost the district bee because she couldn't spell *antinomianism*. No matter how many other beautiful cities I may visit before I die, the sight of sunlight on the steps of a New York brownstone or the sound of a tugboat's horn in the East River will release a complex of feelings that add up to what I know of happiness.

I went home again and from there rotated out to many cities, many countries. In all of these places, I continued to wander blindly through the day feeling at all times not quite right.

7.

For the fourth time in my life I read Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*, that encyclopedic catalogue of pre-World War I civilization that is about a coming of age. The first time I read it was the summer I turned fifteen years. Although I faithfully turned all 1500 pages, my understanding stopped much sooner, long about page 200 (?) when our anti-hero Hans Castorp consummates his first love with the mysterious and married Claudia Chauchat. Every decade or so, I would go back and re-read the novel, in part to see how far my understanding of life had got in the intervening years. I measured my closeness to the end of my life by how many pages of the great tome now made emotional sense to me.

Each time I found could read farther before losing all understanding. In this new phase of my life, I picked up the book again. As I had hoped or perhaps feared, this time I made it through with comprehension to the end. I thought—perhaps wrongly—I had some understanding even of one section towards the end of the novel that had always puzzled me the most.

This deals with a mysterious Dutchman, Mynheer Pieter Peeperkorn, who appears at the Swiss sanatorium where the novel takes place. He arrives Claudia Chauchat, who has unexpectedly returned after a long absence. Unlike the other inhabitants of the magic mountain who have fascinated Hans Castorp, Peeperkorn is not an ideologue like Herr Settembrini who represents liberalism on the left or Herr Naptha who represents reaction on the Right. Peeperkorn is a returned colonialist who has brought with him his servant from Java. Thought is foreign to him: he is drinks large quantities of alcohol and hosts grand, exhausting parties where all are invited and no cost is spared. Despite Peeperkorn's lack of intellect—or perhaps because of it—both Hans Castorp and Claudia Chauchat admire him tremendously, as Claudia Chauchat. Like the woman at the party, Herr Peeperkorn “just *lives*.”

It soon becomes clear that Peeperkorn is ill, although not with the tuberculosis that afflicts all the other characters. As he feels himself to be failing, he confronts Castorp with his prior relationship with Claudia. The two men seal their friendship with mutual understanding and forgiveness, and Peeperkorn dies.

At fifteen I had thought that I would reach wisdom if I could understand what Mann was doing by putting Herr Peeperkorn at the center of the European stage just at the moment when the argument between the Left and the Right is revealed to be no more than self-serving, mutually unintelligible noise about to metamorphose into the sounds of gunfire. I had read that Peeperkorn was a figure for Bacchus, for Dionysios, a contrast to Hans Castorp's other mentors, who represent the immense and perhaps unfulfillable hopes of the Enlightenment and the reaction against those hopes. Was Mynheer Peeperkorn the Fisher King of myth, the aging ruler with the mysterious wound whom the Hero of legend seeks to save but in this retelling cannot be saved by anyone, not even modern science? And if so, what did this mean—for the novel and for me?

Reading it now I see it as a fable about reconciliation with the father, all the more moving because Hans Castorp's father has died when he was a small child. Guilty of lustful feelings and actions with Claudia Chauchat, Hans Castorp is absolved and forgiven by her last lover, Mynheer Peeperkorn, whom Claudia values more highly than the no-longer-youthful Castorp. An oedipal drama of which the reader was unaware comes to consciousness and reaches a completely satisfying resolution. The thread of his youthful life—his brief encounter with Claudia Chauchat, the woman who has haunted his dreams—is suddenly taken up again, re-spun, wound, and cut off. In a different world than that of a civilization about to implode, Hans Castorp might have now become a happy, or at least peaceful, man. Instead, once he

has been forgiven the one sin common to all, he dies in the universal conflagration of the First World War. One feels grateful he had at least a brief moment of grace.

But what has this to do with me, I wonder? It is not here that the secret of life, of the life cycle is to be found. Unreasonably, I feel cheated.

I try again, I make another interpretation. And then I see it: Peeperkorn *is* the Dionysian life, the life without goals. The self-absorbed, the people-centered life. There's nothing left to learn, so *carpe diem* in your second youth—your second childhood. If I understand *The Magic Mountain* in a new and satisfying way, I too should seize the day. The End must be Near.

I see my friend who had longed for a sense of achievement. She tells me she has decided not to work for Trader Joe's. She has realized she does not want to adjust to someone else's schedule, she likes having her own.

I feel sad.

8.

On the way to an airport the cab driver asks me what I do. I tell him I am a translator.

The cab driver is from Uganda. He speaks several languages and owns a house in Gothenburg Sweden where he used to live. As the cab rolls down Wisconsin Avenue in the pre-dawn darkness, we have a little conversation about Gothenburg Sweden, where I have been, and the importance of languages. When I tell him I am a translator for German, it feels as if I am talking about someone else. Increasingly, I am spending a large share of my life in moving vehicles: taxis, planes, buses, auto rickshaws.

A friend asks me how the translation course is going. I tell her I am thinking of taking a dual certificate in French and German. I tell her the program coordinator has suggested I do this since I know both languages.

"Well, that doesn't make any sense for you," she says. "You're old."

I think of the great nineteenth century German novelist Theodor Fontane, who started writing novels when he retired at 67. I think of the wonderful British novelist Penelope Fitzgerald who began at about the same age. I think of di Lampedusa starting to pen *Il Gattopardo* at age 60 and being told by an editor shortly before he died that it was unpublishable.

But I say nothing; in my heart I agree with my friend.

At Thanksgiving I am at a dinner at another friend's house. I am meeting most of the people there for the first time, as a retired person. Over prosecco and prosciutto my friend asks me how the translation course is coming along. Others become interested; all eyes turn toward me; I am peppered with questions.

As I listen to my answers, I feel strange. Is it really true as I say that I am serious about translation? I don't even like German that much—I'm an autodidact in German, and the course was something to do, something to pass the time. Pressed about my plans, I hear myself explaining that there are some anti-fascist German writers I think should be translated. Who on earth am I talking about? I don't know any anti-fascist writers who haven't been translated except Peter Weiss. I can't imagine that his novels about German émigré communists living in Scandinavia in the 1930s would be publishable in the U.S.

The conversation moves on. The wine glasses are refilled and the second course is brought out. No one seems to have guessed I was lying. I relax a bit.

All my life I have been a very honest person—annoyingly so. Who is this person who makes things up? Who is this person who hides behind a mask that doesn't fit very well?

The German translation class comes to an end. I get an A. I sign up for two more.

9.

In winter, as I am coming out of an unfamiliar building, I miss a step and am suddenly sprawled stomach down on the marble floor. I observe that my left hand is at a 45-degree angle to my wrist.

In physical therapy, I meet a surgeon who has slipped on a boat in the Caribbean and fallen into a glass table. He too has a broken wrist. He too has recently retired.

Physical therapy for hands is done in a relay fashion—we all sit around a table that is a half circle with the therapist in the center. At any given moment one of us is being warmed up; one of us is being worked on; and one of us is recuperating with an ice pack. The therapist is warm-hearted, empathetic, and friendly. I like talking to her. And every day I meet new people—guaranteed sociability!

A new patient appears and the therapist takes her health history.

“What do you do?”

“I'm retired.”

“Congratulations! How do you like it?”

The woman is calm. She looks at the therapist and then at me.

“I hate it. I hate retirement.”

The therapist is nonplussed.

“Why? Are you bored?”

The woman shakes her head.

“Oh no. It’s easy to keep myself intellectually challenged.”

“Then why don’t you like it? You can do all the things you always wanted to do now.”

“You know, people don’t really dislike working. It’s that work feels like a prison because it’s four o’clock and you’d like to stop but you can’t. Or it’s a really nice day and you’d like to take a few hours off but you can’t. If you could just work less, that would be much better. It would be more natural too.”

The arm and shoulder therapist walks by, taking a break, and offers the hand therapist a homemade muffin. The hand therapist takes the muffin. They laugh and joke. They chat about food.

“See—that’s it,” says the woman who hates retirement. “You lose the camaraderie of the workplace. You lose the sense of being needed. You find out you don’t really want to do all the things you always thought you wanted to do. It’s not natural, retirement.”

As I leave, the therapist looks down at a form in her folder.

“I see you’ve had cancer.”

“Oh, just thyroid cancer, in 1994.”

The woman who hates retirement says this as if it was a mild case of flu.

I press the ice pack more closely about my wrist. I recall that long ago one of my plans for retirement was to re-learn how to play the piano-before an arthritic twitch developed in the left little finger.

I wonder if I will ever again play the piano as I did when I was a child.

10.

In India, I am temporarily taken out of my self-pity because I am so terrified by the suffering of ordinary people.

In the Philippines, everyone looks healthy and prosperous to me because I am coming from India. I am interested in how in the Philippines auto rickshaw taxis are built as enclosed sidecar motorcycles whereas in India the motors of the *tuk-tuks* are in the back. My companion is pleased to see me take an interest in these transport modes that he has spent his life studying and promoting.

In Switzerland, I go to the Starbucks to check my e-mail because it is familiar. Also because it is cold and rainy, the young man who takes my order does not look down his nose at my French, and everywhere else is even more expensive.

In Sicily the sun is shining, the air is filled with the scent of lemons and oranges. Tourists from many countries throng the narrow medieval streets questing for eggplant, raisins, salted capers, dried ricotta. The food is better than and different from all other Italian food I have ever eaten in my life—sweet and sour; lighter but so good you eat more of it. I put D.H. Lawrence's *Sun and Sardinia*—free because out of copyright—on my Kindle. We work out a new rhythm for our life together: in the day, we tour about; after I go to sleep, my companion wrestles with his e-mail.

In all these places, there are very few old people. Sometimes you see one shuffling through a courtyard under the blinding midday sun as if momentarily let out. I think of the grandparents in Mann's story "Disorder and Early Sorrow" who lead "the humble and hesitant life of the really old."

Not me—I feel totally relaxed and, yes, happy. Actually, on top of the world! Now I get it! At last, at last I understand why people love retirement!

Within a week of my return, the emotional typhoons return. They have been waiting for me. They have used the time to grow stronger.

11.

My companion agrees to have a minor ankle surgery. It is one of a series he will have that we hope will correct a congenital defect and make it possible for him to walk without pain. But it means that once more we have to step out of the flow of life into the sterile hallways, the hushed corridors.

We are in the waiting area of the hospital—a row of curtained spaces. My companion is looking at me with an expression of happiness and gratitude that I am there. Through his eyes as if behind them, stretching backwards in time, I see the

eyes of my mother and father when they were old as I stood by them too in their many, many hospital beds.

My mother and father, now gone. As I lean over and kiss his forehead, I feel for the first time the physical knowledge that someday I too will disappear. The person I was who tended to them, tended carefully and well if often with anger and reluctance, is reflected now only in him. Everyone else is gone.

There is some chatter behind the curtain in the next stall where others are waiting. I try not to listen. Under the colorless bright lights I press his hand in mine, making sure not to go near the transparent cellphone tape of the I.V. protruding from the warm wrist. The air in the room is cold. Why is it always so cold in hospital rooms?

I remember one Christmas Eve with my mother. As always, she remembered the earlier Christmases. All gone before her, they lived on in her memory, growing more alive each year as she retreated more and more into herself. She and I, who had not liked each other since the moment of my birth, held each other in the shared warmth of the imagined past. I admired how, with the strength of her immense will, she would not let them go. I was grateful.

I feel again the warmth of this shared memory as the nurses walk cheerily by.

And now they have come to wheel my companion away, leaving me with a past that is dissolving and a future I cannot know.

12.

We cobble our lives together from hints, clues, random chance. I sift through everything I see and hear as if waiting for a sign—my own Sybil. I feel like Whitman's spider, launching "forth filament, filament, filament, out of itself; / Ever unreeling them—ever tirelessly speeding them." Do any of my actions make sense now that life has become a netherland that could end tomorrow?

I tell a friend I am thinking of taking the translation certificate in both German and French. The program coordinator has advised me that since I know both languages it would be advantageous to do this. My friend objects. She went to college with future translators who did multiple languages but this, she says, makes no sense for me.

"You're old," she says.

I read an interview in the New York Times with a famous scientist. The scientist explains that the research on which she has built her career came about as an accident, because of events in her first husband's career not her own. It was not the

work she had expected to do but it was there and she did it. Is this how I should view the German translation I do because it can be done in hotel rooms anywhere in the world?

I read a short story by Goethe, “The Lawyer,” in another dual-language book. This story is about a trader in one of the Hanseatic towns in the eighteenth century who has spent his life importing riches from the East. As he grows old, he realizes he has missed all the common joys of human life—a wife, children, a home. With the help of a marriage broker, he marries a charming young woman whom he loves, yet this is not enough. Little by little he becomes unhappy. He falls ill. A thought strikes him:

“Now you learn how foolish it is to exchange an old way of life for a new one in later years. How can we banish from our thoughts, indeed from our limbs, what we have always done and sought? And what is my condition now—I who have until now loved the water like a fish and the free air like a bird—when I’ve locked myself up in a building with all my treasures and the flower of all wealth, a beautiful young wife? Instead of what I had hoped for—to gain contentment from it and to enjoy my estates—it seems to me that I’m losing everything, since I’m acquiring nothing more. It is wrong to regard those people who seek to pile up property on property in restless activity as fools; for activity is happiness; and for the man who can feel the joy of an uninterrupted effort, the wealth which he has acquired is without meaning. I’m becoming wretched from a lack of activity, sick from a lack of movement, and unless I alter my course I shall be near death in a short time.”²

I read this as if it were written only for me: “An old habit is not so easily discarded, and a direction we have assumed early in life can be diverted for a time, no doubt, but never wholly interrupted.”³

The translation—as befits a language learning book—is deliberately literal. How much more moving the original text is. I wonder how many other books I have read in translation that were this wooden. Can I put this one in real English?

“An old habit is not so easily given up, and we can deviate from a direction we took early in life but we cannot take a new one”?

Hmmm. Not much better.

“An old habit is not so easily given up. We can turn from a direction we took early in life for a while but not forever”? “Not for long?” “Not permanently”?

² “The Attorney,” trs. ??? *German Stories: Deutsche Novelle*, ed. Harry Steinhauer, (New York: Bantam, ???), p. 11.

³ *Op. cit.*, p. 11.

Hmmm. Still not up to the original.

“Old habits are not so easily given up. We can deviate from the path we took when we were young but in the end we must return to it”?

A bit better, but still not good enough. It’s fun though, playing with words.

A package comes in the mail with some objects found in the attic of my father’s house—the woman who cared for my father has found them in the crawl space: afghans my mother made; a very small tarnished silver cup with her first name and birth date; a fire-proof box that turns out to contain old letters I have never seen before including letters from my father’s employer from the years before his retirement and carbon copies of his responses.

Behind the formal phrasing, the company president is telling my father he will have to shut down his part of the business and retire. There are negotiations as to terms, which the president leaves maddeningly vague. He promises to come to New York for a discussion. Months pass. He doesn’t come. Finally my father writes: “I feel one must be realistic and face facts and although I have laboured 36 years with this firm, it is with mixed emotions that I entertain the foreseeable future.”

Mixed emotions haunts me. It has the ring of truth.

I read the letters several times before I can bring myself to put them away.

I cannot believe it. My father, who always said he loved retirement. Even him.

13.

And then, without warning, it is spring.

My winter coat hangs heavy on its hook. The pink and white blooms of the tulip poplar next door fly off the gnarled tree one by one and flutter downwards, spreading themselves out on the greening grass in one last moment of glory. The entire neighborhood reeks with the urine-like smell of peat moss. I download a pedometer to my smart phone that records how much I walk each day and where and how many calories are consumed. One of my retired friends uses this when she walks her dog.

Another friend I have not heard from since I retired invites me to dinner. We had worked together on a project that had been of interest to us both and, as happens, became friends. My friend is much younger; nonetheless our lives have much in common—books; a knowledge of several languages and other countries; successful husbands who are often absent on business; a love of travel. I accept her invitation,

and on the same evening my companion arranges to meet a friend of his he has not seen for some time.

The place where we agree to meet is in a downtown city center near where I had owned my first house. One of the many redevelopment plans the community had rejected was an enormous ice-skating rink and entertainment center. Now, under the last rays of the spring sun, a relaxed early evening crowd fills the little square and adjoining pedestrian zone, a mostly young crowd of workers, a pair of grandparents hold a baby aloft, a few older people sit quietly on benches. I am amused to see that a small ice skating rink has been built in front of a new county building. Above, a thermometer reveals the temperature to be 71 degrees Fahrenheit. A little girl in a hot pink playsuit falls forward on the ice, struggles to her feet, and continues a shaky progress about the ring. I think of how from earliest childhood, I have often fallen when distressed. I hold my splinted wrist carefully in my lap.

It is good to see my friend, to exchange stories of our recent lives, and the time goes by quickly. As I leave, I am once more the person she knew: the person of modest success, in the world, a person who can use with confidence phrases like “Next year.” As I walk towards the Metro, I see a cab and decide to hail it as if I were still a person in the world—as, momentarily, I am.

Always before in life I had felt myself—no doubt falsely—little dependent upon the opinions of others. Now in every human contact I take on the image of myself that is reflected back. Tonight I am once more the worker, the policy analyst. Poor fluttering chameleon, who will I be tomorrow?

As I arrive home from dinner with my friend, the house is lit up against the darkness of the suburban street. Inside I wander through the bright empty rooms. Outside in the darkness my companion and his friend have just finished their dinner under the spring night sky.

“Look,” says my companion, pointing over the trees and the roof of the next house.

Two stars twinkle brightly back.

“Venus and Mars so close together. Have we ever seen them like that before?”

I stare at the beautiful bright planets temporarily in the part of the sky that belongs to us.

The night was quiet and the world was calm. Where did that come from, that line from Wallace Stevens?

My companion’s friend looks different, not thinner exactly, but the bones under the skin are making their presence more known.

The friend has just returned from Armenia where he had gone to build a water system. A case of food poisoning that began just before he left turned out to be a life-threatening pancreatitis. For eight weeks he lay in a hospital with tubes draining enzymes that would have otherwise destroyed his internal organs. There was nothing to do but stare at the television, all in Armenian.

“I’m not the same person I was,” he says calmly. “Nothing is in our control.”

He likes the work in Armenia, he tells us. He plans to return, work there for two more years, and then retire.

I am glad to excuse myself from the conversation. It is time for me to attend my weekly on-line lecture on computer-assisted translation tools. With the two courses I am taking in German translation this quarter, the space of the Empty Quarter is for now mostly filled up.

At the kitchen table I stare at the little screen, taking detailed notes rendered completely unnecessary by the fact that the lecture slides will be posted later. I take notes because it helps me to remember something if I write it. In the last few days I have able to type with both hands again, but it is slow going and there is still some pain in the wrist.

Following the lecture exhausts me but I remain determined to learn these programs I will never find intuitive and perhaps never use. It is the same determination I had the last fifteen years at work every time there was yet update, driven by a desire to prove to myself and others that while new software would never be as easy for me as it was to those younger, I could still do it, I could still learn.

I walk back out onto the deck where now I am alone.

The planets, still visible, have moved. The air is warm. Beyond where I can see, in the back garden, things are growing. Somewhere in the darkness a child is playing a piano piece—Beethoven’s “Für Elise”—exactly as I played it when I was a child: very loudly, with enormous self-confidence, with a rhythm as unpredictable as my heart’s.

The ghost of my piano teacher rises within me.

“Count!” says the ghost. “You must count!”

Time, I think against the halting rhythm. *Time*.

I try to empty my mind of all thought. Deep inside me, beyond where I can reach, feelings of rage, of sadness, longing circle about each other like swirling planets, like the Crab Nebula.

14.

The German program holds a competition in literary translation as part of the University arts festival for all those in continuing education programs. I spend a week working hard on my submission even though on the date of the reading I have a frequent flyer ticket to be in Geneva. Between this and the two German courses the days go quickly. There moments when I almost resent all this activity. It feels like, well, work.

When my submission is accepted, I am seized with a determination to go and read. To do this, I will have to change my ticket, pay a ridiculous sum to a midtown hotel, and my companion, whose flights can't be changed, will have to fly to and from New York and Washington twice on the same day just so he can be there. He agrees to do this.

"After all," he says, "you've made sacrifices for my career."

It's hardly a career what I'm doing, but I give him a small nod, then a hug.

As I read from the podium, I feel frightened and triumphant and—since I am decades older than everyone else—ridiculous. Still, the words are beautiful—mine and not mine. The audience seems to be listening, but for me the experience is also painful. Is this what zombies would feel like if they existed?

In the reception that follows one of the professors compliments me on the translation. She tells me she had liked Ingeborg Bachmann when she was young and my translation has given Ingeborg Bachmann back to her. For the first time since retirement, I feel that I have done something useful.

As we walk back to the hotel, I stop in the middle of the street and look up Broadway. Once more I marvel at how beautiful the city is at midnight, the Art Nouveau cornerpieces of the buildings illuminated, the people strolling peacefully through the new pedestrian zone. A ferocious murmuring burbles in my brain of which the only coherent syllable is "Me! Me!" This is so big a feeling it is unbearable. I tamp it down and continue meekly on my way.

After this experience, the emotional typhoons recede. I join the association of literary translators and register for their annual conference. My wrist improves and I think about baking bread.

I have survived the first eight months of retirement.

