Eating Pizza With a Spoon

BY HIS OWN HAND

I need to write about my brother, who died by his own hand less than a month ago in Nashville, where he had gone to be among his particular tribe, the musicians of Bluegrass, after living in self-imposed isolation from me, his other brother, Scott, his best friend, Jeff, and the rest of the family for the last three years, since his stroke, since his diagnosis of diabetes, since his last push to have his magnum opus, "Hem," a 2,090 page book about the life and death of Hemingway accepted by anyone who might help him publish it, and since his conclusion that we had all turned against him. It was a conclusion he had repeatedly reimagined and recreated in encounters throughout his life. He sought rejection, since he believed it was his childhood experience, despite his many successes in life, despite his popularity in his last years of life.

I wrote this, a couple of years ago.

> My Brother Has Had a Stroke
>
> I felt a small panic attack, last night, and today, I feel slightly off-balance. It may have to do with my brother, who's had a small stroke. It's the first time I've felt this way about my brother, My brother is an empty volcano, a prairie in the winter wind, a shiny pair of leather shoes, a greasy shirt, a hunting knife, an old housecat. I love my difficult brother, who may be dying, probably not, but his stroke makes him closer to death in my heart, and that hurts.
>
> I've had trouble loving my brother, but I've had several friends cut from the same cloth. He has the temperament of an artist and an autocrat, opinionated and isolated. He lives alone, sometimes dresses like a cartoon woman, and he's brilliant in his paranoid grandiosity. He's been a musician, a writer, a comedian, and a businessman. Good at them all, he's an original thinker, a social skunk, an obsessive critic, and his support for my creative life has been constant and unwavering, as has mine for his.
>
> He was a lot of fun as a kid, and I enjoyed his forays into the performing arts as much as I have my own. He has often offended women and embarrassed me. He stammered as a kid, it went away, and then it came back, on the phone, talking about his stroke, He says it's stress about trying to break his exceedingly long book, on the life of Ernest Hemingway, into three books.
>
> It may be age, as it is for me, in our parallel lives. I've had two heart attacks, and I've been surprised, waiting for his health problems to catch up to him, knowing how long he's gone without catastrophe, when it sometimes seemed imminent.

> This might be it. He said he felt panic. I know the feeling, when the body acts without consultation or direction to undercut the assurance of one's ongoing existence. He dismisses doctors, as he does lawyers, until now, when he has no choice in the matter. He asks me for any real advice I can give him, based on my own experience, but I don't know about strokes. His blood sugar has been extremely high, he's probably diabetic, and now maybe he can deal with it sensibly, and now maybe he can deal with whatever else shows up.
>
> Staying in his room, ranting about the negative forces at work in the world, has not saved him from these picador swords of death, and now I'm feeling it, too, feeling not fearful for my brother, but broken-hearted in the unhappiness of life and the disjointed way we care for each other.

Before he shot himself, he left all his identification in his van, full to the gills with all his earthly possessions and papers, including his computer. He wrote a letter to the woman he left the van to, bequeathing everything to her. She and her husband sent his computer to the dump, saying it was as full of bedbugs, like his van. His computer contained, as far as I know, all his writings, including the full text of his book. "Hem" was a way for him to speak his love for and air his grievances against everyone he encountered who he thought deserved it, including J. Edgar Hoover, who he believed was responsible for assassinating Hemingway. His last letter to the woman who he said was "the kindest person he'd met in Nashville," ended with the line, "I have found out that Hemingway's death was not a suicide, but mine was." Apparently, the bedbugs in his computer were enough for it to be sent to the dump, and his papers too, which they said were indecipherable. They said they didn't know of his life as a writer, his life as a comedian, or the existence of his family.

I had begun to wonder, with him missing the last two years, what we would eventually do with his effects. Scott and I both feared we might one day hear he was dead in a ditch by the side of the road, hoping that no one else would die with him, Called John in Nashville, called Mark in the family, called Johnnymark on his Facebook page, where he self-identified as female, after years dressing in drag, in Key West and on the many videos he sent me, made of himself talking to the camera, my brother sank deeper and deeper into his personal paranoia and isolation. The last year in Nashville seems to belie that reality, but maybe not. He was much loved in the music scene, where he seemed to be always smiling and where he always spoke positively, always encouraging of other musicians, always seeming to take a backseat to their ambitions and keeping his dreams and ambitions to himself.

I imagine he knew he was going to kill himself, and that was why he was so at peace, or so it seemed to those who met him, who commented on his composure, who admired his acceptance of his own life as a solitary man of individual integrity, living off the grid, refusing to be put up in others' homes, after a lifetime of occasions when he had imposed himself on others, skipping out on rent, showing up on people's doorsteps, in his crisscrossing of the country in search of anyone who ever knew Hemingway in order to interview them for his book.

In Nashville, he slept in a bedbug-infested van, or so I've been told. He left enough money behind that he could have bought another van or had that one fumigated. He could have gotten himself to the doctor, he was on Medicare and Medicaid, but he distrusted all doctors, except for the dentists in Mexico where he went for cheap dental work over the years. The low cost made them seem somehow more trustworthy, in his critical estimation.

Standing in for a Lifetime

To say I loved my brother is an aphorism, standing in for a lifetime. At the moment, I'm heartbroken and angry. The bastard said "fuck you" to us all and ended his life as a denial of his own thesis. He believed Hemingway would never have killed himself. He believed that he himself was not responsible for anything he had ever done, said or felt, that others were responsible for the bad done by or to us all. "There are no criminals, the prisons should be closed," he once told Scott. It was his habit to be outspoken, "to ask," as he said, "the unasked question." He believed the original inhabits of the Hawaiian Islands were peaceful and peace-loving until the white man came and corrupted them. He believe that all children were pure and innocent of any wrongdoing, that no one had ever treated him badly for his stammer as a child, that children are never cruel, that only adults are cruel. He kept a belief that there was nothing wrong with him, until his physical problems became undeniable, and perhaps, unbearable.

He believed his intelligence was superior to everyone, allowing him a benign condescension that others may have taken for a gentle and accepting nature, but his gentleness was also true. I had always thought he was a wounded animal who needed to be accepted, despite his apparent character flaws, and if they weren't flaws, then; aberrations. I once took him with me to two New Years Eve parties in San Francisco, and heard, over the next couple of weeks of the several women he had insulted. A famous writer, a granddaughter of his hero, told me she felt his hatred, and he laughed, saying she'd get over it, as if it were her problem and not his.

Since I have learned so much about life from my younger brother, seeing my own behavior reinforced by his, I've often thought I was like him, and maybe I am, in some critical ways, but it's always been my habit to blame myself for my behavior, just as it's always been his habit to blame others for any criticism of his behavior.

He once hated our mother, telling Scott at one point that both of our parents had sexually abused him as a child, an accusation that flew in the face of every evidence to the contrary, but he had read about child abuse and took it up as an axe to grind, until the time when he took care of our mother for two years before she died. But that didn't become a practice of love, as I had hopefully imagined. I saw it as a kind of self-serving tolerance that allowed him two years of rent-free living with a woman who was finally grateful for his help, something she'd never been before then. I saw the same thing in my six months caring for her, before he returned from another coast-to-coast trip, researching his book. We clashed during that time together in our mother's apartment, when he spoke disparagingly of Hispanic immigrants being naturally untrustworthy. I said to him at the time, "Somebody must have hurt you bad, to have such anger in you." That was within days of his declaring that Hitler's moustache was phony, leading him to suspect Hitler's very existence.

His opinions came out unfiltered, whether he truly believed them or not. He loved to provoke, to the point of being annoying, to the point of being told to shut up, which was what he believed, and said he believed, was the inevitable conclusion of every

relationship he'd ever had or would ever have. He provoked the very thing he predicted would happen, at least until he got to Nashville this last year, where he was said to be unfailingly kind and supportive of everyone, except those "with bad attitudes."

He spoke disparagingly of others as groups, as if in prejudice, but it always came down to some one who had offended him with what he believed was unforgiveable behavior. And who is not guilty of that in this life, if you have some uncrossable line of the unforgiveable in mind? The way he behaved in Nashville was another side of his behavior. He was also one of the lightest, funniest, gentlest men I've ever known. There was a tender heart that never went away, the kind one sees in small children. I thought he had lived to defend and protect that tender heart. As he grew older, he became his own best, most vehement, most dependable advocate. He felt and thought like a victim, and he became his own most reliable victim's advocate.

There was much to admire about my brother, and the one characteristic that comes up in the comments of family and strangers is that he projected a sense of self-acceptance for a life lived by his own direction, a sense that inspired others, including his brothers, his nephews and nieces, cousins and friends. The price to be paid for that is the disdain and dismissal of those who don't feel a desire to live as independently, who don't feel the fear in choosing such a life. The feeling of being treated with disdain and dismissal are felt intuitively by those like my brother, in suspicion of their existence, or in the projection on others, by one's imagination, or by literally sensing the truth.

I said to my brother, forty years ago, driving away from San Francisco State, where we both studied, at different times, for masters degrees in creative writing, as he was garrulously describing the character of a woman passing in her car in another lane for a few seconds, "Mark, you're the only person I know who gives me an indiscriminate running commentary of his every inconsequential prejudice." He showed no response.

The paranoid are often correct, simply because they are suspicious of others, and they can become skilled at describing the actions, feelings, and even the thoughts of others, by keen and accurate analysis, based on years of practice. They can be wrong by the same degree. This is the way psychics develop their skills, by looking at others, reading their reactions, and repeating back to them, or to others, in the certitude of their own "mind-reading," what they see.

My brother was a keen observer of others actions and reactions. He taught me and others his lessons. He told my son, Jaxon, when he was a young boy that the best way to get in the good graces of others was, when you first enter their home, volunteer to wash the dishes. That would gain their gratitude, and their gratitude would pay off in their acceptance. During that time, he had very generously taken Jaxon to Hawaii to visit his uncle Scott and aunt Liz, where he practiced that ingratiating habit. Years later, he visited my son and his sister when they were sharing a condo in Seattle. The first thing he did was wash the dishes, with no soap, only water, and then he gave them a cheap pastry with Cool-Whip, something neither of them was interested in. Jaxon said, "Mark, you don't

need to do this. We're family. You're my uncle. It's not necessary." I don't think Mark believed him.

He would bring gifts to people, cheap items he bought at a yard sale, where he was the king of the bargainers. He told me the best thing to do at any amateur sale was to wait into near the end, then offer a dollar for anything you wanted to buy, no matter how much the seller was asking. Often, they would say, "Oh, just take it. I'm sick of looking at it." They just wanted to be done with the whole enterprise. He would walk off with a waffle iron for a dollar and then present it to whoever's good graces he wanted to court. It always seemed to me that he was without true empathy, but his keen sense of what he observed in others passed for care and caring. He told me, in our cousin's house in Portland, Oregon, when we were in our early twenties that, "Emotions are not part of my vocabulary." I thought it was an exaggeration for effect, but I also thought he was being unusually honest, and I saw that play out over the years.

At our mother's funeral, after Scott and I had spoken with some emotion, he also spoke, choking up, saying how much he loved his mother, and that he was planning to increase his attendance at the Methodist Church we had all attended as young men. I began to think her death had truly devastated him, but he never spoke of it again, and nothing changed in his isolation. He did not return to church. He accosted other guests at the funeral, trying to draw them into his thesis that the family lawyers had killed our parents by their cruel advice.

He told me that the two years with our mother were successful for him because he had learned to ask her questions about the past, so she could tell stories and soak in the warmth of her memories, while he would ignore whatever she said. She praised him for being so attentive to something she cared about in her old age. I thought it was smart advice. I tried it myself and failed. I wanted to engage with her in the present. My fault was not letting her have what little pleasure she took in her memories. I wanted her memories to come during meaningful repartee and not in the mist of nostalgia, where she seemed to disappear from the present, but she deserved that, and maybe his method was helpful to her. All she wanted was to remember the good times of her life.

Maybe his sojourn in Nashville was something of the same. I was, as were others, always hoping that something would crack the shell of his emotional disdain, and in his final year, among the new friends of the music scene in and around the bars of Nashville, it seemed he had broken down the walls.

Johnny Side-Door

There were many good times. I don't want to diminish them in some willful attempt to tell the whole truth. Real lives are messy, no matter what any biographer might say or do about it. My brother's life was messy. His van was a compact version of a hoarder's house, as had been his small rented house in Illinois, several years ago. His landlord told me he found Mark lying on the floor in his tiny house, in a path between the accumulated papers and boxes of presumed valuables, keepsakes, and detritus. If the landlord had not happened upon him, he might have died that day, five years before he finally took his life.

He took his life. He ended his life. He wrote the final chapter. "He composed the final scenes of his movie," as one of his friends said. He walked out of the bar where he had become the side-door man, monitoring who got in and who didn't. He walked across the parking lot where he left his van, crossed a street in front of a large apartment complex, sat down on some steps, raised two guns to his head and neck, and pulled the triggers to both at the same time, something the coroner said she has never seen, in sixteen years on the job. Scott and I were surprised to learn that he even owned a gun.

My brother was born John Mark Brooks, on March 20th, 1945, just as the second war was coming to an end. Named after our father, he was called Mark, since our father was John, but over the last ten years or more, he chose to be called John, as a guide in the Hemingway House in Key West, and in Nashville. His Facebook page lists him as Johnnymark and as female. It was difficult to know what to call him. His explanation for his wearing drag, including fake titties, as he called them, no wig and little makeup, was because, he said, he had given up on women and decided to create his own woman, a woman he could love, as he pleased, when he pleased. He said she was the ideal woman who would never criticize him. It all seemed like a charade, and yet when he showed up in drag at my son and daughter's house in Seattle, twenty years ago, they said it was the happiest they'd ever seen him, and they were happy for him. He asked me, when we were with our mother in Moline, ten years ago, if I wanted to feel his breasts. I said I did not and backed away.

A girlfriend of mine, 25 years ago, described him to his face without rancor as the angriest man she had ever met. He scoffed and said she was wrong. He did not accept that anger was any part of his character. Even in the pages of his writing, he accused himself of being angry and then denied it. He said anger was a terrible thing, but anger was the substratum of his behavior toward many and with some. He seemed to be at peace with himself, at times, and the attempt to describe him as one way or the other has always been difficult to sustain. As kids, we laughed and played with great, nearly unending humor. He was a funny guy. He became a comedian, after all, for a time. And he also stopped laughing, for a long time. Those who knew him this last year comment again and again how unfailingly good-humored and funny he was, just before he shot himself to death.

What do I call him? She? My brother? My brother/sister? John, as he was recently known? Johnnymark, as he asked others to call him? Mark, as he was know as for most of his life? I've tried them all. Does he have the right to tell me what I should call him? At this point? As much as we tell ourselves not to speak ill of the dead, are they in charge of our ongoing reality. Is death so final that it demands we suspend judgment? What about suspending forgiveness? What's in a name, anyway? A sibling who has died is still one who died.

On the way home from Sunday evening Methodist Youth Fellowship, the assistant pastor asked us to remind him what our names were. He repeated my name, but he couldn't get Mark's name straight. As a fourteen-year-old, Mark's accent came out like he was from New England, so the pastor tried to repeat what he thought he had heard. "Mawk?" he said. "Mug?" he said.

I could call my brother Mug. Would that be disrespectful of one of the least respectful human beings I have ever met? I will call him Mark, since that is what I'm used to calling him, and that's what everyone in the family called him. Mark is a name that seems to me somewhere between the masculine and the feminine, where he was happiest being. Johnnymark sounds like a nom de plume, a show name. John seems to belong to our father. Maybe I'll change my mind later, as Mark did so often with the truth. I want to call him John, since that's the last name he used, but he was also hiding Johnnymark from that same crowd. He used John a lot in the last ten or twenty years, and I want to respect that. So, Mug it is. Just kidding.

The Storyteller

My brother was such a good storyteller, I remembered several stories he told as if they were true. He never disabused me of a story, until he finally admitted one story was fabricated out of a lesser incident. He was riding his bike downtown in Galesburg, Illinois, where he was in school at Knox College, where his love of Hemingway was born and nurtured by the writers that taught him there, Donald Westlake among them. He was riding along, one sunny day, carrying his laundry downtown to the Laundromat when he passed the open door to a small, brick church. He parked his bike by the front steps, climbed to the sanctuary, put his bag down in the last pew and watched and listened to a traveling preacher invite the gathered to come forward and give their lives to the lord.

Mark decided to give it a try and walked to the rail at the front, knelt, and when the preacher came around, asking him if he was prepared to give his life to Jesus, Mark asked, innocently, "How much does it cost?" The preacher replied, "Why, nothing, my son. It cost nothing, to save your soul." Mark replied that he would think about it and returned to his seat. As the small group of congregants was making their way out, Mark stopped to chat with the preacher, who asked him where he was from. Mark replied that he was from Prairie City, Iowa. The preacher said he knew the town and asked him who his pastor was. Mark said it was Pastor Robert Cambridge, or some such name. "Why I know the man," the preacher said, and they looked into each other's eyes, both recognizing that the other was lying. The preacher asked Mark what he was doing that day? Mark said he was off to Peoria, at least an hour away by car. He bid the man farewell, got on his bike, threw his laundry bag over his shoulder, and rode off down the street.

I loved that story and I believed it for years, until I found out he had embellished it from a simple incident of passing a church. I was never sure, after that, which stories of his were true and which weren't. He was impulsive and brilliant. When we were boys at Disneyland, I was 17, he was 14. One evening, we walked past an outdoor pavilion, the Carnation Plaza Gardens, at the end of Main Street, where Harry James and his Orchestra were playing. Mark was interested in seeing Buddy Rich, the drummer, up close, since he was a budding drummer at the time.

The pavilion was crowded. There were no good seats available. We looked at the decorative trellises above the crowd and thought about climbing up, but they were too flimsy. Then he said, "Do what I do." He went across the path to an empty pavilion and picked up a folding chair. I did the same. He walked to the back of the crowd, hoisted the chair above his head and said, in a loud and authoritative voice, "Coming through! Coming through!" and the crowd parted, all the way to the front of the assembly, where we put our chairs down, took our seats, put our feet up on the bandstand, and watched Buddy Rich, not ten feet in front of us for the rest of the performance. It was masterful. I was in awe of his bravado and his inventiveness.

At a packed performance at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in the 70s, it occurred to me that "someone" gets in free, at every show, no matter what it is. That

someone was my brother. He told me of waiting by the musicians' entrance to many performances and walking in with aplomb. He went to see Dolly Parton by simply going backstage with an air of privilege. I found it difficult to emulate him. I always felt like a thief. He never did. Jeff Miller, his best friend from Junior High School, until a couple of years before he died, told me that they regularly got into the Field House in Moline, where all the basketball games were played, for free, by sneaking in, even though they had tickets that would have allowed them to walk in the front door like honest, paying customers.

And he was cheap. He did not like to pay for anything. After our mother died, in '04, I discovered when we were negotiating the split of her meager estate, that he had at least $100,000 in savings, and now, nine years later, after not working that entire time, living on Social Security only the last three years, he still had $20,000 left. He was frugal, to put it mildly. I saw him, years ago, wear the same shirt for two weeks, thinking it could probably stand on its own beside his bed. When I went to visit him in his apartment in San Francisco in the 70s, I noticed a half-eaten peanut butter and jelly sandwich beside his typewriter. I went back to visit him, months later and noticed the same sandwich in the same spot, now petrified over time. I said nothing. It was his way.

During the six months I spelled him, taking care of mother, he wrote occasional emails from the road, describing his diet, often from the dollar menu at Wendy's, often only a baked potato and chili. Two bucks. Or going a week without solid food. His choice. He could have afforded it, and mother would have sent him money for food, if he asked. She was distressed by his eating habits. He was fond of enemas and diuretics to make him slimmer, so he could show off his shaved legs to better advantage. He had lovely legs. Standing 6'2", slim, with good skin, he was an attractive older woman, except for his big nose and old man face. He looked like a geezer in drag.

Mark was a decent athlete, playing basketball in junior high and high school, to no particular distinction. When he was a sophomore, after the junior varsity game was over, we sat together as the varsity was going through their drills. The Field House in Moline was where Chuck Berry had performed, but it was known as a basketball mecca when Illinois basketball was king and Moline was a powerhouse. The team was called the Maroons, after the team colors, maroon and white. When one of the varsity players repeatedly missed his layups, Mark led me in a cheer, "WHAT A MAROON!" Those just taking their seats for the upcoming game looked at us in wonder. Why were we cheering for a poor performance? Little did they know that "What a maroon!" was what Bugs Bunny called anyone he disparaged, meaning, "What a moron!" We loved our private joke, even if no one else did.

One afternoon, in summer, we were walking alongside the road between Moline and Rock Island, going toward Blackhawk Park on the banks of the Rock River. As we walked the side of the two-lane blacktop, cars passing closeby in both lanes, we pretended to turn to each other and fight. We struck each other in the jaw at the same moment, stuntman style, without actually striking a blow, and we both fell to the ground at the same time. We loved that charade too, even if no one else got the humor of it.

One summer's day, we had been assigned the task of raking the leaves around our parents' house. Incidentally, I never thought of any home of theirs as my house, and I bet my brother felt the same way. We stopped our work to imitate Jonathan Winters, one of our heroes, who did the same thing, trying to come up with improvisational comedy with a stick, trying to be funny, making up different scenarios, tossing the rake, back and forth between us, seeing what funny stuff we could come up with. It was a friendly competition. Comedy was king, not competition. Our father came out the door and told us to get back to work, which we did, but it was great fun playing with my brother. Our father was a pretty funny guy, too, when he wasn't burdened with the responsibilities of being a husband and parent. He was bigger than both of us, and we did what he said, when we weren't preoccupied with our own delight.

The Funny One

I realize, as I tell these stories, that I am not just blowing smoke to say my brother was wonderful, even if I want to call him a wonderful asshole. One of the difficulties of living with Mark was his change in behavior over the years. But I get it, he was funny as a kid, slightly goofy looking, the middle child, he stammered, and I was the smart older brother who did well in school. He was expected to be the same, and when he didn't seem to be the same, as smart as he was, his identity became decided, by our parents, by his brothers, and by his friends. He was the funny one. "Tell us one of your funny stories," mother said to him as we sat around the table, the year our father had his "phony brain tumor," as Mark called it.

It was '74, Dad was 62, and he had passed out, driving off the road without realizing it, into the ditch, on his rounds between stores, running the franchise, Tastee Freez of North-Central Illinois and Southeastern Iowa. I was in San Francisco, at the time, and Mark was in Moline, driving the truck, delivering milk and supplies to the stores in the territory. After that terrifying episode, Dad went to the Mayo Clinic where they showed Mother, Mark, and me a cloud formation X-ray of his brain, pointed to the middle of the cloud and said there was a inoperable tumor there, and he had six months to live. Mark scoffed. He said it was a phony brain tumor, but I took it seriously. Mother said we would never say a thing about it, and that we would go on as always. I said I didn't live like that, but she said he was her husband, and that was that. They put a tube in Dad's skull and drained off the excess fluid. I went home to Moline, thinking he was going to die. Two weeks later, they all came home and mother said it was a mistake, the tumor had disappeared. Mark had said, all along, it was phony, another reason not to trust doctors.

With a bandage around his head, Dad took me and Mark out for a drive, then to a dealership, trying to buy me a car, which I refused. He was driving wildly, recklessly. I demanded he let me out, at a bar, close enough to the house so I could walk home. Later, I realized he wasn't driving badly, he was driving with reckless abandon, like a teenager who was feeling invincible, It seemed to me to be a second childhood, a midlife crisis. Dad lived 18 more years, until he died, suffering from emphysema, all the while denying that smoking cigarettes all his adult life had anything to do with it. On a walking respirator for a year, he told mother he couldn't do it any more, secretly called his sister to come to him, and died soon thereafter. I admired his will to die. I have to feel something of the same for my brother. Our father died when he'd had enough. I believe my brother did the same thing.

It occurs to me now that when he died, Ernest Hemingway was the same age as Dad was when Dad went to the Mayo Clinic. Hem's last stop before the final gunshot was the Mayo Clinic. Mark said in his book that they lied to get Hem on the plane to go to the Mayo clinic and then gave him shock treatments. Hem tried to jump out of the small plane, flying back to Ketchum, Idaho, where he was to meet his mythological end, facing down either his own double-barreled shotgun or, according to Mark, two of J. Edgar Hoover's assassins. Even admitting that others in Hemingway's family had killed themselves, that Ernest had often spoken of suicide, even after accepting that Hem had

tried to jump out of a plane on the way home, it was gospel to Mark that Hemingway did not and could not have killed himself. He could not imagine that anyone would or could think such a thing; it was always the result of some outside act, someone else was responsible. The bad in the world was caused by willful acts by nefarious sources. Not evil, as in the sense of Satan, but by human will and human hand.

In anyone's biography, there is a reader fallacy, that is, the temptation of the reader to supply some part of the character's character with some part of the reader's character. There is also a writer fallacy, the temptation of the author to augment the character of the character with some part of his own character. I've always been tempted to do that with my brother. As much as I've had to admit I am somewhat like my brother in his flaws, I've always imagined he was somewhat like me in our virtues. I wanted him to be as interested in introspection as I am, and he was not. I knew I was as capable of being judgmental as he was, a tradition perhaps. The Brooks family members have what I have called the voice of authority, that way of speaking that inclines others to listen to their judgment as if it's reliable and true, even when it's merely speculation or just plain wrong.

There is also, in the family, a kind of anger in the voice that I took for hostility, until I heard my mother's voice when she was about to die, with the same anger in it. I listened to her, until I realized she was angry with herself. She wanted to get it right, whatever it was, and she was angry when that was difficult or impossible. Mother laughed at us, when she did not understand who we were or what we were doing or saying. She laughed at my paintings. She laughed at Mark's stories, less at the humor in them, I think, than in a way that protected her from how serious he truly was.
During that '74 visit of my father's "phony" brain tumor, my parents, through my father, invited me to join the family business in an executive capacity. It would have made me financially secure, but I said, "You know I have no interest in business," and then I said, pointing at Mark, "There's the guy you should hire. Hire him. He wants the job. I don't." They did hire him, and he worked several years, measurably increasing their income, overseeing the sale and establishment of several new stores, but they told me they knew all along he would be a failure. They knew it from the start. It wasn't true, but they made it true. I was stunned, and I told them so, but the truth was true for them, no matter what I thought or said.

Mark knew that you don't make big money selling ice cream, you make big money selling ice cream stores, but Mother, especially, believed that working meant working eight hours a day in unflagging loyalty, not "sitting around thinking up ways to make money." Mark was right, and they were wrong, but he was wrong, and they were right. They finally said to him that he could work for free if he wanted, but they weren't going to pay him. That was when he took off for Key West and became a guide in the Hemingway house. Still, he didn't blame them for the failure of their business, he blamed the lawyers.

He learned a lot about business in a very short time. The family lawyer said that Mark had learned the law faster than anyone he'd ever seen. During that time, Mark wrote a book about economics, "The Maximum Economy," or Max-Econ." after reading every

book on economics ever written. He said. That seems like an exaggeration, even as I say it, but I believe it to be true, within reason. He probably read every decent book he could get his hands on. He told me a few things about the fast food business. The furniture in such places is designed to be comfortable for fifteen minutes, just long enough for customers to eat, become uncomfortable, and leave. He said, "Fast food is not fast serve, it's fast eat." Turnover is the key.

Mother had wanted her own store, until dad finally relented and set her up to run "The Big T Family Restaurant" in the Southpark Mall. Mark asked her what her P&L Statement was. What was her profit and loss inventory? She laughed at him. Work hard and everything will work out. She didn't know about and didn't care about P&L Statements. They had borrowed $200,000 to set up and run the store and they couldn't pay off the loan. At the end, they owed $80,000. They should have declared bankruptcy but Dad was a proud, conservative Okie who would not declare bankruptcy, even if meant his ruin. Mark said the lawyers had told them that if they didn't turn over the deed to their house, they would be thrown in jail. I didn't believe that for a minute. Mother and Dad lived for ten more years, comfortable in an apartment that was a miniature version of their last home, barely a few stones throw from the apartment where they were first married. And they said that "we" didn't know the meaning of a dollar.

Still, they didn't go to debtor prison, and mother continued to drive a Cadillac and lunch at the country club, ten years after dad died. She was a dominating force in all our lives, maybe especially Mark's. We seemed to have had such a different experience with her. In my baby book, it's revealed that mother thought I would be the second coming, I suppose, bringing her glory and a life of satisfaction. Those positive expectations weighed on me for many years. On the other hand, Mark was expected to fail. Those expectations weighed on him. We were both good at many things, but neither of us was able to garner her approval. She finally praised him for listening to her stories and me for getting sober.

While he was working in the business, Mark fell in love with one of the girls at the Big T. She did not return his advances. Mark's relationships with women were fraught with fantasy and expectation, of the black and white variety. He once told me, "There's only one question a man can ask a woman, 'Will you marry me?' and only one answer, 'Yes.' Everything else is manipulation and aggression." He said that every approach to a woman was a form of rape. When he was with his one great love, Jean, the waitress at Paul's Saloon, in San Francisco, where he played bass with the Styx River Ferry, the most popular Bluegrass band in the Bay Area, he told me that the only true lovemaking between a man and a woman was the complete and simultaneous absorption of the one into the other. I don't believe he ever experienced that. He took another love of his, a married woman, to the Beanblossom Bluegrass Festival in Indiana. One morning, he saw her husband walking up the dirt road toward him, and Mark thought to himself, "I'm a dead man. He's going to shoot me." He waited, as the man walked up to him, tearfully, and said, "Be good to her." That relationship didn't last much longer after that.

When Mark was in 9th grade, he had a crush on a girl named Pam. He tried calling her on the phone, but his stammer prevented it. Stammering is different from stuttering. Stutterers begin to say a name like Pam, "P-P-P-P…." but stammerers can't get the word out, so their beginnings are often silent. Her father answered the phone, "Yellow." and Mark couldn't get past a nearly silent P. His lips were blocked from opening into the rest of the word. "Who's there? Who's there. I guess no one's there," the man said and hung up. So Mark devised a way to get her name out. He changed her name. Sibilants were easier, so he called her up again. Her father answered, "Yellow." This time, Mark said, "Is Spam there?" blurring the "is" and the "SPam: together. "Yeah, sure," her father said and yelled out, "Pam!" Mark had to change her name to Spam to make the call. He had named his new flame Spam.

Mark got good at finding different ways of saying what he wanted to say. That's not the same as saying what you want to say. He learned that language was not accessible or reliable for him. Language is the way we tell the world who we are, and he couldn't get the words out. When your language is on shaky ground, I suspect it puts everything on shaky ground. I may be reasoning backwards, but Mark came to distrust everyone and everything. Except himself. That was not possible.

Our parents sent him for summer school at the University of Iowa for speech training. Mark told me many times that there was nothing wrong with him, nothing that needed training, but he went. He told me that when it came time for them to pick him up, they were the last parents to arrive, leading him to think that he was abandoned. In his defense, I picked up his idea and thought the same thing. I often said that if our parents were cats and we were kittens, he would have been the runt of the litter and Mother would have killed him. I saw a cat do that to a kitten I managed to save from her determined ways. The mother was disdainful of that kitten ever after. I thought our mother was like that. I wanted to believe my brother, and when I began to hear of his lies and exaggerations, I slowly began to see the picture as more complex.

Still, she was not a doting mother to any of us. She was a stoic Swede who told me she took up wife and mother as a profession, learning everything she could about how to do it right. She learned well, and she did well. Having an A+ mother is not the same as having a loving mother, but it was good enough for a long time. I thought we grew up in a "Leave it to Beaver" household. I was Wally and Mark was Eddie Haskell. Scott was the Beav. When I was a young poet, I heard Cyril Connolly say that poetry was born from an active imagination and a rotten childhood. I thought I couldn't possibly be a poet. Mark called the house we grew up in, "The Mausoleum." There was no real interaction between parents and children, but when we were kids, it was idyllic. We had fun, and we did all kinds of things, especially in McCook, Nebraska where we spent our Wonder Years. Dad was on the road five days a week, but when he came home, the place livened up a lot. Our parents were decent people who did what they thought was best. I never thought Mark was hated or rejected as a kid, and finally, I reluctantly considered the possibility that some element was missing from his psyche.

To explain him to my own mind, I wanted to make him normal, and I wanted to make him crazy. He told stories on himself that made me nervous. He said he'd broken into the house of a girl he admired and watched her parents sleeping, then watched her sleeping, then slipped out and came home. I don't know if anything like that ever really happened, but since he described it as something he'd done, it was enough to make me nervous. Scott and I feared that he might be one of those people who could slip off track at some point and kill someone. He did. He killed himself.

Hoping to help him get along better with girls, I told him not to expect living with them to fulfill his life, but to "become the man you imagine you'll become in their presence, and they will recognize you." Something like that may have happened this last year in Nashville. The Medical Examiner said she had seen it happen, that people who've decided to kill themselves, become more at peace with themselves than ever before. But of course, whatever was troubling him was not relieved by such a leap of consciousness. One can be at peace with oneself, and still not be at peace with one's life in the world.

The same Medical Examiner said she had seen bed bugs on Mark but she assumed they were from the scene, not from the van he'd been living in night after night, for years. However, physical pain can wipe out whatever serenity one may feel, no matter how genuine that serenity might be. Mark always had an air of serenity about him, even when nobody else believed it. Was it a pose? I suspect he believed it of himself. He was composed. Hemingway's characters aspired to live in a kind of self-composure. "Living well is the best revenge," his generation said. I think Hemingway was a kind of template for Mark. His mastery of Hemingway's biography grounded him. It was the one thing he did consistently for nearly fifty years, counting the time back to his college years when the attachment began.

What One Has Difficulty Feeling

I woke up this morning feeling afraid, not because there is anything to be afraid of, but because I thought of going to Nashville to stand at my brother's grave and say something. I'm good at speaking in front of people, but this is different. I feel so much about his death, his life, and my relationship with him. We spent hours together, many times, over many years, but there was never a true or lasting sense of intimacy. A glimpse here and there, we were two intelligent people who appreciated each other's company. That sort of time spent together can seem enriching and satisfying, but there was always something missing, and I could not create it. I thought it was my responsibility as the older brother, as the one who thought about such things, to see it happen, but I couldn't do it.

I had a similar relationship with our mother. It's a bit like trying to get someone to love you who doesn't love you, but thinks well of you, just the same. It's OK, but it aint love, baby. I could sense my father's heart, and I can sense my brother Scott's, but I couldn't feel Mark. This is a pattern I have repeated throughout my life. Mark's pattern was to repeat rejection, no matter how well he was received. He told me so. "Everybody wants to tell me to shut up. I know it's going to happen." I avoided doing that with him, but my tolerant avoidance didn't please him. Finally, nine years ago, I told him to shut up, and he smiled. He told me a story of visiting our parents when they were in their sixties, and mother said, "You hate me don't you," and for the first time in his life, up to that time, he looked at her and said, "Yes." They looked at each other and they both smiled. Dad bent over the sink and cried.

Going to Nashville to speak about my brother brings this pain to the surface, this sadness, this emptiness, this lack of control, this vulnerability. I know I feel fear whenever I'm about to do something I don't know how to do. That's a good thing, though. It's bread to a poet. Mallarme said writing poetry is "to say what one has difficulty feeling."

Born on the Mississippi

Mark was born in Moline, Illinois, on the bluffs of the Mississippi River, in the Lutheran Hospital, where I had been born, three years before. We soon moved to Denver, Colorado, where Dad was in training for Minneapolis-Moline, a tractor company. Moline, at that time, was the farm implement capitol of the world, with factories of several companies lining the river, John Deere, J.I. Case, International Harvester, Allis-Chalmers, Minneapolis-Moline, etc. Our grandfathers both worked in the factories, after trying different occupations. The Depression ended their ambitions and drove them into the factories. Mother's father had tried farming in Texas and Oklahoma after emigrating from Sweden. Dad's father had been a railroad agent in Texas, and a small business owner in Oklahoma, before they moved north to join the rest of the Brooks clan.

Over the years, Mark sought out relatives in Texas and across the country, but few of them were as interested in the family past as he was. Mark dug up a photo of the Swiss-French General Eugene Voirol, whose name is carved on the Arc de Triomphe, after serving briefly as the overseer of Algeria. I suspected he probably was a hard ass who carved his own name on the monument. Mark comes from a family with several triumphant members. Mother's brother Harry Axene took Dairy Queen from four small stores to international success and friendship with John Wayne and Ronald Reagan.

Cousin Dean Axene was the commander of the Thresher, the nuclear sub that went down with all hands on board. Fortunately, Dean had been transferred, two weeks earlier. Great grandfather Montgomery Randolph Brooks drove a twenty-mule team from Dallas to Denver. Nephew Brandon was the goalie on two Olympic water polo teams. Mark was an ardent follower of Brandon's career, showing up at meets to see his nephew play. Mark lived with Scott and Liz and their three kids, Brandon, Jessica, and Nicole in Honolulu, off and on over the years. All three of us drove the company truck at various times. I was told that Mark was the favorite among the store owners. I suspect he was popular for the same reason that he was popular in Nashville. Whether real or feigned, he was interested in people, and he was a good listener.

When Scott was getting married, his friends held a bachelor party for him. One of the friends hired a stripper. As the girl danced in the middle of a suburban living room in Moline, Mark found a tensor lamp, stood on a corner table, and used it as a spotlight. He kept out of the way and enjoyed himself. He was not confrontational, as I was, and yet he managed to offend people in his own way. He told me that, once, he invited the receptionist from the local YMCA out for dinner and cocktails. Sitting in the lounge of a local restaurant, he regaled her with stories, until she tugged on his sleeve and said she was bored, she wanted to go home. If she didn't want to listen to him, he said, she should simply have shut up and thought of something else. Mark was a good listener, but he didn't believe anyone else was. He didn't think there was any fault on his part. When people disagreed with him, it was all about them, wanting him to shut up.

Mark was an original thinker who had learned to take a backseat to others, and when he asserted himself, he was not recognized at the level he thought he deserved. I finally

thought that about him and began to probe his interests, but he didn't think my interest was genuine, and often, his talk would become solipsistic, self-involved. He was good at listening to others and talking to himself. Of course, that's not a bad thing for a writer, but as a comedian, it can be problematic. He told me that his problem as a comedian was that he didn't have a high LQ. He said he had a low LQ. All the popular comedians had a high LQ: likability quotient.

Reverie may be a family ditch, into which we occasionally drive our respective cars, but added to Mark's belief in being rejected, it was an especially deep ditch. I took Mark to an open AA meeting in Seattle, and he sat with his eyes down, in apparent contemplation the entire meeting, taking notes. I've never seen anyone do that. It was inappropriate, but it also struck me that he didn't care that it was inappropriate. He told me he thought it strange how people prayed to get God's attention on themselves. I replied, without ever having thought of it before, that people didn't pray to get God's attention on them, they prayed to get their attention on God. That thought changed my experience with prayer from then on, but he may have been more right than I was. He also said that we weren't, as the Christians say, all the same in God's eyes, we were identical. That idea stayed with me. Mark was a provocative thinker, and when he was heard, he was at peace, but when he thought he was not heard, he became angry and condescending toward the listener. I believed he was a bright and tender soul in a brutal world, and which of us is not?

Without any Irritable Reaching

I fear my stories of the unhappy side of my brother will doom the story of his life. This is the problem with my brother, the problem we all had. We loved him and we still love him, but we can't untangle the enigma, the conundrum, the riddle, the puzzle of who he was and how we should accept him and live with him, even now in his death. The poet John Keats, in describing Shakespeare's character, said that what went to make him a great man was his ability "to live in mystery, uncertainty, and doubt, without any irritable reaching after fact or reason." I seek to tell Mark's story without any "irritable" reaching after fact or reason.

He himself sought and concluded mystery after mystery with facts and reasons of his own making, but that habit of his doesn't apply to his life or his death. As certain as he was that Hoover had killed Hemingway, and maybe he did, it was preceded and followed by several other conclusions he made, in the mode of a lifetime of finding fault, such as with the Warren Commission conclusion that Oswald killed Kennedy. He thought otherwise. The 9/11 explanation was also in error. Doctors were responsible for illness. Lawyers killed our parents. Still, Mark's life has so many points of influence about what went to make up his life, I can't reach a definitive conclusion, and I think it's best that way. He was a bit of a mystery, and I'm fine with that. I have to be fine with that. Some things are best left unanswered. Some things, on the other hand, ought to be revealed as soon as they are known.

When he was living at the Swiss Embassy in San Francisco, I went to visit him one night. On the ground floor of a large house on California, the embassy was a small office with a backroom Mark had rented. He was allowed to be there from 5PM to 8AM, but not during business hours. I bet the rent was cheap, but it was a nice place to hang out and drink some of the whiskey I brought with me. We drank and smoked and decided to head out to Henry Africa's, a trendy new fern bar on Van Ness. We had a fun night together, and I dropped him off at the embassy on my way back to my place on Carl Street. Weeks later, he showed me a short story he'd written about that night out with his brother, who, the story revealed, had terrible, awful, stinky, bad breath, the sort that drove people away, turned their heads, and changed the subject. I was pissed that he hadn't told me about my breath when we left the embassy, but he thought it made for a more interesting evening, and obviously, for a more interesting story.

My Remarkable Brother

I once heard Mark tell a story about himself, something I knew had happened to me. I imagined telling his stories as if they were my stories, but I have a harder time lying. If I tell a story that isn't true, a joke, or an aside I've just made up, I'm compelled to confess it. "I made that up. That's not true." Mark had no such compunctions, but he was not a hurtful liar, not even a particular self-serving liar, he just loved a good story. This may explain why I became a poet, and he became a fiction writer. He might even, on occasion, abandon his conspiracy theories, if he was pressed, long and hard enough. Scott was one of the few people who could challenge him, and he did, until, he told me, Mark would smile, and take up another conspiracy theory, as if it they were interchangeable.

What story will I tell at the grave of my brother? What do you say about a brother who died? By his own hand? A brother with whom you not been in contact for nearly three years? A brother who lived five hour away and was always on the road, but never came to visit, never said where he was? He kept everyone at arms length, including his brothers. As this reality begins to sink in, it conjures thoughts of my own death, and thoughts of my inadequacy. What could I have done? Why didn't he talk to me? I know answers, but none of them is the answer.

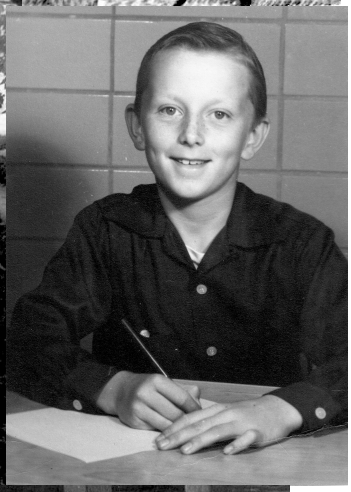
What do I feel about someone who was liked and loved, but with whom I had such a great time and such a hard time? Talking to someone else, a few days ago, I called my brother *that wonderful asshole*. He was a little bit wonderful and a little bit of an asshole, but he wasn't the epitome of either. He was my brother. In my heart, there's no problem, but in my thoughts and feelings, complexity reigns. I need to go through this time. I want to have a drink, I want to eat sweets, I want to go away from this complexity, but there's no escape, and there's an innate refusal to escape.

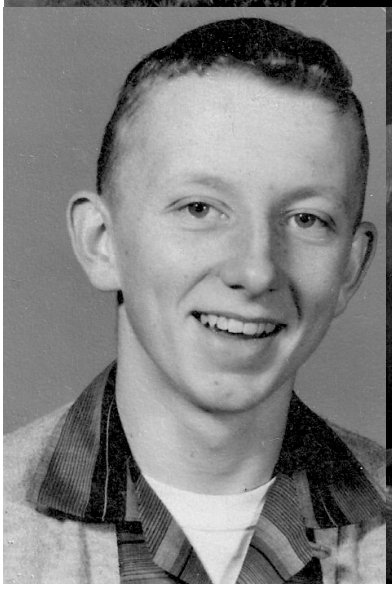
The Watermelon Eaters

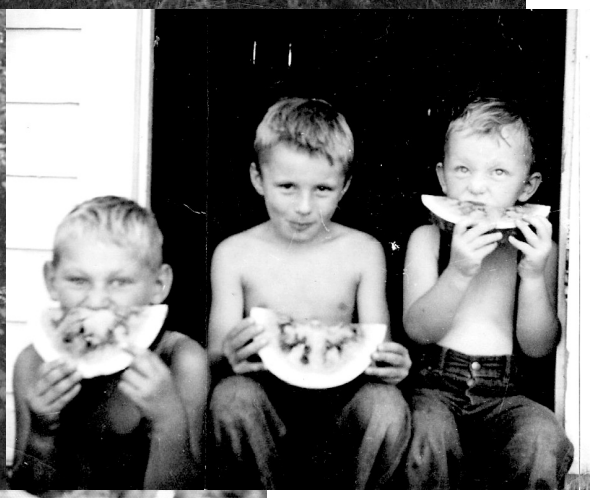
I posted this on Facebook and the response was touching, and tender.

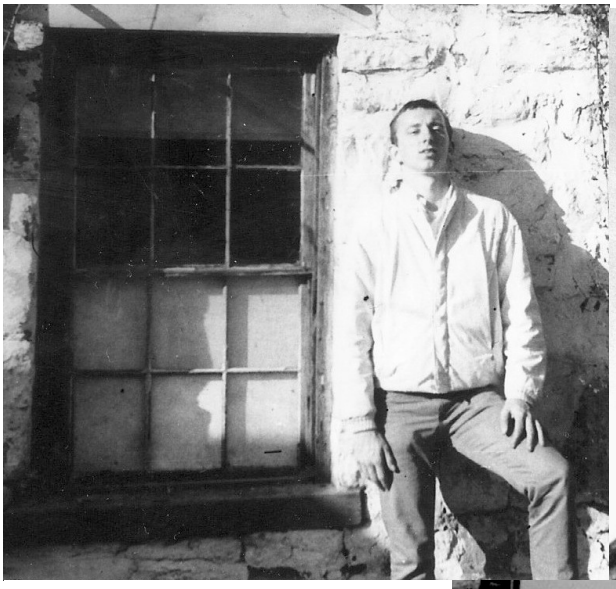
My brother, John Mark Brooks, will be buried on Friday, 8/23/13, at 9AM, at Hills of Calvary Memorial Park Cemetery, 4039 Jordonia Station Road, in Nashville, TN.

Here is a photo of me and my little brother, Markie Maypo, champion watermelon eater. I loved that guy. Every close male friend I ever had was, in some way, like my brother, John Mark. Goodbye, brother, you will never leave my heart.









Learning How to Skip

We will drive to Nashville, tomorrow, Thursday, go to the club where he hung out, that night, and attend the ceremony on Friday. The woman who received his belongings asked if it would be OK to have some bluegrass musicians play something, and I said it would be wonderful.

Something happened today that might clear my brain up a bit. I heard from the Medical Examiner, with whom I've had a 32-email exchange, that the detective on the case said that everything Mark left was a gift, including the money he left behind. If there's no just cause for probate or even to challenge that gift, I'm free of it, and I'm free of thinking about it. Our family had a strange relationship with money. Prosperity came to my parents on the death of my uncle Everett in a car crash, which I have thought had the earmarks of a suicide. I wrote this poem about Uncle Everett's death.

> Between Small Dark Towns in Illinois
>
> In a familiar room, tired of its familiarity, I think
> to that part of the room that has no known familiarity,
>
> More familiar than anything I know, it takes the place
> of everything that takes place within it,
>
> My uncle came back from the slaughter of war,
> a changed man, never fully present in his life again,
> until he was dead in a crash,
>
> He drove his car off a bridge, flew a hundred feet
> in the air, and landed in the night, against a riverbank,
> between small dark towns in Illinois,
>
> He was in the ice cream business, engaged to someone
> who loved him, but life had ended around him, so many
> times, in such hurtful ways, he couldn't be free of it,
>
> It's not hard to believe his death was not accidental,
> that he drove his car into a room where he was
> finally happy to be alive.

We boys never really knew our Uncle Everett, even though he was our mother's closest brother. He came home from the war, after we moved to Denver and then to McCook, Nebraska, but we saw him in the summer and at Christmas, for several years. He was another taciturn Swede. After his death, the business he ran became the business our parents ran. It changed their lives for the better, financially. We moved back to Moline in 1953, when Mark was eight. He went to Roosevelt Elementary School and so did Scott. I went next door to Calvin Coolidge Junior High

School. One day, Scott came home from kindergarten, in tears. He didn't know how to skip, and all the other kids did. Mother told Mark and me to take him down in the basement and teach him, and we did. The next day, he was a happy boy.

Mark was girl crazy from the start, but they were not as attracted to him as he was to them. He loved the most beautiful girls. I flirted with one girl and Mark dreamed about her. I don't recall him having a girlfriend in grade school, junior high, high school, or college, and it seemed as if it wasn't so important to him as I found out later. He stammered, and boys and girls often politely shun anyone with any presumed debility. Mark became popular among a creative crowd at Knox College, where he wrote a column for the school paper. His friends were bright, creative, and musical, one went to the NYU Film School, another was the son of a famous psychiatrist who had written a book that became a Hollywood classic.

Mark was well received by the writers who taught at Knox, and after graduation, he was accepted to the Creative Writing Masters Program at SF State, where he was well received by the writers who taught there. I got married and began teaching school and having kids before I ended up, coincidentally, in the same program. He wrote a novel about a young man named Philip Young, but he failed to submit it for his degree. He left before he completed the degree, but by that time he was a fixture in the music scene in San Francisco.

When it came to our creative lives, we were unfailingly supportive of each other's life. I tried to look after him. One day, driving down Franklin on my way to the Marina in San Francisco, I saw his car, a huge, white Cadillac, big enough to carry his bass fiddle in the back seat, parked by the side of the busy street. I thought he might have left it there, on his way to commit suicide, jumping off the Golden Gate Bridge. I think now that was more of a dark romantic idea than a real assessment, but I was scared for him. It was a long way to the bridge, but that's the way my thoughts went in those days. I went to his apartment and looked for keys. I found a bunch and went back for the car. I got it started, but I thought about the situation I was in, taking it from its parking space, and leaving my car, so I went back home, leaving the car where it was and called Scott in Honolulu to see if he'd heard anything about Mark. Mark answered the phone and told me he sold the car and bought a ticket to Hawaii. I almost stole another man's car. He laughed. He thought it was a great story.

We were big on great stories in those days. We were writers and it's a good way to make your life saner and safer and less vulnerable than it really was. Maybe this book is the same. As I tell my brother's story, it begins to make sense. I once called my life a box of toy train tracks in a jumble. This story, or any other story, is a way of pulling the tracks out and putting them together into a completed circle or a figure eight. Maybe the engine is also buried beneath the pile.

An Imagined Act

The state of mind I've been in, since hearing of Mark's suicide, has conjured images of death and the sense of life in the presence of death. I do not imagine feeling sympathy for my brother but a sense of being in his place. I saw something similar in an old war movie on TV, where death was so prevalent, no one was free of it, where death becomes not only feared but inescapable, until it is, or almost is, compelling. As I ride my bike across the freeway overpass on my way to the YMCA, taking a break from writing, I imagine falling into the traffic below. I imagine going to my brother's burial and suffering a heart attack at that moment.

Suicide is not only another imagined death but an imagined act of dying. On the elliptical machine at the Y, looking out the plate glass window at three women standing in the parking lot, I recognize the sense of being in the moment, without any thought, but it's not a feeling of being at peace in the moment. Instead, it's the feeling of being present in circumstances, what I believe people imagine to be the here and now. But it's the here and now of fear, and not the here and now of peace. As I think that and recognize it, I begin to be present in my own peace.

I believe that anyone who commits suicide is living in the absolute present of their thinking about their circumstances. Nothing else matters, and there's no escape into peace. The peace, that comes from the acceptance of death, for one contemplating suicide, is circumstantial. If death does not come, the ersatz peace is broken. I suspect my brother was living in a kind of expectation, the expectation of death, and there's only a limited kind of peace in that. Still, I imagine it's better than constant pain with no thought of relief. I wish I could have known him this last year, but Scott suggested, on the phone, that going to visit his friends might give me some sense of that.

Just Browsing

At the funeral of our grandfather, Stephen Asa Brooks, in Rock Island, Illinois, I witnessed our father, John, then a young man, stand at the open casket of his father, crying. I had never seen him cry. As a teenager, I was impressed. Mark and I walked around the funeral home and in one room there were a dozen caskets on display. As we were looking at them, a funeral director, solemn in funereal black, offered to assist us. "May I help you," he said, and Mark said, "No thanks, we're just browsing."

I wrote these next passages, a few years ago.

> My brother says he cannot wait to die and "get this nonsense over with." I think it's a cover for what he really means. He reveals himself in his own self-mockery. It's as ironic as saying, "I hate women," meaning "I love them so much I can't stand it." He would love his life to death, if he could. We are brought down by pebbles and thorns. My brother says that to touch a woman is almost worth his life. But, he says, they ask too much. He won't do what they want. He thinks he might be "queer," since he won't sacrifice his life for a woman's rules. There's truth in what he says, in his mind, and in the ways of the world. We are brought down by pebbles and thorns. Some men think women are rule makers for men, unless he rules them and makes rules of his own. Then he's twice ruled. To live aware of the rules but beholden to none is to live free of the way we rule and are ruled by ourselves and each other. The imagination imagines mastery or magic. The reality of freedom imagines nothing but what is.
>
> He stands in front of a full-length mirror talking to himself, to the camera, as if in a mirror, to the striking woman he's dressed himself to be, in her short skirt, heels, and sweater. "My wife," he calls her, with giant floating breasts he kneads to feel their soft weight in his hands. The nipples are buried beneath the breasts, against his skin. This is my brother, and I winced when I first see his brazen drama.
>
> "My darling," he moans, "oh, baby." Then he says, "This is my own true love." Then, "I love you so much," to his image in the mirror. "This is my woman," he tells the camera. "I looked for her all my life. We're together now. This is all the woman I'll ever get. This is all the woman there is for me. That's just how it worked out. There she is." "Oh darlin'!" he moans. "This one's not getting away. Yeah! This one's home for the duration."
>
> I see a glimmer of happiness in his accommodation. I see a kind of acceptance for one who couldn't find it any other way. He talks to the camera, to her, to himself, to whoever might be watching or listening. It's his testament to the triumph and the tragedy of his love, a love that never found a mirror in the heart of another human. And so he sings old blues songs, less badly than when he's among others.
>
> "I don't look that bad," he says, "I don't sound that bad. And I've got a great body." "What other old woman looks this good?" he says. Then, "I think I got it

right. To have the perfect woman around, all the time." He pauses. "I've gotta learn to stand in these heels. I keep getting carried away. I looked for her all my life. I found her a couple of times, but she got away."

"If I were a carpenter," he sings, "and you were a two-by-four, would you marry me anyway?" his comedic reference to being a Gepeto to his manufactured wife. "It's like acting," he says. "It's a costume, one I rather like," he says. "I'm not good at winking at the camera, but it's good at winking at me."

My brother has been my lifelong refuge from the condemnation of others, and I honor his attempt at reconciliation.

He and I drove a Corvette across country, the same year as *Route 66*, a TV show about two guys who drove a Corvette, in and out of trouble, across the American landscape. In our cousin's house in Portland, my brother told me that emotions were not part of his vocabulary. I saw the common ground we would never share, until he cried at our mother's funeral. And then he sent a video of himself speaking the sweet, sad story of his broken heart.

The Night Before

Nancy and I drove to Lebanon, Tennessee, got a room at the Econolodge, went for a swim and sat by the pool before dinner at Los Compadres, before driving into Nashville. I wrote this, sitting by the pool.

I Sit in the Sun in Tennessee

I sit in the sun in Tennessee, by a motel pool, refrigeration
units running on nearby trucks, their drivers sleeping by day,

My brother died by his own hand, and I'm here to see him buried,
to tell a story of our life together in the youth of our past.

Estranged from his family, he'd made himself invisible, but here,
in Nashville, he made himself a beloved figure, with a sweet smile,
advising and encouraging the musicians of his recent acquaintance,
until he put two guns to his head, and took his life away, from us all,

Took his life is not *gave his live*, yet I feel blessed by him somehow,
I've lost someone I'd lost before, this time 'for good', they say,
but there seems no good in this going, no good in this being gone,

I'm blessed to have known my brother, well enough to know this
choosing. He ended his life, and I sit in the sun by the pool, waiting
for tomorrow, to tell him, "You have made this life more real for
both of us, my pained and struggling, angry and loving brother."

Our father said to our mother, "I can't do this, anymore," and died,
not by his own hand, but by his own heart, as we, who live by the heart,
die by the heart, nothing can be done to take the heart away from itself,

I'm blessed to know his heart in life and death. I say to him,
"You haven't left me alone, you've left me alone with you."

What Sort of Person

Mark left a letter to a self-described foul-mouthed woman who befriended him in a bluegrass bar. He wrote that his van and everything in it was hers, along with two large checks, made out to himself and signed by himself, "in case," he said, he "changed" his mind. She said he "was not in his right mind" when he ended the possibility of change, but she and her husband cleaned out the van and burned the contents, kept or sold off his instruments, papers and belongings, trashed his computer, notes and papers, before his body had finally been identified, saying the van was so infested with bed bugs, her husband had run from it, "like a little girl."

What sort of person does that? Was it the one who said she wept to read of his intended suicide, or was it the one who destroyed his life as surely as he did, one who erased him as surely as he made himself disappear. Still, here in this musical city, he made himself beloved among musicians. He was kind to those who were kind to him, but she was harsh with him, and he loved it. He didn't believe the kindness of others, he trusted only their rejection. All his life, he believed his story of rejection, and he gave his life to one who rejected everything he'd ever made or done, turning it to her advantage.

What sort of person destroys the life of a dead friend who may have left family behind, who left friends behind, who left his work behind? What sort of person does this? She is known and knows who she is and what she's done. There's no escaping this certain knowledge. She has helped kill a friend, called Johnny Sidedoor, for keeping the gates of the Inn, like Charon, this former bass player for the Styx River Ferry, he held the door with kindness and with judgment, and now he's crossed over himself, leaving all of him behind, the same as leaving nothing behind.

Gone on Vacation

The ceremony at Mark's grave was tender, sweet, and loving, the way his new friends wanted to remember him, the way I want to remember him, without forgetting what happened the night before. We went to the bar where he hung out, where he was an occasional participant, a musician's friend, a collaborator, a friend among friends. We went to meet the woman who had received his life's accumulation. She was not there. We were told she had "gone on vacation." At the grave, the next morning, she and her husband, his last friends, were not among the gathered dozen or more.

The group at the gravesite was a mix of musicians and lovers of music, friends and acquaintances. The man from the funeral home was a seventy-year-old former Fire Chief, called Rooster, who said of our new friend, the Medical Examiner, Candice, that she was a gem, and she was, meeting with us, a couple of hours later. Rooster told us of her humanity, her concern and care for the survivors of those she had administered to, and she's been all of that and more.

I shook the hands of the gravediggers, including the owner of the field of graves. I told him how lovely it was, not crowded and overgrown with monuments and stones but like a pasture with simple stone markers and flowers in baskets, most of them artificial but still lovely. Several men spoke of their friendship with Mark, I had thought to read the poem, written the night before, but I thought better of it, and told the story of our visit to Disneyland when Mark was 12 and I was 15. I choked up when I spoke, surprised by the jolt in my throat, but not be its presence.

Sarah, a young woman with Chris, the man who first contacted me about Mark dying, invited us to breakfast and there were ten of us. Nancy broached the subject of Mark's belongings being passed to one who disposed of them, and they confirmed our suspicions of her. I have no desire to make her a character in this story, other than to reflect back finally on his life. She was the foil to his decision to end his life the way he did. It's good that we're done with her. The detective said that although her decisions may be immoral, they are not criminal. There might be reason for a civil suit, but even that is more in the heart than in the law.

The Computer

One day, when we were both living in Seattle, Mark showed up at my apartment with a computer he had bought at a garage sale. It was the same computer, a TRS-80, from RadioShack, he had worked to sell, a few years before, in Illinois, when computers were a commercial novelty. I was thrilled. He facilitated my career more than I would have ever imagined. Now, my computer is acting up, jumping, flashing, things moving, I can't edit. I can't control the curser. I used to think my mental state had something to do with the dysfunction of mechanical and electrical things in my life, but I forgot about that over the years, until now. It's only recently started doing this. It got better yesterday, and now it's going crazy again. There's an easy explanation. It's an old laptop, but I think it's my brother, not him exactly, but my mind on him, that's causing this disruption.

We had houseguests stay over, last night, and this morning we talked about Mark. Since then, I've felt the electrical firings in my brain that are matched by this scattered messiness on my computer. After hearing of Mark's life and his mental condition, the patterns of his behavior over the years, my friend wondered if anyone else might be interested in my brother's story, other than it being good for me, and his wife said she thought others would see their lives in this story. I said this writing was as much about dealing with my brother's death as it was about his life. All I can do is tell the story, but this computer is making that problematic. I feel like I'm stuffing messages in bottles and throwing them into the sea, one sentence at a time, in the hopes somebody might find all of them or part of them. I suspect I'll get the glitches fixed and this will all be moot, but the metaphor is apt. His death has engendered an electrical storm in my mind.

We all have known someone in our lives, up close, or in passing, with whom we have difficulty. It often happens with those we love, whose lives are beyond our control, even beyond our influence. I was the eldest child, it was my unspoken job to take care of things, to carry on the parenting role, to pass on to my brothers the rules and regulations, the norms and the characteristics of the previous generation. I went off the reservation, myself, but I still felt that obligation.

When we were boys, we stuck up for each other. I carried that loyalty into my adulthood, more than my loyalty to our parents. That loyalty was ingrained and didn't need much attending anyway. I thought Mark's peculiarities were more due to their mishandling of him, than to any inherent fault of his. As I got older, I began to see how their recognition of his character was not malicious, even though their handling of him didn't help. They did the best they could. That's a cliché, but it's nevertheless true. They were incapable of understanding what he was doing. Mother asked the same thing of me, "Where did you come from?" I was inclined to live a life that was beyond their understanding, and I thought Mark was the same. They simply couldn't get it. He told me ten years ago that they were country bumpkins, implying that he was brilliant and they were not. As right as he might have been, it still showed his fundamental rejection of them, and that rejection came from his sense of their fundamental rejection of him. I could forgive them, since I was at peace in my life, at peace in my heart. Despite not living up to my mother's expectations, I've had a good life. I come from the expectation of acceptance, even if I didn't get it. Mark came from the expectation of rejection, even if he didn't get it.

I feel free of my brother's blanket rejection, even his personal rejection of the last few years, but his isolation and his belligerent sense of superiority weighed on me. When we were together, taking care of mother, One day, I decided, after he told me, once again, that everyone wanted him to shut up, to actively listen to my brilliant brother tell me about what mattered to him. I asked him questions, which prompted him to tell me, as he had tried to tell me when he wasn't asked, about how the lawyers had killed our parents, and about Hoover killing Hemingway. He spoke clearly and cogently his beliefs, not without reason, and I listened.

At some point, in the talking, I realized he was talking to me the way a businessman from the past might describe his business to a woman, his wife, a daughter or a female friend he believed capable of understanding in a general way but not in depth. He was speaking down to me. He didn't act like that. He was sincere, but he gradually became frustrated, knowing, in his mind, I believe, that he was wasting his time. That was the first time that I'd ever entertained the thought that he considered himself superior. I was the eldest, he believed he was shunned, and I was accepted, and I saw the tables turned.

It was good for me to begin to think that way, but I'd already begun to think that way. When I got his first draft of "Hem," I thought he might be the one to break through into the world of literature, more than I had ever done. I considered that I might become known as Mark Brooks' brother, rather that he being known, as he had been, as Steve Brooks' brother. I had known for many years how capable he was.

Still Doing It

I'm still trying to fix my brother, trying to make it right, trying to make sense of it all, to wrap it up and put a bow on it. It seems he was trying to do something like that, himself, at the end. I've learned that his hands were wrapped in plastic bags, as if he was trying to preserve something. He had no ID on him. Was he trying to preserve his fingerprints for identification? Was he was trying to make it look like a staged murder, like the one he imagined for his hero, Hem? He also had a mailing box tied to his belt, with a Las Vegas address on it, and a Florida return address. The detective called the name in Vegas, and the man's wife said he'd been dead for two years. I suspect Mark bought or borrowed the guns more than two years before, after the last time we emailed, while he was in Brownsville, TX, to stay warm in February '10, and maybe get his teeth fixed. Was he now trying to return the guns to their rightful owner? Did he think the cops would oblige him? Was it a kind of creative insanity?

As someone for whom alcohol was, at least, a social lubricant, but hasn't had a drink in nearly 30 years, I've forgotten my brother was on painkillers for the last two or even three years. That look of serenity, that sense that he was blissfully listening to music, that sense that he had it all together, reminds me of the bathroom graffiti I saw in San Francisco in the 70s. "If you got it all together, then what's that all around it?" At the end of my drinking life, a man studying for his PhD in Psychology, working as a bartender, told me I was the freest man he'd ever met. "Then why don't I feel free?" I said, in a voice of plaintive resignation.

This time I am truly heartbroken. This sadness is real. This heartbreak runs deep into the core of who I am, who my brother was, who we are as human beings. This is not the unhappiness of loss in life, but of life itself. This is not the loss of loves, but the loss of love itself. My generally sanguine demeanor has been shattered. I don't believe it is gone, but it's been stripped of its common illusion, the optimism of my life in life itself. The love of being in life itself remains, but any version of it has been shaken. I would say, at any other time, or to any other person, that this a good thing, to find myself without illusion in the life of my love. I don't care to anticipate that survival, right now. I care to feel this reality, even this loss of my reality's happiness.

The Story of Comedy

I want to include something Mark wrote. I was teaching in Washington, after Mother died, and I thought of the two of us collaborating in comedy. I thought it might draw him out and bring us closer, somehow. Instead, it drew this treatise on comedy out of him.

> Comedy is where you stand on a stage and talk about something. Besides, the audience is young single people, couples, married and unmarried. They don't know their ass from a hole in the ground and they want you to 'make' them laugh. Go to an open mike and talk about something. You'll see. It all depends who is in the audience, that night. Practice at home, talking to the wall. Pretend it is an audience. If you have fun, they will have fun. If you actually try to make them laugh, you're finished before you start. If you think they want pearls of wisdom, you don't understand the reality of comedy. They are a bunch of drunken airheads. But, if you can put together an act that works everywhere, you'll be a star, and then, you have only to perform the lines.
>
> I could write material, only if I got a ton of money and dropped my current life until it was done, and there's no guarantee I would succeed. I have no more interest in comedy than a rabbit. Is there a comedy club in Ellensburg that has an open mike some night every week? The only comedy club here, in Bettendorf, has an open mike every six months and they want some new star to show up. The Seattle open mikes turn into the same six or so assouls every night, and they become inbred very fast. Sometimes, one of them gets work. Darryl Lenox was the one when I was there, but he vanished eventually. There was another guy who won the Seattle contest. I saw him on TV a couple times. I can't recall his name, from Samoa, Michael Koa or something.
>
> If you like the open mike, it means you like comedy and if you keep doing it, eventually you will succeed, except for age. I thought it's possible to do it at any age, but the age of the audience changes things. You may be surprised at what they can't or won't do. I went back to an open mike at that club near the University off 45th, ten years later, and the same types where there, not the same people but there was the cute girl, the young stud, a fat guy, a skinny guy, a black guy, a foreigner, and an old guy. I was the old guy and I was forty something. The new old guy was an engineer who retired from Boeing. We had the same hat.
>
> Most at the open mike think it’s a recital. The only applause at an open mike comes from the other comics, because there's no audience. They usually whoop it up very big. They shake hands a lot. The younger ones are eager and really believe they are stars already. It's a place to see and meet a few people. You never know who may be there. It's like law school. You should do it just to say you did it. My group turned into a gross-out, to see who could say something over the top, but nobody experimented with obscenity. I think obscenity is passé now, no more teasing the censors. The comedy audience is clean cut, like I say, young, married, and soon to be married people, but it depends on the club and the night. The owners are in it for the money and many of them go broke. It's a tough business.

The thing I never did was to go onstage with nothing planned and talk about something and then keep talking about something linked to that something."

(He saw me do that very thing in a café in Seattle, in '88. I had decided to give a talk with no prepared thoughts. I spoke for 90 minutes. He said, later, the audience was so attentive, you could hear a pin drop. But that audience was a mix of café patrons and friends. And it was not comedy, which is more demanding and way more judgmental. This was more like a poetry reading, like being in church, attentive and respectful.)

"I heard one comic yell at another comic, "Turn it around. Work it. Work it." I find myself doing this best in bed, before I fall asleep, but it comes and goes. Charles Schultz said, "If you can't sit down at your desk anytime of the night or day and make a sellable cartoon in ten minutes, forget it." What I would do, if I did it again, is go onstage and start talking on the most obvious thing and keep talking with no reference to how funny it is, whatever comes into my silly little head and have as much fun as I can. I would do this as often as I could, onstage and off, until talking to an audience is the easiest thing in the world. It's not the laughs. The audience wants to like you and this is really all they want. I watched an old Cosby show. The audience laughed every time he took a breath. What he said or did was beside the point. The audience wants to be the audience. Their part in the show is to laugh and they will. The problem is to get an audience.

I think what the audience wants most from you is confidence, for you to be sure of yourself but they also want you to reach out to them, for them. The open mikes will get you into the flow. It may be the best audience is one person. It may be good because auditions are usually one person. I did my act for Liz once, sitting on her sofa, and she nearly choked, so starved was she for the laughter. I was shocked. I had to stop and let her get her breath. Frank De Lima's comedy club in Waikiki is a laughing place. The people start laughing when they walk in the door and they keep it up until they walk out the door, it doesn't matter what anyone says. They laugh at the waiters. They laugh at the furniture. They laugh at each other. It's the only place where they can laugh and get away with it, not have to explain what they're laughing at, like a ballgame, where you can yell all you want, at anybody and anything.

At Brandon's fifth grade basketball game in Kaimuki. I told Nicole, "Yelling is OK at ballgames," and she was astonished. She said, "Really?" Her eyes wide open. If the audience likes you, the rest is easy. Don't 'try' to make them laugh. If they see you're trying to make them laugh, they won't like you anymore. Make them relax and they'll laugh at whatever you say or do. I know this may spoil it, but it is the reality of comedy. Comedy 'is' the audience. I always wanted the audience to laugh at what 'I' think is funny, but a restaurant must sell what the customers like to eat, not what the owners like to eat.

After that, our emails, which ran on at length, centered on his complaints about the rejection he felt from me, and parenthetically, from Scott. That string of emails ended when he stopped responding altogether. It began when I was teaching at Central Washington, and it ended in the month after Nancy and I went to tour the Hemingway House in Key West in late December of ’10, on purpose, to see where my brother had lived and worked.

When I was teaching the Writing of Argument, I told my classes that my brother was making an argument in a book he was writing about the death of Ernest Hemingway. I said that my brother’s argument was that Hemingway didn’t kill himself but was instead assassinated by J. Edgar Hoover. I told Mark that the classes weren’t bothered by the idea, but I told them it was an argument that needed to be made well. He wrote back that he was thrilled, that he read my email over and over. Then he said I should make copies of an eight-page summary he had and pass them out to the class. I said I was not interested in promoting his idea, that I had spoken well of him and his writing, that it was an example of an argument. He became angry and told me I was hopeless, that I was not a real thinker, or else I would have edited his book. A year later, I wrote him about our trip to the Hemingway House and he warned me not to mention his name. He had told me there were people there who hated him and may have wanted him killed. He asked me to contact one of Hemingway’s granddaughters, a friend of mine from Seattle days. I did, and she responded that the last time she had talked to Mark, he had a look of hatred in his eyes. He laughed it off, saying she’d get over it.

During that time he told me about his stroke, his diabetes, the pain in his feet, i.e. neuropathy, which I had heard him describe, the year before. I recommended he find a doctor he could trust, who might be of some help. He told me that it “didn’t matter.” I sent him dozens of photographs of our time in Key West, especially of the Hemingway House, where a guide had spoken well of him, telling us that Mark knew more about Ernest Hemingway than probably any other living human being. Mark responded that the guy was putting on a show for us. I said I had talked to a cousin we hadn’t seen in years, on the trip to Florida, but that he hadn’t invited us to visit. (His wife was ill.) Mark said, “There are no invitations. You drop in or you don’t go. What planet are you living on?”

It is sad to write this story, right now. I think it’s important to get this down in the middle of feeling the complexity of my relationship with my brother, that man, the wonderful, the awful, the whole thing, including the story of the people around him at the end, those who reacted to him with the same perplexity that I feel, that Scott feels, that we all felt for so many years. This is not an uncommon story. How do we deal with those we care about, whose reality is clouded, for whatever reason, by their own demons, both self-imposed, and those they had nothing to do with?

At Home in Moline

In Haim Ginott's book, "Between Parent and Child," he tells the story of a young boy whose mother was in the hospital. The boy makes a get-well card and gives it to his mother at her bedside. She gushes, "Oh, this is the most beautiful card from the most wonderful, the most loving son a mother could ever have!" and he runs from the room in tears. Because, he knows it's not true. Only the day before, he had wished she was dead. He could not be as loving as she says. I thought of that story, thinking about Mark. I'm torn in talking about him. There were times when I disliked my brother, when I was ashamed of him, when I was embarrassed by him, when I acted distant from him. We all wonder what we could have done differently in the lives of those we've lost, especially when they take their own lives. He was my younger brother. I was supposed to take care of him.

Haim Ginott's moral was for the mother to have spoken, not about her child, but about what he had actually done, how glad she was to have gotten a card, to acknowledge that he had given it to her. That much was true. He would have accepted that, and felt better about himself. Nobody gushed about what a great brother I was to Mark, especially not him. The last time we talked in person was in January, nine years ago, just before and after our mother died. I wrote about it in my book, "Taking Care of Gladys."

The Eyes of a Child

> It's my last day here. I'm all set to drive out of here, tomorrow. Alexandra emailed from Taos that I should spend a couple of days with her, after staying with Gregory. I still don't have a place in LA. Last night, Mark and I had a talk that started with him saying he was done with Scott. I doubt it. He then said there were only three people who treat him badly, Scott, Liz, and me. He said we reprimand him when we think he's wrong. He said it's a tone of voice. He said Scott and Liz lie in wait for him to make a mistake. Then they pounce on him. I asked him if he had any responsibility for that. He said no, he didn't. I felt calm, as we spoke, but I also felt my energy rise. I said I'd heard anger in Scott's voice, anger I didn't think he was aware of. I also said that Mark's hobby was pissing people off. He denied it. I said he had told me as much. He denied that.
>
> I said there was no way for me to object to anything he had to say, because he always took offense, no matter what I said or how I said it. I said it was impossible to engage in a conversation about this, because he always accused me of attacking him. He has no sense of his effect on others. He believes it's all about being criticized, in an insulting tone of voice, being reprimanded, not for being wrong, but for being thought wrong. Then he said something that changed my awareness of us all. He said that Scott and I are passionate, we get emotional, and he doesn't. I agreed with him that I'm passionate. Then, I said I didn't like it when my emotions undercut what I might be trying to say. He scoffed.
>
> "Don't cut off what I'm saying," I said. "I'm telling the truth. I'm glad you said what you just said. It's true about Scott and me. It's also true that it bothers me when my emotional nature interferes with what I'm saying."
>
> He seemed genuinely surprised. I was surprised to be able to make the distinction between the passionate and the rational. Mark's emotional state is repressed, sublimated

anger. When he's happy, he's rational, he enjoys himself, and he's a pleasure to be around. I told him what he said to me, when he was twenty, standing in our cousin's apartment, in Portland, Oregon. Once again, he seemed surprised, "You remember something that happened, that long ago?"

"I remember a lot of things you've said. A lot of what you said to me has had a profound effect. You were the first person to tell me it was OK to eat a pizza with a spoon. That was forty years ago. One time, you said I should write down my dreams for a year. I forgot about it, but the next January 1st, I woke up and wrote down my dreams. I kept it up until the middle of March. I quit doing it, when it was taking me two and a half hours to write them down. That was thirty years ago. You think outside the box," I said. I asked him if he thought he was a thwarted genius.

He scoffed, "You do what you can."

I asked him if he knew he had an original mind.

"If I had an original mind, don't you think I'd know it?"

"Sorry. I didn't mean to tell you something you already know."

We talked some more. He said that this family doesn't encourage anyone. "Nobody encourages anybody," he said. Mark and I have been encouraging each other for forty years, and Scott is generally supportive. (This was before I began to stay with Scott and his family, and he's been nothing but supportive since then.) I think he was referring to Mother. He has a sense of lost entitlement that he's still hurt by. I've already described my part of that drama.

"You said something tonight that I'll remember," I said.

This morning, he seemed to think I'd jumped back on his side, and he could spout endless pronouncements, as of years past; foolish, wise, and speculative thoughts in words, such as, "All of Mother's medicines are useless. The more expensive they are, the more likely it is they're placebos."

I'm a passionate person, and I've been disappointed that I can't pull off being totally dispassionate, but the greater unhappiness is to be without passion. It felt good to tell him, "I am passionate. It's who I am. I like it, but I don't like it when emotions interfere with what I'm saying."

Living with my dispassionate mother has been an exercise in practicing her faith, while keeping my faith alive, at the same time. At breakfast, I looked in her eyes.

"Well, it's been good to be here," I said.

"It's been wonderful that you were here," she said. "I got to be with you and Mark, and I got to be with Scott, when he worked in the store, so I'm very happy for that." I looked in her eyes again. It felt as if our hearts met in a kindness, hopeful and innocent, in a moment beyond time.

After She Died

Mother died in her sleep, four months after I left. Mark had just been to see her. He said her eyes were blue. Her brown eyes were blue. She'd been in the hospital for the infection in her legs, when she had a series of strokes. She couldn't use the left side of her body, but she was still cognizant, with some difficulty in talking. Her doctor, a man I went to high school and college with, said she had one foot on the banana peel. She survived the hospital and returned to the first nursing home, where, by coincidence,

Katherine Schmidt, her best friend from childhood, was across the hall. The two had a reunion of sorts, before Mother died, without actually seeing each other.

The message telling me about her passing, on my answering machine, was from Mark, nearly in tears. When I spoke to him, he said he wasn't sure he could get through it. He said his friend, Jeff, was there to help. My brother, who abstained from an emotional life, was unsettled by his mother's death. I talked to Scott, and we made plans to fly home. Mark was surprised we would want to. For me, it was a given. Mark suggested I bring my camcorder. I left it, inadvertently, on a seat in the Minneapolis airport. I realized, as I flew on, how much I prefer the reality of the moment to a movie of it. At the memorial service for Mother, all three of us spoke, and all three of us choked up as we spoke. I read the chapter from this book (Taking Care of Gladys) called *Grandma's Legs*. Mark thanked everyone for coming. Scott said how much he loved his mother. The room for the service was filled. Several people spoke about what a wonderful woman our mother was, and several mentioned her wanting nothing less than perfection.

"We're orphans," I said to my brothers, and over the next few days, others said the same thing. The three of us are getting along better than we have. I predicted as much to Mark.

"There was a skunk in the woodpile," I said. We all loved her, and we all felt the burden of her expectations.

"When we were young," I told the banker, "she said she couldn't drive us apart."

"Well, you should get together, more often, from now on," the banker said.

Compensation for Good

Then, last night, after playing soccer, I asked Mark to tell me the story behind his contention that the bank stole Mom and Dad's house. He told me the whole story of his time in the family business, from the early days of success and high hopes, to the final days when Mother told him, "You can keep working, if you want, but we can't pay you."

All the stores that Mark oversaw made money, he said, and that money went to prop up the store that Dad left for Mother to run. He said that store lost money for seven years. I believed Mark's description of the many reasons why. For one, he said, "Dad always had Mother under his thumb, until then." I believe he never had her under his thumb, except in the realm of business, where he only kept them separate. He drove off to business, leaving her at home, keeping the books, until they opened that store. When they finally closed the store, they still owed the bank $80,000, on a $200,000 loan, and the family lawyer told them they'd have to put up the house to pay for it. Mark finally admitted it wasn't the bank's fault for wanting their money back. I believe it was Mother's fault, for believing the lawyer who told them they'd go to jail, if they didn't give up the house, if that is indeed what he said. And it was the lawyer's fault for his act of deceit, saying they could go to jail, if that is indeed what he said.

That end of their business had made Mark angry, and it may have helped make Dad a disappointed man. Mark asked Harry to intervene, and Mother told her brother, who created the company, to mind his own business. In the course of telling his story, I stepped on Mark's ongoing monologue with questions. I was delighted to hear the story, and I jumped in with prodding questions. Mark took offense with a sneer. He called me

for interrupting him, his personal bugaboo. He was angry, and I reacted, and he got even angrier at me for reacting. Around and around we went.

I apologized, finally, for interrupting him. I agreed I'd done that. Then, he interrupted me, in exactly the same way, but, this time, he saw himself doing it. And, from then on, I raised my hand or looked to him for cues when I could jump in. Just before bed, he brought up the business of being outvoted by me and Scott when he proposed wanting Mother's bank account in payment for his two years of service, as opposed to my six months and Scott's no time at all.

"I was here, while you two guys did whatever you wanted to," he said.

Mother had asked him to come home, at first, a year before her final confinement. Then she asked me to come for a month, before he came, only because he couldn't get away any sooner. I thought she preferred my coming, but she didn't. She'd always wanted him with her, before she wanted me. I was happy to see my self-centered belief shattered. I asked him what compensation he thought he deserved, and then I said, "I believe, because it's true for me, that you profited from being with Mother. You lived expense-free for two years. Beside that, the time with her was good for both of us. Not only that, but you're a writer, and I'm a writer, and we got to do our own work, during that time."

After he went to bed, I thought, "There's no compensation for being a good person. There's no reward. It is what it is. In itself, it's good, and that's it."

This morning, he asked me how I felt, and I said I felt great. I wasn't sure what he meant, but he followed his question by saying, "So the soccer didn't wear you out?"

We talked about Scott's history with Mark and the business. Scott called, as he was about to fly back to Honolulu. We said we loved each other, and that's true. As I was washing my noon dishes, Mark was out working on his van. I thought, then, there was no family for Mark but his brothers. I have kids, and Scott has a wife and kids, but Mark is alone. I was glad to see his anger. This time, we walked through our confrontation and continued to talk, in a way that was more forgiving of each other. He said that if I lost everything, I wouldn't be able to go on the same. I said I thought it would be devastating, but I knew my greatest happiness was in my heart in this moment. He said he felt the same, until last Tuesday. It's been a week, and I think Mark has seen a real change in his life.

"He actually fell in love with Mother, in his own way," I thought, "and her death broke his heart."

That might be hyperbole, but I thought there was something in his attachment I hadn't seen before. He's shown more sorrow and anger and maybe even a little compassion in the last week than I can remember.

Intellectual Samurai

I went to the movies in the middle of the afternoon. I went to see *Kill Bill*, and all through it, I thought, "This should be Mark's favorite movie." He's a big fan of Westerns, and *Kill Bill* has the black and white ethos of right and wrong, like the other big blockbuster of this last year, the one I call *Kill Jesus*. *Kill Bill* has sharp dialog, and the spirituality of existential retribution for wrongs committed and suffered.

I thought, "Mark, I've been trying to figure you out all your life, and I've either done it, or I'm getting close. You are an intellectual samurai. You have your own code of justice, and you never forget a slight."

Today, he was talking about how invisible he is in Scott's life. I disagreed, but he persisted. Scott doesn't measure up to his exacting criteria. I suspect that Mark has honed his critical skills, and his sensitivity to deceit, to accurately judge 99.9% of the world. If he could wield a sword in fealty to his perceptions, there would be a lot of dead bodies, at least, metaphorically. *Kill Bill* is a story of professional assassins who have a ruthless awareness of the weaknesses of others, and the final question of the movie is about being true to yourself, no matter who you are. My brother has stuck to his guns, or his swords, if you will, all these years. For that, I imagine him a samurai, and it's either true, or it's what feels good in my need for an image of him. The old Chinese master warrior in the film is described as a nasty old son of a bitch.

"The one thing that happens to old bastards is they get lonely," Bill says, in the end.

"They need other old bastards to compete with," I thought.

I've been feeling a bit of that in this verbal sparring match with Mark. He admitted, last night, to having some of Mother's nastiness, and he felt bad for all the abuse he's heaped on his best friend, Jeff, all these years. Jeff has taken it and stayed friends, and Jeff is not a bastard or a patsy. He may simply be a true friend.

The Buffer Zone

With Mother gone, there's no buffer zone between us brothers. When she was around, we were nicer to each other, and we spoke in support of each other to her. Now, that buffer is gone. Mark and I went at it, hammer and tongs, tooth and nail, again, today, clearing the air by clouding the skies with our vehemence. Suffice it to say, he said what he felt, and I said what I felt. I won't go into it, blow for blow. This book is about our mother, and it serves that purpose to say that when a big piece of the family dynamic is removed, everything changes. Despite everything, Mark and Scott are my brothers, and nothing changes that. That relationship is not about liking or even loving each other. It is what it is. It is. And what is, remains.

On the way to the airport, I wanted to tell Mark that regardless what we think of each other, we're brothers, and that won't ever change. When we pulled up, he jumped out to help me unload my luggage, and he said, "They'll get on my case for leaving the car." A man came and did just that, and he ran out too quickly for my planned remarks, so I said, "So long, brother."

"Have a good trip," he said, as he was leaving.

Mark stayed in Moline, off and on, until he moved to Nashville. I wonder now if mother's death didn't leave him alone and brokenhearted, more than I imagined. Maybe the woman who became his friend, to whom he left everything, was the missing piece he was looking for, or part of it. Nothing takes the place of the real connections with others we call love, intimacy, bonding. I don't remember feeling that bond with my mother, and my brother had a harder time with her than I did. There is a kind of intimacy in any blood relation, but what's missing from it cannot be replaced by any approximation of it. My drinking friend, Chuck, used to say, "Wine is arms

around me from the inside." I want to hug my brother, I want to tell him we could have lived together, and fought and argued, until the love broke the surface. But that never happened, and it will never happen, in part because I came from the same absence. We were shouting across a gulf we couldn't bridge. Some things can't be fixed. Especially when the ones trying to fix it either don't want to fix it or don't know how to fix it. I'm convinced that I tried to talk to my brother, I tried to love him, but I failed. I do know that I wasn't alone in my failure.

Two Guns

There is so much more I could say about my brother. I could stuff this narrative with our emails, over the years, with stories I might gather from everyone he knew. I could do as he did, travel the country researching his life and my story could run to 4,000 pages. I could posit another version of his suicide. Why did he give everything he owned to a woman he barely knew? Why were his hands inside plastic bags? Why did he use two guns? Why was there a box for mailing the guns tied to his waste? Why didn't he spend the $20,000 he left behind on his health, on his survival? Why didn't he take himself to Hanauma Bay on Oahu, or to the rocks off Portlock, where he showed me how to dive alone, a place he loved, and once there, throw himself in the Pacific Ocean? Why didn't he shoot himself in Ketchum, Idaho, where Hem died? Or in Cuba, at Hemingway's lost finca. Or in Key West, where he lived for years, often in drag, and as an expert in Hemingway's life? Why didn't he contact his nieces and nephews who he adored as children? Why didn't he leave some letter of explanation or retribution for his brothers?

Was he murdered because he knew and could prove that Hemingway didn't kill himself? He said he thought he would be killed for that very reason. The last words he wrote were, "I know that Hemingway's death was not a suicide, but mine was." Was it? Is this speculation precisely what he imagined for his posthumous life?

I don't believe in the stoic resolve he professed for himself and for Hemingway. I believe that my brother was a profoundly lonely man, and that loneliness was alleviated for a little more than two years by living with his mother until she died, and by living in the company of Bluegrass musicians in Music City for almost two years at the end, but loneliness can become a wound that nothing can heal. I believe that every death brings a kind of peace that fulfills that emptiness. Long after Ernest Hemingway stopped the pain in his life, my brother dwelt on it. His pain took up the pain he imagined in the death of another Mid-western writer, his erstwhile hero, until he ended it for himself.

Mark wrote letters from college in Galesburg, Illinois, and he signed the return address, "Surf City, Illinois." He wrote a joke that Playboy accepted in the early 60s. It went something like this: A man walks into a bar. The bartender asks him what he wants. The man says, "I'll have a Manhattan." "You got it," the bartender says. He mixes the drink and places it on a napkin in front of the man. The man pays for the drink, and the bartender turns to ring it up. The man says to the bartender, "What's this?" pointing to a sprig of parsley in the drink, "Oh, that," says the bartender, "That's Central Park."

When he was a comedian, he told this story on his parents, "My parents are both golfers, but they argue about it. My father doesn't like her driving, and my mother doesn't like his … putz." Our parents never argued. "Mark, tell us one of your funny stories."

The Secret

A woman who knew Mark in Nashville told me he always looked like he had a secret. I suspect his secret was that he had decided he was going to kill himself, and he kept that secret for three years. Thus the purchase of two guns, two years before. His equanimity may have evolved from that decision. It would be true to who he was. It gave him a secret that put him in the moment of his time in life. He lived as the keeper of secrets. The first, among many that followed, was that he was smarter than everyone else gave him credit for. The second was the true death of Ernest Hemingway, and the third was his own death. Spiritually, that secret didn't actually free him, I believe, but it gave him control over what he had no control. He was living a posthumous existence, he was living in the mix of life and death, in every thought, word and deed. It was brilliant, in a way that suited him.

When I was living in Connecticut, I taught at a prep school run by a de-frocked priest. I got Mark a job at the same school, just before I was leaving it. I was let go, for bringing my toddler son to school on Saturday when I was monitoring the free time of students. The boys loved Jackson, as he was called then, but that pissed off Father McElhinney, the headmaster, and I had to go. Over the next year, while Mark was teaching there, there were more disputes, and many more problems with the man who ran the school, whose true purpose, I heard later, was to increase the property value of the lovely estate the school operated on, with woods and a lake, for his family, who eventually sold it for a considerable profit. At one point, the teachers who remained, met to discuss their employer. The meeting ran late, until an apologist said, "Look, we could go on cataloguing incidents all night," and Mark said, "That's the point."

A student broke into the headmaster's room and found stacks of porn magazines and empty bottles of vodka rolling across the floor. The school closed not long after, and the good father went to another job with the church in the South, somewhere. During that time, Mark agreed to babysit our son, while his mother and I took a day trip into Boston, and when we got back, Jackson's diapers were full to overflowing. Hemingway said every writer needs a built-in shit detector. Mark had a state-of-the-art shit detector, and it never quit on him, except, I believe, in parts of his self-awareness. Mark had refused to change them. He didn't want to get shit on his hands. I told him that one of the first things I discovered, as a new father, was that baby shit is water-soluble. He didn't care. His shit detector didn't come with any cleaning capacity.

Brothers

The effect of my brother's suicide goes in and out of my sensibilities. I feel normal again, and then I feel the weight of it. I have no problem accepting that my brother is gone. Our parents are gone. I will be gone soon, myself. To be gone from this life is one of life's realities. There is no escaping it. Accepting it seems difficult in the mind, despite its consistent reality. I understand that, too. But I also accept that no matter how well I accept this reality, my mind continues to function in its own practiced ways. Time functions to heal the vagaries of the mind, but only so much. There are practices of the mind that can serve to absolve the negative habits of thought and feeling. I saw that in my recovery from alcoholism, but I know it's still a reality that can't be dismissed or ignored.

When our mother died, I accepted it with equanimity. I knew she was dying. I had made peace with her. I had satisfied myself, living with her for six months before she died, that I had done what I needed to do to be at peace in my relationship with her, even without resolving it to perfection. I saw that some things can be resolved, and some things are unresolvable. I was at peace with that. Still, over the next ten years, I felt the effects of her absence, and I felt the lingering effects of her presence before that. The same thing is happening with my brother's passing. In some ways, he was my hero, as I may have been his. He spoke to me of the life we had both chosen, as artists, in a country where economic success is the paradigm most celebrated, and we shared the condemnation and the reluctant tolerance of others, especially of our parents. We were there for each other, as the saying goes. That acceptance, of his choice by me, and my choice by him, was largely unspoken, but it was there. We did not dispute each other's choices. He gave me good advice, and I believe I gave him good advice, although I don't think he took my advice. He never said so. I told him of his positive influence on me. He said nothing of my influence on him.

Some of our interchanges were uncomfortable. In his column for the Knox College newspaper, he wrote a series about my son being born, before we met up again in Connecticut. I wrote him a letter about the baby's slow arrival, making jokes about how I tried to lure him out by sending him a telegram he had to sign for, along with other attempts, and Mark said it was his most popular column. It must have been a drag, having an older brother, but he never said anything about that. He was determined to be successful on his own, and he was.

He was accepted into San Francisco State after graduating, while I was trying to teach and start a family. He could make music with the best in the business, and I couldn't play an instrument. He was a successful businessman, and I was a truck driver. He got his pilot's license. He wrote a book on economics, while I was making wages. He was a comedian on stage. I did something similar, but not in any sense as professionally as he did. We weren't rivals, but I was aware of him as a brother, and sibling rivalry must have been part of our feelings about each other. Mother had great plans for me and expectations of failure for him. That hurts. Scott seems to have gotten off without much in the way of demands on his future, but I did hear Mother tell him he could have been an executive at Sears, after hearing him talk about such people getting in his limousine.

Our uncle Harry was a hero of the business world. That image was over our heads as a kind of standard, but also as an open door. Success wasn't a foreign concept to us, growing up. Our

father was a boy from a small town in Oklahoma who never left that reality in his heart. The company he became a representative of, after the death of our Uncle Everett, tried to discourage him. They thought he was ill-suited for the profession. Taking over a job that could have made him wealthy didn't turn out that way. Still, he prospered until his death at 80.

Mark had examples before him he could follow or ignore. I think he ignored the whole shebang. I believe he was directed by his own pilot. When he was a kid and labeled, because of his stammer, his attitude was that there was absolutely nothing wrong with him. He ignored it. When he was criticized, he built and carried a resentment, but he didn't seem to believe the criticism. I remember what people have said about me, but he seems to have ignored whatever he heard, if he heard anything. He believed he was mistreated by almost anyone he found fault with, whoever seemed to have found fault with him, and maybe that's the accumulation of all those ignored negatives in his mind.

His response to any social difficulties he had with anyone was to say that he had "made a mistake." He seemed to study the world around him, to learn how people treated each other, and he seemed to learn what behaviors he thought were successful and which weren't. If he crossed somebody, it was because he had misjudged the situation and had chosen the wrong action or words. He "made a mistake." He was never wrong, himself. It was his fault only in misreading others. This, to me, is a sociopathic mind, not an empathetic mind, but aren't we all liable to this criticism? We watch others to learn the cues to our own response, until we discover the heart of our own behavior and then we respond to the heart of others, in kind, or in sympathetic understanding. Mark understood that Scott and I were passionate and we tended to react emotionally. He said he was dispassionate and rational. But he was angry and fearful. Anger and fear are rudimentary emotions. He was angry at others and fearful of authority. He hated anger and felt it as a rejection of his life, if not merely some "mistaken" reaction of his. When I was talking to him, the last time we were together, I got the sense that he was reading me and responding in a calculating manner, watching and waiting for me to turn on him. That's what he accused Scott and Liz of doing to him. I suspect he expected that, because that was what he knew of himself. I couldn't tell where his heart was, even if by heart I mean the emotions of his mind, other than these few things he admitted to.

Those who saw him in Nashville, sitting by himself, his head bowed, listening to the music, assumed he was deep in the simple joy of the music, listening and loving, caring and silently sharing his love of the music. And maybe that's true. Here is a photo taken of him at that time, doing just that. A beatific smile on his face, his eyes gently closed, no stress seems to be upon him, his arms crossed, not in defiance or defense, his legs crossed into the peaceful agreement. I'm grateful to see my brother this way, shortly before he died.

I can ascribe what I see in this photograph to many things, to will, to surrender, to drugs, even to insanity. Is there a peace upon him in the acceptance of his life or the acceptance of his death? I can see him as he was, I can see him as I wish to see him. I can see him as he wished to be seen. The judgments don't matter to my heart. He is beyond this world of emotion and thought, and I can be, too, in the embrace of my heart for his heart, regardless of the conflicting realities of the past, present, or future.

In 1697, William Congreve said this, in his poem, “The Mourning Bride,”

> Music has charms to sooth a savage breast,
> To soften rocks, or bend a knotted oak.
>
> I've read that things inanimate have moved,
> And, as with living souls, have been informed,
> By magic numbers and persuasive sound.
>
> What then am I? Am I more senseless grown
> Than trees, or flint? O force of constant woe,
> 'Tis not in harmony to calm my griefs.
>
> Anselmo sleeps, and is at peace. Last night,
> The silent tomb received the good old king.
>
> He and his sorrows now are safely lodged
> Within its cold but hospitable bosom.
>
> Why am not I at peace?

A Man at Peace

The old king is dead. He and his sorrows are safely lodged within the grave's cold but hospitable bosom, so why am not I at peace? I have never been at peace in this question of my brother's life and my role in it. Six months before he died, I wrote him in an attempt to reconcile with him.

> Johnnymark,
>
> I just finished editing, "Taking Care of Gladys," and I wonder about your reaction to what I said about you. I thought you didn't object, but now I'm not so sure. Our relationship is an unresolved issue. Nothing has happened in the intervening years to help resolve it, and now you and I are almost totally estranged from one another. I went looking for you in Moline, and I think you were aware I was there. Scott and I talk about you, from time to time, asking each other if the other has heard anything from you. I said I have had a few remarks on Facebook, but that's all.
>
> I regret that this rift between us has gotten so deep. To some degree, I am responsible for it, and I don't know how to resolve it. I said, late in the book, that I regretted when I called you an asshole in the beginning of the book. I included a lot about you that was positive, but the split between us was real, and I chose to include it. The rift re-opened at the end of the book, as well. Never mind the book. It happened in real life. The book is only a chronicle of what did and didn't happen.
>
> I was in Hilton Head, recently, with Dave and Jana. They asked about you, and they both spoke positively of your previous visits. They enjoyed your company. They said you were a good guest. Jana said she is more family-oriented than Dave. She said Dave is more like the rest of the Swedish Axenes, taciturn and not easy to draw out. After a drink at lunch, he became more talkative. They said you knew more about the family than anyone, and they liked hearing your stories.
>
> Do you have any objections to what I said in the book? Here, (in an attachment) is the most recent version of the book, if you want to look at it and comment. Would you like to write an introduction or an afterword to "Taking Care of Gladys"?
>
> I know it matters to you that someone believes you about the lawyers. Here's why I don't believe you. To begin with, you believe in conspiracies that go against considered judgment. I don't have a problem with that. I like that tendency, generally, but because it's your custom, I've come to expect it but not to take it on faith. I was willing to believe, for example, that J. Edgar Hoover had Hemingway killed, that he didn't commit suicide, but it is absolutely believable to me that Hemingway was a man who needed to be in control, and when he was losing control, he took control by killing himself. The possibility exists that he was killed because he might have something positive to say about Castro. It's possible, but the possibility that he was killed for that has never been

proven to my satisfaction. The possibility, even the probability, that someone other than Oswald was involved in killing Kennedy also exists, but it has never been proven to my satisfaction, and I've paid attention to a lot of the material on the subject.

Beyond these cases, the possibility exists that there is a cabal of powerful men who work to decide the fate of the world, but, in my mind, it has never risen beyond a possibility. I once entertained the idea that the Bush Administration allowed the attack on 9/11, but I still think Al Qaeda was responsible, even though the United States was responsible for the success of the Mujahedeen that led to the Taliban who harbored Al Qaeda. I believe that individuals and small groups, inside and outside governments, have the power to disrupt society, kill leaders and innocent people, so it makes sense that large groups of powerful people can do the same on a grander scale.

Since the powerful have what I don't have, power, I nourish the power I do have, and that is the power to live a sane and peaceful spirit. It does me no good to take up the cause of righting the wrongs of the world, especially those carried out by forces beyond my reach. It seems to me that you are preoccupied with these concerns. I am not, even though I'm conscious of them, even though I'm suspicious and fearful of them. I'm not naturally inclined to distrust, but I have learned not to have faith in anyone or anything. Why should I have any more faith in you than I do in anyone else? Should I have unquestioning faith in you, just because you are my brother? I've spent my life shedding faith in the things of this world, including the things that are not of this world, espoused by those of this world. I believe that anything you can imagine happening between human beings is probably happening right now, somewhere, on the planet. Which of those things are within my power to affect?

I believe that your relationships with your employers, our parents, was not founded on trust, on their part or on your part, and I believe lawyers act like lawyers. I don't trust them to tell me anything other than what is expedient, in their interest or their client's interest, as it serves their own interest. I believe there are a certain percentage in every profession, maybe one in five, optimistically, who want to do right, all the time, and the rest fall into categories of more questionable influence. I also believe that our parents, your employers, were adults who had been in business for a long time. They operated on reasonable intelligence, typical prejudice, self-interest, and the trust in others that operates to the benefit and to the detriment of ordinary people.

They didn't trust you, but they trusted the lawyers. This was a doomed relationship from the start. You were bound to get screwed by that attitude, slightly, systemically, or royally. You told me, in 1984, "Get out of there. That situation is not good for you." I got out of there. It was good advice. It was also good advice for you. I believe you stayed too long at the dance. Our parents' life as business people was a slow-moving disaster, when it should have been an upward spiral, and the lawyers are part of that. I don't know the details of their dealings, and I bet you don't either.

I believe you know some things, and you speculate about the rest. Since I know you to be a free-form speculator, how can I trust what you say to be the truth? I would be a fool to

take your speculation at face value. I would be as stupid as Gladys talking to the lawyers. Since you have a long career as a grand speculator, on the macrocosmic scale, I've come to take your speculation as an interesting intellectual challenge, but not as revealed truth. The most reliable source of your speculation seems to be your own mind. I don't trust your mind. I don't automatically trust anyone's mind, including my own. That's my belief. It's not personal to you, but it applies to you and me, too.

And you have a history of badmouthing your relatives. I can only imagine what you say about me, behind my back. You say negative things about Scott and Liz, and yet you have lived with them, despite your scathing condemnations, and I know that hasn't been a positive experience for anybody. You speak positively about children, but their kids and my kids are not kids anymore, and neither are we.

Your thesis seems to be that all individual realities are governed by forces beyond the individual's knowledge or control. While this is relatively true for all of us, genetically and socially, it's not so conveniently definable. Most people want to belong to the greater reality around them. Most people give up their individual consciousness for the greater consciousness of the group. Most people are victims of that surrender, but that doesn't mean that everything is a direct result of a decision made by some nefarious person or despicable force. I believe that this group-ethic works for the survival of the group, and that same ethic operates positively and negatively on the individual. There is no lobby in Washington for the individual.

You and I are engaged in similar work, in this one important respect; we are both concerned for the individual awareness that works for the good of the individual as well as the whole. My focus is to encourage the individual to pay attention to the peace and freedom that is only consistently available in the awareness of existence itself. You focus seems to be to encourage individuals to see and recognize the threat to their existence in the world at large. You seem to dwell on the negative, I seem to dwell on the positive, but it's the same consciousness of the same reality of being human in human society. You seem to think I'm living in some sort of blind faith, when I'm deeply skeptical of faith itself as a human construct. I used to think it was my responsibility to expose the delusion of faith, but I've found better use of my time by exposing the fullness of living in the awareness of being itself.

So, how come I don't believe you? I don't automatically believe you because you're my brother. I don't automatically disbelieve you because you're my brother. I'm not in the believing business, and I'm not in the disbelieving business. You say that if we all distrusted those in power, at any level, we would all be better off. I agree, but living in constant distrust is no place to live. It's not freedom from what we distrust. I say I distrust, and I also live in peace. These are not mutually exclusive states of consciousness. I distrust alcohol, but I don't live in fear of it.

You say you don't believe Scott when he says he loves you. Love is not dependent on belief. Love is a state of awareness greater than any state of consciousness. I love you, but I don't take what you say on faith, and nothing inclines me to agree with what you

> say, just because you say it. And, that doesn't mean I don't love you. Both of your brothers love you, and if you want to accept anyone's love, I suggest you let go of thinking of love as an expression of intellectual agreement. My spirit is greater than what I think. I haven't stopped thinking, even though I discovered that living in my mind is a clumsy approximation of being wise. Thinking has its limitations. I use my mind; it doesn't use me.
>
> I know this is difficult for you to accept. At least, I imagine it is, but I care about you, in some way based in our long history as brothers. I tried to care about what you care about. I cared for a while just because it was interesting to read, but your insistence that I agree with you put me off, and I lost interest in your topics of interest and your peccadillos as an insistent doctrinaire philosopher-politico. So blame me, and be free.

I got no reply.

For years, I heard Mark speak disparagingly of Scott. When Dad died, Mark and Scott flew from Honolulu to Seattle, where I lived, and we drove cross-country to the funeral. For the first time, Scott and I got to talk and be together long enough to get to know each other as adults. Then when Mother died, it happened again. But by that time, I had gone to stay with Scott and Liz several times over the years. We had become friends, not just brothers. Before Mark estranged himself from both of us, I told Scott some of the things Mark had been saying about him, and he told me things Mark had said. I am responsible for opening up these privacies, these secrets, between the three of us, and Mark responded to being exposed. I had been used to keeping these confidences, until I realized he was using me to spill his venom about Scott. I didn't think he should get away with it any longer.

This family drama is a sad commentary on our, on my, inability to see the brother who needed to be accepted instead of the argument he professed to believe. I tried to tell him I believed in him and not his argument, but they were inseparable to him. They say, "Love the addict, not the addiction," but when the addict and the addiction are inseparable, it's nearly impossible. The addict must recognize his own addiction, for anything to break through. I wish I was better at separating Mark from his identification with his beliefs, but I could not. Maybe, he couldn't either. His last words were, "I know Hemingway's death was not suicide, but mine is." It seems absurd to me that a single belief could so completely overwhelm a man that he couldn't recognize himself as separate from it. We often hold such people up as heroes, martyrs, even saints. I wish I could believe that.

Hemingway House

There was a time when, if you left a town or city, it was as if everyone you had known, disappeared. No more. The Internet has reconnected us all. In the summer of 2010, I went on Facebook, looking for old friends. I thought of a girl I had met and danced with when we were eighteen-year-old freshmen in college. At the time, briefly, I thought she was "the one." She fit an eighteen-year-old's image of the opposite sex, away from home for the first time. We danced and had a great time together, but soon thereafter, she was taken up by the captain of the football team, and we went our separate ways until graduation, when she went East and I eventually went West. She thought I ran a bookstore in Seattle. I heard she was a potter in North Carolina. I found her, recognized her, and wrote her. Over the next six months, we talked, met, and began visiting each other. In December '10, I flew to her place in Asheville, and we drove to Florida together. I wrote Mark about it, before I left Ellensburg. Then, after I had flown to Asheville, and we had driven to Florida, I wrote that I was in St. Augustine, on my way to Key West, after Florida City, and he wrote back.

> *Go to the Hemingway house but don't say your name or mine until you have seen enough. If they connect us, you will get something different.*

He went on at length describing his associations with everyone he worked with. Then he wished us a good trip.

Here's a picture of Mark in drag in Key West.

(During this time, he also sent this email.)

Key West was a heaven for me as you say, until Mama called. I should have said no. She would have called you. Would you have said no? She would have had to go to Hawaii, which is what she should have done in the first place. They wanted her, and we didn't. I let her push me around once again. It cost me the Key West job and lifestyle, plus the job I could have had in Moline, but she didn't want to be alone a couple nights a week. I would be rich now from either job, maybe w/o a stroke. What would you do if you had a permanent pain that the doctors don't believe?

I'm staying here in McAllen TX because Miami is too cold and I can sleep in this van anywhere here. Nobody cares here. I'm doubling up on Tramadol and Gabapentin to see where the overdose is. They are cheap drugs but not enough for my pain yet the dentist gave me Percodan that was no better and they say it's very strong but it's not. My feet are both diabetic swollen and my entire left side had a stroke that has never stopped tingling like razor blades. Sunday is the first anniversary of my stroke pain. The only thing the stroke did was to give my left side pain. I can use everything but it never stops hurting.

My Hemingway book is a bomb and I have no friends or family, but I can only buy a gun in Illinois. Coming here has kept me alive awhile longer. My only problem now is where to shoot myself, at the doctor's office or 3521 (the family home*) w/the Blackwood file on my lap. I might as well take all the dope I can get. Today, so far, I've taken six Tramadol and twelve Gab and it's not so bad. I think I will swap this van for my Cadillac in April and finish my last Hem trip to DC and Boston, Then Idaho, to ask those people what they think. I sent them copies but no response. Then to LA to find an agent for the death of Hemingway, if there is one and then mail my guns to Honolulu, give Scott what money I have left and find a nook to die in.*

What's wrong w/this plan is I don't know how to get the Blackwood information into the public eye. The RI county sheriff now lives on 9th Avenue court (the family home) *on the turnaround where Swanson used to live from the Arsenal, but if I do it in his driveway w/the Blackwood file on my lap, he will just give it to Blackwood for a reward. Maybe visit Hotchner in Westport, CT. Wish him Godspeed. Nobody believes me.*

The only way I can shit is w/epsom salts twice a week. I stop, hoping the shit after the salts is possible. Last night proved it's not. I go to the library every Wednesday and take the salts so I am near a toilet all day. Then do it again Saturday or Sunday. I eat only cereal w/fruit and coffee at Starbucks. When I feel the first tinge of a bowel movement, I must take the Epsom salt dose the next morning, or it will be hell to pay getting it out. Pain pills cause constipation.

Do you have no pains? My week now is divided between two shit days, where I do nothing else. This is no way to live. I will not endure another winter anywhere but Hawaii. There is no warm winter place on the main-land, but Key West, that I cannot afford. I need to try marijuana as pain control, maybe Boulder this summer.

What do you do when the cure for your illness is a crime? In prison, I think you need money for dope.

Sincerely, Bookmark Brooks

I take two Tramadol every three or four hours and as many Gab as I can, w/o choking on them. I wake up in the night to take dope. My left arm goes bad when the Tram wears off and I take two more to get back to sleep. I feel pretty good right now. That's why I'm talking so much. Thank you for listening. Peppermint mocha is not bad but the only drink stays hot is plain coffee. I need a cushion to sit on these wood chairs. My butt has lost all it's padding. Just skin and bone now.

McAllen TX is in Mexico. Very few gringos. I may need another root canal and crown for $350 across the border. If you don't have a passport, they grill you longer coming back. The border guard told me. He said, "We require a passport now but, if you don't have one, we cannot refuse entry to a citizen."

I wrote Scott:

This is bad at the end, but I'm not sure how bad. What he's talking about is new to me, as regards his health. I haven't replied yet. I wanted to pass it on to you. He's talking in circles but with new physical information. It sounds apocalyptic and then not. He's still making plans. What do you think about this?

Scott replied:

Thank you for sending me these emails. Fascinating to hear about his time in Key West. I'm glad you are having fun in Florida. Never been to Key West. Scares me to hear his ruminations about pain, guns, and death. He says he has no friends or family. His health problems are many. His tooth pain can be unbearable. For him to think that the "Blackwood file" will somehow give his death meaning is pitiful. I hope he gets better. I would have lots of advice for him, but I know he hates and resents me, and it would be senseless to give it to him. I will be thinking about this all day.

I wrote Mark:

I'm concerned about what you are saying here. These health problems are serious, as far as I can tell, just reading about them. I trust you are doing what might work to make your situation better. I hope you can find medical advice you can trust that would work for your needs. I'm wary of drugs, as you can imagine, but pain is sometimes alleviated by drugs, so I'm not against their use. I don't think your Hemingway book is a bomb just because it hasn't found its audience. *If you sell diamonds and nobody buys your diamonds, you're still a diamond merchant*. Can you tell me more about the stroke you mention? That's a big deal, and so is diabetes. Physical pain can incline one to think things one might not otherwise consider.

Razed to the Ground

When Mark graduated from Knox, he went home to Moline. Later that summer, he drove the forty-six miles back to where he had spent four happy years. He drove by the house he'd lived in for two years, with his buddies, Tom and Will. It was a comfortable reality for those young men and all the others who came by to play music, talk, drink, and bullshit. It was gone. It was no longer there. The house was gone, the plot of land it sat on, across the street from the campus, was newly mowed grass. There was no sign that the house had ever been there. Mark drove downtown to see the apartment of his friend David, who'd gone on to NYU film school. It was gone. The entire block was a hole in the ground, the buildings razed for some new construction. It was as if his college years had never happened.

And now he is gone. All his earthly possessions are gone. He remains in our minds and hearts. He remains in cyberspace and in these pages, but truly, he is gone. This is the startling thing about death. I wonder if he contemplated this erasure. Maybe he had grandiose plans for his remains and the memory of his life. It would be like him to imagine some grand turnaround in his fortunes at this late date. I will do what I can to encourage that possibility, but I'm aware of his absence, no matter what I do or say.

When our father died, I saw that his personality, his character, his physical being, his mind, his humor, his stories of being a boy in Oklahoma, of playing basketball with Goose Tatum, his size, his history, his presence, were all gone. This awareness makes me want to honor this being alive, while it occurs. I don't believe my brother is alive anymore in this life, but something of myself, that was made real in concert with his life, is alive. I'm alive with his presence having made itself a part of my presence. I'm grateful for that.

Some of it disturbs me, as it should, as I wish it had disturbed him, so that he and I might be free of our predilections, to put it mildly. His tendency to isolation is mine, his judgmental nature is mine, his humor is mine, his grandiosity is mine, his gentleness is mine, his ease as a performer is mine, his inclination to write is mine, his moralistic nature is mine, his ease among casual acquaintances is mine, his memory for the names of obscure movie actors is mine.

Mark could remember the entire Pecos Bill story. We memorized Stan Freberg, we recited obscure lines from obscure movies back and forth to each other, "Renaldo, Conchita is mine!" "Pablo, Pablo, can you take me to town in your boat? Oh, please, Pablo, I have five dollars!" I could go on. As a friend once said of someone else, "He's a veritable spittoon of knowledge."

All gone now. All gone. All forgotten. What remains will be seen and unseen, gone and somehow still present. Our lives are gossamer, words writ on water. And yet the feeling of some people is as if a meteor has hit the ocean by our shore. Mark made a big splash in my inner ocean. The ripples will go on, until their effect is unseen. His presence lingers in the presence of those who knew him and loved him, despite his denials and in the eyes he raised, in that last video made with those young musicians who loved his presence in their lives.

A Young Man

When Mark was a young man, living at home with our parents, Mother called him into the downstairs bathroom, the one Dad used when he was off the road. There was a toilet and a magazine rack, along with the best shower in the world. In the rack were several copies of Playboy, among other assorted magazines. Mother called to Mark to come into the bathroom, and he did. She was standing over the toilet, pointing at a white, sticky substance on the toilet seat. "What's this?" she asked. "Oh," said Mark, "that's glue." "Glue?" she said, "What were you gluing in the bathroom?" He mumbled something. "Well, clean it up, will you?" "Oh, sure," he said, and he cleaned it up.

When Mark had just turned 12, he got on the city bus in front of Schiff Shoes in Moline. He put a dime in the slot, and the bus driver stopped him. The rate for anyone over twelve was twenty-five cents. "How old are you?" the man asked. Mark looked sheepish, held up three fingers, and said in a childish voice, "I'm this many." "Sit down," the driver said, "and next time, you better have the right amount." Mark smiled as he walked to his cheap seat on the bus.

One of our teachers in junior high worked in the summer months at a clothing store. One day, he waited on Mark, getting him to try on a new sports jacket. After trying it on, Mark handed it back to the teacher, whose name was Jack Dye. Mark looked at the man he was supposed to treat with respect and said, "Put it back on the rack…Jack."

From the Man Himself

And, finally, here are some excerpts from Mark's book, "Hem". Out of 2,090 pages, I chose these passages that reveal something of my brother.

> My father had the chance to meet John Wayne twice and he passed it up both times, though I think he had a reason, where I didn't. He didn't want to risk shattering the illusion he had of a man he respected. He knew his wife could have tied Duke Wayne into a knot anytime she pleased, and that would have been embarrassing to everyone. He may have been afraid he would steal her away. I could have met the man, had I the balls or the brains to make it happen. I had no idea he could have shown me anything, or I could have learned something, looking at him up that close. My uncle knew him. They lived across the water at Newport Beach. They played bridge at the Balboa Bay Club. My uncle was treasurer when Duke was president. All I had to do was visit my uncle and ask him to introduce me. It was that simple, but I never did.
>
> When I went to my first school dance, my Dad said I had to be home by midnight, but the dance was a drag, so I came home at ten thirty to watch Maverick. My folks never bothered me about the time after that. I came home when I wanted. I just had to be quiet. One night, I had to pee when I came in, As I tiptoed upstairs, my dad's voice rang out in the darkness, "Go back and flush it."
>
> It is a little humbling how rare we are, given the fact that this happens nowhere else in the universe, at least, if it does, so far away we'll never know about it. If our parents had not made love at that time and place, maybe in that way, our particular zygotes would not have found their eggs. That my zygote found an egg and did not fail to fertilize it, makes me pretty darn important.
>
> I never drank with a woman. I dropped acid with a woman once. She became afraid when the walls and floor began to crawl, but I explained that it wouldn't hurt her, and she relaxed. I was sad to see, she had no thought of sex, which was my reason for dropping the acid.
>
> My mother never spoke to me. True fact. Oh, she gave me instructions, orders. She would ask where to find stuff. But she initiated no conversation at any time my whole life long. She was all business. My father, too. He would rattle on about the scenery while driving, make jokes about road signs, and he talked back to the TV, but never to me, except to get something done. He would hand me his coffee cup in the TV room and say, "Here, take this upstairs, if you can, without spilling it."
>
> I may be the first to joke about 911. Osama Bin Laden was having breakfast in Windows on the World, when he saw the first airplane hit. He turned to the waiter and said, "This *is* Monday, isn't it?"
>
> I would have been gay if they'd been nice about it. I had no idea that jazz band was gay when I joined on bass, but the clarinet player's girlfriend told me. If the black woman

upstairs had not screamed when the new guitar man knocked on her door for that big guy to come down to my car and get me, I would not have known I was in a life and death situation, though Stafford had put me on my guard when he gave out the wrong address to a suspicious musician who came in that night. I owe him my life.

In Nashville, all the men I met were gay, so I went home and drove a truck. I didn't find a real woman, until I saw Oprah, in 1991, with the kid who got caught in his mom's closet. That's when I became my own woman. Now I have great tits, good legs and a woman who will hold my hand on my deathbed, no matter where I am killed. I'm as hetero as Jesus and just as gay friendly. I quit music because, when musicians spoke to me, they talked like gangsters. Sad, because I was getting good, and I would have got a lot better.

My mother gave me all the woman I can stand. I had sex with a dozen or so when I was a young man. There's nothing like a slice of the damp. I love good skin and big tits, but they charge way too much and in the end, they never deliver. You can have them, every one. I'm just a spectator, when it comes to women, watching the game thru a hole in the fence. I should've talked more to the women I met, but so should they have. Women are so tight-lipped. Naturally, I presumed they had nothing on their minds.

Why do I put all this into a book about Hemingway? Most books, we have no idea who the author is. We get only the author's name and a blurb. In this book, you get the whole story, the whole sad, disgusting story. Did I tell you? I flunked my drug test. I couldn't spell marijuana.

I was playing games with my brother and his six-year-old son once, at a family reunion, you know, taking turns doing things in front of everybody else, and my nephew pulled out an imaginary gun and shot his father, who dramatically fell on the floor in a dramatic death scene. I turned to the boy and said, "Now what?" He smiled and said, "That's all."

Were your parents assouls? No. My parents were idiots. It's a lot different. There's not as much blood. They didn't hit me. They just said stupid things all day. It's almost as bad. *Were your parents idiots or assouls?* Well, my dad was an assoul. My mom was an idiot. It was a mixed marriage. My folks were both idiots. They could be assouls when they wanted to but mostly they were idiots. I didn't find out how dumb they were 'til I went into the family business. I got to know my parents too well. Nobody should know their folks that well. It's not healthy. I always like to know what the newest laws are, so I can break them first.

That reminds me of the time I was in the dressing room with Doc Watson and Ray Park. Doc didn't know I was there because he's blind and I didn't make any noise, so he gave Ray some pretty serious advice. He said, "If you'd stop hiding behind that guitar and get out in front of it." Ray looked at me and I didn't even breathe. Vern walked in and said they were on. Merle came in to get Doc, and then I was all alone in the dressing room. I tuned my bass, and then I went out to see the rest of the show. I think we were on first.

I went to see Doc once near Seattle, with Taj Mahal, and it was sold out so I had to sneak in. I found an open door from the outside in back of the building. I accidentally stepped into Doc and Taj's dressing room, with food and beer so I helped myself. Jack Browning was there and, as they were wondering who the hell I was, I said, "Who's on, first?"

That broke the ice. Taj turned to Doc and he said, "I think I am, Doc," and Doc said, "OK." I went out when they did, and I sat in the front row. Everybody thought I was somebody. I think Taj and his friend were flattered that somebody thought Doc was their opening act. I played with Doc a half dozen times but never for money. Just jamming, here and there. Taj is one of my heroes. Boswell said we cannot write biography without having dinner with our subject at least once.

I remember playing with myself in the bathtub when I was a teenager, but it never got bigger. It never went from a small to an extra large in a few seconds, like it did later. I remember holding my balls and my dick in the same bunch and it looked like my mom in her fur coat.

I took ten years to write this book. Most of the time, I was playing with my tits. It's like Groundhog Day. Every morning, I wake up with no tits at all, flat as a board, like a boy, and every day my chest grows, so by midnight I have the biggest tits in town, the biggest knockers in Neverland, the biggest boobs in Bastogne, and it's exactly the same, every damn day. You can't imagine how it is to look in the mirror and see a knockout babe. Mama, I'm beautiful. You're lucky I wrote this book at all. I got a woman.

My Brother's House ('84, Moline)

I'm engulfed in icons
in my brother's house,

In a jar with pens and pencils,
a tuning fork and nail clippers,
silver, sharp, and silent in his absence,

A clock that ticks like a Slinky descending
a mountain, a kerosene lake in the lamp
next to the Monet print, next to coins
forever embedded in a clear plastic cube,

An elbow lamp above the Information Almanac
and the Feminine Mystique, next to the molded-plastic
sarcophagus of the Martin Guitar, a basket-fern and the
closed door to an empty closet draped in nylon net,
paths worn across the faux sheepskin carpet.

I look around the room and see names; James Joyce,
Claude Monet, Ronald Reagan, A.L. Rowse, Omar Khayyam,
Pierre-August Renoir, Leave It To Beaver, Henry Adams,

And Howard Nemerov, the poet we heard read, yesterday, in the
Augustana College chapel, who said, *There are too many of you,
Heaven is closed! The age of Reasonis full up, too. And we have
no more jobs for Romantic poets. Go!*

My brother is a man of reason, I am one of intuition,
we contend, as lovers do, half-believing the other,
not quite content in ourselves, he doesn't understand
my anger, raging like a curse, and I don't appreciate
his, repressed and catalogued like an occupation,

Icons are pleasure objects, with meaning beyond fact,
they move into our hearts and take possession, like old
and new lovers, like armchairs of the imagination,
like lions and tigers, powerful and dangerous, lying
about the house, alluring, as a over-stuffed sofa,

I think we are our brother's keeper,
but that does not make him ours, let us
keep to ourselves, the gods of others
are not our gods, but let us not be
alone, it would be ungodly of us.

Sadness

When I finished writing this book, I felt sadness and little else. Writing about my brother absolved that sadness for the time I was writing about him. *Absolve* includes *pardon, forgive, clear, release, free,* and *liberate*, and all are true to some extent. On the other hand, it has at least given me something to do, so soon after he has gone. After I finished, I had nothing to do, and I felt sadness. My brother remains in my consciousness, his death remains, his absence remains. This sadness is not to be resolved by work. I understand why people say that the ghosts of loved ones walk the landscape. It's an apt metaphor.

I don't believe in ghosts, even though I lived with a psychic for five years, even though I've been a romantic poet, even though I've always had an active and fertile imagination. My dream life is often populated with those I no longer see, including those who have died, but I don't believe the spirits of people linger in bodily form, either here on earth or in some afterlife of reward or punishment. But as long as I have thoughts and feelings of my brother, it will be as if he's living in my reality. During the three years he refused to communicate I thought about him, dreamt of him, wrote to him, and spoke of him. If he had died three years ago, it wouldn't be much different today. The difference now is that it's clear to me that his presence is not literal or possible. He is gone from this life.

Writing about Mark seems to bring him alive. John seems alive, as well. Even Johnnymark lives. This is the nature of the heart of the mind. I've done something in this writing to help preserve this illusion of ongoing life. Just as ghosts are effective metaphors for once-living people, both good and bad, so this biography and these memories recognize the life that once was, as if it still is. Still, this sadness is real, no metaphor. This is the expression of absence, loss, death, of his being no more. Those who speak of a loved one going on to a better place, of being alive in a perfect reality, of hoping to join them at some point, also feel this sadness. This is the truth, despite all we do and say to make it not so. I feel the same aloneness he felt, that we all feel. Nothing truly absolves this aloneness but the acceptance of death. My brother has gone to the grave, the image of aloneness, but aloneness is not upon him. Aloneness is absolved. Peace is upon him, the peace of reality.

A Year Later

It's been a year since my brother killed himself. I write this on a laptop that is losing its light. The screen is ghostly, and I can barely make out my script. It seems somehow appropriate to the task. This last year has been dealing with the ghost of my brother. Of course, I don't mean any phantasm of his physical presence; I mean his presence in my mind, I mean the presence I carry in my mind that I might identify as my brother. In this last year, I've talked about him, I've dreamed about him, I've thought about him, and I've come to recognize how much he affected my behavior, over the years, more, I believe, than I affected him.

When someone close kills themselves, it affects those around them, perhaps in ways their dying otherwise might not. Because my brother killed himself, and because he was so influential in my life, I can't help but imagine my own potential suicide, my own career as a writer/artist, my life as a social outsider. I have imagined suicide before, in poems, and in my thinking, partly because I have allowed myself, over the years, to think whatever I might think. It is in the purview of being a creative writer to imagine the imaginable and the unimaginable, and I've done that, but this occurrence, this death by suicide, this killing of himself by someone who was influential in my life, has made it something other than poetic supposition. I wrote this poem in the late 70s.

Suicide Notes

I see ghosts of past lives,
I see life in the soon to die,
I see myself living
a posthumous existence,

Death is a family theme,
vitality is like signs of life,
meaning is a pastime
before dying,

Everything we do as entertainment
is like playing Baffle until dawn
because you're mad at Ed,

In death,
the most important life
is unanswerable,

As a citizen of this world,
I feel like a vampire of love,
a fraudulent interviewer of loving,

I believe I could be made to believe,
if only I broke out of my dying,

I am dying out of loyalty to the dead,
death is the camp most occupied,

In the war that surrounds us,
death is the victor,

I won't be a suicide,
I was born to die,

Any attempt to manufacture death
is a worse lie than living ever is.

I have always believed, that were I to kill myself, it would be as if I was saying, "Forget everything I ever said, I didn't mean it." My brother was passionate about his beliefs and his writing about his beliefs, and in the end, he said, "Forget everything I ever said, I didn't mean it." I believe that, because he turned his belongings over to someone who he knew would not care for them. I had worried over the last years that he would leave all his work to me, and I knew I would feel responsible for it. I felt the burden of that responsibility. He relieved me of part of it, but not the whole of it. As first-born, I feel responsible to him and his life, to his work and its life, but I wrote this, back when we were young and serious about our work.

The Relentless Gaze

Every story I tell is a song
to the end of stories,

A man I know
by exchange of empathy,
a temptation to nothingness,
stopped by to tell me he can
no longer imagine any desire
for anything,

He disclaims suicide, even
his curiosity is shaken down,

When I came back with the coffee,
he was gone,

After all these years in occasions
of conversation, I don't know
his name, Tom or John, I think,

He said he's too frightened
to be a poet,

But I saw no fear in the man,
only courage without eyelids,
only strength without dreams.

And then I wrote this, around that same time.

Daydreams And Suicide

She didn't mention suicide,
but it showed up when she
said she believed in nothing,

Love and death
were on her mind,
the one in the other,

She hadn't been living up
to her stature, lately,

There was a tender fear
in her eyes,

As she lifted the prayer plant
from its basket and set about
to trim it, perfectly,

Those traits she found herself
taking from her mother
were the very ones
she found to criticize,

Everyone is suicidal, she said,
but not everyone daydreams,

She imagined a torrent
of cloth, in a box,
free of mildew,
next to the sink,

I could smell the cloth.

I think, for me, as a young man, and even older, the imagination of death and suicide was a way to clear my mind of thought and feeling, so that the moment of life itself was free, and wonder could occur, unfettered by concern for the bonds of the world. But when I thought about death as a physical reality, it overcame that freedom with concern for the struggle.

A Decrepit Angel

I sacrifice my body
to palliate my misery
that follows my thinking,

Like a decrepit angel
who carries along
behind my hell-crawling,

Death is winning by degrees,
as my flesh holds the field,

I make concessions to death,
ignoring the count, until innocence
sits near me, and I see how far I am lost,

My stinking breath and puckering flesh
mock what imagined wisdom I think
I have gained,

I sleep, I leave the muse behind,
the sound in my mouth is a rattle of teeth,
I remind into other graves, bleeding fingers
dig into earth like a swimmer,

I visit a wall, against which is hung,
stripped, dried and cured; human emotions.

A poet, not a suicide, at first I lost things,
then forgot chunks of night, too many names
and faces, too much intimacy with strangers,
unrelented upon by this hesitant revolution,
its inevitability,

My body began to spend time missing something,
as binding glues crystallized, if not that, melted,
if not that, the unconnectedness declared itself,

I had the same face, the eyes thickened,
filled, as they were, with what does not wash,

I held the same mirror, it seemed smaller,
until it, windowed, grew,

A poet, not a suicide, sees death,
calls it death, sees dying, calls it dying,

Only vision goes past the dying,
and dead eyes see again,

A poet, not a suicide, wants vision,
does not expect to find it in drowning,
drowns.

I wrote “Dear Nadja” in ’82, nearing the low point of my time as a drunk. At the end of the book, I wrote this.

The Fact of Dying

Ants crawl
across the table
in the corner window,
overlooking the seacoast,
in relentless wash
under the rain,

Spilled wax from a green candle,
beer cans with cigarette remainders,
conversation comparing voice quality
from opera to Bobby Short to the Rolling
Stones, Prokofiev on the cassette,

Janice, who turned twenty-three, last midnight,
has gone with two cars full, for more liquor,
an urban expedition to witness whales passing
in their migration, turned exploration
of over-crowding, physical and mental,

Drawings of owls and carp, those now
drawing the rocky abutment offshore,

Waves relentlessly wash,
ants crawl, do not crawl,

Is it merely their miniature relationship
to our lives that makes them appear
to move like us?

I blow one ant from my arm
and remember my childhood fear
of the seas,

One cough in the throat of the
Pacific, and we are drowned,

What distinguishes us, that doesn't
also extinguish our belonging?

Sandy calls the rocky bridge,
from the near ridge by the porch,
to the great rock in the ocean,
a connector,

"There's a connector,"
she says.

So much to tell and, as happens, I wish I had notes, a tape, verbatim, of the last week. I do have the preceding poem, written in the midst of the shadowy chaos of thought and deed. I'm back in the café, after being out since last Friday. The guys at work have been treating me strangely, these last two days, I think because Clark told them I was suicidal on Sunday. I didn't think of committing suicide, but when we were coming back from an exhausting three-day drunken explosion with twenty-five people and the Pacific Ocean, I seemed to want to.

As we crossed the Golden Gate Bridge, Jeff, Fred, and Richard were joking, yelling at the pedestrians, "Jump! Jump! Jump!" I opened the car door to spit tobacco juice, thought for a second, and said, "Hell, if nobody else will, I will." Jeff grabbed my arm, but for a split second, I imagined the incredible joy of diving into union with being, the joy of final release.

I told Clark I wouldn't commit suicide. A poet who commits suicide is saying to the world, "I take it all back, I didn't mean what I said." On the other hand, I understood Keats saying that death seemed sweet to him. At work, the next Tuesday, I was hopeless. I must have seemed suicidal.

Since I got sober, three years after that incident, I haven't spoken of suicide, until my brother killed himself, a year ago, and now it's on my mind, again. However, in reading a collection of Japanese Death Poems, two years ago, I wrote this.

At the Golden Gate

At the Golden Gate,
few jump out to sea,

Almost all jump back
toward this life,

In their death poems,
Zen monks speak some
sort of instruction,

Or they pull
their words
in after them.

It could be said that my brother pulled his words in after him. His lesson to me was, “My words mean nothing.” I have been teaching myself this lesson for fifty years or more, but the lesson seems not to stick.

My Brother’s Murderer

I look for
my brother’s murderer,
but his suicide has left
no trace,

That terrible
snow we had,
has melted away.